



# Memories

Part One: The Gathering

A Story By ACFan

Part One of the continuing  
saga of Clan Short

Portions of this story contain copyrighted characters from other authors. Johnny Carter is © ND from his story Nick & Ashley and is used with permission. The characters and situations from A New Day Dawns are © GunRunner and are used with permission. Mark Owens is © Slash and is used with permission. The characters and situations from One Door Closes are © MultiMapper and are used with permission. The characters and situations from Enterprise Tour are © Greybear and are used with permission.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Any celebrities portrayed in this story are used fictitiously and have no resemblance to the personalities or preferences carrying the same name. This story is set in an alternate reality, and in no way, shape, or form reflects any events or interactions which may have or ever will happen in the real world.

THIS STORY IS COPYRIGHT © 2002-2005 BY ACFAN. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. DISTRIBUTION FOR COMMERCIAL GAIN, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, POSTING ON SITES OR NEWSGROUPS, DISTRIBUTION AS PARTS OR IN BOOK FORM (EITHER AS A WHOLE OR PART OF A COMPILATION) WITH OR WITHOUT A FEE, OR DISTRIBUTION ON CD, DVD, OR ANY OTHER ELECTRONIC MEDIA WITH OR WITHOUT A FEE, IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S WRITTEN CONSENT. YOU MAY DOWNLOAD ONE (1) COPY OF THIS STORY FOR PERSONAL USE; ANY AND ALL COMMERCIAL USE EXCEPTING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS REQUIRES THE AUTHORS WRITTEN CONSENT. THE AUTHOR MAY BE CONTACTED AT: [acfan@acannex.us](mailto:acfan@acannex.us)

# *Forward*

Welcome, reader, to the universe of Clan Short. This started out as a short story just to see if I could write something interesting. Somewhere along the way, it turned into a full-time project which I've been told has touched quite a few lives in different ways. Over the course of the two and one-half years it took to write Part One, the characters have become a part of my life that I cherish. Along the way, I made a few very good friends who I now call brothers, and have had the honor of helping a few teenagers through problems in their own lives.

As you read this part of the series, remember it is set in a parallel universe to our own; one in which things progressed just slightly different than they did on our timeline. The general public has almost identical access as we do to what we would consider "advanced" technology. Space travel and the technology that is associated with it is reserved for military and government use. Earth is at the point of a societal revolution, brought about by interaction with the races of other planets, much to the chagrin of the Earth governments. The youth of this universe are leading the way, and you are about to see how one group became the leaders in the revolution.

I truly hope you enjoy the story, and look forward to writing Part Two. Thanks to the authors who have contributed their talent and ideas to this saga: Slash, Greybear, GunRunner, MultiMapper, Lil' J, Ghost, and Dakota.



## *Chapter 1*

*"Do you remember which key it is?" Sean asked.*

*"I think so," I told him. The truth is, I was scared, happy, and nervous all at the same time; I had no idea what I might find on the other side of that door. I looked down at the keys, holding them in my hands for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. A lot of memories lay behind that door; just waiting to be opened again...*

*Okay, okay, I think I'm getting ahead of myself here. I'll start from the beginning. My name is Cory Patrick Short. I'm fourteen years old with blonde hair and blue eyes. I don't think I'm the best looking guy in school; but I wouldn't say I'm the worst looking, either. If I had to compare myself to someone, I would have to say I have the same kind of build that JTT has.*

*I was asked by Ter ... err ... Mom, (I'm still getting use to that) to write down some of my thoughts, memories, or just anything I want. She says it will help me remember what happened, but I'm not quite convinced it will. My shrink, Dr. Richardson, agrees with Mom and wants to read what I'm writing at some point down the line so I guess I kind of have to or I'll pay for it later; plus I would do anything to get a normal life again.*

*I think I'll start just a little before the day my life changed forever. It was an average day, nothing much happening. I got up for school, did my normal routine, which consists of hitting the "sleep" button a few times (giggle). I decided to grab a nice hot shower. I turned on the taps and let the room heat up a bit before I stripped out of my boxers. I climbed into the shower, and let the warm water relax me into an almost meditating daze. I love the way a hot shower relaxes me. It lets me forget, just for a few minutes, the pain of not being with my family. After my shower, I went into the kitchen to get myself something to eat. I was the first one up, so the house was still pretty quiet. My first class was about an hour before anyone else's in the house so I was up and out the door before any of the others.*

*The house I live in is a "Home" for kids that have had problems with their families. I wasn't sure why I was there at the time; I knew that there was an accident and I lost some of my memory, but I didn't know what it was all about.*

*It wasn't until lunch that I remembered that I was going to Sean's after school. That brightened my mood for the rest of the day! Just the thought of spending time with my "brother", hanging out, and just being a normal kid for a while, was enough to make anyone happy. The rest of the day went by pretty quickly. I thought I'd better get a move on if I wanted to spend as much time with Sean as I could, so I walked straight from my last class to the door and out the school towards Sean's house.*

*As I walked to Sean's house, I noticed how beautiful the day was. I had been inside the*

*school all day, so it came as a shock to me how warm and sunny it was. I turned the corner to Sean's street; and saw the familiar view of his house half way down the block. I noticed that Teri's Suburban was parked in the driveway as I approached the door.*

\* \* \*

Cory knocked at the door. When it opened, he said "Hey there Mrs. Short, Is Sean home?"

"Not yet, but he should be here soon; soccer ended a half hour ago." Teri then got an evil grin on her face. "And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Teri or Mom you little rascal!" she exclaimed while rustling his hair.

Cory giggled, "Yes ma'am ... err ... Teri," he answered with a big grin. He noticed an aroma drifting from the kitchen that got his full attention. "Are those brownies I smell?"

She smiled, "Go ahead, they are on the breakfast bar. You better not eat them all though, Sean will strangle you!"

As Cory headed toward the kitchen at a barely suppressed run, she watched with a far-away look in her eyes. As happy as the fourteen-year-old appeared, it was sad that he had to live in the home without a true family. He was nothing but a little blond angel that asked for no one to feel sorry for him. But she knew the pain that sometimes showed in those sky-blue eyes, and wished that somehow she could help him.

While Cory slid into the kitchen to enjoy some of the brownies, he pondered the look he saw on Teri's face. It was a look that he'd seen before, but yet he couldn't quite explain it. It seemed as if she was happy to see him, yet sad that he was there. He shrugged it off; figuring it must be one of those 'Adult' issues, and continued towards the brownies.

Just then the entry hall was hit by a tornado. "CORY! BRO, YOU BEAT ME HERE!" screamed Sean as he homed in on the brownies. "You shoulda came by practice, Coach wanted you to play!" Sean soared onto the stool by Cory, and then proceeded to help devour the plate of brownies.

Teri studied her son; thirteen years old (Thirteen and one-half if you asked him!), auburn hair, and hazel eyes. If she didn't know better she'd say he was a lady killer, but his destiny had become apparent long ago. "Hey you two; you better grab some milk to go with those brownies!" she said as she headed for the living room.

The brownies were quickly devoured, so the boys headed for the rec room and fired up the computer. Recently they have become addicted to the game emulator that Sean's older brother Mike had downloaded, so in no time they were in a heated battle for high score on Tron. Since Cory seemed to be heading for a new record, Sean sat back to watch his best friend mastering the game. Suddenly Sean noticed a flash of emotion across Cory's face; it was just a quick flash, but it was something that Sean had noticed happening a lot recently. "Are you okay bro?" he asked.

Cory paused the game and looked at Sean. "Yeah, I think so. I just felt weird for a second; something kinda itched in my head, but it's gone now."

Sean giggled "It must be that one blond brain cell of yours trying to work! You blonds are all the same!"

Cory jokingly slapped Sean upside the head, grinning widely, and then went back to the game.

As he settled back in, Cory thought to himself *'I hope that Sean isn't too worried about me. He's the one guy I can really call a friend; the last thing I want is for him to worry.'*

Once he was sure that Cory was involved in the game again, Sean's smile faded. Sean

thought to himself, *'I really hope he's okay, I'd die if he's hurting inside.'*

The boys played for another hour before Teri reminded them to do their homework before they forgot. Just as they finished their assignments, the ritual Friday night pizza delivery arrived.

"FOOD!" they yelled as they ran toward the dining room. When Teri entered the room with the pizzas, she chuckled at the expressions on their faces. The looks of hunger the boys were giving her would make an Ethiopian cringe in pity.

By the time the boys finished inhaling their share of the pizzas, it was time for Cory to go back to the home. Sean tried to talk his mom into calling to see if Cory could stay, but she reminded him about the Home's policy on overnight visits without prior arrangements.

Everyone loaded into Teri's Suburban to take Cory back. As Teri and Sean watched Cory walk to the door of the home, Sean spoke for the first time since they had got in the truck.

"Do you think he will ever get better, mom?" he asked in a worried voice.

"I really hope so Sean. I hate seeing Cory like this. Dr. Richardson said the time you have been spending with him has helped a lot, so I think he will come around soon."

"I really hope so too; I miss the old Cory so much." Sean then quietly sat back and wept.

When they got back home, Teri locked up. They both headed to their rooms, each needing to resolve the emotions stirred up by Sean's question in the truck.

\* \* \*

#### **Sean's Room:**

Sean couldn't get to sleep. He really wished Mike was here to talk to, Mike would know what to do. After Mike's accident, Sean's life took a turn for the worse. Even though a year had passed, he still had trouble believing his brother was gone. Cory was back at the home for the night; but before Sean went to bed he made his mom promise to try to arrange for Cory to spend the weekend with them. The look he saw on Cory's face earlier was keeping Sean awake, Sean wondered if the unimaginable could finally be happening.

Sean laid back in the dark and thought about the events of a year ago, ignoring the tears sneaking down his cheeks.

\* \* \*

#### **Flashback...**

Cory and Sean had managed to talk Mike into dropping them off at the mall on his way to football practice. They had pooled their cash together, and had came up with enough to get an X-Box. After picking it up, they strolled the mall, laughing at all the guys and girls making out. They jokingly promised each other to slap the other one if he ever did something like that with a girl. About fifteen minutes before Mike was due to pick them up, they headed to the food court and grabbed a burger; then they sat down and waited for their ride. An hour later, Sean spotted his mom come through the door and start looking around. Sean pointed her out to Cory.

"Why is she crying?" Cory asked.

Once Teri spotted them, it didn't take long before they had the unfortunate answer to the question.

Mike had been on his way back to pick them up. Some guy who had too much to drink had just left the bar. The drunk blasted through the red light and nailed Mike's Toyota in the

drivers door. The Toyota was no match for the Ford Explorer he was driving; the impact killed Mike instantly. Cory took it hard; he blamed himself for Mike's death, since it was his idea to go to the mall. Cory totally broke down; after that the psychiatrists decided that it would be in Cory's best interest if he was placed in a "residence" where he could be watched closely. The decision tore Sean up; it was six months after the accident before they would let Cory visit Sean's house.

### **...End Flashback**

\* \* \*

Sean wondered if the look he saw today was a sign that Cory was finally getting over Mike's death. Sean really hoped so; Sean missed having the old Cory around, and wondered if he ever would be back to what he once was like.

Sean glanced towards his closet; just then a moonbeam illuminated a yellow plastic bag on the top shelf in the corner. Sean knew the contents of the bag too well; it contained a brand-new X-Box, still in the original packing, along with a few games. Sean had made it clear that it was not to be touched, it was not to be opened until Cory was able to share it with him, exactly the way they had planned while waiting in the food court.

\* \* \*

### **Cory's Room:**

As Cory laid there trying to get to sleep, a cold chill ran down the back of his spine. It was just like someone had opened the window in the middle of a blizzard. Cory sat up and looked around, letting his eyes adjust to the low light in the room. Nothing had changed, the window was still closed. Mark, Cory's roommate, was still finishing up his homework at his desk. Mark noticed Cory sitting up and looked right at him. When he saw the look on Cory's face, he started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Cory asked sleepily.

"You have a bad dream or something? You just sat up like I poured a bucket of ice water on you."

"No, it's kinda weird. I was just about asleep when a cold chill went down my back."

"You're right, that is weird. You should try to get back to sleep though; you've had a long day. Ain't you going to Sean's tomorrow?"

"You bet I am. It's gonna to be good to spend some time with him. We have a lot of catching up to do. Teri's going to adopt me, so I better get to know them."

"Yes, you do have to get to know them. But in a way you already do know them."

"I know that I KNOW Sean, but I can't remember that much about him. I don't know them that well, but its like I've known them all my life. They seem to know a lot about me."

"Of course they do, they've read your files and from what I've heard, you and Sean used to be best friends so you've probably slept over at his house a lot."

"Your right, I guess not having all of my memory makes things confusing at times. I'm trying to remember, I really am, but it's so hard trying to get the memories back. It seems the more I try, the less I remember. Then, I'll walk past something, or smell something, and it brings back a feeling that, I don't know, that I just remember."

"Well, that's a part of the whole healing process, Cory. You can't just sit and think about what your life was like. You have to get up, look around and enjoy life now, in the present. You



will remember, but it takes time. When you get those feelings, they are feelings of closeness, comfort, and familiarity. That's when your mind is working on remembering. Just let it take its course, and things will come back when the time is right. You're right, you can't try to remember something that you can't remember; that's just impossible."

"Wow, I never really thought about it that way. I didn't pay close attention to how I was trying to remember. The only time I remember anything is when I see something. That's when things come back. Maybe if I just let it come to me when it wants to, I'll remember more. I don't know if I'll ever get back all of my memory, but that might be the way it's suppose to be. There might be something to learn from all of this; thanks Mark, that really helped a lot. I'm tired so I'm going to try to go back to sleep. I have a lot to think about."

"No problem buddy, what are roommates for?"

Cory laid down, and shortly thereafter fell asleep. As he slipped into deep sleep, he began dreaming.

\* \* \*

### **Cory's Dream...**

"Hey! What are you doing? Get off of me Sean!" Cory yelled as he pushed Sean off of him.

"Sorry Cory, I thought... well I thought that's what you wanted. You did say that you love me, didn't you?" Sean responded in a scared voice.

"Well, yeah I guess I did but I didn't mean... Wait! Are you... I mean... Do you really..."

Cory's mind raced a million miles a minute as he thought; 'Can it be? Could he really love me? Is he gay too?'

Cory's mind was flooded with a great tidal wave of emotion. It hit him like a brick falling from the sky. Suddenly it became clear; all of the signs, all of the touches, and all of the times Sean looked at him with those eyes. Sean's stares that seemed to stare deep into Cory's soul, slowly embedding himself deep into Cory's heart.

*'All this time and he does love me!'* Cory thought. *'With that one unexpected kiss he just planted on me, he opened his heart and soul to me.'*

Cory sat on the side of his bed with a mixed expression on his face; a look of confusion combined with a look of happiness. That was the point when Cory knew without a shadow of a doubt that he really did love Sean. The realization hit Cory, his feelings finally making sense.

Cory finally was able to assign words to his feelings as he thought *'I love him as a best friend, as a brother; and now I know a deeper kind of love too. It is a love that is rare, and is only found by a very few lucky people.'*

Cory did what he thought was best. He looked Sean right in those beautiful hazel eyes, looking as deeply as he could and softly whispered "I love you too, Sean."

### **...End Dream**

\* \* \*

Cory woke up in a sweaty panic. "What the heck was that all about?" he exclaimed to nobody in particular.

Cory looked frantically around the room to see where Sean was, but he was nowhere to be

found. Mark was laying in bed, fast asleep; the computer had timed out and went into sleep mode. Cory figured Mark had been asleep for a while. Once Cory had calmed down, his eyes adjusted to the low light and he remembered where he was; at the home, in his own bed.

"That must have been a dream. But why would I dream about kissing Sean?" Cory muttered to himself. He stood up and quietly made his way to the kitchen to get a drink of water. His mind was racing, so he figured he might be able to relax a bit by having a drink and sitting down to think things through. Cory removed a glass from the cupboard and poured some water from the filtered jug. The cold flow of the water running down his throat caused him to suddenly feel the need to pee. Cory quickly went to the bathroom to relieve himself. As he stood there, a new feeling hit him; he suddenly felt all alone. It felt like he was missing something in his life; he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but the feeling was there. He realized that there was more to his life than what he remembered. The emptiness was clear, but the solution was lost in a haze.

Cory was brought back to reality by the sound of a dog barking. He realized how long he had been zoned out when he noticed his morning woody was now limp resting in his hand. He hurriedly finished up in the bathroom and went back out into the kitchen. When he looked at the clock, he was surprised to see it was only 6:27am.

*'It's WAY too early to be up and awake,'* Cory thought. *'Why did I dream about kissing Sean? I know I love him like a brother, but could there be something more?'*

Cory's mind was reeling; thinking of Sean was bringing a warm feeling to his chest. Cory had felt this way before, but this time seemed different; almost like it was the first time he felt it, but somehow he knew it wasn't. It was the feeling of being protected, cared for, and a strong feeling of being loved. The realization of what it could mean sent a cold shiver down his spine.

Cory thought to himself *'Could this mean what I think it means? Am I ... ?'* He couldn't even think it, it was way too much for him to even consider at the moment.

Cory muttered to himself under his breath. "I need to go for a run and just clear my mind. That's exactly what I need, a run."

A run usually helped Cory clear his thoughts. He quickly changed into his sweats, and left a note for the "Warden"; his private nickname for the night shift supervisor. He closed the door and started on his run. The cool air was shocking at first but Cory quickly adjusted. Since he didn't stretch before starting, Cory decided to start with a slow pace. The day was still new, and Cory planned on making the best of it.

Cory thought about the plans to spend the whole day with Sean. He never knew what Sean would have planned for the day; it was always something that made life interesting. What little Cory could remember always had Sean being there for him when he needed someone. Cory was hit with a sudden thought; without Sean, Cory had no idea what he'd be doing. Cory was jolted from his thoughts by the sound of a horn from beside him.

"Look out, kid! I almost hit you!" a man yelled from his car.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there. I was just running and I kinda spaced."

"Well you better pay attention, or you'll end up getting yourself killed," the man exclaimed.

"I will, thanks," Cory replied, and with that the man took off. Cory crossed the street, and started to look around. He was shocked when he realized where he was; he had ran to Sean's street and was just one house away from Sean's house. He had been lost in his thoughts so much that he hadn't even noticed the fact that he was running straight to Sean's.

After a moment of thought, Cory walked to Sean's front door.

## *Chapter 2*

Cory walked up to the house and knocked on the door. He didn't want to ring the doorbell. This early in the morning, waking Sean up was definite suicide.

Teri opened the door, and the moment she saw who was there she got a huge grin on her face. "Oh my! Well, isn't this a surprise, you snuck out. Come on in Cory, do you want something to drink?"

Cory walked into the foyer and closed the door. "Hi Teri! Actually, some water sounds good, thanks. Is Sean up yet?" He sat down on the bench beside the door, and started to undo his shoes.

"No, he's still sleeping. He should be up in about an hour. You can go wake him up if you want; but I wouldn't recommend it. Not if you like your head where it is, anyways." Teri laughed at the comment, and then went to the kitchen to get a glass of water for Cory.

"Okay, maybe I'll just wait for him to get up. Would it be all right if I take a shower though? I stink somethin' fierce."

Teri laughed, "Sure you can, sweetie. While you're having your drink, I'll get you a clean towel and some clean clothes. I don't think Sean will mind if you wear his clothes today." Teri placed the glass on the kitchen table, and then went to get what was needed.

Cory went into the kitchen where Teri had left his water. After he finished the glass of water, he headed to the bathroom. He turned on the water to let it warm up first, and then started to undress for his shower. The warm water felt soothing on his skin. He stood there, just letting the water wash away all the sweat from his run, and the dirt in his mind.

The clouds that had blurred Cory's mind were, for a short while, cleared and forgotten. His mind was cleared of all thoughts as the steaming hot water coursed down his body. He was lost in nothing, but searching through everything.

Reality struck as the water turned suddenly cold. Cory finished up as quickly as possible, and started to towel himself off. He took his time getting dressed; making sure that he looked as nice as possible.

Teri had extremely good taste in clothes, and had picked out something that she thought he would look good in; baggy 501 Levis and an olive colored t-shirt. Cory fixed his hair so that it looked the best he could get it; it never seemed to go exactly where he wanted it. After one last look in the mirror, he headed back to the living room to watch some cartoons while waiting for Sean to wake up.

After a while, Teri joined him in the room. "Cory, why don't you go ahead and wake Sean up. He must have had a late night last night; if he doesn't get up soon, he'll have another late night

tonight."

"Sure thing Teri, will do."

Cory walked up the stairs and opened Sean's door. Sean was sprawled in the middle of the bed, tangled blankets surrounding him.

*'He looks so beautiful sleeping. He kinda looks like an angel dropped down from heaven,'* Cory thought.

Cory stood there watching Sean sleep, gazing down on him as he dreamt about who knows what. Sean looked peaceful and relaxed, as if he had no cares in the world.

Suddenly an enormous rush of warmth ran through Cory's body. Images, or more exactly feelings of images, flashed through his mind. It was the most intense feeling he had ever felt. His vision clouded, and his arms and legs tingled.

Cory intuitively knew this was a good feeling, and that there was no reason to be worried or scared. He followed Mark's advice, and let the feelings run their course. They flowed like the hot lava from a volcano, but didn't burn. It was an intense moment to say the least!

When Cory opened his eyes, he finally realized that the figure sleeping in front of him was someone special. Not only special as a brother; but also as someone whom he loved more than anyone, or anything, in this world. Though it was slightly confusing, the thought relaxed him.

Just then, Cory remembered why he was there. He walked over to Sean's bed and sat beside him. So many possibilities went through Cory's mind on different ways to wake him up. He considered them carefully, and decided that the best way for Sean to wake up would be laughing.

Cory reached under the blanket and felt around for Sean's feet. He found one and began tickling it. A flash in his mind brought the memory that he had done this very thing before. Suddenly, Cory found that another part of his body was re-gaining it's own memories.

Cory let go of Sean's foot as fast as he could. *'What's going on here? Why did I just get a boner?'* Cory thought. He looked down at Sean, who still hadn't moved a muscle, and knew right then and there. All of the feelings he had felt towards Sean were now so clear. Images were coming back faster than he could comprehend. The one that stood out in his mind was the look on Sean's face. It was the look of love, happiness, and pure joy, time and time again reappearing through the mess of images.

Just the thought of touching Sean while hiding an erection was uncomfortable, but the image of the love on Sean's face was calming and relaxing. The realization that he was gay was scary, but Cory somehow knew he had told Sean; and that Sean had accepted him, and still loved him in spite of it.

After finally calming down, Cory resumed tickling Sean's foot. Immediately Cory's nether regions responded, and this time refused to be calmed down. Cory did his best to hide his problem from view. It took a little work to find Sean's sensitive spot; but when he did, the results were instantaneous.

Sean awoke with a start. He looked toward the foot of the bed and found that it was Cory tickling his feet. "HEY! Watch it bro! You're about to end up in a puddle!" Sean ran to the bathroom and proceeded to relieve his full bladder. Sean looked over to the doorway as he was finishing up, and to his surprise Cory was standing there watching him with a small smile on his face.

"Hey there bro, you like what you are seeing?" Sean giggled. "Don't worry, I don't mind."

Cory's grin got a little bigger, so Sean finished closing up and went to the doorway and gave Cory a big hug. "Come on bro, I'm cooking breakfast; Lucky Charms sound good?"

That brought a big grin to Cory's face, so Sean put an arm over Cory's shoulder and they headed downstairs. The two boys were in the process of finishing off the box of cereal when Cory

looked at Sean with a puzzled look on his face.

"Sean? After breakfast could we talk a bit?" Cory asked. "Something real weird is happening, and I need to talk about it; I feel like I'm going nuts here."

The two boys went off to the rec room, and Sean was surprised to see Cory close the door behind them. Sean sat in the beanbag chair, and Cory come over and sat with him, which placed him as close as possible without actually sitting on Sean's lap. Sean put his hand on Cory's shoulder, "What's wrong bud?" he asked.

"You gotta promise not to laugh at me first," replied Cory.

"Bro, I couldn't hurt you like that; I promise not to laugh."

Cory looked at Sean seriously "You got to pinky swear that you won't laugh."

Cory held up his right hand with his pinky extended, then hooked it into Sean's pinky when he lifted his hand up with it. "I pinky swear not to laugh or make fun of anything that you are about to say," Sean said.

Cory then cuddled up to Sean with his head on Sean's shoulder. Sean was unable to tell if it was for security, or to ensure that nobody could hear them outside the room; or maybe even a combination of both. Even though Cory was older, Sean wrapped his arms around him and held him like a protective big brother. He knew that he was about to hear something that he had been waiting to hear for months, but was also enjoying the first chance to hold his friend like this in a long time. Sean reached over with his left hand and slowly ran it through Cory's blond hair; it was amazingly still baby-fine and soft. He massaged the back of his head, feeling Cory's stress and trying to relax him. After ten minutes or so, Sean noticed Cory's warm breath on his neck getting more even and softer, so he knew that Cory was finally relaxing. He turned his head and kissed Cory on the cheek, then said, "Okay bro, whenever you are ready I'm listening."

Cory looked up at him with a tear running down his cheek. "I think I'm going crazy. I'm afraid to tell the shrink back at the home what's been happening, he would probably make me stop coming over here; and I couldn't handle that right now." He snuggled in closer "It feels like I belong here with you, not at the home; and over the last week some weird things have been happening." Cory looked up at Sean, and saw a tear running down Sean's face; but what surprised him more was the slight smile that accompanied it.

Sean looked over at Cory, and looked deep into his eyes. "Cory, if you are about to say what I think you're about to say, don't worry; you are not going nuts. I noticed a couple of things yesterday and this morning, but I was afraid to ask you about them. I love you, bro; please go on. If it's what I think it is, I'll try to help explain it to you as much as I can." With that, Sean pulled Cory over and embraced him in a loving hug; at which point Cory broke into tears and tightly wrapped his arms around Sean.

Just then Teri opened the door quietly to see what the boys were doing; at the sight of Cory crying in Sean's arms she started to come into the room to see what was wrong, but then she saw the look in Sean's eyes that told her it was best to leave them alone. She quickly closed the door, and went into her bedroom to get the diary the doctor had told her to keep. She thought back to the last time she had seen that look in Sean's eyes, and wondered yet again if things would have been different if she had paid attention to it, instead of ignoring it and barging in on the two boys. As she sat down to write the latest entry, she prayed that it would be the last one she would ever have to make; and that her family might return to as close to normal as it could after the loss of Mike.

After the door closed, Cory hesitantly started talking "For the last week or so it seems ... umm... it's like... well... I feel like there's something I'm missing, kinda like I'm here but not really all here. It's like this morning, when I saw you taking a leak; I felt like I've done that before, yet

this is the first time I really remember doing that. Then yesterday when we were playing on the emulator, I had this weird feeling that it had been set up for US!" Just then a pained expression crossed Cory's face. "Mikey set it up for US..." he exclaimed, breaking into tears.

Sean caressed Cory and held him, whispering to him things that he hoped would calm him down. As the tears settled down into sobs Cory finally was able to speak: "Why ... why ... why did it have to be him ... why was it Mikey ... why did Mikey have to die?" Cory pulled back with a start, a look of pain in his eyes "Why do I have to live at the home? Don't you want me anymore? I thought you loved me?"

It was Sean's turn to break into tears, but he managed to get a few words out between sobs. "I DO love you bro; I don't know how to prove it, but I still do. Mom can explain better why you had to go to the home, but maybe now you can come back here. I would like to show you something I found on a site I've been visiting though, maybe it will help you see what I'm feeling; then we can talk some more."

Cory looked at Sean, and it seemed like a dam breaking in his mind; all the things that had happened suddenly burst from the doors they had been locked behind for the last year. He leaned forward as if to kiss Sean on the cheek, then at the last second diverted to his lips. Shortly the two boys were locked into as passionate of a kiss as possible without using tongues

As they separated, Sean looked at Cory "I love you, I always have and I always will. When you were not around, I found a site with some really cool stories on it called The Shack. You GOTTA read 'Gone From Daylight' sometime, but I want to show you something that a guy named Slash posted in the Library; it's a poem that fits how I've been feeling this last year." The boys headed over to the computer and logged on the Internet, and then Sean pulled up The Shack off of his Favorites menu. It took a couple of minutes to find the poem, but he found it and Sean clicked the link "Here ya go bro -- see what you think."

*Author: slashesarmy*

*Subject: Any Idea*

*Have you any idea to the way this life is?  
To lie awake watching the time?  
Too many times I sit and ponder.  
To where this road untraveled will lead.  
You can't tell a lie today.  
Choose a different path along the way.  
You can turn your life around.  
So pick your ass up off the ground.  
Can anyone tell me where our life is?  
Alone, watching you live.  
If you could tell how much I love you.  
My life would be turned upside down.*

Cory looked at Sean "I'm sorry, you really DO still love me. I really don't know how I could ever make this up to you."

Sean looked deep into his eyes and replied, "You are doing it right now; having you back is the one thing I've been wanting for a year now." Sean closed the Internet connection then looked to Cory "I really think we need to talk to mom here, I've listened in while she's been talking to you shrink on the phone, but she can answer a lot more of your questions than I can." When he

saw the questioning look in Cory's eyes he added "She really wants you back as much as I do; don't worry, all mom wants is to help you, but neither one of us was able to say anything to you about what happened until you were able to bring it up yourself."

Cory relented, and as they both got up, he reached over and pulled Sean into a hug. "I love you Sean, please don't ever let us be separated ever again. Pretty please?"

"Never again," replied Sean. "The thought of losing you again hurts too much to even think about. Let's go straighten up a bit before we find Mom, you are a mess!"

Cory giggled, "You ain't exactly straight yourself, did you get the number off the train that hit you?"

By the time they were done both boys looked fairly presentable; the bathroom on the other hand resembled a war zone. They walked down the hall with their arms over each others shoulders; Cory was the first one to spot Teri at the kitchen table.

"Mom?" Cory started.

Teri looked up in joy and shock, it had been a year since she had heard that sweet voice use that word; a long and trying year.

Both boys said in unison "...We need to talk..."

## Chapter 3

Teri looked at the two boys, she could see by their eyes that they had both been crying. Cory calling her 'Mom' meant only one thing; finally the time she had impatiently waited for had arrived. A fleeting feeling of fear came over her; would she be able to handle this right without anyone getting hurt?

Sean broke Teri out of the trance she was in "Mooooooooommmmm! Did you hear us?"

Teri blinked a few times then said "Yes boys, sorry. Why don't we all go into the living room; for some reason I get a feeling this might take a while."

They went into the living room and Teri sat down in the large overstuffed leather chair. To her surprise, both boys climbed into the chair with her; something they had not done in quite a few years. "Trying to make sure I can't run away?" she joked. That extracted a couple of small giggles from the boys; somewhat breaking their somber mood.

Cory got right to the point. "Mom, why do I have to live at that place? Why can't I be at home with you and Sean? Don't you want me anymore since Mikey died?"

Teri wiped a tear from his cheek that had started running down it. "I can't tell you everything right now; there are still things which you are not ready to hear. I will try to tell you what you want and need to hear. I need a promise from both of you first, okay?"

"What's that?" said Sean

"Go ahead," said Cory.

"If EITHER one of you starts feeling even a little bit uncomfortable with anything I'm saying, I want you to stop me IMMEDIATELY; and the same goes if it looks like the other one of you is having problems with what they are hearing. Do you agree?"

"Yes Mom," they answered in chorus.

"The reason I asked that of you is I don't want any of us to have to go through what we have in the last year ever again; we all need to be careful that we don't try to do too much too fast." Just then Teri felt a strange, comforting, chill go through her; she could tell that both boys felt the same thing as she felt their shivers.

They all three looked at each other, the silence broken by Cory. "Mikey is here to protect me," he stated matter-of-factly.

Teri just nodded. "I believe you are right, and I hope he lets me know if I'm going too far." With that she felt a quick chill, and she knew her youngest charge had a very strong guardian angel who loved him deeply.

"Cory, could you please fill me in on everything you remember first?" asked Teri.

Cory reached over and grasped Sean's hand for strength. "I remember that I used to live



here with you, Sean and Mikey. Mikey used to download stuff for me and Sean, and would do cool things with us. I remember that Mikey died and then the next thing I knew I was living in the home. I can remember things here and there before he died; but I don't remember how it happened, in fact you guys never even talk about it around me." Cory grew silent for a minute, then continued. "I was confused when I first started realizing this; I thought that maybe since Mikey died you didn't want me around anymore and that's why you sent me to the home. But then I wondered why you let me hang out here all the time. Sean showed me that he still wants me around, that he even still loves me. I'm so confused; why can't I live HERE?" Cory looked at Teri with tears running down his cheeks: "Why, Mom? Why?"

Teri pulled Cory in tighter to her. "I really do want you back here Cory; we will see how you feel once we're done here, but I hope I can make the phone call I've been waiting forever to make. With one call you can be back here at home, where you belong. I'm not going to get into how Mike died; I don't think you are ready for that yet." A quick chill confirmed what she just said. "But I'll try to fill you in on some things before and after it happened. First, do you remember how you came to live here?"

"No, not really," Cory replied.

"Okay, I'll give you the short version. Your birth mother, Cheri, and I were best friends throughout school. The two of you used to live down the street. You always came over here ever since you were born. As soon as you and Sean were old enough to walk, either you were over here or he was at your house. Mike was with you guys a lot; he felt like he had to protect both of you from coming to any harm. About the time you were six years old, your mom found out that she had cancer; she arranged for me to adopt you if anything happened. Since your father died right after you were born, she knew it was the only way to make sure you ended up with someone who she trusted to take care of you."

Teri thought it was best not to tell Cory that both his and Sean's fathers were killed by a drunk driver, since it was the same way Mike had died. The two men were in Cory's dad's Pinto; when they were rear-ended by the drunk, the car exploded, killing them both. "Mike took you under his wing after we adopted you, and helped both of you boys through Cheri's death. There are a few other things that happened during that time that only you two can work out; I'll just tell you now that I understand, and if you want to discuss it with me I will help as much as I can. You will know what I mean, and I promise that I am fine with it." Teri looked at the two boys; Cory looked confused, while Sean showed a combination of shock, embarrassment, and gratitude. "Don't worry Cory, it's not something bad; but when the time is right you boys will have to discuss it. Sean, don't push it before you are both ready."

Cory took advantage of Teri's pause and commented, "So that's why we all have the same last name; that's been bugging me for a while now."

"You got it, Cory," Teri replied as she looked up at the clock. She was shocked to see that it was 4:30 already; as if on cue, both boy's stomachs growled. "Sean, could you hand me the phone from the table? I just realized that we all missed lunch, so if it's okay with y'all I'll order us a pizza real quick."

She called the local pizza shop and ordered three large double pepperoni with extra cheese pizzas, a double order of breadsticks, and two 2 liters of soda for delivery. "Okay, that should hold you guys for a couple of hours anyways," she chuckled as she hung up the phone.

Once both boys were settled back into place, Teri looked at Cory and noticed that the break had done some good; the tension she had seen building up in his face had melted away. "Are you ready for me to continue?" she asked Cory.

"Yeah, I think so," he replied.

"Well, when Mike died, you took it really hard; later that night you just blacked out." Teri's voice broke as she was saying this, and it took a couple of minutes before she could continue. "When you came out of it a week later in the hospital, the only person you recognized was Sean; even though you were able to place a name to his face, you still had to ask him if he was your friend." Teri looked to see how Sean was taking this; she knew it would be hard on him. When Cory had asked that, she had been worried that Sean was about to join Cory in the hospital room. She saw the troubled look in Sean's eyes, "Sean, are you okay?"

Sean looked up at her "Yeah Mom; I have Cory back now, so I'm okay hearing it."

"I just wanted to make sure," Teri responded before continuing.

"Shortly after that, the doctor took me aside and told me what they thought had happened. It seems that Mike's death had been too much for you to handle, and it caused your brain to overload and shut down. From what we later found out, anything even remotely associated with Mike was blocked in your memory; since you two had known each other since you were born, that meant pretty much everything. Sean stayed with you every day in the hospital. A month later when school started, the doctors arranged for his school work to be brought to the hospital; that way Sean wouldn't have to leave you. Due to him not giving up, after a couple months you were able to do enough on your own that you were ready to leave the hospital. The staff psychologist decided that you would relapse if you were brought here, so he ordered that you were to be put into the home until you recovered more of your memory. The first psychologist that you had at the Home decided it was best if you had no contact with us at all. After the first month, we found out that you were losing more of your memories instead of recovering them; so we got a court order to change your doctor. While we were at it, the judge approved a requirement that we were allowed visits there; also he forced the Home to allow you to come here if you wanted to visit."

Teri was interrupted by the ring of the doorbell. As she looked at the boys, she was glad it did; both of them obviously needed time to absorb what she had said. "Well guys, it looks like the chow is here. Go get some glasses and plates on the table, we'll finish after we eat." In a split second her lap was empty as the urge for food overrode any wish to hear more.

She paid the delivery boy, and then carried the boxes to the kitchen. By the time she had poured the drinks for all of them, one pizza box and one breadstick box were empty. She picked up one of the empty boxes and started inspecting the edges of it carefully.

"Whatcha doin' mom?" Cory asked.

"I'm looking to make sure nobody got cardboard instead of pizza! It looks okay though, I don't see any tooth marks," Teri replied with a grin.

That elicited loud groans from both boys, followed by giggles when they saw the grin on Teri's face.

As Teri snatched the last breadstick, more to prevent a war over it than actually wanting it, she looked at her boys. Then she realized, this was the first time she had been able to see them as "her" boys in a long time. For a long and trying year, she had been forced to regard Cory as nothing more than Sean's friend to keep up appearances until Cory's memory came back. "You know, Cory; after thinking about it, I think that's enough talking tonight. I don't want to push you. I know all of this probably brought up more questions, but did I answer some of the ones you had?"

Cory looked up from licking the pizza sauce off of his plate: "Yeah mom, you got a lot of them; I think a little more is coming back now that I'm thinking about it." He then gave her a big smile, accentuated by a pizza moustache. "Thanks a lot for sticking with me, I'm really glad you didn't give up on me!" He then leaned over to Sean "And thank YOU for helping me, even when I didn't know it; I will owe you forever!" He then gave Sean a big kiss on the cheek, leaving a line

of sauce most of the way across it.

Teri laughed and went over to the sink. She wet a rag and came back to the table, then started cleaning off both boys' faces. "I don't know what to do with you two, but I love both of you anyway," she chuckled.

Teri knelt next to Cory. "Cory, you need to trust me here; I'm going to call Dr. Richardson now, he will probably want to come over and talk to you. Wait!" she said when she saw the panic appearing in both boys' eyes. "Dan and I planned for this a while back; if you will talk to him tonight, Cory, it's possible that the only reason we will be going to the home tomorrow is to pick up your things. I'm hoping that tonight you made enough progress that he will release you; he said it would be soon, that's why he told me to call him at any time if you had a breakthrough."

She heard the sigh of relief from both boys, and saw a spark of hope light up in their eyes. "Okay Cory; does that mean you will talk to him? Actually, he will probably want to talk to you too, Sean."

Both boys answered in unison "Yeah Mom, I'll do it." Once they realized what they had done, they chorused "Jinx!" then collapsed in laughter.

Teri shook her head at their antics, and went into her study to call Dr. Richardson.

On the third ring the phone was answered. "Richardson residence," a female voice answered.

"Mrs. Richardson? This is Teri Short. Is Dr. Richardson there?"

"Yes Teri, just a minute. Is Cory doing okay?"

"He's doing better than ever; thanks for asking."

"Great, I'm glad to hear that! Here's Dan."

Dan Richardson's voice came on the phone. "I can tell from my wife's smile that you don't have bad news. What's up, Teri?"

"We just had a major breakthrough today; I would like for you to come over if you can tonight to talk to both of the boys," Teri replied. "I think it's time for Cory to come home for good."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Okay, give me twenty minutes and I'll be there."

"Thanks Dan, we will all be waiting. Bye."

"Bye."

"Okay guys, he'll be here in twenty minutes; you need to hurry and get cleaned up," Teri said to the study door. The sounds of scurrying feet told her that her little snoopers had heard.

Fifteen minutes later, Dan arrived. He spent forty-five minutes with Cory, and a half hour with Sean, before he called Teri into the study.

"Teri, after talking to both the boys, I agree with you. The break we were waiting for has finally come; and in my professional opinion, it would be better for Cory to stay home with his family instead of going back. If you don't mind me using your phone for a few minutes, I'll make the required calls to get him released, then you can pick up his belongings tomorrow."

"Go ahead," Teri replied, "Do I need to leave, or would it be better if I stayed in here; just in case I'm needed?"

"Actually, you are right; it would be best to stay, just in case anyone has any questions for you," he replied.

His first call was to the judge that had assigned him to Cory's case after the damage done by the first doctor was brought to light. Teri was shocked to hear Dan making arrangements for an emergency court order, just in case the home put up a fight. Dan saw the look of surprise on Teri's

face, and after hanging up he explained.

"Teri, you know that I'm not exactly on the best terms out there at the home; in fact it took a court order to even allow me to take Cory's case. Chances are, they are going to demand a review by their 'staff'; from experience I know that they will stretch it out as long as they can. The major problem is, during the review I would not be able to have any contact with Cory; and honestly I believe that by the time they were done messing with his head, he would be in worse shape than he was when this all started. Judge Lewis is a good friend of my father, and I have been keeping him posted on Cory's progress. That was something that we wrote into the original order to protect Cory. The Judge actually already had the paperwork drawn up; all he has to do is date it and sign it, which he just did."

Teri looked at him with gratitude, knowing that Dan was actually trying to look out for her son "Thank you, I'll owe you forever for this," she stated.

"What I saw tonight was payment enough for the extra work!" he replied with a smile. "Just take care of those two boys; your love does more than any of us doctors could ever do."

Dan then called the home to give them his release order; and as he expected they refused to release Cory. In fact, they demanded to have him returned immediately. Dan just smiled, and told them he would see them personally shortly. After he heard their reply, he laughed and hung up the phone. "Teri, there will be some guests here in just a second; I need to make one more call in private, do you mind?"

Once Teri closed the door behind her, Dan dialed the sheriff's department. "May I speak to John please?" he said to the dispatcher when she answered.

"Please hold, sir."

"Polk County, this is Sheriff Martin."

"Hello John, it's Dan. The home is up to their shit again; I got a court order on its way to release a kid, one of your guys should have it now."

"I know about the order Dan. We just got a request for help from the home, nobody is there yet though," John replied. "Don't worry about it; I know what they're up to and you will have all the protection you need. In fact, as soon as I hang up I'm gonna call the responding officers on the scrambled channel and fill them in. I've got some advice though; you better grab the kid's stuff tonight, this ones gonna cause some fireworks until I talk to them downstate. Oh, don't be too surprised to see some new faces next time you're there; between you and me, this was the final straw we needed to close a major corruption investigation."

"Great, thanks John!" Just then the doorbell rang. "Looks like our escort is here, I better run."

"Okay, I'll see you on the course tomorrow; you be careful. Bye."

"I will. Bye John, thanks again."

Dan had Teri get the boys ready to go. While she was doing that, he filled in the officers as to what was happening, along with his discussion with their Chief. Just before they left, he took Teri and the boys aside. "Okay all of you; no matter WHAT you hear, let the officers and I handle this. You will definitely hear things you don't want to hear; in fact, it will probably sound like everything is going wrong. Don't worry; we have this all under control, and I'll bet if you read the paper tomorrow or Monday you'll understand."

"Teri, before we go; can you make copies of something on the computer here?"

Teri looked at him "I think so; do you know how to, Sean?"

"Yeah mom, what would you do without me! It'll take just a minute," Sean replied with a grin.

Dan shook his head. "Okay Sean, make two copies of this. Leave one here, and give me

one."

Teri gave Sean a playful swat on the butt as the giggling boy slipped past her. Two minutes later, he was back with the copies.

Now that the paperwork was in order, they piled into Teri's Suburban and drove over to the home. As they were pulling into the lot, they were shocked to see eight sheriff's cars and two state cruisers sitting in the lot.

'Shit!' thought Dan. *'It looks like John called out the big dogs. At least I hope it was him!'*

They climbed out of the Suburban and walked up to the door of the home. As Teri and the boys waited just inside the door, Dan walked up to the counter and handed the copy of the order to the desk clerk. "I have a court order here to release Cory Short to his mother, Teri Short."

Without even looking at the order, the clerk tore it into pieces. She turned to the State Trooper at the end of the counter. "I want him, her and that kid arrested for trespassing! The blond is to be escorted to solitary confinement NOW!"

Before the Trooper had a chance to reply; one of the Deputies that had escorted them walked up to him. "Captain, we anticipated this response; here is the ORIGINAL order from the court granting immediate release."

The Captain took a minute to look the order over, and then nodded to his partner. "You stated before they arrived that you were the Director here, right?" he said, looking at the woman.

"Yes, why should that matter?" she replied.

"Because you just saved me a lot of work," he replied. "You are under arrest for obstruction of justice, disregarding a court order, attempted destruction of same, causing officers to be falsely dispatched, and whatever else the prosecutor can come up with. Sergeant; read her her rights and cuff her, this place is officially being shut down." He looked over at Cory. "Son, go get your stuff; if you would like, one of the officers can help you. Congratulations, you are free to go home."

Cory ran over to him and gave him a tearful hug. "Thank you, I will NEVER forget this! I hope I grow up to be just as good as you!" The Captain returned Cory's hug then lightly swatted his butt.

"Go on, Cory, your family is waiting."

As Cory went down the hall with the Deputy that brought them, the Captain walked over to Dan, Teri, and Sean. "Would you mind joining me in the waiting room? We have a report to fill out."

A half hour later, everything was loaded, the report was finished, and they headed home. Teri invited the Deputies and Dan in for coffee; an offer which they accepted after a quick check with Dispatch. Between the joking about the look on the director's face, and the explanations of what happened and why; the boys calmed down from the recent excitement.

After all the men left, Teri went in the study and retrieved an envelope from her safe. "Hey guys, come with me for a minute," she said as she came back out.

They climbed the stairs and began walking down the hall. As realization slowly crept into Sean's eyes, Cory followed along, still confused. When she tore open the envelope and he saw what was inside, Cory suddenly realized what was happening.

"You WERE expecting me to come back!" He exclaimed. "Those are MY keys!"

Teri handed him the key ring, then handed one of the two remaining keys to Sean. The other she put on her own ring for emergencies only. Even though they trusted each other fully, the boys had asked to have real locks put on the bedrooms so that if there was company, a common occurrence during the holidays, they would not have to worry about their rooms being invaded. Each boy had a key to the other's room, a privilege which had never been abused.

"Do you remember which key it is?" Sean asked.

"I think so," Cory replied. He broke into a huge grin when the first key he tried opened the door. "Holy Shi ... OOPS, sorry Mom!" he exclaimed. "You left it exactly how it was!"

They all looked into the room; the bed was a mess, some dirty boxers were hanging from the bedpost, one wall was covered with Dale Earnhardt posters, a half-completed model car sat on the desk, and there were odd clothes hanging out of drawers.

Teri thought at that moment it was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen; it meant her other son was finally back home. She then said something that almost sent the boys into shock "Don't worry about cleaning it up right now, let's get all of Cory's new stuff in here and we will start sorting it all out in a few days."

It took forty-five minutes to get everything into the room exactly where Cory wanted it, and then they all went down to the kitchen for a bedtime snack. Teri smiled as she watched the boys suck down a quarter of a pumpkin pie each. She wasn't sure, but it appeared that each of them had a full container of Cool Whip on their slice.

As they were finishing up, Cory looked at Teri: "Mom, would it be okay if me and Sean slept in my room tonight?"

"Sure thing, Cory; as long as you two promise to sleep sometime during the night," Teri replied with a grin. "Also, both of you need to get a shower."

Teri left to go to her room. Cory grabbed a towel, then went through the common bathroom into Sean's room to get him.

"Sean, can we shower together like we used to?" Cory asked shyly, looking at Sean expectantly.

"REALLY!!! I was afraid to ask you 'cuz I was afraid if you didn't remember you'd think I was weird. You better believe we can!"

Sean started digging through his dresser. "What you looking for?" asked Cory.

"Something to put on after the shower," Sean replied.

"Why?" Cory asked, a hurt look crossing his face.

Sean saw the look and immediately took Cory in his arms. "I'm sorry bro; I just don't know what you remember, and I'm afraid of doing anything to freak you out. If I'm doing something that seems weird, please just tell me. We both still have lots of adjusting to do; I ain't gonna hurt you, so I might do some things that seem different from what I used to do. Just tell me, and real soon I think we will be back to how we used to be."

Cory sniffled then gave Sean a big squeeze. "I'm sorry. You're trying to watch out for me, and I was feeling hurt because you were doing it. I'll try to let you know when that happens; I don't want to lose you again."

Sean grabbed his towel, and they both went into the shower. They used the excuse of washing each other to reacquaint themselves with each others body, both commenting on changes as they noticed them. Cory insisted on using both shampoo and conditioner on the small patch of pubic hair that Sean had grown, then Sean inspected Cory closely until he found a couple tiny hairs so that he had an excuse to do the same for Cory. By the time they were done, both boys sported evidence that they appreciated the extra attention.

Cory knelt down and started washing Sean's legs. The next thing Sean knew, he felt something soft, warm, and wet on his erection. The new sensation was too much; Sean exploded in Cory's mouth. Cory stood up after he was finished and looked at Sean with a smile.

"Sorry Cory, I couldn't hold it. That's the best you've ever made me feel!"

"It's okay Sean, it's been so long I wasn't sure if I still knew how."

"Can I do that for you?" Sean asked.

"Please? I remembered us doing this when Mom was talking after the pizza. I was worried that you wouldn't want to do it anymore, but after you agreed to take a shower together I figured I would take a chance," Cory replied.

Sean was on his knees so fast he forgot to grab the soap. They both giggled when Sean had to ask Cory to hand it to him. Cory moaned as Sean began returning the favor. He was amazed at the feeling; he vaguely remembered that it felt good, but this exceeded his expectations. Suddenly a new feeling came over Cory, it felt like his entire groin was exploding. He latched onto the shower rails with a death grip, trying not to pass out from sensual overload. Once he recovered enough to think straight, Cory looked at Sean with an amazed look: "Whoa! That was the FIRST time I've ever done that!"

Sean looked up with surprise: "That was your first cum!?"

Cory reached down and pulled Sean up then enveloped him in a hug. "Yes, and I am sooooo happy that I gave it to you! After all you have went through for me, you are the only person who deserves it."

The boys stood there in the shower just holding each other until they noticed that the hot water had ran out a while ago. They hurried up and got out, then dried each other off. They brushed their teeth with an arm over each others shoulder, and then headed into Cory's room to hit the sack.

They laid down, and Cory snuggled up to Sean. "I love you, Sean."

"I love you too, bro," Sean replied.

Cory reached up and turned Sean's head. Looking deep into Sean's eyes, Cory said; "Not that way; I LOVE YOU!"

Sean smiled "Cory, I LOVE YOU!" He then locked his lips to Cory's and snaked his tongue into Cory's mouth.

## Chapter 4

Sean woke up with his face just inches from Cory's face. "Ewww ... Morning breath!" Sean thought to himself. He had to stifle a giggle as he slowly snuck out of the bed and shuffled to the bathroom to empty his bladder. As he finished he thought to himself <I>'Great! It looks like he's gonna sleep for a bit more; that will give me a chance to take care of something real quick.'</I> He looked over at Cory sleeping on the bed in the early dawn light, and felt as if his heart would burst from love and pride; his Cory was on his way back. Sean quietly went to his room and fired up the computer after making sure the speakers were off so that nobody was disturbed.

Sean went to his closet while the computer was booting and got out his old laptop. He dug out a patch cable and connected it to the network hub. After both machines were running, he used the laptop to unlock the file he had hidden deep in the main computer, then mapped that file to a drive letter so that he could access it. In no time he found the file he was looking for; and after fifteen minutes of reformatting it so that it looked just right, he printed it out and put it behind the Plexiglas on a plaque he had picked up a while back.

<I>'I really hope he likes this.'</I> Sean thought. <I>'I've waited so long to give it to him.'</I> With that thought, a single tear ran down his cheek. Sean wiped the tear away, and then wrapped up the frame in some tissue paper. He then closed out the file and put the laptop away. Even though the pass phrase required was virtually unguessable, he did not want to take any chances of someone figuring out how he kept his most private writings and journals hidden.

He then logged into his favorite message boards and caught up on the recent posts. He posted an update to everyone on the happenings of the last 2 days; he figured it was only fair after all the support they had given him over the last year. When he heard his mom moving around, he sat up with a start. "Oh man! I better hurry; I need to get back into the other bedroom before Cory wakes up so I can get this hidden where I want it!" Sean muttered to himself.

Sean shut down the computer. He managed to sneak back into the room without waking Cory, and hid the package in Cory's underwear drawer. Sean didn't relax until he was back in the bed. He was pleasantly surprised when Cory rolled over in his sleep and snuggled tightly to him. The feeling of the one person he loved more than anyone else in the world laying so close to him relaxed Sean, and he immediately drifted back to sleep.

About 10:30 Sean awakened with a start to find Cory straddling him, tickling him under the armpits. In between fits of laughter, Sean managed to get out "Cory! Unless you want your butt pressure washed, you better get off of me NOW!" Cory took one look at Sean, then with a huge grin jumped off of the bed and ran to the bathroom. Sean was right on his heels, and the two



boys proceeded to try to fill the toilet with the contents of their bladders. As they finished, Sean commented: "We better get some clothes on; I'm gonna grab some clean stuff outta my room, I'll meet you back here in a few minutes."

"Okay, bro; I'm betting Mom is wondering where we are at anyways," Cory replied. "Dang, it feels weird calling her Mom after the last year!"

Sean just smiled. "It may feel weird, but it's about the best thing I've heard in a long time; besides, for you feeling weird should be normal, since you ARE weird!"

Cory slapped Sean's butt. "I may be weird, but it's only because I've been hanging around YOU and it's rubbed off on me!"

They giggled and hugged, then separated to their rooms to grab some clothes.

Sean had just finished deciding what he was going to wear when he heard a sound behind him. He turned around to find Cory standing there holding the package he had hidden, still wrapped, with a smile on his face and tears of joy running down his cheeks.

"I found this in my drawer, it says 'To the number one person in my life, from Sean'," Cory said in a low voice.

Sean walked over to his bed, and motioned Cory to sit next to him. "Come on over bro, why don't you open it?"

Cory sat down and proceeded to carefully unwrap the package, making sure he was able to save the wrapping paper. Once he had the paper folded up to save, he looked at what was on the plaque. "Oh my God!" Cory reached over and pulled Sean into a bear hug, the looked back at the plaque in his hands.

The background was a semi-transparent picture of both of them when they were ten. They were standing in the back yard with their arms over each others shoulders, wearing matching Speedos. They both had huge grins on their faces. Superimposed over the top of the picture was a poem:

*I sit here, Dream and wonder,  
I look into your eyes and fade away.  
You tempt me, you lure me,  
Your innocence will let me dream today.  
Your eyes, they look in beauty,  
They send the sense of lovingness.  
And they forbid me to look away.  
Those eyes, they make me slowly drift away.  
Today, is the day,  
I'll never turn my back and walk away.  
I'll tell you, I love you,  
I'll take my chance, in a twist of faith today.  
If only, you'll be mine,  
I'll be with you, until the end of time.*

*Sean Short May 12, 2004*

Sean looked at Cory. "Flip it over bud, please?"

Cory got a puzzled look on his face, and then flipped it over. On the back was hand-written:

*For Cory with all my love, August 2004.*

*I have waited for the day I could give this to you,*

*You will forever be a part of my heart and soul*

*Sean*

Cory carefully laid it off to the side, and then looked over to Sean. When he saw the worry in Sean's eyes, he wrapped his arms around him. "Thank you Sean! It's beautiful, I'll treasure it forever. Even though I still don't remember everything, I know that nobody has ever done anything this special. I love you, it's the best thing you have ever given me."

The two boys settled into a loving cuddle. After holding each other for a while, they got up to finish getting ready. "Sean?" asked Cory

"Yeah, Bro?"

"Would you mind if I took this to breakfast and showed Mom? It's so beautiful I need to show it off."

Sean blushed. "Sure Cory! It really means a lot to you, don't it?"

"Of course, silly! How often does the one person you care about the most give you a present that shows how much he really cares."

"Aww man; you're gonna make me all mushy. You know, I didn't really realize how much you really meant to me until I almost lost you. I heard Mom telling Dan that she could tell whenever I had spent time with you; she said it was the only time I was happy. Last night was the first time in a year that I went right to sleep; and it was all because you are finally back home."

"Now, you're making me blush!" Cory giggled. "Seriously, usually I have to jog in the morning to clear my head; my head is usually all messed up after I wake up. Not only is this the first time in a while that I didn't need to run, it's also the first time I've slept in. I didn't realize it until yesterday, but I need you to feel secure. When I'm with you, I feel good; when you're not around it feels like somethings missing."

Sean smiled. "I know what you mean; I've been feeling the same way. I'm just glad you're back, I'm not sure how much longer I could have handled not having you."

Cory walked over and hugged Sean. "Bro, I'm really sorry for hurting you like this. If anything had happened to you because of my screw-up I woulda died. Sooner or later I would have remembered, and there's no way I could handle knowing I was the reason you were not around."

Sean kissed Cory's cheek. "Don't worry about it anymore. Dan promised that you would come back to me, and now you're here. That's what kept me going, and I learned to care for you more in the process. Who knows, maybe this is something good that's taking a while to develop."

Cory giggled. "If this was something good happening, remind me to run if something bad happens!"

Sean joined Cory in his giggles. "You know, when you put it that way you've got a point! I won't have to remind you to run; I'll be grabbing you and dragging you behind me!"

Cory smiled. "You got a deal! You know, we better get downstairs; Mom's gonna start wondering what we're doing."

Sean smiled. "You might not remember it, but this wouldn't be the first time she's wondered what we were doing!"

Both boys headed out the door and headed down the stairs. They walked side-by-side,

arms over each others shoulders; just like in the picture on the plaque Cory held tightly in his free hand.

## Chapter 5

*Hey all, this is Mike, you know, the dead guy? I bet you thought I was out of this, didn't you? Well, as soon as I moved up here, I started watching over my brothers; I was watching when they found out at the mall what happened to me, and I have been there every second since then. It's cool not having to sleep; did you ever try to keep up with 2 teenagers? If I wasn't already dead it would kill me! Honestly, I love both of them very much, and I do whatever I can from up here to protect them.*

*Later; and remember, we are watching over you!*

*Mike*

\* \* \*

### **The previous evening:**

Dan hung around Teri's place until he was sure that Cory was going to be okay after the fiasco at the home. It wasn't two minutes from the time he left the driveway that his cell phone went nuts. Dan looked at the caller ID and saw that it was Judge Lewis. The first thought that came to mind was "Oh shit, Social Services wants Cory!" He answered it expecting the worst, but was shocked by what he heard.

"Dan," Judge Lewis started, "Pick up Sharon and JJ and get your butts down to the courthouse ASAP!"

"Sharon and JJ? Why? What's happening?"

Judge Lewis cut him off. "You know that eight year old, so-called 'angel', that you were asking me to look into you adopting? He has two of my officers hopping on one leg and two others singing soprano right now; so get your ASSES down here before I lose any more men!" The Judge paused for a quick breath before adding; "IGNORE the FUCKING speed limit - JUST GET HERE!"

Dan was in shock, he had NEVER heard the judge use language like that! Before Dan could respond, the judge hung up. Dan called home, and told Sharon to wake up JJ and be ready to go. He opened up the throttle on his Camaro and proceeded to fly home. He slid into the driveway, and found an obviously confused wife standing with an irritated twelve year old boy on the porch. Dan waved them into the car, and explained the situation to them as he drove downtown.

"It appears that Kyle is having 'issues' with some of Urbandale's finest at the courthouse.

According to Judge Lewis, two officers must have got kicked in the knee; and, as he put it, two others are singing soprano."

Dan heard barely suppressed giggles coming from the back seat. "He kicked them in the nuts, huh Dad?"

"I'm glad to see you're listening, JJ," Dan replied. "Because you are probably the only person who can calm the little shit down."

"Why is he at the courthouse?" asked Sharon.

"Well, by the time we were done at the home tonight it ended up being shut down by the State Police!"

The car fell silent as they all considered the implications of the home being closed.

Dan mentally reviewed what he knew about Kyle's recent history. Last winter Kyle's mom was killed in an auto accident when a truck hit an ice patch on I-80. His father was an unfit parent who lost parental rights a year before; so there was nobody left to take care of Kyle, and he ended up at the home. Social Services had called Dan in because Kyle had major problems; after Dan's first meeting with Kyle he knew that normal therapy would not work. As an experiment, Dan brought Kyle home over a weekend to see if maybe having another kid to talk to in a neutral environment would help; and got the shock of his life. Kyle immediately hit it off with JJ; within a few hours they were inseparable. Dan managed to convince the home to agree to alternating weekend visits as part of the treatment plan; one weekend Kyle would come home with Dan, and the next weekend JJ would visit Kyle at the home. Unfortunately, they would not allow JJ to sleep over or Kyle to come over every weekend, and Dan did not want to push his luck by forcing them to; not with him treating Cory at the same time. Two months ago, Dan asked Judge Lewis to look into the legality of them adopting Kyle; by that time JJ had somehow convinced Kyle that he could trust Dan. That put Dan on the short list of adult males Kyle felt that he could trust; in fact he was the only entry on the list.

There was only one other person that Kyle would have anything to do with at the home, and that was Cory. For the last couple of months, they had decided to start sharing their appointment times; it became a double length group session instead of two one-on-one sessions. It seemed to do both of them good; they helped to support each other, and would yield to whichever had the most pressing thing to discuss.

As they pulled up to the courthouse, Dan noticed an officer waving him into the 'police only' spot in front of the door. '*Damn,*' he thought, '*he must have REALLY gone off the deep end!*'

They walked in to find an officer blocking access to the courtroom. Even through the thick oak doors, they could just hear the sound of Kyle mouthing off to someone inside. Once Dan introduced himself and his family to the officer, the officer moved from in front of the doors and waved them through.

"Okay, JJ; you go first," Dan said.

"Thanks Dad, it's nice to know that you need me to deal with your problems!" JJ replied with a giggle and a grin.

JJ opened the door. "KYLE CALVIN HODGES! ZIP THAT LIP AND PLANT YOUR BUTT ON THE GROUND, NOW!!!!" he yelled as he stepped through the doorway.

They followed the officer through the door; even the termites were frozen in shock! Kyle was sitting on the floor with a look of absolute amazement on his face; he had never seen JJ reprimand him for anything, so he knew he had really screwed up. Judge Lewis was sitting there open-mouthed, since he had never seen a display like that from JJ either!

JJ walked over to Kyle; as he walked up, Kyle looked down at the floor and started crying. JJ knelt in front of him and gently put his fingers under Kyle's chin, lifting it up until they

were looking eye-to-eye. "Hey little buddy. Sorry I yelled, but you were so wild it was the only way to get through to you. I got outta bed and hurried over here for you; do you think we can sit down and let my Dad and the judge figure out what's goin on?"

Kyle nodded his head; after JJ stood up, Kyle jumped up and wrapped his arms around JJ. Somehow, JJ carried Kyle to the witness chair and sat down with Kyle cuddling on his lap.

Judge Lewis started shaking his head in disbelief, and then waved toward Sharon and Dan. "Could you two please join me in my chambers; we have some urgent things to discuss. Boys, will you be okay out here by yourselves?"

Both boys nodded, so they headed into the chambers. "Dan, Sharon," Judge Lewis started, "I hated to call you this late, but we have an urgent problem."

"What's that? We didn't need to come in here just because you found an eight year old with a very accurate foot," Dan asked while holding back a grin.

"Smart aleck!" Judge Lewis muttered as he sat down. "Actually, thanks to the scandal at the home, we've got to find temporary placements for all of the kids. All of them but Kyle should have been released according to the real records. Kyle's case is unique; there is only one situation where he can be released, otherwise he is going to have to be put in a mental hospital. At least that's what your case notes say; are they accurate?"

Dan grimaced. "Unfortunately they are correct, he still has serious trust issues."

"Well, there's only one acceptable solution then. Dan, a while back you asked me to look into making Kyle a part of your family; are you still considering that option?"

Dan looked at the judge in shock. "You better believe I am; I thought there was no chance since you never got back with me."

Judge Lewis smiled. "The false reports that were being filed blocked it, but now that we've got the real reports the situation is totally different. If the two of you are willing, I'll release Kyle to you tonight; in fact I have enough of the paperwork completed for you to give a certain eight-year-old a huge surprise by lunch tomorrow. I'll call as soon as it's ready."

Dan looked at Sharon, her smile answered the unspoken question. He turned back to the judge. "Finish the paperwork; this will make two boys tonight that I'm making sure get to go home."

A few minutes later, they came back into the courtroom. Kyle was still on JJ's lap, excitedly telling JJ about the events at the home earlier in the evening. All three adults smiled as they silently watched the boys interact; to the casual observer, it looked like a normal little brother relating his day to a loving big brother.

Dan waited for Kyle to pause before interrupting. "Boys, it's been a long day. What would you say about loading up and heading home?"

Kyle looked over at Dan. "I ain't got a home no more; you shut it down! If you leave, I'll never see JJ again!"

Dan phrased his response carefully. "Kyle, did you hear me say 'boyS'? That means both of you; Judge Lewis thinks the best place for you is coming home with us. You are not going to lose JJ; you will live with us now."

Kyle spun to JJ. "Is he for real? Are you goin' to let me stay with you for a while?"

JJ smiled at the little imp on his lap. "Kyle, you know Dad don't lie. I've been begging him for you to stay with us forever; I think Judge Lewis is gonna try to make that happen. If I get my way, you ain't never gonna leave again."

Kyle wrapped himself around JJ. "Thank you! I wish you were my big brother, you're kewl."

Dan overheard Kyle as he joined the boys. "Kyle, say an extra prayer tonight. You might

just have your wish come true." He picked Kyle up off of JJ's lap and held him to his chest. "Come on, little man, it's time to go home."

## Chapter 6

Teri looked up as she heard the boys coming into the dining room. She was unable to suppress her smile when she saw them; each had the arm closest to the other draped over the other's back, with the hand firmly anchored on the shoulder. In Cory's right hand was what looked to her like a plaque; judging by the grip he had on it, it meant a lot to him.

"Morning Mom!" The boys chimed.

"Good morning guys. How did you sleep last night?"

The boys looked at each other, and then replied in chorus; "GREAT!!!!"

Cory giggled as he turned to Sean. "Bro, you wanna cook breakfast again?"

"Sure, let me get the cereal and the milk," Sean replied with a grin.

As Sean went off to retrieve the breakfast necessities, Cory walked up to Teri and shyly asked "Mom? Do you mind looking at something?"

"Sure Cory, whatcha got?"

"Sean made a surprise for me, and I kinda want to show it off."

Cory handed the plaque to his mom, and waited expectantly to see her reaction. Sean saw him handing it to her, and quietly emptied his hands of cereal and milk as he waited to see her reaction.

Teri smiled, and a few tears of joy trickled down her face. It was certain that she re-read the poem about twenty times, but the last time she finished out loud. "If only, you'll be mine, I'll be with you, until the end of time."

Teri looked up at the boys. "Cory, that is the most wonderful gift I have ever seen anyone get; and you are worth every bit of it. Sean, that is the most beautiful thing you have ever written, I'm proud of you!"

She carefully set the plaque on the table so it would be safe, then smiled. "Come here boys, group hug time!" As the hug broke off, she looked over at Cory. "I know you are going to want to put this where you can see it, but try to find a spot where the sun is not shining on it directly, that way it won't fade. And Sean, if you still have this stored on your computer, could you make a copy on a CD that I can put in the safe, in case anything ever happens to that?"

Sean was still in shock, he had figured she would like it but did not expect the intense reaction. All he was able to do was nod his head.

Cory retrieved the plaque from his mom; "I'll be right back, I'm going to put this up so it does not get hurt accidentally."

Teri turned to Sean. "Put the milk and cereal away, Sean. I'm going to make us all some French toast and sausage for breakfast. How's that sound to you?"



Instead of answering, Sean flew back to the kitchen with the milk and cereal; there was no way he was going to pass up French toast, no matter if it was for breakfast, lunch, or dinner!

Cory came back into the dining room, and was surprised to see nobody there. He heard sounds coming from the kitchen, so he headed in that direction and was pleased to see Sean mixing something in a bowl. "Whatcha doing, bro?"

"Mixing up the batter for French toast, Mom decided we needed hot food!"

"Mom, is there anything I can do?"

Teri looked over from the stove where she was pre-heating the griddles. "Why don't you get the sausage out and make the patties?"

"Great! Millions of sausage patties coming right up!" he exclaimed with glee. After getting out the bulk sausage, and laying out the waxed paper on the counter, he started making the patties.

Shortly the griddles were ready, so Teri turned around to see how many patties were done. Her timing was perfect; and what she saw brought pain, then joy, to her heart. Cory was working on the tenth patty, when suddenly he paled slightly, frowned, and a single tear ran down his face. Almost immediately, his mood shifted, he grinned, and then broke out in a fit of giggles.

Before Teri could say anything, Sean spoke up. "What's so funny, dufus?"

Cory then broke out into a full laughing fit. Teri knew there would be no answer until it was over, so she just smiled and waited for Cory to settle down. Amazingly, in his fit of laughter, Cory was managing to finish the patties, so she started cooking breakfast while waiting for him to come back to earth.

When he had finally managed to settle down to an occasional chuckle, Cory filled everyone in. "Sean, remember when Mikey, you, and I used to sneak down to make an early breakfast?"

"Yeah, why?"

Cory answered between giggles. "Well, I just remembered it myself, and I also remembered how he always ragged on you. He always insisted that I make the patties, because YOU WERE TOO WEAK TO PACK THEM AND THEY ALWAYS WOULD FALL APART!!!!" At that Cory deteriorated into another fit of laughter.

A smile crept across Sean's face as he walked over to Cory and wrapped his arms around him. Not a word was said, but they all knew an important event had just occurred; Cory was starting to remember good times without slipping into depression.

The mood during the meal was light-hearted, as the three of them bantered back and forth between bites. Teri noticed there was a distinctive difference in the way the boys responded to each other, they seemed to be bonded even closer than they had ever been before Mike's death.

Once the meal was finished, the boys proceeded to clear the dishes. As usual, there was no food left; two hungry teenagers definitely ensured that! Just as Sean started the dishwasher, the doorbell rang.

"Well, that eliminates all of our friends!" Cory chuckled, "None of them have figured out how to push a button yet!"

Sean had to laugh; as funny as it was, it was true; everyone they knew knocked instead of ringing the doorbell.

Sean walked out of the kitchen towards the foyer, and spotted Dan standing there with Teri and two boys he had never seen. One looked to be just a little bit younger than Sean was, while the other could be no more than nine years old.

Just then, Cory walked out of the kitchen.

"CORY!!!!!!" screamed the younger kid; he immediately launched himself across the

room and almost tackled Cory.

Sean instinctively went to pry the child off of his brother, when he felt a small hand on his shoulder. The other kid was standing there, and shook his head with a smile on his face.

"Don't worry, they are okay. I'm JJ, and that 8 year old tornado over there is Kyle. Just so you know, Kyle worships the ground Cory walks on."

Sean looked over towards the other two. Cuddled up in Cory's arms, Sean saw a very contented little boy. He was about 4 ft 3, with wavy shoulder length deep brown hair. Just then Kyle turned his face, and Sean saw his almond shaped brown eyes, and a thin nose centered in the slender angelic face. Despite the obvious joy Kyle was feeling, Sean noticed a hidden pain in his features, a pain he had learned to recognize all too well in the last year with Cory. Sure that Cory was safe, Sean turned back to JJ.

Sean had to admit JJ was cute; the combination of collar length wavy strawberry blond hair, slim but not scrawny build, and an angelic face punctuated with an aquiline nose and full lips, was to die for! Sean then looked JJ in the eyes, and was immediately captivated; the glistening hazel eyes drew him in, and he had a feeling that they both shared something in common that few others did. The feelings did not arouse Sean, but he immediately felt as if JJ was a part of him, almost a brother. Sean managed to break the gaze, and was greeted by a look of wonder and acceptance on JJ's face. "What grade you in, JJ?"

"Sixth, I just turned twelve."

Just then Dan walked up to them. "Shit," he chuckled to himself, "you could bake a potato with the energy from all the gaydar going off right now!" He then spoke up: "Boys, do you think you can coax the two leeches over there into the living room; I've got quite a bit to fill you all in about."

That evoked giggles from JJ and Sean, while drawing embarrassed glances from Cory and Kyle. Cory picked up Kyle into his arms, and the five of them headed toward the living room. As they were walking, Kyle spoke up for the first time.

"You must be Sean," Kyle said shyly. "Thanks for taking care of Cory, he is my bestest friend! He told me about you, can you be my friend too?"

The procession stopped as if they had hit a brick wall. Dan, JJ, and Cory waited expectantly for Sean's reply. They were all in shock, this was the most outgoing thing that any of them had ever seen Kyle do. They also knew this might be an important turning point for Kyle; for with as little as he had let each of them know about what went on inside his head, all three knew that his little ego was easily shattered.

Sean looked into Kyle's eyes, and his heart broke when he saw the longing, insecurity, and pain that they reflected. He walked over to Cory and Kyle, lifted Kyle's arms and moved them to his shoulders, then took Kyle into his arms.

"Kyle, little buddy, I will be your friend forever if you will let me." As he saw the smile appear on Kyle's face, he turned his head up and gave Kyle a quick kiss on the forehead.

The other three breathed unconscious sighs of relief, then finished going into the living room. When Sean walked in behind the rest carrying Kyle, Teri's jaw hit the floor.

Dan chuckled; "Teri, lets just say that your son's charm has struck again. His instinctive grasp of what to do when put in an emotional situation with another person impresses and amazes me!"

Teri gave Dan a confused look.

Dan pulled her off to the side, and started explaining in a low voice. "Kyle is extremely insecure and fragile, the only two friends he had were Cory and JJ. On the way in here, he managed to ask Sean if he would be his friend. Honestly, it shocked me, usually he won't even

Speak to anyone else unless spoken to first, but Sean had not even said a word to him yet. Instead of reacting like you would expect a thirteen year old to do when asked that by an eight year old; he took it seriously. Sean not only said yes, but he did it in a way that let Kyle know he was serious."

Teri nodded her head in understanding, and then quietly motioned Dan to look behind him.

Dan looked around, and it was his turn to have his jaw hit the floor. The three oldest boys had managed to squeeze into the overstuffed leather chair, Sean in the middle, Cory on his left, and JJ on his right. Kyle had climbed onto their laps, stretched out over all three, with his head laying at the juncture of Sean and Cory's shoulders. "Dang it, where is a camera when you need it?" Dan quipped.

"Look in the game cabinet," Cory replied. "My drawer, it's the middle one, wrapped up in a bag in the back." A look of shock crossed Cory's face as he realized what he just said. "HOLY SHIT!!! I put that in there before we went to the mall!! I had hidden it there so that Mikey could take pictures of us when we got back without you knowing about it, Sean!! I JUST REMEMBERED MORE!!! Sean, umm, I hate to ask, but..."

Sean cut Cory off. "It has been put up since that day, now I think we can finally enjoy it the way we planned. Congrats, bro; you don't... well I guess you DO know how long I have waited for you to ask me that!"

Everyone was smiling except JJ, who looked totally lost. Kyle noticed it first, and was so happy for Cory that he blurted out "Something bad happened to Cory a year ago, and he can't remember stuff. It's so cool; he just remembered something while I was here!"

Teri retrieved the digital camera, and then started to go to the study to get fresh batteries for it. As she neared the door, Sean called out.

"Mom? Could you do me a HUGE favor?"

"What's that, Sean?"

"Could you NOT look at what's on the camera already, PLEASE?"

Teri looked at her son's blushing face, and decided she probably did NOT want to know what pictures were on the camera. "Okay, but you need to empty it later tonight so nobody forgets and looks."

By the time she returned, the boys had settled back in, and she was able to get the picture. None of them realized it at the time, but that picture would prove to be a prophecy.

Teri and Dan sat on the love seat, and Dan began talking.

"Okay, now that you guys are done fooling around; I've got a few things to update you all on. Some of you know different parts of what I'm going to say, but we all need to be on the same page here, so I'm going to cover all of it. First off, Sharon sends her regards; she came down with a migraine this morning, and decided it was best to stay home while we got everything settled. Secondly, I received a call from the Judge confirming that Cory is fully released, as of now you have your son back for good Teri."

Teri smiled, and Sean and Cory both gave a happy "YES!!!" Sean noticed the confused look on Kyle's face.

"What's up, little buddy?"

"When did Cory get adopted? He never told me," Kyle replied with a pout.

"He has been my brother for a long time, bud. He just did not remember it."

"Okay, I understand now," Kyle replied as his face relaxed.

Cory reached around with his free arm and gave Kyle a half-hug, which brought the smile back to Kyle's face.

Dan made a mental note that Kyle had smiled more since they arrived here than he had

seen him smile in the last three months total. He hoped that what he was about to say next would make it a more permanent fixture on that cute little face.

"Okay, my next announcement concerns Kyle." Dan smiled at the youngest member of the pile in the chair. "As most of you either know, or have guessed by now, Kyle was one of my other patients in the home. After it was shut down, which by the way looks to be permanent, a few case workers from Social Services were called in for emergency placements. Kyle's case worker was one of those called in. In a couple minutes, you will understand why that is important. You see, for the last few months, I have been fighting with the home over adopting Kyle; I had approvals from everywhere else but there, and Social Services could not sign off until they either had the home's approval, or could prove it was refusal with malice."

"When Social Services went to pull everyone's records, they found out there were two sets of records being kept on each patient; one that the doctors used, and another that was used for Social Services and insurance charges. The files were coded so that the right one was given to the right people, so as soon as they were balanced against the records that Social Services had, your case worker had all the information he needed to generate an approval for the adoption. The only thing we were missing was the supervisors' countersignature, but after a phone call, the Judge was assured that if we completed the process last night, he would have the required signature this morning. Sharon already knows, but on the way here I picked up the paperwork." Dan paused for effect: "As of 8am this morning, Kyle, you are no longer Kyle Hodges; you are my SON, Kyle Calvin Richardson!"

As Teri leaned over to give Dan a hug of congratulations, the chair exploded into a mass hug for Kyle. Dan gave them a couple minutes, then went over and dug out Kyle.

When he was finally able to see his new son's face, his heart melted. Kyle had the biggest grin that Dan had ever seen, and still had tears of joy running down his face. "I have one question; may I have a hug, SON?"

Kyle managed to get one word out as he threw himself around Dan's neck: "DADDY!!!!"

It took fifteen minutes before Kyle pulled back from Dan, and another ten for JJ to finish welcoming his new brother.

After everyone was settled back in, Dan continued. "I made some arrangements for a tutor, if it's okay with you Teri. Both Kyle and Cory need time to make adjustments to the sudden changes they just went through, and with Cory getting the memory flashbacks as fast as he is, it's better that he not be in a public school if a bad one hits him. I believe the best support for both boys is sitting next to them right now; their brothers. I have made arrangements for all four boys to be tutored at the same time. I figure that way they can help each other adjust. Would it be okay for them to be home-schooled by the tutor here, Teri? That way if Cory needs to go off to recover, he will have a familiar place to go to."

"I think it's a great idea, I was worried about Cory at school anyway," Teri replied. "Also, you are right, this would be the best place, and Cory can go to either his or Sean's room if needed."

"What about Soccer?" Sean asked.

"You will still be considered a student at the school, and your coach should have no problems with you still being on the team. We will finalize everything tomorrow; so it looks like you guys get an extra day this weekend."

That satisfied Cory; but just as Dan was getting ready to ask if anyone had any questions, his cell phone rang.

## *Chapter 7*

Dan answered his phone.

"Hello."

"Dan, this is John. Is someone there with you?" The voice on the other end sounded concerned.

"Yes John; I'm at Teri Short's with the boys. Why, what's happening?"

"I stopped by the house to see how you guys were doing; and when I went inside, I found Sharon passed out on the floor. We are on our way to Mercy Hospital right now, Life Flight just left with her. Do you think Teri would mind watching the boys so you can get down here?"

Dan's face slowly turned ghost white as John was speaking. Dan put his hand over the microphone on the cell, and then turned towards Teri. "Teri, could you please watch the boys for a little while, I need to run to Mercy right away?"

Teri saw the terror in Dan's eyes, and immediately responded. "Yes, Dan. Take as long as you need."

"She said yes, John, so I'll be right down there."

"Okay, but be careful driving; those boys need you. Bye." John hung up before Dan could ask him any questions.

"What's happened Dad?" said JJ in a small, panicked voice.

"Sheriff John stopped by the house to see how we were doing, and found your mom lying on the floor," Dan answered in a low voice, "They are on the way to Mercy hospital right now, and I am going to meet them there. I want you two to stay here with Teri until I know more. I promise to let you know as soon as I know something."

"But ... " Kyle and JJ started simultaneously.

Dan held up his hand and stopped them. "No arguments boys, I need to get going."

With that, Dan grabbed his coat, gave Teri a hug and whispered in her ear, "Thank-you, she was taken out on Life Flight.", and then he hurried out the door.

\* \* \*

It was times like this when Dan appreciated the Iowa road system. Once he got off of 86th street onto I-80, he was easily able to do 80 without being a hazard; in fact he was passed a couple of times. '*Not bad for a 65 zone,*' Dan thought. Once he hit the west mixer, (the local name for both the west and east junctions of I80, I35, and I235), he dropped to 70 for the trip down I-235, even though the speed limit was 55. Within fifteen minutes he was at the 6th Ave exit, then

three minutes later he was handing his keys to the valet and running toward the emergency room. As he went through the revolving door; he found John, along with one of the deputies from the other night, waiting for him.

\* \* \*

As Dan headed out the door, Teri looked over at the boys. She saw the worry about Sharon in Kyle and JJ's faces, and her own boy's faces reflected the worry for their friends. Teri opened her arms, and immediately had JJ and Kyle on each side. Sean and Cory came up behind them and joined in the hug, wrapping the two youngest boys in a circle of support.

At first, Teri said nothing, but then she felt a familiar chill, and she knew Mike was with them again. It was immediately followed by another; not familiar like Mike, but she felt the care and concern. Just then, she had a premonition, and realized what needed to be said. "Kyle, JJ, could you please listen to me, it will only take a second?" The boys raised their faces to look at her, and as she looked them in the eyes, she said; "I want you to know that if anything happens to your mom, I will be here for both of you, for as long as I live."

Cory gasped, and a fresh tear ran from his left eye. As more tears began to fall, Sean pulled him up close, tight to his shoulder. Feeling Sean's support, Cory began to slowly speak quietly. "When I was little, my mommy went to the hospital. I was scared, and Teri was holding me, just like she is holding you now."

Teri looked into Cory's eyes, and a lump rose in her throat with what she saw. Looking back at her was the scared little boy that she had held so long ago, a little boy who put his absolute trust in her when he found out his mother was sick. Even before Mike's accident, this was one subject that was taboo around Cory, a wound that had never healed.

Cory continued. "When I found out that my mommy was sick, Teri said the exact same thing to me. She has kept her promise, and now I am proud to call her Mom. It hurts in my heart, I know I just remembered her saying it, and it reminded me of my mommy when she said it to you, but it feels like I had forgotten her being sick, even before Mikey's accident." His face slowly returned to normal, and then he spoke again. "Mom, I need to thank you for giving me a family back."

Teri leaned over the top of Kyle's head, and then kissed Cory on his forehead. She then managed to choke out "You're welcome, son."

After a few more minutes of hugs, they broke apart. Teri headed to the kitchen for a much-needed drink, while the boys headed toward the love seat. When Teri returned, she found Sean holding Cory, with JJ leaning against both of them, holding Kyle. The emotional roller coaster had been too much for them, and all were fast asleep. She retrieved a blanket to put over them, praying that her premonition was wrong, for their sake, and then took a seat in the chair to wait.

Three hours later, Teri woke up to the sound of the front door opening. She immediately shook off the sleep, and hurried to the foyer when she saw John helping Dan through the door. She guided them to the kitchen, and helped John seat Dan at the table.

Teri pulled John off to the side. "Is she that bad?"

A tear ran down John's face. "Sharon had a brain aneurysm, she was pronounced dead on arrival, there was nothing the doctors could do for her."

Teri gave John a hug of consolation, then went back to Dan. As she put her arm over his shoulder, she spoke softly to him. "Dan, I'm sorry, I want you and the boys to stay here, and I'll do whatever I can to help you. You gave me my son back, so the least I can do is to be here for you

now."

Dan looked up, with obvious gratitude behind the sorrow etched upon his face. "Thank you, Teri, right now I'm so lost, I don't know what to do," he then broke down into quiet sobs. Once he had regained some control, Teri gave him a concerned look.

"The boys need to be told as soon as possible, can you do it, or would you rather have either John or I do it?"

Dan seemed to draw on an untapped reservoir of strength when she said that. "I can do it; I need to be the one who does it."

"Alright, I will go get them, but wait until all four boys are in here and settled. I think my two are going to be the support that your boys will need. I learned the hard way what happens if you let them try to handle something like this on their own."

Teri went in and awakened the boys, sending Kyle and JJ to the bathroom before they went into the kitchen. As Sean and Cory got up, she pulled them close and spoke softly to them. "Guys, Kyle and JJ are going to need your help. Their mom has passed away, and I think you guys can help them more than anyone. I want you to promise me something. If either one of you even starts to have a problem, or you are not sure what to do, let me know right away. I don't want to see you lose everything you have gained back, Cory. And you, Sean, keep an eye on Cory too. When this is all over; I want all four of you to make it through; without anything even close to what Cory went through happening. Do you guys think you can handle it?"

Both boys gave Teri a hug, and she heard them both answer "Yes, Mom."

They went into the dining room, and Teri pulled out four chairs into an open area of the room. Just as Cory and Sean sat down in the two center chairs, JJ and Kyle came into the room. Cory waved Kyle over to sit in his lap, and, to Teri's surprise, Sean motioned JJ to come sit on his. Teri sat next to Cory and Kyle, and John took the seat next to Sean and JJ. Dan came over and knelt in front of the chairs the boys were sitting in.

"JJ, Kyle, your mommy had a brain aneurysm. What that means is that a blood vessel broke inside her head. There was no way to tell it was going to happen, there are no warning signs." Dan paused, seeing Sean and Cory pull both their charges tight against them. "Your mommy passed away before she even got to the hospital. The doctors said that she did not feel much pain, and that she passed quickly." Dan reached up, and JJ and Kyle fell into his arms. Right behind them, Cory and Sean joined the hug, expressing their sympathy and support without words.

"Does this mean I have to go back?" whimpered Kyle.

"No, baby, you do not have to go back," Dan replied.

"If anyone tries to make you go back they have to go through me first!" Teri stated, her resolve evident in her tone. "You have a father now, and I will not let you lose that."

That must have been the right thing to say, because Kyle relaxed and cuddled in closer to Dan. It took a half hour for everyone to get their emotions back under control. Teri then went to the kitchen and brought out some sliced ham, bread, and condiments. She knew if she had asked, nobody, or at least no adult, would admit to needing to eat. With the food in front of them, she hoped that they all would at least try to eat something.

The boys didn't disappoint her; as soon as they saw food they were at the table, plates in hand. *'Nice to know they still think with their stomachs,'* Teri thought wryly.

"Dan, John; get over here and grab a sandwich, before these monsters eat it all!" Teri called out. When Dan shook his head, Teri walked over to him. "I told you I would help however I could; that includes making sure that you eat something. You of all people should know that not eating when you are depressed worsens the depression. Now EAT!"

After they ate, Teri took Sean and Cory aside. "Guys, I'm going to have Dan and the boys

stay here at least tonight. Would you mind Dan using your room Sean, and then the boys can camp with you two? I'm hoping I can get John to stay with Dan, in case he has any problems overnight," she was proud when they both agreed without hesitation. Once Dan was convinced that he was not kicking Sean out of his room, he agreed that it would be better to try to rest there instead of on the couch.

Teri then went up to John. "John, I hate to ask this of you, but is there anyway possible you could stay here with Dan tonight? I really think that he will need a friend close by before the morning comes."

"I agree. If I could use your phone, I'll call the station so they know where to find me, I'm a bachelor, so not going home is not a big deal."

As she showed John to the phone, Teri looked in on the boys. They had migrated to the living room, and were holding a quiet discussion, punctuated with copious amounts of hugging. It was obvious that Sean was paying attention to JJ and Cory the most, both of which were paying close attention to Kyle. It appeared as if Sean and Cory were succeeding in comforting the other two boys; and surprisingly Cory looked to be holding up well, so far.

Fifteen minutes later, Teri showed Dan and John to Sean's room, while Cory and Sean took the boys to Cory's room. As the boys entered the room, Kyle exclaimed, "WOW, look at the size of that bed - COOL!"

Kyle's reaction at seeing the queen-sized bed that was in Cory's room, (Actually, there was a matching one in Sean's room too), broke the somber mood some, and caused the older boys to begin giggling under their breath. JJ was the first to regain control, "Kyle, put your eyes back in your head and hit the bathroom - you are first."

As Kyle headed into the bathroom, Sean explained to JJ: "Mom got queen size beds for both of us when we were kids, we would always end up sleeping in either my room or Cory's room. As a matter of fact - we still do, I don't know about Cory, but I have trouble sleeping without someone next to me. Last night, knowing that Cory was back home for good, I slept well for the first time in a year."

Cory started to give Sean the evil eye when he stated that they still slept together, but he was unable to restrain himself once Sean finished speaking. Cory pulled Sean into a tight hug, and quietly whispered in his ear; "I promise you will never sleep alone again. I love you, Sean."

Just before Cory pulled away, Sean said "It looks like tonight is a boxer's night, too much of an audience for nude." Just then Kyle walked back into the room, and the worried expression on his face immediately caught Cory's attention. "Sean, why don't you hit the bathroom with JJ; I think Kyle and I need to talk alone for a minute," Cory said, loud enough that JJ could hear him too. JJ looked over at Kyle, then returned his gaze to Cory and nodded his head, giving a slight smile showing he understood.

"Let us know when you are done, so we can come back out," said Sean.

Once the other two were out of the room, Cory sat on the bed and patted his leg for Kyle to sit on his lap. "What's the matter, buddy? You wanna tell me about it?"

"Do you have a sleeping bag I can use to sleep on the floor?" Kyle whispered.

"Why do you want to do that, the bed is big enough for all of us?"

"It's such a nice bed ... umm ... and, all of you will be sleeping there and ... well ... "

"Kyle," Cory interrupted "are you worried about someone getting mad if you have an accident tonight?"

"Yeah ... " Kyle muttered, hanging his head.

Cory put a finger under Kyle's chin, and then lifted Kyle's face up and kissed the tip of his little nose. "Don't worry little buddy, it wouldn't be the first time that bed has had a wet spot on it



in the morning. Does JJ know you have problems sometimes?"

"Yeah, but what about Sean? Won't he get mad at me?"

"Would it make you feel better if I talked to him? I'll tell you what; if he has a problem, I will make HIM sleep on the floor! Remember, this is my room!"

Kyle giggled at that thought. "Okay, you can tell him. Thanks Cory."

Cory lifted Kyle down, and then went over to the bathroom door and knocked. JJ came out first, but as Sean came out, Cory grabbed him and pulled him back into the bathroom. At the quizzical look from JJ, Cory replied; "Didn't you know? He's my slave; I need him to hold it for me!" Cory laughed and closed the door once he saw the shocked look on JJ's face.

Sean could barely contain his laughter. "I'm gonna kill you, what do you mean SLAVE!"

Cory giggled. "You are a slave to love, silly. Now, seriously, I need to talk for a second."

"Okay, what has that one lonely brain cell in that blond head of yours thought up now?"

"HEY! No kisses tonight if you are going to talk like that!" Cory giggled. "But, the reason I pulled you back in here is to warn you; Kyle has a problem with peeing the bed sometimes. He is worried that you will get mad if he has an accident tonight, and wanted to sleep on the floor. I think he needs to cuddle, considering all that has happened today, and told him I would make sure you knew, so you would not get mad or make fun of him."

Sean got serious. "Wow, poor little guy. Thanks bro, I think you are right. Don't worry; I will be just fine about it if he has an accident."

"I knew I loved something about you besides that cute face," Cory replied, then pulled Sean into a passionate lip lock."

As he paused to catch his breath, Sean replied, "Yeah and you are pretty smart, for a blond." Then he pulled Cory back to him to resume the kiss.

When they finally separated, Cory giggled. "Okay, get on out there so I can take a leak without you attacking me. If we stay in here much longer together we will be busted."

Sean smiled, and then left the bathroom. A couple of minutes later, Cory followed, and found the other three sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for him. "Come on guys, let's hit the sack." Cory then proceeded to strip down to his boxers.

After cleaning out his pockets, and then tossing his and Cory's clothes down the laundry chute, Sean turned around. He was surprised to see that Kyle was standing there nervously, still wearing his jeans. "Don't worry Kyle, we are all boys. Besides, if you have a problem tonight, you won't have anything to wear tomorrow."

Kyle blushed. "I ... umm ... don't have on underwear. I get all red and itchy if I wear any."

"What do you usually wear to bed?" Sean asked softly.

"Nothing."

Sean got on his knee in front of Kyle. "Would you be more comfortable if we all slept with nothing on? Usually Cory and I do, but we thought it would make you feel weird if we did that with you here."

A small smile graced Kyle's face. "Would you really do that for me? Yeah, it would make me feel lots better."

Sean gave him a quick hug. "Yes, you are a part of our family now; our mom decided that earlier today, when she said she would watch out for you."

Sean stood up, backed away from Kyle a few feet, and then dropped his boxers to the floor. He then looked around and saw that JJ and Cory had followed suit, both of them were also nude. He couldn't resist checking out JJ's hairless body, and appreciated the show JJ was unknowingly giving him.

Sean pulled his gaze from JJ before it became too obvious that the scenery interested him,

and looked to see how Kyle was doing. Kyle was not at the bed, so he looked around, and found him putting his jeans over the back of the desk chair. Looking at Kyle from the back, Sean was amazed at how tiny he looked, the little butt cheeks, with just a tiny bubble, and cute little dimples on the sides. When Kyle turned around, Sean was almost in shock; there was not an ounce of fat on him! Even though he did not look starved, Sean could still see each of his ribs. Kyle's hip bones were obvious, and as Sean looked closer he felt a jolt of sorrow for the boy in front of him; instead of two little lumps in the sack between his legs, there was only one, on the right side.

"Come here, angel, let's hit the sack," said Sean, motioning to Kyle.

As he headed towards the bed with Kyle snuggled under his arm, Sean thought to himself, *'I swear, I'm going to protect this little angel from anybody hurting him from now on.'*

JJ was already in bed, and once Sean and Kyle were there, Cory shut off the light and then joined them. It took a couple of minutes to sort out who was going to sleep where, then after a flurry of "Good Nights" and hugs everyone drifted off.

About fifteen minutes later, Teri looked in to make sure the boys were all okay. She smiled when she saw the arrangement. Cory was lying with Sean cuddled up to his right side and Kyle cuddled up to his left. Sean's right hand was just below Kyle's armpit on the side of his ribcage. JJ was cuddled up to Kyle's back, with his left arm draped over Kyle and Sean. The sheet was being held in place by Sean's forearm, and all the boys were snoring softly.

## Chapter 8

*Hey Y'all - Mike again!*

*I'm really proud of my little brothers right now; even though they are just getting over me "moving" up here, they are trying to be strong for JJ and Kyle. Sharon is really worried about the two boys and Dan, but she feels much better knowing Teri and the boys are there for them. I did my usual and opened my big mouth; in other words I volunteered to watch over Kyle and JJ so she could concentrate on Dan. There are good and bad sides to that - the good part is watching them grow, and seeing their memories. In one case that's bad though, once I started with Kyle I saw something which I hope the others can handle once it comes out.*

*I better go here; Sean screwed up and left a CD in the stereo, and things are about to get VERY messy! Some times I wonder about that kid...*

*Mike*

\* \* \*

Sean was awakened by soft moist lips pressing against his mouth and a tongue trying to worm its way between his teeth. He opened his eyes, and was barely able to distinguish the side of a very familiar head in the soft moonlight. There was no mistaking that bright, blond hair; it was Cory.

Sean began to return the kiss, and soon a tornado could have struck the bed and not disturbed the two lovers; both had completely forgotten about the other two occupants of the bed. Suddenly they both reached a simultaneous orgasm, coating each others chest with sperm.

As soon as he was able to speak, Sean managed to whisper: "What was that for?"

"I woke up, and I just needed to kiss you," Cory replied softly.

"Wow, why's that?" Sean asked with a huge smile.

"Just for you being you," Cory replied with a glint in his eye.

Just then, they were brought back to reality by a barely suppressed giggle. If blushes could glow, the entire bedroom would have been lit by the glow from their faces! They both looked in the direction the giggle came from, and there was JJ braced on one elbow with a very evident grin on his face.

"I wonder how Kyle slept through that; you both are so cute, but noisy as heck!" JJ snickered.

"You ain't gonna freak on us, are you?" Sean asked nervously.

"Naw; the only problem I have is deciding which one of you I wish was kissing me instead of the other one!"

"So, I guess that means you're gay too?" asked Cory.

"If I had any doubts, they are gone now;" he replied. "I think Kyle is the only one who did NOT make a mess in bed tonight!"

This got quiet chuckles from the three boys, and then Sean looked over at the clock. "Man, its only 3 o'clock? We better try to get some sleep here!"

"I'd better get between Kyle and you guys, let him cuddle up to my back; just in case he decides to cuddle again tonight," JJ stated.

"He fell asleep cuddled to me, so it might be better if we switch around, that way he won't wonder too much," Cory replied.

The other two agreed, so they switched around so that Sean was laying with Cory on one side and JJ on the other. Just as they settled in, Cory heard a low whimper behind him.

"I'm right here, lil' buddy, come on and cuddle up behind me," Cory said softly.

Cory felt Kyle's young body press against him, and what sounded almost like a purr was heard, as Kyle found Cory's arm and wrapped his little fingers around it. JJ laid his arm over Cory and placed his hand on Kyle's shoulder. Shortly thereafter, all four boys returned to a blissful sleep.

The next thing he knew, Sean awoke with a start; "Dang it! I forgot to shut off the alarm on the stereo!" he muttered.

Sean had been listening to his Backstreet Boys *Millennium* CD the day before, and had shut it off just as the last song started. As Sean sat up and reached for the remote to turn it off, JJ grabbed his arm to stop him. Sean looked over, and saw the tears running down JJ's face, and then heard soft sniffles coming from behind Cory.

'Of all the songs that could have played,' Sean thought, 'why did it have to be *The Perfect Fan*?'

Sean then looked down at Kyle, and saw that he too was in tears. He laid back down on his back, and pulled a weeping Cory up close to him. When the final chorus played, there were three tearful voices singing softly along with it:

\* \* \*

*You showed me  
When I was young just how to grow  
You showed me  
Everything that I should know  
You showed me  
Just how to walk without your hands  
'Cause Mom you always were  
The perfect fan*

*(Copyright © 1999 Backstreet Boys)*

\* \* \*

At the very end, as the stereo went silent after the final "*I love you Mom*" Cory, Kyle, and JJ collapsed in full fledged tears on top of Sean. All Sean could do was gather them in his arms

and hold them to comfort them while they were releasing the pain and loss they were all feeling. Sean considered one of his own "perfect fans.", Mike, and tears that had long been held inside of him suddenly came forth. The sound of Sean letting loose was the final straw, all the boys let their emotions free.

Fifteen minutes later, the tears were finally tapering off. The four boys had ended up in a massive 4-way hug, with Kyle lying on top of Sean's chest, and the other two taking opposite sides. Arms and legs were intertwined as each tried to give and receive support from the other by bodily contact.

Suddenly, Kyle whimpered and the other three noticed a sudden flow of warm fluid flowing near their midsections.

Sean looked down and saw the terrified face of Kyle. "You're okay, lil' buddy," Sean said calmly. "I'm proud of you, you made it all night. I understand it's hard to tell sometimes, but all of us crying made it harder for you to feel yourself getting ready to pee."

All three boys hugged Kyle tightly, then Cory asked; "Why don't we all go into the shower now and get washed up? When we are done Sean and I will change the sheets."

"They were due to be changed today, anyway," Sean said to Kyle. "You just made sure we actually do it for once!"

Kyle couldn't help but grin at that, "I'll have to ask your Mom what the laundry schedule is then, so I can make sure you do it when you are supposed to!"

Everyone chuckled at that, and then untangled themselves from each other to sit on the edge of the bed.

Sean got a serious look on his face, and started speaking. "Guys, the shower is just barely big enough for all of us; so I think to save time we might as well all shower at once. I don't know about the rest of you, but that crying session we just had makes me feel a little better. I know who some of you were crying for, and I can guess at the rest I think; but I thought I would answer before anyone has to ask, I was crying for Mike," he paused for a minute, and then continued. "Cory already knows this; but JJ and Kyle, I want both of you to know that anytime you need to talk, cry, or just have someone hold you I will be here for you."

Cory interrupted; "JJ, Kyle, trust me, he means it. I know you guys are just starting to see how close I am to Sean. When I heard the song, I started thinking about my mommy and also Mikey; and I realized that I needed to make sure I get better to make them happy. If you hold your hurt inside it will eat you up, you guy's dad taught me that; but I just figured out that you need to be happy too, or else you will end up being an old grouch," he looked at JJ and Kyle, and then continued. "I know right now y'all are thinking about the things you won't be able to do, but trust me, think about the good times that happened already. I had to learn the hard way you can't change what's already happened. In my case, I almost lost two people who love me in my grief. Please let Sean help you so you don't have to go through that."

As Cory finished, JJ and Kyle got up and hugged him, then went over to Sean and repeated the gesture.

"You both have helped me more than you can guess," said JJ. "I promise to let you know if I need anything, Sean, but if you see that I need a hug, or you think I need to talk, please just do it."

"That goes for me too," Kyle said softly.

The four of them joined in a group hug, and just before they broke it a warm wave of love covered them, the expressions on each one's face showed that they all felt it.

Kyle suddenly spoke up, his voice a mixture of awe and surprise; "That's Mike, he says we are all brothers now!"

The wave increased in intensity, seemingly confirming Kyle's proclamation, then slowly faded away. Sean, Cory, and JJ all looked at Kyle in wonder; it was obvious he was telling the truth, but they were shocked that he was able to know so much. At a loss for words, the three boys kissed Kyle on the forehead and then the four of them went to take a shower.

The shower was actually a little tight for all four of them to wash themselves, so JJ got an idea. "Why don't we just wash each other?" asked JJ, grinning at Sean and Cory.

"That's okay with me, what about you two?" Cory replied.

"Me too, what about you, Kyle?" Sean added.

"Well, I guess so, since you guys want to," Kyle replied quietly.

They washed Cory first; to nobody's surprise, when it came time to wash Cory's genitals there were three hands making sure EVERYTHING was spotless! The scene repeated itself with Sean and JJ, and by the time they were ready for washing Kyle, all three older boys were proudly sporting serious wood.

When it became Kyle's turn, they started at the top and worked down; but when they reached his waist, Kyle suddenly put his hands over his scrotum.

Sean had an idea what was wrong, and knew that how he responded now could make or break the trust Kyle was developing towards him. He waved the other two back, sat down in the corner of the shower on the ledge, then looked over to Kyle. "Come here and have a seat lil' buddy," he said, patting his leg. "We need to talk for a second."

Kyle sat on Sean's lap, with his legs held tightly together. He seemed on the verge of crying, so Sean wrapped his arm around him and pulled him up tight to comfort him.

"Kyle, you don't have to worry. We all know that you are younger than us, which means everything is smaller. But that's not what has you worried, is it?"

Kyle shook his head no.

"I think I know why, if I saw what I think I did last night. We need YOU to tell us for sure though, and I promise I won't laugh or make fun of you; and if either of your other brothers does I'll beat them up for you."

Kyle looked into Sean's eyes and saw the sincerity there, and then looked at the floor, speaking so softly Sean could barely hear him. "I've only got one ball; I'm a useless little eunuch who will never be a man."

Sean's hazel eyes darkened to almost black, and in a barely controlled voice, he asked, "Who was the sorry bastard who told you that?"

"My daddy used to tell everyone that before I was moved to the home."

"Kyle, I'm not mad at you at all, but I need you to look at my face for a minute while I tell you something."

Kyle looked up, and was stunned at the obvious rage that Sean was feeling.

"I swear, if I ever find that useless piece of shit that made you believe that about yourself, I will cut off his nuts and make him eat them while he slowly bleeds to death. That is a promise Kyle, no matter if its next week or twenty years from now, he WILL suffer for making you suffer."

JJ spoke up, the anger at what he had heard also evident; "Sean, there is one condition to that; you have to allow me to help you."

Cory reached up and turned off the cutout on the shower head. "You better make that both of us; that bastard has messed with the wrong kid, he messed with my little brother."

Sean stuck his right hand out flat, and Cory immediately placed his right hand on top of it. JJ followed suit, with Kyle being the last to join the group. "With God as my witness, we are brothers forever. As the saying goes from the Three Musketeers, All for One and One for All!"

With the show of support, Sean had calmed down enough to think rationally. "Kyle, I'm

going to have Mom make a doctor's appointment for you. That way the doctor can tell you how you are going to be affected, and if there is anything that will need to be done to make sure you don't have any problems. I'm going to pay for it out of my savings, that four-wheeler I have been saving for can wait, you are more important."

The look of amazement on Kyle's face was priceless. He was speechless; all he could do was tighten his hold on Sean to express his gratitude.

"Kyle, I have an idea," said JJ, "before we wash you up, why don't you show each of us your nut and let us feel it, so that way you know for sure that none of us have a problem with it?"

Kyle thought for a minute; "Yeah, that would make me feel better, is it okay if Sean goes first though?"

"That's fine lil' bro, this is for you, not us."

All three boys checked Kyle out, commenting on how nice they thought he looked. JJ took it a step further, as just before he stood up, he dove in with his head and placed a quick kiss on the smooth sac. This evoked giggles from all the boys, as they then turned the shower head back on and finished washing up Kyle.

After everyone was dried off, JJ and Kyle got another shock as Sean and Cory started combing out and fixing up each other's hair. "JJ, can we do that too?" Kyle asked.

"I would love to, lil' bro; especially if it will make you happy!"

It took twenty minutes for everyone to be satisfied with the other's hair, with Cory and Sean giving JJ and Kyle pointers on how to make each other look better. When they finally emerged from the bathroom, another problem presented itself.

"You guys need some clothes to wear today!" Cory exclaimed.

"Naw, we can wear what we wore yesterday," JJ replied.

"No way! I'm sure there's still something of mine here that y'all can wear!" At that, Cory began digging through his dressers and closet, tossing out various items for the boys to wear. The boxers and shorts he tossed out to JJ fit fairly decent, and he found an old pair of drawstring swim trunks, which had been too small even before he left, that were able to be worn by Kyle without looking really out of place; they just looked like the extremely baggy style that some boys wore. He pulled a tee shirt out and tossed it to JJ, and then he suddenly stopped for a second. He slowly reached in and carefully pulled out a well-worn Chicago Cubs tee shirt. With a small smile on his face, he turned to Kyle.

"Kyle, this shirt is very special. A couple of years ago, Mikey took Sean and me to Chicago for a Cubs game. He bought this shirt for me, and it became my favorite shirt. It won't fit me anymore; but now more than ever it means a lot to me. Seeing you wear it would make me so happy, it will be as if I am sharing Mikey with you. If you say okay, it's yours, all I ask is that you take care of it the best you can; maybe someday when you outgrow it you will find someone else special to give it to."

Kyle walked over and carefully took the shirt from Cory's hands, then reached around Cory with his free arm to give him a hug. "I'll take really good care of it, Cory. It's my favorite shirt now too!"

As Kyle stepped away, Sean stepped up to Cory and wrapped him in an embrace. "This is for being the most loving, caring person I know," said Sean as he moved to passionately kiss Cory.

When they had finally managed to untangle their tongues, they turned to see JJ running for the bathroom holding his crotch, while Kyle was just standing there frozen with his jaw on the floor. Cory walked up to Kyle and gently closed his mouth.

"Hey lil' bro, are you alright with what you just saw, or do you want to talk?" Cory said softly while lightly placing his hands on Kyle's shoulders.

"I thought boys only kissed girls like that."

"Most of the time you are right, but some boys, like Sean and I, fall in love with other boys instead of girls. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Yeah, I've heard some of the older boys. But they called boys who did that faggots and made fun of them; they said they wear dresses and makeup."

"You did not know this, so I'm not mad at you; but faggot is a nasty name, its just as bad as calling someone a nigger. The right way to say it is that Sean and I are gay. As far as makeup and dresses go, a few gay people do that, but most of them dress just like the rest of the boys you know. Sean and I were born this way; it's not something we chose to be. Being around us won't make you gay, and we don't force other people to do the things we do with each other."

Kyle reached out and pulled Cory close to him. "I understand now, and I swear I will never use that bad word again, or make fun of someone like you guys."

"Thanks bud. But you need to try not to tell anyone, let us do it. There are people out there who would hurt us, just because they don't understand."

"Okay, I promise. If I think someone should know I'll ask you to tell them."

"That's a great plan, buddy."

As Cory was talking to Kyle, JJ came out of the bathroom blushing fiercely. Sean took him off to the side out of hearing range.

"JJ, as you obviously figured out, Cory and I are now out to Kyle. It might not be a bad idea for you to do the same while we are all here; Cory is explaining it so that Kyle understands."

"Thanks, I've been wanting to for a while, but did not know how to do it without taking a chance of him hating me."

Sean looked over at the other two just as they started hugging. "It looks like Cory has that taken care of, sometimes he amazes me. By the way, Mom is cool with it too, so you might want to tell her so she does not worry. Tell her Kyle knows too, that should make her feel better."

"Okay, will do. Dad is cool too, you want to tell him?"

"Sure, I'll do that. Thanks for telling me."

JJ walked over to Kyle and Cory. "Kyle, bro, I need to tell you something too."

Kyle looked up at JJ, paused for a second, and then smiled. "Go ahead, I bet I know now, but it's just a guess."

JJ relaxed. "Kyle, I'm gay too. I don't have a boyfriend yet, but someday I hope to find someone like Cory or Sean."

"I hope you do, JJ. I love all of you!"

Sean interrupted; "I hate to break this up, but we better get downstairs before all the food is gone!"

JJ laughed, "You're right. Dad's here, he will eat the place spotless!"

They went out in the hall, and were just getting ready to go down the stairs when Kyle spoke up. "Cory, can I PHULEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE have a ride on your shoulders?"

In between chuckles, Cory replied; "Sure, but these two are going to have to help steady us going down the stairs!"

After they were all in position, they slowly made their way down the stairs into the foyer. The adults were all in the living room, and it appeared they had been talking until they saw the kids in the foyer. There was Cory standing there with Kyle on his shoulders, while Sean and JJ all but hung off of each side of him. The way the boys were holding each other made it obvious that they were more than friends. There was a closeness and comfort level that no boy over the age of ten would ever allow if he was straight.

Sheriff John was the first to speak. "Well, I guess that answers that question. Just to get



things out in the open, guys, I'll let you know I'm Bi."

"What's Bi?" asked a puzzled Kyle.

Cory had recovered from the announcement quickly, so he answered. "Bi means that he likes boys as well as girls, Kyle."

"Wow, lucky you!" Kyle replied.

The innocence in the tone of Kyle's reply made the comment too much for the adults to take, as they all fell laughing into the nearest seat. The boys were barely containing their giggles, and as soon as Kyle realized what he had said he himself was giggling.

"Thank you Kyle," John choked out, "that's the best anyone has made me feel in a long time!"

The boys entered the room, and JJ spoke up first. "Teri, Sean and I talked a bit, and he said I better tell you that I'm gay."

Sean spoke next. "Dan, just to be fair, it's best you know that Cory and I are both gay, as well as boyfriends. Kyle knows about all of us."

All the adults looked at Kyle. "Don't look at me; I'm just here for the free shoulder rides!"

Teri spoke up. "Did all you ... "

JJ interrupted; "No, we did not do anything. But, if you see me running for the bathroom when they kiss, now you know why."

Dan decided to speak too; "Okay; since everyone else is out, I might as well get it in the open too; I'm also Bi."

Teri chuckled; "I love it, I'm a minority in my own home! From the looks of it, my suggestion for housing has become a need, instead of an idea. To fill you kids in, we were discussing getting a place together in Wauke. Hopefully, one with a good amount of property, so you guys can have fun. That way, Dan can travel to conferences to update his schooling, without having to worry about you clowns."

The boys rushed the adults in a frenzied hug. Cory then stepped back for a second and faced Dan. "Dan, you know how you always told Kyle and me that we needed to release our emotions to get better?"

"Yes, why?"

"This morning all four of us released a lot at the same time. I know I feel better, and it looks to me like everyone else is too. I thought you would like to know so you would not be worried."

"Thank you Cory. It makes me feel a LOT better knowing you are watching out for each other. I am still here, if any of you need to talk to someone else though, as is Teri."

"Thanks Dan, we'll all remember that."

The conversation was interrupted by a soft knock at the front door.

"I'll get it, mom," said Sean.

Sean opened the front door, looked outside, and yelled "MOM; Come here QUICK, it's Tyler, and he is crying!"

Teri ran to the door "What's wrong Ty?"

Tyler handed her an envelope, then wrapped his arms around her and started sobbing on her shoulder.

Teri looked at the outside. It simply said, "Tyler, read right away," she then opened the envelope behind his back. There were two items in it: A note and another envelope. She read the note first.

Tyler:

*By the time you find this, we will be long gone.*

*The only time you ever seem happy is when Teri baby-sits you after school, so we are leaving you with her. Take the note inside here with you, it gives her all the papers she needs.*

Mom

Teri then opened the other envelope. Inside were a key, a power of attorney, and another note.

Teri:

*You get along so well with the brat, you can have him!*

*The key and power of attorney will get you into a safe deposit box at the Firststar bank down the street.*

*In it will be all his important records, along with a letter giving you guardianship of him. Note that he is non-returnable, even after you see what he is really like you are still stuck with him.*

Frank and Julie Cooper

John walked up just as she finished reading. "Grab your badge, John, you are on the clock starting RIGHT now; read these!" Teri growled.

John read the notes, and then knelt behind Teri so he could talk to Tyler. "Tyler, I'm Sheriff John Cooper, but you can just call me John. Can you tell me when and where you found this?"

"Yes sir, I found it in a box of cereal this morning."

"Thanks, now for the hard question, then I'm done. When was the last time you saw them?"

"Friday before school, sir."

"You are safe now; I know Teri is going to take care of you. I will be back out in a minute; I have to make a phone call."

"Okay."

John grabbed Dan and dragged him into the office. He did not even take the time to close the door, so everybody heard him about a minute later. "... I don't care if he has the POPE in his chambers! I said I need to speak to Judge Lewis on an official police emergency; get Joe on the phone NOW!" Five minutes later, the two came back out of the office, Dan grinning from the show he just witnessed.

"Teri," John said, "Judge Lewis will be here in about an hour. We are going to make sure you are set up LEGALLY so they can NOT cause this little angel any more pain."

He then knelt down to be at Tyler's face. "Hey Tyler, do you want to live here with Teri and the boys from now on?"

For the first time since entering the foyer, Tyler raised his head, and a glimmer of hope

appeared in his eyes. "Yes, sir! Can you do that?" Then his voice dropped; "That is if Teri wants a pain in the butt like me around."

"Ty, you are no worse than the other four in the other room," Teri replied "and I feel sorry for anyone who tries to separate the FIVE of you. When you walked in the door today this became your new home."

"Does that mean I can call you mommy?"

"Only if you want to and are comfortable with it, if not you can still call me Teri."

"Okay... mommy!"

Teri's heart melted at the sincere trust he placed in that one word, and Teri vowed to herself that she would never break that trust; even after what had happened, the little angel had just placed his full trust in her.

"C'mon squirt! Let's go in to see your brothers. You have more than you expected!" Teri said with a smile.

\* \* \*

#### **Kyle's viewpoint:**

It was weird! I was sitting on the love seat, facing away from the door, when Teri came in with Ty. I heard her introduce him to JJ, and she made sure that Cory remembered him; it took Cory a few seconds, just like most blonds, but then his brain started working and he remembered Ty from before the accident. It seems that Ty was already gone by the time Cory got here on weekdays while we were living at the home, so they did not get a chance to re-meet each other.

Anyways, shortly it was my turn, so I stood up and turned around to see him. Our eyes met and we both froze! My chest felt like it was gonna explode, and I was lightheaded. Ty later told me he felt exactly the same way. Standing in front of me was a boy about my age, with fine blond hair that was so bright it almost looked silver. He was about my height, but built a little sturdier, unlike me he did not have to run around in the shower to get wet!

What really caught my attention though were those steel grey eyes; I could see a loneliness and fear in them I knew all too well, but there was something deeper, a need to love and be loved, that grabbed my soul. Without thinking, I walked up to him, ran my fingers through his hair, which is almost as long as mine, and pulled him into a tight hug. I felt so happy when he immediately returned the hug!

While I have the chance, I want to thank Mikey for helping me write down what I felt. For some reason, he is able to talk to me, and he helped me figure out what to write so it made sense. I'm really glad we are all keeping these diaries now, there is so much happening I'm not sure I can remember it all!

\* \* \*

Everyone watched as the two boys embraced for almost ten minutes. Once they finally separated, Teri said gently; "Why don't all you boys go up to your room and talk. We are going to get everything ready for when the Judge gets here. If he needs to see you, one of us will come and get you."

She was hit with a mixed chorus of "okay, mom.", "okay, Teri.", and "okay, mommy." The boys then all headed upstairs to their room.

"Dan," Teri said as she walked into the office with Dan and John "don't worry about how

many bedrooms are in the house when you are looking. just make sure it has lots of property. Even though I'm betting most of them won't be used for sleeping, we might as well build a whole wing of bedrooms for that crew."

"I agree, from the reaction we just saw, I think it might be a good guess to say that within the next four years you might find out you are the token straight person in the household. Are you sure you don't want to switch sides while you can?" Dan sat down with a grin.

"No way, somebody has to keep all you guys in line!" Teri laughed.

"Dan," John started, "before things get nuts again, I have something to tell you. I was going to tell you last night, but once you calmed down you fell right asleep. I made a couple of calls, and you don't need to do a thing about Sharon's funeral. The State is going to handle it all for you, including paying for it. The governor said it's the least they could do, after all the help you have given us."

"Thanks John, you just settled the one thing that was worrying me the most. As long as I can hold it together long enough to get some things from the old house today, I should be okay, with you and Teri supporting me."

"You are not going there alone; I already have guys fighting to help. Word got around quick, and I kind of slipped over the open channel and let everyone know you were going to be staying here." John grinned as he said it; obviously the slip was on purpose.

Just then the doorbell rang. John answered it, and came back into the office with Judge Lewis.

"Hello Dan; and you must be Teri. My condolences about Sharon, are you doing okay, Dan?"

"I'm holding on, Judge. Teri's two seem to be helping my two a lot, so it's easier than it could be."

"Dan, you know out of the courtroom it's Joe! Of course SOME people have been known to use that familiarity to badger a certain clerk, who for some reason does not understand what 'Police Emergency' means."

John looked up in the air, and attempted to look innocent.

"Have you eaten yet, Joe?" asked Teri.

"Actually, no. I have been running all morning."

"You mind joining us for brunch? I know five boys who must be starving. Then we can settle the rest of this mess after we have all eaten."

"That sounds great, I always think better on a full stomach, plus it gives me a chance to see all the boys in an informal setting."

Teri went to the intercom. "Sean?"

"Yes mom?"

"Get your crew together and come on down to the kitchen. We're going to set up for brunch, and I can use a few hands."

"Okay, Mom, we'll be right down."

A minute later, the five boys walked into the kitchen. Teri was pleasantly surprised to see that someone had ensured that Ty was cleaned up and groomed. Considering he and Kyle never got more than three feet apart since they met, she had her suspicions as to who that someone was!

"Okay guys. Grilled ham and cheese sandwiches sound good?" Teri asked.

She received a resounding "Yes" from everyone, so she began to work.

"Kyle, Tyler; You guys are in charge of buttering the bread and putting the sandwiches together. JJ, Cory; you two get everyone drinks and set the table in the dining room. Sean, you are in charge of slicing the ham and cheese for the sandwiches."

In no time the brunch was ready. The boys made the normal amount of "mistakes"; which naturally had to be eaten to hide the evidence. The remaining sandwiches were put on a platter, bags of chips were set out for whoever wanted them, and Teri led the boys into the dining room.

John stood up. "Boys, before you sit down, come over here so you can be introduced."

"Boys, this is Judge Lewis. As long as you are not in his courtroom, you can call him Joe. Joe, you already know JJ, and I'm SURE you remember Kyle. The tall blond standing next to Kyle is Cory, the other tall one is Sean, and the young blond is Tyler."

"I'm glad to meet all of you. Tyler, do you know what? My middle name is Tyler, so that must mean you are a good person to have such a great name!" Joe said with a smile.

Ty's face turned bright pink. "Thank you Joe. I'll do my best to live up to it."

At that, everyone sat down to eat. As they were finishing up, Joe spoke up. "I'm impressed. All you boys should be proud of yourselves; I would have never expected a group that has been put together the way you all were to be so in-sync. Your parents and I need to do some work now, but I had to say how lucky they are to have kids like you. Tyler, enjoy your new home here and your new brothers. Teri, be prepared to come by my chambers on short notice, I am going to fast-track adoption papers for Ty, so we can ensure he never has to leave here."

After a chorus of thank-yous, the boys returned to their room to finish getting acquainted, as the adults settled down to prepare the paperwork to protect Tyler, and guarantee his place in the household.

## Chapter 9

Once the boys returned to Cory's room, Sean decided that it would be best to have a serious talk.

"Kyle, Ty," Sean started, "We all need to talk. Do you guys promise to pay attention, or does JJ have to sit between you?"

This caused both suspects to blush fiercely, but they then looked at each other and answered as one; "We'll listen."

"Okay, everyone grab a seat on the bed then," Sean said with a grin.

"Cory, JJ; can I go ahead and speak for you? You know what I need to talk about, and it is something we share."

Both boys nodded their head yes.

"Thanks. Ty, listen up. I have a few things to talk about. Since it looks like you are going to be living here, there are some things you need to know about us. It's nothing bad, but it would be better to know now if you are uncomfortable, instead of finding out later. First thing is, do you know what it means if someone is gay?"

"Doesn't it mean that they are really happy?" Ty replied. This immediately produced a round of giggles from all the other boys, which took a few minutes to settle down.

"In some cases, yes, that's right," Sean replied, grinning. "But it also has another meaning. When a guy likes other guys instead of girls that means gay too."

"Does that mean I'm gay?" Ty replied. "I really like Kyle a lot! It scares me if I think he is even going to leave the room," he then looked at Kyle, the fright in his eyes obvious. It increased as he realized what he had just said.

Kyle saw the fear, and immediately pulled Ty into his arms to prove it was okay. The other three boys just looked on in shock, not believing they had heard an eight year old profess love so plainly. Once he felt Ty relax again, Kyle started to pull away, but he stopped long enough to whisper softly in Ty's ear. "Ty, even if you can't see me, you don't need to worry. I PROMISE I will never run away from you," he then looked deep into Ty's eyes, and watched the fear melt away as Ty realized he was serious. The boys resumed their positions side by side, holding hands to give each other strength.

Sean finally recovered. "Well, that saves me quite a few things I was going to ask. I guess that means you have no problems with Cory, JJ, and me being gay, do you?"

Kyle spoke up. "I feel about Ty like he does about me - so I guess I'm gay too!"

"All you guys have been so nice to me, I wouldn't care if you were from Mars!" Ty replied. "But I don't care who you like, the judge said you are going to be my brothers forever, and

if being gay was bad he wouldn't let you be my brothers. I have always wanted a big brother, but the closest thing I ever had was you, Sean. Now I have a whole bunch of big brothers!"

Sean smiled at the logic behind Ty's statement. "Kyle, Ty, you guys are too young to tell if you are gay for sure, but I think there is a chance that you might be. Being gay is something you are born with, like the color of your eyes, but it's hard to be sure till you are eleven or so. Don't worry, we all will support you; no matter if you are gay or not when you get older. Now, Kyle, we can all see that it's impossible to separate you and Ty, so it's a good guess that you will probably be sleeping together tonight. Don't you think there is something you need to tell him? And Ty, don't laugh, promise?"

"Okay, I won't laugh, I promise."

Kyle shrank in embarrassment; the insecure little boy showed through as he looked at his feet. He mumbled just barely loud enough to hear. "Sometimes at night, I have accidents, I pee the bed. I guess you should know something else too. I'm not normal in my privates; instead of two nuts I only have one."

By the time Kyle had finished, Ty was holding him tightly, not speaking, but showing his support through body contact. Once Kyle settled back down, Ty spoke softly "I don't care about the pee, if it's an accident, then there nothing either one of us can do. Don't worry about your privates; I like ALL of you Kyle, just as you are. If only having one nut helped make you like this, then I'm happy you only have one."

Kyle gave a small smile. "Thank you, Ty. You don't know how much better I feel hearing that from you. You're the greatest."

"I think that just about covers anything that could be a problem," Sean said. "What you guys think about pl...?" Sean stopped when Kyle suddenly sat up straight with a far away look in his eye.

"JJ, you need to go get John NOW!" Kyle barked. "Mike is talking in my head again; he says it's urgent!"

JJ started to run for the doorway, but he then remembered the intercom in the room. He pushed the all-call button, and yelled into the microphone. "If anyone can hear me, we need John up here NOW!"

JJ then ran over to the door and opened it. The sounds of adults running up the stairs made it quite clear he had been heard.

"What's wrong?" an out of breath John asked.

Kyle started to speak, but Cory interrupted him. "You won't believe it, but trust us. This is not the first time this has happened, but Mikey can somehow speak to Kyle in his head so that Kyle can understand him. It happened just now, and he told Kyle to get you in here quick. Please listen, this is not a joke."

Before anyone had a chance to answer, Kyle spoke. It was not his normal voice; it seemed deeper and much more urgent. "Mike says there is a Days Inn at the corner of University and 109th. Ty's parents are in room 126, and they have his half-brother Adam there. Mike said to get someone over there now, because Adam is about to get hurt by them." As soon as he finished, Kyle collapsed onto the bed, looking completely drained.

Ty cuddled down next to him. "Are you okay, Kyle?" Then it hit him what Kyle had just said, and he began sobbing. "I have had a brother and nobody told me? They left me for him, now they are going to hurt him too. WHY?" Teri came over to the bed and pulled both boys into her arms, slowly calming Ty while reviving Kyle.

There was just a seconds hesitation, but then John quickly looked around the room and spotted the phone on the computer desk. He strode over to the desk. "Joe, I'm glad you witnessed

this, because nobody is gonna believe the source!" John said as he reached for the phone. He quickly dialed a number, which was answered almost immediately. "Ruth? Sheriff Martin. I just got a lead on the parents who abandoned the Cooper boy. The information also suggests another boy may be in danger. Roll all available units to the Days Inn at University and 109th, Code 3. I'm rolling now, call the manager and request he standby with keys to room 126. My ETA is 5 minutes. I'll radio you from the car." John looked over at the boys. "Kyle, Ty, JJ; come with me. Everyone else load up in the other cars and follow me, if Mike is right you all might be needed before this is over."

With JJ's help, Teri managed to get Kyle and Ty to John's car. Cory, meanwhile, made sure all the seats in Teri's Suburban were folded up for use. Sean followed Cory, and as they were latching the 3rd row seat in place, they were surprised to hear the deep rumble of Dan's Camaro starting. The two boys looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

"Guess we'll be alone with Mom," Cory quipped.

"Okay guys, strap in," Teri stated as she walked up to the Suburban and climbed into the drivers seat. The roar of Dan taking off told everyone who would be there first.

Dan's Camaro was parked at the curb, so by the time John and the boys backed onto the road, Dan and Joe were already out of sight. John flipped on his dash flashers, and then sped off with Teri's Suburban in close pursuit. JJ was in the back of John's car with Kyle and Ty, holding them and calming Ty down.

Sean and Cory were in the center row of seats in the Suburban. Cory leaned forward and asked Teri; "If Adam is Ty's brother, does that mean he might be moving in with us too?"

"I don't know, son. If he is taken from Ty's parents, I would think that they would want to keep them together. I will try to keep him and Ty together, if they want it and all of you agree to it. It's amazing how well all of you have bonded, but if he does not fit in I will not force you boys to live with him. Remember, none of us has even met him, not even Ty."

In the other car, John picked up the radio. "Unit 3 to all units, there is a black 93 Camaro en route to the Days Inn at 109th. You are instructed to escort him to that location if you spot him; the vehicle contains emergency response personnel."

"This is unit 23, he is on Hickman, and I just waved him in behind me."

"This is unit 3, thank you unit 23."

"Unit 3 to all units, Clear channel 2 for Days Inn traffic only."

"Dispatch to unit 3, Channel 2 clear for Days Inn. All units, all other traffic is to move to Channel 3"

As they pulled into the lot, John turned around and said; "Boys, stay low in the back seat there. Either an officer, one of your parents, or me will come and tell you it is okay to get out. I don't want to take a chance of any of you getting hurt."

As the car came to a stop, the motel manager came up to the driver's door. "I have to ask this, Sheriff. Why do you need access to room 126? And do you have a warrant?"

"We have information the occupants are wanted, and other information a crime might be in progress. That's all I can say. If you have a pen, there's a judge sitting in the passenger seat of that Camaro who will gladly sign the warrant to make you happy," John replied.

Just then, Dan walked up and handed a paper to John. "Joe said you might need this," he said with a grin.

John smiled. "Never mind the pen, it looks like he found one," he said as he showed the signed warrant to the manager.

The manager reached in his pocket, and handed the master key card to John. "Thanks, Sheriff; that was all I needed; now both of us are covered. That key will open the Cooper's door as



long as the deadbolt is not set. If it is, you will have to kick down the door to open it."

John waved Dan to go back near his car, and then, after a quick conference with the rest of the officers, the police moved into the lot near room 126. Two of the officers went up to the door. "This is the Polk County Sheriffs Department. Open up, we have a warrant."

There was no response from inside, so one of the officers tried the key card. It turned the light green, but did not release the latch. "Someone's inside, the deadbolts set," the other officer said over his radio.

Both officers suddenly perked up. "We just heard a loud slap then a scream inside; request permission for forced entry," the second officer called over the radio.

The manager was standing behind John and heard the radio. "Go ahead," he said. "If anyone bitches, I'll take the heat." John nodded, and then motioned two other officers to move in to assist in opening the door. "Access authorized," he called into the radio.

The two largest officers moved in and set themselves to kick, while the other two took up positions to move into the room. It took two solid kicks, but then the door suddenly caved in. The two officers moved in fast. The officers outside heard a "thud" and saw one of the inside officers start to fall, then a shot was heard from in the room.

"Unit 57 to dispatch; Roll EMS to Days Inn, shots fired, officer down." The outside officers locked and loaded, then crashed into the room.

A minute later, there was a scream; then a preteen boy came running through the door, totally naked. He was covered in welts and marks from what appeared to be a belt. As he ran across the lot, John moved to intercept him. As John got closer, he could see most of the marks seemed fresh; but there were also bruises starting to appear, which told John that the torture had been going on all morning. Every inch of the boy's slim body seemed to have a mark on it.

As the boy reached the grassy area at the edge of the lot, John finally got close enough to grab him.

"Are you Adam?" John asked as he caught the boy and held on to him as carefully as he could.

"Don't hurt me!" the boy cried.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm John Martin, the sheriff here. You are safe now; I won't let anyone hurt you."

The boy collapsed, crying, into John's arms. John knelt so that the boy could sit on his lap, and let him cry out the pain. John looked up after a few minutes, and noticed JJ heading toward him. He looked towards his car, and saw Teri there with the rest of the boys. When JJ reached them, he did not say a word, but dropped his shorts so that he was just in boxers and a long tee shirt. He handed the shorts to John. "He needs these more than I do."

John smiled at the generosity of JJ. He lifted the boy's head, and asked again in a soft voice; "Is your name Adam, buddy?"

"Yes, Sir," he sobbed.

"Please call me John, I get a feeling you will see a lot of me when I'm off duty. It looks like you have already made a friend. This is JJ, and it sounds like he has decided that he would prefer to walk around in his boxers instead of letting you stand here nude."

Adam dropped his head in shame, and mumbled through his tears "He don't want me to wear them, I'm a no-good queer. Nobody would want to be friends with a faggot, and if I did put them on, he would probably throw them away when he got them back. That way he wouldn't catch cooties from me. I bet he would never want them back."

On hearing this, JJ quickly walked up to Adam. He lifted Adam's chin so he could see his face. "Adam, there is no such thing as a no-good queer. You are gay, so am I, and so is the boy

who all the clothes that I'm wearing belong to."

JJ noticed Adam had hair just like his little brother, a blonde so bright it looked silver, and as he lifted Adam's chin to look him in the eye, he found the most amazing ice-blue eyes he had ever seen. Adam stood up straight as JJ lifted his chin, and it became evident they were almost exactly the same height. Dan moved off to the side of the boys, and was pleasantly surprised when JJ knelt down to assist Adam, helping him put the shorts on with a minimum of pain.

As the shorts were finally wiggled in place, John was shocked again as Cory walked up and stripped off his shirt; he then handed it to JJ so that JJ could help Adam put it on.

"It's probably best he has a shirt too, bro. Ty is gonna freak if he sees all them bruises up close. That's not what anyone wants to see on his big brother, especially not the way he's all marked up. By the way, I'm Cory." Cory then got a grin on his face "You know what? I think my clothes are being worn by half the city today. Let me guess, you must be Adam, right?"

Adam gave a little smile at the humor, "Yeah, seems like everyone knows me already." Suddenly it registered what Cory had said. "You said his big brother? Wait a second; did you say Ty? Tyler? You mean Tyler Cooper?"

"That's him. He is waiting over there to meet you. He did not even know he had a big brother until just a little while ago," Cory replied.

Adam was overcome with rage, but managed to speak through clenched teeth. "That bastard told me Tyler was dead! Mom got real sick, so she called him. She had told me I was going to be living with him, his wife, and my little brother, but when I asked where Tyler was, that bastard told me he was dead."

Cory took a chance. "Who did this to you?"

"They both did, I was getting along great, then I thought I'd be honest and tell them I thought I was gay, but then the next thing I knew they had stripped me and both of them were beating me with belts and slapping me."

Just as Cory had asked who did it, Joe walked up, so he heard what Adam had said happened. "Hi, Adam, I'm Judge Lewis, but call me Joe out of the courtroom. I'm the local family judge, so I can make emergency placements if I see a reason to. What you just said is more than enough reason; so I'm placing you with the first available emergency home. The good news is; it happens to be these boy's mom that is available. The better news is; it happens to be the same place that Tyler is going to be living from now on."

"What about them?" Adam asked, as he looked toward the motel room in fear.

John spoke up first "Don't worry about them; the state of Iowa tends to frown on gay bashing. The state REALLY frowns upon it when it's a child who is the victim and the bashers are adults. On top of that, they abandoned Tyler; so my guess is they won't even be allowed to have Beanie Babies. There is a better chance of me becoming President of the United States next year than there is of them EVER getting custody of either you or Tyler."

Joe chuckled. "Well put, John," he then looked back at Adam.

"He was right, though. Put those two out of your mind, John's boys will handle them. Right now, you need to follow along with your new brothers, that way you can meet the rest of your family. John and I have to write down a statement from what you just said, and then he needs to secure the area. Later on, he will probably need to ask you a bunch of questions, but for now you have been through enough. Once we get this all cleaned up here, we are going to take you to the hospital to be checked out. We need to make sure that you are going to be okay before you go home with your new family, wouldn't you agree?"

Adam looked at Joe quizzically. "But how do you know they are going to be my family? They're probably not going to like me. There is no way all of them are going to want someone they

don't know around, especially someone who is gay."

"The reason I know is I will be the one signing the papers," Joe replied. "As far as the rest of your question, ask Cory and JJ."

Cory turned Adam toward him before speaking. "I can tell you now, being gay is not a problem in this family. The only person who lives in the house who is not gay is mom; and she supports all of us as long as nobody gets hurt. The two youngest, one of which just happens to be your little brother, are too young to tell; but they both are showing signs that they may be too. Sean and I have already talked to mom; and she agreed to let you join the family as long as all of us agreed to it. Honestly, from what I have seen so far, you will fit in with the rest of us with no problem. Actually, you are a lot like your little brother, so you should fit in great. Besides, I think goofy over there might be developing a crush on you!"

Both boys looked over to see JJ standing there with a beet-red face. "Well ... ummm ... what can I say, he's CUTE!"

Adam pulled JJ close. "You are too, but how you can think I'm cute looking like this we are going to have to have a LONG talk about!"

JJ and Adam both giggled over that statement then returned their attention to Cory, once they had finally calmed down.

"I will warn you," Cory continued, "Sean will probably get on your case if you talk down about yourself around him. It will be because he wants to help you though, not because he is mad. He is the best guy I know to talk to; maybe later we can sit down and catch up on everyone's recent troubles. Right now, though, there's an eight year old little boy who is going to kill us if we don't get you over to him. By the way, how old are you, Adam?"

"I just turned twelve on July 30th. By the way, thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Cory and JJ, I feel a little better now."

"AWESOME!" JJ broke in, "my birthday is August 1st!"

"You're welcome, Adam," Cory replied, "and I guess since my birthday is July 31st, that means we get to have a MAJOR three-day party next year!"

Adam smiled. "I'm already starting to feel like I fit in. You guys are great!"

Cory and JJ each took one of Adam's hands, then they escorted him to the waiting group by the car. As they walked, JJ talked to Adam. "You know, everyone has problems. The difference with this group is; all of us kids have sworn to stand alongside each other, and to help with those problems. If it's something we can't handle, there are a BUNCH of adults who are willing to help. You never have to worry about there being nobody there to help if something happens."

Just then they reached the car. It was obvious Teri had been keeping Ty's attention, that way he didn't see Adam and the boys walk up. Everyone else watched expectantly to see how the first meeting of the brothers would go.

Adam smiled, and tears of joy started slowly running down his cheeks. "Tyler? Is that really you, little bro?"

Ty froze, and then slowly stood up. "Adam? ADAM!" Ty almost ran over Adam running to give him a hug; once Kyle reached Adam, he buried his face in Adam's shirt. When he opened his eyes, he finally saw the damage on Adam's arm. "WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOU?" Ty screamed.

"I will be alright, bro. They tried to hurt me, but it don't matter now, because I'm with you. If you will let me, I want to stay here and be one of your big brothers."

"Adam, I will never forgive them for what they did to you. And if you ever try to leave, Kyle and I will hunt you down and drag you back."

"Thank you, little bro. By the way, I'm curious, why did you say Kyle and you? Why not

just you?"

"Oh, yeah, you wouldn't know that. Kyle is like my other half; ever since we met this morning, we have been kinda like glued together. I don't know why, but being without him by me scares me. It's kinda like he is a missing part of me that I just found."

"Kinda like glued together? That's an understatement!" Cory giggled.

"Yeah," JJ chuckled, "if one of them farts, the other one's butt cheeks flap!"

Just then Teri came over with the rest of the group; and, as if proving their point, Kyle immediately came over and wrapped his arms around Ty.

"Hey Ty, are you gonna introduce your big brother, or do we all have to just guess?" Kyle said with a grin.

Ty lightly elbowed Kyle, but then stepped back so he could point out everyone. As Ty stepped back, JJ came back up close alongside Adam and held his hand.

"Everyone, this is my big brother Adam. Adam, watch close, I'm going to show you OUR family! You already know Cory; well that big old teddy bear hanging on him is Sean. This cute cuddly boy hanging from my arm is Kyle, and you probably already know the kid hanging from you is JJ. Over here is our mommy, Teri, and next to her is Dan, he's JJ and Kyle's daddy. It's weird, even though some of us have a different mommy and daddy, we are all brothers, Sean will have to 'splain it though; it makes my head hurt to try to figure it out."

"I'll do that later," Sean chuckled.

Everyone came up to hug Adam, all being careful not to hurt him.

As Teri started to walk away with Dan, Sean pulled them aside. "I'm going to take Adam to the Suburban. From what Cory has said I think he will fit in great, but I would like to talk to him too. I'll let you know for sure when we are done."

"Okay, don't grill him too much though; I think he's been through enough today," Teri replied.

"No problem, mom." Sean then walked back to the group, all of whom were trying to keep Adam's attention.

"Hey guys, I hate to interrupt, but I need to talk to Adam alone for a couple of minutes. It's nothin' bad, but it needs to be in private. There's only one problem; Ty, could you and Kyle try to separate JJ from Adam so Adam can come to the Suburban with me? That way, we can sit in it to talk."

Adam started to panic until he noticed that Sean was smiling, and then he fully relaxed when he felt Sean's hand being carefully laid on his shoulder. It amazed him that Sean was apparently giving him comfort as he was being guided to the Suburban.

As Adam carefully perched on the edge of the Suburban's seat, Sean suddenly realized how much pain the boy was really in, and how he must be straining not to show it. "Adam! You should have told us you were hurting that bad! We would have got you here sooner if you had said something."

The concern in Sean's voice was the final straw; Adam started sobbing. "Why are you all being so nice to me; I KNOW you will all hate me next week, just like everyone else. My mom would rather smoke a joint with her friends than pay attention to me, and as soon as my dad found out I might be gay he tried to kill me," he then gave Sean a defiant look through his tears, challenging Sean to prove him wrong. "Why should all of you be any different?"

"That's all over with, Adam," Sean said patiently. "I don't know about your mom, but I will bet she had worse problems in her own head, it was not you. As for that s.o.b. you got stuck with as a father; do you know what he and his wife did to your little brother? They left town while he was in school Friday; he finally found a note they had left for him in, of all places, a frigging

cereal box he finally opened this morning! Be glad you are not still with them; they were nothing but trouble waiting to happen. I'm just glad we were able to save you, and I hope you will be happy living with us. Anytime you need to talk I'm available. I have no idea why, but somehow it seems that everyone comes to me lately, even though Dan is the shrink." Sean carefully put his arm over Adam's shoulder in a semi-hug. "We really DO want you to stay with us. Mom said the final decision was up to Cory and me, I know what Cory thinks, and I know that I really want you to stay too. All of us older kids are gay, and I'm pretty sure the two young ones are too, so fitting in here is not a problem. Once we get you fixed up at the hospital, we can go home and have a talk with all of us boys together, that way everyone knows what's happened to everyone else."

Adam was shocked; he could tell Sean was serious. "OH MY GOD! I didn't know they did that to Ty! Sean, if you are all willing to give me a chance, I'll try not to disappoint you. Please promise me that I won't be kicked out again, though."

"That I will promise. Here's a secret for you, even if you do happen to do something that makes mom mad, she will never kick you out. Once you hear what Cory has been through you will understand, she does not give up on anyone." Sean began to get out of the truck. "Stay here bro; I'm going to get the others so we can get you checked out by a doctor." Sean took off at a jog towards the adults; lines of worry crossing his face as he pondered what the latest addition to his family had just been through.

## Chapter 10

The first person Sean ran into was Judge Lewis; he filled Joe in on the info he had learned about Adam's mother, and then hurried over to get Teri. "Mom, we need to hurry up and get Adam to a doctor, he's in a lot of pain!"

"Okay, we need to get everyone around then. By the way, what did you decide? Do I need to have Joe start on permanent custody papers for Adam too, or does he need to find another place?"

"He's gonna live with us, there's no way I'm gonna let him lose the only brother he has! They never even knew that the other one existed until recently; it would hurt them both to be torn apart again, now that they are finally together. I know how it would feel, and neither one deserves that," Sean said forcibly.

Teri looked at Sean, and realized that he was taking charge over the ragtag group that was suddenly becoming a family. She smiled; proud of the willingness Sean was showing to put others before himself. "Okay, Sean; Let me get John and Dan. You can figure out who is riding where and get everyone together."

"That's easy!" Sean replied, "We've already unfolded the third seat, so all of us kids will ride with you. The only argument will be who sits where, and that's easy to take care of."

"Hurry up then Sean, lets get Adam to the hospital and checked out as soon as we can."

Sean quickly got the rest of the boys together. "Load up in the Suburban. Kyle and Ty, you guys get in the jump seat in back. Cory and JJ, you get the middle seat with Adam, and I'll sit up front with Mom. Hurry up, Adam is in more pain than he'll admit to us, so we need to get him to the hospital as soon as possible to get fixed up."

By the time Sean drew his next breath, Ty was half way to the Suburban with Kyle close on his heels. JJ was not very far behind, but was catching up quickly. Sean looked at Cory, and they both took off jogging to join the rest of the crew. By the time they reached the SUV, the rest of the boys were in their seats and strapping in. As Cory latched down the rear access seat and climbed in, Sean looked around for Teri. He saw Dan and Joe getting in Dan's Camaro, while Teri had just left John as he was climbing into his squad car. Satisfied that there were not going to be any delays, Sean got in the passenger seat and waited for Teri.

John turned on his lights, and motioned Teri and Dan to fall in behind him. The three vehicles took off in a line to pick up I-80 to get into town.

Twenty minutes later they were at the Mercy Medical Center Emergency Room. After a few quick words from John, Teri and Adam were immediately taken into one of the exam rooms while everyone else went to the waiting area. There was not much conversation; the worry about

Adam's condition was evident in all their faces.

After about ten minutes, a doctor came out and asked to talk to John. They went through the exam room hallway, to one of the private consulting rooms on the other side of the ER.

"Sheriff," the doctor started, "I'm Dr. Mike Jones. I need to report the boy's injuries to CPS, he has bruising over 90% of his body, along with welts from what appears to be a belt over most of his torso. I have to recommend his removal from parental custody until an investigation is completed, are you able to assist with that?"

"Actually," John replied, "all you need to do is write the report; the group out there is not his family with the exception of one boy, and that boy just met him for the first time today. He is being placed in emergency foster care with Teri, the mother of some of that group. In fact, Judge Lewis is out there with them; he's one of the family court judges. What passed for his father and step-mother have been taken care of, there is no way he will even have to see them again unless it's to testify against them in court."

"You don't know how much better that makes me feel, I was prepared to hold him here if I had to. As long as the x-rays show nothing, he should be free to go. Is that Teri that's in there with him now?"

"Yes. And, if at all possible, could you go over any care she needs to provide for him with her? Assuming the other five boys will let her, she will be the one taking care of Adam."

"I'll do that. Five other boys, huh? Maybe I should ask her if she needs any sedatives while she is here! Let me go see if the x-rays are done, then we should be out shortly."

Meanwhile, Teri was getting to know Adam better. As they sat in the room waiting, they began discussing the day's events.

Adam spoke first. "Teri, do I really get to stay with all of you?"

"Yes, Adam, you are moving in with us. As long as there are not any problems with your mother, you will be living here until you are grown up. The rest of the boys already consider you a part of the family, so it would take an act of Congress to get you away from them."

"You know," Adam started as tears began flowing down his face, "I think I've felt more love today since I ran out of that room, than I've felt the entire rest of my life."

Teri brought Adam into her arms. "Adam, I can promise you it's just starting. You made a good impression on all the boys this afternoon, I know for a fact every single one of them wants you to join our little tribe."

"How did I make a good impression, Teri? I was running around naked all beat up. I know for sure I said some things I shouldn't have; JJ, Cory, and Sean all three told me off. Sean was nice about it, but I could tell he did not like what I had said."

"Well, Adam, you running around naked did not mean anything, they understood why. I would bet that you being beat up had an effect on what you said, and all three of them took that into account. I think what impressed them was that even though you may have wanted to, you did not just crawl into a corner and give up. Either all those boys out there have been through some hard times, or they know someone who has. In the last day, they have went from a bunch of kids trying to solve their own problems, to a group that works together to help everyone. I think when JJ handed you those shorts; you were being welcomed into the group right then. When Sean took you to the Suburban, it was official.

"I'm so scared that I'm going to let you guys down, especially Tyler. Right now my head feels all messed up, I'm so afraid I'll do something wrong then he will hate me."

"I've known Tyler for a long time, Adam. I think he understands more than you give him credit for, and right now he is probably worried about the exact same thing. Dan is a psychiatrist, so you can see him if you need to. Listen and talk to the rest of the boys too; you will be surprised

at how much they already know. Believe me, over the last weekend I've almost become numb from all the times they have surprised me."

Adam squeezed Teri tighter. "Thanks, just hearing that makes me feel lots better. I'm going to try real hard not to disappoint any of you."

"Just be yourself, Adam. Any problems can be worked out, but it's unfair to ask you to be something you are not. You are going to be part of my family; once that happens I will never give up on you or anyone else."

"Thanks Teri, I promise I'll make you proud," Adam said as he snuggled in as tight as he could without causing himself too much pain.

A few minutes later, the doctor returned. When he saw Adam cuddled up to Teri, he smiled. "That's the best thing I've seen all day. I've got some good news, the X-rays came back clear. Teri, let me show you what you need to do. I'm going to give you a prescription for some of this salve, and for something to dull the pain. He is going to be uncomfortable for about the next week, but the only place there might be scarring is on his chest. Adam, if you have some loose shorts you can wear around it would be a good idea, that way there is nothing pressing against your welts. When you have anything on that can rub against them, you need to have Teri put gauze over them until they heal, that will cut down on some of the scars and let them heal faster."

Once the doctor was sure Teri knew what needed to be done, he walked with them to the sign-out desk. It only took about 15 seconds for them to be spotted, but then they were immediately surrounded by boys, all asking, in their own way, "Is Adam okay?"

"Settle down boys!" Teri exclaimed. "He's going to be sore, but other than that he's fine. Now let me finish signing him out so we can all get home!"

As they walked out of the hospital, Teri noticed it was getting dark already. She thought to herself "Oh, shoot. I'll bet the kids are all starving!" She waved Dan, Joe, and John over to her.

"I'm going to stop by Perkins with the boys, you can join us if you want to," she said.

They all agreed, so everyone retrieved their vehicles and loaded up for the drive.

When they arrived at Perkins, a cheer arose from the boys. Teri smiled at their excitement.

Suddenly Adam spoke up. "Teri, there's a problem; I don't have any shoes."

"What size do you wear, Adam?"

"Size 7, why?"

By this time Dan was at Teri's door. "Dan," Teri said, "Could you run over to Big K down the street and grab a pair of size 7 shoes for Adam?"

A sudden crash from behind the restaurant got their attention. When they looked over, the sight sickened them. Two boys, no more than 10, were trying to get the dumpster open. Both were dressed in shorts and old sneakers, with no shirts, and even from a distance it was obvious they had not eaten in a long time.

Before anyone else had time to react, Sean was out the passenger side door, running towards the two boys. In no time flat, he was joined by the rest of the kids; Kyle and Ty didn't even bother with the seat latch, they just went over the top of the middle seat and rolled out the open door.

The two boys at the dumpster froze, the sight of six boys running at them was more than they could handle. They were expecting the worst, and were confused when they could see nothing but concern in the faces that were gathering around them.

Sean spoke up first. "Don't panic guys, we're not here to hurt you."

The two boys visibly relaxed. As Sean looked closer, he noticed they were twins. Both had strawberry blonde hair, green eyes, and millions of freckles. You could count their ribs; they



were so thin a slight breeze might have blown them away.

"I'm Sean; these are my brothers Cory, JJ, Adam, Kyle, and Ty," Sean started, pointing each one out. "Why don't you guys come back to the truck with us, we will convince mom to hook you up with some hot food, I can probably get her to let you stay a bit."

"I'm Jacob, that's my brother Jamie. That sounds too good to be true, what do we have to do for you to get that?" The tone in his voice made it clear he was not talking about raking leaves.

The boys all figured out what he was insinuating at the same time, and as a group they all turned white.

"You mean people have made you do ... ummm ... stuff, even ... sex stuff ... to eat? That's SICK! If anyone even suggests that while you are with us, tell any of us and whoever it is will get the holy crap beat out of him." Sean then fell speechless at the disgust he felt.

"Jamie, Jacob," JJ spoke up, "besides the awesome hair color we share, you guys have something else in common with me. My full name is James Jacob Richardson, and since Jamie is short for James, that means all three of us share a name. That is enough reason for me to protect you myself."

Adam stepped to the front, and Jacob and Jamie both stared in shock as he removed his shirt. "Do you see those marks? This group standing here rescued me from nearly being beat to death by my so-called father. I really owe them my life, and now I'm going to be living with them, permanently. This time yesterday, the only one of these people I had even heard the name of was Ty, and I had been told by my father that he was dead; I had never even met him. Right now, every inch of clothing on me belongs to someone else. JJ's father is getting ready to go buy me some shoes so I can go into the restaurant, yet I have not even had the chance to really talk to him so he would know me. There ain't anyone here going to force you, but my suggestion is join us and come back to the truck. I promise, things will only get better."

There was not a dry eye in the group, even Jacob and Jamie were moved by Adam's speech. They both walked up and gave him a tentative hug, and then they each grabbed a hand, turned him around, and started walking to the vehicles, with everyone else following behind.

All the adults were standing in front of the Suburban watching as the boys turned and headed towards them. "Teri," Joe chuckled, "do you realize that I don't have group rates?"

"I'm not the one you need to tell that to, Joe. There's a certain thirteen year old who seems to have made a hobby out of collecting brothers. Tell HIM that, but leave yourself room to run," Teri replied. She then looked over to Dan. "Dan, add a shirt for Cory to the list, and some shorts for JJ. Might as well add two shirts for the new boys, I got a sneaky feeling we will need them."

Dan grinned. "I better get moving then, before they find anyone else. Do you need any extra soap, shampoo, or towels while I'm at it?"

"Good thinking, Dan. You better grab some economy size stuff, and get some body shampoo for Adam, it will be easier on him than bar soap would be."

"Will do, once the introductions are over I'll head out."

The boys walked up just then, and to everyone's surprise, Adam waved Sean back as Sean walked up to make introductions and plea his case.

"Mom?" Adam started, his face showing the need to be able to call Teri mom.

"Go ahead Adam, you are allowed to call me mom."

Relief flooded Adam's features, giving him the strength he needed to continue. "Mom, this is Jamie and Jacob. I haven't asked why, but I think they need our help as much as I needed your help earlier today. Can we help them, PLEASE?"

"It is fine with me, Adam, but there are three other people who you have to get the okay

from, your brothers. Cory, Sean, Ty; Come on up front here."

They moved up front by Adam, Jacob, and Jamie.

"Alright, Adam has asked me if we can help these two boys. My guess is they will be living with us a long time if we do. This is your one chance, do any of you have a problem or concern about them joining us?"

Cory whispered in Sean's ear, and then Sean spoke up. "Cory and I are fine with it, mom. He just told me he thinks its time to make use of Mike's room. He seems to think our bed is getting full!"

Teri smiled. "That's good thinking. What about you Ty?"

"Can I talk to Kyle for a second?"

"Go ahead, angel."

Tyler and Kyle whispered back and forth for a minute, then Ty came back up to Teri. "It's okay with me, as long as they share a bedroom with me and Kyle."

The twins responded in chorus "You WANT to share a room with us!" They both grabbed Ty in a double-hug, then moved on to Kyle to do the same.

Sean peeled the twins off of Kyle, and took them to finish introductions. He introduced them to Dan first, who welcomed them to "the tribe" and explained he was off to get them some shirts, but would be right back.

Next was Joe. Sean brought the twins over to him, and began the introduction. "Joe, this is Jacob and Jamie. Guys, this is Judge Joe Lewis. He does the adoptions around here, and by the time Mom's done he should have a new car."

Both boys shook his hand, and then Jamie said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Judge."

"You only have to call me Judge in the courtroom, we are all friends here, so just call me Joe, okay? I'll sit down with you boys later with John and get some information from you so there's no trouble. Just looking at you gives me enough reason to place you in emergency custody with Teri, so you will definitely be sleeping in a warm bed with a full tummy tonight. One question for now; is there ANY way to tell you two apart?"

Both boys instantly turned beet red, blushing from the waistband of their shorts to the top of their heads. Finally, Jacob spoke up. "Well ... there is ONE way, but we don't show it off. Jamie is ... uhhh ... well ... he's circumscribed, and I'm not." At that the twins did the seemingly impossible; they turned an even deeper red.

"Do you mean circumcised?" Joe asked.

Both twins nodded.

"Well I guess you will just have to tell me which one of you I'm talking to then, I really would rather not look down your shorts every time we talked," Joe said with a wide grin.

The humor relaxed the twins, and they returned to their normal color. Just then, Jacob saw John's car on the other site of the Suburban. "Shit, the police are here!"

Sean reacted quickly, and grabbed both of them before they could run. "Settle down guys. That's John's car. He's with us; he won't haul you in for digging in the trash. He's a good guy, I bet that when you guys sit down later, if you tell him everything you did wrong and why, he will help you straighten it out. Just don't lie to him, please."

The twins looked at Joe, asking with their eyes if Sean was right.

"Guys, I've known John a long time," Joe began, "and the last thing he ever wants is to put a kid in jail. Him and I will work together to help you, all you have to do is tell us what happened."

This finally satisfied the twins, and they relaxed in Sean's arms.

John had been watching, and saw the twin's reaction to his car. He stayed back until he

was sure that Sean and Joe had calmed them, and then he headed over toward the group.

"Hey there, how you guy's doing?" John asked.

"Fine, sir," The twins replied.

"John, do me a favor; DOn."T ask how to tell them apart, you really don't want to know!" Joe said with a chuckle. "When we're not around the rest of the group, I'll tell you. There's no use in embarrassing these two again."

Jamie held out his hand. "I'm Jamie, that's Jacob," he said.

"Nice to meet you; I'm John, Sheriff Martin if you have to call me at work. After we get back to the house, I'll sit down with you so we can figure out what all needs done to help you two."

"Thanks John, I think we will have a lot to talk about," Jacob said as a thin smile crossed his face. "We were scared that you would take us away, but Sean and Joe said you would help us."

"That I will, Jacob. Right now the best place I know for you to be is with Teri and the boys. As long as you are honest with them, and me, you will be just fine. Now, if I'm not mistaken, I think I hear Dan's car coming; why don't we get over there with the rest of the group, so you can get your shirts and we can all go in to eat. Do me a favor; tell me your last name and where you are from so I can make sure there are no problems."

"Our last name is Stewart, we are from Grimes."

"Okay, you all go on over, I'll be right there."

John climbed in his car, and called an inquiry over the radio. A minute later, he received a response.

"Dispatch to unit 3. We have a missing persons report active for one Jamie Sampson Stewart, age ten, from Grimes; and another report for one Jacob William Stewart, age ten, also from Grimes. Subjects were reported missing Saturday morning at 08:45, missing since 17:30 Friday. Do you need descriptions?"

"Unit 3 to dispatch; Negative on the descriptions, which department was that filed through?"

"Dispatch to unit 3; report filed through Polk County."

"Unit 3 to Dispatch; 10-4, be advised subjects are now in protective custody. Both subjects physical condition gives cause to believe neglect is occurring. By order of Judge Joseph Lewis, the children are now being placed in foster care until investigation is complete. Request CPS be notified, inform them to contact Judge Lewis tomorrow morning for a full report."

"Dispatch to unit 3; Copied all, Sergeant Davis requested I tell you he will handle the necessities from this end. He also said to stop working so hard, you need a break."

"Unit 3 to dispatch; 10-4, I plan to start that break right now. Tell Sergeant Davis to call me tomorrow and I'll introduce him to the work I've been doing all day. Unit 3 clear."

John got out of the car and headed over to where Dan had just parked the Camaro. As he walked up, everyone fell silent, expecting the worst. John walked directly up to the twins, knelt down, and spoke gently to them. "Boys, I have to ask you two questions. The end results of your answers will be the same, you will go home with Teri tonight, but they will make a big difference on my next step to protect you. The first question is; did you guys run away or were you told to leave?"

"We ran away, John," Jamie replied, with his head down.

"I'll ask more about that later, but now the other question. When did you run away?"

Jacob answered this time. "Right after we got out of school Friday. We went home, changed into play clothes, then left."

"Why didn't you put on shirts?" Cory asked.

"We are not allowed to play with shirts on," was Jacobs reply.

Everyone was shocked! Joe was the first to find his voice. "Boys, I never thought I would ever say this to anyone, but you did exactly the right thing running away. The only mistake you made was not going directly to the Sheriffs office, but I'll bet when we talk later I will understand your reason why."

"Here's the news you want to hear, guys," John said. "The answers you just gave matched the missing person's reports that were filed. It's obvious that you have not been fed right in a long time; you honestly could pass for an early nine years old, even though I know you are ten. That in itself is enough reason for me to do this." John turned to Teri. "Teri, are you willing to accept Jamie and Jacob into your care. This is an emergency placement; you will be contacted within a week by CPS as to whether you wish to accept it as permanent."

