

Princess

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Chapter 1

"Where you goin, *Princess*? We're just gettin started, you don't want to miss it!" A loud voice called out, framed by the sound of taunting snickers.

Brian kept his head down and walked faster, elbowing past the group of boys that he had once considered his friends.

A tall figure stood in the shadows beside the field house and watched the scene unfold, holding his breath and hoping he wouldn't have to intervene.

As soon as he had seen that Brian was able to get safely away from the field house without physical violence, he turned with purpose toward the main school building.

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"What you're suggesting is beyond the scope of the school's responsibilities." Mr. Hammond, the school's counselor, said seriously.

"Screw scope and responsibility, this kid needs help! And if he doesn't get it soon, I honestly believe that we're about to have another teen suicide on our hands."

Mr. Hammond looked down with regret, and seemed to be at a loss for words. Finally, he quietly said, "The school can't *officially* endorse what you're suggesting. But I suppose that if I gloss over *why* Brian needs to be absent and insist that it is a personal issue that I, as his counselor, can't discuss... I could probably arrange it."

"Thank you, Lloyd. You know that I can't promise that this will fix everything but considering the way things are going... we've got to do something."

"Who's going to do it?" Mr. Hammond asked cautiously.

"I have someone in mind. The less you know, the better. If this ends up going wrong, there could be legal consequences."

Mr. Hammond reluctantly nodded, then said, "We'll need the parents' cooperation. There's no way this will work, otherwise."

"Just smooth things over with the school and I'll take care of the parents."

"When are you going to do it?" Mr. Hammond asked cautiously.

"I think that will depend on you. If you can manage to get him the excused absence, I'd like to do it tomorrow afternoon."

After a moment of thought, Mr. Hammond quietly said to his desk, "I'm not sure how I'll manage it, but I will."

"I know that you're sticking your neck out by doing this. Just remember, it's his life we're talking about."

"I realize that." Mr. Hammond said as he looked up. "That's the only reason I'm even considering going along with it."

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Brian walked into his bedroom and sat numbly on his desk chair.

He was tired of being afraid.

He was tired of being alone.

Increasingly, he was tired of being...

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"Thank you for seeing me."

"What's this about? The receptionist said it was urgent, but I'm sure we've never met before." Mr. Weston said firmly as he closed his office door behind him and waited.

"My name is Cameron Reed, I'm a coach at your son's school. I need to talk to you about Brian."

"Coach? I can't imagine why you'd want to talk to me about Brian. He's never shown any talent for sports or an interest in anything athletic." Mr. Weston said frankly, still standing just inside the door of his office.

"I don't know if you're aware of this, but he's being relentlessly teased at school and has picked up a nickname." Coach Reed said seriously.

"Yeah. Well, maybe that'll force him to 'man up' and kick some ass. It'll probably be good for him." Mr. Weston said, finally walking fully into the room and settling behind his desk.

"I've seen Brian's reactions, and that's not the way he's dealing with it. He's doing his best to ignore it, and his failure to rise to the occasion is prompting his tormentors to escalate their attacks." Coach Reed said as he looked Mr. Weston in the eyes.

"Maybe then he'll..." Mr. Weston started to say, then realized that he was only voicing his own hopes, not what his son would actually do.

"Mr. Weston, Brian is on a path that has no happy ending. The *best* we can hope for is that he will survive. Even then, the psychological scars will follow him through his life and probably torture him every single day." Coach Reed said frankly, then continued, "As I said, that's the *best* we can hope for. Chances are, it won't end *that* well for him."

"Sit down." Mr. Weston said as he gestured to the chair across from his desk.

Cameron took the seat, then quietly said, "A few of us at the school have an idea of how we might be able to help Brian."

"Don't tell me you're going to start a lot of touchy feely "Let's all just get along" crap. Because, if you start forcing his whole class to go through that, they're probably going to kick his ass worse than ever." Mr. Weston said seriously, then added, "I'd even want to kick his ass if I was forced to sit through it."

Coach Reed slightly smiled, then said, "Well, we do plan to have a little talk with the rest of the class. But it's more about our zero tolerance policy and the consequences of inappropriate behavior. I promise, no one will sing 'cum-bay-ah'."

"So what's your plan?" Mr. Weston asked with interest.

"Here it is in a nutshell..."

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After enduring another day of non-stop taunting and teasing, Brian was dreading having to put up with three more days of the same. And the only payoff he would enjoy at the end of those three days was the weekend; two days of solitude to somewhat buoy his soul for yet another, probably even worse, week of torment.

"C'mon Princess, why you leaving so quick? Don't you want to hang around with some *real* boys?" One of the boys called out as Brian hurried past them.

Another of the boys tripped him as he walked by, but Brian was able to keep his balance and lowered his head even further as he walked faster down the hall.

"Look at that! The Princess is rushing away to hide the family jewels!" Someone called out, then the entire group burst out in laughter.

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As Brian walked out the front door of the school, he was surprised, or more accurately shocked to see his father standing by the main gate, obviously waiting for him.

"Dad?" Brian asked as he hesitantly approached his father.

"Get in the car." Mr. Weston said firmly.

Brian did as he was told and racked his brain, trying to think of what he might have done to incur his father's wrath.

"I had a talk with your P. E. coach, yesterday." Mr. Weston said without prelude as he pulled away from the front of the school.

Brian looked at his father with surprise.

"He told me that some of the boys in your class have taken to calling you 'Princess'." Mr. Weston said, never taking his eyes off the road ahead of him.

Brian tried to restrain his tears, but it was no use.

He knew that he had never been the son that his father had always wanted, but still, he had also never wanted to do anything to disappoint him.

"Stop that!" Mr. Weston said under his breath, as if Brian's tears were making him ashamed.

"I'm sorry." Brian whispered as he tried to get his tears under control.

Mr. Weston didn't respond. He just kept his eyes steadfastly on the road and continued to drive.

Once Brian was able to get his eyes dried, he looked around and noticed that they weren't heading toward home.

With reluctance and more than a little fear in his voice, he asked, "Where are we going?"

"I don't know what to do to help you, Brian." Mr. Weston said in an emotionless tone, then continued, "I've never had to deal with something like what you're going through."

Brian considered his father's words and had no trouble believing him.

"You're going to be going away for a while, somewhere that you can get some help." Mr. Weston said tonelessly.

"What? Where?" Brian asked anxiously as his mind raced.

"We're here." Mr. Weston said as he pulled into the parking lot of what used to be a grocery store.

Brian looked around and saw a large gray SUV parked at the edge of the lot.

Mr. Weston pulled his car up beside the SUV, then slowly got out to stand.

Brian waited for a moment, then reluctantly got out of the car and picked up his backpack.

"You won't be needing that." A young man with golden blond hair said as he approached from the back of the SUV.

Brian looked at his father anxiously, but saw no emotion in his face.

"Does he have any food allergies or need any medications that I should know about?" The young man asked Mr. Weston seriously.

"No. Nothing like that." Mr. Weston responded shortly.

"Come on then, Brian. We've got a long drive ahead of us." The young man said, then gestured to the SUV.

Brian looked at his father, silently begging him to stop this and not make him go with a complete stranger.

Mr. Weston looked into his son's eyes for a moment, then calmly walked away without saying a word.

Brian watched as his father got into the car and drove away.

"Brian. We need to go." The golden haired stranger said firmly.

After a quick look around the abandoned parking lot to verify that there was no other choice, Brian reluctantly walked to the passenger side of the SUV and got in.

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The pair rode in silence as the miles passed by outside the SUV.

After a while, Brian hesitantly chanced a look at the young man who was driving.

The man's hair was dark blond and seemed to have a natural wave. His eyes were a deep rich blue and his skin was tan. His overall look was attractive, although Brian wouldn't call him beautiful. He had a certain 'ruggedness' that masked any boyish good looks that he might have once had.

The young man didn't appear to be 'built', like someone who lifted weights. But Brian noticed that the man was well muscled; broad chested with a narrow waist.

When the silence had gone on too long, Brian finally screwed up his courage enough to ask, "Where are we going?"

"To a little place that's about two hundred and fifty miles from anything you would call civilization." The man said frankly.

"What are we going to do there?" Brian asked hesitantly, feeling more than half sure that he didn't really want to know.

"Brian, there are some things you need to figure out. Me telling you everything that we're going to be doing in advance would only complicate the process and make it that much harder for you in the long run. I need for you to trust me."

"Trust you? How can I trust you when I don't even know your name?" Brian asked helplessly.

"You never asked." The man said as he spared Brian a glance, then said, "And my name is Jason, but everyone calls me Jack."

"I'm Brian... but I guess you knew that." Brian mumbled awkwardly.

"I tell you what, Brian. If you'll reach under the seat, there's a CD case. Why don't you pick something out for us to listen to?" Jack asked quietly.

Brian was surprised by the request, but did as he was told and took out the zippered nylon case that looked something like a photo album.

As he looked through the CDs, he noticed that they were all of singers and bands that he'd never heard of.

"Don't you have any top 40 or pop music?" Brian asked hopefully.

"What I have is in that case. Either pick something for us to listen to, or we can ride in silence for the next few hours." Jack said firmly and there was a hardness in his tone that put Brian on edge.

Finally, Brian ended up picking a CD at random, since he had no idea what any of them sounded like, anyway.

If asked, he wouldn't be able to describe the style of music. It seemed to be almost a Native American chant at it's base and some flutes, but as the song progressed, synthesizers and electric guitars came into play along with a drum beat that was so strong that Brian could feel the vibration coursing through him.

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After a while longer of riding and a few more CDs, Brian turned down the music and asked, "Are we going to stop soon? I'm hungry and I have to use the bathroom."

Jack glanced at him with annoyance for a moment, then carefully said, "It's about an hour before we'll be off this highway. Once we're on state roads, we'll be able to stop for supper. If you've got to take a leak before that, just say the word and I'll pull over."

Brian's eyes went wide, then he stammered, "I think I can wait until we stop to eat."

"Suit yourself." Jack said without concern as he focused entirely on the open road before him.

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When Jack left the highway, it was to get onto a road that seemed to be completely deserted.

In the ten or fifteen minutes that they were on the new road, they didn't see any other cars.

"It's time for a break. Get out and walk around and get your blood circulating again." Jack said before getting out of the truck.

Brian undid his seat belt and took a few seconds to consider the situation he found himself in.

Finally, Brian stepped out of the SUV to the sight of Jack unzipping his pants.

"What are you doing?" Brian gasped.

"Taking a piss. If you got to go, now would be the time." Jack said simply, then as Brian watched, Jack pulled his cock out.

After a moment of pissing, Jack glanced over and saw that Brian had turned away. Even from the back, Jack could tell that Brian was blushing scarlet red. The red was immediately noticeable on his neck and even the tips of his ears.

"I'm guessing that you've never pissed with another guy." Jack said cautiously.

"No! Never!" Brian said as he tried to keep himself from running away and hiding in embarrassment.

Jack finished his business, then tucked himself away before saying, "I bet you've gotta go really bad by now. How's about I go get our food together while you take care of that."

After a moment, Brian turned and found Jack looking at him expectantly.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." Brian mumbled.

"Come to the back of the truck when you're finished. We need to have our dinner, then get back on the road."

Brian waited for a moment, then squatted down to see Jack's feet under the SUV. As Jack had said, he was at the back of the truck, presumably fixing something for them to eat.

Brian nervously looked around, seeing only natural, unspoiled greenery and the road, which was empty as far as the eye could see in both directions.

Nervously, he took out his dick and immediately began to take a long and much needed pee.

The sense of relief overrode his nervousness for a moment as his aching bladder continued to drain.

As soon as he was finished, Brian quickly tucked himself away and nervously looked around again.

Jack was still at the back of the truck and there were still no cars.

Blushing slightly, just from the fact that Jack had known what he had been doing, Brian slowly made his way to the back of the truck.

"Here." Jack said as he offered Brian a box of hand wipes.

Brian took the offered container, then looked at Jack curiously.

"We don't have a sink out here. You can use one of those to wash your hands." Jack said simply, then went back to taking things out of an ice chest.

"Thanks." Brian said with surprise, then took one of the damp towels from the box and cleaned his hands.

"I've got salami, pickle loaf and turkey sandwiches here. Pick whatever kind you want." Jack said as he tore open a bag of potato chips.

Brian didn't usually eat sandwiches, but he was very hungry and the turkey sounded good.

The plate that Jack handed him looked something like a pie pan, but shallower.

Brian took two of the half sandwiches and put them on his plate, then added a generous handful of the sour cream and onion potato chips.

"Drinks are in the ice chest. Just don't overdo it on the drinking, because I don't want to be stopping every few minutes the rest of the way." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded, then selected an orange soda from the variety in the ice chest.

"What do you see out here?" Jack asked contemplatively as he leaned against the side of the truck and ate his sandwich.

Brian looked around at the absence of anything familiar to him and honestly answered, "Nothing."

Jack nodded, as if he had expected the answer.

After a long moment of silence, Brian asked, "What do you see?"

Jack smiled at the question, then said, "If I told you, then you wouldn't be able to come up with the answer for yourself the next time I asked you."

Brian puzzled over the response as he looked around again.

Some trees and a road. There was nothing else to see and no other answer that he could come up with.

Brian took a large bite of his sandwich and was surprised at just how good it tasted.

The turkey sandwich had tomatoes and lettuce on it and the flavors seemed to explode in his mouth.

"Hey, this sandwich is really good." Brian said honestly.

"Yeah. My secret ingredient is mayonnaise." Jack said with a grin, then added, "Actually, I think it probably tastes better because you're hungry. There's an old saying that 'hunger is the best seasoning'."

Brian nodded his agreement, since his mouth was busy enjoying more of the delicious sandwich.

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They finished their meal in virtual silence.

Occasionally, Brian would sneak a glance at Jack in an attempt to gauge his mood, but couldn't get any sense of what the man was feeling.

Finally, after packing everything away, they got back into the SUV and were on their way again.

Brian was trying to think of something to say to Jack, just to make conversation, when Jack beat him to it.

"I guess that there *is* something that I should tell you to prepare you for what's coming up." Jack said ominously.

Brian turned to look at Jack curiously, pretty sure he wasn't going to like what was about to be said.

"Sometimes, life's not fair." Jack said simply, then glanced at Brian to see if he was listening.

"You'll get no argument from me." Brian said as he fought to contain his nervous laughter.

Jack nodded as he turned his attention forward again, then said, "I've heard that the other kids at school have been teasing you and have given you a nickname. Do you know why they're doing that?"

There was a long moment of silence, but Brian finally said, "Yeah."

Jack waited for a moment, then said, "Well?"

After a few seconds to gather his courage, Brian hesitantly mumbled, "I, um... I guess it all started when I wouldn't take off my underwear and shower with the other guys after gym class."

Jack considered the answer, then quietly said, "You know that them teasing you and calling you by that name isn't the right way to behave, don't you?"

"Yeah." Brian said as he looked up at Jack with surprise, interested to know where he was going.

"And you also know that, just because it's wrong, doesn't mean that they're going to stop." Jack said as he glanced at Brian again.

"Yeah." Brian said with resignation.

"So it's not right, it's not fair, it keeps happening, and it's getting worse... is that about right?" Jack asked seriously.

Brian felt the tears welling in his eyes, but he managed to force out another, "Yeah."

Jack could see Brian fighting to hold in his tears, but felt that he needed to continue, just a little more, to lay the groundwork for the coming days.

"Try thinking about this, Brian." Jack said, trying to draw the boy's attention, "You have very little control over what other people do. I mean, you can run to your teachers when there's a problem so they can intervene. Or you can try to get the school to crack down on bullying and harassment. But realistically, what you have the most control over is yourself."

The sound of the engine was the only sound in the SUV for the next few minutes as Brian thought over Jack's words.

Brian looked up when he saw something besides the seemingly endless blur of trees outside his window.

Jack pulled the SUV up to a gas station and stopped the engine.

"This'll probably be your last chance to visit a proper toilet for a while. Go on, if you need to, while I gas up the truck." Jack said seriously.

"Thanks." Brian said gratefully, then quickly rushed away.

Jack watched as Brian left, then took in a long, slow breath. The emotions that he had been suppressing while in Brian's company finally made their way to the surface.

Jack pulled a red bandanna handkerchief out of his back pocket and quickly wiped his eyes.

"He needs you to be strong." Jack told himself, then took in a few deep breaths to regain his control.

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Brian looked up at the squeak of the opening door.

"Do you want to get any snacks or anything while we're here? This'll probably be the last stop we make." Jack asked as he walked past the sink to the urinal.

Brian quickly turned his eyes toward the sink, trying not to look at Jack without being obvious about it. After a moment to consider the question, he cautiously said, "If you don't mind me eating potato chips in the truck, I'd be fine with the chips we had at supper."

"Sounds good." Jack said as he flushed the urinal, then walked to Brian's side.

It took a moment for Brian to figure out what Jack was waiting for, but finally he twigged to it and quickly said, "Sorry! Go ahead, I'm done."

Brian hurried to the towel dispenser and dried his hands.

When he glanced over at the sink, he noticed that Jack was putting eye drops in his eyes.

Once Jack was done, he glanced at Brian and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Well, I'm done here, if that's what you're asking. But since I don't know where we're going or what we'll be doing, I can't say that I'm ready to go." Brian said frankly, then seemed to be bracing himself for an argument.

Jack broke into a smile and said, "That's it, Brian! That, what you just did, how you just felt. *That's* exactly what all of this is about."

"Huh?" Brian asked in confusion.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Don't worry about it. You're on the right track."

Brian looked at Jack uncertainly, then followed him out of the restroom.

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As they walked out of the store, Brian noticed the chill in the air and hurried to get into the SUV.

Jack got the chips from the back of the truck and gave them to Brian before they started the next leg of their journey.

As Brian munched his chips and watched the scenery passing them by, he realized that he wasn't feeling as anxious as he had.

He was still nervous about facing the unknown, who wouldn't be, but he got the sense that Jack wouldn't go out of his way to make him miserable.

Whatever they were about to do, Jack thought it was important and was doing it, doing all of this to help him.

"There are some boots in a plastic bag behind your seat. Why don't you try them on and see if they'll fit." Jack said as he kept most of his attention on the road which was becoming increasingly winding.

Brian tried to reach behind him and ended up taking off his seat belt to finally get hold of the bag.

When he got the bag open, he looked inside and said, "These are covered in dried mud."

"Yeah. That's why they're in the bag." Jack said simply.

Brian took off his shoes, then carefully worked his right foot into the stiff and mud covered boot.

"How close are they to fitting?" Jack asked after a moment.

"They're a little bit loose, but not too bad." Brian said slowly, then added, "If I tighten the laces, I think they'll be fine."

"Good. Because it's likely that we'll hit a mud hole or two on our hike up to the cabin. I don't think your regular shoes would handle that too well." Jack said frankly.

"We're going to a cabin?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But we can't just drive the truck all the way up to the front door. We'll have to get out and walk for a few minutes."

Brian nodded, then hesitantly asked, "How much longer until we get there?"

"Hard to say. Probably just over an hour. But if there are any trees down along the way or if the ground's too muddy, it could take longer."

Brian wanted to ask more questions, but didn't want to push. As nice as Jack seemed at the moment, Brian could tell that the young man became impatient with him when he chattered.

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After a few minutes of silence, Brian took out the CD case and selected another CD for them to listen to.

Brian was shocked when the music started and it was rap. He was about to say something when he noticed that the music behind the rapper was flutes and a synthesizer along with the same driving beat from earlier. Brian found himself somewhere between surprise and hilarity at the bizarre combination of sounds that somehow seemed to work perfectly well together.

When the first song had finished, Brian turned and said, "I really like your music."

Jack smiled and said, "I'm glad. I don't listen to this music all the time, but I really enjoy it when I'm driving. It puts me in just the right state of mind; both energized and tranquil."

Brian considered for a moment as he listened to the music, then finally said, "Yeah. It might be good for background music when I'm studying."

"It might be. You should try it." Jack said frankly.

"Will I get the chance? I mean, am I going to get to go home again?" Brian asked quietly, then looked at Jack hesitantly.

Jack looked away from the road long enough to look Brian in the eyes as he said, "Yes. I promise."

Brian nodded, then turned his attention to the seemingly endless sea of trees racing by outside the window in the diminishing, early evening light.

"I'm taking you to the cabin to give you a chance to figure things out. Once you've done that, I promise that I'll take you back to your home and your family." Jack said compassionately.

Brian nodded again but didn't respond otherwise.

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"Are you belted in? The ride's about to get rough." Jack asked as he pulled to the side of the road.

Brian quickly buckled his seat belt, having forgotten after getting the boots from the back seat.

"Pop the CD and make sure the case is put away." Jack said as he looked around the truck quickly, making sure everything was secured.

Once he seemed satisfied that everything would travel well, he pulled the SUV off the road and into a stand of trees.

Brian wanted to ask Jack if he was nuts, but was too shocked to do anything but hold on tight and look at everything around them.

"Hang on!" Jack said, then the SUV jolted as he drove across uneven ground, weaving among trees.

Brian felt as if he would be ricocheting around the cabin of the SUV if he weren't belted in.

Just as Brian seemed to be getting used to their trek across the uneven terrain, Jack turned sharply and they started going up a steep incline.

"Hold on tight!" Jack called out over the straining of the engine to maintain it's speed as they climbed.

Brian dug his fingers into the dashboard and the door handle as the SUV seemed to be trying to climb nearly straight up the side of a hill.

After a moment to adjust to the new sensation, Brian turned to Jack to ask him to slow down, or at least be more careful.

When he looked at Jack, everything else seemed to disappear for just an instant.

The expression on Jack's face was one of unbridled joy. The face that Brian had seen earlier as rugged now glowed with excitement.

The memory of that expression on Jack's face burned itself into Brian's mind.

Before he could dwell too much on that, they finally crested the small hill and Brian was surprised to find that they were on what was more or less, a road.

"Good news. Since we were able to take the short cut, we should be able to get to the cabin before midnight." Jack said happily.

Brian just nodded dumbly, still not able to force his hands to release the dash board or the door handle.

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They followed the on-again, off-again road for nearly half an hour before Jack left the road completely and drove cross-country again.

By now, Brian was more or less getting used to being jolted and jostled.

"Here we are!" Jack said happily as he pulled the SUV to a stop.

Brian couldn't see anything except what was illuminated by the headlights, but from what he *could* see, they were nowhere.

"Come on, sitting here ain't getting it done." Jack said, then climbed out of the truck.

Brian hesitantly released his seat belt, then opened his door.

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"It's cold out here!" Brian exclaimed.

"Yeah." Jack agreed as he opened the back of the SUV.

Brian could see where Jack was, from the dim illumination of the interior light and made his way back to join him.

"You can carry the bedrolls or the ice chest." Jack said as he pulled two backpacks out of the SUV.

"Bedrolls, I guess." Brian said hesitantly.

"Go on. Grab your backpack so we can get going." Jack said as he put on the larger of the two.

"I, um... I don't know how to wear one of these things." Brian said cautiously.

"Try. Then if you can't get it, I'll help you." Jack said seriously as he hefted the ice chest out of the SUV and put it on the ground.

From the tone of Jack's voice, Brian got the impression that he should have tried before asking for help. He didn't have much chance to think about it. The weight of the backpack drew all his attention.

"I can't..." Brian began to say, but caught himself and actually tried to stand with the backpack on his back.

"Hold still, I'll fasten the strap around your waist, that will keep it from shifting around." Jack said quickly.

Brian did his best to hold still, but had to adjust his footing a few times to balance the huge heavy thing on his back.

"Thanks." Brian grunted.

"Here. We need to get moving." Jack said as he handed the bedrolls to Brian.

As much as Brian wanted to groan, he was able to keep it to himself and just accepted the bedrolls.

A moment later, Jack closed the cargo area of the SUV and Brian found himself in complete darkness.

He blinked his eyes, somehow thinking that he might have closed them.

In all his life, Brian couldn't remember ever being in such complete and all consuming darkness.

Suddenly, a light came on and Brian quickly turned.

"Are you ready?" Jack asked from the darkness.

"I think I'm as ready as I'm going to be." Brian said honestly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "It'll have to be good enough. Come on."

From the position of the light, Brian thought that Jack must be wearing some kind of hat with a flashlight mounted to it.

After a moment to get his balance right, accommodating the unfamiliar weight, Brian followed Jack, making sure to keep close so he could use Jack's light to avoid obstacles in his path.

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After slowly walking through mud that seemed intent on sucking the boots off his feet, Brian hopefully asked, "Can we stop for a rest?"

