

“Complete Comfort”

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Paul, a strong and stocky build, scooped me out of my wheelchair and put me in bed in the back study room where I’d been parked at my desk, dictating some homework to my computer for my online English class. He then stuffed a couple pillows behind my back so, instead of lying flat, I was propped up on my side on the outside edge of bed facing in.

The sun was beaming in the open windows, making the pale blue walls shine, but still we decided to relax or maybe take a nap. As always when he stopped by, it was a welcome distraction from my studies.

“You comfy?” he asked as he crawled into the twin bed with me.

“I’m good. Now let me sleep!” I said with a smirk.

“You think I really put you in here to sleep?” he said as he leaned in for a few long kisses; his lips were always so soft. When we stopped talking, there was a noticeable coolness and a relaxing quiet to the house, with the exception of the buzz of the distant lawnmower and the chirping birds; spring time in the country ensured an orchestra of birds from dawn to dusk.

“You’re the one driving back to Chicago for class Monday and should be tired,” I said between kisses, our faces inches apart.

“Yeah, you’re right. No lovin’ for you then,” he teased as he propped his head up with his arm.

“I didn’t say you had to stop.”

I loved the fact that he still pestered me and touched me the way he did before my accident – when I was sixteen and crashed my car, the impact breaking my neck, leaving me paralyzed from the chest down. I don’t know if it was his comfort with me or my comfort with

him or simply the dynamic between us, but the connection we had before just transitioned and adapted to paralysis and this new type of life. And unlike other friends that felt more rigid around me, Paul flowed with the changes and carried on.

“The scar healed up good, you know that?” he said as he moved some of my red hair off the front of my neck, exposing the scar from my spinal fusion.

“It’s still pretty noticeable. So is the scar from the tracheotomy,” I said, lifting my chin up to show the scars more.

“I don’t think it’s that bad. It’s been what, a little over two years now, right?”

“Can’t believe it’s been two years of paralysis and life in a wheelchair; the time has flown by.”

“It still seems like yesterday sometimes. You know, the day after your accident,” he started to say, his green eyes looking down into mine. “I went back to the ICU to see you. You had the Halo on and your lips were really swollen. You were so out of it. I stood there and wondered if I should talk and whether you’d hear me like in the movies.”

“I was probably an ugly mess!”

“Nah, it wasn’t like that.”

“You can’t tell me you thought I was still pretty then. I’d never believe that,” I said, testing him.

“Beauty didn’t even matter. You were broken and I just wanted you to *live*,” he said, a tone and response I didn’t expect.

“I guess I don’t think much about that since I was on the other side,” I said after a pause.

“It was pretty serious for a while. Another time when you were still in the ICU, your parents and sisters were there in the waiting room with some people from church. Everyone was

talking about your condition and how your spine wasn't gonna heal because it was so damn near severed. I said to them, 'After she gets out of here, something she wants to do but can't will piss her off enough that she will fight this thing.' I just got tired of them moping about it. You might never get your legs back, but I knew you wouldn't just sit around."

"Sit around?" I said amused.

"You know what I mean. You wouldn't just whine or give up. I know you too well to think that. You're too stubborn to let anything stop you," he said with a playful, yet accusing emphasis. He leaned in for a single kiss and then continued; "Sometimes I stood on the left side of your bed for what seemed like hours, petting your hair and holding your hand. That reminds me. I have a confession."

"Oh no, what?" I asked.

"I'd be standing there, wanting you to wake up so badly. You were out of it, the machines were beeping, and all I could do was just be there. So sometimes, when I was there holding your hand, I would take the tip of your pinky between my fingers and pinch it as hard as I could," he said and picked my still hand up from my belly.

"Paul! Don't you even!" I said, hoping he wouldn't reenact his torture.

"It had to hurt. I squeezed as hard as I could." He held my lifeless hand in his.

"I guess I didn't feel it anyway."

"That's kinda why I did it. I just wanted you to wake up. I was hoping that the doctors were wrong and you could feel, so I'd squeeze your pinky, hoping you'd wake up to smack me and tell me to stop."