"Tell CPS don't waste a call," she replied, "I already accept permanent placement. Now as soon as Dan stops picking his nose, and hands out what he went to pick up, we can go eat. Speaking of which; Ty, Jamie, Jacob, I need to see you three before we go in."

Everyone chuckled at Teri's slam of Dan. Dan got the bags out of the car, and started handing things out. "Adam, here's your army boots!" he joked as he tossed a pair of Nike's to Adam. He then pulled out three tie-dyed shirts. After looking at the tags, he tossed one to Cory and the other two to the twins. He then grinned as he announced "Will my exhibitionist son please come forward and put some pants on!"

An obviously embarrassed JJ slowly walked up. "Dad, I'm gonna kill you for that! Please don't make fun of me in public!"

Dan handed JJ a pair of shorts, then slipped in a hug. "Sorry buddy, I was just joking. You know I love you."

"I know Dad, I guess I'm just not in a funny mood right now. Thanks for the shorts."

Dan gave JJ a quick kiss on the top of his head, then turned to the rest of the boys. "How'd I do picking out stuff for you guys?"

All four exclaimed "Great, they're KEWL!" in response.

As soon as their new shirts were on, the twins joined Ty with Teri. "Okay, guys; I know that for at least the last few days none of you have ate right. Restaurant food can be hard to eat when you have had an empty tummy for a while. All three of you can get what you want, but I want you to eat slow, and as soon as you start to feel a little bit full, stop. You don't need to get sick from eating too much, and it will happen if you force yourself. I don't care if you leave half your plate, if you get hungry later I will fix you a snack. Have fun, but take it easy."

"Yes, mom!" all three answered at once, grinning.

Teri reached out and ran her fingers through the twin's hair, straightening it out some. "Let's go, guys. It's time for you to get a decent meal."

As the group walked in the door, the staff behind the counter watched in fascination. The look on the Waitress's face was priceless when they asked for a table for twelve; it turned to horror when Sean asked if they were still running the all-you-can-eat special on pancakes.

## *Chapter 11*

As they left Perkins, Teri was proud of her little troupe. She had expected at least some problems, especially considering that there were three boys in the group she knew nothing about. Sean and Cory made sure the new boys were included in the conversation; the adults didn't have to even speak up once to calm the discussions.

When they reached the vehicles, JJ stopped and asked Terri "Who's going to ride with who?"

"What do you mean? There's room enough for all of you kids in the Suburban; it DOES have nine seat belts! Cory and Sean can sit up front, you and the twins in the center, and the rest of the boys in back."

When he heard this, Ty bounced around as he exclaimed "YES! That means you get to sit with us, Adam!"

They all managed to get into the SUV without any problems, and shortly thereafter the convoy was on its way back to Teri's place. When they pulled into the drive, an awed Jacob announced "Wow, you guys have a nice place here! It's HUGE!"

Teri laughed. "For right now, at least, it's your place too. But don't become too attached to it, we are going to have to get a lot bigger place, especially if you guys get to stay."

Everyone piled into the house. Teri pulled Sean and Cory off to the side as they entered. "Boys; do you think you can be responsible for the rest of these guys in the pool for a little bit? It's still warm enough for you to all be out there for a while, but I want no horseplay."

They both nodded their heads yes, then Cory asked "What about suits? Sean and I are the only ones who have any here."

"That's a problem," Teri answered. "I guess the privacy fence will hide you all from the neighbors, so this time I'll let you guys skinny-dip. But, nobody goes any further than the pool room unless they have shorts on. Speaking of which; Cory, see if you can find two more pairs of shorts for the twins like the ones you gave Kyle."

"Okay, mom; in fact, I think I'll grab clean shorts for all of us," Cory replied, and then took off to his bedroom.

Teri gathered the rest of the boys around her. "All of us adults need to sit and talk for a bit. Why don't you guys all go swimming in the pool, since most of you don't have suits, you can skinny-dip tonight. Sean and Cory are in charge; listen to them. Also, nobody comes in past the pool room without shorts on. Adam, you can get in the water as soon as I put some liquid bandage over your open sores, but no wrestling around or rough housing," she looked at the twins. "Cory is getting some shorts for you two to put on after you get out."

A few minutes later, Cory came bounding down the stairs with an armful of shorts; just as a blushing Adam came out of the bathroom wearing a towel, liquid bandage obvious on his chest and back. The twins stood frozen, shocked by the damage inflicted on Adam. Ty slowly walked up to his brother, tears streaming from his eyes. "I will NEVER forgive them for what they did to you!" he choked out. Ty then pulled Adam down so he could kiss his cheek, and whispered in his ear "I don't want you to ever leave me Adam."

"We will get over what they did to us together, Tyler. When I found out I had a little brother I was so happy, then I was told you were dead. Now that I'm with you, I never want to leave you again," Adam replied, tears welling in his own eyes.

The two brothers separated and joined the other boys. Sean led the group back through the rear mudroom to the pool changing room. The twins and Adam hesitated at first about showing themselves, but when they saw the rest just dropping their clothes and then walking around, Adam threw his towel into the corner and the twins pulled down their shorts.

Everyone just stood there for a minute, checking out each others bodies, and then Sean spoke up. "Okay, guys. First, now we can tell these two apart; Jacob's the one with the foreskin sticking past the end of his wand. Second, follow me; let's hit the pool!"

They walked through the doorway on the other side of the mud room, and everyone but Sean, Cory, and Ty stopped in wonder. There in front of them was a full-size Olympic swimming pool, surrounded by an eight-foot privacy fence. There was even a diving board at the far end and a slide at the shallow end!

Before anyone had time to recover, Sean spoke up. "Alright, here are the house rules. Nobody goes past that line in the middle, or uses the diving board, unless an adult is out here. Mom wants us to take it easy since we are by ourselves; but if Cory or me tells you to stop doing something, that means stop now. From personal experience, get wet before you try the slide. Now let's have some fun!"

Shortly a game of tag got started. It quickly became "dick tag.", with each of them giving the taguee a thorough inspection while tagging them. The twins, especially Jacob, received more than their fair share of tags from Kyle and Ty.

Adam and JJ were the first to drift off to the side. They stood off in chest-deep water away from the others, facing each other with nervous smiles on their faces.

"Wanna play around?" JJ asked quietly.

Adam giggled. "Sure, but what if they notice?"

JJ smiled broadly. "The only ones who might care are the twins, maybe Ty too, but I doubt it. Everyone here is really cool about being gay, so it is not a big deal."

"Okay, if you say so, I'll trust you."

JJ slowly reached out and took Adam's boyhood into his hand. He gently caressed the most private places on Adam's body, marvelling at the softness and the smoothness. Adam reached over and began doing the same to JJ, shyly exploring his new friend. JJ began investigating Adam's foreskin with his other hand, it was the first time he had even known someone who was uncut, and there was no chance of him skipping this chance to explore the rare find. Adam shuddered from the new sensation as he moved his other hand to join the first in it's explorations. They moved together slowly, their bodies instinctively moving to the sensations they were feeling. JJ moved one of his hands to the back of Adam's head and carefully pulled Adam's face to his. He began by just pressing his lips to Adam's, but then started trying to explore Adam's mouth with his tongue. To his surprise, Adam opened immediately, trying to passionately explore with his own tongue. It took a minute for them to sort out what to do, but shortly they were tongue wrestling like pros. All thoughts of the others were gone from their minds as the sensory overload drove

them to the edge. Both boys started moaning, the sound being muffled by each other's mouths but still audible. Suddenly, they broke the lip lock; and as their bodies spasmed uncontrollably, a loud groan escaped uncontrolled from both of their mouths. Both boys' bodies became stiff; a few seconds later, they collapsed against each other.

Adam recovered first, and as he looked up, he turned beet red. "Oh, shit! JJ, turn around, please?"

JJ looked at Adam, saw his blush, and turned around. Once both boys were turned, a round of applause rang through the pool area. All six of the other boys were sitting on the edge of the pool, smiling as they clapped their hands. They continued clapping as they all stood up.

Sean went into the water, and came up to the two boys. "That was awesome, guys! I wish I had a camera when you both got off; it was unreal! Let's join the rest of the guys; you need to rest after all that."

The two beet-red boys followed Sean to the end of the pool and climbed out. Cory met them there, and asked with a giggle "Does that mean you are boyfriends now?"

It was the perfect thing to say to break the embarrassment, as both JJ and Adam giggled and nodded their heads. Everyone was standing together, congratulating the new couple, when Jamie suddenly spoke up.

"Did that feel as good as it looked like it did from here?"

Adam smiled, "Yep, it felt awesome!"

"I can't even guess how to say how good it felt!" JJ chimed in.

Jacob giggled. "It feels good when Jamie and I touch each other in the bathtub too, but we don't make funny noises like you two did!"

Jamie blushed redder than a fire engine. "I can't believe you just told them that!" he said as he playfully slapped Jacob.

Everybody laughed, and after then Sean spoke up. "Hey, guys, I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. Let's go get dressed so we can raid the 'fridge. All this swimming and watching those two make out has made me hungry!" When Sean saw the looks JJ and Adam were giving him, he decided it would be best to run into the house before they strangled him.

JJ and Adam took off after him; by the time the rest of the boys caught up to them in the pool room, Adam had Sean pinned on the floor while JJ was tickling him unmercifully.

The boys managed to get dressed after a few minutes without any further incidents. Cory had planned ahead; as he passed out the clothes, he announced loudly that Jamie was getting the red shorts and shirt, while Jacob was going to be in all yellow. "Now you can stay dressed when anyone needs to know who is who!" Kyle quipped. This brought a round of giggles from everyone, and they headed out to invade the kitchen with smiles on their faces.

In record time, the counter was filled with tubs of ice cream, toppings, and dishes. As the boys systematically destroyed the kitchen, the adults came out of the office. As soon as they saw the kids happily competing to create the grossest combination, they all broke into laughter.

"Do you clowns realize you have to clean up before you eat those?" Teri chuckled.

Eight grinning faces smiled back at her, then returned to the mayhem.

Dan shook his head. "I think I'll go check messages on my answering machine real fast. I'm gaining weight just watching this bunch!" He then headed back into the office.

A few minutes later, Dan yelled out "OH MY GAWD!"

Teri and John rushed into the room. "What's wrong, Dan?" Teri asked.

"Listen to this!" Dan replied.

Dan placed the phone on speaker, and replayed the message he had just heard.

"Dan, this is your aunt, Ann Richardson, from Lexington, Kentucky. I just finally caught

up with Jeremy and Sarah, and they told me what happened. I am sending an e-mail which will explain further; but to make it short, you are my eldest son. The e-mail has the details of what happened after you were born. I have already explained everything to your brothers; Jerald Jr., Kevin, and Tim, and they look forward to the possibility of meeting with you. I sincerely hope one day you will be able to forgive me, and that we will be able to meet."

Dan pressed nine to save the message, and then looked over to Teri. "Could I possibly borrow your computer for a few minutes?"

"By all means, Dan. The Internet lockout is engaged, so I'll have to log in for you first," Teri replied as she turned on the system. Once she was logged in, she disengaged the lock and turned the computer over to Dan. She then headed towards the kitchen to see just how bad the boys and the kitchen looked.

\* \* \*

The boys had decided to pair off while eating the ice cream. Sean and Cory were feeding each other, with the pairs of Adam and JJ, Kyle and Ty, and Jacob and Jamie copying them. Just as Tyler managed to insert the latest spoonful in a giggling Kyle's mouth; they all froze as they heard Dan yell from the office.

"HOLY SHIT! My BROTHER is Kevin Richardson of the Backstreet Boys!!!"

Eight mouths dropped open, as the spoons fell unnoticed to the floor. There was a stunned silence as their young minds processed the information they had just heard. They then suddenly jumped off of the barstools and stampeded into the office, screaming "NO WAY!" as they barreled through the doorway.

As they crowded around the adults trying to see if it was for real, Dan spoke out. "Hold it, give me a minute and I will print it out so you can all see it," he printed the e-mail and passed it to Cory. "Cory, why don't you read this out loud to everyone for me?"

Cory glanced at the paper in his hand, and then began reading aloud.

*Date: August 21, 2004*

*To: danscotrichard@yahoo.com*

*From: arichardson1@hotmail.com*

*Subject: Hello, Daniel:*

*You may not remember me. I'm your Aunt Anne from Lexington, Kentucky. We haven't seen each other in many years, but I know that you are doing well for yourself in Des Moines. I want to express my deepest sympathy for the loss of your lovely wife, Sharon. I know that she will be sorely missed by you and your family.*

*The reason that I am contacting you now, after all these years, is because I need to be truthful to myself, to you, and to your brothers. Yes, you have brothers, three younger brothers, to be exact. I am just going to come right out and say it; you are my son, Daniel Scott Richardson.*

*When your father Jerald Sr and I were younger, we had a boy, you. We were barely struggling to make ends meet, and we couldn't support a child. So we agreed to let Jerald's brother, Jeremy, and his*



*wife Sarah raise you as their own son. We gave you up so that you could have a better life than we could ever give you. Three years later, when things were looking up for us, we had another son, Jerald Jr. Your Dad and I started to look for you, but Jeremy and Sarah had moved away, and we had lost contact. We never gave up looking for you. Two years later, in 1969, Tim was born, and in 1971, Kevin was born.*

*Daniel, you have a family that loves you very much, and would like to be there for you right now. You have a wonderful aunt and uncle, Jackie and Harold Littrell Sr. You also have three wonderful cousins, Harold Littrell, Jr and Brian Littrell, and Chip Dodds. Kevin and Brian are part of the Backstreet Boys, and Chip is a Commander in Starfleet, assigned to the Starship Enterprise.*

*Kevin is married to a wonderful girl, Kristin, and Chip is married to a wonderful boy, Joshua. Chip and Joshua also have an angel for a son, Justin.*

*Please allow us the chance to become a family again. I have always loved you, son. I want you to believe that.*

*If you wish to get in contact with Kevin, his email address is ksrichardson@jive.com. You can contact Chip at cbdodds@starfleet.net; Joshua at jcchasez-dodds@jive.com; or Brian at blittrell@jive.com.*

*Take care of yourself*

*Anne Richardson*

The room fell silent as Cory finished the letter. After about a minute, Kyle spoke in a small voice. "Daddy, when do we get to meet Uncle Kevin?"

"I'll tell you what," Dan replied after a moment's pause, "I'll write an email tonight and we will see if we can all get together soon. I have always known that I was adopted; Jeremy and Sarah never kept that from me. They told me that someday they would find my mother and reunite us. I'm not sure who found who, but it looks like you guys finally will get to meet your grandparents. Why don't all of you go out and finish your ice cream, and I'll get a couple of very important emails sent out."

Reminded of their food, the boys returned to the kitchen. They picked up their spoons off the floor, tossed them in the sink, and then resumed eating with some clean spoons. There was no conversation, each boy deep in thought about the news in the email that they just heard. As they finished, Adam spoke up.

"Man, JJ. I can't believe it! You and Kyle have an UNCLE in Backstreet!"

"Adam, you are wrong on one thing," JJ replied, "he is OUR uncle. Me, Sean, Cory, and Kyle swore that we would be brothers forever. You, Ty, Jacob, and Jamie are a part of that now. Even if we are not related by family, you are all my brothers, which means any relatives of mine are yours too."

Teri and Dan walked up to the boys with smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes. "Did you guys really do that?" Dan asked.

"Yep, we did. It's okay, ain't it dad?" JJ responded, while giving Dan the puppy dog eyes.

"Yes, JJ, it's fine. I'll just have to get used to having a whole bunch of sons; and I'm proud of all of you."

At that, the entire group of boys mobbed Dan and Teri, enveloping them in a massive group hug.

John and Joe were standing in the foyer outside the office, watching the happenings in the kitchen. "Now that's a Kodak moment," Joe stated. "It would be better if CPS was willing to release the twins for adoption, but at least they agreed to long-term foster care with Teri for now."

"True," John replied. "The best thing for those boys is a stable family, and I very much doubt their parents will be authorized to get them back. Hopefully sometime soon, CPS will release them for adoption."

Teri and Dan finally managed to escape the mob surrounding them. "Boys," Dan chuckled. "we actually just came out to get some drinks. I just finished sending emails to your grandma and Uncle Kevin, so this should surprise them. I still have to send out some to Chip and Brian, so I'll be a little bit. I was wondering one thing; you guys are all excited about your Uncle Kevin, what about Brian, or Chip's husband, Joshua?"

"We know Brian's a part of Backstreet too, but what do you mean about Joshua?" Sean asked with a puzzled look.

Teri smiled, then walked over to the intercom unit on the wall and placed one of the boys' CD's in the player. She selected the track she knew would spark their thoughts, and then pressed PLAY.

The first notes of "Bye, Bye, Bye" from N\*Sync's "No Strings Attached" CD filled the house. You could hear the boy's jaws popping as they dropped when each of them realized who Joshua was.

Surprisingly, Jacob was the first to be able to speak. "Holy smoke! Joshua is JC in N\*SYNC! AWESOME!! When do we get to meet him??!!"

Dan chuckled. "I don't know yet, buddy. With him and Chip having a son, plus his band schedule, it might take a bit. Let me go finish the emails, we might know in a few days."

Dan grabbed his drink, and then went back to the computer. As he was pressing SEND on Brian's email, the last one he had to do, his Inbox suddenly had two messages in it. The first one was from Ann.

*Thank you so much for responding, son. It made me cry with joy to see that you took not knowing who your birth parents were and turned it into a career of helping children without loving families recover. I still feel a little guilt, even though you told me not to. Kevin should be sending you an email soon, he is making travel arrangements so that some of us can be there with you and the boys in your time of need. Give everyone my regards, and I will see you soon.*

*Love, Mom*

Dan wiped his eyes, and quietly called Teri over. "Look at this, it's more than I ever expected."

Teri read the message as Dan was printing it, then gave him a hug. "Congratulations, Dan. She seems really nice; I hope this all works out."

Dan went to open the second message, when a third appeared. As soon as he saw the address, he decided to open it first.

**\*\*OFFICIAL DISPATCH FROM USS Enterprise\*\***

*From: Captain James T. Kirk  
To: Mr. Daniel S. Richardson  
Daniel;*

*On behalf of the officers and crew of the USS Enterprise, I wish to extend our condolences for the recent passing of your wife, Sharon. In addition, I wish to personally express my sympathy to you and your sons. I am personally making arrangements for Commander Dodds to be present to support you and the boys. If there is anything you need, please feel free to contact me through Starfleet headquarters.*

*Respectfully;  
Captain James T. Kirk  
USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A*

**\*\* END DISPATCH FROM USS Enterprise\*\***

"Teri, you might want to load the printer, I think all the boys should get a copy of this," Dan stated with a grin. "It's not every day someone gets a letter from Captain Kirk." The next email he opened was from Brian.

*Daniel;*

*Hey cuz! I'm so glad to find out I have another cousin, Welcome to the family! Even though the circumstances are not good, I still look forward to meeting you and the boys. Tell them I said Hi, and assuming Kev does not screw up and send us to Alaska, I should see them soon. Yep, your little brother is arranging the travel plans, and I would advise against letting him do it too often. Hehehe. On a serious note, I would like to extend my condolences for Sharon's passing to you and the boys. I will see y'all soon; take care.*

*Brian*

"Oh my God!" Dan laughed. "The boys are gonna LOVE him!"

He went back to his inbox, and then exclaimed, "Holy shit, I don't believe this! Joshua emailed me; I sent one to Chip, but not him!" Dan decided he might as well open it before he opened Kevin's mail, since it seemed to be a conspiracy to make Kevin's the last one.

*Daniel;*

*Welcome to the family! Ever since your Mom contacted us, Justin has been asking every five minutes when he will get to meet your boys. I would have written earlier, but I had to wait for the tornado to wind down and fall asleep.*

*I would like to extend our condolences from my family to yours on Sharon's passing; if there is anything we can do to help you out I insist you ask. I have been in contact with Starfleet, so Chip has been kept up-to-date on everything as fast as I hear it. Starfleet is helping arrange transportation, so Kevin should not get us too lost getting over there to see you. Don't worry; your brother is actually really cool, just a little dizzy. I better go now, the munchkin is awake again, and it is impossible to type when he is active. We will see you soon; take care of your boys.*

*Joshua, Chip, and Justin*

Dan had to smile reading Joshua's email, Justin sounded just like a few boys right here. He could just imagine what one more energetic boy would be like. He looked at his inbox, and saw that there were no new arrivals, so he finally opened Kevin's email.

*Daniel;*

*Hey bro, how ya doin? Kristin and I send our condolences about Sharon, we are really sorry we never got to meet her. I'm looking forward to meeting you and my nephews; we have a lot of catching up to do! By the way, if any of our cousins make any remarks about me, ignore them. Unless they are good ones; which never happens. I will email you tomorrow morning with arrival times for everyone, so we will see you soon!*

*Kevin & Kristin*

Dan shook his head in disbelief, without even seeing any of his family; he already felt a part of it. He printed out copies of the rest of the emails, and passed them around to Joe, John, and Teri.

John looked at Teri as she handed him the copies. "Teri, could you make sure I'm up by 5:00? I called in to the station while you guys were getting the email. I need to be at the airport to meet the Governor."

"No problem, John. I'm probably going to be up anyway, it will be the only time I have a chance for quiet, since the boys will all be asleep."

"Thanks, Teri."

The adults decided they better check on the boys. It was not too hard to find them; the

giggles coming from the Rec room pretty much gave away their location. Adam and Jacob were deep into a video game, with everyone else cheering them on and wrestling around.

"Sean, Cory; get over here!" Teri said in a mock stern voice.

The boys jumped up. "Yes, mom?"

"Go get some blankets, pillows, and quilts; it's getting late. I'm gonna let y'all camp out down here tonight. The TV gets shut off in fifteen minutes!"

"Okay, Mom," Sean replied "but do we HAVE to shut it off in fifteen minutes? Jacob is kicking Adam's butt, Adam needs a chance to catch up."

"Sean Michael, what did I say?"

"Yes mom," Sean pouted, as him and Cory headed to get everything.

Fifteen minutes later, the kids were finally paired off and cuddled up on the floor. As Teri dimmed the lights as low as they would go, she wondered how they could be comfortable. The boys had managed to lay in such a way that each of them was touching at least two others, either with hands, feet, chest or back.

The adults sat down for some tea, and then Joe headed out to go home. "I'll call y'all tomorrow, I better get some sleep."

The next morning, Dan got up when Teri woke John. They had a cup of coffee before John left, then sat and reviewed the events of the previous day. Dan went in to check his email, at first the mailbox was empty, but as he was just getting ready to close it a message appeared.

*Dan;*

*Your little bro is spazing at meeting you, so I had to do it for him. I've got 2 words for ya; WE'RE HEEERRRREEEE!!!!*

*Brian*

Just then, there was a loud BOOM, and the sound of little feet running to the Rec room window.

Cory suddenly yelled, "KEWL!!! It's a Federation shuttle!"

## Chapter 12

John was standing at the terminal entry for the new Shuttle pad at Des Moines International in full dress uniform. He remembered how it had taken six months for the Governor to talk Starfleet into designating Des Moines as an emergency satellite port for O'Hare, but in the end Des Moines Midwest location won out.

He heard the sonic boom as the Federation shuttle entered Des Moines airspace, and couldn't help but to smile as he thought about the good fortune Dan and the boys had suddenly had thrust upon them. He straightened his uniform, nervously wondering which members of Dan's new family would be on the shuttle.

Once the shuttle had landed and was safely shut down, he went out to greet the guests. The first person to exit the shuttle was Anne.

"Good morning, and welcome to Des Moines, dear lady. I'm Sheriff John Martin; I will be escorting you to see Dan. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but you must be Anne," John said.

"Why thank you! It's a pleasure to meet you sheriff."

Next off the shuttle were Kevin and Kristin. Shortly after they were introduced, Brian came bouncing down the ramp.

"Sheriff, this is Brian. You have my permission to handcuff him if he irritates you," Anne stated.

John came to attention as the last of the party descended the ramp. On the left was a very familiar face; JC Chasez-Dodds. On the right, was a Starfleet Officer, which he assumed was Commander Charles "Chip" Dodds. In between the two was an angelic fourteen year old boy. "Welcome to Des Moines, Commander."

"The pleasure is all mine, Sheriff, I just wish it was under better circumstances," Chip replied. "Let me introduce you to my husband, Joshua, and my son, Justin."

"Pleasure to meet you," John said as he shook everyone's hand.

After the introductions, John led the group to a waiting limo. Chip shot a questioning look at John. "Don't worry about your luggage, Commander Dodds. My deputies are retrieving it as we speak."

"Thank you, Sheriff Martin. Please call me Chip. I'm on detached duty right now."

"Understood," John replied, "only if you call me John."

"Agreed," Chip said.

The entire group climbed into the limo, since John was accompanying them to Teri's house. As they departed, Chip noticed that a van was following them. *'Must have all of our luggage in it,'* Chip thought.

A couple of minutes later, Chip smiled as he looked around the limo at the rest of his party. Kevin was holding Kristin close, both already dozing peacefully. John, Anne and Brian were talking softly, with Justin cuddled up and napping in Anne's arms. Josh was in his favorite position, snuggled in Chip's arms. Chip was amazed at the sudden appearance of open countryside as the limo pulled off of Fleur Drive onto the South Bypass. The pair of vehicles picked up speed, leaving the Des Moines city limits in no time.

When Chip pulled out his communicator, Anne and John both gave him a questioning look.

"I have to check in with the ship," Chip said.

John and Anne both nodded their heads and then resumed their conversation.

Chip opened up his communicator. "Dodds to *Enterprise*."

The communicator speaker came to life. "*Enterprise*, Spock here."

"Mr. Spock, this is Commander Dodds. Is the Captain available?"

"Not at present, Mr. Dodds. He is in San Francisco at Starfleet Headquarters. May I signal him for you?"

"That's ok, Mr. Spock. I was just checking in to let you know that my party and I are safely in Des Moines and enroute to our hotel."

"Very well, Mr. Dodds. Please extend my sympathies and condolences to the Richardson family on their loss."

"I will, sir. If anyone needs to contact me, I will have my communicator with me at all times."

"That is acceptable. We shall see you in a few days. *Enterprise* out."

Chip closed his communicator and put it back into his jacket pocket. He then returned his arms around Josh, and watched as the countryside flew past the limo's windows.

Twenty-five minutes later, the limo and van pulled into the circular drive in front of a large house.

"We will take care of the luggage in a few minutes," John told them. "Right now, Dan and the rest have no idea who I was meeting this morning, so let's surprise them!"

\* \* \*

While John was secretly picking up the passengers at the airport, Dan and Teri were dealing with eight wide awake and excited boys.

Amid comments of "Kewl.", "Awesome.", and "Darn, I couldn't see it!", Teri finally managed to get the boys' attention. "Guys, we will be having company in a little bit. Don't you think you better get your showers and get dressed BEFORE they call to meet us?"

The boys grumbled as they headed for the stairs, but a final comment from Sean and Cory got both Dan and Teri's attention.

"Man, I really wish I could pilot one of those one of these days," Sean stated.

"Me too," Cory replied. "Wouldn't it be cool if we both were on the same ship?"

"Yeah! I wish I knew how to get into Starfleet," Sean replied as they disappeared up the stairs.

As the boys all entered the bedroom and began undressing, Sean realized there would be a problem shortly. He called Teri on the intercom.

"Mom?"

"Yes Sean."

"Could you come up here with the key to Mike's room? I think we need to grab some of

Cory's old clothes out of the storage in there. Otherwise, we are going to have a bunch of nude kids running around!"

"That would not be good. I'll be right up, meet me at the door to his room."

A few minutes later, Sean returned with an armload of clothes. "This should take care of you and JJ," he said to Adam. "Mom is going down to Ty's old house now to get clothes for him, Kyle, and the twins. Don't worry, she's gonna put them in my room."

Everyone relaxed, and then Sean said, "I think we better get some things out in the open. It seems like this discussion ends up being in the nude lately, so let's keep the habit going!"

"Not AGAIN!" Kyle groaned, with an exaggerated pained expression on his face.

Sean reached over and put Kyle in a light headlock, causing both of them to giggle. While Sean was close, he whispered in Kyle's ear. "Way to go last night, bro. You did not pee in your sleep. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks Sean," Kyle whispered back.

Sean went ahead and filled the new additions to the group in on everyone. There was some disbelief from the twins and Adam about Kyle's being able to hear Mike until Tyler spoke up and told in detail what happened to let them find Adam.

The twins got that look on their faces like they were talking to each other silently, when suddenly their eyes got wide, and both of them looked at Kyle in amazement.

"How'd you do that!" they exclaimed in unison.

"I tuned in on the noise I hear every time you guys talk to each other," Kyle replied.

"What did he do?" Ty asked.

"He showed us what we look like when we talk to each other privately, then said 'BUSTED!'" Jamie replied.

Everyone else fell silent as they watched the three boys. The only sound for the next two minutes was an occasional giggle from the three as they shared something funny between them. The three of them reached out and joined hands. The rest of the boys were shocked when each one of them was suddenly encased in a blue glow, first individually, then all three at once. When they separated, Jamie finally spoke.

"WOW! That was AWESOME! While we were talking to each other, Mikey joined us and had us join hands, Jacob and I were able to hear him and talk to him too! Mikey says that now no matter where we are, the three of us will be able to talk to each other. He told us some other things too, but we had to promise to keep them secret, they are good things tho."

Jacob then took over. "He also said we need to tell you ALL the reasons we ran away. The first reason you guys already figured out, we only got food if we found it for ourselves. There is more though."

Kyle got a shocked look on his face, grabbed Ty, and moved over to sit with the twins.

Jacob continued in a subdued voice. "We have three sets of clothes for school, and just this one set of shorts to play in. We are not allowed to visit friends or have them over; in fact dad says we can't have friends. We were not supposed to leave the yard. When we are inside at home, Dad will not let us wear any clothes. The bad part is ..." Jacob suddenly fell silent, shame showing on both his and Jamie's faces.

Kyle reached out and took hold of each of the twin's hands. "Do you want me to tell the rest for you?"

Both boys nodded their heads as Ty took their other hands into his.

Kyle continued where Jacob had left off. "Their mom had died when they were born, so it was just them and their father. A couple of years ago, their father caught them playing around with each others privates. Ever since then, after supper they have had to sit on his lap and let him touch



them there until bedtime. For the last year, the only thing they had for supper was two slices of bread and a glass of milk, breakfast was two slices of bread and a glass of orange juice. While he was playing with them, whenever he was about to squirt they had to take turns swallowing it. If neither one dribbled any, they got a treat; a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Last Thursday, he started doing something else; he started sticking a finger up their butts while he was rubbing. They are both gay, and they knew where that was leading, so they decided to leave before he got home Friday."

Kyle broke out of the trance he had dropped into, and immediately pulled the twins tight against him. The room was silent, the anger at what they had been forced to do was so strong it seemed like a physical fog in the room.

Unknown to the boys, Teri had been listening from Sean's room. She had come in to leave the clothes when she heard the twins start talking, and decided she had better listen. When Kyle finished, she was in a blind rage at what they had went through. For the first time ever, she walked into the room without knocking, going immediately to the twins. She knelt before them and lifted their faces to look directly in their eyes. "Boys, you can be angry, but do not be ashamed. He should have never made you do that, and I promise he will pay. I was dropping off the clothes and overheard all of it. I know now why you did not go to the police, but from now on, you will never have to worry about being forced to do anything. Dan is a psychologist, you can talk to him; or you can talk to me or to any of these boys here. Whatever it takes to make sure he never gets near you again will be done, that I promise you. I'm going to call the Judge from the other room so you don't have to hear me repeat what happened, you go ahead and get calmed down before y'all come down."

Teri went to the phone in Sean's room and called Joe. As soon as she had relayed what she heard, he promised to be over as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the boys were calming down and consoling the twins, pledging their support in whatever it would take to ensure their safety.

Teri finished the call, and headed to the stairs. As she was coming down the stairs, the doorbell rang. "Dan, could you get that please?" she called out.

"Sure Teri."

Dan opened the door, and his jaw dropped so fast it cracked the threshold. He was speechless! In the driveway was a long white limo, and standing at the door were John and seven other people, some of which two days ago, he would have laughed if you had told him he would meet them.

"Wake up, Dan! Are you gonna let us in?" John asked.

"Uhh – yeah, come on in," Dan said in a shocked voice.

John came into the foyer, immediately followed by Kevin and Kristin.

"Dan! I'm your little brother Kevin." Kevin pulled Dan into a hug, a goofy grin on his face. As he pulled back, he put a hand on Kristin's shoulder. "This fine lady is my wife, Kristin."

Dan hugged Kristin. "I'm happy to meet you too."

While all the hugging was going on, everyone else entered the foyer

Dan felt a hand softly touch his shoulder. He slowly turned around. Facing him with a nervous smile was a stately older woman which he instinctively knew had to be Anne. "Mom??"

"Yes, son," Anne said as she pulled him into a hug, both of them crying.

After a couple minutes, they composed themselves, and Anne introduced the rest of the group.

"Dan, this is your cousin Chip, and his husband Joshua. The little angel in Josh's arms is Justin."

"Chip, Josh, it's a pleasure to actually meet you. It looks like I'll have to wait to say hi to Justin though!" Dan said with a chuckle.

"It's a pleasure having you as part of the family," Chip replied. "As far as Justin goes, once he wakes up you will be begging for him to go back to sleep!"

"Yeah," Josh jumped in "this little angel turns into a tornado once he is fully awake. It's probably a good idea to hide breakables now! By the way, welcome to the family, cuz!"

Anne introduced the last person, "Dan, this is your cousin Brian."

Kevin muttered just loud enough to be heard. "Yeah, the reject from the funny farm!"

Everyone cracked up at this, even Teri, who had walked in just as the introductions started. "Everyone," Dan started, "this is my good friend Teri. Teri, this is everyone!" When he saw the dirty look she was giving him, he then introduced everyone by name.

Josh looked over at Teri – "Teri, is there someplace I can put the rug rat? He's getting kinda heavy."

"Sure Josh, follow me, the boys still have their 'nest' assembled in the rec room," she replied.

"Nest?" Josh asked with a confused look on his face.

"Yeah, they camped out in the rec room last night, the end result of it looks like a bird's nest."

"Ohhhkayyy ... I'm afraid to ask!"

Chip followed along with Josh as Teri led them into the rec room. Josh carefully navigated around the pile of blankets and pillows on the floor, and laid Justin carefully on the couch. Chip removed his Starfleet bomber jacket and laid it over Justin, and then both men gave their sleeping son a kiss on the forehead before heading towards the doorway.

As they exited the room, Jamie and Jacob came down the stairs. The boys both still had pained expressions on their faces, even though all signs of tears had been washed off. Without paying attention to who was with Teri, they came over and cuddled up on either side of her.

"Josh, Chip – this is Jamie and Jacob," Teri stated softly.

Josh knelt down in front of them. "Hey guys, why the sad faces?"

"We were just talking about our daddy with Teri," Jamie replied in a subdued voice.

"Holy Smoke!!!! You're JC from N\*Sync!!!!" Jacob shouted, effectively getting the attention of everyone else in the house.

Josh laughed "Yeah, last time I checked I was." Josh then pointed at Chip "and this is my husband, Chip."

Chip knelt down in front of the twins and spoke up, "Why does talking about your Daddy make you guys sad?"

As Jacob started to reply, Teri put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "If you want, I'll tell them for you, ok guys? You two can relax in the rec room while we are talking. Just don't wake up Justin."

"Justin? Who's Justin?" Jamie asked.

Chip answered. "Justin is mine and Josh's fourteen year old son."

In chorus the twins answered, "Okay, kewl." They then headed into the rec room.

When they entered the room, Justin was sitting up on the couch. "Hey guys, I'm Justin. Who yelled and woke me up?"

"Hey Justin, I'm Jacob, and this is my brother Jamie. Sorry about waking you up – your ... umm ... JC surprised me."

Justin replied, "You mean Pop surprised you. How?"

Jamie replied, "You try lookin' up and seein' a N\*Sync member in front of you!"

"I do every morning. So what? I also see a Starfleet officer as well. What's really bad is having to eat breakfast with Aaron every morning."

"Yeah, who was that Starfleet man?"

"That's my Dad – he's a Commander on the *Enterprise*."

Jacob spoke up, "Okay, now who the heck is Aaron?"

"It's just Aaron Carter. No big deal. By the way, how the heck does anyone tell y'all apart?"

Jacob giggled, "Do you really wanna know?"

Jamie blushed. "Actually, the only way is if one of us drops our shorts. Jacob's winkie still has skin on the end, mine don't."

Justin shook his head. "I think I'll just ask if that's okay with y'all. I heard some of what y'all said out there, since you got me up. You wanna talk about it?"

The twins sat on the other end of the couch, and began telling Justin about how they were found. Justin saw the tears starting as they continued, and asked them to come sit by him. As the twins settled in on each side, he pulled them close and thought to himself "I gotta talk to Dad and Pop. There's gotta be something they can do to help these guys."

Sobbing, the twins finished the short version of their lives, and fell asleep in Justin's arms. With dark thoughts running through his head concerning what he was going to do if he ever met their father, Justin shortly fell back asleep, holding his new friends protectively.

"Why don't we all go grab a cup or two of coffee?" Teri asked. "We need to wait for Joe to get here before I go over what happened to the twins, he's the leading Family Court Judge for Polk County."

"Sounds like a plan," Chip replied.

"I'll get the others," Josh said.

Once everyone was gathered in the dining room and had their coffee or tea in hand, Chip asked Teri to fill them in some on how she had amassed such a large family in the last week. As she was just finishing the stories of how each boy joined the family, the rest of the boys came downstairs.

"Mom," Sean said, "where's Jacob and Jamie?"

"They are in the Rec Room with Justin; he's Chip and Josh's son. I told them to relax for a bit," Teri replied.

Sean turned to go check on them, and saw the rest of the guys standing there with their jaws dropped down to their knees. He turned back around to see why they were in shock, and fell speechless when he realized who was sitting around the table.

Ty found his voice first. "WOW!! That's Kevin and Brian from Backstreet, and JC from N\*Sync!! They're really here at OUR house! KEWL!"

The adults chuckled at the responses of the kids, then Dan waved them over to the table. He looked around the table at the adults. "I hate to tell y'all this, but you're gaining a few more kids than you expected. This entire group has sworn to each other that they are brothers forever – I would not be surprised if the twins are included in the group now." He stood up, and placed his hand on the shoulder of each boy as he introduced him. "This is my son, JJ, and here is his brother Kyle. The other four here are Teri's boys; first this is Sean, the unofficial chief of this tribe, this one is his brother Cory, and this is Tyler and Adam, the last two official additions to the family. Jacob and Jamie are the twins, their family affiliation is still in limbo, but somehow I get the feeling they will be a part of this family somewhere before this is all done."

Anne spoke up, "Dan, have a seat, son. I'll handle the introductions from here. First, I want to make an announcement. Teri, I heard a lot of good things about you even before we

arrived, but what I've seen in the short time I've been here has made up my mind. I have been blessed with four wonderful sons, and from this moment forward I'm proud to say that I now have gained a daughter. Your actions regarding Dan and all these boys are above and beyond what most people would even consider. From now on, you are family; you are my daughter as far as ANYONE is concerned. Welcome to the family, and no, you do not have any choice in the matter." Anne then smiled at Teri, and gave her a welcome hug.

"Now, boys; can I have your attention please?" Anne continued. "It's time you met the members of your family that are here. There's even more you will meet later. First, I'm Dan, and now Teri's, mom, Anne; all of you can call me Grandma though, okay? Over there is your Uncle Kevin and Aunt Kristin, and next to them is your cousin, Brian. Sitting by Dan is your cousin Josh, and next to him is his husband Chip. Their son, Justin, is supposed to be resting in the rec room right now. You guys will meet him in a little bit."

"Unca Chip?" Kyle said, "Justin says that Aaron Carter stays with you and you are part of Starfleet. Is he fibbing?"

"Whoa! Yes, Aaron does live with us, and so does his boyfriend David. And yes, I'm in Starfleet, too. How the heck did you know that?" Chip replied with surprise.

Sean chuckled "Uncle Chip, meet our resident psychic! Kyle and the twins seem to have figured out how to talk to each other in their minds!"

"Please don't teach Justin that! He's bad enough when you can hear him plotting!" Josh chuckled.

Just then, the doorbell and phone both rang. Sean went to get the door, while Cory went to answer the phone.

As Cory picked up the receiver, he looked over and saw Sean escorting in Joe.

"Short residence, this is Cory."

"CORY! This is Mark! How are you doing?"

"Pretty good. Things have been nuts the last few days, but my memory has improved a lot. What are you up to?"

"Not much. I'm in a temp home right now. Do you know where Dr. Richardson is at? I need to talk to him."

"Yeah, Dan's sitting in the other room right now. What's up?"

"I kinda need his help if he will give it to me. I need a reference so I can find a place to go. The state says I'm too old for them to place now."

"That bites. Just a sec, let me ask him. I'm gonna put ya on hold here."

Cory went over to Dan. "Dan, Mark's on the phone. The state is givin' him a hassle; he wants to know if he can come see you." The concern in Cory's voice was extremely evident.

"Who is Mark?" Anne asked.

"He was my roomie when I was in the home recovering from my memory loss. He helped me deal with it a lot, especially when I started remembering about being gay and Sean being my boyfriend," Cory replied.

"Tell him to come over then. If Dan can't help him, we will figure something out. It's only right he gets paid back for helping you," Anne stated.

Cory looked at Dan. "You heard your Grandma," Dan replied, "tell him to get his butt over here."

Cory returned to the phone. "Mark, you still there?"

"Yeah Cory, I thought you forgot I was here though!"

Cory giggled, "Naw, but you need to get over here as fast as you can. From what I was just told, you don't need to worry about anything. Do you have a way over, or do you need a ride?"

"Well, I'm in Ankeny right now, if you could send someone out it would be easier. If I call a cab, it will be hard to convince them to let me go, the foster 'rents are afraid I'll run off."

"Okay, just a sec."

Cory put his hand over the phone, then yelled: "MOM! Can someone go pick up Mark? His fosters won't let him leave in a cab, and he's in Ankeny."

"Don't worry about it!" Kevin yelled back. "I'll send the limo to pick him up! Just get the address."

"Thanks Uncle Kev!" Cory then removed his hand. "Mark, what's the address there, the limo will come get you."

"Limo? Yeah, right! And since when do you have an Uncle Kev?"

Cory giggled, "Just give me your address dufus. I DO have an Uncle Kev, wait till you meet him!"

Mark gave Cory the info, then after trading insults they hung up.

Cory was giggling as he handed the address to Kevin. "Man, is Mark ever gonna be surprised. He don't believe a limo is picking him up, then he gets to find out who my Uncle Kev is!"

"That settles it; you are DEFINITELY a member of the family after pulling that off!" Kevin snickered. "It sounds like all you need is the Advanced Pranks course from Brian and you'll be all set!"

"HEY!" Brian said. "Why does everyone always blame ME for the pranks?"

"Maybe it's because you usually DO pull most of the pranks?" Josh muttered.

Everyone got a good laugh as Brian tried to stutter his way out of it, then Kevin took the address out to the limo driver so he could go get Mark.

Teri gathered the boys together. "There's cereal in the kitchen, why don't you all go get ONE BOWL each to hold you over till we go out to breakfast? If the twins and Justin are awake, they might want some too. Why don't one of you check?"

Tyler ran to the rec room as the rest of the boys headed for the kitchen. A minute later, he was back, giggling. "Mom, Uncle Chip, Uncle Josh; you GOTTA see this!"

They followed Ty back into the rec room. Everyone smiled at the sight before them: Justin was lying on a pile of blankets on the floor; with a twin on each side cuddled so close they made a living blanket for him. The twins were using Justin's chest for a pillow, lying so their noses touched each other.

Teri reached towards the twins. "I hate to do this, but they need to eat," she reached down and rubbed the boys' shoulders. "Jamie, Jacob; get up and get into the kitchen for some cereal."

The two boys woke instantly, but as they tried to get up, Justin pulled them back down unconsciously.

Anne chuckled, "Looks like the angel has decided to take them under his wing."

Josh looked at Chip and smiled. "I think Justin is making plans without us again, hon."

"We'll just have to beat him to the punch then, won't we?" Chip replied with a gleam in his eye.

Everyone's attention was drawn back to the boys when the twins began speaking.

"Justy!" they said in chorus, "Get up bro! We need to hurry up before everyone else eats all the Cocoa Puffs! C'mon, we're hungry!"

Justin slowly turned his head and kissed each of the twin's foreheads. "Don't worry guys; I'll make sure you get some food," he then opened his eyes and saw the group of adults watching them. "AWWWWW MAANNN!!!!" he moaned, "Do you all HAVE to watch me sleep!"

"BUSSSTTTeed rug rat!" Josh said with a grin.

"Aww Man; I'm gonna get you Pop!" a blushing Justin replied.

Ty giggled. "C'mon guys, lets raid the kitchen!"

"Jamie, Jacob;" Teri said, "you two are in charge of introducing Justin to everyone else – BEFORE you get your cereal. And only ONE BOWL EACH, we are going out to eat in a little bit!"

"Okay Teri."

As the boys headed for the kitchen, Teri guided everyone else to the office. Once they were in there, she closed the door and introduced everyone to Joe. The last person she introduced was Chip. When she gave his name, Joe's eyebrows jumped up.

"Chip Dodds? You wouldn't, by any chance, be the Commander Chip Dodds who invoked the Federation's Safe Haven Act in regards to Aaron Carter last year, are you?"

"As a matter of fact, Judge, yes I am."

"I'm honored to meet you. How is young Aaron doing?"

"He began settling in a few months ago. It took a while to get over what his so-called parents did, even though he knew it was coming. Thankfully, so far they haven't tried to disregard the restrictions placed on them, but I have this uneasy feeling that sooner or later they will try something."

"That's great news. The family court system nationwide watched that first use very close. It is the first law that helped us at this level directly. Now, back to business. I would like this to be made an official testimony so that none of us has to go through it again. By any chance are you able to log a conversation using your communicator, Chip?"

"Actually that's not a problem. Just give me a second." Chip opened his communicator.

"Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Chip."

"Nyota, could you please tie my communicator in to record to the ship's log, then connect me to the Captain?"

"Recording is started, Chip. One second and the Captain will be on."

"Thank you Nyota."

"Kirk here. Is there a problem, Chip? Uhura tells me you requested a ship's log recording."

"Not a problem yet, Captain. The log recording was upon request of Judge Joseph Lewis, Family Court Judge for Polk County, Iowa. This is regarding some twin boys, they look to be about 8 years old ..."

"They are 10," Joe interrupted.

"Correction, Captain," Chip continued, "The boys are 10. My gut instinct tells me you might want to listen in on this, even more so now that I see that they are suffering from stunted growth."

"That little tidbit was enough to get my attention, Chip. I will monitor the proceedings. If you need my assistance, just say the word."

"Thank you Captain. Dodds standing by. Beginning proceedings."

"Kirk standing by."

"Okay Judge, it's all yours," Chip said.

"Thanks, Chip, and thank you, Captain Kirk. This is Judge Joseph Tyler Lewis, Family Court, Polk County, Iowa, USA. These proceedings are in regards to the minor children Jamie Sampson Stewart and Jacob William Stewart; both age 10, born April 15, 1994. For the first statement, the presiding officer will make his report.

Chip swore in John, and then John began his testimony.

"This is Sheriff John Clay Martin, badge number 624, Polk County, Iowa Sheriff's Department. Yesterday evening I was preparing to eat dinner at the Urbandale Perkins, when one of my party noticed the subjects digging in the dumpster behind the restaurant. They were reported as missing for the last 3 days, but their physical condition suggested long-term malnourishment. As required by State codes, I put them in emergency foster care until their home conditions could be verified."

"Thank you Sheriff. Next up is Teri Short," Joe said.

Chip swore in Teri, and she related what she had heard about the boy's home life and the abuse they had been subjected to.

Once she finished, Captain Kirk spoke up from the communicator. "Judge, has a medical exam been performed on these children yet?"

"No Captain, one has not."

"Keep this channel open, but I request a fifteen minute recess while I arrange for a Starfleet Doctor to perform an exam on these youths."

"Recess granted Captain. This hearing now stands in recess for fifteen minutes."

Ten minutes later, a shimmering column appeared in the room. "Good morning, Doc," Chip said to the doctor after he had materialized. Chip then introduced Dr. Leonard McCoy to everyone in the room.

"It was good till I read that transcript. Where are those boys? If I find anything wrong, I'm gonna do things to their father that would make a Klingon cringe."

Josh turned to Brian, "Bri, go get the twins for the Doctor."

A few minutes later, the twins appeared at the door. The surprise was, they were not with Brian, but with Justin; one twin hiding under each of his arms.

As soon as Justin saw Dr. McCoy, he visibly relaxed. "Jamie, Jacob; this is Dr. McCoy from the *Enterprise*. You don't need to worry; he's the best doctor in the whole universe!"

Jamie cuddled in closer to Justin. "Could you still stay with us? PLEASE?"

Dr. McCoy stopped Justin before he could answer. "Any other time I'd say no. But after what I heard this morning I will allow it, this time ONLY. Now why don't you guys show me where a bedroom is, and we will get this over with."

The twins headed out the door with Justin and the Doctor right behind them. As they left the room, Dr. McCoy told Justin "By the way young man, no matter how much you try to flatter me, the 'no chocolate after 5PM rule' still applies."

"Awww Mannnn!"

Chip chuckled, "I better check on Brian. He's probably gotten into something," he walked out into the kitchen, and the first clue that something was up was the innocent looks on the faces of the six boys. He noticed all six of them were missing their shirts. He then heard the muffled groans from behind the counter. Barely suppressing a laugh, Chip asked, "Alright Sean, what did you guys do with Brian, and why?"

Sean looked up; radiating innocence so much you could see a halo. "Brian is 'resting' in the kitchen. He tried to get into Justin, Jacob, and Jamie's box of Cocoa Puffs after they left."

Chip looked Sean in the eyes. "And WHY do they have their own box? I know your mom told you only one bowl each."

"They did not get a chance to finish their bowls. We talked for a while before we started eating, so they were only half way done when Brian came out. We are finishin' up what they had so it's not wasted, and I told them to get more when they came back out."

"Okay, you can slide this time. Now I guess I better check on Brian." Chip walked around the counter, and collapsed on the floor laughing when he saw Brian.

Anne and Teri came out to see what the commotion was and saw Brian hog-tied on the kitchen floor with a gag in his mouth. Anne looked at Teri and smiled "It looks like Brian's finally met his match. Wait until I tell Jackie, Harold and Junior. Ice cream's on me after the restaurant for the boys!"

Chip finally recovered enough to crawl over and begin untying Brian. He saved the gag for last, and as he removed it Teri told Brian "It looks like you've been accepted. They didn't throw you in the pool!"

There was a knock on the door, and Cory went to answer it. "MARK! Get in here, I missed ya bro!" he exclaimed.

Once they were in the foyer, Cory stopped Mark for a minute. "I'll introduce you to everyone in a little bit. Right now there's some serious junk goin' down, just promise you won't freak when you see who is here."

"After seeing that massive limo pull up, I don't think anything will shock me!" Mark replied.

Cory giggled, "Just wait, it gets even better!" He then guided Mark back to join the rest of the group. When they reached the breakfast nook, Mark came to a stop in shock.

Cory giggled. "Told ya it gets better! You know Sean and Mom, that's my bro's Adam and Ty by Sean. Over there is Dan's son JJ, and you already know Kyle; Dan adopted him. Joe is in the office, he's the family judge for around here, but there by the door is John, he's the Polk County Sheriff. The goofball giving everyone dirty looks is my second cousin Brian, next to him are my second cousins Josh and Chip. We're actually calling the three of them uncle tho, it is too weird having cousins that old! You will meet Josh and Chip's son Justin in a little bit, he is upstairs with the twins and Dr. McCoy. The last three are my real uncle and aunt, Uncle Kevin and Aunt Kristin; and Grandma Anne. Everyone, this is Mark Owens. He was my roommate back at the home."

Anne walked up to Mark. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Cory said that you helped him recover, for that all of us are eternally grateful. I'm sorry for the delay, but there was a major problem with the twins that we are resolving right now. Feel free to join us while we sort this all out."

"Thank you Anne. This is still blowing my mind, but I would be happy to join you."

Everyone finally headed back into the office. Joe was on the phone, and they heard his side of the conversation.

"Yes Commissioner ... I will be resuming the hearing as soon as the Doctor finishes his examination ... The Commander just returned to the room, let me ask him ... Yes, he knows about the law. He was the first one to invoke it ... hold on, I'll be right back."

Joe turned towards the table. "Captain, are you still there?"

"Yes, Judge, and I heard your side of the conversation. What is the Commissioner's number? I can have him patched through here so any determinations he makes are part of the ship's log."

John gave Kirk the number then continued. "If Dr. McCoy finds any physical evidence to support the verbal testimony, the Commissioner is prepared to invoke clause 134-C of the Safe Haven Act. We believe that an out-of-state placement will be required for the children's mental health and safety. Can you recommend any officers who are capable of taking on two boys on such short notice?"

"One second, Captain," Chip interrupted.

Chip turned to Josh. "Hon, you saw Justy with the boys. It would break his little angel heart if we didn't at least try."

Josh hugged Chip. "I know, babe, and we have talked about Justy needing a little brother



for a long time. I think these two are perfect. What do you think?"

"I agree. Let's do it." Chip then broke the embrace and turned back towards the Judge. "Joe, if the twins and Justin are in agreement, I will invoke the custody proceedings. Josh and I agree that we can handle taking on these two. Section 134-C, Sub-part 3 requires a judicial authority in the Starfleet officer's home state or province to verify suitable accommodations. If you contact Judge Jamie Robison in Orlando, we can satisfy that requirement."

Just then Uhura announced on the communicator that the Commissioner was connected.

Joe chuckled "This should be easy; Jamie was my roommate back in college. I'll put him on speaker here, that way everything is ready when Dr. McCoy comes back down with the boys."

Just as Joe got Jamie on the speaker phone, Justin came through the doorway with the twins. Dr. McCoy followed them in, wearing an uncharacteristic smile and waving a plastic bag.

"I assume that you have some good news, Doc?" Chip stated.

"It's things like this that make this worthwhile," Dr McCoy replied. "The boys are malnourished, but that can be corrected. The prize in the bag here is due to their father losing a part of his fingernail while he was inserting what appears to be two fingers into each of them. I did a DNA analysis already, and it came up positive for close relation. Considering the only relative they have living is their so-called father; that narrows it down real quick. I expect to see these boys on the *Enterprise* within three days to do a full workup on their diets and supplements. You understand me, Chip?"

"Doc, they are not even ..." Chip began to reply, but he was cut off by Dr McCoy.

"Don't even try to give me that line, Chip. To quote Spock, 'it's only logical that you take them in'. Or as I prefer to say it, either you do it or I'll do it for you," he then tossed the bag to John. "Here's your evidence, any and all confirming tests you may need have already been cleared through Starfleet Medical. Just give them a call and ask for Dr. Elaine Howard. I have already ordered Priority One processing for you. I want that S.O.B. nailed to the wall."

"Will do, Doctor. With this evidence it's pretty much open and shut. Thank you very much for your assistance," John replied.

"Prepare to beam up, Bones," Kirk ordered through the communicator.

The next thing everyone knew, Dr. McCoy was dematerializing before their eyes.

Joe continued with the proceedings. "The doctor's results are on record, Commissioner; I believe you had a request?"

"Yes, Judge, as soon as you can verify suitability of residency, the State of Iowa wishes to invoke Section 134-C of the Safe Haven Act."

"Commissioner, this is Judge Jamie Robison, Family Court in Orlando, Florida. I am required to keep an open file on Commander Dodds and Mr. Chases-Dodds due to their status as guardians of Aaron Carter under the Safe Haven Act. I hereby declare full suitability, and furthermore fully recommend their approval."

Captain Kirk spoke up. "Commissioner, Starfleet accepts you invocation of the Safe Haven Act, as per Section 134-C. The recommendation of Judge Robison is noted and accepted. Commander Dodds, front and center."

"Standing by, Captain."

"The State of Iowa has certified you and your husband, Joshua Chases-Dodds, under section 134-C of the Safe Haven Act, as the nominated custodial guardians for Jamie and Jacob Stewart. Do you accept this nomination?"

"Affirmative, Captain. Josh and I accept full custody."

"Commissioner, Starfleet accepts your request for invocation of Section 134-C of the Safe Haven Act, and hereby relieves you, and the State of Iowa, of responsibility for the minor

children Jamie and Jacob Stewart. Please forward all documents regarding the children to my attention on the *Enterprise*."

Everyone broke out in cheers of congratulations at the announcement. Once they had finally calmed down, Kirk continued. "Chip? Josh? Congratulations on your new sons! Bones said to remind you that you have three days to have them up here for full exams, and I expect you to bring everyone else there with you."

Chip, smiling, replied, "Aye, sir. Consider it done, Captain."

"Good. See you in a few days. Kirk out."

Chip readjusted his communicator. "Dodds to *Enterprise*, Uhura?"

"Uhura here, Chip."

"Good. Discontinue recording at this time, and forward a copy of that transcript to the CPS Commissioner and Judge Lewis here in Des Moines; Judge Robison in Orlando; and a copy to Starfleet JAG Corps and Starfleet Medical."

"Will do, Chip. Anything else?"

"Yeah, make sure the Captain gets a hard copy of that transcript."

"Sure thing. Take care, kiddo, and congrats from all of us up here. And even Mr. Spock sends his regards."

Chip blushed and replied, "Thanks, Nyota. Dodds out." Chip closed his communicator and then turned to look at his husband, his son, and the twins "Jamie? Jacob? Could you please come over here for a minute?"

Jamie and Jacob walked over to Chip as the older man knelt down in front of them. Jamie spoke up, "Yeah, Uncle Chip?"

Chip had a smile on his face. "Boys, how would you like to come live with me, Uncle Josh, and Justin in Orlando?"

The twins turned to look at Justin, who just simply nodded his head. They then turned back to face Chip. "That'll be AWESOME!!!" the twins replied in unison. Jamie asked, "Uncle Chip? Does this mean that we can call you 'Daddy' and call Josh 'Pop'?"

Josh walked over and knelt beside his husband and faced the boys. "Yeah, kiddos. I'll be your 'Pop', and Chip will be your 'Daddy'. And when the time is right, we will change your last names to Dodds. Would you two like that?" Josh and Chip were surprised by the twins' answer.

Jacob hugged Josh tight, while Jamie did the same thing to Chip. Chip noticed that Justin was watching them. He motioned to his oldest son. "Come here, munchkin. You're a part of this, too."

Justin ran over and gave his new brothers a hug at the same time he became wrapped up in his parents' arms.

The rest of the group just watched and smiled at the new family in front of them.

## *Chapter 13*

*Hey all, this is Mike again!*

*Sorry about hiding out lately, but you try to keep up with this tribe! I'll admit, Kyle kinda freaked me out with his "Kylegrams" between him and the twins, but I have a sneaky suspicion that sooner or later it will come in handy.*

*As far as the adults go, it looks like Dan's long-lost family showing up when they did is doing some good, even though they are shaking up the whole group with all the changes they have brought along with them. Sharon has commented that this was the best thing that could happen right now, she really does not want to see the family grieving, and all this excitement has taken their minds off of the funeral. Sharon and I discussed it and her concerns that either Dan or JJ would follow the same route Cory did when I died have faded after all the support they have both received. I really hope so at least, it still hurts to see Cory miss out on something he used to enjoy because he doesn't remember ever doing it.*

*I don't know about y'all, but Sean does kinda worry me; he has taken on the role of big brother / tribal chief with all of these boys, and I'm not really sure he is ready for it. That's a lotta responsibility he is shouldering, I really hope he asks for help when he needs it. At least I can get thru to him using the connection thru Kyle if things get out of hand!*

*You know, at times I'm beginning to think its better watching everything from up here! I really wonder how much I missed while trying to keep up with a normal life, I see so much more now!*

*Well, I better let y'all get back, my sources say things are about to go crazy again. (Or is that yet?)*

*Seezya!*

*Mike*

\* \* \*

Sean and Cory were finally getting some quiet time together. After dinner, all the boys gravitated into the rec room. After about a half hour of celebrating and congratulating the twins on their new family, Cory got Sean's attention and they snuck out of the room and up to Cory's bedroom.

"What's the matter, Cory?" Sean asked once they were in the room.

"Nuthin. I just needed some one-on-one time with my favorite person. Is that okay?"

Cory replied in an accusing tone.

"What's that about? I'm not ignoring you, Cory."

"You might as well be. Sean, since Ty came up to the door, you have been spending all your time with everyone else. I would like some time with you too. I'm trying to deal with a lot; feelings that I'm not sure if they are new or just returning, plus having flashes of my past show up when I least expect it. One week ago, I knew I could count on you whenever I needed you. But in the last couple days it's like you are so busy with everyone else that you don't have time for me. All I want is a little time alone with you, is that too much to ask?"

"Man, I'm sorry Cory; I didn't mean to ignore you! Why didn't you slap me upside my head and get my attention? I know things have been nuts, I guess I just got overwhelmed by everything happening. How the heck could I do that to you?"

"It really hurts me, Sean, when I can't talk to you and share what's happening with you. For the last day or so I have been wishing that everyone would just leave so we could go back to just the two of us. Instead, we have two new brothers, two guys who are like brothers, and a whole huge family which happens to consist of some members of Backstreet and N\*Sync. It's getting to be too much for me to deal with without you there for me to talk to. I push myself because it makes YOU happy, but now I'm feeling ignored."

"Cory, I realize that I've really screwed up, but you have got my attention now. What do I need to do to make things right again? Talk to me, help me to understand what's wrong so I can get back to what we used to have."

"Sean, I want it to be like Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh have it. They always seem to know what each other is feeling and doing so they can help each other."

The boys were shocked by a soft knock at their door. "Hey guys, mind if I join you?" Chip asked.

"I guess so," Cory replied with a downcast look.

Chip closed the door and walked over to Cory. Chip knelt in front of Cory, and then he placed a finger under Cory's chin and lifted Cory's face to where he could look him in the eyes. "I heard your statement about wanting to be like me and Josh as I was walking past the door. If you would like, maybe I can help you guys out some. How does that sound?"

"I guess so. It has to be okay with Sean though, he is part of this too."

Chip looked over at Sean. "Whadda you think? You want a little friendly help here?"

"It might help. I'm trying to figure out how I got to ignoring Cory. He means so much to me yet I've let him down when he needed me," Sean said with tears rolling down his face.

"I've been there, Sean. Why don't we let Cory tell both of us what is getting to him. Then we can see what can be done to fix it. Sound good?"

"Yeah, sounds fine," Sean answered.

Chip sat on the floor in front of the boys. "Okay Cory, it's your stage. Fill me in."

"Well, ever since everyone started showing up here, Sean has been so busy helping everyone that he has not had any time for me. I've tried helping him. But it seems the more I help, the more he tries to do. I feel selfish wanting to be alone with him when there are so many people wanting his help, but right now I feel like he cares about them more than he cares about me."

A voice from the doorway interrupted them. "Dang Chip, have you been giving Sean sensitivity lessons? It sounds like you and I need to talk, Cory," Josh said as he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"Thanks a lot, hun. You're sleeping on the floor tonight!" Chip said with a smile.

"What did you mean by that, Uncle Josh?" Cory asked.

"Well, this actually proves something I've suspected since I first met you guys," Josh said.

"Sean and Chip are a lot alike. Whenever they get involved in something they go for it full tilt, and unless someone steps in and gives them a swift kick in the butt, they just keep going and going. Cory, I think you might be quite a bit like me; strong in your own way, but able to see when things are getting out of hand."

Chip grinned and pulled Josh down next to him. "That's it, buster. You're sleeping with Justy and the twins tonight!"

"The truth hurts, don't it, love?" Josh said as he gave Chip a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. He then turned to Sean. "Seriously, Sean, it's not as bad as I just made it sound. You have a very admirable quality, but you need to let Cory help you keep from taking it overboard. Actually, Chip's obsessive need to help others was one of the things that first attracted him to me. It has taken a lot of work to get where we are now, but every second of it was worth it."

"That makes sense," Sean said. "But how do you do that? I feel bad that I've let Cory down, and I really don't want to do it again. I lost him for a year, and it was the hardest year of my life. I really don't know what I'd do if he left me for good."

"First thing you guys need to do," Chip started, "is to make time every day for each other. It does not have to be anything fancy, or even sexual. Just a half hour cuddling together watching a favorite show helps a lot. The important thing is to concentrate on each other, forget everything else that's happening around you."

Josh interrupted. "Cory, the second thing is mainly on you. If you need time, grab Sean by the ear and pull him away from what he is doing. If he is being especially thick-headed, give him a swift kick in the butt. Trust me; there have been plenty of times it has taken a kick in the butt to get Chip's brain working again."

"Do you really grab his ear or kick him, Uncle Josh?" Cory asked.

"Yeah he does!" Chip groaned. "There are times I thought he was going to turn me into a Vulcan he was pulling so hard. And can you imagine trying to explain to the Captain why you need a pillow in your seat at the helm? I still don't live that one down!"

Josh chuckled. "True, the Captain does tend to bring that one time up at the most inopportune times. He rags me about it as much as you, Babe. Do you know how many times he has lectured me in jest about damaging Starfleet property?"

Sean and Cory giggled at the thought, then Sean spoke up. "Uncle Chip, Uncle Josh, I think I get the picture now. Is there anything else we should know about?"

Chip got serious. "Actually, this is the most important thing. If you guys have a disagreement, or are mad at each other, do not go to sleep until you have it settled. The problem won't go away overnight; it will just get worse. To be honest, there was one time before Josh and I got married that if we had went to sleep, by that morning we would have been broke up and would never have married. It can get that serious real quick; in fact I think you guys were getting close to that point yourselves. If it means staying up all night, then do it. That one time neither one of us slept for two nights – it took that long to sort everything out. If you both work together you have the makings of a long term relationship here. Don't lose it over an argument."

"Wow!" Cory said, "You make it sound like a lot of work! I kinda see what you mean though. I was gonna talk to Sean yesterday but never did, and I felt worse this morning but did not know why. Thanks a lot for the help; I really want to make it work like you two have."

"I want to make it work too," Sean replied. "I feel bad still about losing touch, but at least now if I start to mess up again Cory knows how to catch me before it gets too bad. Just do me one favor though, if I ever make it into Starfleet, don't send me out with a sore butt – PLEASE!"

Everyone got a good laugh at Sean's last comment, and then Chip got a curious look on his face. "Sean, are you serious about that?"

"Yeah, not that it'll ever happen, but I'd like to be a helmsman one of these days. I know Cory is into the engineering stuff, but I would not feel right unless both of us got into it – and there is almost no chance of that, and even less of us staying together after the Academy."

"They took Chip, what makes you think they won't take you two?" Josh quipped with a grin.

Chip gave Josh a dirty look, and then returned to the conversation. "Don't mind him. He's just jealous 'cause I have a real job. Don't tell anyone else, but y'all are going to be visiting my work the day after tomorrow. Let me make a call here and maybe I can set up some special tours for you two while we are there."

As Chip reached for his communicator, it hit the boys what he just said. "Whoa, we're going to the *Enterprise*!!!" both boys said in unison.

Chip smiled. "You DID hear Dr. McCoy say he wanted to see EVERYONE up there, didn't you? A little advice, if either him or Captain Kirk say they would like to see you, be there. You don't want to tangle with either one!"

Chip looked at the awestruck boys with a grin as he opened the communicator. "Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Chip."

"Nyota, is the Captain available?"

"Just a minute Chip, he's right here."

There was a few seconds pause, and then Kirk came on. "Kirk here. Is there a problem Chip?"

"Hello Captain. No problem, but I do have a question for you. It seems that a couple of my new nephews have a slight interest in Starfleet. In fact, one of them is showing an interest in my position. The other one is a little more technical. He is showing an interest in Engineering."

Kirk cut him off. "Chip, are both boys in the group that is coming up with you?"

"Yes sir, they are."

"What are their names?"

"Sean is the one interested in the helm and Cory is the one interested in Engineering."

"Tell Sean and Cory to expect a special treat then. After lunch, you and Sean will go with me. There is someone else here that wants to speak with you as far as arrangements for Cory go."

After a short pause, a voice with a strong Scottish accent came on. "Chip, me lad. Am I to understand that young Cory has a hankerin' to learn the soul of the lady?"

"Hello Mr. Scott. Yes he does. Would you have anyone available to show him around?"

"Chip, you oughta' be ashamed of yourself! I kinna' let a junior officer escort young Cory. He needs a proper tour to appreciate this old girl. I must insist that he is giv'n a proper showing by me personally. Tell the lad I will join him for lunch, and then he will get to see how a real ship runs."

Chip chuckled. "Thanks Scotty, I owe you one! We will see you soon."

Kirk came back on. "Chip, did that answer your question?"

"Yes it did, Captain. Thank you very much."

"Alright then, I'll see you day after tomorrow, about 0900 ship's time."

"Yes sir. From the looks I'm getting, there are at least two boys are looking forward to it. We'll see you then, sir."

"I'm looking forward to it. Kirk out."

"Dodds out." And with that, Chip closed his communicator and looked over at Sean and Cory.

Cory asked in a shocked voice "Did I hear right? Am I really going to be shown around

by Commander Scott?"

Before Chip could answer, Sean piped up "And I get to be with you and Captain Kirk? WOW!"

"Yes to both of you," Chip chuckled as he answered them both. Chip then rose from the floor, helping Josh up. "Now I think that Josh and I need a little private time. I would suggest you guys take about an hour yourselves – and keep the plans for when we go up there to yourselves for now."

Cory smiled, then stood up and lightly kicked Sean in the butt. Sean jumped, "What was that for?"

"Just making sure you took the hint and didn't run off on me," Cory giggled. He then turned to Josh. "I guess it does work! Thanks a lot, Uncle Josh and Uncle Chip. You both helped out a LOT today!"

"You are welcome guys," Josh replied. "I'll make sure Teri has our home and cell numbers. If either one of you need to talk, no matter what time it is, call either one of us. I'll find Justin and have him make sure that you are not disturbed. So we will see you guys in an hour – no less, okay?"

Cory managed to get out an "Okay" as Sean pulled him down on his lap and began trying to lick Cory's tonsils. Chip grinned at Josh as they left the boys alone.

Just as they closed the door behind them, Justin came bounding up the stairs. "Where's Sean and Cory? Are they okay??"

"They are fine, munchkin. They just need some alone time, about an hour I would say," Josh replied as he intercepted Justin heading for Cory's door.

Justin came to a screeching halt. "Alone time? You mean like the two of you, Pop?"

"Yep. You think you can keep everyone else away for us? Your Dad and I need some alone time too."

"Will do, Pop. I'll have my lil bros help me."

"Okay, squirt; thanks. Now get that bony butt of yours back downstairs before anyone else comes up," Josh said as he was leading Chip into their room.

"Whatever!" Justin giggled as he watched his parents disappear into their room and close the door. He then turned and headed back down the stairs.

As Justin reached the first floor, he was intercepted by Teri and Anne. "Where's Sean, Cory, and your parents?" Teri asked.

"They are paired off for some 'alone time'. Pop said none of them are to be bugged for an hour."

"What's 'alone time', Justy?" Teri asked.

Justin blushed a deep red. "Well, uhh, they kinda need some, well I guess you would call it, umm, one-on-one time alone. If Sean and Cory are as bad as Dad and Pop, it'll get really noisy up there. All I know is Dad and Pop just came out of Cory's room as I went up there."

"Go on; join the rest of the tribe, Justin," Teri said in a shocked voice. She then turned to Anne. "Is he saying what I think he is saying? If so, what should I do about it?"

Anne chuckled. "Settle down, Teri. Welcome to the world of being a parent of gay teens. There's a good chance exactly what you suspect is happening, but since Chip and Josh just talked to them, you have nothing to worry about. Trust me, if you try to stop them, they will just find someplace else to do it! I noticed a little tension between Cory and Sean over the last day, I'll bet Chip and Josh sat them down and, pardon the pun, straightened them out. Those two went through a lot keeping together. You can trust any advice they give your boys."

"I'll have to trust you on that one, Anne. Let me show you something Sean gave to Cory

last week, I think it says a lot about them." Teri then showed Anne the plaque that Sean had made.

"That's so sweet," Anne said as she read the poem. "I honestly think there's a chance those boys will go on to be like Chip and Josh. If so, you have a good reason to be proud of yourself; it takes a great parent to raise children capable of bonding like that."

A loud "NOOOOOOOO...!!!" coming from the rec room got their attention. "Well Teri, I guess we better go see what the kids are destroying!" Anne chuckled.

They walked in on Kevin holding his head in his hands while an image of a burning vehicle showed on the TV screen in front of him. Tyler was sitting at the other set of game controls, giggling.

"See Uncle Kev, I told ya' not to try and pass me! Who's next to get their butt whipped!" Ty gloated.

"TYLER!" Teri said, trying to keep a smile hidden.

"OOOPS! Sorry, Mom, I guess I'm goin' overboard, huh?"

"What's going on in here?"

"Well, the old farts ... I mean adults challenged us kids to a race, and I just beat the pants off of Uncle Kev."

Brian could not resist the taunt. "Old fart, huh? Kev, give me the controls. I'll show these young pups how the game is played!"

Nobody heard the front door opening, as Kyle was responding to Brian's challenge.

"Yeah, you're an old fart, a smelly one too! Bring it on, gramps! It's my turn to show y'all up."

"Kyle Calvin Richardson! What did you just say?" Dan said as he walked in the room.

"Eeep! Sorry, Dad, Uncle Brian started it!"

"Leave it this time, Dan. They are just having fun," Anne chuckled.

Before Dan could respond, Kevin walked over to Kyle and put his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Hey, Kyle?"

"Yeah, Uncle Kev?"

"BUSSTTEEDDD!!!!!"

As the room dissolved into laughter, Kyle blushed then managed to get out "Awww Mannn! I'll get you later, Uncle Kev!"

Kevin rustled Kyle's hair. "Get used to it, lil buddy. In this family that happens a LOT – just ask Justy!"

Just then, Kevin was interrupted by the theme to The Twilight Zone coming from under his shirt. "Excuse me, cell phone," he chuckled at the confused looks.

He pulled out his phone and looked at the Caller ID and smiled. An evil grin showed on his face as he pressed 'send'. "Domino's. Name your poison. What flavor cardboard you want today?"

"Very funny, Kevvy! Where's the friggin' ride? Or did B-Rok screw up again and send them to Atlanta?" the voice on the other end shouted.

"Calm down, Nicky! It's there. Let me check with John to see where you need to go."

As Kevin turned to John to ask, Brian grabbed the phone. "I heard that Nick. Just you wait, I'll get you, you brat!"

"In your dreams, Bri. Now put that worthless straight cousin of yours back on."

"I heard that, Frack!" Kevin said as he took the phone back. "Now, Nick, get that one blond brain cell of yours in gear, okay? Look around. Do you see a deputy standing there with a sign that says 'Insane Asylum'?"

"Yeah, what about it? ... Kevin, I'm gonna KILL YOU!"

Kevin laughed. "Don't blame me! John did that one!"



"I don't even wanna know. One more question; did the space cadet get our rooms at the Marriott set up?"

"I'd ask, but him and Josh are having some 'quiet time' right now. Do you really want me to interrupt them?"

"Quiet time? Yeah right, like they are ever quiet, those two horn dogs! What are we supposed to do 'til they're done?"

"Just come on over here, there's still a few seats left. Are Airboy and Dyllweed with you?"

"Yep, along with the rest of the clan. Our stuff is loaded, we'll see ya in a bit."

"K – seeya in about 20 minutes. Bye!" Kevin hung up the phone.

"Who was that, Uncle Kev?" JJ asked.

"Just a couple more of your new family members, bud. They will be here shortly, they're at the airport." Kevin then turned to Dan. "Hey bro, how did it go at the funeral home? Everything ready?"

"Yeah, I owe y'all big time for all the help. Everything was perfect, all I had to do was sign the forms and double check Sharon's appearance. I really don't know how I would have handled this without everyone in the room's help." As John guided Dan over to the couch and sat with him, Dan looked deep in thought.

"DAMN," Dan said as he suddenly stood up, "I totally forgot, the boys need suits still!"

"Sit down, bro," Kevin said. "It's already handled. They should be here in about fifteen minutes. The rest of the boys are bringing them with them. I was not joking when I said we would handle everything for you."

Dan sat back down, and John put his arm over Dan's shoulder. "Relax, everything will be fine."

Teri looked around, noticing the silence of the kids. Adam was holding JJ, caressing his back, while in the beanbag chair Tyler was cuddling Kyle. Justin and the twins were sitting off to the side, giving the couples room.

Suddenly, Jamie looked over at Kyle with a worried expression on his face. "Kyle, don't try to do it bro; let us do it for you, ok?"

Kyle uttered a barely audible "Okay.", then cuddled deeper into Ty's arms.

Justin had a confused look on his face, then suddenly looked shocked. "Bros, if you are gonna do that, I want you cuddled up to me, ok?"

Jamie and Jacob nodded, and followed Justin over to the recliner. Kristin gave Justin a questioning look, but when she saw the serious look on his face, she moved out of the recliner so they could sit.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked Teri.

"You won't believe it till you see it, just watch," Teri answered in a quiet voice.

Jacob spoke, but not in his normal voice, he sounded more like an adult woman. "Daniel, JJ, Kyle; listen up."

"Sharon?" "MOM!?" was heard from each of them as their names were said.

"Yes guys, it's me, Sharon. When I'm done, you need to thank these three boys for helping make it so I could talk to you. First things first; the three of you need to stop worrying about me, and Dan; stop blaming yourself. Even if you had been right there, there would have been nothing you could have done. It was my time, and now I can watch over all of you all the time. I am fine, and am waiting for when your time comes to be with all of you again. I have it on good authority it will be quite a while, but since I can watch you all the time it's just fine."

"Anne, welcome to the family. I know you will be a great grandma to the boys, not to

mention giving Dan the family he has wondered about all his life. Thank you for having the drive to locate your son and rejoin him. Jerald sends his congratulations and pride in both of you."

"Kevin, your support of your big brother has not gone unnoticed. You have my deepest thanks for all you have done so far, and what you plan to do."

"John, you have been a great friend to this family, but I have one request for you. Dan needs you, take care of him, be there for him, and follow your heart. You have my blessing."

"Adam, Tyler. Boys, I am eternally grateful for how you two have put aside your own problems to help my sons; when the time comes, I hope they can return the favor. If it's in the future for you all to remain together, you have my blessing as well. For you two to still be so caring after what you went through is a miracle, but you are and I am proud to consider you my sons too."

"Dan, let John help you. Don't let anyone tell you it's too soon or a bounce back reaction. John will fill that part of you that we both knew I would never be able to reach. You have no reason to feel guilty, let him in. This is the other side of you that we both knew about, just as I knew I could never totally fill your heart. He understands I will always have a place that he will never fill. Enjoy your new family; I will be with you all up here enjoying it with you."

"Kristin, Brian; your help is appreciated too. I have seen some of the things you have done in the background; you are both wonderful. Once I'm done, pass on my thanks again to Justin and the twins, they are all sweet little angels no matter how much they deny it."

"Teri, give Sean and Cory a big hug and thanks for being there for the boys when they needed someone. You have my eternal thanks for being there for all of them; I have a feeling that soon you will receive part of your reward for having such a big heart. I was impressed by the dedication made to Mike and myself by the boys; The Perfect Fan touched both of our hearts!"

"Last, but not least, is Chip and Josh; both Mike and myself have great respect for how they have reached out to help everyone. From making sure everyone got together, to spending one-on-one time when Cory and Sean needed help, in addition to taking in the twins. Those two deserve halos and wings for their huge hearts. Brad told me to tell Chip that he is so proud of him for what he has done for the twins, and for the job he's done in raising Justin. And he's glad that Chip found a kind and loving heart in Josh."

"I need to hurry, these three are getting tired, and they will probably nap for a bit after this. I know tomorrow is going to be stressful no matter what I say, but keep it in the front of your minds that I'm fine, and when the preacher says I'm in a better place, you can be sure that he is right. I love you Dan, JJ, and Kyle; and will always be with you. God Bless all of you, you are all truly a blessing. I'm going to let these angels rest. Thank each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart."

Jacob, Jamie, and Justin all shook their heads to clear them, then looked up at Teri. "Teri, what did she have to say that was so important?" Justin said with a yawn as the twins cuddled up to him.

"She had some messages for each of us, besides letting Dan and the boys know she is okay. She also said that we need to pass on her thanks to you three angels, trust me, what you guys just did was really helpful. I'm proud of you too, it took a lot of guts to do that, especially you Justin, not knowing what was happening."

"Thanks. I couldn't let Kyle down." Justin then looked at the two sleeping boys in his arms. "I'm tired too, can I take a nap?"

"Go ahead angel," Anne answered. "You've earned it."

Justin muttered as he snuggled down with the twins. "Aww man, why does everyone call me an angel?"

Teri looked around the room at the shocked faces on the adults. "In case you are wondering, believe it – Kyle does it too. Don't ask me how, but he does, and it seems those three have figured out how to too."

Kevin stood behind John and Dan. "Well, bro, I guess she answered one question I had. You guys have my blessings too. And she was right, you two are meant for each other. John, welcome to the family!"

Dan smiled. "Thanks Kev. Mom, what do you think?"

Anne smiled. "Dan, Sharon put it right. There is a place in your heart for her and someone else, and I totally approve if John is willing to be that person. Don't feel pressured, son, but if it is meant to be you have my blessings and congratulations."

"Thanks. I've waited too long to have you here to lose you because I disappointed you, Mom. John, we might as well make this official, would you be interested in a slightly used bi shrink in your life, complete with kids?"

"It matters, can you handle a crusty old cop who has reached the top, and who had resigned himself to only looking at you years ago? Besides, you forgot to mention one thing about the kids, they are both GOOD kids!"

"I'll take that as a yes, but there are two other people who have a say in this though; JJ, Kyle, come here sons."

Both boys came over, dragging Adam and Tyler with them.

"Guys, Adam and Ty are not going anywhere, this is their home! How would you feel about it if John and I became a couple?"

"Dad," JJ started, "I brought Adam with me to make my point. Since the first time I saw him, I have felt a lot different. It's like a part of me that I never knew was missing just showed up in front of me. If John makes you feel like that, I'm all for it. I heard mom, what she said made sense to me about having room for her and John. I would feel weird if you dated a girl, 'cause then it would be like you are replacing mom; but John is different, like mom said, he fills a part of you that she did not."

Kyle interrupted. "Daddy, does John make you feel like Ty makes me feel? When he is here, my tummy feels all happy, but if I don't know where he is at I feel sad."

Dan smiled. "Kyle, JJ; both of you are right. Does that mean its ok with you Kyle?"

"Yes Daddy."

"I guess that settles it. You know, seeing as you two have snuck in as boyfriends from the looks of it, welcome to the family Adam and Ty. By the way, I guess that means you are allowed to call me Dad or something like that now."

The two couples snuggled up, and answered in chorus "Thanks, Dad."

Dan looked over at Anne, who just smiled and nodded her head in approval at how he had handled it. As he was preparing to say more, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Tyler said as he headed for the front door.

"I'll help!" quipped Kyle as he took off after Ty.

Kevin motioned everyone to come watch the boys answer the door. Just as they reached the doorway, the two boys got to the front foyer. Each boy looked out a sidelight to see who was there, then they looked at each other in amazement before scrambling to see who could reach the doorknob first to open the door. With all of their fumbling from excitement, it took four tries before they actually managed to turn the knob to open the door.

As the door opened, Ty yelled over his shoulder "MOM! The REST of the Backstreet Boys are here!"

Teri chuckled as she joined the boys in the foyer. "Well guys, I think if you get out of the

doorway they would like to come in!"

Ty and Kyle giggled, then moved out of the way. The first ones in the door were Nick and Ashley; followed by Aaron with his nephew, Johnny, in his arms. Howie, AJ, Dylan and David came in behind them and joined the group in the foyer.

Just as Teri was about to close the door, she noticed Joe coming up the sidewalk carrying some envelopes. "Just a minute guys, we've got one more guest joining us."

Suddenly everyone's attention was diverted by a slap. "OUCH! What was that for, squirt?" Aaron yelled as he rubbed the back of his head with his free hand.

"You were bad, Uncle Aaron," A semi-sleepy Johnny replied. "You told me Justy was here. I don't see him. You lied."

Before anyone could reply, Ty walked up to Aaron and Johnny. "Hi, I'm Ty, this is my boyfriend Kyle. What's your name?" he said to Johnny.

"Johnny. Is Justy here?"

"Yes he is. Right now he is taking a nap with his new brothers. If you want to come with us we will take you to him."

"Wow, really! Put me down Uncle Aaron, PLEASE! I gotta go find Justy." Aaron put Johnny down, then Kyle and Ty took him by the hand as they left the foyer. The three boys headed towards the rec room, Johnny holding onto both of his new friends' hands.

Joe entered the foyer and closed the door. Teri snapped back to the situation at hand. "Okay, why don't we all follow them. We can do introductions once we are all in the same room. There are only four missing now, and if they don't hurry up I'm sending a search party!"

Just as they were all about to enter the rec room, Chip and Cory came down the stairs with wide grins on their faces. "You can cancel the search party, Teri," Chip laughed.

"Hey, I see you guys found your way down here. I was wondering if you would," Teri said.

Chip responded to Teri's comment with a grin. "We knew where the downstairs area is. We just had better things to do with our time. And I can see that the rest of those losers finally made it."

"We'll talk about that in a few minutes, horn-dog," Nick replied.

Chip responded, "You're just jealous, Frack, cuz Ash won't give ya any. And I'm surprised that you were able to find your way to Iowa. That one blonde brain cell must have overheated in the process."

"Yo, Chip; where's your mount?" AJ asked with a grin.

"Behind you, fool!" Josh replied as he and Sean gingerly descended the staircase.

AJ took one look and collapsed in laughter. "Ride 'em cowboy!" he managed to sputter.

Cory and Chip looked at each other, smiled, then picked up AJ from the floor and started carrying him towards the back of the house.

"Hey! Where you think you're taking me?" AJ shouted.

"To clean out your mind!" Cory replied with a smirk.

About a minute later, everyone heard "One ... Two ... Three!" then a loud SPLASH from the pool area. Cory and Chip came walking back in a minute later. "Anyone else have any comments?" Chip asked with a grin, his arms crossed across his chest.

When there was no response, Chip chuckled. "I thought so. Airboy, find AJ some dry clothes. For some unknown reason, he's all wet."

"Like that's news!" Aaron laughed as he went to search for AJ's suitcase.

Everyone fell silent as they walked into the rec room and saw the sight in the recliner. Justin was sleeping with a twin under each arm. Somehow, Johnny had managed to worm his way

in so he was sitting on Justin's lap, and was sound asleep with both of the twin's arms draped over him.

Aaron walked in, saw Justin, and walked over to Chip and Josh. "Are those Justin's new little brothers?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, they are. How did you hear about that?" Chip replied.

"Tyler said something when we came in and Johnny was asking about Justin."

"Ahh, okay. I'll fill everyone in more later then," Chip said. "Right now, I think introductions are in order as soon as AJ gets in here. Why don't you get over there with David. Boyfriends are the norm around here."

"Okay. Thanks, we were kinda worried about that, that's why we were staying apart. It kinda blew my mind when Tyler introduced Kyle as his boyfriend, but we figured we would still play it safe."

"No problem. Now go catch up on cuddles," Chip replied.

A few minutes later, AJ walked in. Kevin stood up. "Okay everyone, introduction time," Kevin started. "Boys, fill in Jamie, Jacob and Johnny after they get up; they need the rest. I'll start at the doorway here. First, the tall blond goofball there is Nick Carter, next to him is his husband, Ashley Angel-Carter. Their son Johnny is in the center of the pile in the recliner. The miniature version of Nick over there is Aaron Carter, and that's Aaron's boyfriend David Gallagher on his lap. Next to them, the short one is Howie Dorough and the taller one is AJ McLean. The brunette over there trying to suck the air out of Brian's lungs is Dylan Waters-Littrell." Kevin then proceeded to introduce everyone else to the new group.

As he finished, a series of grumbles from the recliner told everyone the sleeping beauties were about to wake up. Once Justin opened his eyes and saw everyone in the room watching, he mumbled "take a picture, it'll last longer."; then started waking up the other three boys. Once all of them were coherent, Justin made sure all three knew who everyone was, then announced: "Unless y'all wanna get wet, you better let me up to pee!"

Suddenly the other three had to go too, so they headed off to the restroom en masse.

Anne chuckled. "Okay, now that is over with, why don't the adults retire to the living room. Teri, Josh; I think it's about time to start dinner, would you mind giving me a hand? Oh, and Joe, I saw the envelopes you brought; I insist you stay for dinner, we can go over them after everyone has eaten."

Joe started to object when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to look at the smiling face of Chip. Chip spoke up, "Joe, there is one thing I learned when I was a kid: never argue with Aunt Anne. You'll never win. And besides, you get to sample Josh's world-famous Fettuccini Alfredo. It's to die for."

Joe replied, "Then it looks like I'm staying for dinner."

"I hope there's enough food to feed this group!" Teri said with a smile.

"Don't worry Teri," Josh replied, "if we need anything we can send Chip out for it. He knows what to get." Josh ducked to miss the pillow Chip threw at him as he ran out of the room.

Teri, Josh, Howie and Anne retreated to the kitchen. Teri and Josh were going through the cabinets to make sure they had everything they needed for dinner. "Josh, I have two packages of Fettuccini noodles. Is that enough for you?"

Josh shook his head. "No, it isn't. If I'm making enough for this crew, I'm gonna need at least another three packages," he then turned his attention to his husband. "Oh babyyyyy?"

Chip walked over to Josh and put his arms around Josh's waist. "Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Could you do me a big favor?"

Chip started chuckling. "Let me guess? You need more noodles for your Fettuccini?"

"Umhum. Could you go and get me some more?"

"Sure, babe." Chip leaned in and gave Josh a quick, deep kiss on the lips.

Howie spoke up, "Okay, I'm leaving. My teeth are hurting right now. You two are just too sweet for my taste."

"Aw shaddup, D. You're just jealous," Chip replied.

"Yeah right," Howie mumbled as he left the kitchen, heading for the living room.

Chip turned to face John. "You wanna go with me. You know your way around this town."

"Sure," John said. "Let's go."

Chip and John walked out of the kitchen, heading out to get groceries for the house, and its growing population.

Once all the adults had moved on to the living room to get to know each other, Tyler started digging through the games. "Hey! I found it!" he exclaimed. "Johnny, do you like to play Frogger?"

"Yeah! Do you really got it?"

"Yep. Let me set it up for you, ok?"

"Kew! Thanks Ty!"

Once Johnny was set up playing the game, the rest of the boys formed a semicircle on the floor around him, watching and cheering him on as they caught Aaron and David up on their lives.

"Man, you guys are lucky," Aaron commented. "I wish my mother had been as nice as Teri. Instead, when I came out I was kicked out of the family, same as when Nicky did. If it wasn't for Chip and Josh, I'd be on the streets. Don't get me wrong, David," he said as David tried to object, "I love your mom and dad to death. There's just times that I wish I had my own mom to talk to too."

"Aaron, come here," Teri softly said from the doorway.

"Yeah Teri?" Aaron said as he wiped the tears from his eyes and walked up to her.

"I heard what you were saying, come here a minute," Teri said as she pulled Aaron into a hug. "It's okay, Aaron. Let the tears out. You are part of my family now, son. If you need a mom to talk to, I'll be proud to be there for you."

Aaron broke down and cried in Teri's arms, releasing the remaining pain he had been holding in for so long. Once he regained his composure, he asked Teri "Do you really mean that?"

"Yes I do. Anytime you need me, I'll be here for you, Aaron," she gave him a huge hug. "Why don't you get on back with David and your brothers Everything will be just fine."

"Thanks ... Mom!" Aaron said with a smile as he returned the hug.

Aaron turned around, and the next thing he knew he was engulfed in a group hug from all the boys; even Johnny had paused his game so he could hug his uncle.

As Teri turned to head back toward the kitchen, she saw Kevin standing by the office door with a grin on his face.

"What's the grin for, Kev?"

"Sis, you keep amazing me more and more every minute. Ever since Aaron was disowned, he has been different. All of us have tried to get him to open up, but nobody had any luck. Shoot, even Mom, Karen, and Aunt Jackie couldn't get through to him! You must have a magic touch. It took you less than two hours to do something nobody else has even come close to in the last ten months."

"What can I say; I won't allow a kid to hurt around me," Teri replied with a grin. "Now, as soon as Chip and John get back with the groceries, we'll finish cooking dinner and eat." Suddenly

a sound from the rec room caught her attention. "Is that what I think it is?"

The third try was starting as they listened. "Okay," they heard Aaron say, "I think you got it. Ready, from the top!" Suddenly the house was filled with a loud rendition of Not too Young, Not too Old being energetically sung.

Kevin cocked his head. "Oh My God! Aaron has not done that in AGES! He NEVER sings anymore unless it's a concert or recording! Sis, Nick is gonna smother you in kisses when he hears that. You just gave him his lil bro back."

As if he was being paged, Nick came running out of the living room followed by Ashley. "Is that what I think I hear? Is my lil bro SINGING for fun again??" Nick asked excitedly.

"Yep, it seems Sis worked her magic on him. All he wanted was someone he could consider a mom. From the sounds of it, our lil Airboy is back."

Nick grabbed Teri into a bear hug. "Thank you Teri! You just made my year! I thought I'd never hear him like this again!"

Just then Aaron came flying out of the rec room, saw Nick, and bounced over to him. "Nicky, where's the CD's; you know, the ones with just the background music on them?"

"In the blue CD case, bro ..." Nick started to reply, but was unable to finish as Aaron sprinted for the door.

"Yep, he's back!" Kevin chuckled as Aaron flew back into the rec room, CD case in hand. Kevin went over and shut the front door that Aaron had left open.

Everyone smiled when they heard the rec room break into a youthful rendition of Larger Than Life. Just then Chip and John arrived back with the groceries.

"What's this; is someone playing one of you guy's practice tracks?" Chip asked as he walked in.

"Nope," Nick said proudly, "That's my lil bro and his pickup backup singers!"

"No way! Aaron hasn't sung outside a studio or stage since he moved in with us! What's going on?" Chip said in shock.

"He just needed a mom," Teri replied. "Now he's got one; me."

Josh walked up behind them, putting his arms around Chip's waist. "Babe, I think Teri needs to sit down with us after dinner. It's time."

"Agreed hun. Let's get the boys to get the food in."

All the adults were gathered at the doorway watching the boys. Chip and Josh squeezed through the crowd, and stood shocked at the sight. Justin was doing an excellent rendition of It's Gotta Be You, with Aaron, Adam, JJ, Cory and Sean as backup. The boys finished the song, and the adults broke out in applause.

"TRAITOR!" Josh yelled with a laugh. "Get over here!"

Justin smiled, and skipped over to Josh. "Sorry Pop. But if you had brought your background music, maybe we could sing them too."

Josh smiled and pulled his son into a hug. "It's okay, Just. You sounded awesome; as long as you are having fun you can sing your uncle's stuff whenever you want. Now why don't you see if you can get some help. Dad has a bunch of groceries that need to be brought in. While you are doing that, I'll see if I can find some real background music for you guys."

"Guys! I need a hand. Dad's got a buncha food to haul in!" Justin yelled.

At the mention of food, all the boys jumped up and rushed to the limo, including Johnny. Chip slipped up to his room with a bag while the boys were occupied.

"What's Chip hiding?" Teri asked Josh.

"Knowing him, I would guess he picked up some chocolate for his evening milk, and he is hiding it from the kids."

"Why's that? I have chocolate here, or at least had."

"He doesn't like normal chocolate. He has to have the semi-sweet chocolate for his milk. He's kinda possessive of it. He won't even let me touch it!" Josh responded with a chuckle.

Josh got a curious expression on his face when he noticed Aaron talking quietly to John and Kevin. Aaron smiled and hugged them both, then headed over to Josh.

As he hugged Josh, Aaron whispered in his ear "Josh, could you get a hold of Lance in a few minutes? I wanna surprise my new brothers with something. Uncle Kev will fill you in. We need to keep it secret though, ok?"

"Will do, squirt. Go enjoy yourself."

Josh caught Chip as he was coming back down the stairs. "Hon, could you grab my background music CDs and give them to Aaron, please. I need to make a call."

"Sure, babe. What's up?"

"Aaron is scheming again. I'll fill you in as soon as I know!" Josh answered with a chuckle. He then joined John and Kevin in the office.

A few minutes later, he was back out and headed for the kitchen with a grin on his face.

"Okay, what's with the grin? 'Fess up!" Chip said.

"Nothings for sure yet, I'll tell you tonight if it all works out. One thing's for sure; Aaron is as bad as you. He's trying to rig a MAJOR surprise for his new bros."

"NOW I'm worried!" Chip responded with a chuckle. "I'll wait though, this should be good! How's dinner coming?"

"You're as bad as the kids, you know that? I'll get to work on it, go occupy yourself. I think the concert is about to start again."

As if on cue, the house was blasted by the sounds of the boy's rendition of Bye, Bye, Bye. "Now THAT'S music!" Josh chuckled as he headed to the kitchen.

A half hour later, as John and Kev came out of the office, Josh headed to the rec room. As he passed them, he quipped "Hey guys, dinners done. Grab some seats in the dining room while I get the kids," he entered the rec room to the final notes of Aaron's Party. "Okay, guys; wash up and get in the breakfast area to eat. Adults to the dining room!"

Everyone got settled, and thoroughly enjoyed the dinner. Teri had created a chef's salad to start things off, followed by Josh's famous Fettuccini Alfredo and some melt-in-your-mouth stuffed pork chops from Anne. The Fettuccini was so popular even Johnny went back for seconds. Just as everyone finished, a bell went off in the kitchen. Anne looked at Teri and said, "We timed that perfectly! Dessert will be out shortly. Aaron, give us a hand, will you, dear?"

They returned shortly with three pans of double-fudge brownies and two 5 gallon pails of vanilla ice cream. Anne looked at Chip, "Not one word Chip. If that old crab you call a doctor says anything, I'll put him in his place. These boys all deserve a treat."

"Yes, ma'am," Chip replied with a grin.

After everyone was finally stuffed, Chip spoke up. "That was an awesome dinner. My compliments to the chefs. I think we all need to go to the rec room. There are a few things that need to be taken care of real quick, and they involve everyone here."

He got a few curious looks, but everyone went in and found places. Chip had Sean hook Chip's laptop up so that it would display on the big screen TV. Once they were all settled, Chip started. "Joe, you probably wanna hang around for all of this. Did you have something for someone here?"

"Judge Jamie told me what you planned, Chip. These two envelopes should probably be held until after you spring your surprise, but the rest I can deliver now. Since you are a Starfleet officer, you being here will make the first two official. Teri, come up here."



Teri came up, slightly confused. "What you got, Joe?"

"Just a couple forms for you to sign," Joe said with a smile.

Teri opened both envelopes and grinned when she saw the contents. She quickly signed both forms, and passed them to Chip to witness. He signed them with a smile, then asked Teri, "May I do the honors?"

"Go for it, Chip."

"Adam, Tyler – front and center!" Chip said in an official voice.

Both boys worriedly shuffled up to Chip, shoulders slumped.

"Stand proud, you two, and face the rest of the room."

They turned around, almost at attention, and felt Chip place a hand on each of their shoulders.

Chip grinned. "Ladies and Gentlemen. May I present to you Tyler Austin SHORT and Adam Kelly SHORT. Congratulations, boys, welcome to the family!"

Both boys looked confused for a minute, then realized what Chip just said.

"Does that mean Teri is our real mom now?" Adam asked excitedly.

"Sure does! From now on, she is your parent, and Sean and Cory are your brothers!" Chip replied.

"AWESOME!!" The two exclaimed as they jumped over to hug Teri.

The boys gave Joe and Chip their 'thanks', then started circulating the room to receive congratulations from everyone.

Chip pulled Joe over to him and asked, "How did you pull that off so quick? The best time I've ever heard of was weeks, not days!"

"Well, somehow," Joe said with a grin, "the Commissioner found out that Teri is part of your extended family. After what you did for the twins, he felt it was only proper to streamline things for Teri as a gesture of thanks to you. Speaking of the twins," Joe handed Chip two envelopes with Starfleet seals on them, "Here are the hard copies of your custody forms. Judge Jamie and I have our copies already. He says to tell you once the boys have settled in to see him about starting the adoption process."

"You are a sneak, you know that, don't ya? I like that!" Chip giggled. "Give the Commissioner my regards and thanks. Just between you and me, he just earned a citation from Starfleet for his public service! Have a seat; the boys are about done, so I'll get started."

"Okay you animals, settle down!" Chip said with a laugh. "Teri, get back up here, you too Dan and John. I'm just gettin' started." Once everyone had settled in, Chip began.

"First off, all the boys seem to have come to the conclusion that they all need to live together, correct?"

"It appears so," Teri replied.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but for that to happen, you will need a larger house, right?"

"Yeah, it looks that way."

"Well, seeing as you are family, we can't let you go thru the hassles of trying to find a suitable house here, so we all decided to help you out a little."

"Just what do you mean, 'we'?" Teri asked.

"Basically everyone in this room, along with the rest of the members of N\*Sync. Just sit back, watch, listen, and learn."

"And don't bother arguing, Teri. It's out of any of you three's hands!" Anne interjected.

Teri sat back with a bemused expression on her face as Chip continued.

"This," Chip brought up a picture on the screen, "is the beginnings of your new home. The picture is about an hour old." The picture showed a large foundation with what appeared to be

freshly laid flooring over it. Off to the side were workers beginning to assemble walls.

"Where's this at?" Teri asked.

"Oh, roughly two miles from our front gate!" He clicked on another picture.

"Here's a picture of Southcrest, mine and Josh's ranch. That reminds me – Mark, come up here."

"Yes, sir?" Mark asked as he walked up.

"First, I'm not on duty, so please call me Chip. Second, look at this picture; you see the driveway here and the grounds around the house?"

"Yeah. What about them?"

"Be honest. Do you see anything you think should be done differently?"

Mark studied the picture for a few moments. "Well, Chip; these two trees here look out of place. There should be some hedges and a garden to blend them in. Over here, by the house, a small pond would do wonders. I'd probably put a couple of palm trees by it, since that is in Florida. Why did you ask?"

Chip pointed to a house just past the main house on the driveway. "You see this, all you have to do is say 'yes' and it's yours. I heard that you were good at landscaping; I think you are a natural! We'll start you at \$75,000 a year, plus benefits and a Jeep of your choice every three years."

"What would I be doing?"

"Head grounds keeper for the entire Ranch. It's a thousand acres in size, but all you are responsible for is around the house and driveway, and we expect you to contract or delegate the mundane jobs."

Mark picked his jaw up off the floor, then responded. "I would be stupid to say no. How long 'till I can start?"

Chip nodded at Josh, who began dialing his cell phone. "You just did. We are giving you a one-month pay bonus to start. Here's your check card to access your account. You can come home with us if you want when we leave. Do you need anything from your ex-foster parent's house?"

"I've got a few clothes, but what I really need to get is my computer and the things Cory and Kyle have gave me."

"John, can you get a deputy to escort him to get his things? I'll fill you in on what you missed when you get back, Mark, okay?"

"One deputy, coming up!" John said with a grin.

"Thanks, Chip and Josh. I hope I don't disappoint you."

"You won't Mark. If we didn't trust you to do your best, we would not have asked," Chip said with a smile. "If you are not sure, just ask; I expect you to take a bit to get used to it."

Josh started shouting in the phone. "You better read your contract again, you dweeb! We ABSOLUTELY state in it that you WILL work with the grounds keeper of OUR choice!

Josh paused, then said "THAT'S IT! You have 15 minutes to get your people off our property! If they are not gone, they will be arrested by Starfleet Security for trespassing. I'm starting the clock NOW!" Another pause, then "Call your lawyers – you are in default on a contract with Starfleet. You try to sue us and we will OWN you! You have 13 minutes and 42 seconds left, I would suggest hurrying up." Josh paused once more, then turned beet red. "LISTEN ASSHOLE! NOBODY talks about me OR my family like that! What was that? YOU BASTARD! YOU JUST CROSSED THE LINE! NOBODY THREATENS MY SON!"

Josh hit the 'end' button on his cell phone, then furiously dialed a 30 number sequence from memory. "Security, Code 2374-Dodds." A short pause then "Lieutenant, Josh Chasez-Dodds, ID 4872904A7. Code 7 regarding the owner of Orlando Landscaping, threat was to Justin.

Transcript via my cell's previous call. All employees have been told to be off Southcrest Ranch in 8 minutes 23 seconds on my mark... MARK. I request a full security detail to protect the Ranch. Subject of threat is in Iowa with myself and Commander Dodds. Charges are to be pressed as per regulations." Josh listened for a minute, smiled, and replied. "Thanks Lieutenant. Well done. If you need to contact me or my husband about anything, use this number. ... You have a great evening too." Josh hung up, and looked at Chip, who was standing there with a reassuring hand on Josh's shoulder.

"What happened?" Chip asked.

"When I tried to let them know we had a permanent grounds keeper, they tried to weasel out by saying only they could approve him. I ended up talking to the owner, who got quite nasty once he saw the wording in the standard Starfleet contract. When he threatened to sue us, I fired them. He then made a major mistake, he made derogatory remarks about us being gay, then compounded on it by threatening Justin. As of right now, he is in Starfleet custody and his employees are being escorted off Southcrest. The house and grounds will be under 24/7 guard until you cancel it."

"Sounds like you handled everything, babe. That's why I love you so much. You don't mess around."

"Thanks hon. I love you too!" Josh said, then faced Mark. "Hey, Mark! Looks like your first job will be finding proper help! You can either hire a company or assemble your own crew – your choice, just let us know. I'll show you how to do background checks when we get home."

The worried look on Mark's face was replaced with a grin. "That's easy – I'll assemble a crew from kids in the orphanages, if that's ok. That way they won't argue with me on what to do. You guys are giving me a break. I have to pass on the help."

Josh laughed. "Mark, you just earned a \$5,000 pay raise for that. You are going to work out just fine!"

Chip walked back to the front of the room. "As I was saying before Josh had to use a Roto-Rooter on our previous landscaper's butt, you will do just fine, Mark!"

Chip clicked on a picture of the plot map of Southcrest Ranch. "Now, Teri, you see this little spot here with the dotted lines around it?"

"Yeah, Chip."

"The dotted lines show your property. As of right now," Chip handed Teri one of the envelopes, "Josh and I own 990 acres of Southcrest – the other 10 acres is yours. It's a gift from us to welcome you to the family. This one," he handed her another envelope, "is from the Backstreet Boys – it's the deed to your house, free and clear. N\*Sync is covering all the interior stuff, furniture and the works. In a couple weeks, you can go with Aunt Anne, Karen, Aunt Jackie, Lynn and Phyllis to pick out furniture and decorations."

"Okay ... let me see if I've got this right. Basically we are moving to Orlando, into a house supplied by you guys from Backstreet on property given to us by Chip and Josh. N\*Sync is supplying everything for in the house. Did I miss anything?"

"Yeah, Teri!" Mark chipped in, "Your landscaping and maintenance is free too, that's from me, I'll pay the guys myself."

Chip laughed. "Well, looks like you got it, Teri! Any more questions?"

"Just one. Do I at least get to pick out what goes in the house?"

"You get to choose everything for inside. You just won't pay for it."

"Well, I already know better than to argue, so all I can say is thanks to all of you. One question though, what are those two envelopes you still have left?"

"Those are from Joe. One is yours and the other is Dan and John's." Chip handed the

packets to their intended recipients.

Teri opened hers first. "This may sound strange, Joe, but why am I suddenly licensed in Florida as a foster parent, an emergency one no less?"

Joe chuckled. "You mean you have to ask? With your history the last week or so, Judge Jamie and I figured we would prepare ahead of time to cover our bases."

Teri laughed. "You have a point. Thanks a bunch."

As Dan was opening the other envelope, Chip walked up to John. "Oh, John, before I forget, you have an interview with the Commanding Officer of Orlando Interplanetary Spaceport the day after tomorrow. Transportation has already been arranged. It seems that the current Chief of Security is retiring, and they need an experienced person to take over."

Dan spoke up. "Joe, how did this license end up with both mine and John's names on it? It's dated yesterday, but we've only officially been a couple for a few hours!"

"DUHHH!" JJ said sarcastically.

"James Jacob Richardson! Would you like to explain yourself BEFORE I ground you for the next 10 years or after?"

"Well Dad, it was kinda obvious – at least to everyone but you and Pop! All us kids knew you two were together two days ago!"

"And WHICH one of you supposedly figured this out?" John asked the boys.

Suddenly every kid in the room was doing their best imitation of an angel.

"Give it up, boys. There ain't a single one of you who could pass for an angel!" John said with a chuckle.

"THANK YOU!" Justin yelled. "NOW will you all believe me when I say I'm not an angel?!"

At that comment, the adults all lost control and fell into fits of laughter, with the kids following close behind.

Once the laughter died down, Dan spoke again. "Okay JJ, I'll let you off the hook, but you better learn to phrase things better. 'Duh' is NOT an acceptable way to address an adult; not even Brian."

"Chip," John said, "I'm not even gonna ask about the foster parent license, but what about my job I have now?"

"Well, John," Chip replied, "actually the interview is just a formality. It seems your boss recommended you to Starfleet for the position, and after one look at your records you were selected."

"Just HOW did he find out about the position?" John asked.

Chip tried out his angel imitation.

John took one look and laughed. "Give it up, Chip. You have less chance of passing for an angel than the boys do. BUSTED! Oh, and Thanks too!"

The doorbell rang, and Teri answered it. "Mark!" she yelled, "Your escort is here!"

"Thanks! I'll be back in a few minutes, this should not take too long," Mark said as he headed towards the door.

Everyone settled into the living room, adults and kids sharing in the discussion of what it would be like when all of them were moved over to Florida. Forty-five minutes later, Mark returned to the house.

"How'd it go, Mark? I don't see any of your stuff," John asked.

"They started to argue until your Deputy set them straight. After that, I got all my stuff out. It's all loaded in the limo to pack up and take with me - the driver insisted he would handle it."

"Kev, give the driver a bonus before he leaves for the hotel tonight - and ask him if he

would like Florida!" Josh said. "Initiative like that is what I look for, and I think he would be perfect to oversee the fleet of vehicles that Southcrest is about to have."

"Will do, Josh!" Kevin replied. "Guys, speaking of hotels, it's about time to hit the sack. We have a busy day ahead of all of us tomorrow. The limo driver has all the info for your hotel, what ya say we all turn in."

"Dad, Daddy, can I stay here with Ty and Kyle?" Johnny begged.

Nick looked at Teri. "What you think, Teri. Can you handle one more?"

"Sure, all the kids sleep down here anyway. He should be fine!"

"Tonight it's ALMOST all the kids, ISN'T IT SEAN?" Cory said in a forceful voice.

"Yes dear!" Sean replied meekly.

Teri looked at her two boys, then at Chip and Josh, who were barely holding back laughter. "Don't laugh, you two. That's exactly how you look! I see my two have been paying attention!"

Nick laughed. "On that note, we're outta here; another pair like Chip and Josh is more than I can handle! Give your Daddy and I some hugs, Johnny, and you be good for Teri, ok?"

"Okay, Dad. I'll be good!"

Chip replied, "Like you have any room to talk, Frack. You and Ashley are just as bad as we are." The rest of the Backstreet Boys then left the house, heading to their hotel.

When Kevin came back in, he had a smile on his face. "Josh - the driver's name is Randy, he said he will make sure he is the driver tomorrow. He is interested in your offer; he said whenever you have the chance, look him up."

"Thanks, Kev. I'll handle it from here. Now, I think bedtime is in order, so we will see you all in the morning!" Josh replied, then he and Chip headed upstairs to their room.

Everyone separated to get some rest. As Sean and Cory headed up the stairs to their room, Sean leaned in to Cory and gave him a loving kiss. "Thank you Cory, you have made my life whole again. I love you!"

"I love you too, Sean. Without you I'd be lost. Let's get undressed for bed; I've still got enough energy to show you just how much you really mean to me."

"That's the best idea I have heard all day. I'll undress you if you'll undress me!"

## Chapter 14

'What the heck is that?' Chip thought groggily to himself. He looked over to the clock; 7:35am. The tapping started again, accompanied by a worried sounding "Uncle Chip? Uncle Josh? Are you up yet?"

"Just a second, kiddo. I'll be right there," Chip replied. He then reached over and shook Josh. "Wake up Babe, we got company."

Josh grumbled something unintelligible, and then put on some sweatpants. "Okay, I'm decent."

Chip pulled on a pair of jeans and went over and unlocked the door to find Cory and Sean standing outside with worried looks on their faces. "Come on in guys. What's wrong?"

Once they were in the room with the door closed, Sean replied. "Cory is worried that he might be hurting me."

Chip and Josh exchanged glances, and then without a word between them Chip pulled Cory over to him while Josh put his hand on Sean's shoulder and headed towards the door. "Sean, why don't we go talk bottom-to-bottom while the two tops discuss technique, ok?"

Sean gave a half-smile. "I guess so. There are a few things I'd like to know."

Once both of them were gone, Chip sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Cory down next to him. "Okay, little one, why the sad face?"

Cory muttered "I'm worried that I could be hurting Sean. He woke up sore this morning, he said there's nothing wrong, but I'm worried."

Chip pulled Cory close. "Has he been bleeding when you were done?"

"No, I checked that close, but I'm still worried."

"Well, yesterday was you guy's first time, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Cory replied.

"First off, did you use protection and lube?"

"Yep, Sean said he read it made it less painful that way."

"You are doing fine then. The pain he is feeling is a pain of satisfaction; it's something only you can give him, a reminder of your love. This may be personal, but how many times have you guys done it so far?"

Cory blushed as he held up four fingers.

"No WONDER he's sore!" Chip chuckled. "Just out of curiosity, how often you think Josh and I do it?"

"At least once a day?" Cory replied.

Chip giggled. "That's what everyone thinks. Actually, between you and me, we average

three to four times a week. If you do it too much, it can hurt both of you, and it loses the special meaning. Most of the time, we either cuddle or do other things, in fact Josh has learned to convincingly fake 'the walk' just to mess with everyone else."

That set Cory to giggling. "You think he can teach Sean that?"

"He probably is right now if I know my husband!" Chip chuckled. "Seriously, Sean probably would let you make love to him ten times a day to keep you happy, and he would enjoy all ten times, it is up to you to control the tempo, so to speak."

"Do you have to do that with Uncle Josh?"

"Believe it or not, yes. In just about everything else he helps keep me on track, but in this case I have to make sure I keep control to protect him. In a way, it balances us out some."

Cory got a downcast look. "That makes sense, but what do we have if I have to control this too. It seems like everything is me watching out for him."

"Cory, I know you don't realize it, but Sean watches out for you in a lot of ways. You are naturally a dreamer, which is good. What Sean does is keep you from drifting too far from reality. That is part of the reason why you had the problems after Mike's death. Your brain is wired so that your emotions drive it. Sean has seen you lose control once; I guarantee he won't let it happen again."

"I guess so. What do you think they are talking about?"

"Believe it or not, probably you, Cory. Plus I'll bet Josh checks out Sean just to make sure he is okay, and then gives him some tips on how to cut down the swelling, which is normal for the first time."

"Thanks Uncle Chip. I feel better now. It's great knowing I can talk to you about this stuff. I'm so scared that I might do something wrong."

"Any time, Cory. You are family now, and I always look out for my family."

Cory reached over and pulled Chip into a hug to thank him. Just as they released the hug, Josh and Sean came walking in the door, both walking as if they had just finished a wild session of sex. Chip and Cory took one look and fell to the floor in laughter.

Once they recovered their senses, Sean spoke up. "Okay, you got me. That was NOT the reaction I expected. What was so funny?"

"Uncle Chip told me that Uncle Josh might teach you to walk like that; it was funny 'cause he was right! Besides, Uncle Josh would never do anything with you, and I know you would never do anything with him."

Sean walked over to Cory and hugged him tightly. "Thanks, Cor. Hearing you say that you trust me that much makes me love you even more!"

"I love you too, you overgrown teddy bear," Cory replied.

Josh cleared his throat. "Okay you two lovebirds, Whadda you say we grab some breakfast before we start getting ready for today."

That brought both boys back to earth. After Chip and Josh both pulled on their t-shirts and made themselves presentable, the four of them headed down to the kitchen. To their surprise, Anne was already there.

"Sit down guys. You going to have the usual, Chip?" Anne said with a smile.

"Yes, Ma'am. Why are you up so early?" Chip replied.

"You know me when kids are around, Chip. I heard these two moving around in the hall then going in your room, so I figured it was time to get up and start the coffee."

Anne set coffee in front of Josh and Chip and orange juice in front of Sean and Cory. She then set a bowl of fruit cocktail in front of Sean and Josh. When Sean gave her a confused look, she smiled. "Sean, a little advice. You really need to eat lots of fruit. It comes with the part you

play in your relationship with Cory. Isn't that right, Josh?"

Josh looked at the blushing boys next to him. "Don't ask me, guys. She just knows somehow. Eat up, Sean!"

Just as Sean and Josh finished, Anne came back to the table with four plates. "Scrambled eggs with cheese and hash browns, that should be light enough for you guys today," Anne said as she refilled everyone's drinks.

As they were finishing eating, Cory looked over at Sean. "You know, we probably better go ahead and get ready. I'll bet the younger guys are gonna need our help getting dressed."

Sean downed the rest of his juice. "Yeah, you're right. Let's go. Thanks for breakfast, Gran'ma Anne."

Anne smiled. "Boys, that just made my day hearing you call me that. Go on, you have a rough day ahead of you. Ask your Uncles for help if you need it, okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am," both boys replied as they headed for the stairs.

As they started to head back up, they were passed by Kevin and Brian, fully dressed in their suits, heading down and toward the door. A yell from the kitchen caused both boys to giggle as they went to their room.

"KEVIN SCOTT RICHARDSON? BRIAN THOMAS LITTRELL? Just WHERE do you two think you are going?" Anne asked in a loud voice.

Chip and Josh were still sitting at the dining room table when Anne raised her voice to her youngest son and nephew. They winced when she used their full names. '*Ouch*,' Josh thought to himself. '*They're really in trouble now*.' Both of them were trying to keep from laughing at the exchange between Anne, Kevin and Brian.

"We have to meet up with the rest of the group, Mom," Kevin replied.

"Not without something to eat you don't! Get your butts in here and sit! NOW!" Anne glared at both of them.

"Yes, ma'am," they replied as they shuffled to the table.

Kristin and Dylan were the next to come downstairs. They were laughing at Kevin and Brian. "I KNEW you two wouldn't get away with sneaking out!" Dylan said.

"Need some help, Anne?" Kristin asked.

That was more than Chip and Josh could take, as they broke down in laughter. "Let's go get ready, Babe," Chip managed to say to Josh as he struggled to his feet.

\* \* \*

Sean and Cory had managed to wake the rest of the boys up, and sent them out to eat. As they filed out, Cory pulled Adam and Ty to the side. "Hey lil' bros, how are you holding up?"

"Fine," they replied.

"Today's gonna be rough for JJ and Kyle guys, they are gonna need a lot of support. Promise me if it gets to be hard on you that you will ask for help, okay?"

"We will," Adam replied. "Are you going to be okay, Cory? We talked last night, and JJ said he was worried about you, since you had problems after Mike died."

Sean walked up and put his arm around Cory. "Tell JJ not to worry about Cory, I'll make sure he is okay. Also, remind them that John will be watching out for their Dad, so they don't have to worry about him either."

The four boys embraced in a group hug. As the hug broke, Ty looked at Sean and Cory. "We'll make you proud, bros. I love all of you!"

That prompted another round of hugs and "I love you too's from everyone, then Ty and



Adam headed out to the kitchen for breakfast, while Sean and Cory went upstairs and started setting out all of the boy's suits. Justin, Jamie, Jacob and Johnny headed out to the kitchen with the other boys.

Teri, Dan and John came down the stairs to find most of the boys quietly eating breakfast. As soon as they saw Dan; JJ, Adam, Kyle, and Ty ran over and gave him a huge group hug.

Dan gave a small smile as he kissed the top of all four boy's heads. "Thanks guys, I needed that. Go on and finish eating, ok?"

"Okay Dad," the four answered.

"Where are Sean, Cory, Chip, Josh, Kevin and Brian?" Teri asked Anne.

Dylan replied, "They already ate. Kevin and Brian just left to meet up with the rest of Backstreet, while the rest are getting ready."

"Ahhh, okay. Why didn't you come to get me to help cook?"

Kristin chuckled. "No need, Teri. We handled this group just fine. The three of us are used to it. You deserved a break this morning, enjoy it, have a seat."

They all sat down, and shortly had drinks and steaming plates of food in front of them. Shortly the boys finished their meals, and headed upstairs in groups.

Josh was dressed in his suit, and was just helping Chip put the finishing touches on his uniform. "There ya go, handsome! You look even more outstanding than usual."

Before Chip could respond, they heard a chorus of knocks on the door. "Right on schedule!" Chip chuckled as he went over to open the door. Justin, Jamie, Jacob, and Johnny came into the room.

"WOW, you look AWESOME!" Jamie and Jacob said in unison when they saw Chip.

"Dad? Pop? Could you help us with these monkey suits?" Justin asked.

Josh grinned. "Come on guys, they are not THAT bad. Get on in here, you bet we'll help you."

Fifteen minutes later, in spite of the squirming, the four boys were fully suited and ready to go, so the six of them headed downstairs.

In the other bedroom, the rest of the boys were getting ready. "You know, Cory, I'm glad someone thought to pre-tie the ties!" Sean commented as he placed the finishing touches on JJ's suit. "Come on over here, Adam, it's your turn."

"For real!" Cory replied. "It's awesome how they all fit us so well, I wonder who got them?" He then gave Ty a swat on the butt and moved over to Kyle.

"Uncle Chip had something to do with it, I'd bet!" Sean giggled. "He seems to have made sure everything else went well!"

"True." Cory then pulled his charges close to him. "Ty, Kyle, you guys look great. Are you going to be ok?"

"Yeah, I think so," Kyle replied.

"If you need anything, no matter what, you guys let me know, ok?"

Kyle hugged Cory. "We will, bro. Thanks!"

Sean put a hand on JJ's and Adam's shoulders. "Same goes for you two, promise?"

JJ gave a small smile. "Yeah, we promise too. We owe you forever, Sean, you too Cory. One of these days I PROMISE we will return the help you have given us."

The six boys embraced, and then left the room to head downstairs.

As John was helping Dan make sure everything was right, Dan spoke softly. "I'm worried. Are the boys going to be ok?"

"Just take care of yourself, Dan," John replied. "I know for a fact their boyfriends are going to be watching over them like hawks, and Sean and Cory will probably be watching over the

boyfriends. Besides, I'm gonna be right by your side the entire way, and if I see they need anything either I'll do it or I'll tell you. Now relax, lets go join the others."

"Thanks John. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I'm sure glad you are here now." Dan then hugged John as they headed for the door.

When they opened the door, they found Chip, Josh, and all the boys coming out of their rooms. Everyone gathered into one group, and headed down the staircase.

Teri, Anne, Kristin and Dylan were standing in the kitchen when they heard everyone coming down the stairs.

"WOW!!" Teri exclaimed, "How did Kevin ever manage to get all those suits to fit so well. All of them look perfect!"

Chip overheard her. "Actually Teri, he had a little help." Teri gave Chip a confused look. Chip continued, "Let's just say that the *Enterprise's* scanners are very sensitive with the right person at the controls."

Teri shook her head, smiling. "Chip, I'm beginning to believe that with you around almost nothing is impossible. Let's load up; the limos are waiting outside."

As they walked out, they split into two groups to enter the waiting limos. In the first limo were Anne, Kristin, Dan, John, JJ, Adam, Kyle and Tyler. The second limo had Teri, Chip, Josh, Dylan, Cory, Sean, Justin, Jamie, Jacob and Johnny. Once loaded, both limos slowly pulled out and headed towards the funeral home.

As per Sharon's wishes, there was no viewing beforehand. She wanted everything to be concluded in one day. When they were about halfway there, John's cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"John, this is Kevin. We have a problem."

"What's wrong, Kev?"

"Seems that someone found out that we're in town and here."

"Okay, I'll get some help over right away. See you in a few."

"Thanks, John."

John hung up, and then dialed the dispatch direct line. "Sergeant, this is Sheriff Martin. You have the address where the funeral is at today, right?"

"Yes sir."

"We need all available units out there for crowd control. It seems someone leaked where the Backstreet Boys are going to be today."

"They are on their way."

"Thanks. Make sure I'm marked as emergency only."

"You are. Please send our condolences too."

"Will do. I'll call once I'm done. "Bye."

John then looked up Chip's number on the speed dial. "Chip, it's John. Seems that someone blabbed and now Backstreet has a bunch of fans outside."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough for Kevin to call me. I've got some units on the way to assist. Do you think you might be able to get some backup?"

"Give me 30 seconds and we'll find out." Chip handed the phone to Josh as he pulled out his communicator and opened it. "Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. What's wrong, Chip?"

"I need to speak to the Captain. It seems that the funeral home is being surrounded by Backstreet fans."

"He just heard you, Chip. He said not to worry. An honor guard of fifteen, led by

Lieutenant Thompson, is preparing to beam down as we speak."

"Thanks, Nyota. Pass on my gratitude to him, will you please?"

"It's done, Chip. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks again, Nyota. Dodds out."

Chip retrieved the phone from Josh. "It's handled, John. An honor guard from the *Enterprise* is on their way down right now."

"Thanks Chip. That should get their attention. Talk to you in a few."

"Okay. Let's hope this is the only problem we have to deal with today."

"Agreed. Bye."

"Bye."

A few minutes later, the limos pulled up to the funeral home. As the first one pulled even with the doorway, the *Enterprise's* honor guard formed a passage between the car and the doorway. Once everyone was inside, they pulled back and let the second limo pull up.

Chip was the last to exit from the limo, and the Guard formed into ranks behind him as he walked to the doorway. Before he entered, he turned to Thompson, the lieutenant in charge. "Coordinate with the local authorities. I want all the back entrances sealed. Station two men at the front door. That should deter any crashers. And one other thing, give everyone my thanks for doing this on short notice."

"Will do, Commander. You worry about your family. We'll take care of everything out here."

Chip smiled, knowing that Thompson would be good at his word. He then entered the door, and saw Kevin talking to JJ and Kyle. Both boys gave Kevin a quick hug, and then headed off into the hallway.

"What was that all about, Kev?" Chip asked.

"The guys and I figured out a way for the boys to say goodbye, and I was just asking them about it. You'll see, I think it will work quite well."

Chip shook his head as he then walked into the viewing room. He looked around, and noticed that all the couples were sticking close to each other, all being watched closely by Anne and Teri. Just as he was entering, JJ and Adam were saying goodbye to Sharon. The only others left in line were Kyle with Tyler, Dan with John, and Anne.

Josh walked up to Chip. "I was waiting for you, hun. Let's get in line, and then I'm going to man the piano for the Boys."

"Sounds good. How's everyone holding up?"

"Pretty good. The support from their loved ones seems to be working."

Chip watched as John led Dan away to his seat, crying but not out of control. Once Anne finished saying goodbye, he and Josh went up together, their arms around the other's waist. "Sharon," Chip said softly, "We're sorry we never met while you were alive, but I promise you this: we'll make sure Dan and your sons are taken care of for the rest of their lives."

As they walked toward Dan to make sure he was okay, Kyle came up and tapped Chip on the leg. Chip knelt down to face Kyle. The young boy hugged Chip. "Mommy said 'Thank You'," Kyle whispered in Chip's ear. Chip pulled Kyle into a hug and gave him a quick peck on the forehead.

Once he was sure Dan was okay, Josh went over to the piano and had a seat. He looked towards the doorway, and as soon as Kevin gave him the signal, he started playing.

The room fell silent as the Backstreet Boys assembled behind the podium and began singing "Amazing Grace". The room was silent as they finished, everyone wiping tears from their eyes. Kevin stepped to the front of the group. "My nephews were having a hard time with coming

up with a proper way to say goodbye to Sharon, so they asked our help. Instead of a speech, they are going to sing their dedication to their mom. They have asked that the extended family of brothers they have been blessed with join them in this tribute. Boys, could you all come up here please?"

All the boys came up, Aaron giving Johnny to Anne before him and David joined them. JJ and Kyle stood in front, with Adam and Tyler at their sides. Behind them were the rest of the boys, with the Backstreet Boys creating a third row.

Josh started playing, and when it came time for the vocals JJ and Kyle sang them together, with everyone else acting as backup singers. The overall effect was as if it was being sung by a choir.

*It takes a lot to know what is love  
It's not the big things, but the little things  
That can mean enough  
A lot of prayers to get me through  
And there is never a day that passes by  
I don't think of you  
You were always there for me  
Pushing me and guiding me  
Always to succeed*

*You showed me  
When I was young just how to grow  
You showed me  
Everything that I should know  
You showed me  
Just how to walk without your hands  
'Cause Mom you always were  
The perfect fan*

*God has been so good  
Blessing me with a family  
Who did all they could  
And I've had many years of grace  
And it flatters me when I see a smile on your face  
I wanna thank you for what you've done  
In hopes that I can give back to you  
And be the perfect son*

*You showed me  
When I was young just how to grow  
You showed me  
Everything that I should know  
You showed me  
Just how to walk without your hands  
'Cause Mom you always were  
The perfect fan*

*You showed me how to love*

*You showed me how to care*

*And you showed me that you would always be there*

*I wanna thank you for all that time*

*And I'm proud to say you're mine*

*You showed me*

*When I was young just how to grow*

*You showed me*

*Everything that I should know*

*You showed me*

*Just how to walk without your hands*

*'Cause Mom you always were*

*The perfect fan*

*'Cause Mom you always were, Mom you always were*

*Mom you always were, you know you always were*

*'Cause Mom you always were ... the perfect fan*

*I love you Mom*

*("The Perfect Fan" &copy; 1999 Backstreet Boys and Zomba Recording Corporation. Available on the "Millennium" CD)*

A tearful pair of boys directed the last verse directly at Sharon. Their boyfriends pulled them close, not caring what anyone thought. Everyone up front was paying attention to the two boys, so none noticed that the dedication had brought the entire room to tears, including the preacher.

Anne coming up front got their attention though, when she gave an unplanned dedication from the heart. "I know a lot of you don't know me, I'm Daniel's long lost mother, Anne Richardson. Unfortunately, I found Dan too late to be able to meet Sharon, but in the last few days I have learned much about her. All of which was just proven right by the tribute her sons just arranged with the help of their Uncle Kevin, Daniel's younger brother. I know I can speak for a lot of you when I say Sharon was an honest, caring soul who did whatever she could for others, something her sons have learned quite well. For the rest of my life, when I hear that song, it will be Sharon that I think of. Thank you, Sharon. Your legacy lives on in these two fine boys here." Anne re-took her seat, wiping tears from her eyes.

The preacher stepped up, still wiping tears from his eyes, and gave his sermon, then everyone went out to the cars to head to the cemetery.

There were four limos behind the hearse. Anne, Daniel, John, Kevin, Kristin, JJ, Kyle, Adam, and Tyler entered the first; Sharon's family were in the second; Teri and all her boys, Chip

and Josh with their boys in the third; Joe, Aaron, David and the rest of the Backstreet Boys with their families were in the fourth. Behind the limos were twenty-four other cars, making for a fairly long procession.

Once the graveside services were finished, everyone headed towards the cars except Dan, JJ and Kyle. The three of them stood next to the gravesite for a few minutes, both boys under Dan's arms, before they turned and joined the others. Once Sharon's family finished with their condolences, everyone got into the limo's for the ride home.

Once they reached the house, everyone filed into the rec room.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going to get comfortable," Chip said, unhooking the shoulder strap of his uniform.

"What should we do with the suits?" JJ asked.

"Lay them up, they're yours," Chip replied with a smile.

"Wow, thanks Uncle Chip!" JJ replied.

"Chip, I've been meaning to ask: how did you get all these suits, which look tailor made, for all of us without getting any sizes?" Said Dan.

"Actually, it was quite simple. Mr. Spock scanned everyone here from the *Enterprise*, then sent the results to the Starfleet uniform depot. The clothes were all delivered to Southcrest just before Aaron and David left, so they brought the suits with them."

"Ahhh, mystery explained. Thanks, Cuz, I owe you one."

"You take care of your sons; that's payment enough for me. Now let's all get out of these clothes and into something comfortable, and then meet back down here. I've got something to take care of."

Thirty minutes later, everyone had managed to change, and joined Chip in the rec room. Chip had brought down two garment bags with him.

"What are those two packages, Uncle Chip?" Cory asked.

"I thought you would never ask. Here, this one is yours, this one's Sean's. They are clothes, I'll tell you that much. Go upstairs, open them AFTER you are in your room. Put them on and come back down."

About a minute later, "HOLY SMOKE!" was heard being yelled from upstairs. Shortly thereafter, Sean and Cory came flying down the stairs wearing Starfleet uniforms tailored to them.

"Wow, Uncle Chip, these are AWESOME!" both boys exclaimed in unison.

"I'm not done yet – come here, guys!"

Sean and Cory hopped over to Chip, faces plastered with huge grins.

"Cory, Sean. ATTENTION!" Chip said in his best imitation of a drill instructor.

Both boys snapped to attention, still grinning from ear to ear.

"Josh, the boxes I gave you, please?" Chip asked.

Josh handed Chip what looked like two jewelry boxes with a big smile.

"Cory, Sean. By order of Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship USS *Enterprise*, I hereby award you both the rank of Acting Ensign. This gives you the privileges and responsibilities of a full Ensign, without the pay. In these two envelopes are your orders." Chip then pinned the Ensign pins onto each of their uniforms and then handed each of them an envelope.

Both boys carefully opened the envelopes, and smiled as they read them.

"Hey you two, what do they say?" Nick said.

Cory went first:

*From: Captain James T. Kirk  
USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A  
To: Ensign Cory P. Short  
Des Moines, Iowa, USA, Earth  
Re: Duty Orders  
Ensign Cory Short;*

*You are hereby ordered to report to Starfleet Academy in San Francisco, California no later than thirty days following your graduation from High School. Upon successful completion of the Engineering course at the Academy, you are hereby instructed to report to the Chief Engineer aboard the USS Enterprise in person by the fastest means possible.*

*Welcome aboard, Cory. Mr. Scott and myself look forward to working with you.*

*(Signed) Captain James T. Kirk*

"I'm gonna frame this, this is awesome!" Cory said in awe after he finished reading it.  
"What's yours say, Sean?" Dylan asked.  
Sean read his aloud:

*From: Captain James T. Kirk  
USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A  
To: Ensign Sean M. Short  
Des Moines, Iowa, USA, Earth  
Re: Duty Orders  
Ensign Sean Short;*

*You are hereby ordered to report to Starfleet Academy in San Francisco, California no later than thirty days following your graduation from High School. Upon successful completion of the Helmsman course at the Academy, you are hereby instructed to report to the Chief Helmsman aboard the USS Enterprise in person by the fastest means possible.*

*Welcome aboard, Sean. Mr. Dodds, the rest of the bridge crew, and myself all look forward to working with you.*

*(Signed) Captain James T. Kirk*

"Wow, are these for real, Uncle Chip?" Sean asked in shock.

"Yes they are guys. And to prove how real they are, you both are required to wear those tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?" Anne asked as she came in from the kitchen. "Congratulations, boys. Those look great on you!"

"Doctor Grouch wants to do a follow-up checkup on the twins, plus I think he has decided that he needs to be the family doctor for the rest of the boys," Josh replied.

"I'll make sure to tell him you called him that, right before your next physical!" Chip chuckled. "Actually, everyone's invited up by the Captain for a tour; the physicals are just Dr. McCoy's way of saying he approves."

"Okay, but if the old crab gets out of line, I'm giving him a piece of my mind. Everyone get cleaned up, dinners almost done. Cory, Sean, could you please change so the uniforms look nice for tomorrow?"

"Yes, gran'ma!" they replied as they headed for the stairs.

Teri joined Anne in the kitchen. "Mom, let me help with setting things out. I've seen smaller armies than the group here right now."

Working together, they managed to get everything set up by the time everybody returned. The main topic of discussion over dinner was Cory and Sean's appointment to Starfleet Academy; which buoyed everyone's mood since it took their minds off of the day's earlier events. Once dinner was finished, the band left to their motel, and everyone began winding down to hit the sack early.

"Sean," Cory said lovingly, "if you want, we can sleep with the rest of our brothers tonight. All I ask is you cuddle me, Okay?"

"I love you, Cor. As long as it's okay with you, let's do it."

"I love you too, teddy bear, let's pick a spot and cuddle."

A few minutes later, Teri made the rounds shutting off lights. As she looked in the rec room, she saw Sean and Cory cuddled in the middle of the room, with the rest of the couples cuddled up close to them behind Cory. Justin, the twins, and Johnny made their own little pile snuggled up close to Sean's back. She smiled, turned the light down low, and headed to bed.

As Josh and Chip were preparing for bed, Josh came up and began rubbing Chip's shoulders. "You did great today, hon. And the joy you just brought to those two boys tonight was worth its weight in gold. I'm very proud of you!"

"Ummm ... you are putting me to sleep, babe. Thanks, and by the way, I love you!" Chip replied sleepily.

"I love you too, hun. Let's get some sleep."

The house fell silent as everyone rested in preparation for the big day tomorrow.



## *Chapter 15*

The whole house was awakened by a voice screaming, "Put me down! HEY! What you think you're doing! HELP!"

Chip and Josh were the first to hear the noise. They hurriedly jumped put of bed, pulled on some track pants and tee-shirts, and then ran down the stairs to see how much damage was done. They followed the sounds from the boys, and ended up at the pool. As soon as they exited the door, both men began laughing.

"Don't you think it's a little bit early to be swimming, Curly?" Chip managed to sputter at the drenched form trying to climb out of the pool.

"Talk to your son and his identical midget cohorts," he replied, just before being shoved back into the pool again.

"Guys," Josh yelled to the boys, "Come on back here and let Curly out of the water. If he makes any more comments, your Dad and I will handle him."

"Okay, Pop!" the three boys chorused.

Teri came out the door just then, followed by Anne and Kevin. "Would you mind filling me in on what all the noise is about?" Teri asked Chip.

Chip pointed to the crowd gathered along the wall of the house watching the antics at the pool. "Look close, you see a few new faces? One second here, I'll have Josh bring them over. It looks like we were invaded this morning, and SOMEONE decided to open his mouth and put his foot in it. May I introduce you to our wakeup call?"

Chip walked with Teri to the side of the pool, where the subject of all the attention was just climbing out again. "Teri, this is Justin Timberlake from N\*Sync. Just call him Curly, it cuts down on the confusion. Justin, this is Teri. Oh, by the way, Brillo-head, those two boys you called midgets are Justy's foster brothers - have a nice swim!" Chip then pushed Curly back into the pool, which drew a round of applause from the assembled group. Jason tried to help Curly, but wound up getting thrown in as well by Chip.

Josh walked up with the rest of the new arrivals. "Teri, I'd like to introduce you to the rest of my band mates. First, this guy over here with the hair that we are not sure what color it is, or will be tomorrow, is Joey Fatone."

"Hi, Teri," Joey said. "Don't mind him, this IS my natural hair color, and if he doesn't watch it, I'll tell Mom to cut him off on pasta!"

Josh snickered. "Whatever, Joey, I don't think even you remember what the original color was. Anyways, the albino over there is Lance Bass. Next to him is his boyfriend, Matt Newman. The midget over there is Chris Kirkpatrick. The guy who Chip just threw in the pool with Curly is

his husband, Jason. Chip already introduced you to the resident juvenile delinquent, Curly, so that should just about cover everyone."

Teri smiled. "Glad to meet y'all. Now I can put faces to the names that have been floating around here the last few days. If someone wants to pull the rat and his husband outta the pool, I'll introduce your nephews to you!"

Lance went over to the pool. "Alright, you two goofballs. Out of the pool and get over there. You better behave, or I'll cut off your video games again."

Both men climbed out of the pool, giving Lance dirty looks as they joined the rest of their group. The rest of Backstreet and their entourage arrived as Teri introduced the boys. Teri was surprised when none of the boys were star struck by the new batch of superstars standing in front of them.

Tyler walked up to Teri as she was discussing the lack of reaction with Kevin and Chip. "Mommy, I'm STARVING! When is breakfast?"

Teri looked around the pool. "There's no way the kitchen can handle this group. You got any suggestions, Chip?"

Chip thought for a minute, and then responded. "Denny's sounds good if there's one around here. Thing is; with a group this size, we need to call ahead."

Teri giggled. "Actually, there's one just over on Merle Hay Road. I went to school with the morning manager. Usually it's dead this time of the morning. It would serve him right if we just show up. I owe him a few from school still."

Chip chuckled. "Dang, when you hold a grudge, you REALLY hold it! Let's see if we can get this clan dressed and dried and then we'll have a little fun invading Denny's."

Kevin put two fingers in his mouth and proceeded to emit an ear-piercing whistle. "LISTEN UP! Everyone get yourself presentable to go out for breakfast. You have FIFTEEN MINUTES; anyone NOT ready is not eating! Lance, get the two delinquents some dry clothes, make sure they are DECENT ones!"

Everyone scrambled to get dressed. As ordered, they were all ready fifteen minutes later. They piled into the four limos outside, and ten minutes later pulled into Denny's.

As Chip started to climb out to make sure the restaurant could accommodate the group, Teri tapped his arm. "Let me join you, Chip. This should be fun!"

They looked around as they walked up to the counter. With the exception of an older couple that was just leaving, the only other people in the restaurant were two boys sitting in a booth in the corner.

"I need to see the manager," Chip said to the waitress behind the counter.

"One minute, sir," she responded.

Two minutes later, a husky man came in from the kitchen. He noticed Teri at the counter. "Hi, Teri. How ya' doin'?"

"Not bad, Cecil. Still need a real job?"

"Gotta feed the wife and kid somehow!" Cecil replied.

He then shifted his attention to Chip. "Good morning, sir. Is there a problem?"

"Not really," Chip replied. "Actually, I was wondering if you could handle a party of thirty-some-odd people all at once?"

The expression on Cecil's face was priceless. "For a party that size, I'll lock the doors! I will need to ask for pre-approval on the payment method though - it's company policy, nothing personal."

"Understood," Chip replied, and then passed his Starfleet Platinum Visa over the counter to Cecil.

Cecil's eyes grew wide when he saw the name on the card, and they almost popped out of his head when he ran the funds availability on the card.

"Is there a problem?" Chip asked.

"Not at all - you're all set!" Cecil responded. "You wouldn't happen to be Commander Charles Dodds from the Starship *Enterprise*, would you?"

"Yes, I am," Chip replied. "Why?"

"My wife has been talking about you a LOT! She works for Family Services. You are considered able to walk on water by them right now!"

Chip blushed and then chuckled at the look on Cecil's face as the rest of the party started entering the restaurant.

"Give me just a minute and I'll have those two boys out. They've been here three hours already anyway," Cecil stated as he regained control of his jaw muscles.

"You will do no such thing!" Teri said forcibly. "They are too young to be out by themselves. Did you see them dropped off?"

"Actually, they just walked in, no signs of any adults anywhere. That's why I've let them sit there. I was hoping a parent would show up."

Teri got a knowing look on her face. "Put them on our bill, and they are staying. Before we leave their story will be known."

Aaron walked up to Teri. "Hey, Mom, is there a problem?"

"Not at all, Aaron. Tell everyone to grab a seat, but you hang up here for a few, okay?"

"Sure thing, I'll be right back."

Cecil was in shock. "Was that Aaron Carter, and did he just call you Mom?"

Teri grinned. "Yep, that's Aaron. He's my unofficial son now, so he has that privilege."

"Andrew is never gonna believe this - Aaron is his idol!"

Aaron walked up just as Cecil said it. "Is Andrew your son?"

"Yes, he just turned 12 last week. His walls are covered with posters of you!"

"If you can get him over here, I'll give him a late birthday present - breakfast with me, N\*Sync, and the Backstreet Boys. You think he'll like that?"

"You will make his year! I'll call right away. Thank you VERY much!"

Teri smiled, and then pulled Aaron off to the side. "Aaron, you see those two boys in the corner?"

"Yeah, they look kinda out of place. It's like they are trying to not be noticed."

"That's what I thought, too. Grab your brothers and make them feel welcome. Sean and Cory are experts in finding out what's going on. You guys do whatever you need to do to keep those two here. If they say anything that raises a red flag, get my attention."

"Sure thing, Mom. I've wanted to see Sean and Cory in action anyway. If I put my hat on, start making calls."

"I like how you think, Aaron. Go to it, son."

Teri walked back over to Chip. "If Aaron puts on his hat, start calling. The tribe is out hunting!"

Chip chuckled. "You are almost as demented as I am! I'll watch; I give them five minutes!"

Cecil finished the phone call he was making. "They will be here in ten minutes. My wife threatened to draw and quarter me if this was a joke."

Teri looked over to the other side of the room, to see the boys breaking out of a huddle. "Watch this, you are about to see something amazing!" she said to Cecil and Chip.

They all turned to watch the events about to happen in the corner.

Johnny had been chosen to be the lead boy of the welcoming committee. He timidly walked up to the table the two boys were sitting at. "Hi, I'm Johnny. Can my cousins and me sit here with you?"

Both boys looked closely at Johnny, and decided he looked sincere. The oldest spoke up. "I guess so. We will probably have to go soon though."

Johnny signaled to the rest of the boys that it was ok to come over then slid into the booth next to the youngest boy. "What's your name?"

"I'm Robbie, and that's my cousin Rusty."

Aaron walked over to the booth. "Hey, squirt. We're putting some tables together over here. Why don't you bring your new friends over there and introduce them?"

"Okay, Unca Aaron," Johnny replied.

Rusty looked at Johnny in shock. "He's your uncle?? That's AARON CARTER!"

Johnny giggled. "Yep, he's my Unca. He's goofy too!" He then grabbed both boys' hands and escorted them to the head of the table that was set up.

Once everyone was seated, Johnny turned to Aaron. "Unca Aaron, this is Rusty and Robbie. Will you introduce everybody else?"

"Sure thing, buddy. Rusty, Robbie; these are our cousins." Aaron then started around the table and introduced everyone.

"Adam?" Robbie asked innocently, "Why do you look like you were beat up?"

"My old father found out I was gay, and he beat me up. These guys found me, and now I have two new brothers; Sean and Cory. I also have my little brother that I had never met, Tyler."

"Wow, that's awesome that it worked out so good for you!" Rusty replied. "I wish we could ..." He suddenly got a sad look on his face.

Cory got up and crouched between Rusty and Robbie, an arm over each boy's shoulder.

"Go ahead, what do you wish for? You might be surprised at how wishes come true."

Rusty continued in a small voice "I wish I knew someone who could take care of us. Robbie's mom ran off a month ago, and he moved in with me and my mom. Mom went on a date last week and didn't come home. This is the last of the money that was around the house, I figured we could have one more meal together before we went to the police and got separated into foster homes."

Aaron put his hat on so hard that an audible 'slap' was heard throughout the restaurant. "You have, and I KNOW Mom will make sure you guys never lose each other."

Sean giggled. "You know something, Aaron - I think Cory and I are rubbing off on you!"

Teri and Chip were passing the time with Cecil, waiting for his son to arrive, when they were startled by the slap of the hat. Chip looked at his watch. "Seven minutes, thirty seconds. Not bad. Teri, I'll start making calls, you get the details."

"I'm on it, Chip. From the sound of the hat, better call it in as an emergency."

"Agreed," Chip then pulled out his communicator and opened it. "Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Chip."

"Nyota, where's the Captain?"

"In his cabin having breakfast with Dr. McCoy and Mr. Spock. Is there a problem, Chip?"

"Let's just say Teri's boys have struck again. Could you patch me please?"

"One second, Chip."

A few seconds later, Kirk's voice came over the communicator. "Kirk here. What's wrong, Mr. Dodds?"

"Looks like two more kids. Teri is getting details now."

"Say no more. Bones and I will be right down. Kirk out."

Chip closed his communicator, surprised at the reaction from his Captain. He no more than had the communicator back on his belt before two shimmering columns appeared in the lobby. He turned to Cecil, "Looks like two more for breakfast!"

\* \* \*

Rusty cowered when he saw Teri heading toward them. Sean looked around and saw her heading over. "Don't worry, that's Mom. She's cool."

"Yeah," Aaron added, "Mom is the greatest."

Rusty relaxed some, and once Teri came up, she had Cory take a seat while she knelt between Rusty and Robbie.

"Hey guys, I'm Teri; Sean, Cory, Ty, Adam, and Aaron's Mom. You wanna tell me your names?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm Rusty Miller, and this is my cousin Robbie Miller."

"Do you guys have a problem you would like to talk about?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"I guessed when I saw you as we came in. I told Aaron to let me know if he thought you might need help."

"Okay," Rusty then repeated what he had told the boys, pausing only when he saw the transporter beams."

"What's that?" Robbie asked in a scared voice when the beams appeared.

Justy reached over and placed a hand on Robbie's shoulder. "Don't worry; it's just a transporter beam." As the forms took shape, Justy smiled. "It's just Uncle Jim and Doc McCoy. You're fine."

Rusty finished his story, then both boys received a hug from Teri. "Don't worry guys, you're safe now," she then got up and joined Chip and the new arrivals.

Cory spoke up. "See guys, I told ya Mom was cool. She'll take care of everything. I promise!"

Rusty's mood was noticeably brighter. "You got a great mom! I'm really glad you guys came here today!"

"Hey guys," Sean interrupted, "Whadda you say that since you're joining the family, we all go over and you can meet the rest of the family."

"Sweet! Let's go!" Robbie and Rusty said in chorus.

"What's the word, Teri?" Kirk asked as soon as she walked up.

"Well, looks like one of you gets to use the Safe Haven Act again. We've got one abandoned boy and one possibly abandoned."

"Actually Teri," Kirk said with a grin, "I think it would only be fitting for the Director of the Federation's new Youth Services Bureau to do the honors."

Teri looked confused. "That sounds fine, but I don't see him here."

"The new director is not a 'he'; it's a 'she'. As a matter of fact, I'm looking right at her!"

Teri and Chip both looked at the Captain in shock. Chip finally was able to speak. "Could you please expand on that, sir?"

Kirk chuckled. "It seems that word got out about you and the twins, Mr. Dodds. Over the last day, Headquarters has been swamped with incoming requests for more information about the act. The Admiral happened to have the file open on Teri when one of his aides suggested a department to coordinate actions under the Act. With your history in just the last month, Teri, he

decided you would be perfect for the job; so he created the department and at 9pm last evening officially appointed you Director. I was supposed to tell you when you came up to the ship today, but it looks like you will need it before then. By the way, the Admiral suggested you appoint a head for a psychiatric department, and said that Daniel Richardson would have his approval if you think he will fit."

Teri got a serious look on her face. "Captain, I'm flattered by the offer, but there are a couple things that take precedence. The first is this rapidly growing tribe I call a family. They need my support before anyone else. The second is my extended family who have gone to great lengths to arrange for us to all be together in Orlando. Unless allowances can be made for those two priorities, I will have to respectfully decline the appointment."

Kirk smiled. "Teri, you sound just like some officers of mine. They're not afraid to draw a line and express their thoughts. In fact, you are standing next to the two biggest offenders - Bones and Mr. Dodds. The Admiral figured you might say that; here's the details: First, you will be working from home, using a comlink for any required communications. You will have a secure link to the main file servers, so your home will be your office. You might be surprised to find out that half of the Federation's Department heads have never stepped foot inside Headquarters. Second, and most important, is that with a few limited exceptions, most of which will be emergency situations you can handle over a communicator, you will set your own schedule each day. If Sean has soccer practice at 3pm, you will be able to take him and watch the practice, no questions asked, no answering to anyone."

Teri looked thoughtful for a minute, then responded. "That sounds fine; I'll accept under the condition that I have all that in writing before I leave the ship tonight."

"I'll make sure of that myself," McCoy interjected. "Just what I've seen so far from you has impressed me; you better believe I'm going to go over everything with a fine-toothed comb before you even see it. Now let's go meet those boys."

Aaron had just finished introducing the rest of the family to Rusty and Robbie when JJ yelled out "Hey, Carrot Top, over here!"

Aaron turned to see who JJ was yelling at, and saw Cecil with a lady he assumed was his wife and a skinny freckled 12 year old redhead boy. *'That must be Andrew,'* he thought to himself as he stood up.

"JJ, you bum! What you doin' here?" Andrew said with a grin.

"Not much, just a family reunion! Come on over, I've got some people I wanna introduce to you."

JJ, Adam, and Aaron met Andrew at the edge of the group. JJ giggled when Andrew's face dropped in shock as he realized Aaron Carter was not only here, but was actually coming over to greet him.

"Hey dufus, close your mouth. You're letting the flies out!" JJ said as they walked up. "What's the big deal? He's only Aaron Carter?"

"You'll pay for that later, JJ," Aaron said with a grin. "Since you two know each other, why don't you handle introductions, smart aleck?"

JJ grinned, "Everyone, This is Andrew Evans, and his mom, Angela. Carrot Top here is my best friend," he then ran through the introductions, purposely saving Aaron for last.

When an impatient Aaron was finally introduced, Aaron shook Andrew's hand.

"It's great to meet you. Your Dad tells me you kinda like my music."

"Yeah, you are AWESOME! I've got everything you have ever done!"

"I had a good teacher: my big bro. How would you like to join us for breakfast, and I'll see if I can con your Dad out of a menu. If so, we'll pass it around and everyone can sign the meal

they ordered."

"SWEEET! Would you really do that?"

"Yep. Two reasons; first you are a fan, and second you are one of my bro's best friends. Besides, you seem pretty cool yourself."

"Wow, THANKS!"

Andrew then turned to JJ. "Hey, JJ, sorry I did not make it to see your mom, man. I really wanted to be there for you, but the thought of going to the funeral made me start getting sick. I got so bad Mom told me that if I went I'd hurt myself, she said you didn't need to see that happen."

As soon as he heard JJ's mom mentioned, Adam immediately pulled in close to JJ and placed his arm around his waist in support.

"Thanks, Andy," JJ replied. "I understand, I would hate to see you hurt."

Andrew looked at the pair in front of him, deep in thought. He seemed to make a decision inside his head, and then spoke. "JJ, is Adam your boyfriend? Are you gay?"

The restaurant fell silent, the only noise coming from the kitchen.

JJ looked at Adam, who nodded his approval for JJ to answer. "Uhh, yeah, actually I am gay, and Adam is my boyfriend. Please say you don't hate me, and we are still friends."

Andrew smiled, then held out his hand to Adam. "Congratulations, Adam. I was wondering how much longer this dufus was going to hide in the closet. Don't worry, he's all yours. This just means I KNOW he won't be stealing girlfriends from me!"

This caused chuckles and giggles from everyone, and conversation resumed around the room.

As Aaron returned to his seat he noticed Robbie had moved, and was now sitting between Brian and Dylan. Since that opened up a seat by him, he guided Andrew to sit between him and David.

"Wow, it feels like I'm out in space with all these stars around me! This is AWESOME!" Andrew gushed.

David giggled. "Get used to it, since you and JJ are friends, you'll be seeing a lot more of these clowns. Besides, you made some instant friends the way you reacted to JJ being gay. I know I speak for all of us when I say you were really impressive."

JJ leaned over and asked Andrew "Hey, Carrot; when did you figure out that I was gay?"

Andrew looked thoughtful for a minute, then spoke. "I've suspected it for about a year now; it was kinda obvious the way you watched me change whenever we were together and you thought I was not looking. Mom and Dad noticed too, I guess."

A blushing JJ asked, "Okay, when did you think you knew tho?"

"You remember the trip to Worlds of Fun in June? When we got to the hotel room; remember the rollaway bed that was there? And how I got really mad and stormed out? Dad followed me, and we had a long talk. They were worried that you might make an advance on me and I'd take it wrong and blow up. Dad and I had a long talk, that's when it hit me that you were gay. Thing is, you were not any different because of it, and Dad explained to me it was not a choice you made, but the way you were born; kinda like my freckles. I had seen the way you looked hurt when you saw the bed; man, you and I have slept in the same bed forever! I asked him if he really thought you would try anything with them in the room when you have never done it in the privacy of a bedroom, and informed him to get rid of the bed; I was going to sleep with you, and if anything did happen I would just let you know that it's not my way, but I'm ok with it being yours. I also said that if we were right, you needed me to be a friend now more than the rest of the time I've known you, and I refused to abandon you like that. You were kinda down the rest of the evening, do you remember what I did when it was bedtime?"

JJ was sitting there, tears of joy streaming down his face. The rest of the group was listening intently, mesmerized by the tale unfolding before them. JJ slowly replied, "Yeah, you insisted that we shower together, which we had not done for ages, and then when we went to bed, you rolled over, laid your head on my shoulder, and told me that no matter what you would always be my best friend."

Andrew smiled. "That's right, and I meant ever word of it. I know things might get rough for you, but I promise I will always be here for you as a friend. If I get labeled as gay because I'm hanging around you, then I'll live with it; you're my friend no matter what anyone says or does."

JJ got up, lifted Andrew out of his chair, and proceeded to give him a heartfelt hug. After the hug broke, JJ spoke. "Andy; thanks for sticking with me. After what you just said, and what we have been like, would you mind if I stopped calling you a friend and started calling you my brother?"

Before Andrew could answer, there was a chorus of boys' voices as he was informed that the rest of the tribe wanted him to join too. Aaron stood in front of him, and made it official. "Andrew, as you just heard you have been invited to not only be JJ's brother; but to join what we jokingly call 'the tribe'. I promise you, everyone is serious. You have earned the right to be called a brother of every boy in this room. I would be proud to call you my brother, just as I call JJ and the rest of the guys' brothers. Just to let you know, it takes something special to be included in this group, and you are the first guy over 11 years old who is confirmed straight that has even been considered."

Andrew looked around the room at the expectant faces watching him, checked the sincere look on Aaron's face, and then turned back to JJ. He spoke in a loud voice so all could hear "Come here and give me a hug, BROTHER!"

The restaurant erupted in a loud cheer, and then Andrew made the rounds of the room receiving welcomes from everyone. He was surprised when Kevin pulled him down to talk to him as he was coming by.

"Andy," Kevin said in a low voice, "I'm really proud of you. You are doing something that most kids could not do; standing by a gay friend who is 'out'. As one straight guy to another, I'll tell you there will be times you will wonder if you made the right choice. Trust me, you did; and you will never regret it. I'm going to give you my card. If you have any problems you don't know how to handle, need help, or just wanna talk, give me a call anytime. You are never going to be alone. Both bands will back you up. If it gets serious, more than likely Starfleet will be backing you too, so stick with it, ok - nephew?"

Andrew gave Kevin a hug, and then put the card in his wallet. "Thanks, Uncle Kev!" he said with a smile.

Kevin playfully swatted his butt. "My pleasure. Now go grab your seat. It looks like the food is coming out!"

Andrew giggled and then ran back to sit between Aaron and David. As he passed JJ, he stopped long enough to tell him "Thanks, bro. I'll remember this day for the rest of my life!"

Teri, Chip, Kirk, and Dr. McCoy joined Andrew's parents standing on the edge of the group watching the introductions and the events following. Teri spotted Robbie first.

"Dr. McCoy, You see the boy cuddled up on Brian's lap? That's Robbie. Give me a minute. I'm still trying to spot Rusty."

Just then, Andrew asked about JJ being gay, and all of them paid close attention to the happenings between JJ and Andrew; locating Rusty became a low priority.

Once Andrew returned to his seat after being welcomed into the group as one of their brothers, Dr McCoy turned to Cecil and said, "You two should teach a class on parenting. That



boy has more sense than half the people I've ever met."

Cecil smiled. "Thanks, Doc. We try hard, but give him some credit. There's been times he's set me straight, too."

The staff started bringing out the food, even the cooks helping carry out plates. Teri told Chip, Angela, Cecil, Kirk and McCoy "Let's grab a table and eat. Let the boys enjoy their meal before you start torturing them, Doc."

McCoy shot her a dirty look, but sat down at the nearest table. Kirk chuckled, "Watch it, Bones. I think you've met your match!"

Chip muttered under his breath to Kirk. "You have no idea, sir."

A few minutes later, as everyone was eating, Teri finally spotted Rusty. She got the attention of the rest of the adults at her table. "I found Rusty, but I don't believe what I'm seeing! Look over there, across from Curly."

They all looked over, and Kirk was first to comment. "Looks like someone has a crush on Curly. This should be interesting."