"You can stop if you want, but I'm going to keep going." Jack said frankly.

Brian weighed how nice it would be to rest for a few minutes, against the possibility of being left alone in complete darkness.

"I'll keep going." Brian finally said reluctantly.

"We're almost halfway there." Jack said with a smile in his voice.

Brian wanted to groan at the announcement.

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"Here it is." Jack said as they crested an incline that had nearly stopped Brian in his tracks.

Brian looked ahead of them and could barely see the outline of a wooden structure in the dim illumination of Jack's flashlight.

"Still cold?" Jack asked with apparent humor as he increased his pace toward the cabin.

Brian felt like every part of his body was dripping with sweat from the effort of carrying the backpack and bedrolls.

"Not so much, now." Brian forced himself to say.

Jack chuckled as he walked up to the door and opened it.

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"Give me a second to get a light on, then I'll help you with your backpack. You can drop those bedrolls." Jack said from ahead of him.

Brian didn't need to be told twice. He let the bedrolls drop at his feet as he strained to see what Jack was doing.

Suddenly, a match was lit and a moment later the soft glow of lantern light began to fill the room.

"That's better." Jack said happily, then quickly took a headband off his head that had a small, rectangular flashlight on it.

Brian found the clasp of the straps around his waist and undid it. As he was trying to figure out how to get the pack off his back, Jack appeared at his side and suddenly the weight he had been carrying for so long was being lifted from him.

"Thanks." Brian said with relief.

"You did good, Brian." Jack said as he carefully sat the backpack aside.

Brian looked at him curiously.

"I'm guessing that you've never done anything like this before. I really expected you to be bitching and moaning for the entire hike." Jack said frankly, then added, "What you just did wasn't easy and you bore it well. I'm proud of you."

Brian was speechless and felt tears beginning to well in his eyes. He didn't even know why he wanted to cry except, maybe, that he couldn't remember the last time anyone said that they were proud of him.

"It's late. We have a few things we need to get done before we can call it a night." Jack said as he turned away.

Brian looked around curiously, not knowing what he could do.

"There are coats by the door. Put one on before you cool down too much." Jack said as he knelt in front of a big thing that looked something like a stove and started putting wood in it.

Brian looked through the coats and was happy to find that one of them appeared to be close to his size.

He put it on and was shocked at how cold it felt against his sweaty skin.

"You can lay the bedrolls out on the bed while I get the fire started." Jack said, still kneeling on the floor.

Brian looked around and spotted the bed; the one and only bed.

He looked down at the bedrolls, then at the bed again uncertainly.

"There's pillows in that garbage bag by the bed." Jack said over his shoulder.

Brian nodded, then proceeded to unroll the two sleeping bags and place them on the bed, side by side.

As Brian was putting the pillows on the bed, Jack walked up beside him and said, "That'll work. When you're finished doing that, I'll show you where the outhouse is."

"Outhouse?" Brian asked as he looked around the cabin quickly.

It hadn't occurred to him before, but as he took inventory, he could see that the cabin was just one room. There was no bathroom.

"Yeah. Sooner or later you're going to need it, so I might as well show it to you now." Jack said as he rummaged through one of the backpacks.

Brian finished laying out the pillows, then noticed that Jack was putting rolls of toilet paper on a small shelf by the door of the cabin.

"We can't leave the toilet paper out in the outhouse or the raccoons and such will get in there and tear it up." Jack said frankly, then offered Brian a flashlight as he approached.

Brian took the flashlight, then glanced over at the table where Jack had left the small headband flashlight.

"I need to save the 'headlight' for when I need to do stuff in the dark and my hands are full." Jack said simply.

Brian nodded as he waited for Jack to lead the way.

"Will you be needing toilet paper on this trip?" Jack asked from beside the door.

"No. I, um, took care of that at the gas station." Brian said shyly.

Jack nodded, then led the way outside.

* * * * *

"See the path?" Jack asked in the complete darkness.

Brian slowly scanned around with the flashlight and finally settled on a small, sort-of-a trail leading up a hill, away from the cabin. "Is that it?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No, that leads to the spring. It's over this way, to your right." Jack said seriously.

Brian moved the flashlight beam to the right and found another path leading down and away from them.

"That's it. Let's go." Jack said firmly.

Brian led the way, and wondered why Jack had him holding the flashlight, since Jack was the one who knew where they were going.

"See that rock? We turn right here." Jack said slowly.

Brian searched to the right and found where the path continued.

After a few minutes of walking, Brian spotted the tiny little house, off to itself.

"Usually when we need to take a whiz, we'll just go behind a tree. But since we're here, we might as well make use of it." Jack said casually.

"I, um... don't need to go." Brian said hesitantly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Jack quietly asked, "Brian, do you remember when I said that what you have most control over is yourself?"

"Yeah." Brian said cautiously.

"One of the things you can control is the way you react to certain situations. From the short time that I've known you, I can tell that you're extremely timid when it comes to your body and the bodies of others." Jack said carefully.

Brian didn't respond, so Jack continued, "While we're here, I'm going to do my best to take every opportunity to help you learn to manage that shyness, or at least to make your reactions less obvious."

Brian nodded, but it was wasted in the complete darkness.

"Come on, I've got to piss." Jack said quietly.

"You want for me to watch you pee?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Truthfully, no. But if you can't get some control over your shyness, things are only going to get worse for you as time goes on. The best way I can think of to help you deal with it is by desensitizing you to it through repeated exposure." Jack said frankly.

"Are you, um, going to want to watch me pee, too?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. At least, not yet. But before we're done here we'll probably do that just to be sure that you can manage while you're around other guys in public bathrooms and locker rooms and stuff." Jack said honestly.

"What about, um... number two." Brian asked quietly, almost mumbling the last words.

"We need to work on your terminology, so you don't sound like a little kid. But to answer your question, no. I can't think of any circumstance where someone else will be watching when you take a dump, so there's no need for you to have to prepare for that." Jack said thoughtfully.

Brian thought about Jack's words. Everything that Jack had been saying fell into place and began to make sense. Jack was going through this, and probably all of it, to prepare him for dealing with the situations that he hadn't been able to handle on his own so far.

With his heart racing and sounding in his ears, Brian screwed up his courage and quietly said, "Okay."

* * * * *

"If you really don't need to go, you can just hold the light." Jack said once they were inside the outhouse.

"Actually, I do kinda need to." Brian said shyly.

"Do you want to go first? I'll hold the light and promise not to look, if you want." Jack said seriously.

"No. Go ahead." Brian said quietly.

Jack reached down to unzip his pants and noticed that Brian had the flashlight focused on his crotch.

He fought the impulse to say anything about that and proceeded to pull the zipper down.

"You okay, Brian?" Jack asked carefully.

"I, um..." Brian trailed off.

"By the time we're done, I'm sure that this will be no big deal." Jack said reassuringly as he slowly took out his cock.

Brian's hand holding the flashlight started to shake slightly as Jack's cock came into view.

"Would you shine the light so I can see my target?" Jack asked quietly.

"Sorry!" Brian said nervously, then hurried to shine the flashlight on one of the two toilet seats mounted on a wooden bench.

"It's okay, Brian. Just relax, it's fine." Jack said gently.

It took a moment for Jack to be able to begin. He didn't typically have a 'shy bladder', but he also didn't typically have an audience with a flashlight.

Once the urine started to flow, Jack relaxed and enjoyed the sensation.

When he was done, he tucked himself away and zipped up.

"Do you need to go while we're here? I'll hold the light for you." Jack asked quietly.

"Um, yeah. But you promise not to look?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Sure." Jack said as he accepted the flashlight.

He took the light and focused it on the other toilet, in front of Brian, then said, "Okay, I've got my eyes closed."

Brian's eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough that he could see Jack's face well enough to tell that he had, indeed, closed his eyes.

Nervously, Brian took out his dick and tried to force himself to pee.

Jack waited patiently, keeping his eyes firmly shut.

Brian took in a few deep breaths, trying to relax himself.

"Don't worry about me. There's no rush. You take as long as you need." Jack said quietly.

"Jack, could you not talk to me right now? It's really not helping." Brian said anxiously.

"Whatever you say." Jack said with a smile.

There was a long moment of silence, then Jack heard the slightest trickle.

He held his breath, not wanting to make any sound that might distract Brian and cause him to freeze up.

Soon, the flow of urine stopped and Brian quietly said, "I'm done."

"Okay." Jack said gently, then handed the flashlight to Brian as he continued, "Why don't you see if you can find your way back to the cabin."

"Alright." Brian said in a relaxed tone, relieved that Jack didn't want to talk about what they had just done.

* * * * *

"Wash up." Jack said as soon as they were inside the cabin, then tossed the box of hand wipes to Brian.

Even though Brian had seen it coming from a mile away, he still didn't come anywhere near close to catching it.

"Not much of a catcher, huh?" Jack asked cautiously.

"No. I'm not really good at anything like that." Brian said as he picked up the box of hand wipes from the floor.

"I'm sure we have a baseball around here somewhere. Maybe we can work on that." Jack said casually.

"I really suck at sports." Brian said frankly.

Jack shrugged, then said, "You don't have to be good at them, or even enjoy them. But I think things will be a lot easier for you in the long run if you're able to at least manage the basics. You know, pitching, catching, running... stuff like that."

"I suck at all of it." Brian said darkly.

"Things like that take practice. I'm betting that you haven't ever really tried." Jack said speculatively.

"No. When you totally suck at doing something, why would you want to keep doing it?" Brian asked indignantly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "You've got a really good point, Brian."

"I do?" Brian asked with surprise.

"Yes. No one likes to fail. So why set yourself up to fail, over and over again when there's no real payoff to winning?" Jack asked seriously.

"Yeah." Brian said with a smile, happy to know that Jack understood how he felt.

"Well, now things are different. The stakes have changed. Continuing to suck at sports will make things harder for you with the other kids at school. If you improve, I can't say things will be great for you, but there will be one less thing for them to tease you about."

"Are you going to get, like, mad and scream at me and stuff if I can't catch or throw right?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"No. But I might get upset with you if you give up, or don't really try." Jack said honestly.

Brian nodded but didn't say anything more.

"Who yelled at you, Brian?" Jack asked quietly.

Brian looked up at him curiously.

"It sounds like someone tried to teach you this stuff before, and in doing so, killed your motivation for ever wanting to learn it at all." Jack said sympathetically.

Brian thought about that for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"Who was it, Brian?" Jack asked quietly.

"My dad." Brian whispered.

Jack nodded, then said, "We're each responsible for our own accomplishments and failures in life. We can't blame other people for the things that we didn't have the strength or will to achieve."

Brian thought about the words, then nodded his agreement.

"But we'll make an exception when it comes to your father." Jack added with a smile. "I have a feeling that we're going to be blaming him for all kinds of things before this is all over."

Brian looked at Jack with surprise.

"When you were too young to know better, he berated you and made you feel like a failure. Face it. He sucks. It's all his fault." Jack said with a teasing grin.

"Yeah." Brian said with a smile.

"So, for this one thing, you're off the hook. It's not your fault, it's not your failure. We still have to fix it, but there's no reason for you to feel the least bit bad about not learning this stuff earlier." Jack said firmly.

"Yeah!" Brian said happily, looking as though the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

"It's late, so we'd better get to bed. If you'll look in your backpack, there should be some sweatpants and a sweatshirt in there." Jack said as he walked to the bigger of the two backpacks.

"Oh. Yeah, thanks." Brian said at the abrupt change in subject.

"I know the clothes in there probably aren't what you're used to, but they should be fine for while we're here. No one is going to see them but the two of us." Jack said frankly as he took some clothes out of the backpack and laid them out on the bed.

Brian opened the smaller backpack and found the sweat pants and shirt almost immediately. He unfolded them to gauge their size, then noticed that Jack was taking off his coat.

"Go on and change. We need to get some sleep." Jack said frankly.

Brian also took off his coat and stole the occasional glance at Jack as he continued to undress.

"Brian." Jack said, now standing only in his boxer shorts.

At the sound of his name, Brian looked at Jack curiously.

After observing Brian's reaction, Jack said, "Oh, good. It looks like you don't have any issues with us changing clothes at the same time."

"No. At least, not until the underwear comes off." Brian said timidly.

"We'll work on that. But would you do something for me?" Jack asked casually as he started to pull on some faded and very comfortable looking sweat pants.

"Sure. What?" Brian asked casually as he pulled down his pants.

"Think about what you're feeling right this minute." Jack said as he stopped to look Brian in the eyes. "You don't appear to be the least bit nervous about looking at me or me looking at you. Think about how drastically different your reaction is when one little scrap of cloth is removed."

Brian slowly nodded, then continued to dress for bed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Jack was doing something in front of a small mirror hanging on the wall.

He stopped what he was doing and watched for a moment, until he realized that Jack was taking out his contact lenses.

Brian could feel a chill on his exposed skin and quickly pulled on his sweat pants.

"I'm leaving a flashlight beside your bed. Make sure you know where it is before I put the light out." Jack said seriously.

Brian pulled the sweatshirt on over his head, then nodded.

"I guess that's it. If you get hungry during the night, you can help yourself to what's in the ice chest." Jack said as he looked around the cabin.

Brian glanced at the ice chest and nodded.

Jack walked up to him and, much to Brian's surprise, pulled him into a gentle hug.

"Don't worry about anything, Brian. Once we get you past this bump in the road, your life is going to be wonderful. I'm sure of it." Jack said with conviction.

"Thank you for doing this, Jack." Brian responded quietly, then continued, "Even though I don't know what's going to happen or what it is that I'm supposed to do, I appreciate that you're going through all of this to help me."

"You're worth it, Brian." Jack said seriously. "Remember that."

Brian nodded as he enjoyed another minute of the hug.

Finally, Jack released him and said, "Good night, Brian."

"Good night, Jack." Brian said as they each made their way to their own sides of the bed and got into their separate sleeping bags.

Brian did as Jack had said and made sure he knew where the flashlight was, beside his bed.

Jack took one last look around the cabin before lowering the flame of the lantern until it went completely out.

Chapter 2

Brian awoke to an unusual sensation.

His body was wrapped in warmth and comfort, but the end of his nose was ice cold.

He blinked his eyes and tried to get his bleary mind to explain why such a strange and unlikely thing was happening to him.

As he slowly came more awake, the memories came back to him in a rush.

His father had picked him up from school and handed him over to a complete stranger who went by the name of Jack.

Brian cautiously turned over to look beside him in the bed and his breath caught at the sight.

Jack was lying there, turned on his side and facing him.

Brian couldn't help but marvel at how innocent and... beautiful Jack looked as he slept.

Jack's golden hair lay tousled and unkempt on the pillow and it framed his youthful, nearly angelic, face.

It was all that Brian could do not to reach out and touch him.

Anything so beautiful just begged to be touched, held... adored.

Before Brian could pursue that train of thought any further, he realized that he needed to use the bathroom.

It was uncomfortably cold in the cabin and Brian was reluctant to get out of the incredibly warm and snuggly sleeping bag. But when nature calls, it's best to answer.

Brian carefully got out of the sleeping bag, doing his best not to make any noise and wake Jack.

He immediately took his coat down off the peg by the door and put it on, then forced his feet into the stiff boots he had worn the night before.

* * * * *

The early morning chill outside was like a slap in the face, and Brian was jolted from his half-drowsy state into full wakefulness.

The sky was light, and the first rays of the sun were just peeking over the horizon.

As much as Brian would like to have stood on the porch and enjoyed the view, the sudden chill in the air had changed his bladder's request for relief into a demand.

He started down and away from the cabin, toward the outhouse, when Jack's words from the night before came to him.

Jack had said that when they needed to pee, they would normally just go behind a tree.

Brian decided that, since Jack was going to all the trouble of trying to help him, that he should at least put forth an effort and not wait to be told what to do every step of the way.

He glanced behind him and saw that the cabin was just out of view, then walked off the path and found a suitable tree to christen.

* * * * *

As Brian walked back toward the cabin, he saw the door open, and Jack stepped out.

"Good morning!" Jack said with a relaxed smile as he casually walked down the path, away from the cabin.

Brian was surprised to see that Jack was wearing a pair of glasses. They weren't horn rimmed, but the frames were stark black against his gentle features.

Jack noticed Brian's surprised look and said, "It wouldn't make sense for me to wear my contacts while we're camping. Besides, I think my eyes will appreciate the break. I know the glasses look dorky, but I guess that's part of roughing it."

"No. I think they look great." Brian said quickly, then added, "You should think about wearing them all the time."

"Really?" Jack asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Seriously." Brian said with conviction.

"Thanks." Jack said with a smile, then quickly added, "Excuse me, I need to visit the lava-tree."

"I already marked that one." Brian said as he pointed.

"I'll watch my step." Jack said with a grin, then hurried away.

Brian continued back toward the cabin, feeling unusually relaxed.

Once Brian was back inside the cabin, he was surprised that it didn't feel nearly as cold as it did when he first woke up.

There was certainly a chill in the air, but it wasn't quite so insistent after being outside.

After a moment of looking around, Brian walked to the stove and hesitantly reached out to touch the handle.

Once he was assured that it wasn't going to burn him, he carefully opened the wood stove and found a bed of faintly burning coals.

The heat that emanated from the stove felt so good that it was almost intoxicating.

Brian walked to a bin of wood, a few feet away, and carried two small pieces back to the stove and put them in.

He waited for a moment to see that he hadn't suffocated the coals, then when the wood started smoking, he closed the door of the stove and stood.

"I'll get the fire going, then we can go get some water from the spring while the cabin warms up." Jack said as he walked into the cabin.

"I already added some wood. There were still coals left from last night." Brian said hesitantly.

Jack walked to the stove and peeked inside before saying, "Good job! I didn't think you'd know to do that."

"I saw you build the fire last night." Brian said shyly.

"You did good." Jack said with a smile as he patted Brian on the shoulder, then added, "Let's get the jugs and head up to the spring. As soon as we have water, we can start making breakfast."

"We? As in, 'me' cooking?" Brian asked cautiously, then accepted two empty 2 ½ gallon containers from Jack.

"Yeah." Jack said with a grin. "Who knows? You might enjoy it."

"I don't mind helping, but the only cooking I know how to do involves a microwave." Brian said frankly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Don't worry, I'll show you what to do."

Even though the air was cold, the sunlight was sparkling through the trees.

Brian felt on the verge of sensory overload from all the intense sights and unfamiliar sounds all around them.

"It's just up here." Jack said, noticing Brian's distraction.

"It's really beautiful here." Brian said in wonder.

"It is." Jack said with a smile as he looked around.

"I guess when I've seen pictures of forests and stuff, I never really... it's so... BIG!" Brian said, obviously not able to express what he was feeling.

Jack chuckled and nodded his agreement before saying, "Here's the spring. You're going to get wet, there's no way around it. So just fill your jugs and try not to worry about it."

Brian stopped and couldn't seem to wrap his mind around what he was seeing.

Water.

Coming out of a rock.

All on it's own.

"Rinse your jugs out before you start filling them." Jack said, then reached over a shallow pool of water below the spring and caught some water in his first jug.

He swished it around a few times, then dumped the water into the pool.

"It only takes a few minutes, but the jug gets heavier as it fills." Jack said as he started filling the jug. "Remember that you have to carry the jugs back to the cabin, so just fill them as heavy as you're willing to carry. We can come back as often as we want for more water."

"Okay. Thanks for telling me." Brian said honestly. "I would've tried to carry them full, because it might be part of an important lesson or something."

"I don't do lessons on an empty stomach." Jack said with a grin, then sat his first jug aside and picked up the other.

"I'll remember that." Brian said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Here's your bread." Jack said as he took a loaf of bread from a plastic shopping bag.

Brian took the bread from him, but had no idea what he was supposed to do with it.

"And here's your toaster." Jack said with a smile as he held up a flat metal basket on the end of a long metal arm with a wooden handle.

"Okaaaaay." Brian said slowly as he hesitantly accepted the strange implement.

"Put the bread in the basket, latch it closed, then open the stove and toast the bread over the fire. You have to keep a close watch on it, because it will burn quick." Jack said frankly.

After a moment of consideration, Brian nodded confidently.

"While you're doing that, I'll be making us some bacon and eggs."

"That sounds great!" Brian said as he figured out how to open the latch on the basket.

Brian loaded two pieces of bread into the basket, side by side, then latched it closed. He opened the stove and watched carefully as he moved the bread close to the flames.

"I'm making coffee, but you can have water or a soda from the ice chest, if you like." Jack said frankly.

"I've never really had coffee before. I've always thought it smelled good. I think I'd like to try it." Brian said consideringly, then yelped, "Crap!"

"What?" Jack asked quickly.

"I burned the toast." Brian said as he withdrew the smoldering pieces of bread from the stove.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Try again."

"Yeah." Brian said with resignation, then looked around before asking, "Where's the trash?"

"We'll be using plastic shopping bags, so we can haul our trash out with us when we leave. But when it's something like that, you just throw it outside, away from the cabin, so the critters can enjoy it."

Jack smiled as he watched Brian take the toast out of the basket and walk directly to the front door.

He hadn't missed the fact that Brian had chosen to go behind a tree this morning instead of going to the outhouse. To Jack, it was evidence that Brian was honestly making an effort to overcome his fears.

A moment later, Brian walked back into the cabin and returned to his place in front of the stove.

"How do you like your eggs, Brian?" Jack asked as he put coffee grounds into a percolator that appeared to be decades old.

"Either scrambled or stepped on." Brian said as he prepared to make another try at toast.

"Stepped on? What's that?" Jack asked with a smile.

"Sorry. That's what my family calls it. It means to break the yolks as soon as you put the eggs in the skillet." Brian said absently, most of his attention dedicated to his bread toasting duties.

"Do you have a preference?" Jack asked curiously.

"No. Just as long as the yolk isn't runny, I'll be happy." Brian said honestly.

"I have a hell of a time keeping the yolks from breaking, so it won't be a problem." Jack said as he took a cast iron skillet and sat it on the stove top.

"How's this?" Brian asked as he held up the 'toaster' so Jack could see it.

"Perfect! Two more slices and your part of the cooking is done." Jack said happily.

"Where do you want these?" Brian asked as he took the pieces of toast out.

"Here." Jack said and held out one of the 'pie pan' plates, so Brian could put the toast on it.

"Shouldn't we change out of these wet clothes?" Brian asked curiously as he prepared to make the next batch of toast.

"They'll probably be dry by the time we're done cooking. But, either way, we'll change out of these sweats after we're done with the breakfast dishes." Jack said simply.

Brian nodded as he carefully watched his bread toasting.

* * * * *

"Hey! This food tastes wonderful!" Brian exclaimed.

Jack smiled, then said, "For some reason, just about everything seems to taste better here. I don't know if it's because we're burning more energy or maybe the wood stove and cast iron add something, but I agree with you completely."

Brian nodded and continued to enjoy the marvelous taste of the meal he and Jack had prepared.

"I was thinking that after we get done, we can go for a walk in the woods and see if we can find any good fire wood." Jack said casually.

"You'll have to show me what to do. I've never chopped wood or anything like that before." Brian said cautiously.

"I didn't think you had." Jack said with a smile, then added, "We have plenty of wood stacked behind the cabin, but it would be a waste if we left some fallen trees nearby to rot when we could make good use of them."

Brian nodded that he understood what Jack was saying.

"How do you like the coffee?" Jack asked curiously.

"It's alright. It doesn't taste as good as it smells, but I think I like it." Brian said, then took another drink from his cup.

"Well, I think the coffee is especially good on a chilly morning like this. When you're warm inside, it helps you to deal with the chill outside."

"Makes sense." Brian said casually, then as he moved to take another bite of his food, he accidentally knocked over his water glass.

Jack tried to catch it before it tipped over, but he didn't quite make it.

"I'm sorry!" Brian yelled as he quickly picked up the glass.

"It's no problem." Jack said as he got up to get a towel.

"I'm really sorry, Jack. I hate it when I do that." Brian said despondently.

"It's fine, Brian. It was almost empty." Jack said casually as he wiped up the small trail of water from the table.

The look in Brian's eyes was one of profound regret.

Jack decided that Brian needed a change of subject, so he said, "It looks like we're just about finished here. I've already got a pot of water heating on the stove for dishes. If you'll help me, we can get them done so we can start our day."

"Just tell me what I need to do." Brian said, looking much relieved.

* * * * *

Jack and Brian worked well together as a team doing the small amount of dishes.

Brian was surprised that such a basic chore was so completely different from what he was used to.

When the dishes were done, Jack took the dishpan of wash water outside to dump it as Brian finished drying the last of the dishes.