"Aww, so it was actually kind of sweet! That deserves a kiss," I said as he leaned in to meet my lips for some long, relaxed kisses. The coolness of the room made the warmth of his

lips even more comfortable. He moved his hand up to cup my jaw, where he knew I could feel his touch as we kissed more. I couldn't reach around his neck, run my fingers through his brown hair, or touch his body anymore, but I still had the passion – the heart-pounding, chest-reddening, physical desire never left.

Two summers before my accident, we spent a day together ripping out my bedroom carpet and replacing the subfloor before laying new carpet. We went out later that night to the side yard with a blanket to relax under the stars. After only a couple minutes of kissing, I crawled on top of him. He unsnapped my bra and he started to lift my shirt when we heard the “Rosanna!?” of my mom catching her fifteen-year-old in a provocative position with her seventeen-year-old boyfriend. I hid mortified in my room, while Paul sat down with my mom to explain that he would never take advantage of me. The next summer, my appendix threw a fit in the middle of the night, which resulted in surgery to take it out the next day. Once I came home from the hospital, Paul took care of me like a paid nurse, lifting me up in bed, escorting me down the hall and to the bathroom, and cooking chicken noodle soup until the nausea from the anesthetics wore off. And on occasion we'd argue over stupid things like not spending enough time together or where to go for dinner. He was the first guy I ever allowed to explore *me*. He knew my deep thoughts and fears, my curves, and my faults. So post-accident, having this maintained normalcy of our relationship in my life allowed me to experience acceptance and comfort that helped me adjust.

“Goodness girl, did you know your arm is nearly frozen?” he said after he moved his hand to the back of my arm.

“I think it's chilly and I knew you were rubbing my arm, but I didn't know it was cold. I guess I can't feel temperature there,” I answered, surprised.

“You’re not just cold; you’re like ice right here and only right here.” He rubbed my arm for a moment and then got up and stood at the foot end of the bed. With a mischievous grin, he grabbed my feet and pulled my limp body down the bed.

"WHAT are you doing?"

“This should warm you up a little. You’ll see.”

He pulled me far enough down the bed that my knees were bent over the edge and feet dangling. He crawled back in bed beside me, put his hands behind my back and lifted me up to sit behind me.

"What you think?" he asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"I’m up!" I was sitting up with my back against his chest and his arms tight around me.

"How does it feel?"

"Good. Really good," I said in complete comfort, something I didn't know would be possible again during those difficult days at the hospital.

“You trust me?”

“Yeah, why?”

Without answering, he moved his hands down to the middle of my back to support me. Right after the accident, I could barely shrug my shoulders, but about a year later, when the swelling naturally went down in my spinal cord, I was able to use a few more muscles in my shoulders, upper back, and upper arms. These upper muscles and his hands supporting me at my lower ribs, allowed me to sit up tall and straight. With my shoulders back and head up high, I felt unbounded. It was so different being able to sit up with nothing behind me since I always had the support of my headrest on the wheelchair.

“You good?” he asked.

“I feel so strong and tall,” I said, looking around. The room was my sister’s bedroom before she moved out, but turned into my makeshift office at the time. As I sat up, it was the first time I realized her dresser was only a few feet in front of me. I was so enraptured in our interactions that the view in front of me could have been a field of butterflies and frolicking fawns and I wouldn’t have noticed. In that moment, it was just him and me together.

“Is it hard on your muscles? Do you feel tired?”

“No! It’s only been a couple minutes. It just feels good.” After several minutes of sitting up, he laid me back against his chest again.

"Can I stay like this for a while?" I asked, cozy with him wrapped around me.

"Yeah, of course," he said.

In those years Paul and I were together, we shared uncountable moments like this that allowed me to experience a certain freedom, something far from paralysis. And this was my therapy to accepting paralysis – living life one day, one moment at a time. I didn’t ever go to counseling or take mind numbing antidepressants for more than a few weeks because it didn’t work for me. Instead, I acknowledged the spectrum of emotions that came in all my moments: I openly talked about the past and the future, cried when I was sad and tired of being in a wheelchair, yelled when I was frustrated with my life, laughed just like I did before, and prayed, asking God for guidance. I had to find another normalcy only by experiencing life in new, different ways.

“Thanks,” I said, still sitting wrapped in his arms.

“For?” Paul asked.

“Helping me. It’s still kinda fun, isn’t it?”

“Like I said, I knew paralysis wouldn’t hold you back.”