Just then, Rusty decided to stretch, standing up and purposely pushing his hips out so that his upper legs were pushing against the table with his back arched. The entire time, he was staring at Curly to see if he was watching.

Chip chuckled. "Now, if THAT was not the most obvious come-on I have ever seen I'll shave my head! That poor boy. First off, he has the hots for a married man, then on top of it, he's picked Justin Timberlake! I think Dan's got his work cut out for him with Rusty. Anyone who could have a crush on Curly needs psychiatric help!"

Teri reached over and slapped Chip on the back of the head. "Behave yourself!" she giggled.

Just then, all hell broke loose. Rusty saw Jason feeding a sausage link to Justin, and on the spur of the moment Rusty picked up one of his sausage links by the end, and as he was waving it in the air asked Curly "Would you like to eat my sausage?"

Curly turned beet red as the surrounding people broke out in laughter. Rusty realized his secret was out, and began crying. He then stood up, chair falling backwards onto the floor, and started to run for the door. Three more chairs flew away from the tables as Chip jumped up and intercepted Rusty while Curly and Jason rushed over to console the boy. The only other sound in the room was Brian trying to calm down Robbie, who was latched onto his neck yelling for Rusty not to leave him.

"Let me go!" Rusty screamed as Chip restrained him.

"You're not going anywhere, now calm down!" Chip replied as he tried to keep hold of the squirming, fighting boy.

Curly and Jason came up, Jason limping a little from running into a table. "Thank God you caught him," Jason said. "I think this is something Justin and I need to discuss with him, Chip. We'll take him in the restroom to get cleaned up, and talk this out. Go ahead and pass him to Justin, and please make sure we are not disturbed, Okay?"

Chip looked at the two men, seeing the concern in their faces. "I guess. But if you two start to get in over your heads you better come out for help."

Curly nodded his head, then reached out his arms and picked up Rusty. Rusty latched onto him, arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, and broke down into tears, repeating over and over "I'm sorry."

Curly put one arm around Rusty's waist, and caressed the back of his head with the other hand as he said "Relax, little one. You are fine, calm down. I'm not mad."

The three of them went into the men's room. As the door closed, Chip turned to Teri. "I

hope I just did the right thing. Do you think they can handle this?"

"I think so," Teri replied, "that's the most mature those two have been since I met them. Right now, I think Justin is the only one who can convince Rusty not to leave. I just hope he does it gently."

The three entered the restroom, and headed for the large handicapped stall. Justin sat on the edge of the toilet with Rusty on his lap. He held Rusty close, cuddling him and soothing him as Jason rubbed Rusty's back.

"You hate me, don't you?" Rusty sobbed.

Justin replied softly "No, little buddy. I don't hate you, and neither does Jason. If we hated you, would we have come after you when you ran? Actually, I'm flattered that you like me enough to do that. The only other guy who has ever flirted that openly with me I ended up marrying, that's Jason."

"Really? I thought you would hate me for embarrassing you."

Jason chuckled. "Don't worry about that. Just about every person in that room has got in their shots on both of us. No one takes it personally. That's how we show we care about each other."

Rusty suddenly got an urgent panicked look on his face. "I gotta pee - NOW!"

Justin stood him up, and Jason caught Rusty as his legs collapsed while Justin was moving out of the way.

"Get his pants!" Jason barked. "He's too weak to stand! Hurry!"

Justin hurriedly pulled Rusty's pants and boxers to his knees, and without thinking reached over to aim for him. He no more than got Rusty's penis pointed before his bladder let loose. Rusty put his hand over the back of Justin's, and squeezed a weak 'thank you'.

Rusty finished up, then Justin redressed him, flushed, and then sat back down on the seat with Rusty on his lap. "Do you get weak like that often, buddy?"

"Yeah. Mom used to just give me a candy bar, then I'd be ok."

"SHIT! Jason, go get the quack - NOW!" Justin barked. Jason raced out of the bathroom. Justin turned his attention back to Rusty. "Rusty, I'm gonna have the Doc check you out, lil buddy. You wanna laugh, tho? You are the first guy besides myself that I've ever held while taking a pee! We both know you are too young to be my boyfriend. Besides I'm married to Jason and would never cheat on him. I hate people who cheat on their spouses more than anything. What would you say to the next best thing: living with Jason and me, even becoming our son if we can get the courts to ok it?"

"What if Jason does not want to? And what about Robbie? I can't leave him alone again!"

"Don't worry about Jason. He'll approve. I promise. As far as Robbie goes, I think he's took a liking to one of my neighbors. Did you notice him cuddling up to Brian? Brian and Dylan live right next door to us. Would that work for you?"

"Sounds great! Why do I feel so weak right now?"

"We are about to find out. You are about to get looked at by the best doctor in the Federation. He'll fix you right up."

McCoy ran in just as Justin said the last sentence. "Alright, Timberlake, what's the emergency?"

"I think we have a diabetic on our hands, Doc."

McCoy growled. "You stick with singing, if you call it that, and I'll stick to diagnosing patients. Can you stand, Rusty?"

"No sir, Doc."

"Sit there then. Curly, keep him steady while I scan him."

McCoy scanned Rusty with his medical tricorder, checked the readout, and then pulled out his communicator. "McCoy to *Enterprise*, give me Sickbay! STAT!"

"Yes, Doctor," Uhura replied from the speaker.

After a few seconds, Christine Chapel's voice came over the speaker. "Sickbay, Chapel here."

"Christine, get me some Type-H insulin down here with an injection kit and syringes ASAP! Tell Scotty I said put a rush on it!"

"Right away, Doctor. Mr. Scott just happens to be here with me. He said to tell you he'll bring it personally. Give him two minutes."

"Tell him make it one! We got an undiagnosed kid down here!"

"I just keyed the override in allowing transport from Sickbay. He'll be right down. Chapel out."

As McCoy closed his communicator and put it on his belt, Mr. Scott materialized in the center of the room. "Here be ye' meds, Doctor. Where's the wee lad that be worryin' you?"

McCoy pointed to Rusty as he prepared the syringe, verifying the dosage from his tricorder.

Scotty ruffled Rusty's hair. "Relax, laddie. The Doctor might be a wee bit short, but if anyone be able to fix you, he'd be the one."

"Pull up his right sleeve, Justin," McCoy said as he walked over. "And watch close. I'm making you responsible for doing this until he learns how to do it himself." Justin just nodded.

McCoy injected the insulin into Rusty's arm, explaining to Justin what to do as he did it. Once he finished, he stepped back and grudgingly said to Justin.

"Congratulations, for once you were right. For right now, when you get out there, give him tea to drink, no sweetener or sugar. Let him eat normally. I'll check his readings when you two are on the ship this afternoon."

Justin hugged the small body on his lap. "You mind telling Lance I'll be busy, Doc? I was supposed to be helping them this afternoon, but this little angel is more important right now."

McCoy looked at Justin, and gave him a rare smile. "I never thought I would say this, but you just impressed me. I'll take care of Lance. You and Jason need to be talking to Teri, tell her doctor's orders. Rusty is to stay with you."

McCoy then turned to Scotty. "Speaking of orders, you are staying down here and eating with us. You need to take a break."

Scotty laughed. "I kina thought you'd be sayin' that."

The room fell silent as the group came back out into the dining area. Jason walked over to Rusty's seat and got his plate, catching a waiter on his way and ordering an unsweetened tea. McCoy and Scotty pulled up seats at Teri's table, ignoring the inquisitive looks from Chip and Kirk. Justin was the last out, carrying Rusty on his right side and the injection kit in his left hand.

As he walked by Teri, Justin said loud enough for everyone to hear "Teri, Rusty is going to be staying with me and Jason - Doctor's Orders!"

Robbie broke free from Brian, and ran up to Curly and Rusty. "What's wrong with Rusty? Is he sick? Where am I going to stay?"

Curly pulled out a chair, and sat down with Rusty. "BRIAN? DYLAN? GET OVER HERE!" He then pulled Robbie over next to him. "Slow down, munchkin. One question at a time, okay? Wait for Brian and Dylan, and then we will answer your questions. Why don't you go ask Teri to join us, ok bud?"

Robbie ran over to Teri and dragged her back to them. Curly looked at Teri. "Doc said that you were the one to talk to. What gives?"

"I just became the director of the Federation Youth Services Bureau. So now I'm in charge of making sure these guys are taken care of. Would you mind filling me in on why Doc had to rush in there with you?"

Brian, Dylan, and Jason joined them as Curly answered. "Teri, this little guy had undiagnosed juvenile diabetes. His mom had been treating him by giving him candy bars, but he had a major attack in the restroom. Doc has showed me how to use the insulin kit, but we are going to get more training on the ship later. This little meeting here is to figure out who is going to be lookin' after these two."

Teri smiled. "Justin, have you decided to grow up when nobody was looking? Okay, let's hear what that devious little mind of yours has contrived."

Justin stuck out his tongue at Teri, which caused giggles from both boys, then continued. "B-Rok, Dyllweed; before I continue, I have one serious question. Before you answer, think about your response carefully. If you try to change your mind later I will personally kick both your butts. I noticed how comfortable Robbie is with you. Are you willing to take him in?"

Brian looked at Dylan, who nodded his head. "Teri, could you please arrange for us to receive custody of Robbie?" Brian asked in a serious voice. "On the condition that Robbie wants it, though."

Robbie looked at Brian. "What about Rusty? I don't wanna lose him. He's all the family I got."

Brian pulled Robbie onto his lap. "I think Curly and Jason are planning on Rusty staying with them. We are next-door neighbors. Would that be close enough for you, lil one?"

Robbie thought for a second, and then answered. "Yeah, that's ok. How long do we get to stay with you?"

Brian smiled. "Forever, lil buddy. Forever."

Curly smiled as Robbie cuddled up to Brian and Dylan joined in to make it a three-way cuddle. "Teri, lets make this official, seeing as it looks like you have your answer about them. I request Rusty be placed with us for an indefinite period."

Teri looked at the two couples cuddling with the boys. "One second, let me make this official," she waved for Kirk and Chip to join them.

Once they were over, Teri asked Kirk, "Captain, may I make use of the *Enterprise's* log, please? There is some official business which needs handled."

McCoy had joined them, and he interrupted Kirk. "Jim, use the tricorder. I can upload through the med link as soon as she is done. Besides, Youth Services is a division of Starfleet Medical. Teri, see Christine when you get to the ship. She will issue you a tricorder and give you training on basic functions. Just don't try to play doctor."

Teri followed McCoy's instructions, and shortly activated the logging function on the tricorder.

Once she was sure it was started, she paused it long enough to get the boy's full names and ages. She verified the applicable sections, then began the proceedings.

"This is Director Teri Short of the Youth Services Bureau. I hereby invoke the Safe Haven Act, Section 309 in regards to the minor children Rusty Scott Miller, age 12, and Robbie Andrew Miller, age 5. As per Section 309, paragraph 'B', they are being taken under protection due to abandonment. In addition, I'm ordering an investigation into a possible violation of Section 14-C, Medical neglect, in regards to Rusty Scott Miller. Reference medical files for said child will be held aboard the USS *Enterprise*."

"Placement will be as follows: Rusty Scott Miller shall be placed with Justin Randall Timberlake and Jason Sebastian Mitchell-Timberlake, residents of Orlando, Florida, USA, Earth.

Robbie Andrew Miller shall be placed with Brian Thomas Littrell and Dylan Jefferson Waters-Littrell, residents of Orlando, Florida, USA, Earth. Both placements shall be considered permanent. Full medical exams shall be performed by Doctor Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the USS *Enterprise* as soon as possible. This concludes the proceedings."

As she finished, the room erupted into a cheer, as everyone had gathered to see what was happening. Cecil came over to the group. "It seems like a few of you have cold food now; we can't have that! Relax, I'll have new orders out shortly, and they are on me. Congratulations on the new families, guys!"

Everyone settled down, Andrew moving around to have conversations with everyone in the room, all the boys coming over to welcome Robbie and Rusty into the family. Curly insisted on feeding Rusty by hand, even after he regained most of his strength. McCoy stopped in a few times to check Rusty's blood sugar levels, and reminded Rusty to stay away from sweets until they had his medicine balanced.

Rusty was down to just a sausage on his plate, when he got an evil grin on his face, and whispered something in Curly's ear. Curly giggled, "Go for it!" he whispered back.

"Hey Uncle Nicky?" Rusty asked innocently.

"Yo Rusty. Wadda you need?"

Rusty picked up the sausage just like he had before. "Dad and Pop refused to eat my sausage. Would you like to eat it?"

Nick turned beet red as Ashley busted out in laughter.

"Gotcha!" Rusty said with a laugh.

This made the rest of the room lose it. Kevin leaned over to Lance, and between chuckles stated "He's already starting to sound like a Timberlake!"

Lance chuckled. "Look at Curly's face; that's the happiest I've seen him look in ages! It might be too soon to tell, but I think Rusty is just what he needed. If it means putting up with pranks from both of them, I'll live with it. Justin has wanted a kid since shortly after we formed the band, and I'll bet today ranks up there with the happiest days of his life."

Kevin got a thoughtful look on his face. "You know, you are right. I've seen the looks of jealousy that he's given Chip and Josh when Justy cuddles with them. This could be exactly what he needs. I just hope Jason does not ruin it for him. I really wonder sometimes if Jason hates kids."

Lance got a serious look on his face. "If Jason even tries to screw it up, he's gotta deal with the rest of us. The band has kept quiet so far about Jason, but we'll nail him to the wall if he gets between Rusty and Justin."

"What's going on that I don't know about?" Kevin asked.

"Have you noticed that Jason seems to disappear whenever we're near you guys, besides seeming to ignore Justin regularly?"

"Oh, shit. We are having a similar problem with Dylan."

"I think we better start looking into this further - both bands," Lance replied.

"Agreed."

Things finally wound down, and the *Enterprise* officers bid their farewells to everyone. Kirk ended up with Teri and Chip. "Do you think you can fit this mob on the Columbus, Mr. Dodds?"

"Yes, Sir. Not all of them are going. There will be no problems."

"Good! By the way, you are not piloting it up. I will let you co-pilot, but I will be piloting. You need to be able to concentrate on your family, so no arguments. I will see you in a few hours at the shuttle." Kirk then called the ship.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. Three to beam up."

"Transporter room standing by, Captain," Spock said from the communicator.

"Energize, Mr. Spock." With a moment, Kirk, McCoy and Scotty disappeared, caught up in the transporter beam.

"I hate it when he does that!" Chip exclaimed with a grin. He then noticed Andrew was saying goodbye to everyone.

"Andrew!" Chip yelled, "Get over here!"

"Yes, sir?" Andrew said as he ran up.

"Why are you saying goodbye? I thought you wanted to spend the next week with your brothers? At least that's what your Dad said."

You could see the smoke rolling out of Andrew's ears as his brain tried to process the question he was asked. Finally everything connected and he broke into a huge grin. "AWESOME! Really? Wow, Thanks!"

"You are EVIL, Chip!" Teri said, laughing.

Aaron walked up and handed Cecil a menu, covered in writing. "Would you mind taking this home with you? I promised it to Andrew; I'll let him know you have it."

Cecil pulled Aaron into a hug. "Thank you Aaron. You just made my son's dream come true. If you ever need anything just give us a call."

Everyone filed out to the limos, Andrew and JJ stopping long enough to give Andrew's parents hugs as they were leaving. Chip was the last one, stopping to settle the bill.

"That came to \$350.00, Chip," Cecil said.

"Not bad. Add on a \$100.00 tip for each employee to the bill," Chip replied.

"Don't forget the cooks and yourself."

Cecil shook his head. "I've already figured out not to argue with you. Thanks from all of us. I'll be seeing you around, won't I?"

"Looks like it, since Andrew is now part of the tribe. If a co-owners position suddenly gets offered to you in Orlando, take it. You will make a group of boys really happy if you do."

Cecil grinned. "I'll take that as a hint. I think you are being waited on. We'll talk later."

Chip joined everyone else in the limo as Cecil removed the "Closed for private party" sign from the door.

The limos emptied into Teri's house. Kevin got everyone's attention with his now-famous whistle.

"Okay, grab your suits. We have an hour to kill in the pool! Last boy in has towel duty!"

All the boys scrambled up the stairs except Rusty and Robbie, who took off once Brian and Curly gave them the go-ahead nod. Teri noticed the concerned look on Curly's face as Rusty disappeared upstairs, and went over to talk to him. She put a hand on his shoulder, and spoke softly. "Don't worry Justin, he'll be just fine. The rest of the guys'll watch him. Let's go wait for them by the pool."

"What's wrong?" Chip asked as him and Josh walked up.

"New father jitters," Teri replied.

"That little boy has stolen my heart," Curly said softly. "Chip, Josh; now I really know how you two feel when you look at Justy, and now the twins. In just a couple hours, Rusty has put all his trust in me. I don't know how, but I'm going to do whatever it takes to become the father he needs. Do me a favor, Teri; please let me know as soon as you have him cleared for adoption. I know you need to find out what happened to his mom first, but God has given me a gift, and I'll die before I lose him. Honestly, I know you all know things are not the best between Jason and me right now, but no matter if it brings us closer together or breaks us up, Rusty WILL have a home with me."

Brian had walked over as Curly was speaking. "Justin, I feel the same way as you do about Robbie. If Jason gives you any trouble, come and get me. I'll do the same if Dylan gives me a hassle, okay?"

Curly stuck out his hand and shook Brian's. "It's a deal, bro. Those two have a home one way or the other."

Josh pulled Chip close. "Guys; I know I speak for both of us when I say 'Welcome to parenthood'. You both are doing great, but I think it might be a good idea if all of us parents sat down and talked after we get back tonight. I'll let Nick and Ash know, you try to corral your spouses. If either of them doesn't think it's important, show up anyway. I can see already who cares the most about those boys."

They were interrupted by a herd of boys scrambling down the stairs. Justy, the twins, Robbie and Rusty stopped just long enough to give their respective parents a hug on the way through, then tore off after the others. Once the mob cleared, Chip spoke up.

"That's what we mean; you guys are naturals. I'm proud of both of you. Go on out there and watch your new sons, Josh and I have a scheduled 'quiet time' to attend to."

"Thanks, big bro," Brian said as he gave Chip a hug. "You two go ahead, and don't worry about your boys. We'll watch them, too."

Josh and Chip watched the rest of the group head to the pool, and then headed up to their room. "Well, hun, looks like Curly and Brian are both going to try growing up," Josh said.

"Yeah, I hope they are not getting in over their heads. I like the idea of you, me Teri, Dan, Nick and Ash sitting down with them. They need to know they can ask us all for help and advice."

"I agree. We'll need to do that tonight," Josh replied as they entered the bedroom and he closed the door behind them.

Out at the pool, a major game of "tag" had commenced. Brian and Curly both looked around for their spouses, but neither one was to be seen. "Oh, well. Their loss!" Brian quipped as he pulled a lounge chair over between Teri and Curly.

Curly dozed off shortly after sitting down, but was rudely awakened by a wet body climbing on his lap and immediately cuddling him. As he opened his eyes, the sound of a giggle from next to him informed him that Brian was in the same situation. He looked down, and saw the reddish-brown hair, still wavy even when wet, and the green eyes looking at him; questioning without words whether it was ok to do this. "Rusty, don't worry; you are fine lil' buddy. How are you feeling?"

Rusty relaxed totally. "I'm feeling a little tired. Can I cuddle with you? You're not mad that I got you all wet, are you?"

Curly smiled, and gave Rusty a hug. "The wet lap comes with being a parent. As long as it's you doing it I don't mind it at all. The cuddle is fine too; but first let me see your finger, it's time to test your blood sugar. Hold it still, you'll feel a little poke, it's supposed to do that, okay?"

"Okay, as long as you say it's 'posed to," Rusty said as he held out his hand for Curly to do the test.

Curly reached into the bag he had brought out to the pool with him, and got out the tester with the notes on operations Dr. McCoy had left with it. After wiping Rusty's finger with the alcohol pad, he pricked the tip of it and inserted it into the tester. A minute later, it indicated a successful test, and he compared the readings to the notes to see where it stood.

"Good news buddy, you are still fine. Go ahead and relax, you've had a rough day."

In no time flat, both were sound asleep. In the next chair, Brian and Robbie had also drifted off, smiles on their faces. Fortunately, none heard AJ come and get Kevin, both running to the back of the property.

## Chapter 16

Kevin ran after AJ. "What's the hurry?"

"Unless you want two of your new nephews committing murder, you better get the lead out!" AJ shouted back.

Kevin caught up with AJ just as they were reaching the back of the property, and went into shock at what he saw as they rounded a row of hedges. Jason was lying on the ground on his stomach, pants around his ankles, with Sean sitting on his back, pulling his arms back almost to the point of separating Jason's shoulders. Dylan was in the same position, only with Cory on his back.

"Sean Michael Short, you BETTER have a good explanation for this!" Kevin exploded.

Sean replied in a deep voice, his barely restrained rage evident. "These bastards are cheating with each other on Uncle Brian and Uncle Justin."

"REPEAT THAT!" Kevin said in shock.

"You heard him," an enraged Cory all but yelled, "these two were screwing like rabbits. I'm just deciding which arm to rip off first to make stew with." To emphasize his point, he yanked hard on Dylan's right arm, causing a loud "POP", and causing Dylan to scream like a girl in pain.

"Let them up," Kevin said through clenched teeth. "I'll make sure Chip leaves that arm for you, Cory. The rest of the limbs are all his. Sean, you can bargain with Josh over your piece. Let's get this trash up to the house, before I decide to just bury them here."

As he was standing up, Jason sneered, "I love how you take these little snot-nosed punks word without asking us."

Before Kevin could react, AJ picked Jason up by the shirt and slammed him against the nearest tree. "If I EVER hear another comment like that about my nephews out of that sewage pit you call a mouth, you're gonna be shitting every tooth you have."

AJ put Jason down and Kevin told him and Dylan "Get your skanky asses up to the house and into the living room. You both have some serious explaining to do. And I mean NOW!"

The two men started to shuffle towards the house, but ended on their faces in the dirt when Sean and Cory drop-kicked them from behind. "I would suggest you move a LOT faster if you want to be able to sit when you get there!" Sean growled at the two as AJ and Kevin dragged them back to their feet.

They reached the house and were almost in the living room when Justy came down the stairs. "Uncle Curly and Uncle Bri are up in Sean's room with the boys. Dad and Pop will be right down," he told Kevin.

"How did you know what's happening?" Kevin asked, surprised.



"My lil bros couldn't miss it. We'll keep the rest of the kids busy while you deal with this trash," Justy replied, then turned and spit on Jason and Dylan and said, "You are not related to me anymore."

Jason stood up and slapped Justy's face, just as Chip and Josh entered the hall. Josh snapped, running up and giving Jason a right hook that laid him flat on the floor. "If you ever even touch my son, ANY of my sons, ever again I promise you'll wish you had never been born."

Chip rolled Jason on his back, nailed him with a right hook, then informed him "The only reason I'm not killing you right now is my baby brother and cousin are first in line for what you have done to them. Right now instead of sitting by the pool watching your SONS getting acquainted with their new family, they are upstairs trying to protect the boys from finding out what you two have done," he then pointed at Justy, who was cuddled between Sean and Cory, the two boys holding him protectively. "Right there is one of the four most important people in my life. If you attack him, you attack me. My son is standing there with a hand print and tears on his face instead of his normal smile. He said you are both no longer family to him. You might as well add me, Josh and the twins to that list."

Dylan cynically commented, "You know, it's funny - you are condemning people for things I have heard nobody say anything about, and on top of it you are standing up for your brat when he was the one that spit on us!"

Chip spun around to face Dylan, his face starting to turn red. "I got a little surprise for you, Romeo. First off, Justy knows more about you than your own husbands do about now. There's a good reason for that; his new little brothers seem to have been gifted with telepathy. When AJ took off with Kevin, they were curious and, for lack of a better description, 'scanned' AJ to see what was going on. From what Justy has told me, all the cuddling they've been doing is more than we thought. Seems they have developed a way to transfer thoughts to Justy, and he can do limited talking to them. They scanned you two losers and pulled every detail of what you have been doing the last six months, and gave every bit of it to Justy. I know what you just did, and can find out more just by asking. As far as the spitting goes, be glad that's all he did. He was going to piss on you, but Jacob reminded him you liked it last month."

"Yeah right," Dylan responded. "Next thing you're gonna tell me is the kids can talk to ghosts too."

Chip started to respond, but Justy interrupted him. "Dad, let me answer."

Chip looked at the serious look on his son's face. "Go ahead, angel. As long as you are sure."

"I'm sure. First, ghosts are Kyle's specialty, just ask Uncle Kevin. Second, does Atlanta, May 14th of this year, doggy style in the dressing room during the third set, using olive oil for lube, ring any bells? Or how's about something more recent: four days ago, about 3pm, in Brian's garage, 69'ing in the Lexus? Do I need to continue? Oh, by the way, Jacob just asked Uncle Nicky if sperm stains velour seats. Nicky said yep, Aaron got busted that way once, fortunately he was able to lie about who it was with. How ya gonna explain THAT one to Uncle Bri?"

Justy gave a satisfied smirk at the ghost-white faces of Dylan and Jason in front of him. "I thought so. By the way, you might as well stop thinking of ways to get back at us. It's kinda hard to do when we know about it as soon as you think about it. Jamie just filled in Kyle and Ty, so within the next 10 minutes every kid but Rusty and Robbie will know what's been happening."

At that point Anne came roaring in, followed by what could only be described as a multi-generational lynch mob. She took one look at Jason and Dylan, and then turned to Chip. "Get that fossilized doctor down here. I want these two revived when they pass out from the reaming they are about to get."

Chip went to reach for his communicator when he started to feel the room start spinning. Josh and Justy noticed this and Justy caught his father. "Dad, let me, please? Your blood pressure is already way up. I can see it." Justy could feel the tears swelling in his eyes. "I love you, Daddy. Don't let those two turds hurt you. Sit down with Pop and calm down. Let me call the *Enterprise*. If the old fossil gives me any trouble I'll talk to Uncle Jim."

Josh took the communicator from Chip's belt and handed it to Justy. "Babe, admit it, he's right. Let's sit and watch the fireworks, it looks like Aunt Anne is in rare form. Besides, you need to calm down right now." Chip just nodded his head and allowed Josh to lead him to the rec room, where they sat down.

Justy grabbed the communicator and moved onto the stairs. "Thanks Pop," he then opened the cover. "Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Justy, what are you doing using your Dad's communicator?"

"Hi Aunt Nyota. Can you patch me through to Sickbay? We kinda need Doc down here."

"What's wrong with your Dad?" Nyota asked in a concerned voice.

"Pop's calming him down right now, before he has a heart attack. His blood pressure is really high. Please, can I just talk to the Doc?"

Kirk's voice then came over the communicator. "Justy, this is Uncle Jim. Bones is on his way to the transporter room now. What is going on down there that would keep both your Dad and Pop from calling?"

Justy looked at the group assembling around their targets. He suddenly realized what could happen, and let the fear show in his voice as he answered. "Uncle Jim, you know the lynch mobs they show in the movies? I think I'm looking at one about 20 feet away from me."

"Don't move from that spot, Justy! I'm on my way down. Stay on the comlink with your Aunt Nyota until I get there."

Justy heard Kirk in the background as he explained to Nyota what happened, so he was not surprised when four forms materialized in front of him. McCoy immediately headed to the rec room to check on Chip, while Scotty and Kirk joined Justy on the stairs. Mr. Spock stood in front of Justy with a raised eyebrow.

"Justin," Mr. Spock began, "It appears that your assessment of the situation was quite accurate. Are you capable of enlightening us as to the cause of this irrational behavior?"

Justy looked up at the man that, by Vulcan law, was legally his uncle. He knew an emotional response would be inappropriate, although he knew that Spock would understand. He thought for a second, making sure he had the proper phrasing, and then stood to face Spock. "Uncle, it is sure that my emotions would cloud the information you seek if I was to speak. I have been practicing thought transfers with my new brothers. Would that be more acceptable for you to learn the truth?"

"That would be logical, nephew. Let us retire outdoors to lessen your distractions."

Ten minutes later they returned and rejoined the group at the stairs, which had grown as McCoy, Chip and Josh had joined them. Josh had a protective arm around his husband's waist. Chip was leaning on Josh, his head resting on Josh's shoulder. As they walked up, they could hear AJ going off on Jason.

"Jason, you heartless bastard, do you realize that right now your husband is sitting up there with a boy who is in the same shoes as me - an addict?"

Jason replied, "Now you are ranting. If he was an addict McCoy would have told us."

"Hey stupid - the Doc DID! An addict is someone whose body can not process a chemical, which causes either an unnatural craving and dependency or bodily damage. If I drink Nyquil, it could kill me - if he has sugar it could do the same to him. I'm weaned off of alcohol; he

needs to be weaned off of sugar. Tell me the difference!"

Everyone on the stairs tuned out the happenings in the other room as Spock walked up to Chip and Josh, placed his hand on Justy's shoulder, and said "Chip? Joshua? Young Justin is progressing above the levels expected for his maturity. I expect to see him and the two youths whom you have rescued for a short training session this afternoon."

Josh put his hand on Chip's shoulder and stood up. "We are honored by your request to train your nephews, and we accept. May I suggest you include our nephews Tyler and Kyle? I believe you will find their abilities 'interesting' to investigate."

"Young Justin made mention of them. Your reasoning is sound, Joshua. Inform the two youths that they are to join your sons. I shall return in 2.5 minutes. A matter has come to my attention which must be resolved."

Spock walked into the other room, the crowd parting as he strode purposely towards Jason and Dylan. McCoy took one look at the way the Vulcan was walking, and yanked out his communicator. "McCoy to *Enterprise*. Tell Chapel to grab everything she can and get down here NOW! We've got a rabid green-blooded Vulcan on our hands! McCoy OUT."

Spock reached the two, stood just out of arms reach, and spoke to the rest of the group. "I must end this interrogation. Starfleet regulations state that the residence of a Starfleet officer falls under Starfleet jurisdiction for all legal matters. This residence is the primary domicile for two officers of the Starship *Enterprise*, Ensigns Cory and Sean Short. Additionally, as per regulations, Vulcan law applies to any domicile being used as a temporary or permanent residence by a citizen of Vulcan. As with the case of Mr. Dodds and his family are temporarily residing here, that statute applies to this situation. Mr. Dodds is not only a Vulcan citizen; but he is, what humans would call, 'adopted' into my own family."

Spock then turned around, and faced Jason. "Mr. Mitchell, stand." Jason knew that he was in deep trouble with the Vulcan when he was referred to as 'Mr. Mitchell'. Spock continued, "As stipulated in Vulcan law, your mate will be given the option of having you castrated for your unfaithfulness. There is another matter which I must bring to closure myself. Extend your right hand."

Jason had never seen the look on Spock's face he saw then, so he carefully extended his hand, mentally prepared to pull back if needed.

Spock grabbed the hand with both of his in a grip which could not be broken. "You have assaulted a youth of my family, specifically my young nephew. Vulcan law requires me, as the eldest male present, to determine suitable retribution for the transgression. Logic dictates the offending member be sufficiently injured as to serve as a permanent reminder not to repeat the offense." Spock then tightened his grip, the sounds of bones breaking evident to the entire room. The pain was too much for Jason, and he passed out.

McCoy checked the damage as soon as Spock released the mangled hand and let Jason drop to the floor. "Dammit Spock, you missed the thumb!" McCoy grumbled as he proceeded to immobilize the hand. "There, is that a satisfactory reminder?" he asked sarcastically.

"That should suffice as a beginning," Spock replied with both eyebrows raised. His ears picked up the whimpers of Jamie and Jacob. Spock turned to face the young boys. "Jamie? Jacob? Your actions today were as expected from citizens of Vulcan. There has not been sufficient time for you to learn the customs of your second home. The punishments you are seeing are only allowed if the person has committed acts which are destructive to the population or his family. Please communicate with Justin; his knowledge is sufficient to begin your teachings." Both boys concentrated, and began to relax once they learned what was happening.

Spock then turned to Dylan. "Mr. Waters, stand."

Dylan was suddenly glad he had not struck anyone, so he stood up, expecting just a verbal attack. He, too, knew that he was in deep trouble with the Vulcan when Spock referred to him as 'Mr. Waters'.

"It is my understanding that one of the *Enterprise's* junior officers attempted to physically amputate your arm. Rest assured he will be dealt with accordingly, and next time will successfully complete the task. Logic dictates that due to Mr. Littrell being Mr. Dodds' brother by adoption, he is also mine. As such, you have committed an act of infidelity against a member of my family. If he chooses castration, I will perform the procedure myself. It is my responsibility to ensure you are not capable of repeating the offense during the period he is considering his response." Spock then kicked out, breaking Dylan's right leg just above the knee.

Christine had beamed down, and went to work on Dylan. What she heard as Kirk walked over shocked her.

"Only do what's necessary to stabilize them," Kirk said forcibly. "Let the local hospital worry about repairs. Those two have lost any rights to medical treatment on my ship."

Christine looked at McCoy, who just nodded his head in agreement.

Kirk turned to Josh. "Josh, it's my understanding that your bandmates are planning on spending the afternoon working instead of relaxing. Is that the case?"

Josh grinned. "Yep, it's for a good cause though."

Well, I want them all to come up for lunch. Get them together, Backstreet too, and they can transport up with us. You, Chip, Curly, Brian and the boys come up on the shuttle. The rest of the adults will be waiting for you on the *Enterprise*. I'll have a few crewmembers give them a hand later to ensure everything is ready."

"Sounds like a plan! Give me ten minutes to get everyone ready. Just seeing some of their faces when they transport out will be worth it!"

McCoy made the final arrangements for Dylan and Jason's trip to the hospital, and then joined Chip, Sean, Cory, Justy and the twins in the rec room. "I'm glad that green-blooded hobgoblin wasn't mad," he grumbled as he sat down.

Sean asked Chip in awe "Are you really Spock's brother?"

"Yep. I was adopted into his family a few years ago after a diplomatic mission on the *Enterprise* by Spock's parents, Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and his wife, the Lady Amanda. Your Uncle Josh became their son as well when he married me. Justy is his nephew, and the twins are one ceremony short of becoming his official nephews. From what I just heard though, their status is already confirmed. When he told Justy to start training them, that was the first step."

Cory then asked McCoy, "Doc, I heard you say you were glad he wasn't angry. I thought Vulcans had no emotions. So how could he be mad?"

McCoy grinned. "Don't let them fool you. Trust me, after carrying him around in my head I can guarantee they have emotions, they just keep them bottled up. I've seen what happens when that green-blooded hobgoblin lets loose, a rabid lion attack would be a pat on the back compared to what he could have done with his bare hands."

Cory looked at Sean. "Babe, remind me never to piss off a Vulcan!"

Chip chuckled. "Good idea, Cory. It's also a good idea not to mess with their families. Just ask the two who left in the ambulances!"

Josh walked back in. "Jim said get ready, Doc. Everyone's gathering now to beam up."

McCoy started grumbling about 'molecule scrambling' as he headed toward the doorway. Chip could not resist taunting him. "Doc, if you didn't complain so much, you might have a chance at convincing Scotty to set it to de-fossilize you when you re-materialize!"

McCoy turned to comment, but turned back around when he saw the barely suppressed

laughter on everyone's face. "Damn kids these days. No respect for their elders," he was heard to mumble as he passed the doorway.

\* \* \*

Sean looked around the limo as they pulled onto I-80 to head to the airport. He whispered to Cory, who was snuggled close into him "You know something, Cor? A month ago, all I wanted was to have you back and be able to cuddle like this. If you had told me all the rest of this would happen too, I woulda laughed. Now look at us - I have the one person back who makes my life complete ..."

Cory interrupted him with a wicked smile. "Really? Who's the person who makes your life complete? I'd like to meet him!"

Sean smiled. "Nice try - YOU are the only one who makes me complete, you silly little elf!"

Cory blushed. "What ever you say, teddy bear. You know, I remembered something this morning; it seems kinda funny now looking back. Remember when Mikey caught us making out about a week before the accident?"

Sean instinctively pulled Cory in close, still unsure of how Cory would react while talking about his latest recovery. "Yeah, you wanna talk about it?"

As Cory prepared to answer, he noticed that all the rest of the kids in the limo shifted around so they were surrounding him and Sean. He was about to comment when Tyler spoke up.

"Big bro, you and Sean have been there for all of us when we needed help. It's only fair we should be here for you." Tyler then cuddled up under Cory's free arm as Adam continued.

"You were talking in your sleep last night, bro. We all know you have been keeping quiet, trying not to worry any of us. Sean, the twins made sure you slept through last night, but the rest of us took turns making sure Cory was okay all night. The two of you have done everything you could to help the rest of us when we needed it, now it's our turn to pay you back."

Chip spoke from the other side of the limo. "Adam, let me explain it kiddo. Our three had a talk with us this morning, just after they gave us their usual good-morning pounce. Cory, Sean. You both know the twins are full-blown telepaths, and Kyle is not too far behind them. It seems that your little brother has a gift too; Tyler is an empath. Do you know what that means?"

Cory thought for a second. "That means he can read emotions, don't it?"

"Very close. In his case, he actually can feel others emotions, and in turn cause the emotions someone is feeling to change. It's a rare gift on Earth, but there are other humanoid races where it is common. The plan all these guys came up with last night is this: Tyler is going to watch your emotions, when he sees that you have the combination of guilt and grief that shows up every time you start to remember something, he's going to send a pre-arranged emotion to Kyle, who will then contact the twins via 'Kylegram'. The twins will then broadcast to everyone else that whoever is nearby needs to go to you until Sean can be there."

Cory looked around at the concerned faces surrounding him. "I don't know what to say. I've been trying to make sure you guys were happy after all that's happened to you, but now you are turning it around. Thanks, bros. Neither one of us will ever forget this, we both owe you forever," he then wiped a stray tear from his cheek and pulled Ty into a cuddle with him and Sean.

Aaron surprised them all as he spoke up softly. "Sean, Cory; you guys are my little brothers now. Let me worry about the big problems, you two just worry about each other. From what I've seen and heard, the two of you have done enough in the last two weeks to wear out even Chip. You need to take a break and let me deal with things now. I know what it's like to have to

stop being a kid before you are grown up. I refuse to let you go through that. Anything that comes up from now on you call me. If I can't handle it, I'll find someone in the family who can. Now, how's about telling us about you guys getting busted; I wanna hear that one myself!"

Cory chuckled. "Whatever, bro. Actually, now it IS kinda funny to think about, but we were both scared when it happened. Mom was out restocking the fridge, and Mikey was supposed to be over at the neighbors helping clean out the garage. Sean and I were watching ET for about the zillionth time and as usual at the end he was crying on my shoulder.

\* \* \*

### Flashback...

"Sean, you know what this does to me when you do this"

"Sorry, Cor. It's just the end makes me sad."

"Why did you insist on watchin' it then?"

"'Cause I know you'll cuddle me."

Cory leaned back and pulled Sean on top of him. "Like I really need an excuse to cuddle you! You're so cute, who could resist!"

Sean giggled. "The only cute one here is lying under me. Now shaddap and kiss me, you fool!"

"That's the best idea you've had all week," Cory said as he pulled Sean's face towards his.

The kiss started with both boys keeping their mouths closed, but Cory soon opened his mouth slightly and gently ran the tip of his tongue over Sean's lips. Sean parted his lips, and returned the gesture; then softly sucked Cory's tongue into his mouth. Within seconds, they were both trying to locate each others tonsils enthusiastically. At the same time, their hands began roaming over each others bodies. Cory slowly slipped his hand into the back of Sean's shorts, and began caressing his smooth globes.

"What the HECK do you two think you're doing?!?"

Cory and Sean separated in record time, and looked up to see Mike standing over them. They jumped to their feet, looking for an escape route.

Mike looked at them sternly. "Don't even try it. Plant yourselves on the couch, NOW! Now could one of you answer my question, preferably today?"

Both boys sat down and stared at their feet. Neither one spoke, afraid anything they said would get them in more trouble. They were shocked when Mike pushed them apart and sat between them, placing an arm over each boy's shoulder.

In a much calmer voice, Mike spoke to them. "Hey lil' bros, sorry to scare you like that, but what would have happened if Mom had walked in on you two? You probably don't know this, but she figured out that you two were gay and boyfriends a while back, but it still would not be cool to throw it in her face like that."

Cory looked at Mike accusingly. "Did you tell her?"

Mike gave Cory a hurt look. "Bro, you know I wouldn't do that. A couple months ago, she talked to me while you two were down at the park. She told me what she thought, she was worried that I would find out and either hurt you guys or shut you out. I pretended I didn't know, and told her that if she was right that I would still be the same big brother to you as I have always been."

Sean gave Mike a worried look. "Does she still love us?"

Mike kissed Sean's forehead. "Yes, lil' one, she still loves you both. You know if there had been a problem I would have got you out of here; I promised you guys I would protect you forever

when you first told me, and that still stands. Sean, you don't need to worry, between Cory and me nobody will ever hurt you and get away with it."

Cory reached an arm around and hugged Mike. "Sorry Mikey. I guess we let it get a little out of hand, huh?"

Mike chuckled. "Lil' bro, if it had been a movie, you were moving from an 'R' rating to an 'X' rating real quick, or at least your right hand was!"

Cory blushed. "MIKEY!"

"Sorry bro, but the truth hurts! Why don't you two hit the pool and cool off, I'll bring some drinks out and join you in a few, okay?"

Both boys breathed a sigh of relief, and ran to the changing room after giving their big brother a hug.

**...End Flashback**

\* \* \*

Curly leaned across the group and hugged Sean and Cory. "It sounds like Mike was an awesome brother. I'm sure he's proud of you two now."

Cory smiled. "Thanks, Uncle Justin. Something felt weird when I was telling that though."

Curly parted the boys so he could kneel in front of Cory and Sean. "I have an idea what it was, but I'll ask a couple questions to make sure. Sean?"

"Yeah, Uncle Justin?"

"Think real carefully. Before Mike's accident, which one of you was usually the one going to the other for comfort?"

Sean thought for a minute. "You know, now that I think about it, usually it was me. If I had a problem, I'd go to Cory, and if he had one he went to Mike."

Curly smiled. "That's what I thought, and it kinda explains a little of the stress you two are showing. I'll bet you are afraid to lean on Cory like you used to, Sean. And Cory, I'll bet you feel like you are missing someone to lean on, and don't feel right leaning on Sean."

Both boys looked at him in shock as they realized that Curly was right.

"Uncle Justin?" Cory asked softly.

"Yeah, buddy. You okay?"

"I think so. I think you are right, but what can I do?"

Aaron slid over next to Curly. "Cory, lil' bro, I realize for the next couple of months it will have to be by phone, but I would be honored to be the one you lean on. And if something happens and you can't get ahold of me, you have a buncha' uncles and a few aunts who are more than glad to help or listen."

Curly smiled. "He's right. Your mom gave him the big brother position. He won't replace Mike. Nobody can do that. But I know that Aaron will do whatever it takes to help you."

Cory leaned forward and pulled Curly and Aaron into a hug. "Thanks, guys. I guess I still have a lot to re-learn, I'm really glad I've got y'all to help me out. I've never really felt right asking Sean for help since I came back; now I see why." Cory turned to Sean. "Baby, I'm really sorry I was so hard on you. It's gonna take a little work, but lets get back to the way we used to be, okay?"

Sean smiled. "Cory, just be yourself. If I need more than you can handle, tell me. I've been so scared that I'd hurt you if I counted on you for comfort like I used to, that you wouldn't be able to handle it. We both have a little relearning to do. If you are sure you are up to it, I'll try to

loosen up some."

Josh chuckled. "It doesn't matter if he is up to it, Sean. You've been supporting everyone without anyone to support you. If you don't start opening up to him soon you will end up in the same state he was in a few months ago. Every strong person has someone they go to for comfort; for Chip, it's me; and for you it needs to be Cory again. Now, if y'all are done with your conference, we're gonna get a parking ticket if we don't get this limo off of the landing pad!"

The kids all looked at Josh with confused looks, and then piled out the doors as they realized the limo had been stopped for the last ten minutes. Chip laughed at the noises of shock and appreciation as all the boys saw the shuttle for the first time. As he exited the limo, he pulled Aaron and Curly to the side.

"Aaron, you first. That was an awesome promise to make to those boys. I really hope that you meant every word."

Aaron looked at Chip and smiled. "Chip, trust me. I meant every word I said. I feel so much better since Mom made me part of their family. There's no way I'm gonna break the promises I made."

"That's what I wanted to hear. You have made me proud, now you better go find David before he gets lost without you!"

Aaron blushed and ran off to rejoin his boyfriend. Chip then turned to Curly and pulled him into a hug.

"Jus, when did you grow up on me?" Chip said with a smile. "Not only did you just probably save those two's relationship; but you probably saved their sanity too."

Curly giggled. "Hey, I just did what either of them would have done. I saw a problem and tried to help them avoid it. Nothing special."

"That's a load of bull, and you know it. Two weeks ago, you would not have even listened to them; now you not only paid attention but thought about what was happening. Honestly, I'm not even sure you woulda caught it two DAYS ago. 'Fess up, what's the source of your sudden growing up?"

They started walking towards the shuttle as Curly was thinking. "You know Chip, this may be weird, but I feel totally different since Rusty appeared. It's like the part of me I was totally missing but didn't know about is suddenly here."

Chip smiled. "That's what I thought. It shows watching you when he's around. Welcome to fatherhood, Justin. I think you are going to do an awesome job. Go find Rusty before you break your neck watching him. You have made me prouder of you today than I have ever been."

Curly hugged Chip and said thanks, then all but ran to Rusty.

Chip walked up to Sean and listened as Tyler was talking to him.

"Big bro? Where's that shuttle from?" Tyler asked Sean.

Sean pulled Ty under his arm. "What does it say on the side? Why don't you read it to me?"

Tyler looked at the shuttle. "It says '*Columbus*' up there on the front."

"That's the shuttle's name, lil bro. Look on the back, that's where it tells where the shuttle is from," Sean said patiently.

Tyler squinted in the sunlight, and read the lettering. "It says 'NCC-1701-A'. 'USS *Enterprise*'. WOW! Is it really from the *Enterprise*?"

"Yeppers! One of these days, I might be able to fly it - then I'll take you for a ride, okay? You better hurry up and find a seat!"

"KEWL! Thanks bro!" Ty yelled as he ran to the shuttle's rear door and up the ramp.

Chip chuckled, which got Sean's attention. "That was great, Sean. I think you just made



his day! Now you better hurry up yourself."

Josh was standing at the door counting heads, as Chip entered he whispered something to Josh which brought a grin to his face.

\* \* \*

### Shuttlecraft *Columbus*:

Chip sat in the pilot's seat, bringing the shuttle's systems online. He yelled back to the passengers "Justy, are all the kids belted in properly?"

"Yes Dad, I'm just belting myself up now."

"Thanks, son." Chip grinned; thinking of how Captain Kirk had given Justy the responsibility of making sure everyone was belted in the first time Justy had ridden on a shuttle. Now it was tradition; no matter who the pilot was, if Justy was onboard he was responsible for checking belts. Chip then looked over at the empty seat to his right. '*Time to have some fun*,' he thought.

"ALRIGHT! WHERE is my CO-PILOT!" Chip yelled in as irritated of a voice as he could fake without breaking out in laughter.

"Pop's back here!" Justy giggled.

"Josh knows he's not allowed to co-pilot if another helm officer is on board," Chip responded. "Mr. Short! Stop making out with your boyfriend and report to your post!"

Sean responded in a shocked voice. "Really?? Uhh ... sorry ... Yes sir!"

Chip was unable to suppress a giggle when Sean sheepishly slipped into the co-pilot seat. "Sorry sir, I thought since I was only a kid the regulations did not apply to me."

Chip smiled. "Cut the 'sir' crap, Sean. I'm doing this as a treat for you, not because of the regulations. Just so you know, after today they do apply. This will count as your co-pilot training." Chip noticed Sean stiffen at that. "Relax Sean, Josh is qualified. If he can do it you will have no problems."

"I HEARD THAT!" Josh shouted. "You are gonna pay for that later, hun!"

Chip turned to face his husband. "Promises, promises, big boy!"

Sean giggled. "What do you want me to do, Uncle Chip?"

"Did you study those CDs I gave you?" Chip asked.

"Yes."

"Just follow the pre-launch routines from them. I'll tell you if you miss something."

"Okay." Sean concentrated, and slowly began checking readouts and adjusting controls. "I think I got it. Hatch is secured and hatch seal is verified. Life support and gravity are online and passed diagnostics. Communications online, engine prefire complete."

"Sounds good, you got it all. What's next?"

"You already checked to make sure the passengers were secure, so I guess it would be calling the tower for clearance."

"Very good! Just so you know, the Captain has ordered that Justy handle the passenger check if he's on board. What are you waiting for?"

Sean placed the headset on, and dialed the tower frequency on the communications board. "Des Moines tower; this is shuttle *Columbus*. Requesting clearance for departure," Sean said in the deepest voice he could muster.

"Shuttle *Columbus*, this is Des Moines tower. Please state pilot and co-pilot names and destination."

Before Sean answered, Chip got his attention. "Tell them we are going via the San Francisco lane," he said over the intercom.

"Des Moines tower, this is shuttle *Columbus*. Pilot is Commander Charles Dodds, co-pilot is Ensign Sean Short. Destination is November Charley Charley One Seven Zero One Alpha. We will be using the San Francisco flight lane."

"Acknowledged, *Columbus*. Landing pad is clear. Ignite engines and standby for clearance."

"*Columbus* standing by. Thank you, Des Moines."

Sean looked at Chip "We are cleared to fire up the engines, then hold for flight clearance, Uncle Chip."

"Thanks, Sean. You are doing great! Just one thing: when you give them the registry number for the ship, you don't have to phonetically spell out the number. Our guys are better than the planet-bound controllers." Chip then energized the impulse engine, hovering the shuttle about a foot off the ground.

"*Columbus*, this is Des Moines tower."

"This is *Columbus*. Go ahead, Des Moines," Sean replied.

"*Columbus*, you are number one for takeoff. You are cleared bearing two-six-three, altitude four-eight thousand feet. Transfer to Denver control for further instructions upon entering Mountain Time zone. Have a good flight."

"Acknowledged, Des Moines. *Columbus* number one for takeoff bearing 263, cruising altitude 48 thousand feet, transfer to Denver control upon entering Mountain Time zone. Thank you, and have a good day. *Columbus* out."

"I got it all Sean. Great job, you sounded like a pro!"

"I guess all those hours playing on the flight simulator games musta done some good, huh Uncle Chip?" Sean asked as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Must have! You just made me very proud, and I'm sure the Captain is gonna be impressed when he reviews the flight logs. I've seen Academy grads that still can't do that good."

Sean beamed with pride at the praise from Chip, and started scanning the panels in front of him with renewed confidence as Chip lifted off and began their journey.

\* \* \*

### **Orlando, FL - Orlando Interplanetary Spaceport:**

John was still in shock. As soon as he had arrived on the *Enterprise*, Captain Kirk had informed him he was to beam down for his interview with Starfleet Security. It ended up not being much of an interview; he had never seen anything like it.

"Mr. Martin. Would you mind if I called you John?"

"Feel free, Admiral"

"I've been in contact with your supervisors; between their recommendations and the information given to me by Captain Kirk and Commander Dodds, the only real question I have is would you feel comfortable moving up to Chief of Starfleet Security for the Southeastern Region of North America? Before you answer, John, you should know everyone I've talked to in Des Moines has assured me you would have no problems with the responsibilities involved in the job. In fact, they are not much different than the ones you have now, just a little larger scale."

"Admiral that answered one question. I just would feel bad about leaving Polk County short handed without notice."

"John, that's one of the qualities that got my attention; your loyalty. You have no need to worry, I've been in discussion with the county board. We decided that if you accept the job, a Starfleet liaison will be assigned to the Polk County Sheriffs Department permanently. He will perform normal duties, as well as acting as a coordinator for Starfleet/civilian matters."

John grinned. "Sounds like you planned ahead, Admiral. I'll be up front with you; before I accept, I need to know if there will be any problems with me having a boyfriend and family."

"Well, John, you managed to sneak something past me! Congratulations on the boyfriend. If anyone gives you a problem about him let me know. Starfleet does not tolerate bigotry or discrimination. Who's the lucky guy?"

John smiled "Dan Richardson. We have 2 boys, both his sons."

"Ahhh ... Commander Dodds' older cousin. I guess that settles where you are going to live! How's this sound; if you accept, you start today. You will be listed as TAD in Des Moines until you can move to your new home; if anything comes up where you are needed here we can transport you to the 'port immediately."

John stood up. "Admiral, I accept. Thank you for your trust, it will not be violated."

The Admiral shook John's hand. "That is one thing I am not worried about. See the Ensign at her desk. She will take you to get your equipment."

"Thank you, Sir. Have a good day."

John fingered the communicator on his belt, and sensed the phaser in the shoulder holster under his jacket. The bomber jacket itself was deceptive, the only thing that gave him away as Starfleet Security was the small emblem over the breast on the jacket, and the commander's insignia on the right shoulder strap. Inside the jacket, in special hidden pockets, were special security 'toys' that he had previously only dreamed of using.

John returned the salute of the guard as he crossed from the Starfleet area of the spaceport to the public area. He was hungry, so he decided to grab a snack before he returned to the *Enterprise*. He finished off the fish sandwich and strawberry shake from McDonalds, and headed to the restroom before leaving.

Years of training settled in as John entered the restroom quietly. The first thing he taught any new officer was to do that, there were numerous times he and his men had ended up with a bust from walking in on a crime in progress in the restrooms. He scanned the room, and saw nothing except two small sets of feet occupying one stall. He was about to relax his guard until he heard the voices from the stall.

"Are you okay, Jeffy?"

"Yeah, at least I'm not peeing blood this time."

"Why is daddy so mean? All you did is ask if we could get a snack."

"I don't know, Sammy. What bites is he would really hurt us if we tried to say anything about him hitting us. Who's gonna believe a couple of kids?"

John had heard more than he could stand. He walked up to the stall door. "I'll believe you. Starfleet Security, open up, please."

There was a pair of whimpers from behind the door, then it opened slightly. John carefully opened it further, and had his first look at the occupants. Inside was a pair of platinum blond boys, tears falling from their sky blue eyes.

"You are not in trouble, guys. How old are you, and what are your names?"

The nearest boy looked up at him. "I'm Sammy Taylor, this is my brother Jeffy. We're 10."

John's blood began to boil as he had a better look at the two boys. Sammy had a healing black eye, while Jeffy had an obviously fresh bruise forming just off to the side of where his kidney should be, along with a nose which had obviously been broken in the past. "Be honest, who

did this to you guys?"

They both started to look at the floor, but John knelt down and lifted their chins. "Guys, I can't help you if you lie. Tell me the truth, and I'll protect you."

In a weak voice, Jeffy answered. "Our Daddy did it. He says that's the only way we'll learn. If we don't get out there soon, he'll be mad. That's how my nose got broke last year."

"I need you guys to totally trust me, okay? I'd like you to stay in here till he comes in. I'm going to give you some pins to wear. They will record what he says and does. I'll be in the other stall, and that way I can catch him in the act. Does that sound okay to you?"

Both boys nodded. Sammy looked at John. "You promise to protect us?"

"You better believe it," John answered as he pulled two miniature bugs out of an inside jacket pocket and pinned them inside the boy's collars.

John pulled out his communicator. "Martin to Security Central."

"Central; go ahead, Commander."

"Central, activate and record on C-1 and C-4. Alert level two, standby to transport all occupants from my location on my cue."

"Understood, Commander. Alert level two, recording and transporter standing by. Do you need officers standing by at the pad?"

"Give me four officers, phasers set to stun only."

"Acknowledged. Standing by."

John had the boys re-enter the stall, and he entered the stall next to theirs and raised his feet to make it look unoccupied.

Five minutes later, someone entered the restroom, looking to see what stalls were occupied. Once he was sure the boys were the only ones in there, he spoke.

"Alright, you two brats! Get your butts out here and get your punishment for making me stand out there. I mean NOW!"

John heard the door unlatch, then the slam of it being forced open followed by two loud slaps. He jumped to his feet. "ENERGIZE!"

The four of them materialized in Security a few seconds later, and the boy's father was hit with three stun rays from phasers as soon as the transporter finished. Just before the man crumpled to the floor, John noticed the fist just inches from Jeffy's jaw.

John checked the boys as the doctor that was standing by checked their father. Once he was sure there was no additional damage that required immediate attention, he stood and turned to his men. "Well done, gentlemen. I see that you came prepared; from the looks of it the rifle might have come in handy. Once you transfer this man to holding, drop by my office and give the Lieutenant your ID numbers; he will be expecting you. Your records will be noted with my approval of your professionalism."

The squad leader went to attention. "Thank you, sir. I know I speak for my squad, and probably the whole region, when I say welcome to Orlando and we all are proud to be serving under you."

Thank you, Lieutenant. I would like to see this region meet the toughest standards in the fleet - those set by the crew of the Starship *Enterprise*. If your squad is any indication, we are already there. It looks like the Doc is done. Carry on."

The security team responded with crisp salutes. John had to restrain a chuckle as he overheard one of the junior men comment to their prisoner "Welcome to the worst day of your life. You just pissed off the Head of Security for this entire region. That means you are now on the scum list of every Starfleet security person in southeast North America."

John turned to the doc. "Were you able to get an ID for me?"

"Sure was. That ensign has no idea how much of an understatement he just made! Starfleet Security is the least of this guy's problems. He's been identified as Lieutenant Jonathon Taylor. And Commander, you're gonna love this."

"I am?" John said.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Taylor's current assignment is the Starship *Enterprise*, assigned to Helm Division. His superior officer is Commander Charles Dodds."

John grinned. "I think you're right; his problems are just starting! Chip's gonna have a field day with that one. I'll have McCoy send the med records down for you. I think he's gonna become a long-time resident."

The Doctor looked at John in shock as he watched the ensuing communications.

John flipped open his communicator and switched to the starship's frequency. "Martin to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead, John; and, by the way, congratulations."

"Thanks Nyota. I need to speak to Captain Kirk, Priority One, Official Business."

Nyota entered on-duty mode, realizing from that point on everything was official logs. "Stand by, Commander. I'll contact him for you."

"Standing by," John replied.

Thirty seconds later, he received a reply. "Kirk here. How may I help you, Commander?"

"I've had an incident with one of your crewmen, Captain. Would it be possible to schedule a conference between myself, you, Commander Dodds, and the head of Youth Services in approximately fifteen minutes onboard the *Enterprise*?"

"Consider it done. Mr. Dodds and his party are on final approach as we speak. Shall I inform Mr. Scott you are ready to beam up?"

"Yes, sir. There will be three to beam up, and if possible I would like Dr. McCoy standing by."

"That will be no problem. I'll see you when you get up here, Mr. Scott will call you when he is ready to beam you up. Kirk out."

"Martin out." John then closed his communicator and returned it to his belt.

The doc shook his head in disbelief. "Every director before you has took at least a year before any ship's Captain would even speak civil to them. On your first day, you have the Captain of the flagship of the fleet OFFERING to beam you up! If this is a preview of what things are gonna be like, I'm glad I'm on your team."

John smiled. "Thanks, from what I've seen today I think there's gonna be lots of happy faces around here for quite a while." John sat down in a nearby chair, pulled both boys onto his lap, and cuddled them while calling his office to notify his clerk of the expected visitors and what he wanted inserted into their records. Just as he finished, Scotty called him on his communicator, letting him know McCoy was standing by and they were ready to beam him and his companions up.

The boys had obviously done this a few times, as they automatically took positions next to John as soon as they heard they were beaming up.

As he watched them dematerialize, the doc thought to himself '*I hope he's doing what I think he's doing. Those two need a good home.*'

\* \* \*

**Shuttlecraft *Columbus*, approaching San Francisco:**

Chip smiled as Tyler took his turn checking out the cockpit while they were in flight. The boys had all taken turns, asking questions and enjoying the view.

"Whadda those buildings?" Ty asked.

"That's San Francisco," Chip replied. "Do you see that real tall one over there?"

"Yeah, it's HUGE!"

"Well, that is Starfleet Headquarters. Your mom, me, Sean, Cory, and probably John all work for the people in there."

"Wow, that's awesome! Hey, what bridge is that? I think I saw it in a school book?"

"That's the Golden Gate Bridge, lil' buddy. You want to have a closer look?"

"YEAH! That'd be AWESOME!"

Chip dove down and skimmed the water heading towards the bridge. Sean giggled and pointed at the viewer, which he had set for rear view.

"Hey lil' bro, look at this. That's what's called a 'rooster tail', and I think Uncle Chip is going for the world's record on size!"

Ty took his eyes off the bridge long enough to look at the viewer, and gave an appreciative "WHOA! KEWL!" before his attention was drawn back to the bridge in front of them.

As they passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, Sean reached for the radio headset and put it on. As Tyler was shouting and bubbling about seeing the bridge, the call came over the radio that Sean was expecting.

"Shuttlecraft, this is San Francisco Control. Identify self and pilot."

Sean grinned as he replied. "San Francisco Control, this is shuttlecraft *Columbus*. Pilot is Commander Charles Dodds."

"*Columbus*, this is San Francisco Control. I should have known. Tell that kamikaze helmsman that Commander Jamison said warn me next time. Also, tell Chip he gets one hundred points for flooding my spoiled nephew's convertible with that rooster tail. I'm still chuckling over it."

"Will do, San Francisco Control. If your nephew wants us to pay for it, send the bill to Captain Sulu on the Excelsior. That's who taught Uncle Chip to fly."

"*Columbus*, I might just do that, just to see the look on his face! 'Uncle Chip', huh? It's great to see he's letting family other than that husband of his ride shotgun! Enjoy yourself, and tell Chip I said stop in some time."

"Thanks, Commander. I'll do that. *Columbus* out."

Sean looked at his board, and noticed the autopilot was engaged. When he looked over at Chip, he saw why. Chip was laughing so hard tears were rolling from his eyes. Chip noticed Sean looking at him, and gained control enough to speak.

"Sean, I don't believe you just did that! Hikaru is gonna shoot both of us when he gets that bill! I can't wait to see his face, that's gonna be priceless! If there was any doubt that you are my nephew, there ain't any more. You are about to become a legend in Starfleet for that prank!"

Sean giggled. "I thought you'd like that. Are we about ready to head up?"

Chip checked the ship's position. "Yep. Justy, belt everyone up. It's time to go vertical!"

"Sure thing, Dad."

A minute later, Justy yelled from the back "Sean, all passengers are belted. We're ready back here!"

Sean looked at Chip. "Ready when you are, Sir."

Chip smiled. "Go ahead and request clearance, Mr. Short."

Sean hit the switch on his console. "San Francisco Control; this is Shuttle *Columbus*,

requesting clearance for atmospheric departure. Destination is NCC-1701-A."

"*Columbus*, this is San Francisco Control. You are cleared for immediate departure on Lane Seven. You have a clear lane."

"Acknowledged, San Francisco. Lane seven and the lane is clear."

"Confirmed. Have a safe trip, *Columbus*."

"Thank you, San Francisco. *Columbus* out."

Sean sat back and watched in awe as the shuttle's nose came up, the impulse engines came to full power, and the shuttle rocketed away from Earth.

A few minutes later, Chip couldn't help but smile at his co-pilot's awe as they broke thru the ionosphere and Sean got his first look at space. Not wanting to ruin the moment, Chip quietly checked in with TerraMain and received their flight instructions. Just as he was finishing, Sean looked over and saw what Chip had done.

"Sorry, Uncle Chip. I shoulda done that," Sean said.

"Don't worry about it, Sean," Chip said with a smile. "I would have been disappointed if you hadn't stopped to enjoy your first look at space."

"Thanks, Uncle Chip. This is just so AWESOME!"

Chip chuckled. "Keep that attitude, Sean. Captain Kirk once told me, 'If space becomes boring, it's time to retire'. I think he's right. The look on your face a few minutes ago proved it."

Just then, Ty popped up into the cabin. "Unca Chip? Why's it getting dark outside?"

"Tell you what, Ty. I'm going to announce it. I'll bet a few of your brothers want to know too."

Chip turned on the passenger cabin speaker. "Tyler just asked me a question that I'm sure crossed a few minds back there. He wanted to know why it got dark outside. We just left the Earth's atmosphere, so there is no air to give the sunlight its color now."

Sean giggled, then announced "Look at the viewscreen; you can see the sunlight on the satellite I found. Anyone know which one it is?"

Chip looked at the dataline and had to restrain himself from laughing. "Good choice, Sean!"

After about a minute, Cory spoke up. "I guess nobody else wants to guess, so I'll try. If I'm right, there are three uncles back here who should be ashamed of themselves; but I think it's the MTV satellite."

"You got it, Cory," Chip chuckled. "How'd you figure it out?"

"Sean was having me quiz him last night on satellites. I recognized the number."

Chip laughed. "Good deal. Keep that up, cross-training is good. But slow down some, okay? You two don't have to learn everything in a week!" He then turned to look at Josh. "Hun, how's it feel to be shown up by your nephews?"

Josh grinned while flipping Chip a one-finger salute. "Better watch it. I bet they show you up soon too!"

Chip shook his head, and turned back to Ty. "You wanna sit up here, lil one?"

"YEAH!" Tyler answered excitedly. "I won't get in the way of you flying, will I, Uncle Chip?"

"Naw, I'll fix that." Chip then entered a command into his console, then picked up Tyler and sat him on his lap. "Mr. Short, you have the conn."

Sean looked at Chip in shock, then hurriedly answered "Yes, sir!"

"If anyone else wants to come up and look around, come on. Just don't touch the consoles," Chip announced. This almost immediately caused a stampede of curious kids from the back.

Robbie tugged on Chip's arm. "Unca Chip? Why can't we float?"

"The shuttle has artificial gravity, Robbie. That makes it so everything stays where it belongs and doesn't float around. It also keeps your Uncle Justin from getting sick."

"Aww, man. I wanted to float!" Robbie pouted.

"Talk to Justy, maybe he'll take you guys to the anti-grav chamber today to play around."

Robbie turned to Justy. "Will you? Puhweezzee!"

Justy grinned. "Sure! Maybe we can get a game of 'tag' going if there's not too many others there!"

"AWESOME!" was the unanimous response from all the kids.

Adam glanced in front of the shuttle, and asked "Sean, is that another satellite up there?"

"Kinda, bro. Actually, that's TerraMain. That's the main base for all the Federation starships."

"Wow! What's those little dots around it?"

Chip answered. "JJ, those are the box docks. They're basically dry-docks. If a starship is getting a lot of work done, it's put in there. That way, instead of having to move the repair equipment around inside TerraMain, it all stays in one place and they bring the ship to it."

Sean noticed a red light illuminate on his panel, and picked up his headset. "TerraMain, this is *Columbus*, requesting permission to enter security zone. Destination is NCC-1701-A."

"*Columbus*, this is TerraMain. Permission granted."

"Thank you. *Columbus* out."

The light changed from red to green, and Sean adjusted their course to head towards one of the box docks, using transponder information from the *Enterprise*. He couldn't contain his grin when Chip told him to take the 'scenic route' when they got there.

Tyler noticed they were no longer heading for TerraMain, and spoke up, "Uncle Chip! I think Sean is lost, he's going the wrong way!"

Chip laughed. "Don't worry, he's doing fine. Just watch."

A few minutes later, a box dock with a starship docked inside it came into view. Everyone was silent as they came up closer and the starship became clearer and larger.

"Man! Those nacelles look SWEET!" Cory said in awe.

"Cory, you're worse than Scotty!" Josh chuckled.

"What? So I like looking at the engines. What's the big deal?" Cory responded defensively.

"Settle down, Cory," Chip said soothingly. "What Josh was saying in his crude way was that you are a lot like Mr. Scott. You are both natural engineers. You see the beauty in the machinery. Take it as a compliment."

"Okay, Uncle Chip. Sorry, Uncle Josh, for getting mad," Cory replied meekly.

Josh stepped behind Cory and pulled him up tight to him to show he accepted the apology, and continued to hold him as Sean gave the grand tour of the outside of the starship.

"Ty, why don't you read me the lettering off of the side of the engine? That way we'll know if Sean is in the right spot," Chip asked.

"Sure! It says 'NCC-1701-A ...'. HEY, that's the *Enterprise*'s number!"

Adam spoke up, "Uncle Chip? Is that REALLY the *Enterprise*?"

Chip smiled. "It sure is. You think Sean has the right place?"

"YEAH! Can we see the rest of it?"

"Sure. Mr. Short, why don't you show the underside to our passengers first?"

"Yes, sir," Sean replied.

"Uncle Chip?" Tyler asked with a puzzled look. "Why do you call Sean 'Mr. Short' when



you talk to him?"

"Right now, he's on duty. When he's on duty, I have to treat him like any other officer. That's how officers are addressed when they are working."

"Okay," Tyler answered, satisfied.

Chip was shocked as Cory began pointing out various parts of the gigantic starship to everyone as they passed by them. Once they had passed the bottom edge of the saucer, Sean headed out a little bit, then turned around and gave the passengers a full frontal view of the starship. Sean then eased *Columbus* in a different direction so that they were rising above the great starship's saucer. JJ read off the name and number on the saucer. "'USS *Enterprise*'. 'NCC-1701-A'." JJ turned to look at Chip. "Uncle Chip, those letters are huge."

Tyler spoke up, "Unca Chip, what are those little bumps under the name?"

"Ty, those are phaser banks." Chip noticed a scared look on the young boy's face. He put his hand on Tyler's shoulder and gently squeezed it. "Don't worry, little buddy. They've been deactivated while the ship is in dock."

As they came in closer to the saucer, Sean spoke up, "Hey, guys? You see that big bump in the center of the saucer? That's the bridge; it's where Uncle Chip works, and hopefully someday I'll work there too."

The shuttle was flying over the saucer and getting close to the starboard nacelle when Adam spoke up, "Uncle Chip, we're getting awful close to that. We're gonna be ok, right?"

"We sure are, Adam. The warp engines are shut down right now while the ship's in dry-dock. I shut them down myself when we docked last week."

Sean guided *Columbus* between the two huge nacelles. The kids could see the wing-like pylons connecting the nacelles with the Engineering section. Sean then lowered the shuttle below the nacelles, heading towards the back of the Engineering section. He then guided the shuttle towards the open landing bay doors, finishing the tour. Sean then announced, "Sorry guys, but you need to go belt back in for landing. That's the rules."

There were a few grumbles, but a couple minutes later, Justy yelled up "Everyone's belted in!"

"Thanks, Justy," Sean called back. He then set the communications board to the starship's frequency.

"*Enterprise*, this is *Columbus*, requesting permission to come aboard."

Uhura's voice came over the comlink. "*Columbus*, this is *Enterprise*. You are cleared for landing. Will this be manual or automatic?"

Before Chip could tell Sean what his reply should be, Sean answered the question. "*Enterprise*, we'll go with manual today."

"Acknowledged on that manual landing. See you onboard, *Columbus*."

Chip looked at Sean. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yep. I'm willing to give it a shot."

Chip sat back, and watched as Sean piloted up to the open landing bay doors. Everyone felt a tingle as the shuttle passed through the shuttle bay force field.

"Unca Chip, what was that?" Ty asked worriedly.

"We just went through the force field that keeps the air in the ship," Chip replied.

"How could we go thru it if it's keeping the air in?" JJ asked.

Cory answered. "There's a transponder on the shuttle. It's like an electronic ID bracelet. When the ship 'sees' the ID, it checks to see if we are okay to come in. If we are, the computer modifies the force field to bend around us as we enter."

"Wow!" JJ replied.

"You've been studying the manuals, huh Cory?" Chip asked with a grin.

"Yeppers. I don't wanna disappoint you."

"You won't. Now slow down, please? I don't want you two to overload yourselves."

"Okay," Cory replied.

Just then Sean sat the shuttle down. It slid a couple of feet once it hit the deck before coming to a full stop, but other than that it was a smooth landing.

"Sorry, sir," Sean said, embarrassed. "I guess I wasn't stopped."

"Don't worry about it Sean, all of us do that occasionally. You did great for your first time."

"Thanks, Uncle Chip!" Sean said as his face exploded into a grin. He then made sure everything was shutdown, opened the rear hatch, and informed everyone they could unbelt and get up.

Just then Cory yelled out, "Captain on deck!"

"At ease!" Kirk said with a grin as he entered the shuttlecraft. He then came up to the cockpit. "Mr. Short, you did well for a first time. I have crewmembers that still can't land that good."

Sean blushed. "Thank you, sir. How did you know it was me?"

"It was easy. Usually Mr. Dodds here tries to see how close to the bulkhead he can slide the shuttle without making contact," Kirk replied with a smile.

Chip gave his Captain a dirty look. "Thanks a lot, SIR!" Chip said as Sean broke into a fit of giggles.

"What is it you are always telling Justy?" Kirk said with a big grin. "Oh yeah, I remember. Hey Chip - BUSTED!"

Chip began blushing a deep red as everyone broke out in laughter. Once they calmed down, they all exited into the shuttlebay.

Kirk pulled Chip to the side. "Mr. Dodds, You need to meet me in the briefing room in ten minutes. We have an emergency conference with the Southeast Region Security director. Mr. Scott is going to escort everyone to the forward lounge."

"Yes sir."

Sean returned to Chip's side. "What was that all about, Uncle Chip?"

"I have no idea, Sean, but I got this funny feeling that it isn't good." Chip then turned to follow Kirk to the turbolift, leaving Sean, Cory, Justy and the rest of the tribe in the capable hands of Josh, Brian, Curly and Scotty.

## *Chapter 17*

Kirk led Chip to the turbolift. As the two men entered the lift, Chip turned to his Captain. "Sir, is anything going on that I need to know about?"

Kirk turned to face his Helmsman. "All in good time, Mr. Dodds. We're needed in a meeting with the Southeastern Regional Security Director and the Director of Youth Services."

That's when a light bulb went off in Chip's mind. "Teri's involved in this meeting? It must be pretty important then."

"You could say that." Kirk then turned his attention to the intercom inside the lift. "Deck Seven!" The lift began its journey through the interior of the starship.

As the turbolift made its way through the ship, Chip became more worried at his CO's silence. Within a couple minutes, they were on Deck 7 and heading for the Briefing Room. When they walked in, Chip's jaw dropped. Sitting there waiting for him were Teri and John, both with serious looks on their faces.

"Okay, I'm here. Now will someone please tell me what the HELL is going on?!" Chip said, exasperated. "And why are you involved, John?"

John answered. "It seems one of your junior officers has a serious temper problem. As for my involvement, I AM the Security Director for the North American South East Region. That kinda makes it my responsibility to report this to you."

"Report it already! And WHY is Teri involved?"

Teri signaled John that she wanted to answer. "Chip, the reason I'm involved is there are two young boys who were the targets of your man's anger. Unfortunately for him, John caught him in the act. John has filed for Safe Haven Act protection for the boys, and is accepting custody as soon as Doctor McCoy finishes with them."

Just then, as if on cue, McCoy walked in with the two boys.

"John, they're all yours. I found nothing permanent. I'll review the short term things you need to watch with you after your meeting is done."

Chip turned around to see the boys, and his jaw dropped.

"Jeffy? Sammy? Are you guys okay? What happened, why didn't you tell me?"

Jeffy and Sammy's faces lit up when they saw Chip. They ran over and grabbed him in a double hug. "Uncle Chip!!" They clung to Chip like there was no tomorrow. "We're so glad to see you."

"Please, what happened, guys?" Chip asked in a worried tone.

"Daddy got mad at us again," Sammy said in a small voice.

After letting go of the two boys, Chip knelt down to face them.

"Why didn't you two tell me what was going on?"

Jeffy spoke up, "Daddy told us that you wouldn't believe us if we told you. He also said that he would REALLY punish us, too, if we told you."

"Well," Chip said, "you don't have to worry about your Daddy ever again."

"You promise?" Sammy asked.

"I promise," Chip replied. Then he got an idea.

"Jeffy? Sammy? You two want to see Justy and Uncle Josh?"

The boys' eyes lit up at the sound of JL and JC's names.

"They're aboard?"

"They sure are. And Justy's got two new little brothers with him. Want to meet them?"

"New brothers? AWESOME! Where they at?" both boys answered.

Chip chuckled as he stood up and punched a button on the table.

"Dodds to Security."

A voice came over the intercom. "Security, Thompson here, Commander."

"Mr. Thompson, can you come up to the Briefing Room on Deck Seven?"

"Sure thing, sir. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Dodds out." Chip closed the connection. He then returned his attention to the boys. "Guys, John is a good friend of mine. He has promised to take care of you, and I promise he will not hurt you like your old FATHER did." Chip then sat down and the two young boys crawled up into his lap.

The two boys cuddled in Chip's lap. "Thanks Uncle Chip. If you trust him, we will too."

Five minutes later, Thompson entered the Briefing Room. "You sent for me, Commander?"

"Yes, Mr. Thompson. Could you escort these two boys to the Forward Lounge on Deck Six? Personally deliver them to my husband and son."

"Yes, sir."

Chip turned to the boys. "Jeffy? Sammy? I want you two to go with Mr. Thompson here. He will take you to Uncle Josh and Justy, okay?"

"Okay, Uncle Chip." Thompson then led the boys out of the Briefing Room.

Chip then turned back to the table. "Okay, first off, congratulations John. Second, tell me what happened."

\* \* \*

### **USS *Enterprise*, Forward Observation Lounge:**

Justy was having a blast. As soon as they reached the lounge, all the kids immediately rushed to the windows. Justy gladly played tour guide, pointing out all the sights to the rest of the boys.

After about five minutes, the newness wore off and Tyler snuck up behind Justy. He slapped Justy on the back of the head. "TAG - YOU'RE IT!"

Justy spun around as everyone else scattered around the lounge.

"You asked for it, Ty! I'm gonna get you!" He then took off chasing Tyler, but reached out and tagged Rusty as he ran by him.

"Tag, you're it Rusty. But I'm still gonna get you, Ty!"

The lounge was filled with giggles and the occasional 'aww man!' as the kids got totally involved in their game. When Lt. Thompson entered with Jeffy and Sammy, nobody even noticed

until Kevin gave one of his patented whistles.

"Alright you animals!" Kevin yelled. "We've got company. Find a seat and PLANT IT!"

All the boys froze, and then looked at the doorway. Justy grinned. "He's not company; that's Lt. Thompson. He's a target!" Justy then noticed the boys who were with the security officer. "That's no fair Mr. Thompson; bringing kids with you to keep from being pounced. Jeffy, Sammy, come on in here; let me introduce y'all to the rest of the tribe."

Jeffy giggled at Justy, who had froze sitting on Aaron's chest.

"Hey buddy, I see you have Aaron in his place again!"

Justy grinned at the twins. "You bet! C'mon, you need to meet my lil' bros!"

Sammy and Jeffy walked over as Justy waved Jacob and Jamie to join them. Once they were all standing together, he started introductions. "Sammy, Jeffy; these are my lil' bros Jamie and Jacob."

Nick chose that moment to look up from his snuggle with Ashley. The sight in front of him was too much to resist commenting on. Justy was standing in the middle, his wavy dirty blond curly hair going all over the place from wrestling. On his right were his freckled little brothers, their strawberry blond hair in tangles, and the tops of their heads just even with his shoulders. On his left, two bruised platinum blonds, their curls hanging to their shoulders, just four inches taller than the other set of twins.

"Call the exterminator! We're being invaded by twins!" Nick yelled.

The response was quick and deadly, as both sets of twins plus Justy pounced on Nick and Ashley. Ashley slapped Nick upside the head. "Next time goofball, MOVE that scrawny butt of yours before you insert your foot in your mouth!" Ashley said with a laugh.

The five boys released their prisoners, and Justy began pointing out everyone else in the room. "I guess I'll start with the two goofs in the corner. The one with auburn hair is Sean, and the blond that you need sunglasses to look at is Cory," he then yelled to Cory "HEY, BLONDIE! Stop sucking on your boyfriend's face and GET A ROOM!"

Cory began to give Justy a one-finger salute, then thought better of it when he noticed the four boys standing with him. He stood up, pulling Sean up by an ear, and came over to the group. "Hey guys; don't believe everything this goofball tells you. Aaron has been a bad influence on him."

"Bite me Cory. This is Jeffy and Sammy Taylor, from what my bros tell me they are the latest new tribe members," Justy replied with a grin.

Justy got an evil grin on his face as he went to introduce the next pair. "If you look behind the couch, one of your new brothers is behind it humping his boyfriend!"

"HEY!" two squeaky voices answered from behind the couch. The two 12 year olds stood up, both as red as JJ's strawberry blond hair. They climbed over the couch, using Nick and Ashley as ladders. Once they were standing in front of the couch, JJ and Adam said in unison "You are gonna get it later, Justy!"

"Yeah right!" Justy said sarcastically. "Jeffy, Sammy, the one whose face matches his hair is your new brother JJ. The blond nutcase standing next to him is his boyfriend Adam; he's Sean and Cory's lil' bro."

JJ gave Justy a confused look. "Jus, could you fill me in here? Do you mean brother like you and me or like Kyle and me?"

Justy smiled as he replied. "Bro, since Uncle John has used the Act, I would say that they are gonna be you bros for real."

JJ looked at the two boys. They were standing there with a scared look; as if afraid they would not be accepted. "Jeffy? Sammy? Come here guys," he said, holding his arms out.

They slowly walked over, unsure as to his intentions. Both boys' bodies were stiff as JJ pulled them into a hug.

"Welcome to the family, bros," JJ said softly. "I'm not gonna ask what happened, I can guess from how you look. Don't worry; I'm here to protect you now."

Adam carefully joined the hug from behind, turning it into a four way hug. "Guys; I'm guessing you are here because of the same thing that happened to me. Don't worry about any of the guys here; nobody will let that happen to any of us ever again. Since I've been through something like you, anytime you wanna talk just ask, okay?"

The twins relaxed, assured that they would really be accepted. Jeffy spoke. "Thanks Adam. We might take you up on that later, but not now. This is blowing our minds."

"I understand. I just went through it myself. One thing; you can definitely trust these guys. Once you are part of the family, every single one of them will back you up. Why don't we let Justy finish introducing everyone before he pees himself?" Adam finished with a grin.

"I HEARD THAT! Be glad you are still under Doc's care!" Justy said. "I can't slap you; but you WILL be swimming when we get home!" He then pointed Jeffy and Sammy to look over towards the window. "The last group is the five giggle boxes over by the window. First is your little brother, Kyle. He's the little brown haired munchkin over there. You see the older blond, the one whose hair almost looks white? That's Sean, Cory, and Adam's little bro, Tyler. By the way, Ty is taken; Kyle is VERY possessive of him! The little blond is Johnny. He's Nick and Ashley's boy. The little strawberry blond is Robbie, he's B-Rok's foster son. The red-blond 12 year old trying to keep them all under control is Robbie's cousin Rusty. Rusty is Brillo-head's foster son."

Kyle ran over, with Ty following close on his heels. "KOOL! More big brothers!" he exclaimed as they each grabbed a twin into a hug. As the hug finished, Kyle looked at the two boys with a serious expression. "After what you had to go thru, you deserve a new family. I'm proud to call you two my brothers," Kyle said softly.

Jeffy and Sammy looked at Kyle in shock. "How ... what ... who ..." they both said in confusion.

JJ chuckled as he filled them in. "Sorry bros, I didn't get a chance to warn you. Between Kyle and the twin carrot-tops over there, there is no such thing as a secret around here. The only person whose mind they have not read this week is Uncle Chris - and that's because he has none." JJ then looked around the room.

"UNCLE KEV!" he shouted, "Could you stop boring Andy to death and let him come meet my new bros?"

Kevin picked up a cushion from a nearby chair and tossed it at JJ, and then patted Andrew on the shoulder before sending him over to the boys.

The twins watched as the skinny redhead ran over to join them. JJ introduced him as he slid into the group. "Jeffy, Sammy; this is my best friend Andrew. Just like the rest of us kids here, he is one of your new brothers."

Sammy spoke up. "Don't get me wrong; but this is NUTS! How do you guys keep track of who belongs to who?"

Cory giggled. "I ask the same thing every morning, bro. Just roll with it, it grows on you."

Sean then tapped Justy on his shoulder. "Hey Jus; whadda you say we go play in the anti-grav? I know your Dad said it was okay on the way up here."

Justy grinned. "Yeah, but we have to have some adults with us; it's ship's regulations."

Lt. Thompson overheard this, and immediately interrupted.

"Justy, don't even think of me! I'm not getting any closer to that chamber than the control room - Doctor's Orders! Remember what I was like LAST TIME after you finished with me?"

Brian and Curly both spoke at the same time. "I'll go!" they said in unison. They looked at each other in shock, and then blushed when Kyle spoke aloud what both were thinking.

"Both of them want to do the same thing; play with their new sons!" Kyle said. "I guess you guys ARE gonna be good daddies!"

Ashley looked at Nick. "The two of us are going too; someone's gotta keep those two in line!"

Nick looked at Ashley in shock, and then replied as he stood and hurried away from his husband, "You talk about ME putting MY foot in MY mouth! You just put yours so far in if you wiggle your nose it's gonna turn brown! When you get bruised ribs, don't look at me for sympathy, you asked for it!"

Lt Thompson shook his head. "Alright, let's go. This is starting to sound like a Klingon family reunion here! I'll alert Sickbay to be ready. Y'all need to work off some energy."

\* \* \*

#### **USS *Enterprise*, Recreation Deck:**

The boys were just finishing putting on their safety gear before going in the chamber when JJ pulled Jeffy and Sammy aside.

"Guys, I know you gotta be sore; Adam is still feeling his bruises too. Stick near to us, I know the rest of the guys are not going to go after you, but it's still best to stay safe."

Jeffy got a concerned look on his face. "JJ; can I ask you something without you getting mad?"

"Sure bro, any time."

"Why is everyone being so nice? When do we get to see what everyone is really like?"

"As shocking as it sounds, all the guys here are actually being themselves right now. Sean, Cory, Kyle and I made a pact to stand by each other no matter what a while back. As each kid joined us, they have been added into the pact; now you guys are a part of it too."

"But what if we screw up, or make someone mad?"

"We all screw up, lil bro. The difference is, the rest of us will help you fix what you mess up. Making someone mad happens to all of us sooner or later; if anyone responds too badly, the rest of us will take care of them."

"If you say so. I hope you are right."

"Hey, I'm your big brother now. If ANYONE gives you a problem, come get me, okay?"

Sammy and Jeffy fell into a hug with JJ. "Thanks ... bro. I guess we gotta learn that families don't mean pain, huh?" Sammy said softly.

"That's right. Wait till just before bed tonight; Sean and Cory usually have a meeting with all the kids so everyone knows what the others have been through. That way we can help each other adjust and get over what happened to us. As hard as it is to talk, don't be afraid; anything that's said in our tribal pow-wows does not go any further; even Uncle Chip does not know what we talk about. You are gonna be surprised at how many of us understand what you have been through."

Curly walked up as JJ finished. "You guys okay?"

"Yeah Uncle Just; we were just having a family conference," JJ responded.

"I kinda figured that when I heard the last thing you said. Just to let you guys know, all of us adults are here for you too. Everyone you have met today has their own skeletons in their closets. There is not a single one of us who will let you get hurt again. Let's hurry up and get in

there before everyone else starts worrying."

Curly pulled the three boys into a hug, and then guided them into the chamber. As JJ took the twins over to join Adam, Curly launched himself at an unsuspecting Ashley. "BONZAI!" he screamed as he flew across the chamber.

About an hour later, Chip walked into the Anti-Grav Tank Control Room. He addressed Thompson, "How are the natives enjoying the tank?"

Thompson replied, "Just fine, sir."

"Good. I need Sean Short out of there, Lieutenant. I'm going in there."

"Good luck, Commander. You're gonna need it."

"Thanks a lot, Lieutenant," Chip said with a pout in his voice. He then hit the intercom button to address the occupants of the tank. "Okay, you hooligans. I'm coming in there, so no pouncing!" Chip could hear a chorus of "Awww Mann's through the speaker. A few minutes later, he entered the Tank. Justy came floating towards him. "Hey Dad! What's up?"

"I need Sean for his tour."

"Okay! I'll find him!" Justy then set off to find Sean, who was in the process of being tagged by Ashley. Justy got Sean's attention. "Hey, bro. Dad's looking for ya. He wants to take you on your tour."

Sean's eyes lit up at the words that Justy had just said.

"KEWL!!! You think you can escort me over to Uncle Chip without getting attacked?"

"Sure, bro. Come on." Justy led Sean to where Chip was floating.

Sean couldn't stop in time and slammed into Chip. "Sorry, Uncle Chip," Sean said, blushing.

Chip responded, still trying to catch his breath, "That's ok, Sean. Just don't let it happen again, okay? Now go get your uniform jacket on and follow me."

"Okay," Sean said. Chip then led the boy out of the Anti-Grav Tank. He gave a wave to Mr. Scott, who was just entering, obviously to pick up Cory.

\* \* \*

### **USS *Enterprise*, Main Bridge:**

Chip led Sean out of the starboard lift onto the Bridge. Sean was in awe at the sight in front of him. He had heard of many of the *Enterprise's* missions, and had always dreamed of coming aboard the legendary starship. Now here he was, not only on the *Enterprise*, but standing on her Bridge as well. Chip turned to Sean, "You okay, little buddy?"

After a few seconds of being in awe, Sean found his voice, "WOW!! This is AWESOME!!"

"It's not that awesome. It's only the Bridge of the *Enterprise*," Chip said with a grin.

"To you it's only the Bridge, Uncle Chip. To me, it's a dream come true," Sean said.

Chip started to show Sean around. Chip started the tour at the Science Station. Spock just happened to be on duty at the time, seated in the command chair. "Commander Dodds? I take it that this is the young man interested in Bridge Operations, specifically the Helm?"

"Yes, sir. His name is Sean Short, and he's my nephew."

Spock turned to face the younger boy. "Mr. Short, welcome aboard the *Enterprise*. I trust your trip up here was memorable?"

Sean blushed for a moment then regained his composure. "Yes, sir, it was. Uncle Chip ... I mean, Commander Dodds ... let me pilot part of the way up here. It was AWESOME!!"



"I am gratified that you found your trip stimulating. I am sure that Commander Dodds will show you every aspect of the Bridge today."

"I plan on it, sir," Chip said. Chip then led Sean around the Bridge, stopping at each station along the way, explaining everything. Sean was still somewhat in awe at the fact that he was on the Bridge of the *Enterprise* and having met Captain Spock.

Once Chip and Sean made their way around the Bridge, Chip led his protégé down the steps to the center of the Bridge. He placed his hand on the back of a chair. "Sean, this is the Helm. This is my station here on the Bridge," he paused for a moment, and then patted the back of the chair. "Want to try it on for size?"

Sean was dumbstruck when he heard his Uncle say what he thought he said. "You mean it?"

"I sure do, Sean." Sean sat down in the chair at the Helm console. Chip, being the doting uncle he was, pointed out all the features and controls on the console. Sean was amazed at the fact that he was sitting at the console that his uncle sat at everyday. That he was at the console that basically controlled the movements of the giant starship. He looked up at his Uncle.

"You know something, Uncle Chip? The flight sim I have at home is actually right, the controls on the console match the game controls perfectly! I bet I could run this console in no time. This is my favorite station when I'm playing."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Which simulation software would you be referring to, Mr. Short?"

Sean turned towards the science officer. "It's Microsoft Space Sim 2004, sir."

"Interesting, Mr. Short. I assisted in the initial programming for the simulation, but have not evaluated the final product. That is a situation which I shall soon rectify. Mr. Dodds, have you evaluated this software?"

Chip replied "Yes, sir. I was instrumental in the designing of the Helm Control section for the *Constitution*-class ship that is used in the simulation."

"Fascinating. I will need to evaluate your efforts, brother. I expect they are up to our families standards?" Spock stated.

"As always, brother. I would not allow anything less," Chip replied with a slight grin.

Sean picked his jaw up from the console in front of him.

"SWEEEEET! You REALLY helped program the sim? AWESOME!"

Chip chuckled. "Yeah, Sean; the console I used for the sim is based on the *Enterprise's* console, with a few changes for security reasons."

Sean took a second look at the console. "I see what you mean, there are a few controls here that are not on the sim, plus you moved a couple things around. I bet I could still have it down in about 5 minutes if you let me study it."

Chip chuckled. "I'm sure you could. We use the same software for training at the Academy; when we get back home I'll unlock the training mode for you, then everything will be exactly like what you see here."

"SWEEEEET! Thanks Uncle Chip!"

\* \* \*

### **USS *Enterprise*, Engineering:**

"Well, whadda ye think, laddie?" Scotty beamed as they walked into Main Engineering. The part that Cory glued his eyes on first was the massive warp core, the heart of the *Enterprise*.

The core ran vertically; extending eight decks up and five decks down. The horizontal part ran out from the main core and back until it split into two upward conduits inside the nacelle pylons and into the nacelles themselves.

"WOW, Mr. Scott, this is AWESOME!" Cory replied as his head spun, taking in the entire room.

Cory's eyes settled on the main control console. "I KNEW IT! That looks EXACTLY like the one in our game looks like - at least AFTER I modified the program!"

Scotty looked at the boy in shock. "Laddie, what program would that be?"

"It's Microsoft Space Sim 2004. Sean and I played it all the time when I would visit. Things have been so nuts the last week since I moved back home that we have missed our usual games."

Scotty got a curious look on his face. "Aye, that be the one I figured you was talking about. Tell me, exactly how did you modify it?"

Cory blushed. "Well ... I kinda noticed something didn't feel right when I was playing as engineer. So I took it back to the home with me and dug around in it after I de-compiled it. I found a few settings that were turned off, so I turned them on; then I tweaked the program some so the readings it gave me were more accurate. Do you know the program, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, young Cory; that I do. I certified the Engineering part myself," Scotty replied. "And I dinna wanna hear no more 'Mr. Scott' from you. You are to call me 'Scotty', understood?"

Cory grinned. "Sure thing ... Scotty!"

"Now tell me, lad; just how did you make the readings more accurate?"

Cory thought for a second then replied. "I noticed the rounding routine that they were using for the readings left a major error - the readings on the console resolved to 6 places, but the readings used in the computations were only resolved to 4 places. I updated it so both resolved to 10 places and was suddenly able to tweak the efficiency rating higher than I had ever been able to before."

Scotty got a look of wonder on his face, for the first time in a long while he was impressed by the achievements of a cadet. "Cory, me lad. I dinna know how you did it, but I believe you unlocked the Academy training mode in your game. Do you think you might be able to show me on the lady's computer what you did?"

Cory beamed with pride, his idol was asking him to show his skills. "Sure, Scotty. Are you sure the Captain won't care?"

"Don't you worry, laddie. I can handle the Captain. You just show me some of your magic."

Cory stood at the console, first checking the existing core readings. He then turned to Scotty, "Scotty, could you unlock programming mode on the ship's computer for me? I don't want to accidentally trip any of the security blocks."

"Smart thinking, lad. I'll do ye one better, I'll give you your own access." Scotty walked up to the console.

"Computer; add new user. Identification: Commander Montgomery Scott. Authorization: Scott six-nine-five-bravo-alpha."

"Identity confirmed. Continue."

"Computer; new user name Cadet Cory Patrick Short. Access level two. Override rank requirement."

"User addition approved. Override approved. Proceed with voiceprint identification."

Cory took his cue. "Computer. Identify Cadet Cory Patrick Short. Authorization: Short one-seven-one-alpha-delta. Process and acknowledge."

"Identity confirmed. User entered. Authorization code accepted. Level two access granted."

Scotty looked at Cory. "That should do ye, lad. There's only one level more powerful than that on the ship, and only six other people have that one."

"Thanks Scotty! This should only take a minute here."

Cory then logged into the computer's program mode, and ten minutes later he finished the changes that he had done to the simulator. He then issued the final commands.

"Computer; debug routine 28c974f3."

"Acknowledged. Debug complete, no errors found."

"Computer; compile routine 28c974f3."

"Compile complete. Awaiting run authorization."

Cory smiled. "Scotty, I need to do a full reload and restart on the mixture control program. I think that's gonna require both of us to do."

Scotty smiled. The boy was impressing him more every second.

"Aye lad, that's true. Let's be gettin' this started already."

Cory crossed his fingers as he gave the final command.

"Computer; reload and execute program 28c9. Authorization: Short one-seven-one-alpha-delta."

"User authenticated."

Scotty spoke up. "Computer; reload and execute program 28c9. Authorization: Scott six-nine-five-bravo-alpha."

"User authenticated. Reload and execute of program 28c9 in ten seconds."

The ten seconds seemed like forever, but then there was a flicker of the console lights and the new displays came online. Cory immediately spoke as soon as it was obvious the system was back up.

"Computer; run full diagnostics warp core mixture controls."

"Diagnostics complete. No errors found."

Cory then showed Scotty the new displays. As they finished, Cory commented about the 95% efficiency rating that was being displayed. "That's not bad, it could be better though."

"That it could, Cory. Just your programming change alone has brought it up a full percent though."

Cory grinned. "If it's okay with you Scotty, I can show you what this fine lady is really capable of!"

"Laddie, you already have my full attention. Show me how well you can make this fine girl sing."

Scotty watched with pride, then shock, as the efficiency rating display slowly climbed. After ten minutes, Cory sat back.

"That's about the best I can do. The mixture control circuitry needs finer steps in it."

"Laddie, do you realize what you've done?" Scotty asked, shock evident in his voice.

"What's that, Scotty? Did I mess up?"

"Not hardly, lad. The gents who designed the core say the highest possible rating is 97%. You just exceeded that by 1.3%. Once Starfleet confirms the reading, you will be the most famous engineer in the fleet!"

Cory turned beet red. "Scotty, this is your ship. You deserve the credit, I'm just a kid."

Scotty looked at Cory sternly. "I'll have none of that, lad. This lady is yours as well, and I'll have no part in denying you credit for a job well done. If I have to walk up to the Admiral myself, you ARE a full member of the *Enterprise's* crew. Let's finish your tour; you need to be familiar with your new home."

Cory smiled, and walked up to Scotty and gave him a hug.  
"Thanks Scotty, you just made one of my dreams come true!"

Surprisingly, Scotty returned the hug. "Lad, the *Enterprise* has been jokingly called my wife; and the Engineering crew my family. That makes you my son, and I couldna be prouder."

\* \* \*

### **USS *Enterprise*, Forward Observation lounge:**

Captain Kirk walked into the Lounge, and looked around at the boys laid out on the floor, munching on sandwiches that had been sent up from the Galley. He noticed Kevin standing off to the side, and headed toward him. "Well Kevin, have they enjoyed themselves today?" he asked as he walked up.

"Yes sir; I think they almost wore out the anti-grav chamber. I know a bunch of boys who are going to sleep like rocks tonight."

"Well, I have another special treat for them; as soon as Cory gets back."

Kevin saw the gleam in the Captain's eye and chuckled. "Knowing you, sir, this should be good."

Just then, Chip and Sean came in. "I see the tribe is recharging!" Chip commented as he grabbed one of the few remaining sandwiches. He noticed the smile on Kirk's face and commented "For some reason, I'm afraid to ask what you are up to, sir. The last time I saw that smile you made Justy the ship's mascot - a point he NEVER lets me forget!"

"Just wait," Kirk replied. "I think you will enjoy this just as much as the recipient."

Sean walked up to the men. "Captain? Thanks a LOT for letting Commander Dodds show me the bridge. I hope on day I'll be able to work up there too."

Kirk smiled at the young cadet. "Mr. Short, keep that dream. If I have any say at all, you WILL see that dream come true. Do your best and listen to your Uncle Chip; the rest will come easy."

Sean stood straight and tall. "Aye sir. I will do that. Thank You."

Kirk grinned. "That I have no doubt of. Now go enjoy yourself with the rest of the kids. That's an order, Mr. Short."

Sean grinned as he saluted the captain and ran over to tell the rest of the kids about his tour.

The kids all gathered around Sean, curious as to what happened to make him so happy.

"Okay, spill it!" Justy said.

"Just chill!" Sean replied. "Wait for everyone to sit!"

Once everyone was gathered around, Sean began. "Man, that was AWESOME! Uncle Chip took me up on the bridge. He let me sit at the Helm, then I got to sit in the Captain's chair! I found out something; Mr. Spock and Uncle Chip helped program Space Sim 2004!"

"No way!" Justy interrupted. "I knew Dad was messing with it, but I didn't know about Uncle Spock! Are you sure?"

Sean grinned. "Yep. Mr. Spock told me himself. Uncle Chip says when we get home he's gonna unlock the training mode so I can start learning the Helm just like at the Academy."

Sean continued to fill the group in on his tour, until ten minutes later Cory and Mr. Scott entered the lounge.

Kirk and Chip both did a double-take when the two walked in. Scotty was walking with Cory held close, his right hand on Cory's right shoulder.

"Thanks for the tour Scotty; that was great!" Cory said as they walked up.

"T'was my pleasure Cory. You needed a proper introduction to our lady. After all you are as responsible for her health as myself."

Kirk could not resist the temptation. "Mr. Short, is that the proper way to address your superior officers?"

Scotty pulled Cory close, then answered for him. "It would be if he was following the senior officers' orders, Captain."

Kirk grinned and shook his head. "That knocks military protocol for a loop. Someone call me when you all decide to put me back in command."

Cory began giggling. "You ARE in command, sir. You are just lucky to have officers who can handle problems themselves."

Chip grinned. "Out of the mouths of babes, Captain!"

Scotty and Cory walked over to the rest of the boys, and Cory was just getting ready to start telling about his adventures when Mr. Spock came into the room and handed a tablet to Kirk. Everyone fell silent when they heard Kirk's response.

"Thank you, Spock. I presume you are going to be present for the ceremony?"

"Affirmative, Captain. I believe it will be necessary for myself to enter a commendation onto the official record."

"I expected as much. Get the podium ready while I have Uhura start the recorder," Kirk replied. He then walked over and activated a wall comm unit. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Bridge. Go ahead, Captain."

"Uhura, begin recording in the Forward Lounge. I want this played ship-wide."

"Understood, Captain. Starting recording now. Bridge out."

Kirk went up to the podium, and got everyone's attention. "I want all of you to gather in front of the podium. I have a special announcement to make."

Once everyone was in place, he continued.

"Cadet Cory Short; front and center."

Cory walked up to the podium. "Cadet Short reporting as ordered, sir."

Kirk addressed the young man in front of him. "Cadet Short. It has come to my attention that you have performed a modification to the *Enterprise* which has improved her efficiency above and beyond what was specified in the original design. In the absence of an obvious problem, you still sought a solution; and in the process you have set a new standard for the entire Fleet to follow. I just received confirmation from Starfleet; your programming has resulted in a confirmed efficiency rating for the ship's engines of 98.3%. This action went above and beyond the expectations of a Starfleet Cadet's performance; I now have a message from Admiral Morrow which I am to read to you:

*To: Cadet Cory Patrick Short; Des Moines IA USA Sol III (Earth)*

*From: Admiral Morrow, Starfleet Operations, San Francisco USA Sol III (Earth)*

*CC: Starfleet BUPERS; cmdg. off., USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-A*

*Cadet Short;*

*Due to your recent performance, I have received requests for*

*action from Commander Montgomery Scott; Captain James T. Kirk; and Captain Spock. All three hold your skills in the highest regards, and I am honored to comply with their request.*

*Effective immediately, you are activated as a full Ensign assigned to the USS Enterprise. You are to be listed on the ship's roster as inactive reserve, but are subject to activation if required. You have all privileges and responsibilities of a Starfleet officer from this point forward.*

*Welcome to Starfleet Command, Ensign.*

*Admiral Morrow*

Kirk retrieved a small box from his pocket. "Ensign, welcome to the *Enterprise*," he then handed the box to Scotty.

"Ensign Short," Scotty began, "It be with more than a wee bit of pride I'll be putting this on to you. These would be the first Ensign bars that were issued to anyone of your age. It's only fitting that I be putting them on to you, seeing as one day this lady shall be all yours."

Cory stood at attention as Scotty pinned the new bars on his uniform; then saluted Scotty as he stepped back. "Thank you, Commander. I will do my best to prove you right."

As Scotty stepped back, Mr. Spock stepped forward. "Ensign Short. I have reviewed the modifications you completed and found them fascinating. As is ship's policy, I am inserting a commendation into your service record. Your performance today meets the standards expected of the *Enterprise's* senior officers, which has also been noted. The *Enterprise* only accepts the best of Starfleet for its crew, so it is only logical that you be assigned to her."

Instead of saluting, Cory raised his right hand, palm out, in the traditional Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Captain Spock."

Spock returned the salute. "Live long and prosper, Ensign Short. Your understanding of proper protocol will also be noted."

Kirk returned to the podium. "At ease Mr. Short, and welcome aboard the *Enterprise*. Uhura, stop recording."

"Recording stopped sir. Congratulations, Cory!"

"Thank you, Commander."

Cory spent the next hour accepting congratulations and telling everyone about his tour. Chip noticed he was getting worn out, and decided that since McCoy had finished with everyone they would leave after dinner. He pulled Cory off to the side. "Cory, now that you are the ranking officer I need you to get everyone together and down to the Crew's Dining Lounge on Deck Eight. I need to stop by the Bridge. I will see you down there."

"Yes sir." Cory then issued a whistle that rivaled Kevin's. "Okay, everyone settle down. We are heading to the Crew's Dining Lounge on Deck Eight for dinner. Justy, I'd like for you to take care of the little ones, and Sean can take care of the teens. All the adults please stay with me. Uncle Josh, could you follow behind so we don't lose anyone?"

Josh was impressed, even though you could tell Cory was issuing orders, he had phrased it so nobody would have hurt feelings. "Sure thing, Cory."

They made it to the Dining Lounge without incident; and after a lively dinner Chip had Cory take the adults to the transporter room while Sean took everyone who was riding the shuttle

to the hanger deck.

Once Cory had watched the last one beam down, he headed to the hanger deck. Upon entering the shuttle, he sealed the hatch and turned to get his seat. To his surprise, instead of being in the co-pilot seat, Sean was sitting back with the rest of the passengers.

"Sean, what are you sitting back here for?" Cory asked.

"You out-rank me now. That means that the co-pilot seat is yours," Sean replied.

Chip watched silently from the front, curious as to how this was going to play out.

"Sean, come on, you know you want to be up there. Why don't you head on up, I'll wait till I can co-pilot with you."

"Nope. I'm not going to break the rules."

Cory knew that Sean would argue all day, so as much as he hated to do it, he went for broke. "Mr. Short. Report to the co-pilot position immediately."

Sean looked at Cory in shock. He began to formulate an argument, but just as he started to speak Cory stopped him.

"That was an order, Mister, not a request."

"Yes sir," Sean replied as he moved up front.

Once Sean was settled in, Chip opened the private pilot channel. "Sean, settle down a second and listen, okay bud?"

Sean looked back at Cory with a glare, then responded. "Yeah, go ahead Uncle Chip."

Chip saw the look, and prayed he could diffuse the situation.

"Sean, don't think I'm taking sides, but would you listen to where I think Cory was coming from?"

"I guess."

"Believe it or not, he was looking out for you. He all but told you he did not want to be up here, I'll bet it was because he wants you to have your flight time in so you can be certified as a pilot on the shuttles. You could not see it from where you were sitting, but I saw his face before he decided to pull rank on you. Sean, I could see the pain in his face, it was the only way he could see to get you to listen, and it hurt him to do it."

"Why did he have to be so cold about it? When we went to dinner he didn't do that. This time it was like he was rubbing it in."

"He knows you Sean. Believe it or not, legally when he asked you to come up here the first time that could have been an order. You have hurt him twice at the same time; you refused to go along when he said to go do what you really wanted to do anyway, and then you disregarded his rank by arguing with him. In two minutes you have ruined a great day for him, and I'll bet that you're jealous of his rank and taking it out on him."

"Yeah, sorry Uncle Chip. I guess you're right." Sean then looked back to find Cory, and felt his heart drop when he saw Cory had folded down a jump seat in the rear of the compartment and was sitting there crying, staring at his feet. "Excuse me a minute, please Uncle Chip?"

"Go ahead. I'll get the preflight done."

Sean got up and headed back to Cory. He tried to put his hand on Cory's shoulder, but Cory swatted it away. He knelt in front of Cory.

"Cory, please listen to me. I'm sorry babe, I guess I wasn't thinking. I know I shouldn't have argued with you. I did not really mean to hurt you. I guess I was a little jealous about you getting your commission and took it out on you by quoting regulations. Can you forgive me, babe?"

"I really don't know, Sean. I saw that look you gave me. You HATED me." Cory then screamed it out. "HOW THE HECK CAN I FORGET THAT YOU HATED ME!"

## Chapter 18

Aaron pushed Sean and Cory through the door. "You two; Cory's room, NOW! Stay there until the rest of us get there, and NO Talking!" He then turned to the kids following him. "Tribal council in five minutes. I want all of you there, no excuses," Aaron ordered sharply.

As Chip and Josh stormed past them and went up the stairs to their room, Teri cornered John, Justin and Brian. "Alright, spill it. Why the hell is Aaron treating Sean and Cory like convicts? WHAT HAPPENED?"

Brian answered for the group. "Teri, trust me when I say its best that we don't give you details. You will hear all about it soon enough. If Aaron does not make the boys do a public apology, Chip will. I'll leave it at this: the two of them had their first real lovers fight - in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and DEFINITELY over the wrong thing."

Teri started to turn away. "I need to talk to Aaron. A talking to is fine, but not a friggin' trial; which it sounds like he is planning."

Curly grabbed her. "Teri, please don't. This is actually necessary. All those boys swore a pact to stand by each other no matter what. Sean and Cory are breaking the rules they wrote, and Aaron is bringing them to task for that. I heard JJ tell John's new sons about it. JJ told them if someone screws up the rest of them will straighten him out. This is going to be the first real test of that. Aaron knows to come for help if he needs it, but I've known him a long time. He can be more mature than Nick when it's needed."

Teri looked at Curly. "Justin, you better be right. If you are not, once I'm done with Aaron you are going to wish you had never been born. And that is a promise."

Aaron slowly walked down the hall towards Cory's room. He honestly was not looking forward to this, but he had promised to be Sean and Cory's big brother, which meant it was his responsibility to set them back on the right path. As he passed their room, he could hear Chip from behind the door, throwing things and screaming words that Aaron had rarely heard him use. It was obvious that Josh was having little or no success in calming Chip, and Aaron winced at the thought of being on the receiving end of his anger. He opened the door to Cory's room, hoping for the best.

JJ sat with Sammy and Jeffy on either side of him. As Aaron walked in the room, JJ pulled his new brothers in tight to him. It was scary, Aaron's ever-present smile was conspicuously absent.

Just as Aaron was getting ready to speak, Kyle interrupted. "Hold on, bro. You got reinforcements coming. Mike is PISSED!"



\* \* \*

**Mike:**

*Sorry to interrupt here, but I told the guys I would tell this part. Even Aaron has trouble being objective - I thought he was going to rip BOTH of their heads off! Well, here we go - sometimes being a guardian angel is really a drag.*

*I looked at all the boys before I began talking through Kyle. Sammy and Jeffy were looking confused, having no idea what I was about to do. Justy, Jamie, and Jacob were cuddled into a ball; I could see that all three were angry at my two younger brothers for getting their Dad and Pop so mad. Adam and Ty both were worried about their older brothers, as were JJ and Kyle. Mark, Rusty, Robbie, Andrew and Johnny had assembled together in their own little group, unsure as to what would happen now. Aaron and David were standing in the middle; both wondering if they had a chance of undoing the damage. Last was Cory and Sean; both feeling dejected and abandoned by the one they loved. Additionally, they both realized that they had probably trashed their chances at Starfleet. They saw no way that Chip would continue to support them after what happened on the shuttle.*

I started speaking through Kyle. "Aaron, David; go ahead and take a seat. You have done great holding things together; now let's see if we can fix them."

"Okay, Mike. Thanks for helping," Aaron replied as he sat down.

"Thanks for being there for them, Aaron. Now everyone gather in a circle around Sean and Cory, group yourselves by families. Johnny, that means you sit with your Uncle Aaron and Uncle David."

I could see that being put together in the center was affecting the two boys, which was exactly the effect I wanted. There was nowhere either could look without seeing the face of someone they have helped.

"Sean, you go first, I want you to tell everyone everything you thought and felt from the time you entered the shuttle until you walked in the door here. NOBODY is to interrupt him, not even you, Cory. Jamie, make sure your Dad hears all of this, Jacob do the same for your Pop."

Sean began. "When I got to the shuttle, I started to head up front, but then I got to thinking. Cory had got the promotion, I was still trying to get used to the idea, but I had not got to talk to him about it. I knew that he could ride co-pilot just by out-ranking me, so I decided to give him a treat and let him ride up front. When he came on, first he asked me to go up front. I tried to tell him he earned it, but then he ordered me to go. When he repeated the order before I could tell him I was giving it to him as a gift, I blew my top; I started feeling jealous and angry that he was able to use his rank to ruin a surprise I had for him. Once I got up front, I glanced back at him; I guess my anger at him ruining the surprise must have showed. After Uncle Chip calmed me down, I went back to apologize and explain; but he refused to listen and pushed me away. Aaron made me go back up front, I managed to handle the communications but that was about it. When we got in the limo, I sat in our normal spot, but he sat in the other corner and would not even look at me. Aaron grabbed both of us when we got here, sent us up here, and he still won't look at me."

"Okay, that about covers it, Sean. Your turn, Cory; save any comments to Sean until I tell you it's time."

Cory sniffled, and then started. "Once I had made sure all the adults transported ok, I headed to the shuttle. On the way, I was thinking about just getting home and finding a corner to cuddle with Sean for a while. I was really worn out; after the ceremony everyone was taking all of my time. I had not had even a minute alone with Sean. When I entered the shuttle and saw Sean in

back I was exasperated. I knew he needed the flight time to get qualified as a pilot, as much as I needed him his qualification came first. I tried asking nicely for him to go up front, but when he refused the day caught up to me. I just wanted to get home, so I ordered him up front, as much as it hurt to pull rank. He started to argue, and I really lost it; it looked like he refused to acknowledge my promotion. After I repeated the order, he went up front; but when he looked back at me all I could see was the hate in his eyes. I felt like I was going to die, I just went to the back and withdrew into myself. I did not care about the promotion any more; I had lost my boyfriend because of it. When Sean came back and tried to apologize, I couldn't listen - every time I heard his voice I saw that look he gave me. When Aaron separated us, I started going back into myself, but Uncle Josh shook me and informed me that I had better stop that now, just sit and relax until we got home and could straighten it out. I gave Sean some space in the limo, and the entire ride home Uncle Josh stared me down while Uncle Chip was staring Sean down. I did not realize how all this was affecting everyone else until I heard Aaron call a tribal council - and when he said we couldn't talk to each other I kinda went into shock."

"Jamie, Jacob, keep updating your parents. Sean, Cory; both of you pretty much were doing the same thing, looking out for the other one. But you are both guilty of the same thing too; not listening to what the other was saying. I will save Aaron the trouble of explaining; the reason he wanted you guys to talk it out here is this is the only setting where you could both speak without worry. I have another good reason, everyone here has just seen what happens when you don't listen; I hope they all learn from your mistakes. Justy, I believe you had some comments?"

"You're as bad as my lil' bros, Mike. Yeah, do you two realize how much trouble you could cause Dad for that little catfight you had? I grew up around Starfleet; Dad was the one responsible for everything that happened on that shuttle today. I know now why you did what you did, and so does Dad; but does knowing excuse what you did? Dad always told me that when I'm on a ship or shuttle I have to think about how every little thing I do is going to affect the crew; did EITHER of you think about that? Cory, YOU are a COMMAND OFFICER now; when you are in uniform, even spitting on the sidewalk is not allowed. Dad says being an officer is like a miniature ambassador, everything you say and do reflects on Starfleet and your crew. Now that I understand why you did what you did, I forgive you, but Dad and Pop won't be that easy. A little advice; settle your war with each other quick, then see Dad before he makes up his mind whether or not to continue sponsoring you."

"Guys, Justy made a valid point. Sean, do you have anything to say to Cory?"

Sean carefully put a hand on Cory's shoulder. "Cory, I'm sorry I pushed you so hard. What started as a surprise got out of hand, and ruined what should have been the happiest day of your life. Will you forgive me?"

Cory placed his hand on Sean's hand. "Yes, I'll forgive you. Will you forgive me for using my rank to try to push you to succeed, and then not listening when you tried to explain?"

Sean pulled Cory into a hug. "Yes, babe. What would you say to hijacking a lounge chair by the pool for a while after this is all over?"

"I think you are pretty smart for a helmsman. It sounds great; I think we need a little private talk too."

I know Kyle reflected my smile; hopefully this little episode has made those two stronger. I really hated to break the mood, but the rest of the group still had some things to answer to. "Cory, Sean, I'm proud of you, bros. Now the rest of you have a little lecture coming still, and make sure Chip and Josh know I'm applying this to them too, Jamie and Jacob. It seems that once the ceremony was over, all of you were so happy for Cory that you did not allow him any time with Sean. Most of you are paired off with someone, either as a boyfriend or a twin. Most of what

happened would probably have been avoided if you had just given the two of them five minutes by themselves. All of you need to think about others, and if you see that a couple needs some time, take it upon yourself to separate them from everyone else and give them that time. Cory, Sean, it is time to go see your Uncles, they are expecting you by the pool. I am going to get the new members caught up on the tribal history while you are gone, come back once you are done. You still have to conduct your normal business before the meeting ends."

*Okay, I'm going to let Cory take over here. I'll be back in a little bit; you really don't need to see everyone's histories again, do you? I'll take care of the new guys while you are gone.*

\* \* \*

**Cory:**

*I stood up and helped Sean to his feet, then we headed downstairs to the pool. Mikey made a lot of sense when he was talking to us; I just hope my short temper did not ruin our chances of staying in Starfleet. When Mikey chewed out Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh I really got worried, I hope they did not take it personally. Okay, we're at the door going out to the pool deck now, wish us luck.*

*I figured it would be best to get the official part over with first, then it would not be hanging over our heads.*

"Commander? Ensign Short and Cadet Short requesting a conference, Sir."

Chip stood up from in front of Josh with his arms behind him.

"I've been expecting you, Ensign. I have reviewed your personal reasons for today's incident. I am now awaiting your official report."

*Ouch, it looks like Uncle Chip is not going to make this easy. I'm on my own with this one. If I ask Sean to help it will look like I am not ready to be an officer. Here goes nothing!*

"Sir, upon investigation, it appears that Cadet Short was attempting to reward my promotion by allowing me co-pilot privileges on the trip back, despite his status as Junior Helmsman. Due to my error in not allowing him to explain himself, he appeared to willingly disobey a lawful order. As a result of my review, I feel it would be inappropriate for any charges to be filed against Cadet Short. I accept responsibility for his actions, and request my personal reasons be entered in the report as explanation. I hereby apologize for the incident on the shuttle today, and accept full responsibility.

Chip thought for a minute, and then replied. "Ensign, your refusal to press charges is approved. By accepting responsibility for Cadet Short's actions, you have shown me that you understand the responsibility a senior officer has to his junior officers. Despite the fact your actions were by the book, you disrupted the normal operation of the shuttlecraft. Before I decide what to do about that, you have one chance to tell me what you should have done."

*YIKES! Talk about putting me under pressure! Here I am, fourteen years old and about to make a speech which will permanently affect not only my life, but Sean's life too. Any suggestions?*

"Sir, upon entering the shuttlecraft and noticing that Cadet Short was not at his normal station, I should have politely asked him to step to the back and discussed it with him. As you were in command, if I had not been able to resolve the situation, I should have brought it to your attention for final resolution."

*OUCH! My head hurts after using all those big words! I hope I got it right, even if Sean forgives me I could never forgive myself for ruining his dream.*

"That was correct, Ensign. Do I need to worry about a repeat of this offense?"

"No sir. I can assure you I will not repeat my actions, and Cadet Short has learned from both his and my errors."

*I really feel weird speaking for Sean, but it looks like Uncle Chip is expecting me to do just that. Please say this is over; I need to get some Tylenol from Mom.*

"Consider this incident closed. There will be no more mention of it from either of you. I will express your apologies to the adults who were aboard. At ease, gentlemen." Chip retook his seat in front of Josh on the lounge and leaned back into his husband's arms. He then motioned the boys to take a seat on the lounge next to them. "Okay you two, you are off the record now, what do you got to say for yourselves - and I expect you each to reply."

*I think I'll let Sean go first. He's had to stay quiet since we came out here; it's time for him to unload some.*

"Go ahead babe; I've talked too much already."

Sean gave Chip and Josh a nervous look. "Uncle Chip, Uncle Josh, I guess I was really stupid. I let things go way too far, and ruined the day for everyone. I'm sorry I messed up, I'm really gonna try to keep this from ever happening again."

Chip responded first. "Sean, you did have a good idea by trying to give Cory a treat, but you need to listen more when he talks to you; not just when you are on duty, but all the time. You still take everything personally. That's something you still need to work on a little bit. When you are on duty, taking things personal can get you or someone near you hurt or killed. I accept your apology, and I'm glad to see you learned something from this."

Josh then spoke up. "Sean, I'll accept your apology too. You were trying too hard, something even Chip is guilty of sometimes. Don't be afraid to tell Cory to stop and take a breath. If you let work interfere with your personal life you two have no chance as a couple."

Sean smiled. "Thanks, both of you. I've learned a lot today, even though I hate how I had to go about it. The only thing that matters to me right now is that I've got Cory back."

*Jeeze! Why did he have to make me feel all mushy just before my turn! Talk about messing up your train of thought! Oh, well; I guess he'll just have to make it up to me with extra cuddle time later. OOPS, I think Uncle Josh saw my evil grin!*

"Uncle Chip, Uncle Josh, I was really out of line today. I ignored what Sean was trying to tell me, and turned it into something that almost broke us up. I know that all the kids look at Sean and I as their leaders, and today I gave them a really bad example. I'm really sorry, and I promise it won't ever happen again; next time I might not be lucky enough to get Sean back."

Chip smiled. "Well put, Cory. The unique thing about you and Sean is the two of you seem to switch who's in charge depending on the situation. That's normally not a problem, but on duty just remember that whichever one of your departments is involved determines who is in charge. For example: Mr. Scott is senior to me in regards to seniority date; but unless he's in command, I override him as far as Helm decisions go. Boys, give yourself some time. Don't try to be the perfect officer all at once. You never will be. I accept the apology and hope you two can really patch things up the rest of the way."

Josh chuckled. "From the look Cory gave Sean a minute ago, I think 'patching up' is a very polite term, babe," he then turned his attention to Cory. "I accept too, Cory, and agree with everything that's been said. Just remember, no matter how you feel, instead of pushing Sean away listen to him. As you found out, it can save a lot of problems. Now go on, you two. I think a few kids are getting worried."

*Sean and I gave Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh big hugs before we went back inside. When we got back upstairs, I stopped him before he opened the door and just stood there in a hug with him for five minutes. I don't know about Sean, but to me that hug meant more than any words*

could ever say.

*Well, we just re-joined the tribe in the room, and Mikey is whining that he wants the keyboard back. I swear, just because he's our big bro, he thinks he can order us around! Anyone want a guardian angel - cheap?*

\* \* \*

**Mike:**

*WHOA! Now that's gratitude for ya, I help save their relationship, and then Cory tries to sell me off! I swear, I get NO respect! (giggle) Anyways, the new members are all caught up on everyone's history, so I'll give the crew a few parting words and be out of your hair for a while. By the way, watch out for Aaron - the little sneak has big plans brewing!*

"Welcome back, guys. I caught everyone up on the histories for you, as well as your usual comments. Kyle's getting a little tired here, so I'll let you take over now. I just want you to know I am proud of you guys, it took a lot to listen and make up after a fight like you had. These guys are counting on you, but also are willing to be there for you, never forget that little brothers."

"Thanks Mikey. I miss you, but at least I know you are watching," Cory said with tears in his eyes.

"Lil' buddy, any time any of these guys gives you a hug, I'm there giving you one with them. That goes for any of you here; you are all my little brothers now. I'm gonna get out of Kyle's head now, but don't worry, I'll still be here."

*I dropped back and made a quick pass through everyone, the closest thing a ghost can do to a hug. By the smiles on their faces, I could tell each and every boy understood what I had done. Now, time to plan revenge on that little squirt for trying to sell me off. This should be fun! Talk to y'all later!*

\* \* \*

Cory sat down and pulled Sean onto his lap. "Guys, I realize today has been really screwed up. Part of it is our fault, and we are both sorry about that. Sammy, Jeffy, believe it or not things are not always this weird around here; some days we can go up to four hours with everything being absolutely normal."

The comment had its desired effect, as the room broke into giggles.

"Hey, Cory," Justy squeaked between giggles, "Invite me over when you have one of those days, I haven't seen one yet!"

That finished everyone off, as the boys dissolved in laughter. Once everyone settled down, Sean spoke up.

"Okay, Sammy first, do you have any questions or comments for any of us?"

"Yeah, I'm kinda bummed that I've made all these new friends today, and in a few days I'll probably never see them again."

Sean smiled. "I guess you didn't hear about the plans, did you? In a couple months all of us, and that includes you two, are moving to Orlando. We just have to wait for the house to get done. It's right down the road from Uncle Chip's ranch."

"Okay, I hope we are still here then."

JJ spoke up. "That is not a worry, bro. I've known John a long time, and if he says that he's taking care of you, it would take the firepower of the *Enterprise* to get you away. And I

KNOW Dad ain't letting him go anywhere, not if he knows what's good for him."

Sean giggled. "Easy there, Tiger. How's about you, Jeffy?"

"Yeah, just one - where's the food? I'm hungry!"

Mark raised his hand. "I second that. Last one to the fridge starves!"

There was a mad rush to the stairs, with Robbie and Johnny hopping on the back of the first older kid to get near them. Fifteen minutes and three loaves of bread later, all the boys, except Sean and Cory, headed to the Rec room. Sean and Cory headed out to the pool deck, and shared a lounge chair in a quiet cuddle.

An hour later, Chip was beginning the unlock of the simulator for the boys. He unlocked the Helm section without problems, but when he went to do the Engineering section he found that all the locks were already removed. He pulled out his communicator and called the *Enterprise*.

"Dodds to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Palmer here. Go ahead, Commander."

"Get me Mr. Scott, please."

"Aye, sir."

A couple seconds later, Scotty came on the line. "Scott here. How may I be helping ye, Mr. Dodds?"

"Just a quick question for ya, Scotty. Did you do a remote unlock of the Engineering simulator for Cory?"

"Ahh ... negative, Mr. Dodds. The young lad handled that all hisself."

"That's what I was afraid of. Thanks, Scotty. Dodds out." Chip closed his communicator and turned to Josh. "I'm not even gonna bother asking. I just know he's gonna tell me how simple it was. Remind me to update the security on the computer system at the Ranch BEFORE Cory gets to Orlando."

Josh looked shocked. "Why? I thought we had the best out there?"

Chip shook his head. "We had the best on EARTH. I'm gonna have to use Vulcan security protocols to try to Cory-proof our systems!"

Chip caught Cory and Sean as they were coming in and heading to their room for the night and let them know the simulator was fully unlocked. They thanked him, and agreed that it would be best to wait for the next day to test it out. Chip looked in the Rec room and saw that the rest of the gang had passed out in their normal nest, with the notable exception of Sean and Cory. He then grabbed Josh by the hand and led him to their bedroom.

\* \* \*

### The next morning ...

Aaron was bouncing off the walls as he woke everyone up. The day had finally come for him to spring his surprise on his new family. His first victims were Sean and Cory, much to their displeasure.

Aaron knocked once on their door, and charged in.

"AARON!!" Cory yelled. "Give us a chance to get decent! What's the big rush?"

Aaron grinned. "I just got some plans for us all today! Hurry up and get ready!"

"Whatever. Give us a little peace; we'll be down in a few," Cory said.

Sean muttered from underneath the blanket, "Looks like we need to blond-proof the bedroom door."

Cory reached under the blanket and swatted Sean's head. "Watch it, another comment like

that and you sleep in your own room!"

"OUCH! Sorry babe. I guess I should say 'Aaron-proof' instead."

"That's better. But you still are gonna pay for the blond insult," Cory said as he began tickling Sean.

Aaron giggled as he backed out of the room. "I'm gonna get clear before the fireworks start!"

His next targets were Justy and the twins. As he tried to sneak up on them, Justy opened one eye and growled "You try it, blondie, and I'll shave your head!"

Aaron took a step back. "Okay, Jus, you win. You mind waking the twins. It's time to get your Dad and Pop up. I'll need some help there."

Justy concentrated on Aaron for a second, then grinned. "That's sneaky, bro. We'll take care of Dad and Pop. You better not be thinking about it when you wake Kyle if you wanna surprise him! You know what Dad will do to you if you wake him."

Justy then nudged the twins, both of which were instantly awake. Jamie spoke up first. "You better not be foolin' us, Justy! Let's hit the bathroom first. If Daddy and Pop tickles us, it'll get messy if we don't!"

Aaron made the rounds of the rest of the kids, and was just finishing up when "JUSTIN!! JAMIE!! JACOB!!!" was heard being yelled from upstairs.

\* \* \*

#### **Chip and Josh's room:**

Justy and the twins snuck into the room quietly. When they were about four foot from the bed, Justy counted down using his newfound skills with the twins. On cue, all three pounced on their sleeping parents.

"JUSTIN!! JAMIE!! JACOB!!!" Chip yelled in surprise.

"I'm gonna get all three of you!" He then began tickling whichever boy he could get his hands on. Josh exited his morning stupor and joined in on the torture.

After about five minutes, Chip looked over at the clock.

"Justin, would you like to explain why we are getting such an early wakeup call?"

"Sure, Dad. Aaron woke us up. He's getting everyone ready for his surprise today."

Chip looked at Josh. "Pool?"

Josh grinned. "Agreed."

Chip and Josh gathered the boys into a family hug, then Josh told them, "Go on downstairs. We'll get dressed and be down shortly."

The three boys gave their parents a kiss on the cheek, and then headed out to raid the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Chip and Josh exited their bedroom, and met Cory and Sean in the hall. "Why the red face, Sean?" Chip asked with a grin.

"I made the mistake of making a blond crack while Cory was on top of me. Aaron is SOOOO dead when I catch him!"

Chip chuckled. "Okay, I'll let you have first shot. All he did to us is send the boys up to do a wakeup pounce. Obviously he got you two in person."

"You could say that," Cory replied, "at the worst time no less!"

"Let's go Aaron hunting," Josh said with an evil grin.

They found Aaron on the kitchen phone, calling the hotel to wake everyone there. As

Sean and Cory grabbed Aaron, Josh grabbed the receiver and put it to his ear.

"This is JC. Who is Aaron annoying now?" he said into the phone.

"This is Nick. Tell my little brother he better update his will, there are two bands ready to kill him as soon as we get over there."

"Nicky, if there is anything left you are welcome to it. Let's just say he interrupted Cory and Sean in a private moment. Then he sent the twins and Justy after us. If anyone else wants a piece of him, they better hurry over."

Nick began giggling. "I'll be sure to pass that on. Sounds like he's back to being his scheming, lovable self; don't it?"

"The jury is still out on the lovable part! See you guys in a little bit, sounds like it's almost our turn."

"K. Later." Nick then hung up.

Josh turned to Chip with a grin. "I almost could feel sorry for Aaron right now. Nicky's on the warpath, along with the rest of Backstreet and N\*Sync."

Chip chuckled. "Let's go see if there's anything left for us!"

They walked out to the pool, and witnessed an already soaked Aaron being tossed off the diving board into a forced belly flop.

"Cory, how many times is that?" Chip yelled out.

"That was number four! One more then it's your turn!" Cory replied as he prepared to catch Aaron again.

Aaron jumped out of the pool, and went to run towards the doorway. He came to a screeching halt when he saw Chip and Josh standing there with their arms folded across their chests. As Sean and Cory grabbed him from behind, Justy squeezed between his parents while a twin took each side. As Aaron went flying into the pool one last time, Cory looked over and giggled as he saw all three boys had adopted the same stance as their fathers.

Sean turned to look at what Cory was giggling about, and said with a grin "Looks like the fun's just starting. Wanna watch?"

"Yeah!" Cory replied as he headed for a lounge chair.

Ten minutes later, Chip decided Aaron had been tortured enough.

"Okay guys; let him out to dry off. Hopefully that took care of some of the excess energy he had," Chip said with a grin.

A soaking wet Aaron walked up to Chip and Josh and pulled them both into a hug. "Chip, Josh. I know I've been a major pain in the butt since you guys took me in. I'm really sorry."

They wrapped their arms around Aaron, and Josh spoke. "Aaron, we understand. The way your parents treated you would be hard on anyone at any age, but it's really hard on a teenager. We are just glad to see you are safe and happy."

Aaron sobbed. "Yeah, but all this time I've been pushing you guys and Nicky away. I was so scared that if I let you get close I'd lose you too. Until you brought me here, I couldn't understand why anyone would want me. David and I have even had arguments about it."

Sean and Cory had came up to see what was wrong, and upon hearing Aaron they joined in the hug. "Aaron," Cory said softly, "you are a great guy who I'm proud to call my big bro. Whatever anyone has told you in the past, forget it. You made a promise to be there if we needed help, and you did that last night; it takes someone really special to do that."

Josh smiled. "You know, Cory's right, Aaron. We knew all along that you still had that special guy inside you. That's why none of us ever gave up on you."

Aaron pulled himself tighter into Chip and Josh. "I've never really said this, but thank you for having faith in me and taking me in. I'm gonna owe you for the rest of my life for giving me a



chance."

Chip moved his hand up and caressed Aaron's shoulder. "Aaron, as long as you are happy and safe that's all the repayment we'll ever need. Let's all get dried off, I'll talk to the guys when they get here and see if I can get them to forget the dunking they are planning to give you."

They broke the hug, but before they went inside Aaron grabbed Sean and Cory and hugged them. "Lil' bro's, thanks for believing in me. Anything at all that you need just let me know; thanks to you guys I'm getting my life back."

The three boys walked to the house, Aaron keeping an arm over Sean and Cory's shoulders.

\* \* \*

### **Vets Auditorium, Des Moines, IA:**

Big Ken looked around him in wonder. In all the years he had been hosting the morning show on Star 102.5, with all the children's charities he had worked for, nothing matched what was about to happen here. He did his final sound check with the studio, verifying everything was ready to simulcast the upcoming events over the station.

Chip yelled to Ken. "Hey Ken, come over here a minute!"

Ken looked around, trying to spot who was yelling at him. When he saw a man standing there in a Starfleet uniform waving his arms, he went into shock. "Uhhh, okay ..."

Chip walked over. "Big Ken?"

"Yeah ..."

"I'm Commander Charles Dodds from the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. How you doin' today?"

"How ya doing, Commander. How can I help you?"

"I understand you are the man I need to talk to."

"About what??" Ken asked with a puzzled look.

"Well, it seems that this concert is drawing a little attention. For some strange reason, MTV just cornered me backstage. It looks like they are one of two groups who want a live feed from here."

"Wait a minute - ONE of TWO groups!?"

"Yep. The other one kinda serves a little larger audience - try the entire Federation."

"Stop pulling my leg - there ain't no way!"

"Ken, I just got off the horn with my CO about this little shindig; for some reason HIS boss is extremely interested in this."

"WAIT A MINUTE! Are you telling me STARFLEET wants to broadcast the concert?"

"Exactly, Ken. You think you are up for the challenge?"

"For the kids of Iowa, I have never turned down a challenge. Bring them on!"

"Alright, looks like you and I are doin' some co-hosting today. Be ready for a few surprises; this bunch is full of them."

As the lights started dimming, Ken smiled. "To quote Pat Benitar - 'Hit me with your best Shot!' I'm up for it - are you?"

"What the hell are you waitin' on? Let's party!"

Ken grinned, slapped Chip's shoulder, and then stepped out onto the stage.

"Des Moines! It's great seeing all you guys and gals out here! How's it feel to get a day off of school to go to a concert?"

The auditorium was full of students from Des Moines and surrounding area schools, and they broke into a thunderous roar of applause.

"I'm Big Ken from the Star 102.5 morning show here in Des Moines, and I'm just as surprised as you to be here. Our guests have asked me to tell you that not only is this being broadcast over the radio station, but it's being recorded to be released on a CD - so make a LOT of noise! Oh, by the way, everyone wave, you are on MTV as well as all over the Federation - courtesy of Starfleet Command. Congratulations, you are about to participate in the Federation's first galaxy-wide concert!"

That wound up the crowd even more, as Ken continued.

"Let's get this show rolling, Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls ... Here he is, the Little Prince of Pop ... AARON CARTER!"

Aaron came sliding out on stage. "Thanks Ken, and thank YOU Des Moines for being here! I've got a whole buncha surprises for y'all today; but for now LET'S ROCK THIS JOINT!" Aaron then launched into a lively rendition of 'Another Earthquake'.

After he finished, he stopped for a second. "THANK YOU! As a lot of you know, I was kicked out of my family a while back due to being gay. California does not have the shelter system for kids that Des Moines does, so if it wasn't for two very special guys I would have been out on the streets. Not only did they give me someplace to stay, they gave me a family. Nick and I had always been close to our mom, so that hurt me more than anything when she rejected me. When I came here to visit, I was given the opportunity to have the one thing I was missing - the acceptance of a mother. The reason I'm throwing this party is to raise money for the Des Moines shelters, and we are donating all the proceeds from the CD we are going to make here today; but also it's my way of saying thanks for standing by me when I was down. I'm proud to introduce to you my family: Commander Charles Dodds from the Federation Starship *Enterprise*; his husband, JC Chasez-Dodds of N\*Sync; my new mom, Teri Short, who just became the Federation Youth Services director; and my brothers - Justin Dodds; Jacob and Jamie Stewart; Sean, Cory, Adam, and Tyler Short! Get on out here!"

Everyone filed out, and gathered behind Aaron. Once they were all assembled, he continued. "A few of you probably recognize Jamie, Jacob, and Tyler. You heard me right when I gave Ty's NEW last name; he is now legally Teri's son, while the carrot-top twins are now Chip and JC's foster sons! Since this is MY party, it's only right that my brothers and JC help with this next song. I'll let Chip and Mom off the hook - this time!"

Aaron looked at the kids. "You know what to do; LET'S GET THIS PARTY STARTED!"

The music started, and shortly all the kids were hamming it up with Aaron as they gave him backup to 'Aaron's Party'. As the song finished, every light in the auditorium went out. A blue strobe began flashing to the beat as the Backstreet Boys stole the stage, immediately launching into 'Everybody (Backstreet's Back)'. When the lights came on as the vocals started, the crowd went nuts.

As the song wound down, the opening notes of 'Larger Than Life' began playing. To the delight of the crowd, the opening scream was done by Justin as N\*Sync came running out to join the men of Backstreet in the performance. The two bands performed the moves as if they had been doing it together all along.

In the back, Chip nudged Teri. "Please tell me I'm dreaming - this can't be real!"

"Don't look at me!" Teri replied in shock. "I'm still trying to figure out what's going on myself!"

They both looked on in shock as Ashley ran to join the bands on stage. Seconds later, they heard him announce to the crowd "Hey Des Moines! You didn't actually think I'd sit this out, did

you? It took a few phone calls, but all the guys from O-Town couldn't pass up putting one of our songs in the mix. We talked it over, and since they couldn't be here, there are a couple of new daddies who are going to cover the leads. B-Rok? Curly? Get your skinny butts up here!" A few seconds later, the sounds of "All or Nothing" flooded the arena.

Aaron walked up to Chip and Teri. "Chip, I think you need to talk to your lil' bro - that was his idea for that song. Oh yeah, get ready, you two are on next!" He then ran before either of them could grab him.

"If he's serious, I'M throwing him in the pool!" Teri exclaimed. As the song finished, her worst fears came true.

Kevin took the microphone. "As Aaron mentioned earlier, a few of our families have grown in the last week. Chip, Teri, John, Dan, Kristin; come on out here for a minute."

Chip walked up to Kevin and whispered to him, "Cuz, You are soooooooo dead when we get home!"

Once they were all out there and done threatening his life, Kevin continued. "I'm going to introduce the kids one at a time, and after they are seated in front of their parents we have a special dedication for them. First, I'll start with my nephews, Dan and John's boys." As each one came out, they sat facing their parents. "JJ Richardson ... Kyle Richardson ... Sammy Taylor ... and Jeffy Taylor. Now, the rest of these guys may not be direct nephews, but in mine and Kristin's hearts they are just as much nephews as the four who are out here already. The next group is Chip and JC's boys; Justin Dodds ... Jamie Stewart ... Jacob Stewart ... and unofficially, Mark Owens. Now for Teri's boys; Sean Short ... Cory Short ... Adam Short ... Tyler Short ... and Aaron Carter, with his boyfriend David Gallagher. Speaking of Carters, we can't forget Nick and Ash's son Johnny Carter! Now, B-Rok is getting in on the daddy game too, here's his foster son Robbie Miller. Not to be left out, JT has his own angel, Rusty Miller. There's one more special kid here, who I think of as my part-time son; come on out here Andy. Guy's and gals - Andy Evans! Kids, this one's from us to you!" Kevin gave the signal to the rest of the musicians, and in harmony they all began: "I'll be the oonnnnee ... .." AJ, JC, Curly and Brian harmonized on the solo parts, while all the adults kicked in on the harmonies.

Brian stepped to the front of the stage with Robbie on his hip as the rest of the boys hugged their parents. "Speaking of dedications, this next one is very special. When I wrote this next song for my mom, I had no idea the effect it would have on my extended family. I'm sorry to say that Dan's wife of 15 years passed away a week ago. We never got to meet Sharon, but the proceeds from the CD we are making tonight are being donated in her name to the local shelters. JJ and Kyle have requested that they be allowed to sing with us, and after discussion we decided that it would only be fitting that all the kids take over for this song. From this day forward, this song is dedicated to you, Sharon; you truly were the 'Perfect Fan'."

The lights dimmed as JJ and Kyle walked to the front of the stage. Adam and Tyler walked up next to their respective boyfriends and all four joined hands. Aaron, David and the rest of the boys formed a semicircle behind the four; then Ashley, Backstreet, and N\*Sync made a third row behind them. Kevin sat at the piano, and as he played the first note the auditorium went silent.

Kyle: "It takes a lot to know what is love."

JJ: "It's not the big things, but the little things ... That can mean enough."

Kyle: "A lot of prayers to get me through."

JJ: "And there is never a day that passes by ... I don't think of you."

Kyle and JJ: "You were always there for me."

Kyle, Ty, JJ, Adam: "Pushing me and guiding me ... always to succeed."

For the first chorus, all of the boys on stage sang the "You showed me" verses, while the four boys in front handled the rest of the lines. For the second stanza, all four boys sang the verses. When the time came for the second chorus, the band members all joined in; adding a stunning dimension to the song.

For the third stanza, JJ took lead vocals, tears starting to run down his face as he put everything he had into the words. When the final chorus came around, every kid in the auditorium joined with the singers on stage; giving the song a presence which would make the Vienna Boys Choir green with envy.

When JJ and Kyle said the final "I love you, Mom.", the crowd was completely silent. Adam and Ty held their boyfriends after they finished, unmindful of the schoolmates watching them. When the boys separated, they looked out at the silent crowd. To their surprise, every person in the crowd was standing watching them; as soon as it was apparent that JJ and Kyle had recovered the crowd exploded into massive applause for the boys.

Brian came to the front of the stage and pulled the four boys in close to him. It took five minutes for the crowd to settle enough for him to speak. Once they had settled and seated, Brian spoke. "In all the times that song has been sung, thanks to these boys and all of you out there it has finally sounded the way I imagined it. I promise this one WILL be released as a single; every person here tonight deserves it. Thank you; I speak for all the family when I say you have just gained a permanent spot in all of our hearts."

Kevin walked up behind Brian. "DES MOINES! I know every band says this - but this time we are being totally honest when we say YOU ARE OUR FAVORITE FANS OF ALL! For the 'flip side', this one goes out to YOU!"

As the kids scrambled backstage, Backstreet launched into 'Everyone'. Every time the lyrics were supposed to be "This one goes out to you.", the band loudly replaced "you" with "Des Moines". N\*Sync did backup until the song finished, and then Justin came up to the front of the stage. "We feel the same as our bro's in Backstreet. You guys and gals are the BEST! If there's anyone who has anything bad to say about the fine state of Iowa, they are gonna have to deal with US!"

N\*Sync then launched into a lively version of 'Pop'. Justin was hamming it up even more than usual, so when the song finished Aaron yelled out "Hey JT, next one's all yours!"

Justin saluted Aaron, as his bandmates evacuated the stage and tossed him a guitar. Nick snuck out to assist Justin with the vocals, which drove the crowd wild. The pair launched into 'Like I Love You'. Once the song finished, Nick took the lead.

The crowd went insane as the spotlight lit up the drum set at the rear of the stage; Aaron had picked up some sticks and was ready to rock.

"Hey y'all, it looks like my little bro wants to play on the drums!" Nick announced. "This one goes out to the homeless kids out there - 'I Just Wanna Take You Home'." Justin had grabbed an electric guitar and the three of them gave a hot rendition of the single.

Once they finished, the rest of Backstreet and N\*Sync came out, and as the lights softened Justin announced "This one is for you, Iowa. 'God Must Have Spent A Little More Time On You.'"

The two bands harmonized perfectly, giving the song an unreal quality that conveyed their emotions to all listening.

As Backstreet exited the stage, Chip walked around to the back of the stage. N\*Sync started with 'The Music Of My Heart'. When the part originally sung by Gloria Estefan came up, Chip walked out towards the guys, singing; surprising Teri and Anne backstage. He then took Josh's extended hand and the two of them handled the lead vocals for the rest of the song to the

delight of the audience.

Once the song finished, Chip announced, "This next one is a message to all the child abusers out there." N\*Sync then launched into 'The Game Is Over'. Ashley and the Backstreet Boys joined them for the last chorus, then Brian and Justin went to the front of the stage and joined Nick and Ashley to sing lead vocals for 'As Long As You Love Me'.

Backstage, Chip and Anne were watching. "Aunt Anne, do you see what I see?"

"I think so. Justin and Brian seem to be sending a message, wouldn't you agree?" Anne replied.

"Yep. I think there are two people who better watch out, or they will be replaced."

The song wound down, and Ashley stepped up front. "I'm gonna sneak in another O-Town one if the guys don't mind helping out. 'Cause you all know, I've 'Been Around The World'."

After the last song, Big Ken and Chip walked onto the stage. Big Ken started the announcement. "Des Moines, what do ya' think?"

The crowd roared their approval.

"Well, Commander Dodds here just got a couple interesting envelopes. I guess I'll turn it over to him."

Chip took the microphone. "Hey y'all! It seems that y'all are getting kinda popular. This first envelope is from the Federation Council. They seem to think you might want a little donation," he opened the envelope. "How does fifty thousand dollars sound to start things off?"

Ken looked at Chip in shock, as the crowd stood and applauded. Chip grinned. "This next one is from my own ship, the *Enterprise*. It has a note with it, which I'll read:

*To the people of Iowa:*

*As an Iowa native, I'm proud to see one of my officers take the initiative to help the best state in the Union. The officers and crew of the Enterprise have collected one hundred thousand dollars, and as the Captain of the Flagship of the Fleet, I personally challenge every other ship in the Fleet to match that. Additionally, I'm adding fifty thousand dollars from my own personal funds.*

*(signed) Captain James T. Kirk  
USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-A*

The audience went nuts at the fact that the legendary Starfleet Captain had sent that message, and the donation that went along with it. Once the applause subsided, Chip continued, "Just to let all of you know, JC and I are producing this CD, and we will match, dollar for dollar, each and every sale as our own personal donation." The audience erupted again in a thunderous applause. After a few minutes, Chip was able to continue, "We have one more, but this one is a video."

A screen dropped down, and shortly the crest for the Vulcan Embassy was on the screen. A stately Vulcan came onto camera.

"Greetings, residents of Iowa. I am Ambassador Sarek of the planet Vulcan. One of the indicators of a civilized society is providing for the youth. We of the Vulcan High Council commend you for striving to do more than simply provide. The Council has determined that five hundred thousand dollars in your local currency would be a satisfactory assistance for your efforts. It would be

logical for other planets of the Federation to match this donation." The Ambassador raised his right hand in the traditional Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper." The screen then went blank.

Chip turned to Ken. "You know Ken, as well as I know Ambassador Sarek, I think my father just issued a challenge. Look out, I don't know of any planet that will ignore a challenge from him!"

Ken grinned. "I'm just glad he's our friend. Thank you, Ambassador." Ken then managed the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

As Chip and Ken headed off stage, Justin ran out ahead of his bandmates. "This next one goes out from all of Iowa to our FAVORITE 'Space Cowboys': Captain James T. Kirk, and the officers and crew of the Starship *Enterprise*!" N\*Sync then started in on 'Space Cowboy'.

Aaron rounded up all the kids in back. "Hey guys, we are all up for these last ones."

The stage went black, and Aaron went out with the kids. As the drums kicked in for 'Not Too Young, Not Too Old', the lights came on and Aaron took charge with the rest of the tribe.

Josh grabbed Chip as he headed out to the stage. "We all are up on this next one - and I mean ALL, Ken included!"

Justin carried out a guitar, Kevin sat at the piano, and Aaron sat at the drums as everyone filed out and they began playing 'Let the Music Heal Your Soul'.

Justin walked up to the front of the stage. "Thank you for being here, you were honestly the best audience we have ever had. As you know, there is only one song fitting to end this, and I give you the ONLY time you will ever hear Backstreet, Ashley, Chip and N\*Sync all together singing our final song."

The stage went black one final time, and as the lights flashed on, the groups launched into an extended version of 'Bye Bye Bye'.

The lights dropped, and after a chorus of THANK YOU from everyone on stage, they all ran off. Ken came to the stage front.

"Thank you, and remember to pick up your free shirt on the way out! You have proven Des Moines is the best, be proud and have a great weekend!"

Backstage, everyone finally got organized. Anne took control.

"Alright, get in the limos! We'll unwind at home!"

## *Chapter 19*

As the house was re-invaded by the tribe, the kids split off into two groups. Aaron led his group into the Rec room, while Cory and Sean headed to the office followed by JJ, Andrew, and Adam. The five boys immediately headed to the computer and fired it up.

Sean opened the simulation program, and received a pleasant surprise. Instead of "Welcome to the USS *Constitution*," the voice-over announced "Greetings, Gentlemen. Welcome aboard the USS *Enterprise*."

JJ looked over in awe. "Wow, how'd you get it to do that, Sean?"

Sean giggled. "I didn't; Uncle Chip musta done it when he unlocked the training modes."

"COOL!" Adam gushed. "What else did he do?"

Sean grinned. "Let's find out. First off, we need to get everyone listed in here. I'm already set up as helmsman, and Cory is already setup as Chief Engineer. Andy, what would you like to be?"

Andrew thought for a second. "I think I'd like to try communications, it looks like fun."

"Okay, have a seat. You need to set up your profile. Keep all the info real, that way you can get credit for it in school if you get good."

Andrew sat down and set up his profile, then looked at Sean. "Hey bro, it says I need command approval before I can enter the profile. Who does that?"

Sean reached over and tried to approve the entry, but was denied. "Darn if I know. That's the first time I've ever saw that!"

Cory gently pushed Sean out of the way. "Let me try, bro. As Chief Engineer, I should have some power."

Cory entered a few keystrokes, and then spoke his authorization sequence. Thirty seconds later, the computer audibly responded. "Identity confirmed. Trainee record activated."

"Show off!" Sean said with a grin. "You gonna set up the other two too?"

"Yeppers! Get over here, Adam; you're next."

Adam considered his options, and then began entering his profile as Science Officer. Just as he was finishing, Chip came into the room.

"Cory, I think you have some explaining to do!" Chip stated.

"Why's that, Uncle Chip?"

"I just got a call from Commander Uhura. It seems that she just was assigned another trainee, one Andrew Evans. Would you like to explain that?"

"OOOPS! We are setting up for a multi-player game on Space Sim. It looks like when you unlocked the training mode, it now automatically uplinks to the ship. You might wanna call

Uncle Spock; our lil bro was just entered as Science Officer. I'm gonna have to remember to lock out training mode when we play if it's gonna do that. It's too late now, I'm glad I told them to enter their real info."

Chip returned the call to the ship, and informed Uhura she had a new trainee, and then asked for Mr. Spock.

Spock came on. "Mr. Dodds; I expect you have an explanation for the appearance of new trainees on the roster?"

"Yes Sir, it appears the simulator uplinks to the ship whenever a new 'player' is added to the game. Once Ensign Cory approved them for playing, they were automatically entered into the ships training roster."

"Interesting. I believe this qualifies as one of Microsoft's 'undocumented features'. Inform Ensign Short he is authorized to use whatever measures are necessary to isolate this problem and repair it. I will notify Admiral Morrow that Ensign Short has been assigned to decompile and repair the software. I have completed approval for Adam to begin his Science training, and will ensure his academic records reflect his progress."

"Thank you, Sir. I will pass on the information. Dodds out."

Chip turned to Cory. "You heard him, bud. Have fun, you just got the okay to dig as deep as you want into the software, this time legally! Let Mr. Spock know as soon as you figure it out, there's no rush, but it's all yours to figure out what they did and what needs to be done to fix it. If you need anything to work with it, let Mr. Spock know, Starfleet will buy it for you."

"Sure thing, Uncle Chip. What about the part of the license agreement which forbids decompiling? Can't Microsoft take me to court for that?"

Chip grinned. "Not any more. You discovered a security breach, Cory. That is a serious problem, and Captain Spock just overrode any agreement which you may have agreed to when you bought the software. The Starfleet agreement allows for designated personnel to have full access to the code for upgrades and troubleshooting. Normally you would get the code provided by Microsoft for the training software we distribute to the fleet; but you are finding features that are not supposed to be available in the retail version, even if unlocked for training."

Cory looked thoughtfully at the computer, and then returned his attention to Chip. "Uncle Chip, could you get me a copy of that code anyway? I want to compare it to the retail version."

"Sure, Cory; I'll have it sent down in a little bit. You guys go ahead and have some fun. JJ, are you gonna play too?"

JJ grinned. "You better believe it! I'm gonna try my hand as Navigator!"

Chip smiled. "Okay, I'll warn Chekhov. Have fun guys." Chip then left the room and re-joined Josh at the pool.

Cory had JJ enter his profile while he called up to the *Enterprise* on Teri's new com console.

"Ensign Short to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead, Cory."

"Could I please speak to Mr. Spock, Nyota?"

"One second, Cory."

"Spock here. How may I be of assistance, Mr. Short?"

"Sir, could you please lock down the data stream from this location and provide me with a raw dump upon completion of the session?"

"May I inquire as to the purpose of requesting this data?"

"Yes Sir. I want to see what the program is transmitting so I know where to look to repair it."



"That is logical. When you have completed the simulation, ensure your terminal remains energized; the operating system must be modified to accept the data. An instructional document will be on your printer upon completion. I will approve disbursement of the data and the required translation software to your terminal."

"Understood, Sir. Thank you."

"I expect to see your report as soon as practical, Ensign. Spock out."

Andrew had a puzzled look on his face. "Why did he blow you off and tell you basically to hurry up, Cory?"

Cory turned to Andrew. "Scotty explained it to me when we were having Mr. Spock verify our settings. Vulcans use pure logic to respond. What looked to you like him blowing me off was his way of telling me he was confident I can do the job. If he did not trust me to get it done, he would have wanted status reports or would have had someone else do it. When he told me that my reason for wanting the report was logical, that was the highest compliment I could ever get from him."

"Whoa! I guess I got a lot to learn, huh?"

"Don't worry about it, bud. All you gotta do is have fun, let Sean and I worry about dealing with Starfleet."

The boys settled into the game. Due to the training mode being activated, they were able to issue commands using voiceprint instead of keyboard sequences, which improved the apparent reality of the game. At one point Cory glanced at the corner of the screen and had to suppress a giggle; under the CO listing was Chip's name, and under the Damage Control Officer's listing was Josh's name. 'I'm gonna have some fun with those two!' Cory thought to himself. A few minutes later, a dialog box popped up stating "Helmsman, you have the con."

Sean was enjoying some light making out with Cory as the simulator was bringing them back home, when suddenly Adam yelled out: "I have a Klingon Battle Cruiser bearing 265 mark 3!"

Cory hopped off of Sean's lap as Sean yelled out "Shields up! Andrew, hail them! Cory, take the Helm."

"I have the helm," Cory replied.

"Take us out of warp, one-quarter impulse power. JJ, change course to 265 mark 3. Andy, set Red Alert."

"Aye sir - course 265 mark 3."

"We are at one quarter impulse, Sean," Cory stated.

"I have the Klingons, sir," Andrew interjected.

"Put them on-screen."

Sean then crossed his fingers; this was not supposed to be part of the scenario he had picked to show his new brothers how to play.

"Klingon Battlecruiser, this is the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. You are deep inside Federation territory, identify yourself and state your intentions."

"The Klingon replied with a smirk "Who I am is not important. My intentions are to avenge my father. Prepare to die." The screen went blank as the port nacelle was hit with a disrupter bolt.

Sean glanced at the damage control display, and made his decision. "Cory, take the Engineering duties. I'll double as Helmsman."

Cory toggled a couple of screens on the display, and then reported. "Shields are holding at 75%; there's minor damage to port nacelle."

Sean rattled off his next round of orders. "Andrew, notify Starfleet of our situation. JJ, set

evasive maneuvers. Helm, target phasers and fire at will," he then assumed his Helm persona.

"Phasers locked on, firing full salvo."

"I'm showing their shields at 50% Sean," Adam called out.

The program showed the Klingon ship returning fire again. Cory muttered something about the ships designers then announced, "They know what they are doing. They hit the port nacelle again. Shields are holding at 60%, but they have affected the core, the pulse in the system when you try to fire the phasers will knock it offline now."

"BULL!" Sean exclaimed. "Adam, get me the schematics for the phaser tie-in. Cory, take the helm and keep them occupied with torpedoes."

Sean looked at the diagrams for a minute, and then grabbed Cory. "Look at this! There's a tap before and after this buffer; they have the phasers tied in after the buffer. Program it so that the phasers tap before the buffer, I'll bet it fixes the problem. And do it NOW!"

Cory grabbed the keyboard and made the changes to the program while Sean kept the ship occupied with occasional torpedoes. A minute later, Cory announced "Done, lets try it; worst thing that can happen is we'll lose!"

Sean grinned. "Adam, watch the power levels, let me know if we are getting in trouble. Cory, baby-sit the core. Helm - forward phasers, 100%, FIRE!"

The boys watched in suspense as the simulation processed the commands using the revised phaser layout. A few seconds later, they were rewarded with a picture of the Klingon Battle Cruiser exploding from the shot.

"All stations, report," Sean said with relief.

Andrew went first. "Communications all normal, damage control reports ten injuries and no casualties."

JJ continued the report. "Navigation normal, I have full control."

Sean looked over the Helm section of the display. "Helm is normal."

Adam went next. "I show no survivors, and no other ships in the area. This needs to be verified, but I showed the phasers were at 105% with no effect on the warp core."

Sean looked over at Cory. "One second, I have more to look at than you guys!" Cory said with a grin. "Okay, warp core should be stable to Warp 4, past that I don't trust it. It looks like the nacelle will need to be looked at once we get back, this close in it's not worth messing with. Your change seemed to work, Sean, but I'll need Scotty to run through it to make sure it's really safe."

Sean shook his head. "You worry too much Cory. Computer, virtual helmsman."

A few seconds later, a prompt came up saying, "Computer helmsman awaiting commands."

Sean relaxed. "Just in case he was not alone, only drop us to Yellow Alert, Andy. JJ, lay in a course for Earth."

"Course laid in."

"Helm, ahead Warp three. I'll give you a safety cushion, Cory."

Cory giggled. "It's a cute cushion too!"

A few minutes later, the program announced the simulation was over. The boys exited the program and turned off the monitor.

Cory looked around him. "Guys, that was awesome, and definitely NOT what we had planned to do for your first try! I think it might be an idea for all of us to go upstairs for a few minutes to unwind before we join the rest of the guys."

Andrew smiled. "That's the first smart thing you've said today, Cory. Last one in the room has towel duty!"

The boys all took off running to Cory's room, piling up as they all tried to get in the

doorway at once. Sean giggled "Looks like a tie!"

While Andrew hit the bathroom; Sean and Cory sat cuddled on one side of the bed, while JJ and Adam cuddled on the other. Andrew came out of the bathroom and took a flying leap, landing between the couples.

"You know," Andrew began with an evil grin, "if you horn-dogs stopped making out so much, you might actually get something done!"

JJ looked at Andrew. "Shit, sorry man. It's not fair that we can cuddle our boyfriends in front of you. Not only is it rubbing it in your face that we are gay, but also that you don't have anyone here to be with."

Andy pulled the four boys close to him. "It really does not matter that you are gay and I'm straight. I'm gonna pick on you guys about making out, but I would do the same thing if there were girls here. It feels weird asking this, but after what we just went through, there is something I'd like."