When Jack returned to the cabin, he quietly said, "It's time for us to change. You'll probably want a t shirt and a long sleeve flannel shirt so you can take off a layer if you get too warm."

Brian walked to his backpack and looked inside. All the clothes were folded or rolled and were very neatly packed.

After one or two tries, he found the clothes that he would need.

"Brian." Jack said, to draw his attention.

Putting down the shirt he was holding, Brian turned and froze at the sight of Jack standing before him, completely naked.

Brian's eyes went wide as he stared at Jack.

"Look in my eyes." Jack said quietly.

It took a moment for Brian to tear his gaze away from Jack's manhood, framed in a nest of dark golden curls. But finally Brian managed to force himself to meet Jack's eyes.

"Brian, you looked at me and nothing horrible happened." Jack said seriously.

It took a moment for the words to register, but Brian finally hesitantly nodded.

"Our goal is for you to get comfortable enough that you can talk to me when we're naked as easily as when we're dressed." Jack said quietly.

"I understand, but it's hard." Brian said helplessly.

"Not at the moment." Jack said with a grin, then reached down and gave his limp dick a quick tug.

Brian blushed scarlet red and turned away in embarrassment.

"Look at me." Jack said firmly, but not harshly.

Brian forced himself to meet Jack's gaze again.

"I'm exactly the same person you were talking with at breakfast, just a few minutes ago." Jack said seriously.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I'm really trying. But I feel all shaky and my heart feels like it's about to explode out of my chest." Brian said as tears welled in his eyes.

"That's adrenaline. It's a normal reaction when you're afraid. But when that happens, you have two choices. You can either give in to it or face your fear and deal with it."

"And if I give in to it, then it'll keep happening." Brian said quietly.

"That's right. Try thinking about it like this. When you deal with people, you label each other so you know how to interact. When you're with a teacher, you take on the role of a student. When you're with your father, you take on the role of a son." Jack said carefully.

Brian nodded that he understood, but couldn't see how it related to his current situation.

"When you act frightened, like a scared little mouse, you draw other people to react in the opposing role of a cat. They become predators because you react like prey."

Brian pondered that for a moment, then hesitantly nodded.

"Look at me, Brian." Jack said gently.

Brian hadn't realized that his gaze had shifted away, but he quickly met Jack's eyes.

"You don't have to be comfortable looking at naked guys. But you really need to be able to control your reactions so you don't draw people to treat you badly." Jack said with concern.

"I'm trying." Brian whispered.

"Then undress." Jack said simply.

"What?" Brian asked with renewed fear.

"I want for you to take off your clothes. Then I want you to stand here and look me in the eyes and talk to me." Jack said seriously.

"I... I can't." Brian whispered as his eyes began to well with tears again.

"Yes, Brian. You can." Jack said firmly. "I'm going to stay right here. And I promise that I won't say or do anything bad to you."

"I'm not afraid of that." Brian mumbled.

"What is it then?" Jack asked curiously.

"I just... I don't want you to see me." Brian said as his blush started rising again.

"I saw most of it while we were changing last night. Nothing bad happened. You look perfectly normal." Jack said honestly.

Brian seemed to be frozen in thought, at war within himself.

"Do it, Brian. Right now." Jack said firmly.

"But I..." Brian began to protest.

"Now!" Jack barked.

Before he could think better of it, Brian hooked his thumbs in the elastic waistband of his sweatpants and underwear and pulled them down in one quick move.

"Look at my eyes." Jack commanded.

Brian could feel himself blushing wildly, but did as he was told.

"Nothing bad happened." Jack said gently.

Brian could feel his heart racing and felt his hands and arms trembling.

"Take a few deep breaths and relax." Jack said as he continued to look into Brian's eyes.

Brian did as he was told and drew the air slowly into his lungs and tried to calm himself.

After a long moment, Jack gently asked, "Feeling better?"

Brian hesitantly nodded.

"Good. Now, the rest of it." Jack said, then at Brian's uncomprehending stare, he clarified, "Finish undressing."

It took a moment for Brian to react, but finally he began to slowly pull his sweatshirt off over his head.

Jack waited for a moment, then quietly asked, "What were you embarrassed about?"

"It's all... big and weird looking and I'm getting hair and stuff." Brian mumbled.

"So? Look at me. Mine's bigger than yours and I've got lots of hair. What's the difference?" Jack asked curiously.

"I don't know. It's just... I saw the other guys and I'm... not like them." Brian muttered.

"How so?" Jack asked curiously.

"They're like I used to be... you know." Brian finished uncomfortably.

"So you're maturing a little sooner than they are. That's a good thing." Jack said honestly.

"It is?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Sure. I think every boy wants to hurry up and become a man. You've just got a head start on the rest of them." Jack said with a smile.

"Really?" Brian asked in wonder.

"Totally!" Jack said with a grin, "If anything, they're the ones who should be shy. Just think about it. Physically, they're still little boys and you're becoming a man."

"So this is supposed to happen?" Brian asked cautiously.

Suddenly, Jack understood the root of Brian's problem.

"No one's ever told you about what to expect as you grow up, have they?" Jack asked with concern.

"I've heard some stuff, but... no, not really." Brian said quietly.

Jack slowly started to smile, then said, "Then I've got some really good news for you."

"What's that?" Brian asked hopefully, seeming to really need some good news about then.

"We've got something else to blame on your dad." Jack said with a grin.

"What?" Brian asked curiously.

"He's your dad. It's his job to prepare you for these changes. He didn't, so he failed. He sucks. It's not your fault."

Brian chuckled at the announcement.

"Go ahead and put some clothes on, nudist." Jack said playfully.

"Okay." Brian said with a grin, then started to dress.

"What's happening to you is called puberty. It happens to all kids, eventually. Your body is changing, just beginning the transformation from boy to man..."

* * * * *

After dressing, Jack and Brian left the cabin and started a slow, casual walk in the woods surrounding the cabin.

Jack briefly outlined male anatomy and the stages of puberty, in general terms, so that Brian could get an overview of what normally happened.

Brian followed along and was paying his full attention.

"I can't say how it is for everyone, but at your age, I had a problem with spontaneous erections." Jack said casually as they walked.

"You mean, like, a stiffy?" Brian asked cautiously, verifying that he understood.

"Yeah, woody, boner, hard on, it's all the same thing." Jack said thoughtfully.

"That's normal?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But I think it's different for everyone. I mean, for me, I'd pop a bone all of a sudden for no reason at all. Hell, I once boned up when my grandma kissed me on the cheek. Talk about embarrassing." Jack chuckled.

"So getting a... stiffy... that doesn't make me gay?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. What makes you gay is if you want to make love to a guy." Jack said seriously, then added, "Unfortunately, it gets confusing because our cocks seem to have minds of their own, especially at your age."

"But, I want to look at guys, you know, their bodies. Does that make me gay?" Brian asked desperately.

Jack considered for a moment, then said, "I don't think so. Considering that you've been dealing with all the changes of puberty without anyone to help you, I think you're probably just curious and trying to establish in your own mind what's 'normal'."

Brian didn't respond and seemed to be considering Jack's words carefully.

"Tell me, Brian. Do you think about what it would be like to kiss a boy? You know, hold him tight and love him?" Jack asked curiously.

"No... I've wondered what it would be like to touch y.. a guy. But I never thought about kissing or holding or stuff." Brian said shyly.

"Then I don't think you have to worry about being gay. It's natural to be curious. I've always heard that it's even natural for guys to experiment together. What makes the difference is who you want to hug and kiss and 'love'. All the rest is just mechanics." Jack said thoughtfully.

"I want to touch you." Brian whispered with a tinge of fear in his voice.

"Where?" Jack asked curiously.

"In the cabin, I guess." Brian said uncertainly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "What I was asking, is where on my body you'd like to touch me."

"Oh, your dick." Brian said shyly.

"Boys have dicks, men have cocks." Jack said seriously, then stopped walking and opened his coat.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked suddenly, even though he had a pretty good idea.

"I'm letting you touch my cock." Jack said simply, then proceeded to open his zipper.

"I can't..." Brian began to protest.

"Why not?" Jack asked as he pulled his pants down slightly, then fished his cock and balls out through the fly of his boxers.

Brian looked at Jack with fear, obviously not having an answer.

"Just go ahead and satisfy your curiosity. Nothing bad's going to happen." Jack said quietly.

Hesitantly, Brian reached toward Jack's cock, then looked up with concern.

"Go on. It won't bite." Jack encouraged.

Brian experimentally touched Jack's cock and said with surprise, "It's soft."

"Semi-hard, actually." Jack said with a grin.

"I mean, from the way it looks, I thought it would be, like... rough, I guess." Brian stammered.

"Yeah. I can see why you'd think that." Jack said gently, then quietly added, "Feel the balls."

Brian's curiosity overrode his shyness for a moment as he let his hand drift down and gently cup the low hanging balls.

As Brian probed, he noticed that Jack's cock was quickly approaching full hardness.

"That's what happens when you give it attention." Jack said frankly.

Brian slowly withdrew his hand and stared at the stiff cock with wonder.

"So? You wanted to touch it. Did that answer your questions?" Jack asked as he worked to get his stiff cock back into the confines of his underwear.

"I don't know what my questions were, but... yeah. I think so." Brian said uncertainly, then hesitantly asked, "Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"Yeah. But now's not the time to do anything about it. I'll take care of it later." Jack said as he finished zipping up his pants.

"How?" Brian asked curiously.

"Have you ever heard of jacking off?" Jack asked as he buttoned up his coat.

"I've heard the word, but I don't know what it is." Brian admitted reluctantly.

"You remember what I was telling you about sperm, right?" Jack asked as he motioned for Brian to start walking again.

"Yeah." Brian said hesitantly.

"It builds up." Jack said frankly, "When you get hard and stroke your dick, you get a really good feeling and then your sperm releases. It's called cumming."

"I think I did that once, but I was sleeping when it happened." Brian said shyly.

"Oh yeah, that's a wet dream. That happens when a lot of cum builds up and needs to be released. Once you start jacking off, that probably won't happen much anymore." Jack said frankly.

"Once I start? You mean, I'm supposed to be doing that?" Brian asked cautiously.

"I think most guys do. I know I do." Jack said frankly, then added, "Some people, mostly religious types, think it's bad or makes you a pervert or gay or whatever. In the old days, they'd even tell you that it'd make you go blind."

Brian giggled when Jack made a show of adjusting his glasses.

"But honestly, I don't see anything wrong with it. It feels good and you're not hurting anyone." Jack said simply.

Brian seemed to be thinking about Jack's words, very seriously.

"You may not be ready for that yet. If you don't feel like doing it, then don't. Not everyone is built the same way or operates on the same timetable." Jack said frankly.

"I think maybe I want to, I just... I don't know how." Brian said timidly.

"Remind me when we get back to the cabin, and I'll show you enough to get you started. After that, whatever you do or don't do is up to you." Jack said seriously.

* * * * *

They walked quietly through the trees for a few more minutes, each lost in their own thoughts, when Brian quietly said, "When my dad dropped me off with you, I thought I was going to be taken to... like, a military school or a boot camp or maybe something even worse."

"I know. It was written all over your face." Jack said with a grin.

"And you just let me sit there and be scared?" Brian asked as he looked at Jack with hurt showing in his eyes.

"You've got to realize, that I'd never met you before and I hadn't been told much about you. I thought that it would be best if I acted stern at first so you'd get the message that I was serious and that I wasn't going to coddle you." Jack said gently.

"I was so scared. My dad picked me up from school and didn't tell me anything at all about what was going to happen." Brian mumbled.

"I'm sorry about that, Brian. But I couldn't just hand you the answers. You had to have the balls to ask. Part of all of this is to get you to learn how to declare yourself and ask for the things you need. As long as you insist on acting like a doormat, people are going to walk all over you." Jack said simply.

"But back home, anytime I speak up, I get told to shut up." Brian said thoughtfully.

Jack stopped walking and looked Brian in the eyes as he asked, "What have we discovered about your dad since you've been here?"

"That he sucks." Brian said frankly.

"Yep. That he does." Jack said with a grin, then added, "And this is yet another example of 'how' he sucks."

Brian thought about Jack's statement, then slowly said, "So he was always telling me to shut up, then got mad at me when I wouldn't speak up for myself."

"That's what it sounds like to me. He may not be the asshole of the year, but I wouldn't nominate him for any parenting awards, either." Jack said frankly.

Brian slowly nodded, then said, "So that's what you meant back at the gas station. You were kind of letting me know that I could speak up for myself and that you wouldn't yell at me."

"Except that I couldn't just come out and say it, or you wouldn't really understand. You had to discover it for yourself. If I told you, you'd hear it, but you wouldn't *know* it." Jack said seriously.

"I feel like everything that I've learned in my life was all wrong." Brian said distantly.

"Not everything, I'm sure you learned plenty of important things the right way. But since your dad totally sucks, you missed out on a few of the basics."

Brian ruefully grinned, then said, "My whole life, I always thought my dad had all the answers and was right about everything and that I was a failure because I couldn't be what he wanted me to be."

"What do you think he wanted you to be?" Jack asked curiously.

"I don't know. A typical boy, I guess. I get the feeling that he wanted me to play football and get into fights and... you know, stuff like that." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Did he ever try to teach you to play football or take you to a game, or take you out in the back yard and teach you how to defend yourself?"

"No. Never." Brian whispered regretfully.

"Well, as far as I can see, you're not a failure at anything. He's a total suck ass father, but that's not your fault. I'll help you learn some basics, then we'll turn you loose on the world and see what happens."

Brian smiled at the words, then the walk continued.

* * * * *

"Can I ask you something?" Brian asked, breaking the long silence.

"Sure. Anything." Jack responded immediately.

"Why are you doing this for me?" Brian asked curiously, then quickly added, "I really appreciate that you're helping me this way, but I don't understand why anyone would go to all the trouble."

"Well, I told you the main reason before we went to sleep last night." Jack said frankly.

Brian racked his brain, trying to think of what Jack might be talking about.

"I even told you to remember it." Jack prompted.

"Because I'm worth it." Brian said with a smile.

"Right. That's the main reason." Jack said honestly, then added more quietly, "It's also because of some other stuff."

"Like what?" Brian asked cautiously.

They walked in silence for a moment, before Jack finally said, "My parents divorced when I was about five years old."

Brian nodded, but remained silent.

"I moved out with my dad and my mom stayed at home with my little brother, Dillon. He was just a baby then." Jack said quietly.

Brian stared at Jack as he tried to imagine how a little five year old would feel, being ripped away from his mother and younger brother.

"My dad is great. And I don't just mean compared to yours." Jack finished with a smile at Brian.

An understanding smile was Brian's response.

"A couple years ago, kind of out of nowhere, my mom showed up with Dillon and just dumped him on us." Jack said distantly, then added, "It's not that we wouldn't have welcomed him or didn't want him. But mom kind of just showed up one day and said, "Here's your kid, he's your problem now.", then she left."

Brian could see that telling the story was painful for Jack.

"Dillon was a real mess. I mean, he was drinking and doing drugs and had even tried to kill himself once." Jack said regretfully.

Brian stared at Jack with wide eyes and couldn't imagine how that must have been.

"It was when he tried to kill himself, that mom decided that she'd had enough. I found out later that her and her husband were about to split up, and it was mostly because of Dillon." Jack said distantly.

"So what did you do, I mean, to help Dillon?" Brian asked cautiously.

"My dad and I tried talking to him, but it was like talking to a brick wall. He was so full of anger and resentment that we couldn't get through to him." Jack said quietly. "One weekend, the three of us got in the truck and came up here, to the cabin. We hiked and talked and... well, I guess you get the idea."

Brian smiled and nodded.

"It's the only happy memory I have of my brother." Jack said as his eyes filled with tears.

"What happened?" Brian asked quietly.

"A couple weeks after we got back, he killed himself." Jack said as he took a red bandanna handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his eyes.

Brian took a step closer to Jack and put an arm around his waist to comfort him.

"Thanks." Jack whispered, then continued, "I don't know... I'll probably never know why he did it. But what I *do* know is that he absolutely hated his existence. He had a lot of problems and... they seemed so big to him that he wanted to die to get away from them."

"And that's why you wanted to help me?" Brian asked quietly.

"Yes. I always thought that if Dillon had come to live with us sooner, then we could have reached him and he'd still be alive today. But if I can't have my brother back, the least I can do is keep someone else from going down the path that he did." Jack said quietly, then added, "So, in a way, me helping you is a tribute to him, showing that his life really did mean something."

"I know I'm not your brother, but... you could still think of me that way, if it would make you feel better." Brian offered quietly.

"I already do, Brian." Jack said as he draped an arm around Brian's shoulder to casually hug him. "Even before I met you, when I'd heard about what you were going through, I could tell that you were on a path that led to a very

dark place. I imagined what you must be feeling and... well, I guess that's when I started to care about you."

"Who told you about me?" Brian asked curiously.

"My dad." Jack said simply, then clarified, "You'd know him as Coach Reed."

"He's your dad?" Brian asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Like I said, he's great." Jack said with pride.

"I wish mine was." Brian said sourly.

"You just said that I could think of you as a brother, right?" Jack asked seriously.

Brian looked up at him and nodded.

"Well, when you adopted me, you adopted my dad, too. We're a package deal. Remember, he's the one who arranged all this." Jack said with a gentle smile, then added, "And I'll tell you from personal experience, that if you'll let him, he's going to want to do all the dad things that you always wished your dad would have done with you."

"So, do you and your dad want to use me to take Dillon's place?" Brian asked hesitantly, and seemed to be afraid of Jack's reaction.

Jack was surprised by the question, but gave Brian a quick smile to put him at ease before responding, "No. Dillon was with us for such a short time that I don't think he left a void in our lives that needed to be filled. I think that it's more that, since your dad sucks and mine is so great... it just makes sense for all of us to do this. You, me, dad, we'll all be happier if we end up being a family."

"It sounds good, except that... since I've never done stuff with my dad. I don't know, it'll be, like, weird and stuff." Brian said awkwardly.

"Yep. But as long as you don't act like a doormat, that shouldn't be any problem. Yeah, it might be awkward at first, but just give it a chance and if you don't like something, say "no, I don't want to do that", and that'll be the end of it."

Brian nodded his agreement.

"Give me the hatchet and start gathering up these branches." Jack said casually.

Brian looked around and was surprised to see that they had happened upon a small fallen tree.

He took the hatchet from the tool belt that Jack had given him at the cabin and handed it to Jack, then proceeded to gather up the small branches in the area that didn't need to be chopped.

* * * * *

"I think I'm having TV withdrawal." Brian said with a chuckle as they carried armloads of wood toward the cabin.

"That's part of what makes this place seem so magical. It's completely unlike our day-to-day lives in the so-called real world." Jack said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean 'so-called'." Brian asked curiously.

"You need to understand that the world that you grew up in is like a stage. Everything that you're used to seeing every day is a prop. *This* is what's behind the stage. *This* is what's real."

"Wait, are you talking about 'the Matrix'?" Brian asked with a grin.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Maybe, in a sense. All the houses and streets and schools are a house of cards built on the very real world that we're standing on. Living in their 'constructed' world is fine, but I think it's important to realize what's underneath. Be comfortable in your own skin. Be able to recognize silence. Take a 'real' look at the sky without light clutter clouding your vision. Breathe clean air so you know what it tastes like. Drink real, clean, unpolluted, untreated water straight from the earth. After experiencing all this, then you can see the fabrications and constructs for what they really are."

"Yeah. I don't know if I really want to go back." Brian said quietly.

"I think that's natural. But the fact of the matter is that you're still you. Here, there, it doesn't matter. All the things that are important, you carry with you. So if you decide to stay, you're not getting away from your problems because you brought them all with you." Jack said honestly.

"If that's true, then what's the point of being here at all?" Brian asked curiously.

"The slower pace and change of scenery help you look at things from a different perspective. Not having a thousand little niggling distractions vying for your attention allows you to relax in a way that just doesn't seem possible in town." Jack said as they approached the cabin.

Brian followed as Jack led them around to the back of the cabin and over to a large wood pile.

"Well, we've checked out most of the woods surrounding the cabin and got some firewood, to boot. What do you feel like doing next?" Jack asked simply.

"I don't know. What are the choices?" Brian asked curiously.

"Well, we could go fishing and catch something for dinner. I guess since we've had such a productive morning, we *could* decide that we've had enough drama for one day and take the rest of the day off to rest and relax. Or, I suppose we could hike up to the hot spring and take a long, slow, soaking bath." Jack said with a grin.

"But don't you have anything 'fun' we can do?" Brian whined playfully.

"Brat!" Jack chuckled.

Brian smiled, then said, "I don't know, I mean, if we don't go fishing, does that mean that we don't eat tonight?"

"No. There's no shortage of food. In fact, it would probably be better if we finished off a few of the perishables today and save the fishing for another day." Jack said frankly.

"So that kills option one. Would it be possible to go have that long bath, and then take the rest of the day off?" Brian asked curiously.

"Sure, except that the hot spring is about a two hour hike from here. By the time we get back, there won't be much of a day left." Jack said honestly.

"I'm okay with that."

"Great! Then let's pack up the sandwiches and get ready to go." Jack said happily.

Before Jack could walk away, Brian stepped forward and hugged him.

"Thanks for doing all of this, Jack." Brian said quietly.

"Thank you, too, Brian. Having you here is helping to heal some wounds that I thought would never stop hurting." Jack said as he held Brian firmly.

"Hey. No more drama. It's our day off." Brian said playfully.

"You started it!" Jack responded, shifting Brian to his side so he was hugging him with one arm.

"Okay. You're right. But no more drama today, after this... right?" Brian asked mock-seriously.

"Oh, let's see. A two hour hike, then we get **NAKED** and bathe for a while, then a two hour hike back... I don't know, is there any part of this scenario that might cause one of us to react dramatically?" Jack asked, as if thinking aloud.

"I see what you mean." Brian said, now completely serious, then he added, "I can't promise that I won't freak out a little bit, but I'm okay with trying. That's progress isn't it?"

"Brian, that's **TREMENDOUS** progress." Jack said as he looked into Brian's eyes. "And no matter how things go at the hot spring, just the fact that you are not only willing to go, but you **CHOSE** to go... It's fantastic. I'm proud of you. Now let's get those sandwiches so we can get going."

Brian chuckled, then said, "Yeah."

Chapter 3

Brian was surprised when he stepped into the cabin.

He hadn't even realized that he was cold until he felt the warmth.

"It feels good in here." Brian said in a low appreciative voice.

"Isn't it strange how everything that you take for granted is intensified here? Just stepping into a warm room after being outside feels like such a profound thing." Jack said distantly.

Brian nodded, then said, "Yeah. Just like the bacon and eggs this morning tasted so good. Back home, I wouldn't have even thought twice about something like that."

"Why don't you get the sandwiches and put them in this backpack? I need to visit the outhouse before we go." Jack asked as he handed a small backpack to Brian.

"Should I pack us some drinks, too?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes. That's a good idea." Jack said as he took a roll of toilet paper from the shelf by the door, then thought to ask, "Do you need to go, too?"

"No. I'm good." Brian said casually as he walked to the ice chest.

Jack nodded that he had heard before walking out the door.

* * * * *

As Brian packed the food into the backpack, he thought about the incredible journey he had taken. In less than twenty-four hours, he had been pulled from a nightmarish existence and into, what seemed to be, the Garden of Eden.

He smiled as he thought about the embarrassing and incomprehensible thing that he had done. He had asked Jack if he could touch his dick... cock. And Jack had let him.

Brian felt his skin tingle with a blush and couldn't believe that he had really done such a thing. But, he was glad that he had done it. Not just to answer the questions that he still couldn't form in his conscious mind, but also to prove to himself that he could trust Jack.

If Jack would let him touch him in such an intimate way, simply because he had asked, then nothing that he could say or do would be likely to cause Jack to react negatively toward him.

Brian checked the backpack to see that they had a reasonable amount of food and drinks for the hike, then walked to the door and took one of the rolls of toilet paper off the shelf and carried it back to the backpack.

He didn't have to go, and didn't know that he would need to before they got back. But he felt that it was best to be prepared, because he sure didn't want to have to use a leaf. With his luck, he'd probably use poison ivy.

Jack walked back into the cabin and put his roll of toilet paper on the shelf.

"I packed TP, just in case." Brian said casually, while Jack took a hand wipe from the box and cleaned his hands.

"Good idea. I'll bring a shovel, in case we need to dig a latrine." Jack said as he walked to the corner and picked up a small shovel that seemed to be folded up.

"Is that everything?" Brian asked hopefully.