JJ looked at Andy with concern. "What's that, carrot-top?"

Andy relaxed and gave a small grin at hearing JJ using the nick-name. "Nothing against you, Sean and Cory; but I really feel like cuddling up to my best friend and his boyfriend. Dang it feels weird saying that, even though I know I'm family now, I still expect to have my butt kicked for saying it out loud."

Adam put a finger over JJ's mouth. "Andy, any time you want to, just do it. I know you are not after JJ, so as long as you don't mind an occasional moan come on over."

Andrew giggled, and scooted over into a three-way hug with JJ and Adam. Cory and Sean scooted over behind them, wedging up against Andy.

Cory giggled, "Hey bro, how's it feel being the filling of a straight sandwich?"

Andy laughed. "With all this gay bread around me, it's warm!"

That caused all the boys to giggle, and then they settled down and shortly fell asleep.

About thirty minutes later, Teri came up looking for the boys, since no one had seen them since shortly after arriving back from the concert. When she saw three of her sons, one future son-in-law, and their friend all cuddled in one pile, she smiled and pulled a spare sheet over them. "Sleep well guys, you deserve it."

As she walked out of the room and closed the door, she saw Chip coming up the stairs.

"Hey Teri, you seen Sean and Cory?"

"Yep, they are taking a nap with Adam, JJ, and Andrew. And you are NOT to disturb them until they wake up on their own!"

Chip held up his hands in defeat. "Dang, you been taking lessons from Aunt Anne?"

"Very funny. Now turn around, those two are finally getting some time the way they want it."

Chip chuckled. "Agreed, it's about time they relaxed. Honestly I was about to order them to! Sean has a nice surprise coming when he gets up, though."

"I'll tell you what, you can look in the door at them, but if you wake them I'll really be pissed."

Chip went over and looked in, then closed the door. "Did I just see Andrew between the two couples?"

"Yep. Shocked me too, but from the way they are laying obviously its okay with all of them."

As they came down the stairs, Aaron caught Teri. "Mom, have you seen Andy?"

"He's taking a nap with three of your brothers and JJ, Aaron," Teri replied.

"Ahhh, okay. That explains him being missing in action. I'm sure if there're any

explanations needed later one of them will probably fill us in."

Aaron headed back into the Rec room. He looked around at the kids sprawled on the floor watching *Lord of the Rings*. As he walked in, Justy commented "You know what, if all elves are THAT cute, I want one!"

Jamie looked over at his big brother. "Stop drooling, Jus! You're making a puddle!"

Aaron chuckled. "Jamie, you really got room to talk - he's only drooling, both you and your brother have obvious kickstands."

"AWWWWW MANNNNN!! We'll get you later, Air Boy!" the twins chorused with red faces.

Aaron sat down with Jeffy and Sammy. "Hey, you two have been awful quiet. What's going on?"

"I dunno; this is still kinda like a dream," Jeffy said. "We're afraid if we do anything we'll screw up and get sent away."

Aaron pulled the two boys onto his lap. "Listen up, guys. Nobody gets thrown out or hurt for messing up around here. You can ask my brother Nick; I can be the worst screw up in the universe sometimes. When I get too bad, I usually end up in the nearest pool, or if there are no pools nearby I get tossed into a cold shower. Life is going to be a lot different for you guys now, between Kyle and JJ you guys will have a LOT of support."

Sammy cuddled into Aaron's shoulder. "Yeah, but they never had to live someplace where if you breath wrong you get whipped."

"Hey guys, there's still things about Kyle's life before he went into the home that he won't talk about, so don't be so sure about that. Let's get down on the floor and join the rest of the tribe; you are one of us now."

The two boys gave Aaron a big hug to express their thanks, then joined Justy and the twins in front of the TV. Just as they were getting comfortable, they were pounced by Kyle and Tyler.

"HEY!" Sammy yelled, "What was that for!"

Kyle giggled. "We had to make sure my brothers were not falling asleep."

Johnny, Rusty, and Robbie waited until the free-for-all started, then hopped on top of the nearest pile and joined in the massive wrestling match. Mark was sitting back in the corner laughing, until Aaron spotted him.

"I'll give you something to laugh about!" Aaron giggled as he and David grabbed Mark and pulled him into the pile of wrestling boys.

"HEY!" Mark managed to get out before he was drawn into the mess.

After fifteen minutes everyone started wearing down. The older boys ended up lying on the floor with the younger kids sprawled on top of them.

Mark looked down and found Jeffy on one of his shoulders and Jamie on the other. He leaned his head down and gave each of them a kiss on the forehead. "Luv ya, bros. Thanks for making me a part of this."

That started a round of hugs from everyone. As it wound down, Aaron, Mark, David, and Justy sat down on the couch. They were immediately followed by all the younger boys fighting for prime lap space on their favorite big brother. Once everyone was comfortable, in no time the only sound was the slow, regular breathing of a large group of sleeping boys.

Jacob and Jamie were the first to awaken. Jacob looked at the sleeping Justy under them and smiled as he said "You know, Jamie, he really does look like an angel, don't he?"

Jamie returned the smile. "Sure does. I guess that comes from being one, huh?"

The twins did not realize that Justy woke at the same time as them, and was faking sleep

to try to scare them. After hearing the comments from his new little brothers, Justy could no longer keep quiet. "JEEZZZZEEEEEE!!! Not you guys, too! Why does EVERYONE think I'm an angel?"

Jamie looked at Justy with surprise. "You cheated, you were faking sleep! You are OUR angel, if you can keep quiet we'll tell ya' why."

Justy looked at both boys, and was mildly shocked when he saw that both of the twins were totally serious. He pulled a boy under each arm, and relaxed into the corner of the couch. "Go ahead, now y'all got me curious."

"Do you remember when we first met you in the Rec room?" Jamie started. "You didn't even know us, but the first thing you wanted to do is talk about why we were sad. When you pulled us into a hug while you were listening to us, it made both of us feel tingly in our bellies and safe. Do you remember what happened next?"

Justy thought for a second. "We went to sleep?"

"Before that," Jacob continued. "Something about talking to you made both of us feel safe and wanted. We had decided to reward you by letting you touch us like our old dad did when we were good. But when we started rubbing against you, you stopped us and told us we would never have to do that again. You said that if anyone tried it, you would hurt them; and that you were our big brother now and nobody would ever hurt us again. You said that big brothers don't do that stuff with their little brothers, and daddies should never even think about it."

Jamie took over the discussion. "Even though you didn't ask Dad and Pop first, you had already decided that we were staying with you. Since we have met you, bro, you have made our lives a TON better. Whenever you hug us, it feels like an angel wrapping his wings around us making us safe. When you are in the room, even the grown-ups are different; somethin' about you makes everyone wanna be good. We talked with Ty, and he says you don't know how to hate, you get mad but even when Jason hit you you still did not hate him."

The ping-pong discussion continued as Jacob took over. "Bro, in the few days we have been together, you have made both of us forget what it was like living with our old dad. The best thing that ever happened to us is when the guys found us and brought us here; if they had not done that we would have never got you for a big bro. You try to make everybody happy, that is something only an angel could do. Since you just being around makes everybody feel good, that means you are an angel."

Justy looked at the faces of his two new brothers and smiled.

"I guess if you put it that way, you guys can call me an angel. I love you two guys, but I did not realize I had made that much of a difference," he tightened his hug around the twins and softly told them "Thanks for coming into my life."

Both twins tilted their head up and kissed the nearest cheek of their big brother, then reached up and softly wiped the tears of joy off of Justin's face that were slowly running from his eyes.

Aaron had awakened while the twins were talking, and silently reached over with his right arm and pulled the three boys closer to him. "Justy," he said softly, "your bros are right. All those times Nicky came over, and even when he dragged me along, it was because when we were around you it made us forget all the bad stuff from at home. When your Dad saved me, there were a lot of times those first weeks when I woke up and did not want to get out of bed. But you came in, and either pounced me or started wrestling, and in no time I forgot about being depressed and was ready to start the day. You have a special magic, lil' bro, and me, Nick, Jacob, and Jamie all owe you our lives for what you have done for us. In fact, if it wasn't for you, your Dad would have gave up after what happened to Brad. Instead, he kept working to make sure that he gave his angel the best life he could. I could go on forever listing everyone who you have somehow changed their

life for the better, but I would lose my voice long before I was done. You instinctively know how to make someone's life better, and for that you are definitely an angel."

By this time, Justy was barely able to speak. He managed to squeak out "Thanks, Aaron." before completely breaking down in tears.

A half hour later, the kids all started drifting out to the pool deck to join the adults. The crowd fell silent when they saw Aaron carrying Justy out followed by David with the twins. The look on Justy's face, still red from tears, immediately drew everyone's attention. Aaron sat Justy carefully in a lounge, and then David placed a twin on each side of him. Aaron and David kissed each boy's forehead, and then turned to go back inside.

Chip, Nick, and Josh intercepted them at the doorway. Nick spoke first. "Okay, bro. What's wrong with Justy - this better be good."

Aaron smiled. "Nothing's really 'wrong'; it's more that he's got a lot of info to process. The twins decided to tell him why they think he is an angel, and by the time them and I were done, he realized how much he has helped all of us. Right now he is still processing a lot of info; the best thing I can suggest is the three of you stopping by and thanking him individually for something he has done to help you out. Make sure you use examples, he really needs to know that he has helped."

Nick grinned while tapping David on the shoulder. "What'd you do with my lil' bro - and who is this?"

David giggled. "This IS your lil' bro - between Justy, Chip, Josh, and Teri he's learned a lot, and is starting to use it."

Chip noticed the group from upstairs coming down the hall.

"Y'all take your turns with Justy first, I have an Ensign to fry!" he said with a grin. He then walked over to the group and tapped Sean on the shoulder. "Cadet, report to the diving platform immediately. Do NOT jump off."

Sean replied "Yes, sir!" and then jogged to the platform.

"What's that about, Uncle Chip?" Adam asked.

"I'm gonna have some fun; just watch," Chip replied with a grin.

Chip grabbed an envelope from the kitchen, and then joined Sean on the platform. "Could I have everyone's attention, please?" Chip shouted.

Once the pool was quiet, he continued. "It has come to my attention that a certain teenager among us has decided that if he's about to lose a game it's time to change the rules. As undesirable as that is in normal life, it is a trait that is prized among Starfleet officers. In the process of changing the rules, this same young man made a discovery which has resulted in a fleet-wide Level 1 ECO. That means Engineering Change Order, and a Level 1 means do it NOW. For the second time in a week, the surname 'Short' has made waves throughout Starfleet. Sean, I need you to read this first note to everyone.

Sean took the note from Chip.

*From: Admiral Harrison Morrow*

*To: Cadet Sean Short*

*Re: Duty orders*

*Cadet Short;*

*It has come to my attention from Starfleet Engineering that*

*you have discovered the cause of the surges when the phasers are fired on Fleet ships. Upon review, it has been decided to implement these changes on a priority basis Fleet-wide. I have received recommendations from both Captain James Kirk and Captain Spock based on your simulation tests and this discovery to activate your commission. Upon review of the facts, I concur with their recommendations and hereby activate you as Ensign assigned to the Helm division, assigned to the USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-A.*

*I wish to add my personal congratulations at your accomplishment of becoming the youngest active-duty Ensign in Starfleet history. An additional note; the exercise you completed has a 40% failure rate for the senior class at the Academy. You were the first crew to stay and fight instead of retreating that completed the exercise successfully. That shows a rare resolve and determination, which will take you far in Starfleet.*

*Admiral Harrison Morrow  
Chief of Starfleet Operations*

Sean carefully refolded the message, and handed it back to Chip with tears of joy in his eyes. When everyone applauded his accomplishment, he lost what control he had of his emotions and grabbed Chip into a tight hug. "Thanks Uncle Chip. I promise I won't disappoint you again."

Chip rubbed the back of his young trainee's head as he replied softly "You earned it, little buddy. That scenario kicked my butt the first time I went through it; even Mr. Spock raised both of his eyebrows at how you solved it. Your Uncle Josh and I were on the ship watching you to see how you reacted; all of you reacted better than most students at the Academy do. In fact, you followed procedures right down the line. Mr. Scott was watching too, he said to tell you that your choice to run at less than the speed Cory recommended was commendable. You impressed a lot of important people today, Sean; I was going to enter a recommendation this afternoon to activate you, but when I called the ship I was given this." Chip then raised his voice so everyone else could hear. "Cory, I have a message here for you from Mr. Scott. Also, for those who don't know, a recommendation from Mr. Spock for promotion based on performance alone is rare. Both Sean and Cory have done something very few ensigns have ever done; impress Mr. Spock to the point he makes official recommendations in their personnel files. I may have pulled some strings to get these two started in Starfleet, but both of them have proven themselves and have earned everything they have got from the time I gave them their letters until now. Teri, you have two very special sons here who will make a lasting impression Federation-wide before they are twenty. I think both of them deserve a hand."

By then, Cory had joined Sean and Chip on the platform. To their surprise, at first everyone clapped. But then, led by the members of the tribe, everyone stood up and gave them a standing ovation.

Once everyone settled, Cory opened his note.

*From:  
Commander Montgomery Scott  
Chief Engineer, USS Enterprise*

To:  
Ensign Cory Short  
Engineering Division, USS Enterprise

Ensign,

*Upon review of the modifications you requested I review; I have verified they pass all safety standards and have dispatched them to Starfleet Engineering. The following response was immediately received:*

\* \* \*

Commander Scott:

*Upon review of your proposed modifications, we are issuing a PRIORITY ONE ECO number 9834-78-08272004-6. As per your attachment, this ECO will hereby be referred to as the 'Short Enhancement', with development credit being given to Junior Helmsman Sean Short, with Junior Engineer Cory Short as reviewing engineer.*

*You are hereby instructed to install this modification immediately.*

Captain Benjamin Matlock  
Starfleet Engineering

\* \* \*

*Mr. Short, initial tests have indicated an emergency phaser capability of 125% of design level. This letter will become a part of your official record.*

Commander Montgomery Scott  
(The following was hand-written at the bottom.)

Cory,

*Ye continue to amaze me, laddie! I was watchin' you on the simulation, and I kinna' had done better myself. Both yourself and Sean did a fine job, and ye both deserve the credit. Tell Sean I send my congratulations, ye both deserve all ye have got.*

Scotty

Cory's jaw dropped, and he showed Sean and Chip the letter.



"WOW," Sean said in awe, "You mean they NAMED it after us?"

Cory shook his head. "No, Sean, it's named after YOU. All I did was review it. It takes a lot to get Scotty's praise, and it's all for you."

Chip pulled the two boys close to him. "I have an announcement. Since these two seem to want to shake up Starfleet, I think a congratulatory dinner is in order. Everyone get out your suits and ties, if you need some let me know. It's time we went out and had a proper congratulatory dinner for the four boys here who have changed a bunch of our lives in the last week - Sean, Cory, Aaron, and Justy. I'll take care of arrangements; you all have about 45 minutes to get ready."

## Chapter 20

Teri smiled as the limos pulled into the restaurant. "Sam & Gabe's, Chip? How did you pull this one off?"

Chip grinned. "It's amazing what some places do when they get a call from the *Enterprise*. Especially if the Captain says he wants to throw a party."

"So THAT explains why you wanted the boys wearing their uniforms. I thought this was just us?"

"That was the original plan, but once the Captain heard what I was doing, he decided it should be an official function."

The limos let off their passengers at the entrance, and they proceeded to enter the building. As they entered, Josh's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Sweetheart, you are amazing!" Josh told Chip in awe. "How did you find a place with LIVE jazz?"

Chip smiled. "The Captain has been here a few times. He highly recommended it."

As Chip approached the podium, Scotty noticed the group and joined them.

"Mr. Dodds, we was wonderin' when ye were goin' to arrive. Yourself, Joshua, and the boys will be a sittin' next ta the Captain. The wee Ensigns are to take their trainees to my side."

Chip's eyebrows shot up. "Their trainees, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, they would be the ones training them, now wouldn't they?"

Chip shook his head. "You are incorrigible, Scotty. I'm curious just what you and the Captain are up to now."

Scotty rounded up the group to go with him as everyone else found their seats. Chip took his family to the table in the center front of the stage, while Scotty headed his group to the table immediately to the right.

Andrew tapped JJ on the shoulder. "What's up with this, bro? Why are we sittin' up front?"

JJ shook his head. "I have no idea. It's weird that we have to sit with the crew. I understand Sean and Cory, but why us?"

Adam was busy looking around the room. He noticed that even though the *Enterprise* had a large group, there were still regular patrons in the restaurant too. Once everyone was seated, the waiters began taking orders.

Lt. Commander McPherson leaned over so the boys could hear him. "Guys, we have been here a few times. If you like chicken, the Penne All Sophia is great, the Atlantic salmon is awesome, and for those of you with a liking to eating cows I recommend the beef tenderloin

DeBurgo."

Cory giggled. "Thanks, Mac. I'm betting none of us had any idea what all these weird names were on the menu. The most exotic thing I usually order is pizza!"

The group settled into quiet conversations as they were waiting on dinner. Nobody noticed Josh sneak up to the stage, until the bandleader made the announcement.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it seems we are going to have a special treat tonight! Please welcome Mr. JC Chasez-Dodds from the boyband \*N Sync, who has gracefully offered to join us tickling the ivories tonight."

The waiter came around to the Engineering table, and got Scotty's attention. "Sir, Mr. Chasez-Dodds has requested that delivery of the main course be withheld until the next band break. Will that be acceptable?"

"Aye, lad; that it would be. Thank you."

The waiter gave a short bow, and then headed to the other tables.

Adam slapped JJ under the table, then leaned over to whisper in his ear "Watch the band, not the waiter - unless you like singing soprano for the rest of your life."

JJ blushed, then whispered back "Sorry, babe. You have to admit he had a cute butt though. It just isn't as cute as yours."

Their interchange was broken up by Andy giggling. "I hate to say it, JJ - BUSTED!"

Scotty settled them back down, and then told the boys and Mac what the waiter said. There were no complaints as they all sat back to enjoy a side of Josh's music that was rarely heard.

At the Captain's table, Justy leaned over to Jamie and Jacob. "Bros, watch me when the food comes out. There are special forks for each course; I'll show you what to use since you have not ever ate somewhere this fancy."

Both boys smiled back. "Thanks, Jus," Jacob replied. "We were kinda scared we'd mess up and get laughed at."

Kirk heard the interchange between the three boys, and interrupted. "Guys, don't worry. Usually the people who laugh are the ones who did not know what to do either. Just try your best, and if you need help ask."

"Okay, Uncle Jim; thanks!" the twins chorused.

As the break started, Josh returned to his seat and the waiters started bringing out the first course. For most of the boys, it was a shock seeing the amount of food and the professional presentation. To the relief of the adults, Aaron, David, and Justy made sure the kids at each of their tables used a semblance of proper etiquette. At the Engineering table, Scotty ensured that Sean, Cory, and the other three knew what to do.

Once everyone finished their dessert, Captain Kirk got their attention, and in the process the attention of the surrounding tables. "Now that everyone has finished with this outstanding meal, I need to say a few words. As an Iowa native, it makes me proud when another Iowan performs admirably in the public view. In the last two days, two young men who are here tonight have reached heights never thought possible. I would like these two young men to please stand; Ensign Cory Short and Ensign Sean Short.

Both boys rose and stood nervously.

The Captain continued. "By their own accomplishments, these two were given the rank of full Ensign, despite their not having attended the Academy yet. Ensign Cory used his computer skills to design a change to the *Enterprise* which has increased her proficiency beyond what the designers thought possible. Ensign Sean used his problem-solving skills to locate and implement a change while using the training simulator which as we speak is being implemented in every ship in the fleet. Additionally, both of these men represent Iowa as the two youngest commissioned

officers in the history of the Federation. Gentlemen, I speak for the entire crew when I say 'Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*'."

Kirk could tell by their blushes that neither of the boys was in any condition to speak, so he waved them to sit down before continuing.

"At the risk of getting 'pounced', I would like to also commend the youngest member of my crew, the ship's mascot Justin Dodds. In true *Enterprise* fashion, when he realized the two boys sitting next to him needed to experience a normal family, he took them under his wing. In three days he has already changed them both for the better, as evidenced by their expressions and how they carry themselves. Justin, you are a fine tribute to your parents and I am proud to have you listed as part of my crew."

Despite his blushing, you could see the pride in Justy's face at being publicly commended by the Captain.

Finally, Kirk turned toward the Engineering table once more. "Adam, Andrew, and JJ please stand up. The three of you have earned the right to sit with the crew whenever you are with us after your performance today. Your teamwork with Ensigns Sean and Cory during the surprise training simulation we ran today was commendable. I chose that particular simulation due to the difficulty it gives the senior class at the Academy. As a group, the five of you solved the situation in a unique manner, despite the odds being against you. You are now a permanent part of the *Enterprise*'s extended family, and you have definitely earned it. Let's give all of these boys a hand; all six of them have earned it."

To Kirk's surprise, not only did his group begin clapping, but all the patrons of the restaurant joined in. After a few seconds, it turned into a standing ovation throughout the dining area.

As it became quiet again, an older gentleman sitting across the room stood up. "May I have everyone's attention, please? It seems that all we hear are the bad things about today's youth; obviously the news reporters are missing something. Watching this large group of boys tonight has been a refreshing awakening; even before the good Captain's speech, I had decided to revise my opinion of their generation. After hearing of their accomplishments, there is only one appropriate thing to do. A toast; to today's youth, tomorrow will be in very good hands."

Throughout the room, the toast was answered.

As they reloaded the limos for the ride home a half hour later, all the boys who would be staying in Iowa after the weekend joined Teri in her limo. Aaron and David also joined the group after a quick discussion with Chip and Dan.

Aaron spoke as he was getting in. "Mom, everyone else is heading to the house; we need to hit the mall. Dan said Southridge Mall would work."

Teri looked at Aaron. "Why do we need to 'hit the mall', Aaron? What have you got up your sleeve?"

Aaron made a show out of trying to look up his sleeves, then replied "My arms, why Mom?"

"I shoulda' known better!" Teri exclaimed as she shook her head at the car full of giggling boys.

During the entire twenty minute trip to the mall, every boy in the car tried to get Aaron to tell them what he was planning; all any of them got was one of Aaron's trademark smiles no matter how they begged or threatened. Once they got there, everyone followed Aaron and David as they walked inside, looked at the directory, and headed for their destination.

"AARON! Where we GOIN'!" Ty said in exasperation.

"Just wait bro. You'll see shortly," Aaron replied with a grin.

Everyone fell silent when Aaron and David walked into Kay's Jewelers. Aaron walked up to the counter.

"May I help you, son?" the elder salesman asked.

"Yes, sir, my name is Aaron Carter; I placed an order two days ago and was informed it was ready."

"Ahh, yes Mr. Carter. I hope you understand I will need to see some identification due to the size of your order."

Aaron pulled out his billfold and started to retrieve his Florida driver's license; but he changed his mind and pulled out his Starfleet Dependents ID card. "Will this be okay?"

The salesman's eyes got wide when he saw the ID. There was no known way to forge them due to the color 3-D holographic photography and the proprietary Identichip; a technology which Starfleet refused to release even to the Earth-side governments. "This should be fine, Sir," he replied as he scanned the Identichip, which verified itself with the Starfleet HR server. Ten seconds later, an identification code was returned with instructions to replace Aaron's signature with the code.

"That's the first time I've seen someone your age use a Starfleet ID. Everything is in order, would you like the items all boxed?"

Aaron looked at David, and then grinned. "Actually - why don't you pull out the special necklace? I'll pass the rest out after we get home."

"A wise choice sir, if I remember our conversation correctly."

The salesman handed Aaron a small black felt box. Aaron took the box, thanked the salesman, and turned to Teri.

"Mom, I could not go back to Orlando without giving you a little something. This is just a little something from your sons to you, to show you how we care for you. Cory, Sean, Adam, Ty and I talked it over, and we all decided this said it best."

Teri looked at the necklace as Aaron took it out of the box and laid it in her hand. It was a gold herringbone necklace, with a small diamond cross. There were three hearts on each side of the cross, each with a birthstone and a boy's name. On the left were Mike, Sean, and Cory; on the right were Aaron, Adam, and Tyler.

"My God, it's beautiful!" Teri exclaimed as she tried to control the tears trying to force their way from her eyes.

"Mommy, can I put it on you?" Tyler asked.

"Yes, please Tyler. I'm so happy I don't think I would be able to hook it."

As Ty was placing it on her neck, Teri commented "This is so sweet; I will treasure it forever. Thank you each and every one of you." The tears finally won the battle as each boy, youngest to oldest, gave her a hug and an 'I love you'. Just as she started to recover, David held out another box.

"All of us future in-laws got together too, and decided you needed a bracelet to match the necklace," David said with a smile. He then opened the box, and placed the bracelet on Teri's wrist.

Teri looked at the bracelet; it was the same style as the necklace, only with three smaller hearts on it - one for David, one for JJ, and one for Kyle. Each heart also had the names and birthstones just as the necklace did. "All I can say is thanks, this means just as much to me as the necklace. All of you boys have gone beyond anything I would have ever expected of you, you are the best sons and son-in-laws anyone could ever have." She then looked around the store. "Hey guys, I think we better get going, y'all are drawing a crowd."

Aaron looked up. "EEK! You're right, mom!" He turned to the salesman, "Thanks so

much for the fine work. If everything else goes like this, I will be the happiest guy in Iowa. Don't be surprised if you get an occasional order from Orlando; with service like this I know a few band members who will be more than happy to give you their business."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter; it was a pleasure serving you. It's not often I get a chance to see the results of my work; you have just presented me with a memory I will never forget. Goodbye sir and may God bless you and your family."

\* \* \*

Teri had asked the limo driver to take the long way back, as she wanted to enjoy some private time with 'her' boys. They were on Hwy 5 just past the Hwy 28 exchange when they heard a loud BANG and an Explorer came flying across the road and rolled down the bank.

Cory reacted first. "STOP THE CAR! Sean, call McCoy and get a med team down NOW, everyone else follow me. We need to see if we can help. Aaron, grab the fire extinguisher just in case. David, direct traffic. MOVE!"

As Cory led the group to the vehicle, Sean pulled out his newly-issued communicator. "Ensign Sean to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead, Sean."

"Commander, I need a full med team at these coordinates ASAP. There is a civilian vehicle which just did a very good imitation of a tumbleweed across the road here."

"Understood, Sean. Dr. McCoy was on the bridge, he is on his way. *Enterprise* out."

Sean closed his communicator as McCoy and Chapel beamed down next to him. "Thanks, Doc - this way!" he yelled as he headed down the hill.

They arrived to find that Cory had used his phaser to remove what was left of the top of the SUV, and was working inside in the back seat. Adam and JJ were removing the debris from the front seat to give the med team access.

"Sean!" Cory said as he saw him, "Get ready to catch!" A minute later, Sean was surprised to be handed a kid who looked to be five or six, still in his booster seat. Once they had him free, they took him up the hill to a safe area.

Lt. Simpson checked the young boy over. "Well, except for the arm it looks like he's gonna have a few bruises, but I'd bet that booster seat saved his life." The lieutenant then proceeded to set the boy's arm and then put on a soft cast. "This is just to protect it while it finishes healing naturally; the field unit is not as strong as the shipboard ones. He's all yours, Ensigns, I'm gonna prescribe some cuddles to prevent shock."

For the first time in the last 30 minutes, Sean and Cory made an attempt at smiles. They looked down at the vehicle, and saw McCoy and Chapel still working on the driver, which told them there was still a chance.

Sean carefully picked up the boy and took him to the limo to sit down, with Cory following right behind.

Cory gently ruffled the kid's hair. "Hey buddy, I'm Cory and the teddy bear you are cuddled up to is Sean. What's your name?"

"Timmy," he whimpered, "is Daddy goin' to be okay?"

"We got the best doctor in the universe checking on him right now. How old are you, Timmy?" Cory answered, trying to change the subject.

"I'm almost six. Why are you dressed like space guys?"

Sean giggled. "That's 'cause we are. Our Captain just threw a party for us."

Just then Aaron came up. "Bro's, Doc needs to see ya'. Why don't you introduce me to the

stunt rider here?"

Timmy turned and looked at the source of the new voice. "I'm Timmy. Hey, you look like Aaron Carter!"

"That's because I am Aaron Carter. Hop on over here, these guys gotta talk to their boss."

Timmy moved over to Aaron, and then both Sean and Cory headed to where the Captain, Dr. McCoy, and Teri were standing.

"You needed to see us, Doctor?" Sean asked as they walked up.

"Yes, Sean, I do. The Captain, your mom, and I were just discussing the situation Cory got you into. Jim, why don't you break the news?"

"Ensigns, you did an outstanding job trying to save the occupants of the vehicle. We had to beam out a second bomb that was under the dash. The first one blew off the driver's side front suspension, and the driver's foot. Fortunately, the trigger on the second one failed. For the record, the official story will be that a front tire blew on the vehicle, the information I just gave you is for Starfleet internal purposes only."

"Excuse me, sir, but why is Starfleet that involved?" Cory asked.

"Good question, Cory. The driver was Terrance O'Neal, the only son of Ambassador Marcus O'Neal, who happens to be the only Earth representative allowed on Rigel VII. Unfortunately, Terrance was unable to be saved; he lost too much blood before Bones got to him. He regained full consciousness long enough to ask about his son Timmy and to make one final request. That request is what got me involved. Seeing as Timmy's only relative is the Ambassador, I contacted him and he insisted his son's last wish is to be complied with."

Sean looked at the faces surrounding him, and addressed the Captain. "Sir, how does that affect us?"

Captain Kirk gave the boys a half smile before continuing. "Terrance's last wish was that the officer who was working so fast to save them is to be the one to raise his son. He specifically stated that he was talking about the one who cut off the roof. I explained to the Ambassador about your age, Cory, and he reminded me of a little-used regulation. When you both accepted active commissions, you immediately gained full status as adults Federation-wide. In other words, you both now have the full rights and responsibilities of adults."

Kirk looked at Teri, who nodded her head slightly, before he continued. "I realize the two of you are a couple, so you both need to make the decision; but only Cory can answer the question when I ask it, since he specifically was requested. Go talk about it, you have five minutes to decide."

The two boys joined hands, and walked down the road a few yards for privacy. Sean began first. "Babe, what are we gonna do? I don't want to put the little tyke out, but I don't think I'm ready to be a dad."

Cory had a pained look on his face. "I know; I can't let him go, but yet I'm only 14, I'm too young to be a daddy!"

The two boys hugged each other for a minute while sorting their thoughts, when they were interrupted by a small voice. "Bro's? What's wrong?"

The two looked up to see Ty and Kyle looking at them with concern. Cory answered "Little Timmy's daddy is dead. Before he died, he said he wanted Cory to be Timmy's new daddy. Timmy's grandpa said that he wants us to do it too. Thing is, both of us are too young to be parents."

Kyle looked at the two older boys, and then said something neither expected. "Don't be dummies. Cory, you have been like a Daddy to me since the first day I met you in the home. When I was bad, you made me admit to it and take my punishment. JJ has been a big brother, but you

always were more."

Ty continued. "Yeah, and Sean, all the times I came over you made me sit down and do homework before I could play. I know we all call you our big brothers, but really you are like our Dads; if we do somethin' wrong you are gonna make us answer for it. Besides, don't ya' think Mom will help you?"

Cory and Sean held out their arms to the two young boys. "Come here, group hug." As they broke the hug he continued. "Thanks, guys. I never thought you saw me like that, I just was doing what I thought was right."

"Same here," said Sean. "Are you sure you won't mind, Ty? This is gonna affect you guys too. Same with JJ and Adam."

"Justy and the twins say 'Hurry up', or else they are gonna sic their Dad and Pop on ya'. Does THAT answer your question?" Kyle stated with a grin.

When Ty nodded in agreement, Cory looked at Sean. "We know how everyone else feels, now what do you think, babe?"

"I'm willing to give it a shot, like Ty said Mom will probably help. What about you, no matter what you are affected more than me since you are the one taking custody."

Cory looked Sean in the eyes. "Sean, WE are doing this, your name is going to be right there with mine. That is one thing I will NOT bargain about."

Sean hugged Cory, then they turned to rejoin the Captain and Teri. "Thanks Ty and Kyle; y'all just helped more than you know."

As they were walking, Cory thought about how he was going to approach this. He finally decided just as they arrived at where the Captain was standing.

Kirk looked at the two boys, surprised that he was unable to read their faces. "What did you decide, Cory?"

Cory came to attention. "Sir, I request the *Enterprise's* Medical Officer record this conversation for inclusion in the Ship's log, with all due respect."

Kirk raised his eyebrows, he had been going to suggest just that himself, but Cory beat him to it. "As you wish, Ensign. Bones, could you do the honors?"

"I don't believe it, an Engineer with common sense!" Dr. McCoy muttered just loud enough for everyone to hear as he was setting up his tricorder. "You're on, Ensign. This should be good."

Cory grinned slightly; the Doctor's humor having its intended effect and relaxing him. "Thank you, Doctor. Captain; after discussing Timmy O'Neal's situation with my partner, we have reached a decision. I am willing to accept permanent custody with two requirements. First is that both myself and Ensign Sean Short be listed as parents, and second is that Timmy be required to change his last name to Short for his own protection. Due to the cause of his fathers' death, I don't think it would be safe for him to keep his original last name." Cory then gave the Captain a look which clearly stated it was his turn.

McCoy saw the look, and before the Captain could respond he tapped him on the shoulder. "Jim, don't bother arguing. He reminds me of a certain hot-shot captain I met quite a few years ago. Namely you. Honestly, you still get your way one way or the other."

Kirk grinned and shook his head at the Doctor's comment, then responded. "Ensign, I agree with your conditions, but need to clear them with the Ambassador. Give me just a minute here." He then pulled out his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead, Captain."

"Uhura, I need a priority channel opened to Ambassador O'Neal on Rigel VII. Relay it to



my communicator please."

"One second, sir. Opening the channel."

It took a minute, but then the communicator sprang back to life. "Captain, I have the Ambassador for you; I'm putting him through now."

"Captain Kirk, this is Ambassador O'Neal. Is there a problem?"

Kirk responded. "Hello, Ambassador. I would not say a problem, but there are two conditions which Ensign Cory Short has before he can accept custody of Timmy. The first is that his partner, Ensign Sean Short, also be listed on the permanent guardianship as adoptive parent along with Ensign Cory."

"So am I to understand that Cory and Sean are a couple, both of which are in Starfleet? What is Sean's age?"

"Ensign Sean is thirteen, and yes they are a couple."

"In that case, I will accept that condition. If Starfleet recognizes then as a family then so shall I. What is the other condition?"

Kirk tensed slightly before replying, he knew this would be the tough one. "My Ensign believes that Timmy is still at risk from whoever caused his father's death. To reduce that risk, he requires Timmy to change his surname to match theirs."

The communicator was quiet for a minute, and then the Ambassador answered. "Unfortunately, I believe your Ensign could very well be right. Timmy is the last surviving member of my family; if that's what it takes to keep my grandson alive then so be it. Tell Cory and Sean they have already impressed me, and I look forward to someday soon meeting them in person."

Cory reached out his hand for Kirk's communicator. "Ambassador, this is Ensign Cory Short; we both were listening. Thank you and we both look forward to meeting you too. I'll give you back to the Captain now."

Kirk retrieved the communicator. "Thank you, Ambassador. I assure you Timmy is in good hands."

"I already get that impression. Thank you Captain. O'Neal out."

"Kirk out."

Kirk turned to Teri. "Teri, I believe this is your department, could you do the finals?"

Teri looked at her sons. "Cory, Sean, before I finalize this, I want you to know I'll help you as much as I can; all you have to do is ask. As much as it worries me, you two are now adults legally and have to live with your decisions. Ensigns Cory and Sean Short, do you accept full custody of the minor child Timothy Christian O'Neal?"

Cory spoke for both of them. "We accept custody and request his surname be changed to 'Short'."

"Approved. From this point forward, he shall be known as Timothy Christian Short. This concludes these proceedings."

Both boys gave their mom a hug, then turned to the Captain and extended their hands. Sean spoke for them both when he told the captain "Thank you for your support sir. I just hope we can handle this."

"You both can, your Mom is the best support network I know of. Now go get your son, Bones will go with you to help break the news."

As the three walked up to the limo, it was obvious the rest of the boys had joined Aaron and Timmy. Doctor McCoy opened the door, and everyone fell quiet as him, Sean, and Cory climbed in.

Cory and Sean sat in their favorite corner spot, and then Cory spoke. "Timmy, could you

please come over here with Sean and me?"

Timmy walked over, and stood in front of them. When Cory signaled for him to sit on their laps, he climbed up and snuggled Cory.

Cory spoke in a soft voice. "Timmy, this is Doctor McCoy. He is the Chief Medical Officer on the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. He was the one trying to help your daddy; the one I said was the best doctor in the whole universe."

Timmy looked up at Cory, tears forming in his grey eyes. "Did Daddy die?"

Cory pulled the skinny four-foot tall boy closer and nuzzled his face into Timmy's short red hair. "I'm really sorry, he was hurt too bad to help. He woke up long enough to tell the Doc something. He loved you so much the last thing he did was to make sure you were going to be okay."

Timmy buried his freckled face in Cory's shoulder, tears freely flowing. After ten minutes, he calmed enough to ask "What did daddy say?"

Sean reached over and kissed the boy's forehead. "Why don't we let Doc tell you?"

Timmy looked over at McCoy. "What did he say, Doc?"

McCoy pulled out his tricorder. "Instead of me repeating it, I'll let you hear." He then played it back.

"Doc, is Timmy okay?"

"If Timmy was the boy in back, he's fine. Now let's get you out there with him."

"Doc, if I don't make it, tell Timmy I love him. If that happens, find the officer who cut the roof off the truck. I heard him working to get both of us out and want him to raise Timmy."

"I don't plan to have to pass that message, but I will."

There were some wet coughs, then one last statement. "Thanks Doc, it's my time now."

Timmy looked at McCoy. "Was Daddy hurting when he said that?"

"Yes, he was Timmy."

"Is Daddy hurting now?"

McCoy looked into Timmy's eyes. "No, I don't think he will ever hurt again."

"What about Granpa? Does he know?"

Sean answered. "Yes he does, Tim. We talked to him just before we came to the car. Do you understand what your dad asked to be done?"

Timmy thought for a second, and then realized who was being talked about. "Cory, does that mean you are my new Daddy?"

"Yes it does little buddy. Actually you got two new daddies - Sean and me both."

"How can I call you both Daddy?"

Sean answered "Well, how does Daddy and Pappa sound? Would that work?"

Timmy thought for a second. "Yeah, I guess. That makes you Pappa and Cory Daddy, right?"

"If that's what you want, it's fine with us," Cory replied. "Did your Uncle Aaron introduce everyone here to you?"

Timmy looked confused. "Uncle Aaron? - - WHOA! Aaron Carter is my UNCLE?"

McCoy chuckled. "Sounds like you have this zoo under control, Cory. I'm heading back up to the ship." He then left the limo.

"Yep, he sure is," Sean answered. "Did he tell you everyone's names?"

"Nah, we were having too much fun."

"That's okay, bud," Cory said. "Let me do it, and then we'll go meet your Grandma. First is your Uncle Ty, and next to him is his boyfriend, your Uncle Kyle. Next to them is your Uncle Adam and his boyfriend, your Uncle JJ. The two big ones are your Uncle Aaron and his fiancé,

your Uncle David."

"Wow, I got a lotta uncles!" Timmy snickered.

"Just wait, the rest are waiting at home!"

Cory playfully rubbed Timmy's head. "C'mon kiddo, let's go chase down Grandma so we can get home."

"I'll wait here, Babe. I need to relax a minute," Sean said.

"Okay, we'll try to be quick," Cory replied before reaching over to give Sean a quick kiss.

Cory climbed out of the car, carrying a giggling Timmy on his hip. They headed towards Teri and the Captain, who were standing with a State Police trooper making the required earth-side accident report.

They finished just as Cory walked up. "Timmy, this Pappa's and my boss, Captain Kirk."

"Kewl!"

Kirk rubbed Timmy's head. "Just call me Uncle Jim, the rest of my crew's kids do. How are you doing?"

"Okay. Daddy is intr'ducin' me to my new uncles. I got LOTS of them!"

Kirk chuckled. "Yes you do, I'll bet the rest are waiting at home for you. Cory, you need anything else before I head back to the ship?"

"Actually, sir, if you could have Security pickup all of Tim's stuff from his old place. I really would rather have them check it out first."

"Good thinking, Cory. I'll have it done immediately. You head on home with your new son. Consider that an order."

"Yes Captain!" Cory replied with a grin. He then turned to Teri. "Mom, meet your new grandson, Timmy."

Teri wrapped her arms around Timmy and Cory. "Welcome to the family, Timmy. Are you ready to go to your new home?"

"Yeah, I'm getting sleepy," Timmy replied.

"Let's go, then," Teri said as she headed toward the limo.

By the time the limo was moving, Timmy was asleep in Sean and Cory's arms.

Sean and Cory received a pleasant shock when they arrived at the house. Teri and the rest of the boys got out first, and then when Sean and Cory exited, with Timmy snuggled in Cory's arms; they found everyone in an informal honor guard along both sides of the sidewalk.

"Who're all these people, Daddy?" Timmy asked sleepily.

"These are a lot of your relatives, son. They all want to meet you."

"O'tay. Wake me when they're done," Timmy replied as he pressed his head into Cory's shoulder.

Cory giggled quietly as he walked to the house and into the Rec room carrying Timmy.

Aaron led the rest of the group in, all the kids quietly taking a seat on the floor near the couch with Timmy, Cory and Sean on it. Timmy finished waking up, and looked around at the assembled group.

"Daddy, Pappa, why are the Backstreet Boys and NSync standing here lookin' at me?"

Sean smiled. "They want to see their new nephew. They are your uncles too." Sean then introduced everyone there.

Anne walked up to them as he finished. "Timmy, I'm your Grandma Anne. Welcome to the family, kiddo." She then kissed him on the forehead, giving him her official seal of approval.

"Nobody leave yet," Aaron announced. "I have something I want everyone to see. After the last couple of days, I finally feel part of a full family again. After what I saw tonight, I'm glad I planned this surprise. You adults jokingly call us the tribe, in reality you are right. Tonight I saw

the two 'leaders' of our tribe take charge and save a young life with the assistance of their brothers. In the process we all gained a nephew. I know some of us have to take off tomorrow, so I wanted to pass these out tonight."

Aaron opened the box he had brought from the jewelers. "I had these specially made for all of the 'tribe'; it's my way of showing we are always together no matter how far apart we are physically. Johnny, you first." Aaron then placed a gold herringbone necklace on each boy's neck, youngest to oldest, each of which had an Amethyst charm in a link on the front. Once he finished with Mark and David, he continued. "Now for my brothers, something extra. Cory, Sean, Ty, Adam, Justy, Jamie, Jacob and Nick; you all are special in the fact I don't just call you my brothers; you are all really my brothers. That means more to me than anyone could ever understand."

Aaron then pulled out nine red boxes, and removed a small cross from the first one. "Each of these are the same, they have the birthstones of each of us, and are designed to attach to the necklaces." He proceeded to attach one to each of his bro's necklaces, finishing by attaching one to his own.

"Finally, for my nephews, their own little mark." Aaron got out two blue boxes, and removed two small white gold crosses from them to put on the young boy's necklaces. "Before you ask, I got a few spares of everything, so adding my newest nephew was no problem! Anyone who is interested should have no problem getting Mom to show you what we got for her, just ask. Oh, if something happens to any of the necklaces let me know so I can get it fixed or replace it, okay guys?"

Everyone answered affirmatively, and then the adults started filtering out of the room.

Aaron leaned down to Timmy. "Lil' buddy, there's gonna be times in the next few weeks you are gonna wonder if this is all real. All you gotta do is reach up and touch that necklace; that will remind you that you have a big family that loves you. How's that sound?"

"Thanks Unca' Aaron. This is cool!"

Nick came up behind the couch. "Cory, we're about to put Johnny in his bath, if it's okay with you and Sean, Timmy can take a bath with him."

Cory looked at Sean, who nodded his head, then replied "Thanks, Uncle Nick. That sounds like a great idea, if he wants to."

Nick smiled, "First off, stop the 'Uncle' bit; you're my brothers too now!" he ruffled Timmy's hair and then asked "Timmy, you wanna take your bath tonight with Johnny?"

"Do I gotta take a bath?" Timmy asked with a pout.

"Yes, you do, kiddo. Either with Johnny or by yourself, you decide," Cory answered. "By the way, the pout won't work - your Pappa and I still try it, so we know what you are trying to do."

Nick cracked up at that. "I need to use that reply with Johnny! You two are gonna do great!"

Timmy realized he lost the battle, so he replied "If you put it that way, I guess I'll take it with Johnny. At least he's FUN."

Sean shook his head. "Go on, bud. Just try not to flood the floor, okay? Grandma hates it when the water gets in the hall."

Timmy giggled at the thought. "Okay, Pappa," He replied as he followed Nick and Johnny out of the room.

Aaron and David were both sitting on the floor stifling their laughter. "What's so funny, goofballs?" Cory asked.

Aaron managed to answer "Sorry, bros; it was just so funny the way you busted him about pouting. You know, Nicky is probably going to use that on Johnny for real!"

Both Cory and Sean giggled. "Only if Timmy does not tell him first!"

They were both surprised when a set of arms reached around them from the back of the couch and hugged them. Justy released the hug and came around in front of them. "That was from me and my bros. I know it seems obvious, but all of us are really proud of you, first for stopping for the crash, and then taking in Timmy. I'm sure you've heard why Jacob and Jamie think I'm their angel, well after tonight you have proven yourselves to be angels yourselves. There are a lot of kids in this house you have given a second chance to; in fact if it wasn't for you I would not have my brothers. Most of the guys don't know how to say this, so I'll say it for them. Thank you for being there for all of us when we needed you the most. I gotta go; Jamie and Jacob are waiting for me." Justy headed for the doorway, but yelled as he headed out "by the way, pouncing lessons start tomorrow!" then ran up the stairs.

Sean looked at Cory. "I don't know about you, but I need a drink!"

"Sounds good, let's go. We'll be right back, guys."

They walked to the kitchen, and as they were grabbing sodas from the 'fridge they were intercepted by Chip and Josh.

"Here we go again!" Cory quipped with a grin as he rolled his eyes.

Josh chuckled. "Been getting a lot of advice, guys?"

"Not much," Sean replied, "but if one more person tells me how great we were, I'm gonna puke! All we did was what any normal person would do; what's so special about that? At least Justy was thanking us for helping everyone instead of just saying we were great."

Chip smiled. "That's our Justy; he likes to make sure you know what you do right. What you two did tonight was what everyone is taught to do, but very few actually will do. That is what everyone is proud of. It reflects on not only you, but your mom as well. The Captain called me once he made it back to the ship, Tim's personal belongings will be here in the morning. When he told me what you two had agreed to, I seriously wondered if you were ready for it. After Josh and I talked about it, I realized the two of you are more mature than quite a few adults I know."

"Besides," Josh continued, "I'm sure you will probably be asking your mom for pointers. You can call us too if you need to; especially when he starts asking questions about you being a gay couple."

Cory relaxed. "Thanks, I think you might be getting a few calls! It's still sinking in; give us a few days to adjust. Nicky thinks we'll do good after he heard how we dealt with Timmy trying to pout his way out of a bath."

Chip chuckled "We heard about that! Nice tactic, telling him it won't work since you still do it. A word of advice, you might want to make sure you have something on tonight, I bet you get a third person in bed before the night is over!"

"Will do, thanks," Sean replied.

An hour later, everyone was winding down. The nest was created in the Rec room, and everyone began to get ready for bed.

Timmy came up to Cory and pulled on his arm. "Daddy, do I have to sleep in there with everyone else?"

Cory got on one knee in front of Timmy. "Where would you like to sleep, little one?"

"I wanna sleep in your bed with you and Pappa."

Cory smiled. "I guess that's where we'll sleep then. Where did you find the cool Pokemon 'jamas?"

Timmy grinned. "Johnny let me borrow them!"

"Did you thank him?"

"Yep!"

"Okay, go find Pappa and we'll head up to bed after we say goodnight to Grandma."

"Okay, Daddy," Timmy said as he ran back into the Rec room to get Sean.

A few minutes later, the three of them located Teri in the office. "Night, Mom," Sean and Cory chorused. Timmy then walked up and gave her a hug. "Ni-Ni Gwanma."

Teri kissed his forehead as she returned the hug. "Goodnight sweetie and goodnight boys. See y'all in the morning."

Sean and Cory tucked Timmy into the bed, and then got ready and climbed in with him.

Teri looked in a few minutes later, and found the three boys sound asleep; Sean had cuddled against Cory's back and Timmy was scooted tightly into Cory's front with both of his parent's arms securely over his little chest.

## *Chapter 21*

"WAHHHHHHHHHH!"

Sean and Cory both shot instantly awake. "Timmy, we're right here! What's wrong lil' buddy?"

"They killed him! The bad guys killed daddy! He said they would!" Timmy answered hysterically. He then collapsed against Cory in tears.

"Sean, go get Dan! Timmy's doing like I did when Mikey died!" Cory said as he pulled Timmy into a hug. "Timmy, I'm right here baby boy. Calm down, pappa is going to get Uncle Dan."

Sean ran through the bathroom into his old bedroom. "DAN! Get up; we need you in our room NOW!"

Dan and John both jumped out of the bed. "What's wrong Sean?" Dan asked as he threw on a robe. "The last time I saw you this freaked out, Cory was in the hospital!"

"My SON is freaking out, hurry up! He is NOT gonna go through what Cory did!"

Dan and John followed Sean as he ran back into the other room. They found Cory holding Timmy, both now in tears.

John grabbed Sean. "Go get Tyler and Kyle. Tell Kyle to yank Mike off of whatever friggin' cloud he's hanging out on and get him down here NOW, preferably along with Timmy's father. MOVE!"

Sean ran out the door as Dan sat down next to Cory and put his arm over both Cory and Timmy. "Cory, its Doctor Dan. Come on buddy, hold it together. Sean and Timmy both need you to be strong right now. You can do it."

Cory turned his face toward Dan, tears still streaming down his cheeks. In a panicked voice, he began rambling. "Tell me WHY Dan? PLEASE! Explain why someone had to hurt this little angel who is now my son by killing his father? Why did some damn drunk have to kill Mikey and cause so much grief for Mom and Sean? Why did Sharon have to die just as Kyle was getting a loving family? Why did I have to be so damn weak and collapse when Sean needed me the most? Why did I have to lose a year of living with the two people in this world who I love the most? Why does Mom have to worry if I'm going to be okay or is something going to make me lose it again? WHY DOES EVERYONE AROUND ME ALWAYS GET HURT!" He then pulled Timmy closer and resumed sobbing.

As Dan was trying to frame a response, a small voice came from on Cory's lap. "Please don't cry, Daddy. It'll be okay. Daddy, I'm sorry, I hadda' bad dream. I didn't mean ta scare you. My other Daddy used to tell me that sometimes bad stuff happens so the good stuff can. Maybe all that

bad stuff happened so I could have you and Pappa."

Timmy's voice brought Cory back from the edge he was about to fall over again. Still crying, but no longer hysterical, Cory kissed Timmy's head and quietly wept as he cuddled his son.

\* \* \*

**Mike:**

It figures - I was sitting back with Elvis discussing today's music. You know what, he's a big fan of Backstreet, \*NSync, and O-Town! Shoot, he even likes Aaron! Anyway, Jimi Hendrix had just flew in to join our pow-wow when I felt my leg being pulled. "Hey guys, I'll be back in a few. Looks like Tyler's boyfriend Kyle seems to think I'm needed downstairs."

They both chuckled, and then Elvis said "Kyle? Man, that boy is getting a rep up here. Better go check it out; last I heard only Saints could receive summons, so it must be a hot problem. Take your time, it's not like we are going anywhere in the next millennium."

"Awww mannn, that was BAD E!" I groaned. "Things have been good lately, so this should be easy. I'll be right back."

As I took flight, I turned my attention to see if Kyle was at least giving me a hint at why he wanted me. Man, I was shocked when I realized what was wrong and who he wanted me to bring along. This was WAY beyond what I could do alone, so I stopped by The Pearly Gates on my way out.

"Saint Peter, I need a little help," I said in a humble voice as I landed.

"Yes, Michael? I was expecting you," he answered in a musical voice.

"If possible, I need to locate a new arrival, as quick as possible; his son is in the care of my wards and is having serious problems."

"Ahh that would be Terrance O'Neal. I just summoned him before you landed. He is off checking on his father, so it will take a short time for him to arrive. While we are waiting, we have some unfinished business to attend to."

"Unfinished business?" I asked, confused.

"Yes. When you first came home, you volunteered for Guardian Angel duty for all of your family. We knew how big it is going to become; that is why we asked if you wanted to limit it to just your two little brothers. You will be pleased to know Our Father had a good chuckle when you refused to set any limits. When He recovered, He said that I was to give you some time; once you realized how it was growing then I was to give you one last chance to set a limit."

I thought it over; obviously this was only the beginning. I had not heard of anyone being allowed to change their wards once assigned, so I knew this was a rare honor. After careful consideration, I gave my reply. "Honestly, although my family has grown beyond what I expected, I would prefer to keep my assignment terms exactly the same; no matter how big the family gets. I made a promise to be there for all of them, it would not be right to cut off anyone who is added later."

Saint Peter smiled. "That is what He and I expected you to say, Michael. Our Father has given me directions for if you were able to follow your heart. It has been a long time since I have been ordered to do this. Kneel, Angel Michael."

I knew better than to question Saint Peter, so I dropped to one knee; having no idea what was to come.

"Michael is a noble but common name. The problem is, from this time on you need a unique name. Your wards call you 'Mikey'; so from this point henceforth that shall be your name."



Saint Peter then ran his hands over my wings, which turned from snowy white to shimmering gold. "Arise Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Children."

I felt a sudden power flow through me as the cherubim sang in celebration of the dedication of a new Saint. The Heavens rang as angels played whatever instrument they had at hand. I looked toward the Throne and whispered "Thank you Father."

"The Pope has been notified of your ascension, Saint Mikey. I suspect you are about to become very busy. Before you go to attend to your duties, I have a message for you to deliver. Notify young Justin Dodds that he has an identical set of wings waiting for him when it is his time to join us. Reassure him that they are going to be in storage a long time, though. Ahh, Terrance is arriving; it is time to go to your wards. For your information, you may now appear visible to those you chose; I suggest you use the ability wisely. A public appearance would be suggested once the Pope makes his announcement."

Terrance came up and said "You needed me, Saint Peter?"

"Yes, Terrance. You have unfinished business down below, and your son needs closure. Go with Saint Mikey, he will guide you to finish what was left undone."

"Thank you, Saint Peter. Saint Mikey, I'm ready when you are."

I expressed my gratitude to Saint Peter, and then we both took flight. As we headed down, I filled him in on the situation as I knew it.

\* \* \*

Sean came running back into the room followed by Kyle, Tyler, and Aaron.

Aaron took one look at Cory and flew across the room, dropping to his knees in front of his little brother. "Cory, come on bro, we're here for ya' bud. Relax, clear your head; DON'T let it beat you!"

"You don't understand. I'm failing as a Daddy on my first night, Aaron! Timmy needed me to calm him. Instead, I freaked out and he ended up having to calm ME. Why do you all put up with me; I'm so totally screwed up!"

Aaron was about to respond when the room was illuminated with a golden glow.

"Cory Patrick Short, what have I told you about talking down about yourself? You have done more good in the last week than some people have done their whole lives."

Everyone turned to the voice in the center of the room in shock. "Mikey?!?" Cory exclaimed.

Timmy looked at Cory then Sean. "Daddy, Pappa? Who is dat? Is he a ghost? Will he hurt me?"

Mike's appearance had calmed Cory, just like Mike himself did before he was killed. "Timmy, that is your Uncle Mikey. He's better than a ghost, he's an angel. A very special type of angel, he is Pappa and I's Guardian Angel. I promise he won't hurt you."

Mikey chuckled. "Actually, I think the proper way to address me is 'Saint Mikey', but I'll let it slide from you, little brother. Welcome to the family, Timmy! Oh, by the way - you were right Timmy; sometimes it takes bad stuff to let good stuff happen. Here are a couple examples from the last week, Cory. Two young boys ran away from home instead of letting their father take the abuse to the next stage. Those same boys now have a big brother who adores them and two loving fathers who would never abuse them. My second example: a young gay teen outs himself to his father, and is beaten severely. He now is living with the little brother he never knew he had, two new brothers, a new nephew, and a mother who would kill anyone who lays a hand on him. I know you know who I'm talking about, but do you know what all these boys have in common?"

"They've all been hurt," Cory replied

Mikey shook his head. "They were all hurt differently, so that don't count. There is one identical thing they have in common. YOU and Sean kept all three of those boys from being killed before their time. More importantly, there is one person in this room tonight who you saved all by yourself, bro."

"Who's that?" Cory asked, calmed but confused.

Mikey turned to John. "I know you were told to keep quiet, John. But either you tell him or I will, your choice. I would think as a Saint I kinda overrule Chip."

John shook his head in defeat. "If he's gonna hear it, might as well be from me. Dan, I hate to say it hun, but next time someone wakes us up in the middle of the night you are on your own. It's too early in the morning to be dealing with pushy Saints." He walked over and sat on the opposite side of Cory from Dan.

John began. "First off, Timmy I want you to cuddle your daddy real good; this is kinda scary but has a really happy ending. Cory, that wonderful little boy you are holding was six seconds from being spread along the side of the highway. The timer for the bombs under the dash was in the dome light on the ceiling; when you cut the roof off of the SUV, you cut the trigger wires from the timer. You are the only reason Timmy is sitting here right now, Cory. Also, if you had not done that, most of the kids in this room would either be dead or in the hospital right now. Don't ever forget that."

The room fell silent as everyone realized that they were six seconds from a major tragedy.

Timmy was the first to break the silence, as he softly said "You saved me. You didn't let me die like my other daddy. Thank you daddy, I love you!" He then cuddled tightly into Cory's chest.

Mikey gave everyone some time to recover from the shock. After a few minutes, he continued "Kyle, Timmy's father is here; open up to him bud."

"Sure Mikey, but I wanna talk to ya' too before ya' go, okay?"

"Sure thing. Timmy, could you come here please?"

Timmy was still uncertain about Mikey. He looked at Sean. "Pappa?"

Sean smiled. "It's okay, lil' guy. Come on, I'll stand with you."

That satisfied Timmy; he walked over to Sean, took his hand, and then moved in front of Mikey. "Daddy and Pappa say you are an angel. Why do they need a guard'n angel?"

The room lit up brighter as Mikey smiled. "I remember when your Daddy and Pappa used to ask tough questions like that. Sometimes things need to happen that people have trouble dealing with. A guardian angel helps them through the tough times, like right now. When you had your bad dream, it scared your Daddy and made him remember a bunch of things all at once. It's not your fault; some things happened in the past that make your daddy hurt when he thinks about them."

Timmy looked thoughtfully at Cory. "Daddy? Cuddle me when you hurt, okay? I know it makes me feel better."

Cory's heart about burst with love at the request. "Yes, Timmy; I'll cuddle with both you and Pappa from now on. Thank you ... SON."

Timmy broke into a huge grin, and turned back to Mikey. "Unca' Mikey, thanks for bein' Daddy and Pappa's guard'n angel."

"Sure thing, kiddo! Actually, I'm really the guardian angel of all the kids in the house tonight. That includes you! Now I have a little surprise for you. I brought your father with me, but he's not able to be seen like me. He's gonna talk to you through your Uncle Kyle. Does that sound okay?"

"How can he do that? Why can I see you but not him?"

Mikey chuckled. "Well Timmy, actually its Kyle that is letting him talk, I used to have to do it that way too. Which leads to your second question; I'm a Saint now, so I can let people see me."

"Okay," Timmy replied, satisfied. He turned to look at Kyle expectantly.

Kyle started speaking in a voice familiar only to Timmy. "Hi there Gizmo. How you like your new daddies?"

Timmy's face broke into a smile as tears of joy started rolling down his cheeks. He leaned back against Sean, and then answered. "DADDY! Why'd you die? They're kewl, but I miss you."

Terrance chuckled. "You must be fine; you are still as inquisitive as ever! It was my time, baby; nothing could change that. God sent Cory to rescue you, so that him and Sean could raise you. It's okay to miss me, but don't spend all your time doing it; your new Daddy can tell you why. Maybe you can help him with that."

"Okay Daddy. Are you gonna come back here a lot?"

"I can't say, lil' buddy. I'm here now because Saint Mikey summoned me. Since he is your Guardian Angel, the only way I can do this again is if he decides you need to see me. Just remember I will always love you Son, and Saint Mikey will keep me updated on how you are doing. I hate to say this kiddo, but Kyle is getting tired. Can I talk to your new daddies for a minute before I have to go?"

"Sure, Daddy. I luv ya' too, can I have one more hug?"

"Come here, Gizmo."

Timmy took the couple of steps to reach Kyle, and wrapped his arms around him. The faint outline of a set of white wings appeared and wrapped Timmy in a protective embrace.

They broke the hug, and Timmy exclaimed "I could FEEL his WINGS! WOW!"

Sean pulled Timmy into a hug. "We all saw the wings too; you really are a special little boy."

Terrance got everyone's attention. "Cory, Sean; first off I want to thank you for taking in Timmy. I know you heard it secondhand, but I want to make it official; I hereby give you my son to raise to the best of your ability. Cory, thank you for saving Timmy. I could tell you were young by your voice, but I did not realize how young you are. Despite your age, I still believe you will be the best daddy for Timmy; and with Sean as your partner I am sure he will be raised as good as or better than I could have done myself. As you will find out Monday, my will requests no memorial services of any kind. Dad will have a small service anyway where he's at, but there's to be nothing here. I do have some good news, Starfleet found the bombers; they are going to quietly disappear to a work planet. I'm really glad I got to meet you, and for that I owe Saint Mikey. Thank you for letting me meet Timmy's new family and allowing Timmy and I to say proper last goodbyes. It's time for me to return; express my thanks to Kyle. Bless you Cory and Sean; and Timmy, remember I always will love you my little Gizmo. Farewell all."

Kyle shook his head as Terrance left, then walked over and sat between Cory and Dan. "Timmy, he really does love you. Dad, I know you love me, but I never knew what it meant to feel a father's love. Now I do, and it makes me feel better."

Dan ruffled Kyle's hair. "I know what you are trying to say, son, and I understand."

Mikey started giggling, interrupting the conversations.

Cory gave him a weird look, and then asked "Alright, what's so funny ghost-boy? Also, what's with this Saint business?"

"Just wait. JUSTIN, JACOB, JAMIE; YOU CAN COME IN NOW!"

Three red-faced boys sulked through the door. Their jaws dropped when they saw Mikey standing in the middle of the room.

"You three act like you've never seen a saint before. Have a seat!" Mikey said with laughter.

The three stunned boys dropped to the floor and sat in awe.

"See what happens when you try to spy, you three?" Mikey said, still giggling. "I guess it's time to fill y'all in. First, these three have been outside the door since John started talking. Now for the question nagging at most of the little brains in the room. When I died and first went to the Pearly Gates, I told Saint Peter that I wanted to be the guardian angel for my entire family. I had no idea you guys were gonna expand it this much. Let's see; if I have my count right, I now have somewhere near nineteen brothers and two nephews. On my way down tonight, Saint Peter asked me a question while we were waiting on Timmy's father. He offered me the chance to change my assignment to only the brothers directly related to me. I refused his offer; he told me that him and Our Father had expected that answer from me. He had me kneel, and changed my wings from white to gold. After that, he declared me 'Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Children'. That means I can do things like appear like this, but I have additional kids to watch. Oh, by the way Justy, Saint Peter sent you a message; you already have a set of wings just like this waiting on you. They are gonna be in storage for a long time yet, but they are all yours."

Jacob couldn't resist the temptation. "See, bro; we TOLD ya' you were an angel!"

Justy turned beet red, and was totally speechless from embarrassment.

"Alright guys," Mikey continued, "stop picking on the future saint! Oh, Aaron, Elvis said to stop messing around and get back in the studio; he might have all eternity to wait for your next release, but that don't mean he's willing to wait that long!"

Kyle giggled. "Busted bro; you better hurry up! Mikey, did you come cuz' I called ya', or did ya' see what was happenin' and just show up?"

Mikey thought out his response carefully. "Kyle, I was expecting you to ask that, but it's not a simple answer. Normally if I was away, I would get a feeling that I needed to check on you. When you called for me, I was with Elvis and Jimi Hendrix discussing music. I actually felt you trying to pull me down here, and as soon as I turned my attention to you I knew everything that was happening. Thanks to your special gift, I knew to get Terrance before I came down. Things are a little different now; as a Saint any of you can direct a prayer to me and I will hear it immediately."

"Does that mean you won't be guarding us anymore, bro?" Ty asked sorrowfully.

"No, little brother, it does not. No matter what I am always gonna be a guardian angel for all of you. It just means that I can help other kids now too. I made a promise to all of you, and I will always keep it."

"Thanks Mikey. I'm glad you're our big brother!" Ty replied, obviously relieved.

"Okay guys, I'm gonna hafta go, first because it's four AM and all of you should be in bed; and also because the Vatican works quickly. I gotta go help a French kid who's about to be outted to his parents; fortunately they will take it good. Goodnight all!"

As Mikey faded away, Dan got Cory's attention. "Do you think you will be okay now, Cory?"

"Yeah, Dan; thanks for helping. I'm sorry I woke everyone up."

John chuckled. "That's ok, Cory. It's not every day you get woke up to meet a saint."

That got all the boys giggling. "Yeah," Sean quipped, "especially considering it was Mikey. Mom's never gonna believe this one!"

Timmy brought them back to Earth when he interrupted. "Daddy, can we go backta' bed?"

Cory gave the sleepy boy on his lap a squeeze. "Yeah, buddy. Go pee real quick while

Pappa and I chase everyone out, okay?"

"Okay," Timmy replied, as he climbed down and shuffled into the bathroom.

John and Dan took the long way back to their room, as Aaron rounded up his group to head back to the Rec room. As he was rounding them up, he pulled Tyler to the side. "Ty, I just wanted to say 'thanks' for calming Cory and Timmy. I really think you saved a meltdown there. Great job, lil' bro."

Ty hugged Aaron, and whispered in his ear "Thanks, big bro. You helped too, I could tell as soon as Cory saw you."

They all cleared the room just as Timmy shuffled back out and climbed into the bed. Sean and Cory slipped in behind him, and in no time all three were again fast asleep.

\* \* \*

### **Saturday Morning:**

Teri and Anne were sitting in the kitchen talking.

"Mom, I don't believe this. It's almost nine and only half the boys have come in for breakfast!"

"It is unusual, Teri. Justy is usually such an early bird."

Chip and Josh chose that moment to walk into the kitchen. "Did I just hear that right?" Chip said in shock. "Justy and the twins are STILL asleep?"

Teri nodded her head. "Not only are the Three Musketeers still sleeping, but so are Cory, Sean, Timmy, Kyle, Tyler, Aaron, John and Dan. Did we miss a party last night?"

"Not that we heard!" Josh replied.

As the adults were pondering the unusual event, Tyler and Kyle quietly walked in and immediately went to Teri. "We love you, Mom" they chorused as they both gave her a huge hug.

They then went to Anne, and repeated the action, saying "We love you grandma." Both Chip and Josh received the same treatment before the two boys grabbed a chair for breakfast; both staying in constant physical contact.

As they were sitting, Aaron, David, Justy, Jamie and Jacob came in. They made the same rounds as Ty and Kyle had made, except they included the first two boys.

Chip looked at the boys. "Would one of you mind telling us WHAT is going on?"

David gave Chip a sober look. "I hate to say it, but you need to wait 'till everyone's here, Chip. Some of the guys had a rough night, and it's rubbed off on the rest of us."

Chip started to press for more information, but Justy interrupted him. "Daddy, please don't. I know why, but we all agreed that only one guy can discuss it, and he's not here yet."

"With that attitude, I think someone wants to lose their video games," Chip stated.

"Daddy, I'm really not trying to act like a smart-aleck, but my brothers are more important than any stupid video game. We need to do this for them."

Chip was shocked. Not only did the threat of taking away his video games not phase Justy; the boy actually stated they did not mean anything to him.

Josh recovered and told Chip "Baby, I think this must be serious. Let's wait and see; you know Justy wouldn't refuse to say anything unless there was a good reason."

Chip's response was interrupted by a young voice yelling "Gran'ma!"

Teri suddenly found her lap filled with a squirming five-year old. "Morning Timmy! Where's your Daddy and Pappa?"

"Right here, Mom!" the two boys chorused as they walked in, followed by Dan and John.

Both Sean and Cory made their rounds of the table, and then grabbed the empty seat next to Teri.

"Okay guys, I think all of you that were missing are here, now WHAT HAPPENED?" Teri asked, exasperated.

"I had a ni'mare last night, gran'ma," Timmy said. He then continued with glee. "I got ta' meet Unca' Mikey! He's really cool, he's a SAINT! He ev'n brung my old Daddy to say goodbye! Unca' Mikey made John tell Daddy what coulda' happ'nd if he had not saved me. Daddy felt bad and started cryin' when I woke him up, though." Timmy leaned back against Teri, satisfied that he had told everything important.

David was the first to speak. "Up until just now, I was the only one not there who knew about that. I woke up just as the rest of these guys came back into the Rec room, and spent the next hour calming them so they could sleep."

Anne looked around the table; the boys seemed to be waiting for the explosion while the adults looked to be still deciphering Timmy's summary. "Dan, you are the child psychiatrist. Could you please translate what Timmy just said, son?"

Dan first looked at Cory, who nodded his approval. "Okay, here's the short version. Timmy had a nightmare, and woke up Sean and Cory. Timmy was hysterical, which prompted Sean to get John and I. We found Cory in the same shape as Timmy when we came in the room; so John had Sean get Kyle and Ty."

Kyle interrupted. "I started calling for Mikey when Sean got me up. I guess I was makin' too much noise with my head; 'cause it woke up Justy and the twins. This cute guy sittin' next'a me was calmin' them while we ran up the stairs. Aaron heard Sean wake us, so he came too."

"Did everyone understand that?" Dan asked with a grin.

"My son, the sarcastic shrink," Anne shot back with a smile.

Dan stuck out his tongue at his mom, and then continued. "Teri, you have two special sons in your herd. I could tell when Ty woke up, both Cory and Timmy suddenly calmed down a little. When Aaron came in, it was like he was Cory's white knight; Cory got a hold of himself that quick. When Mikey appeared in the middle of the room it was quite a shock, and yes he is really a Saint. Would you believe his official title is Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Children?"

Teri shook her head in wonder. "Mike a Saint. Now I've seen everything. As far as Cory goes, do you think that ..."

Cory interrupted. "Mom, please stop right there. I know what you are gonna ask; the answer is it won't happen again. Ever since my first Mom died, I've had a problem with death. Whenever it started to get to me, I'd talk to Mikey. Last night, when Timmy woke up screaming about his father, I got more of my memories back. I remembered that when Mikey died, the part that freaked me was that I wouldn't have him to talk to about his death. All the stuff that's happened to all the guys hit me at once. The real hero from last night is sitting on your lap, Mom. When Timmy told me what his father used to tell him, things started to fall in place. Mikey made John tell me about the bomb timer so I would realize how much good has happened from what looked bad. That's what Timmy told me, sometimes it takes bad stuff happening so good stuff can happen."

Teri looked at Cory in shock. "You just answered a lot of questions I had, Cory. I just wish I'd known; I could've helped you a lot sooner, and maybe kept you out of the home."

"But Aunt Teri," Kyle interjected, "if Cory had not been at the home, I wouldn't have my Daddy and big brother and my uncles and my cousins."

"And I wouldn't be going to work in Orlando," Mark said as he walked in. "Have I missed something?"

"Just my head messin' with me again!" Cory replied.

Timmy crawled back on Cory's lap. "See Daddy, whadda' I tell ya'. Even Unca' Mikey didn't think of dat!"

Cory ruffled his son's hair. "Yeah, buddy. I guess that means you're smarter than your Uncle Mike."

Timmy glowed at the praise. "Daddy, when we gonna eat brek'fest? My tummy's hungry."

Sean giggled as Timmy's stomach backed up his comment. "So we hear, lil' guy. Mom, why are you starving our son? You're gonna have to take some lessons from Grandma Anne."

"Yeah, Mom," Cory interjected with a grin. "It's bad enough starvin' us, but don't torture our son! Shame on you, Mom."

Teri looked at her son's grinning faces. "I give up! Mom, were any of my brothers this bad?"

Anne chuckled. "Every single one of them! Let's round up some food before they really start trouble."

After everyone finished eating, they started migrating out to the pool to join the rest of the group. As Chip and Josh started to head out, Justy grabbed them and pulled them into the living room.

Justy looked at his parents with a serious face. "Dad, Pop, I really need to tell you something. The twins and I were kinda spying on them last night; but Mikey busted us and made us come in the room. When John told us how close Cory cut it saving Timmy, it reminded a lot of us just how special the families we have today are. That's why I couldn't say nothing; since Timmy was the one who made us think, we figured he should be the one to tell y'all."

Chip and Josh pulled Justy into a three-way hug.

"We understand kiddo," Josh said softly. "You did right, and made us proud. Something tells me that's not all that's on your mind, though. You wanna talk about it?"

Justy squirmed, then hugged them tighter. "Mikey told me that there's a set of saints wings waiting for me in Heaven. He said they are gonna be stored for a long time, but I don't know why I deserve them. I ain't done nothin' special, besides helping my lil' bros."

Chip kissed his son's forehead. "Kiddo, I think you are looking at it wrong. I'll bet it's not what you've done, but what's in you heart that has earned those wings. You have a big heart, son; that's why everyone good likes you. Don't worry yourself about the wings; just keep being the great kid you are."

"Thanks Dad and Pop. I feel better now. I just didn't want you to be mad at me or my bros. I just remembered something, Timmy don't know how to pounce!"

That caused both parents to chuckle. "You better get going then," Josh snickered, "it's your duty to make sure all parents are tortured equally!"

"POP!" Justy exclaimed before breaking out in giggles. "That was mean! I'll get you!" As he ran for the door, he yelled behind him. "When you least expect it!"

Chip and Josh grabbed a drink from the kitchen, and then slowly walked out to the pool. As they walked through the doorway, they both almost collapsed with laughter when they heard Sean yell.

"Justy! I'm gonna KILL you!" Sean yelled as he extracted himself from the pool, followed by a giggling Timmy.

## Chapter 22

Dan smiled as he looked around the pool. Sammy and Jeffy were fitting right in, pouncing unsuspecting adults without warning. Timmy, Robbie and Johnny were becoming inseperatable; as the three youngest boys in the group they had found security in numbers. For the first time in days, Sean and Cory were just being kids. It had taken threats of bodily harm to do it, but they finally relented and allowed John and Dan to watch Timmy so they could play.

Teri came walking out of the house carrying the phone. "Sean, its Coach Simmons. He wants to talk to you!"

Sean grabbed a towel and retrieved the phone from Teri. "Thanks mom."

"This is Sean. Whazzup, Coach?"

"Ahhh, so you are still alive after all! We missed you at practice, but the final game is today at 4:00 and I was wondering if you would bless us with your presence!"

Sean giggled, knowing the Coach was engaged in his usual ribbing. "Sorry about that, Coach; things went from bad to nuts this week. I'm sure I can get a ride from one of these bozos here, so yeah, that'll be no problem."

"Thanks, Sean. How's Cory doing, is his memory getting better?"

"Actually, he's doing great. If I told you everything that's happened this week you'd never believe me; but he's got back to his old self pretty much now."

"Great! I'll see you at the game. Bye Sean."

"Bye Coach."

Sean handed the phone back to Teri. "Mom, I got a game at four; you think I can get a ride?"

Teri smiled. "That's the first normal thing I've been asked in a week; I'll carry you myself if I need to!"

"MOM! That'd be EMBARRASSING!" Sean groaned.

"Don't worry! Head on up and get your gear ready; I'll take care of the ride."

Sean grinned, and then headed inside to get ready. Teri walked over to Kevin to make arrangements.

\* \* \*

Coach Simmons was walking the soccer field making sure there was no debris on it when the caravan pulling into the lot caught his eye. *'Who would be coming here in four limos?'* he thought to himself. He walked off the field, and went to greet his unexpected guests.



His jaw dropped to the ground when the first limo came to a stop and Sean climbed out the back door. When a small boy followed him and all but jumped onto his side, the coach shook his head and walked over.

"Well, Sean, what happened? You helicopter break down? The jet tied up?" he asked with a chuckle.

Sean flushed red with embarrassment. "Well ... actually, Coach, some of my family decided they wanted to watch."

Timmy interrupted. "Pappa, who's dat? Why'd he make you go pink?"

Sean ruffled Timmy's hair. "Hold on, munchkin. You'll find out in a second, okay?"

"K, Pappa."

Cory had exited the limo and was now standing by Sean. "Hi Coach, sorry I missed the season, but I kinda forgot it."

Coach Simmons was about to reply when Timmy interrupted again. "Daddy, you were a bad boy. Why'd you forget?"

"Hold on, kiddo!" Coach said. "It's okay, he had a good reason. Now Cory and Sean; if you were not almost out before, you are now. You mind introducing me to the munchkin? Also, what's this 'daddy' and 'pappa' all about?"

Sean looked at his coach in shock. "Almost out already??? Whadda' you mean, Coach? Oh, yeah, the little gremlin on my hip is our son, Timmy."

"I ain't no greml'n, I'm a Mogwi! Daddy, pappa called me a greml'n!" Timmy exclaimed.

Coach Simmons chuckled. "Glad to meet you, Timmy. Sean, the reason I said 'almost out' is that the relationship between you two has been obvious for some time."

The two boys looked at each other in confusion. "How's that?" Cory asked.

"Things like what you did just now, the way you look at each other and seem to connect on a different level. Now what's this about Timmy being y'all's son?"

Timmy answered proudly. "Daddy saved me when my old Daddy got in a acc'dent. Before my old Daddy died, he made him my new Daddy."

Coach Simmons shook his head. "NOW I've seen it all, but for some reason it don't surprise me. Congratulations, guys. Sean, you better get ready." He then looked around at the rest of the people who had exited the vehicles. "HOLY SH...! I don't believe this! Cory, I thought Sean said your FAMILY wanted to watch?"

Cory giggled as he took Timmy from Sean. "Well, Coach, they ARE our family." Cory then introduced everyone to the coach and showed them to the best seats in the stands.

The game was close right up to the end, when Sean stole the ball with five seconds to go and gave a desperate kick from mid-field. The sun was in the goalies eyes, so he did not get a line on the ball until it was too late, which allowed the ball to just enter the goal in the upper right corner.

Timmy led the crowd out to the celebrating team. "PAPPA! You DID IT! You WON!"

The team had lifted Sean on top of them, and suddenly Timmy found himself being hoisted up to be with Sean. The boys settled, and went through the congratulations line before meeting by the Coach on the sideline.

Timmy had ran off to find Cory. He came back dragging Cory to join Sean, still talking constantly about the game. "Daddy, did you see Pappa's kick? He kicked it to the MOON! Dat was AWESOME!"

The entire team had heard Timmy's last comments, and combined with hearing Timmy when he ran out they were able to put two and two together. Cory stood nervously next to Sean, surrounded by a suddenly quiet group of teammates.

"I guess we were right." Kelly, who was Sean's best friend on the team, said. "Are you two gonna hug already? The suspense is killing us!"

Cory shyly brought Sean into a hug, and the team broke into a quiet applause. "It's about friggin' time; we thought you two would never figure it out!" Kelly announced.

Kelly turned as he felt someone tapping on his shoulder. "Yeah ... Holy SMOKE!"

Standing behind him were both bands, their families, Mark, David, John and Dan with their boys, and Teri with her other boys. Aaron was the one tapping him on the shoulder. "Are you trying to hint at something about my little brothers?"

"Oh Sh...! You're Aaron Carter! They're your brothers?"

Aaron laughed. "Yeppers! All their Uncles and their Aunt are behind me! Now, as you were saying ..."

Kelly blushed. "Well, all us guys kinda had a pool going as to when these two would realize they were in love. We all know they are adopted brothers, so it's not like incest or anything."

Aaron shook his head as he looked at the boy. "Who won the pool?"

"I did, I guessed it would be at the last game. What's the deal with the kid calling them dad and pop though?"

Aaron looked around and saw the rest of the team was listening intently. "Well, Cory saved this young guy's life. Just before his father died, he gave Cory and Sean custody of Timmy, so now Timmy is their son."

Kelly looked at Aaron skeptically. "But they are kids like us, they can't be parents."

"Actually they can; they are also Starfleet officers," Aaron replied with a grin.

The entire team turned to stare at Cory and Sean. One of the boys in back yelled to the pair "Are you guys REALLY in Starfleet?"

Cory replied. "You can bet on it, Julio. We're the youngest officers EVER!"

For the next half-hour, the team circulated through the family, asking questions and making comments. To all of Sean's teammate's surprise, when the topic finally got around to autographs not only did the band members freely give theirs to everyone, but they insisted on getting the autograph of each member of the team.

Just as they were about to break up for the night, Kevin walked up and got their attention. "I've talked to your parents, and all of you are coming back with us for a victory party. They will pick you up from Sean's house later on."

Aaron was standing next to Kelly when the announcement was made, and saw the boy's head droop. "What's wrong, dude? Don't you like parties?"

"I live in a shelter," Kelly replied in an ashamed voice. "My worker will be here shortly to pick me up, and we are not allowed to be out past dark."

Aaron looked at Kelly and felt a tug at his heart. "How'd you end up in a shelter?"

"A couple years ago I started breakin' into places and bustin' up stuff inside. I got caught, and the judge decided I was uncontrollable. He took me away from my mom and put me in the shelter." Kelly's jaw was now on his chest as he mumbled the last part.

"Why'd ya' do all that?" Aaron asked softly.

"I guess I was bored. Mom was workin' two jobs, so I never saw her till late. We had fun when she was home, but she couldn't pay the bills if she didn't work."

"Do you get to see her?"

"Naw. The home says I'm not being good enough. My shrink had to force them to let me play soccer."

"What kind of work does she do?" Aaron asked, an idea brewing in his head.

"She cleans houses. She cooks good too, but nobody pays for that. I really miss her," Kelly replied, now softly weeping.

Aaron sat Kelly on the bench, and kneeled in front of him. "Kel, if I can fix it so you are able to be with your mom, would you pinky swear never to get in trouble like that again?"

"Don't tease me," Kelly replied harshly. "The judge said I'm stuck there till I'm eighteen."

Aaron looked straight into Kelly's eyes. "You swear you won't do it again, and then watch while I work miracles. I know it's hard to trust people after what you've been through; but sometimes you need to take chances for good things to happen." Aaron then held out his right hand, pinky extended.

Kelly examined Aaron's face closely, and then slowly hooked his finger around Aaron's finger. "I pinky swear that if you can get me back with my mom I will stay out of trouble."

Aaron gave Kelly a quick hug. "Thank you. Now watch, this is something special."

Aaron turned towards the limos and whistled. "MOM! GRAB YOUR TRICORDER AND COME OVER HERE!"

Teri arrived a minute later. "Hello, Kelly. How you been?"

"Fine, Mrs. Short."

"Great. What's up, Aaron?"

Aaron got a scheming grin on his face. "Well mom, it seems that Kelly has a little problem which we are gonna solve. Pull up his case; I wanna see who the judge was."

Teri accessed the records. "Judge Williamson, why?"

"Because, mom, he sentenced this young man to a youth shelter until he is eighteen for vandalism. Kelly can not even see his mother. I plan to change that right now."

"Something tells me you have more than that in mind, Aaron. What else are you planning?"

"Well, it seems his mom does house cleaning and can cook. I think I have a job for her that will give her more time with her son plus give him a chance to prove himself."

"Oh, really? And what would that job be, Airboy?"

"MOM! Actually, you need a hand around the house, and that way Dan can help Kelly work through any problems he has. Let's get to work."

Teri grinned. "I don't know who is worse, you or your brothers. I'll call Joe; if he can't do it then I'll step in. Here's Kelly's mom's number, have her meet us at the house."

Kelly watched in awe as Teri contacted Judge Lewis.

"Joe, this is Teri. Could you pull up case number 78-63902-AQ?"

"Got it Teri. What's up?"

"In your opinion, is the punishment too harsh for the crime?"

"Just a second, Teri. I'm still reviewing it." A minute later he continued. "I agree the punishment is extreme, but unfortunately it is not far enough out of line to allow a retrial. There's not much I can do about it."

"That's what I thought, Joe. Go ahead and close it out, I'm taking it as of right now. I'm invoking the Safe Haven Act - Section 17, Subparagraph 24. Unreasonable incarceration."

"Got it, Teri. He's all yours, I hope you know what you are doing. I'll see you at the party, Kevin just called me."

"Thanks Joe. Don't worry; he's gonna be in good hands - his mothers."

Just then, Kelly's social worker walked up. "Come on, McCarthy. You've been out too long already."

Teri pulled out her Federation ID. "Sorry, sir, but he's not going anywhere with you. I'm with Federation Child Services, and as of five minutes ago this boy is now a Ward of the United

Federation of Planets."

John had followed the social worker as he walked toward Teri and the boys; his police sense telling him trouble might be brewing.

The social worker responded. "Like hell. Until I see the paperwork at the office, you have no claim to him." He reached out and grabbed Kelly; to his surprise the next thing he knew he was on the ground in handcuffs.

John rolled him over. "I guess you didn't understand the lady. The Federation has assumed custody of that child. Right now I have you on initial charges of assaulting a Ward of the Federation and disregarding a Federation custody order. Do you wish to add to those charges?"

The worker shook his head, deciding silence was best.

\* \* \*

Aaron looked at the young pre-teen sitting across from him in the limo. Kelly was just a hair taller than Sean, all of it in his legs. The twelve year old had a deep tan, which went well with his chestnut brown hair and hazel eyes; eyes that were now showing panic. "Kelly, settle down bud. You've got nothing to worry about."

"What if she don't want me back?" Kelly responded as he wrung his hands. "What if she found out life is better without a loser like me around? What if she hates me?"

Aaron pulled Kelly across the limo and sat him on his lap. "Kelly, your mom was in tears when I told her she could come see you. Trust me, she misses you. The next thing I'm gonna say is not just from me, but everybody in this car. None of us better hear you call yourself a loser or anything else like that again. If you start feeling that way, let someone know, one of us will help you through it."

Kelly snuggled into Aaron's chest. "Sorry. It's just why would she want me back? I was the one that screwed up and got taken away."

Teri reached over and placed a hand on Kelly's shoulder. "Yes, Kelly, you did mess up. But it's not your fault you were taken away; the judge over-stepped his bounds when he sentenced you. If he had not, I would not have been able to release you like I did. Trust me, moms understand when their sons mess up; we only get mad when they fail to learn from their mistakes. Right now you are starting with a clean slate; what you do from today on will determine if I'm the best adult you know or your worst nightmare. You have two paths ahead of you, just ask anyone here and they will help you along the right one."

"Thanks Mrs. Short," Kelly replied, relaxed by Aaron holding him and Teri's speech. "I only have one question; how often do I gotta listen to long speeches like that?"

Teri smiled. "From me, they are rare. From Cory and Sean, they are an everyday occurrence! And you better start calling me Teri, you hear me?"

"MOM!" Cory and Sean yelled in unison.

"Busted!" Aaron giggled.

Kelly grinned. "Okay, Teri. You know, I just realized I'm riding in a limo cuddling Aaron Carter. Sean, I think you are rubbing off on me, bro. Is this a conspiracy to make me switch sides?"

"HECK NO!" Sean replied. "Why would I do that? My brothers don't need YOU as competition!"

Kelly turned his head and looked up at Aaron. "Aaron, should I take that as an insult or a compliment? I'm not sure which it was."

"Considering the source, call it a compliment. That's the closest Sean can get to telling

you you're cute without Cory slapping him silly," Aaron responded with a grin.

When Sean blushed, Cory went to slap him anyway. Teri saw it and told Timmy. "Timmy, control your daddy. If he slaps your pop, all three of you are going swimming - the hard way."

"Stop it, Daddy!" Timmy said as he grabbed Cory's hand. "I don' wanna swim right now. Besides, he is cute."

The limo rocked with laughter as Kelly tried to hide his blushing face in Aaron's shirt. "That's enough," Teri said between giggles. "We're almost home, and I really don't want to explain to Kelly's mom why he is blushing."

As their limo pulled in the drive, all of Kelly and Sean's teammates and all of Sean and Cory's extended family gathered in a circle around the door.

"How'd the rest'a the team beat us here?" Kelly asked.

"Easy. Kev was in charge of seating in the other limos. He could find room in a sardine can," Aaron replied with a grin.

Kelly just looked at Aaron in wonder as everyone else exited the limo.

"Well, Kelly, its show-time" Aaron quipped. "Don't worry; I'll be with you all the way. I stuck my neck out because I see something special in you, and I won't let anything go wrong now."

Kelly nervously climbed out, and as soon as Aaron was out Kelly was glued to his side, not caring what his teammates thought. They walked through the crowd to the front door, everyone quietly falling in behind them. Aaron guided Kelly towards the rear of the house and out to the pool deck.

Standing there were Anne and Kelly's mom. Just an inch taller than Kelly at five-seven, she had the same chestnut brown hair and athletic build as her son. The only difference was her eyes, a deep brown which showed the suffering she had been through for the last year. When she saw Kelly, tears of joy rolled down her face. She held out her arms and said softly "Thank you God. Kelly Joe, it's really you! Come here baby!"

Kelly broke away from Aaron and ran across the deck, falling into his mother's arms in tears. "I'm sorry mom! I missed you so bad!"

"Shhhh ... it's okay baby, everything's gonna be just fine now." She held Kelly tight, both overcome with the joy of being together once again.

Anne motioned Aaron to join her. "Aaron," she said softly, "let me be the first to say we are very proud of you. Helen told me about what happened with Kelly while we were waiting; your instincts might have just saved Kelly's future from being totally ruined. Today you have proven you are a man; you make me proud ... grandson."

Once Aaron finished hugging Anne in gratitude, she waved Teri to join them. "Teri, you have gained a fine son here. Helen and I have already discussed Aaron's surprise for you; so once her and Kelly have recovered, Aaron can do the honors. Aaron, her answer was yes, and I fully approve."

Teri looked at Aaron curiously; he just smiled and whispered "you gotta wait, mom."

About ten minutes later, Kelly and Helen separated. Kelly looked around, and found that everyone was standing watching them with smiles on their faces. "Hey everyone, look! I GOT MY MOM BACK!"

The assembled crowd cheered and applauded. Sean leaned over to Nick. "Anyone ever says anything bad about Aaron I'm personally gonna kick their butt! That is the happiest Kelly has been in a year; and its all 'cause of Aaron."

"Stand in line, little bro," Nick whispered back. "Today he has made me prouder of him than I have ever been."

Anne got everyone's attention. "Since we have such a crowd here, I want each of you to step forward when I call your name. Sean, you will be responsible for introducing your teammates. This is Kelly's mom, Helen McCarthy. Helen, it's time to meet the family." Anne then went through each person, followed by Sean introducing the team and his coach.

Once all the introductions were done, Helen reached behind her and picked up a package off the table. From the dust marks, it was obvious it had been wrapped for quite a while. "Kelly, I had got this for you for your last birthday. Unfortunately I was never able to give it to you. I saved it, hoping someday the wrong would be righted. Could you please open it, son?"

Kelly carefully took the package from his mom, and with tears flowing down his face slowly and carefully unwrapped it. Inside the wrapping was Aaron's CD Another Earthquake. Kelly embraced Helen, the CD clutched tightly in his hand. "Thank you, mom!" he whispered, tears once again rolling down his face. "I wanted this soooo bad before I got taken away; not only did you get it, but you KEPT IT for me! I LOVE YOU mom!"

"I love you too, son. You might want to listen; Aaron has something to say I think you'll like."

Aaron took his cue. "Everyone, listen up! I think we all agree Mom has been working too hard, and with a five year old grandson here now it's gonna get worse. Mom, I have offered Helen a permanent position as housekeeper and cook for here at home. When everyone moves to Orlando, she and Kelly will come along with you. Don't worry about her pay, that's my responsibility."

Teri started to argue, but Anne stopped her. "Teri, don't make me put my foot down. You need the help, and Aaron is making sure you have it. I back him all the way, any questions?"

"No, mom," Teri answered meekly. She turned to Aaron. "Thanks, son, but I'm gonna get you for this!"

Aaron giggled then gave Teri a hug. "Only the best for my mom!"

"I agree!" Kelly piped up.

Helen smiled. "Why don't you spend a little time with your friends, Kelly? We have forever to catch up, but not much time before all these hungry kids start eating the chairs. Mrs. Short, where's the kitchen, I'll get started."

"Please just call me Teri, Helen. There's no need to be formal, your son is gonna be running with my boys anyways. As far as the food goes, today you are a guest; spend some time getting to know the crew, since some of them are going to be leaving tonight."

Helen started to argue, but saw the determination in Teri's eyes. "Alright, Teri, but this will be the last time. You have a family too, and it's my job to make sure you have time for them."

They were both distracted when they heard Timmy yell "Hey, KELLY - BONZAI!"

They watched as Kelly turned just in time to be hit dead-on by a pouncing Timmy. The two boys fell into the pool; when they came back up, they both began laughing as Kelly told Timmy "You'd better run munchkin! When I catch you, its tickle time!"

Teri giggled. "Looks like Timmy has accepted Kelly; the young ones only pounce people they like."

"Thanks for the warning!" Helen responded with a grin.

Helen began making the rounds of the pool as Teri and Anne got everything together for a cookout. Kevin took Helen off to the side. "You know, I think you'll find your life is going to be much different from now on."

"How's that, Kevin?"

"You might not realize it, but Aaron had more in mind than just giving you a full-time job when he suggested you work for sis. Kelly is going to need a lot of extra attention after what he

went through; Aaron is counting on his bros being the support network you both will need."

"But they are so young. I'm still trying to get used to hearing Timmy call those two boys dad and pop, how can they support Kelly too?"

"Don't let their ages fool you. Those two boys are known throughout Starfleet, and are responsible for saving most of the boys here today. I really think their youth has become an advantage, they are not aware that some things are not possible, so they just do them."

"I had no idea! They seem like such normal boys right now."

Kevin smiled. "Usually they are, but put them in a situation and suddenly they surprise all of us. Chip threw a simulation at them as a joke, they ended up solving it like nobody has before. In the process, they figured out a repair to fix a bug in the ship's weapons system which is being implemented fleet-wide right now."

"Thanks for the warning, I'll watch out!" Helen said before heading off to see what else was happening.

An hour later, Sean and Cory were taking a much needed break from playing in the pool when Kelly walked up, Timmy riding on his back. "Hey, Sean! Does this belong to you?"

Sean looked over Cory's shoulder. "Yeah, he's ours! You having fun, kiddo?"

"Yeah! Kelly is givin' me horsey rides! He's a GOOD horsey!"

"Why don't you climb down here with Daddy and me; let your horsey rest a minute. We want to talk to him anyway."

"Okay, pappa. Put me down horsey!"

Kelly giggled as he placed Timmy on Cory's lap. "There ya go, Timmy. What's up, Sean?"

"Have a seat. Since you are gonna be around for a while, there's a few things I'd like to cover with you."

Kelly sat down in the lounge next to the boys. "I knew things were going too good. Okay, lay it on me," he announced with a dejected look on his face.

Cory noticed the look. "It's nothing like that, Kelly. You are a part of what the grownups call 'the tribe' now. We just wanted to give you some advance warning on a few things so you don't get surprised."

Kelly brightened up a little. "I'm not in trouble? Why do you think I'll be surprised? Y'all don't do anything weird with each other, do you?"

Sean chuckled. "No, it's nothing like that. First thing is, as Cory said we are considered a tribe by the grownups. What that really means is we look out for each other; since Aaron rescued you that makes you the newest member. If one of us screws up, the rest try to help him out. It also means if you have a problem, all of us are here for you."

Kelly looked thoughtful. "But what if I make you all mad, then you will ignore me."

Cory answered. "Kelly, Sean and I screwed up big time Thursday. We had everyone mad at us, adults and kids. Do you know what happened?"

"What? They all kick your butts?"

"No. Aaron called a tribal council, and made us talk it out in front of all the kids. Nobody could leave until it was settled with all of us. That's what we mean by everyone backs you up; Justy was ready to strangle Sean and I but he let the group settle the dispute instead. In the process, we all learned from Sean and I's mistake."

"That don't sound too bad, I guess. What if I don't agree with everyone else?"

Sean answered. "Then you let us know, and we all work it out until everyone is satisfied. Some of the guys have been through a lot worse than you, Kel. You can see it in Adam's bruises and a few of the boys' skinniness. For a couple of them, this is their first real family, so there are

going to be some problems."

Kelly looked across the pool at Adam, whose bruises were just starting to shrink. "Oh, man, I had no idea! I guess I can get used to that, it's a lot better than just being told I have to do it someone else's way."

Sean smiled. "I kinda' figured you'd say that. There are a couple things you will see sooner or later that might freak you out, so I'll warn you now. Do you remember Cory and I's older brother, Mike?"

"Yeah, that stupid drunk killed him a year ago. Why?"

"Well, he kinda comes and visits occasionally. So don't be surprised if you think you are seeing a ghost; you probably are. He's the guardian angel of all of us kids here."

Kelly had a dubious look on his face, but a second later his jaw dropped. He was unable to speak, so he just pointed towards the doorway.

Timmy turned first to see where he was pointing. "Hi Uncle Mikey!" he exclaimed joyously while frantically waving his hand.

Sean and Cory looked just in time to see Mikey waving back as he disappeared. "Kinda like that!" Sean said with a laugh.

Kelly shook his head in wonder. "I don't believe it! I just saw an angel standing in the doorway, and Timmy's sitting here saying 'hi' like it's nothing new!"

Sean giggled. "Get used to it, Kel. If things get rough for you he's the best friend you will ever have. Timmy has seen him work; Mikey brought Timmy's father back to say goodbye for him."

Kelly took one more look at the doorway. "Okay. I guess now I believe in ghosts and angels! How many more surprises you got for me?"

"I'll take this round!" Cory said with a giggle. "First thing is that Jamie, Jacob, and Kyle can read minds. Tyler is an empath, he can read and affect emotions."

Kelly smiled. "If you had told me that five minutes ago I would have laughed; but after seeing Mike I'm willing to believe just about anything."

Cory got serious. "The last thing is really important. We need to know now if you will have any problems with it, so tell the truth. Every kid here over the age of eight except Andy is either confirmed gay or is showing signs of being gay. The one thing we will not allow is anyone forcing someone to do sexual things they don't want to do. That includes bugging them until they give in. Until we move down to Orlando, things are gonna be kinda crowded, so chances are most of us are going to be sharing a bedroom. Since most of us are already paired off, there is a good chance you will be woke up by someone moaning as they are doing something with their boyfriend. Is that going to be a problem? If so, we'll make arrangements for you to have your own place to sleep."

Kelly thought it over. "Since I'm not gonna be forced to join in, I'll be okay. Does that mean nobody will make fun of me if I have to take care of myself?" he finished with a blush.

"Not at all, the most that will happen is someone will hand you a towel!" Sean responded with a smile.

"Kelly, I'm really glad to hear that," Cory continued. "By Monday it will just be close family left here, and I really don't want you feeling left out."

Kelly stood up and leaned over to wrap his arms around Cory, Sean, and Timmy. "Earlier Aaron told me he was getting me my mom back. He didn't tell me he was giving me a whole family! Your mom told me I was starting new; I didn't believe her then, but now I do after what you just said. Thanks guys, I now know what true friends really are."

"You just gained a whole bunch of brothers, Kelly," Sean whispered. "And every one of



us is proud to have you as our newest brother."

"C'mon, Timmy; let's go find your Uncle Aaron so I can thank him too."

Timmy grinned. "Daddy, if Kelly is your brother, is he my uncle now?"

Cory smiled at his son. "He sure is, munchkin. Go on, have some fun."

"Okay, daddy!" Timmy said as he scrambled into Kelly's arms. "C'mon Unca' Kelly, let's go!"

Kelly giggled. "Now THAT is gonna take getting used to! Seeya in a few!"

Cory waited until Kelly and Timmy were out of hearing before quietly asking Sean "Do you think he's really gonna be okay?"

Sean snuggled down into Cory's chest. "Yeah, now that he's with his mom again I think he'll be fine. He's just gotta lot to learn."

The two boys had just fell asleep when they were rudely awakened by a small wet body hopping onto their laps. "Daddy, Pappa, wake up! Gran'ma's cookin' and I'm hungry; but she said I gotta wait!"

Cory shook the cobwebs from his head as Sean groaned from the interruption. The smell of hamburgers, brats, and hot dogs on the grill assaulted his nose. "You know what, that does smell good. Lets all go over and see if we can sneak a snack," Cory said with a grin.

The three boys walked towards the grill. They were about five feet away when Anne turned around waving a large fork. "We told Timmy he has to wait, that goes double for you two! Unless you want to have to use a pillow when you sit for the next month, I'd advise you find something to do until there is enough food cooked for everyone to start eating."

"But Grandma, our son is starving to death!" Cory tried.

"Nice try Cory, too bad it's not going to work," Anne responded with a smile. "Why don't you round up the tribe and Sean you round up your teammates; tell them to wash up and get shirts on. Dinner is almost done."

Cory picked up Timmy. "Sorry kiddo, but your Grandma Anne has a weapon. Why don't you go find Johnny and Robbie. Tell them to have their daddies get them ready to eat, then you hurry up and come back here; we'll get you ready."

Timmy gave Cory a quick hug. "Okay daddy. I'll hurry."

A few minutes later, all the boys were fighting for position around the grill. Helen saw the situation could get ugly, and put two fingers in her mouth to emit a shrill whistle. "Alright you savages! Here's how it's gonna work. I want a single line, youngest first. Timmy, Johnny and Robbie; you can each pick ONE parent to help with your food. The rest of you be patient, there is enough to go around."

Timmy grabbed Cory, Robbie grabbed Brian, and Johnny grabbed Nick before the three youngest boys wiggled their way to the front.

Everyone filled their plates and found seats around the pool to relax and eat. Once they all finished, Kevin stood up and got their attention.

"Unfortunately, some of the guys are going to have to leave tonight. We all discussed it and decided you kids deserve one more night together before we all head back. I want to thank and congratulate all of Sean and Kelly's teammates; you guys are great. Coach, if you wouldn't mind watching the team we have some quick family business to take care of. Chip contacted the *Enterprise* and has a holographic camera set up in the rec room. I want everyone to get cleaned up so we can record this family get-together forever. Helen, Kelly, Andy, and Mark that includes you too."

All the family migrated into the rec room, where Anne ensured they were arranged exactly how she wanted them. "Sean and Cory, sit on the couch with Timmy on your laps. Aaron;

you and David sit to the right of them with Johnny on your laps. Adam and Tyler sit to the left. JJ and Kyle sit at Cory's feet, Jeffy and Sammy sit at Sean's feet. Justy, sit next to Adam with Jamie and Jacob on your lap. Rusty, Robbie, I want you two to sit at Justy's feet. Andy, Kelly, and Mark stand behind the couch, and no hiding behind anyone.

"What about me, Grandma?" a voice said from nowhere.

Anne looked around. "Well Michael, if you would be kind enough to become VISIBLE I might let you stand behind your brothers!"

Cory giggled. "Dang, even as a Saint he STILL gets in trouble!"

Mikey appeared and glided over to the back of the couch. "It's all y'all's fault; you are being a bad influence on me."

Anne placed the adults around the group of kids, then set the timer on the camera and took her place in the center rear of the group. A few seconds later, the camera beeped and ejected a mini-disk.

Anne checked the viewer to make sure she approved of the picture, then pressed a button. The camera ejected more copies of the picture, which she immediately put away. "I'll pass these out later as soon as I get some mini-projectors for them. Thanks to all of you, this week has made my life and my family complete."

All the boys returned to the pool, and in no time they had a game of water tag going. As parents started showing up to pick up their sons, each of the teammates made sure they thanked Aaron, Sean, Cory, and even Timmy for the party.

Later that evening, the goodbyes started. First to go were Aaron, David and Mark. They were heading to Southcrest to get a room ready for Jamie and Jacob, so Chip arranged for the *Enterprise* to beam them directly there. A half hour later Lance, Matt, Howie, Chris, AJ, and Joey headed for the airport to catch flights home.

All of the adults that were left went into the dining room, except for Justin. Justin sat next to Rusty and gave him a hug. "How you doing, kiddo? It's about time to check your sugar again."

"Okay, Dad," Rusty smiled as he returned the hug. "Thanks for lettin' us stay one more night."

"Thank your Uncle Kevin; it was his idea to give you guys one more night together. I was just the first to agree."

Justin pulled out the tricorder and checked Rusty, made some adjustments, then administered the nightly dose of insulin. "Okay, you're all set. Have fun tonight!" Justin then headed out to join the rest of the adults.

"Okay guys, movie time!" Sean announced. "What sounds good?"

"GREMLINS!" Timmy shouted with glee.

"YEAH!" Robbie chimed in.

Sean looked around the room. "Whadda you think guys, should we watch that first?"

Kelly was unsure if his vote mattered, but answered softly. "I'd like that, not that it matters."

JJ reached over and rubbed Kelly's shoulder. "Kel, you are one of us. Your opinion matters just as much as mine or Cory's. I agree with you, that movie is great."

Cory grinned. "Okay, what do you think Justy?"

Justy gave a huge grin. "I wanna know why Timmy's called Gizmo! If we have to watch the movie to find out, I'm all for it!"

With the first movie title settled, Sean pulled out the DVD and they all settled down to watch it. By the time it was over, every boy there was in tears from laughing at Timmy's impressions of Gizmo as the movie played.

"Okay guys, lets get the nest ready," Cory announced. "How's Never-Ending Story sound for the next movie?"

Everyone approved of his choice, so he found the DVD while they retrieved the blankets and pillows to build the nest. Once everyone was settled, Cory started the movie and settled in next to Sean and Timmy.

Later that night, Teri was making her rounds shutting off lights and looked into the rec room. She couldn't help but smile at the pile of sleeping boys in the center of the room. Instead of their normal separation into couples, they all were cuddled into one big pile, even Kelly and Andrew were cuddled into the group. She quietly slipped in and pulled covers over the boys, then dimmed the lights and headed to bed.

## Chapter 23

### Southcrest Ranch, Orlando, FL:

Mark awoke with a start as Aaron pulled the covers off of him. He looked around in confusion before realizing where he was at; in a guest room at Chip and Josh's ranch in Orlando. "Hey! I wanna sleep in!" he groaned.

Aaron giggled. "Unless you want to suffer the wrath of Aunt Jackie, I suggest you move it! She's making breakfast right now; and if you miss it you'll starve."

"Jeeeeeze! Let me get dressed goofball; I'll be right down."

"I'll tell Aunt Jackie. We're gonna start on the room for the twins after breakfast; Zac just got here to help."

Mark looked puzzled. "Zac? Whatever, I'll find out when I get down there."

After a quick shower, Mark headed downstairs to the kitchen.

"Good morning Mark, glad you decided to join us!" Jackie announced with a smile.

"Sorry Aunt Jackie, that's the best I've slept in a while," Mark replied sheepishly.

"I understand. Grab a seat, breakfast is just about done."

Mark sat at the table, and finally looked around at who was there. At the head of the table sat Harold Littrell. Mark had met him and Jackie last night when Aaron had brought them back from the airport. Both were looking forward to meeting their new nephews, and had already made plans for things that would be in the twin's room before they even arrived at home. Next to Harold, Aaron and David were sharing a chair; sucking face and getting in as much cuddling as they could.

Mark's eyes finally met the eyes of the last person at the table, and his heart began racing. Sitting there looking back at him was a god, deep brown eyes and blond hair pulled back into a pony tail. The two boys just sat staring into each others eyes, ignoring everything happening around them.

David was the first to notice the looks Mark and Zac were caught in. "Aunt Jackie, I think we have a problem!" he announced between giggles.

"Awwwww, ain't that cute!" Jackie said as she saw the two boys locked in their stare.

Aaron looked at David. "You grab the blond, I'll grab the newbie. Whadda you think, Uncle Harold; living room to unwind them?"

Harold chuckled. "Yeah, we need to at least get them down to earth enough to introduce them! Wait 'till Chip and Josh hear this, they are gonna lose it!"

With Harold's help, Aaron and David managed to get the two zombies maneuvered onto a

couch in the living room. Along the way, both Mark and Zac kept their eyes locked on each other.

Aaron knelt in front of them. "Earth to Mark and Zac! Come in Mark and Zac! Return to Earth immediately!"

Aaron's voice did not even faze the two boys, so he turned to David. "Hey babe, I think we need to use Plan B; go get the ice!"

David ran back to the kitchen, and returned a minute later with Jackie following him. Her grin gave away her plans for the a pitcher of ice she was carrying.

"These two are as bad as Brian!" Jackie announced as she poured half the pitcher down the back of each boy's shirt.

Both boys instantly came out of their trance-like state. "HEY! THAT'S COLD!" they both screamed as they jumped to their feet.

Aaron giggled. "You think you two love birds could keep from looking at each other long enough to be introduced?"

Both Mark and Zac turned beet red as they announced in unison "Lovebirds? I'm straight!"

"You might want to re-think that; from where I was standing it was love at first sight!" Jackie said with a giggle. "I haven't had to use ice on anyone in a long time!"

"Before you two get all sappy again," Harold added with a grin, "you should at least know who you are staring at. Mark, the long-haired blond next to you is Zac Hanson. Zac, meet Chip's new landscaper, Mark Owens. Now that you know each other's names, save us the suspense; kiss and get it over with!"

Both Mark and Zac turned beet red. Just as Mark was about to speak, Aaron reached from behind them and put their faces together. Nature took over, and the two began a long passionate kiss.

"I gotta call Chip!" Aaron giggled. "Wait 'till he hears how his landscaper defected and fell for a member of Hanson!"

\* \* \*

### **Short Residence, Des Moines, IA:**

Cory felt something warm and wet sliding up and down his shaft. At first he thought he was still dreaming, but the muffled moans from under the blanket brought him out of his post-sleep haze. He lifted the blanket, and whispered "Dang, I love it when you wake me like this Sean! Watch it, I'm close!"

A minute later, Cory began wiggling around and softly moaning. Just as he reached the point of no return, Timmy woke up and threw the blanket off that was covering the three of them.

"Ewww! Poppa that's GROSS! Stop eating Daddy's pee-pee!" Timmy shouted.

Sean lifted his head in shock, and suddenly found his face covered with Cory's semen as Cory erupted.

"DADDY! You peed on poppa! EWWW!"

Kelly was awakened by the shouting, and as soon as he realized the situation he decided that he had better rescue the embarrassed pair. "Timmy, stop pickin' on your parents and get over here!"

Timmy weaved through the semi-awake boys in the room and pounced Kelly. "Uncle Kelly, that was GROSS! Why do they do that?"

Kelly looked over at Cory and Sean, who were still trying to salvage a shred of dignity.

"I'll tell you what, I gotta go pee, and I'm sure you do too. Let's go hit the bathroom; after that we'll find somewhere private to talk and I'll explain it to you."

"Okay, Uncle Kelly," Timmy replied as he quickly grabbed Kelly's hand and began dragging him towards the bathroom.

As they were leaving the room, Justy came over to Sean and Cory. "Here Sean, wipe off your face." Justy handed Sean an old shirt. "I've learned to keep this with me in case of wet dreams. Be glad it wasn't Johnny that caught you; when he caught Nick and Ash, half of Orange County knew about it before we were able to shut him up."

"Unca' Justy, you lie!" Johnny shouted from across the room. "Daddy says it was only half of O'lando!"

Justy grinned. "See what I mean?"

Cory regained his composure enough to groan "Mom's gonna KILL us if he does that!"

"It's too late to do anything about it now," Sean said dejectedly. "I guess we all might as well get around for breakfast."

Justy knelt down and pulled the two boys into a hug. "Cheer up, if your mom starts to freak Nicky and Ash will set her straight. It's not the end of the world, trust me."

Cory and Sean returned the hug, then the three of them woke up the rest of the boys. Once the full tribe was awake, they moved as a group to Cory's room to cycle through the shower.

While Sean and Cory were waking everyone, Kelly escorted Timmy into the pool changing room. Once the door was closed and locked, he began. "Hey kiddo, we need to talk about what you saw."

Timmy sat next to Kelly. "What was poppa doin' to daddy's pee-pee?"

Kelly thought for a second on how much to say. "Well, Timmy, what you saw was one of the ways your poppa and daddy show that they love each other."

Timmy screwed his face into a grimace. "But daddy peed on poppa! That's yucky!"

*'What the heck am I getting into!'* Kelly thought to himself before continuing. "Well Timmy, when you start to grow up some special things happen with your pee-pee. One of those things is it feels special when some things are done to it. Your pop was doing that for your daddy."

Timmy replied "Okay, I guess. But why did Daddy pee on him, and why did it look so funny?"

Kelly smiled, the worst was over. "That was not pee, Timmy. What came out was called sperm, when someone makes you feel special that's what happens. I'll bet your daddy was wiggling around and making funny noises just before it happened, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, that's what woke me up. Can you make me feel like that?"

Kelly was shocked, he did not expect that question. "Umm, actually Timmy you gotta grow up some before you are ready for that. Right now it would hurt."

"Why don't it hurt when Daddy does it?"

"Because his privates have started changing to be a man. Until your Daddy and Pop say it's okay, you should not let anyone play with your privates. If you want to do something like that ask them first, they will tell you if it is okay."

Timmy smiled. "Thanks Unc'a Kelly. What should I do if they do it again?"

Kelly smiled. "Wait 'till they are done, then roll over and join in their hug. Whatever you do, don't scare them!"

Timmy giggled. "Okay. Thanks!"

Kelly opened the door, and Timmy ran out into the kitchen. Just as Kelly entered the room, he heard the one thing he did not warn Timmy about.

"Gran'ma! I woke up and saw Poppa kissin' Daddy's pee-pee! Then Daddy squirted

spermzies on Poppa's face!" Timmy announced excitedly. "Unca' Kelly says I will be able to do that when I grow up!"

Kelly scrambled to prevent any more damage. "TIMMY! I forgot to tell you, THAT IS NOT SOMETHING YOU BRAG ABOUT! It's between you and your parents!"

Timmy bowed his head down and began sobbing. "Sorry."

Ashley had been sitting at the breakfast bar. "Come here, Timmy. You don't need to cry kiddo, it was an honest mistake. Johnny did the same thing to Nick and me; you are not gonna get in trouble."

Nick quickly intercepted Terri as she headed angrily towards the stairs. "Hold on, Mom. Listen up for a minute before you fly off the handle! This was bound to happen sooner or later, at least it happened while we were here to help with damage control. You can be glad of one thing; by the time we caught up with Johnny, he was getting off the phone with Aunt Jackie after telling her ALLLLL about it! I bet if you talk to Kelly you'll find out he's got it all covered, he just forgot to tell Timmy not to brag."

Teri looked at Nick, anger still in her eyes. "Why couldn't they do it in private?"

"Mom, think about it. Right now they have to share a room until your new house is done. On top of that, Timmy has attached himself to Cory and gets antsy if Cory leaves him to use the bathroom. They are parents now, which means no privacy. Trust me, they both feel lousy right now, chewing them out won't help. Ash and I have been there, I promise they feel low as a worm unless one of the guys has made them realize it was gonna happen anyway."

Teri looked over at her grandson cuddled on Ash's lap, then back at Nick. "I hope you're right, I just don't want Timmy to develop a complex. I'll find out what Kelly said, then all of us will sit down later."

Nick visibly relaxed. "Thanks, Mom; you won't regret it."

Nick then turned to Kelly. "Hey Kel, why don't you take the rugrat up to his parents? I bet they are worried about him."

Kelly retrieved Timmy from Ashley, and headed for the stairs. As he passed Nick, he whispered "Thanks Nicky; I had no idea what to do."

Nick rustled Kelly's hair. "No problem, Kelly. I gotta look out for my little bros."

Upstairs in the bedroom, Cory and Sean were cuddling on their bed while waiting for the rest of the boys to get ready. "I hope Timmy is gonna be okay," Cory whispered.

"Me too. I feel bad now, he was really freaked."

Jamie walked over and sat next to them. "Y'all should know better than to try having a private conversation with us around! Don't worry about Timmy, Jacob just checked on him and he was fine."

Sean reached an arm over and pulled Jamie into their cuddle. "Thanks, bro. I'm definitely not gonna do that again while Timmy is sleeping with us."

Jamie shook his head. "Kelly handled that already, trust me. Timmy was just surprised, he understands now."

Sean started to argue, but just then Kelly came in the room with Timmy on his back. Once they were in the room, Timmy climbed down and stood in front of his parents with his head hung low.

"Daddy, Poppa, I'm sorry for 'mbar'sing you. I didn't mean to. Do you still love me?" he said, tears forming in his eyes.

Cory motioned to Sean, and they both got up and knelt in front of Timmy. Cory lifted the boy's chin. "Nothing will stop us from loving you, Timmy. Daddies make mistakes sometimes, we should not have done that with you there. We're not mad at you, and we'll never do that again

when you are sleeping with us, okay? Come here and give us a hug, son."

Timmy threw himself at his parents. "Thank you Daddy! Please don't make Poppa stop showin' he loves you. Unca' Kelly told me why he did that, I'll sleep with Gran'ma so he can love you if you don't want me here."

Sean gave a start. "Timmy, we ALWAYS want you with us, we just don't want you to feel uncomfortable. If I have to choose between doing stuff with your Daddy and the three of us cuddling together at night, I'll choose the cuddling every time. There is no way I'm ever gonna allow you to feel like you are not allowed to cuddle with us."

Timmy gave Sean then Cory both a big hug. "You can still do stuff. Unca' Kelly told me just to look the other way, then I can cuddle with you after you are done."

Cory smiled. "We'll see about that, bud. Right now, I think you need to get a shower so we can all go eat breakfast."

Timmy grinned. "Okay, Daddy. Can you and Poppa take it with me? I ain't never took a shower before; I always take baths."

Cory giggled. "Sure thing, kiddo. Let's hurry up though, I'm getting hungry."

Sean pointed Kelly towards the other bathroom, and then the three boys disappeared into the shower.

Justy looked around the room at the remaining tribe members. "Hey guys, let's all wait until they are back here before we go down. This is gonna be the last time for a while that we will all eat breakfast together."

Everyone agreed, and they all settled down discussing the last weeks events among themselves. Suddenly Jacob and Jamie started giggling, followed quickly by Justy.

"What's so funny?" Kelly asked as he walked in the room with a towel wrapped around his waist.

Justy managed to answer between giggles. "You really started something! Timmy is asking ALL kinds of questions about Cory and Sean's privates right now - he's driving them NUTS!"

Kelly joined the rest of the group as they all began giggling. "I kinda figured the little rugrat was gonna do that!"

A minute later, Timmy came flying out of the bathroom, nude and still soaking wet. "BONZAI!" Timmy screamed as he launched himself at Kelly.

The next thing Kelly knew, he was laying on the floor with his towel down at his feet. "What was that for?" He asked Timmy in shock.

"That's for callin' me a rugrat!" Timmy exclaimed gleefully as he began tickling Kelly. A wrestling match began, with Kelly putting up just enough resistance to make it fair.

Cory and Sean walked out of the bathroom carrying a towel, and busted into laughter when they saw what their son was doing. "Timmy! We meant AFTER you were dried off and dressed!" Cory managed in between breaths. "Get over here and dry off, kiddo."

"Okay, Daddy," Timmy giggled as Kelly rolled him over and knelt across him. Timmy looked at Kelly, and suddenly exclaimed "WOW! Look Unca' Kelly! You got a hair by your pee-pee! You're startin' to get furry like Daddy is!"

"Where!" Kelly exclaimed, forgetting where he was and who he was talking to.

Timmy reached up with both hands, using one to hold down Kelly's penis to see better and the other to trace the fine quarter-inch long dark hair centered over the top of it. "Right here. You see it?"

Everyone in the room gathered around to witness the most important event in a boys' life. Timmy proudly pointed it out to each of them, bragging about how his Unca' Kelly was a big boy



now.

As the older boys congratulated Kelly, Timmy sat up and wrapped his arms around Kelly's waist, giving him a tight hug. He noticed that Kelly was hard, so he carefully stood up to whisper in Kelly's ear. "Unca' Kelly, I think your spermies are tryin' to get out. Daddy says big boys rub themselves to let them out, you better go help them. You can carry me so nobody sees it."

Kelly hugged his new nephew, and picked him up to head to the bathroom. Just as they reached the door, Timmy slid down and Kelly hurried in, quickly closing the door behind him.

"Hey Nature Boy, get over here and get dressed already!" Cory giggled. Timmy started to head for his daddy, when he saw Kelly's clothes were still sitting on the dresser. "One second, daddy. Unca' Kelly needs his clothes." Timmy grabbed the pile and slipped into the bathroom, coming out a minute later with a big smile.

"What's the smile for?" Cory asked as he grabbed Timmy and began dressing him.

Timmy blushed then whispered to Cory. "Unca' Kelly was wipin' up when I went in. He said I was a big boy too, 'cause I helped him not be em'barr'sed. 'Specially since he just squirted his first spermies."

Cory hugged his son. "You're pretty special, did you know that? That's why Poppa and I both love you." He then kissed Timmy's forehead and then slipped a tee shirt over his head. "Get your shoes on, it's time to head down to eat."

Kelly walked out of the bathroom, this time fully dressed. Cory went over and gave him a hug. "Way to go, bro! Timmy told me, congrats!"

Kelly returned the hug. "Thanks, I almost didn't make it. When Timmy slid off me, I just about lost it right there. I would'a been soooo embarrassed if I had shot on him!"

"Don't worry about it, with all of the touching I was surprised you didn't shoot. Let's go eat."

The tribe assembled in the hallway and headed down the stairs, Cory and Sean in the lead with Timmy riding on Cory's back. As they walked into the kitchen, Nick looked over at them with a big grin.

"Welcome to parenthood! Sucks getting' caught, don't it!" Nick announced loudly.

Before Sean or Cory could respond, Justy yelled out, "Eight and under, your target is Nicky - ATTACK!"

Before Nick could move out of the way, the first wave hit. Kyle and Ty knocked him out of the chair, and as soon as he hit the floor the second wave consisting of Robbie, Johnny, and Timmy slammed into him. Ashley just sat in his chair, holding his stomach in laughter. "I TOLD ya' it wasn't a good idea to do that! You REALLY need to start listening!"

Chip and Josh were just sitting back with Teri watching the entertainment. Chip waved Cory and Sean over to them. "Guys, I'm not gonna make fun of you, but I want to know if you learned anything this morning," Chip asked seriously.

The boys looked at the three adults in front of them. It was obvious that Chip had been elected to speak for all of them. Cory responded slowly. "Yeah, Uncle Chip. This parent stuff ain't all it's cracked up to be! I understand now why they said in school sex can wait. Once you got a kid, you gotta consider him whenever you do anything. I wouldn't give up Timmy for nuthin', but I guess we still need to learn what to do around him."

Chip nodded his head, and then looked at Sean.

"Cory was speaking for both of us. Timmy's a smart lil' guy; I think we need to talk to him if we think somethin' will freak him out."

Teri held up her hand to stop Chip from responding. "You are both right. One other thing you need to realize, though. Timmy already worships you two, and he will try anything he sees

you doing. Kelly did a good job of explaining he had to wait, but it's up to the two of you to direct him so he doesn't try things he is not ready for. That's your job; not mine, not Chip and Josh's, and definitely not Kelly's. Do I make myself clear?"

Both boys hung their heads. "Yes Ma'am."

Just then the phone rang, and JJ ran to answer it. He took one look at the caller ID and decided to have some fun.

"Short's Butcher Shop; where the meat is well beat!" JJ answered with a grin.

"Ummm ... ahhh ... shit!! JJ, I'm gonna STRANGLE you! This is Aaron, let me talk to Chip!"

JJ giggled. "Gotta catch me first, old man. Just a second!" Without pulling the phone away, JJ yelled: "HEY, UNCLE CHIP! AIRHEAD WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!"

Chip jogged over to the phone and took it from JJ. "JJ, remember he WILL see you in a couple months; you better be careful."

"I was just funnin' him, Uncle Chip," JJ giggled as he ran back to the table.

Chip snickered a little bit, then spoke into the phone, "This is Chip, what you need Aaron?"

"Tell JJ if I ever get the hearing back in my other ear his scrawny little butt is mine! Did you hear how he answered the phone?"

"Nope, I'm afraid to ask!" Chip chuckled.

"Short's Butcher Shop, where the meat is well beat!" Aaron giggled. "If Mom had heard that, she'd KILL him!"

Chip barely restrained himself from busting a gut laughing. "Settle down, Aaron. I seem to remember having to talk to you and Justy about prank calls a couple of years ago. Turnabout is fair play. Now what did you call about?"

Aaron grumbled, then brightened up as he replied. "I've got some bad news. Your new landscaper defected!"

"What do you mean 'defected'?" Chip asked, suddenly very serious.

"He's fell in love! The only problem is, it's with Zac!"

"You say WHAT!" Chip exclaimed loudly.

"You heard me. Mark and Zac have been totally useless since the first time their eyes met. Aunt Jackie had to pour ice down their backs just so we could introduce them to each other!"

Chip was doing his best to keep from laughing. "Tell Aunt Jackie I said she can do whatever she wants to get those two working on the room. I'll pass on the info to the rest of the tribe. Thanks, Aaron."

"Anytime, Chip. I just wish I could see Josh's face when he finds out!"

"Get to work! I'll see you tonight!" Chip said with a chuckle.

"Okay, later Chip" Aaron replied, then hung up.

"What's wrong?" Josh said as he walked up behind Chip.

Chip grinned. "Nothing serious. Mark just fell in love with Zac Hanson."

Josh froze for a second. "WHAT?!?!"

"You heard me. Let's go tell the tribe."

They walked back into the dining room to find the kids in a feeding frenzy. As fast as the food appeared on their plates, it disappeared into their mouths. Chip grinned as he prepared to make the announcement. "If you human vacuum cleaners can slow down for a second, Aaron wanted me to tell you guys something!"

The boys looked at Chip, then their food, and then back at Chip as they grudgingly put their forks down.

"That's better. It seems that Mark has defected. He has fell in love with a member of another band."

"Whadda' you mean, Uncle Chip?" Kyle asked in a confused voice.

"Just that; he's fell head over heels in love ... with Zac Hanson," Chip replied.

The room fell silent, then erupted in cheers. "Mark did it, he beat the Dark Side!" Adam exclaimed with a giggle.

Teri looked at her son with a smile as she shook her head. "I think calling being straight 'the dark side' is kinda pushing it, don't you think, Adam?"

Adam blushed as he sank down in his chair. "Sorry mom!"

"Hey Adam, sit on up; your Mom is just jealous of us!" Josh chuckled. "She knows that she is outnumbered here."

Adam giggled as he sat up. "Yeah Uncle Josh, I didn't think of that!"

Teri shot Josh a dirty look, then smiled as she shook her head. "Josh, you are incorrigible!"

The boys returned to eating, and then once they were all finished retreated into the Rec Room to spend what little time they still had together.

As noon approached, Brian walked towards Rec Room to get the boys for lunch. To the surprise of all the adults, not one of the kids had been seen since breakfast. He walked into the room and smiled at the sight in front of him. All the boys were sitting in a circle, each holding the hand of the boy next to them. They were totally silent, seemingly communicating on a higher level. Robbie slowly looked at Brian. "Hi Daddy. We don't gotta go yet, do we?"

Brian knelt behind Robbie and softly rubbed his little shoulders. "Not yet, kiddo; but it will be soon. Right now it's lunch time, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy. We'll be right out," Robbie answered as he turned back towards the circle.

Brian stood up and headed back to the kitchen. About a minute later, the boys quietly followed him and took their places in the dining room.

Helen brought the first load of food out, and noticed the mood of the boys. Even Andrew was sitting quietly. "Listen up all of you!" she announced. "This is not the end of the world, you will all be seeing each other again soon. I will not have a bunch of sad faces at my table, is that clear? You are all still boys, and I expect you to act like boys."

Everyone at the table, adult and child, looked at Helen in shock. Justy was the first to respond. "Sorry Helen, I guess we all just are still thinkin' about what we've been discussing. My lil' bros were helping out, and we all have been going through what has happened with all of us in the last few weeks. It's kinda hard to be happy after seeing what some of these guys were rescued from."

Helen walked up behind Justy and caressed his shoulders. "I can't say I know what everyone has been through, but I can say that it is in the past. It is fine to learn about and learn from the past, but don't let it bring you down so it ruins the present. What happened in the past is what makes now possible. I lost my son in the past, but due to that I not only got him back, but gained an entire family. When I woke up this morning, the first thing I did was thank God for the blessing of giving me this wonderful family as He returned my son to me. After lunch, I expect to see ALL of you boys out at the pool having fun, you have spent enough time in the past. Now lets eat."

The lunch was quieter than normal, but there were still some giggles and small jokes. As the boys finished and waited to be excused, Teri stood up "Could I have everyones attention! I remember the first night that this family gained it's new members. Out of necessity, I allowed the group to skinny dip. This afternoon, the pool is reserved for the kids only, and I'm going to declare

it a suit-free zone. For those who don't know, the house rules are you must be wearing something in the house anywhere past the changing room. Go have fun, guys; and remember there are little ones with you, so don't do anything they shouldn't see or do."

The boys ran for the pool, tossing their clothes into the changing room as they ran past. In no time, they had a game of water tag going, staying in the shallow end so the little ones could play too.

After a bit, Cory noticed that Timmy seemed to be tiring, so he called out to the others. "Hey guys, take a break! The kids are wearing out!"

Everyone headed to the mat by the fence, since it was in the shade. Cory and Sean sat against the fence first, then Timmy climbed onto Cory's lap, snuggling against his shoulder, and soon fell asleep. Johnny stretched across Justin, Jacob, and Jamie's laps, and was soon out of it as well. Rusty sat between Jeffy and Sammy; once Robbie saw how Johnny was laying, he decided to do the same with them. Adam and JJ sat next to Cory and Sean, and soon found Kyle and Tyler snuggling on their laps as well. Andrew squeezed in between JJ and Sammy, while Kelly filled the space between Jeffy and Jacob. Soon all of them were fast asleep, one continuous bundle of naked boys.

About a half hour later, they were all woke up when Helen came out with a tray full of Iced Teas. "Hey sleepyheads, time's a wasting. Have a drink, then get back to playing."

She handed each boy a drink, just in case they would be embarrassed standing. She made sure Rusty got the only drink in a blue glass, and then she headed back into the house.

Justy took a swallow, then turned to Kelly. "Man, your mom was pretty cool about us bein' naked, Kelly. She didn't stare, make a comment, or nothing!"

Kelly giggled. "That's 'cause she's used to me. Before I got taken away, as soon as I got home from school the MOST I ever had on was underwear until I had to leave the house again or someone visited."

Jacob said softly "Our old dad used to make us do that."

Kelly put an arm around Jacob. "The difference is that I was naked 'cause I wanted to be, and nobody was doin' things to me. You guys had something good and fun turned into something bad by someone who was using you. Don't let what he did to you ruin the good and fun stuff, okay?"

Jacob reached his arm around Kelly and smiled as he returned the one-armed hug. "Okay, Kelly. Thanks for tellin' me that, I feel lots better now."

Cory spoke up. "You know, I think what Kelly just said goes for all of us. Each of us has had bad things happen, and if we let it get to us we'll hurt ourselves. Kelly, if you had any doubts about being part of the tribe, forget them. You just proved you are one of us."

Johnny interrupted the conference. "Unca' Justy, could you take me down the slide?"

"Sure, munchkin. Let's get wet!" Justy answered with a smile.

Shortly their was a line for the slide, as the youngest boys rotated through their favorites to get rides down the slide.

Two hours later, they were still going strong as Nick came out to the pool deck. As soon as Johnny saw him, Nick found his arms full of a naked wet boy. "Daddy! We've been slidin' down the slide! It's awesome!"

Nick smiled warmly at his son. For the first time in Johnny's short life, he had family close to his own age to play with. Nick hated to have to end this, but was satisfied with the fact that within the next couple of months his son would never be without these boys to give him support ever again. "Johnny, as much as I hate to say it, it's time for y'all to get dressed and get ready. Uncle Chip says we gotta leave soon."

Johnny pouted for a second, then his face lit up. "Okay, Daddy. When everyone comes home, can we swim nekked in our pool?"

Nick hugged his little angel. "If the weather's good we'll see, okay kiddo?"

"Okay"

Nick turned towards the door, and called over his shoulder. "C'mon guys, time to head in." He then carried Johnny inside to get dressed.

To Teri's surprise, the goodbyes went fairly well. There were quite a few 'see ya soon' and quiet tearful hugs, but it seemed that the boys had all settled their goodbyes throughout the day. She cried a few tears herself when Jamie and Jacob came up to her.

"Aunt Teri, thanks for savin' us," Jamie said as he hugged her. Jacob joined the hug, and added "Without you we wouldn't have our new Daddy and Pop. Even though we're going away, we still love you."

Teri hugged both boys tightly. "I love you too, guys. Take care of yourselves, we'll see you in a couple months, okay?"

"Okay," they both sniffled. They gave her one last squeeze, then headed over to join Chip and Josh.

Next in line was Justy. "Aunt Teri, thanks for givin' me my new brothers. Even more, thanks for givin' Aaron his life back. Until this week, I kinda took Dad and Pop's love for granted, but now I realize that they are even greater than I thought. I learned a lot from you, and I can't wait till you come home." Justy threw his arms around Teri and gave her a huge hug.

Teri choked out a response. "Thanks, angel. Take care of your new brothers, I just know that you are gonna be the best thing that has ever happened to them."

As Justy walked away, Teri wiped the tears from her eyes. As her vision cleared, she saw Rusty and Robbie standing there waiting for her. She knelt down to be on Robbie's level, and motioned the boys to join her.

"Thanks for makin' us stay at Denny's, Teri." Rusty began as they both hugged her. "I kinda used to have a crush on Curly, but now he's gonna be my Dad someday soon. You're the best!"

Teri smiled. "Take care of your new daddies, guys. They both love you very much, and are very proud of you. If you need to talk just call me, okay?"

"Yeah," both boys said in unison. They then gave her one more hug before joining their new families.

The last one in line surprised Teri - it was Nick. "Hey Mom, you didn't honestly think I'd leave without a thanks, did you?"

"Actually Nick, I kinda figured you would want to say something," Teri replied with a smile.

"When Kev first told me about you while he was bouncing off the walls about having another brother, I was skeptical about what you were really like. You not only impressed me, you gave my lil bro a life back; for that you are a goddess! You are a very special person, Mom; God blessed all of us when he brought you into the family. Ash and I are both anxious to have you move down home, this last week has made me realize what Aaron and I were missing growing up, and I look forward to making up for it. For the first time, Johnny has family his age to play with; family he would never have if it wasn't for you."

Teri hugged Nick. "Even when Dan told me y'all were coming, I had no idea how it would change my life. Don't sell yourself short, Nick; Aaron would not have made it this far if it wasn't for you being there to support him. Take care of your husband and son; you are truly the light of their lives."

"Thanks Mom," Nick replied as he gave her a squeeze and then rejoined his family.

The rest of the adults finished their goodbyes, with a long tearful hug between Dan and Kevin being the final touch on the temporary parting.

\* \* \*

Dan looked at the lifeless group of boys sprawled around the Rec room floor. For the last three hours, since Chip left with everyone going back to Orlando, the boys had not moved. Sean, Cory, and Timmy were leaning against the chair, Adam and JJ were cuddled in front of the TV, Kyle and Ty had staked out a corner by the doorway. Andrew, Kelly, Jeffy and Sammy were half-heartedly playing a game of Monopoly; but even they were subdued in their reactions to the game. John walked up behind Dan and began massaging his shoulders.

"Hey babe; I can see how the kids are taking this, what about you?" John asked with concern.

"I'm dealing. This last week has been a real eye-opener. A week and a half ago, my biggest concerns were how Cory and Kyle were doing at the home when I wasn't there, and worrying about JJ getting outed at school. Since then, I've lost my wife, gained a boyfriend, been reunited with family I didn't know I had, gained another son and two stepsons, and basically went from being a kid shrink barely making it to being one of the most influential child psychologists in the Federation. I kinda understand the boy's mood right now, it's all starting to catch up to me too."

John reached down and hugged Dan from behind. "I know what you mean, this last week has turned all of our lives upside down. Thing is, I would do it all again seeing as to what the end result is. Between my new job and my new sons, it was well worth it. Having you is just the icing on the cake, I just wish we didn't have to lose Sharon for all of this to happen."

Dan patted John's arm. "I agree, hon. I think Helen put it right at lunch today; sometimes we need to go through the bad things for the good things to happen. Now, you got any ideas to liven up this bunch? They are getting depressing!"

Just as John started to respond, Kyle got a surprised look on his face, then broke into a huge grin. "KEWL! Jamie and Jacob say they're at their new home, and it's HUGE!!!"

All of the boys immediately jumped up and gathered around Kyle. "What's their new room like?" Timmy asked excitedly.

Kyle concentrated for a second, then replied. "They say it's as big as this room, it's got bunk beds and a buncha' Yu-Gi posters all over the walls. Jacob says Aunt Jackie and Uncle Harold are gonna take them toy shopping in about fifteen minutes." Kyle then started giggling. "Jamie thinks Mark and his new boyfriend Zac are goofy. They just finished supper, and the two of them were feeding each other!"

That immediately lightened the mood, as Kyle and Cory both fell to the floor laughing, while the rest of the boys fell into a serious giggle fit. Even John and Dan chuckled at the image that appeared in their minds.

Just then Teri walked in. "What's so funny?" she asked.

Dan answered between chuckles. "Kyle is talking to Jamie and Jacob. They just described how Mark is doing with his new boyfriend. They were feeding each other over supper!"

"Oh my God!" Teri chuckled. "Poor Chip, I feel sorry for him! Andy, could you come here a minute?"

Andy stood up and walked over to Teri. "Yeah, Teri; wazzup?"

"I just got off the phone with your Dad. Your Grandma is sick and needs someone there for a while, and I'm supposed to ask you if you want to go with your parents or stay here with us.

Before you answer, Cecil said that he thinks you should stay here so you can finish school, but the final decision is yours."

"What's wrong with Grandma?" Andrew asked in a concerned voice.

"It's nothing bad. She slipped and cracked the bone in her hip. She's gonna be fine, but needs some help until it heals again."

Andrew visibly relaxed. "Okay. Dad's right, I should finish school here, even though I really don't want to. Are you sure it's okay for me to stay here? It's gonna be kinda crowded."

Before Teri could answer, Cory spoke up. "Hey Carrot-top; you are a member of the Tribe! That means you ALWAYS have a place here, right guys?"

The resounding 'YEAH' was deafening. "Does that answer your question, Andy?" Dan chuckled.

"Besides," Kelly chimed in, "I need you here to hang with when all these goofballs decide to start suckin' on each others tonsils!"

The next thing Kelly knew, he was buried under a pile of kids, all giggling as they tried to tickle him. "Truth hurts, don't it?" he giggled from the bottom of the pile.

John chuckled. "Dan, I think they are back to normal. Watch what you wish for, you might get it!"

Teri grabbed the two men and headed for the kitchen. "Let them be, a good wrestling match is just what they need."

A few minutes later, the boys settled back down. Cory sat back with a grin. "Hey, why are we sittin' in here? Sean, where's your soccer ball?"

"In the coat closet, why?"

"Grab it, I feel like a soccer game. Last one out to the front yard is goalie!" Cory then grabbed Timmy and ran for the front door.

When Helen went out to get the boys for supper, the game had turned into a free-for-all; teams were non-existent. She smiled when she noticed all the boys made a conscious effort to ensure Timmy was included in the game. "BOYS!" she shouted. "I hate to ruin your fun, but it's time to get inside and get ready for supper."

The boys started to complain, but as soon as they heard food mentioned they stormed inside and fought for space in the bathroom to get cleaned up.

*'If anyone even suggests these boys ain't normal, this proves them wrong!'* Helen thought to herself as she followed them inside.

Once the food was served, it was obvious the depression from their new family leaving had not affected the boy's appetites. Dan, John, Teri, and Helen had to fight to make sure they got any food. Cory made a point of making sure Timmy got his share of the food, threatening anyone who tried to take the pieces of chicken that Timmy wanted. After supper, the boys retreated into the Rec Room and put Harry Potter in the DVD player.

After the movie, Cory looked at the sleepy group around him. "Hey guys, lets hit the sack. Timmy, c'mon up and we'll get ready."

Teri looked in on the boys an hour later. They were all laying crossways on the bed clothed in just their chosen underwear. Timmy was safely nestled between Cory and Sean, Kyle and Ty were cuddled between JJ and Adam, and Jeffy and Sammy had managed to sneak between Kelly and Andy.

As she turned to leave, Helen walked up and looked past her. "They look like a group of angels!" Helen whispered to Teri.

"They are angels," Teri replied, "every single one of them. If half the people in the world could have unconditional love the way those boys do, war would be a distant memory."

Helen smiled. "Just remember, Teri, they learned it from you. The new boys are learning it too, they are just giving back what you have given them."

"Thanks Helen, just remember you have done the same for Kelly. Lets hit the sack, when they are hungry in the morning you will forget them looking like angels!"



## *Chapter 24*

Alec Saiz took one last look around their old bedroom. He had just spent all morning moving his little brother's things to their hidden fort in the woods, and was almost done adding his things to the pile. This would be the last trip; so far his luck had held and the school hadn't told his father that he didn't show up today.

Tears rolled down his face as he looked at the room, stripped of all indications that two boys had grown up there. 'I promised Trav no matter what happened that I'd back him up, please God let this be the right thing I'm about to do for him.' Alec thought as he locked and closed the bedroom door.

Nobody noticed the thin fourteen year old as he pulled the wagon full of trash bags into the woods for the final trip. He still had not hit his growth spurt, so with his height of five feet he could pass for twelve if he wanted to. In fact, he usually passed for a twin of his twelve year old brother Travis. The only physical difference between them was the color of their eyes, Alec's were dark brown, while Trav's were grey. Both showed their mother's Mexican heritage in their hair, skin and facial features. Alec wondered if things would have went different last night if his mother had survived when Trav was born.

As he reached a safe spot in the woods, Alec reflected on the events of the previous evening.

\* \* \*

Their father had always held a grudge against Travis. In his mind, Travis was the cause of his wife's death, so he took it out on the boy. Due to this, Alec had spent all of Travis's life protecting his little brother. Last night was the first time that even he was unable to help, as Travis got caught at his boyfriend's house kissing. The other boy's parents called Mr. Saiz during dinner, telling him they were okay with the boys being a couple, but they wanted him to make sure Travis knew what the limits were. Unfortunately for Trav, their father had no intentions of that. Finding out that his youngest son was gay finally gave him the reason he was looking for, and fifteen minutes later Travis found himself thrown out of the house with nowhere to go. When Alec tried to follow him, their father threw him back onto the couch and told him to go to his room; nobody in the family was to have any contact with Travis from this point on.

Travis had told Alec a year ago that he was gay. Alec had hugged Travis and responded that he was straight, but that he loved Travis and would always be there for him. Shortly after that, they used some of their hidden 'emergency' cash to get two pre-paid cell phones. They were kept

hidden and charged just in case anything happened; anytime either of them left the house a phone was with them just in case. The other thing they made sure of was that their fort was set up to spend a couple of nights in, no matter what the weather; they had even found a portable heater at a garage sale and set it up there.

Once their father had fell asleep, Alec tried the cell and was relieved when Travis answered on the first ring:

"I'm scared, bro!"

Alec winced. Trav sounded like he was about to lose it. "I know, bro. Plan 'B' starts tomorrow, after that I might have an idea. Settle down and try to sleep. Did you call Gabe and fill him in?"

Travis calmed a little hearing Alec's voice. "Yeah. I talked to his dad, too. He said that if we are still out this weekend to come over, but he can't afford to have us live there. He also said to tell you that you are more of a man than Dad, and he's glad you are gonna take care of me."

"That's good, bro. Luv ya, get some sleep. You know the plan."

"Yeah. Luv ya too, big bro. Better get off the phone before ya get caught, then we would be screwed."

"Yep. Bye!"

The next morning, a nervous Alec left the house and hid around the corner until he was sure that their father was gone for the day.

\* \* \*

Alec reached the fort and unloaded the last of the bags into the corner. Travis was still asleep; he had not slept most of the night because he was worried that Alec would not get away. Once Alec had arrived with the first load, he relaxed and followed his big brother's orders to nap while everything was being moved. Alec looked at his watch - it was 10:30 already.

*'I hope this works, if not we are screwed!'* Alec thought as he got out his cell and entered the phone number that he prayed would reach some help.

\* \* \*

Sean and Cory were just finishing their shift in the shower. It had been decided that to save time and water the boys would shower as couples.

For the younger pairs the plan worked, but the older ones made up for it. When Ty and Kyle offered to take Timmy with them to shower, the smile on Cory's face brought the room to tears in laughter.

They all were just sitting down for a late breakfast when the phone rang. Helen answered it.

"Short residence; this is Helen."

"Helen, this is Alec Saiz. May I please speak to Mrs. Short?"

Helen paused; she knew Alec was one of Sean and Kelly's teammates from the cookout. If he had asked for one of the boys, she would have told him to call back, but asking for Teri was something else. She had also noticed the worried tone in his voice, and decided it was best to go for it. "Yes Alec, she's right here. Hold on for a minute, I will get her for you. I'm going to put you on hold, okay?"

"Okay, thanks Helen."

Helen walked to the head of the table, where the adults had gathered to try to survive the

feeding frenzy of the group of teens and pre-teens who had invaded the dining room. She leaned over and whispered to Teri.

"Teri, Alec Saiz is on the phone. He wants to speak to you. It sounds like there's a problem from the tone of his voice."

Teri looked at the expression on Helen's face and replied. "Thanks, Helen. I'll take it in my office." She then got up and went into the office.

"This is Teri. What's wrong, Alec?"

Alec was in tears as he replied. "Can you help us, PLEASE! Our dad kicked my little bro out last night 'cause he's gay. I won't leave him but we ain't got anywhere to go!"

Teri immediately became all business. "Yes, we will try to help you, Alec. Take a second to calm down while I get some more help in here." Teri did not even bother to put him on hold as she laid the phone on the desk and strode to the doorway.

"JOHN! DANIEL! CORY! SEAN! KELLY! Get in the office - NOW!" She then turned back to the desk and picked up the phone. "Hang in there. It will be just a second, Alec."

"Thanks, Teri," Alec replied, somewhat calmed.

Teri patched her tricorder into the phone's base as everyone came into the office. "Everyone is here, Alec. I'm going to log this call, so you need to tell only the facts, okay?"

"Okay."

Teri began recording. "This is Teri Short, Director of Federation Youth Services. Begin preliminary investigation regarding Alec Saiz. Representing Federation Security is Commander John Martin. Youth Services Mental Health is represented by Dr. Daniel Richardson. Starfleet Command is represented by Ensigns Sean and Cory Short of the USS *Enterprise*. Also present is a civilian witness, Kelly McCarthy. Interview is taking place over civilian phone network. Alec, could you please tell us exactly what has happened?"

Alec reviewed what happened the previous night. Once he finished, the questions started.

John went first. "Alec, what would happen if your brother was taken in and you returned to your father?"

"He'd beat the shit outta me," Alec replied. "Any time I stood up for my brother he would beat my butt until I couldn't sit down. This time, he will probably kill me for going against what he said."

"That's what I expected. Teri, in my opinion the Act needs invoked on both boys."

Instead of a question, Dan gave an opinion. "Alec, from what you have said I believe you have been the one stabilizing factor in Travis's life. With the combination of his sexuality and family situation, it is my opinion that it would be detrimental to his mental well being to be separated from you at this time. Teri, I recommend the Safe Haven Act be invoked for both boys immediately."

Sean and Cory conferred while the others were making their statements, then Cory gave their decision. "As officers of the Starship *Enterprise*, it is our belief that neither boy is safe in their home environment, and we recommend the Safe Haven Act be enacted on their behalf."

Kelly looked at Teri and grinned. "You take care of getting' them out. I'll take care of where to put them." He then ran for the door.

Teri shook her head as Kelly passed her. "I believe it's unanimous. John, take the Suburban and get the boys. Take Adam, JJ, Kelly, and Andy with you to help. Cory, call Dr. McCoy and set up a physical. Alec, wake your little brother and tell him to get ready, I'm invoking the Safe Haven Act on both of you. You are coming to your new home."

As John began rounding people up, Cory called the starship. "Ensign Cory to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Cory."

"Commander, could you patch me thru to Doc? Mom's invoking the SHA over the phone right now."

"Sure thing, Cory. Here you go."

"Sickbay, this better be good, Ensign!" McCoy answered.

Cory giggled. "Cut the crab routine, Doc; we all know better! Mom said to call you; she has two kids who need a physical real quick, SHA inductees."

McCoy grumbled. "I swear, give them Ensign bars and they think that they know it all. Get them up here. I'm too busy to come down. Make it fast Cory."

"Will do, Doc. As soon as they get to the house we'll beam up. Thanks."

Both of them signed off, then Cory found and filled in Teri. "As soon as they get here, Sean and I need to take them up to the *Enterprise*. I guess getting them settled is gonna have to wait."

"That will be fine, Cory. I'm still getting used to the way both you and Sean act when you are on duty. It's like you suddenly grew up. Both of you boys have made me very proud in this last week, keep it up."

Cory blushed. "Thanks, Mom. I'll pass it on to Sean. Who are they gonna stay with?"

It was Teri's turn to grin. "It seems that Kelly is pulling a Justy; he went out and told Helen that she was getting two new sons. Not asked, but TOLD!"

Cory giggled. "How'd she take it?"

"After she talked to me, she agreed to it. So it looks like you have two more members for your tribe."

Cory gave Teri a big hug. "Thanks, Mom. You are really the best Mom in the whole world."

Twenty minutes later, John returned with Alec and Travis. Teri was shocked when she met them in the hallway; if she didn't know better they could easily be twins! Both boys were about 5 foot tall, thin but not malnourished. Both had identical hair cuts, collar length straight black hair, with a skin tone which made them seem to have a natural tan. The only real difference between them was their eyes, Travis had deep grey eyes which just grabbed you, while Alec's eyes were a dark brown which seemed to never end.

Travis was latched onto his older brother like a shadow. Cory and Sean walked over, Cory speaking as they met. "Hey Alec, welcome to the tribe! Let me guess, that must be Travis hangin' on ya'."

Alec grinned. "Yeah, thats my lil bro. Trav, this is Cory and Sean. If you got any problems, you can see them, too. They won't let ya' get hurt."

Travis relaxed slightly, but still kept a hand on Alec.

Cory grinned at the two boys. "Y'all need to separate for a minute! The Doc is waiting for us, and he is a real pain if you make him wait too long."

Travis dropped his hand and looked at Cory with confusion. "Wadda' ya' mean 'he's waiting for us'? Where are we going?"

"Just watch!" Cory answered with a grin as he pulled out his communicator. "Ensign Cory to *Enterprise*. Four to beam up."

"We be ready when you are, laddie."

Cory giggled. "Energize, Scotty!"

When the four boys materialized in the *Enterprise's* Transporter room, both Alec and Travis still had looks of shock on their faces. Cory and Sean both came to attention. "Permission to come aboard, sir," they chorused.

"Aye, permission granted. By the looks on the lad's faces, didn't tell them how they were

a getting' here?" Scotty replied with a chuckle.

"Oops! Sorry, Scotty. I knew I forgot something!" Cory giggled while Sean played innocent.

Scotty shook his head. "Sean, could you take care of these fine lads? Since Cory is here, I could use an extra hand with a wee problem we've been a havin'."

"No problem, Mr. Scott," Sean replied. "C'mon guys, if we hurry up maybe the Captain will let me show ya' around." Sean led Alec and Trav out of the Transporter Room. As they walked towards the turbolift, Travis finally regained his voice. "Okay Sean, where in the heck are we?"

Sean giggled. "Welcome aboard the Starship *Enterprise*, guys."

"No way!" Travis replied in shock.

"Man, I thought your Uncle was BS'ing us!" Alec added, finally out of shock.

"It's for real, guys. Lets go see Doc then I'll get the okay to show ya' around."

They entered the turbolift, and Sean instructed "Sickbay". His two companions both went speechless again as the lift accelerated. Thirty seconds later, the door opened and the three boys walked out onto Deck Seven. The three walked down the corridor to Sickbay.

McCoy looked up as they entered. "Not bad timing, Ensign. All three of you go in my office, we'll get the history out of the way first. Where's Ensign Cory?"

Sean smiled. "He got kidnapped in the transporter room by a rabid Scotsman."

McCoy grinned. "I'll have to remember that one, Sean. If it's okay with these two, you can check in with Jim while I'm getting their histories, just don't go far."

"Okay Doc. I'll wait out here."

A few minutes later, McCoy brought the boys out of his office and took Travis into the exam room. Alec sat next to Sean. "You know what, he's pretty cool for a doctor."

"He's the best Doc you'll ever find; if he can't fix ya then give it up," Sean replied with pride.

"Well he even got Trav to loosen up, and he's gonna talk to him about being gay and safe while they are in the exam room. He was treating Trav like a real person; our old doctor just kept telling him he would grow out of it."

McCoy walked out of the exam room with an arm over Travis's shoulder just then. "You better believe I'm gonna have a talk with that quack first chance I get, too! It's people like him who give legitimate doctors a bad name. You're next Alec, Travis here has a clean bill of health. There is nothing wrong with him that a loving family won't fix, thanks to you."

Alec blushed as he stood up and went into the exam room, followed by McCoy.

Travis shyly sat down next to Sean. "This is kewl! Why does everyone call you and Cory Ensign though?"

Sean smiled. "It's because we are really Ensigns. Both of us are part of the *Enterprise* crew. That's also why I was able to bring you here, we would have had to have an escort if you didn't have an officer with you."

"Wow! Doc said to ask you this. Do I have to worry about being gay with my new family?"

"Nope. In this group, if you are not gay you are a minority. We will all be there for you, and nobody will ever force you to do something you don't want to do. If they try, let Cory or me know, we'll handle it. Once we get back home, we'll all sit down and you can get to know everyone better and ask all the questions you want, okay?"

The two sat for a minute, then the sickbay doors opened and Chip walked in. "Hey Sean, how's it going? Who's your friend?"

Sean looked up. "Hi Uncle Chip! This is Travis, his big bro Alec is in with Doc right now."

They are our newest tribal members. Travis, this is my uncle, Commander Chip Dodds."

"So I've heard. Where's your brother at?"

"Mr. Scott hijacked him to Engineering. Something about a wee problem," Sean replied, giving a fair imitation of Scotty on the last part, which caused Trav to giggle.

Chip chuckled. "You're as bad as I am, Sean! Add a little more bass and I think you'll have him down!"

Just then McCoy walked out with Alec. Sean immediately noticed neither was smiling. "What's wrong, Doc?"

McCoy looked at Chip. "You showed up at the right time, Chip. Are you prepared to make a medical decision for Teri?"

Chip got serious. "I can, but up to a point. What's the problem?"

"As I'm sure you've noticed, Alec seems stuck physically at twelve years old. The reason behind that is his body is producing an excess of Melatonin. Normally at puberty it reduces, but his is above normal levels. Testosterone therapy at these levels could cause more problems than it would help. I feel safer waiting to see if the mid-puberty growth spurt at least drops his Melatonin to a safer level before even considering treatments. Alec understands that he will not be growing like other kids his age, but this is one decision I can't let him make."

Chip walked over to Alec and knelt in front of the younger boy. "Before I answer, how do you feel about it, Alec? This is your body we are discussing."

Alec looked up at Chip. "I'm kinda used to everyone calling me shrimp, at least I know why now. Doc told me what would happen if we do nothing and what could happen if we use the treatments. I've always told Trav I'd be here for him forever, I'd rather put up with teasing at school than take a chance of not being there when he needs me."

Chip nodded his head. "Don't worry about school; by now I'm sure Dan has called and pulled you out. Doc, I'm going to agree with you. Follow what you think is best. I'll fill Teri in real quick and then we can show these two around."

"Fine by me, just make sure you are back for your pre-departure in an hour."

Sean gave Chip a puzzled look. "Pre-departure?"

"Yep," Chip replied, "while you and Cory are studying and catching up on your backlog of programming, the rest of us have to go out for a trip around the galaxy. It shouldn't take too long, so unless you want to deal with a disappointed Vulcan you better bust your butts on that simulator repair."

Sean grinned. "Well, I guess that means that at least the two of us are gonna get something productive done in the next couple weeks, huh?"

Chip reached over and gave Sean a light slap on the back of the head. "Watch it, buster! Remember, I'm still your superior officer!"

McCoy gave Chip a stern look. "If you are not back in an hour, you're going to be a civilian. I suggest you get your butt in gear and show these boys around the ship."

Chip shook his head as he headed for the door with Alec and Travis under his arms. "You know Doc, one of these days we're gonna have to talk about your superiority complex!" Before McCoy could answer, they slipped through the doorway and the doors slid closed behind them.

\* \* \*

The boys had barely rematerialized in the Rec room before Kelly was in front of them grabbing for Alec and Trav's hands. "C'mon guys, Mom's been waitin' to meet you!"

Cory noticed the panic in Travis's eyes and laid a hand on Kelly's shoulder. "Go on bro,

we'll be right behind ya."

Cory waved for Alec to go with Kelly, and then guided Travis into the office. After the door was closed, the two boys sat in two chairs along the wall. "Hey lil' buddy, whazza matter? Things moving to fast for ya?"

Travis looked over at Cory, tears running from his eyes. "What if she don't want me? I'm nothing but a little faggot, nobody wants me around. Look what happened when my dad found out!"

Cory reached over and pulled Travis out of his chair and onto his lap. Once Travis was sitting on Cory's lap, he buried his face in Cory's shoulder and began weeping. Cory softly rubbed the boys shoulders and held him as he cried out the stress of the last twenty-four hours. "It's okay lil buddy, let it all out," Cory whispered soothingly.

It took about ten minutes before Travis's tears were reduced to an occasional sob. Cory kissed his forehead softly and then gave him a quick squeeze. "You feel a little better now, Trav?"

"Yeah," Trav responded shyly, "I'm sorry for being such a baby. What's gonna happen to me now?"

Cory smiled for the first time since they entered the room. "Hey kiddo, you're not a baby. Everyone needs to cry once in a while. As soon as you are ready, we'll go out and I'll introduce you to your new mom. And you don't need to worry, if Helen had any problem with gay kids she would not be here. Just remember; Alec, Kelly, and Andy are in the minority here - they are the only straight people under 18 except for maybe the young kids. In a couple months all of us are gonna be moving to Orlando, and that includes the two of you."

"I've never had a Mom; what's it like?" Travis asked shyly.

Cory giggled. "It's pretty cool. They tend to baby you sometimes, but if you need someone they are there for ya'. The only bad part is they expect you to keep your room clean!"

Travis giggled at that, but then became serious again. "What about Gabe, I don't wanna leave him?"

Cory responded carefully. "I know how you feel, Trav. Why don't you give him a call? After you let him know you are gonna be okay, I'll talk to his parents and see if they wanna come over to visit. I can't make any promises, but right now Mom is setting up an office staff; who knows, maybe one of them does something that she still needs someone for. If we can figure out a way to keep you two together, we will."

Travis hugged Cory tightly. "Thanks Cory, I feel a little better now. Can I call Gabe now?"

Cory giggled. "Yeah, lets do it. We can't have your boyfriend worrying about you."

It took a minute to get Trav to understand all of the buttons on Teri's communications console, but shortly Travis had it down enough to place his call.

"Michaels Residence," a male voice answered.

"Hi, Dr. Michaels! This is Travis."

Cory's eyebrows raised at Trav calling his boyfriend's dad Doctor; when the viewscreen came to life showing the call being taken in his office Cory smiled.

"Thank God you are okay; we were getting worried since you didn't call like you said you would this morning. Where are you at? Where's Alec? Who is that behind you?"

Cory tapped Travis on the shoulder. "Let me answer for ya', I'm sure thats the only way he will believe it." Cory then switched the console to conference mode, and scanned his ID so his credentials would be displayed at the other end.

"Good afternoon Doctor," Cory began. "I'm Ensign Cory Short, Engineer's Assistant, USS *Enterprise*. As of 10:47 USA Central Time, both Travis and Alec were taken under the protection

of the Federation Safe Haven Act. They have just returned from on board the *Enterprise* after receiving complete exams from the Chief Medical Officer. Right now Alec is meeting their new mother; Trav here needed to do a few things before he was ready to take that step."