"Almost." Jack said, then took a white metal box off a shelf on the other side of the room before saying, "This is our first aid kit. It's always a good idea to carry it if we're going any distance away from the cabin."

Brian nodded as he accepted the box and put it in the backpack.

"Ready?" Jack asked with a smile.

"Give me a second. I don't want the first aid kit to squash the sandwiches." Brian said as he shifted things around in the pack.

Jack nodded, then seemed to think of something.

As Brian was about to close the backpack, Jack handed him a folded piece of cloth and a length of rope.

"What's this?" Brian asked as he looked at the cloth curiously.

"It's a duffle bag. We'll need it later." Jack said simply.

Brian shrugged, then said, "Okay. I'm ready."

* * * * *

Brian was astonished by the beauty of their surroundings.

The woods seemed to be alive with birds and all kinds of small animals. He mostly heard them and only caught fleeting glances, but enjoyed the experience just the same.

As they crested a small rise, Jack held out his hand to stop Brian, then made a shushing motion.

Brian froze in place, then slowly inched forward when Jack encouraged him to do so.

In the small clearing below them, there were no less than a dozen deer.

Brian watched in wonder as they quietly nosed through the underbrush, searching for tender young plants to eat.

Suddenly, they all seemed to look up at once, even though Brian hadn't heard anything that would have alerted them.

In a flash of movement, the deer darted out of the clearing, away from them.

"Wow. I've never seen anything so beautiful." Brian whispered.

"I know. It's just more of the magic of this place." Jack said, matching his quiet tone.

Without further discussion, the pair proceeded on their hike.

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As they walked, Brian suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Is something wrong?" Jack asked as he quickly surveyed their surroundings.

"I'm supposed to be in school right now." Brian said as he looked at Jack with surprise.

Jack smiled, then said, "I think you missed the bus."

Brian thought about that for a moment, then smiled as he nodded.

"Don't worry about it Brian. Dad took care of it." Jack said as he encouraged Brian to start walking again.

"How?" Brian asked curiously.

"You'll have to ask him. All he told me is that it's taken care of. You're not going to get in trouble for missing your classes." Jack said frankly.

"Good. I'm surprised that I didn't think about it until now." Brian said honestly.

"You've had a lot on your mind." Jack said casually.

Brian chuckled and nodded his agreement.

"Do you feel like talking about anything?" Jack asked curiously.

Brian thought for a moment, then responded, "I'm glad that you're helping me, I really appreciate it. But I'm not sure it's going to help me when I get back to school."

"We've only just started." Jack said honestly. "I've been trying to help you deal with each thing that's holding you back as it's surfaced. But we're not anywhere close to being done."

"What else do we have to do?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Horrible things." Jack said with a smile.

Brian grinned, knowing that Jack was playing.

"Pitching, catching, running... maybe some wrestling... I don't know, things like that." Jack said consideringly.

"It sounds tough." Brian said, trying to restrain his grin.

Jack smiled, then the expression faded as he said, "There is one thing that you might not enjoy."

"What?" Brian asked cautiously.

"You need to learn how to take a punch." Jack said regretfully.

"You're going to hit me?" Brian asked with a spark of fear.

"Yes." Jack said quietly, then added, "But it won't be like a fight and I won't do it any more than I have to."

"Why do you have to hit me at all?" Brian asked slowly.

"Because, sooner or later, you're going to have to defend yourself. If you're afraid to be hit, it's just going to cause your opponent to want to hit you that much more." Jack said regretfully, then continued, "But if you can look him in the eyes and show him that you're not afraid, it's as likely as not that he'll decide that he doesn't want to hit you after all."

"So your going to hit me, so I'll know how to keep from flinching away?" Brian asked cautiously, to verify that he understood.

"Yes. And you also need to be able to take a punch. So if someone does hit you, you'll be able to react and defend yourself instead of curling up and crying like a little baby." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought about the words, and reluctantly nodded his acceptance of them.

"You get to hit me, too." Jack said quietly.

Brian looked up at him with interest.

"You not only need to know how to take a punch, you need to know how to throw one." Jack said honestly.

"You're going to teach me how to fight?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. That would take a lot more time than we have. If you want to learn how to fight, talk to my dad. He'll be all kinds of happy to teach you whatever you want to know." Jack said with a smile.

"So what are you going to teach me?" Brian asked curiously.

"I'm going to teach you how to throw one mean, wicked punch. If you can do that, you'll be prepared for about 95% of the confrontations that you'll face." Jack said seriously.

"Really?" Brian asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Most of the guys who'll try to push you around are just big pussies and won't expect you to fight back. If you can paste them with one good punch, you'll earn their respect... or they'll run off crying to their mommies. Either way, one good punch is usually all it takes to shut a bully down." Jack said honestly.

"I don't want to fight." Brian said quietly, as his gaze fell to the ground.

"You don't always get a choice." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought about that as they walked.

"You don't need to worry about that too much. It shouldn't take much time for you to get the hang of it." Jack assured him. "The main thing we need to work on is your attitude."

"What's wrong with my attitude?" Brian asked curiously.

"Nothing at all. You're incredibly positive, considering what you've been through." Jack said honestly, then explained, "But what I'm talking about is the attitude that you 'project'."

At Brian's uncomprehending stare, Jack clarified, "Teenagers have a unique type of attitude that people, mostly parents, have a really hard time dealing with. Most teens come by it naturally, but I think it'll help you a lot if I help you to develop it consciously so you can use it when you need to."

"I don't understand what you're talking about." Brian said timidly.

"Say something to me that a parent would say, and I'll show you." Jack said as he stopped walking.

Brian thought for a moment, then smiled before saying, "Do your homework!"

Jack tilted his head down and cocked it slightly to one side, then looked at Brian defiantly.

Brian broke into a laugh when he saw the expression.

"What do you think I just said?" Jack asked, drawn into Brian's laughter.

"WHATEVER!" Brian crowed.

"Do you think you could do that?" Jack asked casually as they started to walk again.

"Yeah. Probably. It doesn't seem that hard." Brian said honestly.

"Trust me, the hard part is learning when NOT to use it." Jack said with a grin.

"So, are there other ones or do you just use the WHATEVER expression for everything?" Brian asked curiously.

"Oh, there are tons of them. I'll show you a few of the basics, but then you'll have to come up with the rest on your own. It's best if you personalize them anyway."

"Young man! I told you to do your homework!" Brian said sternly, trying to sound like a parent.

Jack turned and flashed him a completely different expression, this one with a barely restrained smirk.

Brian burst out in laughter at the expression.

Jack stopped and waited for him to calm down.

"That one... That was great! You HAVE TO teach it to me." Brian said as he fought to get his laughter under control.

"What do you think I was saying?" Jack asked with a smile.

"I don't think, I KNOW what you were saying. 'And just who the hell do you think you are?' was right there in your eyes." Brian said with delight.

"I think you'll need to work on the whole teenage attitude for it to work properly, but having a few of these expressions handy and ready to use should give you time to ease into it." Jack said contentedly.

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"I need to visit the lava-tree." Brian said casually as they walked.

"Me too. Do you mind?" Jack asked as he stopped.

"Would it matter if I did?" Brian asked cautiously as he turned to look at Jack.

"Of course. It's technically our day off, so if you don't want to do it, I'm not going to insist." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought for a moment, then finally said, "Yeah, I guess."

"Pick a tree. Once we're there, just keep your eyes forward and don't worry about what I'm doing. I'm not going to close my eyes, but I won't be looking at you." Jack said seriously.

Brian nodded then pointed to a tree.

Jack and Brian walked up to the tree, side by side and both kept their eyes forward. It took a few seconds for Brian to get himself to relax, but the sound of Jack's urine splashing on the base of the tree was enough inspiration to get things going."

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Once they were finished and both had zipped up, Jack turned to Brian and said, "What we just did would be considered acceptable behavior in any public bathroom. I think we'll need to do it a few more times to get you a little more comfortable, but the difficult part is over."

"You mean, that's it? You don't need to watch me pee?" Brian asked in confusion.

"Yep. That's it. And if anyone is watching you while you're taking a piss, they're the one with a problem, not you." Jack said honestly.

"But, it's still hard. No. I mean, when you talk to me I can't make myself start." Brian said with difficulty.

"There are some unwritten laws about public bathrooms. One of them is, you don't talk or look at each other while you're pissing. Another is that if you have a choice, you will never choose the urinal next to another guy.

Also, don't use the stall just to take a piss unless all the urinals are busy and you can't wait."

"Why not?" Brian asked curiously as they continued their walk.

"Because it makes you seem like you're too shy to use a urinal around other guys. You know, that thing about acting like a mouse..."

"Right." Brian said with a nod.

"But what you just did, that was perfect. I think that the only thing left for you is practice. Once you get out of the habit of automatically being afraid of this stuff, you shouldn't have to worry about it again." Jack said with a smile.

"Thanks, Jack." Brian said gratefully.

* * * * *

"We're here." Jack said as they finally came to the top of a steep rise.

"Wow." Brian said as he looked at the surreal landscape covered with steaming pools of water.

"You see the edge of the treeline over there? That's where we need to go first." Jack said, then started leading the way down a steep path.

"Why over there?" Brian asked curiously as he followed.

"Because the steam from the hot springs will make your clothes wet and heavy if you leave them right beside the pools. Besides that, we've got to put our things out of reach of the wildlife or it might not be here when we're ready to go back." Jack said frankly.

"But it's freezing!" Brian complained.

"Not really. It's warmed up quite a bit." Jack said, then gave Brian a glance that let him know that he was being whiny.

"Okay." Brian said quietly and seemed to be reluctant about something.

"Come on, you're going to love this." Jack said encouragingly.

Brian forced a smile for Jack's benefit as he followed.

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"I've seen it already. Remember?" Jack asked as he noticed Brian's hesitation.

"Yeah. It's just..." Brian trailed off and didn't seem to be able to force himself to undress.

"Go on. Just do it." Jack said encouragingly as he took off his clothes at a casual pace.

Brian had to fight the urge to run away as he forced himself to go through the motions of undressing.

"These hot springs have probably been around for 10,000 years, but they might go cold before you're finished." Jack said impatiently as he stood before Brian, completely naked.

Brian glanced at Jack, giving his best estimation of the 'WHATEVER' look, then finally forced himself to take the last step and pulled down his pants and underwear.

"Oh! I see now." Jack said quietly, then turned and started to gather his clothes and put them into the duffle bag.

"Yeah. It boned up while we were walking and it won't go away." Brian muttered as he blushed scarlet red.

"It could just as easily have happened to me. Trust me, your cock's going to do what it wants to do, no matter how you feel about it." Jack said without concern, then turned back and gathered Brian's clothes.

Brian's cock was stiff and curving slightly upward, like it was straining to reach his belly button. It was all he could do to fight the urge to put his hands in front of him to hide it.

The fact that Jack was working to suspend the backpack and duffle bag in the tree seemed to ease Brian's nervousness slightly. Him behaving so casually made Brian feel as though he weren't being watched.

"I think we're all ready. Come on." Jack said when the clothes were finally secured.

Brian shyly nodded as Jack walked past him to lead the way. Brian followed him toward the largest of the pools of steaming hot water, with his stiff cock bobbing slightly as he walked.

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"Go slow and easy." Jack said as he carefully eased himself into the water.

"Is this safe? It seems awfully hot." Brian asked, as he waded deeper into the pool.

"It takes getting used to, but if you go slow, it'll be fine." Jack assured him as he rested back on the edge of the pool, leaving only his head above water.

As Brian's balls touched the water, he reflexively jerked up. It took a few more starts and stops before Brian was able to get his sensitive cock and balls to accept the heat.

"This is the first time I'm seeing you in full light. You're REALLY white." Jack said lazily as he watched Brian lower himself into the water.

"I don't go outside much." Brian said, a little bit defensively, as he went chest deep into the steamy water.

"Sorry, Brian. I didn't mean for that to sound insulting. It's just that you're... astoundingly white." Jack said haltingly as he looked Brian in the eyes to convey his sincerity.

"And how is that NOT an insult?" Brian asked playfully, finally able to ease down beside Jack, matching his position. He was amazed when he realized how comfortable he felt in the hot water. It didn't even compare to any bath he'd ever taken.

"Never mind. I was just surprised." Jack said dismissively as he closed his eyes and took a moment to appreciate the warmth.

"I think I know what you're going to say, but I'll tell you anyway." Brian said quietly, "I always felt like I was too skinny and scrawny to go outside in shorts or without a shirt."

"You look fine, Brian. I wouldn't lie to you about something like this, not even to spare your feelings." Jack said seriously, then cautiously added, "But you *could* use a little sun."

"Maybe when we get back, I can start doing some stuff outside." Brian said consideringly, then added, "I think that after being here and doing all this, that being a couch lump won't be as much fun as it used to be."

Jack chuckled and said, "You're probably right. Tell me, is there a park anywhere near your house?"

"No. Not really." Brian said thoughtfully, then added, "There's a golf course not too far away, but I can't think of any parks or playgrounds except for at the school."

"Do you know how to play golf?" Jack asked curiously.

"No. Do you?"

"Yeah. Maybe, when we get back, we could play golf together." Jack said casually.

"Doesn't it cost a lot?" Brian asked with concern.

"You'll need to rent some clubs and stuff, but I don't think it'll be too bad. We'll look into it and see if we can manage it." Jack said seriously.

"Yeah. As long as you won't mind teaching me, it sounds like fun." Brian said contentedly.

"It would probably be better if my dad taught you. He knows a lot more than I do and I know he'd really enjoy it." Jack said honestly.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know. I mean, your dad is my gym coach. It'd be kind of weird doing stuff with him outside of school."

"He's a gym coach because he really loves sports and he enjoys teaching people. He tries to make it so everyone else enjoys sports as much as he does. It's hard not to have fun when you're learning from him." Jack said with a smile.

"Okay. I'll give it a try." Brian said thoughtfully.

"If you don't like it, you don't have to do it again." Jack said simply.

"Yeah. I remember. Don't be a doormat." Brian said with a smile.

"You're getting it!"

* * * * *

They soaked in silence for a while, just appreciating the warmth and letting their muscles relax.

Finally Jack broke the silence by asking, "Brian, why are you so nervous about being naked?"

After a moment of thought, Brian quietly said, "I don't know, I just am."

"What do you think is going to happen. I mean, in your most horrible fantasy, what bad thing do you imagine happening to you when you're naked?" Jack asked curiously.

"I don't know... maybe someone would see me and laugh at me?" Brian said hesitantly.

"They might." Jack said casually, then added, "But not because there's anything wrong with you. The only reason someone would have to laugh at you

or make fun of you being naked would be if there's something wrong with them."

"What do you mean?" Brian asked with interest.

"I mean that you have nothing to be ashamed of. If someone else has a problem, it's their problem. They're either shy or have some other body issues and they're reflecting their own insecurities on you." Jack said honestly, then continued, "I don't expect this to make it so you aren't shy. In fact, I expect that you'll still be nervous and everything. But it's important for you to realize that no matter what anxiety you're feeling, there's no logical reason for it. There is NOTHING wrong with you."

"Except that I'm too white." Brian responded, half jokingly.

"Well, yeah. But that can be fixed." Jack said with a smile.

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"What would you think if I was gay?" Brian asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Jack thought for a moment before saying, "Honestly, I don't think that I'd think anything about it."

Brian looked at him curiously, wanting more of an answer.

"Unless you're saying that you're in love with me, I can't think of any reason that it would make a difference." Jack said frankly.

"I'm pretty sure that I love you, but I don't know anything about 'being in love'." Brian said thoughtfully.

"There's plenty of time for you to figure that out." Jack said with a casual smile, then added, "And I love you too, Brian. Just like you were a member of my own family."

"Yeah. That's how I feel too." Brian said with a responding smile, then cautiously added, "In fact, I think I love you more than them. You sure are nicer to me."

"What's your mom like? You've never said." Jack asked curiously.

"She's just a mom. She takes care of us and stuff." Brian said simply.

"But is she nice to you?" Jack asked with concern.

"Yeah. I guess. But... I don't know, it's kind of like me and her... we just do what we're supposed to do. She cooks and cleans and stuff and I do my school things and pretty much try to stay out of everyone's way."

"Everyone' being your dad." Jack said cautiously.

"Yeah." Brian admitted quietly.

"So you're not close to your mom?" Jack asked curiously.

Brian thought about it for a moment, then shook his head as he said, "I used to be, but not now. I guess when I got old enough to start taking care of myself, she kind of just moved on to doing other things. She's always busy with the house."

"It's funny, I've never really had a mom. I always felt like I was missing out on something." Jack said honestly.

"From the sound of it, your dad was better than both my parents put together." Brian said with a pained smile.

"Yeah. I was really lucky." Jack said distantly.

"I think I'm lucky too." Brian said quietly. "Even though I never figured out on my own that my dad sucks, deep down, I always knew I didn't ever want to be like him. Now that I'm getting to know you, I finally have... an example, I guess."

Jack seemed surprised by the statement.

After a moment for the shock to wear off, Jack sat up and turned to look Brian in the eyes before saying, "Even though I may have some of the answers about how to help you with the things that are causing you problems right now, I'm a long way from being a good example."

"I don't believe that. You're everything that I'm not, everything that I want to be." Brian insisted.

"Brian, listen to me." Jack said firmly as he looked Brian in the eyes. "I've got some problems of my own that I'm dealing with. Why do you think I was able to come out here and do this with you on a moment's notice?"

Brian thought about that and finally said, "I don't know. I didn't even think about it."

"I'm nineteen. I'm still living with my dad and I don't have a job." Jack said frankly.

"Jobs are hard to find right now."

"I think that if I tried, I could probably find one, but the thing is, that I don't know what it is that I want to do. I'd rather not get locked into a job

doing something I hate and be stuck in it because I'm too afraid to give up the pay or the seniority when I figure out what it is that I *do* want to do."

"What does your dad say about it?" Brian asked curiously.

"He says that I should take the time to decide what it is that I'd like to do with my life." Jack said frankly.

"Listen to him." Brian said as he looked into Jack's eyes. "You're my friend and I want you to be happy, just like your dad does."

"Thanks, Brian." Jack said appreciatively, then continued, "But I'm afraid that ten years from now I'll look up and notice that I've spent what are supposed to be the best years of my life living with my dad and accomplishing nothing."

"I think that since you're worried about it, that you won't let that happen." Brian said honestly.

"I see other people, my friends, and they're all in pretty much the same situation. I don't see any of them getting out of it. In fact, if anything, they're getting worse."

"Worse? How?" Brian asked with interest.

"Most of them spend their days sleeping and their nights getting high and playing online games. I only ever talk to them online because they hardly ever leave their houses anymore. Some of them, I met online and have never even seen in person." Jack said quietly.

"It sounds like they have problems, but you're okay." Brian said carefully.

"If it weren't for my dad, I might be just like them by now." Jack said regretfully, then explained, "It gets really lonely. I don't have ANY friends who I can visit or go and do things with. All the people I used to hang around with are either submerged in a job and a marriage and all that or they're substituting a computer generated reality for a real life."

"I'm going to have to watch 'The Matrix' again when I get home. I didn't know it was so relevant." Brian said, trying to inject some humor into the conversation.

Jack smiled at the words, then quietly said, "More than you know."

Brian looked at Jack with concern, knowing from his expression and tone of voice that he was about to reveal something that was really troubling him.

"I've reached a point where I'd rather look at online porn than go out on a date with a real girl." Jack admitted shyly.

"Why?" Brian asked curiously.

"I don't know." Jack said quietly, then amended, "I think that it's because all the girls that I've been interested in, turned out to be looking for... something else. Not me, anyway."

"What did they want?"

"I got the feeling that some of them used me like an accessory to impress their girlfriends. They weren't really interested in me, I was just something that looked good hanging on their arm. And then there are the ones who just wanted to have someone to pay their way so they could party every night. There hasn't been one who wanted to get to know me or even pretended that she might want to share in my interests. I'm tired of getting used, put off, disappointed, rejected and dumped. Porn is easier." Jack said frankly, then quickly said, "I'm sorry to be laying this all on you. I'm here to help you with your problems."

"Jack, we're friends. We're family. That means we help each other, even if it's just by listening." Brian said quietly.

"You're pretty smart for a kid." Jack said with a grin.

Brian decided that it was time for him to practice and gave Jack his best attempt at a 'WHATEVER' look.

Jack chuckled, then said, "You're getting better at that."

Brian smiled at the compliment, then said, "I don't think you have a problem, except maybe you're looking for girls in the wrong place. They can't all be like that. I have no idea what the right place is, but I'm sure you can find it. As far as your friends, again, it's not your problem. Maybe if you can show them that reality can be more fun than a computer generated fantasy, they might be willing to go out and do things."

"Have you ever been on a raiding party on teamspeak? It's hard to compete with a rush like that." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "Considering the way that my reality is, it probably wouldn't be a good idea for me to start playing any of those games. I might never want to come back."

"I think you may be right." Jack said honestly, then smiled as he said, "How about we make an exciting reality for you, instead."

"Yeah. Let's do that."

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Jack asked with concern as they walked away from the hot spring.

"You mean besides freezing?" Brian asked as he hurried to where they had left their clothes.

"Yeah. Besides that." Jack said with a chuckle.

"Hungry." Brian said honestly as he waited for Jack to release the rope and lower the duffle bag and backpack from the tree.

"I'm getting hungry, too. I know a good spot to stop on the way back where we can sit and eat." Jack said cheerfully as he handed Brian his clothes.

Brian looked at Jack speculatively. It appeared that the talk that they had had, had really been of help to Jack.

"Thanks, Brian." Jack said sincerely as he started to dress.

"After all you've done for me, I'm glad that there's something that I can do to help you, even if it is only listening." Brian said honestly, then pulled on his t shirt.

Jack noticed that Brian didn't seem the least bit self-conscious about being naked in front of him, but decided not to mention it and continued to dress as he said, "Whether you know it or not, you're doing a lot more for me than that."

"Like?" Brian asked curiously.

Jack shrugged, then said, "You're giving me a 'real life' friend that I can spend time with. You're showing me that I have value, that I can really do something to improve another person's life... not to mention that you're helping me resolve my feelings about my brother."

"These are his clothes, aren't they?" Brian asked as he looked down at the loose fitting black t shirt and black jeans he was wearing.

"Yeah. I'm sorry if that's creepy." Jack said quietly, then motioned for Brian to start walking.

Brian giggled, then said, "As long as it doesn't bother you, it's no problem for me."

"No. After Dillon died, we got rid of the few things that he brought with him, but we forgot about the camping gear. His backpack sat in the garage all this time, until I got it out to pack for you. That's when I found out that Dillon hadn't emptied his pack when we got back from camping. So I just washed his clothes and put them back in there." Jack said quietly.

Brian put an arm around Jack's waist and said, "I'm sorry you lost your brother, Jack. Reality sucks sometimes and I don't really blame anyone for wanting to get away from it. I guess what matters is 'how' you choose to get away. If you drink, do drugs, get lost in games or commit suicide, you're not helping anyone. No one is happier or better off. But if you try to escape your reality by changing it to make the world a better place and help people, then it's not a bad thing at all."

Jack stopped walking and stared at Brian with wonder.

It took a moment for Brian to notice, but he finally turned back to look at Jack with question.

"That was really profound." Jack said in amazement.

Brian shrugged, then said, "I have my moments."

* * * * *

They had walked in silence for nearly half an hour. It wasn't strained or uncomfortable at all, it was just that they both had some thinking to do and nothing needed to be said just then.

Finally, Jack broke the silence by saying, "It's right down here."

"What is?" Brian asked in confusion.

"The place where we can eat. Just watch your step, it's steep." Jack said as he led the way to some dense underbrush.

Brian could hear the trickle of water, but didn't see a stream anywhere.

"Careful." Jack said as he disappeared into some bushes.

Brian hesitantly followed and found that the bushes were masking the edge of a stream.

The place where Jack was waiting for him was like a little beach, formed from the sediment of the stream being deposited along the bank.

"This is nice." Brian said as he looked around.

A loose canopy of trees caused the sunlight to glitter and sparkle all around them, and the tinkling stream had a nearly tranquilizing effect.

"Ready to eat?" Jack asked with a smile.

"Past ready." Brian said with a grin as he took the backpack off his back.

"I love it here." Jack said as he looked up at the sparkling sunlight.

Brian looked at him and could see the peace radiating out from him.

"It shows." Brian said quietly.

"I think maybe I needed this get-away as much as you did." Jack said introspectively, then accepted a sandwich from Brian.

"Well, just don't expect things to be the same when you get back." Brian said frankly as he sat down to enjoy his food.

Jack turned and looked at him curiously.

"I see two ways that this can go. Either we each go back to the same thing that we left, or we work together and improve both our lives." Brian said simply, then took a bite of his sandwich.

"I really hope it's that easy." Jack said honestly.

"I didn't say anything about it being easy!" Brian said with a grin, then added, "If I've learned anything in the past twenty-four hours it's that the 'easy' things you choose are the ones you end up most regretting."

Jack thought about that for a moment, then said, "I suppose that's right. If I really invested some effort into finding a job, or new friends, or a decent girlfriend, then I'd probably be better off than just settling for whatever comes along."

Brian arched an eyebrow at him and waited for him to notice.

"Present company excepted." Jack added dutifully.

Brian nodded with a grin.

"I've never thought of myself as lazy, but... looking at it from this perspective, I guess I really am." Jack said thoughtfully.

"I am too." Brian said frankly.

Jack looked at Brian curiously, prompting him to explain.

"All of it. My dad, the guys at school, I just accepted everything that happened to me. It never even occurred to me to fight against it. Just be quiet and let it pass. Mommy will make it all better. Don't make waves. Don't raise a fuss. Just keep your head down and eventually all the bad things will go away." Brian said distantly, then looked Jack in the eyes and whispered, "I'm tired of being quiet."

Jack smiled, then said, "You know, there's probably not another living soul for about a hundred miles in any direction. I wouldn't mind if you wanted to make some noise."

Brian stopped and seemed to be thinking, then he quietly said, "I don't think I know how."

"Oh, you know how." Jack said with a smile.

Brian thought for another moment, then tilted his head back and let out a scream.

Jack considered, then said, "On a scale of one to ten, I'd rate that at about a two."

"Can you do better?" Brian asked with a grin.

As an answer, Jack opened his mouth and let out a scream that seemed to come from the depths of his soul.

"Wow!" Brian said in amazement.

"That one's been building up for a while." Jack said with a timid grin.

Brian got a determined look on his face, then started to scream in earnest.

It was an anguished cry, but there was a note of determination and defiance in there, too.

"Good one." Jack said appreciatively.

"I feel... all tingly. It's like I've been running." Brian said, barely able to contain his giggles.

"Sometimes, adrenaline can be a wonderful thing." Jack said peacefully.

"What else can we do? I feel like doing something wonderful!" Brian said with excitement.

Jack thought for a moment, then smiled.

"What is it?" Brian asked excitedly.

"Take off your clothes and I'll tell you." Jack said with a grin.

"What?" Brian yelled.

"Back home, how often do you get to do things naked?" Jack asked with a smile.

"I get naked when I shower. That's it." Brian said frankly.

"So? How would you feel about a naked hike back to the cabin?" Jack asked as he watched Brian's expression carefully.

"All the way back to the cabin?" Brian asked cautiously.

"At least for as long as it's fun. You don't have to, but just think about it. When will you have the chance to do something like this again?" Jack asked seriously.

"Remember me, the 'astoundingly' white guy? I think that should answer your question."

"You don't have to do it, but you said you wanted to do something wonderful and... this sounds kind of wonderful to me." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought for a moment, then asked, "Is this one of those lessons that I'm supposed to be learning?"

"No. It's just for fun." Jack said simply.

"And you said I can put my clothes back on whenever I want." Brian said slowly.

"Or don't take them off at all. It's completely up to you." Jack said honestly.

Brian slowly nodded in thought.

"I've talked myself into it. You do what you want." Jack said as he started to undress.

"But it's cold." Brian objected halfheartedly.

"We'll warm up once we start walking." Jack said simply as he pulled his shirt off over his head.

"But what about mosquitoes and stuff?" Brian asked cautiously.

"I haven't noticed any, but if you start having a problem, let me know, I have some bug repellent in the first aid kit."

Brian watched as Jack pulled down his pants, then came to a decision.

"If a mosquito bites my cock, I'm going to make you scratch it when it itches." Brian said as he took off his shirt.

"Just as long as you don't make me kiss it to make it better." Jack said with a grin as he sat down on the ground to put his boots back on.

"I was wanting to ask you about that." Brian said absently as he continued to undress.

"About what?" Jack asked curiously.

"Blowjobs." Brian said frankly.

Jack looked at Brian with surprise, then hesitantly asked, "What about them?"

"Well, I've heard some stuff, and it's all, like, that blowjobs are really great. I mean, from what I heard, it's like freaky, spectacular great. And I wondered if that's really true." Brian asked cautiously.

"It's true." Jack said simply.

"Have you ever..." Brian began to ask, then trailed off.

"Go ahead and ask whatever you want. It's fine." Jack said encouragingly, then asked, "You ready?"

Brian looked around to see that they hadn't left anything, then nodded.

Dressed only in their socks and shoes, carrying their clothes in the backpack and duffle bag, they began the trip back.

Once they were out in the open again, Jack had to admit, there was still a chill in the air.

In hindsight, he realized that it might have been smarter for them to have waited to get naked until after they were up the bank and on the other side of the scratchy bushes.

Jack wanted to generate some body heat, so he said, "Let's get moving."

* * * * *

They walked for a few minutes when Brian finally quietly asked, "Did you ever get a blowjob?"

"Sure. Lots of times." Jack said casually.

"How... I mean, I heard that you get a girl to stick it in her mouth. Is that it?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"First of all, whether it's a girl or a guy, a mouth is a mouth. I've had both and you can't tell the difference." Jack said frankly.

Brian's eyes went wide at the statement.

"And you don't just stick it in. There's sucking, licking, bobbing up and down, maybe if you're lucky a little trip down under to suck on your balls." Jack said thoughtfully.

"And it feels good?" Brian asked cautiously.

"It feels great!" Jack said with a smile.

Brian was quiet for a few minutes, then he hesitantly asked, "You said you did that with a guy. Did you ever, um... do that?"

"Are you asking if I ever gave a guy a blowjob?" Jack asked, just to be sure of the question.

"Um, yeah." Brian said nervously.

"Yeah. A couple times. But that was a few years ago." Jack said slowly.

"How was it? I mean, did you like doing it?" Brian asked curiously.

"It wasn't bad. I think I enjoyed that I was making my partner feel good, but I can't say that it's something that I really think about much. I suppose that if I were with a guy and we were messing around, I might do it again." Jack said consideringly.

"So it wasn't, like, gross or anything?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. At least, I never felt that way about it." Jack said casually.

"Are you gay?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"No. But I'm open to trying different things. I've been with a few guys, but it didn't really 'do it' for me. I think for me, sex with a woman is better, I enjoy it more. Of course, the thing that's most important is who you're in love with. If something happened one day that I fell 'in love' and it turned out to be with a man... I'd be okay with that." Jack said thoughtfully.

"How can you say you're not gay and still say that you'd be okay with falling in love with a guy?" Brian asked in confusion.

"I prefer women. To me, that means I'm straight. To someone else, the fact that I'm open at all to the possibility of being with a guy would make me bisexual. And I'm sure that there are some people who would even call me gay. Honestly, it's all words. I'm just me." Jack said frankly.

"But I don't know what I am." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Some people know right away, others take years to figure it out. Just try not to worry about it too much, because worrying won't make it any easier or help you find out any faster." Jack said honestly.

"You know, I thought walking naked in the woods would feel... I don't know, naughty, or something. But this is nice." Brian said with a smile.

"Under our clothes, we're all just animals. Our bodies were designed to be touched by the sun and embraced by the breeze, so it's only natural that being out here like this would feel right." Jack said with a contented smile.

"You're kind of a poet, aren't you?" Brian asked with a grin.

"Not always, but out here, like this... yeah."

Chapter 4

As Jack and Brian walked naked and silent through the woods, Brian considered his feelings, or more precisely, his lack of them.

Finding himself in this unfathomable situation would have been impossible to imagine just a few days ago. But now, Brian couldn't find any trace of embarrassment as he walked along.

To Brian's eye, Jack appeared to be in the same introspective state, naked and unashamed as he, just another animal in the woods, walked along in harmony with their surroundings.

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The time had passed by without notice. All too soon, the pair arrived at the cabin. Jack walked in ahead of Brian and immediately went to his side of the bed and began to put on his sweats.

"It's going to take a while for dinner to cook. Would you mind going to the spring to get us some fresh water to go with dinner while I get the stove going?" Jack asked casually.

Brian walked across the room and picked up the jug that they had emptied earlier.

As Brian walked toward the door, Jack hesitantly asked, "Don't you want to get dressed first?"

"My clothes'll just get wet if I do." Brian said simply, then continued on his way.

Jack watched Brian's bare butt walk out the door, then muttered to himself, "I've created a monster."

* * * * *

As Brian walked to the spring in the diminishing late afternoon light, he felt a smile come across his face.

He wasn't thinking any particular thoughts. He wasn't feeling any particular feelings. But somewhere, deep inside him, he was happy.

After filling the water jug, Brian slowly walked back toward the cabin, looking forward to the coming night. Not because of anything they were planning on doing, because, as far as he knew, they didn't have any plans. He was simply looking forward to being surrounded by safety, security, acceptance and love.

Deep inside him, he felt a pang of regret that he couldn't have the same feeling when he was at home with his parents, who were, by definition, supposed to support and love him.

* * * * *

Once Brian was back in the cabin, he put the water jug on the counter by the dishpan, then walked across the room and began to put on his sweats.

"Is there anything I can do to help you with dinner?" Brian asked casually as he dressed. The soft fabric of the sweatsuit felt amazingly comfortable as he slipped it on over his chilled skin.

"No. Not right now. It's going to be a while before the stove is hot enough to get the water to boil." Jack said casually, then turned before continuing, "But if you want, you can unpack your backpack. There are some kitchen supplies in there, under the clothes, that I'm going to need."

"Oh, okay." Brian said as he started to take the clothes out of the backpack, then asked, "Where should I put these?"

"You can use those wooden crates in the corner as dresser drawers if you like." Jack said casually.

"Sounds good. I'd like to see what clothes I have to choose from." Brian said simply.

"I know they're probably not what you're used to. But no one will see them but us." Jack said as he moved around the kitchen area, organizing things.

"Well, I don't wear clothes like this back home, but that's mostly because my mom has always done my shopping for me. I never really cared too much about stuff like that." Brian said frankly.

"That settles it. You're not gay." Jack said with a playful grin.

Brian chuckled, then responded, "Whew! I'm glad that's settled."

Jack gave him a quick smile before going back to work.

Once Brian was past the clothes, he found several pouches of dehydrated food and a few canned goods.

"Where do you want the food?" Brian asked as he carried an armload of food across the cabin.

"Over here. I've cleared a space for you." Jack said as he motioned to the counter top.

"Why so much dehydrated stuff?" Brian asked casually.

"Mainly because it isn't perishable. We don't have a refrigerator, so we need food that we can store for a long time without it going bad." Jack said honestly.

"But what about the eggs?" Brian asked as he glanced at the ice chest.

"They'll be fine. If they can survive under a chicken's ass, a few days at room temperature won't do them any harm." Jack said frankly.

Brian chuckled and nodded his understanding.

"The sandwiches were the last thing I was worried about using up. They're gone now, so we just have to take care not to cook more than we can eat, and there shouldn't be any problem." Jack said frankly.

Brian walked back to his backpack to start looking through all the little pockets and pouches as he said, "I don't think it should be a problem, considering how good everything tastes here and how hungry I always seem to be."

"You and me both, Brian." Jack said as he worked on putting the food away.

Every time Brian opened another pocket or pouch on the backpack, it revealed another treasure. He found a sewing kit, a very old looking pocket knife, a compass, a few things that looked like things an expert woodsman would be able to use, but he had no idea what they were, and then he found a folded up piece of paper.

When he unfolded it, he was surprised to see that it was hand written, in a nearly illegible scrawl. The printing was similar to his own handwriting when he was in first grade. At first he thought it was a joke, or some kind of secret code, mostly due to the hand drawn heart symbols. But when he deciphered the meaning, his blood ran cold.

♥ u dad

♥ u jak

sry not same az u

wsh i wuz

i h8 me

dln

Brian's eyes filled with tears and he debated within himself whether or not he should show the letter to Jack. He couldn't even begin to guess at what Jack's reaction might be.

They had had such a good day. Was it really so much to ask that Jack be allowed to enjoy one full day of happiness before the harsh realities of life intruded to bring his spirits down?

He watched as Jack checked the stove and smiled that the water was finally beginning to boil. The debate continued within Brian as Jack started to slowly pour the contents of a pouch into the boiling water as he stirred.

Finally, Brian decided that Jack needed to see the letter. Whether it hurt or not, the man had been so incredibly open and honest with him that it would be a crime, no, a sin, not to show him that same respect in return.

But after another moment of watching Jack's dinner preparations, Brian's resolve crumbled and he decided that it would be best for Jack if he got the message after dinner, when there wasn't anything that he needed to be doing or worrying about.

"Is there anything in your backpack that needs to be unpacked?" Brian asked as he folded the piece of paper and put it back in the side pocket of the smaller backpack.

"Yeah. It's about the same as yours, mostly clothes and supplies." Jack said casually.

"Where do you want your clothes?" Brian asked as he looked around to see if there were any more crates.

"Just lay them on my side of the bed and I'll take care of them when I'm done here." Jack said with a smile.

Brian nodded, then went to the business of unpacking.

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Once Brian had finished with Jack's backpack, he went back to the crates to get a better look at his clothes... Dillon's clothes.

The most obvious thing about them was that most of them were black. There was a midnight blue t shirt with a stark white raven on it that was the most colorful shirt in the collection. There were also a few t shirts with skulls and other slightly nightmarish things, but none of it was any worse than what he'd seen other kids wear to school.

After a few more minutes of looking through the clothes, he decided that, overall, he liked the style.

"Soup's on." Jack finally called from the kitchen area.

Brian was surprised at just how good their dinner tasted. Intellectually, he knew that the chili was dehydrated and the cooking instructions were 'add water', but the resulting chili along with buttered bread, was as fine a meal as he had ever tasted. Of course, the feast was complimented by tall glasses of cool spring water, that, just an hour before, had been inside the earth.

Brian was able to eat his fill, and there wasn't a single scrap of food left for them to share with the local wildlife.

Without offering or being asked, Brian automatically walked to the dishpan and helped Jack do the dishes.

He felt the dread building up in him, but couldn't deny that giving Jack the letter was the right thing to do.

When he had dried the last dish and put it away. He drew up his courage and quietly said, "Jack. I found something while I was unpacking."

"What did you find?" Jack asked with interest.

Rather than answer verbally, Brian walked to the backpack.

Jack looked at Brian curiously before taking the piece of paper from him.

Brian watched as the color seemed to drain out of Jack's face.

Tears started to well in Jack's eyes before he stiffly said, "I need to bring in some wood before it gets dark."

"Okay." Brian said quietly, then watched as Jack hurried out the door.

Brian walked to the stove and checked to see if the fire needed any wood. It seemed to be fine, so he left it alone.

After a few minutes of walking around the cabin, Brian finally settled into one of the chairs at the decades old table and waited.

Less than an hour before, Brian had felt so carefree and like nothing was impossible.

Now, all he could do was sit quietly and worry for Jack.

* * * * *

Brian walked to the front door and looked out. The early evening twilight had given way to darkness.

Picking up the flashlight, Brian walked outside.

As he turned the corner, he spotted Jack, propped against the back of the cabin.

Before he turned off the flashlight, he caught a glimpse of the wet trails of tears on Jack's cheeks.

Feeling his way in the dark, Brian finally took hold of Jack and held him firmly.

After a moment, Jack put his arms loosely around Brian and returned the hug.

Brian held Jack close for a few minutes, silently offering his support.

Then something odd caught Brian's eye and he looked up.

Brian nearly gasped at the sight of the infinite sky above them.

Jack wasn't in any state to be talking about the stars just then, but Brian was amazed at the seemingly countless stars filling the sky. He had never imagined such a majestic sight.

"It's getting cold. We need to get inside." Jack said hoarsely, barely breaking the silence.

"Okay." Brian said gently, then turned his flashlight on and watched as Jack gathered an armload of wood.

When it was apparent that Jack was ready to go, Brian led the way, shining the light where Jack would need it.

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"Are you alright?" Brian asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. It's just that he never... that's the only time he ever said that he loved me." Jack said, barely able to restrain his tears.

Brian nodded, and knew that there weren't any words that would be adequate to comfort his friend in this situation.

"Thanks, Brian." Jack whispered.

Brian nodded, and got a sense that Jack was past the worst of his pain.

"Well, the dishes are done. We have fire wood. So I suppose that the rest of the night is ours to do with as we want." Jack said, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"If I had my phone, I'd at least have a few video games and my music. I don't have any idea of what there is to do." Brian said honestly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "That's part of the magic of this place. Without any of those things to divert your attention, you have to develop a new set of skills."

"Like?"

"Like conversation, story telling, playing games, singing, or maybe just sitting silently and thinking about things." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded thoughtfully.

"Of course, I promised to teach you a new trick when we got back to the cabin." Jack said with a grin.

"Oh, yeah." Brian said as a blush immediately colored his cheeks.

"It's up to you. If you don't feel like you're ready, I can show you some other time." Jack said gently.

"N-No. I want to." Brian stammered, "I'm just... scared, I guess."

"If you want me to show you, all you'll have to do is watch for a couple minutes. I won't touch you or ask you to touch me." Jack said as he looked Brian in the eyes.

"That's okay. I mean... it's not like I haven't touched you already." Brian said shyly as a fresh, even brighter, blush overtook the previous one.

"This is different, Brian. That was to satisfy your curiosity. This is something sexual. There's no way that I'd let us do something like that."

"Why not?" Brian asked curiously, sounding less nervous.

"I like you, Brian. No, I love you. If we were to do anything sexual together, everything would change between us. It might feel good at the time, but we would both know, deep inside, that it's wrong."

"Wrong?" Brian asked quietly.

"Well, wrong for us." Jack amended. "We're not meant to be lovers. If we tried, I'm pretty sure it would destroy what we already have."

Brian thought for a moment, then slowly nodded his agreement.

"So, do you want to teach the 'big guy' a new trick? I'm pretty sure you're really going to like this." Jack said with a grin, as he casually gestured toward Brian's crotch.

Brian giggled and said, "Yeah. That sounds great."

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Jack motioned for Brian to walk with him over to the bed.

"When you get to be my age, some porn usually helps things along. But for you... well, I doubt that you'll need any encouragement." Jack said, then pulled his sweatpants down.

"Wwwhat should I do?" Brian asked nervously.

"Just sit down and watch. This won't take too long. I'm just going to show you enough to get you started." Jack said as he then pulled off his boxer shorts.

Brian's eyes went wide when he saw that Jack was already fully erect.

Jack walked to his backpack and took out a small jar.

"Petroleum jelly is one of those all purpose things like bailing wire and duct tape that you should always pack with you on a trip. It's useful for a lot of different things, but this is probably my favorite." Jack said as he gathered some of the pale goo on his fingertips before closing the jar.

"Just so you know, you can't use this with a condom. So if you're going to be doing anything that requires a condom, you'll need a water based lubricant." Jack said seriously.

Brian looked at Jack uncertainly.

"Oh, come on! Don't tell me that no one's told you about condoms!" Jack said with exasperation.

"I've seen lots of stuff on TV, and I've heard things. I'm just... I don't know if I understood it right." Brian said cautiously.

Jack nodded, then said, "Remind me to cover that with you before we leave."

Brian nodded that he would.

"I guess we'll start with the basic stroke." Jack said as he took hold of his slightly less rigid cock.

Brian watched with wide eyes as Jack slowly began to stroke himself.

"Since you're cut, like I am, you should be able to do just like I'm doing." Jack said as his strokes became longer and more fluid.

"What do you mean 'cut'?" Brian asked shyly, feeling like it was something that he should already know.

"It means that we don't have foreskin." Jack said simply as he continued his long, rhythmic strokes.

"You mentioned foreskin before, but I don't really understand." Brian said timidly.

Jack took firm hold of his cock and forced a sheath of skin to gather around his glans.

"When boys are born, they have skin like this that covers the entire tip of their cock and sometimes beyond. Sometimes when a boy is just a few days old, a doctor or a rabbi cuts the foreskin, leaving the glans... the head, exposed." Jack said carefully, then continued to stroke himself.

"Why do they do that?" Brian asked cautiously.

"There's something in the old testament teachings about it, so for some it's religious. I think for everyone else it's an excuse to mutilate our penises so the glans will be exposed and desensitized. That way we won't enjoy sex as much." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought about that for a moment, then said, "Can I blame this on my dad, too?"

Jack chuckled and said, "Sure. We can't be sure that he told them to do it, but I think it's safe to assume that he didn't tell them not to."

"Is that cum?" Brian asked as he pointed to a glistening pearly drop on the tip of Jack's cock.

"Not exactly. That's precum. It's the body's natural lubrication." Jack said, then used his thumb to spread the precum around his glans.

Brian watched in wonder, transfixed by the sight.

"I think it's basically the same fluid as cum, there's just less of it." Jack said, and Brian noticed that his voice sounded different; deeper, huskier.

"I was going to show you some other strokes, but I'd better stop." Jack said as his pumping hand came to rest.

"Why are you stopping?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Me showing you how to do this is one thing. Me jerking off and shooting my load in front of you is something else and crosses a line." Jack said as he reached down to pick up his boxer shorts.

"I can go outside for a while if you want to finish." Brian said quietly.

"Actually, I was thinking about going to the outhouse so I could do just that. And while I'm gone, you could deal with anything that might have *come up* in the last few minutes." Jack said as he glanced at the tent in Brian's pants.

"So, when the cum... comes. What should I do?" Brian asked cautiously.

Jack walked to the door and tossed a roll of toilet paper to Brian, then took another for himself.

Brian didn't come anywhere close to catching it, but fortunately, it landed on the bed, beside him.

It was obvious that Jack noticed the failed catch, but all he said was, "I'll knock when I get back."

Brian nodded and watched as Jack walked out the door.

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After a moment of hesitation, Brian slowly pulled down the front of his sweatpants. His hands automatically continued the process without him being consciously aware and a moment later he was standing naked, breathing shallowly.

With shaky hands, he gathered some petroleum jelly on his fingertips.

Hearing his heart pounding in his ears, he took his engorged cock in his hand. And he absently noted that it had never been as hard as it was at that moment.

As soon as he stroked himself with his slimy hand, a flood of sensations coursed through his body, unlike any he had ever known in his life.

Feeling lightheaded from the nervousness and excitement, he did his best to mimic Jack's movements from earlier and couldn't believe the amazing feeling.

After that, instinct took over and his hand was a blur, jacking with all the force and fury at his command.

The sitting position he was in felt a little awkward, so he laid back on the bed without missing a beat.

Brian closed his eyes as the indescribable sensations in his cock became the center of his universe.

He felt an urgency building within him and his hand started moving impossibly faster.

Completely lost in sensation, he stroked himself until the urgency erupted into a long ropey white strand of cum, flying across his stomach and chest.

He was unprepared for a second spurt that shot up his chest and onto his mouth and nose.

His pumping hand slowed as lesser spurts also collected on his chest and stomach.

Finally, his hand stopped and he just lay there, breathing heavily.

The world was calm and silent around him as his body felt as though it were made of lead.

Absently, Brian licked his lips, then, too late, remembered that it was his cum that was there.

His first instinct was to be revolted by it, but as the taste registered, he realized that it was sweet... and slightly salty.

He didn't lick his lips again, nor did he spit. He was too exhausted to be concerned and continued to lie in a satiated heap on the sleeping bag.

A knock on the door snapped Brian out of his half drowsy state.

He sat up quickly, wanting to hide the evidence of what he'd just done. But just as quickly he realized how silly the thought was and called out, "Come in."

Jack stepped into the cabin, then stopped just inside the door.

"I see that everything 'came out' okay." Jack said slowly.

Brian giggled, then said in a small voice, "I made a mess."

Jack smiled at him as he said, "I'll get you a damp cloth. I don't want you using up all the toilet paper."

"Thanks, Jack." Brian said past a chuckle.

"How are you?" Jack asked as he wet a towel and wrung it out.

"Never better." Brian said softly, but sincerely.

"I'm glad. Even though it's a wonderful thing, the feelings are so intense. I could understand if it was a little bit frightening." Jack said as he walked to Brian and began to wipe him clean, starting with his face.

"No. It was perfect. It was you that made it perfect for me." Brian said honestly as he looked up into Jack's eyes.