Doctor Michaels visibly relaxed. "Thank you, Ensign. Knowing that both boys are safe under Federation protection eases my mind tremendously. You also eased another of my worries; I have been hounding their former father to let me examine Alec due to his lack of growth. Instead of listening to a pediatrician, namely me. He insisted on listening to the general practitioner who had treated him when he was a kid."

Cory grinned. "Well, Doctor Michaels, I think you and Mom need to sit down and have a talk. How would you feel about coming over and meeting their new family this evening?"

"I sense an ulterior motive young man, but I'll still accept your invitation. Let me go get Gabe before Trav wets himself; I'll get the directions from you after they finish."

"Sounds good," Cory replied then stepped back so Travis had the screen.

About thirty seconds later, a boy with white-blond shoulder length hair skidded to a stop in front of the screen. As soon as he saw Travis on the viewer, his mouth split into a grin that threatened to warp the facebow attached to his braces. "TRAV! I was SOOOOOOOO worried about you babe! Are you okay? Where ya' at?"

"Hey sweetie. I miss you tooooooo," Travis replied with a grin a mile wide. "I'm just fine, my big bro made a call and now we got a new family that don't care if I'm gay. I think you guys are gonna come over later so you get to meet them."

"AWESOME! I can't wait to hold ya' again! I wanna cuddle ya SOOOOO much!"

Gabe had not noticed Cory standing behind Travis. He turned red as an apple when Cory was brought to his attention by Timmy running into the office yelling 'DAADDDDDYYY!!!!' as he jumped into Cory's arms.

"W..wh..who is that?" Gabe stuttered.

"Oops, sorry hun. That's Cory; the little tornado in his arms is his and Sean's boy Timmy. Don't worry, they're cool."

Timmy reached over and slapped Travis's shoulder. "I ain't no 'nado; I'm a hur'cane! Just ask Gran'ma!"

That broke the tension as everyone broke into giggles. As Travis recovered, he spoke to Gabe. "Hey babe, why don't we finish catchin' up tonight. Cory needs to talk to your Dad and I need to find Alec."

"Sounds like a plan. Luv ya' baby."

"Love you more."

"Love ya' more than more"

"Double love ya more"

"Gadzillion million love ya' more!"

The boys took the hint when Cory groaned theatrically; after one more round they finished saying goodbye. Once Cory finished giving Dr. Michaels directions, he ended the call. "You feel better now, Trav?" Cory asked as he put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Yeah, thanks Cory. I'm not gonna get in trouble for not goin' out right away am I?"

"Naw, Helen will understand. I'm the one who has to worry, I invited them over without asking Mom first. I just hope she accepts that I was doing it to help her. Besides, this way Helen gets to meet her future in-laws."

Timmy wiggled down off of Cory and walked up to Travis. "Twav, will you give me a horse ride? We can see if your mommy is done with the cookies yet!"

Travis's eyes lit up at the mention of snacks. "Hop on, little guy. I'll bet my big bro is



there eating them all!"

The three giggling boys headed to the kitchen. Travis started to freeze as he went through the doorway, but Timmy egging him on from his back got him over his fright.

Helen looked up and saw the scared boy standing on the other side of the counter with Timmy on his back. "Hello Travis. I see you have made friends with Timmy. Timmy, why don't you go pounce your Pop; he tried to steal the cookies I was saving for Travis."

Once Timmy was gone, Helen sat down and motioned for Trav to sit next to her. Cory started to head for the door, but turned around and grabbed a seat when Helen motioned for him to stay.

"Travis," Helen began softly, "I realize right now things are moving way too fast for you. You can relax some; as unlikely as it sounds you are home now. I know what happened at your old home and why; I promise you will NEVER have to worry about being kicked out again. I know you are gay; the only way I'm going to treat you any different is I plan on giving you a lot of extra love to make up for what you have missed."

Travis looked at her in shock. "But my Dad said that I was going to Hell for being gay, that I was lower than trash. Why don't you think that?"

Helen put her hand on her new son's shoulder. "I have never thought that, but in the last couple of days I was proven right. If it wasn't for a young GAY man, I would not be sitting here with THREE sons; I would be in an apartment wondering if I would ever see Kelly again. That young man, Aaron Carter, reunited me with Kelly. When Kelly came to me asking for you and Alec to become his brothers, I knew it was God's way of letting me pay Him back for Kelly being returned to me. Both you and Alec are God's gifts to me for patiently waiting to get Kelly back. I also know of two more gay young men; both of which are known throughout Starfleet and one of which is a hero many times over. That young man is sitting right over there, he's Cory. Thanks to him, the young boy you were carrying on your back is here instead of being scattered all over the roadside. Cory disarmed a bomb while rescuing Timmy; he not only saved Timmy, but also a whole group of young men, most of which are gay."

Travis looked at Cory in awe, his unasked question answered by Cory's blushing face. He turned back to Helen. "What about my boyfriend, Gabe? Can he come over without me being watched all the time?"

Helen smiled. "As long as you are responsible and follow the rules I have no problem with that. I do need to sit down with his parents and make sure our rules agree with theirs, but after that you will be trusted until you show me you are not ready for the responsibility. The only thing I will say now is that if Sean and Cory make a rule for you two that is more restrictive than what us parents have, you are to follow their rule. Remember that Sean and Cory have made some mistakes you have not made yet; if they tell you not to do something it is to help you. Now, when do you think I'll get to meet Gabe?"

Travis turned in his seat and gave Helen a hug. "Wow! If this is what it's like to have a real family it's AWESOME! Thanks ... MOM! Oh, well, Cory kinda invited Gabe and his parents over tonight. That's okay, ain't it?"

Helen had a couple of tears of joy running down her face as she hugged Travis and replied. "Yes son, it's fine. If Gabe is anything like you I look forward to meeting him."

Travis cuddled with Helen for a few minutes before his stomach began rumbling. Helen giggled and commented "Sounds like someone is hungry! Tell you what, there's some peanut butter cookies over by the sink; grab yourself six of them and a glass of milk. After that you might want to find your brothers, I think they are worried about you."

Travis giggled as he headed for the cookies. "Thanks Mom, you're the greatest!"

\* \* \*

Cory, Sean, Teri, and Dan were having a conference in Teri's office. "I'm going to have to fill out the final placement report," Teri began. "Do any of you have anything you think needs put in it?"

Both Sean and Dan shook their heads no, but Cory hesitated before he answered.

"Mom," Cory replied hesitantly, "I might be wrong, but going by the stuff I learned watching Dan with Kyle I think we need to watch Travis."

Teri and Dan turned to give Cory their full attention. "Why do you say that, Cory?" Dan asked.

Cory squirmed in his chair. "Do you remember how I used to ask you about why Kyle was acting up, and you explained to me what happens when someone is emotionally abused?"

Dan leaned forward. "Yes, you made me proud with the questions you asked and how you tried to understand so you could help Kyle. What did you see that the rest of us missed?"

Cory swallowed nervously, then continued. "I had to talk with Trav in the office here before he would even go see Helen. He was kinda like Kyle was just before we left the home; he did not trust anyone but his brother. He calmed down some after I let him talk to his boyfriend, but still would have ran if it wasn't for Timmy on his back when we went to the kitchen. Once Helen finally convinced him that she truly did not care if he was gay, he seemed better; but I'm not sure if he really is okay. I invited Gabe and his parents over here tonight; if we can't figure out a way to keep Gabe and Trav together, when it comes time to move I think Trav is gonna lose it. Gabe's dad is a pediatrician; if he is as cool as he seemed on the phone, I was thinking of you hiring him as a staff doctor for the kids, mom. I already pulled his records and ran them through Doc McCoy; he said to tell you it was your call but he would have no problems working with Dr. Michaels."

Before Teri could reply, Dan held up his hand to stop her. "I'm glad you listened Cory. From what you just described I think you are right. You have picked up on some of the signs of emotional abuse; now that I know about it we can work on helping him through it. As far as the doctor part goes, I think you have a good idea; if that works out tonight we can kill two birds with one stone."

Teri shook her head. "You know, it's nice to know I'm in charge around here! You do have a valid point, Cory, but next time please tell me about it BEFORE you take action. As far as your concerns about Travis, since Dan believes you are on the right path I'm not going to argue. I have no idea what to even start looking for, but obviously you paid attention and were able to see what the rest of us missed. You are doing great Cory, I'm proud of you!"

Cory relaxed. He knew that the minor chewing out he had just received would be the end of it, and that Dan would make sure his concerns about Travis were handled properly.

\* \* \*

Travis, Kyle and Tyler were sitting on the couch in the Rec Room comparing notes on how their life now was different than it was in their previous homes. At first Travis had been reluctant to talk to the other boys when Dan had suggested it; but once they started talking about what their lives used to be like he realized that he was not alone. In no time he was sharing how it was with his old father, and listening carefully as Kyle passed on the tips Dan had told him while he was back at the home. The three boys were so absorbed in their conversation that none of them even looked up when the doorbell rang and Helen answered it.

Helen opened the door. Outside were two adults in their mid-thirties and a very nervous

twelve-year-old boy. Helen was pleased with her new son's choice for a boyfriend, Gabe was about 5 foot 2, fair skinned, with the rare blond hair which looked almost white cascading to his shoulders. His ice-blue eyes naturally grabbed your attention, and were a perfect compliment to his thin nose and full lips. He was built like Travis, skinny but obviously very active.

"Dr. Michaels, Mrs. Michaels, Gabe. Welcome to our home, come on in! I've been waiting all evening to meet my future in-laws!"

As they entered the foyer, Alec came out and took their coats. "Hi Doc, Mrs. Michaels. Wazzup lil bro! I don't know if she told you yet, but this is our new Mom, Helen McCarthy!"

The Doctor and his wife both chuckled. "We kind of figured that out when she called us her in-laws, Alec, but thanks for the introductions anyway," Dr Michaels replied. "Helen, this is my wife Carrie and my son Gabe. As for me, you can just call me Austin or Doc Austin if you want to be like most of my patients."

Helen smiled. "Follow me, I'll introduce you to the rest of the family."

As they prepared to leave the foyer, Gabe finally spoke up. "Where's Travvy at?"

Helen stopped and turned to the boy. "He's in the Rec Room with a couple of his new cousins. They are helping him deal with how his old dad treated him, since they went through some of the same things that he did. Alec, why don't you take Gabe in to be with Trav and then join us in the dining room?"

"Okay Mom!" Alec answered as he guided Gabe into the Rec Room.

Alec and Gabe froze as they entered the room and overheard the ongoing discussion.

"Why did we end up with such screwed up parents when we were born?" Travis asked the two younger boys.

Kyle answered the question after a glance at Tyler. "Mikey said Saturday that sometimes bad stuff needs to happen to let the good stuff happen. I guess our first parents were the bad stuff."

"That kinda makes sense," Travis replied. "By the way, who is Mikey?"

Tyler took his turn answering. "Mikey is our big bro. He's dead now, so he's our guardian angel."

"If he's dead, how did he tell you that Saturday?" Travis asked with a confused look.

All five boys were startled when the question was answered from the couch. "I just stopped in and said 'Hi!'"

"MIKEY!!!!" Kyle and Ty exclaimed in unison.

Mikey grinned at the boys. "You guys should'a known I would stop in to see how my latest charges were doing. Welcome to the family Trav and Alec. Oh, yeah, you too Gabe, you are a Tribe member too, the rest of the guys just don't know it yet! Trav, I'm glad you are talking to our little bros about what your life used to be like; but from now on forget all of the things you used to do to protect yourself - you no longer need to hide inside yourself to protect Alec. Alec, you can back down too, from now on you don't need to protect Trav from punishment - if he does something wrong the punishment will fit the crime, and he won't be in danger. The two of you are going to feel overwhelmed with love until you get used to it; I promise you that it is all for real, so enjoy it."

Gabe, Trav and Alec looked at Mike in shock. "How do you know so much about us?" Alec asked.

Mike gave a glowing smile. "Why don't you all have a seat over here?" he asked as he patted the couch. The boys all moved onto the couch; when Gabe saw Ty take a seat on Kyle's lap, he smiled and took up his favorite position on Trav's lap.

Mikey took up a position on the arm of the couch. "Relax Gabriel, you are doing nothing wrong. As a matter of fact, you have a lot to do with these two being safe now. Do you remember

a prayer you said at dinner Saturday night? You asked Our Father to do whatever it takes to protect your boyfriend. When you asked that, I became involved. I guess it might make more sense if I tell you my full title; its Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Children. Once you asked for help, I made sure that Alec remembered Mom's phone number when he heard Sean give it to Kelly to pass out to his friends. After that it was just a case of letting things go as they were before; a little tickle in your Dad's mind, Gabe, which had him make the phone call which started the ball rolling. The next step was restraining your old father Travis; I made sure he did not hit you no matter how badly he wanted to. I sat with you all night, Trav, until it was time for school; then I made sure the secretary was too busy to call and say Alec was not there until after you two were safe here. Gabe, your love for Trav made it possible for him and Alec to have a better life; don't be surprised if his love for you causes some positive changes in your life soon."

Alec unconsciously placed an arm around both couples and pulled them close to him. "I understand why you helped Trav, but why me? I'm not gay, and I was not abandoned; I ran away."

Mike moved next to Travis and Gabe and wrapped his wings around all five boys in an angelic hug. "Alec, you are what we call our living helpers. You swore an oath to protect Travis no matter what. Yesterday you made an extreme sacrifice to keep that oath, a sacrifice I had no hand in at all. You gave up the only family you knew so that you could ensure your little brother was safe. Higher powers than me have noted that in the Book of Life; and due to the sacrifices throughout your life for one of the children I am protecting, you are also under my wings, just like now. Oh, while I'm here, I checked out the scoop on your growth problem. Don't worry about it, there is a good reason you have been held back from puberty. I can't reveal why, but when the time is right the problem will disappear."

For the first time in a VERY long time, Alec's face broke into a huge carefree smile. "Thanks Mike, I understand now and feel LOTS better!"

"You're very welcome, Alec. Enjoy your new home, you both earned it. Guys, I need to get going and check up on your cousins in Orlando."

Kyle giggled. "Justy says if you are gonna come down there you better show yourself. Oh yeah, Jamie said make it so Mark and Zac ain't so goofy too!"

Mike softly chuckled. "Tell Jamie I said to pounce Justy for me; I'll see them in a few. I will see you later guys, Kyle knows how to get me if there's an emergency, but I'll still be watching over all of you as much as possible."

The boys finished their goodbyes, and Mike faded away. Once Mike was gone, Alec looked at the two young couples in his arms and smiled. "You know, I could stay here forever, but I think we better go see what Mom's up to. Besides that, you need to meet our bro still, Gabe."

\* \* \*

Teri, Cory, and the Doctor had found a safe area by the pool and were having a quiet discussion while watching the rest of the boys work off excess energy. "So Austin, have you figured out what my scheming son has up his sleeve yet?" Teri asked.

"MOM!!!" Cory moaned in feigned pain.

Austin chuckled. "Not yet, but if he's anything like Gabe I'm sure it will be interesting. Sometimes I think the boy is too smart for his own good."

Teri looked at her blushing son. "If Gabe is anything like Cory or Sean, I have only one bit of advice - RUN!" She looked to make sure Cory wasn't going to throw anything at her then continued. "Seriously, there are a few things you might not know about Cory and Sean that you really need to know before we discuss his reasons for inviting you over here."

Austin looked at Cory, who was fidgeting in his chair. "I know that Cory has Starfleet credentials, even though I still haven't figured out how he got them at his age. You mean to tell me there is more?"

Teri nodded as she watched Cory blush. "You are sitting next to one of the two youngest fully commissioned officers in Starfleet history. The other one just tossed Kelly off of the diving board. Both of them have designed modifications to Starfleet vessels which are implemented fleet-wide, starting with the *Enterprise*. Between the two of them, they are responsible for saving most of the boys here and a few that are not here right now. Cory himself is responsible for saving the young boy cuddling with Carrie right now; this may come as a shock, but that boy is now Sean and Cory's son. I could continue, but I think you get the idea."

Austin looked at Cory with a newfound respect. "Cory, you have no reason to be shy. I know grown men who can't even imagine doing half the things you have already done. If Gabe was to choose you as a role model, I would be very pleased."

Cory grinned shyly. "Mom always told us to help others. I guess Sean and I just listened better than most kids."

The conversation was interrupted as Alec, Trav, Kyle, Ty, and Gabe came out of the house. Alec's whistle made the pool fall silent. "Kelly, come over here bro. Everyone else listen up, Trav wants to say something in just a minute."

Kelly climbed out of the pool and joined his new brothers. Trav put his left arm around Kelly's waist and his right arm around Gabe's waist. "Gabe, this is my new big brother Kelly. Kelly, this is my boyfriend Gabe. I wanted you to meet him before I introduced him to everyone else, bro."

Kelly moved to turn it into a three-way hug. "Welcome to the family, Gabe! You ever got a problem let me know, if I can't fix it one of these guys can."

Gabe visibly relaxed and then grinned. "Thanks Kelly; you really don't care if Travvy or I are gay?"

Kelly squeezed both boys tighter. "Gabe, you are in the one place where NOT being gay is considered weird! I kinda know how you feel in the morning, I woke up yesterday morning and realized that I was one of the two known straight kids between the ages of 8 and 18 in the entire house. I never minded if my friends were gay before that, but now I really can't stand people who put you down for who you love."

Travis and Gabe both turned their heads and each of them kissed one of Kelly's cheeks. "Thanks for being my big bro, Kel," Travis whispered.

Travis then broke the hug, guided Gabe in front of himself, and wrapped his arms around Gabe's waist. "Hey everyone," Travis yelled, "I've wanted to do this for a LONG time! Everybody, look! This is my boyfriend Gabe! Y'all find your own blond god, this one's MINE!"

There was a deafening cheer as the pool emptied and all of the boys rushed to greet Gabe. Cory even excused himself for a minute to welcome the new boy into the family, and came back with Timmy on his hip.

"What did you get into this time?" Teri asked Timmy, as Cory sat in his chair and scooted Timmy onto his lap.

"Nut'in Gran'ma. Daddy said I gotta leave Aunt Carrie alone now an' sit in the shade with him," Timmy answered with a giggle.

"Aunt Carrie huh?" Teri replied with a grin. "I won't ask! Go ahead and cuddle your Daddy, just remember he has to be able to talk to us, okay kiddo?"

"K, Gran'ma!" Timmy answered as he snuggled into Cory's shoulder.

Cory stroked his son's shoulders as he began speaking. "Doc, there are a couple reasons

for what I'm about to offer. The first one is sitting in my lap. I've grown kinda attached to the little booger, and I want to make sure he's getting the best. The second reason is over there in the corner trying to use his tongue to clean the insides of your son's throat. I asked Dr. McCoy to check you out, and he totally approved of my plan. That really means a lot to me, 'cause as the Chief Medical Officer of the *Enterprise* he usually doesn't agree about anything medical that don't involve him directly. Mom is lettin' me ask since it was my idea; can you join us as the Federation Youth Services Medical Director? Basically you would be the one called when the Safe Haven Act is invoked and an impartial medical exam is required. Oh, yeah, you would be stuck with all of us too."

Austin looked at the boy in front of him. At first glance it looked like a big brother holding his little brother, but as Austin watched he could see the look on Cory's face that only a father would have when holding his son. As he watched, he contemplated the bombshell the young teen has just dropped on him. As Cory had hinted, a recommendation by Dr. Leonard McCoy was as good as gold. From what he had been told by Teri, along with the reports which raged through the medical grapevines, both Starfleet and civilian; he knew he was being offered the chance to be part of the cutting edge of the Federation's child welfare reforms. "Okay, I understand what you've said so far, Cory; but how does this involve Travis?"

Cory looked to Teri for help, but had to reply when she nodded back to him. "Doc, I guess the best way to say it would be how Dan explained it. He said that Trav only has two people he feels he can count on right now - Alec and Gabe. When we called you earlier, Trav was freaking about meeting his new mom, he didn't calm down until he got to talk to Gabe. I was the only one there with him, and after I described what I saw to Dan he agreed that Trav has suffered severe emotional abuse. In a couple months we are moving to Orlando; if you, Carrie, and Gabe don't move with us Trav's probably gonna break down from losing Gabe."

Sean walked up and stood behind Cory. "Besides, Doc, when that 6 year old boy Ricky comes back tomorrow for his appointment; you know, the one that you have been trying to get CPS to pull from his druggie mom for the last year, you can take it in your own hands. Besides, Gabe needs a little brother anyway. Your final thesis in Med School said you became a doctor to help kids; now's your chance." Sean then looked down at their son, who was sleeping peacefully on Cory's chest, and added softly "besides, there is no feeling like looking at your son and knowing he is alive and happy because of something you did."

Austin started to look around the pool area for Carrie to ask her opinion when he suddenly got his first view of Adam in something other than a long sleeve shirt and long pants. The sight of the still-healing marks on Adam's body tied Austin's stomach in knots, and he reached his decision immediately. "CARRIE! GABE! Come here!"

Carrie came over first, followed shortly by Gabe. Travis was not far behind, following Gabe like a lost puppy. Once they were all seated, Austin made his announcement. "Everyone, I have just been offered a job as Federation Youth Services Medical Director. I'm taking the job as of now; tomorrow will be my last day at the Clinic as a staff doctor. Travis, I just heard that you are going to be moving to Orlando; you can relax because we are going to be moving with you. Oh, Carrie, dig out those old toys of Gabe's; I'm bringing home a younger brother for Gabe tomorrow."

Carrie sat in shock, while Gabe and Travis had began hugging and kissing as soon as they heard the words 'moving with you'. Both boys' minds clicked onto what was said at the same time. While Gabe was speechless with shock, Travis gave Austin a puzzled look. "Doc, I know how you straight people make babies, and it sure as heck don't work that fast! How you gonna get a little bro for Gabe?"

Austin laughed. "Trav, lets just say that I know of a young boy who needs to get out of a bad environment. Tomorrow he is going to get a wish answered. I do have a question, Cory. How did you know about Ricky?"

It was Cory's turn to giggle. "Just a little lesson, Doc; secrets are hard to keep around here. I wanted to see what you would need to feel comfortable joining us, so I had Kyle send a Kylegram to Jamie and Jacob; the three of them checked you out and found out about Ricky. If you had said no, after what they told me I would've been at your office tomorrow rescuing him myself."

Austin began to respond, but Teri held up her hand. "Trust me Austin, you will find out soon enough. I'll put it this way; none of these boys understand the meaning of impossible, in fact they take it as a challenge!"

Later that night, Sean carried the last load of blankets and pillows into the Rec Room. As he sat to wait for Cory to bring in the cookies Helen had baked for a bedtime snack, he thought about the events of the day. *'I don't believe Cory!'* he thought to himself. *'I haven't seen him take charge like he did today since before Mike's accident. It was kinda nice being asked for my opinion instead of making the decisions.'*

Cory walked in just then, and came immediately over to Sean. "Hey babe, what's with the grin?"

Sean took the cookies and sat them on the table, then pulled Cory into his lap. "I was just thinking of how great you did today, and how lucky I am to have such a great boyfriend."

Cory blushed half way down his chest. "You would have done the same thing! Besides, I'm the lucky one, you stuck by me when I didn't even remember you."

Their discussion was interrupted by Kyle and Tyler joining them. "Y'all sound as bad as us!" Kyle giggled.

Tyler smiled as he tapped Kyle on the back of the head, then turned his attention to Sean and Cory. "I've been wanting to say this, but I didn't know how. I know something the rest of the guys don't, and it's the real reason we are all lucky. Cor, before you came back Sean seemed like he was missing somethin' in his head. I've watched ya' both since I moved in, and both of you are the same way if the other is not nearby. I really think you are kinda like twins, your minds seem to work together. Everything you two do is thought of by both of you; today Cory took charge but he involved you in all of it Sean."

Before either could reply, Kyle poked Cory. "Everything he just said applies to you too! As far as being lucky goes, there's one kid who has us all beat; Timmy, 'cause he can call you Dad and Pop."

Sean smiled. "Thanks, guys. Speaking of Timmy, I thought he was going to shower with you?"

Tyler giggled. "Sorry, bro, but he decided he needed to break in the new uncle. Alec is in for it!"

Cory slapped his forehead and laughed. "Poor Alec, I hope Timmy is easier on him than he was on Kelly!"

A half hour later, everyone had finished their showers. As he grabbed the last cookie from the plate, Timmy climbed into his parent's laps. "I luv you!" Timmy whispered as he snuggled into Sean and Cory. They both leaned over and kissed his forehead, replying "I love you too!" in unison.

Helen joined Teri in her now-nightly rounds to make sure everything was shut down for the night. As they looked in the Rec Room, Helen stopped in awe. "I have never seen such a beautiful sight!" she whispered to Teri.

Teri smiled. "I agree totally. Look at how they are grouped so that the older ones are guarding the younger ones!"

Sean was laying with Cory on one shoulder and Timmy on the other, both boy's arms over their son. Adam's back was against Cory's back, and he was being cuddled by Tyler. Kyle was cuddled against Tyler with JJ tight against him, JJ and Adam having their arms interlocked over their little brothers. Jeffy and Sammy were nestled together between JJ and Andrew, both with their hands touching JJ's arm.

On the other side, Kelly's back was against Timmy's back. Gabe had been given the okay to spend the night, and was cuddled front-to-front with Travis with his back pressed into Kelly's chest. Alec was protectively cuddled against Travis's back with his arm over his two brothers and Gabe.

"Don't you worry about them doing something?" Helen asked as she surveyed the group of brief and boxer clad boys.

"Not really," Teri answered. "My guess is that most of them got that out of the way in the shower." At Helen's surprised look, she continued. "Chip and Josh filled me in on the facts of life with gay sons. If you set limits on what they can do and tell them to keep it private they are going to pretty much follow the rules. If you say 'no' absolutely, they will find some way to do it and end up getting hurt. Besides, if Timmy catches them, half of Iowa will find out about it; just ask Sean and Cory!"

"That actually makes sense," Helen replied after some thought. "I just noticed something, do Sean and Cory end up in the center all the time?"

Teri thought for a second, then replied. "You know, come to think about it, they do. It's almost like Sean and Cory protect all of the boys during the day, and at night the boys all protect Sean and Cory."

Teri dimmed the lights in the room, and her and Helen headed for the stairs.

"Teri, is there anything you would do different raising the boys if you knew then what you know now? I know I would have spent a lot more time with Kelly."

Teri stopped on the stairs and looked at Helen. "I spent the last year asking myself the same question, Helen. When I took in Cory, I had no idea what changes he would bring into my life. After this last week, I finally have my answer; if you think about it you really would answer the same way. I would not change a single thing; all of the stress and worry after Cory had his breakdown has rewarded me with more sons than I ever expected and a grandson who I adore. Ten years ago, I made a decision which has affected the life of everyone under this roof; I agreed to take my best friend's son if anything ever happened to her. That decision saved Timmy's life, probably saved Adam's life, and gave a group of boys a fighting chance to finish growing up normally. Even today, kids are still pressured into trying to be what is considered 'normal' by their peers; even the fact that being gay is now broadly accepted does not reduce the perceived pressure. The parents who live in the stone age still do not help the problem, and the kids end up suffering for it. The one decision I made ten years ago has made it so that fourteen boys here and five boys in Orlando can sleep peacefully tonight knowing that their sexual alignment has no bearing on how their family treats them."

Helen smiled. "I see where those two learned their compassion and conviction! You've convinced me Teri; I wouldn't change a thing either. Thanks a lot, you just cleared up a lot of the worries I was having. I'm going to call it a night; those fourteen angels are going to be hungry animals in the morning!"

"Tell me about it!" Teri chuckled as she opened her bedroom door. "See you tomorrow, Helen. Goodnight."



"Goodnight Teri," Helen replied as she entered her room.

## Chapter 25

*Hey everyone, this is JJ! I finally managed to sneak in some time to get you all caught up on what's been happening with me and MY brothers! Just a sec - I gotta take care of something! (Give it up, Cory! This is MY turn, you can wait 'till next chapter! Go chase down your rug rat before your Mom sees him tracking water all over the house!) Sorry, SOMEONE wanted the computer to play games on! Anyways, I'm gonna let you in on some of the latest news in the Richardson clan; all of the stuff that's been happening while Cory and Sean have been saving the Universe. <Giggle> Read on, you will see that those two ain't the only ones to have fun!*

\* \* \*

JJ woke to two boys giggling at his chest. He opened his eyes, and found the tops of Kyle and Ty's heads just below his chin. "Okay goofballs, what's so funny?"

Both boys turned beet red. "Nuthin' bro! Really!" Kyle stuttered.

"Why are you blushing then?" Adam interjected from the other side of them.

"We ain't doin' nothin' bad, leave us alone!" Kyle uttered defensively.

"Yeah, we was just sword fighting," Tyler added. The look he received from Kyle for his slip could freeze fire. "Sorry Ky, I wasn't thinkin' when I said that."

JJ and Adam both bent their heads down and kissed their little brothers' head. JJ spoke for both of them. "Hey guys, settle down. We're not mad, and you ain't gonna get in trouble. You must'a really been having fun the way you were giggling! Hey, let's head upstairs and let the rest of the guys sleep; we can get the first showers and talk more."

Kyle and Ty stood up first, both immediately making sure their 'swords' were securely put away. Adam joined them, but when JJ went to move to get up, a stereo moan accompanied by two hands grabbing for his arm stopped him.

Adam giggled. "I'll take these two on up, babe. Go ahead and wake your shadows, we'll see y'all upstairs."

JJ stuck out his tongue at Adam before carefully rolling over and softly shaking Jeffy. He leaned over so both could hear, and said softly "Jeffy, Sammy, c'mon little bros; time to get up."

Both boys opened their eyes, and smiled sleepily when they saw JJ leaning over them.

Sammy: "Okay bro, we are up."

Jeffy: "Why do we gotta get up?"

Sammy: "Can't we just lay here and"

Jeffy: "Cuddle for a while?"

JJ giggled at their antics. "Naw, Adam, Ty, and Kyle are waiting for us. C'mon you two."

JJ stood up, and immediately had a twin under each arm. As the three of them headed for the stairs, JJ reflected on the twin's personality shift since they joined the family.

\* \* \*

**Flashback...**

JJ finally was able to make time to sit down with his new brothers after Aaron's concert on Friday. After locating Kyle and telling him to join them, JJ led Jeffy and Sammy up to Dan and John's room for some privacy.

Once all four boys were comfortably seated Indian-style on the bed, JJ started.

"Sammy, Jeffy, I'm sorry I took so long to get us together; as you saw, things are nuts here right now."

Sammy looked at his new big brother. "That's okay. We thought the talk from Sean and Cory was all we would get."

Kyle giggled. "There's one thing you guys need to learn, when it comes to big bros JJ is more protective than Sean and Cory put together! Just watch it; last time I screwed up he chewed me out BAD! I was in the courtroom, and even Judge Lewis was surprised!"

JJ shrugged his shoulders at the quizzical looks from the twins. "Hey, he was actin' like a brat, so I treated him like one. If Dad hadn't been such a chicken, I would not have had to do it. He came home with us that night, so I guess it was worth it."

Kyle started pouting over being called a brat, so JJ leaned over and hugged him while giving him a kiss on the forehead. "Hey lil' bro, you have to admit you were goin' too far. Like I told ya', I yelled 'cause I love you, and the way you were going I coulda' never saw you again."

Kyle returned the hug. "Yeah, you're right, I guess. I was just scared. I love you too, bro."

JJ sat back and returned his attention to the twins. "Guys, I know it does not seem like it, but I have been keepin' an eye on you since you got here yesterday. I noticed a couple of things that we really need to talk about. You guys are kinda acting the same way Kyle did when he first started staying with us on weekends, and it's got me worried." JJ saw the fear seeping into the twin's faces, and tried to stop it. "You can stop worrying, it's nothin' bad, nuthin' wrong, and you are not in trouble. You have had a rough life, guys, and you have picked up a couple of habits from it. Dad says that it is your way of trying to protect yourself, at least that's what he said when I asked him about Kyle."

The twins studied each other for a minute, and then Jeffy turned to JJ and asked defensively "What's wrong with our habits?"

JJ took a deep breath before responding carefully. "Most of your habits are fine, guys. But you are doing the same thing Kyle used to do; keeping to yourselves whenever you can so that you are safe. You can let go now, I'm your big bro now and it's my job to look out for you."

Kyle interrupted. "Yeah, listen to him, bros. 'Bout a week ago, I didn't trust no one but JJ and Cory. I kinda know how ya' feel - this real family stuff is scary. There ain't none of these guys gonna let us get hurt, 'specially JJ."

Sammy looked at Kyle suspiciously. "What makes you trust them now? What did they do that's so special?"

Kyle saw the suspicion, and decided it was time to push the issue. "You are gonna wish you hadn't asked that. There are four guys here who know what I had to live like before I was put in the home. Cory knows from helping me through counseling before Dan became my dad. JJ

knows from sitting up with me all night after I had nightmares while visiting at his old house. Tyler knows because we talk about it a lot trying to get to know each other. Sean is the one who worked the fastest, though. Instead of waitin' for me to tell him, he kept askin' questions 'till he was happy that I wasn't hiding stuff from him. When he found out I only got one ball, instead of makin' fun of me he told me he was gonna have a doctor make sure I was okay. I went from being called a no good one balled piece of trash to being called a little brother. I have watched and even helped as these guys helped all of these other kids. Do you understand now why I trust them, or do ya' wanna hear about the stuff that they won't let happen to me again, like the beating and peckers being forced where I didn't want them."

JJ pulled Kyle back towards him and gave him a hug. "Thats enough, lil bro. Those days are over, please don't work yourself up talkin' about them, okay?"

Kyle buried his face in JJ's shoulder. "Sorry bro. It's just that they had live a lot like I did before I met you. I want them to be happy like you make me happy."

JJ gave Kyle a squeeze, then looked up and saw the shocked looks on the twin's faces. "Let me guess, you're wonderin' how he knows about your past, ain't you?"

Both boys nodded their heads, unable to speak.

JJ gave them a small smile. "Between Kyle reading minds and Tyler reading emotions, it's kinda' hard to keep a secret if they are worried about you. You two are our family now, and even though Kyle has not told me what your life was like, I know it musta been bad for him to get this freaked."

Jeffy and Sammy looked at each other with surprise, then in one movement they scooted against each other and placed their arms over each other shoulders. The two boys started to retreat into themselves, overwhelmed by their new brothers knowing about their past. JJ saw what was happening; so he reached across the bed, pulling both boys toward him then on top of him as he laid backwards.

As JJ settled with a twin on each shoulder, Kyle wiggled between the twins and laid on top of JJ. Both JJ and Kyle put their arms around the twins, pulling them tightly into the snuggle. JJ thought back to the times when Kyle withdrew into himself; hoping that what he was about to do was what they needed too.

"Jeffy, Sammy, c'mon guys. It's okay, no matter what happened before I'll still love you. You guys are my little brothers now, do you really know what that means to me?" JJ started in a soft voice as he hugged the boys laying against him.

The slight movement of the two heads buried in his shoulders told JJ they didn't, so he continued. "It means that anyone who has hurt you or tries to hurt you has to deal with me. You don't have to just count on each other now, I gotta make sure you don't get hurt. It also means you need to trust me to help ya' get over the stuff that happened to you before Pop found you."

JJ had to strain to hear what Sammy mumbled into his chest. "If you knew what we did you wouldn't like us."

JJ gave the boys another squeeze. "Kyle knows, and I'll bet Tyler does too. Both of them still love you, so why do you think I won't? C'mon, tell me; I promise I won't get mad or hate you."

Jeffy turned his head slightly. "But we liked it. Unca' Calvin was right, we're nothin' but little pros'tutes."

After some coaxing, JJ finally got the full story out of the twins. Whenever their old father was away, they had stayed with a friend of his that they had always called 'Uncle Calvin'. One night when they were six, he caught them experimenting with each other. He took advantage of them, and started having them perform fellatio on him. When Calvin realized the boys enjoyed

it, he started inviting over his friends and let the boys loose on them for a fee. For the last year, Calvin had even started filming the boys as they 'serviced' his friends. JJ almost vomited from disgust when Sammy finished by saying their old father was getting a cut of the profits from the sale of the movies.

Once he regained control of his stomach, JJ spoke carefully. "Lil' bros, we need to sit up. I want you to see my eyes when I tell you what I think, okay?"

Everyone sat up, both of the twins with worry about JJ's response etched on their faces.

JJ began, looking Sammy straight in the eyes. "Sammy, you can tell Jeffy if you think I'm being honest. Just watch my eyes, they can't lie. What you guys had happen to you has got to be the worst thing I have heard since I met Kyle. Calvin took advantage of something you liked, and used you to satisfy his friends and make money. There is nothing wrong with you liking to pleasure a guy like that, but it is only supposed to be done with someone who makes you feel good back; someone who you love and they love you back. I know you liked it, but from now on could you not do it anymore until you got boyfriends? Even then ask me if it's okay first; Calvin messed with your heads, so you will be safer if I help you decide if it's for real. I absolutely still love both of you, and I'm proud of you for being strong enough to tell how you felt. I want both of you to forget everything that happened before Pop found you; all of that is my problem to fix. Stick with me, Kyle, Adam and Tyler; we'll help you out and protect you, okay?"

Jeffy and Sammy looked at each other, using the natural ability all twins have to wordlessly communicate between each other. They simultaneously cracked slight smiles, then Jeffy spoke for them. "I guess you don't hate us. You really mean that; you know, that you are gonna take care of Unca' Calvin?"

JJ reached out and pulled the boys into a hug. "Yeah lil' bros, give me a couple of days to figure out how, but that bastard is gonna pay for using y'all. I was serious, you can forget all about it, it's my problem now."

Kyle leaned against the twin's backs and wrapped his arms over their shoulders. Even knowing ahead of time had not prepared him for actually hearing what they had been through, and he was still recovering. "That goes for me too, bros. You ain't gonna get hurt any more, you are our family now."

Kyle and JJ's affirmation of their support was the final straw. Jeffy and Sammy relaxed and began sobbing in relief as they were sandwiched between their new brothers. An hour later, Dan found the four of them asleep in a pile on the bed, exhausted by the emotional overload.

### **...End Flashback**

\* \* \*

Ever since that conversation, the twins had hung on JJ like shadows.

The six boys managed to squeeze into the shower at the same time. At first Jeffy and Sammy were skittish about any contact at all, but as they realized that none of the others planned to do anything other than wash they joined in on the horseplay. As they were finishing the shower, Kyle and Tyler decided to finish their sword fighting.

At first Jeffy and Sammy were giggling as much as the others at Kyle and Ty's antics, but suddenly Jeffy dropped to his knees and turned Kyle towards him.

"Whoa, Kyle, you just got one ball? Kewl!" Jeffy exclaimed as he reached out and inspected Kyle's scrotum. "One of the guys we used to do was born like this; he tasted better than anyone else!" Jeffy then stood back up and hugged the still-shocked Kyle. "You are extra special

bro; if anyone picks on you about that let us know. We'll beat up anyone who does that."

Kyle smiled as he recovered and returned the hug. "Will do, bro. I was born like this too; I hope you are right!"

As much as he didn't want to, JJ interrupted the exchange. "C'mon guys, let's get dried off. Jeffy, Sammy, why don't you go with Adam and get started on breakfast; I gotta discuss something with Pop."

The boys split off, all but JJ heading downstairs. JJ took a deep breath once they were all clear, it was time to deal with the twins problem. For the first time since he had been told, he gave the matter of what they had been through his full attention. He finished clearing everything else out of his mind, then knocked on his parent's bedroom door.

"Come in JJ!" Dan called out.

JJ opened the door and walked in, locking it behind him. He then walked over to the bathroom door and locked it too. Once he was sure they were not going to be interrupted, he turned toward Dan and John.

Dan began to joke about the locked doors, but then he got a good look at his oldest son. JJ's normally full lips were nothing but thin lines, and his magnetic hazel eyes were replaced by ominous black pools.

Dan turned serious. "John, get dressed NOW! I've only seen JJ like this once; all I'll say is all Hell is about to break loose."

Both adults threw on clothes as fast as they could, then sat in front of where JJ was waiting patiently. "What's wrong, Son?" Dan said as soon as they were settled.

JJ handed John the list of names that Kyle got from the twin's memories. As John opened the paper, JJ finally started venting the anger and disgust he had been feeling since he heard the twin's history.

In a cold voice, JJ answered. "To start, I want all of those guy's nuts hanging from the fence by supper..."

\* \* \*

Adam led the boys into the dining room. "Mornin' Helen, what's for breakfast?" the boys announced.

Helen shook her head and smiled. "Y'all act like you haven't ate in a week. I was thinking about waffles; how's that sound?"

"Yeah!!!" four of the five boys exclaimed. Kyle dropped his chin to his chest and quietly began sobbing.

Helen noticed Kyle's reaction and rushed over to him. "What's wrong, baby?" she asked as she pulled him into her arms.

"N .. nu .. nuthin'," Kyle stuttered.

Helen rubbed Kyle's shoulders as she tried to calm him. "It's okay Kyle, you can tell me about it. I can't make things better if I don't know what's wrong."

Kyle snuggled into Helen and whispered just loud enough for her to hear "Me and JJ's mommy used to make blueberry waffles when I came over. She said they was special for me. I miss Mommy!" Kyle broke into a fresh round of tears.

"Shhhh ... It's okay Kyle. It's good that you miss her, it shows that you love her. I'll bet right now she's smiling knowing you love her so much."

"If it's good, why does it make my tummy hurt?"

"Thats because you're holding all the love you have for her inside you now. When she

was here, you gave it to her. I bet you don't think about her much because it makes you sad. Is that right Kyle?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I know she is watchin' over us, but it hurts to 'member her."

Helen kissed Kyle's head, then continued. "You know something? When Kelly was separated from me, it hurt me to think about him. I was feeling like you do now."

"What did ya' do?" Kyle mumbled.

"I figured out that it didn't hurt as much once I started doing things that we had fun doing together. It was like I kept the good memories of him alive by doing the things we enjoyed. Maybe you should do something like that; it helped me."

Kyle thought for a minute. "I guess I can try. How do I start?"

Helen smiled slightly. "I think a good start would be a special batch of blueberry waffles for a very special little boy. How does that sound to you?"

Kyle leaned up and kissed Helen's cheek. "Okay! You know what? You are almost as smart as mommy was!"

Helen chuckled as she kissed Kyle's forehead. "I'll take that as a compliment, little one. Why don't you and Ty meet me in the kitchen, and we'll see what we can do about making some waffles that'll make your Momma proud."

Kyle giggled as he hopped down and grabbed Tyler's hand, dragging him into the kitchen. Helen turned to Adam and said "why don't you guys get everyone else up? By the time they are done with their showers, I should have enough done for the first round."

Adam giggled. "You sure about that Helen? None of us have had anything to eat for quite a few hours."

Helen smiled and shook her head as Adam ran for the rec room. She turned to join the boys in the kitchen, but was stopped by the twins pulling her into a hug.

"Thanks for helping our little brother, Helen," Jeffy said.

Sammy took over the conversation. "We think he's messed up a little cuz' JJ is tellin' Pop what happened to us."

Jeffy interrupted. "Yeah, I hope Pop still wants us after he finds out. It's kewl feeling like someone might actually love us."

Helen looked at the twins hanging on to her, their insecurity evident in their blue eyes. "Guys, you can stop worrying those pretty blond heads of yours. There is one thing I've figured out about this house; when you walk through that front door you are loved for what you are now, and nothing in your past can change that."

Dan walked up and motioned the twins over to him. "She's right, guys. John and I still love you just as much now as we did before JJ told us what happened." As he sat down and pulled the twins onto his lap he continued. "In fact, right now John is contacting his boss in Orlando to start things rolling to give the people that used you what they deserve."

Dan noticed Helen was heading to the kitchen. "Thanks for helping our sons, Helen. I think you are going to fit in here just fine."

"Anytime Dan, you have some very fine young gentlemen for your sons. I need to get moving, Kyle and Ty are waiting to help make blueberry waffles," Helen replied as she headed out of the room.

Dan raised his eyebrows. "I wonder if she has any idea what she's getting into with your little brother, guys!"

Jeffy looked up at his new dad. "Yeah she does, Daddy. Kyle got all sad when she first said she was making them. He was missing his mommy bad, but after Helen talked to him he is feelin' better."

JJ took a seat next to them. "What's this about our little brother?"

Dan responded first. "Blueberry Waffles, son. Need I say more?"

JJ shook his head. "Is he okay? Where's he at?"

"Don't worry, bro; Helen talked to him and he's okay now. Him and Ty are helping her," Sammy replied as he turned toward JJ. "Hey, why have you been crying, JJ?" he asked as he noticed JJ's red eyes.

Dan answered as he reached over and pulled JJ into the family embrace. "Your big brother went to bat for you guys. He was so mad he broke down in tears telling us about what you had to go through. I have only seen him close to that mad one other time, and that was when the home Kyle used to be in started blocking us adopting him. You two have nothing to worry about now, JJ told us everything and we WILL make sure nobody does that to you again."

John entered the room as Dan finished talking. "That's right, in fact I have to go to Washington, DC after breakfast to get the ball rolling. Thanks to you two, a lot of kids are not going to have to do what you had to do."

In a tiny voice, Sammy pleaded "Do you still want us now that you know what we did?"

"Yes, son, we still want both of you. It doesn't matter if you liked it or not, you were being used. If anyone ever gives you trouble about that, let one of us know." John wiped a tear from his eye then continued. "The Lord has blessed us with four fine sons; there is nothing any of you could do that would make us send you away. Go clean up you three, it smells like breakfast is almost ready. I love all of you equally, never forget that."

Just as JJ and the twins sat down at the dining room table, the rest of the tribe made their way into the room and grabbed their normal seats. Teri had just joined them when Kyle and Tyler came walking in from the kitchen. Both boys carried plates with two large waffles on them, dripping with blueberry syrup and topped with whipped cream.

Kyle smiled as they sat the plates in front of Sammy and Jeffy. "Momma used to make these for me 'cause I was special. You guys are my special new big brothers, so since she was not here to make them, I made these for you. Welcome home, bros!"

Kyle had made this announcement while standing between the twins. Both boys turned in their seats and gave Kyle a big twin hug. "Thanks Kyle! You're the best little brother in the whole world!" both Sammy and Jeffy announced in unison.

As Kyle left the twins and headed towards his seat, John pulled him over and hugged him. "That was the nicest thing I've ever seen Kyle. I'm really proud of you, and I know your momma is too."

Kyle smiled. "Thanks Pop!" He then hurried over to his chair by Tyler as Helen came out pushing a cart with a serving platter heaped with waffles, six flasks of blueberry syrup, and a plate already prepared exactly like the ones Kyle gave the twins.

"This one is for you; a special waffle for a special boy," Helen told Kyle as she sat the prepared plate in front of him. Kyle silently turned and hugged Helen, the quiet tears saying more than any words.

To all of the adults surprise, not one of the boys even mentioned the fact that Kyle, Sammy, and Jeffy were the only ones to get whipped cream for their waffles. As breakfast was being finished, John spoke up.

"Teri, Sean, and Cory, I need to see you in the office after breakfast. Gabe, call your dad and ask him to hurry over. I have a feeling that he's about to get very busy."

Alec, Trav, and Kelly gave Helen a hand cleaning up as the rest of the families dispersed throughout the house. Andrew joined JJ and Adam as they headed to the rec room with their brothers. "What happened this morning? When I got up you all were gone," Andy asked as they all



sat on the couch.

JJ smiled, finally relaxing from the mornings stress. "Kyle and Ty kinda woke us up. I'm glad they did, 'cuz now I've took care of a promise I made to my newest little brothers.

Andrew chuckled. "I'm not sure I wanna know what they were doing!" He then turned serious. "I wanna thank you guys for lettin' me stay here. I kinda feel like you are all my brothers now too, and if any of you need help let me know, okay?"

JJ reached over and rubbed Andrew's neck. "Hey man, like we told you at Denny's, you ARE our brother. You and I's been friends for a long time, and you proved that you were more than a friend right then."

All seven boys cuddled together as each thought about the changes in their lives over the past week. Tyler broke the silence when he commented softly "I used to tell Sean I wished for a big brother, one that was as nice as him. Now I got three big brothers and a big family and a cute boyfriend. I really hope this ain't a dream."

Adam reached over and hugged his little brother. "Ty, thank God this is not a dream. I would go through the pain all over again if that's what it would take to keep you now that I have you little brother."

The cuddle became a group hug as they all expressed their love for each other. As they broke apart, Kyle began giggling.

"What's up, bro?" Sammy asked.

Kyle grinned. "I just got done catchin' up Jamie and Jacob. Justy had to hold Unca Josh down to keep him from goin' huntin' for Calvin! Unca Josh said to tell you guys not to worry, he's gonna make some calls and do some stuff that Unca Chip and Pop can't do." Kyle looked confused for a second, then muttered "OUCH!"

"What's wrong?" Tyler asked with concern.

"Justy just told Jamie somethin'. Justy says the last time he saw his Pop that mad was when the Carters kicked Aaron out. I had to ask what a word meant, and Justy told Jamie so he could tell me. Justy says Unca Josh is gonna castrate Calvin with a butter knife! I guess Calvin better hope our Pop finds him first, cuz Justy says castrate means cuttin' his nuts off!"

All of the boys winced at Kyle's announcement. They all turned to JJ in shock when he muttered: "In that case, I hope Uncle Josh DOES find him first. If it was me I'd use a hammer and chisel."

Adam recovered his voice first. "Babe, please let it go, the grown-ups can handle it now. I don't want you to let this eat you up, your brothers and I need you to be yourself. You did your part, please don't let it mess your head up."

JJ leaned forward and kissed Adam. "I'll try, cutie. I can't forget about it till Pop and Dad say it's taken care of, but I'll do my best."

Andy looked at JJ with confusion all over his face. "I know I'm missing something here, what's going on?"

JJ looked over at the twins. Sammy noticed the look, and answered the unspoken question. "Go ahead bro, he's one of us."

JJ sat back. "Okay, here you go. Babe, you might wanna listen close, this is gonna be the unedited version. Ty, why don't you get the rest of the guys in here, that way we don't have to repeat it."

Once the entire tribe was assembled in the room, JJ prepared to update them. Adam went to sit with Sean and Cory, but JJ stopped him. "Babe, stay here and hold me, please? I need you a lot right now."

Adam sat back down, snuggling tight against JJ with one arm around his back and the

other over his chest.

JJ gave a long sigh. "Okay guys, please don't ask anything or comment until I'm done; this is gonna be really hard for me to talk about. I know most of you know about what happened to make it so that Jeffy and Sammy became my little brothers. Well, you are about to get what that old guy on the radio calls 'the rest of the story'."

## *Chapter 26*

### **Doctor Austin Michaels' Office - Clive, Iowa:**

Austin sat in his office nervously awaiting his first patient. For the last six months, he had been seeing the young boy twice a month as ordered by the Family Court judge in Ames. 'I hope she shows up this time' he thought as he looked at his watch. Just then, his nurse knocked on his door.

"Doctor, believe it or not your first appointment is here on time. Do you want me to send them in?" She asked.

"Thanks, Caroline, send them in," Austin answered with relief.

Shortly thereafter, a scruffy girl about 24 years old came in dragging a dirty boy behind her. As soon as they entered the room, Austin could smell the mixture of pot and booze from the woman's clothes.

"I see you made it this time, Karla. My nurse has some updated forms that need filled out, could you please handle that while I examine Ricky?" Austin asked while trying not to gag.

"I don't know what it is about you damn doctors and paperwork," Karla grumbled. "The only reason you're seeing the little bastard is that damn judge said to do it, and this makes six months so it's gonna be the last time. Ricky, keep that trap of yours shut, let him look at you so we can get out of this shithole." She then stormed out of the door, slamming it as she exited.

Austin shook his head as she left, and then turned to the six-year-old standing by the exam table. "Hi there Ricky, I see that she's just as polite as always! What do you say we have a seat in the chair over there, little guy?"

"What if she comes back?" Ricky answered in a small voice.

Austin smiled. "Don't worry about that, I told Caroline to keep her busy until I came back out. Are things still the same at home?"

Ricky gave a little grin as he headed for the chair. As soon as Austin sat down, Ricky cuddled into his lap and answered. "Yeah, she stills doing stuff that makes her act funny. The hot water stopped workin', so I ain't taken a bath yet 'till it's fixed."

Austin took a good look at the boy on his lap. While not malnourished, it was still evident to his practiced eye that the child was not eating as well as he should. His normally sandy blond hair was starting to approach brown due to lack of washing, but the green eyes still had a shine of hope in them. "Ricky, I know we have talked about this before, but I need to ask you one more time. Do you think things are getting better, or do you think you would be better somewhere else?"

Ricky turned and looked Austin in the eye. "Doc, Mommy said after today she ain't gotta

do stuff to make ya' happy no more. Does that mean it'll be like before the judge saw me?"

That was the final straw for Austin. "Ricky, she may think that, but we have a surprise for her. I think it's time for you to have a new home where you can be a happy kid. How does that sound?"

"Where's that?" Ricky replied. "Mommy tells her boyfriends I ain't nuthin but a bast'rd leech. What does that mean?"

"It means your mommy does not realize what a special little boy you are. I think I know the perfect place for you to live, little buddy. How would you like to become part of my family; live with me, my wife, and our son."

"Does that mean I'd have a big br'ther?" Ricky asked with an excited gleam in his eye.

"Yes it does; in fact, if I don't bring you home with me today he's gonna be extremely disappointed in me. The only catch is that this will be for forever, you will not ever live with your mommy again. We would be your family."

Ricky answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "She's always tellin' ever'one she didn' want me, so I guess she won't miss me. Will I get to have toys at your house?"

"Yes you will, lots of toys! Don't you have any?"

"Naw, mommy said theys a waste of money 'cuz I'd break them."

"I guess we'll have to take care of that. Look over on my desk, you see that new thing on the corner?"

"Yeah, wazzit for?"

"That is a Starfleet Medical Tricorder, and it has recorded everything that happened since you got here. The important part is about to be recorded, as soon as you stand up in front of me."

Ricky giggled as he stood up. "Kewl! Whats gonna happen now?"

Austin grinned. "Kiddo, you are about to have a wish come true. I remember a couple of months ago you told me you wished that you could live like the other kids at school; in a few minutes it is going to happen."

Austin stood up and placed a hand on Ricky's shoulder. "I have reviewed statements made by Ricky Guy Williamson, and observed both the appearance and conduct of his birth mother, Karla Williamson. In addition, there are physical signs of both illegal drug and alcohol abuse by the same Karla Williamson. I hereby invoke Section 213-C of the Safe Haven Act due to the imminent risks to same child's health and mental stability. As of 8:30am local time, Ricky Guy Williamson is a Ward of the United Federation of Planets, and shall be placed with me as ordered by Teri Short, Federation Youth Services Director. Psychological evaluation is to be completed by Dr. Daniel Richardson as soon as possible."

Ricky looked up at Austin. "What did all those big words mean, Doc?"

Austin smiled as he looked down at the boy. "They mean that you are going to go home with me, and you get to live with us until you are all grown up."

"AWESOME!" Ricky yelled as he jumped into Austin's arms.

Austin shifted Ricky over onto his left hip, then picked up the tricorder and placed it on his belt. "Come on, kiddo, let's go home."

They walked into the hall, and turned to the admissions counter. Austin couldn't help but smile as he made the formal announcement to Karla. "Miss Williamson, as the Medical Director for the Federation Youth Services Bureau, it is my duty to inform you that, as of five minutes ago, Ricky is now a Ward of the United Federation of Planets. You are not to attempt contact with him in any way from this point forward. Do you understand?"

"What the fuck are you talkin' about, asshole? Gimme the brat so I can go pick up the food stamps. He ain't going nowhere but home with me. You ain't nuthin' but a small time shit-ass

clinic doctor, you don't scare me."

Austin's face turned grim. "I will put this in small words so that you can understand me. Ricky is no longer your child. The Federation has taken responsibility for raising him from now until he grows up. You no longer have any reason to contact him. Oh, one more thing, since you seem to have trouble hearing too; I happen to be the Federation's Youth Services Medical Director. Ricky's case has already been reviewed with the Youth Services Director, so you pretty much have a snowball's chance in Hell of getting Ricky back."

Karla tried to lunge for Ricky, but was stopped by a large hand grabbing her shoulder. "Miss, I would not recommend that," a huge Iowa State Trooper growled as he pulled her back. "You have enough problems without assaulting a Federation representative. Come with me, we need to discuss a few things that one of my fellow officers found in your apartment."

As the officer escorted Karla away, Caroline attracted Austin's attention. "Doctor, your son is on Line Five. He said it's urgent."

"Thank you, Caroline. Did you get the rest of the appointments transferred to the other doctors?"

"Yes I did. Were you serious about needing me?"

"Absolutely. Call me about nine tomorrow, I'll let you know where to meet me. Starting today you are on salary as my on-call nurse, so why don't you take the rest of the day off and I'll yell if I need you."

"As you wish!" she answered with a grin as she began packing her personal effects.

Austin picked up the phone. "Hello Gabe, what's the problem?"

"Hi Dad. Uncle John needs to see you as soon as possible. I can't tell ya' over the phone why, but it involves the twins in a way."

"I was just getting ready to leave. Is he at home?"

"Yeah, he's here. Mom's on the way over too."

"Okay. Tell him we'll be there in about thirty minutes - I have to stop and get your little brother a swimsuit."

Austin managed to pull the phone away from his ear just in time to keep from being blasted by Gabe yelling "AWESOME! HE'S COMING HOME!!!!"

"Yes, son, your little brother is coming home. I'm going to get going, I will see you in a little bit. Love you, Gabe."

"Love you too, Dad! I'll tell Uncle John you are on the way."

Austin placed the handset down in its cradle, then turned to Caroline. "I hate to do this, but it looks like duty calls already. Make sure you have that communicator with you at all times today; we might have to take a trip on short notice."

Caroline looked at Ricky, still sitting in Austin's arms, but now sporting a grin a mile wide after hearing Gabe's excitement at being his new big brother. "After seeing the results of your new job, it will be a pleasure to keep the communicator with me, Doctor."

Austin chuckled as him and Ricky said their goodbyes and headed for the door.

\* \* \*

#### **Teri's house:**

Cory looked at John in shock. "HE DID WHAT!?! You mean to tell me there are pictures of the twins all over the NET!"

"Settle down, Cory. We ..." John began.

"No, John, I will NOT settle down!" Cory interrupted. "Jeffy and Sammy are under the same pact as the rest of us, which means Sean and I have to watch out for their well being. I'm not gonna rest until every single picture that trash made of them is destroyed."

Sean put an arm around Cory's waist, then added. "Cory is right. You guys take care of catching those scumbags; we've got to convene a tribal council to figure out how to protect the twin's identities."

Teri interjected "Boys, I really don't think it is necessary to involve the rest of the families. Jeffy and Sammy need at least some of their dignity preserved."

"Too late, Mom," Cory replied as he looked out the doorway towards the rec room. "I think JJ is on our wavelength; it looks like the meeting is about to start."

Dan raised his hand to prevent an argument. "Teri, you didn't see what John and I did this morning. JJ has always been the type to protect his friends and family; in fact I know he covered for Kyle a few times when Kyle first started visiting us, just to make sure he could come back. I don't know why, and I'm honestly afraid to find out, but this has pushed him way beyond just protecting his brothers. He's out for blood, and I'm not really sure if it isn't literally. I trust both Cory and Sean to protect my sons; and I think they are the only ones who have a chance at keeping JJ from killing somebody."

Before Teri could answer, John interjected "I've known JJ since he was in diapers, and have never seen him go off like this. Dan has the right idea, let the boys run an investigation from their end while we go the legal route. Sean, Cory, the only limit I'm going to place on you is any information you receive will be given to us to handle; none of the boys, including you, are to be physically involved in any apprehensions. Is that understood?"

"Yes John," both boys answered.

"I'll agree on one condition," Teri said as she looked both boys in the eye. "You two make SURE that Kyle lets your cohorts in Orlando know that the same rules apply to them, and that INCLUDES Justy, Aaron, and David."

"I'll handle that, Mom," Sean replied.

"Well then, what are you waiting for?" Teri answered with a grin. "Get your troops going, boys. We need to get things done!"

Sean and Cory almost tripped over each other as they scrambled to join their brothers in the rec room.

JJ had just finished filling everyone in on what happened to the twins when Sean and Cory reached the rec room doorway. Timmy spotted his parents, and in a flash, was in Cory's arms. "Daddy, Unca JJ says some guys did nasty stuff wit' Unca Jeffy an' Unca Sammy. Are we gonna get dem?"

Sean reached over and rustled Timmy's hair as Cory replied. "You better believe it, little angel. That's what your Pop and I were just talking to Grandma about."

They started to head into the room when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it!" Cory yelled as he put Timmy down. Cory turned and went to the front door, Timmy tagging along like a little puppy.

Cory opened the door. "Hey Doc, you made pretty good time getting here! Mom, John, and Dan are in the office; they're expecting you."

Austin grinned. "Thanks ... Cory? ... Gabe said it was urgent."

Cory giggled. "Don't worry, Doc, you'll have us all memorized in no time! You got it right, I'm Cory."

Just then Timmy spoke up. "Hey Doc, who's dat hidin' behind ya'?"

Cory couldn't help but giggle as Timmy scampered past him and pulled Ricky from behind Austin's legs. "Timmy, I believe that is Ricky, he's gonna be Gabe's new little brother."

"Hey Ricky, I'm Timmy - and that's MY new Daddy!" Timmy exclaimed gleefully as he pointed at Cory. "My other daddy is in with our uncles, I call him Papa, you'll meet him later."

Timmy's fast delivery took Ricky by surprise, and made him forget his fright at meeting Gabe. He gave Timmy a confused look. "Whadda you mean you got two daddies? What about your momma?"

Timmy giggled. "Yep, two daddies. If I need mommy stuff I go to Gran'ma or Helen. It's cool, I can get double daddy cuddles!"

"What's a daddy cuddle like? All my mommy's boyfriends ever wanted was for me to leave the room so they could smoke that funny smellin' stuff and get drunk," Ricky replied with a downcast look.

Cory and Austin were watching the two young boys interact with amusement. They were both shocked when Timmy reached up and pulled on Austin's hand.

"Doc, did you help Ricky like we helped Unca Twav an' Unca Alec?"

"Yes I did, Timmy," Austin replied, but was cut off from continuing by Timmy turning to Ricky.

"Guess what Ricky? She ain't your mommy no more, you gots a new Mommy and Daddy! Are these clothes from your old mommy?" Timmy announced.

Ricky looked at the threadbare jeans and worn shirt he was wearing. "Yeah, these are my school clothes."

Cory was pleased at his son's first attempt at diplomacy, as Timmy took Ricky's hand and turned to Cory.

"Daddy, you let me forget my bath last night! Can we go take it now, and Ricky can borrow my clothes while Gran'ma washes his old mommy outta his."

Cory looked at Austin, who nodded his head in assent. "Okay Timmy, I think that's a great idea. Why don't you let me get Ty to help you guys, okay?"

"Okay Daddy!" Timmy exclaimed. He turned to Ricky. "Race ya up the stairs!"

The two boys took off, and once they were out of sight Cory and Austin finally entered the foyer. Before heading to the office, Austin put an arm over Cory's shoulder. "Cory, don't ask me how but I think your son has done more in the last few minutes to relax Ricky than everything I tried on the way here. That boy had himself all worked up about whether Gabe would like him or not, and I think Timmy has made him forget all about it."

Cory giggled. "Thanks, Doc, I'm sure it wasn't all intentional! I think he's just excited to have someone his age here to play with again! We both better hurry up, I know everyone is waiting for you, and if I don't get someone upstairs quick those two will flood the house."

Austin chuckled as the two of them separated. Cory entered the rec room; he was not more than two feet inside the door before Gabe asked "Where's my new little brother?"

"Relax Gabe, he's upstairs with Timmy getting cleaned up. You could smell the stuff his old mom was smokin' on him, so Timmy convinced him to share a bath. Ty, could you do me a big favor, bro?"

Tyler looked up from snuggling Kyle. "Whazzat, Cor?"

"Run up and keep those two outta trouble in the bathtub? While you're at it, there's a little boy up there who could use some help with his worry about his new family."

Tyler turned and gave Kyle a noisy kiss. "Be right back, babe! I gotta go make sure our new nephew is ready to meet all his uncles!" He then hopped up and ran out the door, yelling "SAVE SOME WATER FOR ME!" as he ran up the stairs.

Cory had just cuddled up next to Sean when suddenly his communicator came to life.

"Ambassador Sarek to Ensign Cory Short."

It took Cory a second to compose himself before he was able to answer. He considered where the call was coming from before composing his reply.

"Ambassador, this is Ensign Cory Short. Please proceed."

"Ensign Short; I have just completed a disturbing call from my son-in-law and grandsons. The information I received suggests that two recent additions to your family have suffered grievous wrongs at the hands of their previous caregivers. I must insist you provide me with confirmation and scope of these allegations."

The room was so quiet you could hear a mouse tiptoe across the carpet. Cory took a deep breath before answering.

"Ambassador, the information you have received is accurate. The Taylor twins were rented out for fellatio and filmed for profit doing the same. Preliminary information shows both their primary caregiver and those he trusted them with while away profited from this enterprise. At this time we are preparing to investigate further into the expanse of the damage done."

"The information I received then was accurate. Is my information correct that my grandsons swore an oath of brotherhood while visiting your residence?"

"Yes it is, Ambassador."

"Have the Taylor twins swore that same oath?"

"Yes they have, Ambassador."

"That is as I hoped. I must chastise young Justin for failing to disseminate the implications of his swearing of the oath to you. I am aware that my two most recent grandsons were already under the same oath. When Justin responded by swearing the same oath as his brothers, he placed your group in an interesting legal position. Due to the size of your group, you qualify as a Clan pending approval by the Vulcan High Council. I have been in communication with the Council, and based on the positive effects of your actions your Clan status has been confirmed. By your actions, Ensign Sean and yourself have proven yourselves as the leaders of the Clan in the eyes of the Council. Under Vulcan law, as the senior leader you are responsible for ensuring these wrongs to the members of your Clan are righted as required by Vulcan law. In one Earth hour a technician from the Vulcan Embassy will be at your residence to install the terminal required at the Clan Leaders residence. I must insist these transgressions be righted with dispatch. You have the resources of Vulcan at your disposal."

Though in shock, Cory still managed somehow to respond. "Thank you, Ambassador. Your assistance has been most welcome. I will review the applicable Vulcan statutes and ensure they are followed to their fullest extent. I shall await the technicians arrival."

"That shall be acceptable. Live long and prosper, Cory."

"Live long and prosper, Ambassador Sarek."

The communicator went dead, and Cory looked around the room. Every single boy was staring at him in shock, and as he looked towards the doorway he found John and Dan standing there with their mouths hanging open. Cory couldn't resist the chance to pick on the two adults.

"John, Dan, don't you think you should knock before entering an Embassy?" Cory said with a giggle.

That broke the spell, as all the boys noticed the adults and broke into giggles.

John shook his head. "Cory, did I just hear what I thought I heard?"

Cory snuggled up to Sean. "Yep, you heard right! Me and my Teddy Bear here are the leaders of a Vulcan Clan, and there are some slimeballs out there who are about to find out that they crossed the wrong planet!"

"Yeah!" Kyle piped up. "We're gonna grind 'em up into' Slimeburgers!"

Dan shook his head. "What ever happened to the two shy boys I used to treat at the



Home?"

"You fixed their heads!" Tyler quipped as he pushed between the adults, followed by Timmy and Ricky. Right behind them came Austin, Teri, and Carrie. Ricky finally noticed all of the boys in the room, and turned to run out the doorway. Instead, he ran right into Austin's legs.

Austin picked up the scared little boy and held him close. "What's wrong, Ricky?"

"Who's all those big kids? They're gonna beat me up!" Ricky cried.

Austin kissed Ricky's forehead. "Settle down, son. You don't need to worry about these guys. They only beat up people who hurt one of them, and since you are one of them now they won't let you get hurt. Let's go meet your new big brother. It looks like he's going nuts waiting on you!"

Carrie smiled as Ricky peeked his head over Austin's shoulder. As soon as she had arrived, Teri had told her where the boys were at and she had went up to greet Ricky. She had walked into the bedroom as Tyler was drying off the boys after their bath, and found her arms full of wet, naked six-year-old boy as soon as Ty had introduced her as Ricky's new mommy. She had been pleasantly surprised when, after he convinced the two little nudists to get dressed, Tyler whispered in her ear that he was throwing Ricky's old clothes away and that Ricky could wear some of Timmy's things until they went shopping.

Ricky peeked at Carrie; in his short life he had learned early not to trust males, but she was his new mommy so he knew he could trust her. "Mommy, is it REALLY okay?"

Carrie leaned forward, kissed his cheek, then whispered in his ear. "Yes baby boy, it is really okay. You can trust these guys."

Ricky relaxed in Austin's arms, and they headed across the room to where Gabe was sitting with Travis on his lap. Austin placed Ricky back on the ground, and turned him to face the boys. "Ricky, do you see the blond being used as a chair in front of you?"

"Yeah."

"That's your new big brother. Gabe, this is Ricky. Ricky, that's Gabe; the guy on his lap is Travis."

Gabe smiled at Ricky, then turned to Trav. "Hey babe, make a little room on my lap for my little brother!" As Trav shifted around to make room, Gabe held out his free arm for Ricky to join them.

Ricky hesitated, then slowly sat on Gabe's lap. You could see the shock on his face when Gabe wrapped his arm around him in a one-armed hug and said joyfully "Welcome home, Little Brother!"

Travis then leaned around and made it a three-way hug as he added "Welcome to the family, Ricky! Trust me, you can relax. You got your big brother and me to watch over you now."

Ricky wiggled around and got comfortable, then wrapped his arms around Gabe's arm. "Gabe, is Travis your boyfriend?" he asked innocently.

Gabe shot a glance at his dad before answering. "Yes he is, bro. Why do you ask?"

Ricky giggled. "Timmy told me you had a cute boyfriend, but he lied. You gotta BEAUTIFUL boyfriend!"

Travis turned beet red and tried to crawl into Gabe's shirt. Gabe smiled and gave Ricky another squeeze. "Thanks little buddy! See, we already agree on something, now all we gotta do is convince Trav that it's true!"

Travis turned his still-blushing face to the room. "ALEC! They're picking on me!"

Alec was sitting with Kelly, both trying to keep from laughing. "Sorry bro, it ain't picking on you when they are right! Face it, everyone realizes you are good looking! Even us straight guys!"

Gabe giggled at Trav. "Busted, babe! C'mon, we gotta introduce my little bro to the rest of the Tribe!"

Gabe got up and went to the arm of the couch, where he sat then pulled Ricky up with him. "You ready for the grand tour, lil' bro?" Gabe giggled as Travis ran back into the room with his mom and joined them.

Ricky looked around and found everyone smiling at him. "Yeah, if I can 'member all of them!"

Gabe giggled. "I know what ya' mean, bro! If you can't remember, just ask. All of us have trouble sometimes!"

Gabe made the rounds introducing all of the boys, then made sure Ricky knew all of the adults too. Each boy in return gave Ricky a warm welcome.

Once it was all over with, Cory stood up. "Hey guys, we need to get an area ready for the terminal, the tech should be here in about twenty minutes! Mom, I hate to be a pain, but could you guys hang in the kitchen or something while we get this all ready?"

Teri shook her head with a smile. "I swear, you are getting back to your old self more and more every day, Cory!"

John placed his hand on Teri's shoulder as they turned and walked out. "Just wait, Teri, I have some news you'll REALLY love!"

Ricky started to walk towards the door, but JJ stopped him. "Where ya' goin', bro? You're one of us now, that means you get to be just as involved as the rest of us!"

Ricky looked at JJ in shock. "But I'm a little kid, I'm too little to do stuff, I'll break it."

Adam joined JJ, and kneeled down to Ricky. "Hey lil' guy, you mighta' been told that at your old home, but here it's different. There's lotsa things that are easier for you and Timmy to do, and if something gets broke on accident it can be replaced. Why don't you go help Timmy empty those shelves?"

Ricky's grin stretched from ear to ear as he ran over to give his new friend a hand.

Austin had been at the doorway watching, and called JJ and Adam over. "Way to go, guys. Let the rest of your tribe know, Ricky pretty much had to sit in his room and do nothing at his old house. He didn't have any toys or anything, so all of you are going to have to help him learn what it's like to be a real kid."

"Not a problem, Doc!" Adam replied with a giggle as he looked over and saw Timmy whispering something in Ricky's ear. "Knowing my nephew, Ricky is about to get a crash course in being a terror!"

Austin looked over, just in time to see Ricky in mid-air as he executed his first official pounce. A couple of seconds later, Ricky and Gabe were wrestling and tickling each other in the middle of the floor.

"I think you are right!" Austin laughed. "I see the pounce lessons have already started!" He then turned and rejoined the rest of the adults.

Cory looked at his watch as they finished preparing the area for the new terminal. "Way to go, guys - five minutes to spare!" he announced.

With one minute to go, Cory headed towards the front door. As his watch chimed the hour, he opened it to find two Vulcan technicians coming up the sidewalk.

Cory raised his hand in salute. "Welcome to my home. I am Cory Short. An area has been prepared for you."

The lead technician stopped and returned the greeting. "That is excellent. We estimate twenty local minutes to complete the installation and testing. An additional ten minutes will be required for training."

"That will be acceptable," Cory replied formally. "I will accompany you to the chosen location."

As expected of Vulcan technicians, the installation went flawlessly and exactly on schedule. The lead technician turned to Cory. "Mr. Short, we are ready to proceed with training. May I enquire as to your wishes regarding training of additional members of your Clan?"

"I will require myself, my life partner Sean Short, and Clan member JJ Richardson to be trained," Cory replied.

"As you wish, Sir."

JJ and Sean joined Cory as the technicians set up their logins and covered the operation of the console. Once they completed the run-through, the lead tech turned once again to Cory. "That completes the training. Will there be any additional services you require?"

Cory stood up from the console. "Your services were impeccable as expected. I shall make reference to that in my request to have you return for any future needed services."

"That would be acceptable. We shall take our leave now," the tech replied.

Cory raised his right hand in the traditional Vulcan salute. "From myself and my Clan, Live Long and Prosper."

Both technicians stood up straight and returned the salute. "Live Long and Prosper, Cory Short. May Logic always be your guide."

Cory nodded his head in acknowledgement of the additional honor, and then escorted the techs to the door. Once they were gone, he returned to the rec room and took a seat.

Gabe walked over to him, Ricky under his arm. "Man, Cory, those guys never smiled once!"

Cory grinned at Gabe. "Yeah, get used to it. Vulcans have learned to control their emotions. If you noticed, the entire time they were training us none of us messed around or anything, and I was always serious and professional with them. We are a Vulcan Clan now, which means all of us have to learn to interact on their level. It's not really that hard, you just need to know what a lot of big words mean."

Ricky added his thoughts. "It was kewl, they treated us like one of them instead of like kids! Are all Vulcans like that?"

Cory patted his lap, and Ricky climbed up on it. "All of them I have met are like that. As long as you are doing the best that you can do, they will respect you. The highest honor a Vulcan will ever give you is his respect, and the very worst thing you can do is hurt a member of his family. There are a lot of kids we have helped, including two of the Vulcan Ambassador's new grandsons. Since they are part of the group here that we call the tribe, Ambassador Sarek made us a Vulcan Clan, which means that if anything happens to one of us it has to be fixed according to Vulcan laws. You were not here when we were discussing it, but some bad things happened to the twins. I was told by Ambassador Sarek to handle it, so now we have to take care of the people who were hurting the twins. You and Timmy are going to be helping just as much as everyone else, just because you are young does not mean you can't do anything. How's that sound?"

Ricky looked at Gabe in awe. "Bro, is this what it's like in a real family?"

Gabe smiled as he picked up Ricky from Cory's lap. "Yes little brother, this is what it's like. Sometimes you gotta work, but you also get to have a lot of fun! Dad was so worried about what would happen to you after the last appointment, so when Cory offered him a chance to be the Tribe's doctor and told him he could rescue you he jumped at the chance. I've always wondered what it'd be like havin' a little brother; now that I have you I ain't never going to give you up. That's family."

Ricky cuddled tighter into Gabe. "Bro, my tummy feels all tickly and I'm happy but it

feels like I'm gonna cry. What's that?"

Tears of joy began streaming down Gabe's face. "Little buddy, I think for the first time in your life you are feeling love. I know one thing for sure, I love you."

Ricky turned and saw the smile and tears on Gabe's face. He let loose of his own tears as he replied "I love you too, bro!"

Cory silently signaled to the rest of the boys to follow him, and they left the two new brothers alone in their special moment.

Helen looked up from setting the table to see the mass of boys heading into the dining room. "I KNOW you can't smell lunch, I just put in in! Are you reading my mind again, Kyle?"

Kyle giggled. "No Ma'am! Gabe and Ricky needed some private time, so Cory brought us out here!"

Helen smiled. "That was very considerate of you boys. Lunch should be ready in about twenty minutes, why don't you all go get cleaned up so you are ready."

Cory smiled. "Thanks, Helen. It sounds like a plan, c'mon y'all!"

Helen watched as the boys headed up the stairs. As they left, she thought to herself 'Now I see what Aaron meant when he said Sean and Cory would support Kelly. As sweet as they seem, I feel sorry for anyone who ever crosses them.'

A few minutes later, Gabe came out with Ricky on his back. "Where's all the guys?" Gabe asked.

"They went upstairs to get cleaned up. Why don't you take your brother on up and join them, lunch will be ready soon."

"Okay, thanks Helen!" Gabe replied as he turned and jogged to the stairs.

Carrie came out of the office as the boys hit the stairs. She couldn't help but smile at Ricky's giggles as he was bounced around as they went up. She walked into the dining room and joined Helen.

"Well, it looks like Gabe and Ricky have hit it off!" Carrie exclaimed as she walked into the room.

Helen turned with a smile. "Carrie, let me tell you a secret. There is magic in this house; Cory and Sean are the magicians. I think just being around those two brings out the best in any kid, and I'm sure you'll see a change in Gabe as he treats his new little brother the way he has seen Sean, Cory, JJ, and Adam treat theirs. I didn't ask why, but I know the boys gave Gabe and Ricky some private time together. It's my guess that you can throw away any worries you had about the two of them getting along; the magic has worked once again."

"Thanks Helen! After what we have been going through in the office, great news like that is exactly what I needed!" Carrie replied.

\* \* \*

Cory and Sean gathered all of the boys around them before heading downstairs. Sean took the lead and addressed the group. "Guys, as much as we all joke about it, what I'm gonna say is serious. As most of you know, we all consider each other brothers - at least everyone but our boyfriends! It has not mattered if we were gay or straight, kids or teenagers; we have stuck by each other since the beginning. Today something special happened; we were recognized as a family by the Vulcan High Council. That means that every person in the room right now, along with Justy, Jamie, Jacob, Mark, Aaron, and David, is legally one of our brothers. After lunch, we are going to have to start dealing with what was done to Jeffy and Sammy. Some of the things you will see are going to make you mad, some might bring back bad memories, and others you won't

understand. Just remember we are all in this together, if you need help or a shoulder to cry on one of us will be there for you. Right now, I think we should have a group hug; and tonight it's gonna be a group sleep-together here in the room so if anyone has a nightmare the rest of us are here for you."

The entire group fell into a huge hug, as the hug broke every boy softly uttered "I love you bro" to all those near him. As he finally separated from the hug, Ricky exclaimed "This is the bestest day EVER! I got more hugs today than ever at my old home!"

There were lots of muffled giggles when Gabe responded "Just wait little bro, it's only lunchtime!"

## Chapter 27

### Southcrest Ranch, Orlando Florida, Late Afternoon:

Josh ran into the office and answered the terminal. "Southcrest; this is Josh."

"Hi Uncle Josh, this is Cory. Where are Justy, Jacob, Jamie, Aaron, David, and Mark?"

Josh was about to jump down Cory's throat for using the terminal for personal business, but then he noticed the icon in the corner signifying Cory was on an official Vulcan terminal. Alongside the icon was a family crest which Josh had never seen before. "They are out in Mark's house, Cory. Where are you calling from? That looks like the Rec room, but you don't have a terminal there!"

Cory smiled as he replied. "I do now! The Vulcan High Council has determined that I am the head of Clan Short, that is our Crest up in the corner. Could you please call them in; we have some important Clan business to discuss. If Zac is there, have him join them, if he's going to be Mark's partner he needs to be sworn in. I need Rusty, Robbie and Johnny to get over there as soon as possible too."

Josh thought back to the Vulcan protocol training he had received from Chip. *'If Cory's serious, I don't have much choice,'* Josh thought to himself. *'From what Chip said, ignoring a request from a Clan leader is worse than him ignoring an order from Jim.'*

Josh returned his attention to the viewscreen. "Give me just a minute, Cory. I'll get everyone on their way here."

"Thanks, Uncle Josh. Once they are all here, could you please stay out of the room until we are done?"

"I understand, Cory. I might not believe it, but I understand."

Josh turned to the intercom and selected 'All Page'. "Mark! Pick up on the intercom!"

A few seconds later Mark answered. "Yeah Josh, whazzup?"

"I need all of you guys in the office ASAP. That includes Zac, Airboy, and David. Cory is on the viewscreen on an official call."

"Okay, we'll be right up. Thanks, Josh."

Josh then turned to the phone and dialed Curly's cell phone. After the third ring, it was answered.

"Grand Central, it's your dime, make it quick!"

Josh had to chuckle. "Hey Curly, I need ya' to do something."

"The last time you said that, I ended up with a son! A son who just decided to see how loud my new sound system will go. I'm replacing the speakers now!"

"Well, you ain't gonna believe this, but the Tribe is now an official Vulcan Clan. Cory is on the viewer right now and is calling a meeting; he needs Rusty over here as fast as possible."

"If it was anyone but Cory, I'd agree. From him or Sean I'll believe anything! Let me guess, it was more of an order, and he wants Robbie there too."

"You got it. Would you believe Johnny too?"

"Oh shit; I don't think I want to know. Nicky is over at Bri's; I'll let them know and we'll be over shortly."

"Sounds good." Just then it hit Josh what was going on. "Sonuvabitch! Get those kids over here and get all of the guys who are in Orlando over here NOW! I just realized what is up; Cory's declaring war, and he has all of Vulcan backing him!"

Curly's gulp was audible even over the cell phone. "I'll be right there with the boys. I'll get Nick and B-Rok to round up everyone else. How serious is it?"

Josh shuddered as he responded. "Put it this way, from what I've been told by the twins, it's very possible that Cory has legal grounds to turn quite a few residents of Florida into eunuchs! Need I say more?"

"That was too much already! I'm rolling!" Curly didn't even bother saying goodbye as he flipped his phone shut and ran to Brian's house next door.

As Josh hung up his end, Justy came running into the office, followed by the rest of the crew. "Whazzup, Pop?" he asked as he skidded to a stop in front of Josh.

Josh couldn't help but grin as Jamie and Jacob skidded into the back of their brother, all three falling to the floor. "For some reason I bet you already know, but Cory is calling something he called a 'Clan meeting'." Josh was shocked when Justy got a confused look on his face and the twins suddenly went into deep concentration. A few seconds later all three faces went into shock as Kyle filled them in via Kylegram.

"Pop, I forgot all about this, but when I gave my oath saying the rest of the tribe were my bros, it made us a Clan. Kyle says the Vulcan Council put Cory in charge, and now we ... uhh ... "

Aaron saw the stress on Justy's face, and walked behind him, putting his arms around the boy's chest. "Go ahead Justy, we are all in this together."

Justy shivered as he said in a small voice "Grandpa Sarek told Cory that we have to make sure everyone who did that stuff to Jeffy and Sammy is properly punished to the satisfaction of Vulcan law."

Josh looked at the suddenly sober faces of everyone in the room. "Guys, in the last week you have proved that when all of you work together things are done right. Cory has already told me that I'm basically out of this as far as the meeting, but if you need help afterwards, as long as Cory approves, I'll do what I can. He is your Clan leader, so on Clan business his final word is law."

Cory spoke up from the forgotten viewscreen. "Thanks Uncle Josh, you explained it better than I could. In reality there is one person I still have to answer to, that's Sarek. Our exact legal status is unique, we are considered a sub-clan of Sarek and were granted that status due to all of us having Earth citizenship. Justy, Jamie and Jacob are what we would call 'associate members' of the Clan; since they are Sarek's family that takes precedence. All three of them are considered liaisons between the main family and my Clan, and according to Sarek have normal rights in both. I heard the worry in your voice, Justy; you can relax some. All of us here have been doing research all afternoon; I verified our conclusions with Sarek and all but one of the men involved will be handed over to John. The last one's fate will be determined today. Uncle Josh, I'll appreciate any help you can give the guys; please try to keep it the family though."

Josh nodded at the screen. "Will do, Cory. I'll probably set the rest of the guys loose

giving John local assistance while I back these guys up."

"Thanks, that'll work. How much longer do you think it'll take for Brillo-head to get there?"

Josh looked at the camera monitor, and glimpsed a Tarheel Blue Mercedes M-Class convertible tearing up the driveway. "He just flew in, as soon as the boys recover from riding with him they will be in!"

Twenty seconds later, Rusty, Robbie and Johnny scrambled into the office and pounced Aaron.

"Hey Unca Airhead!" Johnny exclaimed joyfully.

Aaron giggled at his nephew. "You been listening to your Daddy again, kiddo? When you go home tell him I said he's goin' swimmin', okay?"

"O'tay, Unca' Aaron!" Johnny giggled as he snuggled up to Aaron.

Josh shook his head as he tried to resist laughing. "They're all yours, Cory! Tell your Mom that we're gonna call her from the bedroom terminal."

"Okay, thanks again Uncle Josh."

As Josh closed the door, he heard Cory say, "Okay guys, gather around, we've got work to do..."

\* \* \*

#### Short Residence:

Cory watched as the Orlando crew gathered around the video pickup. He took one last look around the group sitting with him, ensuring everyone was still there. *'Here we go, I hope I don't screw this up,'* Cory thought to himself before beginning.

"This opens the meeting of the Clan Short of the family of Sarek. Our first order of business shall be introduction and approval of new members, followed by assignment of duties to bring to justice those responsible for the wrongs done to Jeffy and Sammy. Any other business will be handled after that is completed."

Cory made the introductions of everyone on both ends, then began. "We have five new members of the group: Alec and Travis Saiz, brothers of Kelly; Gabe Michaels, boyfriend of Travis; Ricky Williamson, brother of Gabe; and Zac Hanson, boyfriend of Mark. All of you are aware of what it means to join our family, are you willing to live under our rules? This is forever, guys; no matter what happens once you say yes, you are one of us for life."

Cory looked at Alec first. "I accept," Alec answered. As Cory looked around, the rest of the boys answered the same, until he finally got to Ricky.

"Does that mean ALL of you are gonna be my big brothers?" Ricky asked in awe.

Cory smiled. "Yes little buddy, ALL of us."

"YEAH! AWESOME!" Ricky exclaimed.

Cory giggled. "Does that mean yes, Ricky?"

Ricky bounced up and gave Cory a hug. "Uh-huh! This is the BESTEST day EVER!"

Cory returned the hug, then passed Ricky back to Gabe. "One more to go; Zac, has anyone explained to you what it means to be one of us?"

Zac nodded his head. "You might say that they have; the only thing thats talked about more over here is Mark and I's first day meeting each other! I accept, and just so you know, Aaron seems to think you and Sean walk on water!"

Both Cory and Sean blushed. "I don't know about that!" Cory stuttered, then he regained



some composure and continued. "Everyone has accepted the nominations, does anyone have a reason they should not join us?" Cory scanned everyone's faces, both locally and over the vidlink. Seeing no signs of doubt, he announced "That makes it official, all of you are approved! Welcome to the family!"

A cheer erupted on both sides of the link. Once everyone had settled down, Cory continued. "I really hate to do this, but I have to review what happened to Jeffy and Sammy so we all have the same information." He looked over to the twins, "Guys, you might wanna cuddle with JJ and Adam, some of these guys might have questions for you as we are doing this."

The two boys moved over onto JJ and Adam's laps. To Cory's surprise, Andrew moved behind the four boys, scooted between them, and placed an arm over each pair.

Seeing Cory's look, Andrew announced "Hey, someones gotta support these two!"

Cory shot a silent 'thanks' to Andrew, then began describing what had happened. It took forty-five minutes to complete the briefing, after everyone's questions were answered.

"Are you guys okay?" Cory asked Jeffy and Sammy with concern.

Jeffy gave Cory a thin smile. "Yeah; it's kinda different when you are tellin' people about it who ain't gonna make fun of ya, they just wanna help. Its still kinda weird knowin' all of ya really care about us."

Cory relaxed slightly, then turned to Sean. "Babe, you worked all afternoon on figuring out what we need to do, you mind taking it from here?"

Sean gave Cory a hug and quick kiss. "Sure, hun, I got it."

The boys exchanged places, then Sean began. "I checked up on the laws, pretty much all of the people we are after will be turned over to the Federation for trial, so we need to get as much photographic evidence as we can. The one exception is Calvin Wilson; if we get the evidence I believe we will find, he is going to go in front of an Interplanetary Tribunal by request of Sarek. I have got approval for John to assist us. Kyle, could you get your Pop?"

"Sure, bro!" Kyle exclaimed as he hopped out of Tyler's lap and ran to the doorway.

A minute later, Kyle returned with John. "Have a seat, John," Sean offered.

"Thanks," John replied as he sat in the offered chair. "What do you need, Sean?"

"Well, I managed to get the okay to have you work with us to go slime-hunting. We need to figure out how to work things so we are not duplicating each others work. Calvin Wilson is ours to make retribution to, all of the rest are all yours for Federation prosecution. I figure you will have less trouble than us going the financial trace and phone records route, while we would have less trouble gathering evidence in the back alleys of the 'net.'"

John scanned the faces in the room, then the faces on the other end of the vidlink. Every one of them, youngest to oldest, had a serious, determined look that would make the Pope confess to sins he didn't commit. "Okay, that sounds fine. What are your plans?"

Sean pulled a crumpled note out of his pocket. "I figure you can deal with the FBI and find out what they know. We'll scour the Net for evidence, any names we get or identities we confirm we'll pass to you, and info you get that will make our job easier you will pass to us."

When Sean paused, Aaron interjected "We'll handle Usenet and the streets here. I'm sure there are some boys out here with info. I've got staff who can do wonders tracing posts, they do it all the time for me."

Justy jumped in. "I'm gonna get Pop to give up some more land, get ready to get some temporary barracks, John. I think it's time a bunch of boys had a home again, and we can use that as an incentive to talk."

Sean placed a couple of marks on his paper, then continued. "Great idea, Justy, go for it, if you need help with your Pop give me a yell. We are going to work the web on this end, any

pictures we can find we'll run through the Federation computers for a facial ID match. The only question I have is do you want us to hack and crash the sites as we find them, or do you need them up?"

John started to chuckle, but then he remembered Cory cracking the Simulator software. "As long as you give me a snapshot of the ENTIRE site tree before you crash it, it's all yours. How do you plan to keep them from just installing a backup?"

Sean giggled. "Well, after we fill their disk with Vulcan encrypted text files and lock their boot records so they can't reformat, every one of their DNS records is going to be permanently redirected to a special site I just set up, which displays the person's trace information for them. Oh, it logs the info too! If they still manage to restart, I'll set Cory loose on them."

John shook his head. "Remind me not to cross you! What are you going to do about the sites that don't have pics of the boys on them?"

Sean got an evil grin. "I'll decide that on a case-by-case basis. I know the difference between art and abuse, you can see it in the subject's eyes. Let's just say there are a lot of abusers who are getting ready to lose some profits."

"I bet there are! Do me a favor, before any of you start tearing up the Net, give me a couple of days to alert the FBI, that way they don't waste time trying to hassle you. Aaron, I think you can go ahead on the street kid angle, just don't let word get out as to what you are looking for. Justy, I'll give you a hand with your Pop, if he says no we'll get some of the property across the street."

John headed back to the office, and the boys discussed the details of the plans for twenty minutes before they decided everything was in place. After a group hug on both ends of the link, Cory broke the connection. Just as they signed off, Helen knocked on the door then opened it.

"Hey guys, supper is almost ready, go get cleaned up," Helen announced.

"Yes Ma'am," the boys chorused, as they headed upstairs to wash up.

\* \* \*

### **Southcrest Ranch: Orlando, Florida:**

Just as Justy was closing the call on the viewscreen, Josh walked into the room.

"Hey munchkin, what's this I hear you are giving away property now?" Josh asked with a grin.

Justy's head snapped around. "POP! I was gonna ask, really ... besides ... umm ... well ... SOMEONES gotta do something for those kids!"

Josh walked over and pulled the stiff form of his eldest son into an embrace. "That they do, son. John told me all about your idea; I'm really proud of you for just thinking about it. I also know what you guys chose as your part of the job, before you do ANYTHING that requires any of you leaving the property I need to review it. It's not that I don't trust you, but I want to make sure we have a plan in place to protect all of you. Aaron, you are in charge of the crew over here and are to report directly to Cory, okay?"

Aaron nodded his head. "Okay, Josh."

Josh turned Justy so they were face-to-face. "I think I know of a little man who has a call to make. Call your Dad, kiddo; if you can get him to agree, I'll start working on setting up a group home over by Teri's property."

Justy fell against Josh and wrapped his arms tightly around his chest. "Thanks, Pop; you're the GREATEST!"

Josh changed some settings on the viewer, then pulled Justy in front of him. "Make the call, son."

\* \* \*

**USS *Enterprise*, Main Bridge:**

Chip was just taking his station to begin the next watch rotation when Uhura turned to the Captain. "Sir, I have an incoming call for Mr. Dodds on the Vulcan Diplomatic channel from Clan Short."

Chip turned and glanced at Spock; the twin arched eyebrows on the *Enterprise's* First Officer showed he was as surprised as Chip. Chip nodded to the Captain.

"On screen, Commander," Kirk ordered with a smile.

The bridge went silent when Justy's face appeared. Justy had seen the changes Josh made, and decided to follow proper Vulcan protocol. "Good afternoon, Captain. With your permission, I have a request to make of my Father."

Kirk's smile disappeared. He knew the one thing even Justy would not joke about was Vulcan protocol, and it was obvious he was not starting now. "You have my permission, Justin."

Justy turned his head slightly towards Chip's station. "Father, as a result of the finding of some very disturbing information regarding Jeffery and Samuel's previous caregivers, our Clan has been tasked by Ambassador Sarek to seek retribution for those involved. I foresee a large number of street boys needing permanent shelter as a result of our efforts, and believe the logical location for such a shelter would be on property adjacent to the Youth Services Director's residence in Orlando. Naturally, your approval of the location is required."

Chip thought for a second, then had an idea. "Justin, I know you don't know this, but I have an option on fifty acres directly across the road from Teri's new home. Have your Pop get the property and then donate it to Youth Services for the shelter. Will that work for you?"

Justy nodded his head. "That would be acceptable. I will inform Cory to make arrangements for proper accommodations. Live long and prosper, father."

Chip returned the salutation. "Live long and prosper, my son."

After the connection closed, Kirk beat Chip to the punch when he turned to Spock. "Spock, by any chance would you be able to enlighten us as to how Justy got access to that channel, and what the hell was he talking about?"

Spock turned away from the Science console, both eyebrows still arched. "It would appear that my father has invoked an archaic statute in Vulcan law. The group of youths that you refer to as 'the tribe' have been given legal status as a Vulcan Clan. More specifically, Ensign Cory is Clan Patriarch of a sub-Clan to my own family. The information I have suggests that Justin, Jacob, and Jamie are the designated liaisons between the family and the sub-Clan. In regards to the reference to Jeffery and Samuel, due to the disturbing nature of the information it requires minimal distribution."

"Understood, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied. "Call for reliefs for yourself and Mr. Dodds; meet me in the Briefing Room on Deck Seven in ten minutes. Uhura, have Dr. McCoy join us. Mr. Chekov, you have the Conn."

\* \* \*

Cory and Sean were sitting on the back steps, watching Timmy and Ricky as they learned

to control Sean's remote control monster trucks. Gabe and Travis came through the door and joined them, giggling at the antics of the two young boys in the yard.

"You know something, Cory?" Gabe asked as he took a seat and Travis snuggled into his lap, "I think this is the first NORMAL thing I've seen today! I'm glad Timmy and Ricky are getting along, from what Dad said I think Timmy might be his first ever friend."

"I know what you mean, Gabe. Things went nuts today, we all needed to take a break."

Sean wiggled in Cory's lap, then added "You missed it though, it musta took Cor and I fifteen minutes to convince Ricky that they could really play with the trucks, and that we wouldn't be mad if they accidentally broke them! I think you are gonna have to be careful with Ricky, Gabe. He's petrified about having fun, his mother really did a job on him."

"Thanks, Sean. I'll watch him, I've had lots of practice with someone else who was hiding from trouble; a very cute someone else!" Gabe gave Trav a squeeze, which cause Trav to giggle softly.

"Watch it angel, you might start getting what you asked for!" Trav giggled. "I know Alec ain't gonna get hit for me talking, so all that whining about me bein' in a shell might backfire on ya'."

"Promise?" Gabe responded as he tickled Trav under the ribs.

Trav giggled as he grabbed Gabe's hands and held them around himself. "Yeah babe. Thanks for stickin' with my sorry butt, I love you."

Gabe leaned his head forward and nibbled on Trav's right ear. "I love you too, but I'm gonna toss you in the pool if you keep talking down about yourself. Your butt ain't sorry, in fact it's really cute!"

Sean couldn't resist the temptation. "Yeah, Gabe's right Trav, you do have a cute butt!"

Cory playfully slapped Sean's head. "Watch it, teddy bear! The only butt you are allowed to look at is mine!" He then looked over at the blushing boys next to him. "But as a disinterested third party, I would have to say that they both have cute butts!"

Sean giggled and returned the slap. "Hey babe, you better stop sightseeing too! You're gonna teach our son bad habits!"

As if on cue, Timmy and Ricky noticed the additional boys watching them, and ran up to the deck. Ricky squirmed onto Trav's lap and pulled one of Gabe's arms around himself. "Big Bro guess what! Sean's lettin' us play with his big trucks! They move by themselves and everything! They're awesome, I even gotta drive one all by myself, and I didn't break it or nuthin!"

Gabe looked over Trav's shoulder at the bubbling six-year old on Trav's lap. "I saw that lil' bro; you looked GREAT out there! Are you having fun with your new friend?"

Ricky giggled. "Yeah, but he says we get to play with toys ev'ry day. I think he's lyin'."

Trav wrapped an arm around Ricky. "He's not lying, Ricky. Welcome to the closest thing to Heaven on Earth. My old home was kinda like yours, I couldn't do nothing. You and I got a lot to learn; around here if you don't play and have fun one of the guys is gonna sit down with you and ask whats wrong."

"Wow!" Ricky said in awe. "Whaddabout if I mess up?"

Cory had been listening quietly, and decided to answer. "Ricky, it matters what you mess up. If you just goof up a little, someone will tell you what you did, why you shouldn't do it, and then ask you not to do it again. That would be something like you and Timmy leaving the trucks outside all night. If you break something on purpose or something else bad like that, then you will get in trouble. You only get punished around here AFTER you do something bad; I don't know about your new mom and dad, but our mom says the only way to learn sometimes is to get in trouble. If someone tells you it's okay to do something and you don't think so, ask another one of

us. Anyone who tries to get you to do something that will get you in trouble will have to deal with Sean and me; Timmy can tell you what that means, can't you kiddo?"

Timmy giggled. "Yeah! Daddy and Poppa are BAD when they are mad at someone! They make Gran'ma look nice!"

"I heard that, squirt!" Teri giggled as she walked out and handed the phone to Cory. She ruffled Timmy's hair as she continued "I'm your Grandma, I'm supposed to be nicer than those mean old Daddies you have!"

"Thanks for the support, Mom!" Cory groaned as he took the phone. "This is Cory."

"Hey Cor, it's Justy."

"Hey, wazzup bro? Mark and Zac driving you nuts still?"

"Naw, they're down to getting mushy about once an hour now. I thought you might wanna know I talked to Dad."

"You talked to Uncle Chip? What about?"

"I called him about getting some property to set up a shelter for the street kids and any kids we rescue, goofball! DUHHH! Get that little blond brain cell working again!"

"Hey, give me a break, I'm spending quality time with my family! What did he say?"

"Him and Pop slipped one by me. They had an option to buy fifty acres across the road from you guy's new house. Pop just signed the papers on it, it's ours to use, the only thing is it's not temporary. Dad and Pop donated it to Youth Services, Pop says that means it's Starfleet property, so even the FBI can't touch kids once we have them there!"

"Awesome! What are we going to do about buildings, though?"

"I've got that handled too! Somehow Grandpa found out about our plans, and Starfleet received a 'request' from the Vulcan Embassy to provide modular housing for the new Youth Services campus. I'll put it this way; four cargo shuttles just flew by here heading that direction."

Cory giggled. "Yeah, it's amazing how fast Starfleet moves if Ambassador Sarek makes a request! May I ask how he found out?"

It was Justy's turn to giggle. "Well, since I'm one of the liaison's between the Clan and our family, I figured it was only right to inform Grandpa of our progress! He actually said your planning ahead was impressive!"

"Great! One thing though, shouldn't it be me reporting to him? I don't want him to think I'm slacking off."

"Yeah, I thought of that too. I asked Pop, he said that for normal stuff like this either me or my brothers are supposed to handle it; Vulcan protocol assumes you have better things to do. While I was talking to Grandpa I told him this wasn't covered in my training and asked him to clarify the proper procedures; he said the last time the statute which gave us Clan status was used was 247 Vulcan years ago. The accepted practice at that time was the liaison handled status reports and requests to the host family; the Clan patriarch only made contact for official functions or to report completion of a task assigned by the family patriarch. He wishes to follow those precedents unless he sees a logical reason to change them."

"The scary part is that makes total sense, in fact I would even say it's logical. Are you guys gonna have any problems with doing that?"

"Naw, no problems here. Uncle Spock taught me that whatever station you have in Vulcan society comes with responsibilities. Besides, I'm doing something no one's done in over 200 years, how kewl is that!"

"You gotta point there! Hey, I didn't get a chance to ask earlier, how's Jacob and Jamie doin'?"

Justy began giggling again. "Pretty good, Pop is threatening to put a lock on the 'fridge to

keep them out; I think they're trying to make up for lost time! I think they are just starting to realize that Pop and Dad are serious about them becoming a full part of our family. They tried to sleep in their room for the first time last night, they made it a whole hour before they came in my room. Pop had to explain to them this morning that they were not in trouble for coming back in my room; he just wants them to try to get used to their beds. He told them not to worry, he knows it's gonna take some time."

"I'm glad they are eating! Keep it up, you are the best thing that has ever happened to those two, Justy. If you need any advice, remember we're all here for ya' bro. Don't forget Mark, he's learned some from Dan when we were back at the home. I'm sure he'll help you if you ask."

"Thanks, Cor, I'll remember that. Is Timmy doin' okay?"

"Yeppers, he's keepin' busy showing Ricky what it's like to be a kid! He kinda sat around after Johnny left, but as soon as Ricky walked in the door he's been all over the place!"

"Sweet! We got a Kylegram about what Ricky had to live like, I think Timmy is just what he needs. Oh, Jamie said to warn you; he thinks Timmy and Ricky are gonna be like you and Sean, going by what he's read from your minds and what Kyle read from theirs! Kyle can't go as deep as my bros can, so he has no idea what you two were like at that age."

Cory chuckled. "Thanks for the warning! I better go, Mom is standing here looking impatient. Talk to ya' later bro; you've done a great job!"

"Yeah, I better go too; Aaron is sitting here shooting spit wads at me. He's SOOOO dead! Later!" Justy then hung up the phone.

Cory hung up his end, then turned his head towards Teri. "Hey mom, I got some news for you! You got somewhere besides here for rescued kids; the modular buildings are going up right now on the fifty acres across the road from our new house. Oh, Uncle Josh is threatening to put a lock on the 'fridge to keep the twins out too, I guess they've decided to eat now!"

Teri shook her head as she took the phone from Cory. "You guys are amazing. Every time I turn around you slip in something new! I'm just glad you're on MY side! While I'm out here, you guys got about 45 minutes before time to come in. The rest of your tribe has started on their showers; the tutors that Dan arranged for are coming tomorrow morning so it's an early night for all of you. Helen is going to have a snack ready for all of you for after everyone's cleaned up. The Rec room is going to be your classroom, so you all have to sleep upstairs tonight." Teri turned to Gabe, Trav, and Ricky. "Gabe, Ricky; your Dad decided to pull you out of school and have you join the rest of the boys here. Until we move to Orlando, him and your Mom are going to move into Tyler's old house down the street. It's up to you, but he said if you want you can stay here with the boys while they handle getting things moved."

Gabe was the first to answer. "Thanks Teri, if you don't mind I'd really like to stay here with Trav for a while, he needs me." He couldn't help but giggle when Trav responded by wiggling in closer and purring. "See! There ain't no way I'm gonna leave my cuddly kitty alone!"

Teri smiled at the pair. "Your Dad, Mom, Dan, Helen, and I talked it over and we agree with you. Right now the best thing for both of you is time together, and we're not going to force you apart. Ricky, what do you think? Would you like to visit over her for a few days while your Mom and Dad move into their new house?"

Ricky looked down at the ground and mumbled. As Teri was about to ask him to repeat himself, Kyle came running out the door, still wet from his shower and totally nude. He rushed in front of Ricky and knelt down.

Teri was about to scold Kyle and send him in for clothes when he looked up at her. "Mom ... sorry, I mean Teri ... Ty and I have been keepin' an eye on Ricky's head today. I gotta talk to him so he ain't scared."

Teri smiled at the budding psychic kneeling in front of the tribe's newest member. "If it was urgent enough for you to forget a towel, I'll let you slide this time. One condition though; if you really want to call me 'Mom' I expect you to do it. That goes for ALL of the boys!"

Kyle jumped up and gave Teri a tight hug. "Thanks ... Mom!" He then returned to his spot in front of Ricky.

"Hey little buddy, you wanna talk about what's scaring you?" Kyle asked in a small voice.

Ricky barely shook his head 'no' as silent tears began seeping from his eyes.

Since he already knew what the problems were, Kyle pushed on. "Did you know that sometimes I pee the bed at night? You can ask Cory and Sean, one night I pee'd all over both of them and my big brother JJ! They were really cool, nobody made fun of me at all."

Ricky raised his head slightly and whispered loudly "What about evr'one else, they'll laugh."

Gabe put two and two together, and responded quickly. "Little bro, if you pee the bed and someone makes fun of you they gotta deal with ME!"

"Me too! I'll kick their butts!" Travis added.

Sean ended the discussion of who was going to do what quickly. "Hold on guys, you know the rules. You get what's left after Cory and I get done with them. Trust me, there won't be anything left; in this house nobody is allowed to make fun of someone else for something they can't control."

Ricky took a quick glance at the faces around him. Satisfied that they were serious, he muttered "But I'm 'posed to be locked in a little room at night, there ain't no little rooms with locks here. My room's gotta have padlocks on it."

Steam began shooting out of Teri's ears as she digested the young boys' statement. "Ricky, you will NEVER, EVER, have to sleep in a room like that again! Good little boys like you don't sleep in little locked rooms, they sleep in beds in big rooms. If they get scared, they climb in bed with their Mommy and Daddy or their big brother! If that's the kind of CRAP your old mother taught you, I want you to forget EVERYTHING she ever said or did! If you are not sure about something, ask one of the grownups; your old mother lied to you a lot, and within the next fifteen minutes I PROMISE all of the adults will know what she did. NONE of us will think your questions are dumb, we all know you have to re-learn what's right." Teri spun around to Cory and Sean. "Boys; I expect you to brief everyone before bed tonight. That includes EVERYONE in Orlando, have Josh fill in anyone who is not there, including your Grandma." She turned and stormed into the house, yelling for all of the adults to meet in her office before the door was even closed.

"See! I made Teri mad!" Ricky whimpered.

Without a word being said, Trav scooted to one side so that Gabe could pull Ricky up to his chest. "Hey little brother, do you still trust me?" Gabe asked softly.

"Yeah," Ricky answered with a questioning look.

Gabe kissed his cheek, then continued. "I'm not gonna lie to you, ever. Yes Teri is mad, but it ain't at you. She's mad at your old mommy, 'cause your old mommy did a bunch of bad things. You remember telling Dad you wanted to be like a real kid?"

"Yeah"

"Well, real kids don't get locked in little rooms to sleep. Real kids have their own bed; and they get to stay over at their friend's houses sometimes. Real kids mess up sometimes, real kids get in trouble sometimes, and real kids have fun most of the time. Some real kids are super lucky and they have a big brother who loves them. Do you still want to be a real kid?"

Ricky flipped around and hugged Gabe tightly. "YES! Do you still wanna be my

brother?"

Gabe kissed both of Ricky's cheeks before answering. "Yes, I still wanna be your big brother, forever. Whadda you say we go in and ask if you can stay here too, since you didn't get a chance to answer earlier."

"Yeah! Thanks Bro!"

As they started to get up, Kyle stopped them for a second. "Ricky, I wanna save you getting embarrassed later. I can kinda read minds, that's how I knew what was making you worry earlier. I know you had to sleep naked, and I wanted you to know it's okay to sleep like that here too, as long as you put on shorts if you leave the bedroom. In fact, don't be surprised if a lot of the guys are doing the same thing, okay?"

"You mean I get to sleep with ALL of you!" Ricky exclaimed.

"Yeppers, lil' buddy. Just as soon as we are all cleaned up. Let's get going, I think Helen was baking some brownies for our snack!"

After the four boys disappeared through the doorway, Cory pulled Sean and Timmy back onto his chest. "Dang, I thought Mom was gonna rip Kyle's head off for coming out here naked! I guess she thought his reason was good though, from the sounds of it Ricky's old mom is gonna have a very rough night!"

"That's an understatement!" Sean giggled.

"Daddy?" Timmy asked meekly, "Can Ricky cuddle with me t'nite? I promise we'll be good!"

Sean nuzzled his son's head. "You know he might pee in his sleep, don't you buddy?"

"Yeah Pop, it's okay. That means we getta wash each other in the bath again!"

Cory couldn't hold back his giggles as he replied "It's fine by me, son! It looks like you two are gonna be great friends!"

"Thanks, Daddy!" Timmy then hopped up and began yelling as he ran through the house. "YIPEEEEE! Ricky, GUESS WHAT! We get to cuddle together tonight!"

"Were we THAT bad?" Sean giggled as he stood up.

"Why you asking ME, goofball?" Cory replied with a grin. "Remember, I LOST my memory! DUHH! C'mon, let's grab the trucks for the boys, we better head upstairs before the tornado causes any damage!"

The two boys stopped by the office on their way through. As they walked in the door, they heard Teri on the phone.

"Thank-you, Sargent. Please note on your report that he is in Federation custody under the Safe Haven Act. Have a good night."

"Whats up, Mom?" Sean asked.

Teri looked up at her sons. "That was the officer that raided Ricky's old house earlier today. They detained her on drug charges, but it looks like false imprisonment, child abuse, neglect, and child endangerment will be added. He had noticed that the boy's bedroom was locked, and it was too clean with only a couple of toys. The laundry room, on the other hand, had two padlocks on it and a crib mattress on the floor in the corner. The room has no windows, and was the only room in the house that smelled like pee. After Ricky's statement outside, we were able to put things together; she was locking Ricky in the laundry. The bedroom was just for show to keep CPS happy; I'll bet Ricky has never even been in that room. Since Ricky made those statements in front of me and two Starfleet officers, it's considered an open and shut case."

Both boys stared at Teri in shock for about thirty seconds before either could speak.

"Mom," Sean stated, "I want everything out of that bedroom, even the carpet if you can get it. Ricky may have never used the stuff before, but it's his and he is definitely going to get to



use it now."

"We mean EVERYTHING, Mom!" Cory added. "Lights, furniture, toys, even down to the nails hanging pictures on the walls. If there's anything special done to the walls, I want them too. That room is to be stripped, and if anyone argues tell them you are under orders of the Patriarch of Clan Short. If they still argue, I'm sure a call from the Vulcan Embassy will change their mind. Ricky might not know it, but that room's contents belong to him, and he WILL have the chance to enjoy it."

"Oh shit," John muttered as he stood up and joined Teri. She was about to reply when he held up his hand. "Hold on, Teri. I hate to say it, but you were not being asked that by your son; that was an official request from a sub-Clan of the most powerful family on Vulcan. I'll take it from here, it's more in my field than yours."

John faced Cory and came to attention. "Cory, Federation Security has received your request. Arrangements have been made to provide additional space in the dwellings being constructed in Orlando for Ricky and his caregivers to reside in. Would the relocation of the articles in question to that location be suitable?"

Cory had come to attention when John did. "Commander Martin, the arrangements you suggest will be acceptable. The room is to be shared by Ricky and Timothy, ensure allowances are made for their habitation requirements."

"As you wish. Live long and prosper, Cory."

"Live long and prosper, Commander."

Once they both relaxed, John waved the boys to have a seat. "Guys, we just ironed this out today, so if you see any problems let us know. They hadn't started on the pool yet by the main house, so it wasn't too big of a deal to change it from an outdoor pool to an indoor pool. We figured that most of the time if you guys want to swim outside you are either going to be at Chip and Josh's or across the street at the Shelter. What we did was change the pool so it added a level of bedrooms above the pool. After the teachers leave tomorrow, we need to all sit down and decide who is living where, that way Teri and Helen can begin placing furniture. Besides, with all the nudists around here, you can skinny-dip all you want with an indoor pool!"

Both boys giggled at his last comment. "Thanks, John," Sean replied. "I was kinda wondering how that was gonna work. We'll prepare the guys tonight; I know the couples will want to share, but our token straight brothers will still need to decide. Did you plan a room for Andy?"

"Of course, he's one of your tribe, isn't he?" John chuckled.

"You've got a point!" Cory chuckled. "We better get going, Timmy went upstairs with Ricky and Gabe; who knows WHAT he's getting into!"

"He's definitely YOUR son!" Teri grinned. "He's acting like his parents more and more every day!"

"Thanks a lot, MOM!" both boys chorused as they headed for the door.

Cory and Sean almost collapsed in laughter when they walked up to the bedroom door. Taped to the door was a note scrawled in red marker: "No Clothes Beyond This Point!"

"Well, I guess we better not break the rules!" Sean giggled as he began stripping.

"Yeah, I don't wanna get in trouble!" Cory replied as he dropped his shorts.

Once they were both suitable disrobed, Sean opened the door and they walked in. All of the boys in the room were nude, laying in various positions on the floor watching Peter Pan on the television. Cory looked around the room, then asked "Where's Timmy?"

JJ turned on his side and answered. "Hey Cor! Timmy decided to join Trav, Gabe and Ricky in the shower! None of us felt like warning them what they were getting into when they agreed, so this should be interesting."

As if on cue, Timmy and Ricky came running out of the bathroom hand in hand, still soaking wet. They were followed by Gabe and Trav, towels in hand. "Hey you two!" Gabe ordered, "Stand still until we get you dried off!"

"You heard Gabe!" Cory said, trying to keep a straight face. "I expect two DRY little boys when we get out of the shower!" He then grabbed Sean's hand and dragged him into the bathroom. Once the door was closed, Cory released his giggles. "I see Timmy is already corrupting Ricky; those two are gonna be a handful!"

"If that's corruption, Timmy can keep it up!" Sean replied. "After what that boy has lived through, he deserves some silly time."

The two boys climbed into the shower, and after some very thorough washing of each other's bodies, they dried off and returned to the bedroom.

They walked out to find Helen setting a plate of brownies on the desk, Carrie having just sat down a pitcher of milk and a pile of plastic cups.

"Kelly, please call me in the office when you guys are done with these. There's no reason for any of you to get dressed just to bring the leftovers down."

"Sure Mom, thanks!" Kelly replied.

As they turned to leave the room, Carrie turned back around and scanned the boys sitting comfortably with each other. She smiled as she said "Ever since we realized that you were gay, Gabe, I've went to sleep worrying if you were going to be okay. Tonight I'm going to sleep in peace for the first time in a long time; I don't have to worry because I know you are with a group of boys who understand and will look out for you. Thank you, each and every one of you; you are truly very special boys, and I know that both of my sons are in good hands." She came back in the room and kissed Gabe and Ricky on their foreheads. "Pleasant dreams, guys."

Once they had left, the boys attacked the brownies, then sat down as Sean performed his duties as Clan historian, filling in the new members on everyone's history and updating them on the information about Ricky. The mood in the room brightened when Cory took over and discussed the arrangements being made in Orlando for the boys' lodging. He saved the arrangements they had made for Ricky for last.

Cory picked up Ricky and sat him on his lap. "Ricky, did you ever get to go in your bedroom at your old house?"

Ricky snuggled into Cory's chest. "I got to once, when some lady came over to ask my old mommy if I was okay. After the lady left, my old mommy locked it up again."

"Did you like the stuff that was in there?"

"Yeah, but I couldn't touch nuthin. She said I'd break it."

"I thought so. You know, even though she never let you have it, all of that stuff is yours. I talked to John, he's gonna get all of it for you, and put it in you and Timmy's bedroom in the new house in Orlando. You and Timmy can touch, play with, and do whatever with it and not get in any trouble. Is that okay with you?"

"Really! Wow, thanks Cory!" Ricky responded as he gave Cory a big hug. Suddenly, he realized what Cory had said. He leaned back and gave Cory a curious look. "You said TIMMY's and mine! Are you gonna let Timmy visit me?"

"I'm gonna do even better. If its okay with you, Timmy and you get to share the bedroom, both of you will live there."

Ricky looked over at Timmy, the huge grin on Timmy's face answered any questions he might have had. "AWESOME! Thanks Cory!" He bounced off of Cory's lap and ran to Timmy. "We get to share a REAL bedroom! Your Daddy is AWESOME!"

Cory watched as the two boys embraced in celebration. *'I hope Jacob and Jamie are*

*right.*' he thought. *'Both of them deserve to find what Sean and I have.'*

After Helen left with the empty plate and pitcher, the boys cycled through the restroom one last time before bed. Cory and Sean were the last ones out. As they stood at the doorway looking over the expanse of boys laying sideways on the bed, Sean commented "You know, I really don't know how we became responsible for these guys, but I'd do it all again just to see this."

"I agree, Babe," Cory replied. "No matter how bad things get, we always have them to count on. Let's hit it, it looks like Timmy saved us a spot."

Austin had decided to stay over in case he was needed in a hurry, and accompanied Teri in her nightly rounds. He had to muffle his laughter when they reached the boy's bedroom and saw the sign on the door. "Should I ask, or do I even want to know?" he chuckled.

Teri smiled. "They are definitely an unique collection of boys. I kind of expected this when I saw JJ checking the setting on the thermostat, prepare yourself to see something that no artist could ever capture; the innocence and love of youth."

They quietly stepped in the room, and looked over the boys on the bed, their innocence accentuated by the moonlight streaming through the windows. Starting at the headboard, Alec, Kelly, and Andy had drifted into a three-way cuddle in their sleep; arms and legs tangled with each other. Next in line were JJ and Adam, Adam laying over JJ's chest. Tyler and Kyle were next, holding each other tightly. Teri was pleasantly surprised to see the next pair; Ricky was laying almost on top of Timmy, holding him like he was never going to let him go. Cory and Sean were next, Cory holding Sean protectively. Next in line was Gabe holding Travis, and the line was completed by the twins; Sammy and Jeffy in their normal tangle.

They stood for about ten minutes, just watching the boys, then quietly left the room. "No matter how bad my day has been, that makes it all worth it," Teri said with a smile.

"I agree," Austin replied as they separated and headed to bed.

## Chapter 28

John stuck his head through the doorway. "Up and at'm boys, before I drag a hose up here and water y'all down!" He managed to get the door closed in time to deflect the pillows that were thrown at him.

Timmy and Ricky were the first out of the bed, giggling in stereo "I gotta PEE!" as they ran into the bathroom.

As all the couples engaged in their ritual morning tonsil hockey, Andrew, Alec, and Kelly untangled themselves and scooted to the edge of the bed. Alec looked around at the boys expressing their love to each other, even the twins were in a brotherly cuddle. "Dang, I'm feeling left out!" he quipped.

"Don't look at me!" Kelly giggled. "That would be taking brotherly love a little too far!"

Andrew got an evil grin on his face. "What the heck, it's good practice!" he announced as he twisted around and grabbed Alec, locking lips before Alec had a chance to respond.

Kelly watched in amazement as at first Alec started to push Andrew away, then suddenly pulled the little redhead on top of him as he laid back and began returning the kiss. In no time the two boys were fully involved in their first kiss.

Kelly's concentration was broken by Timmy and Ricky joining him. "Unca' Kelly, why's Unca' Alec and Unca' Andy kissin'?" Timmy asked as he pulled on Kelly's arm.

Kelly turned to the two little boys looking expectantly at him. "Don't worry guys; your Uncle Alec was just feelin' left out, so Uncle Andy decided to help him." Kelly looked over at where the boys had been sleeping, "Hey, it looks like someone had a dry night last night. Way to go, Ricky!"

Ricky beamed at the praise, and placed his arm around Timmy. "I had my bestest friend ever cuddled with me, so I told myself before we went to sleep not to pee on him, and it worked!"

Kelly smiled at the boys. "I guess that means that from now on you gotta sleep together. Can you two handle that?"

Both boys giggled as they scooted onto Kelly's lap. "Unca' Kelly, why is ev'ryone else kissin'?" Timmy asked.

Kelly giggled. "They are just showin' each other that they love their partner."

Timmy broke into a huge grin. "Oh, okay! I better get started then!"

Kelly could feel his heart melting as, in slow motion, Timmy and Ricky turned toward each other and shyly began their first kiss. He wrapped his arms around the boys and lovingly kissed the tops of their heads. "God bless you guys, I hope you will always be there for each other," Kelly whispered.

Cory giggled as he tapped Kelly on the shoulder. "Hey, what's this? I leave you alone with our son for five minutes, and you are already giving him pointers on picking up cuties?"

Kelly grinned. "Hey, I had nothing to do with it, he's just taking after his Daddy! Look, he even zones out while kissing just like you!"

"Bite me, Kelly!" Cory chuckled. "By the way, is your bro having fun?"

Two groans escaped from Alec and Andrew as Kelly turned his head. As Kelly giggled at the noise, he replied "It sure sounds like it! I'll bet they both need showers now too!"

Timmy and Ricky broke their kiss, and began wiggling around on Kelly's lap trying to see what the older boys were talking about. As they wiggled back and forth for position, Kelly suddenly got a surprised look on his face. "OH SH.....!" Kelly exclaimed.

Cory turned his head back just in time to see the tears in Kelly's eyes before Kelly covered his face in shame. Cory was about to ask what was wrong when a comment from Timmy caught his attention.

"Wow! Those are spermies! Hey Ricky, when we get big we'll make those. Unca' Kelly said so!" Timmy announced in an awed voice.

Kelly sobbed loudly as he laid backwards onto the bed. Cory was frozen with shock as he watched his son and Ricky inspecting the droplets on their sides. Cory's trance was finally broken when Kelly sobbed again after the boys reached down and innocently began inspecting the final drops leaking from Kelly's deflating member.

Now that his brain had re-engaged, Cory quickly thought of a way to start to diffuse the situation. "Timmy, Ricky? I think your Uncle Alec and Uncle Andy need some help getting washed up again. Why don't you two help them find the shower and make sure they get clean?"

Cory's distraction worked, as both boys immediately jumped up and began dragging Alec and Andy to the bathroom; both of them excited to have been put in charge of a bigger kid.

Cory looked at the rest of the boys. "All of you get ready, Kelly and I need some time here. Anyone needing the bathroom use the hall one, tell Helen that Kel and I will be a little behind for breakfast, but do NOT tell her what happened. Ty, before you get dressed, make sure everyone in the shower understands that nothing about what happened here is to be discussed downstairs. Make SURE Timmy and Ricky understand, okay?"

"Sure Bro!" Tyler exclaimed as he rushed to the bathroom carrying his clothes.

The rest of the boys dressed and evacuated the room in record time, leaving Cory in the room alone holding a sobbing Kelly.

"I'm sorry!" Kelly sobbed into Cory's chest. "I'm such a piece of trash, look what I did on two innocent boys! They were moving around, and it just happened; I couldn't stop it. There's gotta be something wrong with me. Let go of me, I'm getting outta here before I hurt anyone else!"

Cory tightened his grip on the now-struggling boy before responding. "Shhh, settle down Kel. You have not hurt anyone, and there is nothing wrong with you. Remember swearing to stick together no matter what? This is included, especially since you did nothing wrong. I'm not gonna let you go anywhere, bro."

Kelly froze in Cory's arms. "Whadda you mean I did nothing wrong? Look what I did all over your SON!"

"Relax, bro. I know exactly what you did. If you'll listen I'll tell you. I woke up in the middle of the night to take a leak, and saw you cuddled up tight against your new brother, Alec. No matter who you are, skin to skin contact like that is gonna make you horny. Add to that the fact you had two very active little boys suddenly start squirming around on your lap, probably making accidental contact with an already sensitive part of your body. When I was your age it didn't take long before I went off, so I'm gonna guess you are like I was. Put it all together, and it was a

normal thing you had no control over. The only effect it had on Timmy was to satisfy his curiosity about sperm. I'll bet he's using this to get Ricky caught up on the facts of life in a gay family while they are supervising the showers."

Kelly pulled himself tight against Cory. "Yeah, but the rest of the guys probably think I'm a monster now."

"I doubt it, bro. Just in case, we'll all sit down and talk after breakfast. It'll only take a minute to explain what happened. I've got your back, bro, and no one is gonna mess with me. Let's get dressed before all of your Mom's great food is all gone."

They both dressed, and as they were preparing to leave the room the four boys came out of the bathroom. Alec walked over to Kelly and pulled him into a tight loving hug.

"Hey little bro, don't worry about what happened," Alec whispered in Kelly's ear. "It could have been any one of us, it's not your fault."

"Thanks bro," Kelly replied as he snuggled Alec. They broke their hug after one last squeeze, then the six boys headed downstairs.

As the boys were finishing their breakfast, Cory stood up and walked to the head of the table. "Listen up! After you take care of your dishes, go up to the bedroom for a quick meeting before we start school."

"Is there a problem, Cory?" Dan asked. "I noticed a lot of the group was quieter than normal."

"There's nothing to worry about, Dan," Cory replied. "We just gotta clear the air about a couple things so all the guys can pay attention today."

Dan looked over at Teri for help. "Don't look at me!" she exclaimed. "I'm outranked in my own family by those two teen terrors I call sons. Besides, I'm the last one to argue about anything Cory or Sean thinks these boys need; look at the things they have already achieved."

The boys finished cleaning up and headed upstairs. Once they were all there except Sean and Cory, Ty went to the bathroom door and knocked on it.

"Thanks lil' bro," Sean said as him and Cory came out of the bathroom.

Sean stood in front of the group as Cory took a seat. "Cory's filled me in about what happened and why. I know what some of you think, especially after what you went through, but it was not what it looked like. Between Kelly not being used to sleeping nude with other people and the accidental contact when Timmy and Ricky started wiggling around on his lap, Kel's body reacted without warning. It could'a happened to any of us, and knowing how our son can't sit still unless he's asleep it's probably gonna happen again."

Before Sean could react, Timmy launched himself from the bed, immediately followed by Ricky. "PAPPA! Stop pickin' on me!" Timmy giggled as he sat on Sean's chest, Ricky perched directly behind him.

Sean giggled as he pulled both boys into a hug. "I wasn't pickin' on you, squirt; you're my favorite little tornado. Now take your friend and sit with your Daddy."

Once he was able to regain his feet, Sean continued. "I think that just proved my point! Kel, I was told that you threatened to run away because you thought you were a monster. I'm going to say this now; all of you are our brothers, and if any of you run away, Cor and I will find you and drag you back. We have all promised to stand by each other no matter what, and I can tell you Cory and I both take that promise very seriously."

Kelly stood up and moved over with Sean. "Thanks Sean. I still feel lousy about doing that on the boys, but it helps knowing you guys don't hate me for something I didn't know was gonna happen."

Travis joined the two boys. "Big bro, there's something you should know," Trav started

shyly. "We kinda had a meeting in the hall when we left the room. None of us ever hated you, in fact we were all worried about you freaking out. You took a chance on me without even really knowing me and fought to be my brother; you are gonna have to do a lot more than squirt accidentally for me to even get mad at you. Besides, I need you to help me figure out why Alec was makin' out with Andy!"

The last comment broke Kelly's mood. Once he stopped giggling, Kelly put his arm over Trav's shoulder. "Little bro, I doubt even Mr. Spock could explain that one!"

Cory was holding his stomach from laughing so hard. "You're killing me! C'mon, we need to get downstairs guys; we can sort THAT out later."

The giggling group of boys stampeded down the stairs and into the Rec room. They skidded to a stop when they entered the room; the furniture was moved against the walls and a table and chairs were being set up in the center of the room. As the boys watched, laptops were placed on the table at each seat.

"Which one of you is Cory?" one of the men asked.

Cory stepped forward. "That's me." He looked at the man curiously; he appeared to be about twenty-five, almost certainly was of Indian heritage, and had smooth black hair reaching most of the way down his back. 'Hmmm ... he's kinda cute!' Cory thought as he studied the well-defined body; obvious even through the loose clothes.

The man smiled at the obvious attention Cory was paying to him. "Dan told me to get your help. I'm Derek Tecumseh; I'll give the younger kids a break and allow you to call me Mr. T in class. I need you to give me a hand until I learn everyones names, Cory. Would you please help me with seating; I've been led to understand that some members of your group will function better if they are seated with their significant others, please ensure those pairings are made and arrange seating so that similar academic levels are together."

"Yes sir," Cory responded. He turned and started directing the other boys to their seats, finishing with Alec, Andy and Kelly. To everyone's surprise, Cory placed Alec and Andy together and put Kelly on the other side of Sean from him.

"Why am I sitting with you guys instead of with Andy?" Kelly asked as Cory was taking his seat. "Andy and I are the same age, and you guys are lots smarter than me. Alec is two whole years older than we are!"

Cory leaned over and smiled. "Kel, you've had some hard times, but I've noticed that you are smarter than you will admit. Think of it as a challenge; now you gotta keep up with us. I know you can do it, are you willing to accept the challenge?"

Kelly looked at Cory in shock. "I know you, Cory; I don't really have a choice, do I? You still didn't explain Alec and Andy being together."

Cory shook his head in wonder. "That's one of the things I like about you, Kel; if you really want something you don't give up. Andy has been in advanced classes in school and still aced them. Besides, I have a sneaky suspicion the two of them need the contact with each other right now while they sort out their emotions."

Before Kelly could respond, Derek got their attention. "Okay boys, let's get started. I'm going to come around the table and talk to each of you so I can get to know you. While I'm doing that, the rest of you may talk quietly amongst yourselves. Once I'm finished, we will be taking skills tests for the rest of the morning."

Later that morning, Derek took Cory aside as the rest of the boys filed out for lunch. "Cory, from what I have seen so far, almost all of your choices for the boys academic levels were correct. I will be able to tell further once I score this mornings tests. I do question your choice of placing Kelly with yourself and Sean; the pair of you appear to be well above your grade levels,

while he seems to be struggling at the level I am testing the three of you at."

Cory smiled as he replied. "Mr. T, Kelly's never been pushed to achieve what he is capable of. He can do the work, but needs the basics to work with. Trust me, sometime soon you will see that he's where he belongs."

"That's good enough for me. I expect you to work with him to bring him up to your level, understand?"

"Yes sir, I'm planning on it."

They headed into the dining room where Helen had set out a lunch of fish sandwiches and fries. As Cory made his way to his seat, Timmy bounced up and hugged him. "Daddy! Did you have games to play too? Ricky and I did, he beat me once and I beat him once."

"Sounds like you guys are getting to have fun!" Cory chuckled as he picked up his son. "We gotta take a bunch of nasty old tests, I guess that means you guys are somethin' special."

Timmy giggled as he snuggled with Cory. "You're silly, Daddy. I'll tell Mr. T to give ya' some games, okay?"

"Sure thing, kiddo," Cory giggled as he kissed Timmy's head and placed him in his chair.

Derek had trouble concentrating on eating as he watched the boys interact over their meal. Dan had told him to expect the boys to be unusual, but everything he had seen so far was completely normal. In fact, he was amused as the boys switched back and forth between comparing their tests and taking good natured verbal jabs at each other. He was about to lean over and tell Dan there was nothing unusual about them when Kyle stood up and whistled.

"QUIET!" Kyle commanded. "Aaron is relaying through Jamie; he has a report to make to Cory," Kyle concentrated for a minute, then smiled as he announced "The shelter in Orlando is done, Aaron says he needs Mom to get some staff down there ASAP; as soon as it is staffed Mark and Zac are going fishing."

Cory looked at his mom. "What kind of time frame can I expect for staffing, Mom?"

Teri thought for a second. "Cory, you'll have your staff by Friday. You can set the Orlando crew loose Saturday; I'll head down there to give a hand since, knowing them, the staff is going to get swamped. Dan and Austin, I'll need you with me."

Cory nodded his head. "Kyle, tell Aaron to be in the study in five minutes; I'll call him to go over the attack plan."

Kyle nodded and then concentrated again. A few seconds later, he looked up. "Justy is home sick today; he's letting Aaron know and said he will be there too in case we need anything from the family."

Cory smiled as he replied "Yeah, I bet he's sick! More like he knew things were about ready and he wanted to be around to get it rolling. C'mon Sean, we got work to do. Derek, sorry but you are going to lose your classroom for about a half hour. The Rec room is off limits until we come back out." With that, Cory and Sean walked out of the room.

Derek retrieved his jaw from the tabletop and turned to Teri. "Teri, excuse me if I'm out of place, but don't you think you should correct those boy's priorities? Admittedly both of those boys were perfect students this morning, but I have trouble with students kicking me out of a classroom."

"You're fine, Derek. Actually, I should have warned you this would happen. The conversation you just witnessed wasn't boys talking with friends; it was an official report to a Vulcan Clan Patriarch, namely Cory. That terminal on the east wall of the room is his private terminal, and right now he is taking care of Clan business on it. When it comes to that, nobody here can override him, not even me; and I'm not about to call Ambassador Sarek because the boys missed a little school."



Derek nodded his head. "I believe I understand. By any chance do you have another terminal I may borrow?"

Teri looked at Derek curiously as she replied. "Yes, there's one in my office, why?"

Derek just smiled. "In good time. Leave it at the fact I was born and raised in Florida."

Fifteen minutes later, Derek walked out of the office and immediately entered the Rec room.

Cory turned to see who had violated his order to stay out, and was surprised to see Derek. From the look on Derek's face, Cory figured it was important, so he didn't immediately go off. "Aaron, Justy; hold on a minute. We have company."

Derek came to attention before speaking. "Cory, I understand you are Clan Patriarch. I have deduced that a segment of your Clan is preparing to do some operations in the Orlando area. My father is Tribal Chief of our tribe in Florida, and has authorized me to investigate the possibility of offering our assistance. Would you be open to briefing me on the situation?"

Cory thought for a second before responding. "Actually, I would appreciate the help, but first I need to verify I can do it. Please have a seat, this shouldn't take long." As Derek sat down, Cory turned back to the screen. "Justy, call Ambassador Sarek and verify the rulings on accepting assistance from a Terran Indian tribe."

"I'm on it, Cory!" Justy replied.

A few minutes later, Justy reappeared on the screen. "Grandpa said to tell you that he commends you for your efforts to extend Vulcan customs to Terran culture. I'll give you the version with small words since you're blond; basically as of now, if a Terran Indian tribe offers assistance it is to be handled the same way as if a Vulcan Clan was to offer assistance. If the assistance will logically increase the chances of completing the mission, then it is to be accepted. The other side of this is that if a tribe needs help and we can provide it we are expected to do so."

"Thanks Justy, that's what I thought. By the way, you're goin' swimming for that blond crack, isn't he big bro?"

Aaron giggled as he shot an evil grin at Justy. "You better believe it, little brother. Since you're up there, I'll handle it for you."

Cory grinned. "Thanks bro. Go ahead and get everything in place like we've discussed; I'm going to hold a briefing here and will get back with you as soon as I know if and what assistance we will get. Kyle will let y'all know when we know something."

"Sounds good, Cory," Aaron replied. After both ends cleared up a couple of loose ends, they signed off.

Cory smiled as he and Sean stood up and moved away from the terminal. "Derek, it looks like you are about to hear some things you are gonna wish you never heard."

\* \* \*

Derek looked at the group of boys surrounding him with a combined look of shock and admiration. Sean had not only told him about the problem in Orlando, but had called all of the boys into the room and had each of them fill Derek in on their history. To finish off, Sean had filled Derek in on the histories of the Orlando crew.

"Boys," Derek said as he scanned the room, "as some of you know, the most important thing to an Indian is their honor amongst their tribe. A tribe is a group of families with a common heritage who work together to protect themselves from injury or oppression from others. You have chosen to create a tribe of your own, and are even now working to protect those who have suffered the same injustices as yourselves. For that you have great honor, not only amongst yourselves but

amongst my tribe; I would venture to say Vulcan as well. I shall recommend to my father that what resources the tribe has be made available to assist you."

Sean had been thinking as Derek talked, and had came up with an idea. "Hey Ty; go get Mom real quick, I need to see what she thinks about something."

"Okay, bro!" Ty said as he hopped up and ran out. A few seconds later he returned, dragging Teri behind him. "Here ya' go, I found her!" Ty giggled as he let go and returned to his seat.

Sean unsuccessfully tried to hide his giggles as he looked at Teri. "Sorry, mom, I forgot that my little bro takes me literally! I need to ask you something; have you started staffing Orlando yet?"

"Not yet; what kind of scheme are you brewing up this time, Sean?" Teri replied, a small grin on her face.

"MOM! Remember me, I'm your innocent son!" Sean giggled.

"The only Saint in this family is Mike; so spill it kiddo!"

"Welllllll ... I was thinking, and since even today Indians have troubles getting into jobs that really pay them what they are worth, and we have a bunch of open jobs right in the area that Derek is from, plus the fact his tribe is gonna help us ..."

Teri placed a hand over Sean's mouth to stop him. "Sean, I think I understand why; but please tell me what the question is!"

Sean hesitated for a second before blurting out "Mom, can Derek's tribe fill the staff in Orlando?"

Teri thought it over for a minute. "There are a few positions that require certain types of schooling, those will matter on if anyone is trained in the field. I think that I can sub those out until someone is trained. Since I know how that overactive little brain of yours works, son, I'm guessing you want ALL of the staff to be from Derek's tribe." She then turned to Derek. "I'm sure he never asked you first; what do you think?"

Derek grinned as he replied "I think you better make sure there's a large pediatric clinic building; I have a few cousins who are going to be more than willing to move their practices to a common location. I'm sure that ninety percent of your openings can be filled tomorrow, just give me the word. You have some impressive young men for sons; it would be an honor to assist them in this way."

Teri couldn't help but giggle as the room was blasted by the boy's cheers. "That settles it then," she announced as she shook Derek's hand. "I'll call Josh and verify how many buildings we need to staff, then I'll give you the list after class finishes today - assuming these goofballs let you hold one!"

Derek chuckled as Teri left the room. "Let me call my father. Sean, could you please get everyone ready while Cory and I take care of this call?"

"Sure thing, Mr. T," Sean replied.

Derek shook his head as Cory grabbed Sean for a quick kiss before coming over to the terminal. '*Young love, that's so beautiful,*' he thought to himself.

Cory was still giggling as he re-adjusted the viewscreen's settings before turning it over to Derek. Once the call went through, Derek was shocked to have it answered directly by his father. "Good afternoon, Father."

"Good afternoon, Derek. Considering you are calling on a Vulcan Diplomatic channel, can I correctly assume you have came to a decision on your idea to help those boys?"

Derek shot a glance at Cory, who was standing out of the viewer's range with a big grin on his face. "Yes I have. Basically the boys have been tasked with seeking retribution on a group

which, to put it politely, defiled two of their members. Their current plans include reducing the street kid population in the area drastically; by giving those same kids a place to live. I have heard the histories of each of these boys first hand; most of them have been through things no child should even know about, yet working together they are all slowly healing each others wounds."

"I would prefer to know how these youths came to be so respected as a group before I decide."

Just as Derek was formulating his response, Sean tapped him on the shoulder. "Mr. T, that's more my job."

Derek nodded his head. "Father, this young man next to me is Sean Short. He is more qualified than I to answer your questions."

Sean took Derek's place in front of the pickup. "Good afternoon, Chief Tecumseh; I'm Sean Short, Clan Historian. How may I help you?"

Sean spent ten minutes answering questions. While Sean was busy, Derek got the younger boys started on their next assignments. He had not even noticed Cory was missing until he saw Cory re-enter the room wearing his suit.

Cory nodded at Derek, then went to join Sean. Derek was amazed at the way Cory was carrying himself; like a perfect statesman with not even a hair out of place.

Chief Tecumseh had just thanked Sean for his help when Cory walked up to Sean and stood at his side. The Chief took one look at the new arrival and quickly came to his feet.

Sean thought fast. He also stood up, and then began official introductions. "Chief Tecumseh, I give you Cory Short, Patriarch of Clan Short of the House of Sarek." Sean then left the final talks to Cory.

"Chief Tecumseh, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Please, be seated. It is my hope that we may look forward to a long and fruitful partnership. Was Sean able to satisfactorily answer your concerns?"

"Yes he was, Cory. I must say that it distresses me to hear of the abuse your Clan members have survived, but it lightens my heart to hear that you are all working together to overcome the past. I am unsure of what assistance we may be, but I pledge to help however we can."

"Thank you Chief; I have a proposal which I think would be beneficial to your Tribe as well as my Clan. We have just assembled a Youth Shelter on the outskirts of Orlando, near the Southcrest Ranch. It is on Federation property and is overseen by the Federation Youth Services Bureau. Your son has noted that you have many tribal members who hold the qualifications to fill essential positions in the staff, and I would like to propose that your people fill all of the positions. I have conferred with Ambassador Sarek, and he has stated that your Tribe is to be given equal status to a Vulcan Clan due to the offer to work with us. As you have pledged to help us, I in return pledge to help you however we can."

Chief Tecumseh looked at Cory for a couple of seconds before responding. "Cory, I see in you a wisdom well beyond your years. I fully accept your offer and look forward to meeting personally to make our treaty official."

Cory allowed himself to smile as he responded. "As do I; I believe one of our Uncles would term the merging of our two treaty ceremonies 'most interesting'. How much time do you need to prepare for the ceremony?"

"I will have everything ready within an hour, all that will remain is travel arrangements once a suitable location is determined."

Cory thought for a minute then replied "I believe the most logical place would be a section of land which was once your forefathers and has just been opened for our use. That would

be the compound of the new shelter. Will that be acceptable?"

The Chief considered the proposal for a minute before responding. "Yes, I do believe that will be perfect. When would you like to meet?"

Sean slipped a piece of paper in front of Cory. Cory looked down at it before responding. "It appears Sean has been making the travel plans already. Would seven pm Orlando time tonight be acceptable?"

"Yes it would," Chief Tecumseh answered in surprise. "You'll have to tell me how he managed that."

Sean giggled as he yelled out "Two words Chief: Diplomatic Mission!"

The Chief allowed himself to laugh as he responded "I can see that Sean don't mess around! I look forward to meeting you, I have a feeling that life is about to get very interesting!"

"I'm going to bring a few of the guys with me; and one of our members there in Orlando is going to join us. That will be Mark, I'm going to make him your contact for any everyday issues that come up. Would you be open to Derek serving as a contact here?"

"I was just about to suggest that, Cory. I do insist you accept our hospitality while you are visiting; I feel that due to the length of the ceremonies it would be wrong for you to have to travel back in the evening."

"Thank you, I accept your offer. I think Derek is trying to give me a hint; he's waving a book in the air. I really am looking forward to meeting you in person. Live Long and Prosper, Chief Tecumseh."

"Live Long and Prosper, Cory. Oh, and tell Derek I said to quit being a spoilsport!"

The Chief signed off before anyone could respond. Cory was giggling as he removed his suit jacket and tie, placing them on a hanger he had brought back with him. "You hear that, Derek? Your Dad says you need to quit being a spoilsport!"

Derek grinned. "Yes, I heard. He can say that, he's not in a CLASSROOM full of teens and kids who SHOULD be studying! Get in your seats, all of you have two more tests to take yet today."

\* \* \*

Kelly was the last one out of the classroom, and he walked slowly to the dining room to join the rest of the boys. Sean met him as he walked in. "How'd you do, Kel?"

"Man, I don't know how you and Cory flew through that stuff - my head hurts from thinking!"

Sean put his arm over Kelly's shoulder and guided him to the table. "Don't worry, bro. It gets easier, you're just not used to being taught like you should'a been. The home tried to do Cory like juvi was doing you; Mom and Dan tore them a new butthole making sure Cory didn't lose out on the good classes."

Kelly giggled as he put an arm around Sean's waist and gave him a squeeze. "So THAT'S why I never got to pick my own schedule! All the classes I thought sounded interesting I was told I wasn't eligible for - I thought it was my grades."

Sean shook his head. "Nope, if they were like the home it was the fees. They didn't wanna pay the money for the better classes books and stuff, so they tell the school which classes they'll allow. It kinda bites, but there's nuthin you could'a done about it."

The conversation halted as both boys joined the rest of the tribe in devouring the plates of peanut butter cookies on the table. Once they were gone, Cory gave a screeching whistle.

"Hey guys, we need to figure out who's goin' to Orlando tonight!" Cory announced after

he had everyone's attention. "I know I gotta go, who else do y'all think should be there?"

Each of the boys looked around the room. Adam was the first to respond. "Cor, I think Sean should be with ya'; you guys seem to work better together. If my super-cute boyfriend don't mind stayin' here, I think we can keep it under control for ya'."

JJ leaned over and gave Adam a quick kiss. "Flattery will get you everywhere, my silver headed angel. Keep it up and you'll have to help me study anatomy for health class!"

"Promise?" Adam replied with a knowing grin.

JJ just smiled as a reply, and then snuggled into Adam's arms.

Sean was giggling at their antics as he replied "You're right about that bro, we do kinda feed off'a each other when we are busy. I think Jeffy and Sammy should join us; this is you two's project even more than the rest of us."

The twins conferred silently for a minute before Jeffy replied for them. "Yeah, I guess Chief Tecumseh is gonna want to meet us. Since our big bro is stayin' here, can Kel come along?"

As Sean was about to reply, Teri walked into the room. "That sounds like a good idea, Jeffy. Timmy, Doc Austin said you can invite Ricky if you want to."

Timmy jumped up and ran to Teri. "Thanks Gran'ma!" he exclaimed as he leaped into her arms and gave her a huge hug. "You're the bestest Gran'ma in the whole world!"

Cory giggled as he leaned over to Sean and whispered "You know what babe? I think Mom is starting to spoil our son already!"

Sean gave Cory a quick kiss before replying. "Yeah, maybe so; but she used to spoil you too, and look how you turned out!"

Teri put Timmy down and turned to the boys. "Cory, John and I will be joining you. Once you make the treaty official, I'll sit down with him and start working out the staffing details. Since this is a diplomatic visit, Starfleet has given you John as your security escort. Judge Robison wants to see me while we are down there, so I'll meet up with you after you finish the ceremonies. Are you sure that you are ready for this?" The look that flashed across Cory's face was all the answer she needed. Teri pulled out a chair and sat down. "Come here, son."

Cory shuffled over to Teri, and didn't resist when she sat him on her lap. He wrapped his arms around her, laid his head on her shoulder, and softly replied through his silent tears. "I don't know, Mom. I'm trying so hard to make you proud of me. You and Sean went through so much to get me back, I can't let you down."

Teri pulled the young teen close to her. "Cory, you have nothing to prove to either of us. Every day you make me proud just because you are here. I knew about you and Sean's relationship before Mike died; the only thing that kept Sean going was the chance that you would be back someday. I know that legally you are an adult, but there are still a lot of things you need to learn. The only thing that you could do that would let me down is work yourself to the point that you end up sick again. You are my son, nothing will ever change that. Slow down some, the world won't stop because you didn't finish everything today. I love you, son; all you have to do is ask and I'll find you help to solve the problems you want fixed."

"Thanks; I love you mommy," Cory sobbed as he stuffed his face in Teri's shoulder and cried out the stress he had been holding in. After a few minutes of Teri holding him, rubbing his back while soothing him with words, Cory fell silent against her shoulder.

Teri smiled once Tyler announced "He's okay now, he's sleepin'." She watched with pride as Sean quietly moved the meeting to the rec room, leaving Teri and Cory in peace. A half hour later, Cory finally stirred from his sleep. He looked at Teri sheepishly.

"Sorry, mom, I didn't mean to fall asleep on you."

Teri grinned as she replied. "It's okay, Cory. You were a few years overdue for it anyway."

Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah, thanks! I'm not sure if it was while I was sleepin' or before; but I remembered you used to ask me if I needed 'mommy cuddles' whenever I was feelin' bad. I guess I still need them occasionally, don't I?"

"Whenever you want them, son. That's the first time in a couple of days you've said anything about another memory coming up; has it slowed down or are you just not saying anything?"

Cory grinned. "I really don't think you wanna hear about some of the latest ones, they're kinda personal. Sean and I usually grab some quiet time every couple of hours so he can check up on me; it's just small things now, I think all the big stuff is done with. I don't have any more big stuff to come up, do I?"

Teri kissed Cory's forehead. "Unless it was something that I don't know about, I think you have made it through all of the big memories, Cory. I'm glad to see that you and Sean have worked out a way to discuss them as they come up, keep that up and everything should be just fine. Just remember that you can still come to me if you want to or need to, okay?"

"Sure thing, Mom," Cory replied as he kissed her cheek. "Thanks again. I guess I better go find out what my brothers are getting into."

Teri chuckled as she replied. "I'll make it easy on you; last I saw Timmy was dragging Ricky through the house toward the pool. He's definitely taking after you already; both of them were wearing their birthday suits!"

It took Cory a second to digest what Teri had said, then he turned beet red with embarrassment. "MOM! I never ... Not that much ... Sean made me do it!"

"Yeah, that's why you were always pulling him. Get out there and have some fun, I'll come get you when its time to get ready."

Cory gave his mom a quick hug, then hopped up and rocketed towards the pool. By the time he reached the doorway to the pool deck, the only clothing left on his body was his shirt, which he tore off and tossed toward the changing room as he opened the door and ran onto the pool deck. Five feet from the doorway, he found himself with a slippery wet five year old trying to shimmy his way into Cory's arms.

"Hey lil' guy, whatcha' been doin'?" Cory asked Timmy as he picked him up and put him on his hip.

"Waitin' on you, Daddy!" Timmy giggled.

"I can see that, that's why you're all wet, ain't it squirt," Cory said with a smile. "Let's hit the slide, then we'll find your Pop, okay?"

"Yippee! Let's go, Daddy!" Timmy squealed in glee. After seven trips down the slide Timmy was finally satisfied, so they headed over to the fence where Sean was sitting watching the fun.

"You okay, Cor?" Sean asked, concern in his voice.

"I'm fine now, bro. I guess I was just overdue for my cuddles from Mom. I guess it's kinda like our favorite rug-rat here, he's gotta have his daddy and poppa cuddles or he starts stressin'."

An hour and a half later, Derek came out to get the boys. He stood in the doorway for a minute, unwilling to disrupt their carefree innocence as they frolicked naked in the pool. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Guys, its time to come in!" To his surprise, they all immediately climbed out of the pool. Everyone started playfully shaking the excess water from their heads all over each other, then they filed past Derek into the changing room.

The adults had trouble keeping straight faces when all the boys filed into the Dining room

a few minutes later. Each of them were dry with their hair combed neatly, wearing nothing but smiles. Teri held back laughter as she asked "Don't you boys think you might have forgot something?"

Adam responded for the group. "Since all of our clothes were gone, we figured going nude was okay."

Teri shook her head. "Did you think about the fact that most of you never made it to the changing room with your clothes? It took Helen and I five minutes to find all of them! Next time, at least carry them to the room, okay? You all know Helen's rules at the table, so hurry up."

As soon as the boys were out of earshot, Dan turned to Teri and told her between chuckles "You know, six months ago JJ would not have even attempted that! As crazy as it sounds, I'm glad to see it, for all of the boys. They are all coming out of their shells and having fun, something a lot of them have never been able to do."

Helen overheard as she sat the food on the table. "Dan, if I know Kelly we haven't seen the end of it. If I may make a suggestion, if they do what I think they will just laugh and roll with it. Kelly knows better than to make this a habit."

Everyone nodded their heads and sat back to see what happened. Sure enough, a couple of minutes later Kelly led the group back to the table; all of them now in tee-shirts and sandals, nothing else. Before anyone could say anything, Kelly announced "Mom says we gotta have shirts and shoes at the table! She didn't say nuthin' about shorts!"

Teri laughed as she shook her head in wonder. "Kelly, you're going to grow up to be a great lawyer with that outlook! After today add at least underwear to the list; we don't need any of you trying to eat the wrong hot dog at the table."

All of the boys giggled at her implied meaning as they all acknowledged the new rule. The room broke into laughter when Andy commented a little too loudly "Helen's gonna have to get some big hot dog buns for Alec."

Once everyone settled down, Travis spoke up. "Andy, I know it's none of my business, but I gotta look out for my bro; he's looked out for me all my life so it's my turn. Are you in love with Alec, do you want to be his boyfriend?"

You could hear a pin drop in the silence that followed. Austin's jaw dropped in shock; in all the years he had known Travis, the boy had never been that forward with anyone. It took a full minute before Andy could form a response.

"You know, Trav, I've been tryin' to figure that out all day. Ever since we met at the party, I felt better whenever Alec was around. I used to think it was just 'cause he was willin' to be my friend, even though he's two years older than me. Sittin' with him in class today, I couldn't stop lookin' at him and my belly was tingling. Is that what love is like?"

Before anyone could answer, JJ reached over and placed his hand on Andy's shoulder. "Bro, that's exactly how I felt the day I saw Adam running from the motel room. I ignored everyone telling me to stop and ran over to meet him. As soon as we started talking to each other I knew I wanted to be his partner forever; I want to protect him so he never has to feel the hurt he felt again."

Travis smiled. "You got it bad, Andy. Okay Alec, time to 'fess up bro. And before you start, no trying to protect anyone's feelin's; I'll know if you do it, I've watched you too many years. You've never lied to me bro, please don't start now."

Alec looked at Travis in shock. "Dang bro, you musta pulverized that shell when you broke out of it! Derek, could you add diplomacy to his training? Okay, I guess it's best to face this now. Andy, please wait until I am done for your answer; I have to cover a few things that don't affect my feelings today first, okay?"

Andy nodded his head and sat back to listen.

Alec leaned on the table and began. "Up until a few days ago I hadn't allowed myself to consider any relationships. I would look at girls and think they were cute; but I knew if I started dating that Trav would be at home alone with our old father. I couldn't take the chance of him getting hurt, so I just told everyone my father wouldn't let me date. I didn't even want to chance the soccer team until Doc promised to keep Trav over there until I got home. I almost didn't come to the party; I felt like I was taking advantage of Doc's offer. Just as I was about to turn it down, Trav called me on the emergency cell phones we had to see how the game went. I told him how we did, and had just told him that I was going to skip the party when he put Doc on the line. You remember that Doc? You ordered me to go; you told me that if I didn't go I would regret it later. I'm not sure how you knew, but two things happened at that party. The first was I learned about how everyone here has helped each other, and the second was that I overheard Kelly being given the number here. I put the number in my phone just in case; and now we are both safe."

Alec paused for a second. In the quiet, everyone heard as Timmy asked Cory "Daddy, was it Unca' Mikey?"

"Yes son, that was Uncle Mikey helping."

Alec picked up where he left off. "As you see, he did good work. While I was at the party, I met this carrot-top kid. When he introduced himself as the 'token straight kid' we both laughed and pretty much hung together the rest of the day. He actually impressed me; most kids his age try to play big shot when they are with older kids, but he was just being himself. He was smart but didn't flaunt it, and had a sense of humor that kept me laughing. When I got home that night, I realized I might have just missed a real good friendship. I had finally decided to call here to see if I could get Andy's number, since Sean wasn't in school anymore, when things went nuts at the old house. It was weird, it felt like my heart jumped when I found out Andy was staying here. I didn't think anything of it; he said he was straight and I had never even considered my options so I assumed I was too. This morning I think we shocked each other, and both of us have had to do a lot of thinking today. Andy is right, he's 12 and I'm 14. I thought a lot about that today; I was always told that it's wrong to date someone who is not your age." Alec saw the dejected look on Andy's face; he held up his finger to show Andy he needed to wait, then Alec continued. "If I was 24 and Andy was 22 nobody would say anything; so that means it's a stupid rule that means nothing. After I figured that out, I started to reconsider what I felt. Andy is cute, funny, and smart. My only worry was if he was just having a crush or if it's something else."

Tyler interrupted. "Get over it, dude. Trust me, it ain't no crush! Neither one of ya' have crushes!"

"You know, there's nothing worse than an eight-year-old empath who thinks he's Dr. Ruth!" Alec quipped. "Anyways, when Trav made you explain your feelings Andy I got my answer. You might not have recognized it, but we both are feeling the same. I would have liked to do this in a little more romantic setting, but a certain nosy little brother won't let me. Andy, will you be my boyfriend?"

"YES!!" Andy exclaimed as he ducked under the table and popped back up in front of Alec, plopping himself on Alec's lap chest to chest. The boys wrapped their arms around each other and kissed to seal the new relationship.

Sean giggled as he got up and walked over to the pair. He leaned over and whispered so both could hear "Hey guys, settle it down. No making mayonnaise at the table!" Alec and Andy pulled apart and looked at Sean with confused looks. When Sean pointed to the tents under their tee-shirts both boys blushed and nodded. Kelly got up and moved to where Andy had been sitting, then Sean pried the two boys apart and sat Andy in the vacated seat next to Alec. Before heading



back to his seat, Sean told both boys "Hey guys, before you do anything, talk to JJ and Adam. Take this slow, you don't need to go all out at once. If you have any questions JJ or Adam can't answer, ask Cor and I when we get back, okay?"

All things considered, the meal went fairly smooth after the initial theatrics. As they finished, Austin raised his hand for quiet. "While we are all together, I want to take this chance to say a few things. First off, Carrie and I both want to thank all of you boys. You not only made Gabe and Ricky feel welcome, but you have went out of your way to make them a part of your group. I saw something tonight at this table I never thought I'd see; a group of youths calmly helping some of their own sort out new emotions. If I had any doubt you were all still kids that was lost when you decided to eat dinner bare-butt; yet in about thirty minutes I'm going to be traveling with some of you, preferably fully dressed, to witness as you finalize a history-making treaty. I have watched as my eldest son not only cuddled his new little brother whenever he needed it, but included his new brother in whatever he was doing. I just heard my future son-in-law take charge of a situation for probably the first time in his life. Trav, your timing might need work, but I'm proud of how you handled it. Great job, Son. Alec, Andrew; congratulations and best wishes. Alec, I do have some advice for you; there will be times that Andrew will want to do things that seem childish to you. When that happens, do them with him and enjoy it; those are things you missed out on and you're getting a second chance to learn from them. Before I put you all to sleep, thanks Teri for raising such wonderful boys."

Realizing the speech was over, the boys scampered away from the table and rushed upstairs before anyone else could start a speech. As soon as they hit the bedroom doorway, the tee-shirts were off and the group that was staying sprawled out on the bed. Cory, Sean, Kelly, and the twins began to get dressed while shooting looks of longing at the boys on the bed.

As he finished dressing, Cory looked around the room. "Okay, now for the fun part! Kelly, we need to trap your midget fan club and get some clothes on them!"

"We ain't midgets! We're kids!" the boys heard Timmy giggle from the far side of the bed. "Yeah, that's right!" Ricky chimed in.

Cory motioned the twins to go over the top to get to the other side of the bed. Kelly took the foot of the bed, and Sean joined Cory on the last side. Cory counted down with his fingers and the boys attacked at once. A few seconds later it was over, the twins having captured Ricky before he slid under the bed and Kelly catching Timmy as he tried to sneak out from under the foot of the bed.

Cory smiled as the giggling boys were presented to him. "Okay guys, you gotta get dressed now. You better hurry up, or else you won't get to meet a real Indian Chief!"

"REALLY!?" both boys exclaimed with wide eyes. Timmy wiggled around to look at Kelly. "C'mon Unca' Kelly! You gotta help us get ready to see a real Indian!"

Kelly looked over at Sean and Cory; they both just smiled and nodded for him to go ahead. A few minutes later, both kids were dressed and begging to get going.

The seven boys headed down the stairs, Timmy on Cory's back and Ricky on Sean's. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they found Teri, John, Austin and Derek waiting on them.

"Is everyone ready?" John asked.

"Just a second, John," Sean replied. He placed Ricky on the ground and turned the boy to face him. "Ricky, I don't want you to get scared, so I'm gonna tell you what's going to happen, okay?"

Ricky nodded his head and waited for Sean to continue.

"Okay little buddy. In a couple of minutes, John is going to call TerraMain we are ready

to go. They are going to use what's known as a transporter to move us really fast to get there. You will feel like your whole body is tickling, then the next thing you will see is two rooms, one at TerraMain and one in Orlando. All I need you to do is to stand really still until you see me hold out my hand for you, okay?"

"Okay, Pop!" Ricky answered with a grin.

Sean did a double-take. He considered his words carefully before responding, afraid to send Ricky back into his shell. "It's okay for you to call me Pop if you want, but can you tell me why you want to?"

"Sure! Unca' Kyle says Timmy and I's boyfriends. You're Timmy's Pop, so that makes you my Pop-in-law, right?"

Sean grinned at the little imp in front of him. "If you put it that way, I guess you're right. You know, that means you gotta listen to me just like Timmy does if you're gonna call me Pop."

Ricky grinned and rolled his eyes. "That's easy! If you say no, we just ask Grandma!"

Sean laughed and playfully swatted Ricky's butt. "Whatever, squirt! You ready to go?"

Ricky nodded his head vigorously and moved to stand next to Timmy.

John looked to make sure everyone was ready, then opened his communicator. "TerraMain Transporter Control, this is Commander John Martin. Clan Short diplomatic party ready to transport, final destination Orlando. I have eleven to beam up."

"This is TerraMain Control. Understand Diplomatic party of eleven, final destination Orlando. Standing by for your order, Commander. You are number one in line."

John took one last look to ensure everyone was ready. "TerraMain, energize."

As the group dematerialized from the hallway, the history of the future began to be rewritten .....

## *Chapter 29*

The Admiral glanced around the transporter room one last time before he signaled for the technician to accept the signal from TerraMain. Satisfied everything was in order, he gave the signal then came to attention. John had briefed him as to Cory's appearance, so he knew who to greet. As the eleven forms began to materialize, he scanned them for the telltale blond hair John had told him to watch for. As soon as he spotted Cory, the Admiral turned so that he directly faced him.

Once they were fully materialized, the Admiral gave the Vulcan salute as he addressed Cory. "Welcome to Orlando, Mr. Short. I sincerely hope your negotiations prove successful. Commander Martin has been authorized to provide any assistance necessary."

Cory returned the salute. "Your assistance is appreciated, Admiral. Initial indications are showing a positive outcome is probable. May I suggest we retire to an informal setting; there are probabilities of some situations arising which I believe you should be aware of."

"As you wish, Sir," the Admiral replied. "Please join me in the Conference room." He waited for Cory to join him, then led the group to a room just outside the Transport bay.

Once inside the room, Cory spoke up. "Admiral, would you be offended if we make this totally informal. This was one of the boys' first transport, and I'm not sure how much longer he will be able to restrain himself."

"I understand, I've raised three boys myself. Feel free, they have both done quite well so far. Since we are dropping the formalities, you may call me Juan."

Cory smiled. "Thank you. Let me introduce my companions. As I'm sure you know, I'm Cory; the young man who seems glued to my side is my life partner Sean Short. Sean also holds the position of Clan Historian." Cory held out his arm, and it was instantly filled with a five year old. "This little imp is our son Timmy, that's his friend Ricky climbing onto Sean." Cory positioned Timmy on his hip before moving around the room. "I'm really proud to introduce you to our Mom, Teri Short, who also happens to be the Federation Youth Services Director."

Juan held out his hand to Teri. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Teri. I'm not sure which you are better known for around here; your exceptional sons or the Safe Haven cases you have already streamlined."

Teri smiled. "I really hope it's the Safe Haven cases, these two boys have achieved all of this completely on their own."

"From what I've heard, they had an excellent teacher."

Teri blushed at the compliment. "Thank you, Juan."

Cory decided to rescue his mom. "Juan, the man standing next to Mom is Dr. Austin

Michaels, Ricky's father and the new Youth Services Medical Director. Next to him is the son of Chief Tecumseh, Derek Tecumseh. Last but not least are the twins, John's sons Jeffy and Sammy Taylor, and finally there's our Clan Youth Coordinator, Kelly McCarthy.

With the introductions completed, everyone took a seat at the table. Cory couldn't help but giggle when he noticed Kelly ended up with two little imps sharing the chair with him. "Juan, don't hold it against John, but there's a few things he was under orders from me not to tell anyone."

Juan looked at Cory with interest. "Really now! You've got my full attention, young man."

Cory grinned as he continued. "I'm sure you know about the new youth shelter Mom is setting up outside town. I actually have a secondary interest in the shelter, which is why I'm here to sign a treaty with Chief Tecumseh. The first wave of boys entering that shelter are going to need protection of the highest level; I want them so not even the FBI can touch them. The fact it is Federation property would normally be enough, but I've got a feeling that before this is over that will not be sufficient. With this treaty, I will be able to insert a little twist into things. One of the key points is that the Chief and his Tribe will staff and run the complex. Sean has contacted the proper people, and once I sign the treaty the Seminole tribe will be granted the return of their forefather's land in the area the complex covers. It will remain Federation property, but they will be the managing custodians of the land. By Terran law, that makes it an Indian Reservation; but once the treaty is signed the tribe is considered an equal to my own Clan under Vulcan Law. I figure that's gonna put a few twists into anyone's plans for retribution against any boys in there; they are going to have to jump through so many hoops to get a kid out of there we'll definitely catch them. The best part is the fact that Chief Tecumseh's tribe will have permanent jobs for a good portion of the members. In case I sound paranoid, there's two little reasons I'm being careful. Both of them are sitting on John's lap right now, and it's my responsibility to ensure the trash that defiled them is disposed of properly. In the process I plan to help every other boy who was used by these idiots."

Juan looked at John in shock. "I didn't know it was your new sons! Sammy, Jeffy; I promise that you will be avenged. As of right now, anything your new Dad needs to catch those people I will make sure he gets."

Juan then stood and straightened his uniform. He turned towards Cory, who noticed the look on Juan's face and realized things were about to get official again. Cory stood and faced Juan with a totally serious face.

"Mr. Short, now that I am fully aware of the scope of your mission, I wish to make the full resources of Starfleet Security available for your assistance. Commander Martin has any resources you require available to him."

"Thank you, Admiral. Your assistance is most welcome, and I graciously accept the offer. If at some future time my Clan may be of assistance to you please do not hesitate to ask."

"I will remember that, Mr. Short." Juan then relaxed. "Cory, you are an amazing young man. Sean and Timmy are truly blessed to call you family."

Cory blushed and looked over at Sean. "Juan, I'll be honest, without Sean I really don't think I could do all of this. He has stood by me through the worst parts of my life, everything I've done is my way of paying him back."

Juan smiled and placed a hand on Cory's shoulder. "Cory, that is what is amazing about you; it's obvious when I watch you that you are not doing all this for yourself. Whatever you do, don't change. There's very few people in this universe who can honesty say they live their lives that way, those that do usually go far and leave a lasting impression."

John chuckled as he stood up and joined the pair. "Sir, with all due respect, I think you've

embarrassed Cory enough. If he blushes much more he's going to spontaneously combust from the heat."

"I see what you mean, John," Juan chuckled. "I guess the historians are going to have to add modesty to their description of Cory. Is there anything else before you have to go? I just noticed it is getting close to time for you to leave for your meeting."

Cory recovered enough to answer. "I think that covers everything I thought would help you. Would it be possible to arrange transportation for Mom and Dr. Austin to meet with Judge Robison while we finalize the treaty?"

"Consider it done. If you think of anything else, just ask."

Ten minutes later, two limos pulled away from the building; both heading for destinations which would change someone's destiny.

\* \* \*

Kelly watched in awe as they passed in front of the property the complex was built on. "Man, this is NOTHIN' like the place I was stuck in!"

Cory scanned the view with a smile. "I agree Kel, Uncle Josh really went all out! I know I told him to make it like a camp instead of a group home, but MAN is this place sweet!" He was about to add more, but the limo passed the property, slowed down, and made the turn into Southcrest.

Once it was stopped in the driveway behind the mansion, it suddenly gained occupants. First in were Jamie and Jacob, giggling madly as they pounced Kelly in greeting. Next was Justy, who plopped himself on Cory and Sean's laps then wiggled around until he was sitting between them. Aaron, David, Mark and Zac squeezed in next, with Josh finishing off the invasion. Josh made a beeline through the crowded limo to sit with Jeffy and Sammy on his lap.

Once everyone was settled, the limo made its way back down the driveway and off the Ranch, heading for the front entrance of the Youth Services Compound.

Inside the limo, Josh gave the two boys on his lap a hug. "How do you guys like your new home?"

The both giggled before Jeffy replied. "It's awesome, we're lovin' having a real family! We didn't know what we were missin' with our old dad."

Josh squeezed both boys as he stared out the window. In a low voice he stated "I've found out that you missed a lot, boys, and I promise that he is going to regret denying you your childhoods."

Sean noticed Josh's mood change. "Hey Uncle Josh, did you hear Kelly got a promotion?"

Josh's face lit up. "Promotion? I didn't even know he had a job! You guys opening up a slave camp?"

Sean giggled. "You're a goof ball, Uncle Josh. He's got a position in the Clan - Youth Coordinator. Since he's so good with the young kids, Cor and I figured he deserved a title to recognize his skills."

That broke Josh's funk. "You two are a pair of nuts! I have to admit you're right though, I noticed it too."

Kelly interrupted just as the limo came to a stop again. "So THAT'S what you were talkin' about when you introduced me! I thought you mighta' sucked Cory's brain cell through his tonsils again when he said that!"

"Bite me, Kelly!" Cory exclaimed as the car exploded in laughter.

They managed to settle down before the driver opened the door. Cory moved to get ready

to exit, but John held out his hand to stop. "Sir, I must insist that you allow me to verify the area is safe before you exit."

"Carry on, Commander," Cory replied, realizing that playtime was over.

John nodded. "Mark, I need you to join me exiting first. Josh, ensure protocol is followed as far as everyone else goes."

"You got it, John," Josh replied.

Mark shifted to be by the door as Josh began listing who was to leave when. The driver opened the double door facing the tepee that had been erected in the center of the courtyard, and John immediately exited along with Mark. Once they were both stationed on either side of the door, John motioned for Cory to exit. Once Cory was standing by John, Sean was helped out and immediately joined Cory. Once Derek was out also, John told everyone else to wait until the main introductions were completed. He then motioned for Derek to take the lead, while he and Mark flanked Cory and Sean. As they began the approach to the tepee, two young braves in full ceremonial dress stepped out, followed by Chief Tecumseh. The two groups met in the middle of the thirty foot space between the limo and the tepee. As they met, both Mark and Derek moved to the side and took positions facing each other. John nodded to Mark.

Mark came to attention and took a step forward. "May I present the Patriarch of Clan Short, Cory Short. Accompanying him is his life partner and Clan Historian, Sean Short. We are joined by Commander John Martin, Director of Starfleet Security for Southeastern North America. I am Mark Owens, I will be the liaison between yourself and Clan Short." He then took one step back into his previous position.

Derek mirrored Mark's previous actions. "I am honored to present my father and Chief of the Seminole Nation, Chief Hawkeye Tecumseh. To his right is my middle brother Charles, and to his left is my youngest brother Byron."

Cory and Hawkeye both stepped forward and clasped forearms. Cory greeted the Chief. "Greetings, Chief Tecumseh. It is an honor to meet you in person. I look forward to a long and mutually prosperous relationship between your Tribe and my Clan."

"It is a pleasure and honor to meet yourself and your partner, Cory Short. The Great Spirit has smiled upon us with this blessing of our Tribes' joint venture."

Cory gave a small smile as he continued. "I have selected some members of my Clan to witness this historic occasion. Would you please accompany me to the limo and I shall introduce them to you?"

The Chief gave his own small smile at the pride evident in Cory's voice. "Let us go to them, I look forward to meeting some of the boys my son has told me about."

The group moved back to the limo, and John motioned to the occupants that it was okay to come out. As they exited the vehicle, Cory introduced them.

"Chief Tecumseh, representing Ambassador Sarek, who is the Head of the House of Surak of the planet Vulcan, is Mr. Joshua Chases-Dodds. Accompanying him are his sons, who are also the liaisons between Clan Short and Ambassador Sarek; in order, Justin Dodds, Jamie Stewart, and Jacob Stewart." Cory waited for them to exchange greetings, then signaled for the next group. "This is Kelly McCarthy, Clan Youth Coordinator. To his right is Ricky Williamson, son of Dr. Austin Michaels, Federation Youth Services Medical Director. To his left is Sean and mine's son, Timothy Short." Cory watched with pride as Timmy politely waited his turn, said hello to Chief Tecumseh, then walked over and stood next to Sean. Ricky followed Timmy's example, then went to stand with Kelly. "It is my pleasure to introduce you to our eldest brother and Lieutenant in charge of the Orlando Clan Branch, Aaron Carter. Accompanying him today is his life partner, David Gallagher." Cory barely managed to keep a straight face as Derek's younger

brother's jaws dropped at the sight of Aaron and David climbing out of the car. "Chief, I realized you would definitely want to meet these two Clan members, both of which are Commander Martin's sons; this is Samuel Taylor and his brother Sebastian Taylor. Sebastian goes by Jeffy normally, this is one of the few times any of us have even spoken his given name. Finally, this is Zachary Hanson, Mark Owens' partner."

Cory was shocked when the Chief greeted Zac, then knelt down placing one hand on each of the twin's shoulders.

"Sammy, Jeffy, I've waited to meet you ever since I heard what happened to you," Chief Tecumseh began. "You are two amazing boys, I can see the Great Spirit is strong in both of you. Very few braves would survive their own blood selling them as slaves for pleasure. You have not only survived but are seeking to re-balance the great scales of justice. Soon you will face another challenge. One which will bring you great joy upon completion. Follow the signs the Great Spirit leaves in your hearts, for He has great plans for your futures. Jeffy, my Shaman tells me your old father is the one who insisted you use your middle name, as it was the same as his. Sebastian was your great-grandfather on your mother's side, and I'm told he was a great man. Your old father had no respect for him, but I think a strong young brave such as yourself using the name would be a fitting tribute to a great man."

The two boys looked at each other silently, then Sammy spoke. "Chief, is that why nobody ever used 'Bastian's name out loud? I've always called him that when we talk to each other, just not when anyone hears it. Our old father wouldn't even use it unless he was really, really mad."

"Yes, Sammy, that's the reason. It is also why he got hurt more than you. Both of your given names were chosen by your mother; are you willing to honor her memory by using them?"

The two boys looked at each other again. A few seconds later, Jeffy spoke. "It's gonna take getting used to, but now that I know about my names I don't want to be called Jeffy no more."

Cory joined Chief Tecumseh and the twins. "Are you positive about that?" Cory asked. When he received a nod from the boys, Cory cleared his throat and announced "From this time forward, I hereby decree that Sebastian Jeffery Taylor shall no longer be addressed as Jeffy and shall be addressed by his given first name. Justin, notify the Family Archivist of the change at your earliest opportunity."

"I'm on it, Cory," Justy responded.

The twins shyly gave the Chief a hug of thanks, then Chief Tecumseh walked with the boys over to John. "Commander, you have been truly blessed to be given charge of these two young braves. Take good care of them." He then put a hand on Cory's shoulder. "Come Cory, I believe we have an appointment with destiny."

Everyone proceeded into the tepee, following Charles and Byron's instructions and sitting along the wall of the tepee. Chief Tecumseh and Cory sat opposite each other at the table set up in the middle of the room.

Cory began the proceeding. "Tonight we are gathered to finalize the treaty between Clan Short of the planet Vulcan and the Florida Seminole Nation of the planet Earth. My Clan is prepared to support the Seminole Nation to the best of our abilities upon signing of this treaty."

Chief Tecumseh took over. "As Chief of the Florida Seminole Nation of the planet Earth, I pledge the assistance of my Tribe to Clan Short of the planet Vulcan. It is my hope that this will be the start of a long and plentiful relationship."

Cory motioned to Sean, who stood and placed a tricorder on the table, then returned to his seat. Cory's fingers flew over the controls, then he turned the instrument towards Chief Tecumseh. "Could you please review the treaty on the tricorder and ensure I did not miss anything we

discussed previously?"

Chief Tecumseh reviewed the display then pressed a point on the screen. "On behalf of the Florida Seminole Nation, I, Chief Hawkeye Tecumseh, accept this treaty as written and hereby affix my seal." A beep a few seconds later confirmed his entry, and he turned the unit to Cory.

Cory pressed the same point on the screen. "I, Cory Patrick Short, Patriarch of Clan Short, Clan of the Family of Sarek of the House of Surak of the planet Vulcan, ratify and accept this treaty and hereby affix my seal." A double beep confirmed his entry, and Cory placed the tricorder back into the center of the table. Both he and Chief Tecumseh stood at the same time and extended their hands.

As they clasped hands, Chief Tecumseh spoke. "Technology does not seal a treaty. The clasping of hands of two men of honor does."

Cory smiled slightly. "You speak wisely. Mike used to tell me to look in his eyes when he was trying to tell me something. He taught me that the eyes can't lie. I can see the honor in your eyes, and know in my heart that great things will come from tonight."

"This Mike sounds like a wise man. I must meet him sometime."

Cory prepared to explain about Mike's death when he was startled by a voice coming from above his head.

"Hey little brother, are you just gonna sit there or are you gonna introduce me to your distinguished guest?"

Everyone in the tepee looked up to see Mike floating near the top, sitting Indian style in mid-air. Mike chuckled. "What? Did you honestly think I'd miss seeing my bros making history? Give me some credit!"

Everyone in the room was speechless - except Timmy. "Unca Mikey, you're bein' bad. Stop messin' with Daddy an' get down here!"

Mike shook his head as he floated down and sat by Timmy. "You know something, kiddo? You're the only five-year-old I know of who has the guts to talk to a Saint like that."

Sean interrupted before Timmy could respond. "Mike, give it up. Someone has been taking lessons from his Daddy; you know as well as I do that you don't have a chance."

Cory shook his head. "Chief Tecumseh, may I introduce you to my other older brother Michael Short, better known as Saint Mikey of Urbandale. Despite his manner, he's actually the one person most responsible for how I am today."

Chief Tecumseh turned to face Mike and nodded his head in respect. "It is a great honor to be in your presence, Saint Mikey. I sense that it is a good omen that the Great Spirit has allowed for you to join us."

Mike smiled. "You are very perceptive, Chief. The One you call the Great Spirit and the One we call Our Father are one and the same. I had already made plans to be here, but I received a message from Him that I needed to be here personally. Cory has made some arrangements which affect not only those I am responsible for, but yourself and your future generations. There are forces which would do anything to prevent his announcement of your next step; they know that once it is spoken it is out of their realm. My presence prevents them from even getting near anyone associated with this treaty to cause harm. Oh, and before I forget Chief, your Great-Grandfather said to tell you that your actions tonight have returned great honor to the Seminole Nation. May I suggest that we drop the formalities and get to business; as great as my little brother is doing, he does much better when he can be himself."

Chief Tecumseh's smile grew wider. "Mike, I see what Cory meant by you making him what he is today. Your influence in his attitude is quite obvious. Thank my Great-Grandfather for me, he has buoyed my spirit with his praise."



Cory looked over at Mike. "Bro, I think the REAL reason you showed up is so you had a voice in this too! You know, I was going to wait until I felt it was time to cover the arrangements Sean made, but you HAD TO open your mouth! I'll get you for this!"

Mike chuckled. "Hey lil' bro; just think of it as payback for trying to sell me off a while back!"

"BUSTED!" Justy and his brothers chorused.

Cory turned beet red, unable to come up with a reply. Once the laughter in the room subsided, he regained his composure. "Since a certain Saint decided to throw formality out the window, Chief, I'll just tell you what we've managed to arrange."

Chief Tecumseh was still smiling as he replied. "That sounds fine to me, Cory. I've always thought more productive work gets done in informal settings than any formal meeting."

Cory sat back. "First thing is your Tribe's status. Ambassador Sarek has said that once you entered into the treaty, you basically have the same legal status in the Federation as my Clan does. Any tribal lands that belong to you are now protected by Federation law; unfortunately that does not apply to the lands provided for you by the US government. Sean did a little digging and found out that the land that we are on now was once your tribal territory. The Federation has decided that it will be turned over to your Tribe for their use; with the condition that the tribe runs the Youth Shelter on the property. Everyone who works for the Shelter will be on the Federation's payroll, at Federation standard pay rates for the job they are doing."

The Chief looked at Cory with interest. "It sounds like you have everything pretty much covered. How are we to handle schooling for the residents?"

"Actually, I was just getting to that. I would like everything to be handled on-site; schooling, medical, you name it. I'd even like you to handle your own security; if it's something you can't handle, John will have a contact set up for you with Starfleet and Federation Security. Anything else you need help with just ask Mark; if he can't handle it he'll get a hold of someone who can for you. Basically it's been set up so that no Terran law enforcement officials are allowed access onto the property; no FBI, no Sheriffs, no US Marshals, nobody but assigned Federation or Starfleet Security personnel. Some of your first residents are going to be wanted by a lot of people, and we are going to make sure that those people have no way to access them. Most of the first group will have sold their bodies; some will be gay, the rest just did what was needed to survive. After seeing what happens when a group of boys with similar histories gets together, I really think that learning to live as a tribe is going to be just what these boys will need."

The Chief thought for a second before responding. "You have planned it out quite well. It sounds like you want every boy to walk out of here not only a man, but a brave as well. I only have one more question, but it's for Saint Mikey." He turned to look at Mike, but froze with a smile on his face at what he saw. Mike was 'sitting' a foot off of the floor, with Charles and Byron sitting in front of him. The three of them were deep in conversation regarding the afterlife as compared to the teachings they had received.

Without missing a beat. Mike turned his head. "Go for it, Chief. I like the name, and your dedication will be just fine." Mike then turned back to his conversation.

Chief Tecumseh smiled as he stood up. "Joshua, Cory, Sean, will you please join me outside for a moment?"

Once the four were outside, the Chief signaled for quiet. He stood quietly for a couple minutes, then began speaking. "Great Spirit, you have blessed us with new lands to raise your children. These hunting grounds of our forefathers are now returned to us to rescue those who are forgotten." He opened a pouch and began spreading some dust from it as he continued. "I call on you, Great Spirit, to protect these lands from those who would cause evil to come upon its

inhabitants, and ask of you that it be guarded by your helper, Saint Mikey, until the sun goes to it's final sleep. In the name of the Great Spirit I call these lands Camp Little Eagle, and in the Great Spirit's name, I banish all evil from these lands."

The evening became suddenly still; there was not so much as a cricket chirping to be heard. The silence was broken by two distinctive screeches as two eagles flew in from the north and landed on Chief Tecumseh's outstretched arms.

"Welcome, Eagle Spirits, to Camp Little Eagle. If it is your wish to make this your home, you may choose your residence and it will remain yours and your childrens' forever."

The two eagles gave a chirp of acceptance, then glided down from his arms into the opening of the tepee. Cory led the procession in behind them, but came to a stop when he saw what was happening inside. The two eagles walked up to Timmy and Ricky, allowed the boys to gently pet their heads, then started looking at the boys then at the tabletop.

Kelly softly giggled as he watched the birds. "Hey guys, I think they want you to help them onto the table! Hold out your arms in front of you and I'll bet they climb on."

Everyone watched in awe as the two boys put their arms in front of their chests and the eagles gently climbed on. The eagles then nuzzled each boy's neck, helping support their weight by bracing on the boy's shoulders. Kelly helped each of the boys stand up, and braced them as they walked carefully to the table. As they were set down, each bird reached into the boy's hair and carefully used their beaks to cut out a swatch of hair. The eagles carried the two swatches of hair to the center of the table, then turned to Mike and sounded three quick screeches.

Mike responded with two similar screeches, then turned to the boys. "Timmy, Ricky, you guys are getting quite an honor. As the Chief knows, these guys are the Guardian Spirits for the Camp. You guys know how Kyle can talk to me, right?"

Both boys nodded their heads. "Yeah, why?"

Mike smiled. "These guys would like for you two to be able to do the same thing with them. That way you can help them watch for trouble. When they took a little of your hair to start their nest with that was the first part, but I need to talk to you about the second part."

Timmy and Ricky looked at each other. Ricky nodded then they turned back and Timmy said "Okay, go ahead."

"Okay. What they need to do to finish the ceremony is for you to let them pierce each of your right ears with their talons." Mike saw the confused looks and clarified. "Talons are what you call claws. Each of these guys has an extra talon that normal eagles don't have. That's the one they use for your ear. Once it's in, the talon will break off and stay in your ear. I've called the Medicine Man already, he's on his way to finish making it so they don't fall out. Each Eagle Spirit can only do this once during each time they are here, so it is something that almost nobody else will have. I won't lie to you, it will hurt a little when they pierce your ear, but not for long, okay?"

Mike then turned to Cory and Sean. "You two can drop out of Daddy mode. Our Father has approved this. Do you really think He would let something like infection happen as a result of one of His ceremonies?"

Cory and Sean both grinned then stuck out their tongues at Mike. Sean giggled his comeback. "Hey, YOU'RE the one who taught us to take care of family, dude!"

Timmy got Mike's attention. "Unca Mikey, we wanna let the Eagles do it."

Mike scanned both boys. "You guys are great. I see you really do understand what we're asking. The Medicine Man is almost here, so whenever you are ready we can start."

To everyone's surprise, both boys immediately sat at the table and laid their heads on it with their right ears up. The eagles walked over and nuzzled their chosen boy's ear, then climbed on his shoulder. They carefully placed the special talon against the boy's earlobes and pressed

them through. To all who were watchings surprise, neither boy so much as flinched as the talons went into place. The eagles climbed down and stood in front of the boys. Once both Timmy and Ricky were sitting up, the eagles reached around and plucked one of their own tail feathers. They presented them in their beaks to the boys, who smiled and gently accepted the gifts.

The quiet in the room was broken by a new voice. "Thank you Great Spirit for allowing me to witness this sacred event!" Everyone turned and found the Tribal Shaman standing just inside the door. He walked over to the table and addressed the two young boys. "You have received quite an honor. The Eagle Spirits have declared you braves by their gift of their feathers. The last time this happened was to my grandfather's grandfather." He sat next to Timmy and began the final locking of the talon into Timmy's ear. "You have been through much, little one, yet you rise above it all. You shall now be known as Soaring Eagle, Timothy." He finished with Timmy and moved over to Ricky. As he worked on Ricky's ear, he addressed him. "You are a very impressive young man. You have survived rough times, and are healing well. You are patient and quiet, two very admirable traits. You shall now be known as Sitting Eagle, Ricky." Once he finished, he turned to the two eagles who were watching closely. "Thank you Spirits for choosing these young braves. I will ensure that tonight they will receive a proper headdress for the placement of your gifts."

Mike finally spoke up. "We all need to head outside, there is some private business that these two need to take care of." He floated over everyone's heads and led them outside. Once they were all out, he announced "I need to head out for a bit, but I'm definitely going to be back to see my nephew's ceremony tonight. Thanks Chief, there's a party on the Happy Hunting Ground tonight thanks to you!" Mike then slowly disappeared into the night air.

Everyone stood around and discussed the night's events while waiting for Timmy and Ricky to finish.

\* \* \*

Teri and Austin were surprised when Judge Robison met them at the doorway to his chambers. "Aha, you must be Teri! I finally get to meet you in person!"

Teri smiled. "You got it, Judge. This is Doctor Austin Michaels, Youth Services Medical Director."

Austin shook the Judge's hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Your Honor."

"Please, just call me Jamie. No need to be formal out of court. Your timing for this visit is perfect. I actually was considering calling you when I got the message you were coming over. Please, come in and have a seat. Coffee anyone?"

Both Teri and Austin accepted the coffee. Once they were all seated, Jamie began. "Teri, what is the status of that new Youth Shelter that I heard you were planning?"

"Well, now that you ask, Cory and Sean are signing a treaty right now with Chief Tecumseh of the Seminole Nation to administer the property. All the buildings are in place, and Cory is planning on the Tribe staffing the positions. I would guess it will be up in less than a week knowing those two."

"There's a couple of points, though Jamie," Austin interjected. "The main one is that this place is going to give 'secure facility' a whole new meaning; Sean researched every law he could and has set it up so that not even the FBI has a chance of walking through the gates uninvited. My understanding is this is not a short-term facility. The program is designed to help kids recover from their past and become the best they can be, no matter what their sexuality. Sean said it's going to be family-based, Indian style. I take that to mean that the Tribe will be family to anyone

in there."

Jamie smiled. "Not bad, it sounds like Sean's actually taking the old saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' literally. I think I see their point on law enforcement. A lot of the street boys have got into trouble while trying to survive. Once they are inside, they no longer have to worry or run. What about when they are grown up and ready to move out?"

Teri giggled. "Would YOU argue with a blanket pardon from the Patriarch of a Vulcan Clan? Cory came to me on that one - once they turn twenty and are ready to move into society, he is going to pardon them for any outstanding crimes from before they started - as long as they leave on good terms."

Jamie chuckled before replying. "I guess that pretty much covers it, seeing as to the fact the shelter seems to double as a rehab center. I guess you are wondering why I'm asking."

"I figured you'll get to it," Teri replied. "Chip and Josh both warned me that you were long-winded."

"Wait till I see those jokers!" Jamie laughed. "Seriously, three months ago a small plane crashed outside town. There were two boys and their parents on board. Both parents were killed instantly, but by the grace of God the boys survived. One of them lost his right arm and most of his right leg, the other has some damage to his left hand. The court has temporary guardianship of them, but I do not feel comfortable putting them in a standard shelter, especially the severely injured boy. Both boys hint that they were responsible for the crash, but nobody has got any details from them of how, and right now I honestly consider both of them suicide risks. Also, for some reason, the FBI has been poking around, and I really don't want them to take the boys. I would like for you to evaluate them and see if you have any ideas."

"How old are they?" Austin asked.

"They just turned 10, they're twins."

Teri looked at Austin. "What do you think? 'Bastian and Sammy?"

Austin nodded. "Yep, probably Kelly and the munchkins too. Between the five of them someone will get through."

Jamie gave them a puzzled look. "You are planning to use some of the boys to evaluate them?"

"You better believe it," Teri replied. "I've watched these guys take one day to get histories out of kids that it would take months for any of us to get. If these five can't pull it off, I know of two other boys who can literally force it out of them. I've learned from my sons, success is knowing your resources and not being afraid to use them. The boys are the reason the new shelter went up so fast, they kept pulling strings until they got what they wanted."

"It sounds like you know what you are doing, I know none of our people have had any luck. When would you be able to get the boys here to try your luck?"

Austin grinned. "Call the hospital and inform them Federation Medical Services is taking over as of right now. We'll meet you at the hospital at 9am with the boys. How's that sound?"

Jamie chuckled. "It sounds like you've been taking lessons from a certain Chief Medical Officer I know named McCoy! You have a date, I'm curious to see how these boys work."

They chatted for a few minutes about some other cases that Jamie was considering forwarding to Teri. Once that was done, Teri and Austin excused themselves to go rejoin the rest of the group.

\* \* \*

Teri and Austin climbed out of the car at the reservation. "I wonder what the party is for?"

Austin commented as they looked over the expanse of people in the central park.

They were suddenly startled by a voice above their heads. "Hey Mom, Doc!"

Teri looked up. "MICHAEL PATRICK SHORT! Don't you know it's not Saintly to go around scaring people!"

Mike giggled as he sank down to stand in front of the pair. Teri shook her head then introduced him. "Austin, this is my son Michael; otherwise known as Saint Mikey of Urbandale. Get used to having him pop in. He tends to show up whenever something big is happening." She then turned back to Mike. "Could you save us the shock and fill us in on the reason for the big party?"

"Sure Mom. Part of it is the celebration of the treaty. It's not final until a celebration is held to thank the Spirits. Which, by the way, has made me a guest of honor! The other reason is a lot more serious, and you two are just in time to see it. The Guardian Spirits of Camp Little Eagle chose Timmy and Ricky as their Spirit Helpers. Tonight they are going to receive their official rank as braves of the tribe. Oh, and before you freak, neither one of you needs to do anything with either of the boy's new earrings. I promise there is no reason to worry about infection or anything like that. Our Father does not allow injury to come from Spirit Gifts, and those earrings are the mark of chosen men."

Teri noticed Austin looked unsure, so she turned to him. "Austin, take him at his word. Even while he was alive, he would not lie about something that could hurt his brothers. He is the Guardian Angel of all of our boys. He can't allow them to be hurt."

Austin smiled. "If you put it that way, now I feel better. Shall we go see what kind of trouble the Clan is causing?"

Mike led the way, escorting the two of them to a table set in the center of the park. As they approached, a man in full ceremonial dress stood up.

"Chief Tecumseh," Mike began, "May I introduce to you mine, Cory, and Sean,'s mother, Teri Short. Accompanying her is Doctor Austin Michaels, father of Ricky."

Chief Tecumseh shook both of their hands. "It is an honor to meet the parents of these fine young gentlemen. Saint Mikey, I'm to tell you that the time has arrived for the ceremony."

Mike flew off towards the fire that was set up. Teri addressed the Chief. "Chief, are the arrangements the boys made for you satisfactory?"

"Yes, Teri, they are. Cory said that you would be able to sit down tomorrow and assist me with the staffing. Is that still viable?"

"It looks like tomorrow afternoon is open if that fits into your schedule. In the morning Austin and I need to evaluate a couple of boys, but then we are free to assist you however you need us."

"That sounds fine. For now we need to head over to the fire, there are two young boys there who are about to move on to the next stage of their lives. I know that Ricky was hoping you would make it in time, Austin. He's looking forward to having his new father watch the first time he has achieved something on his own. My Shaman tells me you saved the boy just in time, Austin. You will see many rewards for your care about his future. Continue to follow your heart, for many good things will come from it."

"Thank you, Chief. I had worried about if I was doing the right thing when I took him from his mother; but between what we found afterwards and what you just told me I'm now positive I did the right thing. Shall we go join the boys?"

Chief Tecumseh led them to a front-row spot for the ceremony. There were five blankets laid on the ground, two of which were occupied by Sean and Cory. Teri sat next to Cory, Chief Tecumseh sat next to her, and Austin sat at the end. As they looked around, they noticed Mike

floating off to one side, and a pair of eagles sitting on an ornate perch on the other. Just then the Shaman exited the tepee in the back and walked to the center of the clearing.

"Oh Great Spirit," he chanted, "this day You have gifted us with more blessings than we can count. You have returned honor to our nation and provided a means to pass it on to our children's children. You have gave us prosperity when the world has denied us. Most importantly, You have provided us two new braves to guide us into tomorrow, chosen by Your helpers and full of Your Spirit. Great Spirit, guide us tonight as we confirm to the Nation those You have chosen. Give them the honor and courage to overcome the evil of the world."

A lone drummer started a slow beat as Timmy and Ricky slowly walked out and stood beside the Shaman. As the drum stopped, both boys turned and walked over to the perch. They held out their arms, and both eagles carefully moved off the perch, down their arms, and onto their shoulders. They then moved back to their spots by the Shaman, an eagle on each of their right shoulders.

Once they were in place, he continued. "The Spirits have chosen. Who shall come forward to pass these young men on to their destiny?"

Cory answered first as he rose and walked forward. "I come forward as father of Timothy." He walked up next to Timmy and placed a hand on his left shoulder.

Austin took his cue from Cory, and stood up. "I come forward as father of Ricky." He took the same position as Cory and waited to see what was next.

"As these boys have been chosen to hold positions of braves and warriors, so shall their names and stations reflect their responsibilities. The Spirits have decreed these two boys as men, and they shall be recognized by our Nation as such. Timothy, step forward."

Timmy stepped up and turned to face the Shaman. "Timothy, the Spirits have chosen you." He then placed an ornate headband with the eagle feather standing proudly in the rear on Timmy's head. "The Seminole Nation no longer shall call you Timothy; from this moment forward you are Soaring Eagle. Turn around and view your fellow braves."

Timmy turned, and once he was facing the crowd he let out a yell of victory, in chorus with the screech of the eagle on his shoulder. Cory picked up a bowl from by his feet and stepped in front of his son. "Today you became a warrior, son. May I have the honor of being the first to paint you to match your status?"

Timmy nodded his head. "Yes, Dad."

Cory carefully painted Timmy's face to match the markings of the companion on his shoulder. A soft 'cluck' from the eagle told Cory when he was done. Cory stood, turned, and announced to the crowd "Fellow warriors, I give you Soaring Eagle!"

As he was told to do, Cory went back to his seat. To his surprise, Timmy followed and sat between him and Sean with 'his' eagle still on his shoulder. Cory leaned up and whispered to Timmy "Hey, kiddo, ain't you supposed to be up there?"

Timmy giggled and replied softly. "Naw, William said I'm 'posed to sit with you and Pop right now."

Cory looked at the eagle on Timmy's shoulder, and was satisfied when he saw him nod. "Okay, he knows what to do better than any of us."

Cory turned back to the ceremony in front of him just in time to see the Shaman place the headband on Ricky's head.

"The Seminole Nation shall no longer call you Ricky; from this moment forward you are Sitting Eagle."

Austin repeated Cory's motions, stepping forward and applying his son's first war paint. Once he was finished, he turned to the crowd. "Fellow Warriors, it is my honor to present to you

Sitting Eagle!"

After the cheering died down, Austin went back to his seat with Ricky right behind him. Once they were seated, the Chief rose and turned to the assembled tribe. "Tonight we celebrate two new braves, and tomorrow we start a new beginning for our Tribe. Soaring Eagle's father and I have just signed a treaty which not only will give us our own land, but will provide for us and our children's children. We will be taking in those that have been abused and abandoned. When they are grown, they will have learned our ways and will be able to pass them on to future generations."

When he stepped down, the crowd broke up and the celebration began. The boys both received a warm welcome, and had the time of their lives dancing and talking to their new tribe. As things started to wind down, Josh managed to corner both of them. The eagles had returned to their shoulders, and they were sitting on a bench resting.

"Boys, I was really proud of you tonight," Josh began. "You listened to your friends on your shoulders and did exactly what you were supposed to. I have a message for you. Ambassador Sarek said to tell you that you represented Clan Short and his family properly."

Ricky looked confused for a second, then smiled as his companion explained the compliment. Timmy got the idea right away and replied "Wow! Thanks, Unca Josh! How'd he find out?"

Josh chuckled. "Well, the Chief let me transmit the ceremony to him, since he IS the Patriarch of my family. Something this important I couldn't just tell him about, I figured he would want to at least hear it for himself. I guess I was right, since he told me he was forwarding a copy to Mr. Spock and your Uncle Chip."

"Kewl," Timmy replied. "Unca Josh, could you find Daddy and Pop? William says we gotta get to bed."

Josh leaned over and kissed both boy's foreheads. "Sure thing, I'll find Doc too. You guys just wait here."

A few minutes later, all of the boys were gathered together. After some begging, Josh relented and let Justy, Jamie, and Jacob stay over with their friends, as long as they promised to return home with Aaron in the morning. The Chief showed them to the guest house, and shortly everyone was sound asleep, worn out from the day's activities.

Before he left, Mike looked over the sleeping boys. "Sleep well, guys. You've earned it." He then turned to the two eagles sitting on the headboard. "Welcome to the Clan! If you need any help with these guys give me a yell."

Two soft squawks acknowledged him, and the eagles closed their eyes as he faded away.

\* \* \*

Teri was just finishing her morning coffee when she heard a commotion in the room the boys slept in. She slipped to the doorway and peeked through the partially open door. "Do you two ever stop torturing Kelly?" she chuckled.

Timmy and Ricky looked up from their perches on a giggling Kelly's chest. "Hi Gran'ma!" they chorused.

Teri shook her head. "Come on guys, get out here before you wake the rest of the boys up! I'll fix you three some cereal."

At the mention of food, the two young boys hopped up and ran through the doorway. Kelly followed behind, giving Teri a hug as he slipped past.

Teri followed the three boys into the kitchen. As she was fixing their breakfast she commented "Where did your friends fly off to?"

Timmy grinned. "William said they were gonna catch breakfast before we go to the hospital to see 'Li-jah and Benji," he announced proudly.

"Yeah," Ricky added, "Duke says Daddy is gonna fix it so they can come in too!"

Teri froze in shock. "How did you guys know about the trip? Did Jamie or Jacob tell you?"

Timmy giggled. "Gran'ma, WILLIAM told me! Duke told Ricky!"

Teri looked at Kelly in shock. Kelly grinned as he replied "Don't look at me, I think these two have been taking lessons from Sean and Cory!"

"Are they picking on you again, Kelly?" Austin asked as he walked up and grabbed a seat.

"Hi Daddy!" Ricky exclaimed as he jumped up and rushed to give Austin a hug. As soon as the hug broke, Ricky rattled off "Duke said to tell you to tell them that him and William are animal helpers when we go to see Elijah and Benji so that they can come in with us."

Austin chuckled. "Slow down Ricky, your brain is moving faster than your mouth can handle!"

Kelly giggled. "Let me help you out, Doc. The eagles filled in the boys on the trip to the hospital today. They want you to tell the hospital that they are some of the animals that visit sick kids. Elijah and Benji are the two boys they are going to visit, and from what I understand Elijah and Benji are injured somehow."

Austin pulled Ricky onto his lap. "Is that what you meant, son?"

"Yeah, Daddy, what Kelly said!"

Austin looked off into space for a second. "You know, I just might be able to pull it off. Kelly, you were wrong about one thing though; you, 'Bastian, and Sammy are going too. There's no way I'm going to be able to check those boys without you helping with Ricky and Timmy."

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of two voices yelling in the bedroom. Suddenly William and Duke flew out, each carrying a pair of small boxers. They dropped their prizes just before they landed on the back of Kelly's chair. Sebastian and Sammy came running behind, as soon as they saw Teri and Austin watching they dove for their underwear and turned to run back into the bedroom.

"Hold it right there, you two!" Teri giggled. "Put those on and have a seat."

"Mom!" Sammy groaned as they both sat down. "Those stupid birds stole our boxers! Why are WE gettin' in trouble?"

Teri moved to stand between the two boys and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "You are not in trouble, guys. Those eagles can't talk to you, so they got you out here the best way they could. I don't think they would have done it if you would have got in trouble. Remember that they are just like Mikey, they can't let you get hurt. I was just going to come get you two anyways. Doc and I need your help with a pair of boys in the hospital this morning."

"Why us? We ain't nothin' special. Cory, Sean, or Justy can help better," Sebastian replied.

Austin butted in. "That's where you are wrong, Sebastian. You and Sammy will understand these boys better than Sean, Cory, or even Justy can. The boys are twins, and they are about your age. Kelly, Timmy, Ricky, and our feathered friends are going along to help you; since the boys have lost their parents we figure the seven of you will be able to help more than any adult."

"Besides," Kelly added, "I've heard you guys complaining the last couple of days about how everyone's trying to help you but you can't find a way to help them. This is your chance, dudes. Give back some of the help you have got."

"But what do we do?" Sammy asked.



"Relax, guys," Teri replied. "Just be yourselves. If you get stuck, I'm sure that William or Duke will have ideas to help you. Austin and I are going to stay out of the way and let you boys work the Short Clan magic. Elijah and Benji have had enough adult interference from what Judge Jamie said, so it's up to you to help them."

"Okay, we'll try," Sebastian answered. "What's for breakfast?"

Austin laughed as Teri went to get more bowls. "You are as bad as the rest of the boys; you're all a bunch of walking stomachs!"

\* \* \*

Benji climbed out of his hospital bed and moved over to join Elijah in his bed. "Hey bro, wanna watch some TV?"

"Yeah, might as well. Did you hear the nurses? Some big doctor is gonna take over caring for us. Why can't they just leave us alone?"

Benji shook his head as he cuddled into the remains of Elijah's right side. "I don't know bro. It's not like anyone's gonna want a couple of freaks like us if we ever leave here."

The two boys cuddled silently and soon fell back asleep holding each other protectively.

They woke to find Austin standing in the room watching them. He was smiling as he looked at the two boys, their thin faces accented by the sandy blond hair cascading to their shoulders. They were laying in such a way that their injuries were hidden, neither boy showed much leftover baby fat in their thin frames. Both boys were fair skinned, a trait which was accentuated by the lack of sun from their extended hospital stay.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," Benji mumbled. "Yeah, then you can show all of your friends the freaks," Elijah added.

Austin thought to himself 'with spunk like that, these two definitely have a chance'. He then replied "Sorry Benji and Elijah, it's just that the two of you remind me of older versions of my new son, Ricky. You have the same sandy blond hair as him, the only thing different is your eyes are gray while his are green. I'm Doc Austin, and as of last night I'm your new doctor. I'm with the Federation Youth Services, in fact I'm the Medical Director! Anything you guys want or need just let me know, I've got a lot of pull, so I can get it for you."

Benji looked Austin straight in the eye. "Yeah, we've both heard that before. Every time it happened we never saw the doctor again; what makes you different? Nobody wants a cripple and his freak brother."

Austin rose to the challenge. "I guess you want proof, don't you? Have either one of you ever touched a live eagle or had one stand on your chest? I'm talking about a free eagle; not on a leash, in a cage, or anything else like that."

Elijah answered. "No, but that would be cool. Both of us love eagles. It'll never happen though. Nobody can bring birds into a hospital."

"Never say never, Elijah," Austin replied with a smile. "My youngest son is outside with four of his friends. They brought a couple of their feathered friends with them, would you like to meet them?"

Benji looked at his brother before answering for both of them. "Okay Doc, we'll play along. I know there ain't no hospital gonna let eagles loose inside, so let's see you pull that rabbit out of your hat."

"Well, Benji, it seems you don't believe me. What do you think about making this a bet? If I'm lying, I'll walk out this door, check you guys out of the hospital, and take you anywhere you want. If I'm telling the truth, you both have to agree to join my family, permanently. No questions

asked, and I will not be able to change my mind."

The bet had it's desired effect, it cracked Benji's attitude. "I guess you've made your point Doc. Don't worry about the bet, but can we still see the eagles?"

"Ask and you shall receive!" Austin announced with a smile as he stuck his arm out the doorway and waved. He stood back and watched with joy as Elijah and Benji's faces broke into huge grins.

Timmy and Ricky were first through the doorway, with William and Duke perched on each of their shoulders. Kelly, Sammy, and Sebastian followed directly behind, with Teri and Judge Jamie bringing up the rear. As they watched the two youngest boys carefully head towards the bed, Teri leaned over and whispered to Austin "Timmy was giving me a play-by-play; you are cruel!"

Ricky was the first to reach the bed, and walked up to Elijah's left side. "Hi Elijah. I'm Ricky and this is Duke. He says if you want to he'll climb down so you can pet him."

Elijah was speechless, all he could do is nod his head. Ricky leaned over slightly, and Duke hopped off of his shoulder and strutted onto Elijah's chest. Ricky gently grasped Elijah's hand and guided it to pet Duke's folded wings.

Benji was absorbed in watching his brother with Duke, and did not notice Timmy coming up to his side of the bed. "Hi Benji; I'm Timmy and this is William. Would you like to hold him?" Benji turned to the little redhead and grinned. "Sure Timmy, thanks!"

Both boys spent the next few minutes exploring the eagles, allowing their curiosity to run free. They slowly came out of their trances and began to notice the room full of people watching them. Kelly noticed they were listening, and began the introductions. "It looks like you are family, guys; William and Duke are Indian Spirit Guides, since they like you it means you must be good people. Before they run off to break you two outta here, I want to make the official introductions. You already know Doc, he's Ricky's dad. The lady next to him is Timmy's grandma, Teri. The old guy is Judge Jamie Robison, he's the one that's been tryin' to protect you. In fact, he called Doc and Teri to ask them to help you guys. I'm Kelly, and these two behind me are Sammy and Sebastian. Guys, the one on the left in the bed is Elijah and the other one is Benji." Kelly turned to the adults with a big grin. "Mom; don't you and Doc need to leave so you can get his new sons out of this hole?"

The room fell so silent you could hear a flea fart. Kelly giggled at the surprised looks on Austin and Teri's faces. "What??? Mikey and I had a little talk last night. Before today's over you were gonna do it anyways, so why not get ahead of the game!"

Austin relaxed and glanced over at the bed. "Don't scare me like that, Kelly. For a minute there I thought you had been taking mind reading lessons from Jamie and Jacob. You are right, but why don't you take the munchkins and go get some ice cream for everyone while Teri, Judge Jamie, and I ruffle a few feathers in the hospital. I'm sure Sammy and Sebastian can fend off any evil nurses that try to sneak in. If not, William and Duke will definitely handle the problem."

All the boys quickly agreed to ice cream, and they all headed towards the door, Timmy and Ricky in the lead. Suddenly Ricky stopped and looked at Duke. "Daddy, Duke says the tube in 'Lijah's pee-pee is hurting him a little. He says the nurses put it in him so they didn't have to carry him to go potty every time he had a pee. Can you fix it for him?"

"They did WHAT!" Austin yelled as he spun on his heels and strode to the bed. He walked up next to Sebastian, who had just joined Elijah in giving Duke attention, and ripped the sheets back. He took one look and then turned around. "Kelly, go get my Med Kit out of the Doctor's lounge, make it quick!"

"Yes Sir!" Kelly yelled as he sprinted out the door. Austin turned back towards the bed to

find Sebastian had slipped behind him and was gently rubbing the six-inch stub that was once Elijah's leg. He glanced at Elijah's face and saw the shame in his eyes. Austin took a deep breath before he said "Sebastian, I think you might be the first person to really pay attention to Elijah's leg. Why don't you tell him what you think, and tell the truth, okay?" Austin crossed his fingers in hope that the right thing was said.

"It feels kewl. It's kinda soft all around except at the end. I can feel Elijah wiggle when I rub a couple of spots!" Sebastian noticed the disbelief on Elijah's face and added "You ain't gotta have two legs and two arms to be a friend. I want to be your friend 'cuz I like you, if it feels good I'll rub your leg and where your arm was whenever you want."

Sammy spoke up from the other side of the bed. "If you don't believe him, try to look at his mind, Elijah. When he started rubbing your leg we got to see some of what happened; we still like you. I bet you can do it now too. Benji, can I see your other arm? I know you hurt it saving Elijah; I hope that I can be as brave as you if my brother is about to get hurt."

Benji sat back in shock and slowly moved his left arm into view. Just past the base of his thumb his hand ended. As he laid back, Elijah's right shoulder came into view. There were no traces of the arm which used to be attached to it. Benji stared at the ceiling with tears in his eyes as he softly spoke. "When I felt the plane turn sideways, I tried to grab Eli and pull him to my side. I didn't move fast enough. When the wing came in it hit his leg and arm. Daddy had taught us how to use the emergency kit, so I was able to stop my hand and his arm and leg from bleeding. By the time I got to Mommy and Daddy they were dead. After we got to the hospital, the doctor told me I messed up and it was my fault that Eli would lose his arm and leg. I'm really sorry, bro I screwed us both up!"

Sammy grabbed Benji and pulled him into a hug as he collapsed in tears. Austin reached over and gently rubbed the back of Benji's neck as he softly spoke. "Benji, it's okay. The doctor was wrong, you did everything just right. You are only ten, yet you did a better job of saving yourself and Eli than most adults could. I have already looked at both of you guy's medical records and viewed the scans from when you came in. Do you want to know what mistakes I found?"

Benji looked up at Austin and slowly nodded.

"I only found ONE mistake, and it was with Eli's arm. IF the arm could have been saved, the worst thing it would have caused would have been Eli having no control of his hand; when you sealed off a vein you burned through one of the nerve clusters. If you don't believe me I can get you a second opinion; Dr. Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the Starship *Enterprise*."

Benji started to reply, but Sammy stopped him. "He's serious. If Doc McCoy heard what you were told, he'd come down here and rip that doctor a new asshole!"

"So it's not my fault?"

Austin leaned over the bed and kissed Benji's forehead. "No son, it's not your fault. If it wasn't for your quick action, I would only be getting one new son today instead of two."

Benji gave Austin a small smile. "Thanks, I feel a little better now."

Austin stood back up. "Anytime either of you needs to talk, I'm here for you. You are also going to find out that you have a whole bunch of friends you haven't even met yet, all of which will help you in an instant. I get the feeling there is more to that crash than you want to say right now; whenever you feel ready we can talk about it, if we never talk about it I will just assume you worked it out with your brothers."

Just then Kelly returned with the bag. Austin first got out his tricorder and scanned Eli. "Well, kiddo, it looks like you should have been out of here about two weeks ago. The only thing I see with your leg and arm is some scrambled nerve signals, but I think two massages a day should help them relearn where they go."

Sebastian interrupted. "Is that what I was doin'? If so, I'll take care of Eli and massage him."

Austin gave a knowing smile. "As long as it's okay with Eli, it's okay with me. You were doing just fine earlier, and he's had enough strangers messing with him."

Eli's gave a hesitant smile. "You really want to come see me after I get out?!"

Sebastian giggled. "I guess climbing over from the other side of the bed is coming to see you, so sure! We're friends, ain't we?"

It took a few seconds for the comment to sink in, but then Eli and Benji's eyes got wide. "We're gonna LIVE with you!" they chorused.

Austin chuckled at the reaction. "Yes you will, guys. For now these guys live a couple of houses down from me in Iowa, but you and your brothers will usually be at their house anyways. Once we move down here, we are all going to be living in one huge house. I would not be the least bit surprised if the four of you decided to share a bedroom." While Eli was distracted with sorting through the new information, Austin removed the catheter from the boy. "There you go, Eli. When you need to go to the bathroom, let the boys help you for now. Once 'Bastian gets the nerves in your leg trained some, we'll see about setting you up with something so you can walk on your own. Benji, could I see your hand for a minute?"

Shocked to hear that his twin might walk again, Benji numbly held out his left arm. Austin scanned it and reviewed the readings. "Just as I thought. Sammy, since your bro is going to help Eli, do you want to help Benji?"

Sammy grinned. "Sure Doc, whadda I need to do?"

"Pretty much the same thing for Benji's hand as what your brother is doing for Eli's leg. The rehab specialists should have been doing it for a while, but since they're obviously idiots I'm making you two responsible for retraining the nerves in my new son's injuries." Austin then turned to Teri. "Let's go, Teri. You, Jamie, and I have some butts to chew as soon as you get these guys transferred to my family. Kelly, here's some cash, take your fan club down and get the ice cream. If the munchkins see something down there that our feathered friends would like, get it too."

A few seconds later, the room was emptied of guests except for Sammy and 'Bastian. 'Bastian stared at Sammy for a minute as they silently argued, then hesitantly spoke. "Eli, Timmy says you can make things float. Can you make yourself float so you don't gotta use a wheelchair?"

Tears came to both Eli and Benji's eyes as they heard the question. Eli answered "I could, but I ain't gonna ever do it again. That's why we're here; I was showing our mom and dad that I figured out how to, and they crashed. I screwed up my body and hurt my bro 'cause I was showing off. It ain't gonna happen again, I wish Benji and I had never found out we could do it!"

Sammy looked at the two boys next to him, obviously Eli spoke for them both. "Eli, Benji, You are gonna hear the long version of this pretty soon, but I can give you the short version. Did you ever think that it was your parent's time to die? I'll bet it was, and I'll bet right now they are watching you and smiling 'cause you got a new family. Sometimes bad things happen so that good things can happen. I know a kid whose daddy was killed, and he was six seconds from getting killed too. He's got a new family now, and just had an Indian tribe hold a ceremony for him and his best friend making them braves. In fact you know him, it was Timmy. One of Timmy's uncles was abandoned by his original parents, and another was hurt bad by those same parents. They didn't even know about each other, but now they are together in one family and learning all about each other. Actually, one of them is our big brother's boyfriend; the other is our little brother's boyfriend. Do you see what I mean?"

Benji looked over at Eli then responded. "I kinda see it, but nothing good has happened to us. Both of us have screwed up bodies now."

"Yes it has," 'Bastian quickly replied. "Instead of going to a group home, you are getting a real family. You ain't gotta worry about goin' to different homes, you both get to stay together. None of us care what you look like, and none of us care if you can do stuff we can't do. Them two eagles sittin' here watchin' us can talk to Timmy and Ricky; how kewl is that!"

Eli and Benji's eyes almost popped out of their heads when they looked at William and Duke. Both eagles made eye contact then nodded their heads in agreement.

"WOW!" Eli exclaimed. "I guess we ain't too weird after all. But I still feel bad about makin' myself float."

Just then Kelly, Timmy, and Ricky returned. Kelly was pushing a cart covered with hot fudge ice cream sundaes, Pepsis, and two dishes of meat chunks. Timmy and Ricky wrestled a folding table in behind him. As they set up the table, Kelly commented "Eli, I can tell you right now you ain't gonna get away with being carried around or sittin' in a wheelchair. You guy's bodies got hurt on the outside, before the night is over you are gonna meet a lot of guys who have been hurt just as bad on the inside. We don't let anyone feel sorry for themselves; we'll help you get over it. You have already done something today that all of us have been hoping for; you have helped Sammy and 'Bastian feel more secure and needed. When we get home we'll see what we can do about you feeling guilty about your mom and dad; right now forget about it and float your skinny butt over here before the ice cream melts!"

Eli blushed. "But ... well ... I ain't got nothin' on my bottom!"

Kelly giggled. "Don't sweat it. We're all used to seeing each other nude, among other things. Doc's got all the nurses scared to come near this room, so there ain't nobody gonna walk in who would care."

Benji climbed off of the bed. "C'mon bro, it sounds like we gotta get used to it."

As Sammy and Benji headed towards the table, 'Bastian helped Eli finish getting untangled from the sheets and lowered the safety rail on the side of the bed. "C'mon Eli, you can do it," he encouraged.

Eli concentrated for a minute then slowly lifted a couple of inches off of the bed. He slowly slid towards 'Bastian, once clear of the bed he went from horizontal to vertical and 'stood' by him.

'Bastian placed an arm around Eli's waist. "I'll help steady you, let's go to the chair Kelly's moved for you."

The rest of the boys were silent as they watched him move across the room. Just as they were reaching the chair, Timmy said "William says for you to sit with Eli, 'Bastian. That way you can help him balance, 'cause he ain't used to his new body yet."

'Bastian took a seat, then helped guide Eli down to sit to his right.

Eli grinned once he was in place. "Whoa, that was weird! I kinda felt like I was going to fall over at first, but as soon as 'Bastian put his arm on me I was fine. I really did it!"

Ricky grinned back. "Duke says it'll get easy once you do it more. That looked sooooo kewl!"

Kelly moved two more chairs for Timmy and Ricky. As soon as they sat down, they were joined by their feathered companions, who perched on their shoulders and waited for their treats.

The boys went into full attack mode on the sundaes. 'Bastian helped Eli steady his dish when needed, while Timmy and Ricky repeatedly put down their spoons and used some forks they had brought up to hand chunks of meat to their feathered friends.

As they were beginning to finish, Teri and Austin walked into the room carrying two piles of clothes. Austin smiled at the sight of his two newest sons smiling and sitting with the rest of the boys. Suddenly it hit him, ELIJAH was out of bed and sitting with Sebastian!

Austin swallowed his surprise long enough to make his announcement. "Guys, I am proud to announce that Elijah and Benjamin Saunders are now officially members of the Michaels family. Since both of them are strong enough to destroy ice cream sundaes, I think it's time for them to stop laying around in here and come home."

A cheer erupted around the table. Austin walked over to Benji and said "Welcome to the family, Son. What's the chance of a hug?"

Benji smiled and threw both arms around Austin. "Thanks for helpin' us ... Dad."

After about a minute, the hug broke up and Austin moved over to Eli. "I didn't forget about you; it's just hard to hug two people who are in different places! Welcome to the family, Son."

Eli threw his arm around Austin and melted into the hug as Austin cradled him. "Thanks for not lying to us. I was scared a lot about what was gonna happen to us. I'm still a little scared but I think I can trust you Doc ... I mean Dad."

Austin kissed Eli's forehead. "Son, I don't want either of you to think you have to call me Dad. I only want you to do it when, and if, you feel comfortable with doing it. Okay?"

"Okay, Doc," Eli replied.

Benji thought about it for a few seconds before answering "Okay, Dad."

Austin considered his words carefully before asking his next question. "Eli, I'm glad to see you're out of the bed and sitting up. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing okay as long as 'Bastian holds me. I feel kinda wobbly, like I'm falling over."

"That's okay, your body has to get used to it's new balance. Did the boys carry you over?"

Eli considered all he had been told by Austin and the reactions he had from the boys before he replied. "You ain't gonna believe me, but I brought myself over with 'Bastian helping hold me steady. I made myself float."

Austin gently turned Eli's face so they could look eye-to-eye. "Eli, not only do I believe you; I'd like to know more. You guys are now part of a group of very special boys, boys who don't understand impossible. A few of those same boys can do things that most people refuse to believe. It sounds like you are talking about telekinesis; the ability to move things just by thinking about it. Is that what you did?"

Eli gave a small grin. "Yeah, that's it; telekun .... kan .... whatever that big word was. I can't do it long though."

Austin chuckled. "Don't worry about that, the more you practice the longer you'll be able to do it and the easier it'll become." Austin turned his head towards Benji. "Benji, can you do it too?"

"A little bit, not as good as Eli though."

"Good," Austin replied. "On our way home we'll swing by Southcrest and I'll have the three musketeers see if they can give you a hand. Their uncle has taught them a few tricks that help sharpen your skills faster."

Everyone looked at Teri as she tried to stifle laughter. Kelly spoke first. "What's so funny, Mom?"

Teri composed herself enough to reply. "I hope you brought spare clothes, Austin. That little comment you made is definitely gonna put you in the pool!"

"How would they find out?" Benji asked.

"Well, Benji," Teri replied, still grinning, "knowing those three they probably already know. If not, as soon as we walk in the door they will find out. They check out every new kid to see if he needs any help. They usually won't tell anyone else what they find except Sean or Cory unless it's urgent."

Benji began to look agitated as he formed a reply, but Sammy placed a finger over Benji's lips and said "Ben, let it go for now buddy. There's a lot of kewl stuff you haven't heard about yet. By the time we get to bed tonight you'll understand, okay?"

"Okay, Sam. I know I can trust you," Benji replied.

Austin gave Sammy a smile of thanks, then announced "Okay, since everyone's done eating, let's blow this joint! Sebastian, if you wouldn't mind, help Eli get dressed. Sammy can help you if you need it Benji. I'll be right back. I have an idea that will blow those nurse's minds as we're leaving. Ricky, ask Duke if he ..."

Ricky interrupted. "Duke says twenty-two inches, Daddy. Fourteen between his ankle and the knee."

"Thanks, son," Austin chuckled as he headed to the door.

By the time he returned, the boys were dressed. Austin unwrapped a long package as he knelt in front of Eli. "Son, nobody can give you your real leg back, but I think this will help your balance enough that you can walk without having to concentrate as much on floating. Shoot, I bet with a little practice with using your mind to move this nobody will even notice that only one of your legs is permanently attached. Lift up so I can pull your pants down to attach this. Sebastian, watch closely, from now on this is your job."

Austin adjusted the air bladders behind the plastiskin so that the new leg was close to matching the existing one, then he placed it over the remaining stub of Eli's leg and pressed the button to let it clamp in place. "How's that feel, Eli? Is it too tight?"

"It's kinda weird, but it ain't too tight. How's it gonna help me walk though?"

Austin smiled. "Right now, I've got the knee joint locked until you get some practice, but basically it's going to push on your leg to let you know when you are standing on it. You still need to use your 'floating' to balance yourself, but now you won't have to hold yourself up as much."

Eli grinned as he realized what was said. "Okay. I still want you to hold me, 'Bastian - that way I know I ain't gonna fall."

A few minutes later, Eli and Sebastian led the procession to the elevator in front of the nurse's station. As the elevator doors opened, Eli moved away from Sebastian, turned around, and lifted himself a foot off of the floor. He looked directly at the nurse who had gave them so much hassle and did his best Terminator impression. "I'll be back!"

Eli then floated into the elevator following Sebastian. Once the doors closed, he settled back to the floor and erupted into giggles. "Did you SEE her FACE!"

Austin managed to squeak out between chuckles "Yes I did, Son. I think you almost gave her a heart attack! That was great. I wish I'd had a camera. You are definitely a Michaels with a sense of humor like that!"

As they entered the entrance lobby, Kelly noticed two suited men near the exit. When the men looked at their group and started their way, Kelly grabbed the communicator off of Austin's belt. "Clan business, Doc. You just stall them."

Kelly opened the communicator and set it to the priority channel. "Clan Short Youth Coordinator to Commander Martin."

"This is Commander Martin. Go ahead, Kelly."

"I need assistance at this location. I am escorting two youths under Clan protection." Kelly heard the two suited men announce themselves as FBI. "Be advised FBI personnel are attempting to detain us."

"Assistance is on the way, Kelly. Martin out."

Kelly then began listening to what the FBI agents were saying. "... we had evidence these boys might have ESP, but needed proof. That boy's stunt upstairs is enough, they are FBI property

now, Doctor, and there is nothing you can do about it."

"Maybe not him, but I can," Kelly announced as he stepped forward. "Let me introduce myself. I am Kelly McCarthy, Youth Services Coordinator of Clan Short of the Family of Sarek of the House of Surak of Vulcan. These youths are under MY protection. If you believe you have justification to detain them, I require you to serve the proper warrants to the Vulcan Embassy. Otherwise, you must desist immediately or I shall file a formal grievance through the Embassy."

"Out of my way, Kid. This ain't playtime," the largest agent said before pushing Kelly and sending him sliding across the floor. The agent never saw Kelly come to a stop at the feet of the Starfleet Security detail that had just materialized. The agent was laying on the ground, hit by the fire of three phasers set to 'stun'."

Kelly looked up to see he was at the feet of the Lieutenant which had been their driver the night before.

The Lieutenant reached down and helped Kelly to his feet. "Sir, I witnessed the attack on you. Do you wish formal charges be pressed?"

Kelly stood up straight. "Lieutenant Barnes, I had identified myself as a representative of Clan Short. As I was in official capacity, the Clan wishes full retribution for his actions. The boys are Safe Haven and Clan Short protected."

"As you wish, Mr. McCarthy." Lt. Barnes then quickly walked up to the remaining agent, phaser out and at the ready. "Sir, your fellow agent is under arrest for attacking a Vulcan Dignitary. Please state your business."

"This so-called Doctor is trying to leave the premises with two youths which are under the FBI's custody. This is out of your jurisdiction, Lieutenant," the agent sneered.

Lt. Barnes turned to Teri. "Mrs. Short, may I please borrow your ID for a second? Yours also, Doctor."

Both handed their ID's to Lt. Barnes. He turned back to the agent. "I'm sorry, but you are completely wrong. Right now I am holding the ID's for the Federation Youth Services Director and the Federation Youth Services Medical Director. Additionally, Mr. McCarthy was not playing when he identified himself, he is in fact the Youth Coordinator for Clan Short. As a matter of fact, Mr. McCarthy can override both Mrs. Short and Dr. Michaels if he sees good reason. This is one of those times. He has declared the youths in question as under Clan protection. If you insist on continuing, I will be required to detain you under Interstellar Law. The boys are also under Safe Haven Act protection, which nullifies any Terran claims for custody."

The agent grinned. "So you think. The boys are coming with ..." He never finished the sentence, as Lt. Barnes stunned him point-blank with the phaser. "Ensign, take these two into custody," he ordered his companions.

Lt. Barnes then turned to Teri and Austin, handing them back their ID's. "Thanks for your assistance. Kelly has already told me what to do with the first one, if he declines doing anything with the second one we will still proceed with any charges you wish to press."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Teri replied. "Youth Services wants anything you can come up with against both of them. These two are about to serve as examples of what a bitch I can really be when crossed."

Lt. Barnes chuckled. "With pleasure! The FBI still thinks they are above Federation law, it's about time someone put them in their place!" He turned to Kelly, who had rejoined them. "Kelly, what do you want to do about the other agent?"

Kelly thought for a second. "How's about attempted kidnapping?"

"That works. If you would like, I can stay with you until you rejoin your Clan. That way none of their associates can try anything."



Kelly got a mischievous grin on his face. "Mr. Barnes, are you married or dating anyone?"

Lt. Barnes looked at Kelly in shock. "No, I'm not. Why?"

Kelly tried to look innocent. "Oh, nothing. I just was thinking about getting you a permanent assignment. I'll talk to Cory and John, then we'll see."

"I think I just got drafted!" Lt. Barnes commented to Austin.

"I think you're right!" Austin chuckled.

Kelly motioned for Lt. Barnes to follow him. They walked over to where the rest of the boys had grabbed a seat, then Kelly spoke. "Lt. Barnes, I would like you to meet the two boys who are so important the FBI is going to jail over them! This is Benji Saunders, one of Doc's new sons."

Lt. Barnes shook Benji's hand. "You're a lucky boy. Wait until you meet the rest of your new family."

Kelly then guided him to the other bench. "Lt. Barnes, this is Elijah Saunders. He's also one of Doc's new sons."

Lt. Barnes looked at the boy as he held out his left hand to shake hands. "Elijah, if you need any help getting used to your new body let me know. If my guess is right, you and I have something in common."

"What's that?" Eli asked as they shook hands.

"Let me show you." Lt. Barnes then sat down, leaned over and reached down to press on the middle of his lower shin. A few seconds later, he was handing Sebastian his foot and the lower twelve inches of his left leg so that Eli could inspect it. "I've had this for the last six years. Trust me, it's not too bad once you get used to it."

"Wow! Thanks for showin' me. They still let you work even with one leg?"

"Actually, Security insisted that I take Terran duty. They said I was too valuable to be on disability and spent a lot of money to train me so I can use my disability to my advantage. I think Kelly is planning on me being around you guys for a while, if you would like I can teach you some of the things I was taught."

"AWESOME!" Eli exclaimed as he inspected the leg. As Lt. Barnes took it back and re-attached it, Eli continued. "I thought I was gonna have to ride in one of those motored wheelchairs all my life, now Doc and you are tellin' me I can walk like I used to. This is KEWL!"

Lt. Barnes looked over his shoulder and watched as the rest of the Security team beamed out with their prisoners. "Now that the troublemakers are gone, I think the first step is getting you out of here." He glanced at Timmy and Ricky. "I'm surprised the two of you took off your war paint. You could have used it today."

Timmy giggled. "It ain't off, Will and Duke taught us to hide it - see?" Both boys suddenly were covered with the designs painted on them by their parents the night before.

Lt. Barnes smiled. "That's great! The races that can do that usually show it if their family or them is threatened. Right now you guys have every right to show it until Cory tells you things are safe, okay?"

Both boys nodded their understanding.

Kelly announced "Okay guys, lets blow this joint!"

The group headed out the door and over to a long white Hummer limo parked at the curb. "I need to get one of these!" Teri joked as she helped the boys in.

Lt. Barnes smiled. "I agree. Let me make some calls after we get to Southcrest. Maybe Commander Martin can pull some strings." He was about to add more, but then he saw Eli levitate himself up and into the limo without anyones help. He turned back to Teri with a grin. "I can see

that those two are going to fit right in! You do realize that as soon as they figure out how to raid the 'fridge without leaving their rooms, your food bill is going to triple?"

Teri laughed. "I doubt I'll even notice. As it is right now, when I walk into the meat department the butcher runs for cover!"

As the limo pulled away, the adults sat back and watched as the newest additions to the family investigated every inch of the Hummer's interior.

## *Chapter 30*

### **Southcrest Ranch:**

Benji and Elijah were speechless as the limo pulled through the gate into Southcrest. As the Mansion came into view, everyone else fell quiet except Sammy and Sebastian. Sammy looked at the stunned occupants and giggled. "What's the big deal? It's just Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh's house!"

"It's HUGE!" Elijah gasped as they drove around to the back. "I've NEVER seen a house THIS big!"

As the limo came to a stop, Benji pointed toward the rear door of the house. "Who's that?"

Teri looked to where he was pointing. "It looks like our welcoming committee, and they're wearing their formal towels! The taller one is Justy, the twins are Jamie and Jacob."

When they reached the limo, Justy ripped the door open. "No fair, Aunt Teri! Y'all got the Hummer! Where's our new bros?"

Teri chuckled. "How did I know you three would have your radar on? Settle down, let us out of the car at least!"

Justy glanced at his little brothers. "Okay, Aunt Teri. But Sammy and Sebastian need to stay in there with the new twins. The seven of us gotta talk. Pop is waitin' for y'all inside; Mark's comin' to show you in."

Teri shook her head and grinned as she climbed out. "Justy, I think you've been taking lessons from Cory. You switch from a normal teen to all business like a pro."

"What can I say, I taught him everything he knows!" Justy giggled as he climbed inside the limo.

"I HEARD THAT!" Cory exclaimed as he ran up and jumped in behind Justy. "Watch it, I'll set Timmy and Ricky loose on you!"

"Whatever," Justy said as he reached over and closed the door.

Cory grabbed a seat next to Justy and looked across at the newest additions to the group. It was obvious that they were not comfortable with the sudden invasion. Cory decided to try to break the ice by doing introductions. "Eli, Benji, welcome to the family. This goofball sitting next to me is Justy, the terror on your right is Jamie, and his mirror image on your left is Jacob."

Before Cory could add more, Justy jumped in. "And he's Cory, living proof that you don't need a brain to survive."

"Yeah, you're just jealous. You wish you were as smart and cute as me!"

"Whatever, Cory. Don't even go there; remember, I know you! When they were handing out brains, you thought they said drains and picked up a clogged one."

"Bite me, Justy!" Cory exclaimed as he took a playful swat at him.

"Yeah, right! Like I'd take that chance; I ain't gonna get rabies!" Justy replied as he scampered across the limo.

Cory turned his attention back to Elijah and Benji. "Ignore him, guys. He's spent too much time in the pool and flooded his brain."

Justy giggled as he moved over and wiggled his way in between Eli and Benji. "Give it up, Cor. You're tryin' to fight a battle of wits unarmed. Guys, don't worry about him, we just keep him around to scare the rats off."

Sammy saw their expressions and leaned over so that both Eli and Benji could hear him. "Don't worry, they're not gonna fight. I didn't know what a real friend was 'posed to be like until I saw these two."

As if proving the point, Justy waited until Sammy sat back, then launched himself across the limo, stealth pouncing Cory. After a few seconds of tickling, both boys leaned back onto the seats and placed an arm over each other's shoulder, both sporting mile-wide grins.

"Sammy's right," Cory said to the shocked boys. "Justy and I mess around a lot, but both of us have each others back. We're actually your official welcoming committee; we figured you might wanna know a few things before you meet the rest of the guys. First thing is, Jamie and Jacob are our resident mind readers. Right now, the only ones who know the full story about what happened to you guys and what you can do are sitting in here. Don't be afraid to let the rest of the guys know, none of them are gonna laugh at you. Jamie told me you had a really kewl family; if you give Doc and all of us a chance you'll have another one. I can tell you that a lot of the kids you'll meet today don't know what it's like to always have had a family who loves them no matter what. Eli, Benji, you've got a special gift. I'll bet you were given that gift to make up for the injuries you've got now. Jamie, Jacob, and Justy were helped by a very famous Vulcan to learn how to use their minds to their full potential. If you guys let them, they might be able to save you some learning time."

Eli looked over at Sebastian, who nodded his head. "That sounds kewl, but do you EVER stop talking, Cory?"

"Yeah, really! I was fallin' asleep!" Benji added.

Sammy was all giggles as he jumped in. "Naw, Sean has to kiss him to shut him up!"

"And you don't EVEN wanna know how he shuts Sean up!" Sebastian finished.

As Jamie and Jacob gave a chorus of 'EWWWWW', Cory turned beet red and said "Okay, I get the hint! We talked it over in case you said okay, and Jamie would like to work with you and Sebastian, Eli. Jacob said he thinks he'll do better with you and Sammy, Benji. Justy and I will be here if anyone needs a hand."

\* \* \*

### **Another part of Orlando:**

Sean looked at the group gathered around him. "Byron, you sure you're up for this? It might not be pretty."

Byron grinned. "Hey, if your boyfriend can handle it I can! Besides, you heard Dad - I might as well get used to it."

"Good point! I'll be sure to tell Cory your high opinion of him," Sean giggled. He then

turned to Lt. Barnes. "Well Matt, I guess it's time for you to enjoy one of the perks of your new job. Let's hit it!"

Matt grinned. "I know this sounds sick, but I think I'm going to enjoy this!" He put the Jeep in gear and drove the last three blocks to their destination. As he set the parking brake, the grins of a minute ago disappeared and were replaced with determined frowns.

Sean led the procession down the dirt path through the unkempt yard. "Watch the second step, it's falling off," he announced as they mounted the porch. Once everyone was in position, he knocked on the door.

An unkempt man in jeans and a dirty tee shirt opened the door. "Yeah, whadda you want?"

Sean forced a genuine-looking smile. "Hello Mr. Heinz. I need to see Antonio."

"You got the wrong house kid. Get outta here," Heinz growled as he tried to close the door.

Sean put his foot in the door. "Let me make it clearer then. I'm Ensign Sean Short of the Starship *Enterprise*, representing Starfleet Command. These gentlemen with me are Byron Tecumseh, representing Federation Youth Services, and Lieutenant Matthew Barnes of Starfleet Security. We have the right house; I would suggest you open the door voluntarily. Otherwise, you ain't gonna have a door. As I said, we need to see Antonio."

Heinz opened the door as if he was letting them in, then slammed it as soon as Sean's foot was out of the way.

"Look out, Sean!" Byron growled.

Sean moved to the side just in time as Byron delivered a flying drop kick to the door. The kick was more than the old wooden door could handle; with a loud crash it splintered into two pieces and fell open. As soon as Byron was clear, Sean and Matt jumped through the doorway with their phasers drawn.

Sean looked around and saw that Heinz had pulled a gun out of a drawer and was pointing it towards him. Without a second thought, Sean fired his phaser and dropped Heinz. Matt rushed over and restrained the stunned man before he could regain consciousness while Sean covered him.

While they were busy with Heinz, Byron ran past them towards the back of the house. A few seconds later, Byron yelled "SEAN, GET BACK HERE!"

Matt nodded to Sean. "Go ahead, he ain't going anywhere. I'll call in for a pickup while you help Byron."

"Coming!" Sean yelled back as he ran to join Byron. He ran down the hall and through the only open bedroom doorway. What he saw as he entered the room made him come to a sudden halt.

Chained to the bed in the middle of the room was an obviously frightened nine-year-old boy. His long auburn hair was in tangles, and the sheet under him made it obvious he had just recently put up a serious struggle. Upon taking a second look at the thin, pale boy; Sean realized what the struggle was about. The boy's anus was inflamed and bruised, and even from the doorway, Sean could see a white substance still trickling out.

Sean turned his head and yelled angrily out the doorway. "Matt! Kill that son-of-a-bitch!" He then walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. He reached out and gently brushed some hair out of the boy's eyes. As Byron looked for the keys to the shackles, Sean began trying to calm the kid.

"Hey little buddy, I'm Sean and that's Byron over there lookin' for the keys. Don't worry, you're gonna be safe now. Are you Antonio?"

The frightened boy nodded his head slightly, still unsure about his visitors.

Sean smiled. "I was hoping so. Don't worry about your father. We've got a friend from Starfleet Security taking care of him right now. Where he's going, he's going to be on the receiving end of what he's done to you - if they don't kill him first. A couple of your friends were worried about you. What do you think about going to see Elijah and Benji?"

"Are they okay? Daddy told me they died," Antonio answered in a small voice.

"They ain't dead, but they both got hurt and could use a friend right now. Eli lost an arm and leg in the crash, and Benji lost part of his hand. Can you still be their friend with them being hurt?"

"Yeah, I'm just glad they didn't die. You ain't gonna tell them what I did are you?"

Just as Sean was about to respond, Byron yelled out "Got it!" and ran back to the bed. He immediately unlocked both of Antonio's hands, then moved to his feet. As soon as the boy's hands were free, Sean pulled him up into a hug. "Antonio, you didn't do anything wrong, and what was being done to you is over."

Antonio sat limp in Sean's arms for almost a minute before Sean's words sunk in. Once it hit him, Antonio slowly wrapped his arms around Sean and began silently weeping tears of relief. Byron slid across the bed and joined the embrace from the back, wrapping his arms around both boys.

Five minutes later, Matt entered the room and found the three boys still in their embrace. He walked over and sat next to them, then quietly asked "Is he okay, Sean?"

Sean turned his tear-stained face towards Matt. "I don't know, Matt. I really don't know. He was raped by his own father while chained to the bed. He's safe now, but I think its gonna take a lot to be okay."

Matt had to swallow before he could reply. He looked at the thin arms wrapped around Sean and made his decision. "Byron, could you go get the tricorder out of the Jeep? You've got some work to do."

As soon as Byron moved away, Matt reached over and began softly rubbing Antonio's upper back. "Hey Antonio, I'm Matt. I just sent your father off so he can be punished for what he's done to you. I promise he's never gonna touch you again. In fact, if it's okay with you, I'd like for you to live with me from now on so that I can protect you."

Antonio turned his head slightly towards Matt, and then reached up with his left hand and slowly ran it over Matt's face. "Why're you cryin'?"

Matt gently clasped the small hand. "I'm crying because a sweet little guy like you should have never even heard about the things that were done to you. Would you like to sit over here with me, then Sean can see if he can find you something to help the hurts and some loose clothes to wear that won't make you hurt worse."

Antonio timidly slid off of Sean and onto Matt's lap. As soon as Matt reached a protective arm around the boy, Antonio wrapped both arms around Matt and pulled himself tight against Matt's chest. Once Sean was out of the room, Antonio timidly asked Matt, "Did you kill my daddy like Sean told you to?"

"No, little buddy. I wasn't that nice to that idiot. Your OLD Daddy has gone to a Federation jail. How would you like to listen while I call in and tell my bosses what to do about him?"

"You're REALLY gonna make sure he can't come get me?"

"Yes I am. In a few minutes there is going to be no way he can even get near you. Can you hand me my communicator from under your butt?"

Antonio relaxed slightly, and even giggled a little as he retrieved the communicator for

Matt. He tensed up for a few seconds when Byron came back in the room until he recognized him, but then relaxed and listened while Matt reported in.

"Security Central, this is Lt. Barnes."

"This is Central, Ensign White. Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Ensign. Stand by to log official charges against a Mr. Heinz, currently in holding."

"Logging in progress. You may proceed Sir."

"This is Lieutenant Matthew Barnes. The following are preliminary charges against Edward Heinz of Orlando, Florida. Attempted murder of a Starfleet Officer, Child Endangerment, false imprisonment, and rape of his nine year old son. Additional charges may be filed upon further investigation. Federation Youth Services is on site and assuming custody of said child under provisions of the Safe Haven Act. Stop log."

The reply was in a tone that would cut titanium. "Rest assured, Sir, that I will ensure ALL appropriate personnel are notified of these charges." In a calmer voice the Ensign continued, "May I ask how the young boy is doing?"

Matt gave a small smile; from experience he knew that Edward was going to have an extremely rough night tonight. "He's sitting right here listening to us. Considering the day that he's had, I would say he's doing okay."

"What's his name?"

"Antonio."

"Hey there, Antonio! I'm Ensign White. I know Lt. Barnes probably already said this, but you are not going to have to worry about your old daddy ever hurting you again. He broke a lot of laws, laws that are going to put him in jail for a long time where he can't hurt anyone. The best part is, you are gonna meet a lot of people who want to help you start a new life where you don't have to worry. Can you promise me you'll let them help you?"

Antonio looked up at Matt, wordlessly asking if it was okay to answer. Matt smiled and nodded, then Antonio said shyly "Okay, I promise."

"Thanks lil' guy! Can you do me a big favor? Tell Lieutenant Barnes that I just got a message back from Holding saying they are taking care of his problem. I need to get going, but before I do I've got a secret for you - Lieutenant Barnes has ticklish feet!"

Antonio giggled as he replied "You're silly! I'll tell him!"

"Thanks Antonio. I'll talk to you later! White Out."

Matt whispered to Antonio. "Say 'Antonio out'."

"Antonio Out!"

Matt took the communicator back and made sure it was in standby. He then wrapped both arms around Antonio and gave him a gentle hug. "You feel a little safer now, lil' buddy?"

"Yeah. What did he mean about a problem?"

"Let's just say your old Daddy is not going to get much sleep for the next few days. The guys I work with don't like seeing kids get hurt; so when someone like your old Dad comes in after doing things like he did to you, they make sure he pays for it."

Sean came back in the room with a small pile of clothes. "I just talked to Mom and Doc. They said we need to head over to the Camp. They'll meet us there, and then we can finish up after Doc has fixed this little elf up. Oh, great catch Byron; John's got guys on the way to follow up, but from what I saw you just found a bunch of stuff which is gonna make our hunting go a LOT faster!"

A couple of minutes later, Antonio was dressed. Matt picked him up and placed Antonio on his hip. "You know something? I think you do kinda look like a little elf! Pretty soon you are

gonna be my little elf, how's that sound?"

Antonio giggled. "You're really silly, I ain't no elf! I guess you can call me one if I get to stay with you though."

Sean giggled at the exchange. "Hey, Antonio, this is the last time you're gonna have to be in this house; look around and see if there's anything you wanna take with you. Byron and I are going to grab all of your clothes for you."

Twenty minutes later, they were satisfied that Antonio had everything he wanted to keep. Sean was just finishing strapping everything down into the back of the Jeep when a car pulled up and three Federation Security officers climbed out. Matt walked over and briefed them quickly, then joined the other three back at the Jeep. "Okay, it looks like we're ready to roll. Which one of these guys do you want to sit in the back seat with you, Antonio?"

After thinking for a second, he replied. "I wanna sit with Byron. I wanna know how to break doors like that!"

Matt lifted the giggling boy up and sat him in the back seat of the Jeep. "As you wish, my elven prince!"

Byron climbed in next, and began making sure Antonio was strapped in properly. As he worked, he said softly "You know what, lil' buddy? You are going to surprise Elijah and Benji big time! A couple of the guys can hear what people are thinking, that's how we found out about you. When you meet Kyle, Jamie, and Jacob you can thank them. Jamie and Jacob found out about you, they let Kyle know, and Kyle called us."

"You two ready back there?" Matt asked.

"Yeah!"

"Great! Let's go home!" Matt announced as he started the Jeep.

\* \* \*

### **Southcrest Ranch:**

Aaron knocked on the limo door before opening it and climbing in. "How's it going, guys?"

"Oh my God! You look just like Aaron Carter!" Eli exclaimed.

Aaron chuckled. "I hope so! Since I AM Aaron Carter, it'd be kinda weird if I looked like someone else!"

Justy grinned. "If it was me, Airhead, I wouldn't admit that! Aaron, this is Elijah and Benji. Guys, meet Aaron - living proof that a brain is not required to make music."

"You're goin' swimming later, Justy!" Aaron replied. "Right now, if you guys are almost done, Mom is calling a meeting across the road."

Cory scanned the three sets of twins sitting across from him. "Well guys, what do you think? Do you need more time, or have you got it all figured out?"

"I think I've got it now," Benji replied. "I'm not the one who has to count on floating to move though." Everyone looked at Eli. "How good have you got it, bro?" Benji asked.

Eli grinned. "As long as 'Bastian is with me I'll be fine. Jamie figured out that the two of us had a natural link, so he can help some." He paused a second before adding "I guess I'm about as ready as I can be, it's just gonna take practice now."

"Awesome!" Cory replied. "I guess we're ready then, but I want to say something first."

Everyone in the car groaned theatrically, then giggled when Cory stuck out his tongue in defiance.



"Everyone's a critic!" Cory giggled before continuing. "Seriously, there's a whole bunch of people in this car right now who I'm really proud of. First is Jamie and Jacob; the two of you are doing awesome, it's great to see how well you are adjusting to being real kids. Justy, when these guys called you their angel that said it all, but you still are the best big brother I could ever wish for Jamie and Jacob to have. 'Bastian, Sammy, you guys are awesome. You guys left this morning to try to help a couple of kids you didn't even know, and came back with two new friends. Speaking of which, Eli and Benji, you guys hung in there when a lot of people would've gave up. Aaron, you were right that you can't replace Mikey; but you have still managed to be there when you were needed. All of you are great, and I'm proud to call each of you my brothers."

Cory made the rounds of the group, giving each a hug of appreciation. Once Cory finished, Aaron got up. "Since we're all in the limo, I'll just drive us over there. Everyone else has already headed over."

"QUICK! FIND THE CRASH HELMETS!" Justy yelled in mock panic.

Aaron casually flipped a one-fingered salute at Justy then headed for the door.

"Wait 'til I tell David you're making offers again!" Justy giggled in reply.

"That wasn't an offer, Munchkin!" Aaron chuckled. "Now get dressed, we don't need you three scaring the kids there!"

Justy waited until Aaron was out and just about had the door closed before yelling "It must be your IQ then, Airhead!"

The limo dissolved into giggles at the exchange of insults. Eli recovered first and turned to Justy. "Man, how do you get away with talking to Aaron like that? And where's his bodyguards?"

Justy giggled his response. "Man, Aaron and I have been running around together since I could walk! Don't take our fake arguments seriously; it's just our way of having fun. As far as bodyguards, if you really knew the security here on the Ranch, you wouldn't ask. There's things about it I haven't figured out yet!" He glanced out the window, grinned, and added "Hold on guys, Aaron's taking a short cut. He's gonna be SOOOOOO dead when Mark catches him!"

After a couple of minutes of bouncing around, Aaron came over the intercom. "Thank you for joining us today on AC's Offroad Tours! If you will shift your attention to the passenger side of the limo, you will see the future headquarters of Clan Short. As you can see, to the west is the recreational area, equipped with an indoor Olympic pool, a hot tub, weight room, game room, and a full size sauna imported from Finland. It is rumored that the unattached members of the clan will have apartments above the recreational area so that they will have easy access to the facilities. To the east is the residence of the Federation Youth Services Director and senior Medical Officers. The big round building behind it is the Clan Operations center, and the other buildings are family housing." Aaron then turned onto the winding driveway and headed towards the road.

As they neared the entrance to the property, Justy spoke up. "Eli, we need to ask a favor of you. None of us have found a gate we like to put out here; since you are a natural artist, could you design one for us?"

Eli blushed. "I ain't that good!"

"Yes you are, it's just that nobody has really challenged you. Go for it, and have fun with it."

"Okay, I'll try."

A couple of minutes later, they pulled into Camp Little Eagle. It took a couple of tries for Cory to recognize the two little boys that ran up to the limo; between their native dress and their face paint, both Timmy and Ricky could pass for totally different kids. Cory led the group out of the limo, and found himself carrying Timmy a few seconds later.

"Hey kiddo, why the face paint?" Cory asked as he kissed Timmy's cheek. "Did we go to war without anyone telling me?"

Timmy giggled as he replied "DAAADDDYYYYYY! You're SILLY! You know it's 'cuz them bad F-Bee-Eye guys tried to hurt Unca Kelly and tried to take Ricky's new brothers. Unca John says he's got it taken care of, but you gotta tell us it's okay."

Cory smiled as he regarded the boy in his arms. "You know what, son? I've got a better idea; why don't we let William and Duke decide? They know if it's safe better than I do, and that way you can warn me without saying anything."

Timmy thought it over. "Okay Daddy. I hope I'm as smart as you when I grow up!"

Cory pulled Timmy tight against him. "Thank you, Son," Cory whispered as they headed over to where Teri was standing.

Behind them, everyone except Eli had exited the limo. They all watched as Sebastian reached in to steady Eli and helped him out. Eli was unsteady as he took his first hesitant steps with the knee unlocked on his new right leg.

"Come on Eli, you're doing fine," Sebastian softly encouraged while holding Eli's hand. "Keep going, lift it a little more, that's great!" As they slowly continued ahead, Sebastian kept up the support, paying more attention to how Eli was doing than to what he was saying. "Great job, Eli, you've got it. I love you!"

Both boys came to a sudden stop as each of them realized, at the same time, what Sebastian had just said. Eli slowly turned to Sebastian, holding his hand firmly to keep him there. "Did you really mean that? Even with my screwed up body, did you mean that?"

Sebastian nodded his head and shyly answered. "Yeah, but I hate it when you say your body is screwed up. You may look different, but you ain't screwed up. I'd love ya' no matter how many arms and legs you had."

Tears began running down Eli's face. "Hug me, 'Bas, please?"

As the two boys embraced, Eli whispered "I just realized I love you too, 'Bastian. You don't care what I look like. I'll try not to say I'm screwed up anymore. Would you like to be my boyfriend?"

"Yes!" Sebastian replied as he squeezed Eli tighter. "I wanna be with you forever!"

The boys held each other until they both had their emotions under control, then continued on to join the rest of the group, arms around each other's waist.

\* \* \*

### **Camp Little Eagle, Medical Compound:**

Austin looked over the readouts on the Medical Bed one last time. "Here we go, Antonio. You might feel a little tingling while the bed is fixing you up. When it's done your butt might still be a little sore, but it's gonna be fixed from where he hurt it, okay?"

"Okay, Doc. What was that stuff that was running out? Did he pee in my butt?"

Austin knelt so he was face-to-face with Antonio. "He didn't pee in your butt, Antonio, that was semen. When you get bigger you'll make it too. It's a part of what makes babies when a man and a woman have sex. When it's a man with another man, it don't make babies but it gives each of them a little part of the other."

"Okay. Did you get it all outta me? I don't wanna have part of him with me."

Austin smiled. "I thought that's what you would want, so I programmed the bed to make sure. If you are ready, I'll start. You'll probably be put to sleep while the bed works, then it will

wake you up when it's done."

Antonio nodded his head, then laid back. Once Austin started the bed, he went over to where Matt was comparing DNA samples.

"Well Matt, it looks like you're actually using your training!" Austin chuckled as he joined Matt at the desk.

"Yep; before I joined Starfleet I was studying forensics in college. Have you ever seen this triple bump in the third helix before? Both of them have it."

Austin looked at where Matt was pointing on the screen. "No I haven't. It's not in the sexuality quadrant, that's two more helix's down. Computer, query quadrant K-27 function and analysis."

"Analysis Completed. Quadrant K-27 controls onset and duration of puberty. Sample Alpha indicates a two year long puberty at approximate age of fifteen years. Additional quadrants indicate this has already occurred, which matches entered subject data. Sample Beta indicates future puberty at age fourteen of three year duration. WARNING! DNA MISMATCH! Subject's DNA age does not match entered data! DNA age is thirty-six years old. Verify Subject age."

Austin looked at Matt in shock. "Buddy, you might be in for a long ride here! Computer, physical age verified at nine Earth years old. Subject is on Medical Bed One at this time. Re-compute."

"Acknowledged. Dimensions of subject's body indicate age of nine years, carbon data verifies age of thirty-six Earth years. Subject appears to be developing at one-quarter normal rate. Mental scan confirms mental development is concurrent with physical development. Abnormal DNA string appears to control aging of subject. Awaiting proceed order for DNA repair."

Austin turned back to Matt. "It's your call, Matt. If you say no, you are probably going to be raising him for the next forty years. If you say yes, I have no idea what the side effects will be."

Matt took about three seconds to decide. "It's time to use your new authority, Doc. The answer is no, and I want all DNA modifications locked out on him until he's legally an adult, which should be around 2055."

Austin nodded his head. "I agree Matt; there's too much uncertainty the other way." He turned to the console. "Computer, Federation Youth Services Medical override. Identify: Doctor Austin Scott Michaels. Confirmation: Seven-One-Four-November-Alpha."

"Identity confirmed. Continue, Medical override authorized."

"Subject: Antonio Fredrick Heinz. DNA manipulation and repair of quadrant K-27 prohibited under my orders. Any DNA work requires my personal presence during the procedure. Subject's records are to be locked to all except Federation Youth Services Medical personnel. Medical override to remain in effect until the Terran year 2055. Confirm."

Austin listened as his orders were read back. Once he was sure everything was in order, he continued. "Computer, transmit one copy of subject's records to Doctor Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer, USS *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-A. Mark same for his eyes only. Confirm."

Once the computer confirmed the additional orders, Austin gave the final order. "Computer, execute Medical Override."

"Acknowledged. Medical Override now in effect. Records have been successfully transmitted to Doctor Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer, USS *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-A."

Austin smiled. "Computer, override completed."

"Acknowledged."

Austin waved to Matt. "Let's see how your new son is progressing." They went over to the display and checked the readings. "It looks like he's just about finished. I just hope he heals faster than he grows."

Just then a lab technician stuck her head through the doorway. "Doctor, there is a Priority One call coming in for you from the Starship *Enterprise*. It's a Dr. Leonard McCoy, and he doesn't sound happy"

Austin grinned. "I was expecting that. Patch it in here, please."

"Yes, Doctor."

By the time Austin reached the viewscreen it came to life. "Dr. McCoy, this is Dr. Michaels. Did you receive the file I sent you?"

"Cut the pleasantries, Michaels. You're damn right I got it, and it better not be your idea of a sick joke. I want that kid's status - NOW!"

Austin pressed a series of buttons on the console. "I'm sending you a live feed from the Med Bed. The injuries are just about repaired from his ordeal. He has an abnormality in quadrant K-27 of his DNA which I believe to be responsible for his extended life cycle. His biological father shows the same abnormality, and it appears to be a dominant trait. If I understand the information correctly, we will not have the opportunity to verify this for another twenty years, when Antonio finally reaches puberty. Antonio's EX-father is in the capable hands of some of Commander Martin's finest, in custody for the crimes listed in the report from Youth Services I just sent to you; so the chances of him being in any condition for testing are zero"

Austin watched as McCoy scanned the report. Once he finished, he came back on, fuming. "Inform John that I said his men better handle it; if I get my hands on that bastard I might just forget my Hippocratic Oath. What made you put a block on DNA modifications to Antonio?"

Austin grimaced. "When we were running queries on the abnormality, the computer decided that a repair was needed and was awaiting orders to proceed. We think we know what this does, but I'm not about to experiment on a boy's life to see what happens if it's removed. Matt here is about to become his guardian under Safe Haven, and he agreed with me."

"Damn overgrown adding machines! I'm modifying your order; the timespan is now indefinite and can only be overridden by the Federation Surgeon General. The only exception is the Longevity Research Project on Vulcan; I'm gonna send them a copy of these records today and will tell them to expect a DNA sample from you within the next week. I believe Ensign Cory will be able to assist you, unless he wants a full old-fashioned physical when I get back. Remind him he's old enough for a prostate exam, he'll get the hint. Good call, Michaels, I expect to meet the young man as soon as we get back."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'll get those samples out today. You're not the only one who holds things over Cory's head! Antonio will not be a problem at all ..."

"Who you talkin' to, Doc?" a sleepy voice asked from the bed.

Austin turned and was surprised to see Antonio sitting up and stretching like a cat. "I'm talking to Doctor McCoy. He's the Chief Medical Officer on the Starship *Enterprise*. Do you want to come say hi?"

Antonio grinned as he hopped off the table and ran over to sit on Austin's lap. "Hi Doctor McCoy! I'm Antonio. Why was you talking about me?"

McCoy smiled at the boy's no nonsense approach. "Well hello there, Antonio. Doc Austin and I were just making sure that nobody could hurt you. It seems that you are a very special little boy, and we wanted to make sure that Matthew will be able to be your new Daddy forever."

Tears started falling down Antonio's face. "I don't wanna have to go hide again!" he sobbed.

Matt dropped down and wrapped his arms around Antonio. "Hey little guy, I promise we will NEVER have to hide! You are going to be joining a special extended family. All of the guys will watch out for you and be happy to let you grow up at your pace. Nobody is gonna mess with

you, if they do they're gonna have to deal with Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan. if they are stupid enough to take him on they deserve the whipping they're gonna get. Besides, I think it's awesome that I get to watch my little elf grow up for a long time!"

"Really? My old Daddy said that if anyone found out they'd put me in a hospital and cut me up."

"You don't have to worry about that, Antonio. First off, it's been thirty years since doctors did that, and second Doc Austin and I just made sure that nobody can find out; and if they do find out there is nothing they can do to mess with you. Why don't you go with Matthew and get dressed while Doc Austin and I finish up? When I get back, you can come visit the *Enterprise* with your friends, okay?"

"Kew! Thanks Doc!" Antonio gushed as he hopped up and streaked to his clothes.

Austin turned back to the console. "As I was saying, mentally he's a true nine-year-old. Doctor. You know as well as I do that there's not a nine year old boy on Earth who would miss a chance to visit the *Enterprise*!"

"You have a point. Work on getting his history. I have his records flagged so I will know of updates as you post them. Plan on getting calls well into your retirement, Doctor. You just took in a case that will probably outlive not only yourself but also your children. Let me know when that bastard that passed for a father is dead, I'm going to send a thank-you card to his funeral. McCoy out."

Austin chuckled as the screen went blank. "Did you hear that, Matt? I think I'll do the same. What about you?"

Without hesitation Matt replied. "Actually, I'll pass on that. I'm going to get my revenge by watching this cute little elf slowly grow into a fine young man. He's got a lot of years left to be a kid, and I'm going to enjoy every last one of them with him."

The next thing Matt knew, his chest was covered by an underwear-clad leech. Matt tilted his head and kissed the grinning face of the boy attached to him. "I guess I ain't gotta ask you if you approve of that idea, huh?"

Antonio giggled into Matt's chest. "I'm glad you're my new Daddy. You're nice!"

Matt gave him a quick squeeze. "When's your birthday, lil' buddy?"

"February 29th, Grandpa said that's why I grow so slow."

Matt smiled. "Did he say why being born on February 29th made you grow slow?"

"Yeah. He said that guys in our family that are born on my birthday are special and don't grow like the rest of our family. My old daddy grew like normal people, but Grandpa said his grandpa was like me. It kinda made my old daddy mad, cuz' he had to move all the time so nobody could figure out that I'm different. Why ain't we gonna have to move?"

"We're not going to have to move because we live in a house with a lot of special kids. They are not special like you, but in different ways. What year were you born?"

Antonio giggled. "1968. I bet I'm older than you, Daddy!"

Matt chuckled. "That you are, little one. Just remember, I'm supposed to be the Daddy here!" Matt tickled Antonio just under the ribs, causing him to wiggle and giggle uncontrollably. "Let's go, Squirt. You gonna travel dressed like that, or you gonna put on the rest of your clothes?"

Antonio gave Matt a sloppy kiss on the cheek then hopped down. "You're silly!" he giggled as he ran back and finished dressing.

A few minutes later, the three of them exited the medical compound and began the walk over to the main compound, Antonio happily riding on Matt's back.

\* \* \*

**Camp Little Eagle, outside the Main Compound:**

Teri, John, and Hawkeye were just sitting back watching as the Clan boys enjoyed the new pool with their new friends from Hawkeye's tribe. Teri couldn't help but smile when Justin and Brian, holding hands, walked up and joined them. "I'm glad to see that you two decided to get rid of your old partners, I think you'll be a lot happier together."

Justin grinned. "Hey, I told Rusty that I don't believe in cheating. Jason did the one thing I refuse to forgive; besides, this way the two little guys get to be brothers!"

Brian was watching Timmy, Ricky, Robbie, Johnny, and some of the younger Tribe kids as they worked on building a tower in the sandbox. "That's for sure. I had a choice between Dylan and giving Robbie a good home. It was a no-brainer, I had the divorce papers filed five minutes after we got home. I wish I could have seen our lawyer's face when he got the conference call from both of us filing at the same time!"

"You guys did the right thing, both for yourselves and the boys," John replied. "When the four of you walked in earlier I could see in their faces how happy you have made them."

They were interrupted by Robbie running up to Brian and pulling on his arm. "DADDY! LOOK! Unca Aaron is FLYIN'!"

Everyone looked up and saw Aaron flailing around in mid-air about fifteen feet above the center of the pool. As they watched, he suddenly dropped, managing to roll into a ball just before hitting the water. Brian giggled as he watched Aaron climb out and begin chasing Benji. "Don't worry, son; it's just Eli and Benji having some fun. It looks like you've got a bunch of new friends over there. Are you guys having fun too?"

"Yeah! We're buildin' a tower to the MOON!" Robbie exclaimed as he ran back to the sandbox.

"Teri, I think we need to order more sand!" Hawkeye chuckled. "I'm still amazed at how fast we got set up. I didn't realize how many members of the tribe were wasting their schooling due to not being able to find jobs to match their skills."

"That should never be a problem again, Hawkeye. Since this is basically a self-contained community, they can train for anything that interests them and have a job waiting."

Suddenly, William and Duke began flying over the kids in the compound screeching. All of the kids dropped whatever they were doing as if it was a pre-arranged signal, and headed over to the pavilion where the adults were gathered. The reason for the rush was shortly apparent as Austin, Matt, and Antonio joined them.

Austin looked out and was surprised to see his two newest sons racing to the front. When they broke through the crowd and stopped in front of him, Austin could barely contain his giggles.

"Hi Dad!" both boys chorused.

"Hey guys! It looks like you're having fun! Eli, it's great to see you've figured out a way to run, but didn't you forget something?"

Eli looked to where Austin was pointing, and giggled when he saw only one leg holding himself up. "Oops! Just a minute!" Eli put two fingers from his left hand in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. "Here leg! Get over here!"

Realizing the potential for fun, Eli played it to the hilt. He 'walked' the leg through the crowd, then made it bounce like a puppy once it was in front of him.

"Now what have I told you about running off without me?" Eli scolded. He let the leg bend over slightly so that it appeared to be pouting. "Do I have to tape you on so that I know where you are at?" The leg's top twisted back and forth. "Alright, fifteen minute time-out in the corner, then get back here where you belong!" As he shuffled the leg over to the nearest corner, the

watching crowd cheered Eli's performance.

Austin caught his breath finally and placed a hand on Eli's shoulder. "You handled that well, son. I do have to admit, that's the first time I've ever seen a leg get a time-out!"

Eli giggled. "Sorry Dad, I guess I wasn't thinking and ran off without it."

Austin smiled as he sat down in a nearby chair and pulled Eli to sit on his leg. "It's okay, Eli. I know you have to get used to it, so don't worry about getting in trouble. I do want you to let me know if it's causing any problems like sores or rashes, but if you just need to take it off for a while I don't mind at all. What do you think about all of your new friends?"

Eli gave Austin a big grin. "They're awesome! Douggie, he's one of the Indian kids, is missin' an arm too; we was talking a lot and he's helped me figure out how to do stuff I used to use two hands for. All of the guys have been cool, nobody's made fun of me or picked on me. You were right, Dad, these guys are great!"

"That's because you are a great kid, son. Do you realize that you have made my day by calling me 'Dad'?" Austin pulled Eli into a hug. "I love you, son."

Eli wrapped his arm around Austin. "I love you too, Dad."

They stayed that way for a minute, then Austin spoke. "You know, you have another friend here, one that almost all of these other guys don't know yet." He turned to Benji. "Benji, why don't you join us down here? I think you two should have the honor of doing the introductions."

Benji took a seat on Austin's other leg. Once everyone was ready, Austin yelled "Matt! Come on out!"

Matt came around the corner, Antonio walking with him and nervously clutching Matt's hand. As soon as he spotted the boys, Antonio pulled away from Matt and ran to them yelling "ELI! BEN! You're okay!"

Austin couldn't help but to smile as the three friends were reunited. As soon as they broke their three-way hug, Antonio began firing off questions.

"What happened? Why are you here now? How bad were you hurt? How do you move with only one leg now, Eli?"

Seeing that all of the questions were overloading Eli and Benji, Austin placed a finger over Antonio's mouth. "Settle down, little one. You will have plenty of time to get your answers, right now all you need to know is that you'll never be separated like that again."

The smiles that Eli and Benji flashed at Austin expressed their thanks more than words. Austin winked at Eli, then added. "You know, I think fifteen minutes are up, Eli."

"Thanks, Dad!" Eli answered with an evil grin. He turned his head to the side. "Hey leg, have you learned your lesson?"

The top of the leg wiggled in a decent approximation of a nod. "Okay, get back over here. I don't want to see a stunt like that again!" Eli then made the leg 'walk' back to him.

Sebastian came up and arrived at the same time as Eli's leg. He picked the leg up and put it on Eli's stump. Once it was in place, he latched it and stood up.

"C'mere cutie!" Eli giggled as he reached out and pulled 'Bastian to him. He gave 'Bastian a quick kiss then announced "Antonio, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Sebastian. Sebastian, this is Antonio, he's mine and Benji's friend from before the accident."

Sebastian giggled at the stunned expression on Antonio's face. "Welcome home, Antonio!" he said as he pulled Antonio into a hug. "Any friend of Eli's is a friend of mine."

Sean walked up to the boys and pulled Antonio back to his chest. "Dang Eli, when you decide to fry someone's brain cells you go all out! Do you think you could do that at a moments notice to someone you don't know?"

"Yeah, why?"

Sean rubbed Antonio's shoulders, slowly relaxing him as Sean and Eli talked. "I'll fill you guys in once we get home, but for now I'll say that you might get a chance to do it to some people who hurt your boyfriend and his brother before they moved in with us."

"That's all I need to hear!" Eli replied.

Antonio's brain finally finished processing the flood of new information it had received. "Eli, I thought you and Benji ain't supposed to do that stuff where anyone can see it?"

Eli smiled. "It don't matter anymore, bro. Everyone here knows about Benji and I; in fact we've been having fun with it all afternoon. AIN'T THAT RIGHT, AARON!?"

"Bite me, Eli!" Aaron giggled from the front of the crowd. A few seconds later he yelled, "OUCH! I didn't mean it literally!"

"Open mouth, insert foot, babe!" David giggled from beside him. "Ohhh, that's gonna leave a mark!"

Antonio looked over at the commotion, then snapped his head around to look for Matt. "DAAAD!"

Matt ran over. "What's wrong, son?"

Antonio pointed towards Aaron. "Is that really Aaron, Nick and Ashley Carter, David Gallagher, JC Chasez-Dodds, Brian Littrell, and Justin Timberlake over there? Why are they here?"

Matt chuckled. "I told you this was a special group! Yes, that's them. They're all part of your family now, you'll get to meet them as soon as Teri makes you my son for real."

Antonio giggled as he replied, "Well, let's hurry up then; unlike me you're getting old! Which one is Teri?"

As Antonio dragged Matt over to Teri, Benji leaned over to Austin. "Dad, does that mean you know about Antonio?"

Austin smiled. "Yes son, we know about him not growing like you. Matt and I have made sure his secret is safe, and I promise he'll never have to move to protect himself ever again. Let's join them, Teri's going to finalize our family, too."

A few minutes later, Teri was guiding Byron as he completed his first Safe Haven Act inductions. Once he finished, Teri made her official announcement. "First things first, I want to congratulate Austin, Carrie, and Matt on their new sons. Benji, Elijah, and Antonio; welcome to the family!" Teri then motioned to Jamie and Jacob to join her. Once they walked up, she continued. "I think these two boys deserve special recognition. When they were found, they were scared to do anything without permission. Today they took the initiative, and acted as soon as they discovered a possible kid in trouble. They contacted Kyle, who called Sean and passed on the details. Thanks to them, Antonio is safe with his new Dad. Way to go, guys; I'm very proud of you." Teri leaned down and gave both blushing boys a hug.

As soon as they ran back to rejoin Justy, Teri continued. "Chief Tecumseh and I discussed the current Clan structure, and determined it would be best for Derek to remain in his position as Teacher and assign Byron as liason between the Clan and the Tribe. Charles will work with the Orlando crew, and both boys are now authorized to perform Safe Haven Act extractions in the field. This should help you guys with the kids out there, since your chances of getting near them with an adult are almost zero. Cory, Sean; take these guys around and make sure they meet everyone. John and I are going to go figure out how we're getting home!"

\* \* \*



**Orlando Interplanetary Spaceport:**

Sean went into shock as the limo pulled onto the Shuttlecraft Landing Field. "John, how did you manage this?"

"It wasn't hard. It seems that some hot-shot Ensign got orders to complete his Atmospheric Certification. Oh, that's right, these are for you."

Sean opened the dispatch and read it to himself.

*From: Captain James T. Kirk, USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-A*

*To: Ensign Sean Short, Helm Division*

*Ensign Short.*

*Upon review of your flight records, I have determined that you require completion of your certification flight for your atmospheric pilot's license. Arrangements have been made for the flight. I expect to find a glowing report waiting for myself and Commander Dodds in the morning. Good Luck, Sean.*

*(Signed) James T. Kirk Captain, USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A*

Sean grinned. "That's pretty sneaky, John. Who's certifying me?"

Matt raised his hand. "I am, and I expect you to stay ABOVE any bridges we get near."

"Hey, I was only the co-pilot on that trip! Uncle Chip was the pilot!" Sean giggled.

Matt grinned back. "Yeah, but half of Starfleet knows about it! I've already reviewed your audio logs from previous flights, and I'm passing you on communications. Let's see if you can pilot as well as you talk."

A minute later, they pulled up to their designated shuttle. As they prepared to exit the limo, Sean went into work mode. "Mr. Short, could you please ensure our passengers get seated properly and belted in?"

"Yes, sir," Cory replied with pride.

\* \* \*

**Shuttlecraft Newton:**

While Cory was getting everyone settled, Sean submitted his flight plan. He had just received approval when Cory came forward. "Sean, we have a problem. I don't know how to belt in William and Duke."

Sean thought for a second. "Bring Timmy and William up here. Timmy's rode in shuttles before, so William should be able to figure out from his memories of the trips what will work."

Cory ran back and returned a few minutes later with Timmy and William.

Sean turned to Timmy. "Hey, kiddo. We need you to ask William to help us. He can't use a seat belt like you; so I need you to let him see what a shuttle ride is like, and then see if he has any ideas on how he would be safe."

Timmy concentrated for a minute, then smiled. "He says it's easy, Pop. Just fold down the back seats and fasten the belts across them. Him and Duke can hold on to the belts; he says it's easier than grabbin' a fish after diving a couple hun'ed feet."

"Thanks son, and thank William for me. Go on back so your Daddy can get you fastened back in, then he'll fix it up for our feathered friends."

Once the cabin was clear again, Sean turned to Matt. "Mr. Barnes, begin preflight."

"Aye, sir."

Once they finished the check and double-check of the instruments, Sean turned towards the passenger area. "Mr. Short, are all passengers and cargo secured for flight?"

"Yes, sir," Cory replied.

"Thank you," Sean replied before turning back to his console. "Mr. Barnes, open our flight plan and request clearance to depart."

"Aye, sir." Matt placed the headset on, and dialed the tower frequency on the communications board. "Orlando Control, this is shuttle *Newton*. Requesting clearance for departure."

"Shuttle *Newton*, this is Orlando Control. Please state names of pilot, co-pilot, and destination."

"Orlando Control, this is shuttle *Newton*. Pilot is Ensign Sean Short, co-pilot is Lieutenant Matt Barnes. Destination is Des Moines, Iowa."

"Acknowledged, *Newton*. Landing pad is clear. Ignite engines and standby for clearance."

"*Newton* standing by. Thank you, Orlando." Matt turned to Sean. "We are cleared to fire up the engines, then hold for flight clearance, Ensign."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"*Newton*, this is Orlando Control."

"This is *Newton*. Go ahead, Orlando," Matt replied.

"*Newton*, you are number one for takeoff. You are cleared bearing three-two-seven, altitude four-eight thousand feet. Transfer to Chicago Control for further instructions upon entering Central Time Zone. Have a good flight."

"Acknowledged, Orlando. *Newton* number one for takeoff bearing 3 2 7, cruising altitude 4 8 thousand feet, transfer to Chicago Control upon entering Central Time Zone. Thank you, and have a good day. *Newton* out." Matt closed the channel then turned to Sean. "I guess that trip with your Uncle Chip did some good."

"I hope so. I want Uncle Chip to be proud of me."

"I know he will, Sean. I'll make sure he gets a copy of today's flight log as well. You're gonna do a great job, Sean. I have every confidence in you."

"Thanks, Matt." Sean beamed with pride at the praise from Matt. He then scanned the panels in front of him with renewed confidence as he lifted off and began their journey home.

\* \* \*

### Short Residence, Des Moines, IA, later that night:

The boys had finished dinner and were upstairs getting ready for bed. Kelly noticed Antonio sitting on the edge of the bed with a downcast look, so he went over to see what was wrong.

"What's up, man?"

"I know I'm too old to cuddle, but seeing all you guys with your cuddle partners makes

me want someone too," Antonio answered in a shamed tone.

Kelly sat down and placed an arm around Antonio. "I know in a way I'm younger than you, but I think you've been told to look at it all wrong. The way we've got it figured, it takes four years for you to grow like I do in one year, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, even though you see a lot more in four years than I do in one, your brain probably grows just like your body. In fact, Jamie said he's positive it's growing just like your body, it just has more room to store information than other nine-year-olds. What you need to do is just count your birthdays, the only difference between your years and mine is my year has twelve months and yours has forty-eight months. Now get rid of that frown and get over here with Byron and me; we're the official cuddle pile for those without their own partner. Just promise not to worry if you wake up with a sticky belly or back; I found out the hard way that sleeping nude can make guys my age squirt without warning."

Antonio slowly smiled. "You know what, I think you're right. I need to just be a nine year old for now. I'll be okay if you squirt, I like all of you guys so I don't mind a part of you soaking into my skin. Let's go to bed!"

As Kelly walked over to dim the lights, Cory whispered to Sean. "Babe, that just settled any doubts. We picked the right guy to be in charge of the kids."

Sean pulled himself tighter to Cory's chest. "I agree, babe. Goodnight, I love you."

"I love you too, Teddy Bear."

## Chapter 31

Antonio wiggled from between Kelly and Byron. "I gotta pee!" he mumbled as he crawled off of the bed and ran to the bathroom. When he came back into the bedroom, he was surprised to find Kyle and Ty sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for him. "What are you guys up for?"

Kyle smiled. "We got up to help our new brother. Jamie, Jacob, and I had a talk while you were coming home. Your old family messed with your head pretty bad, didn't they?"

Antonio gave the boys a shocked stare. "They kinda tried, but I didn't let them."

Tyler shook his head. "They let you think that, bro. Grab some shorts, Mom's lettin' us use her office. Let's go get their junk outta your head."

A few minutes later, the three boys quietly slipped out of the room and padded downstairs. Teri was at the table having her morning coffee, and looked up as the boys appeared.

"Hey guys! Tyler, you didn't wake Antonio up this morning to help him, did you?"

"MOM! No way, we waited for him to get up! Can we take some cereal into the office?"

Teri shook her head. "No way! I really don't feel like cleaning Coco Puffs out of the computers. All three of you take a seat, I'll get you some quick breakfast before you take over the office. Antonio, do you like Coco Puffs or is there something you like better?"

"If you have Apple Jacks, I'd like some of them please, Mrs. Short," Antonio responded shyly.

Teri stood up and walked around to Antonio. As she pulled him into a hug, she softly said "Antonio, thank you for trying to be so polite. I know this goes against what you have been told over and over, but I think both of us would be a lot more comfortable if you were to call me Teri or Mom. Just about all of the boys call me mom at least occasionally, there is no reason you can't do it too if you want to. As far as the Apple Jacks go, you don't ever need to be shy about asking for food you like. If it's not here, Helen will get it for you. This time you got lucky, John is an Apple Jack freak, it looks like he's got to learn to share with you now!"

"But kids ain't supposed to call adults by their first names," Antonio whimpered.

"Just remember - you are very special, little one. You are so special that all of us adults sat down and talked last night about how we could help you. You are so special that two of your new brothers are giving up their morning cuddle time to try to help you. You are in a tough position; you are nine, but you are also almost as old as me. Everyone here agrees that it does not matter what year you were born, we are counting your birthdays. That means you have the same rights and live by the same rules as any other nine-year-old in this house; once you turn ten, everything adjusts accordingly. It also means you are expected to act like a kid, not a miniature

adult. This is your home now, and I do not believe in forcing a kid to be formal in their own home. Now do you understand why I would like for you to either call me Teri or Mom?"

"Yeah, I guess so. What's gonna happen if I mess up?"

Teri giggled. "You get the same as the rest of these goofballs when they do it, sometimes I think on purpose. I'll remind you and possibly give you a playful swat on the butt if I think you are just having fun. You can ask Tyler, he used to be the worst one."

Antonio smiled. "Wow, this is gonna be totally different from my old family."

Teri gave him a squeeze. "I bet it will, this is different from a lot of families; but it lets you guys grow up at your pace. Are you ready for those Apple Jacks?"

Antonio giggled. "You know, you even SOUND like a Mom! Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks ... Mom."

Teri kissed Antonio's forehead. "Now you sound like one of my boys! Have a seat, three bowls of cereal coming up!"

As soon as the boys finished inhaling their morning snack, they went into the office and closed the door. Kyle and Tyler sat on opposite sides of Antonio and placed their arms around him.

Kyle began describing what he knew. "Antonio, Mom kinda showed you what we were talking about. There's a little more; all the stuff you should know from since you were born is locked in your head. Jamie thinks it was hypnosis, he says it looks like every year they made you start over at your age, they skipped it on your birthday. We don't know how to fix it, but we think Ty's Uncle Mikey can, so I'm gonna call him."

As soon as Kyle spoke his name, Mike appeared in the center of the room. "You rang, oh miniature climber of curtains?" Mike chuckled.

Mike ignored Kyle sticking his tongue out and focused on Antonio. Upon seeing the fright in the young boy's face, Mike unfolded his wings to their full span and highlighted his halo. "Shhh, relax little one. I am one of the good guys, I'm Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Guardian of Gay and Abandoned Children." Mike caused a chair to slide over, and he took a seat. "Please come here and have a seat, Antonio."

"H ... Ho ... How do you know my name?" Antonio stuttered.

Mike smiled and held out his arms. "I know things about you that you don't know yourself. I was there when my little brother comforted you after you were unchained. You have been my responsibility from the moment you woke up yesterday morning; when your old father finalized his plans to abuse you I started working to make you safe again."

Antonio slowly stood up and timidly shuffled over to Mike. He gently poked at Mike's leg, then took a seat when he found that it felt solid.

Mike wrapped his wings around the boy and hummed softly. Antonio relaxed in the comfort of Mike's embrace and laid his head on Mike's shoulder.

Mike cuddled Antonio for a few minutes before speaking again. "Antonio, for the next month or so you are going to be getting back almost all of the memories that your old family was blocking by hypnotising you. I want you to talk with Cory, he knows how to deal with memories coming back and can help you through it. There is one memory I'm erasing from your mind, but I will tell you about it. It would hurt you too much to keep the pictures of it in your head, but you can handle knowing about what happened."

"What's that?" Antonio asked as he looked at Mike with total trust in his eyes.

"Two years ago, he did the same thing to your body that was done to you yesterday. He hurt you a lot worse that time; if it wasn't for how fast your body heals you could have died. It scared him, that's why he waited for you to grow more before trying again. Since that was before I was called to be a Saint, I wasn't around to be called to help you. I couldn't help you then, but I'm

helping you now so you don't have to re-live that pain."

Antonio pondered the new information for a minute before responding. "Thanks Saint Mikey; If it was worse than yesterday I don't wanna remember it. Why can't you make me remember everything at once?"

Mike smiled at Antonio. "Bro, you forget I'm supposed to protect you! You have a very unique brain, but even it can't handle that much information all at once. You have fifteen years of stuff that was hidden from you, it would fry your brain trying to re-file all of that at once. Cory lost about as much as you, and even coming back slowly it messed with him some."

"Okay. Why did Kyle and Ty have to call you, why didn't you just come and fix my head?"

Mike couldn't suppress a small giggle. "You are definitely still nine; full of questions and not afraid to ask them! I could have come to 'fix your head' if you had asked for it, but instead Kyle and my little brother asked for you. They are special in their own way; both of them are my helpers, which means they can call for me anytime they have someone who needs help. It also means they can do things without me having to be here, things like helping you put your memories where they belong. I'm also the Guardian Angel of this family, which now includes you. Anything that concerns my family Kyle and Ty make sure I know about; if something worries you that you think I'm needed for, just let one of them know and they will tell me. Most of the time either Cory or Sean are able to handle the problems that come up, so it's going to be rare that you need to call me."

Antonio was about to ask another question when Tyler giggled. "Dang bro, you're worse than Mom! You talked so much you put Kyle to sleep!"

Both Mike and Antonio turned their heads to look. Mike smiled at his little brother. "He's just ahead of schedule, bro. It's time for the three of you to cuddle and take a nap; you and Ky will be able to help Antonio more while the three of you are sleeping. I'll tell Mom to leave you alone until you get up on your own."

Mike glanced at the futon on the far wall and it unfolded into a bed. He carried Antonio over and laid him in the center, then carried Kyle over and placed him at Antonio's side. Kyle immediately snuggled against one side of Antonio, then Tyler climbed in and snuggled up to the other side. Mike retrieved a blanket from under the futon and spread it over the boys, then leaned over and kissed each of their foreheads. "Our Father is watching and protecting you, guys. Rest in peace and let Him guide your minds in their work."

Mike folded his wings back and left the room, the lights dimming as he went through the doorway. Teri was still at the table, she looked up and smiled when she saw Mike exiting the office.

"Well, I see Kyle knows when to ask for help! Is Antonio going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine, Mom, it's just going to take time. He has to go through the same process as Cory to get his memories back, and I eliminated the one that would have messed him up. He knows about what it was, but the actual event is gone. They need to be undisturbed until the three of them awaken on their own; Kyle and Ty are helping Antonio's brain set up a file system."

"I'm glad to see you are still the same, looking out for the kids. Thanks Mike, You are making me very proud, Son."

"Thanks Mom, even now that means a lot. I have to go, but I know the boys are safe as long as you are here. Bless you, Mother."

Teri beamed as she watched Mike fade away. Once he was gone, she sat back and watched to ensure the boys were not disturbed.

\* \* \*

Cory looked around the table, making sure everyone was still there. "Hey guys, I know lunch is done, but nobody go anywhere. We need to take care of something. Kel, Trav, Benji, can you give me a hand?"

The three boys jumped up and followed Cory upstairs. A few minutes later, they came back down carrying armloads of packages, with three large boxes following them like puppies. As they appeared in the dining room doorway, Helen joined them pushing a cart with a huge cake on it, fifteen candles burning brightly in it's center.

"Okay everybody, one ... two ... three!" Cory announced with a grin.  
Everyone except Alec stood and began singing.

*Happy Birthday to you,  
Happy Birthday to you.  
Happy Birthday dear Alec!  
Happy Birthday to You!*

Alec stood up, and with a huge grin and tears of joy running down his face walked over to the cake.

"Make a wish, Bro!" Trav said with a grin.

Alec held up his hand for quiet. Once everyone was paying attention, he spoke softly. "I really have nothing else to wish for. I have a family where I don't have to worry about being hurt. My little brother is safe and happy for the first time in his life. I have a group of friends who I call family just because they are really like brothers to me. On top of all that, I have a great new Mom and an awesome new little brother. I even found someone special to share my heart with, my boyfriend Andrew. All of my wishes have already been answered, with bonuses for having to wait." He stood still for a couple of seconds, then leaned over and blew out the candles. As he stood back up, he found himself in the middle of a four-way hug with Helen, Kelly, and Travis.

"That was the most beautiful speech I've ever heard, Alec," Helen said softly. "I'm proud to call you one of my sons."

"Thanks Mom, I meant every word," Alec replied as he wiggled around and wrapped his arms around her.

Andy came up and joined the hug. "That was awesome, Babe."

After a couple of minutes of hugs, Travis piped up. "What did you wish for, bro?"

Alec giggled. "I ain't telling, if I do it won't come true. All I can say is this is the first time I didn't wish for something for you or me."

"Aww man! Well, at least I tried!" Trav responded with a grin.

Alec shook his head. "Mom, that's the best looking cake I have ever had for a birthday. Please sit down and let us handle passing it out, you've worked too hard already." He turned to Andy and his brothers. "Could you guys give me a hand?"

The three boys nodded, and started moving the plates and silverware from under the cart to the table. Even with Alec cutting the cake, Andy taking up ice cream, and Trav and Kelly passing out the plates; it took five minutes for everyone to have their cake in front of them. Alec sat down with his plate before looking around; to his surprise nobody had touched their cake yet, not even Timmy or Ricky.

"What's everyone waiting for?" Alec asked.

Cory giggled. "C'mon Birthday Boy, everyone knows that YOU have to take the first

bite!"

Alec blushed. "Duh! Well, let's dig in!"

As soon as the first bite passed Alec's lips, the feeding frenzy began. Alec was about done when everyone on the other side of the table suddenly stopped eating and began giggling. Alec looked up, "What's so funny?"

"Look behind you!" Antonio giggled.

Alec turned his head, and found a four-inch square piece of birthday cake floating in mid-air behind him. Before he could respond, the cake slammed itself into his face. Alec turned back around and surveyed the faces around the table.

"Eli, I know I wanted another piece of cake, but I didn't want it on my face!" Alec giggled. "Just for that, you gotta let me throw you in the pool later!"

"Awww Mannn! How did you know it was me?"

"It was easy; you were the only one trying to look innocent!" Alec replied with a grin; he then proceeded to clean off and eat the mess on his face.

Sebastian put his hand over his mouth, trying to hide his giggles. "Busted, babe! That was a good one!"

Eli beamed at the praise from his boyfriend. "Thanks, 'Bas, the look on his face was worth goin' swimmin' for!"

All of the boys collapsed in laughter as Austin commented to John with a grin. "You know, I'm not sure which is worse; my son's sense of humor or your son encouraging it!"

John grinned back. "As long as they are having fun and no one gets hurt, I don't care! It's great seeing them be kids!"

"I agree!" Dan added. "Sometimes I wonder about these boys; they've been taking on things most adults couldn't handle."

Alec looked up from feeding Andrew. "You guys better be glad Mom baked this special for me; otherwise you'd be wearing it right now!"

Helen stepped in before things got out of hand. "Okay, that's enough. Austin, Dan, John; I know you were making a point, but I think it would be best to hold that discussion away from the table where you're safe. Alec, as fun as a food fight sounds, I'd prefer it if you'd try to keep away from that idea. Stick to water balloons, okay son?"

"Okay Mom!" Alec grinned. "Did you pick up any?"

Helen chuckled. "It's your fifteenth birthday, and your first one with your new family. I'll put it this way, Wal-Mart had to place an order for balloons; for some reason they ran out."

A chorus of "AWESOME" echoed around the table. Helen held up her hand. "HOLD ON! No balloons until AFTER the presents!"

"Awww"

Helen smiled. "Don't worry guys, there's plenty to keep you occupied for a while. Right now, it's time for my son to see how much he means to all of us."

Alec turned his attention to the large pile of wrapped packages in the corner of the room. "How did y'all manage to get all of that? I never saw anyone go shopping!"

Teri chuckled at his awe. "You have some very persuasive brothers. They've had us adults running in circles while they kept you occupied."

Alec looked around the table. "Thanks guys. I love all of you."

"OPEN them ALREADY bro!" Travis said impatiently. "I wanna see what ya' got!"

"Tell you what, lil' bro. Why don't you and Gabe bring them over to me? Seeing you this happy has already made this the best birthday ever."

Trav and Gabe scrambled to the pile. After looking through the boxes, Travis pulled out



one and brought it over. "This one's from me. I figured you deserved somethin' special."

"Come here, bro," Alec said as he wrapped his arms around Travis. "I already have somethin' special; a lil' bro who I was willing to give everything up for that's now the happy lil' guy I always thought he should be."

Alec released Travis and carefully opened the package while Travis watched nervously. Once the wrap was off, he opened the box and looked inside. Inside was a six-inch white ceramic dove mounted on a pedestal with a plaque mounted to the front. Alec held it up, and with tears in his eyes read the plaque.

*To Alec;*

*You believed in me when nobody else would,  
and protected me no matter how much you were hurt.  
You loved me when all I saw was hate.  
You are my shining star in a sea of darkness, my hero in times of  
trouble.  
When I was at my lowest, you gave up everything to make me safe.  
For that, Brother, you are forever my idol.  
The Dove is a symbol of peace, and that is what you gave me.  
I give you this Dove as a symbol of my love for you.*

*I will love you forever, bro.*

*Travis*

Alec carefully placed the gift in the center of the table, then pulled Travis into a tight hug. With tears flowing down his face, Alec whispered to Travis. "Lil' bro, of all the gifts I have ever got or ever will get, I am going to treasure this one the most. I love you too bro, and today you just proved that everything I went through for you was worth it."

"Do you really like it?" Travis asked, still unsure.

"Yes, lil' bro, I really love it. It's just like you, it's one of the most special things in the universe."

Trav finally smiled. "Thanks bro. I really do love you, and I meant every word on that."

"I know you did, that's why it's so special," Alec replied as he kissed Trav on the forehead.

It took a couple of minutes for the two boys to recover, then Travis went back and helped Gabe with passing out the rest of the presents. When all that was left were the three large boxes and one small one, Travis took a seat. Gabe picked up the remaining small present and brought it over to Andy. "I think you should give him this one."

Andy took the box and turned to Alec. "Babe, Trav ain't the only one who knows you are special. I hope you like this."

Alec unwrapped the package, and pulled out a blue velvet box. Inside was a gold herringbone necklace with a locket containing a lock of bright red hair in it. Alec turned and pulled Andy into a kiss, then said "I love it! Now I've always got a part of you with me! Can you please put it on me?"

Andrew smiled shyly and took the necklace. "You know what?" he asked as he placed it

around Alec's neck. "I had so much trouble figuring out what to get you that I had to call Mom and Dad! Mom said the most special thing Dad ever got her was one of these, so I asked Dad where to get one."

"Are they okay with us being a couple?" Alec asked in a suddenly worried tone.

Andy kissed Alec's nose. "Settle down, cutie. Mom and Dad ain't like that; in fact Mom wanted to know what took me so long! She said that she knew a couple of years ago that I'd end up with a boyfriend; she said somethin' about my fascination with Aaron. They both can't wait to meet you."

A smile crept across Alec's face. "Really! That'd be awesome! You got some kewl parents!"

Teri giggled as she interjected "Believe it or not, Alec, you're right. Cecil and I go way back, he's a great man. I think you and him are going to get along fine."

"Wow, thanks Teri!" Alec grinned.

Cory walked over and joined them. "Congrats bro, it looks like you got some in-laws! You still got a big present left, in those boxes. That one's from all of the rest of us, here and in Orlando."

Alec stood up, took Andy's hand, and walked over to the remaining boxes. "Which one should I open first?"

Andy grinned. "Don't ask me, nobody would tell me what they got you. I guess we can start with the smallest one."

Alec opened the offered box carefully. Once he saw the contents, all care was gone as he ripped into the rest of the boxes. Shortly he was sitting in the middle of a professional drum set with a huge grin plastered across his face. "WOW! I've always wanted some drums, but these are AWESOME! Thanks guys!"

Sean walked over and stood at the edge of the mess. "There's one more thing, bro! I have a message from Aaron; he said to tell you that once we are settled in Orlando he'll give you lessons on how to play right. Until then, PLEASE warn us so we can get out of hearing range before you practice!"

"BITE ME Sean!" Alec giggled. He turned around and said "Hey, Kyle; I know you are passing this party to Orlando, pass on my thanks to those guys too. Tell Aaron I said thanks a million and I'm looking forward to learning from him."

Kyle giggled. "I just did, Justy says to tell ya' he's already ordered five cases of earplugs. He's just kiddin' though, all of them are glad you like it."

"That's okay. I expected someone to say it," Alec said with a grin. "Would y'all mind giving me a hand getting' this all put away and getting' the trash out?"

Kelly put his arm over Alec's shoulder. "Bro, you are gonna just sit here; the rest of us are taking care of it for you. It's your birthday dude, you ain't gonna do ANY kinda work today."

Alec started to argue, but Helen stopped him. "Alec, Kelly is right. In my family you are not allowed to work on your birthday. Since you're MY son, that rule applies to you too."

Alec sat back. "Okay Mom, I guess I don't have a choice. Can I at least find someplace special to put my present from Trav?"

Cory walked over during the conversation and interrupted Helen's response. "Bro, you better believe you can. Why don't you get it and we'll go upstairs. I got a plaque from Sean that's just as special to me as that is to you; if you'd like we can put them together."

Alec smiled as he stood up. "Thanks Cor! Let's go."

\* \* \*

Teri watched with amusement as the group of soaked boys started in from the back yard. "Well Helen, those sixteen hundred balloons didn't last long!" she chuckled

"Fifteen hundred and ninety-nine," Helen responded. Teri looked to where Helen was pointing and began giggling. Timmy was using Ricky as cover and trying to sneak up on Cory. Once they were about five foot away, Ricky slipped to the side and Timmy nailed Cory between the shoulders with the final balloon.

Cory spun around in surprise and saw Timmy trying to hide his giggles. "Busted, Gizmo! Come over here and give me a hug, that was a good one!"

Timmy pounced on Cory, still giggling. "I told ya' I was gonna getcha, Daddy!" he announced as he wrapped his arms around Cory's neck.

Cory gave Timmy a quick kiss on the cheek, then shifted him so that he was sitting on his hip. "You sure did, munchkin. I'm proud of you, that was really sneaky!"

Timmy snuggled into Cory as they entered the house and went upstairs to get changed. They entered the room just as Sean announced "Put on good clothes, Mom says we're going out for dinner tonight."

A few minutes later, the boys filed downstairs. As they walked outside, their jaws all dropped. Sitting in the driveway were a pair of Midnight Blue Hummer limos, dealer stickers still in the windows.

"Who bought the Hummers?" Sean asked.

Matt raised the hand he wasn't using to hold Antonio on his hip. "I did, or actually you could say the Federation did. That one we had in Orlando worked so well for you guys that I went to bat for you and convinced my boss that they were needed."

John laughed. "Like it took you a lot of convincing! All you had to do was remind me that I get to use them too!"

Teri shook her head. "You know, I think you two are almost as bad as the boys; always looking for new toys to play with! Let's load up before you decide to buy something else."

Everyone was smiling as they climbed into the vehicles and headed out to finish the Clan's first birthday celebration.

## Chapter 32

### Chuck E. Cheese, Des Moines:

Teri couldn't help but smile as Alec came up behind her and gave her a huge hug. "Thanks for the dinner, Aunt Teri. This is AWESOME!"

"You deserved it, Alec. Go on and have some fun, enjoy your birthday!"

As Alec ran off to join the rest of the boys at the games, Helen commented "That's the happiest he's been yet. You've worked your magic again, Teri."

Teri just grinned. "Helen, the only magic I work is helping the boys feel free to be themselves. The real magic is inside each one of them."

Helen shook her head. "As the boys would say, 'whatever' Teri. Exhibit A just took his son up to trade in some game tickets, see?"

Teri looked to where Helen was pointing and smiled as she watched her son and grandson.

Cory walked up to the counter holding Timmy's hand. "Well lil' buddy, you see anything you like?"

Timmy grinned as he handed Cory his pile of tickets. "Do I got enough to get that big teddy bear, Daddy?"

"That's as big as you! You sure about that?"

"YEAH! It's KEWL!"

Cory counted out Timmy's tickets, then fished his own pile out of his pocket. After combining the two, he grinned. "It looks like you got yourself a bear, kiddo!"

Timmy wrapped his arms around Cory's waist. "Thanks Daddy, you're the bestest!"

The clerk gave Cory a puzzled look as she handed him the bear. "Why does he keep calling you 'daddy'? You're not old enough to be his father."

Cory smiled at her. "It was his fathers last wish that I raise his son, since I saved Timmy's life. Timmy chose to call me Daddy, and I'm doing my best to live up to the name."

She smiled in response. "Now I understand. There's not many guys your age who would even try to take on having a kid. You must be pretty special, good luck."

Cory blushed at the compliment. "Naw, Timmy's the one that's special; I'm just lucky to have him. Thanks for the compliment, though."

Cory jumped as Timmy suddenly gave a loud 'screech' followed by a pair of 'caws' which sounded exactly like a crow. Cory turned and looked down at his son, and almost dropped the bear when he saw Timmy's face. As Cory watched, Timmy's face went from it's earlier slight tan to a

dark brown. As the skin pigments changed, Timmy slowly regained his war paint in full glory. From across the room, an answering 'screech' was heard over the noise of the crowd.

Cory turned to the shocked clerk. "I don't know what's up, but it looks like there's about to be a problem. Pass the word to the rest of your employees, there is a possibility that some things that seem strange will happen, but don't worry. We have two Federation Security Officers here to handle problems, and can call more if needed."

The clerk ran off to pass the word, and Cory knelt down to Timmy. "What's wrong, son?"

Timmy looked at Cory with fire in his eyes. "Calvin chased down the twins and is here now. It took William a few minutes to confirm it was him. He's inside here somewhere."

Cory instantly went into defensive mode. "Can you pass messages to Ricky through William and Duke?"

"Yeah, that's easy."

"Okay, have Ricky go warn Eli and Benji; I want you to stay with your Grandma so that you can keep the grownups updated on what's happening."

"Okay Daddy. Can you carry my bear for me?"

Cory picked up the bear and weaved through the crowd with Timmy in tow. Half way there, they ran into Kyle. Cory grabbed Kyle's arm and whispered in his ear "Calvin's here, get your bro then round up the rest of the guys."

Kyle nodded his head, then ran off to begin organizing the retaliation force.

\* \* \*

Eli had released his leg, and was sitting on Sebastian's lap watching the Animatronics show. In the seat next to them, Benji was sitting with Sammy perched comfortably on his lap. Ricky ran up to the giggling couples, and started to announce his message. "Guys, Calvin's he..."

A balding man with a prominent beer belly pushed Ricky into a nearby seat. He pulled a revolver from his pocket as he spoke. "Thanks for the introduction, shrimp; but I think the ones I'm concerned about know me already. Now just sit there, and I won't have to shoot you."

Calvin turned his attention to the other boys. "Well, Jeffy, I see you've developed a taste for crips! I hope you two have taught them your techniques, I have a few friends who would love to have a boy who can't run off. Oh, by the way, you have someone else to teach." Calvin pulled the boy that had been hiding behind him to the front and pushed him so that he fell into the seat shared by Benji and Sammy.

Sammy looked at the new arrival in shock. He instantly recognized the boy, there was only one kid that he knew that had that look; at a small twelve years old, he had distinctive hazel puppy dog eyes set in a thin face under his shaggy brown hair. "Tommy?!? Why are you with IT?"

Tommy turned his head to Sammy. "Mom OD'd, so Uncle Calvin's taking care of me now. Why are you and Jeffy here in Iowa?"

"Dang, I'm sorry to hear about your mom. Our old father screwed up and hit us while a Federation Security officer was able to see it. We have a new family here, and don't gotta do the stuff Calvin wants to make us do anymore. Oh, just so you know, my bro ain't called Jeffy anymore; he's using his first name now, Sebastian. The cute guy we are squashing is my boyfriend Benji, and the matching cutie on 'Bastian's lap is Eli."

Calvin interrupted. "You can have old home week later, get up and lets get out of here."

"We ain't going anywhere you bastard!" Eli answered angrily. "As a matter of fact, I'm gonna kick your ass; that was my little brother you pushed, and NOBODY hurts my little brother." Eli then silently communicated to Benji, *'Hey bro, that looks like the kind of gun Dad had. You*

*think you can pop the cylinder with your mind?*

Benji gave a slight smile as he thought back *'That's easy; I'll take care of the gun, you handle him.'*

"Oooohhh, I'm scared," Calvin sneered as he moved the gun to point at Eli's head. "You know, on second thought I think I'll just kill you; it would slow us down too much dragging your crippled ass around. In fact, I might as well take out your boyfriend too; I never did like his attitude."

Eli cracked an evil smile. "In a way I'm glad you showed up, you S.O.B., you saved us the trouble of hunting you down. You are about to wish you hadn't got up this morning." As he said the last word, the cylinder of the revolver popped out, the bullets flew out and onto the floor, then the cylinder started spinning so fast that it began to squeal in protest.

Eli laughed. "Game's over, you lose!" he announced, as the leg Eli had leaned against the arm of the seats came up and kicked a field goal in Calvin's groin. The kick was so strong that it launched Calvin onto the stage, where he landed in agony.

As Eli and Benji checked on Ricky, Gabe and JJ came running onto the stage, both carrying phasers. They took position covering Calvin as JJ announced angrily, "Go ahead and move, dirtbag. Give us a reason to vaporize you, please."

John came up behind them. "I'll take it from here, guys; you can stand down."

"Cover him, Gabe," JJ said before turning to John. "Pop, I'm sorry but this is out of your hands. Could you please get our Clan Patriarch; we are both claiming our rights as eldest family members under Vulcan law."

John nodded his head. "I understand, JJ. I also know what punishment is allowed for his actions tonight; if you go through with it the three of us need to sit down and talk when we get home." John then turned and waved for Cory to join them.

Cory jogged over. "What's up, John?"

John stood at attention. "Mr. Short, the man on the floor has transgressed against members of your Clan. Mr. Richardson and Mr. Michaels have declared their rights as elders under Vulcan law. How do you wish to proceed?"

Cory became all business. "Commander Martin, I must review the facts before making that decision. Move the detainee to a non-public area of the building, I will instruct Kyle to extract the relevant information from the suspect and the victims and will have a reply in thirty Terran minutes."

"As you wish, Sir," John replied. He sent Matt to find a private area as Cory motioned for Kyle to join them.

Kyle walked over, and as soon as he was near Cory he said "I'm already working on it, Cory. I've got Calvin's version already, I'm working on the rest of the guys now."

"Good. Can you push it into my head, I can't use a verbal report."

"Not a problem, Jamie and Jacob are helping. Justy said to tell you the Embassy is sending over a Vulcan witness due to the gravity of the charges we already have. He will verify my report for you before you make the decision."

"Tell Justy that his logic is flawless as always."

Kyle was silent for a minute, and then stated "I have your report ready. Do you wish for Jamie to echo it to the Embassy?"

"That is acceptable. Begin your report." Cory cleared his mind and awaited the information from Kyle. Once he had all of the information, he had to struggle to keep from pronouncing sentence immediately.

A minute later, two figures materialized in front of Cory. He immediately recognized the

figure on the right and came to attention. As he extended his hand in the standard Vulcan greeting, he said "It is well to see you, Ambassador Sarek. It is my understanding that my liaison has briefed you on this disturbing situation. Is this information accurate?"

Sarek returned the greeting. "You have been informed correctly, Cory. With your permission, my assistant shall verify that your report matches the information retrieved during the investigation."

"Permission is granted, Ambassador. Please proceed."

It took five minutes to complete the mind-meld with Kyle, then another five minutes to verify Cory had the complete report. Once it was verified, Cory turned to Sarek. "Ambassador, due to the severity of the situation I ask you to also retrieve the facts. I believe your knowledge will be beneficial if my logic fails while taking this to the conclusion."

"Your request is logical," Sarek replied. Once Sarek completed the mind-meld with Cory, they went into the room where Calvin was held.

Cory walked up to John. "Commander Martin, I have reached my conclusion. Due to the severity of the crimes involved, I require Calvin Wilson be released to Clan Short for prosecution under Vulcan law."

John looked behind Cory and saw Sarek watching intently. John then looked Cory in the eye as he replied "Mr. Short, as required by treaties between Earth and Vulcan, I hereby recognize your jurisdiction in this matter and release Calvin Wilson to your custody. Will you require Federation Security to provide assistance?"

"That will be acceptable," Cory replied before turning to Calvin. "Calvin Wilson, your actions of the current Terran day and your previous actions regarding members of Clan Short have been reviewed. It has been discovered that you planned premeditated murder of two members of the Clan once you kidnapped them from this location. In addition, while on these premises you attempted to murder a third Clan member and assaulted one of the junior Clan members. This assault resulted in said member receiving two broken fingers. Under the laws of every member planet of the Federation you are a menace to society. I have also discovered that you caused Thomas's mother to overdose so that you could use him for prostitution, in addition to the outstanding charges against you for the prostitution of Sebastian and Samuel. The eldest siblings of the affected Clan members have declared their wishes to administer punishment as specified in Vulcan law for your transgressions. I grant them their right and sentence you to death."

Calvin turned pale. "You can't do that! This is America, I'm innocent until proven guilty! I want my lawyer!"

Sarek beat Cory to the reply. "Mr. Wilson, I regret to inform you that you are misinformed. Clan Short has multiple members who are capable of a primitive type of mind meld. One of those members has scanned not only yourself but all persons involved; both myself and my associate have verified his findings. His report is legal evidence in every court on Earth and throughout the Federation, and as such convicted you before we entered this room. As Clan Short is a part of my own family, I am capable of overriding Cory. His decision in this situation is logical and proper; I concur completely."

Calvin turned his head to John. "Are you gonna let them get away with this? I demand you call your Regional Commander!"

John smiled as he replied. "Mr. Wilson, I am the Starfleet Security Director for the Southeast North American Region. You were just addressed by Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan, and you were sentenced by Cory Short, Patriarch of Clan Short. If you had paid attention earlier, you would have heard Mr. Short when he informed me that he was taking jurisdiction. If I had refused him, Ambassador Sarek would have demanded the same right, and in addition would have filed a

grievance with Starfleet Security for my refusal. To put it bluntly; you started an interplanetary incident and now you have to suffer the consequences."

Calvin's reply was cut off as JJ and Gabe entered the room. They walked up and stood in front of Cory. "You called for us, Cory?"

Cory looked closely at the sober faces of the two boys in front of him. "Yes. I have determined the punishment. Mr. Wilson's actions require a sentence of death; you have the option of deferring the punishment to a third party. What is your decision?"

JJ responded first, after giving careful thought. "As eldest sibling, it is my responsibility to deliver justice for my brothers. I accept the responsibility to deliver punishment."

Gabe looked at JJ before adding "I now have the same responsibilities, and also accept my responsibility to deliver punishment."

Cory considered their responses. "I will allow you to carry out the punishment on the condition you both submit to a mind-meld to ensure there are no damaging effects after you are done. Do you accept my condition?"

Both JJ and Gabe replied at the same time "Yes, Cory."

Cory turned to John. "Commander Martin, please equip JJ and Gabe with phasers and ensure they understand operation and settings."

John spent the next five minutes ensuring both boys were prepared, then turned to Cory. "Mr. Short, your Clan members are prepared."

Cory waved both boys over to him. "Get in position on either side of me. I will count down from three, on one you both fire. Ensure your phasers are set to maximum, it is not proper to make him suffer."

The boys took position, and followed instructions to the letter. A few seconds later, all that was left of Calvin Wilson was a small amount of ash, as he had been hit by both phasers at exactly the same instant. Neither boy had a chance to realize exactly what they had just done before Sarek and his assistant stepped forward and began the mind melds to protect them.

\* \* \*

Helen and Teri relaxed as the restaurant returned to normal. It had took Matt announcing his position to convince the patrons that everything was okay, but soon after things returned to normal. Austin returned to the table, having just finished taking care of Ricky.

"How's your son?" Helen asked.

"Which one?" Austin replied with a smile. "Ricky's fingers on his left hand are going to take a bit to finish healing, but I think Timmy's fawning over him is making it worth it. Eli and Benji are huddled with Sebastian and Sammy working out their fright, and Gabe has disappeared with JJ."

Helen's reply was interrupted by a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Kelly standing there with a boy she had never seen before.

Kelly grinned shyly. "Mommy, this is Tommy. I think he's cute, kinda like a little puppy. Can I keep him?"

Helen shook her head in wonder. "Kelly, Kelly, Kelly. As glad as I am to meet Tommy, I think he has family that would complain if you pulled a Sean and Cory with him."

Tommy sobbed once before softly replying. "Sorry, Ma'am, but I ain't got no family left. My Mom died of an OD and Uncle Calvin's got himself in a lot of trouble with some kid called Cory."

Kelly saw the looks Helen and Teri exchanged at hearing Calvin's name. "Yeah Mom,



THAT Calvin. All I can say is he's in so much trouble that a certain Vulcan Ambassador has come over to witness. Aunt Teri, can you please help him? I wasn't kidding; I like Tommy and want him to come home with us."

Teri gave the two boys a small smile. "Kelly, you've been paying attention; that's good. Aaron is going to be proud of you when he hears about this. You got your wish, he can come home with you. But, Kelly, YOU get to explain to Sean, Cory, Adam, and Tyler why they have a new brother!"

Kelly pulled Tommy into a hug. "See! I told ya I'd take care of ya!" he exclaimed. After about a minute of celebration, Kelly suddenly spun and stared at Teri. "AUNT TERI! YOU are adopting Tommy?!?"

Tommy jumped in. "You really want me?! Why?"

Teri broke into a huge grin. "Nice delayed reaction, Kelly! Yes, I'm adopting you, Tommy; for two reasons. First is that in one sentence you said enough for me to see that it's time for you to have a good family; the second reason is that this is the first time I have seen Kelly this happy since he moved in. Do you think you can spare one of those hugs for your new Mom?"

Tommy threw himself into Teri's arms and began crying the tears he had been holding inside since his mother was found dead.

\* \* \*

Eli, 'Bastian, Benji, Sammy, Alec and Andrew were sitting at a table in the corner of the restaurant.

"I'm really sorry for ruining your birthday," Sebastian moaned.

Alec placed an arm around Sebastian's shoulder. "Hey bro, you didn't ruin my birthday. You guys had no control over what happened, so how can you think you did anything wrong? Actually I look at it as an extra gift; two boys I think of as family are going to be able to sleep tonight without worrying about a certain jerk chasing them down. Besides, how many times have we been told that bad things happen so that good things can follow?"

All five of the boys stared at Alec. "Whadda you mean, Alec?" Sammy asked.

"Think about it. Right now Cory, JJ, and Gabe are discussing what to do to about a seriously sick minded man. If he had not tracked you down here, what do you think he would have done with Tommy? Speaking of Tommy, did you see how him and Kelly hit it off immediately? My lil bro had the same look in his eyes when he looked at Tommy as 'Bastian gets when he looks at Eli. I really hope I'm right; if so this is definitely the best birthday ever. I'm going to take a chance and tell you my birthday wish; I wished that Kelly could find someone that makes him as happy as Andrew makes me."

Andrew giggled as he leaned over and kissed Alec's cheek. "You are something else, babe. I hope you're right; your little bro could use a partner. Speaking of which, look over there by your mom."

All of the boys turned just in time to see Tommy throw himself into Teri's arms. As they watched, Kelly came up and began rubbing Tommy's back as he leaned in and joined the hug.

Alec turned back to the table. "I know you guys didn't plan it, but I think tonight there's one more boy who is going to get a good nights sleep for the first time in a while. Sammy and Sebastian, that's happening because you were strong enough to talk about what happened to you. As far as Eli and Benji, thanks to the two of you I was able to say that to your boyfriends; if it wasn't for your special gift they wouldn't be here right now."

Alec jumped as Cory commented from behind him "You got that right, Alec." Cory, JJ,

and Gabe came around and sat down, then Cory continued. "We just did something that I hope I never have to participate in again; but I will if that's what it takes to protect you guys. All I care about right now is that you guys are all okay."

Just then Ricky noticed Gabe was out and ran over. He wiggled his way onto his big brother's lap and cuddled up closely. Gabe leaned his head down and kissed the top of Ricky's head. "How you feelin', lil bro?"

"Okay I guess. Why did that bad guy hurt me?"

Gabe gently rubbed Ricky's shoulders as he replied slowly. "I don't know, baby bro. I guess he just liked hurting kids. You're the last kid that he's ever gonna hurt though, that I promise. I waited all my life for a little brother; now I have three of them and I won't let anyone hurt any of you."

Sammy was the first to realize what Gabe implied. He turned to JJ and asked "JJ, why is Gabe so sure that Calvin won't come back?"

JJ looked at Cory; when Cory nodded his okay, JJ turned back toward his brothers. "Eli, Ben; you might wanna take a seat with Gabe and Ricky. 'Bas, Sammy; come on over and have a seat on my lap."

Once all of the boys had shifted so they were grouped by family, JJ continued. "Lil' bros, I made you a promise that I would make sure Calvin could never hurt you again. Earlier tonight I almost failed you, but in the end it worked out. I'm not going to tell you what Kyle found in his head, and Kyle is under orders from Cory not to tell you either. I can tell you that both Gabe and I, since we're the oldest brothers of our families, had a very hard thing to do to fill our roles under Vulcan law. Calvin can't hurt you anymore because he has been executed for his crimes against the five of you, along with Tommy. He was found guilty under Vulcan law, and Gabe and I delivered the punishment."

It took a second for Sammy and Sebastian to digest what JJ said. Once it hit them, they wrapped their arms around JJ and sobbed tears of relief.

Eli was the first of the trio on Gabe's lap to figure it out, and he turned to Gabe. "You did that for Ricky?"

Gabe shook his head. "No, little brother, I did that for all three of you. I know you're still getting used to it, but you two are my brothers now too. I promised Ricky when he first came home that I'd be there whenever he needed me, and that goes for you two too. I know that there's a lot of guys who say they'll do anything to protect their little brothers; Alec, JJ, and I have done more than say it, we've done it."

Benji was still confused. "I know he hurt our lil' bro, but what did he do to us that was that bad?"

Gabe pulled the three boys on his lap in tight. "Bro, you and Eli's gift saved a few lives tonight. I'm proud of both of you; instead of freaking out, you put him into a situation where you could take control. I punished him for what he would have done to you, along with what he did and was going to do to Ricky."

Cory interrupted the discussion. "Guys, I know that you wanna know what you missed, but right now the best thing you can do is cuddle with your big brothers; they just had a really rough time. When we get home we'll all sit down and talk, but right now just let it ride." He turned to Alec. "Hey birthday boy; grab your cuddle toy. Let's go find the rest of the guys and let these guys have some time."

It didn't take long for the three boys to find the rest of the group; they had all decided to invade the video game area. Cory snuck up behind Sean and poked him under the ribs.

"Cory, you're gonna pay for that!" Sean giggled as he twisted around. Sean wrapped his

arms around Cory and asked quietly "How did it go, babe? Are you gonna be okay?"

"We'll talk later, but I'm alright for now," Cory replied as he returned the hug. "I just want to forget it and have some fun. This is supposed to be a party, and I'm not letting some slimeball ruin it."

Sean pulled his head back and looked Cory eye to eye. "You better believe we're gonna talk about it. You, me, JJ, Adam, Gabe, and Travis are going to sit down with Dan as soon as we get home. No arguments. I almost lost you once, and I will not take that chance again. I'm also not going to let Trav and Adam have to go through what I went through."

Cory smiled. "I really got to talk to Uncle Chip; he's rubbing off on you! Now are you gonna drop it until we get home, or do I have to drag you by the ear to the foosball table?"

Sean shook his head. "You're as hard-headed as you are cute. Let's go, it's been a while since I kicked your butt at foosball."

\* \* \*

Matt chuckled as he commented to Teri "That right there just made these new Hummer's worth every penny!"

Teri looked at where he was pointing. Tommy was standing about ten feet away from the vehicles with his jaw dropped to his chest. "I think I'm going to have to rescue my new son!" Teri giggled. She walked over to Tommy and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What's up, kiddo?"

"Is one of those YOUR car?" Tommy asked in awe.

Teri smiled. "You're close; actually BOTH of those are OUR cars. Remember, I said that you are part of MY family now?"

"Yeah, but that can't happen until a judge says it's okay."

Sean and Cory joined the pair, Timmy riding along on Cory's back. Right behind them were Adam, JJ, Tyler and Gabe.

"What's up, Mom?" Sean asked.

"I see my favorite troublemakers decided to come out finally!" Teri giggled.

"But Gran'ma, they're out already!" Timmy deadpanned.

"That's NOT what I meant, you little turkey!" Teri laughed. "Anyways, maybe one of you can convince Tommy here that when I say he's my son now that there's no waiting for a judge."

Sean giggled. "Dang, Mom, do we gotta do ALL of your work for you!" He held out his hand to Tommy. "Tom, come on over here in this limo, I'll explain it all to ya' on the way home."

Tommy started towards Sean, but froze again as William and Duke swooped down and went through the open door on the limo. "I ain't getting' in there! Two big birds just flew in!"

"I'll be right back, Daddy," Timmy announced as he hopped off of Cory's back and ran to the limo. A few seconds later, he walked back to Tommy with William perched on his shoulder. "Unca' Tom, I'm Timmy and this is William. He says that since Gran'ma is 'dopting you, you're my Uncle now! Duke is waitin' with Ricky in the car to meet you. Duke's an Eagle too!"

Kelly walked over and saw the look on Tommy's face. He came up next to Tommy and placed his arm around his shocked new friend's waist. "What's wrong, cutie?" Kelly asked with concern.

Tommy latched onto Kelly. "Man, this is getting' too weird! I can kinda understand bein' able to go home with Teri, but I'm still havin' trouble with not having to go to court to make it permanent. Uncle Calvin got hauled off, and I'm worried that he's gonna come back; then these two birds fly into one of the limos and the next thing I know Timmy here hops off of Cory's back, calls him 'Daddy', then gets one of the birds and comes back with the bird on his shoulder. On top

of everything else, he tells me the bird told him that I was his uncle now! I see all of these guys around here acting like it's not a big deal to be a gay couple in public; where I grew up in Mississippi you'd get shot for holding another boy's hand. I'm not even goin' to mention the strange shit that happened up by the stage! Y'all have got me freakin' here!"