"I don't know much about psychology and stuff, but it seems to me that this is one of those turning points that can be a wonderful memory or end up scarring you for life. I really hope that years from now you'll look back on this day and be able to smile at the memory." Jack said as he gently wiped Brian's chest and stomach.

Without thought, Brian leaned forward and put his arms around Jack and pulled him into a firm kiss.

It only lasted a few seconds, but it might as well have lasted forever, since time lost all meaning. The only thing that existed for Brian in that moment was feeling.

Finally, Jack pulled back and looked at Brian with concern.

"It's okay, Jack. That was love, not 'in love'. I didn't have words, and I needed to tell you, so you'd know." Brian said as he looked into Jack's eyes to convey his sincerity.

"I understand, Brian." Jack said quietly, then sat on the bed beside Brian and pulled him into a firm hug.

They sat like that for a few minutes, until Brian reluctantly said, "I've got to pee."

"Big boys call it 'needing to piss', but go on." Jack said as he released Brian, then handed him the damp towel and continued, "Here, you can finish cleaning up while you're out there."

Brian stood and quickly pulled on his sweat pants, then stepped into his boots.

"Here." Jack said as he waited for Brian to pull on his coat, then handed him a flashlight.

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Brian walked briskly to the treeline and dropped the flashlight and towel on the ground before quickly pulling down the front of his sweat pants and beginning to take a much needed pee... piss.

When he finished, he smiled to himself as he took a moment to clean the last of the petroleum jelly off his, now limp, cock.

Finally, he turned to walk back toward the cabin, then stopped. He felt a sense of tranquility, of inner peace, that he had never known before.

He tilted his head back and looked at the infinite stars above him as he took in a slow, deep breath of clean, fresh air.

The air was cold, but he didn't care. He felt alive for the first time. And life was beautiful.

* * * * *

Jack was organizing the clothes that Brian had unpacked for him.

The door opened and Brian said, "I just stopped in for this. Be right back."

Jack turned in time to see Brian grab a roll of toilet paper before disappearing back out the door.

He smiled, then went back to getting things put away the way he wanted them.

Once that was done, he sat down on the bed and considered the tremendous undertaking that he had committed himself to.

When his dad had told him about Brian, he had imagined a boy who was closed off, maybe not to the degree that Dillon was, still, that was his expectation.

But Brian had surprised him. The boy was open to his instruction, he was almost desperate for it.

The way that Brian seemed to watch his every move and hang on his every word worried him, because he was afraid that he might say or do the wrong thing and hurt him.

He didn't really have a plan, more like a series of objectives.

Without a handbook or any real experience, Jack felt like he might be in over his head.

Brian seemed to have grown up deprived of any sort of male role model.

The boy's shyness was only one symptom. He also seemed to be starved for physical contact and desperate for any type of approval.

Jack knew that the activities in the coming day would not only provide Brian with some much needed confidence, but also give him several

opportunities to achieve things, for which Jack would reward him with praise and affection.

His thoughts turned to Dillon and how troubled he had been the last time Jack had seen him.

Even though Dillon and Brian were two very different people with completely different problems, Jack could see a definite connection. He felt that his father had chosen correctly to become involved because Brian would almost certainly have started down the path to self destruction if no one had helped.

With his low self esteem and a complete lack of support, Jack couldn't see any way that Brian would have been able to deal with the challenges of adolescence that were only just beginning to surface.

The door opened and Brian stepped into the cabin.

"While I was sitting there, doing my business..."

Jack quickly interrupted, "I think that now would be a good time to start using some 'big boy' words."

Brian flashed him a 'seriously?' look, then slowly said, "Okay. I was taking a... dump, then out of nowhere, icy wind blew on my... ass! It... scared the shit out of me! I thought there was an animal or something down in there licking me!"

Jack tried, but he couldn't contain his laughter at Brian's expression.

Brian glared at Jack and waited for him to quiet.

Finally Jack said, "The outhouse is old and it's got a few loose boards. Now and then a draft will blow through."

"Yeah! Now you tell me." Brian said indignantly, but a smile had found it's way into his expression.

Jack picked up the box of hand wipes, then said, "Wash up, then let's see what we can come up with to do next."

* * * * *

After cleaning his hands, Brian walked to the table and took the seat opposite Jack's.

"Brian, I know that I've mentioned this before, but I want to say it again to drive home the point. Part of what makes this place seem so magical is the absence of all the technological toys that we use to distract us and keep us

from thinking. Being here, like this, we have to become active participants in our entertainment."

It took a few seconds for Brian to process Jack's words, but finally he said, "So watching TV, listening to .mp3s and stuff like that is sort of one-way entertainment. We don't have to do anything but soak it in, and because of that, we're forgetting how to 'be' entertaining."

"Saying 'forgetting' kind of implies that we ever learned in the first place. I think that so many parents use the television as a baby sitter and video games as 'play' for their kids that there's a whole generation that's growing up who don't have the first clue about how to make up a game or entertain themselves." Jack said thoughtfully.

Brian nodded, finding no evidence to dispute what Jack was saying.

"Being here, without all those 'conveniences', we have the chance to talk or play games that we've made up for ourselves or even to just appreciate some peace and quiet. There's also the experience of being out of touch. We don't have a phone or a computer to talk to other people. No one is going to call or text us."

"Yeah. I always carry my phone with me. It was in my backpack. I don't think I can even remember a time when I was completely 'out of touch' with everyone." Brian said slowly.

"So this may be the first time that you've been able to experience the sense of being 'alone'." Jack said quietly.

"Well, not totally alone." Brian said with a smile.

Jack returned the smile, then said, "True. But you're getting the experience of being 'out of contact'. I think that's important. Without that lifeline, always waiting to be used, there's a feeling of independence, of separateness, that you never really can feel when you're inside a city."

"Yeah. I guess so." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Do you realize what we're doing right now?" Jack asked seriously.

"Just talking." Brian said hesitantly.

Jack smiled, then said, "How often do you have the experience of sitting down with someone, face-to-face, and talking with them like this?"

Brian thought for a moment then slowly answered, "I don't think I ever have, not like this. Whenever I've sat and talked with someone, it was for something to do with school or for some other reason that I 'had to'."

"I can't talk about everywhere, but from what I see around me, it looks like conversation is becoming a lost art. Mindless incessant chatter is doing quite well, but true civilized, thoughtful conversation has gone the way of the dinosaur. I mean, sure, there's the whole Internet version of conversation, and I guess that's okay, but there's a 'distance' to it. It's safe because there's anonymity. But talking to someone, looking them in the eyes, reading their facial expressions and body language... I just don't see it happening anymore." Jack said distantly.

Brian slowly nodded, then quietly said, "We never did anything like that at my house. I mean, talk. Dad's always watching the TV or doing chores around the house. And mom's always doing... something. Mom things."

"Well, that's another way that I was lucky. Every now and then, dad would take a night for us to sit and talk about things. He might order a pizza or something, and then we'd just sit there and talk about his work or my classes and whatever else came to mind. It actually sounds kind of boring when I'm telling about it, but it's hard to explain how important it is. It's like my dad's way of showing me that he's interested in my life and that he really wants me to be a part of his life."

"Wow. I can't even imagine how that would be." Brian said in wonder.

"What does your family do at dinner time? Do you eat together?" Jack asked curiously.

"Oh yeah. I'm not sure whether it's mom or dad who came up with it, but we always sit down together at dinner time." Brian said as he looked Jack in the eyes.

"What do you talk about?" Jack asked with interest.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "Nothing, really."

"So you just sit there, silently?"

Brian thought for a little bit longer, then slowly said, "Yeah. I don't think anyone ever told me that we weren't allowed to talk at dinner, but... we never really did. Sometimes dad mentions something, like, that we're going to visit my grandfather in the nursing home, or something like that. But, other than that, I can't think of anytime that we've really said anything."

"Are you close to your grandfather?" Jack asked curiously.

Brian shrugged, then said, "Not really. I only get to see him once every couple of months, and then it's only for a few minutes."

"My grandpa and I are really close. This is his cabin." Jack said with a gentle smile, then continued, "If it weren't for Grandpa, I don't think me and dad would have done very well after the divorce. Grandpa brought us up here and talked with both of us. I don't even know how long we stayed here... it felt like forever. But me and Dad and Grandpa went for walks and talked about stuff. It felt like what a family 'should' be."

"I don't know what that feels like." Brian said darkly, then realized something, and smiled. He looked Jack in the eyes and said, "Yes I do know. This. This is what family feels like."

"That's right, Brian. Sharing our thoughts and feelings, sharing in 'doing' things, in having experiences. Connecting, bonding or whatever you want to call it, this is what family is about." Jack said as he looked into Brian's eyes.

Brian smiled, then it faded as he said, "But then I'll have to go back... to them."

"The great thing about family is, that once you get it, you have it forever. You carry it with you. When your dad is being a dick-wad and you're feeling alone, you can remember that you have a family that loves you and will always be happy to see you and do things with you." Jack said with a gentle smile.

"Tell me, Brian, do you play a musical instrument?" Jack asked curiously.

"I wanted to learn piano, but my dad said 'no'. He said that after a long day of work, he didn't want to have to listen to me playing scales while he was trying to relax." Brian said distantly.

"He sucks." Jack said frankly.

Brian smiled and nodded.

"If you really want to learn to play the piano, we'll get you a keyboard and headphones, so you can practice without disturbing anyone. From what Grandpa says, people used to learn to play music so they could get together and share in the pleasure of playing together. No one ever thought about making a career out of it or making money off of it. The whole point was to enjoy making music and share the joy and the music with others." Jack said quietly.

"Do you play an instrument?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes. I play the guitar." Jack said with a smile, then added, "And I play it badly."

Brian giggled at the declaration.

"I didn't bring the guitar this trip because I didn't want to take the chance of it becoming a distraction." Jack said honestly.

"Well, maybe if I can get a keyboard, we can find the time to play badly together." Brian suggested hopefully.

"Yeah. I'd really like that." Jack said with a smile.

There was a lull in the conversation, and Brian felt like he should say something.

"Would you like some popcorn?" Jack asked curiously.

Brian blinked, then, just to be sure he had heard correctly, asked, "Popcorn?"

"Yeah. I brought some and we've got a popping basket. If you'll do the popping, I'll melt some butter for when it's done." Jack said as he stood from the table.

"What do I have to do?" Brian asked cautiously as he walked with Jack to the stove.

"It's kind of like when you make toast, except that you have to shake it a little so the kernels don't stick." Jack said as he took a wire mesh basket on an arm and handed it to Brian.

"Open that." Jack said as he walked to the pouches of food and retrieved a plastic bag of popcorn.

Brian opened the top of the basket and watched as Jack poured in the kernels.

"Close it up and you're ready to go." Jack said with a smile, then sat the bag of popcorn aside.

Brian closed the basket, then opened the wood stove that had a generous amount of coals built up, and slowly moved the basket over them.

"I'm putting a bowl beside you so you can dump it out when it's done. I'm thinking we'll need two baskets." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded as he watched the basket carefully. He didn't want to take the chance of accidentally catching the popcorn on fire.

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After a few minutes, the first kernels of popcorn started to pop. Brian couldn't help but smile as he watched the popcorn kernels exploding inside the wire mesh basket.

Due to his microwave experience, Brian knew that when the popping had slowed to only one kernel every few seconds, that it was time to stop.

He took the basket out of the stove, then carefully opened it and poured the steamy hot popcorn into the waiting bowl.

Jack was immediately at his side with the bag of popcorn to fill his basket again.

Brian went back to toasting the popcorn kernels over the coals while Jack took the bowl and added butter and salt to the popcorn.

"My mouth is watering." Brian said with a grin.

"I know. Me too." Jack said happily as he placed the bowl of prepared popcorn at Brian's side.

Brian noticed and snagged a few pieces of popcorn as he carefully watched his basket.

"Excellent popcorn." Brian said with appreciation.

"Yeah. None better." Jack said happily as he walked to the ice chest.

The first kernels of popcorn started to pop, then Jack asked, "Do you want orange soda?"

"Sure." Brian said casually as he shook the basket and made sure it didn't drift too close to the coals.

"It's not going to be ice cold, but I've never really minded that too much." Jack said as he placed two cans of soda on the table.

"Why don't you just keep them outside?" Brian asked curiously.

"We've tried that. We've also tried using the pool under the spring as a refrigerator, since the water's so cold. The raccoons and such are very resourceful here. It's as likely as not that anything we put out there won't be there when we come back for it." Jack said frankly.

Brian chuckled, then turned his full attention to the basket as the popcorn started to pop.

In less than a minute, Brian was emptying the basket into the bowl.

Jack quickly poured butter over the popcorn, then gave it a generous dusting of salt.

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"Nothing EVER tasted this good." Brian said after his first mouthful of popcorn.

"Yeah. Except every other thing that we cook up here. It's all wonderful." Jack said with a grin.

"I just can't believe how something as simple as buttered popcorn can feel so special! I have microwave popcorn at home all the time and it's no big deal. I can't even tell you what the difference is except that this means something." Brian said with difficulty.

"Brian, you made that. It's your accomplishment. I help you with the butter and salt, so that makes it something that we shared. We're sitting here, enjoying it together without anything else to distract us, so that makes it more of a focus for our attention. We haven't been getting a lot of things that you would consider 'treats' since we've been up here, so that makes it special." Jack said consideringly, then added, "Or maybe it's because I used real butter."

"It's got to be the butter." Brian said playfully.

Jack smiled, then went back to eating his popcorn.

* * * * *

"Do you know how to sing?" Jack asked as he relaxed back in his chair.

They had finished the popcorn and were nursing the last of their sodas.

"No, not really." Brian said shyly.

"I'm not a great singer, myself. But I still enjoy doing it when I get the chance." Jack said frankly.

"Okay. But I wouldn't know what to sing." Brian said shyly.

"It doesn't matter. Just think about some of the songs you like, and try to sing one of them. If it's something I know, then maybe I'll join in." Jack said with an encouraging smile.

"You say that we've got nothing in common, no common ground to start from, and we're falling apart." Brian began to sing, he was a little bit flat, but all in all, not bad considering that he had probably never sang A Capella before.

Jack decided that, since he knew the song, that he would join in.

"You'll say, the world has come between us, Our lives have come between us, But I know you just don't care." They sang, more or less in unison and slightly off pitch. Still, for a first try, it wasn't that bad.

"And I said, what about 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'? She said, 'I think I remember the film, and as I recall, I think, we both kinda liked it.' And I said, 'Well, that's one thing we've got.'" They sang together, and this time they actually seemed to come together enough that they sounded like they were singing the same song.

This time, Brian sang alone. Mostly because Jack wasn't sure about the next lyric of the song.

"I see you - the only one who knew me, and now your eyes see through me, I guess I was wrong. So what now? It's plain to see we're over, and I hate when things are over - When so much is left undone." Brian sang in a voice that was clearer and sounded more confident than when he began.

"And I said, what about 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'? She said, 'I think I remember the film, and as I recall, I think, we both kinda liked it.' And I said, 'Well, that's one thing we've got.'"

Brian nodded to Jack, signaling him to join in, then began to sing, *"And I said, what about 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'? She said, 'I think I remember the film, and as I recall, I think, we both kinda liked it.' And I said, 'Well, that's one thing we've got'."*

Jack stopped, but Brian continued with the next verse, *"You say that we've got nothing in common¹... Why did you stop?"*

"Because all it does is repeat over and over after this." Jack said frankly.

"Yeah. Songs sometimes do that." Brian said simply.

"Not like this one. It really repeats a lot, I mean, to the point of being annoying." Jack said seriously.

Brian thought about it for a moment, then said, "I guess I can see how you could feel that way, but it doesn't bother me."

Jack smiled a brilliant smile which confused Brian.

"You just disagreed with me." Jack said happily.

"Yeah. So?" Brian said hesitantly.

"Brian, don't you get it? A doormat would NEVER disagree with someone. You listened to my opinion, disagreed with my assessment, then voiced your own opinion, which you stated respectfully, I might add. That is AWESOME! If we can just get you comfortable enough to do that all the time, with your family and at school, then you should be in great shape when you get back." Jack said cheerfully.

"If I knew it would make you this happy, I would have disagreed with you sooner." Brian said hesitantly.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Keep that attitude coming, buddy. By the time we get you back home, they won't know what hit them."

"I'll do my best." Brian said with a reluctant grin.

* * * * *

As the night went on, more singing and general conversation ensued.

Even though all they had done was talk and sing, Brian couldn't remember a more entertaining night in his life. The evening had seemed so full and so much fun.

"I was thinking that, if you wanted, you could try something new tonight." Jack said casually.

"What's that?" Brian asked with interest.

"Sleeping naked." Jack said simply.

"Why would I want to do that?" Brian asked cautiously, not knowing if there might actually be some good reason for it.

"I've always thought that it felt good. It's more comfortable. I was just thinking that this would be a safe place where you could try it out and decide if it's something that you like." Jack said frankly.

"I always wear pajamas at home." Brian said slowly.

"I figured." Jack said with a shrug as he stood, then added, "I usually sleep naked, the cabin was just too cold last night, and besides, I was afraid that I'd freak you out if I stripped naked and went to sleep beside you."

Brian chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I probably would've been laying there, terrified, the entire night."

"Come on, tomorrow's a work day so we need to get our sleep." Jack said with a grin as he started to undress.

"Oh yeah, horrible things." Brian said as he walked to his side of the bed.

"That's right. So we need to get our rest." Jack said as he pulled down his pants.

"I don't think that will be a problem. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Brian said as he also undressed.

Jack was completely naked, he glanced over at Brian and found that he wasn't paying him the least little bit of attention.

"Goodnight, Brian." Jack said as he sat on the edge of the bed and scooted into his sleeping bag.

"Goodnight, Jack." Brian said happily as he did the same.

Once he was assured that Brian was settled into place, Jack reached beside him and turned down the fire of the lantern until it went out.

Chapter 5

Brian awoke to the feeling of soft fabric all along his naked skin. It was so warm and comfortable, he couldn't imagine another feeling that could compare. As he opened his eyes, he found that he was looking at Jack's sleeping face, just a few inches away.

The more Brian got to know Jack, the more handsome he seemed. And beyond being handsome, he was also beautiful. That beauty shone from an inner joy that radiated out through his eyes and voice. But when he was sleeping, innocent and unworried, Jack was angelic.

As Brian gazed at Jack, he assessed his feelings. What he might have mistaken for attraction the previous morning was now more clear to him. What had confused him was that he'd never felt that type of love before and when he felt it he thought the feeling was romantic love. But what he was feeling for Jack was what he imagined that other people felt toward their beloved family members. Brian felt cheated. He felt that he had been entitled to that type of love all along and that his parents had robbed him, they had, in fact, 'neglected' him by denying him such a basic thing that would have cost them nothing to give.

In an effort to evade the dark thoughts of his parents, Brian got up and quietly put on his sweats. After putting on his boots and pulling on his coat, he quietly walked out the front door of the cabin.

The sun was just starting to rise.

Brian stood on the porch and took a moment to drink in the beauty of his surroundings. Even though the air was cold and he could see the puffs of his breath, it was so mesmerizingly beautiful that he couldn't help but stop to appreciate it.

Finally, when he had had his fill of the scenery, Brian slowly walked down the, now familiar, path and found a convenient tree where he could do his morning business.

On his slow walk back to the cabin, he became aware of just how relaxed he was feeling. That caused him to think back and consider that at no time in his life that he could recall, had he ever felt so utterly content. You're supposed to feel safe at home, you're supposed to feel relaxed. Home is supposed to be your sanctuary, your haven from the tempest of everyday life... or, so he had always believed. But now, in just a few short days, a cabin in the middle of nowhere had become more of a home to him than the house he grew up in. And the virtual stranger that Brian had only met

two days before had become closer and dearer to him than any member of his biological family.

Eventually, Brian's musings receded and he made his way back to the cabin.

Jack was still asleep, looking adorable and Brian was surprised to find that he had the urge to kiss him. Again, it wasn't any type of a romantic feeling that was driving him. But Jack just looked so cute and Brian wanted to be able to express the love that he felt.

Instead, Brian walked to the box of hand wipes and took one out, then made quick work of washing his hands.

After that, he went to the stove to see if there were any coals left from the previous night.

There weren't. They hadn't done anything with the fire before they went to bed, so it had burnt itself out.

Brian debated trying to start the fire himself, but since he had never done it before and hadn't been watching closely when Jack had first started it, he didn't want to take the chance of doing it wrong and messing something up. Instead, he decided to go to the spring and get some fresh water to go with breakfast.

He took the two empty jugs and quietly walked to the front door.

* * * * *

Returning to the cabin, Brian found Jack awake and working on the fire.

"Would you show me how to start the fire when you have time? I was going to do it, but I didn't want to mess it up."

"Sure. Maybe tomorrow." Jack said casually.

"I got us water. Is there anything else I can do to help with breakfast?"

"Not yet. It's going to be a little bit before the stove is hot enough to cook breakfast. And you can go ahead and change if you want. There's no need for you to stand around in wet clothes in this cold cabin when there's nothing else needing to be done."

Brian nodded and went to his side of the bed.

"Did you sleep well without pajamas?"

"Yes. It was great. I don't think I'll be able to do it when I get home. I can't imagine my folks being okay with it." Brian said frankly.

"I know how that is. While Dillon was living with us, I started sleeping in my boxer shorts. As much of a rebel as he pretended to be, he was really skittish about nudity."

"Worse than me?" Brian asked with a grin.

Jack considered for a moment, then said, "Actually, yes. You were comfortable changing clothes in the same room with me. It wasn't until the underwear came off that you really had a problem. Dillon was shy about his body and refused to change clothes in front of us. While we were up here at the cabin, he actually went to the outhouse to change clothes."

Brian thought for a moment before saying, "I thought I was the only one who worried about stuff like that."

"No. I think just about everyone does to some degree. Some can manage it and others have to work to overcome it." Jack said honestly.

"You don't seem to have much of a problem." Brian said honestly.

Jack shrugged, then said, "Well, I had an advantage. When I was little, Dad and I would get ready for work and school at the same time. We'd both be in and out of the bathroom for showering, teeth brushing and stuff like that, so we'd see each other naked just about every day."

"My mom and dad have their own bathroom. I don't think I ever even saw my dad without a shirt... not that I'd want to." Brian finished with a queasy look.

"Well, for me, it was just normal. And because I saw my dad naked so often, whenever I had a question about something, I could just come out and ask him. By the time I reached puberty, I had a pretty good idea of what was about to happen and I couldn't wait for it."

Brian sadly smiled and muttered, "That must have been nice."

Jack picked up on the regretful tone of Brian's voice and said, "Brian, you didn't miss out on anything. You're just getting started. We may be playing 'catch-up' right this minute, but by the time we're done, you'll be ready to face everything that's coming." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded, then walked to the bed to straighten his sleeping bag.

Sensing that Brian would appreciate a change in subject, Jack said, "I'm going to need lots of toast this morning, so as soon as the fire is going strong, you might want to get started."

"Lot's of toast?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yeah, I thought I'd make us some eggs and creamed chipped beef on toast." Jack said frankly.

Brian thought for a moment, then slowly asked, "Creamed... beef? That really sounds disgusting."

Jack chuckled, then said, "Regardless of what it sounds like, it's full-on awesome. And if you don't like it, I'll be happy to eat yours."

Brian smiled at Jack's enthusiasm, then said, "If you say it's good, I'll trust you."

"Just give it a fair chance. I'm betting that you'll like it." Jack said happily.

"Do you think the fire's ready yet?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. I'll let you know when. Just relax for a few minutes." Jack said as he set up the percolator.

Brian went to the bed and laid down on top of his sleeping bag.

"Would you feel up to a hike after breakfast?" Jack asked casually.

"Sure. Did we need to do something, or is this 'just because'?" Brian asked curiously.

"I thought we had a baseball here, but I couldn't find it. So I thought we could walk down to the SUV and get the soccer ball from the back seat." Jack said absently as he chopped what looked to be beef jerky on a cutting board.

"Yeah. Sounds good. And we can carry out some of our garbage and dirty clothes and other stuff we're not going to be needing." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Hey! That's a great idea!" Jack said with surprise. "That'll make our walk down that much easier when it's time to leave."

Brian smiled at Jack's praise.

"I was thinking that after we get the soccer ball, we could take the long way back to the cabin, so you could see a few of the sights." Jack said as he sat the chopped meat aside.

"The 'long' way?" Brian asked cautiously.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Yes. There's a longer way to get to the cabin that we use if it's been raining. It doesn't have a bog or as many steep inclines, but it takes nearly twice as long."