Sean joined the pair and put a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Relax, bro. As crazy as it all seems right now, I promise you will understand before we go to bed tonight. There's one thing I can settle right now for you; you will never have to worry about Calvin again."

"How do you know for sure?" Tommy asked.

Cory joined them. "I can answer that, lil' bro. About two hours ago, Calvin was tried and convicted for multiple crimes. Most of them involved members of Clan Short, for now all you need to know is that Clan Short is a Vulcan Clan; I'll fill in the rest later. Just his crimes against the Clan were enough to allow the final sentence, but there was also one crime that he committed here on Earth. That crime on top of the ones against Clan members gave me no choice as to what his punishment could be. Tommy, you can sleep in peace tonight; the man who murdered your Mom is now a pile of ashes, he was executed for murder, attempted murder, and other charges which just added to the proof that he was a menace to society."

Tommy got fire in his eyes. "I KNEW that bastard did it! Right after he heard Mom and I talkin' about me being careful about being gay, he started hinting that I would enjoy living with him. Mom shot down the idea, but since he was my only kin he got me after she died. Mom used to smoke some pot, but she never did the hard stuff, but that's what killed her. Now that I know he did it, I'm glad he's dead; but I just met you guys and now you're gonna have to go to jail for killing him."

Cory gave a little smile. "Actually, no we're not. There were two Federation Security representatives and Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan witnessing it. Earth can't touch any of us, it was a Vulcan trial and Vulcan sentence. His attack tonight was considered an interplanetary incident, so Earth police and courts have no jurisdiction over what happened."

The conversation was interrupted by Cory's communicator.

"Ambassador Sarek to Cory Short."

"This is Cory, Ambassador. How may I be of assistance?"

"I am preparing my report for the Council. Upon review of this evenings events, I determined that the disposition of Thomas Wilson was not properly addressed. I insist you look into this oversight and report his status."

"With all due respect, Ambassador, there was no oversight; at the time of your departure we had insufficient information. Thomas Wilson's status has been handled through proper Federation Youth Services channels. At this point in time he has been declared a Ward of the Federation and is in custody of my mother. This will be a permanent placement, his Clan status will be confirmed within twenty-four Earth hours."

"The outcome is acceptable. Yourself and the members of the Clan responded properly to this evenings event. Live Long and Prosper, Cory Short."

"Live Long and Prosper, Ambassador Sarek"

Cory put the communicator away. "Way to go guys; Ambassador Sarek basically just gave you all a Vulcan citation! You impressed him enough for him to say that you 'responded properly', that means a lot!"

Tommy looked at Cory in awe. "You really weren't kiddin' me, were you? Was he really askin' 'bout me?"

"Yes he was," Cory replied. "Now do you believe us about the rest of the stuff?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well then, let's get going. I wanna get home so we can show you around!" Cory finished. Everyone finally loaded up into the limos and sat back as they headed back home.

Later that night, Dan sat back after listening to Cory, JJ, and Gabe talk about their parts in the night's problems. "Well boys, it sounds to me like you were right not only in the way you handled things; but also in how you resolved the problem. JJ, why don't you go first son; tell me how you feel about killing Calvin."

JJ thought for a second before responding. "Honestly, Dad, I don't feel anything. Even when I did it, I didn't feel anything. Cory's been telling us that when we are acting in an official capacity as Clan members we should try to be like a Vulcan. From the time I claimed my rights as the oldest brother, I started thinking things out like I thought a Vulcan would. Calvin had a history of abusing, using, or killing to achieve his own desires. If you look at it, the only logical choice is to remove him from society. When Cory announced the punishment, I thought it over and agreed that it fit the crimes. After that nothing mattered, I carried out my duty. I don't even think about it; it's over and my brothers are safe."

Before Dan could say anything in response, Gabe added his reply. "Dan, I'll admit that at first I was mad about what he did to my bros, but then I saw how JJ was handling it and realized what he was doing. By the time Cory called us, I had done pretty much the same thing JJ did. When Cory gave us the chance to have someone else do it, I didn't even consider the possibility. My family had been hurt by him, so it was only logical that as the eldest member I deliver the punishment for his crimes. I'm the same as JJ though; it's over, my brothers are safe, so I don't even think about it."

Dan looked at Cory, wordlessly telling him it was his turn.

"Dang, Dan; I finally get out of the Home and you STILL pick on me!" Cory quipped before starting. "Seriously, even though Ambassador Sarek was there, I still was worried about whether I was doing the right thing. After sitting here talking about it, I agree with JJ and Gabe; there was no other logical choice. In fact, I'm pretty sure now that Ambassador Sarek would have stepped in if I had made any other decision. I don't enjoy passing judgment on someone's life like that, but given the evidence I would do it again if it saves innocent people from being killed or abused. I'm not going to hide the memories of it; I want them as a reminder of what happens to someone who goes out of control. I've been placed in a leadership role along with Sean; this is a perfect reminder of what happens when you abuse your influence."

Dan looked over the boys and their partners sitting in front of him. "Well guys, I think you've got a pretty good handle on things. I want all of you to keep an eye on each other for the next few days. If you notice anything unusual, even if it seems like nothing, let me know. What you guys did tonight would be hard on most adults, so don't be ashamed if it has an affect on you. Why don't you all head on upstairs; I'll make sure all of the adults know you'll be okay."

As they headed out, each of the boys thanked Dan for taking the time to talk with them. As Dan watched them head up the stairs, he thought to himself *'Thank God they are supporting each other. By themselves the last few weeks would have crushed any of them, but with them sticking together they are accomplishing miracles.'*

\* \* \*

Tommy sat in awe as Sean finished running through the Clan member's histories. "Wow, I thought I had it bad! I guess I gotta lot to learn. How do you 'member all of that stuff?"

Sean grinned. "It's easy; I care about all of you guys, and if you care about someone you try to remember important stuff about them. We all help each other, even Timmy and Ricky. As

you found out tonight, we all stand up for each other too; and since you are one of us now that makes you just as protected as everyone else."

Tommy grinned. "Thanks, Sean. You know, I really need to stop wishin' so hard; I used to wish I had brothers, now I got TONS of them!"

Everyone in the room giggled. Tommy turned his head to Kelly. "Kelly, I do have one question. I know you told your mom that you thought I was like a cute puppy and that you wanted to keep me. Was you sayin' that you wanted to be my friend, or did ya' mean more than that?"

Kelly formed his reply carefully. "Before I moved in here, I considered myself straight. Even though I looked at guys, even in the showers, I didn't get 'excited' by them. Now that I look back, I was the same way with most girls too. After a couple of nights here, I noticed that since nobody minds if you look in this group I was looking more. I was actually appreciating nude males, but none of these guys gave me a stiffy by looking at them. When I saw you tonight, I felt something I never felt before; it was kinda like a need to hold you and protect you. And right now, thinking of seeing you nude is starting to give me a stiffy. So I guess I'd like to be your boyfriend; but I'm afraid to lose you as a friend. Do you see what I mean?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I kinda felt the same way when I first met you. I'd really like to try it out as boyfriends; I've never had one and I bet these guys will make sure we still stay friends if it don't work out."

"You're right about that, lil' bro," Cory added. "If you both want to give it a shot all of us will help you, all you have to do is ask."

Kelly turned to face Tommy. "Tommy, I want to give this a chance. I've never felt like this before; will you be my boyfriend?"

Tommy wrapped his arms around Kelly. "Yes, Kelly! You make me feel special, i'd love to be your boyfriend." He then kissed Kelly quickly on the lips.

A few minutes later, the boys began getting around for bed. Tommy giggled as he undressed, then commented "This is wild, my first night with a boyfriend and I get to sleep nude with him!"

Kelly noticed Byron glancing around. "Hey Byron, you ain't kicked out! Just 'cause I've got a boyfriend don't mean you can't keep my other side warm for me. I told you when you came over here that you could cuddle with me, I'm not changing that."

Tommy added his approval. "It's okay with me too, Byron. The only argument you might hear is which one of us you get to keep warm."

Byron grinned. "If you put it that way, okay. I didn't want to mess you guys up just as you were getting started."

About five minutes later, all of the boys were cuddled in their groups. Timmy and Ricky cuddled up to the new bear, smiles on their pixie faces. After the excitement of the day, they were all fast asleep in no time.

## *Chapter 33*

Byron woke to the sound of soft sobbing coming from across the room. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then wiggled off of the bed and went to investigate the source. To his surprise, it was Antonio sitting at the desk, his head resting on his arms sobbing quietly.

"What's wrong, buddy?" Byron asked as he knelt and placed his arms around Antonio's small chest.

"Nuthin', you wouldn't understand," Antonio sobbed back. "Just let me be."

Byron's mind flashed back to a point ten months ago; he had realized he was gay and was considering ending it all when Derek had walked in on him. When Derek had asked him what was wrong, Byron had replied in those exact same words; in fact his reply was even in the same tone. Derek's persistence had paid off; once Byron opened up about what he considered a problem, Derek was able to show him that there was nothing wrong and nothing to worry about.

Byron replied in a soft yet commanding tone. "Antonio, I understand a lot more than you think I do. My big brother saved me from making a big mistake when I thought nobody would understand; I'm not going to let you make the mistake I almost made. C'mon, let's hit the bathroom, grab a couple of towels to wrap around us, and head down to the Rec room to talk."

Teri looked up in surprise as she heard the two boys come down the stairs. She immediately noticed Antonio had been crying, so she ignored the fact that the two of them were just wrapped in towels. She stopped her preparations for making coffee and met them as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "What's wrong?"

Byron answered for the two of them. "Antonio needs to talk to someone. I'm taking him to the Rec room for some privacy so we don't wake the guys."

Teri leaned over and kissed Antonio's forehead. "Take him into my office, Byron. He knows where the blanket is. I'll make sure you two are left alone. Once the rest of the crew is up I'm sure one of them will bring you some clothes down."

"Thanks, Teri," Byron said with a smile. "I don't know how long we'll be. Are you sure it's okay?"

Teri laid a hand on Byron's shoulder. "Yes, it's okay. Any of you boys needing to talk is the most important thing in this house. Get in there, I'll let you know when breakfast is ready."

Teri watched as the boys went in the office and closed the door. She jumped when Matt came up and asked, "What's that all about?"

Teri turned and guided Matt towards the table. "I think your new son is having some problems."

Matt placed his head in his hands. "What kind of problems? What do I need to do? Why

didn't he say anything to me?"

Teri started the coffee then sat next to Matt. "Settle down and stop worrying! I know it's hard to believe, but the boys are handling it. I have no idea what the problem is, but from experience I can tell you that we'll find out when the time is right. I've learned something from this roller-coaster ride which has given me a new family - the boys as a group can handle a lot more than we give them credit for, and as long as we stay off of their backs they have no problems with coming to us for help if they need it. Going by the looks I saw on Antonio and Byron's faces, right now Byron is having to convince Antonio to talk. That means you would have no chance. Most of them will talk to each other before any adult. Antonio even more than most. He's learned to distrust adults over a period longer than you've been alive. That's going to take some time to overcome, and if you try to force him it'll never happen."

Matt looked at Teri in shock. "The way you make it sound, it's like I'm his parent only when he wants me to be!"

"Not really, Matt. You need to remember, he's went through a lot; and it's easier to talk to someone who has been through something similar recently than it is to talk to someone who has never been through the ordeal or had it happen a long time ago. I think that's the magic of this group; all of their experiences add up to a serious knowledge base to help each other."

Matt relaxed. "You know, looking at it that way I see your point. I just wish I knew what was wrong."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find out. My only recommendation is to support Antonio with whatever comes out of this talk. If you have concerns about their choices, discuss it with them. Whatever you do, don't force your ideas on them. Right now, you don't have the trust that you need for him to accept that you are looking out for him. All his life the adults around him have forced choices on him that hurt him. You need to show him that you are not going to do that."

Matt got up and poured them both some coffee. "Thanks, Teri. I'll do that. I never really thought about what I needed to do to overcome what his old family did to him. At least now, you've gave me a direction to head towards."

\* \* \*

Byron sat down and pulled Antonio onto his lap. Once they were settled, he pulled the blanket over both of them. Byron wiggled his arms under the blanket and gently wrapped them around Antonio's belly. As he cuddled with Antonio, Byron softly asked "Okay buddy, we're alone now. What's got you feeling so down?"

Antonio replied in a whisper. "You're gonna think I'm being a baby. I gotta watch all of you guys cuddle with your boyfriends. I ain't never gonna be able to have that."

"Why?"

"Duhhhh! Who's gonna want a boyfriend who don't grow up? Who wants to date someone who's gonna outlive them four times? It's gonna be twelve years before I even get my first hair down there! The only guys who have ever been interested in me are grownups who think I'll be their long-term boy toy; I wanna have a boyfriend, I don't wanna be some old fart's plaything. I might as well just die, I ain't never gonna be happy with someone."

Byron held Antonio tighter. "Please don't say that. I almost did it. My big brother Derek caught me just in time. We had a long talk, and he explained to me that sometimes the Great Spirit gives us a gift which seems like a curse at first glance. If we follow our hearts, He will guide us to the point where we see the gift for it's true worth. I have followed my brother's wise words. I think that today might be the day my curse becomes a gift. My father knows of this curse. He was



guided by our Shaman to send me here. The Spirits said my destiny was within this Clan."

"What's that got to do with me?" Antonio interrupted.

Byron giggled. "For someone with so much time you are sure impatient! I'm getting to it, okay?"

Antonio gave a small smile in response to the aging jab. "Okay, you better hurry up; you're getting older by the minute!"

Byron smiled as he continued. "Once I tell you my curse you'll understand. You know that I'm gay; I told everyone that as soon as I knew it was cool. My curse is that I want a boyfriend a little younger than me; someone I can protect and help become a better man. I don't want a boy-toy; I want someone who will stay with me forever. The problem is that at our ages people get stupid over a years difference in age; yet adults marry with ten years between them. I wanted to ask you to be my boyfriend on the ride away from your old home, but I was scared that you'd freak. In some ways you're older than me, yet in others you are just a nine year old; if you went on the years since you were born I would be YOUR junior, in fact you could be my dad. I don't care about that, other people might have a problem with the way you age but I think it's awesome. In fact, I'll do whatever I can to make sure I'll be with you for as long as possible."

Antonio turned to face Byron. "There's three years between us, nobody's gonna be okay with that!"

"You're wrong there. Do you know how old Andy is?"

"No, why?"

"Because Andy turned twelve last month. You know his boyfriend is Alec; and we just were at Alec's fifteenth birthday party. Nobody has a problem with that."

"Yeah, but I'll be turning ten when you're sixteen. I'll be eleven when you're twenty. What they gonna say then?"

Before Byron could answer, Antonio's question was answered by Mike as he appeared in the room. "I'll tell you what they are going to say, they will say that it must be true love for Byron to be willing to wait for you to grow up. That's what your families and the Clan will say. Nobody else's opinion will matter."

Antonio giggled as he commented "You know, Mikey, you give 'big brother is watching' a whole new meaning!"

Mike smiled. "I told you I'd be keeping an eye on you in case you needed help. I know you're confused right now, Antonio, but I think you are going to sort things out pretty soon. I know how much problem you have trusting people; so I stopped in to let you know that Byron was speaking from the heart. I won't tell you how to answer him, but I'll tell you to begin listening to your heart again instead of going on past experiences. That's not just for right this instant; it's for all of your dealings with your new family. You understand?"

Antonio thought for a minute. "Yeah, I see what you mean. I guess I gotta learn to trust again, don't I?"

"Yes, but let everyone else help you so that you don't make the wrong choices. In some ways you are an adult trapped in a boy's body, in other ways you are just a really old boy. I'm talking about mentally, not just physically. As soon as you learn to balance that out things will be easier; normally you would have learned it as you grew, but your old family messed that up. You are learning the balance pretty fast, but sometimes it will mess with you like it did this morning. Just let someone know when that happens, they'll help you through it."

Antonio smiled. "Okay, I get it now. Thanks Mikey." He then turned to Byron as Mikey faded out. "Byron, Mike kinda hinted that people outside our families ain't gonna understand us dating. Are you gonna be able to handle that without hiding from me in public?"

Byron pulled Antonio into a cuddle. "Antonio, if I have to choose between having you and going out in public - I'll never leave your side. Mikey said to listen to your heart. My heart tells me that I'd live in a cave before I'd lose you."

Antonio giggled. "It better be a heated cave! My mind is telling me to say no, that it'll cause too much trouble. But my heart says yes, that the Clan will help protect us. For the first time I can remember I'm going to do like Mikey said and listen to my heart. Byron, will you please be my boyfriend?"

Byron looked at Antonio and answered in a serious tone. "Antonio, I swear with my ancestors as my witness that I will never leave your side for as long as the Great Spirit leaves me on this plane."

Antonio smiled as he stood up. "Thanks for being here for me. You just made my life complete. Can we lay down and cuddle? I didn't sleep too well last night."

Byron stretched out and patted his chest. "From now on, angel - this is your new bed. Lay down and I'll cover us up. Today I start protecting you in your sleep."

The two boys laid belly to belly, both almost purred as they felt the body of their new partner settle into position. Byron slowly caressed Antonio's back as both of them responded to the newfound love they were feeling for each other. A few minutes later, they both stiffened then relaxed and fell asleep as a small wet spot dried between them.

\* \* \*

Kelly came bounding down the stairs, all but dragging Tommy behind him. Tommy skidded to a stop and tried to cover himself when he saw Teri, Helen, and Matt at the table.

"KELLY!" Tommy whined. "Y'all said it was safe to come down here in our boxers! Now I'm gonna get in trouble, and it's y'all's fault!"

Teri shook her head in wonder as she motioned her newest son to join her. Once she had coaxed him to her side, Teri leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Don't worry, Tommy; you're not in any trouble. I guess nobody explained the house dress code, did they?"

Tommy was still blushing as he shook his head no.

"That's what I thought. Just so you know, the only guy here who is a worse nudist than Kelly is your nephew Timmy. With that said, Kelly was telling you the truth; when there is no company here you can run around in your boxers if you want. The only exception is when you are eating; then you must have on a shirt, at least some boxers or a swimsuit, and shoes. I know that you guys usually sleep nude, so you don't need to worry about that. I don't believe that any of you should be ashamed of your bodies; you should be comfortable enough so that if you are worried about something you'll have no problem with walking up and asking me to look inside your shorts. Did Sean have his usual meeting filling you in on everyones history?"

Tommy was still slightly embarrassed, and it showed in his Mississippi drawl as he answered. "Yes Ma'am. Them guys went through some bad stuff. I ain't had to do half'a what they did. Y'all ain't like down from my old parts; I would'a been skinned for runnin' 'round in my shorts. If Momma'd caught me sleepin' nekkid wit' Kelly she'd'a beat me like a stubbr'n mule."

Teri smiled at Tommy. "I see you're going to have to work on your grammar!" she chuckled. "There's a lot of things that work differently around here, just relax and learn. I expect you to make some mistakes, and if you're not sure just ask. Since Kelly dragged you down here, I'll make an exception to the dress rule this time; have a seat and we'll see about some cereal for you. What sounds good?"

Tommy leaned in and gave Teri a hug. "I dunno ... sorry ma'am, I mean whatever you

have is okay."

Teri kissed his forehead. "Tommy, I know you have been taught to be polite, but please call me Mom or Teri. It makes me feel more comfortable, okay? The last I saw, we had Cocoa Puffs and Apple Jacks in the cupboard. If there's something you like better, let Helen know and she'll get it for you. That's one of Helen's rules; any food you like, within reason, we will have here for you. I'll put it this way; there's a certain little angel in Orlando that Helen keeps the fixings for cherry cobbler for, just in case he visits. She has a special recipe just for him."

"Wow! Nobody has ever let me choose what I eat! The Apple Jacks sound good, but do you know how to fix grits right, Helen?" Before Helen could answer, Tommy turned his head back to Teri. "I'll try to fix up my grammar, that way I talk like the rest of y'all – I mean you do. Okay, Mom?"

Teri giggled. "As long as you try I'll be happy. Oh, you don't have to stop saying y'all, that sounds just fine coming from you. That's part of who you are, besides a lot of us say it too."

Helen had walked over, and she rustled Tommy's hair. "As for your other question, yes I do know how to fix grits; you need to wait until I go to the store to have them though. I assume you want eggs and corned beef hash with them?"

Tommy's head spun in shock. "How'd you know that? That's my favorite breakfast!"

Helen smiled. "You're definitely a Southern Boy. I think I can give you a treat for lunch, I've got everything I need to make some real homemade biscuits and gravy. I think you'll like it, Iowa sausage makes it even better than you're used to!"

Tommy grinned. "You better make a bunch then, I can eat lotsa that!"

Kelly walked over and joined them, a bowl of cereal in each hand. He sat one by Tommy and sat the other at the next chair over. "Hey, what are grits? I've never had those. Are they any good?"

Tommy spun and hugged Kelly. "Thanks for getting' me a new family; this is awesome! Grits are good as long as you don't fix'em like a dang Yankee, them folks screw up boilin' water!"

Helen laughed. "I couldn't agree more, Tommy! I was born and raised south of Little Rock. We moved up here when I was seventeen. Here in Iowa people still can cook, but once you go east of the Ole' Miss it gets worse the further north and east you get!"

Tommy giggled. "I guess you know cookin' then. What's so special 'bout Iowa sausage?"

"You'll see, it's the best sausage in the US. Sit down and eat; if you want you can help make lunch."

Tommy took his seat by Kelly. "AWESOME! I love helpin' in the kitchen! Cookin's fun!"

Teri smiled as she commented "Watch it, Tommy. If your brothers find out you can cook they'll never leave you alone."

"What was that?" Cory announced as he walked in with Sean and most of the rest of the Clan. "Did I hear that my little brother wants to be the Clan chef?"

Tommy blushed and slid down in his chair as he tried to concentrate on eating. Sean came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hey lil' bro, don't let our big brother get to you."

Adam and Ty joined the boys. Adam added his thoughts. "Lil' bro, whatever you want to do, just do it; the rest of us will back you. Just don't let Sean help; he's about as much help in the kitchen as a bull in a china shop."

"Bite me, Adam!" Sean giggled. "You ain't much better!"

Tyler giggled as he snuck by and wiggled onto Tommy's lap. "Do you really know how to cook? Can you teach me, bro?"

Tommy looked around him at the boys. Silent tears started running down his face as he

said "This is for real, ain't it? Y'all really are callin' me kin. I ain't gotta never leave, do I?"

Ty answered for all of them as he cuddled into Tommy's chest. "Tommy, you're my big brother now. I know you're cryin' 'cause you're happy; it's okay. You and me have got five big brothers to help us; Adam, Sean, Cory, Aaron, and Mikey. I'm glad you're my bro, and I know the rest of our brothers are too. We won't let anything take you away from us."

Tommy was speechless as he wrapped his arms around Ty and pulled him in close. Cory and Sean moved to the sides of the chair and wrapped their arms around the pair, while Adam did the same from the back. Everyone else watched quietly as the five boys started the forging of the brotherly bond that would guide their actions throughout the rest of their lives.

A few minutes later, Tommy had recovered enough to speak again. "Y'all know what?" he said softly. "I useta' wonder how it'd be havin' a brother. Now that I got all y'all, it's awesome. Y'all's been tellin' me we're kin now; I kinda didn't believe it 'till now. Y'all made me feel safe and wanted just now; something I'd plumb near forgot how it felt." He gave Tyler a squeeze as he continued. "Lil' bro, you wanna learn cookin' stick with me. The pair of us are gonna make a great team."

Tyler beamed at the news. "Kewl! You're an awesome big brother! Can I learn to talk like you too? I think it sounds awesome."

All of the boys giggled when Teri immediately answered. "I don't think so, munchkin! One son with a Mississippi drawl is enough!"

The giggles turned to laughter when Helen piped in with a deep southern accent. "Now there Teri, it ain't no reason to git you're skirt askew. Both dem young'uns ain't hurtin' nothin' by talkin' alike."

The laughter was interrupted as Timmy and Ricky appeared. They were both still soaking wet from their bath, wearing nothing but their birthday suits and dragging towels behind them. They zeroed in on Tommy.

Timmy grinned as he announced "There you are, Unca Tommy! We was lookin' all over for you! Could you dry us off, PLEASE!"

Tommy grinned at the boys. "Do you little rug rats know y'all are nekkid in the dinin' room? Git over here before y'all's birds decide to chow on dem worms stickin' out."

Timmy giggled as he stood in front of Tommy. "Unca Tommy, you're silly! That ain't a worm, it's a stiffy! Ricky and me's been sword fighting!"

"That's more than I needed to know!" Tommy stuttered as his face turned red. He dried off Timmy and went to start on Ricky. Timmy stopped him. "You missed a spot, Unca Tommy."

Tommy turned red again. "I can't touch you there."

Timmy giggled. "Yeah you can, it ain't like you're playin' with it! I trust you, and so does Daddy or else he wouldn't let you dry me."

Tommy looked over at Teri to see her opinion. When she just smiled and nodded, Tommy turned back to his new nephew and began drying the areas he skipped. As soon as he finished, Ricky wiggled in and passed his towel to Tommy. "Dry ALL of me too!" Ricky giggled.

Tommy finally finished and sat back down. As soon as he was seated, Timmy and Ricky jumped onto his lap. Tommy chuckled at the boys. "Hey, ain't y'all forgettin' sumthin'?"

"What's that?" both boys answered innocently.

"Ain't y'all supposed to be dressed at the table?"

Timmy giggled. "Yeah, but today's special! We got a new Uncle!"

Tommy turned his head. "Cory, Sean! Talk to y'all's son!"

Sean tried to keep a straight face as he walked over to rescue Tommy. "Okay guys, stop torturing Tommy. Get upstairs and get dressed."

"But Poppa, we was gonna have Unca Tommy dress us after breakfast," Timmy pouted.

Sean became serious. "Timmy, you know the rules. We let you slide with drying off, but now it's time to get back to normal."

"No!" Timmy exclaimed as he folded his arms across his chest. Ricky mirrored Timmy and sat defiantly.

Sean crossed his own arms and stated "I'm going to count to ten. If your two little bare butts are not upstairs by the time I reach ten, there are going to be two little boys spending their morning on opposite sides of the living room staring at the wall." Sean started counting; he had reached five before the boys realized he was serious. They hopped off of Tommy's lap and ran for the stairs, disappearing into the bedroom just as Sean reached ten.

Teri smiled at her son. "You handled that well, Sean. Were you willing to follow through on your threat?"

"You better believe it, mom. You never let us slide, I'm not about to let him get away with back talking me or Cory."

Cory giggled. "Besides, there are some interesting designs in those walls!"

Teri just nodded. "I was waiting to see how you dealt with him when he decided to stand up to you; I think you guys are going to do just fine."

The boys spread out to their normal positions at the table and began eating their breakfast. About halfway through, Kyle spoke up.

"Helen, Antonio and Byron just woke up. They're comin' out to eat in just a minute, just as soon as they finish kissin'. They found where you hid the clothes, Trav."

Matt started to stand, but Dan stopped him. "Hold on, Matt. There are three boys here that I can honestly say I know how their mind works. None of those three even blinked, so I'm certain that nothing improper or dangerous is happening. Sit it out, I'm sure we'll know the full story shortly."

Matt sat down, but watched the office door to see when the boys came out. A few minutes later, Byron walked out with Antonio riding on his back, both of them giggling. Antonio noticed the look on Matt's face, and whispered to Byron to head over by him.

When the boys reached him, Matt motioned for Antonio to take a seat on his lap. Once Antonio was seated, Matt spoke while Byron stood nervously watching.

"Hey kiddo, I heard you had a problem this morning. Did you guys get it all sorted out?"

"Yeah, we got it," Antonio replied as he fidgeted on Matt's lap. "I was thinking stupid, but Byron helped me. Why are you mad?"

Matt kissed the top of Antonio's head. "I'm not mad, son. I was worried about you. That's part of being a dad. You worry about your son. I admit I'm new at this dad thing, but I'm willing to learn with your help. I can tell one thing already - there's something on your mind. Is it something you want to tell me about?"

Antonio squirmed some more before replying. "Yeah, kinda. I don't want to make you mad though."

Matt thought for a second. "I'll tell you what, let me see if I can help you. This is what I've figured out, and I'm not mad yet. I'll admit I'm worried, but I'm not mad. First off, whatever it is concerns Byron. That's obvious by the way he's standing here waiting for something. Going by the way you two were acting when you came out, you must consider it something good. I'm responsible for making sure you are safe and happy. I don't see anything that puts you in danger, and you were definitely happy; so I guess there's nothing to worry about."

Antonio relaxed slightly. "Yeah, I guess so. You promise not to get mad?"

Matt was serious as he replied. "You are a very smart little man. I know how hard it is for

you to trust me after what has been done to you. I can't expect you to trust me unless I trust you; since I do trust you I promise not to get mad."

Antonio thought over Matt's statement. "Okay, but you promised. I was about to do something stupid this morning because I thought that nobody would want a boyfriend who takes forever to grow up. Byron woke up and saw me, he brought me down here and we talked. He had thought about doing the same thing I was thinking about doing, but Derek talked him out of it. Byron don't care how I grow, he loves me just like I am. We're boyfriends now, and Byron swore by his ancestors that we'd be boyfriends until one of us dies." Antonio looked Matt in the eyes to see his reaction.

Matt thought over what was just said before responding. "I'm glad Byron was there for you when you needed him. I want both of you to sit down with Dan to discuss the thoughts you were having; that's non-negotiable. As far as the two of you being boyfriends, I want to hear Byron's side before I say yes or no." Matt turned his head to Byron. "Okay, you're up. Do you have anything to add?"

Byron shuffled his feet. "Well, Matt, I think Antonio said it best earlier. The only guys interested in him are dirty old men looking for boy-toys. I know his body is younger than mine, but his spirit is older than me. I admit he's good looking, but I think the Great Spirit placed us together for something big; something that's going to use his mind. If I've gotta hide to keep him with me I will, I love him that much. I'm going to enjoy waiting for him to grow up."

Matt smiled. "Byron, you told me more in what you didn't say than you did in what you said. I've got my suspicions at what you were skating around; you can relax, this is the one situation where I won't hold it against you. I think that you were right about one thing; the two of you were put together for an unknown reason." Matt wrapped his arms around Antonio and gave him a hug. "As for you munchkin, you can relax. You two have my okay, just take it slow and ask for help if you have problems."

Antonio twisted around and returned the hug. "Thanks Dad. You must really care about me with all of the stuff you are making us do."

"That I do. Now that you have a boyfriend, I got to watch out for both of you. Now why don't you two go grab a seat and get some food."

Thirty minutes later, everyone finally finished their meal and headed out back for a pickup game of soccer.

As they all assembled outside, Cory had an idea. "Hey guys, let's make this interesting. What do you think about splitting teams into boyfriend against boyfriend?"

JJ grinned. "Sounds good to me. How are you gonna choose which team gets which boyfriend?"

"That's easy! Sean and I'll be captains; we'll take turns picking from you guys, whichever one is not picked goes to the other team."

Everyone agreed to the arrangement, and in no time teams were picked. Cory's team drew skins, and they began playing. Nobody really kept score, but they all stopped to congratulate Ricky when he scored a goal against JJ. Just as they were getting ready to restart, Helen came outside.

"TOMMY! I'm getting ready to start lunch; do you still want to help?"

Tommy looked over. "Yeah! I'll be right in!" He started to head in, but then turned around. "Hey lil' bro; you comin'? You ain't gonna learn hangin' out here."

Tyler glowed at the invitation. "Wow! Thanks bro, wait for me." Tyler grabbed his shirt from the pile and ran to catch up with Tommy. The two boys headed into the house, Tommy proudly walking with his arm over Tyler's shoulder. Helen smiled as they passed her, their pride

showing on their faces.

Fifteen minutes later, Teri walked into the kitchen. She couldn't help but smile when she saw the boys. Tyler was covered in flour and cutting out biscuits, while Tommy was at the stove cooking sausage and beginning to assemble the rest of the necessities for the gravy under Helen's directions. "How are they doing, Helen? They giving you any trouble?"

Helen turned around. "They are doing great; I think you've got a couple of natural chefs here. They wanted to do all of the cooking, and I think that the rest of the boys are in for a treat."

"I figured as much. Keep it up guys, I can't wait to see how it comes out."

"Thanks, Mom," both boys replied while staying focused on what they were doing.

A short time later, Helen returned outside. "Okay guys, time to get cleaned up for lunch!" She managed to get out of the way just in time as the boys stampeded into the house. When the boys came back down, they were shocked to find Helen sitting with the rest of the adults at the table even though there was no food set out.

"Mom, I thought you said lunch was ready?" Kelly asked as they sat down.

"It is, just be patient," Helen replied with a grin. "I was kicked out of the kitchen."

Adam looked at Helen quizzically. "Who kicked you out? I know Mom wouldn't do that, and nobody else is that crazy."

"Your little brothers did it, Adam," Helen replied. "They made this lunch special for all of y'all. They worked hard to do good, so be sure you all let them know what you think."

Just then Ty came walking out carrying a platter of biscuits almost as big as him. Tommy was right behind him pushing a cart with four large steaming bowls of gravy and four bowls of hash browns. The two boys carefully set the serving dishes on the table, then took their seats and watched expectantly as everyone started filling their plates. Cory was the first to try the food; his grin at the first taste showed his appreciation.

"This is great guys! Who made what?" Cory asked.

Tommy blushed. "You really think so? Ty did everything with the biscuits. Helen told me what to do while I made the gravy. I cut the 'taters and Ty cooked them."

By this time everyone else had tried their servings. Helen was the next to comment. "Tommy, Tyler; you two did wonderful. I couldn't do any better myself."

Sean echoed everyone's thoughts as they all finished their meal. "Lil' bros, I'm proud of you. You can cook for us any time you want; I've never had biscuits and gravy this good!"

Tommy gave a shy reply. "Aww man, it ain't nothin'. Helen told us what to do."

There was no way Kelly was going to let Tommy get away with playing off the meal. "Babe, Mom's tried to do that with me; the stray dogs in our old neighborhood wouldn't even eat what I made. I could tell she didn't make this, it tasted different. In fact, it really was the best biscuits and gravy I've ever had; y'all did something different and it turned out awesome. Keep it up, I think you two are gonna end up being a great team in the kitchen; y'all can cook for us anytime."

"Tyler, Tommy, would you come here?" Teri asked. Once they were next to her. Teri pulled both boys onto her lap. "Guys, Kelly was right. You two should be proud, I know you've made me really proud of you. There's just one thing; I don't ever want to see either of you push it off when you are complimented for a great job. You earned those compliments; accept them and thank the person giving them to you. It's wrong to take credit for something you didn't do; it's almost as bad if you refuse to take credit when you did a great job. The two of you did great today, and I'm happy to find out that at least two of my sons have a hobby other than collecting stray boys."

"MOM!" Sean, Cory, and Adam chorused.

Teri giggled at their response. "Sorry guys, I couldn't resist."

Their conversation was interrupted as Aaron came barging through the front door. "Hey Mom! What's for lunch!" he asked as he gave her a quick kiss.

Teri watched as Aaron grabbed a plate and scraped up the leftovers to give himself a heaping helping. After the first taste, Aaron began shoveling the food into his mouth. Once the plate was spotless, he sat back and grinned. "Dang Helen, you outdid yourself with this meal!"

Helen shook her head. "I wish I'd made it. Your little brothers cooked today, tell them."

Teri chimed in. "You know Aaron, if you had stopped for a second I would have introduced you to one of the cooks. Get your butt over here before I sic Timmy and Ricky on you."

"Sorry Mom," Aaron said contritely as he got up and came over.

Once he was next to her, Teri reached up and slapped him gently upside the head. "That was for not being civil when you came in. These guys look up to you, show some manners. I'm sure that by now you heard that you've got a new brother; don't you think you should at least say 'hi' to him?"

Aaron grinned sheepishly. "Sorry; I smelled the food and couldn't stop." He looked at the boys still sitting on Teri's lap. "You gotta be Tommy; welcome to the family lil' bro, come up here."

Tommy shyly stood up and shuffled to Aaron. He was surprised when Aaron grabbed him and gave him a huge hug.

"Whadda you think of your new family, bro?" Aaron asked with a smile.

Tommy smiled back. "I think they're great! Mom's awesome; Cory, Sean, and Adam act like we've been kin forever; and Ty is learnin' cookin' with me. I ain't sure about Timmy likin' me though; he m'barrassed me this mornin' by comin' out nekkid and wantin' me to dry him."

Aaron giggled. "Don't worry bro, he likes you. You got lucky, usually he cons people he likes into a shower; you got off easy! You really don't want to know what you have to go through showering with him! Now what's this about cooking? Does that mean what I think it does?"

Tommy nodded his head. "If you're thinkin' we did the fixin' of lunch, yeah it does."

Aaron motioned to Tyler. "Get over here, Ty! After a meal like that you both deserve a hug!" Tyler jumped down and joined Tommy in Aaron's arms.

Aaron squeezed both boys. "Guys, I'm really proud of you. I could tell all of that was homemade, that's something very few adults could pull off. I'm gonna be doing a lot of bragging in Orlando about you two. There ain't anyone down there who can say their little brothers are awesome cooks. Once y'all are down there, I'll bet Joey's mom will wanna teach you how to cook pasta."

Tommy thought about the reprimand he had just got from Teri before he responded. "Thanks Aaron; don't go bragging too much, we're still learnin'."

Aaron giggled. "Okay bro, whatever you say. The two of you are naturals, I'll leave it at that. Ty, why are you being so quiet?"

Tyler took his turn at blushing. "Tommy may be learnin', but he's teachin' me. I'm lettin' him answer for both of us."

"He must be teaching you to talk too!" Aaron giggled. "You don't need to do that, you accomplished this together so you both should talk about it. What part did you do?"

"I made the biscuits and cooked the 'taters after Tommy cut them," Tyler answered proudly.

"You should be very proud then; the two of you worked together. You didn't just help, you did some of it while Tommy did the rest. That is a true team effort."

Cory interrupted the exchange. "Bro, you're not taking them with you! Did you just stop



in to raid the leftovers, or is there a reason you flew all the way up here?"

Aaron turned to Cory. "Dang, you're getting possessive, lil' bro! Don't worry, I think Mom would strangle me if I even offered for them to go home with me."

"You better believe it! They don't need your influence!" Teri giggled.

"Sorry, Aaron," Cory replied. "Seriously, what's up? I didn't think you went anywhere without David."

"That's okay Cory. I had a few reasons to come up here. The first was to meet our new little brother. I'm glad I did, I ended up with an awesome lunch. A close second was to see how you were doing after what happened last night. I've got my answer, and it looks like I'm going to be staying a few days until you're over it."

"What do you mean?"

"Cor, you're not acting like yourself. I haven't heard one joke out of you since I got here. When you did talk you were short with me. David and I talked things over last night. He's holding down the fort in Orlando while I'm up here taking care of you, JJ, and Gabe. The last reason is going to brighten everyone's day. Camp Little Eagle has a bunch of new residents. All of the boys whose names Kyle got from Calvin's head have been taken into protective custody and released to Chief Tecumseh. We got all of them!"

A cheer went up from around the table at the news. Aaron moved over to Cory and gave him a hug. "Lil' bro, what you had to do would stress out anyone. I have some orders for you from Josh, and from Chip as well. He called last night from the *Enterprise*. They both said to tell you to forget about chasing down the adults that were involved for a few days. You are supposed to do that computer work on the simulator and let John and his crew catch up with the work you guys did already. Chip said that Spock will be waiting for that information when the *Enterprise* gets back to Earth. You've made all of us really proud, now take some time for yourself. You get my drift, lil bro?"

Cory gave a small giggle. "Yeah, I get it; y'all think I need a vacation and you are gonna make sure I take it. I'm not gonna argue with you; Sean nailed me to the wall this morning in the shower about the same things. I get the hint, and Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh actually has a good idea about working on the software. Right now, Sean made me promise to spend some pool time outside before it gets cold. Since you're the brother-in-charge for now, do you want to get everyone out there?"

"You got it!" Aaron said with a grin. He turned to Teri. "Mom, it's time for a pool party! I promise we'll all stay dressed for a change. What do you think about a cookout for dinner?"

Teri grinned back. "If you can keep the tornadoes dressed it's a miracle! Sounds great; just try to keep it down to a dull roar out there, okay?"

"You got it!" Aaron replied as he followed the rush of boys up the stairs to get changed.

By the time they came back down, the adults had claimed prime seats to see the show. They were not disappointed; Aaron came out with Tommy in his arms and immediately tossed him in the pool. As Aaron stood at the edge laughing, Adam pushed him in. Keeping it in the family, Sean pushed in Adam and was pushed in by Cory. Cory stood laughing at the edge until Timmy decided to finish the family dunk with a flying pounce; the impact put both Timmy and Cory in the water. The rest of the crew jumped in before they were tossed in, and for at least a little while all cares were forgotten as they played.

## Chapter 34

Aaron woke up and couldn't help but smile. Timmy and Ricky were still in the same positions they had assumed at bedtime the night before, one under each of Aaron's arms and both of them using his chest as a pillow. Somehow, they had managed to drag Timmy's huge teddy bear along, and it was sandwiched between them on Aaron's stomach. He glanced towards the headboard and saw William and Duke perched in their now-usual positions, standing guard over all of their charges. Aaron gently shook his nephews. "Hey guys, I need to get up."

To his surprise, both boys were instantly awake. Timmy wiggled up and gave Aaron a kiss on the cheek. "Mornin' Unca Aaron. Can we get up too?"

Aaron chuckled. "Sure thing, Munchkin. Right now I need to hit the bathroom."

Both boys hopped up. "C'mon Uncle Aaron!" Ricky exclaimed as they both grabbed a hand and began pulling him up. "We gotta go too!"

Aaron began to argue, but changed his mind when he saw the looks on the boy's faces. "Okay guys, but this better not become a habit." Aaron decided to save Sean and Cory the trouble of trying to get the boys to take their bath. "Ricky, Timmy; why don't y'all shower with me this morning. I heard what you pulled yesterday; right now Cory does not need to have to deal with things like that."

Timmy looked up at Aaron. "Why's Daddy so sad, Unca Aaron?"

Aaron knelt down between the boys. "Timmy, your Daddy had to do something that he didn't like doing so that some of your other uncles would be safe. He's been thinking about it a lot, and it makes him hurt inside."

Timmy thought for a minute. "I guess Gran'ma and me needs to give Daddy extra cuddles. Can you help Daddy too?"

Aaron smiled as he pulled both Ricky and Timmy into a hug. "That's why I came up here. Ricky, you might want to give Gabe some cuddles too. He needs them just like Cory does."

Ricky nodded his head against Aaron's chest. "I was thinkin' of that, but I didn't know if he'd let me."

"Don't worry," Aaron replied. "If he gives you any trouble about it tell me. I'll make sure he understands that you're helping him."

Aaron scooted the boys into the shower. Twenty minutes later, he managed to have them dry and getting dressed. Just as they were finishing, the rest of the boys started waking up and drifting in groups into the bathroom. Aaron couldn't help but smile when Timmy ran over to sit on Cory's lap just as he sat back down. As they cuddled, Gabe came out and found Ricky on his lap as soon as he took a seat.

Gabe looked at Ricky with surprise. "What's up, lil' bro? Is something wrong?"

Ricky snuggled into Gabe's chest. "Nothin's wrong; I just wanna cuddle you cuz' you're such a good big brother."

Travis joined the pair in their cuddle. "You got that right, Ricky. I think you got yourself an awesome big brother; I know he's the best boyfriend in the whole world."

Gabe looked at his two companions with tears in his eyes. "Thanks guys, I love both of you. I wish I knew what I did to deserve you."

Eli and Benji joined the pile. Benji answered Gabe's question for everyone. "Bro, I can tell you what you did. You stood by Trav's side when he needed it most, you gave Ricky a family by welcoming him with open arms, and you gave two crippled boys with bad attitudes a chance to move on with their lives. You really care about us, we can all see that; in fact you probably saved all of our lives in one way or another."

Gabe hung his head and muttered "Yeah, but I killed someone too."

Eli reached over and lifted Gabe's chin. "Yes you did. You, JJ, and Cory did what had to be done to protect the people you love. If you hadn't done it, I can name five kids who would not be able to sleep at night because they would be worried about him coming back for them. I also have a good idea of what he planned to do from some comments he made; I don't know about the rest of these guys, but I consider you my hero for taking care of him. Think about it big bro; Ambassador Sarek would not have let you do it if it was wrong to kill him. You did what was needed to protect us; that makes you one of the best big brothers in the whole world."

Gabe gave Eli a small smile. "I guess if you look at it that way you're right. I just don't want you guys to learn bad things from me."

Travis kissed Gabe before commenting. "Babe, if looking out for your little brothers and doing what you could legally do to protect them is bad, then you can be as bad as you want. One of the things I love about you is that you always check yourself to make sure you did the right thing; you can stop checking babe, this time we all agree you did exactly what you should've done."

Gabe took a chance to look around, and was shocked to see that both Cory and JJ seemed to be getting the same treatment he had just received. He smiled as he commented "Hey bros, I think we should get dressed and head downstairs. It looks like the rest of the guys need some time too."

Ricky waited impatiently as his brothers got dressed, then the five of them went into the hall to go downstairs. Duke took flight and joined them as they went through the door.

Eli and Benji looked at each other and giggled. Benji stopped everyone else and said "Hold on, guys. Since Eli's gotta float down anyways, let's do this like brothers should. Gabe, take a seat on the top step; Trav, you sit on his lap and Ricky sit on Trav's lap. The two of us are gonna sit on either side." Once everyone was in position, Eli and Benji concentrated for a second. The group of boys lifted off of the steps and slowly floated down in one mass; Ricky giggling uncontrollably the entire way to the dining room with Duke perched in his lap.

\* \* \*

Aaron watched as Gabe led his brothers out of the room. Once the door closed behind them, he turned back to Cory. "Hey lil' bro; were you paying attention to what the guys told Gabe?"

Cory slightly nodded his head as he rubbed Timmy's back. "Yeah, kinda. But that was all about him; what's it got to do with me?"

To everyone's surprise, Tommy answered. "It's gotta LOT to do with you. I know what he was plannin' to do with me and the twins; he told me enough times. You and Sean are what's holdin' this group together, and you made a decision which saved a bunch of us. Kel and I have been talking, and he says you ain't actin' normal since those happen'ns. I'm startin' to think you're lettin' your head mess you up again. I just got y'all as kin, and I ain't gonna watch you crash like you did before. Sean don't need it, Timmy don't need it, Mom don't need it. You also gotta think about Adam, Ty, Aaron and me; we didn't see it happen but we'll get hurt too. Ya' need to stop worryin' your pretty blond head and git to livin' again before I figger out how to git hold of that Justy kid an' have him fetch a Vulcan to do sum head-fixin'. You ain't got me riled yet, but you're pushin' it."

Sean looked at Cory in shock. "Babe, I think our little brother just gave you one of those kicks in the butt that Uncle Josh and Uncle Chip was talking about."

Cory was frozen, still trying to process what he just heard. A few seconds later, he finally was able to respond. "Yeah he did; and he's right. Tommy, thanks a bunch lil' bro; you've got my attention now. I know I've been thinkin' about that a lot, but I didn't think it was messin' with me. I think you might have the right idea Tommy; but we might not need a Vulcan. It's time you met Justy, Jamie, and Jacob anyways." Cory turned to Aaron. "Bro, could you get a hold of David and see if he'll escort the three musketeers up here? I think there are four heads that need some cleaning and filing help up here; and a human would understand how to file emotions better."

Aaron nodded his head. "I'll call Josh once I'm sure he's up and set everything up. I'll make sure that Triple Threat knows you called them the three musketeers, that should have them ready to visit."

Kyle giggled from over on JJ's lap. "Too late, Air-Head! They know; Justy says Cory can call them that, but you're goin' swimmin' for the triple threat stuff. They just helped Uncle Josh wake up. Jamie said for some reason he's more than happy to ship them off with David for a few days. He said somethin' about sleepin' in."

JJ giggled. "I guess we better warn Mom. It's gonna be cool having the twins back here."

Aaron smiled. "Just wait! You can ask Cory, those two are really opening up. I think you'll be impressed."

Adam looked over at Aaron. "That sounds great, they were so jumpy before. I kinda miss them; when we found them I think they were hurtin' as much inside as I was outside."

Tommy looked over at Adam with a confused look on his face. "Whadda ya' mean, bro?"

Adam put an arm over Tommy's shoulder. "Bro, you know about me being beat before I came home. We found Jamie and Jacob when we stopped for dinner after I left the hospital. Their old father had messed them up really bad in their heads. When Justy came up here they kinda hooked up with him and started opening up; that's why Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh decided to make them Justy's brothers."

"Okay, I kinda get it. It's just weird the way y'all talk 'bout guys I ain't met like they's kin."

Adam giggled. "It's okay bro, we understand. I promise you'll get to meet everyone pretty soon."

Aaron looked at Cory then turned and checked on JJ. Satisfied that both of them were settled down for a while, he announced "Okay guys, I think we better all get around and get downstairs before Gabe and his bros eat all of the food."

\* \* \*

Matt was surprised when Antonio climbed on his lap after breakfast. "What's up, little buddy?"

Antonio giggled as he snuggled into Matt's arms. "Nuthin! I just ain't had a daddy who I felt safe cuddling with for thirty-six years. I realized this mornin' that I'm starting to feel safe here with you, so I'm gonna see what this daddy cuddle thing is all about."

Matt chuckled. "Well, I think it's time we both learned! Just remember; I'm a new daddy, so I'm gonna make mistakes sometimes. The one thing I'll never let happen is to let you get hurt. You've already made me proud by everything you've lived through; I'm looking forward to lots of years of you making me proud of what you accomplish."

Antonio purred as he snuggled tighter. "I'm glad I've got a lotta years to have you for a daddy; you're making me feel happy."

Teri smiled at the interaction between Matt and Antonio. The peaceful moment was shattered by the ringing of the doorbell. "I'll get it," Teri announced as she stood and headed for the front hall. As soon as she saw who was there, she opened the door with a smile.

"Joe! I was beginning to wonder if you forgot about us!" Teri joked as she opened the door.

Judge Lewis chuckled. "Not likely, Teri!" he replied as he hefted the briefcase in his right hand. "I've started asking my clerk what you had for me whenever I walk into the office. This is the first chance I've had to come out and place faces with all of these files."

Teri giggled. "Well come on in. They all just finished breakfast. I think there's gonna be some happy people if that case is filled with what I think it's filled with."

Joe followed Teri into the foyer. Just as he closed the door, they were distracted by a group of shimmering columns in the hall. A few seconds later, Teri chuckled as she identified the new arrivals. "Dang, Josh must really want to sleep in! How many days did he pack you guys for?"

David giggled. "Hey Mom! Josh said he'll call Tuesday to see how the guys are doin'. Where's the blond goofball I call a boyfriend?"

"He's in the dining room," Teri replied as she received a triple hug from Justy, Jamie, and Jacob. After giving each of the three a kiss on the forehead, she told Justy "Why don't you take your brothers into the dining room. There's a few kids in there waiting to see them."

"Sure thing, Teri."

Teri looked at the two remaining new arrivals. "Mark? Zac? How'd you two sneak out?"

Mark grinned. "When I reminded Josh that I'd helped Cory through the worst time in his life, Josh all but held a phaser to my head to make me hurry and pack to be here for him. These guys are responsible for me getting the best break of my life. There's no way I'm going to miss a chance to pay them back."

Before Teri could respond, Joe commented "That's a very admirable attitude, Mark. I'm impressed by your increased maturity. Who is this young man with you?"

Mark's face glowed with pride as he answered. "Joe, this is my boyfriend, Zac Hanson. Zac, this is Judge Joe Lewis; he's the Family Court Judge here in Polk County."

Zac stepped forward and held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Honor."

Joe chuckled. "It's a pleasure to meet you too, Zac, but please call me Joe outside the courtroom, okay? I'm glad to see Mark has such a well-mannered partner."

Teri turned her head as she thought she heard a noise behind her. She was about to ignore it when it repeated - a soft knock on the door. She turned back to the door and opened it. Standing outside were two young boys who looked to be about twelve years old. Both had short hair; one medium blond and the other medium brown. The blond had bright green eyes, while the other

boy's eyes were a deep blue. "Hey guys, how can I help you?"

The blond answered shyly. "Are you Mrs. Short?"

Teri heard something familiar in the tone of the question. "Yes I am, but you guys can call me Teri. Are you looking for some help? What's your names?"

The blond boy answered again. "I'm Caleb, and this is Noah. I don't know if you can help, but can we talk to you? Noah heard about you before he came to my house."

"Come on in here, we'll see what I can do," Teri replied as she placed a hand on each of the boy's shoulders.

They entered the front hall and Noah came to a sudden stop. "Judge Lewis?" he said in a shocked voice.

Joe turned at the new voice. "Noah Baldwin? What brings you here? Is this your new brother Caleb?"

Noah looked at the ground. "Yeah; we kinda ... well ... we're sorta havin' problems at home."

Joe reached over and lifted Noah's chin. "If you're having problems that you think you need Teri's help with, I'm all ears. In fact, why don't you two go with Teri into the rec room while I get your file from the office."

Noah gave Joe a small smile. "Thanks sir. You're not mad about me havin' problems with the family you set me up with, are you?"

"No, actually I'm impressed you decided to look for help. Get on in there so we can sort things out for you."

Teri started to escort the two boys to the rec room. As she passed Mark, she told him "Get Eli and Benji to help you with y'all's bags. Send everyone else in here; adults included. I'm calling a family meeting. Tell Gabe to call in everyone from his house too."

"Yes Ma'am!" Mark replied with a giggle as he gave Teri a mock salute. He managed to avoid Teri's swat as he ran towards the dining room, Zac hot on his heels.

A few minutes later, Teri looked around the room at the assembled families. Once she was sure everyone was there, her eyes settled on the two awestruck boys sitting between Aaron and David. "Caleb, Noah. I know this is not what you expected; but right now you are sitting with the collectively most powerful kids advocate group in the Federation. Whatever your problem is, someone here can help you. You guys decide how you want to tell us; we'll wait until you are ready."

The two boys whispered to each other for a minute, then Caleb started to stand up. Aaron placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back down. "Stay here buddy; it's easier to talk if you're with someone you care about."

Caleb gave Aaron an appreciative smile, then began explaining. "Noah and I hit it off the night he came home. As soon as I saw him I knew he was special. Mom and Dad thought it was cool the way we got along until last Friday morning. We'd fell asleep in our underwear cuddled up to each other Thursday night; by the time my dad came in to wake us up we were belly to belly and our stuff had wiggled out of our shorts. He freaked out and started yellin' about how he wasn't gonna let nobody corrupt me. He was leaving to go out of town for work; he's supposed to be back today. He told Mom that we ain't allowed to be alone with each other and that he's callin' the judge Monday to send Noah back. Noah and I talked about it at school; that's when he told me about y'all and we decided to sneak out this morning and ask if there's any way you can stop him from sending Noah away from me."

Teri smiled at Caleb. "You made a good decision; I'm about to take the first step in protecting Noah." She turned to Joe and held out her hand. "Joe, the file please."

Joe chuckled as he handed a disc to Teri. "I figured as much. Let me guess, Section 27-A-6 on the close ticket? By the way, Caleb's adopted too; his records are also on the disc."

As Teri discussed the applicable sections with Joe, Matt came over to explain what happened to the two confused boys.

"Hey guys, I'm Matt; I'm in charge of security for all of these boys. Do either of you have an idea of what just happened?"

Both boys shook their head no.

Matt smiled. "Well, as of right now, your Dad could call the President of the United States and still not separate you guys. Judge Lewis just turned your files over at the request of the Federation Youth Services Director. That means that Teri now has absolute say over what happens with BOTH of you. All she has to do is nod her head and you both will have a new home; and I KNOW she will not let you get separated."

Noah grinned for the first time since the meeting started. "Wow! I'd heard stuff when I was in the new home waiting for my new family; but I didn't think all of it was true! This is awesome!"

Caleb was more subdued. "Judge Lewis? When was I adopted? I never knew that."

Joe spun to face Caleb. "I'm sorry Caleb; I thought you knew. You were about eighteen months old when they adopted you. By the time most kids are your age the parents have told them that they were adopted."

Everyone was shocked when Caleb's face clouded over with fury. "THEY LIED TO ME! I'd asked them lots of times if I was adopted since I don't look like them. I never got as good of stuff for my birthday or Christmas like my cousins; now I know why."

Matt reached down and pulled Caleb to his chest. As Noah stood and covered Caleb's back with a hug, Matt told Caleb "Settle down lil' buddy. I've been there; I know it hurts right now. Being adopted don't make you any less of a person." Matt pulled an arm loose and pointed at Cory. "You see that blond over there? That's Teri's adopted son Cory. At fourteen, he's the youngest commissioned Engineer in Starfleet, he's got two major engineering changes to starships that he either developed or helped with, and he is the Patriarch of a Vulcan Clan. Teri loves him just as much as her son Sean; the fastest way to piss her off is to treat Cory different just because he's not her blood relative."

Noah added his opinion. "He's right Caleb; I like you just as much no matter who your parents are."

Matt guided both boys back to sit with him and Antonio. As they sat down, Joe spoke up. "That wasn't the reason I came over today, but I'm glad I was here. I actually came over to make some of you happy. Judge Robison and I have been working together; we have finalized a few things that have been left hanging." Joe opened the case he had brought with him and pulled out a folder.

Joe smiled as he pulled out the first form in the pile. "Is there a Tommy Wilson anywhere here?"

Tommy shyly raised his hand. "That'd be me, Sir."

"Great! Why don't you grab those two goofball brothers of yours who like to moonlight as Starfleet Officers and come over here; I need them to sign something."

Cory and Sean escorted a perplexed Tommy over to where Joe was sitting. Cory had a huge grin on his face as he commented "Hey lil' bro; I know you're starting to believe us that you're a part of the family now. I know that look on Joe's face; any doubt you still have is about to be blown out of the water."

Joe chuckled at Cory's comment. "Sometimes you're too smart for your own good, Cory."

Tommy, your new mom told me that you thought you had to see a judge before she could make you a part of her family. From the sound of it you've figured out that she can do a lot more than you thought; the only thing she can't do is give you her name. I have one question for you; you need to give me an honest answer. Don't worry about what anyone thinks, I know for a fact they all value honesty above everything else."

Tommy nodded. "I understand, Sir. Momma learned me early there ain't no good comes from fibbin'."

Joe nodded with a smile. "Okay. Tell me what you think about your new family and if you want to keep them."

Tommy smiled. "Dang Judge, I thought ya' was gonna give me a hard question! In the last couple of days I learned I had a bunch'a big brothers who like talkin' to me and helpin' me. I gotta new little brother who I think is awesome, and a new nephew who's kinda silly but really lovable. Mom's wantin' me to try to talk like the rest of y'all, but I like her anyways cuz' she lets me know if I'm messin' up. A couple'a days ago I thought I'd lost all my kin; this mornin' I woke up and looked around me. You know what I saw? I saw a bunch'a guys layin' around me who love each other and love me; I saw my new kin. You're darn tootin' I wanna keep them!"

Joe chuckled. "I thought as much! Well, I think that if you're going to be part of the family you should do it all the way. I have a piece of paper here that will complete the process and give you Teri's last name. Do you want to take that last step?"

Tommy turned to look at Teri. "Can I? Do you want me that much?"

Teri smiled as she held out her arms to Tommy. "Yes I do, Tommy. That's why I called Joe as soon as I brought you home. I think you fit the family perfectly and I want you to be part of it."

Tommy was unable to speak as he jumped into Teri's arms and buried his face in her chest. It took almost five minutes before he was able to control his emotions enough to turn his head and ask Joe "Can you really do it today? Please?"

Joe pointed at Sean and Cory. "If it wasn't for your big brothers, I'd have to say no. But, since they are Starfleet officers they're allowed to witness proceedings like this and make them legal. I guess now all you have to do is convince them to sign the papers, I signed while you were cuddling your mom."

Before Tommy could even ask, Cory reached in front of Joe and grabbed the pen. "Give me that paper, Joe! One of the memories I've got back is what it feels like to lose your mom, and how it feels for another family to take you in as one of their own. There is no way in hell I'm going to let Tommy down; besides, it's not every day that you get a little brother who is an awesome cook!" Cory signed his spot as fast as Joe could slide the paper to him, then pushed it over to Sean. "Hurry up and sign before I decide to make you sleep outside!"

Sean giggled as he signed in the remaining blank. "You know Cor, you're getting' kinda pushy in your old age! At least you're right about Tommy; I want him to have a family as bad as you do."

Joe took back the form. "Thanks guys, hang around though; you've got a few more after this." Joe waved Tommy and Teri over to join him. Once they were standing by him, Joe put his hands on Tommy's shoulders and turned him to face the room. "Gentlemen, I'm proud to present to you Tommy Short."

Tommy was shocked to suddenly find himself in the center of a six-way hug. Cory, Sean, and Teri got him first; Adam, Ty, and Timmy piled onto the outside. Tommy was once again speechless, tears of joy streaming down his face.

Joe smiled at the group in front of him. "In case anyone wondered, this is the reason I



enjoy my job. Is there a Doctor Austin Michaels in the house?"

Austin stood up and replied with a grin. "A judge with a sense of humor; what a concept! How can I help you, Judge?"

Joe continued with a grin of his own as Teri slipped out of the room. "I've heard through the grapevine that you and your wife Carrie have been taking lessons from Teri. It seems there are three boys who now call you Dad; the problem is they still carry their own names. Do you want to fix that problem?"

Austin turned and looked at the shocked faces of the three boys he had taken in. "You know, a month ago I would have laughed if you told me I'd have three more sons. Now I have four boys calling me Dad; four boys who each hold a piece of my heart. The decision is theirs, not mine; I'll be happy no matter what they decide."

Carrie wrapped her arms around Ricky and asked "Do you understand what you need to decide?"

Ricky had a mile-wide grin as he replied. "Yeah, Duke 'splained it. If I say yes, then I'm really your boy forever; nobody can take me away. Y'all gave me three awesome big brothers and now you wanna give me your last name. I wanna be a Michaels for real!"

Benji piped up with a reply as soon as Ricky finished. "Y'all joke about all of us twins taking turns talking; we do it 'cause it saves time. Eli is gonna answer for both of us."

Eli took his turn. "When we were in the hospital, everyone treated us like trash until Doc Austin showed up. Neither one of us trusted him, but our new little brother went out of his way to make us realize we needed to give Doc a chance. Thanks to him and our boyfriends, we have a family we are proud of again. I was the last one to accept our new family, but I'm the first to say we wanna be Michaels kids just like Ricky and Gabe."

A tear ran down Austin's cheek. "Thank you boys; all three of you. You have all made myself, Carrie, and Gabe much happier. Joe, let's give these guys what they deserve."

Three minutes later, the Michaels family was in their own group hug in celebration of the three boy's decision. Joe looked through his remaining papers and gave a big grin. "John, you're next; I hear Sammy and Sebastian have settled in nicely, are you ready to take the final step?"

John looked at his two sons; the bouncing of their heads answered his unspoken question. "You better believe it, Joe. Those boys have made me proud ever since I found them. They have earned the right to carry my name."

Joe was all smiles as he gave the twins their new last name. His next victim was Helen; she didn't even have a chance to respond before Alec and Travis yelled 'YES!' in unison.

Just as Joe finished with Helen, Teri returned to the room, fuming. "John, call your former co-workers at Polk County and tell them to pull the kidnapping report on Caleb. He and Noah are Wards of the Federation as of right now."

John moved to the phone and began calling as Caleb and Noah jumped up and joined Teri.

"What happened?" Caleb asked Teri with a worried tone.

Teri took a seat and pulled both boys onto her lap. "I called your house to see how I could help you. Caleb, your Dad got home this morning about the time you got here. As soon as he realized you guys had left the house, he called the police and told them Noah had kidnapped you. When I tried to talk sense to him, he informed me that there was no way he was going to let Noah 'have his way with you'. That was his exact words. When I informed him that from what I could see nothing more than normal experimentation was occurring, he went through the roof and started ranting about Child Services sending out perverts. I reminded him that you were adopted too, and told him neither of you forced the other to do anything; that's when your mom commented that if

she'd known you had bad blood they never would have adopted you. I had heard enough; I informed them a Federation Security detail would be by to retrieve both of your belongings and that from this point on you were no longer their children. I am also blocking any future adoptions they might attempt."

"What's going to happen to us now?" Noah asked, tears running down his face. Caleb had his face buried in Noah's chest, his sobs audible to everyone in the room.

Teri hugged the two boys. "For now you stay here. More than likely you will be moving to Orlando; we have a camp down there for boys who need someplace to grow up where they are loved no matter what."

Antonio was sitting on Matt's lap. He turned his head and told Matt "Go ahead, Daddy. I know you want to, and I want to help them too."

Matt stood up and balanced Antonio on his hip. "Teri, break out the tricorder. Antonio and I would like to give these two a chance to see where their feelings lead."

"Are you sure, Matt? Considering your position and what these boys have already been through, there's no turning back once you say yes."

Matt glanced at the two boys sobbing on Teri's lap, then looked her straight in the eye. "I'm positive, Teri. Those boys are only going to Orlando when we move down there; and then they are going as my sons. Now hurry up, I need to go get my son's belongings."

Teri got the attention of the two boys on her lap. "Guys, Matt and Antonio want you both to join their family. I'm going to let you decide; would you rather go to the camp or join Matt's family?"

Noah looked over at Matt, then back to Teri. "What happens if we wanna become boyfriends? We can't do that if we're brothers."

Cory answered for his mom. "Noah, it doesn't work like that around here. Sean has been my brother since I was six, but he is now my boyfriend. It don't matter if we have the same last name; everyone knows I'm adopted. Don't think you have to be gay either; no matter if you are gay or straight we will all back you up."

Caleb finally spoke, his eyes red and puffy from crying. "Noah, you make me feel different. I'm tryin' to keep it like you're just my brother, but it's like something more with you. I want you to decide, I don't know what to do right now. The last people I thought loved me just threw me away; I need you to make me safe again."

Noah pulled Caleb against him and thought about what he had just heard. He was still thinking when Kyle walked over and joined them.

"Noah? Do you remember Cory, Mark, or me from the home?"

Noah looked up. A few seconds later, his eyes widened in recognition. "I remember you a little. You hung out with one of the older guys. I was only there for a week before things got shut down, so I didn't get to know many people. One of the other kids told me not to mess with you; he said someone had messed you up and I'd get hurt if you thought I was gonna try anything."

Kyle giggled. "Dang, I had a reputation and didn't know it! Let me fill you in some before you decide. The blond who was talking to you about boyfriends is Cory; he was the older kid I used to hang with. He's the one who caused the Home to be shut down. He had lost his memory, that's how he got there. The old kid over there is Mark; he was Cory's roommate. All of us are a kinda family now, and Matt is our guard. Antonio was worse off than you guys when Matt made him his son; I know Matt's serious and he ain't gonna let you get hurt again."

Noah gave Kyle a skeptical look. "Nothing personal, but how do I know I can trust you?"

Kyle smiled. "You don't, but why would I lie to you?"

Noah thought about it. "Okay, you got me. Caleb is counting on me to protect him; I don't

know anything about Orlando, so it's better if we get a family while we gotta chance. You all say that if what Caleb and I are feeling is long lasting that you'll be okay with it; what do you think about it Matt?"

Matt knelt down so he was eye-to-eye with Noah. "You are a very impressive boy, Noah; you are asking all of the right questions. First off, I'm gay; it would be stupid for me to deny you the feelings for each other when I'm looking for someone like that myself. You two deserve a chance and I want to give it to you."

Noah nodded his head. "Okay, that answered my questions except one. How long are you gonna keep us before you get tired of us?"

Matt answered seriously. "I'll never get tired of you, this will be forever if you decide yes."

Noah turned to Teri. "I'm sorry we dropped this on you; but can you make Matt our foster dad?"

Teri smiled at him. "You don't have to apologize; this is my life now. I won't make Matt your foster dad though; I'm making him your actual dad."

Joe spoke up from across the room. "Hurry up Teri, you might actually get them done while the ink is still wet on their name changes; I brought blanks with me. I've learned quick; around here I need to carry spare paperwork."

Teri shook her head and began the process of assigning the boys to Matt. As soon as she finished, Joe called Matt, Antonio, Noah, and Caleb over. "Matt, you are definitely a part of this family. I planned on giving Antonio his final name change today as a surprise; instead I'm proud to be giving THREE boys a father's name. Boys, from this day forward you are all the sons of Matthew Barnes; and I hereby order you to use your new father's last name as your own."

Matt pulled his new family into a group hug, tears of joy flowing down all of their faces. As the hug broke, Sean came over.

"Congratulations, guys. Matt, while you're out, could you grab another bed for the bedroom? Between Antonio's new brothers and our visitors it's gonna be too cramped otherwise tonight."

Matt smiled as he replied. "Sure thing, Sean. I was wondering how much longer until you asked that! You guys gonna have the room ready when I get back?"

Aaron answered for Sean. "You can bet on it; they are going to work on that while Cory, JJ, Gabe, and Kyle are in the office for attitude adjustments."

Cory couldn't resist. "Hey Airboy; that's MY room you're setting them loose in! Don't you think I should have a say in how it's arranged?"

Aaron giggled. "Easy there, bro. Don't worry; Sean's gonna be in charge. Right now your head is more important; besides we all know that Sean thinks just like you."

Twenty minutes later, everyone separated to begin their assigned duties. Matt and John donned their uniforms then left with Caleb, Noah, and Antonio to pick up the new boy's belongings and do some shopping. Tommy and Tyler joined Helen in the kitchen to begin lunch, while Teri and the remaining adults moved to the living room. Aaron, David, and Mark rounded up the group for in the office: Justy, Jamie, Jacob, Kyle, Cory, JJ, and Gabe. The rest of the boys headed upstairs to begin making room for the new furniture.

\* \* \*

Justy took charge as soon as the door to the office closed. He grinned as he announced "Okay guys, I'm losing quality pounce time right now. Let's see what's bouncing around those

empty heads of yours!"

Cory giggled at Justy. "Okay smart aleck, we get the hint. Please take this seriously though, bro. I got bad enough that Tommy chewed me out. Believe it or not, it was his idea to call you guys."

"I know," Justy replied. "As soon as he was able to get me off to the side, Tommy told me exactly how you were acting and begged me to make sure that you will be okay. He may talk funny, but that kid definitely don't take any crap as far as his family is concerned."

Cory smiled. "In other words, you think he's a younger version of you! If so, I just hope he doesn't get as excited as you do when people remind him that he's an angel."

Justy blushed as he replied. "Don't EVEN start with that. Just remember that we're going inside your head. You'd really have trouble explaining to Sean why you suddenly cream your jeans every time you see a German Shepard. You get the hint?"

"Yeah, even though you wouldn't be that cruel," Cory replied with a grin.

"YES, HE WOULD!" Mark, Aaron and David yelled in unison. Cory turned his head to see what they meant, and saw the three of them trying to hold back laughter.

Mark was the first to be able to explain. "Zac was messing around picking on Justy and the twins last week; he made the mistake of falling asleep right after a major prank. When he woke up, he found out that the twins had got even; he orgasmed at the sound of a cat's meow. It wouldn't have been that bad, except someone kept playing Cat Chow commercials over the intercom every half hour. I think the only reason Josh didn't kill the three of them for that one was the fact he was laughing too hard to catch them. Supposedly they undid it; but for some reason Zac gets boners now at the sound of a cow mooing."

Cory turned back to Justy, and began giggling at the sight in front of him. Justy, Jamie, Jacob, and even Kyle were all sitting quietly trying to look innocent. Once he regained enough composure to speak, Cory addressed the four pranksters. "Okay guys, let's hit it. No pranks though; this needs to be done right. We'll have the prank fun later; I know where Mom hid Sean's old see-and-say. If I remember right it had a VERY realistic cow on it!"

Gabe chuckled. "You know, I bet Ricky would even play with the see-and-say; all we'd have to do is tell him it's part of a joke. Seeing as Timmy is well on his way to totally corrupting my innocent little brother, we might as well let him in on the fun."

Cory sat down as the four gifted boys gathered around him. After about fifteen minutes, they announced that they were done and moved on to JJ. After they finished with JJ and Gabe, they all took a seat.

"Man, that wore me out!" Justy commented. "I could definitely use a nap after this!"

Aaron looked around at all of the boys who had been involved. "I think you've got the right idea, Justy. Me, David and Mark are going upstairs to help out the others. The rest of you grab some shut-eye for a little bit. We'll wake you for lunch, okay?"

Everyone agreed with the plan; Cory spread the blankets on the floor, then all seven boys cuddled into one huddled mass and almost instantly fell asleep.

Teri intercepted Aaron, Mark and David as they slowly closed the office door behind them. "How'd it go, guys?" she asked.

"Don't worry, Mom. I think they've got it under control," Aaron replied. "Right now they're all taking a nap. We're gonna wake them for lunch."

Teri smiled. "That's good. Sean told me Cory hasn't been sleeping right since that night. Him taking a nap is a great sign."

Aaron gave Teri a hug. "I'm not leaving until I'm sure, so you can relax. I'm looking out for my little brother."

"I know you are Aaron, and all of us are glad you came home to help him. Speaking of which, you better get upstairs; it sounded like they were tearing the walls down in Cory's room the last time I walked by."

"I'm on it, Mom!" Aaron chuckled as he turned and sprinted up the stairs.

## Chapter 35

Sean looked around him at the group lounging in the Rec Room. After lunch, they had moved all of the tables out of the way so that they would all have someplace to lay or sit. Timmy and Ricky had crashed in the recliner as soon as it was unblocked; the rest of the boys broke into groups and began either playing games or talking.

Cory leaned over and kissed Sean's cheek. "What you thinkin' about, teddy bear?"

Sean smiled. "Just looking around at these guys, thinkin' about how we have become a family. We've got a cute little son, a bunch of brothers, and friends who are just as good as family. In a way, what you had to do has affected me too; it made me finally realize just how much these guys mean to both of us."

"I know, bro. Justy filled me in about something when he woke me up; it wasn't punishing Calvin that was messing my head up. He said it was me worrying about how it was going to affect everyone else that messed me up. I'm glad we saved Tommy though, the things that were planned for him make me sick."

Sean looked across the room at their new little brother. Tommy, Kelly, Caleb, and Noah were sprawled on the floor playing Monopoly; all four boys with smiles on their glowing faces. "I hear ya', bro. Mom surprised me with him, but he fits in with us perfectly."

Sean cuddled into Cory's side, and soon the two boys drifted off into a peaceful nap.

Twenty minutes later, the peaceful scene in the room was abruptly disturbed by Timmy.

"DJ!!!" Timmy screamed. "Nooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Sean and Cory jumped up and ran to the recliner to see what was going on. They were both surprised to see Timmy drenched in sweat; breathing heavily and showing his war paint.

"What's wrong, kiddo?" Cory asked in shock.

"Daddy!!" Timmy started crying hysterically as he lunged out to Cory. "DJ's hurt! He's hurt!"

It took a minute to calm Timmy down enough to talk, then Sean asked him, "Who's DJ, munchkin?"

"I don't know, Pappa," Timmy sniffled. "But he's hurt."

"Was it just a bad dream, lil' guy?" Cory asked.

"NO, DADDY!" Timmy replied forcefully. "DJ's hurt and he is asking for help."

"Well tell us where to find him Timmy, and I promise we'll go help him," Cory calmly replied.

"I don't know, Daddy!" Timmy said as he started sobbing uncontrollably. "I (gasp) just (gasp) don't know."

Cory reached around and felt Timmy's forehead. He looked up at Sean and said, "Babe, go get Mom, Doc Austin, and Dan. He's burning up; one of them has gotta know what's up. Jamie, Jacob; see if you can figure out what's happening!"

As Sean ran out of the room, Cory held his sobbing son, stroking his hair and telling him it would all be okay.

Jamie walked over and placed a hand on Timmy's shoulder as he replied to Cory. "Cor, we were already trying; both of us are just as confused as you. It definitely wasn't any dream, but we can't figure out who or where this DJ is either. There's only one thing we know for sure, this DJ kid needs some help."

Just then, Teri, Dan, and Austin rushed into the room behind Sean. As Cory was beginning to fill them in, the room was silenced by a signal from the terminal. Tommy was nearest; to everyone's shock he glanced at the ID of the caller, jumped up and straightened himself real fast, then proceeded to answer the call.

"Clan Short Headquarters, Communications Officer Thomas Short. How may we be of assistance, Admiral?"

The room was silent as everyone focused on the image of Admiral Harrison Morrow on the screen. "Good afternoon, Thomas. I need to speak to Ensign Cory Short please."

Tommy glanced over at Cory before replying. "At the present time he is comforting his son, Sir. Would it be acceptable if I adjusted the pickup to show his location in this room?"

The Admiral smiled as he replied. "That would be perfectly acceptable, Thomas. I enjoy the rare times I get to see my officers interacting with their families."

Tommy adjusted the pickup, then stepped back. "Go ahead, Admiral."

"Mr. Short, I must commend your choice of a Communications Officer. My only question is why are you hiding him from Starfleet?"

Cory relaxed slightly at the Admiral's humor. "Good afternoon, Admiral. Ensign Sean and myself believe that any future members of Clan Short who wish to become Starfleet personnel need to wait until their fifteenth birthday. We have both learned from the additional stress of our youth in our jobs."

"That is why both of you are commissioned officers, Ensign. When faced with immediate decisions, you have both demonstrated skills that I only wish the Academy could teach. It is also the reason I'm calling you now. I would like to request the assistance of Clan Short in a civil matter."

Cory was suddenly serious. "Go ahead, Admiral."

"My nephew is a police captain in California. One of his men will soon be contacting Director Short regarding two boys. That man, Detective Rob Gunn, is the ONLY person authorized to know any information you may get regarding the location of the two boys. I need the Clan to ensure the boys remain hidden from Earth police personnel until I notify you otherwise."

Cory thought for a second. "Excuse me, Admiral, but with all due respect; is there a reason Federation Security is not able to do this?"

"That is a very valid question, Ensign. The circumstances surrounding the reason the boys are runaways are tied to internal corruption in the local police force. Unfortunately, it is in the one area where Federation Security is not allowed to tread unless Starfleet personnel are involved. As a Vulcan Clan, you have Diplomatic Immunity in any situation which involves your normal business. One of the points in your official charter, as filed with the Federation Council by Ambassador Sarek, reads as follows: 'Clan Short is the primary Vulcan representative for protection of abused or neglected youth for all Federation races.' These two boys fall under that guideline of the Charter, which will make them under your protection if you accept them."

"I see the logic of your request now, Admiral. May I ask the names of the boys?"

"Thank you, Cory. They are both thirteen; one is Tanner Michaels, born February 26th, 1991. The other is David McAllister; he was born March 1st 1991. I'm told David usually goes by DJ."

Timmy let out a screech as he heard the Admiral. William flew in and landed on Timmy's lap. A few seconds later, Timmy looked up at Teri. "Gran'ma, open the door! William's gonna go try to find DJ an' watch him for us."

Cory looked up from Timmy to see a shocked look on the Admiral's face. "Sorry Sir, we just sent one of our Clan Air Force interceptors to locate the boys. Have your nephew inform his man that he needs to get all of his information from us; any electronic means of tracking the boys is going to return false information within the next hour."

The Admiral's shock turned into a smile. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't believe it. Do you need me to send descriptions?"

Cory looked over to where Noah and Caleb were hurriedly entering voice commands on the computer; the printer was already spewing out sheets of paper. "Actually Sir, my intelligence people are already on it; we might know more about them than you do already. William, he's the eagle that just left, is receiving the information real-time as we find it."

"Thank you again Cory; I'll sleep better tonight knowing that no matter where those boys are they are going to be watched over by your Clan. I would suggest giving them some time to work their way to where ever they are going, just make sure they are safe doing it. I'll leave the final decision to you as to when they are contacted directly by your people. Have a good day, Cory."

"Thank you Admiral. They might not know it, but they are on their way to safety. Live Long and Prosper, Admiral Morrow."

"Live Long and Prosper, Cory Short," the Admiral replied as he signed off.

Once the connection closed, Cory smiled as he called Tommy over. "Hey lil' bro; come here!"

Tommy walked over in front of Cory. "Did y'all think I done okay?" he asked hopefully.

Cory held out his arm and pulled Tommy onto his lap next to Timmy. "You did awesome, Tommy. I thought you sounded very professional. What was that about being the Communications Officer?"

Tommy held down his head. "Sorry, Cory, but I've always wanted to do that. I promise I ain't gonna do it again."

Cory lifted Tommy's head and kissed his cheek. "Lil' bro, you can do it anytime you want. In fact, I think we'll go ahead and make it official; you ARE the Clan's Communications Officer now. How did you get rid of your accent though?"

Tommy's face lit up like a light bulb. "Really?! WOW! Thanks Cor! It ain't hard talkin' like that to the terminal; I just 'tend I'm talkin' stuff into the 'puter to do. It's diff'rnt talking to people."

Cory smiled. "That makes sense to me, bro. Get on over there with JJ, ask him to get you set up in the terminal with full communications rights. Tell him to set up his assistant security officer, Gabe, too."

"Okay bro!" Tommy exclaimed as he jumped off of Cory.

Timmy hopped down long enough for Cory to stand, then climbed back up into Cory's arms. They headed over to where Sean, Justy, Jamie, and Jacob had set up a table and were going over the printouts as fast as Noah and Caleb could produce them. Kyle and Tyler were busy sorting everything into categories.



Cory looked over Sean's shoulder at the paper he was holding. "Dang, it looks like someone drained Tanner's inheritance account! There's only five hundred dollars left in it!"

"I know," Sean replied. "there's no way they can survive on that." He turned to Noah. "Hey Noah, are you still in the account for Tanner's inheritance?"

"Yeah, why Sean?"

"Redirect his card to this account," Sean said as he got a card out of his wallet. "That's my account that has my share of the settlement from when my Dad was killed. Set them with no limit on withdrawals, I doubt they are going to take the whole fifty thousand. Besides, nobody's going to be smart enough to look for their card number, they'll just watch the account that the card is supposed to work for."

Noah spoke a couple of commands, then grinned. "Okay, it's done!" He glanced at the screen and giggled. "Just in time, too; they just got a thousand dollars out of it."

Cory grinned. "Well, at least they have money! Can you tell me where?"

Caleb looked up. "Yeah, it's a Wal-Mart in Auburn, California. I'm 'fixing' the camera in the ATM right now; for some reason it's going to have video problems."

Cory did a double-take. "WHAT! You know how easily that can be traced back to us?"

Caleb shook his head. "Not very easy; I'm routed through the open public network on Alpha Centauri then the FBI offices in Washington, DC. We all know that Alpha Centauri don't release info on their users on the public network; I'm using software that puts us right on it. In fact, traces fall dead as soon as they hit the planet."

Cory giggled. "I had no idea we had a couple of hackers in the house! How seriously are you guys into that?"

Noah smiled. "Actually, it's something I messed around with before Caleb and I got together. He had been doing a few different things too, we just put our skills together."

"Great, later on I want you two to give me a hand, we have some code hacking to do." Cory then took a paper that Justy was handing him; his smile quickly faded. "This is some pretty serious shit! What do you think, bro?"

Justy's face was grim as he replied. "That's the official report; I think it smells more than Aaron's feet. I ain't a personality expert, but this don't match what the comments in their school records say about them. I think there's a set-up going on."

Cory nodded. "I trust you on that; what do you think about having Dan review what you went over? He's the head shrink around here. You're the head of intelligence in the Clan, use any resources you or your team needs."

"Good idea, bro. I'll let you know what he says," Justy replied as he grabbed a pile of papers and headed across the room.

\* \* \*

The boys had just finished dinner, and Cory joined Noah and Caleb in the Rec Room. "Well, are you guys up to hacking some software?" Cory asked with a grin.

Caleb turned his head. "Yeah, but why do you want to do it?"

"Well, it seems that Space Sim is doing some things it's not supposed to. We need to figure out why," Cory replied. "I've got the code from Starfleet. We need to de-compile the commercial version and compare the two."

Noah shook his head. "Man, that's a lotta code to go through. Any ideas what we're looking for?"

Cory nodded. "We're gonna start with the multi-player section; we'll go from there."

Believe it or not, we're actually wanting to see differences in the code. If it's the same we need to design a patch for Starfleet to block retail versions."

Caleb and Noah both grinned. "Kewl! Can we fix the screwups too?" Noah chuckled.

"We might as well while we're in there. Won't we get in trouble from Microsoft for de-compiling Space Sim though?" Caleb added.

Cory grinned at his two eager helpers. "Don't worry about Microsoft, Starfleet has that handled. As far as fixing errors, if we all agree on it we'll do it."

The three boys sat down and became obvious to everything as they immersed themselves in sorting out computer code.

\* \* \*

The rest of the boys were upstairs lounging on the new beds. Matt had picked out two king-size beds to replace the crowded queen size that had been in Cory's room. Floor space was now cut in half, but the expanse of mattresses made up for it. Sean set up two movies to play, and the boys cuddled in groups to watch the shows.

Timmy and Ricky had decided to get back to the normal routine, and attached themselves to Kelly. Since Tommy was also trying to cuddle Kelly, he ended up with Timmy on his lap while Ricky plopped on Kelly.

"Unca' Tommy, why does Daddy gotta play with that stupid 'puter 'stead of bein' here?" Timmy pouted.

"I don't know, lil' buddy; he said it was somethin' he needed to get done."

JJ overheard the question. "Timmy, your Daddy has to do that for his work. Mr. Spock assigned the job of fixing some computer software to your Daddy, and now he's doing what he is supposed to."

Timmy spun his head to see JJ. "Okay Uncle JJ, I un'erstan' now. Thanks!"

"No problem lil' guy," JJ replied as he settled in next to Adam.

By the middle of the second movie, almost all of the boys had drifted off to sleep. The only exceptions were Byron and Antonio; Byron only because Antonio kept squirming around.

Byron giggled as Antonio shifted yet again. "Hey wiggle worm, what's up?"

Antonio stuck out his tongue before replying. "I'm just waiting for my new brothers; this is their first night here, and Sean didn't get to talk to them like he did the rest of us. I hope they don't freak out."

Byron pulled Antonio against his chest. "Relax, babe. They are with Cory, and you know he ain't gonna let anything bad happen. I'm sure they won't even notice; they've been looking at computer code for a few hours now. I'll be surprised if they can see to climb the stairs!"

As if on cue, Cory came walking through the door followed by Noah and Caleb. The two newest boys were halfway across the room before they noticed everyone else; as soon as they did, both of them came to a halt with their mouths hanging wide open.

Antonio jumped off of the bed and ran over to them. "Cory didn't warn you, did he?"

Both boys shook their heads 'no', still in shock and unable to speak.

Antonio shot Cory a dirty look, then grabbed the hands of his new brothers and guided them over to the bed. "Sit down bros; I'll try to fill you in."

Cory joined the boys on the edge of the bed. "Sorry, I'm getting used to the way we all live now; I kinda spaced telling you guys what to expect. Usually Sean sits down with everyone; since we were working on the computer he didn't get a chance with you two."

Noah had managed to recover somewhat, and couldn't help but giggle when he saw Caleb

sneaking glances at Aaron. "What do you think, Caleb? Is Aaron's butt as cute as you imagined it was?"

Caleb turned beet red. "I wasn't looking!" he replied forcefully.

"Sure you weren't!" Noah giggled. "You always stare whenever you see a picture of him, and you were almost drooling when we sat with him earlier! Now you're seein' him naked just like you always wanted to!"

"Shut up!" Caleb exclaimed as he held his hands over his face.

Noah was about to continue when Byron stopped him. "I think you've said enough, Noah. There's no reason to embarrass Caleb any more. I'm sure that you are going to respond just like he is within the next month or so; how are you going to feel if he treats you like you are treating him now?"

Noah stared at his feet. "I guess I'd feel pretty bad. I'm sorry for picking on you, Caleb."

Caleb nodded his head, but kept his hands over his face. Cory decided he better diffuse the situation the rest of the way. "Caleb, could you look at me?"

Caleb peeked through his fingers at Cory. "What?"

"Calm down, you're with friends here. The first time Aaron slept nude here I was looking big time. I can call him my big brother now, but I used to stare at his pictures and mentally undress him all the time. It's okay to look here, we all understand. You're not sick or weird, you're just like the rest of us. I know you're embarrassed by what Noah said, but you don't need to be."

Caleb whined his response. "I can't help it, as soon as I saw him there I had to look!"

Antonio grinned. "Bro, I'm a lot older than you are and I still look whenever he gets undressed."

Both Noah and Caleb looked at Antonio in shock. "What you talkin' about; you're just a kid!" Caleb exclaimed.

Cory giggled as he explained. "That's one of the things we need to talk about guys; your little brother isn't as little as he looks. Let's all pile up in a clear spot and I'll fill you in."

Once they were all comfortable, Cory began. "Since Antonio brought it up, I'll explain about him first. You guys have a special little brother to take care of; and he's gonna be little for a long time. Antonio doesn't grow like the rest of us; he was born on February 29th and ages one year for every four years he's alive. He's gonna be nine for just over three more years. I guess you guys are wondering about all the naked guys here too, ain't you?"

Noah grinned. "Yeah, did we miss an orgy or something?"

Cory shook his head. "Not likely, we all just sleep however we feel comfortable. Since most of us are gay and have boyfriends, we like to cuddle up naked. Nobody here cares if you are gay or straight, and nobody will force you to do something you don't wanna do. If you guys are gonna be a couple, all of us are here to help you out, all you have to do is ask. If someone is messing up, the rest of us work together to try to help them out. Trust me, it works; Sean and I had a big blowup, the rest of these guys made us sit down and work it out. I'm going to let Sean fill you guys in on everyone's history tomorrow; for now I'll just tell you that most of these guys are recovering from abuse you can't even imagine in your worst dreams. Oh, if you wake up with two munchkins and a teddy bear in the morning, don't worry. Knowing my son, they are probably doing their normal inspection of everyone's privates. I seriously wonder if he's keeping a list of who has started growing pubes! They'll probably con you into a shower in the morning anyway; it seems to be their way of welcoming you to the family. We usually shower as couples to save time, and we wait till morning so that we can wash of the results of anything we might have done overnight."

Caleb grinned. "You mean messin' around?"

"Yep. Either that or wet dreams from cuddling someone you care about. You guys have any more questions?"

Noah shook his head. "Nah, we'll wait for Sean I guess. It just seemed weird seein' all these moons in here!"

"You mean like this?" Antonio giggled as he stood on the bed, turned around, and wiggled his butt at Noah.

Noah grabbed Antonio's hips and pulled him down onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around Antonio as he replied "Yeah, little brother, just like that. I've kinda been watchin' you today; is Byron your boyfriend?"

"Yeah, you ain't mad are you?" Antonio replied with an edge of fright in his tone.

"No little bro, I'm not mad as long as he takes care of you. I know you helped our new Dad decide to adopt us; I'm gonna make sure nobody hurts you."

Caleb scooted over and joined in the embrace. "That goes for me too, bro. I think I'm gonna enjoy having you as family."

Antonio's smile returned. "Thanks! Would you guys like to cuddle with Byron and me tonight?"

Both boys looked at Byron; when he smiled and nodded his head they chorused "Sure!"

Antonio and Byron staked out a fairly open spot on one of the beds for the four of them while Noah, Caleb, and Cory undressed. Before climbing to their spots on the bed, Cory pulled Noah and Caleb into a hug. "Welcome to the family, guys. You can stop worrying, we're all going to protect you."

Both boys returned the hug, then scampered across the bed to the spot Antonio had set aside for them. There was just enough room to squeeze in; Caleb ended up back-to-back with Antonio, while Noah laid down face-to-face with Caleb. Byron stretched his arm out and protectively laid it over the three boys laying in front of him.

Cory dimmed the lights, then wedged himself between Sean and Timmy. Just as he was settling in, Cory heard the soft voice of Caleb:

Heavenly Father; thank you for guiding us to our new family, a family where we are loved for who we are. Thank you for giving me Noah as a brother and a boyfriend, and thank you for Matt, Antonio, Teri, and all of these boys. Father, please watch over all of us here, help all of these guys overcome the hurt they are feeling. Please watch over our old mom and dad; they still have our love even though Your plans moved us away from them. Please Father, help DJ and Tanner where ever they are to find safety. We thank You for all of Your many blessings as we pray as You taught us:

*Noah's voice joined Caleb's to finish the prayer.  
Our Father, who art in Heaven; Hallowed be Thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done;  
On Earth as it is in Heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against ourselves.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.  
In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*

"Amen" Cory whispered as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

## *Chapter 36*

### **Two Days Later, Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco, CA:**

Noah and Caleb stood nervously next to Cory, waiting to be called in. Just as they were finally settling in to their new home, Cory received the summons to come to see Admiral Morrow yesterday. For some unknown reason, Cory had insisted that the two boys be with him for the meeting.

"Ensign Short, the Admiral will see you and your party now."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Cory replied. He walked through the immense door into the Admiral's office, followed closely by Noah and Caleb. Cory walked to the front of Admiral Morrow's desk and came to attention. Cory saluted as he said "Ensign Cory Short, reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease, Ensign. Due to the nature of today's discussion, I would like to keep this meeting informal. Why don't you introduce your companions, then have a seat while we wait for the rest of the guests to arrive?"

Cory smiled. "Thank you, Sir. On my left is Noah Barnes, and on my right is Caleb Barnes. Guys, this is Admiral Harrison Morrow, the Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet."

After the three boys took a seat, Admiral Morrow asked "Cory, may I inquire why you thought it necessary to bring Noah and Caleb to today's meeting?"

"Well, Sir, they both assisted me in troubleshooting the software and designing the repairs to the code. Due to them being so much help, I figured they deserved to be here to receive credit for their work."

The Admiral smiled at the two blushing boys. "In that case, the two of you should be very proud of yourselves. I'm not sure if you know this, but Cory is considered one of the top ten Engineers in Starfleet already. There are cadets who would give up their commissions to work with him on a project. You have received quite an honor." He then focused on the now-blushing Cory. "Cory, there's no need to blush. The Starfleet IT Department is using your code modifications in all of our training software; after the magic you worked on the *Enterprise*, as soon as it arrived this morning it went into production - without testing. It seems that Space Sim was not the only software with the security holes in it. Your patches are being applied to all of the outsourced software and some of our own internally developed software. Once everyone else is here, we'll discuss it further. What is the latest on those two boys from California?"

Cory relaxed at the change of subject. "Well, Sir, we know for certain that they are en route to Des Moines to contact Federation Youth Services. I have Clan Security on a 24-7 watch

on them, and we are prepared to extract them at a moments notice if deemed necessary. I've already told Mom that the Clan is taking them under Safe Haven; she's prepared to do the honors as soon as they arrive."

"Who will be listed as their parents?"

"Actually Sir, nobody. They will get the same guidance from the adults as the rest of the kids, but their guardianship will be listed as Clan Short. As such, no legal proceedings can be brought against them for the actions that were required for them to escape. Sean and Aaron handle our legal affairs, and both of them have already got it set up so nobody on Earth can touch them."

Admiral Morrow smiled and shook his head in wonder. "You know something Cory? Every time I talk to you, you sound more and more like a man I respect like no other - Ambassador Sarek. I feel sorry for any being that crosses either one of you; they don't have a chance."

Just then the intercom on the Admiral's desk chimed. "Admiral; Captain Kirk and Captain Spock to see you, Sir."

"Send them in."

Cory jumped up and came to attention facing the door, followed a split second later by Caleb and Noah. Once Kirk and Spock were done with their official greetings to the Admiral, Cory saluted. "Welcome back, Captain."

Kirk grinned as he returned the salute. "Thank you, Ensign. I appreciated your homecoming gift!"

"Thank you, Sir!" Cory replied before dropping the salute and turning to Mr. Spock. Cory raised his hand in Vulcan greeting, his actions being mirrored by Noah and Caleb. "Welcome back, Captain Spock. I hope that your latest travels were successful."

Mr. Spock raised an eyebrow at the two boys with Cory before returning their greeting. "It was as expected. May I inquire as to the identities of your companions and the logic behind their presence?"

Unsure of the boy's positions, Cory described them as he introduced them. "As you wish, Sir. The young man with blond hair behind me is Caleb Barnes, and the young man with brown hair is Noah Barnes. Both are Clan Short members who have been added since your departure. Noah and Caleb assisted in the debugging and repairs to the Space Sim software, and share equal credit with myself as to the finished product."

Mr. Spock nodded his head once. "Your decision to include them in this meeting is acceptable. I have reviewed the results of your work and found it to meet the expected standards. You may continue introductions, Mr. Short."

Cory nodded his head before motioning the two boys to join him at his side. "Noah, Caleb; I'd like you to meet my Commanding Officer, Captain James T. Kirk of the USS *Enterprise*."

Kirk stepped forward and shook both boys hands. "It's great to meet you guys; you've got to be pretty special to keep up with Cory on the computers! Just call me Uncle Jim, the rest of the kids do."

Both boys were awestruck as they shook Kirk's hand. Caleb was the only one able to speak. "WOW! Cory never told us we'd be meeting y'all! This is awesome!"

Kirk chuckled. "Just wait, Sean don't know it yet, but he's bringing all of you up to the ship tomorrow! I'm sure Scotty is going to want to meet you two."

Both boy's grins showed their acceptance of the news. Cory then turned to Mr. Spock, and as Noah and Caleb turned they both became serious. Cory again did the introduction. "Noah, Caleb; it is my honor to present to you Captain Spock, First Officer and Science Officer on the

USS *Enterprise* and son of Ambassador Sarek."

Noah stepped forward. "Mr. Spock, I speak for my brother as well as myself in stating it is an honor to make your acquaintance. We are honored that you found our work acceptable. I believe you will find the details of the problems most interesting."

Spock raised both eyebrows. "I shall await your report then, Noah. May I inquire as to the length of time you have resided with Clan Short?"

Noah nodded. "We have been residing at our new home slightly in excess of seventy hours, Sir."

"Your grasp of proper communication skills is unusual for that time frame. My father will find my report to him on your progress very interesting."

Kirk interrupted the conversation. "Okay Spock, you can stop torturing the boys now! Admit it, they impressed you!" He turned to Cory. "Cory, one of these days you're going to do something that DOESN'T surprise me!"

Cory grinned at Kirk. "No way, Sir! I promised Scotty that I'd keep you on your toes!"

Kirk shook his head. "For some reason I believe you! Let's get this over with before you cause any more gray hairs."

Admiral Morrow chuckled. "Hold on, Jim. There's one more guest coming; Cory is planning on having some fun."

As if on cue, the intercom dinged. "Admiral, a Mr. William Gates to see you."

The Admiral motioned everyone over to the conference table before replying. "Send him in, then hold all my calls until further notice."

"Aye Sir."

As everyone took their places around the table, the Admiral met Mr. Gates at the door. He escorted him to the table, then once they were seated began the introductions. "Everyone, this is Bill Gates, head of Microsoft. Mr. Gates, let me introduce our companions. To my left is Captain James T. Kirk, Commanding Officer of the USS *Enterprise*. Next to him is Captain Spock, Science Officer on the USS *Enterprise*. To my right is Ensign Cory Short, Engineers Assistant on the USS *Enterprise* and Patriarch of Clan Short of Vulcan. To his right is Noah Barnes, Clan Short IT Security and Caleb Barnes, also Clan Short IT Security. I will be quite honest, the details of the report I received are Greek to me, so I'm going to turn this over to Mr. Short."

"Thank you, Sir," Cory said as he stood and walked over to the display on the wall. "Mr. Gates, we discovered a flaw in the retail versions of Space Sim that allowed them to uplink to a Starfleet ship's computer. Upon comparison of the retail code to the classified Starfleet specific code, we found you in contract violation. To be exact, we found that both contained the same code with a weak lock placed on the retail version."

Gates interrupted Cory. "Listen kid, you have no idea about contract law, so give it up. Besides, if you decompiled the retail version I'm filing charges; we only gave Starfleet rights to their code."

Cory held up his hand to stop the Admiral from responding, then went into Vulcan mode as he replied. "Mr. Gates, it is apparent that you have been given insufficient information. The code in question is considered a Starfleet security breach, as such it is open for inspection. The standard Starfleet software license requires access to all associated code whether retail or custom; it is a non-revocable clause in a contract your company signed. Additionally, if you continue on your present course of action, there is a high probability that you will leave here with no company to be head of."

Mr. Spock spoke as Cory paused. "Mr. Gates, I concur with Mr. Short's hypothesis. I place the chances of your company being bankrupt at 98% if you continue with this illogical

emotional outburst."

Gates looked at the Admiral for help. "What's the deal here?"

Admiral Morrow shook his head. "I hate to tell you this, Bill, but Mr. Short is one-hundred percent right. Both he and Mr. Spock are referring to a ruling by the Federation Council. By contract, you should have already lost everything due to the amount of flaws found; the fines are on a per-incident basis. Mr. Short requested that you be given a fair hearing to discuss the problems found and assess where the fault lay. Before you leave today, the five gentlemen with us will decide on their recommendation to the Council as to your fate. Of those five, four will decide using logic only, so you better pay attention."

The anger on Bill Gates face disappeared, and was replaced with shock, then fear, then resignation. He turned back to Cory and spoke. "Mr. Short, it appears I was out of line. Please continue."

Cory nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Gates. We found one flaw that seems to be common across multiple software platforms; unfortunately Space Sim did not lock it out properly in the retail code. I am going to display the code snippets for the areas we found; Noah was in charge of error tracking and will describe the implications of each problem."

Cory brought up the first frame, and Noah took over the commentary. "This segment is where the software connects to Starfleet servers to access the DNS for Fleet ships. The retail version should have had this code stripped out, instead it was locked out by using false ship names. If the name of an actual ship was forced into the program, it was able to access the ship's training database. We found that by removing this code and all calls for it that program speed increased three percent. We developed a modified access code that is more secure; it only adds a one percent overhead."

An hour later, Noah finished with the last slide. "As you can see, by your programmers leaving in the Starfleet code there was serious unneeded overhead in the retail version. You will notice that we did not show you the repaired code; some of it is for Starfleet eyes only. Caleb will discuss with you what your options are at this point."

Caleb stepped up. "Computer; begin logging."

"Logging activated."

Caleb turned to Gates. "We had our Clan legal department review your contract. Forty-eight of the flaws we found were in direct violation of the contract terms; each copy you have made of Space Sim is subject to a fine for each of those flaws. As such, the total of your projected fines exceeds Microsoft's estimated value considerably. Due to the fact that a portion of those flaws have been found in other manufacturer's software in a lesser degree, we have developed a more logical solution to this issue. We will provide you with a clean copy of Space Sim; all the offending code has been removed, and we repaired a few bugs that have slipped through your programmers as well. You will make this copy available for download immediately at no charge, and will distribute it to anyone who calls in for it on appropriate medium for no fee. Don't require proof of ownership; this needs to get out to the hackers as well as legit customers. You will turn over all existing code to Starfleet and use this as your base code for the next version. In thirty days, we will make a modification to a certain address Noah did not show you that all of the existing copies try to access. Once they access that address, the software will be disabled and a notice will appear on their screen giving the address to download the replacement version and the phone number to call to get a hard copy. You will need to keep the download and hard copies available for one year, even if you release a newer version before then. If you agree to this route, all you have to do is figure out the excuse you are going to use for needing to do this; if you pick the right one you might actually pick up some customers on your next version."



Gates looked around the table. "Considering the alternative, I really don't have much choice. Does anyone have any ideas on how we can pull this off?"

Cory smiled. "You would have to get the Admiral's permission, but I think that you could play it off pretty easily. There are two copies on the disk we'll give you; one is just 2004 stripped of all the code, while the other is marked as 2005 with quite a few enhancements. We looked at all of the areas that annoyed us as players, and worked out the bugs in them. In addition, we were able to insert the code giving the retail version voice capability. Personally, I'd make an announcement that a hacker had managed to access the retail copies and install a spy worm into the program; then in the same announcement state that Starfleet programmers assisted you with completion of the 2005 version and verified the access point was closed. Make it sound like you are distributing 2005 for free because you are concerned about your customer's privacy; you might even consider free full version displays at major retailers to make sure it gets out. We've already taken care of the hacked software distribution sites; they all have the edited 2004 version now. Oh, one thing Caleb forgot; from now on you will only develop the retail version, the copies Starfleet gets from you will be internally modified to meet Simulator requirements. You will still be provided the information you need for new classes of Fleet ships to add them to the base program."

"I like that idea; I think it will work great! Admiral, give me about a week to find out exactly who approved the code being left in like that; even though Cory is offering my company a chance, I would prefer to turn the responsible party over to you for further action. Despite the rumors in the IT industry, I don't approve of sloppy software. It looks like it's time for me to do some overdue house cleaning, and then stop everything and review every line of code in all of our products. I busted my tail to build this company, I'm not about to lose it because someone got lazy."

Admiral Morrow nodded his head. "As long as you put it the way Cory suggested, I'm fine with you distributing the 2005 version that way. I think we're about done. Gentlemen, I need your recommendations to pass on to the Council. Caleb?"

Caleb looked up. "Mr. Gates suggested that it might be a breakdown in management that caused this. I'm okay with leaving it at this as long as he is able to provide a verifiable area where the problem occurred and can prove that it is fixed."

Noah went next. "I agree with Caleb, as long as something is in place so this doesn't repeat. If it does happen again, the fines should be automatic without appeal."

Cory took his turn. "I believe we should follow the outlined agreement. Admiral, I do think that a fixed time line needs to be set by you; and it needs to be non-negotiable."

Admiral Morrow turned to the other side of the table. "Mr. Spock, your opinion?"

"I find the statements made by Clan Short to be acceptable. The economic impact of dissolving the company makes that option illogical; the alternative developed by Clan Short lessens economic impact while still providing appropriate discipline for the transgressions of the employees."

Kirk looked around the table before answering. "Well, I think the Clan's got it all handled; the only thing I can think of is making it so that they review all future releases of any software which might contain Starfleet code before the software can hit the streets. As a third party, maybe they can keep this from happening again."

To everyone's surprise, Bill Gates spoke up. "Excellent idea, Captain. I'd be happy to agree to that; it protects both parties that way, and the code is secure with them."

Admiral Morrow stood up. "Gentlemen, since we are all in agreement, I will pass this on to the Council for approval. They are in session now and awaiting my call, I shall return shortly."

Fifteen minutes later, Admiral Morrow returned. "The council has approved the arrangements. Bill, hang around; we need to set up a schedule. The rest of you are free to go."

Cory walked up to Bill. "Mr. Gates, here's the master for you to distribute. This other one has the same thing as the master along with the modified 2004. I would suggest not letting your programmers even know that you have it until it's locked in to where they can't touch it; we closed off almost all of their back doors too. It appeared that each team installed their own back door, their were about 40 of them total. We left the QA doors and your personal door, all of the rest are gone."

Bill chuckled. "No problem; but I'll bet you installed one for yourself."

Cory giggled. "No need to, we've got yours! You did a good job of hiding it, so we'll just use it. Just let us know if you change it."

"Will do!" Bill replied. He then spun in shock as Caleb gave him a serious swat on the behind. "What was that for?!"

Caleb grinned as he replied "Windows ME - need I say more?"

Bill chuckled. "You're the first person with enough ba ... guts to literally spank me for that mess! You are definitely going to go far with that attitude, young man. Don't ever change it!"

Mr. Spock looked over from where he was getting his report from Noah. "Mr. Gates, am I correct in my observation that you consider corporal punishment a suitable recourse for production of inferior software?"

Bill smiled as he replied. "Considering the programmers seem to be getting younger every year, it might not be that far-fetched of an idea, Mr. Spock."

Both of Mr. Spock's eyebrows went up as he returned to his discussion with Noah. Once they were finished, Cory said their farewells. Fifteen minutes later, they beamed back into the front hall at home.

The three boys headed into the Rec Room to see what was going on. Cory was about three feet inside the doorway when Timmy noticed him and came flying across the room.

"DADDY! YOU'RE HOME!" Timmy yelled as he pounced Cory.

Noah and Caleb saw Timmy coming, and managed to brace Cory to keep him from falling as Timmy slammed into his chest.

Cory giggled at the squirming boy in his arms. "Hey rug-rat; did'ja miss me or something?"

Timmy purred as he molded himself to Cory. "Yeah Daddy; I was scared you wasn't comin' home."

Cory kissed Timmy on the cheek. "You can relax, little one. There's no way I'd let anything separate me from you and Pop; the two of you are what makes me smile whenever I wake up."

Timmy snuggled tight against Cory's chest. Cory walked over to where Sean was sitting at the terminal, leaned over, and gave Sean a quick kiss. "Hey Cutie; did you miss me too?"

Sean giggled. "Of course, silly! I was getting lonely without my favorite cuddle toy! How did the meeting go?"

"Pretty good; the patches were approved and Microsoft is going to distribute the reworked Space Sim. Noah and Caleb got to meet the Captain and Mr. Spock; you should have seen Noah discussing programming with Mr. Spock! Oh, dust off your pilot clothes, you're driving the tour bus to the *Enterprise* tomorrow."

Sean got suddenly serious. "Cor, please don't joke about that. I'm not ready to take responsibility for taking these guys into space. I care about all of them too much, if something happened I'd die."

Cory saw the fear in Sean's eyes. He quickly sat Timmy on the loveseat, then returned to Sean. Cory then pulled Sean to the loveseat also, guiding him onto his lap once he was seated. "Sean, babe, relax. Nobody is going to get hurt; Captain Kirk is the one who wants you to do it. You are qualified, and I trust you just as much as I trust Uncle Chip. This is the one thing that you can do that none of the rest of us can; you make me proud when I see you run through the practice courses on the simulator like they are nothing. You're the best thirteen-year-old pilot in the Federation; I think it's great that you get to show our new family why they call you that. You always tell everyone not to talk down about themselves; listen to your own advice bro."

Sean nuzzled Cory's cheek. "Yeah, I guess you're right. You gonna be my co-pilot?"

Cory smiled. "Naw, I think I'll let Matt do it. I'm not qualified yet, and I want to wait until you feel comfortable teaching me. Besides, this way I can handle all of the questions from the newbies so they don't bug you."

"You know, for a blond you're pretty smart!" Sean giggled.

"Yeah, and you don't do too bad yourself, considering you're a Helmsman!" Cory shot back with a chuckle.

Their cuddle was interrupted by Tommy shouting. "Holy Smoke! I ain't never heard no such thing! Bro's, git over here; y'all ain't gonna have no ideas guessin' what Justy's done found!"

Cory and Sean jumped up and ran to the computer terminal. Aaron arrived the same time they did; he took one look at the screen and grinned.

"Justy, could you print that? Make a few copies; I think Mom might be interested in this one," Aaron requested.

"Sure. Computer: print document, five copies. Execute."

A few seconds later, Justy handed two copies to Aaron. He gave Cory and Sean each a copy, and placed the last one on the growing pile of research that all of the boys had conducted. Cory glanced over the form, then looked back up at Justy. "Bro, we're gonna take Timmy and Ricky upstairs to explain this to them; could you and Tommy fill everyone else in while Aaron handles the adults?"

"No prob, Cor. This just explained a lot of things."

A few minutes later, Sean and Cory sat Timmy and Ricky down in the bedroom.

"Why's ev'ryone so 'cited, Daddy?" Timmy asked.

Cory smiled. "It's because we just found out something really special, lil' guy; something special about you and your friend DJ."

Both young boys perked up at the mention of DJ. "Did you figger out why he's talkin' to Timmy?" Ricky asked.

Sean giggled. "Not for sure, munchkin; but what your Uncle Tommy and Uncle Justy found helps us a lot to guess at how it's happening. You guys need to sit still and wait to ask questions until Cory finishes telling you about what we found, okay?"

Both boys nodded, then sat back holding hands while watching Cory expectantly.

Cory pulled a chair over and sat in front of them. "Timmy, before you were born, your birth Daddy used to work on experimental stuff for Starfleet. At the time, they were experimenting with what's called time travel; basically what they were trying to do was figure out how to go a short time into the past to prevent disasters like a ship blowing up or stuff like that. Your Daddy was supposed to be sent back thirteen minutes as a test; something messed up and he was sent back thirteen years. He had a tracking bug on him, but it took almost two years to find him by searching through the time lines. When they found him, a pre-arranged signal was triggered which told him that he would be transported back in five hours. When he came back to his normal time, he brought you back with him, Timmy. What it says here is that he had a job in California while he

was waiting, and got a little too drunk at a New Year's party. It seems that he got one of his co-workers pregnant; nine months later you were born. Since your mommy was married to someone else, they made it look like you died in the hospital. They did that to protect you and your daddy; if anyone found out he was from the future there would be a lot of trouble. Also, if he had left you there it could have messed up what we know as reality today. You understand so far?"

Timmy nodded. "Yeah, kinda. That means I'm like Uncle 'Tonio, ain't I? I'm old but still a kid."

"You got it, kiddo. You grow normal, it's just that you will always be eleven years older than you look."

"Okay; but whaddabout DJ?"

"I'm getting to him, Gizmo. You see, your Mommy had another baby about a year after you were born. Your Daddy had already came back, so he didn't know about it. Starfleet prevented him from contacting her; they thought it would be best to keep separate just in case his return erased her memories of him being in the earlier time. To make it easy, DJ is your half-brother. I think that the two of you can "talk" because of that; kinda like the twins all do."

"KEWL! I gotta brother!" Timmy exclaimed excitedly.

Ricky gave Sean a confused look. "Pop, does that make DJ a big brother or a little brother?"

Sean giggled. "I don't know, Ricky. I guess you guys will just have to argue about it when y'all meet."

"Ya' think he's gonna like me, daddy?" Timmy asked in a suddenly subdued voice.

Cory reached forward and pulled Timmy onto his lap. "You know what, munchkin? I think he's gonna love you, just like all the rest of us do. You're an awesome little guy; anyone who don't like you has gotta be crazy."

Timmy gave a small smile and rested his head on Cory's chest. "I love you, Daddy."

Downstairs, Austin, Teri, Aaron, Tommy and Justy were sitting at the table discussing the latest turn of events.

Austin looked across the table. "Justy, how sure are you of this being accurate?"

Justy grinned. "Doc, if you knew where I found this at you wouldn't ask that! Let's just say the place where Starfleet has this stored requires a pretty high level of access just to know it's there. That printout is part of the official logs; lying on it would be grounds for Court Martial."

"Okay, if it's so secret, how did you find it?"

Justy looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. "Starfleet don't keep secrets from Vulcan, and Vulcan's don't search for information unless it's necessary. As a Vulcan family member searching from a Clan headquarters, ANY information that matched my search was made available. I started this search last night; this was buried so deep that it took until today for it to be found."

Austin began to respond, but was cut off by Tommy. "Doc, I ain't meanin' to be rude, but y'all are a' whippin' a dead horse. It ain't makin' a lick of difference where Justy found it; I'm gett'n new kin, a nephew bigger 'en me. What's y'all's plan here? There ain't no way my bro can have a son that's grown same as him. It ain't right and ain't fair to DJ. Whaddabout Tanner; both 'dem boys need real kin to call their own, parents lettin' them know if they's slippin' the wrong way. Y'all's givin me new kinfolk, 'stead of floppin' like tadpoles let's git these boys their own kin too."

Aaron was in shock at Tommy's outburst. Teri just chuckled. "Oh, Aaron, I forgot to warn you; your little brother gets a mite bit excited at times. It seems to happen when he knows he's right from what I can tell."

Tommy turned bright red and stared at the table. "Sorry Mom; I didn't mean to be bad,

please don't be mad at me," he sniffled. He jumped in his seat when Teri reached over for him, but relaxed somewhat when she pulled him onto her lap. "Please don't hit me, mommy," he whined.

Teri pulled him tight against her bosom and kissed his forehead. "Shhh, relax son; I will never hit any kid, especially one of my own sons. I have no reason to be mad at you; in your own way you told us what you thought needed to be done. We might need to work on your diplomacy a little bit, but I think everything you just said was absolutely correct." She sat and caressed his back for a few minutes until he was relaxed, then continued in a soft tone. "You know something? You sound a lot like one of your big brothers, Cory. I know that even when he was younger, whenever he spoke up like that he had an idea about how to fix the problem too. Do you have any ideas?"

Tommy replied just loud enough for Teri to hear him. "Yeah, but it's dumb, it ain't gonna happen."

Teri turned his head so she could kiss Tommy on the tip of his nose, then replied "The only way it can't happen for sure is if you don't tell us. It won't hurt to try."

Tommy looked around, he was shocked to see that Cory and Sean had joined them. "I guess so. Y'all promise not to laugh at me?"

"We promise, babe. Just look at me and let me know your idea."

"Well, I was kinda thinkin' that since Russ and Sara have been so good, maybe they'd like to have DJ and Tanner for kin; maybe they could help out somehow."

Teri gave Tommy a hug of encouragement. "There's nothing dumb about that idea, son. In fact, I think it's a great idea. Why don't we see if your brothers can make it work?" She looked up at the rest of the boys. "Well, guys, any comments?"

Sean looked at Cory. "I know that Sara's a nurse, but what about Russ?"

"I don't know either. What about you guys?"

Aaron shook his head, but then Justy's face lit up. "Oh yeah, Russ used to do some work as a sound mixer. Air-boy, you still planning to use that studio out back at the Ranch for your recordings?"

Aaron grinned. "You know, that's been one of the things holding me up from using it; finding someone to run the sound room that I approved of. It would be perfect if I had family to count on to run it."

Austin broke into the mix. "You know, since Sara's a nurse, maybe she could act as a liaison between me and Camp Little Eagle. It would make things easier for me and the Camp to have someone handle the day-to-day medical needs."

Teri looked back down at Tommy. "See what I meant? Not only did you have a good idea, but it's one that your brothers have already figured out how to make work. Doc Austin and I will do the next part, convincing them to do it. Thanks to you, Tommy, the boys could very well have another surprise coming. I'll start working on Russ and Sara as soon as I can talk in private to them. They called earlier and told me the boys were getting on a bus; they are supposed to call back tonight once they are safely off."

"I guess so," Tommy replied softly. "Whaddabout me bein' dis'spectful? I gotta be punished, ain't I? My old Mommy'd slapped me to next month if I'da done dat with her 'round."

Teri pulled Tommy back against her. "I need you to be honest, son. Did your old mom hit you a lot?"

Tears streamed down Tommy's face as he sobbed. "Yeah, all the time. Lotsa times she'd do it just cuz' she hadn't caught me doin' nothin'. She says I ain't gonna learn to be good without being punished."

Teri glanced around the table, and was surprised to see the looks of shock on Sean and Cory's faces. Guessing that she was in territory which they had no knowledge of, she continued

Carefully. "Tommy, you're a very strong young man, and very well mannered for your age. You've had a rough life from the sound of it; but instead of it bringing you down, you've developed into a fine young man. I know you loved your mom, but what she was doing was not punishment; it was abuse. You are my son now; like I said earlier, I do not hit my sons. I also don't believe in punishing them for expressing their opinions, as long as it's done in a constructive manner. I will admit you were a little rough about the way you went about it, but I understand where you were coming from. Adults are not perfect, Tommy; we make mistakes just like you do. If I hadn't listened to Sean and Cory, none of what you see around you would have happened. Today you followed in your new big brother's footsteps; you spoke up and are probably going to make a difference in two boy's lives who you've never met. Do you still think you need punished?"

Tommy turned his tear-stained face to Teri. "I guess ... if you put it that way ... you really ain't gonna treat me any different than Sean or Cory, are you?"

Teri smiled and kissed Tommy on the forehead. "No, son, I will never treat you any different. You can ask Adam and Tyler; they've been around longer than you."

A small smile crept onto Tommy's face. "I love you Mom!" he exclaimed as he threw his arms around Teri. "Y'all've made me feel special ever since I got here. I'd been wonderin' when it was gonna end; now I'm seein' it's for real. Thanks for puttin' up with me."

Teri giggled. "Silly boy; there's nothing about you to 'put up' with. You're twelve years old; you have a lot to learn and it's my job to help you learn it."

Cory walked over and put an arm over Tommy's shoulder. "You know, lil' bro, if you keep sittin' on mom's lap she's not gonna be able to get ready to talk to Russ and Sara. Why don't we hit the pool and let the old folks do their thing?"

Tommy got a mischievous look on his face. "Yeah, sounds great! We better hurry before they forget what they're 'posed to do! You know how old folks forget stuff."

Teri shifted her fingers under Tommy's armpits and tickled him. "Are you trying to say I'm forgetful, giggle boy? How's about I forget you're dressed and toss you in myself!"

Tommy wiggled free, then went around the back of Teri's chair, leaned over, and kissed her cheek. "Thanks Mom, you're the best!"

A few minutes later, Teri watched with pride as her boys led the troupe in tossing their clothes into the changing room and running out to the pool. Austin joined her as she walked over to the doorway and looked out at the playing boys.

"All of those boys are amazing!" Austin commented.

"That's the understatement of the century," Teri whispered. "I honestly love every single one of them. I thank God every night for bringing them into my life."

John and Dan had came up behind them. Dan placed an arm around Teri. "A little secret Teri; every night we hear them thanking God for you being here for them."

The adults watched the boys as they frolicked and cuddled in the pool area. After a few minutes, they turned with smiles on their faces and went inside to begin the process of augmenting their growing staff.

## *Chapter 37*

Tommy awoke to the sound of soft giggles coming from behind him. As he rolled onto his back to investigate the source, Kelly moaned in his sleep and shifted himself around until he was laying on the left side of Tommy's chest. As Tommy wiggled his arm free and wrapped it over Kelly's back, he addressed the source of the giggling. "Timmy, Ricky; what'ch y'all gigglin' 'bout?"

Timmy pointed towards Noah and Caleb. Though obviously still asleep, the two boys seemed to be acting out their mutual dream by grinding their bodies together. Tommy smiled then motioned to Timmy and Ricky. "Y'all get over here and cuddle with us; them two is just enjoyin' a dream. There ain't no need in you wakin' them and ruinin' it."

The two boys crawled over and slipped under the covers. Timmy immediately wiggled around until he was laying on top of Tommy's stomach, while Ricky snuggled into Tommy's right side. Kelly semi-woke enough to shift around and place his arm across Timmy's back and muttered "Go back to sleep kiddo, it's too early to play."

The last thing Tommy heard before he drifted back into dreamland was a soft voice from the middle of his chest. "Night, Unca Tommy. Love you."

\* \* \*

Cory and Sean were engaged in the middle of their morning tongue wrestling when they heard Kelly's comment. "Timmy, this is getting to be a habit!"

They broke their kiss and scooted over to join the tangle of four boys by them. Cory took one look at Tommy's face and knew what had happened. "Hey lil' bro, let me guess; your nephew the wiggle worm has struck again. Don't worry about it; as far as I know he hasn't started doing it on purpose - yet."

Sean placed a hand on Timmy's shoulder and rubbed it softly. "Can you tell me what happened, son?"

Timmy turned his head and replied softly. "Sorry Poppa, Unca' Tommy was dreamin' and he started wiggling his pee-pee on me. My pee-pee was layin' on his; it felt good so I started rubbin' too. A couple a' minutes later, Unca' Tommy's spermies came out all over my weenie, they made it slippery and it tickled then tried to squirt spermies too."

Tommy sat up and pulled his nephew into a hug. "Relax little buddy, I'm not mad; you just surprised me. Promise me that you'll only do that with Ricky? It ain't right for you to be rubbin' with uncles, okay?"

"But we don't know what to do, Unca' Tommy."

Cory looked at Sean, who nodded his head. "Tom, Kel; for some reason I think these two trust you in these matters. We know neither of you would take advantage of them, so could you help them out?"

Kelly giggled. "I think you're just scared they'll get you next! I see what you mean, though. They see all of us makin' out and want to feel it too; it's up to Tommy, but I think it's a good idea that they learn what's okay and what's off limits."

Tommy glanced down at the young boy snuggled tightly against his chest. "I ain't gonna let this lil' guy get hurt; if we don't do it, he'll find someone who will. Kel and me's gotta get Doc's okay first, but if he goes for it we'll handle it bro."

Cory smiled. "Thanks guys; sooner or later Sean and I are gonna have to go on duty with Starfleet. You have no idea how much better it makes me feel to know that we can trust y'all to watch over Timmy. Now, nothing personal, but y'all need a shower!"

Cory and Sean couldn't help but giggle at the looks on Tommy and Kelly's faces as they were drug into the bathroom by their young nephews.

\* \* \*

Everyone had just finished breakfast when Dan turned to Matt with a grin on his face. "Matt, did you remember to grab extra sheets for the boy's beds?"

Matt looked at Dan with a confused look. "Yeah, why?"

Dan chuckled. "From the amount of showers this morning, I'm betting they need changed already!"

Before Dan could brace himself, Justy led the charge of blushing boys pouncing Dan. John sat back and laughed. "You should know better, babe!" Before anyone else could react, Dan found himself unceremoniously thrown into the pool.

Teri tried to keep a straight face as the boys filed back in. "Was that really necessary, guys?"

She lost control though when Justy replied. "Yes Ma'am, it sure was! He's just jealous 'cause John didn't give him any last night!"

Once everyone had settled back down, Teri turned to Sean. "What have you guys got on the schedule today, Sean?"

Sean looked at his watch. "In a couple of hours we are supposed to leave to go up to the *Enterprise*. I figure we have enough time to catch a movie, then we'll head out to the spaceport and head up. That reminds me; just in case anything happens, I'm going to forward the house phone to Cory's communicator. We can respond a lot faster than you could if the boys need us."

"Good idea, Sean. Any idea when you guys will be back?"

"Not really, Captain Kirk invited us up. I'll call you just before we come back."

"Okay. I talked to Russ and Sara last night, they agreed to Tommy's plan, and are going to drive over as soon as they take care of a few things at home. I think there are going to be a pair of very happy boys very soon."

Timmy interrupted. "There's four now, Gran'ma! Kyle asked Mikey, DJ made two friends but the aunt they are comin' to see is in Heaven with my first Daddy."

Teri walked over and gave Timmy a hug. "Thanks for telling me, little one. We'll take care of DJ's friends too."

The boys headed into the Rec room and put in a Harry Potter movie. A few minutes later, Teri looked in on them and chuckled as she heard a lively argument going about which actor was the cutest.



\* \* \*

**Shuttle *Mississippi*, Des Moines Spaceport:**

Sean began strapping himself into the pilots seat on the shuttle and glanced nervously at Matt.

Matt saw the look, and responded calmly. "Settle down Sean, this is no different than your training runs. If I even considered that you were not ready you wouldn't be sitting where you are now. Just relax, let's get this show on the road."

Sean sat back for a second, then turned to the passenger compartment. "Justy, secure all cargo and make sure everyone's belted in."

"Yes, Sir!" Justy replied with pride. Two minutes later, he called forward. "Passenger area ready for flight, Sean."

Sean forgot who his passengers were and settled into the routine. "Thanks' Justy. Mr. Barnes, begin preflight."

Matt began running his fingers over the console. "Exterior hatches closed and sealed. Life Support on line. Diagnostics passed, standing by to prefire thrusters."

"Acknowledged," Sean replied. "Opening flight plan."

Sean put on his headset and set it for the tower frequency. "Des Moines tower, this is shuttle *Mississippi*."

"This is Des Moines Tower. Go ahead *Mississippi*."

"Des Moines, open my flight plan, destination is NCC-1701-A. Standing by thrusters for clear pad."

"Acknowledged *Mississippi*. Flight plan open, state pilot and co-pilot."

"Des Moines, Pilot Ensign Sean Short, Co-pilot Lieutenant Matthew Barnes."

"Understood and logged *Mississippi*. Pad clear, engage thrusters and hold position."

"Thank you Des Moines. Engaging thrusters, understand hold position."

Sean turned to Matt. "Mr. Barnes, engage maneuvering thrusters and hold position."

"Aye Sir. Thrusters engaged, engines pass diagnostics and on line."

A few seconds later the comm link came to life. Shuttle *Mississippi*, this is Des Moines Tower. You are clear for takeoff heading 273 true. Transfer to Denver Control upon entry into Mountain Time Zone."

"Acknowledged Des Moines. Takeoff heading 273 true, transfer to Denver at Mountain Time Zone. Thank you, *Mississippi* out."

Sean then turned to Matt. "Mr. Barnes, take communications, I have the conn."

Matt smiled at the professional manner Sean was displaying. "Yes sir, I have communications and navigation, you have the conn."

Sean spun the shuttle until it was pointing the right direction, then engaged the engine and launched. As soon as they reached cruising altitude, he relaxed slightly as he announced with a grin "Thank you for flying Clan Short Airlines. I'm sorry, but we will not be providing in-flight meals today; the amount of food required to feed y'all would have put us over takeoff weight! You may now release your seat belts, we are taking a detour over the Grand Canyon for your viewing pleasure."

Matt barely suppressed his laughter at Sean's announcement. "Now THAT is the Sean I want to see at the helm!" he announced over the intercom.

Sean giggled. "We'll see what Captain Kirk thinks first; I'm not sure he's expecting that."

A couple of minutes later, Cory came up front. "Hey Matt, why didn't we get the *Newton*

today?"

Matt grinned. "Well, Cory, the *Newton* is for Federation business - basically for your Mom and John. This shuttle was just assigned to Clan Short. It has a unique diplomatic status to match the Clan's status. You have got your own personal shuttle, in fact when we move to Orlando it moves with us."

"Wow! Who set that up?" Cory asked in surprise.

"I think Admiral Morrow did it as a gesture towards the Vulcan Embassy; basically acknowledging the status of the Clan. In fact, when we get back it's getting your crest put on it; they didn't have time to do it before we needed it today. They barely managed to get the new transponder in so that we ID as a diplomatic shuttle."

"Kew! Thanks Matt, it all makes sense now," Cory replied as he turned to re-join the rest of the boys.

About fifteen minutes later, Sean announced "Anyone wanting to see the Grand Canyon, here's your chance!" It took a few passes to satisfy all of the boys, but once they had all returned to the back Sean smiled. "You know Matt, seeing the kid's faces was worth the side trip!"

"I agree! You can see so much more the way you went; I think it was a perfect choice."

"Thanks Matt. It made me relax some too, just flying without having to worry about anything. You ready to go up?"

"Ready when you are, Sean. Just give the word."

Sean smiled. "Let's do it, Matt. Lay in a course for the Denver corridor, then begin preparations for atmospheric departure."

"Course laid in, it's all yours Sean," Matt replied before turning his head to the passenger compartment. "Justy, get everyone ready; we're going up."

Just as Justy began strapping in the kids, Cory's communicator went off. As soon as he answered it, his face went pale. "Hold on, Tanner, we'll be right there. I'm going to give you to Justy; keep him updated - we are on our way." Cory passed the communicator to Justy then ran to the front of the shuttle. "Mr. Barnes, you are relieved of your station. Outfit a security crew with full body armor and prepare for landing. DJ has been shot, they are at the bus station in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Mr. Short, notify Denver Control we are declaring a Priority One emergency."

Sean snapped into command mode, and began rapid-firing orders. "You heard him, Mr. Barnes. Justy! Keep Tanner on the line; Adam - prepare for emergency maneuvering! Cory, take your station, lay in a direct course for Cheyenne, Wyoming."

Sean switched channels on the communications console as he began initialization of the emergency overrides, then announced "Denver Control, this is shuttle craft *Mississippi*. We are declaring a Priority One Medical Emergency; I repeat, this is Shuttlecraft *Mississippi*, we are declaring a Priority One Medical Emergency. Clear all airspace between our present location and Cheyenne, Wyoming. Clear airspace above Cheyenne, Wyoming for emergency atmospheric departure by request of Cory Short, Patriarch of Clan Short of Vulcan. Acknowledge."

A few seconds later, he received the reply. "Shuttlecraft *Mississippi*, Priority One emergency acknowledged. You have clear airspace below thirty thousand feet en route to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Civilian ATC has been notified and traffic grounded. Airspace above Cheyenne is now a no-fly zone. Do you require us to contact your destination?"

"Negative Denver, thank you. Initiating Emergency maneuvers. *Mississippi* out."

"Acknowledged. Denver Out."

Adam yelled from the back. "Hit it Sean, we're set back here."

"Hold on!" Sean yelled back as he maxed the thrusters and sped towards Cheyenne. The snap from the shuttle passing the sound barrier echoed down the length of the Grand Canyon. Sean

kept his eyes on where he was going as he asked Cory "Have you located that bus station yet?"

"Just entering it into the system now!" Cory replied. "You got it - they better hope there's a place to land."

Justy yelled directions from the back. "Sean, Tanner says there is a yard on the east side; the doors are on the west side though, the east side is only windows."

"Land on the east side!" Matt yelled. "We'll make our own door if we need to!"

"You got it Matt; prepare to disembark on my mark. Phasers set at your discretion, use deadly force if needed."

"Cory, set override on the doors. I want them open the second I cut the thrusters."

Cory entered the commands into the console. "Override set, awaiting your command."

Sean came in fast and low, taking the top off of a small tree as he crossed the sidewalk. He was still about six inches off of the ground when he cut the thrusters. "Landing Party - MOVE!"

Matt led the calvary out the open door. As he quickly appraised the situation through the glass, he saw a man he recognized from pictures as Colin laying on the floor, holding his leg with one hand while trying to control a pistol with the other. When he saw the man turn the pistol towards a small body on the ground, Matt blew out the window in front of them with his phaser rifle. At that point, Colin made his first and last mistake. He shot towards Matt's legs; the problem was, he hit the artificial section of Matt's leg. Colin's shock at Matt not even flinching at a hole you could see daylight through caused him to pause, before he could recover and fire again it was too late. JJ and Gabe both drew a bead on Colin and knocked him out with their phasers. A movement between the benches caught JJ's eye; he nudged Gabe and they focused on the area. JJ had a hunch that he knew who was trying to sneak away; as soon as they got a clear shot they dropped the two suspects. Matt looked over the area then opened his communicator. "Area secure." Immediately, Antonio exited the shuttle with the Med kit, followed closely by Justy, Jamie, Jacob, Kyle, Sebastian, and Sammy. Cory led the second group out, leaving Sean as the only one in the shuttle.

Antonio laid out the Med kit, and quickly surveyed the injuries. Colin's injuries were the worst; he had been stabbed in the inner leg and the femoral artery had been nicked. Antonio quickly repaired the artery and closed the wound, then sedated Colin so that he would not be a threat for about eight hours. Antonio then rushed over to the boy laying on the floor with Timmy trying to snuggle against him. "You must be DJ; relax and I'll see what I can do."

Timmy snuggled tighter to DJ and held his hand while Antonio started stabilizing him. "Is DJ gonna be okay, Tonio?"

Antonio looked up from the readout on the tricorder. "He's gonna be fine, it looks worse than it is."

Antonio winced as he began repairs. No major blood vessels had been hit, but the bullet had lodged in the bone. Antonio sealed the smaller blood vessels to stop the bleeding, and extracted the bullet to prevent lead poisoning. The damage to the bone was too much for the equipment he had to take care of, so he temporarily closed things up and numbed the nerves in DJ's leg to eliminate the pain he was feeling. "DJ, listen up. You need to stay laying down, I've stopped your bleeding, but we need better stuff to really finish fixing you. Your bone is messed up, it might break if you stand on it. That new growth on your side is Timmy; why don't the two of you get to know each other while you are waiting to leave."

DJ gave a weak smile in response, and Antonio stood up to go to the other injured boy. As he walked over, a strawberry blond boy that was kneeling by DJ got up and joined him.

Once they were out of earshot, the boy asked Antonio in a low, cold voice "Why did you

fix that trash before you fixed DJ? I thought you were coming to help us."

Antonio spun and looked up to stare the boy straight in the eyes. "You must be Tanner. Let me tell you something; in thirty-six years, I have learned one thing, it is NOT my place to decide if someone lives or dies. I suffer from a unique medical condition that makes it in my best interest to have the medical knowledge of a paramedic; I have a photographic memory so I can learn a years worth of knowledge in a week of studying. Since I'm the one with medical training, I'm the one responsible for making the decisions as to who is most critical. If Colin dies, it will be as a result of judgment for his crimes or other causes; not because I refused to treat him. If you ask any ethical medical personnel what you asked me, they will give you the same answer." Antonio turned, knelt down, and began examining a black-haired boy lying on the floor.

Tanner looked down at Antonio in shock. "Sorry Sir, I kinda thought you was a k ... I mean ... uhhh ... is Beau gonna be okay?"

Antonio looked over his shoulder. "Beau is gonna be fine, thanks for telling me his name. He's just got a mild concussion, I can fix that fairly quick. We'll have to talk to Doc about a replacement tooth though, he lost one here. What happened to him?"

"Colin pistol-whipped him, sir. Toby is freaked right now. He won't come out of the office; he's afraid that he's lost his little brother."

Antonio turned to Tanner with a smile. "Tanner, please stop the 'sir' stuff, I'm Antonio, okay? I may have been alive thirty-six years, but I'm still only nine. I'll explain later, it's kinda confusing. Don't worry about what you said, I actually understand what you were thinking; I don't hold it against you. Right now I'd like to ask a favor of you; can you get Toby and tell him I said he needs to be here when I wake Beau up? Then go tell Cory what happened; he's the blond numbskull talking with DJ and Timmy."

"Okay, but why does Cory need to know what happened?"

"This is kinda scary, but he's in charge! Trust me dude, you guys just got inducted into a group that's put the FBI in their place; just go with the flow for now and we'll fill you in later. Go get Toby, I'm almost done."

Tanner ran off, and a few seconds later a boy with white-blond hair came sliding to a stop next to Antonio. "Tanner said he was gonna be okay! Why are his eyes still closed? Where's the doctor?"

Antonio smiled. "I guess you're Toby. I'm Antonio, and I'm the one fixing up your little brother. Beau is fine, but the best thing for him is going to be seeing his CALM big brother sitting here with him when I wake him up. If you are scared, he'll be scared. Let me know when you are ready."

The shock of finding a kid healing his little brother brought Toby out of his panic. "Dude, I hope you're not messin' with me! If you're serious, hit it. If not, you better run."

Antonio giggled. "Get ready then." He adjusted some controls, and a few seconds later Beau's eyes fluttered open.

"Toby!" Beau exclaimed softly as he sat up and wrapped his arms around his brother's chest. "Are you okay? Are DJ and Tanner okay?"

Antonio answered for Toby, who he could tell was speechless. "Tanner and Toby didn't get hurt; DJ's still got to be fixed up the rest of the way, but he's gonna be fine too."

Beau looked over at Antonio, and saw the medical equipment strewn around him, including things he didn't recognize. "Where's the doctor? Last thing I remember is getting hit after I stabbed that sorry piece of trash."

Antonio smiled. "I'm the one who fixed everyone up; from what I've heard, you saved DJ's life. The trash is going to be punished severely for hurting you guys."

Beau looked at Antonio suspiciously. "Yeah, right; whatever. I heard him say he was a cop; ain't no one gonna believe us over him. I'm probably goin' to jail now."

All three boys jumped as a new voice joined in. "You're wrong on both counts. He screwed up big time; he's not gonna be going in front of any Earth courts. By the way, I'm Cory; and I know for a fact that there's an Admiral who won't even let charges be filed against you. You might not have known it at the time, but when you swore to be DJ and Tanner's brothers forever last night, you put yourself under the same protection they're under since they ran away. They told me all about you guys; the only place you two are going is to your brothers new home. The four of you are family, and it's gonna stay that way. C'mon; DJ is waiting to see you guys; he's got to wait 'till we get to Doc to get his leg finished, so right now he can't walk."

The boys went over to DJ and Tanner, and were shortly tied up in a group hug. As Cory walked with Antonio to join them, he commented "How're they doing, Gramps?"

"Stuff it, Blondie," Antonio growled. "I might be old enough to be your dad, but we've already decided not to treat me that age. They're gonna be fine; I'm glad I'd studied all of those medical books over the years - somehow I chose a different one after each brain wipe they tried. Doc Austin found out and showed me how to use the Med Kits; with you klutzes he figured we'd need it. "

They had got within earshot of the new boys as Antonio made his comment, and Cory noticed three confused faces staring at him. "I'll explain later guys; for right now, lets just say you are looking at a very old nine-year-old. I've got some good news for you though; you don't need to talk to Mom about the Safe Haven Act. All four of you are protected under Vulcan law as members of Clan Short. Mom's working out the details now to give you the family you deserve, and I've made sure that there's not a law enforcement agency on Earth that can touch you for what you had to do." Cory finally took the chance to look over the new boys. DJ matched the description they had of him perfectly; thirteen years old, about five foot three, with sandy blond hair and emerald green eyes. He then looked over the three other boys. Beau, the youngest, was about four-three, with black hair and what could only be described as blazing blue eyes. From his build, Cory guessed him at about eight years old; but after Jamie and Jacob he knew better than to go by looks. Next to him was Toby; white blond hair, maybe four-six, with the same eyes as Beau. Toby looked no more than ten. Last was Tanner; about five-three, strawberry blond hair with an eight-inch thin pony tail, steel gray eyes, and the best tan Cory had ever seen. Cory knew that Tanner was also thirteen, and that him and DJ were boyfriends. He turned to Tanner. "Hey Tanner, you can relax; your boyfriend is going to be just fine. Why don't you introduce everyone to the rest of the group here?"

\* \* \*

As Matt went to restrain the freshly sedated Colin, JJ and Gabe ran to the other two suspects. As they were restraining the pair for when they regained consciousness, JJ yelled to Matt. "We've got Steve and Mary here!"

"Okay, I've got positive ID, this is Colin!" Matt replied. He finished restraining Colin, then turned to the group of telepaths waiting in front of him. "Okay guys, they are all yours.

Justy concentrated for a second, then announced. "Bro's, take this piece of trash; Kyle and 'Bastian, take Mary. Sammy, you and I'll take Steve. Let's drain them guys."

Just then, a local Police Captain walked up to Matt. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but get these kids out of here before I arrest every single one of you for disrupting a crime scene. Where are tho..."

Matt interrupted as he flipped out his ID. "I'll tell you who we are. Lieutenant Matthew Barnes, Head of Security for Clan Short of Vulcan. My security team has taken three persons into custody for attempted murder of a Clan member. Any further questions need to be directed to the Clan Patriarch, Cory Short; he's the blond young man talking to Detective Gunn over there."

The Captain glanced at the ID, then looked back up with a smile. "My apologies, Sir. I didn't consider that this might be a different way of doing an investigation. Don't you worry about the loss of physical evidence?"

"No need for it. Do you see the pairs of boys with each suspect? By the time those boys stand up, I'll be able to tell you if any of them killed a fly ten years ago. All six of those boys have telepathic abilities, and have been trained to use them to collect evidence. The evidence will be verified by Vulcan mind-meld and entered into an official deposition."

The Captain chuckled. "I know where it goes from there; a Vulcan deposition bears more weight than a signed confession. Is there any way we can assist you?"

Matt thought for a second. "I think we've got it under control in here; but could your officers clear traffic and pedestrians for about a one-block radius? If I know our pilot, he's gonna tear out of here like a roadrunner with it's tail feathers on fire as soon as we can load up the injured kids."

"Consider it done!" the Captain replied as he pulled out his radio and ran towards the doorway.

\* \* \*

Tanner looked at Cory in shock. "How'd you know we're boyfriends? Now I know we ain't gonna ..."

Cory placed a hand gently over Tanner's mouth. "Shh, don't panic. A lot of the guys in this room are boyfriends, in fact my life partner, Sean, is waiting in the pilot's seat of that shuttle for all of us. Our son Timmy is the one who has been talking to DJ; that's him down there holding DJ's hand. Y'all are with friends now, for real."

Tanner nodded his head. Once Cory moved his hand, he smiled shyly. "Sorry I panicked, it's just that nothings went right yet. The blond here is Toby, and the little black haired guy is Beau. They're twelve and ten, they're supposed to ..."

Cory interrupted again as he pulled the two boys into a hug. "They are going to join you as brothers in your new family. Guys, your Aunt passed away; later tonight I'll explain how we knew without knowing your names. For now, you can relax; you have a real home to go to."

Jamie and Jacob walked up and joined the group. Jamie spoke for the pair. "Cory, how long do we gotta keep this trash in our heads? Uncle Spock's gonna have to use bleach to get it outta there - it stinks!"

Cory giggled. "Not long guys, we're taking off as soon as everyone's ready. I'm figuring he was the worst, so I'll ask Mr. Spock to do you guys first."

Within a few minutes, Justy, Sammy, Kyle, and Sebastian joined them. Antonio looked up, "It's about time, slowpokes. Y'all ready to go?"

Matt turned to his telepathic interview squad. "You guys have been in their heads; do I need to have them beamed up or will they be safe in the shuttle?"

Justy, Kyle, Sammy, and Sebastian conferred for a minute before replying. Just before they were ready to answer, Antonio joined them. A few seconds later, Justy gave their answer. "Load them up and strap them down, Matt. We got it all figured out."

Antonio waved Benji and Eli over. He broke into giggles when Eli walked up. "Eli, you

forgot something again, goofball!"

Eli grinned as he looked down and noticed only one foot. "Whatever; it's just for show anyways! Is DJ ready for a ride?"

DJ was feeling a little silly. "Dude, you're standing on one leg; how can you carry me?" he giggled.

Benji leaned over and explained softly. "He's gonna carry you the same way he carries himself; by floating. I'm gonna take care of the rejects from society. If you want, Tanner can ride with you."

DJ looked over to his boyfriend and smiled. "Tanner, can you hold my hand and walk with me?" The look on all four new boy's faces was priceless as DJ raised off of the ground and floated towards the shuttle.

A minute later, everyone was loaded into the shuttlecraft. Sean looked over their prisoners, then asked a smirking Antonio "What did you do to them, 'Tonio?"

Antonio giggled. "They're just taking a nap for about the next eight hours. Doc McCoy can wake them up if we need them."

Sean smiled. "Way to go, bro." He then headed to the front, and stopped at the first row where their guests of honor were seated. Justy had converted one of the seats into a bed for DJ; Sean smiled as he knelt next to him. "Hey dude, you doin' okay?"

DJ gave a weak smile. "Yeah, but I can't feel my leg. Are you sure it's gonna work again?"

Sean laid a hand on DJ's shoulder. "Don't worry; Antonio just blocked the feeling in it so that you don't suffer. It's all still there."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Now you need to just relax, I'm about to take you on the kewlest ride of your life."

"Okay."

Sean became all business as he stood up. He looked around the cabin, addressing occupants as he found them. "Gabe, JJ; you are authorized deadly force - understood?"

"Yes Sir."

"Cory, call Mom. We're stepping up the timetable; we've got the resources of the Federation at our disposal, tell her to use them."

"Got it Bro."

Sean yelled over his shoulder as he moved into the pilots seat. "Justy, prepare for atmospheric departure!" he then turned to Matt. "Mr. Barnes, notify Denver we are initiating Emergency Atmospheric Departure. Bring all systems on line NOW."

"Yes Sir!" Matt replied as he worked his console.

Sean adjusted his communications board, then keyed the transceiver. "*Enterprise* this is shuttle *Mississippi*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Sean."

"Thank you Nyota. I need to speak to the Captain or whoever has the Conn. Requesting Emergency Recovery."

A few seconds later, a new voice came on. "Kirk here. Is there a problem Sean?"

"Yes Sir; could you have a Medical team and Security detail standing by in the Shuttle bay? We are transporting a stabilized gunshot victim and three detainees. We are initiating Emergency Atmospheric Departure in approximately fifteen seconds."

"Understood Ensign. Upon atmospheric departure, initiate Emergency Recovery Sequence Alpha. Personnel will be standing by."

"Acknowledged Captain. We are to come in under Recover Sequence Alpha. *Mississippi* out."

"*Enterprise* out."

Justy yelled from the back. "Sean, passengers secure."

"Thanks Justy." Sean turned to Matt. "Status, Matt?"

"Life support on line, all propulsion systems on line. Awaiting your command."

"I have the conn; let's rock and roll," Sean announced.

A scant few seconds later, a sonic boom marked the beginning of a new life for four unknowing boys.

\* \* \*

### **Main Bridge, USS *Enterprise*:**

As soon as he closed the connection with Sean, Kirk went into action. "Mr. Dodds, take Helm to manual. Uhura, sound Yellow Alert; Med team and Security to Shuttle bay for emergency recovery. Mr Spock, you have the conn."

Kirk spun and headed for the turbolift. "Shuttle bay," he announced as soon as he was through the doors.

Scotty met Kirk as he entered the shuttle bay. "What be the problem, Capt'n?"

McCoy joined them just as Kirk replied. "Ensign Sean is coming in hot with a gunshot victim and three detainees. Bones, he said the victim has been stabilized. Scotty, recovery procedure Alpha has been set."

"I'll be on it, Sir!" Scotty replied as he spun around and began rapid-firing orders to the bay crew.

Kirk had just finished filling in Mr. Thompson when he saw the flash of the shuttle passing the *Enterprise* and then making a quick U-turn. A few seconds later, Scotty received control from Sean and Kirk announced "We're bringing them in; get ready to move!"

McCoy led the charge into the shuttle as soon as the door opened. He spotted a young boy with a tricorder hovering over a seat in front, and rushed up there. Just as he arrived, he heard some very un-childlike mutterings from the boy about the lineage of shuttle pilots. "How's the patient, doctor?" McCoy asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Antonio responded without looking up. "Considering the roller coaster we just rode, he's fine. Sean ain't gonna be that lucky when I get my hands on him." Antonio then turned his head and saw who he was talking to. "Sorry, Sir, I'm Antonio Barnes. Let me get out of your way."

"I'm Doctor McCoy, son. The only place you're going is to sickbay with our patient. I've been waiting to meet you; besides it sounds like you need a little instruction on keeping hot-shot command officers in line," McCoy replied with a rare smile. He looked over at the three worried faces hovering over DJ. "You three are coming with us; it looks like a couple of you got involved too. I'll get your physicals out of the way while he's recovering."

\* \* \*

### **Three hours later, Forward Lounge:**

McCoy led Antonio and the four boys into the lounge to rejoin their group. The only remaining sign of DJ's injury was a slight limp. They were no more than three feet inside the door



when Timmy noticed them and ran over, wrapping his arms around DJ's waist.

"DJ! I KNEW you'd be okay! Doc is the BESTEST in the Universe! C'mon guys, you gotta meet ev'ryone!"

McCoy shook his head in wonder as Timmy dragged the boys off. Antonio joined him as he walked over to join Kirk, Chip, Matt, and Sean.

Kirk could not resist the temptation as the two joined them. "Why Bones, I do believe you are growing a shadow!"

McCoy glanced at Antonio, and placed a hand on the blushing boy's shoulder as he replied. "Actually Jim, this young man's thirst for knowledge on the preservation of life is, as Spock would so eloquently put it, impressive. His mind is like a steel trap; by the time DJ was done, Antonio was asking questions about the equipment that I had to think about the answers to. Sean, tell that blond goofball that passes for an Engineers Assistant not to question this young man about medical priorities; the tricorder recorded his tongue-lashing of Tanner. I couldn't have done it better myself. I've ordered Dr. Michaels to accelerate Antonio's medical training. Within the next six months, he is going to take over internal Clan medical. That will free Doctor Michaels up for Safe Haven work. Chip, that means he will be taking care of your sons planet side."

Matt knelt down and pulled Antonio into a hug. "I'm proud of you Son; today you showed everyone the special lil' guy that I love more and more each day."

Antonio melted into Matt's arms. "Daddy; can we sit down? I wanna cuddle."

"As you wish my Elven Prince!" Matt replied as he stood with Antonio still in his arms and carried him to a chair.

Once they were out of hearing, Sean asked McCoy softly. "Doc; all of this switching around ain't gonna mess up Antonio's head, is it? I mean, he won't get dual personalities or something?"

"Good question Sean. From what I can tell the personality shifts from child to adult are a survival instinct; he should grow out of it as his body reaches adulthood. It seems that when his experience is needed the adult comes out; otherwise his normal emotional level is dominant."

"Thanks Doc, that makes sense." Sean glanced over towards the new boys and noticed they seemed to be getting mobbed. "Excuse me, I see four boys who look like they could use a private tour to unwind. With your permission, Captain, I would like to have them on the Bridge in a half hour. I think a stop by the Recreation Deck would do them some good first."

"Permission granted, Ensign. Your plan sounds perfect."

"Thank you, Sir," Sean replied before he turned and intercepted DJ, Tanner, Toby and Beau.

Chip glanced around the room, and smiled as he saw Scotty and Cory assembling their own little group for an Engineering tour. "They're learning," he muttered.

"Yes they are," Kirk replied. "Let's head to the Officer's Galley on Deck Three. I want to give these guys a surprise for dinner."

To both Kirk and Chip's surprise, McCoy chimed in. "Good idea, let me get Antonio and Matthew. Two of these boys have nutritional requirements which they need to be aware of."

\* \* \*

#### **Russ and Sara's house, Wendover, Utah:**

Russ looked up at the clock on the wall. "That's a good sign; the boys should have left Cheyenne about a half hour ago."

Sara nodded. "I'm surprised they haven't called to say they're okay. I'm sure if Teri had got a call she'd let us know though."

Just as the words left her mouth, the doorbell rang. She relaxed when she opened the door and found their neighbor's eleven year old son Ian.

"Hey Sara, can those boys come out and play?" he asked excitedly, a gleam in his brown eyes.

"I'm sorry Ian, they had to go home already."

Ian was crestfallen. "Aww mannn. I figured they was still here since those birds are still playin' in the yard. I didn't even get to meet them."

Sara ran her fingers through his long chocolate-brown hair. "I'm sorry kiddo." It then hit her what he'd said. "Ian, did you say birds; as in more than one?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Stay right here, Ian." Sara turned her head. "Russ! Front yard, NOW!"

"Ian, how'd you like to see those eagles up close?"

"Won't they hurt me?"

Russ joined them. "Actually, I'll bet they would like to play in the sprinkler with you. Those are special eagles."

They went into the front yard. Sure enough, William and Duke were strutting around the yard, popping covers off of the sprinkler heads then putting them back on.

Ian began giggling once he realized what they were doing. "They're silly birds!"

William looked up, then walked over to Ian and gently tugged on the boy's pants. Duke began tapping one of his claws on the top of the sprinkler that he had just re-assembled.

Ian knelt down, and was surprised when William hopped onto his lap and snuggled against his chest.

"Go ahead and pet him," Russ told Ian.

The boy's eyes were wide as he gently rubbed his fingers along William's head and back. Russ brought over a lawn chair, placing it behind Ian and then helping him up into it.

Russ leaned over to William. "William, tell your friend I'm going to turn on the section by the driveway so the rest of us don't get wet."

Duke gave a "cluck" of thanks, then strutted over to the edge of the driveway.

Russ had just returned from turning on the sprinkler when Ian's dad and mom, Robin and Kayla, walked into the yard. Sara motioned them to join her next to Ian. "Come on over and meet Ian's new friend, William!" she chuckled.

Robin was trying to figure out a tactful way to separate his son from what he was sure was a wild eagle, when he was distracted by the sudden appearance of two shimmering columns directly in front of them.

As soon as Teri and John materialized, they took in the action around them. Teri turned to Russ and held out her hand. "Russ, I'm Teri Short, Federation Youth Services. This is Commander John Martin, Federation Security. You already know William; the bird who mis-appropriated your sprinkler is Duke."

Russ shook their hands. "Pleasure to meet you. These are our neighbors Robin and Kayla York. That's their son Ian holding William. Are ..."

Sara snapped out of her shock and interrupted. "I'm Sara. Are the boys okay? What happened? ..."

Teri held up her hand. "The boys will be fine. Right now they are on the Starship *Enterprise*, along with two friends they made on the bus. Their former parents are in custody; the little bit of information I have suggests freedom is no longer an option for any of the three of

them."

"What happened?" Sara repeated.

John took over. "The preliminary report I got from Lt. Barnes is pretty minimal. It appears that Colin, DJ's father, had someone here tracking you. They found out the boy's route, and tried to abduct them at Cheyenne. Two boys got hurt; one of their new friends got a concussion when he was pistol-slapped after injuring Colin with his knife, and DJ was shot in the leg. Tanner used the cell phone you gave him to call; it was forwarded to the shuttle that Cory and the rest of the boys were on. They responded, gave first aid, took the suspects in custody, then went directly to the *Enterprise* to finish the repairs to DJ's leg."

He was interrupted by Teri's communicator.

"*Enterprise* to Director Short."

Teri recognized the voice instantly; there was no mistaking the accent. "This is Mom, go ahead Tommy. Does the Captain know what you are doing?"

"MOM!" Tommy giggled before he continued. "Aunt Nyota is giving me lessons. We just heard from Doctor McCoy. DJ is on light duty for a week to finish healing. When we get home, you need to sit down with Antonio, Helen, and the new parents regarding a medical problem Toby and Beau have. Scotty won't let us feed the old parents into the converters, so as soon as we eat and figure out which prison planet they go to we'll be home. Love you, Mom!"

Teri smiled. "Thanks for the update Tommy; Love you too! Short out."

"*Enterprise* out"

The combination of the good news and the actual exchange broke the stress and had all of the adults smiling. "It sounds like you've got a pretty special son there, Mrs. Short," Robin chuckled.

"Please, just use our first names," Teri replied. "Would you believe that he has a Mississippi drawl that will drive you nuts normally? He's the most recent son that I've adopted, and still is adjusting to having a loving family. I'm up to five living sons at home, one unofficial son in Orlando, and one who was killed by a drunk driver but tends to pop in occasionally. And I can't forget, one grandson and one grandeagle; from the looks of it they are missing each other."

Teri noticed that Ian looked dejected. She knelt in front of him and lifted his chin. "What's the matter, Ian?"

"Nothin'."

Teri looked him in the eyes. "Ian, I have a house full of boys of all ages who have had to live through things you've never heard of. I've got real good at knowing when something's wrong. We can't make it better if you don't tell us."

Something in the tone of her voice reached Ian, and he opened up. "When I saw a couple of boys over here, I was hoping that they'd like me and maybe be my friends. I got here and they were already gone; now I hear one got hurt and they got to go to a starship. They ain't never gonna come back here, and I ain't got any friends since I am nasty. Daddy can't move anywhere where nobody knows about me since he got laid off. William's the only one besides mommy, daddy, Russ, and Sara that even will cuddle me."

To everyone's surprise, Teri looked at the eagle in Ian's lap. "William, I just heard Ian talk bad about himself. By any chance is he feeling the same emotional leanings as most of the boys at home?"

Surprise turned to shock when William turned to face Teri and clearly nodded his head. He then turned back and snuggled into Ian's chest.

Teri turned her attention back to Ian. "Do your parents know what you were talking about when you called yourself nasty?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, we'll talk about this out in the open then. You are not nasty; you might be gay. There is nothing wrong with that; in fact I personally know about thirty boys who are gay. I love every single one of them, too. If your parents don't mind, you still have a chance to meet DJ and Tanner; you can escort William and Duke to the *Enterprise*. That way you can talk to the guys in person, and see that there is really nothing wrong with you."

Ian looked at his parents expectantly. "Please? I'll be good!"

Kayla thought for a second, then asked Teri "Who would be watching him? The other boys could lose him so easily up there."

Teri smiled reassuringly. "Two of my sons are Ensigns assigned to the *Enterprise*. Also, the Chief Helmsman's sons are there. Between the five of them, there's no way anything will happen to Ian. He's probably safer up there than in your own yard."

Robin glanced at his wife, then gave the decision. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for him; go ahead. How's he going to get there and back?"

Teri smiled. "He'll be transported up; if I know Sean and Cory, they'll bring him back on the shuttle after dinner."

Robin reached over and ruffled Ian's hair. "What do you think, son? Can you handle a transporter, a starship, and a shuttle ride all in one day?"

Ian was speechless, all he could do is nod his head so fast it was about to pop off.

Teri put a hand on his shoulder. "You're going to need to calm down a little so I can tell you what to do, okay. I'm going to call in and make the arrangements while you are relaxing."

He nodded once more, then Teri opened her communicator.

"Director Short to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. How may I help you, Teri?"

"Nyota, I have two eagles and one youth who would like to come aboard."

"The Captain says that's not a problem, Teri. Do we need to make any special arrangements?"

"You probably should track down my grandson and his cohort to meet their eagles; since Cory is probably glued to Scotty he can welcome Ian."

Nyota was chuckling as she replied. "Not a problem, Teri. Mr. Scott will call you when he's ready. *Enterprise* out."

"Thank you; Short out."

Ian was in a daze as Teri explained what he needed to do. She had finally got through to him when her communicator went off.

"*Enterprise* to Director Short."

"Go ahead, Mr. Scott."

"Aye Lass; by any chance would the young laddy and our feathered friends be ready to join us?"

"I'm not sure who is more excited Mr. Scott; the birds or Ian. They're in position; three to beam up."

"I be locked in and awaiting your word, Teri."

"Energize, Mr. Scott."

A few seconds later, Scotty came back on. "The young laddy and his feathered friends be flyin' around the transporter room. I do believe they're happy to be here!"

Teri giggled. "Thank you Mr. Scott. Short out."

"*Enterprise* out."

Teri looked over to see four relieved faces looking back at her. "I think he's going to be

occupied for a while; now it looks like the six of us need to sit down and have a talk about the future."

\* \* \*

**Deck Nine Brig, USS *Enterprise*, outside Holding Cell One, after dinner:**

Kirk turned to Spock as they were entering the Brig. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea, Spock."

Spock stopped, motioning the rest of the group to wait. "Understandable, Captain. Logically this interrogation is unnecessary by looking at the surface facts. You must factor in the emotional inconsistencies of the human brain to find the purpose of this endeavor. The emotional and physical trauma which this being has inflicted with the willful arrogance that he is above the law requires closure. The only logical means of closure for these youths is to witness his ultimate breakdown when the fallacy of his legal status is realized."

McCoy's comment from the rear of the group caught everyone by surprise. "I hate to say it, but for once your damn logic makes sense Spock."

Kirk smiled. "Well put, Bones. Let's get this over with."

They split into two groups as they entered the area. DJ, Tanner, Toby, and Beau took up positions in the back group. Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Cory and Lt. Thompson entered the cell first. Gabe and JJ entered next and took up positions covering the flanks of the main group. Finally, the back group entered, staying safely behind everyone else.

Cory took the lead. "Colin McAllister. You have been detained for a multitude of crimes." Cory then listed off every single law that Colin had broke. " ... The last and most serious charges against you are one count of attempted murder and one count of assault with a deadly weapon. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Colin grinned smugly. "I'm a cop, punk. Don't try to pull no shit. That fairy so-called son of mine made that shit up to cover for his little boyfriend trying to kill me with a bat. Also, if that little brat hadn't stabbed me, nobody woulda got shot; my finger wasn't even on the trigger. I want my lawyer; once I'm done all of you are getting it for false imprisonment; those four punks in back are all going to Juvie."

Cory barely kept his temper as he replied. "You might want to rethink your attitude; I've got statements which prove you are lying out your ass."

"Kid, go back to your sandbox. Your so-called statements ain't worth toilet paper. I'm a cop, my word IS law."

"Not on MY planet it's not," Cory growled. He turned to Kirk, came to attention, and spoke in a flat voice. "Captain Kirk; as Patriarch of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the planet Vulcan I am required to claim jurisdiction regarding this detainee. I require the assistance of the persons present as witnesses to immediate trial."

"I acknowledge your jurisdiction, Patriarch Short. The resources of the *Enterprise* are at your disposal," Kirk replied.

As Cory turned to Spock, Colin shouted out "What the hell do you think you're doing? You are a HUMAN, and the Federation is supposed to protect US! You have no right letting some alien trash persecute me! I want to talk to your superior officer NOW!:"

Cory ignored the outburst as he spoke. "Mr. Spock, you may proceed."

"As you wish, Mr. Short," Spock replied. "Mr. McAllister, there are indications that you are unaware of the facts surrounding this issue. David and Tanner are under the protection of Clan

Short by order of Admiral Morrow. Your recent action regarding David violated Interstellar Law. Mr. Short's declaration of jurisdiction may only be overridden by the Vulcan High Council; the scope of the evidence against yourself indicates that the logic of his decision is impeccable. Immediately following your detention the facts of your crimes were telepathically retrieved by two independent sources. Patriarch Short requested my assistance reviewing the evidence. Upon completion of the review I logged the official deposition. The list of crimes which Mr. Short reviewed earlier are correct, in addition the charge of attempted murder is raised to five counts. It is my findings that your intent was to murder all four boys in addition to an Officer Robb Gunn. Mr. Short. As First Officer of the Starship *Enterprise*, I release Colin McAllister for your sentencing."

Cory stood silently, his expressionless face watching as Colin realized he had finally met his match. In the back, Tanner and DJ began to feel that justice was being served as they watched the emotions fleeting across Colin's face. At first there was anger, but it quickly gave way to shock, panic, and then a painful resignation.

Once Cory was sure Colin realized the full implications of his actions, he spoke. "Mr. McAllister, over a course of many years you have used your own son for personal gain. You invaded his privacy and committed murder of your own wife to continue your perversions. You committed the worst act a father can do to his child; you attempted to molest him and his friend. Then you went a step further; when it was obvious he was no longer going to cooperate with your wishes, you attempted to kill him and his friends. Humans are a unique species; they literally wear their emotions on their faces. The one emotion which you have not displayed your entire life is remorse; even now it is absent from your expressions. I will allow you two minutes for a final statement before pronouncing sentence."

Colin realized leniency was not in Cory's vocabulary, so he went for broke; trying to inflict one last bit of pain. "I admit I did all of that - in fact I made good money. My only regret is that they didn't wanna play along; in fact I would have let their little friends join the fun too if they wanted to."

He was cut off by a soprano growl from the back. "You bastard!" Beau screamed as he rushed past the shocked adults directly towards Colin. Beau had his knife in his hand, and it was obvious he intended to complete the sentencing himself.

Everything seemed to switch to slow motion for everyone. Beau launched himself into midair, bowie knife out for the kill. Colin knocked Beau off to the side and managed to grab the knife from him. As he turned towards Kirk and raised the knife to throw it, JJ realized what was happening and tackled the Captain. Gabe drew a bead; as soon as Beau had fell clear, Gabe shouted "Strike three; you're OUT Bitch!" as he vaporized Colin on the spot. As the knife clattered harmlessly to the deck, time slipped back to normal and everyone began to react.

As McCoy checked on Kirk, Cory rushed over to Beau and ensured he was okay. Once he was sure that the only thing wrong was that Beau was a little shaken up, Cory sat on the floor and pulled the boy into his lap. As the rest of the boys surrounded him, he spoke calmly "Beau, promise me you will never attempt anything like that again. Even though the end result was the same, that was not the way he needed to be executed. You let your anger take control; you ended up putting everyone in this room, including yourself and your brothers, in serious danger."

"But he was trying to hurt DJ again!" Beau answered defiantly.

DJ touched Cory's shoulder, then replied. "Yes he was bro; but I knew it so I wasn't listening. I stopped listening to him when Cory said there was no remorse; when I heard that, the last bit of power he had over me evaporated. We could have lost you bro; and that would be a lot harder to live with than some words out of a dead man's mouth. You were going to execute him,

weren't you Cory?"

Cory looked at DJ over his shoulder. "DJ, you will never see his psychological profile. There was no possibility of rehabilitation for your father; even if imprisoned the probability of him committing murder to further his goals was unacceptable. The only logical choice for the protection of him and society was termination."

McCoy joined them, and lifted Beau off of Cory's lap. "Cory you are as bad as Spock. I saw the profile too; what he's saying boys is that Colin was a killer looking for targets. Yes he was going to be executed; and I even agree that it was best. Now you, Beau, are coming to Sickbay for another exam and some talking to about being a hero."

Cory stood up and joined Kirk and Spock as they walked up to Lt. Thompson.

Kirk addressed the security officer. "Mr. Thompson, report please."

"Well Sir, when the young man lost his temper and attacked, the suspect managed to take Beau's knife away from him. Mr. Richardson was closest to you; when he saw the possibility you were under attack he responded by knocking you to the deck. Mr. Michaels and myself continued to monitor Colin; Mr. Michaels was able to achieve the first clear shot and dispatched Colin before anyone could be injured."

"Thank you Lieutenant; please draft a commendation to join mine in these boy's service records."

"With all due respect Sir, that might be a problem," Cory interjected. "They are Clan security; they are not commissioned officers."

"I guess we'll have to fix that problem!" Kirk replied. "Mr. Thompson, I expect to see that commendation in three hours." He turned and went to the Comm station on the desk. "Uhura, get me Admiral Morrow; pipe it down here when you get him."

While they were waiting, Cory rounded up the boys to witness what he thought Kirk was up to. They were all standing behind him when the call came in. "Captain, I have the Admiral on the line."

"Thank you, Uhura; visual please."

The screen came to life. "Good evening, Captain. After seeing the group behind you I'm not sure if I want to ask this, but is there a problem?"

"Good evening Admiral. I do have an issue I need to discuss with you. But first, I believe that there is a Clan Patriarch here who wishes to tell you something."

Cory shot Kirk an 'I'll get you later' glare before composing himself and stepping forward. "Admiral; the youths that were being monitored at your request have been evacuated and are now directly under Clan Short protection. At this time I request closure of all Federation and planetside investigations directly involving either youth. The situation regarding Colin has been resolved by termination. It is logical that the Federation prosecute Steve and Mary due to the lesser severity of their crimes."

Admiral Morrow nodded. "As you wish, Mr. Short. Yourself and your Clan have done an impressive job; I fully intend to give Ambassador Sarek a glowing letter of appreciation for the assistance you provided. Live long and Prosper, Patriarch Short."

"Live long and Prosper, Admiral Morrow."

As Cory stepped back, Kirk took over again. "Admiral, in the course of Colin's trial there was an altercation. Two members of the Clan Short Security detail were present; due to their quick and professional responses no innocent persons were hurt. As a matter of fact, one of them took it upon himself to knock me to the deck when it appeared I was about to become the target of attack, while the other focused on Colin and dispatched him as soon as safely possible. I fully intended to enter commendations for these two young men, but have been informed they do not have service

records. May I suggest that as a measure of goodwill towards Clan Short that their senior security personnel be issued commissions in the Federation Security Department?"

Admiral Morrow chuckled. "You know Captain, I think if you had your way every single one of those boys would be commissioned! In this case I agree with you, though. To perform their jobs properly on Earth they need clearance which will not be argued with. What are their names; I will take it from here and make the appropriate calls."

"Thank you Sir. They are James Jacob Richardson and Gabriel Michaels."

"Very well, then. Express my thanks to both young men. Morrow out."

"Kirk out."

They prepared to leave, but stopped when DJ and Tanner, flanked by Gabe and JJ, stopped in front of Steve and Mary's cells.

DJ placed an arm around Tanner's waist to give him support, then Tanner spoke. "You never were parents to me. I know what a real family is like; maybe now I can have one again. The only good thing I have to say about you is you didn't try to kill me. You might as well forget my name; when I walk out that door I'm going to forget you and everything about you. You no longer exist, you pieces of trash."

Cory felt an unnatural chill at hearing Tanner's words. He intercepted Tanner in his march towards the door. Quietly, so nobody could overhear, Cory spoke to him. "Tanner, calm down a little bit. I have no doubt that exactly what you said is going to happen if I let you walk through that door right now. You need to stop and sort things out for a second; I'm still recovering from losing memories, and I've learned they are all tied together. If you let this happen, you are probably going to lose your memories of DJ as well."

Tanner froze. "But I don't want them in my head! What can I do?"

Cory relaxed. "Sit down with DJ and the guys tonight; you have a lot of help if you ask for it."

Tanner gave Cory a quick hug. "Thanks for stopping me before I screwed up."

Cory looked over Tanner's shoulder and saw the relieved look on DJ's face. "Any time, bro. Let's go home."

\* \* \*

### **USS *Enterprise*, Shuttlebay:**

Kirk watched with a smile as the boys all prepared to leave. His smile grew even wider when Ian walked up and gave him a hug.

"Thanks, Sir, for letting me visit! Your ship is AWESOME! I wish we could stay longer though, Sean said there's still stuff I didn't get to see."

Kirk tilted Ian's head up to look him eye-to-eye. "Well, I guess that means you are just going to have to come back again, doesn't it?"

Ian's eyes widened. "Really! KEWL! I can really come back?"

Kirk nodded. "You better believe it. You better hurry up, you don't want to miss your first Shuttle ride, do you?"

"No Sir!" Ian exclaimed as he gave one more quick hug then ran towards the craft.

On board the shuttle, Sean was trying to restrain his giggles. On the way up, DJ, Tanner, Toby, and Beau had been too preoccupied to pay attention; but now they were investigating every inch of the craft. When Ian joined them in their poking around, Sean finally lost it. After giving the boys time to satisfy their curiosity, Sean leaned over to Matt. "Matt, you mind sitting behind the



co-pilot? The last time we left, I screwed up a surprise. I'm going to try to get it right this time."

Matt smiled. "I was hoping you'd think of that, Sean. If he needs help, I'll be right there."

Sean walked up to where Cory was explaining the console to the newest additions.

"Guys, get with Justy and get ready to go. Cory, could you do something for me, babe?"

Cory relaxed as Sean put his arms around him. "What's that, teddy bear?"

"I know this stuff today has stressed you out, hon. Since we can't relax by playing with the flight sim, could you do me the honor of being my co-pilot?"

"But what about Matt?"

"It's okay. He thinks it's a good idea too, and he said to tell you if you need any help he'll be sitting right behind you. I won't be mad if you say no; I just would like the most important person in my life sitting by me as we take the new guys to their new life."

Cory could feel the day's stress fading away as he was filled with the love and support of Sean. "I can't argue with that logic. Let's do it!"

The boys took their seats. As soon as they were strapped in, Sean turned to Cory and announced with pride "Mr. Short; seal all hatches and prepare for departure."

"Aye, Sir!" Cory replied. "Justy, prepare passengers for takeoff!"

\* \* \*

#### **Shuttlebay control room:**

Kirk and Chip were standing by to watch the boys take off. They exchanged surprised looks when they heard the voice on the comm channel.

"*Enterprise*, this is *Mississippi* requesting permission to depart. Pilot is Ensign Sean Short, Co-pilot is Ensign Cory Short. Destination is Des Moines, Iowa."

Chip, smiling, took the controls. "*Mississippi*, this is *Enterprise*. Permission to depart granted. Destination of Des Moines, Iowa is acknowledged and logged. *Enterprise* will maintain surveillance until you contact San Francisco Control. Have a safe trip."

"Roger, *Enterprise*, and thanks."

Kirk and Chip witnessed the *Mississippi's* thrusters fire up and gently rotate the shuttle into an outward path. Within minutes, the shuttle carrying the boys was slowly gliding through the force field and on its way home.

## Chapter 38

### Starfleet Landing Pad, Des Moines International Airport:

Teri looked around her at the group waiting anxiously at the Des Moines Spaceport. Besides Dan and John, she had four parents waiting for their kids to come home. Robin and Kayla were still in shock at the sudden turn of events in their lives. Russ and Sara, on the other hand, were worried to the point of almost being sick about the injuries to the boys and whether they would accept the plans which had been made for their futures. Just then Teri's communicator went off.

"*Enterprise* to Director Short."

"Go ahead, *Enterprise*."

"Teri, the boys just transferred to San Francisco Control. Mattering on how much sightseeing they do, they should be there fairly soon."

"Thanks Nyota, we'll be watching for them. Short out."

"*Enterprise* out."

Teri turned to the group listening in. "Relax, everything will be fine. If there were problems, Nyota would have told me." She then added with a grin "Besides, they are in the capable hands of Starfleet's only thirteen-year-old qualified shuttle pilot; what is there to worry about?"

\* \* \*

### Shuttlecraft *Mississippi*:

Sean beamed with pride as he listened to Cory handle communications.

Cory switched to the San Francisco frequency, then began. "San Francisco Control, this is shuttlecraft *Mississippi*. Pilot Ensign Sean Short, co-pilot Ensign Cory Short. Request clearance and routing instructions for atmospheric re-entry."

"*Mississippi*, this is San Francisco Control. You are cleared for re-entry on lane five, you have a clear lane. Please inform your pilot that my nephew is nowhere near the bridge today, so I highly recommend he goes ABOVE it."

Cory was giggling as he replied. "Acknowledged, San Francisco Control! I think Captain Sulu is still reeling from the last bill! You have us cleared for re-entry on Lane Five."

"That is correct. Have a good day, *Mississippi*, and welcome back to Earth. San Francisco

out."

"Thank you, and have a good day yourself. *Mississippi* out."

Cory looked over at Sean, who was still grinning. "You heard him Sean, no rooster tail contests today. Let's hit it, these guys need to get home to relax."

Sean yelled to the back. "Justy, is everyone ready for re-entry?"

Justy yelled back. "What do you think, Bozo? Of course they are, we're wanting some of Helen's treats!"

"You're goin' swimming for that comment, Angel Boy! Here we go y'all!"

Sean then turned back to Cory. "Cor, prepare for re-entry."

"Already done, Sean; awaiting your word."

"Begin re-entry!" Sean announced.

\* \* \*

### **Starfleet Landing Pad, Des Moines International Airport:**

As Sean did the final shutdown of the shuttle's systems after landing in Des Moines, Cory headed to the back. He stopped when he reached the row of seats with DJ, Tanner, Toby, and Beau in them, and surveyed the nervous faces on the four boys. "What's wrong, guys?"

DJ spoke for the group. "What's gonna happen with us now? What if Teri can't help us; or there's no family that wants all four of us? You're just a kid like us, you can't take us in if that happens. What about the cops; I know they want Tanner."

Cory crouched down. "DJ, you all can stop worrying. First thing is, Mom ain't gonna let anything happen to you. She went through a year of torture just to be there for me, and she'll do whatever she has to for you. Just because I'm fourteen doesn't mean anything; we'll all sit down later and talk about it, but for now just trust me. When I accepted these Ensign bars I legally became an adult, and some recent things that have happened make it so that I can take control over any Earth agency in regards to you guys. The cops can't touch you, just ask Eli and Benji; they got to watch the FBI get knocked down a few notches. Until Mom tells me that all four of you have a family that she approves of, you are under my custody. Does that make any sense?"

"Whatever," DJ stated, obviously not believing a word.

Justy joined them, and heard DJ's response. "Dude, watch out for Cory; he's a blond with a brain cell and he knows how to use it! Seriously, have you heard of Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan?"

"Yeah, whaddabout him? He ain't got nothing to do with us."

Justy gave DJ a stern look. "He's got EVERYTHING to do with you. This blond nut case next to me also happens to be Patriarch of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of Vulcan; he reports DIRECTLY to Ambassador Sarek. Clan Short is responsible for rescuing abused and homeless youth, no matter what planet they are from. Before y'all were even on that bus, the Federation had already made a formal request for Clan Short to ensure your welfare."

"So that's what all that stuff was about with Colin; I thought it was just something you had all cooked up to mess with his head. You mean that trial was for real?"

Justy nodded solemnly. "Serious as a heart attack, dude. Y'all ain't got to worry anymore; we've got your backs. Whadda you say we hit the deck; if I know Helen she's got some awesome munchies waiting for us."

DJ looked around and found that the little group he was sitting with were the only ones left in the shuttle. "I guess you're right."

Tanner finally spoke. "Deej, even though some screwed up stuff happened at that last bus station, it's like someone's watchin' us and helping. I don't think God would'a sent Toby and Beau if we wasn't going to make it. Let's see what Teri can do; I got a weird feeling that we're done running for real."

The boys exited the shuttle; Toby, Beau, DJ and Tanner were deep in a discussion reassuring each other they would all stay together, so they did not notice the adults standing and waiting for them. Tanner was the first to look up.

"Holy smoke! Russ, Sara; how'd you get here?" Tanner exclaimed.

Russ gave a small smile. "We heard about what happened at the bus station and had to see for ourselves that you guys were okay. Besides, I couldn't wait to hear about Ian's adventures in space!"

Teri took advantage of the pause as the boys were digesting the surprise welcoming committee and walked over. "Hey guys, I'm Teri Short. A couple of not-so-little birdies told me you need to see me. Hop in one of the Hummers; once we get home I've got some surprises for you. For now, just know that I know of four boys who are about to see the dawning of a new life - together."

Teri's technique worked; the boys heard the mention of the Hummers and all other thoughts exited their mind. Without a word they flew over to check out the custom vehicles. Russ and Sara watched in wonder as the boys disappeared into the vehicles.

Russ turned to Teri. "Why didn't you tell them?"

Teri grimaced. "You might not believe this, but Timmy told me to wait. He said DJ's still working out a couple of things in his head. I gave him enough info to settle the worries, now he's just got to sort it all out. By the time we get to the house, he should be ready for the surprise."

Russ looked at Sara. "I think I know what you mean, Teri. It seems that DJ is feeling responsible for everything that's happened."

Sara added "Russ and I've talked about it already; somehow he needs to be convinced he's not to blame."

"Don't worry about it," Teri replied as they headed to the other Hummer. "Knowing my crew, he'll be getting a reality check by the time they go to bed tonight."

As they left the spaceport, things began to get interesting in the Hummer carrying Cory's family and the new boys. Timmy looked up from his perch on Cory's lap. "Daddy, can you tell DJ 'bout the stuff ya' found? Ya' know, 'bout him and me?"

Cory glanced at DJ, and found that he had stopped investigating the interior and was staring in their direction. "I guess so, Gizmo. DJ, you might wanna have a seat for this one."

DJ plopped down. "You mean that you know why we can talk to each other?"

Cory nodded. "Yeah, but you ain't goin' to believe it. DJ, were you ever told about your Mom losing a baby before you were born?"

"Yeah, what's that got to do with it?"

"The baby was not 'lost' in the normal way. Timmy's birth dad did some experimental stuff for Starfleet with time-travel. Your mom and him got together during a party; things happened and she got pregnant. When he came back to his normal time, he brought the baby back with him. That baby was Timmy; he's your half-brother. We think you guys are developing the ability to communicate like a lot of twins do with your minds. You might say I've got a personal interest in you, DJ; since you're my son's brother I've got to make sure you're safe."

The pessimistic attitude that DJ had been using as a shield from the fast paced events of the last few hours evaporated. "M .. my .. my brother?" he whispered repeatedly. Ian and Toby sat back and watched, giving DJ the space he needed. Tanner cuddled against DJ's side, quietly giving

him support as he digested the new information.

Timmy slid off of Cory and wiggled onto DJ's lap. He looked at DJ and said "I'm 'fused though. Are you the big brother or am I?"

DJ looked in wonder at the boy in his lap. "I've always prayed that I wished I'd met you. It'd be too weird to call you my big brother though; would you be okay with me calling you my little brother?"

Timmy stretched up and kissed DJ's chin. "Yeah, I was scared you wouldn't want me."

DJ had tears in his eyes as he pulled Timmy tightly against him with his free arm. "I've wanted all my life to know you; now I have got my wish and I'm not gonna lose you again."

Cory watched with a smile and cuddled against Sean. "DJ, don't worry; we won't let it happen either." Cory turned to look at Toby and Beau. "Guys, I've got good news and bad news for you. The good news is that you don't have to worry about where you are going to be living at; we've already found a real family for all four of you. The bad news is about your Aunt Gloria; she passed away a few months ago. She died in her sleep, they think it was a heart attack."

"Where we gonna be livin' at?" Beau asked in a worried tone.

"I don't know for sure yet, but if Mom was able to convince them to do what I suggested it'll be somewhere near all the rest of us. We'll find out more when we get home."

Toby and Beau visibly relaxed at knowing their future was secure. Tanner looked up from watching DJ cuddling his long-lost brother and softly said "Thanks for helping us, guys. I know you had to; but still, thanks."

Sean slid from under Cory and sat next to Tanner. He put an arm over Tanner's shoulder, then replied "You're welcome, Tanner; but you have one thing wrong. We didn't help you guys 'cause we had to; we helped you because we wanted to. Every single one of the guys you met today did something to try to make sure you were safe. We could have picked you up from Russ and Sara's, but Timmy there said you still needed time to work out some things in your heads. I'm glad we listened; since you were able to help Toby and Beau by being on the bus."

Sean paused, looked over at Cory, then continued. "You guys might all want to listen to this. Cory had a meltdown shortly after we got Timmy. Timmy said something to Cory then which struck all of us. He told Cory 'Sometimes bad things gotta happen so that good things can happen'. You guys just went through a pretty bad spell, but you are not alone anymore. It's kinda becoming a tradition for all of us to sit down before bed whenever a new guy joins us to go over what all of us have went through. I know for sure that you guys will be the guests of honor tonight, and I suspect that Ian will be joining us too."

One hour later, Josh and Chip beamed into the foyer at Teri's house. They followed the noises of kids at play, and found themselves in the back yard looking out over a major barbecue. Josh couldn't resist the temptation, and yelled "Hey, Teri - who let the animals outta their cages?"

"I'm gonna shoot you!" Chip exclaimed to Josh just before the first wave of pounces hit them. It took a minute to dig themselves out of the pile of giggling boys, but Chip and Josh finally broke free and started towards a table. They were about halfway there when Eli yelled "Hey Uncle Josh; turn around!"

Josh turned, and was pounced once again - by Eli's prosthetic leg! Josh managed to catch it; but it wiggled free and rose to the top of his head. Even Chip was laughing as the leg began a victory dance on top of Josh's head; totally messing up his hair in the process. It then hopped down and jumped over to join the boys, who were rolling on the ground at Eli's latest prank. Josh was grinning as he watched the leg run off and yelled "Hey Eli, you really need to get a leash for that leg!"

The adults sat down and made sure all the preparations were taken care of, then Chip

waved Aaron over. "Aaron, get the boys together, it's time to answer some of their questions."

"Got it, Chip," Aaron replied as he ran off and started rounding them up. A few minutes later, all of the boys were seated on the ground by the table, waiting to see what was going to happen.

"You're on, Teri," Chip announced.

Teri looked over 'her' growing tribe of boys. "Guys, all of you made me really proud today. DJ, Tanner, Toby, Beau; that includes you too. Today you were placed in a situation which would panic most adults; you worked together and made sure everyone made it through. Ian, you may not have known it, but you helped your family more than you know earlier; you're about to see how much. I know what you guys want answered, but there's a couple of other things you need to know first before I tell you that."

"I guess first thing you should know is that we have a couple of new neighbors at our new house in Orlando. Russ is going to be in charge of the studio on Southcrest, and Sara has accepted a position as Medical Liaison between Doc Austin and Camp Little Eagle. Robin just accepted the Head of Security job at Camp Little Eagle, and Kayla is now the coordinator between the various departments of Youth Services, including assisting Clan Short. Each family is getting five acres of land on the property line between Southcrest and our new place; the houses are going up right now. The Federation is providing modular houses for both families which are about three times as large as their old homes. DJ, Tanner, Toby, Beau; you guys need to come up here and have a seat for the next part."

The four boys nervously got up and joined the adults at the table. As they got closer, DJ and Tanner realized who was sitting next to Chip.

"WHOA! You're JC from N'Sync!" they exclaimed in unison. Tanner continued their thoughts, "Man, you're awesome! Why're you here?"

Josh chuckled at their reaction. "Chip and I had to come to make sure our sons were not torturing Teri too much. Besides, part of the surprises for today we have a hand in. Grab a seat over here; it's time to talk about your future."

The awestruck boys took the offered seats, DJ and Tanner both stealing quick touches to assure themselves Josh was really there.

Teri gave Russ and Sara a glance once the boys were seated, then sat down.

Russ and Sara came over and knelt down in front of the boys, then Russ spoke. "DJ, Tanner; we've got to be honest with you. We knew you needed time to sort things out, so we called ahead and talked to Teri long before you left. We would not have let you guys leave if Teri was not able to help you. Both of us felt sick when we were told about you guys getting hurt at the bus station; then Teri got through to us that if we had not let you go, Toby and Beau would not have got the help they needed. All four of you boys must have someone special looking out for you in Heaven; will all four of you let Sara and I be the ones watching out for you here on Earth? We want to have all four of you as our sons, forever."

Before they could reply, Sara added "Russ is speaking for me too, guys. It does not matter what has happened to you in the past; we both want to make sure all four of you have a happy and safe future. We heard that you swore to stick together; at the bus station you proved it was not just words. I've been watching Toby and Beau since I met them, and I honestly believe that they are just as sweet and caring as you are, DJ and Tanner. I want to see all four of you together as family, and I really hope you'll let it be our family."

Russ looked at the four stunned faces in front of him. "Guys, why don't you grab Ian and head to someplace private to talk it over? He's known us all of his life, and he can probably answer a lot of your questions. We'll wait for you, it's a big decision."

The four of them nodded silently, and stood to head off to talk. To everyone's surprise, Timmy ran over to join them, William flying alongside; after a few whispered words, DJ picked Timmy up and carried him along as they met with Ian and headed into the house.

Teri waved Cory over. "What's your son up to this time?"

Cory smiled. "Relax, Mom; him and William are going to pass on any questions they have to us. Timmy's just trying to look out for his brother."

Teri shook her head. "He's getting more and more like his Daddy every day!"

Cory giggled as he turned to rejoin the rest of the boys. "Thanks Mom!"

\* \* \*

Once the six boys were settled in the living room, DJ finally spoke. "They lied to us. I thought they were so kewl, but they lied to us. I'm tired of being lied to."

Ian shook his head. "I don't understand; I've never seen them do that before. Usually Russ will just say he can't tell me, he's never lied to me."

Timmy held up his hand to tell them to wait, then spoke after a couple of seconds. "Jamie checked their minds; they was scared you'd run if you knew they were tryin' to make sure Gran'ma was gonna help. They talked to Gran'ma, and she told them to just let you go with what you needed to do. They knewd you was scared and needed to work stuff out."

Tanner looked at Timmy warily. "How do you know that?"

Timmy turned his head and pointed to the talon embedded in his earlobe. "See that? It's onea William's claws. He's an Eagle Spirit, and he picked me as his helper. Me and him can talk in our heads like DJ and I talk when we're dreamin'. He asked Duke, Duke told Ricky, and Ricky asked Jamie. Jamie and Jacob can look at anyone's brains."

Beau giggled. "He's not lyin', bro. They were able to tell me stuff about Toby that only I know."

Tanner gave a small smile. "Okay. Sorry Timmy, it's just kinda weird. I'm still getting used to DJ doing it."

DJ got back to the subject. "I guess I kinda understand why they did it. What's gonna keep them from doing it again?"

Toby chimed in. "Man, I think they only did it to help you. We might not have met if you had known the truth, what about that?"

"Yeah, maybe that was one of the bad things that needed to happen so we could meet you," Beau added.

A new voice from behind them startled the boys. "Very good, Beau. You hit it right on!"

Timmy turned around. "Uncle Mikey! Stop scaring us like that!"

Mikey giggled as he became visible. "Wazzup, rug-rat! Gentlemen, Saint Mikey of Urbandale, Protector of Gay and Abandoned Youth, at your service. Welcome to the family, guys. Oh - news flash - Colin is now sweating off his extra pounds Down There."

Tanner recovered first, and asked "Why did Timmy call you Uncle Mikey?"

"He can get away with it; when I was alive I was Sean and Cory's big brother. Kyle called me over in case you guys needed any help deciding what to do. I think you need a little more info than anyone here can give you."

DJ sat back in awe. "Dude, I can feel you here! What don't we know?"

Mikey settled in front of them. "The Book of Life had the two of you staying with Russ and Sara instead of getting on the bus; Colin was supposed to be captured trying to take you from there. By listening to their concerns for you instead of their hearts, Russ and Sara caused a minor

rewrite which put you here today. Our Father was actually quite pleased; it's rare that anyone goes to the lengths they did for someone else. Then you performed a miracle; you caused a change in the Book that the results of are still a blur. When the four of you swore to be there and take care of each other, you altered the future. Toby, Beau; it was your time at the bus station. I'll leave it up to you to decide when and who to tell. Our Father gave your dad a waiver, he is watching from Heaven since his suicide was a humanitarian gesture to give you a chance. The four of you have a long future ahead of you; a future in which you are truly calling all of the shots. I'm going to be there to advise you, but only Our Father knows what your decisions will bring forth. Even the choice of staying with Russ and Sara is not decided yet, guys; but you should consider that their actions are the reason the four of you are here today. I understand your aversion to being lied to, DJ; but I can promise that lies are not going to be the norm if you say yes."

DJ thought for a minute. "You're right, Saint Mikey; knowing all of that does make a difference. I guess I need to stop judging people like they're my father, don't I?"

"That's a good way to put it, DJ. I think you can learn a lot from Russ about what a real father is like, but it's a decision all four of you have to agree on. By the way; you're Timmy's bro so it's Uncle Mikey for you. The rest of you can drop the Saint, I don't mind."

Tanner smiled. "Thanks, Mikey. I think we can all figure out the right thing to do now."

Mikey gave them all hugs, then faded away. The boys huddled together, and began seriously discussing what their choice would be.

\* \* \*

Russ and Sara watched nervously as the boys filed out of the house and walked towards them. The yard fell silent as everyone awaited their decision.

Tanner led the group. When he reached the table, he spoke. "I drew the short straw, so I got stuck being the one to speak for all of us." Tanner paused as he watched Russ start to take a drink, then delivered the punch line. "It looks like at least one of your four new sons is gonna grow up to be hung like a horse!"

His timing was perfect, as about half of Russ's Dr. Pepper came flying out his nose. Sara laughed as she pulled the four boys into a hug. "Welcome to the family guys! You had us worried, it took so long."

DJ grinned. "We had to talk to Uncle Mikey, he's a Saint. He showed me that I'm gonna need a little help with trusting people after what my father did; can you do that?"

Russ had joined the hug, and both him and Sara answered "No problem. Did you say UNCLE Mikey?"

Teri saw the confused looks at DJ calling Mikey his uncle, and helped explain. "Mikey is, well was, my oldest son. He was killed by a drunk driver, He's the guardian angel for all of these boys, and carries the official rank of Saint Mikey of Urbandale. Get used to hearing his name, he pops in and out a lot around here."

Russ answered in shock. "Holy smoke! He helped me talk to my brother! You mean your SON was the subject of the Papal Proclamation that said there was a new Saint that is the protector of gay and abused children. Is this the same one?"

Teri nodded. "One and the same."

They were interrupted by Tanner turning and yelling "Hey everyone; we've got a new FAMILY!"

The yard broke into cheers from all of the boys. As the congratulations were winding down, Helen announced that the food was ready.



Once everyone finished eating, Teri got the boy's attention. "Hey guys; pools open - explain the rules to the new guys!"

Teri watched with amusement as the regular crew stripped to birthday suits in record time. As most of the boys ran towards the pool, Timmy and Ricky hopped on Eli's back as he flew Superman-style behind the rest of the group. DJ, Tanner, Toby, Beau, and Ian sat and watched the others strip and run off. Teri came over to the blushing boys and crouched in front of them. "What's wrong guys, don't you want to swim?"

Tanner looked at his companions, then answered for them. "Yeah, but it's too weird getting nude out here."

Teri stopped him. "Tanner, do the rest of these guys know what you and DJ had to go through; and what was done to you?"

"Toby and Beau do; we ain't told Ian about it."

"I'm pretty sure Sean is going to be doing something like this a little later tonight; would it be okay if I told him the short version so he understands what we're talking about?"

"I guess," Tanner and DJ replied.

Teri turned to Ian. "Ian, you have made friends with a group of very special boys today. Something you don't know about them is what they went through before they came here. Some of them simply lost their families, some others were abandoned or kicked out. Some of them went through various degrees of sexual, emotional, and even physical abuse. These guys have had to suffer through just about all of the above between the two of them. It's my guess that you, Beau, and Toby are just shy about people you just met seeing you nude; these two had to live with their privacy being violated every day."

Ian stood up, turned, and pulled DJ and Tanner into a three-way hug. "Dang guys; that's messed up. I KNOW Russ and Sara ain't gonna let that stuff happen to you again. It sounds like the rest of those guys had to get over some bad junk too; maybe this might start helpin' you guys get over it."

DJ leaned back a little and smiled at Ian. "You know something, you might be right Ian. My old father is dead; I gotta stop lettin' him control my life. What do you think, Tanner?"

Tanner nodded. "Makes sense to me. You in, Toby and Beau?"

Toby grinned. "If it's gonna help you guys, try to stop us!"

Teri stepped back to give them space as the five boys quickly stripped down and streaked off to join their new friends.

Chip chuckled as he watched the last one disappear. "You know Teri; you're teaching these boys, especially my boys, bad habits."

Teri grinned. "Just consider it payback for pouncing lessons!"

As they headed into the house to settle final details on the boy's placements, Robin got Teri's attention. "You know, I think Ian's smiled more today than he has the whole last couple of months."

"These guys have that effect sometimes. There's a good chance he's going to discover a lot of things about himself that he wouldn't normally have noticed; these guys as a group seem to give peer pressure to be the best you can be, and being able to do something that other kids consider weird is considered something to celebrate with them. That's why nobody even blinked when Eli flew into the pool with Timmy and Ricky on his back."

Robin grinned. "I think Ian's gonna fit right in ... "

\* \* \*

The boys were surprised when they came inside. Teri had them get dressed then sit at the dining room table. When John and Matt came in dressed in full uniform, they fell silent, curious as to what was about to happen.

John stood at the head of the table. "Patriarch Short, may I have your assistance?"

Cory stood and joined John. "How may Clan Short be of assistance Commander Martin?"

"It has come to the attention of my superiors that the senior members of your Security detail have performed their duties above and beyond what was required of them. To ease the performance of their duties, and in appreciation of services rendered in the last twenty-four hours, the Federation is offering commissions for your two men. With your approval, they will be issued the rank of Ensign; upon completion of training on Federation laws and procedures they will receive automatic promotions to Lieutenant Junior Grade. Is this acceptable to you?"

Cory nodded once. "It is acceptable; you may proceed Commander."

John nodded to Matt, who stood and announced "Mr. James Jacob Richardson and Mr. Gabriel Mark Michaels; please join us in front."

Once the boys had joined them, John continued. "Mr. Richardson and Mr. Michaels; the Chief of Starfleet Security has authorized me to offer you both commissions in Starfleet Security. Are you willing to accept these commissions, and the responsibilities that accompany them?"

"Yes, Commander," both boys replied.

John nodded to Matt, who pinned their new rank emblems onto their shirts.

"Gentlemen," Chip announced as he rose from his seat, "I've been authorized to inform you that commendations have been inserted into your service records for your performance today aboard the *Enterprise*. In addition, Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Thompson both send their congratulations. On a personal note, I want to say great job, guys."

Before they could respond, John added. "The formal part is over; way to go guys, I'm proud of you."

JJ spoke first. "Thanks Uncle Chip, tell Uncle Jim and Mr. Thompson thanks too." He then turned back to John. "Thanks Pop, this is awesome!"

As JJ gave John a hug, Gabe took his turn. "Uncle Chip, thanks a bunch; please tell them thanks from me too." Once JJ broke the hug, Gabe held out his hand. "Thanks Uncle John, we won't let you guys down."

Once all of the congratulations were over, Chip and Josh rounded up the group to return to Southcrest. Just as they were all preparing to be beamed out, Beau ran up and pulled the twins into a three-way hug. When they saw the smile on Justy's face, they gave each other knowing looks, then finished preparations to depart. Once they had beamed out, Cory looked over the remaining group.

"Okay guys, let's hit the bedroom. It's been a long day; Sean still has to go through his indoctrination of you guys. See you tomorrow, Mom."

The boys headed up to the bedroom, and a couple of hours later Teri did her nightly check. She smiled as she looked at the boys all snuggled in their groups; their faces showing total contentment as they slept. She turned and closed the door, and shut off the lights as she called an end to one of the most eventful days she had ever experienced.

## *Chapter 39*

DJ slowly awoke from the best sleep he'd had in a long time. He smiled as he realized who was snuggled in his arms; his boyfriend and soon-to-be brother Tanner. He began to wiggle free; but stopped when he heard a soft whimper from behind him and felt a small arm reach across his chest and take hold tightly. DJ's smile grew to a grin as he looked over his shoulder. Latched securely to his back was his long-lost little brother. DJ twisted around and ran his fingers through Timmy's bright red hair lovingly. After a minute of this attention, Timmy's eyes fluttered open and he smiled up at DJ.

"Kewl! You're really here, bro!" Timmy whispered.

DJ replied softly "Yes little brother, I'm really here. Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah. I ain't gotta be scared no more that you'll get hurt. I was 'fraid I'd never get to meet you."

DJ shifted to where he could pull Timmy against his chest. As he hugged the small body of his long-lost brother he replied with a tear running down his face. "Now that I've got you, I swear you'll never have to worry about losing me again. You're a really special little fireball, and I ain't gonna lose you again."

Timmy snuggled tightly against DJ's chest. "I love you big brother. I ain't gonna ever let you get hurt again."

DJ sobbed softly as he replied. "I love you too little brother. I really don't know what I'd do without you now, you're really a part of me."

Timmy replied by snuggling tighter against DJ. A few seconds later, he asked shyly "Deej, can you take me into the bathroom?"

DJ was interrupted in framing a tactful response by the sound of someone giggling from the other bed. DJ turned his head and found Cory sitting there watching them.

"It looks like you got his seal of approval, DJ. He only schemes to get people into the bathroom he likes; you must really mean something to him since he's not including Ricky. You've got mine and Sean's okay; if we didn't trust you Timmy would not have been sleeping where he did last night. Go spend some time being a big brother; when he tries to talk you into a shower go ahead, I'll see you downstairs."

DJ smiled at Cory. "Thanks Cory; I think I'll do just that. Why are you guys so nice to us?"

Cory smiled back. "We'll talk about it over breakfast; right now get your little brother into the bathroom before I ground both of you!"

The boys all finally managed to make it down to the breakfast table. They waited

patiently as Helen, Tommy and Tyler took turns bringing out omelets cooked to each individual order. Once everyone finished eating, Cory got their attention. "I was asked earlier why we are being so nice to our newest Clan members. I think it's gonna sink in better hearing it from all of us. DJ, since you asked, I think it's only fair you get your answer first."

Sean stood up. "DJ, the ONLY reason that Cory and I did not adopt you ourselves is that it would not be fair for you to have to answer to someone your own age. You are and always will be Timmy's big brother. Cory and I talked it over this morning; you are just as much our son as Timmy, but asking you to respond to me as a parent when I'm only a couple of hours older than you is just wrong. Tanner, Toby, Beau; that goes for you guys too in a different light. The three of you are about to become Timmy's brothers by adoption; if we had decided to adopt DJ the three of you would have been included. That means that once the adoption is final, you all have a little fireball as a brother. Russ, Sara; as of now we want you to know you have our permission to treat Timmy just like the rest of your sons. That includes straightening him out if he gets in trouble."

DJ had tears running down his face as he replied to what he just heard. "Two weeks ago I had someone I didn't even want to call my father; now I've got two dads, a pop, and a mom, not to mention a boyfriend who's also my brother plus three more brothers. I don't know what to do or say; I'm scared I'm gonna wake up and this is all a dream."

Cory walked over and pulled DJ into a hug. "DJ, it's not a dream. This is your reward for surviving the hell you lived through. Sean and I don't expect you to call us Pop and Dad; if you want to and it's okay with Russ and Sara you can. If you do, plan on seeing people outside our group giving you weird looks!"

To everyone's surprise, Tanner spoke up. Turning to Russ, he asked "Dad; is it okay if we call Cory and Sean Dad and Pop sometimes?"

Russ smiled as he replied. "Guys, if it wasn't for those two all of us wouldn't be here. If you feel comfortable with it AND you promise not to confuse people with it I'm fine. Just remember that they have the same rights with you guys as they have given us with Timmy. You don't know this; but Teri, or should I say your Grandma, told me last night that legally Sean and Cory are adults. That means that even though they are your age, they have to answer for their actions just like Sara and I do. If they tell you to do something, listen and do it."

All four boys agreed. A few more minutes were spent discussing their status within the group, then they all split off to take care of their daily business.

\* \* \*

Russ couldn't help but smile as he looked at the passengers in the Hummer. When him and Sara announced they were taking their new sons out to get some clothes, they suddenly found they had a mini-army that insisted on coming along to assist. At first Russ and Sara tried to argue, but they gave up after Tommy informed them 'There ain't no way we's lettin' no grownups pick our nephews new clothes. Y'all's got no sense of what's cool.' Now they had DJ, Tanner, Toby, Beau, Tommy, Adam, Tyler and Timmy joking around in the back as they headed out to Jordan Creek Towne Center to raid the clothing stores. Ian managed to con his way into joining the group, but Cory and Sean begged off on the trip; saying there was no way they were going to miss a chance at some alone time.

In the back, Adam giggled as he watched Timmy bouncing between his big brother and his soon to be brothers. As Timmy started his third round on DJ's lap, Beau moved over and sat next to Adam.

"Adam?" Beau asked shyly.

"Yeah little guy?" Adam replied as he placed an arm over Beau's shoulder.

"Please don' get mad, but I wanna know something."

"I won't get mad; go ahead. If I'm gonna be your uncle I gotta be there to answer questions for you."

The boys fell silent waiting to hear what Beau was going to ask. "Okay. I kinda looked at ya when you got up this mornin. I know Sean told us about what happened to you, but when I saw all them marks I felt sick. Would it hurt if I touched them?"

Adam was blown away, he definitely didn't expect the question he was asked. "I guess it's okay. I'll let you know if it starts to hurt." He carefully pulled up his shirt and sat forward to give Beau access.

Beau gingerly reached out and gently ran the tip of his finger over the large scar that ran the length of Adam's spine. Silent tears rolled down Beau's face as he finished tracing the large scar and began working his way through the smaller visible scars using both hands. It only took him a couple of minutes to work through all of the accessible scars on Adam's chest, back and arms. Beau sat back and placed a hand over his eyes, now audibly sobbing softly.

Adam pulled Beau onto his lap and held him tightly. "It's okay lil' guy; the people who did this ain't gonna hurt anyone no more. I'm gonna be okay."

Beau spoke through his sobs. "Look at my arm, Uncle Adam."

Adam looked down, and was shocked to see a map of the injuries on his arm fading from Beau's arm. "What did you do? Are you okay?"

Beau had mostly recovered, and asked Adam "Does it feel different where I touched you?"

Adam thought for a second before replying. "Yeah, I don't feel the spots I was hit there."

Beau gave a small smile. "Jamie and Jacob were right then. They told me that they thought I could make someone not hurt by touching them. It don't heal ya, but it stops your hurts. I felt what you was feeling. Why was you lying to everyone and tellin' them you didn't hurt?"

Adam was shocked. "The rest of the guys needed help a lot more than me; I didn't want anyone worrying about me."

"Please don't do that. Too many people love you."

Tommy interrupted. "Yeah, bro. If we don't know you're hurtin', then we worry sumthin's wrong when you don't wanna do stuff."

Adam looked at the faces surrounding him; all of them showing concern. "Dang it guys, y'all worry too much. Beau can tell ya, it was just my bruises hurtin'; there was nothing major wrong. Beau, that's an awesome talent you got there; if you don't mind, I think I'll have to get with you later for the rest of the spots. How long does it last?"

"I don't know; it's the first time I've done it. I'll do the rest as long as you promise not to hide hurting from us again."

"Deal."

Tanner waved Beau over to join him. "Hey bro, I do have a question for ya'; whats the deal with you, Jamie, and Jacob? Y'all seemed kinda tight when they were here, and you've kinda been down since they left."

Beau blushed as he took a seat. "Jamie and Jacob talked to me a lot while we were on the *Enterprise*. They knew Toby and I were gonna end it all until we met you guys on the bus. They told me all about their old life; even stuff Justy don't know. They had it really bad, I guess I kinda like them both since they shared with me what they had to live with."

Everyone turned their heads to look at Ian as he announced, "I'll do it, Timmy." Ian took a deep breath. "I guess William and Duke like me. I can hear them in my head!"

William squawked from his perch on the rear shelf, nodding his head.

Ian continued. "Kyle's talking to the twins and Duke's relaying it. They're not ready to tell everyone what all happened; they said thanks Beau for keeping the secret. Did y'all notice how they always do stuff together? They have spent all of their lives supporting each other, and even though they are in a safe home they still can't handle it if the other one's not around. Until they met Beau, they had figured they'd never have a boyfriend. All the guys they liked were either taken or would have weirded out about having to share them. Beau, you're different. As soon as they scanned your head like they do for all the new guys, they knew you were different. I guess the best way to say it is you're the third part that is going to make them complete. William just told me that the Book Of Life has updated again; and thanks to you, their future just got better."

Tanner smiled as he put his arm around Beau. "Bro, I guess that means you got a pair of boyfriends, don't it?"

Beau managed to turn an even deeper shade of red. "I dunno. I guess that'd be kewl, but I ain't asked and they didn't either. I really don't know how."

Ian surprised them all with his next move. He moved over by Toby, and shyly spoke. "Toby, I ain't doin' this just for show; this is for real. Can we .... I mean .... would you be my boyfriend?"

Toby was speechless for a second. From being with Ian the last couple of days, he had already learned that Ian was quiet and shy about expressing his thoughts. "Ian, I've been wanting to ask you the same thing since I met you, but I was scared you'd say no." Toby reached around and pulled Ian into a hug. "Yes, I'd love to be your boyfriend!"

As everyone congratulated the new couple, Tommy pulled Beau off to the side. "When we git back home, you're callin' the twins on the console. Y'all need to settle this, ain't none of y'all gonna be settled 'till ya' do. Maw's been harpin' me to start lookin' out for myself, I guess that means I'm needin' to be lookin' out for kinfolk too. Cor called you our kin this mornin'; so y'all are gittin' treated as such. Get to thinkin' 'bout what you're gonna say, you ain't gonna be happy 'less you do it."

Beau just nodded his head as he tried to figure out what he was going to do.

\* \* \*

Russ did a quick head count as the group left Yonkers and headed for the Food Court. He was pleasantly surprised at the choices the boys made in clothes; the 'uncles' made sure that the choices were not too plain or too outlandish. Once he was sure everyone was still with them, he led the group over for lunch.

On their way over, Adam had to hit the restroom; as he was coming out he heard someone say hesitantly, "Adam Short?"

Adam turned to see who was talking; and was surprised to find one of Sean's teammates, Clint Anderson. He had met Clint at the party two weekends ago; but was surprised that Clint recognized him. "Hey Clint, wazzup?"

Clint smiled. "Not much, just chillin'. How you doin', last I saw you was kinda messed up."

"I'm healing slowly. Thanks for asking."

Clint joined Adam as he headed to the group's table. "Hey, Adam, I know your mom said if anyone needed help to call her. Does that apply to straight kids too?"

Adam suddenly stopped and gave Clint his full attention. "You better believe it; straight, gay, from any planet in the Federation, it don't matter. What's up?"

"Well, I kinda goofed up, and I think I got my girl pregnant. Crystal is cool with it, but we think our parents are gonna blow. I know my dad's gonna beat my butt raw; her dad is worse than mine. When I met him, he not only told me he'd cut my nuts off if I touched her, he showed me the knife he'd use to do it. The bad part is, if she is pregnant I want to raise the kid. I'm adopted, and I know what it's like wondering why your parents got rid of you. She agrees, but we both know her parents are gonna force her to get an abortion."

Adam shook his head. "Dude, you ain't kiddin' you need help. I'm glad I'm gay; if JJ gets pregnant, it really is a miracle. Come on, I want you to tell Russ and Sara what you just told me; they can call Mom and fill her in. Is Crystal here?"

"Yeah, she should be coming out of the restroom any time."

"Get her and bring her over, she needs to be involved in this too."

As Clint went to get Crystal, Adam hurried over to Sara and Russ. "Sara, did you bring that tricorder Doc gave you?"

Sara gave Adam a worried look. "Yes, what's wrong?"

"We might need to do a pregnancy check."

Russ chuckled. "Adam, I really don't think you have to worry. JJ's not THAT good!"

Adam shot back with a grin. "Don't be so sure, he carries a lot of magic in that wand of his! Trust me!"

Sara giggled at Russ's flushed face. "You should know better, Russ. You're an easy target!" She then turned back to Adam. "Okay, on who?"

Adam motioned towards Clint, who had just joined Crystal and was talking to her. "Clint's girl Crystal. If she is, Mom might have to pull some strings for both of them."

Sara looked over at the couple; they appeared to both be in their mid-teens, with matching medium blond hair. The body structure of both indicated that puberty was well along. As she watched, they headed towards the table, both obviously nervous. After they arrived, Adam did the introductions. "Russ, Sara; this is Clint Anderson and his girlfriend Crystal."

Russ stood and shook both of their hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Adam said that you might need some help; he hinted that Clint's little head took over thinking from his big head and now you might have a problem. Have a seat, tell us about it."

As Clint recapped what he told Adam, Sara scanned Crystal with the tricorder. Once Clint was done, Sara gave her findings. "Crystal, Clint; you performed an adult act, and seem to be willing to be responsible for the consequences. I've talked to Teri quite a bit, and am pretty sure that if even one of you has problems with your family over this, both of you will be taken in for your own protection if she thinks it's needed for your safety. If your parents respond the way Clint thinks they will, both of you will be removed from your families. Are you both willing to take that step, and more important are you willing to stay there for each other?"

Sara was impressed to see that both of them thought it over before responding. Crystal answered first. "My Mom had a heart attack in her sleep last year, so now it's just Dad and me. He doesn't like Clint; in fact he's hated every boy I've even been friends with. Once, he threw a boy across the yard then slapped me so hard I got a black eye; just because the boy kissed me. I love Clint; if I didn't we wouldn't have done it."

Clint took his cue. "Like I said, I'm adopted, and any time I screw up they throw it in my face. I don't want to put another kid through that, and I know abortion is just legal murder. I love Crystal and want to spend my whole life with her. If she's pregnant, I'll do whatever it takes to protect her and our child."

Sara smiled. "Good answer, both of you. Give me your numbers, I'll get Teri to have your parents over. Crystal, what's your last name?"

Crystal relaxed slightly knowing they had support now. "It's Thornton."

"Okay; have a seat, we'll head out shortly. By the way, start thinking up names; you'll need three of them."

The sudden silence at the table was broken by Timmy. "William says they're all little boys too!"

Russ placed a hand on each of the shocked couple's shoulders. "Congratulations! I think there are going to be three boys who will have some very good parents. If things go down like we think they will, I promise you'll have all the support you need with them."

Crystal finally found her voice. "How does he know they are boys? He's on the other side of the table! And who is William?"

Russ chuckled. "Relax; you're about to meet a very special group of boys and young men. As compensation for the trouble they have all lived through, it appears that Our Heavenly Father has Blessed some of them with some additional skills. The little redhead over there is Timmy. Do you see the eagle sitting on his lap?"

As Crystal and Clint looked over, William stuck his head over the edge of the table.

"The eagle is William; I can tell you for a fact that him and Timmy are able to talk to each other. William is what the Indians call a 'Spirit Guide', and Timmy basically acts as his interpreter. A couple of the guys can read minds and emotions; I'm going to make sure they are watching your parents while we give them the news. If any of them see that your parents are faking accepting it to make Teri happy, they'll speak up and Teri will respond according to what they find."

Clint looked over at Adam. "Dude, is he for real?"

Adam smiled. "Oh yeah, he's for real. He's seen all of us in operation; in fact they have four new sons thanks to us."

As soon as Adam made the comment, DJ, Tanner, Toby and Beau raised their hands. DJ spoke for the four of them. "Trust me, you guys are safe. The FBI won't even mess with these guys. If Teri says you need protection, you've got it. I'd tell you to ask my ex-father, but last I heard he was building fires in Hell."

"DJ!" Russ said in shock.

DJ grinned. "Sorry Dad, but that's what Uncle Mikey told me!"

Russ shook his head. "I think I'm gonna have to have a talk with that boy!"

The table broke into laughter when Tommy quipped "Don't bother, Russ. Mikey is just denser than a force field sometimes!"

Adam took over the conversation one it quieted back down, introducing the rest of the group while Sara called and filled in Teri on what was happening. Thirty minutes later, they were finished eating and headed back home.

\* \* \*

Teri, Dan and John took their seats at the table and looked around to ensure everyone was present. To John's right was Mr. Thornton; next to him was Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. Finishing out the side of the table were Sean and Cory, both in full uniform. On the opposite side of the table sat John, Clint, Crystal, Sebastian, Sammy, and Tommy. At the end of the table sat Robin and Kayla.

Teri introduced everyone, then began. "Clint and Crystal approached one of my sons today to ask for assistance with a problem they are having. At their request, I arranged this meeting to discuss it in a controlled environment. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?"

Mr. Anderson spoke up. "Yeah, this ain't none of these kid's business, get them out of



here. Those Starfleet costumes don't impress me."

Before Teri could reply, Cory waved her off and stood. "Mr. Anderson. I am afraid Director Short was in error during her introductions. Let me clarify the duties of the persons attending this meeting. My presence here is two-fold. In one regard, I am present at the request of Director Short as a representative of Starfleet. In that regard I am acting as Ensign Cory Short, Engineers Assistant, assigned to the USS *Enterprise*. My secondary function here is as my official title; Patriarch of Clan Short of the family of Sarek of the planet Vulcan. Your offspring approached a member of Clan Short for assistance; if at any time during this conference I determine that it would be logical for Clan Short to assume responsibility I will declare such. Present to my right is Ensign Sean Short, Helm division, USS *Enterprise*. Present to Miss Thornton's left is Samuel Martin and Sebastian Martin. Both are Clan Short Intelligence, and are here at my request. The final Clan member to the left of Sebastian Martin is Thomas Short, Communications Officer for Clan Short. His presence is required due to the probability of Clan Short involvement; he will be logging these proceedings. Have I clarified the necessity of our presence sufficiently?"

Anderson growled "Yeah, you proved your a punk who knows a lot of big words." He started to reach over to push Cory, but suddenly found John holding his arm.

John flipped out his credentials with his free hand before speaking. "Mr. Anderson, let me refresh your memory; I'm Commander John Martin, Starfleet Security. I would highly recommend you sit down and relax. You just about put yourself in a serious situation. If you would have made contact with Patriarch Short, I would have no choice but to put you under arrest for assault on a Vulcan Dignitary. Once he identified himself as such, Patriarch Short is no longer operating as a Starfleet witness. I assure you he is not playing a game; I can also assure you he has no sense of humor in this capacity. He is literally the most powerful fourteen-year-old on Earth, take my advice and don't cross him."

Anderson glanced at Cory, expecting to see a smug look. He was surprised to see an expressionless face looking back at him. *'These guys are serious! What the hell is going on here!'* he thought as he sat down.

Once everyone was re-seated, Teri began. "This will be easier if I describe the situation. I'm sure all of you know that Clint and Crystal are dating. You may not be aware of this, but they are committed to each other and plan to marry upon reaching adulthood."

Cory stopped Teri. "Director Short, I must inform our guests that I have security personnel standing by with phasers set to stun. They have been instructed to disable any occupant of this room which attempts a hostile act or logically appears to be doing same."

Teri took the hint, one of the twins had signaled Cory there was going to be trouble. "Thank you Patriarch Short. Everyone, he's not joking, and if he's got who I think he does behind those phasers they are crack shots. The reason Clint and Crystal came to me is they made an error in judgment due to their love for each other. They are both very mature for their age; most fifteen year olds would have panicked. Federation Child Services has performed a medical scan on Crystal, and we have determined that she is pregnant with triplets; additionally they are confirmed to be Clint's children. The couple has declared their wish to keep the children and raise them."

Crystal's father landed halfway across the table, hands outstretched towards Clint. The Andersons watched in shock as John calmly walked over, sat him back in his chair, then restrained him. He turned to Cory. "Sir, how long will he be out?"

"At the setting Mr. Michaels is using, approximately seven point three minutes Commander."

John nodded. "Mr. And Mrs. Anderson, it look like you have about seven minutes for

your response, we already know his."

John glanced at his sons, both of them frowned, telling him they still needed to watch the Anderson's. John signaled behind his back to the security team to keep on guard, then took his seat.

Before either of them could speak, Sebastian stood up. "Mr. And Mrs. Anderson, don't bother. Patriarch Short, we have determined the unborn children and possibly their parents are in lethal danger."

Cory stood up. "Report, Mr. Martin."

"Mrs. Anderson intends to perform an abortion with a clothes hanger on Miss Thornton. In addition, Mr. Anderson intends to beat his son, using a leather strap and/or bare fists. He is also considering the same for Miss Thornton. We also found that Mr. Anderson fully intends to remove Clinton's testicles with his military Bowie knife."

"Acknowledged, Mr. Martin. Notify me of any additional developments. Director Short, Clan Short requires you to invoke the Safe Haven Act based on the information you just received."

Mr Anderson stood up. "Now wait just a cotton-picking minute! What's this 'Safe Haven' bull; and where do you get off basing anything on some little punk blowing smoke out his ass? I'm taking my son right now, and as soon as he's safe I'm calling the cops and reporting you for attempted kidnapping!"

He started to continue, but froze as he felt two phasers at his back.

"Mr. Anderson, I would suggest you take your seat," JJ said from behind him.

Once he sat down, JJ and Gabe stepped back towards the wall and held their phasers at the ready.

Seeing things were under control and that Mr. Thornton was awake, Teri began. "The Safe Haven Act is a law that was passed by the Federation Council back in 2002 which protects children and youth from unsafe or abusive situations and abandonment. Tommy, Sammy, and Sebastian are all three recipients of that protection. As far as Sebastian's report, it bears more weight in a court of law than a signed confession. The twins are telepaths, and have been trained to Vulcan standards for collecting evidence. Since their accounts have been accepted by Patriarch Short, I have no choice but to honor his request. As of this time, I hereby take custody of Clinton and Crystal under the Safe Haven Act, article sixty-seven point six. From this point forward, you are to have no contact with either of them. Failure to heed this no contact order will result in prosecution under Federation law in a Federation court. You will remain here while Federation Security escorts both youths to retrieve their personal belongings. You will be given the chance to review same belongings before you depart; once you depart any claims to same belongings are null and void. Any attempt to bring theft charges against either youth will be considered contact and prosecuted as such; in addition civil courts will be given the option to charge you for filing of a false report. Do you understand and acknowledge these stipulations?

"Yes" All three adults replied in a beaten tone.

Tommy spoke for the first time. "I have acknowledgment. Case number Two-F-Seven-Dash-CPS-Four-Nine-Eight-DHQ is filed and former guardians acknowledgments are on record. Clint's case file is on your terminal, Mom."

Robin spoke up. "Teri, what is it going to take to get custody of them?"

Teri smiled. "Seeing as I have all of your information on file, you are halfway there. Kayla, you and Ian need to be in on the decision too."

\* \* \*

Teri, Robin, Kayla, Ian, Clint, and Crystal were sitting in the living room, winding down from the earlier excitement.

"I don't believe he tried to claim my underwear was his property!" Clint chuckled.

Teri laughed. "I know, he was getting pretty pathetic. The twins told me he was going to pull that before you even got back; I wish I had a picture of his face when they started listing off everything you left that was legally yours. Oh, the couple of things you forgot about that you did want have been taken care of, they're with the rest of your stuff. Transporters come in handy, we even got your teddy bear from when you were in the group home. I think your sons will love having something their Daddy used to cuddle with."

Kayla smiled at Clint's blush. "Don't be embarrassed; all kids have one of those. It might not be a bear, but they all have a special cuddle toy. Ian's still got his raccoon; and still uses it if he feels lonely."

"MOM!" Ian moaned.

Clint giggled. "Don't worry Ian; the only reason I didn't still use mine is it was hidden from me. Where was it?"

"In the basement" Teri replied. "Your old mom hid it from your old dad, he was going to burn it. Not to change the subject, but does anyone have any problems with Clint and Crystal moving in with y'all?"

Kayla was the only one to speak. "Is either one of you going to have a problem with Ian being gay? I'm sure someday he's going to have a boyfriend."

"No problemo!" Clint replied. "I've got a few gay friends, in fact some of them live here. It's no different having a gay little brother; I'll protect him either way."

"That goes for me too," Crystal replied. "As long as he don't mind me asking advice on fashion; I'm a klutz when it comes to picking out clothes!"

Ian giggled. "I can do that! Oh, Mom, I do have a boyfriend - Toby! He said YES!"

Ian suddenly found himself in the middle of a parent sandwich, as Robin and Kayla expressed their joy at his new-found happiness. Clint and Crystal looked at each other, then went over and joined the hug.

Teri waited for the congratulations to die down, then announced "I guess its official; y'all are now a family!"

\* \* \*

Tommy looked over his shoulder at Cory; he was standing behind Beau with his hands crossed over Beau's chest, trying to calm Beau's nerves.

"Hang in there Beau; we're gonna stay right here with you," Tommy said softly.

Cory smiled as he squeezed Beau. "You better believe it; no matter what happens we're here for you. You ready?"

"I guess so; are you sure they won't laugh or hate me?" Beau asked.

"I'm sure," Cory replied as he gave Tommy the nod to go ahead.

Tommy entered a command into the terminal in front of him. A couple of seconds later, Josh came on the screen. "Southcrest, how may I help you?"

"Hey Uncle Josh; are the twins available."

"Hey Tommy. Just a second, I'll see if I can catch them. They just dumped an ice tray down the front of Zac's pants; last I saw he was chasing them around the dining room table."

"Tell Zac I said pick on someone his own size!" Cory yelled.

"I'll be sure to tell him that," Josh chuckled as he turned away to get the twins. A minute

later, Jacob and Jamie appeared in front of the screen, grinning but out of breath. "This better be good, Tommy; we just about had Zac!"

Tommy grinned back. "I think you'll like this. Cory and I have someone here who wants to ask you guys a question. When he asks, trust me he's serious."

Cory moved Beau in front of the screen. "Go for it. You'll never know until you ask."

Beau blushed and said under his breath. "I can't. I'm scared."

Jamie and Jacob looked at each other and smiled. Jacob spoke for them. "We could find out Beau, but we think it's gotta be important for you to be scared. Remember, it's us; there's nothing you could say that will make us mad at you."

Beau gathered up what little resolve he could, and blurted it out. "I love you guys and wanna be your boyfriend!"

Cory watched the screen as Beau tried to pull himself tighter against Cory's chest, sure he was about to be rejected.

The twins stood there speechless, mouths hanging open in shock. Jamie found his voice finally and whispered just loud enough to be heard "Did you mean both of us?"

Beau nodded his head, then returned to looking at his feet.

Jacob recovered. "Beau, look at us, please!"

Beau looked up; he was shocked to see both boys looking back at him with smiles on their faces and tears running from their eyes. Once they were sure he was looking, they gave their answer in stereo. "You really DO understand us! We had been tryin' to figure out what to do if you asked one of us since we both like you; we never figured you'd ask us both. We know things are gonna be weird sometimes, but YES!!!!"

Beau got a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "For real? REALLY!"

\* \* \*

#### **Southcrest Ranch, Orlando:**

Jacob and Jamie's heads bobbed up and down like kids on pogo sticks. As Beau broke into a huge grin on the screen, Jamie turned his head and yelled "POP! DADDY! JUSTY! C'MERE!"

Justy was first into the room; as soon as he saw the trails of tears on their faces he ran over and put his arms around his foster brothers. "What's wrong bros? Who made you cry; I'll kill 'em."

By that time, Josh and Chip had joined the group. Cory figured he better help calm them down before things turned bad and came onto the screen. "Justy, put your fists away; those are tears of joy. You might wanna take a seat; your bro's have some good news."

Chip and Josh each put a hand on Justy's shoulders. "Settle down and hear them out, Munchkin."

Jacob and Jamie were not fazed by Justy's protective outburst. Both of them glowed with joy as they announced "Daddy, Pop, Justy; We got ourselves a boyfriend! Beau asked us and we said yes!!"

Chip and Josh looked at each other in shock. Justy broke free of his parents, knelt down, and looked his new brothers in the eyes. What he saw brought joy to his heart; the boys had a spark and life in their eyes he'd not seen since he first met them. Justy looked up at his parents and saw the doubt in their faces. "Daddy, Pop; it's right. Daddy, they've got the same light in their eyes you had when you came home from that New Year's Eve party after meeting Pop. I don't know

how they're gonna do it, but they're happier now." Justy turned to the screen. "Beau, thanks buddy. Welcome to the family! I know this is gonna be new to you and my little bros; if you need help or advice just give me a yell."

The twins looked up at their new parents. Chip took one glance at Justy and Josh, then smiled broadly. "Congratulations guys. It looks like you got the approval of the leading matchmaker in Florida. Seriously, you guys deserve to be happy; if you honestly are going to be happy having Beau as both of you's boyfriend we'll give you the chance."

Josh turned to the screen. "Beau, you just made two boys really happy. I'll tell you now, you are moving into territory I wouldn't even attempt to try. All three of you need to ask for help for this to work; once you get down here, I want to sit down with the three of you as soon as you get here."

\* \* \*

#### **Short Residence, Des Moines:**

Beau was all smiles. "This is for real, ain't it? The two cutest boys I've ever seen not only are my boyfriends, but their parents are happy about it! I was so scared y'all'd think I was weird 'cause I wanted to ask both of them; it's so kewl you want to help us! I hope Russ and Sara are this okay about it."

"Okay about what?" Russ asked as he walked into the room.

Beau was still riding the high of finding out he had Chip and Josh's support. "Jamie and Jacob said YES! They're my boyfriends now!"

Russ looked at the screen and saw the joyous faces of the twins, then looked at Beau and saw the same look in his eyes. "From the looks of the three of you, it doesn't matter what we think. Just for the record, I do wonder if you guys are old enough for a relationship; but I'm willing to support you if you're serious. Come here Beau; congratulations son."

\* \* \*

#### **Two Days Later:**

Sean slowly looked around the yard. The adults had announced at lunch that the houses in Orlando were ready. Now all of the kids were relaxing in groups in the back yard; most discussing how this house had changed their lives in such a short time. It was sobering listening to them; even though Sean knew each story and had told them himself countless times, hearing it from the person it happened to was different. What was really getting to Sean was their claims as to the help they had received from himself and Cory.

Cory joined his boyfriend. "Hey babe; whats up? You seem kinda out of it."

Sean wrapped an arm around Cory's waist. "I don't know, Cor. These guys are makin' you and me sound like some sorta miracle workers. We mighta helped them, but I'm not sure about all the stuff they're sayin'."

Cory pulled Sean with him and found a seat. Once Sean was safely on his lap, Cory began. "Teddy bear, they are totally right; but it really is all because of you. If you hadn't stood by me when I was down, none of these guys would be here today." Cory saw the stubbornness in Sean's look. "You don't believe me, do you? I can think of one thing which proves my point. When we saved Adam, he was convinced he was worthless. A couple of days ago, he did something that

I know he learned from you; he took charge and helped someone he barely knew. You're the reason that Clint and Crystal are going to be able to have a go at a life together. You might not have been there, but your big heart is contagious. That is one of the things I love the most about you.

Sean snuggled closer. "Thank's babe. I guess it's just too weird hearing people say I'm special; I just treat everyone like I wanna be treated. I guess Mom taught us good, didn't she?"

"Yep; but you learned better than me. I had to copy you and Mikey to figure out what to do."

The two boys cuddled for the next hour, then joined everyone as they joined in a group hug. As the hug was breaking up, Clint got everyones attention.

"Guys, I heard an old song yesterday. When I heard it, it hit me that it could be a theme song for all of you. Teri has a copy of it, come inside I want you to hear it.

Everyone followed Clint into the Rec Room. He played the song through, then looked at Cory. "What do ya' think, Cory?"

Cory smiled. "I think we need the lyrics real fast so you can play it again."

Sebastian giggled. "You're getting' slow Cory!" he announced as he brought the lyrics up on the big screen. "Play it again!"

The older boys who remembered the song took the leads as the rest kicked in on the chorus.

*This ain't a song for the broken-hearted  
A silent prayer for the faith-departed  
I ain't gonna be just a face in the crowd  
You're gonna hear my voice  
When I shout it out loud*

*Chorus:  
It's my life It's now or never  
I ain't gonna live forever  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
(It's my life)  
My heart is like an open highway  
Like Frankie said  
I did it my way  
I just wanna live while I'm alive  
It's my life*

*This is for the ones who stood their ground  
For Tommy and Gina  
who never backed down  
Tomorrow's getting harder  
make no mistake  
Luck ain't even lucky  
Got to make your own breaks*

*Chorus:  
It's my life*

*And it's now or never  
I ain't gonna live forever  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
(It's my life)  
My heart is like an open highway  
Like Frankie said  
I did it my way  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
'Cause it's my life*

*Better stand tall when they're calling you out  
Don't bend, don't break, baby, don't back down*

*Chorus:  
It's my life  
And it's now or never  
'Cause I ain't gonna live forever  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
(It's my life)  
My heart is like an open highway  
Like Frankie said  
I did it my way  
I just want to live while I'm alive*

*Chorus:  
It's my life  
And it's now or never  
'Cause I ain't gonna live forever  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
(It's my life)  
My heart is like an open highway  
Like Frankie said  
I did it my way  
I just want to live while I'm alive  
'Cause it's my life!*

*"It's My Life"*

*Available on the Bon Jovi Album "Crush"*

*©2000 Bon Jovi / The Island Def Jam Music Group*

The boys turned to the sounds of applause from the doorway. Dan spoke for the assembled audience. "Boys and Crystal, that song fits your lives to a tee. If that's the official song of Clan Short, I can't think of a more fitting one. Oh, you sounded awesome by the way!"

Russ chimed in. "When we get all set up in Orlando, I'm going to get the arrangements made so you can all record it. You really did sound good."

Sean got everyone's attention. "You know, that really does fit all of us; but it's not just because of Cory and I. Every one of y'all got here today by being stronger than the ones trying to

hurt you. Mom, Cory, and me mighta helped some, but y'all need to take credit for yourselves too. Together we might be hard to beat, but that's because of all of you."

Antonio smiled as he added "He's right, I've seen the changes in all of y'all since I got here, and they didn't do nuthin' to make you change; you did it yourself. Y'all are my family now, and I couldn't want a better one!"

The emotional charge of the room finally got to be too much, and all of the kids all huddled into another group hug. Once the hug broke, everyone separated into their respective families and began preparing the move to Orlando. The first group to leave was Russ, Sara, Robin, Kayla, and their new families. Matt and Helen rounded up their group next; they wanted to make sure the house was ready for Teri and her boys tomorrow. Andrew decided to go with Helen to give them a hand. Doc Austin rounded up his group and joined them, saying he wanted to get started setting up his new office.

Dan came in to the Rec Room and addressed the shrinking group. "Guys, I think its time to get our stuff from our old house. I want to do this as the family we've become. Teri, John, and I talked; we think each of our families deserve some one-on-one time without all of the craziness of the last couple of months. Enjoy the break guys. JJ, Kyle, Sammy, 'Bastian, let's head out."

Fifteen minutes later, Dan and John took their family in one of the limos to Dan's old house. Derek said his goodbyes, and Teri suddenly found herself with nobody but her sons and grandson sharing the house with her. She made the rounds of her boys, giving each a hug and kiss, then went to the kitchen to start supper. She was pleasantly surprised when Tommy and Tyler shyly followed her.

"Mommy, can we help?" Tyler asked with puppy dog eyes.

Teri pulled both boys into a hug. "I wouldn't miss that for the world guys."



## *Chapter 40*

Teri broke from her normal routine and decided to wake her personal collection of angels. The boys had decided that it would be only fitting to spend their last night in Des Moines in a nest in the Rec Room, watching movies until they all passed out.

She came to a stop as she entered the room; her boys presented a sight no artist could capture. Instead of the normal tangle of bodies, the boys had fell asleep in the perfect picture of brotherly love. They had piled pillows and quilts so that they were semi-reclining. Sean and Cory were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, heads laying against each other. Adam was cuddled under Sean's right arm, head on Sean's shoulder; Ty fell asleep wedged between Adam and Sean, head on Sean's lower chest. On the other side, Tommy had taken up the same position as Adam on Cory's left side. Timmy was half-laying on Cory, securely held in place by Tommy.

A familiar voice from behind Teri made her smile even more. "Awesome sight, ain't it Mom?"

Teri turned. "Yes it is, Mike. I'm not sure who needed the family-only time more, me or the boys. I hate to wake them; they look so peaceful. Look at their smiles, you can't tell they are anything but family."

Mike smiled back. "Mom, when you put your foot down about waiting to leave until they had some time alone, it was the best thing you could have done. All of them have been trying to look out for the other guys, they needed the break to finish bonding. I think we're gonna see a change in all of them today, a change for the better."

The conversation was interrupted by a sleepy little voice from the pile of boys. "Mornin' Gran'ma. Mornin' Unca' Mikey"

Teri turned to see her grandson wiggle out of the group, waking most of them in the process, and stumble over to give her a hug. "Good morning Timmy. Did you sleep good?" Teri asked as she picked him up.

"Yeah. I was missin' Ricky, but Unca' Tommy cuddled me and made it better," Timmy replied as he made himself comfortable on Teri's hip. He looked over Teri's shoulder and asked "Unca' Mikey, you gonna stay an' visit today?"

Mikey wrapped his wings around his mother and nephew. "I'm gonna try to, kiddo. If I do have to leave, I promise to come right back."

"Okay."

The rest of the boys wandered over and joined the family hug, sleepy smiles on all of their faces. As the hug broke, Mikey commented "Mom, I think it might be an idea to let the guys use your shower this morning."

Teri cast Mike a knowing look. "I agree; you guys go get cleaned up, I'll whip up some breakfast."

As the boys headed down the hall to get the shower, Adam noticed Cory had quiet tears running down his face, along with a small smile. "What's wrong, bro?" he asked with concern.

The group stopped as Cory replied. "Whenever Mikey thought I needed reassured that we were all brothers, he'd talk Mom into lettin' us use her shower and all three of us would shower together. Mom used to have some special liquid soap that smelled like strawberries just for that, and we'd all wash each other. I didn't remember about it 'till he said something, and I guess I kinda miss him doing that."

Adam handed his clothes to Tommy then hugged Cory. "Bro, maybe that's what Mikey's doing; we can still do it in his memory. We share a lot with the rest of the Clan; but this is just for our family. Will you please make me your little brother?"

Cory smiled as he felt all of the pressure of the last two months fall away. "Little brother, I think you're right. Let's go; it's time to make us all family."

They went into the room, and Cory went to the cabinet that Teri had always kept the body wash in for them. He opened the cabinet door, looked inside and exclaimed "Oh my God!"

The rest of the boys rushed over, and found Cory sitting on the floor holding a bottle with a dusty note on it. On the front of the note, it read "To Cory from Mom".

Cory carefully took the note off of the bottle, and slowly opened it. Once he had read it a few times, he passed it on to Sean with tears in his eyes. Sean took one look, and asked softly "Can I read it out loud, Cor?"

Cory just nodded, still unable to speak.

Sean re-opened the note and read it aloud:

Cory;

*Since you are reading this, it means I finally have my other son back. Mike always insisted on this certain soap for any time you or Sean felt down, and I guess one of you is in need of support again. Cory, since the day you moved in Mike considered you just as much his brother as Sean. He loved both of you equally, and told me more than once he'd rather die than see either of you hurt.*

*Today I placed the rest of Mike's belongings in his room and locked the door. I plan to do the same for your things tomorrow; tonight I'm going back to the hospital to be with you. Today you woke up; thank God you remembered Sean a little bit; he can live with you remembering your friendship. The doctors say you might not remember everything from when you woke up, so I'll fill you in a little. Sean and I were in the room the first time you woke up; you saw me first and asked "Ma'am? Where am I? What happened?". Sean was sitting in a chair on the other side of the bed; when he saw you didn't remember me he sobbed aloud. You turned over and saw him, then said the words I'll never forget. "You're ... Sean? You're my friend, ain't you?"*

*Cory, you saved Sean with those seven words. If it takes every penny I have, I'm going to get you well again. The bottle this note was on is a symbol of Mike's love for you, as you use it remember Mike is*

*here in spirit with you. I will not ever pack it or throw it away.*

*Love;  
Mom*

Tommy took the note from Sean's hands as Cory stood and fell into Sean's arms. He carefully folded it and laid it on the shelf, then joined Sean and Cory's hug. Adam, Tyler, and Timmy also joined, all of them crying silent tears to match Sean and Cory's tears.

After a few minutes, they broke the hug. Tommy picked up the note. "Timmy, take this to Grandma and have her put it someplace safe, okay?"

"Okay Unca' Tommy," Timmy replied as he took the note and walked out of the room.

Teri was just about ready to start cooking when Timmy walked into the kitchen. "Gran'ma, Unca' Tommy says to put this somewhere safe."

Teri took the note in wonder, looked down at it, then realized what it was. "Oh no! I forgot all about this! Are your Daddy and Pop okay, Timmy?"

"They cried some, but William says it was a good cry. William said to tell you they's okay."

Teri knelt down and gave Timmy a hug. "Tell William I said thank you. I'll put this away for your Daddy; now you better hurry up and get back up there before they start without you."

Timmy squeezed her then gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. "Okay Gran'ma, love you!"

Once Timmy returned, the boys undressed and climbed into the huge shower. Even with six of them, there was still a little room to move around. Not a word was said as they started with Cory, everyone slowly washing him from head to toe. Once Cory was done, they switched around and did the same to Sean, then Adam, Tommy, Tyler, and finally Timmy. Just as they finished drying off, Timmy climbed up on Sean and gave him a hug. "Pop, can you ask Gran'ma if we can stay here again tonight? I wanna sleep in our bed with just all my uncles one more time."

Sean looked around at the rest of the group, then replied. "I think you got a good idea, son. I'll see what I can do, okay?"

"Okay Pop. I love you."

"I love you too. Let's get dressed so we can eat, okay?"

"Okay," Timmy replied as he slid down Sean and grabbed his clothes.

Once they were all dressed, the boys headed down for breakfast. Once Timmy let William out for his morning hunt, they sat down. Teri came out pushing a cart stacked with waffles, sausage, and hash browns. "You guys ready to eat?" she asked.

"YEAH!" the boys chorused, trying not to drool.

As Teri started passing out the plates, Tommy looked around the table. "Mom? We got any peanut butter?" he asked.

Teri looked at him in surprise. "Yes, we do; why?"

Tommy giggled. "You mean y'all ain't had peanut butter on waffles? It's awesome!"

Teri went and got some peanut butter; she was surprised to see the rest of the boy's curiosity overcame their hunger as they watched Tommy carefully make sure each square had some peanut butter in it, then pour syrup over the top.

Timmy walked over to Tommy's seat. "Unca' Tommy, can I try a bite?"

Tommy grinned, and cut a small piece off for Timmy to try. Timmy slowly put it in his mouth, ready to spit it out. Once he tasted it, he broke into a huge grin. "Awesome! Unca' Tommy,

fix mine like that!"

Teri shook her head as half of Tommy's first waffle disappeared with the rest of the boys trying it. As she saw how the voting was going, she got up and grabbed another jar of peanut butter, sure that it would be needed.

As they finished off the pile of food, Sean got Teri's attention. "Mom, could we stay here one more night? We kinda need some more time together."

Teri looked around the table at her boys, half of which had peanut butter mustaches. She noticed something different; the new bond between them was almost visible. "I'll call everyone and let them know. I think you guys have earned it."

\* \* \*

The boys were waiting for Sean in the Rec Room. He told them he had to get something special, then went upstairs. He entered the room carrying a yellow bag, holding it like it was fine china. He carefully sat the bag down, then looked at Cory. "Cory, I promised myself that this bag wouldn't be opened until the day that you could do it. Is today the day?"

Cory looked at Sean, then over at Mikey, who was floating about six inches above the love seat. "Yeah, but I have to say something first. Everyone gather around here, you too Mikey."

Once they were all in place, Cory gathered up his courage and spoke. "Most of you guys don't know what's in this bag, or what it means to Sean and I. I probably couldn't open it if Mikey wasn't here; that drunk killed him when he was coming to pick us up after we bought it. It hurts some to look at that bag; even though Mikey has told me a thousand times that it was his time to go, I still blame myself a little for talking him into taking us to the mall. Sean and I have been talking about getting this out for the last couple of weeks, but I never could go through with it." Cory reached into the bag and pulled out a small white bag. With tears in his eyes, he handed the contents of the bag to Mike. "Mikey, we bought that game for you. I can't play it now; not without you here to play it with me."

Mikey motioned for Cory to sit on his lap, then embraced his little brother with both his arms and his wings. As Cory buried his face in Mike's shoulder and began sobbing, Mike spoke softly. "Cory, I love you little brother. Thank you. I know it still hurts, that's because you love me too. Let it all out, Tigger; you can still love me without the hurt. Listen to your heart, it knows I didn't leave you, I just changed so I can watch my little Tigger no matter where you go or what you do."

Hearing Mikey call him Tigger had the desired effect on Cory; he cuddled in tightly to Mikey, put his thumb in his mouth, and fell asleep. When Cory was young, Mikey had given him the nickname because of the way he always bounced around. As Cory got older, it became an unspoken rule that only Mikey could use the nickname; even then it was saved for special occasions when Cory needed extra support. Sean explained that to the rest of the boys while Cory slept, and warned them that it was best not to use it. Sean had seen one of their cousins try it once before Mike died, and Cory had went off like a rocket. Now, there was a good chance Cory would try to kill anyone who called him by the nickname reserved for Mikey to use.

When Cory awoke twenty minutes later, he followed the same pattern he always did after Mikey helped him get through a meltdown.

Cory looked up at Mikey's face and asked in a sincere, small, childlike voice "Does Tigger's big angel still love him?"

Mikey noticed the slight change in the normal procedure - instead of 'big brother' Cory said 'big angel'. "Tigger's big angel is always gonna love him forever," Mikey replied as he kissed

Cory's forehead.

"I love you Mikey," Cory murmured in a more normal voice.

"I love you too Tigger. You know, I've been waiting over a year to see what you guys got; why don't you show me then we'll see if angels can play video games?"

Cory gave Mikey a small smile. "Okay, what are we gonna play?"

Mikey picked up the game Cory had gave him earlier. "I have this game from the most important people in my afterlife I want to try out."

Cory turned and kissed Mikey's cheek. "Thanks bro, I'm sorry for being such a baby."

Mikey looked Cory straight in the eyes. "You are not being a baby, you're being the little Tigger that I've always loved. No matter how old you are, I'll always be here for you if you need to let out your emotions. You've had a rough year, Cory; you needed to let it out. Do you think you are ready to move on with your life, knowing that I'm right here with you even when you can't see me?"

Cory nodded. "I am now; I'm glad Mom set it up so we would be alone today."

Mikey gave Cory a squeeze, then set him loose to open the bag. Cory brought out the X-Box and games they had bought in the mall, and began setting it up with Sean's help. A few minutes later, it was ready to go, and Sean turned to Mikey.

"Mikey, who do you want to lose to first?" Sean goaded with a grin, secretly glad things were working out the way Cory and him had planned in the mall while eating.

Everyone knew it was no contest; when Mikey answered 'Cory' they all smiled. Each of them realized that Cory was the only choice, he needed the final closure of actually playing the game with Mikey to really move on.

Teri looked in the doorway about ten minutes later. Tears of joy came to her eyes at the sight before her. She recognized the NASCAR racing game on the screen as one that Mikey and Cory used to spend hours on with their PS/2. She knew the game was securely locked in her safe for Cory's emotional well-being, so it only meant one thing; the X-Box that they had been putting off getting out was finally being put to use. The part that brought back the most memories was who the players were; Mikey and Cory. Sean was joined by Timmy in his normal position cheering Cory on, while Adam and Ty took up position as Mikey's cheering section. As she turned away, the joyous yell from Cory as he beat Mikey out of the pit made her smile.

\* \* \*

The boys played again for about three hours after lunch, then Teri interrupted them. "Guys, I hate to say it, but we need to run out and get some more food if we're going to stay another day. If you want to come with me, I'll let each of you pick out a game to play on the X-Box. And yes, Mike, you can pick one out too."

Sean, who was getting thoroughly trounced by Tyler, saved their game. "Sure Mom!"

Mike smiled. "I'll pick out a game on one condition; Cory has to teach the rest of our brothers how to play."

Cory grinned, already knowing what Mikey's choice would be. "You're on, bro. The one I gave you is just for when you are here though, okay?"

Mikey smiled, he now knew Cory would be okay. "It's a deal. You want me to drive, Mom?"

Teri grinned when Cory replied "No way dude! Your license expired when you did!"

When the laughter subsided, Mikey put his arm over Cory's shoulder. "Now that's my little Tigger! Good one, Cory!"

Cory grinned at Mikey. "Thanks bro!"

A few minutes later, they loaded up into Teri's Suburban for the trip. Mikey went invisible and tagged along in the front seat, enjoying the one-on-one time with his charges as much as they were enjoying having him around. As the boys discussed the various wrecks and goofs as they each played the game, Teri drove to the Wal-Mart Supercenter on 73rd street. After she parked, the boys piled out, anxious to get inside and out of the unseasonably hot weather.

After picking up everything they would need for another day in Des Moines, they left the store. They were about halfway to the Suburban when William suddenly launched from Timmy's shoulder and flew off to a far corner of the parking lot. About thirty seconds later, Timmy screeched and went into his war paint. Cory and Sean instantly reached under the loose tee-shirts they had put on and pulled their phasers, then they all followed Timmy to where William was circling a car parked in the corner. Teri hurried to the Suburban and tossed their purchases in the back, then drove over to where William was circling.

As they reached the car, it took less than a second for the boys to assess the situation and jump into action. Sean started trying doors, finding them all locked on the running vehicle. Adam did a flying kick which shattered the drivers window, then reached in and shut off the car. While all of that was happening, Cory got out his communicator, silently thanking God that the *Enterprise* was in orbit.

"*Enterprise* this is Ensign Short. I have Priority One traffic!"

The reply was immediate. "Ensign Short, this is *Enterprise*. Uhura here. Proceed with Priority One traffic."

"*Enterprise*, I need a Med Team Code Red to my coordinates. Tell them to bring anything they can carry. Subject appears to be an eleven year old male. Have Transporter standing by for pickup."

"Acknowledged Ensign. Med team enroute and transporter standing by. *Enterprise* standing by."

Cory dodged the seatback from the Lumina Euro that Sean had just cut off then thrown out, and went in to further assess the situation. He almost gagged at what he saw; chained into the back seat was a boy of about eleven, beaten to within an inch of his life. The boy was totally nude, and was still bleeding from what appeared to be a partial castration. He helped Sean cut the chains with his phaser, then gently helped lift the sweat-covered boy out. As they were lifting him out of the car, Cory noticed the heater controls were set for maximum heat, even though it was almost ninety degrees outside. He had heard the blower motor running when they came up, so it was obvious what was happening.

Just as they were laying the boy out on the makeshift cot formed by the removed seatbacks, McCoy beamed down with his team. He took one look at the boy then began stopping the bleeding. "Ensign Cory, call the ship and tell them to be ready to scramble some molecules ASAP!"

"Already done, Doc. They're standing by."

"Good. Where's the bastard that did this?"

Cory looked over his shoulder at the Windsor Heights police cruisers pulling in. Obviously the Wal-Mart security force actually watched the cameras in the parking lot. "I don't know yet, but I'll bet these guys pulling in will find out."

Cory watched as the cruisers emptied with guns drawn. As soon as the officers realized Starfleet Medical was on site, they put the guns away. Cory got out his ID and walked over to the nearest officer. Figuring this was no time to play games, he pulled rank the best way possible. The wallet was open to show both his Starfleet and Vulcan identification cards when he handed it to

the officer, he figured the Vulcan one would get things done the fastest. "Captain, I am Patriarch Short of Clan Short of Vulcan. An attempted murder has occurred. There is a high probability it was committed by the registered owner of this vehicle. May I presume your assistance in the apprehension of the individual who committed this crime?"

Tyler came up at the end of Cory's speech. When he heard how Cory was talking, he decided to follow suit. "Sir, the victim has stated to Doctor McCoy that the assault was performed by his biological mother. His condition is weak, but he positively identified the vehicle as hers."

"Acknowledged Tyler. Inform Director Short that I am claiming jurisdiction over the victim for his protection."

"As you wish, Sir," Tyler replied, then turned and headed for Teri.

Cory turned back towards the Captain. "I revise my earlier statements. Director Short of Federation Child Services witnessed the conditions of the attempted murder. I believe she will be able to arrange any assistance you will require to apprehend this criminal."

The Captain finally found his voice. He had heard the rumors going around the local police forces about Clan Short and Youth Services, but had never expected to actually be dealing with them. "Mr. Short, I assure you that we will do everything in our power to find the person who attempted this. May I ask who is the victim and how bad?"

"Earth male, approximate age of eleven years. He appears beaten over seventy percent of his body, is bleeding from a partial attempt at castration, and is suffering heat exhaustion from being locked and chained in a car with the heater running at maximum intensity."

As Cory went down the list, you could see the blood rising up the Captain's neck. When Cory finished, the Captain replied. "Thank you Mr. Short. Please contact me when you are able to get the victim's name, right now we've got a monster to catch." He turned and started barking orders to his men, then headed over to work with Teri on speeding up catching the mother.

Cory returned to the area where Doctor McCoy was working on the boy. "How is he Doc?"

McCoy didn't even look up. "Just about stable enough to transport. I expect a full report ASAP."

Cory smiled, knowing that McCoy's 'just about stable enough' meant the boy was going to make it. "No problem Doc; we're gonna come up with him. I just claimed jurisdiction; he's mine until I decide otherwise."

Just as McCoy was about to reply, the boy spoke in a soft voice. "Look, an Angel! Am I dead?"

Cory glanced up and smiled; Mikey was hovering over them. "No little buddy, you ain't dead. That's your Guardian Angel, Saint Mikey. He's here to make sure nobody hurts you ever again."

"Kewl!" the boy exclaimed softly before drifting back to sleep.

Cory looked back up at Mikey. "You gonna come up too, bro? Please?"

"I'll be there, Cory."

\* \* \*

**Sickbay, USS *Enterprise*, forty-five minutes later:**

Cory finally finished his reports, and joined McCoy at the bedside of their newest addition. "What do you think, Doc? He gonna be okay?"

McCoy looked over at Cory. "It matters what you mean by okay. Whatever that witch

used to try to castrate him was contaminated; I was only able to save one testicle, the other was already infected and beyond help. No matter what I do, he's going to have some scars, there's too much damage to the skin. He's going to be sensitive to temperatures for the rest of his life, on top of the emotional trauma of what was done to him. He's going to survive, but it'll be a damn miracle if he's ever okay again."

Cory reached down and gently brushed the boy's fine auburn hair out of his eyes, then softly replied "Do what you can, Doc; we'll take care of the rest."

As Cory watched, he saw the boy's hazel eyes flutter slightly and begin to open. Cory motioned for Tyler to join them, then gently took the boy's hand in his.

Tyler saw McCoy's questioning look, and answered the question before it was asked. "Doc, remember I'm an Empath. He's one of us now, that means he gets all the help we can give him."

McCoy allowed himself a rare smile as he thought: *'If anyone can save this kid's sanity, they are here in this room. Welcome to your new life kid.'* He stepped back to where he could monitor the Med Bed, and let the boys get to work.

The boy focused on Cory after some effort. In a slightly weak voice, he asked "Where am I?"

Cory smiled. "Hey little buddy. You're on the starship *Enterprise*, and just had the best doctor in the Federation fix you up. I'm Cory; how do you feel?"

"I kinda hurt; not as bad as I did, but I still hurt. You were in my dream; I thought I saw an angel and you were there too."

"That wasn't a dream, buddy. That was your new guardian angel watching over you. You're safe now, I promise nobody's gonna hurt you again. Can you tell me your name?"

"You promise not to make me go back if I tell you?"

Cory leaned over and kissed the boy's forehead. "I promise, little guy. The only place you're going when you leave here is to your new home with me."

The boy looked at Cory with suspicion. "You can't promise that; your just a kid like me. You ain't gonna be able to talk your parents into letting me stay; I'll end up on the streets like my little brother."

McCoy stepped up to assist Cory. "Young man, Cory is probably THE most powerful fourteen year old in the Federation. If he decides it's needed, he can have your mother executed for what she did to you with just a nod of his head. Right now, every law-enforcement agent in the United States is searching for your mother, on his orders. If he promises you something, you can bank on it. Do I make myself clear?"

The boy was looking wide-eyed at Cory as he answered McCoy. "Yes, SIR!" After a pause, he shyly replied to Cory. "Cory, my name is Calen Michael Slate. I'm sorry about being such a brat, but I guess that's all I'll ever be."

Cory smiled. "Calen, you were not being a brat; you were trying to protect yourself. You were doing nothing wrong. Now what was this about a little brother? Fill me in, I'll bet you we can find him too."

Calen smiled at the praise. "He ran away about a week ago, his name is Cabe Dyson Slate, he's gonna turn nine tomorrow." Tears ran from his eyes as he continued. "I'm gonna miss his birthday; but he had to run away so Mom would stop hurting him. She said he was a freak, he can watch someone play an instrument once then he can do it. I wish CD was here!"

Cory took Calen's hand. "What does he look like?"

"Mom used to say he looks just like me; we got the same eyes and everything."

Cory turned his head. "Doctor, with your permission I would like to have my personnel



utilize your resources to locate the missing youth."

McCoy looked Cory straight in the eye. "What are you waiting for, Christmas? You're as bad as Spock; get to it man."

Cory smiled as he looked around the room and began shouting directions. "Okay guys; search and rescue - you have twelve hours! Subject is Cabe Dyson Slate, nicknamed CD. He's eight about to turn nine; look for both ages. Probably malnourished like his brother. Auburn hair, hazel eyes. Tommy - take the law enforcement agencies. Adam - you have the youth shelters; state and private. Sean - courts and newspapers. Timmy and William - work with Orlando, have them cover surrounding states. Move it gentlemen - we have a birthday boy to save!"

McCoy was pleasantly shocked as he watched the Clan step into high gear. When Cory wasn't looking, he slid over to the com unit. "Sickbay to Bridge."

Kirk came on. "Kirk here. Is there a problem Bones?"

"No, but I think you need to see this, Jim."

"On my way. Kirk out."

Kirk smiled when he walked in and found Cory sitting in a chair with a freshly-dressed Calen on his lap. McCoy pulled him off to the side. "Jim, the boy, Calen, has a little brother who ran away a week ago. You've said you wanted to see Clan Short in action; turn around and hold on tight to something."

Just as Kirk turned to look, Timmy called out "Indiana and Nebraska are clear!". A few seconds later, Tommy chimed in "No police reports filed; Polk County Law Enforcement clear!" followed by Adam adding "Polk and Warren County youth shelters clear!"

As Kirk watched the boys working like a well-oiled military machine, McCoy explained. "Cory gave them twelve hours to find the boy; Timmy is interfacing with Orlando, the rest are assigned the most likely ways of locating him in-state. They've already cleared the upper half of Iowa, and all of the states immediately bordering it have been cleared by the Orlando crew."

Kirk shook his head in wonder. "And what is Cory's part in this?"

McCoy smiled. "If I read his eyes right, he's comforting a boy who is about to become his son. At the very least, Teri is going to get two more sons if Cory don't claim them himself."

Just then, Adam yelled out. "Got him! Oskaloosa; private shelter!"

"Get me coordinates!" Sean barked.

Kirk rushed to the com unit. "Bridge, this is the Captain. Have Lieutenant Thompson assemble a security detail in transporter room one ASAP. Stand by for landing party."

"Acknowledged Captain."

Cory stood and brought Calen over to Kirk. "Captain, I'd like you to meet Calen. Would it be possible, with the Doctor's permission of course, for you to arrange a tour for him while Sean and I handle some Clan business?"

Kirk smiled. "Bones, I do believe this young man could stand to see some of the sights in the ship; things like our hot fudge sundaes and the famous *Enterprise* pizza. Don't you agree?"

"You just better make sure he doesn't over exert himself Jim."

Kirk turned back to Cory. "I'll handle this personally. Cory, I assume you want him to get the 'crew's dependents' tour?"

Cory blushed. "As much as I'd like that, I don't think even I could pull it off."

Kirk turned his head. "Ensign Sean Short, front and center!"

Sean rushed over and stood next to Cory. Kirk looked both of them over, then started. "Sean, has Cory discussed with you his feelings about your newest charges?"

"Yes sir; and I agree with him. But we really have very little chance of doing it."

Kirk grinned as he took Calen from Cory. "You two go get Calen's brother while I show

him where his new parents work. That's an order."

Timmy came running from the other side of the room. "Unca' Jim; can William and me go with you and Calen? I can show him the kewl stuff Justy showed me! This is kewl; I'm getting' more brothers!"

Cory stared at William, who had landed on Kirk's shoulder opposite of an awestruck Calen.

"You know, for a little bird you got a big mouth!" Cory mumbled just loud enough to hear.

William turned around and shook his tail feathers at Cory, which caused everyone to laugh. Kirk managed to squeeze out between chuckles "Come on Timmy, let's start the tour."

As Kirk left to start the tour with Timmy and Calen, Sean and Cory led their brothers to the transporter room to begin the rescue mission.

\* \* \*

### **Oskaloosa, IA:**

The group beamed into a field near the group shelter. Adam stopped them before they headed to the building. "Hold on guys, I have some background Calen didn't need to hear."

Everyone stopped and turned to Adam. "What've you got?" Cory asked.

"As I was searching the directory for Oskaloosa, I noticed this one did not show the occupant turnover the rest did; in fact the same names were on their resident list for the last two years. On a hunch I did a DNA scan of the building, trying to match to Calen's DNA. The computer came up with a match inside; 97% probability of being related. I've got a feeling this is not what it's supposed to be."

Tyler held up his hand for silence before anyone could reply. About thirty seconds later, he spoke. "I count fifteen kids in there. All of them feel like they're scared and trapped. I can feel their hunger too; not like when we are hungry, but like Jamie and Jacob were when we found them."

Cory had heard enough. "Thanks Ty and Adam. Mr. Thompson, deploy your men to cover all exits. Nobody leaves the building. Call the ship and have Doc standing by in the transporter room; tell him I'll have fifteen boys to be checked out. I'll need Briefing Room One for debriefing the boys once he's done."

Cory then turned to Adam. "Hey bro; have you been taking the weapons training with JJ?"

Adam grinned. "You better believe it. I gotta be able to cover my boyfriend's back."

Cory grinned back. "You're definitely my brother! Did John issue you a phaser yet?"

"No. He said he couldn't unless you told him to. Things have been too nuts for me to ask you. JJ tried to tell him it was okay, but he said you had to make the call."

Cory frowned. "I gotta fix that; JJ is head of security and a commissioned officer, it's his call. Mr. Thompson, do you have a spare phaser with you?"

"As a matter of fact I do; I was not sure if you and Sean grabbed yours, so I brought some extras with me." He pulled a phaser out of the pack on his waist. "Here you go, Adam. I just heard Cory say you were to have one, so that one is yours. I'll get a replacement from Commander Martin."

"Thanks Mr. Thompson," Adam said as he took the weapon, turned so it was pointed in a safe direction, and verified the power level and settings. Once he was sure the phaser was set

properly and safe, he clipped it on his belt and turned back to Cory. "Okay, Cor; I'm ready when you are."

Before they headed to the house, Sean added his own thoughts. "Guys, of all of the kids we've helped, this is the first time we are going in as just family. Calen and CD are proof that us brothers are able to handle things without a huge support group. Captain Kirk is going to make them Cory and I's sons, but I'll always know that we wouldn't have them without the help of our three brothers and our youngest son. I know it might not have seemed like it with all of the other guys around, but you guys really do mean more to us than anyone else. You are our brothers, and we are proud of it."

Lt. Thompson smiled as he watched the brothers embrace in a five-way hug. As the hug broke, Cory announced "Okay bros! Let's go show these punks that nobody messes with a kid when the Short family is around!" The boys all high-fived, then turned to the house in the distance and walked purposely towards it.

As they approached the house, Cory noticed the barred windows and excessive locks on the door. "Mr. Thompson, I don't think we are going to bother with the doorbell. All personnel set phasers to stun and have them at the ready, we're going in hot."

Thompson nodded. "I agree Cory, I can smell the fear here. Hold on for a second." He reached into his bag and pulled out two more phasers, then handed them to Tyler and Tommy. "I've seen both of you at the practice range; you might not be certified yet, but I think you can handle these well enough if needed."

They walked up to the door and Thompson smiled. He held up three fingers, got in position, then counted down. When he reached zero, he gave the door a swift kick. The door flew open, the wood frame no match for Thompson's training.

Cory was first through the door. He spotted a man reaching under the kitchen counter and yelled out "Starfleet Security - this is a raid! You in the kitchen; hands where I can see them! Walk VERY slowly in here and lay face down on the floor!" Cory glanced around and verified what he first saw; all of the boys visible in the room were wearing nothing but loose boxers; no socks or anything else. From the bruises he saw, some had very recently been manhandled by an adult. "Adam, Tommy - clear the house; I want everyone in this room! Tyler, guard this man; if he so much as twitches I expect you to fire."

Adam and Tommy took off through the house, and Tyler moved into a safe position to guard the prisoner. Thompson leaned over to Cory. "Why did you announce Starfleet Security instead of Clan Short?"

Cory replied with an evil grin. "I've got quick eyes Lieutenant; if my first impressions are correct, there's a good chance I'm going to say or do some very un-Vulcan things. Just roll with it, this is one of the times human responses are more logical."

Thompson chuckled. "I want to be a fly on the wall when you debate that one with Mr. Spock! You're in command, follow your instincts."

A few more boys came down the hall and joined their house mates on the floor in the main room. Cory noticed the terror on their faces. "Hey guys, relax! We ain't here to hurt you, we came to help you. Once everyone's out here, I'll explain what's going to happen next; if you want to watch some TV while you are waiting go ahead. Just keep the volume down so we can hear if anyone needs help, okay?"

Just then, Tyler yelled at his prisoner. "Don't move, dirt bag!"

Cory grinned. "Guys, don't mind my little brother; he's watched too many Police Academy reruns! The only one here who needs to worry is the guy laying on the floor; that's a real phaser and Ty knows how to use it!"

The boys relaxed and giggled at Cory's humor. One of them reached over and turned on the TV, then flipped to the Cartoon Network. "This is kewl; we never get to pick what we can watch!" he exclaimed. One of the younger kids, who had fresh bruises on his face, came up to Cory. "Sir? Phil's not the real bad guy. He tries to make us feel better when we hurt. Can he watch 'toons with us?"

Cory saw the sincere look on the boy's face. "Mr. Thompson, secure Phil's arms and legs, then sit him up against the couch."

Cory smiled as the boy who asked him to give Phil a break grabbed one of his buddies and pulled the cushions off of the couch to make a comfortable seat for Phil. Once Phil was comfortably seated, Cory leaned over and whispered so that only Phil could hear. "Dude, you still have a lot to answer for. That boy there just got you out of life in prison, at the very least. You are going to be interrogated by a Starfleet officer I know quite well. Take my advice; tell him everything that you have seen or done here. If you fondled a boy, tell him; if you sat up all night cuddling and calming a boy who was just violated, tell him. Right now, I'm here as Starfleet security; when it comes time to decide your fate I will be presiding in my higher office as Patriarch of Clan Short of Vulcan. My intelligence team will be verifying if you told the truth; considering most of them are telepaths I won't have any doubt. We will talk again, the next time you will be given a chance to explain yourself."

Cory stood up, straightened his clothes, then came to attention. "Mr. Thompson, I require your assistance."

Thompson turned from looking out the doorway and hurried over to where Cory stood; the formal tone Cory had used told him this was suddenly Clan business. "How may I be of assistance, Patriarch Short?"

"My observations have led me to conclude that another being is responsible for the majority of the suffering of the assembled youths here. Based on that observation, once Commander Dodds concludes his interview with this subject I must require that he reports his findings to myself before any action is taken. Based on the findings of his investigation and the interviews that Clan Short will perform with the victims, I will then declare the logical deposition of the subject."

Thompson nodded. "I assure you the appropriate people will be notified, Sir."

Cory relaxed and looked around at the confused faces of the boys in the room. "Guys, you just saw me handle stuff in my official capacity. Not only can I tell the FBI to take a flying leap; I've done it. Whatever has been done to you here is over; it's time to be kids again."

Just then, they heard Adam yell from down the hall. "Stay clear of the door!" A few seconds later, a loud crash signified that another door had been sacrificed to the cause of children's safety. About four minutes later, Adam and Tommy reappeared, Adam carrying a boy appearing to be about six. "This floor is clear, Cory; we didn't see any attic access or basement doors in the hall."

Cory smiled as he realized the boy on Adam's side was latched on securely and not letting go. "If you need help explaining your new son to JJ let me know bro. What's his name?"

Adam smiled as he caressed the little blond's head. "Harley Jared Donaldson. His parents were killed in an accident; he got sent here when none of his relatives wanted him. Funny thing is, he's not on the list of kids supposed to be here."

Cory's smile turned to a grin. "Well bro, why don't you, Harley, and Tommy stay here with Sean and Ty while Mr. Thompson and I find the basement. We're still one kid short up here; the kid who is responsible for all of these boys being saved, I hope."

Cory nodded towards the kitchen, and followed Lieutenant Thompson as he worked his

way back as silently as possible. Just as Cory had figured, there was a doorway around the corner at the back of the kitchen. They opened the door and carefully slipped down the stairs. The main basement area was clear, but there was a partition at the south end with a dead-bolted door on it. Thompson looked over the design and whispered to Cory. "They have a strong door there, but I think the walls might be weak. Your choice."

Cory looked it over, then whispered back. "Too much chance of hurting someone if they are by the walls; burn off the deadbolt pin then we'll go in through the door - it opens out, so nobody can be hurt."

Thompson nodded, adjusted his phaser, and set to work on the deadbolt. Cory had his phaser out, ready to fire if need be. After about thirty seconds, Thompson stepped back. "It's weak enough we can grab the door and break it; I'm ready when you are."

Cory moved into position at the side of the door, listened for a few seconds, and then nodded that he was ready. As soon as Lieutenant Thompson yanked it open, Cory dove through the doorway. As he entered the room, he saw a man trying to force a boy to perform a blow-job. Reflex kicked in; before Cory even thought about it he fired his phaser and dropped the man where he stood. Cory took a quick look around the room; nobody else was in there. "Clear!" he called out.

As Thompson entered the room; Cory went over to the boy, who was now curled into a ball sobbing loudly. Once Cory got a better look he knew instantly they had found who they were looking for. "CD, I'm Cory; relax little one, we came to rescue you."

CD looked up in shock. "I ain't told nobody to call me that! How'd you know my nickname?"

Cory knelt down and rubbed his shoulders. "Your big brother is worried about you. Your old mom tried to hurt him, and we found him. I promised him I'd make sure you guys were together to celebrate your birthday tomorrow. Hop on, I'll give you a ride upstairs."

As CD uncurled himself and started to climb onto Cory's back, Cory notice Lieutenant Thompson checking the man for a pulse. Cory gave a knowing grin as he commented "Mr. Thompson, I keep forgetting to have you look at my phaser. It seems the power adjustment keeps slipping without me noticing."

Thompson looked up and returned with a knowing grin. "I'll make sure this man's death is logged as a weapon malfunction. When we get back to the ship, remind me to get you a new one. I'll take care of the defect paperwork."

Thompson turned red with anger as CD announced "That's what he gets for tryin' to make me suck him! He was goin' to try to put his thingie in my butt."

Thompson pointed to Cory's phaser then held out his hand, unable to speak. Once Cory handed him the weapon, he fiddled with it for a second then fired it at the body on the floor. Cory and CD watched as the lifeless body turned into a scattering of ashes. Thompson took his phaser off his belt and handed it to Cory. "Yours was definitely defective. Too bad the poor guy was attacking a Clan member, he might have had a chance otherwise. Take mine, I'll have to destroy this one; it's not safe."

Cory saw the confused look on CD's face. "He was attacking you, kiddo. Both you and your big brother are under the protection of Clan Short of Vulcan. I'll explain more later; but for now just remember nobody will ever try to force you to do that again."

A huge grin spread across CD's face as he realized what Cory was saying and what had really happened. "Thanks Cory, you're awesome!"

The three of them headed back upstairs to rejoin the rest of the group. Once they were all together, Cory looked around. "Mr. Thompson, have your team escort this man to the brig; after I

brief Commander Dodds on the situation here, I'm sure he'll want to have a long talk with him."

Once the team, to the delight of the kids in the home, beamed up with their prisoner, Cory asked Sean to fill in the boys on what was about to happen.

Sean got all of their attention, then began. "Okay guys, you are about to go visit the USS *Enterprise*. Once we get up there, Doctor McCoy is going to check each one of you out to make sure you are okay. After that, we'll sit down with you and see if you have a safe home to go to; if not we will put you someplace safe. You guys told me that you have no clothes here; don't worry about it, we will get you some on board the ship. We're gonna talk to y'all all at once so you know there's no funny stuff going on. Right now, CD and Harley have new families they are going to; so they will just be watching as the rest of you get helped out. Mr. Thompson is going to arrange you guys to beam up, stay where he tells you to and stand still. Any questions?"

The oldest boy there, who looked to be twelve, raised his hand. "Are we gonna get to have a tour of the *Enterprise*?"

Lieutenant Thompson answered for Sean. "You better believe it; I'm going to take you myself. You guys deserve it."

It took a few minutes for the boys to be put in their places, then Cory opened his communicator. The boys all were shocked when they heard his next words.

"*Enterprise* this is Ensign Cory Short."

"*Enterprise*, Uhura here. Go ahead Ensign Cory."

"Thanks Nyota. Is Scotty standing by in the lower Transporter Room?"

"Affirmative, Cory. One second, I'll put you through."

A few seconds later, a new voice came on line. "Scotty here. Would our wee guests be ready to come aboard laddie?"

Cory grinned. "That they would, Scotty. We have two groups; Sean is escorting a group of ten, let me know when you are locked in."

"I be ready now Cory. Countin' Sean I have eleven lads showin' on my screen."

"That's affirmative Scotty; energize!"

The first group dematerialized. About a minute later, Scotty came back on.

"I be lookin' at ten excited young lads waitin' here with young Sean. Are their friends ready to be a joinin' them?"

"Affirmative Scotty; ten to beam up. Energize!"

\* \* \*

### **Transporter Room Seven, USS *Enterprise*:**

Once everyone else had cleared out of the transporter room, Thompson approached Scotty. "Commander Scott; this is Ensign Cory's phaser. I believe you found that it was unstable and required immediate destruction."

Scotty looked up in surprise; Thompson was the last person he expected to request the falsification of a report. When he met the Lieutenant's eyes, a chill went down his spine; the cold fury in them was so out of character that Scotty knew something bad had went down. "Aye, Lieutenant; I believe I did. Be in Briefing Room One in five minutes for debriefing; I'll be makin' sure the Captain is present."

"Yes, Sir," Thompson replied, then headed through the door.

Once the door was closed, Scotty set the self-destruct timer on the phaser then transported it into empty space. Once that was done, he called the bridge. "Bridge, this is Commander Scott."

Might the Captain be where I kinna have a word with him?"

Kirk answered immediately. "Is there a problem with the boys, Mr. Scot?"

"The laddies be fine, Captain. With all due respect Sir, I be thinkin' that yourself and Mr. Dodds might be needed in Briefing Room One. I'm a thinkin' Lieutenant Thompson's debriefing will be needin' sealed."

"Your instincts have not failed me yet, Scotty. We'll see you there. Kirk out."

\* \* \*

**Sickbay:**

Cory looked up from watching Calen and CD explore William's feathers to see Kirk walk into Sickbay. As soon as the Captain spotted him, he motioned for Cory to join him in the passageway. Cory told the boys where he was going, then joined Kirk.

Once the door closed behind them, Cory asked "Is something wrong, Sir?"

"Yes and no, Ensign. For the first time since he came aboard, I just had to seal a report from Lieutenant Thompson. You were in command of the mission, and overall I believe you performed flawlessly. If I have a choice, I'll take an officer who thinks on his feet and adapts to the situation any day over one that is strictly by the book. On the other hand, I will not condone one of my command officers bending or breaking the rules just to satisfy a personal vendetta. Mr. Spock saw the logic in your actions in the basement; I still need to be convinced as to why I should file an official report which differs from what actually happened. I want the truth, Mr. Short, and you have five minutes to do it."

Cory began describing his thoughts at the time. "Sir, I had indications that there was at least one serial rapist on the premises before entering the basement. Most of the younger boys have various stages of bruising on their faces consistent with forced oral sex. On the basis of their interaction with the prisoner upstairs, I concluded he was most likely not the one doing it. One of the boys basically told me as much; in fact quite a few of them interacted quite well with him. While Mr. Thompson was cutting the deadbolt downstairs, I was leaning against the wall and could barely hear a voice inside. I heard a man say, quote: 'Open your mouth, punk, and get it wet - now! You might as well stop fighting it; you're the only cherry here I ain't popped, and today's your day! You've got one minute, then I flip your scrawny carcass over and pop it dry.' end quote. In my opinion at that time, there was a good possibility that, if that was indeed the almost nine year old boy we were looking for, the boy was in danger of being grievously injured. In fact, the attitude of the assailant suggested it could be fatal. Since the man was using his penis as a weapon, I set my phaser accordingly before entering the room. Once I confirmed that what I heard matched what was happening, I fired."

Kirk barely managed to keep from smiling as he informed Cory of his verdict. "Mr. Short, that has to be the loosest definition of a deadly weapon I have ever heard. A judicial review would determine that stunning him would have been sufficient." Kirk paused for effect, then finally let his smile free. "Fortunately, I usually disagree with the findings of judicial reviews! There's nothing worse than a back-seat driver. Considering the information you had, I think you made the right choice, Cory. Just so you know, if you hadn't done it, Mr. Thompson was going to finish the job. Since your phaser was so 'unstable' that Mr. Scott had to beam it into space, I guess that any relatives are going to have to live with the official report. You did right, Cory. Just remember that sometimes a leader has to put his men on the spot for them to learn how to make proper decisions."

Cory smiled back, relieved it was over. "Thank you Captain. I see what you mean now. It makes a difference if you think it through after it's over."

"You're learning!" Kirk chuckled. "Once Bones is done poking and prodding, get all those boys dressed and bring them and your brothers to the Bridge. Calen, Timmy and William too."

"Yes, Sir!" Cory replied as he gave Kirk a quick hug of thanks and went back inside.

Cory couldn't help but giggle as the door closed behind him. Adam was pacing back and forth, a worried look on his face. "Hey bro; you lose something?"

Adam stopped long enough to reply. "Yeah, Doc's takin' FOREVER with Harley!"

Cory quickly went over and pulled Adam into a hug before he could start pacing again. "Relax bro; you know that Doc is just making sure he's okay. Knowing him, he's also probably talking to the little guy to help him relax some and feel safe. I was kinda joking with you down there about him becoming your son; you're serious about it, ain't you?"

Adam nodded. "Yeah, the little guy kinda stole my heart I guess. I can't let him get hurt again."

Cory searched Adam's eyes, then made a decision. "Bro, as much as I love you for what you want to do, I can't let you do it without one other person's approval. Take a seat, I'm getting JJ up here."

As Adam followed Cory's instructions, Cory went over to the com unit. "Bridge, this is Ensign Cory. Could you please contact Commander Martin and have him arrange for Ensign Richardson to be beamed up ASAP? Better yet, all of his family, there's some Clan business we can handle while they're here."

Uhura chuckled as she replied. "You are right on cue, Cory! Mr. Spock just informed the Captain that it would be logical for you to call for them! I'll get them up here as fast as I can. Where do you need them?"

"I need JJ down here. We'll meet the rest up there. Thanks, Nyota."

"Consider it done, Cory. Bridge out."

As Cory turned around, he was just in time to see Adam fly out of his chair and run over to where McCoy had just appeared with Harley. As Adam took the boy from McCoy, he asked "How is he, Doc? Is he gonna be okay?"

McCoy rolled his eyes in wonder. "Settle down before I sedate you Adam. Other than a sore butt for the next couple of days he will be just fine. Take a seat before I put you on a table." McCoy turned to where Sean was sitting with Timmy, Calen, and CD. "Okay Mr. Short; time to give up your soon-to-be middle son for his physical."

CD climbed off the table after a little urging from Sean, then slowly shuffled towards McCoy. Cory intercepted him, lifting his chin to look him in the eye. "CD, remember me saying I was going to make sure you were safe?"

"Yeah."

"Part of making sure you are safe is making sure you ain't hurt, buddy. Doctor McCoy is the best doctor in the Federation; he wouldn't be here if he wasn't. Don't be scared of him, he's not really as mean as he sounds."

CD gave Cory a small smile. "Okay, I guess. You ain't gonna leave are you?"

Cory smiled and kissed CD's forehead. "No angel; I'll be right here waiting for you."

Ten minutes later, CD came running out and jumped in Cory's lap. "You were right! He's nice! I wish all doctors were like him!"

Cory giggled. "Doc, your reputation is ruined! How does he look?"

McCoy shook his head at Cory's comment. "Other than the malnutrition, he's just fine. Obviously you got to him before that slime did. You know the routine; both of them are on the



same diet as Justy's brothers. Now get these boys some decent clothes before I decide that two Ensigns are due for a full physical."

Cory turned his head towards where Sean, Tyler, and Tommy were standing. "Bros, could you handle getting these guys down to the Quartermaster while Adam, Harley, and I handle one last piece of business? We'll catch up with you in a few."

Timmy jumped down from next to Calen and grabbed Sean's hand. "YEAH! C'mon Pop; I know a shortcut!"

Even McCoy had to laugh at Cory's quick response. "Timothy - NO! You are NOT taking them through the jeffries tubes! Is that understood?"

Timmy pouted and looked down at his feet. "Yes, Daddy, I'm sorry."

Cory motioned for CD to get up, and went over to where Timmy was standing. He picked Timmy up and held him to his chest. "Hey Gizmo, a lot of these guys haven't done more than walk from the bedroom to the kitchen in the house they were in for quite a long time. How would you feel if one of them slipped and hurt themselves or one of the other guys? Think about Calen too, he's still weak from being hurt; do you think he should be doing that yet? I'm proud of how you are trying to learn all about Daddy and Pop's ship, but places like that are for Daddy and Uncle Scotty to work. They're not made for little boys to play in."

"Okay, Daddy. I unnerstan' now," Timmy replied as he gave Cory a hug.

"That's my Gizmo. I'll tell you what; you're in charge of making sure your new brothers get there okay. How's that?"

"Kewl!" Timmy exclaimed as he gave Cory's neck another squeeze and hopped down. "C'mon CD, we got to help Calen!"

With Timmy in high gear, it took no time for the room to clear. Tyler decided to bring up the rear to watch for stragglers; just as he exited the door, JJ walked in.

"Hey Doc! Was that the new midget engineers I just saw leaving?"

McCoy smiled. "Be glad Scotty didn't hear you say that. Cory went fishing and that was his catch; one from the first pond and fifteen from the other. Have a seat, you guys have to have a talk. I'll be in my office if you need me."

JJ went to take a seat; that's when he noticed Adam was there. "Hey babe! Who's that sitting in my favorite spot?"

Adam was so nervous he knew if he didn't get right to the point he'd chicken out. "JJ, this is Harley. Please say yes; I want him to be our son."

JJ dropped into the chair next to Adam in shock. Cory watched quietly as JJ reached out and took one of Harley's hands, slowly tracing each little finger.

Knowing what was running through JJ's head, Cory finally spoke. "JJ, you know the answers to all of those questions. They are the same answers as Sean and I received when we got Timmy. You and Adam are just as responsible for the happy boys we have in the Clan as Sean and I are."

JJ looked at Cory. "What if Dad and Pop say no?"

Cory pulled the trump card. "Mr. Richardson; what is your status in society upon accepting a Starfleet commission?"

JJ thought for a second, then smiled. "I'm an adult now."

Cory nodded. "Besides, I know your Dad and Pop will help you with learning to be a parent. You are no different than Sean and me; if they give you any hassle I'll deal with them."

JJ dropped Harley's hand and held out his arms. "Come over here Harley; Pop wants a cuddle!"

Cory let them bond for a few minutes, then ushered them out to get Harley his clothes and

meet up with the rest of the group.

\* \* \*

### **Main Bridge, USS *Enterprise*:**

John glanced around the bridge, amazed at the restraint the thirteen identically dressed new boys were showing as they politely asked questions of the crew about the equipment. As Timmy and William supervised from Kirk's lap in the Command Chair; Tommy, Tyler, Kyle, Sammy and Sebastian helped keep the mob orderly. Conspicuous in their absence were Cory, Sean JJ, and Adam; repeated questions as to where they were just got answered by knowing smiles. John finally could no longer resist the temptation, and teased Kirk.

"Captain; I really think you need to get your transporter checked out. It looks to me like it shrank your crew!"

Not to be taken so easy, Kirk shot back "My crew? Their paperwork said they are your number one squadron."

John shook his head with a grin. "Don't give them ideas, Sir. Seriously, why the enlisted dungarees?"

Kirk grinned. "Cut the formality, John. When those boys beamed up, the only thing they had to wear was boxers. When Sean took them down to Supply, the Quartermaster made the mistake of telling them he could program for uniforms to fit them. As soon as they heard that, every single one of them decided to get them instead of the civilian clothes they could have had. He's getting a commendation for his mistake from Sean and myself; Sean informed me that the boys sense of self-worth jumped immediately as the uniforms were passed out." Kirk stopped as he noticed one of the older boys standing patiently behind John. To the boy's delight, Kirk was just able to read his name tag and addressed him by name. "Do you have a question, Peter?"

The boy seemed to grow two inches as he heard Kirk use his name. "Yes Sir. We were all talking, and we were kinda wondering ... we don't want to sound greedy ... but can we ... are we going to get to keep these uniforms? The man downstairs said that no kid who's visited has ever got any like these."

Kirk smiled. "You heard right; I have never authorized him to issue *Enterprise* enlisted crew uniforms to anyone but my crew. Those uniforms are yours to keep; you are a group of special kids, and I'm happy to give you all a special gift that nobody else has."

"Thank you Sir!!!" Peter replied with a huge grin. He glanced at Timmy, then asked shyly "Why does Timmy have a different uniform? His looks a lot like yours."

Kirk chuckled. "Timmy's parents are both officers here on the *Enterprise*. He has a uniform like they wear; you'll see what I mean when they get here."

"Wow! You're a lucky kid, Timmy! Thank you, Captain!" Peter then sped off to rejoin his companions.

A minute later, the turbolift door opened. Cory, Sean, JJ, Adam, Calen, Harley and CD stepped onto the bridge. All were dressed nearly identically; JJ, Cory, and Sean had insignia signifying their rank and division, Harley and CD had no insignia and wore the red turtleneck of a trainee, Calen's turtleneck was replaced by a red collarless shirt due to the injuries on his neck, and Adam was an exact match to JJ except for the rank insignia. They were about three steps inside the door when Lieutenant Thompson stopped Adam. "Mr. Short, are you aware you are out of uniform?"

As had been pre-planned, Timmy jumped down and ran over. "Unca' Adam, you forgot to

put these on!" With a huge grin, Timmy handed Adam a small box.

Adam opened the box, and almost collapsed in shock. Lieutenant Thompson took the box from Adam's outstretched hand, removed the contents, and spoke as he put them in place. "By order of Captain James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS *Enterprise*, I hereby commission Adam Kelly Short as Ensign, Security Division. Mr. Short, do you accept this commission, along with the duties and responsibilities which accompany it?"

Realizing this was for real, Adam managed to come to attention. His voice cracked and covered several octaves due to the emotional overload as he replied. "Yes Sir, I accept my commission and all the responsibilities that go with it."

Thompson decided not to push Adam's emotions any further. "Relax Adam, before you pass out. Congratulations, and welcome to Starfleet. When you get to Orlando, Mr. Barnes will help you get all of the paperwork done. Right now, there's something a little more important to handle."

Timmy climbed into his favorite position on Cory's hip, then the eight boys worked their way over to the Captain's Command chair. Once there, Kirk stood, congratulated Adam, then had Uhura contact Teri and put her on the main screen.

John had rejoined Dan; after looking over the group, he commented "Dan, I've got this weird feeling I've been here before and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

Dan nodded slowly. "Me too. My only question is who and how many."

Both fell silent as Kirk began. "Good evening, Teri. As you've probably figured out by the group behind my chair, your boys have been busy. You can relax; the boys behind my chair are having a sleepover on the Rec Deck tonight. Based on what Sammy and Sebastian have found, these boys will be staying across the street from you in Orlando. I've spoken with your new assistant and she is processing their records as we speak. I believe the placement of these last three boys you are going to want to handle personally. I handled the interviews for you, but the final placement is all yours." Kirk turned to the boys. "Ensign JJ Richardson, Ensign Adam Short; front and center. State your request gentlemen."

Adam and JJ stepped up, each holding one of Harley's hands. Both tried to start a couple of times before Adam turned his head. "Sorry Sir, but we can't seem to ask this formally. Permission to speak informally?"

Kirk nodded. "At least you tried. Permission granted."

"Thank you, Captain," Adam said before turning back. "Mom; this little blond guy between us is Harley Jared Donaldson. JJ and I talked it over, and we want to adopt him and give him both of our names. He doesn't have any family to go to. JJ and I are both legally adults; we think with you, Dan, and John to guide us we can give him an awesome loving family. Please Mom?"

Teri thought it over for a few seconds before replying. "Both of you have been there from the minute Cory and Sean adopted Timmy, so I know that you understand what you are getting into. JJ, from the shocked looks I saw behind you, I assume you did not discuss this with your parents. You'll be glad to know they recovered quickly and signaled me with a thumbs-up. I have to agree with them, since I know neither one of you is afraid to ask what to do if you don't know. Congratulations guys; now how do you want your new son's last name done?"

JJ quickly put his hand over Adam's mouth. "Teri, please make it Short-Richardson. Adam's the one that saved him."

From the look on Adam's face, Teri could see that he had just been overruled. "Adam, your partner is right; you saved him so our last name should be first. Take your son to meet his granddad and grandpop."

As the grinning boys turned and went to where Dan and John were standing, Teri turned her attention to Cory and Sean.

Before a word could be said by anyone, Timmy spoke his mind. "Gran'ma, you know Calen; this is his lil' brother CD. You're 'posed to make 'em my big brothers!"

Teri couldn't help but chuckle. "Slow down there Tiger. You're as bad as your Daddy and Pop were at your age! Boys, now you know how I felt when you two pulled that! I was a step ahead of you this time; I saw the looks before you beamed up. Hurry up and get my grandsons down here! Dan, John; I need to steal Harley tonight, I'll turn him over for you to start spoiling tomorrow. JJ, you can stay over with your new son tonight if you want to."

JJ thought for a second, then took Harley from John. "Hey lil' guy; is it okay if Pop goes and gets your new bedroom ready for when you come home tomorrow? Your Daddy will still be with you."

In all of his short life, Harley had never been consulted as to what he would like. He wrapped his arms around JJ's next and hugged tightly. "Okay Pop. Can you find me a new Teddy Bear? The bad man took my old one."

JJ kissed his new son's cheek. "I'll do even better; I'm going to give my teddy bear to you. I think he's getting lonely and needs a little boy to cuddle with."

Harley was speechless, he could only respond with a hug.

Kirk smiled at the boy bonding with his new pop, then addressed Teri. "Give about a half hour for them to wrap up things up here, then your quiet house will be re-invaded. I know of a great Italian restaurant there in town; Biaggi's Ristorante Italiano. Take the boys there, I'm covering the bill. Goodnight Teri."

\* \* \*

#### **Short Residence, Des Moines:**

Teri had just finished filing her reports on the latest adoptions when she heard the telltale sound of a transporter beam in the front foyer. She quickly got up and went to greet the boys. On her way out of the office, she grabbed a camera. As she rounded the corner and spotted her family, she got off a quick shot before any of them noticed her, then quickly placed the camera on a nearby stand.

"MOM!" Cory exclaimed.

Teri grinned. "Cory, I'll never understand how someone who loves to use a camera as much as you could hate to have their picture taken like you do. I wanted to make sure my first look at my new grandsons with their dads and most of their uncles was saved forever."

Cory shook his head and grinned. "Okay, I guess you're off the hook this time Mom; just don't make it a habit!"

Teri noticed that both Calen and CD cringed when they heard Cory tell her what not to do. She motioned for Timmy to climb down off of Sean. "Timmy; why don't you bring your new brothers and cousin over and introduce them to me?"

"Okay!" Timmy exclaimed as he jumped down. To her surprise, Harley assisted Timmy in ushering his reluctant brothers over to her. She knelt down to be closer to their level before speaking to them. "Okay, who is who Timmy?"

Timmy smiled broadly as he introduced them to her. "Gran'ma, this is Calen; an' this is CD. They's my big bros now! My new cousin is Harley; we are 'bout the same age and he's really kewl!"

Teri smiled as each boy was introduced, then spoke. "Thank you, Timmy. Calen, CD; right now I probably know more about what your old home was like than your dad and pop do. Things work a lot differently around here. For one, if an adult hits you they have a whole line of people who will literally kick their butts. We actually had an adult hit Chip's son Justy a few weeks ago; last I heard he was still in the hospital undergoing reconstructive surgery on the hand he did it with. The things you had to live through will never happen again. I saw your reaction when your Dad sounded like he was talking back to me. He's not in any trouble, I knew what he was trying to tell me. Around here, I want you to express your opinion; all I expect is that you are not rude about it or crude and insulting. I'll bet there were a lot of things you guys were afraid to do because you thought you would get in trouble and get hurt. I know it will take getting used to, but now if you are not sure if you can do something just ask. If someone gets mad at you for asking a question, they have to deal with your Dad and Pop; if they are not around tell me and I will take care of it for you. Oh, I also require everyone to get lots of hugs!"

Calen decided to test her while he knew everyone was watching and could protect him. "How could you know what our life was like? We didn't tell anyone about a lot of it."

"Good choice of a question, Calen," Teri replied. "After you beamed up to the ship, I talked to the police officers that had came out there. I knew Cory and Sean would be busy with you, so I had them contact me with any information they found on your old mother. It didn't take too long; they found her in a bar in Altoona. I had her brought here, then called Orlando and had Josh send over Jamie and Jacob. If I know your Pop, he's going to fill you in about them, but for now all you need to know is they are telepaths. An hour after they got here, I had a report and they went home; your old mother is now sitting in jail awaiting trial on Federation charges. Considering the twin's report is better than a signed confession, she will be convicted for attempted murder and about twenty other things."

Feeling a little more sure of himself, Calen went for broke. "I bet you can't tell me why she did this to me."

Knowing she was about to break through his shell, Teri replied carefully. "Calen, I don't know how CD and Harley would respond to the answer to that. I know the rest of these guys might giggle, but they would not make fun of you. I won't say it out loud unless you ask me to; we can go in my office and I'll tell you in private if you want."

The last thing Calen expected was compassion at his statement. "Go ahead and say it; they're gonna find out anyways."

Teri nodded. "With the exception of CD and Harley, I know for a fact that all the rest of you do what Calen did quite regularly; so no laughing. Calen was caught rubbing his privates and making himself feel good. Calen, she had serious problems; she believed anything to do with sex was dirty and that touching yourself made you a demon. There is no excuse for the damage she did to you there. She failed in both things she tried to do though; you are still alive, and you can do anything with just one nut that the rest of these guys can do with two. You have no reason to be ashamed of how your privates look now, they are proof that you beat her and survived. By the way, if I catch you, the only thing I'll do is tell you where the nearest bottle of lotion is so you don't rub yourself raw! Just ask your Pop."

"That explains it! Uncle John was asking why there was a half empty case of lotion in Sean's closet!" Adam announced with a giggle.

Trying to save face, Sean spoke before thinking about what he was saying. "You must have found it first, it was three-quarters full!"

Sean realized he goofed when CD turned and asked "Pop, can I use some? I've never tried it with lotion!"

Sean turned six shades of red in embarrassment. "Sure kiddo, you can have a bottle. Adam, you are soooooo going swimming!"

Teri shook her head. "Calen, there's something else I know. You have not had a hug from a grown-up family member since your Dad was killed in that accident five years ago. It's going to take time to get over what was done to you; can we start it with a very proud Grandma getting a hug from her oldest new grandson?"

Calen slowly stepped into Teri's outstretched arms, still unsure if this was real. It finally hit home when he felt Teri's arms gently wrap around him; obviously being careful not to make his bruised body feel any pain. The tears fell freely as he began to release his pent-up emotions from the last five years.

Teri kissed the top of his head. "Let it all out, Calen. I'm going to talk to your little brother and cousin, but I'm right here if you need me. Just relax in my arms, I'm not going anywhere." She looked up at her other two new grandsons. "CD, Harley; both of you have at least a week of experiences that only the two of you know about. Nobody will force you to talk about them, but I promise you will feel better if you do. I'm guessing that you two were made to do things you didn't want to do; those things don't make you bad or nasty, you didn't have a choice. No matter what you've done or what was done to you, you are my grandsons. Everything you heard me tell Calen applies to you too; and all three of you are welcome to hugs and cuddles whenever you want."

Both boys decided to take Teri up on the offer immediately, and joined Calen in Teri's arms. They stayed that way for five minutes, each of the boys overcoming some of the demons of their past with the help of Teri's love. When they finally broke apart, Teri smiled and said "Have your parents show you where the bathrooms are so you can clean up your faces, then we'll go out to eat, maybe even pick you up some more clothes on the way back. You guys look great in your uniforms, but I think that after tonight we'll save them for special occasions."

All three boys smiled their thanks, and were shortly en route to get cleaned up to leave.

\* \* \*

### **Later that evening:**

As the boys all filed into the bedroom, Cory, Sean and Adam pulled their new sons off to the side. Cory spoke for all three parents.

"Guys, all three of us care about you a lot. Part of that is making sure we don't do anything to make you feel uncomfortable. We want to let you guys decide where you sleep tonight, but you need to know a few things first. Usually all of us sleep nude; nobody is forced to, including you, but that's how we feel comfortable. No matter how you want to be dressed you can sleep with us. If you want to sleep with us, but can't handle us being nude, let one of us know; we'll put on something so we can cuddle with you. If you're really not ready to share a bed with us, there's another bed in Sean's room that you are more than welcome to sleep in instead."

Calen interrupted. "What happens if someone gets a stiffie?"

Sean took over. "I'll answer that one. If you get a stiffie, don't worry about it. If you want to play with it, go ahead. All of your uncles have boyfriends and are used to being poked with stiffies occasionally; nobody will say anything if you have one. That brings up another point which is more about CD and Harley; you guys were forced to do stuff. Nobody here will do that to you; the most that might happen is they might have a nice dream and rub against you in their sleep. Sooner or later, you guys are going to catch someone doing some of the stuff that was done

to you with their boyfriend. If you look at their faces, you will realize it's different; they both want to do it and are not hurting each other. It's one of the ways they show each other that they are boyfriends and love their partner. Does that make sense?"

Calen nodded immediately. "Yeah, that makes sense to me, Pop. It don't sound so bad now that you explained it."

CD and Harley whispered back and forth a few times before CD answered for both of them. "When the Bad Guy was gone tryin' to find more kids, Paul used to let us touch each other. He said somethin' about us needin' to learn that sex wasn't supposed to hurt. He wouldn't let us see him nude, but he'd tell us what to do to make it feel nicer for each other. A couple of guys would even put our weenies in their mouths and make it feel really different. Harley and me will be okay, we know we're safe now."

Adam knelt down and pulled both CD and Harley into a hug. "That's right, guys - you're safe now. Around here there is one rule that is never to be broken. If someone says NO that means NO; we don't allow arguing about it or begging. You were forced to learn things which you wouldn't even think about until you are older; we understand that. There are some things that you are not allowed to do even though you know about them. Nobody is allowed to put anything in your butthole, and you are not allowed to put anything in someone else's butthole. Anything else besides touching you have to ask one of us first; we'll talk it over with you and help you decide if it's the right thing to do. Is that fair?"

"Yeah, daddy."

"Yeah, Uncle Adam. Thanks for lookin' out for us."

Cory looked over the three boys with pride. "Do you guys know what you want to do tonight then?"

Calen looked over at his little brother and new cousin, then back at Cory. "Can we talk about it for a minute, Dad?"

Cory smiled. "Sure, we'll wait over on the edge of the bed for you."

After a quick discussion, the boys came over to where Cory, Sean, and Adam were waiting.

"Pop, I gotta question. Is there a church we can go to so I can thank God for you and Daddy findin' us?" CD asked shyly.

Sean pulled CD into a hug. "Let me go talk to your Grandma; there's one nearby that I went to a lot when your Daddy was sick and in the hospital. Anyone is welcome, and they have morning services on Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday so that people who work weird days can still go to church. We could all go there tomorrow morning; all of us have some thanking to do."

CD returned the hug. "Thanks Pop, that sounds kewl."

Sean ran downstairs, and returned a minute later smiling. "Hey everyone; fold the uniforms when you take them off! Mom wants us to wear them for Church in the morning."

Once Sean returned to his seat, each of the boys lined up with a parent; CD with Sean, Calen with Cory, and Harley with Adam. Calen spoke for all of them.

"Dad, we wanna sleep with all of you and sleep nude like you." Calen regressed to a small child as he spoke the next words; words echoed by CD and Harley to the parent in front of them. "Daddy, can you please help me get ready for bed?"

Cory didn't even blink. "If it makes you happy I would be honored to, SON."

A few minutes later, everyone was ready for bed and just kicking back, unwinding from the eventful day.

Tyler finally couldn't resist the urge to pick on Cory. "Hey, bro; you growing a crust yet?"

You musta eaten about fifty loaves of garlic bread!"

Cory giggled. "Dude, that was some great bread! Y'all just wasn't quick enough!"

Tommy joined in. "All of the food was awesome. I didn't believe you ate all that bread and still ate the meal you ordered!"

"Unca' Tommy, can you make 'paggettie like that?" Timmy asked while rubbing his belly. "It made my tummy all happy!"

"I'll see what I can do, lil' guy," Tommy giggled. "Spaghetti sauce is an art, but I think I know how they did it. We just gotta lock up the garlic bread so your daddy don't eat it all."

Cory just shook his head in defeat. "Okay guys, let's hit the sack; we gotta get up for church." He got up and went to shut off the light. He looked to make sure everyone was ready and smiled. With the exception of a small hole for him between Sean and Calen, everyone was belly to back, cuddled tightly into a supportive family group. He shut off the light, and made his way to the spot reserved for him. About a half hour of squirming later, he heard Calen whisper.

"Daddy?"

"Yes Calen?"

"It feels kinda funny down there where my nut was. You ain't gotta do nothin' but could you hold me down there tonight and put a finger where my nut was? I can't get comfortable to sleep."

Cory considered it for a second, then replied. "Lil' buddy, think about it for a second. I know I'm only fourteen, but I'm still your daddy; besides I have to do things like an adult. You're going to have to get used to it; I think I know someone who can help you some. I'll bet it's more that you are thinking about it too much. Let's go down to the Rec Room for a second, we need to make a call."

Once downstairs, Cory logged into the terminal and placed the call. A few seconds later, an obviously sleepy Dan answered. "Short Compound, this is Dan."

"Dan, this is Cory. Sorry about waking you, but I didn't know if the remote station in Kyle's room was set up yet. I've got a son here that could use some reassurance about something they have in common."

"That's not a problem, Cory. It's working, but the outside access to it won't be up until tomorrow. Let me transfer you over."

A few seconds later, Kyle came on the screen. Cory took one look and could tell Kyle had not slept one wink yet. "Hey lil' bro; you having trouble sleeping?" Cory asked.

"Yeah, I kinda miss Ty holdin' me," Kyle replied shyly.

"I bet you've got a big brother who feels the same way. After we're done, why don't you go cuddle with him so you both get some sleep. Right now, would you mind talking a bit with Calen? Since you know what it's like with only one nut, maybe you can reassure him about his."

Kyle giggled as he replied. "Like you have to ask? Get out of the room, I'll send Calen up when we're done talking. There's some stuff parents don't need to see or hear!"

Cory grinned and gave Calen a quick hug. "I'll see you in a few minutes, son. Kyle ain't going to lie to you; let me know if he was able to help. I'll stay awake until you come back up."

It took fifteen minutes before Calen quietly came back into the bedroom. His face broke into a huge smile when he found Cory sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for him. He immediately walked over and perched himself on Cory's lap and gave him a hug. "Thanks Dad. I guess I was kinda thinkin' about it too much. It's different now that I know someone else like me down there. I thought it was somethin' that made me look sick; Kyle showed me his and now I know I don't look much different than anyone else unless you really look at me. You ain't mad about me askin' you to do that, are you?"



Cory kissed Calen's forehead. "No, I'm not mad; you were asking for help the only way you could think of. Are you ready to get some sleep?"

Calen looked over Cory's shoulder and saw the hole that they had left was gone; CD was now cuddled against Sean. "Yeah, but our spot's gone; now you can't cuddle with Pop. I'm sorry!"

Cory glanced over. "There's nothing to be sorry about; I'm just as happy between you and Timmy. Let's get some sleep."

Cory scooted over to the end of the line of boys. Before he had a chance to roll onto his side, Timmy's 'daddy radar' kicked in; one leg and one arm reached out and made it quite clear that Timmy wanted to cuddle up to his Daddy's side. Cory lifted his arm out of the way of Timmy's head, and suddenly found CD following his new little brother into place. Cory looked over to where Calen was watching and said quietly "It looks like your brothers are claiming this side of me; the other side must be reserved for you."

Calen smiled and cuddled under Cory's free arm, snuggled as tight as he could be to Cory's chest. "Goodnight Daddy, I love you."

Cory kissed the top of Calen's head. "I love you too, Son. Sweet dreams."

\* \* \*

Teri was sitting at the table drinking her morning coffee when she heard Adam yell "DUDE! Somebody needs to change their Huggies!" A few seconds later, the dining room was invaded by nude boys with watering eyes; Cory trailing behind with a huge grin..

"Did you guys forget something?" Teri asked with a chuckle.

Tommy looked over from his seat. "Mom, you can't go in the room without a gas mask! Even Timmy's teddy bear had to run for cover; Cory's butt is RANK!"

Teri thought for a second then slapped her forehead. "I should have known better, Cory and garlic don't mix! That was Garlic Bread you were hogging last night, wasn't it?"

Cory giggled. "Yeah, GOOD garlic bread, with lots of garlic!"

Teri shook her head. "Get your stinky butt up there and open a window to air it out; hopefully after breakfast the air will be clear enough for y'all to get dressed without passing out." She looked over at Sean. "Is he as bad as last time he pulled that stunt?"

Sean grimaced. "Worse; if I didn't hear his butt cheeks flap I woulda thought a skunk got in."

Teri chuckled at Sean's response. "Thanks for the visual, kid. Tommy, Ty; why don't you guys grab some aprons and we'll throw together some breakfast."

As Teri and her two helpers disappeared into the kitchen, CD leaned over and asked Sean "Pop, you mean we gotta help Grandma cook?"

Sean smiled. "No, little buddy. Your uncles like to cook; sometimes they'll even cook it all themselves and not let an adult help. Your grandma wants to get breakfast quick today, so all three of them will be cooking."

CD relaxed, obviously he didn't like kitchen duty. "What kinda chores do we gotta do then? Are we going to get an allowance?"

Cory came up behind CD and put his hands on his son's thin shoulders. "Slow down, CD. We are waiting to sort out chores until we get to Orlando. We'll figure out allowances then too. You'll have a say in it, so just wait until we are all settled in."

CD leaned his head back. "Okay Dad. I guess I'm still tryin' to fight to get stuff. We had to do all the chores, even cook, and was always promised money but never got it."

Cory brushed CD's bangs out of his eyes. "That won't happen, son. If your Pop or I even

thought of doing that to you guys, your Grandma would chew our butts off."

CD smiled. "Thanks, Daddy. It's kinda kewl bein' able to ask stuff without someone getting mad."

Cory moved over slightly so he could put one of his hands on Calen's shoulder. "It's definitely kewl having two more sons to answer questions for!"

\* \* \*

The boys all fell in line behind Sean and Cory as they walked up to the door of the church. Teri had dropped them off, having to do some emergency shopping at Sean's request. The pastor was greeting people at the door, and got a huge smile when he saw the group coming towards him.

"Sean! I'm so glad to see you; we've missed you. How's everything going?"

Sean shook the pastor's outstretched hand. "Everything's been great, Pastor Mills. We are moving to Orlando to a place where we can work at helping kids in trouble. My prayers got answered and then some! Let me introduce everyone. This is Cory; God gave him back to me just like you said He would. We're officially a pair now! The little guy in his arms is our youngest son Timmy." Sean reached behind him and guided CD and Calen forward. "These are our other sons as of yesterday, Calen and CD."

Once Pastor Mills finished welcoming Cory and their sons, Sean continued. "Pastor, I picked up some brothers too; this is Adam, Tyler and Tommy. The little guy in Adam's arms is his new son Harley; Adam got him yesterday too."

Pastor Mills welcomed the rest of the boys, then stepped back. "In all of my years, I have never seen a plainer miracle coming from prayer. A year ago, a scared young boy came in. After the service, we talked and I found out about how he had lost one brother forever and the other one had lost almost all of his memory. Today I'm looking at him and see the secure young man that God intended. Sean, you are living proof that love and prayer can accomplish anything."

Sean blushed as he replied. "Thanks Pastor. It's almost time to start, we'll talk some more during fellowship after the service."

As the boys headed in to find seats in the pews, CD pulled the pastor aside and whispered something to him. When the pastor nodded his head after a few minutes of discussion, CD gave him a quick hug then ran to catch up with the others.

"What was that all about?" Sean asked CD as they took their seats.

"You'll see, Pop!" CD replied with a grin.

The service went normally until the end of the sermon. Pastor Mills looked directly at the boys as he spoke his next words.

"Brethren, some of you remember Sean when he first visited us a year ago; most of you have grown to know him since then. Today Sean has joined us one last time before he moves to Florida; but he joins us with a joyous heart. The young man that makes his Spirit complete has recovered and is with him today, along with six other boys who now share in his endless amount of love. I would like for all of these young men to come forward so you can meet them."

Once each of the boys had been introduced, along with announcing their relationship to Sean, the pastor continued. "Since Cory's recovery, him and Sean have affected the lives of each of these boys in some way. From welcoming in an abandoned child to literally saving a life, together they have lived the teachings of Jesus to help their fellow man. One life in particular was touched so much that he has to say his thanks in front of God. CD has asked me to let him express his thanks in front of all of you. CD, go ahead."

CD stepped forward. "Thank you, Pastor. Let us pray."

The congregation bowed their heads, then CD began: "Heavenly Father, today we stand here in peace, some of us for the first time in our lives, to thank You for the blessings You have gave us. Thank you for not only giving me a new Dad and Pop, but sending them to save my brother Calen and bringing us back together. Thank you for healing Dad and giving him back to Pop. Thank you for giving us a grandma who is nice and listens to us. Thank you for Uncle Tommy, Uncle Adam, and Uncle Tyler. Thank you so much for giving me my new little brother Timmy to cuddle, love and teach. God, from the bottom of my heart I want to thank You for sending Daddy to find me and save me from the bad man who was hurting me. Also thank you just as much for sending Uncle Adam with Daddy so that he could rescue my friend Harley who You made into my cousin. Thank you for Pastor Mills and all of these nice people who helped Pop when Daddy was sick. Most of all, thank you for listening to the prayers of a bunch of lost boys and making it so they are all safe again. Thank you God for giving all of us a family to love us and teach us right from wrong. God, I know I didn't say much but the Lords Prayer for the last week, but you still listened to my heart. Today I can say it loud and strong with my new family that You have given me.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven; Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the Glory forever; Amen."

There was not a dry eye in the building after hearing CD pour out his soul. Cory led the boys in giving CD a hug of thanks; nobody said a word out of respect for the moment. Pastor Mills remained silent as the boys returned to their seats, then spoke in a subdued voice. "There is nothing I can say worthy of following CD's prayer except Thanks be to God. The boys would like to have you join them in Fellowship Hall so they can thank you in person." He placed the microphone in its holder, and everyone stood to exit the Sanctuary.

Fortunately for Cory, the noise of everyone getting up and talking masked the sound of what happened next. The noses of most of the congregation were not so lucky. As he stood up, the gas he had been holding back decided to break free, resulting in a deadly semi-silent fart. Sean and Adam quickly guided Cory out along with the rest of the sudden mass departure before anyone identified him as the cause of the fresh round of watering eyes. They could tell by his look that he had tried to hold it, so neither said anything. As Cory headed to the restroom to try to clear out any aftershocks, Sean gathered the boys around. "Guys, it was an accident. No picking on him until we get in the limo, okay? We are still in church."

They all nodded, and once Cory came back out they joined the congregation in Fellowship Hall.

An hour later, after receiving best wishes from all of the people Sean knew, the boys were standing outside with Pastor Mills waiting for Teri. Pastor Mills turned to Cory. "Well Cory, you almost made it! That's the fastest I've ever seen some of them move!"

Cory dropped his head, ashamed of what happened. "How did you know?"

Pastor Mills reached over and lifted Cory's chin. "I happened to be watching you guys when it happened. I could tell by the look on your face something happened that you didn't want or expect. It didn't take long to figure out what. I'm glad this is not a Catholic Church; their candles would have lit off an explosion!"

Adam grinned and said in his best newscaster voice: "In other news, a 14 year old young man is in custody after unleashing a fireball the size of a watermelon on his unsuspecting church brothers and sisters. Minor injuries have been reported and the youth, who will remain nameless

due to age, is being questioned on where he got the materials for such an explosive event. No motives have been discovered at this point and the National Guard has been asked to stand down after earlier reports of terrorism were squashed by the boy's mother, saying, 'I only feed him garlic!'."

Even Cory came close to collapsing with laughter at Adam's parody. Once everyone recovered their breath, Adam came over and gave Cory a hug. Loud enough for everyone else to hear, Adam told Cory "Sorry bro, but the timing was just too sweet to pass up!"

Cory returned the hug, replying "It's okay bro. That's gotta be a classic; besides it made me feel lots better!"

Pastor Mills was still chuckling as he added "I agree, nobody's made me laugh like that in a long time! I'm really glad you all came out today, there are a lot of people who are going to sleep better knowing you are all together and safe. You guys touched a lot of hearts today, maybe they'll go out and pass it on." He looked over and saw Teri pulling in with the Hummer. "It looks like your ride is here; keep in touch and Go with God."

Each of the boys gave him a hug and expressed their thanks. Cory went last, and was just finishing thanking the pastor one more time for taking care of Sean when a voice came from the Hummer.

"Hey Stinky, come on! I may have forever, but times wasting for y'all!"

Cory looked over his shoulder just in time to see Mikey float out of the Hummer and wiggle his wings. When he turned back, he could tell by the stunned look on Pastor Mills' face that Mikey was allowing the pastor to see him. On a hunch, Cory guided the pastor over to the vehicle.

"Pastor Mills, I'd like you to meet our big brother Mikey. He goes by Saint Mikey of Urbandale now though."

Mikey saw that the pastor was still speechless, so he went ahead. "Relax Pastor Mills; Our Father just wanted you to keep doing what you've been doing. I'm actually here on a more personal note; to thank you myself for helping Sean through what happened last year. My little brothers mean a lot to me, and you played a part in them making it to where they are now by standing by Sean in his time of need. You are a fine example for everyone around you, don't change a thing."

Pastor Mills found his voice as he relaxed. "Thank you Saint Mikey; I'll do just that. Your brothers and nephews taught quite a few people something about caring and responsibility towards others today, including me. It's been an honor to meet them and you, especially since Sean told me so much about you when you were alive. Today will hold a special place in my heart forever."

Mikey smiled. "You're welcome. You do have a reward for your efforts, in fact you've had it for the last six months. The boy Paul that you seem to run into whenever he's in desperate need for food is actually homeless and without any living relatives. He's afraid to tell you because he does not want to go to a group home. You will see him tomorrow; tell him it's time to have a home again with you. He will accept; you are the only person who has looked out for him without wanting something. Mom will call you tomorrow night and get everything done so that he becomes your legal son."

"Thank you for giving me hope, Saint Mikey. I promise to follow in Sean and Cory's footsteps and give this gift from God the life he deserves. I better hurry, I have a lot to do to prepare my place so that Paul has a spot to call home."

"Go with peace, Pastor Mills."

"May Peace be with you and your family, Saint Mikey."

\* \* \*

As the boys piled out of the Hummer at the house, Teri told them "Get into something comfortable, then go to the Rec Room."

Everyone but CD knew what was about to happen, so they hurried and got changed into shorts and tee shirts. Once Teri saw that everyone was ready, she came walking into the room carrying a cake bearing nine candles. As she walked through the doorway, the boys started singing.

*Happy Birthday to you;  
Happy Birthday to you!  
Happy Birthday dear Cee Deeeeee!  
Happy Birthday to you!*

CD had a smile ten miles wide and tears of joy running down his face as Cory and Sean escorted him to the table Teri sat the cake on.

As Cory and Sean knelt beside him, Cory said "Make a wish and blow out the candles, son." CD closed his eyes for a couple of seconds, then reopened them. He took a deep breath and blew all of the candles out first try. He turned to Teri. "Thanks Grandma! I didn't think anyone 'membered with all the stuff that's happened!"

Teri smiled "Your big brother, Dad, and Pop wouldn't let anyone forget! I'm going to get the ice cream real quick; go ahead and cut your cake!"

Once Teri finished her cake, she went and retrieved the things she had picked up earlier, then passed them out to the boys. Once everything was accounted for, she signaled Sean. He cleared everyone but CD off of the couch, then stood back to wait his turn. As agreed, Mikey went first. "CD, Happy Birthday. Since angels don't have money, I had to have Mom buy this for me. But I picked it out for you as a reminder you always have one more uncle watching out for you."

CD opened the small box that Mikey put in his hand and stared. Inside was a pair of diamond stud earrings. He found his voice enough to say "Thanks Uncle Mikey! Now I gotta get my ear pierced, these are awesome!"

Mikey chuckled. "Watch, little one!" He took one of the earrings out of the box and placed it against CD's right earlobe. As everyone watched, it seemed to make it's own hole and slip right through. Mikey put the back on they moved back. "How's that?"

CD reached up and felt the new earring. "Wow, I didn't even feel it! Thank's Uncle Mikey! What about the other one?"

"Have Grandma put it in her safe in Orlando; it's a spare in case something happens to the one you have in."

"Okay."

CD was overwhelmed as the boys each gave him a gift. As he fingered the necklace Teri had just put on him from Calen, Sean and Cory came up together. Cory spoke for them both as he said "CD, we figured it would be more fair if you got one present from both of us. Happy Birthday, Son."

CD tore into the big box they sat in front of him. His jaw hit the floor when he opened the inner case and found a teal Fender electric bass guitar! He spent the next five minutes wordlessly bouncing back and forth between Sean and Cory giving them hugs of thanks. Once he settled back down, Teri spoke.

"CD, I went ahead and had my present to you sent to Orlando so it wouldn't get damaged. I got you the amp to go with the present you got from your parents. It is already in your bedroom."

While CD was in Teri's arms thanking her, the rest of the boys cleaned up the mess from his presents. Mikey said his goodbyes, and they all just sat back and celebrated being a family.

About thirty minutes later, Cory's nose picked up on a familiar smell. He got up and went to the kitchen. When he saw Teri just finishing stacking brownies on a serving plate, tears started running down his face.

Teri looked up and saw Cory standing there crying; she dropped what she was doing and rushed over to hug him. "Tell Mom what's wrong, Cory," she whispered as she held him.

Cory wrapped his arms around her as he replied between sobs. "You made brownies the first day I started getting my memories back, Mommy. It was later that day they started working again. I'm sorry I hurt you and Sean like that; you had to live with me being here in body but not really being here as me."

"Shhhh ... it's okay, baby boy. Both of us were just happy you were able to be here at all. That don't matter anymore; we've got the Cory boy back that we have always loved. We loved you even when your mind was giving you trouble. Thanks to you, there are a bunch of boys in the other room that have learned to overcome their past and make themselves better. In the last month, you have done more than enough to make up for the year you were without memories."

"Thanks, Mom. I know we got to leave soon; can we do it from the front yard instead of inside?"

"Whatever it takes to make my Cory happy. If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do."

Cory gave her one more hug, then followed her in as she took the brownies into the rec room. An hour later, they watched as the contents of the house began to be transferred to their new home. When the time finally came, the only thing left was CD's new guitar; he refused to let it go without him with it. At Cory's request, Teri took everyone else outside, leaving him in the empty house alone. He went upstairs and into Mikey's old room. He stood in the center of it silently for a minute, then began going to the rest of the rooms in the house, repeating his actions in each one. Finally he reached the front foyer, and stood looking at the view he had seen millions of times. He smiled as he turned and opened the front door. As he opened the door, he found Sean waiting on the front step for him. He stepped out on the porch, and reached for the doorknob.

"Wait," Sean said. "I was watching you through the windows. Please hold me and let me see what you see as you look inside."

They embraced and stood in the doorway cheek-to-cheek, both looking through the doorway at the tangled history which had passed through that portal into their young lives. They reached out as one and placed their hands on the doorknob; then with one last look, they closed and locked the door on their old memories, then turned to go start a new life and build new ones.

\* \* \*

### *Memories*

*An open door I look through now;  
a chance to view the past.  
I look through all my memories,  
I look upon the cast.  
Of characters who've touched my life,  
of friends who've touched my heart;  
of people who've helped form my life,  
time can not tear us apart.  
The things we've done,*

*the things we've seen,  
are etched now in my mind.  
Of families and friends in need,  
and love we've shared in kind.  
This room once full  
is empty now,  
it causes me to sigh.  
And think of all experiences  
I've picked up by and by.  
This open door it gives to me  
a chance to search the seas;  
for you my friends are always there,  
etched in my memories*

© 2005 GunRunner. Used with permission

\* \* \*

The End (of Part One!)