"So it's a choice between a longer, easier path and a shorter, rougher one... it sounds like one of those metaphor things that they're always trying to teach us about in English class." Brian said thoughtfully.

Jack thought for a moment, then said, "More of an allegory, but yeah. If you want to look at it that way."

Before Brian could think of a response to that, Jack said, "I need to take a piss. You can go ahead and start the toast whenever you want and I'll start on the eggs and gravy as soon as I get back."

"How much toast?" Brian asked curiously.

"Four slices each, I think." Jack said as he started walking toward the door.

"Do we have enough bread for that?" Brian asked quickly.

"Yeah. There's another loaf. As long as you don't burn too much, we'll be fine." Jack said with a grin as he walked out the front door.

* * * * *

Brian was busily toasting bread when Jack walked back into the cabin.

"I guess I'd better get busy or you're going to be finished before I get started." Jack said as he cleaned his hands.

"I wouldn't count on that. Toasting bread like this takes quite a while." Brian said frankly.

"Maybe, but I still think that toast made this way is better than what you have at home. I mean, not only does it taste good, but you also have the knowledge that someone actually took the time and care to make it 'just right'. I think that knowing that makes you appreciate it more." Jack said casually as he put a cast iron skillet on the stove.

Brian thought about that for a moment, then quietly said, "My mom cooks for us all the time, and I know she works hard to make sure everything is good. This is different, but I'm not sure why."

"Because you're participating. If I just put the food in front of you at the table, you probably wouldn't appreciate it half as much as when you've contributed to making the meal." Jack said honestly as he put the cut up dried beef and some butter into the skillet.

Brian slowly nodded, then said, "Maybe I should offer to help mom in the kitchen sometime. I feel bad that I've never really appreciated how much work she puts into taking care of us."

"It's what's normal for your family. That's just the way it's always been. It's easy to take things for granted in a situation like that." Jack said thoughtfully, then added, "But you really should offer to help your mom around the house, not just to be of help, but also so you can fend for yourself when you need to. Otherwise you might find yourself being eighteen and on your own and not knowing how to do even the basic chores."

Brian took the 'toaster' out of the stove and checked to see that the bread was sufficiently toasted, then said, "Yeah. I guess I always figured that someone would teach me that stuff when I needed to know it."

"Trust me, Brian. They won't." Jack said seriously. "Look at how bad they screwed up preparing you for puberty. If that's any indication of how they're going to prepare you for life on your own, you'd better start right now on learning things for yourself."

Brian chuckled as he loaded the next batch of bread into the 'toaster', then said, "Yeah. Otherwise, I'll be living in my apartment, looking at a can of pork and beans, trying to figure out how you're supposed to get the stupid thing opened."

"Yeah. And you'll wonder why the clothes don't just magically appear clean and folded in your dresser anymore." Jack said as he tore open a pouch, then dumped the contents into the skillet. A moment later, he started pouring water into the skillet as he stirred with a wooden spoon.

"I really am on my own." Brian said distantly.

"No. Not completely." Jack said seriously, drawing Brian's attention. "You'll have me and my dad there to help you whenever you need us. But you're going to be the one responsible for making sure you're prepared for life away from mommy and daddy. If you don't put forth an effort, then nothing we can do will really help you."

Brian nodded, then suddenly looked at his 'toaster'. Luckily, the toast hadn't burned while his attention had been diverted.

Jack moved the skillet off to the side, then took a second, smaller cast iron skillet and put it on the stove.

"Scrambled or stepped-on?" Jack asked casually.

"Whatever you feel like cooking." Brian said without concern as he loaded more bread into his 'toaster'.

Jack nodded, then went to work frying the eggs.

After a few minutes of contemplation, Brian quietly said, "Jack. I'm scared."

"Of what?" Jack asked curiously.

"Everything's changed." Brian muttered. "It's like my life before I came here was just a dream."

"More like a nightmare, from the way I heard it." Jack said honestly.

Brian gave an ironic chuckle and a slight nod, then said, "It's like the entire world is different now. Everything that I 'knew' before turned out to be lies. I guess what I'm saying is that nothing makes sense anymore."

"The world hasn't changed, your perception of it has." Jack said quietly. "When you're a child, you are the center of your world. It's a very one dimensional existence and has a limited point of view. You're just breaking out of that and seeing that the world is broader and deeper than you ever imagined."

Brian checked his toast, then looked up at Jack and quietly asked, "I can't go back, can I?"

"To the way you were?" Jack asked to confirm.

Brian nodded.

"No. Growing up is a one way street." Jack said simply, then added, "But you're not the only person who regrets the loss of... I hesitate to call it innocence, but I guess it's as good a word as any. I can't say for sure, but I think that maybe that's part of the appeal of drugs and alcohol. People are trying to numb their perception of reality, trying to reclaim something that is lost forever."

Brian thought about the words as he opened the toaster and took out the last of the toasted bread.

"I think that, together, we'll figure out how to live well in reality, so we aren't tempted to immerse ourselves in addictions to avoid it." Jack said with an encouraging smile as he took the skillet off the stove.

"That sounds like one of those things that's easier said than done." Brian said as he sat the 'toaster' aside, then stood with the plate of toast.

"As a very wise man once pointed out to me, it's the easy things that you usually end up most regretting." Jack said with a grin.

Brian smiled at Jack's comment, then asked, "Wise, huh?"

"You have your moments."

* * * * *

"So, what do you think of creamed chipped beef?" Jack asked cautiously.

"This is soooo good!" Brian said in amazement.

Jack smiled at the declaration.

"You really need to teach me how to cook stuff like this. I want to be able to fix this for myself when I get home." Brian said between bites.

"It's really easy. Dried beef, butter, country gravy mix and water." Jack said with a smile at Brian's appreciation of his efforts.

"What about the eggs? How do you make them taste so good?" Brian asked curiously.

"Eggs, butter, salt and pepper." Jack said simply.

"That sounds simple enough. I wonder which one my mom is leaving out, because her eggs never tasted this good." Brian said honestly.

"Just remember that being here adds something to anything you cook. If you tried to cook exactly the same thing at home, it probably wouldn't seem quite as good." Jack said honestly.

"Yeah. The magic cabin." Brian said with a grin.

* * * * *

After finishing their meal and doing the dishes, Jack and Brian gathered up the things they wouldn't be needing, so they could haul them down to the truck.

A misty chill hung in the air, but thanks to their brisk pace, the walk was comfortable.

Every time they rounded a bend or crested another rise, Brian was once again amazed by the scenes of natural beauty.

They spoke very little on their hike. Jack sensed that Brian would get more out of their walk if he was left alone to appreciate the beauty of their surroundings on his own terms.

Finally, they walked around a dense stand of trees and saw the SUV in the middle of a grassy meadow.

"That seemed a lot easier than it was the other night." Brian said with surprise.

"Yeah. The hike to the cabin is mostly uphill. Also, it's a little bit easier to travel during the day." Jack finished with a smile.

Brian chuckled and nodded his agreement.

"Let's just put all this stuff in the back seat, that way the cargo area will be empty for our backpacks. We can just drop and go." Jack said as he opened the rear passenger door.

"Sounds good to me." Brian said cheerfully, then handed Jack the things he had been carrying.

"Here you go!" Jack said, then tossed the soccer ball to Brian.

Brian wasn't fast enough and the ball smacked him on the forehead before bouncing off and rolling away.

"I'm sorry, Brian! I wasn't thinking." Jack said quickly.

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine." Brian mumbled as he rubbed his forehead, then walked over to pick up the ball.

"Really, Brian, I wouldn't do that to you on purpose." Jack said with concern.

"I know. I'm not mad. It's my own stupid fault." Brian said as he carried the soccer ball back to where Jack was standing.

"No, it wasn't. You weren't prepared." Jack said seriously. "If it were your fault, I'd be the first to tell you."

"Okay." Brian said quietly, not sounding to be completely convinced.

"Toss it to me." Jack said as he closed the door.

They were only a couple feet apart, so Brian stepped forward and handed the ball back to Jack.

"I was thinking that we could toss this back and forth while we walk. That way you could get used to the weight and feel of it." Jack said casually.

"Walking and catching... at the same time? Um... I can foresee some problems with this plan." Brian said cautiously.

"Stay close, and it shouldn't be a problem." Jack said quietly, then asked, "Ready?"

"I guess..." Brian said hesitantly.

"Here." Jack said, then tossed the ball, one-handed, into Brian's hands.

Brian's hand's automatically closed around the ball, and he froze in his tracks.

"I caught it!" Brian said in amazement.

"Well, yeah. I practically handed it to you." Jack said slowly, curious at Brian's reaction.

"But I NEVER catch ANYTHING." Brian said emphatically.

Jack was surprised by the depth of Brian's conviction in his declaration.

"That's over now, Brian. Those days are gone. Starting today, starting right now." Jack said seriously.

Brian hesitantly nodded.

"Toss it back to me so we can get back to walking." Jack said more gently.

Jack watched Brian's expression of concentration as he tried to throw the ball to Jack.

It took some doing, but Jack *did* catch the ball, even though it went high and wide.

"Let me show you how to hold it when you're throwing, that might help..."

* * * * *

Jack was honestly surprised.

As bad a catcher as Brian was, he was even a worse pitcher. Jack could be standing two feet away and Brian somehow managed to throw the ball too high, too wide, or just plain drop it.

"Brian, this may sound stupid, but would you try something for me?" Jack asked as he stopped walking.

"Sure. What?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Close one eye, then throw the ball to me." Jack said seriously.

"Okay." Brian said hesitantly, then did as he was told.

Brian's pitch was too high, but mostly on center.

"Now the other eye." Jack said seriously as he stepped forward and handed the ball back to Brian.

After an uncertain look at Jack, Brian closed the other eye and tossed the ball back to him.

This time, the ball landed right in Jack's hands.

"I did it!" Brian said joyfully.

"Yes. You did." Jack agreed, then handed the ball back to Brian as he said, "Let's see if you can do it again."

"Yeah!" Brian said happily, then closed his right eye and concentrated before throwing the ball to Jack.

Once again, the ball was perfectly on target.

"Yes! Yes!" Brian crowed as he pumped his fist in the air.

Jack found himself on the verge of tears at Brian's excitement over such a simple achievement.

"That was great, Brian. You did it *exactly* right." Jack said with a gentle smile.

Brian's smile was luminous. Jack didn't think he'd ever seen a more joyous smile in his life.

"Hang on, let me try something." Jack said as he took out his red bandanna handkerchief.

"Anything." Brian said happily.

Jack smiled, then took the bandanna by diagonal ends and rolled it up.

Brian watched him curiously and finally asked, "What's that for?"

"This is going to be your eye patch." Jack said seriously, then added, "At least, for as long as we're playing ball."

"Did you blow your nose on it?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Nope. I got a clean one when I got dressed this morning." Jack said casually.

Brian nodded that he heard, then hesitantly asked, "So, something's wrong with my eyes?"

"Yeah. It looks that way. You'll need to get that checked out when you get home." Jack said casually, then said, "Turn around so I can get this tied to the right size."

Brian turned and Jack loosely tied the bandanna around his head, like a headband.

"Okay, now let's see if it works." Jack said as he gently turned Brian to face him, then pulled the bandanna down to cover his right eye.

"What do you think is wrong with me?" Brian asked slowly.

"I don't know. But it should only take a trip to an eye doctor to find out." Jack said as he shifted the bandanna around so it was just right. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." Brian said as his smile returned.

"Here." Jack said as he gently tossed the ball to Brian.

The smile on Brian's face when he caught the ball made Jack want to hug the boy.

* * * * *

They took the longer route back to the cabin, tossing the ball back and forth the entire way.

Although Jack wasn't an expert, he felt that while Brian would benefit from some practice, all things considered, he was probably on par with the other kids in his class.

Brian was almost giddy with his new-found ability to catch and throw a ball.

If Jack didn't know better, he would have sworn that Brian had floated the entire walk back to the cabin.

"I think that's enough of the ball playing for now. We can do more later." Jack said as they approached the cabin, then thought to add, "You can take the bandanna off now."

"Do you mind if I keep it?" Brian asked hopefully, then quickly added, "I mean, so I can have it in case I need to catch something again."

"That'll be fine. You can either take it off, or scoot it up and wear it as a headband. Whichever you like." Jack said with a smile.

Brian shifted the rolled up bandanna up so it rested on his forehead, then asked, "So, what are we doing now?"

"Well, *right* now, I'd like to see how fast you can run. Depending on how that goes, we'll decide what needs to be done next." Jack said seriously.

He hated lying to the boy, but if he told him that he wanted to watch the way he ran, Brian might become self-conscious and not run in his natural gait.

"What do you want me to do?" Brian asked with a smile, looking as though he was ready to take on the world.

"When I say 'go', I want you to run to the nearest tree and tap it, and then run back to me as fast as you can." Jack said frankly.

"Okay." Brian said as he turned to face the tree and bent slightly so he was ready to take off running.

"Go!" Jack said as he watched Brian intently.

Although Jack's dad, Cameron, hadn't spoken specifically about Brian's athletic performance, Jack had been hearing for the past few years about how, increasingly, Cameron was getting kids into his gym class who didn't know how to run. Apparently, all their lives had been spent in an environment where any type of play that involved running was either discouraged or not possible.

As Jack watched Brian run, his fears were confirmed. Brian's ankles were swinging out as he ran and his arms were flailing around. So far, since they had known each other, nothing about Brian had ever caused Jack to think of the boy in any feminine terms, at least, until now. The fact of the matter was that Brian ran like a little girl.

"How was that?" Brian asked as he ran up to Jack.

"Not too bad. But I think I can give you a few pointers to improve your speed." Jack said with an encouraging smile.

While he preferred to be honest, he realized that in a circumstance such as this one, that it was better to tell a little white one and give Brian some gentle instruction than to tell the truth and risk another jab at Brian's already fragile ego.

"I'm going to run to the tree. I want you to pay attention to my feet and ankles. Watch how I line them up when I run. When I get back, I want to see if you can mimic my moves." Jack said seriously.

Brian nodded, then watched as Jack took off running. He watched Jack's stance and form as he ran, trying to imprint the image on his mind so he could duplicate it.

Jack slowed as he approached Brian, then said, "Okay, don't worry about speed. Just focus on positioning your feet, pulling your knees up and keeping your ankles in line with your strides."

Brian nodded that he understood what Jack was saying.

"Ready. Set. Go!" Jack counted down, then watched as Brian took off running.

His first try was better. Not great, but better. Jack decided that once he was able to get Brian into proper running form, that the only thing that would help him would be practice.

* * * * *

"Let's head back to the cabin. I need to get lunch started." Jack said to Brian at his side as they jogged.

Once they had Brian's sprinting form under control, Jack transitioned to jogging. Brian's form was actually okay, but Jack wanted to make sure that Brian had the stamina to endure a reasonable workout.

"What are we having?" Brian asked, a little bit out of breath, but not too bad considering the distance they had jogged.

"I was thinking about some chicken soup." Jack said simply.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That *does* sound good. Like the perfect food for a day like today."

"That's what I thought, too." Jack said happily, then noticed the clouds in the distance and said, "It looks like we could be in for some rain this afternoon."

"What are we going to do if it rains?" Brian asked curiously.

"We'll need to bring in a good supply of wood for the stove and make sure all the water jugs are filled. That's about it." Jack said thoughtfully.

"What I was asking is what are we going to be doing the rest of the day if it's raining outside?" Brian asked seriously.

"Oh, I don't know. We'll figure it out when it happens." Jack said with a smile, then added, "We've probably got a few hours before it gets here, so we'll have plenty of time for our next 'horrible' lesson."

"When you hit me." Brian said a little bit nervously.

"That's right, Brian. But it's nothing to get wound up about. It shouldn't take very long. You'll just have to get through it." Jack said gently.

"Yeah." Brian said quietly as they approached the cabin.

"I'm going to get started on lunch." Jack said as he slowed his jog to a walk.

"I'll fill the water jugs." Brian said immediately.

Jack smiled at Brian's willingness to do the chores without being asked.

* * * * *

When Brian returned to the cabin, he found Jack working diligently on making their lunch.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Brian asked as he put the water jugs on the floor in the 'kitchen'.

"The cooking is under control, but if you wanted, you could bring in a few armloads of wood. There's no telling how long it's going to rain, and we'll be a lot better off if we don't have to deal with wet wood." Jack said absently as he opened a can of cooked chicken.

"How much wood do you want?" Brian asked without hesitation.

Jack stopped and thought for a moment, then said, "How about you fill the bin, then stack that much again on the floor beside it. That should get us through for as long as it decides to rain."

Brian nodded, then walked out the front door.

* * * * *

Jack stirred the chicken soup on the stove, then looked curiously over at the wood pile.

Brian had carried several loads of wood into the cabin and stacked them just as he had asked, but Brian seemed to have been gone for longer than he should.

Just as Jack was about to go outside to see if Brian had run into a problem, Brian walked into the cabin with a huge smile on his face.

"I saw a squirrel." Brian said happily as he unloaded an armload of wood onto the pile.

"This place is thick with them." Jack said frankly.

"But this one, he was so small and cute. He just sat up and looked right at me. He was only about three or four feet away from me." Brian said happily.

Jack couldn't help but be drawn in by Brian's wonder at something he considered so commonplace.

After a long silence, Brian quietly said, "I love the 'real world'."

"I'm glad. Some people can't cope well with change and just can't deal without their 'things'." Jack said, then motioned for Brian to take a seat at the table.

"I guess I can understand that. I was feeling lost without my phone. I mean, it's got games and music and stuff." Brian said absently as he accepted a large, steaming bowl of soup from Jack.

"Well, I'm not immune to the lure of those things. But my grandpa has always been very strict about not bringing any technology up here. At first I felt a little bit lost without the toys, but now I understand just how wise he was to insist on keeping this place the way it is." Jack said as he took his seat, opposite Brian.

"This soup is great." Brian said appreciatively after taking his first spoonful.

"Yup. I boiled the water all by myself." Jack said with a grin.

Brian chuckled, then took another spoon of soup.

"A lot of people think of going camping as an escape from reality. But I still think that this is reality and that life in the city is more illusion than substance." Jack said thoughtfully.

"But for a lot of people, life in the city *is* reality. That's probably why they get caught up in addictions. Maybe it's human nature to never be satisfied with the reality that we find ourselves in." Brian said slowly.

"I don't know about that. I think maybe it's more that there are some people who are never satisfied. Others adapt to their reality and become content with it." Jack said speculatively.

"Contentment and laziness look pretty much the same to me. Just because people don't try to change their reality doesn't mean that they're happy with it." Brian said as he met Jack's gaze.

Jack carefully considered Brian's words, then slowly said, "Maybe."

Brian's eyebrows went up, silently asking him to expound on his one word response.

"I still like to think that there are people who are happy being exactly where they are." Jack said thoughtfully.

"I like to think a lot of things. That doesn't mean any of them are true." Brian said frankly.

Jack chuckled at the statement and nodded his agreement.

"It's funny though. Everything that seemed so important to me just a few days ago all seems meaningless now." Brian said distantly.

"I'm sure those things are still important, but probably just not as important as you once believed." Jack said with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. I guess." Brian said noncommittally, then continued, "But the new 3D world has a whole lot more to it than I ever imagined."

"Like?" Jack asked with interest.

Brian chuckled, then shyly said, "Well, the whole sex thing, for one. I mean... wow. I've heard about that stuff all my life and sort of understood it on some level, but now... wow."

Jack laughed and nodded his agreement.

Brian smiled, then slowly said, "It's hard to put into words, but having this different point of view just makes it so that I feel like I need to revisit everything I thought I knew and challenge my assumptions."

"Yeah. Maybe that's part of what makes teenagers so rebellious." Jack said speculatively.

"A part of me can't wait to get back home so I can rip into my dad. Of course, another part of me is still scared of speaking up." Brian finished regretfully, then added, "Hopefully we can get that part to just sit down and shut up."

"Being afraid isn't a bad thing. It causes you to be cautious and not take unnecessary risks. Your impulsiveness and fearfulness are important tools, but they're miserable masters. What we need to do is make sure that it's *you* that's in control." Jack said frankly, then clarified, "You need to have the courage to act on your impulses when you believe that's what's right. But you also need to evaluate your fears and decide if they're justified."

"Courage, huh? That might give me a little problem." Brian said quietly.

Jack snorted with laughter, then said, "Give me a break! You're so brave that it's almost unbelievable."

"Me? Brave?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Brian, you were terrified to be naked in front of me, but you made yourself do it. You've been screamed at and demeaned for your athletic performance, and you still tried when I asked you to. All your life you've been told to shut up every time you've ventured an opinion, and yet, here you are, openly sharing your point of view with me." Jack said with admiration, then quietly added, "If our situations were reversed, I don't know if I could have handled it."

"I think you can handle just about anything." Brian said with a grin.

Jack shook his head and said, "Even though there have been some tough times, I've always had my grandpa and my dad there to help me through things. You've never had that kind of support, and it looks like up until now, you've built up a good fortification of defenses to be able to deal with everything all by yourself."

"It's not like I had a choice. That's just the way things were, so I had to deal." Brian said honestly.

"I know. But what I'm saying is that you did 'deal'. You've faced what would have broken other people, and you made things work. Now, when something came up that was too big for you to handle with your skill-set, Dad noticed and arranged for me to help you. There's no shame in this. You didn't fail at anything. You're here right now because... well, because your father sucks. I mean, it was his job to teach you this stuff. But you're also here because my dad saw you dealing with harassment and teasing and not handling it well. He could see by your reactions that you didn't have the coping mechanisms in place to handle what was happening to you. So he asked me to help you."

Brian slowly nodded, then cautiously asked, "But all the naked stuff and running and catching... how's that going to help me with bullying?"

"Well, it removes some of the things that trigger bullying behavior. That, in itself, is a very good thing for you. But aside from that, it helps you to build self-confidence." Jack said frankly, then carried the kettle of soup to the table and ladled their bowls full again.

"But, what should I do when someone calls me 'Princess'?" Brian asked cautiously.

"That's one of those things that you'll have to decide for yourself. I'm trying to give you the tools that you'll need, but what you do with those tools is going to be up to you." Jack said as he looked Brian in the eyes.

"But..." Brian trailed off helplessly.

Jack felt sympathy for Brian's need to know how to deal with the most important question in his mind.

"I tell you what." Jack said in prelude, "I can't tell you *exactly* what to say, but what I can tell you is that if you can be honest, and I mean brutally, completely, honest, that you'll usually stop a bully in his tracks. Bullying behavior is usually a defense mechanism that's trying to mask some insecurity that the bully is too much of a coward to deal with. If you can figure out what that might be and say it aloud, you disarm him."

"I don't understand." Brian said slowly.

"You're as white and skinny as a piece of chalk. I think I should start calling you chalk-boy from now on." Jack said in a poorly mimicked teasing tone.

Brian puzzled over the statement for a moment, then shook his head, indicating that he still didn't understand.

"If I'm making fun of you for being too white or too skinny, then that probably means that I'm insecure about my darker skin tone or the shape of my body." Jack said frankly.

"But there's nothing wrong with your skin color or your body." Brian said slowly, still not quite understanding.

"And there's nothing wrong with your cock, but you're still shy about it." Jack said honestly, then added, "The things we're sensitive about don't always have a basis in reality. The prettiest girl in school might see herself as too fat, too tall and with teeth that are too big for her mouth. That doesn't mean that any of it's true, but if she's insecure about those things, she might start picking on people based on their appearance, to distract people from looking at *her* appearance."

"But why would anyone call me 'Princess'?" Brian asked slowly.

Jack shrugged, then said, "You'd know better than I would. From the way it sounded from my dad, there's just one or two bullies responsible for all the misery you've been feeling. The rest are just going along with it. If that's the case, then you need to deal with those people and the rest of it will take care of itself."

"Okay. I think I get all that. Except for why they call me 'Princess'. That makes no sense to me." Brian said honestly and seemed almost desperate for an answer.

"Princesses are spoiled. They expect everyone to kneel before them and cater to their every whim." Jack said simply.

"I'm not like that!" Brian said indignantly.

"I'm not saying that you are. But since I don't know why they call you princess, I'm trying to come up with the attributes of a princess so you can pick out any that might apply to you... or to the people tormenting you."

"So spoiled and entitled. Is that it?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Pretty." Jack said simply.

"What?" Brian asked with surprise.

"Princesses are typically thought of as pretty. Maybe someone who's tormenting you, finds you attractive and can't find a more appropriate way of expressing his attraction." Jack said frankly.

Brian laughed at the very idea.

"Come here." Jack said firmly as he stood and took a step away from the table.

Brian hesitantly stood up and walked to Jack's side.

"Look in the mirror and tell me what you see." Jack said as he led Brian to the small mirror on the wall.

It took a moment for Brian to force himself to look in the mirror, but finally he did.

"Forget about the little kid that you're used to seeing. Look at the guy in the mirror as if you're just meeting him." Jack said as he stood aside.

Brian studied his reflection, but didn't say a word.

"It's not just your cock that's growing up. Look at your face. You're becoming a young man. That's not a little boy that's looking back at you." Jack said quietly.

"I can't be... I'm not..." Brian stammered in wonder.

"Face it, Brian. You're a stud." Jack said with a grin.

Brian blinked, but couldn't find any words.

Jack waited for a moment, then said, "But if you spend too much time in front of that mirror, you *may* turn into a princess."

Brian turned quickly at the statement.

"Help me with the dishes. We have things to do before it starts raining." Jack said with a gentle smile.

Brian slowly nodded, then hesitantly asked, "Do you really think I look good?"

"Didn't I already say that?" Jack asked with a grin, then added, "Or do I have to fuck you to prove it?"

Brian was shocked by the suggestion.

Jack noticed and rolled his eyes before saying, "Yes, Brian. I think you're very attractive. I swear that if I were your age and didn't think of you as a brother, that I'd be trying like crazy to get into your pants. Is that better?"

Brian blinked, then giggled before answering, "Honestly. I'm not sure."

"Hold the dishpan while I pour the water in." Jack said as he took the pot of hot water from the stove.

"You said... I mean, that thing about... um, fucking... How? I mean, I don't know how guys... um, do that." Brian stammered with a scarlet blush.

"To tell you the truth, I've never done that with a guy. But from what I understand, you grease up the guy's asshole, make sure it's stretched out enough to take the size of your cock, then you just stick it in there and it's party time." Jack said as he got the dish water ready.

"That's it?" Brian asked with surprise.

"As far as I know." Jack said as he poured water into a second dish pan for rinsing their dishes.

"Why haven't you ever done it?" Brian asked curiously, feeling less nervous due to Jack's casual reaction to his question.

Jack shrugged, then said, "I guess mostly it's because I've never wanted to, and no one's ever asked me to do that to them. Once, when I was just a little bit older than you, an older guy, like, sixteen or seventeen, said that he wanted to fuck me. He said it kind of like he was joking around, but I'm pretty sure that if I'd said 'yes', he would have done it."

"What did you do?" Brian asked in wonder.

Jack chuckled at the memory, then said, "I was scared and excited and... I don't know. The adrenaline was flowing, that's for sure. But all I really did was play it off as a joke and said that I wasn't into old guys."

"But why didn't you just tell him that you're not gay?" Brian asked curiously.

"Mostly because I've noticed that no one believes it... ever. The more you go on about how gay you're not, the more people are certain of how gay you are." Jack said frankly, then handed Brian a washed bowl.

"But if you don't say that you're not gay, then people might think that you are." Brian said slowly as he rinsed the bowl and stacked it in the drainer.

"They're going to think whatever they want to think, no matter what you say. If someone asks me, I'll tell them. Otherwise, I just let them believe whatever they want. What other people believe really doesn't matter as long as you don't let it."

"So, if everyone thought you were gay, it wouldn't bother you?" Brian asked cautiously.

Jack considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. It would. But I'd try my best not to let it become the biggest, most important thing in my life. Because, outside the bedroom, what does it really matter?"

Brian considered Jack's words as he rinsed the dishes he was handed. Finally he said, "I understand what you're saying in my head, but I don't know how I could make it not bother me. I mean, no matter what, it still seems like a pretty big deal."

"My dad talked to me about this stuff a lot. You know, whenever I'd ask him about things. So by the time I had to deal with it, I already had all the stuff he taught me sorted out in my head. It's probably going to take some time for you to get things into an order that makes sense to you." Jack said honestly.

"Yeah." Brian said with resignation.

"Leave that. Let's go outside so we can get started on our next lesson." Jack said as he hung the dishrag to dry.

Brian looked at the dishes, and was surprised to find that they were all washed, rinsed and stacked in the drainer.

* * * * *

"To start with, why don't you punch my hand, right here." Jack said as he held his hand up.

Brian balled up his fist and did his best to hit Jack's palm with all the force that he could. Unfortunately, he missed and punched Jack in the jaw.

"I'm sorry, Jack! I didn't mean to do that!" Brian said quickly.

"I know, Brian. It's okay. You didn't hurt me." Jack said as he rubbed his jaw.

"Oh God! I'm really sorry!" Brian said as his eyes welled with tears.

Jack could see the misery in Brian's tear filled eyes and pulled him into a quick hug.

"I'm fine. Really. You didn't hurt me at all." Jack said softly as he held Brian close.

"I'm always screwing things up. I'm such an idiot." Brian said as he cried into Jack's shoulder.

Jack pulled Brian away from him and looked him in the eyes as he said, "You're NOT an idiot! And if I EVER hear you say that again, I'm going to punch you, for real!"

Brian stopped crying and looked at Jack with wide eyes of surprise.

"I love you, Brian. And no one is allowed to talk bad about you in front of me, not even you." Jack said firmly, then after a moment, he added, "It was an accident. That's all."

Brian slowly nodded.

"Now, why don't you put on your eye patch, then let's try this again." Jack said more gently.

Brian looked at Jack with confusion for a moment, then realized what he was saying and pulled the bandanna down to cover his right eye.

"Okay. Now try to punch my hand, right here." Jack said as he held his hand up.

Brian balled up his fist and punched Jack's hand, but it wasn't his best effort.

"Just because I love you doesn't mean that you can't piss me off." Jack said firmly. "Now hit my hand like you mean it!"

Brian tried again, and this punch had a little bit more force behind it.

"Better." Jack said with a nod, then continued, "But there's definite room for improvement."

* * * * *

It took about half an hour of instruction before Brian was able to manage a somewhat decent punch.

Jack was a very patient teacher until the moment that Brian gave less than his best, then he would become stern to encourage Brian to try harder.

Finally, Jack said, "That was good. I *felt* that."

Brian smiled at the praise.

"Okay, I've been thinking about how to do this next part, and that's why I wanted to get you able to punch. We're going to trade punches for a while." Jack said seriously.

"Like, how?" Brian asked cautiously.

Jack punched Brian on the shoulder with one quick jab.

"Ow!" Brian said as he reflexively grabbed his shoulder to soothe it.

"Like that." Jack said with a grin, then added, "Your turn."

Brian looked at Jack uncertainly for a moment, then did his best to punch Jack squarely on the shoulder.

"Do you think you hurt me?" Jack asked seriously.

"Not really." Brian said honestly.

"Why is that?" Jack asked as he looked into Brian's eyes.

"You didn't even flinch. I mean, you acted like I never even touched you." Brian said frankly.

"See if you can manage to do that." Jack said simply, then popped Brian on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Brian yelled, then grabbed his shoulder again.

"We're going to keep on doing this until you can take a punch without reacting to it." Jack said simply.

Brian was becoming frustrated and slugged Jack's shoulder with his full force.

"Nice one." Jack said without showing that he had even felt it.

"Come on. I can do this." Brian said, then tensed his jaw and waited for Jack's next punch.

As Jack pulled back to throw his punch, Brian scrunched his eyes closed and waited for it to hit.

When the punch didn't come, Brian peeked open his uncovered eye to find Jack with his fist cocked and ready to fly.

"Look me in the eyes and let it happen." Jack said seriously.

"Let it happen." Brian parroted as he met Jack's gaze.

Jack let the punch fly, and to Brian's credit, he didn't call out. He did react, but not nearly as obviously as he had before.

"That's better. Your turn." Jack said seriously.

Brian tensed his jaw and tried to throw a punch that Jack would *have to* acknowledge.

Jack took the punch as though it were nothing, then responded with a quick jab to Brian's shoulder.

Brian had prepared himself enough that when the punch landed, he didn't wince.

"Excellent! If you can do that every time, you're going to be just fine." Jack said happily.

Brian was still determined to make Jack acknowledge him and hit Jack's shoulder as hard as he could.

Jack obviously knew what Brian was trying to do and responded with a punch to Brian's shoulder that was just a little bit harder than the one before.

Brian got a determined look in his visible eye and hauled off and hit Jack even harder.

"Hey! That hurt!" Jack yelled, then, before Brian knew what had happened, Jack had tackled him to the ground.

Brian felt a spark of fear, not sure if Jack were going to try to hurt him, until he felt Jack's fingers digging into his sides.

There was no way to stop the laughter that followed.

Brian was ticklish.

Jack was on top of Brian, sitting on his mid-section, as he mercilessly tickled Brian's ribs.

"Stop! Stop!" Brian said between his gales of laughter.

"Why should I? You hurt my shoulder." Jack said playfully.

As Brian wriggled around under Jack, he suddenly realized that he had an erection and that it was pressing into Jack's ass.

A moment later, Jack seemed to realize the same thing.

"Unless you want for me to be your first, you'd better move." Brian said as he looked into Jack's eyes.

Jack let out an amazed chuckle, then said, "That was PERFECT!"

Brian looked up at Jack with confusion.

"That's the attitude! That is EXACTLY what you need to be doing when you get back home." Jack said as he got off of Brian, then offered his hand to help Brian to stand.

"Be a smart ass?" Brian asked cautiously.

"You just got a boner while we were wrestling. Instead of being embarrassed about it, you completely turned it around with your attitude. If you can just keep doing that, you're not going to have any problems!" Jack said with excitement.

"First you get all happy when I disagree with you and now you're about to jump for joy when I rub my stiffy on your ass... If this is what it takes to make you happy, no wonder you're single." Brian said slowly.

"Well, you dry humping my ass isn't what made me happy. It was your very appropriate reaction to it. But you just keep that attitude coming, buddy. By the time we get you home, you'll be able to turn it on like a fire hose." Jack said happily.

Before Brian could think of a response to that, a strong gust of wind seemed to rise up out of nowhere.

"The rain's coming and we still need to fill the jugs we used at lunch and fill the spare water jugs." Jack said quickly.

"Race ya!" Brian called out and took off running before the words had registered.

Chapter 6

Jack and Brian rushed into the cabin, both speckled with the rain that had just started to fall.

"We made it." Brian said past a laugh.

"Yep. Safe and sound." Jack happily agreed as he closed the door.

"That rain sure is cold!" Brian said as he walked to the stove to check the fire.

"You can pretty much count on that when it's coming from the northeast. When it comes from the south, it's usually warm. Sometimes, if it's warm enough, we'll go out and just get soaking wet and enjoy it." Jack said with a smile at the memory.

Brian walked up to Jack and pulled him into a firm hug.

"What's that for?" Jack asked curiously.

"Just because." Brian said quietly.

"Is something wrong?" Jack asked with concern.

Brian chuckled, then said, "No. I just... can I just hold you like this for a little bit?"

Jack put his arms around Brian and said, "Sure, Brian. Everyone needs a hug sometimes. All you ever have to do is ask."

Brian nodded into Jack's chest and held him firmly.

* * * * *

Jack and Brian had been standing silently, holding each other for some time when Brian quietly asked, "Is there something else that we should be doing right now?"

"Not a thing." Jack said gently.

Brian slowly released his hug, then said, "I don't know what that was. But thanks."

"*That* was a whole lot of new things catching up to you all at once. Don't worry about it, that happens sometimes." Jack said with an assuring smile.

"Does it happen to you?" Brian asked uncertainly.

Jack thought for a moment, then said, "Now and then. I remember something like that happening about three weeks after Dillon died. One minute I was fine, then it hit me, all at once."

"That he was really dead?" Brian asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. That was part of it. But I think it was also that so much had happened and I'd been on emotional overload for so long that I finally reached a point where I had to let it out." Jack said distantly.

"It sucks that he died." Brian said quietly.

"Yeah. It does."

* * * * *

"Since it looks like we're going to be inside for the rest of the night, why don't we change into our sweats so we can be comfortable?" Jack asked casually.

Brian shrugged, then went to his side of the bed to get his clothes.

Jack watched Brian carefully, trying to gauge his reactions and detect any nervousness.

As far as Jack could tell, Brian wasn't the least bit bothered.

"Brian." Jack said to gain his attention.

With his pants half-way down, Brian looked over to see Jack standing completely naked.

"Take off your underwear." Jack said quietly.

Brian rolled his eyes, then pulled his pants the rest of the way off, followed by his underwear. When he was done, he spread his arms as if to say, 'Go ahead, take a good look'.

"Tell me how you're feeling right now." Jack said seriously.

"My butt's cold." Brian said flatly.

Jack chuckled, then asked, "But are you feeling afraid?"

"Nope. Cold butt. That's it." Brian said frankly as he crossed his arms across his chest impatiently.

"I guess you'd better cover it up, then." Jack said with a grin.

Brian rolled his eyes, then picked up his sweat pants and stepped into them.

"Just a couple days ago, you'd be on the verge of a panic attack even thinking about being completely naked in front of me." Jack said casually as he started to dress.

"Yeah. I guess. But it's different with you. I'm still not sure how I'll do around the guys in the locker room." Brian said thoughtfully as he pulled on his sweat shirt.

"I'm sure you'll feel nervous. But if you can just remember how nervous you were when you undressed with me and realize that nothing bad happened, then maybe you'll be able to make yourself do it anyway." Jack said reassuringly.

"I don't know. I mean, I know that you won't make fun of me. They will." Brian said quietly.

"And what will *you* do?" Jack asked as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I don't know... make fun of them back, maybe?" Brian ventured.

"I suppose you *could* do that." Jack said with a nod, then quietly added, "But teasing them back is bringing you down to their level; Playing on their field. I think some attitude and honesty might be more likely to make it so that the teasing will completely stop."

"So if someone teases me... what should I say?" Brian asked cautiously.

"How about, 'Yeah, it's big. Real big. So what've *you* got, little boy?'" Jack said with a grin.

Brian thought about the words, then broke into a smile as he said, "Wow. I can't even imagine what the guys would say to that!"

"They'll probably be too stunned to say anything. But once they get over the shock, they might try to provoke you one or two more times. If you can just keep turning it around on them, it'll stop being fun for them, real quick." Jack said frankly.

Brian slowly nodded, then quietly asked, "Is it too big?"

It took a moment for Jack to figure out what Brian was asking, but once he did, he said, "No. You're perfectly normal. I'll bet that within a year, the rest of your classmates will have caught up to you and no one will even think twice about it."

Brian absently nodded that he heard.

"I guess there's one other thing that I should mention while we're on the subject." Jack said hesitantly.

Brian looked up at Jack curiously.

"You're what's known as a *'shower'*." Jack said carefully.

"What does that mean?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Some guys are *showers* and some guys are *growers*. Being a *shower* means that your cock is pretty much the same size when it's limp or hard. So, at first glance you might look like you're a lot bigger than some other guys." Jack said honestly.

"How do theirs work?" Brian asked curiously.

"They usually look fairly small when they're limp, but when they get erect, they grow... a lot." Jack said frankly.

Brian seemed to be lost in thought, trying to process the new information.

"Realistically, I don't think it matters which you are, as long as it works. But if I had to choose to be one way or the other, I'd stay with being a *shower*... well, except that I can never wear spandex bicycle shorts. It looks like I'm trying to smuggle a kielbasa." Jack finished with a grin.

Brian chuckled, then said, "I think I can live without spandex."

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"Would you get me a stick of butter from the ice chest?" Jack asked from the stove.

As Brian carried the butter to Jack, he asked, "Why did you bring so much butter?"

"Because I use it for just about every meal, either in the main course or on the bread that goes with it. Besides, it doesn't spoil at room temperature, so it doesn't matter if I bring a little bit too much." Jack said honestly.

"Are you going to be needing any toast?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. But you could butter a few slices of bread for each of us. It'll still be about half an hour before the soup's ready, so you can do it whenever you feel like it." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded, then carried the butter over to the table.

"I'm going to be needing that butter when you're done with it." Jack said casually.

"Okay." Brian said as he picked up the loaf of bread, then said, "We're running low on bread. Are you sure you want me to butter it?"

"Yes. When the bread runs out, we'll just eat something else. Don't worry, I've got it covered." Jack said with a grin.

Brian couldn't help but smile at Jack's easy going nature.

* * * * *

Once the bread was buttered, Brian sat quietly at the table and watched Jack cooking.

"This'll be ready soon. Would you pour us some water to go with dinner?" Jack asked before taking a taste of the soup.

"Sure." Brian said, then pulled his headband down to cover his right eye.

"Are you planning to have to catch something?" Jack asked curiously.

"No. But I think that whatever's wrong with my eyes makes me clumsy when I do certain stuff." Brian said casually.

Jack absently nodded as he slowly stirred the slightly bubbling kettle of soup.

"It's funny. The guys who've been teasing me, I always thought they were my friends." Brian said as he carefully filled two glasses with water.

"Friendship is a funny thing. It doesn't really follow any logical rules, as far as I can tell. It just happens the way it happens and you make the best of it, however it ends up going." Jack said quietly.

"You're thinking about your computer zombie friends again, aren't you?" Brian asked as he placed the glasses of water on the table.

Jack slightly nodded, then said, "I was thinking about what you said before. I've been hanging onto my old friends, even though we've been growing apart... and that's not really a bad thing. It's important to accept people as they change. But I think my mistake has been in not putting myself out there where I might be able to make new friends."

Brian gave a weak chuckle, then said, "Yeah, being lazy and blaming the world for it can really become a habit."

Jack smiled at Brian's words as he nodded, then said, "Soup's on."

Brian took his place at the table and watched as Jack placed a bowl of soup in front of him. It was steaming hot with a dollop of butter in the middle of it.

"What is it?" Brian asked before taking a spoon of soup and blowing on it to cool it a little.

"Potato soup. This is one of my cold weather favorites." Jack said happily as he carried a bowl to his side of the table.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "I don't think I've ever had potato soup before."

"It's awesome." Jack said with a smile, then took a spoon of soup to blow on it.

Once the soup was cool enough to put into his mouth, Brian took a taste and paused to analyze the flavor.

Jack enjoyed his first spoon of soup, then waited to see Brian's reaction.

"*This* is great!" Brian said as he looked at Jack with his uncovered eye.

"Yeah. On a cold rainy day, I can't think of anything that compares." Jack said warmly.

"And you just added water?" Brian asked before getting another spoonful and blowing on it.

"That's it. Boil water. Add mix. Cook fifteen minutes." Jack said happily.

"I always thought that cooking was complicated. You know, that you had to cut and chop and time and measure each little part of each dish in the meal." Brian said honestly.

"Well, I suppose that *actual* cooking is like that. Some people enjoy it, and that's great for them. Me, I'd rather just make something simple that tastes good." Jack said frankly.

"Seriously, Jack, I need for you to teach me how to cook like this. My mom is a good cook, but I've seen her work for two hours on making a meal that took about five minutes to eat. It always seemed so... difficult, that I never wanted to try to cook for myself." Brian said seriously.

Jack smiled at Brian's appreciative words and responded, "There's not much to teach. If you can get water to boil, you've pretty much mastered my style of cooking."

"When I move out on my own, I'm going to need for you to go shopping with me or make me a list or something. Because your food is great."

"Sure thing, Brian. I'll be there whenever you need me." Jack said warmly.

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When they had finished doing the dishes, Jack took a large kettle from the rack by the stove and put it on the kitchen table.

"Are you going to cook something else right now?" Brian asked curiously.

"This is for tomorrow. Bean soup is another meal that's perfect on a cold rainy day." Jack said casually as he poured the dried beans onto the table, then added, "You can help me if you like."

"Sure, just tell me what I need to do." Brian said as he sat down in the chair next to Jack's.

"We need to sort through these beans to make sure that there aren't any stones or twigs or anything like that mixed in there." Jack said casually.

"That sounds easy." Brian said as he poured some beans from the bag and began sorting.

"Yeah. It seems like kind of a chore, but really, it only takes a few minutes and the payoff is some really excellent soup." Jack said as he kept the majority of his attention on his sorting.

Once he had a good portion of the beans sorted, he picked up the kettle and moved it under the lip of the table. Brian watched as he scooted the sorted beans off the table and into the kettle.

After another minute of sorting, Brian took the kettle from the table and did the same.

"What do we need to do when we're done sorting?" Brian asked casually.

"I'll put water on them and let them soak overnight." Jack said absently as he concentrated on his work.

Brian nodded as he continued to sort.

"Do you still need that eye patch?" Jack asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think doing something like this is easier with it than without it." Brian said as he concentrated on his sorting.

"I think that, until we can get an eye doctor to look at you, that you should probably only use the eye patch when you really need it. I'm afraid that if you keep it on all the time, it might make whatever's wrong get worse or throw it farther out of whack or something." Jack said with concern.

"Okay. As soon as we're done with this, I'll take it off. I mean, unless you're planning to throw things at me." Brian finished as he looked up with a grin.

"If I plan on throwing anything, I'll give you enough advance notice so that you can put your eye patch back on." Jack said with a smile.

Once the sorting was finished and the kettle of beans was set aside, Jack announced, "I need to go behind a tree."

"Me too, but it's raining." Brian said as he glanced at the window.

"Yeah, but it's eased up a little. I'd rather go in a light rain than take the chance of it being a full on downpour when I 'have to' go." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded in resignation as he walked to the door and took his coat down off the peg.

"You're doing well enough now, that you don't need to go with me. I mean, I don't expect it." Jack said frankly.

Brian shrugged, then said, "I know. I just need to go."

Jack smiled at the casual response, then led the way outside.

* * * * *

"Man! That rain's cold!" Brian said once they were back inside the cabin.

"Yeah. It's kind of a shock to the system." Jack said as he took off his coat.

"It feels so nice in here." Brian said as he walked to the stove to soak in some of the heat.

"It's a whole lot different from being in a temperature controlled house that's always within a few degrees of being the same temperature." Jack said with a grin.

"Oh yeah. But I think this is better. I mean, how can you appreciate warmth like this if you never let yourself get cold?" Brian asked speculatively.

"This is what's waiting outside the 'comfort zone'." Jack chuckled.

Brian thought about that for a moment, then said, "The comfort zone is kind of a trap, isn't it?"

"Absolutely." Jack said emphatically. "The longer you linger in the comfort zone, the more mediocre and complacent you become. Until, eventually, you just drift from one bland day to another, because you're too afraid of doing anything that might disrupt the 'peace'."

"I think you just described my family." Brian said with a chuckle.

Jack smiled a wicked little smile, then said, "I wouldn't count on things being the same when you get back."

Brian looked at Jack curiously.

"I have no idea what's going to happen. But I just have a feeling that now that you've found your voice, things are going to be different." Jack smirked.

"Either that, or I'll slip back into the comfort zone." Brian said a little bit anxiously.

"That's not going to happen." Jack said with certainty.

Brian looked at him hopefully, silently asking for assurance.

"Remember, you can't go back. Growing up is a one way street. Your perception of the world has changed. There's no way that things will be the same when you go back because *you're* not the same." Jack said honestly.

"I just... I don't know what I'm going to do." Brian said quietly.

"And there's no way that you *can* know until you're in that moment." Jack said frankly.

Brian slowly nodded.

"We're all warmed up now. What do you feel like doing next?" Jack asked gently as he took a seat at the table.

Brian also took a seat, then asked, "Do we have any other *horrible* lessons that still need to be done?"

"Not that I can think of. I may come up with something else later, but that's all I've got for now." Jack said thoughtfully.

"What about the condom thing? You said you wanted to talk about that later." Brian said hesitantly.

"Yeah! That's a good idea. Since we don't have anything else going on, now would be the perfect time to do that." Jack said happily.

Brian looked at Jack and waited expectantly.

After a moment of thought, Jack quietly said, "I didn't bring any condoms with me."

"Well then, no sex for you!" Brian said playfully.

Jack laughed at the statement, then said, "It looks like I don't have to teach you *when* to use a condom. That was *exactly* right!"

Brian nodded, then thoughtfully said, "Yeah. I got that part. You always use a condom unless you're going to be with only one person and that person is only with you."

"Right. And if either of you have been sexually active, then it's also important that you've been tested before you take that step." Jack said seriously.

"Yeah. I get that. 'When' to use one isn't the problem. 'How' to use one is the part I really don't get." Brian said frankly.

Jack thought for a moment, then broke into a smile as he walked to the neat stack of clothes on his side of the bed.

Brian watched curiously as Jack returned to the table, carrying a tube sock.

"You're going to have to use your imagination a little bit, but I think we can make it work." Jack said as he started rolling up the sock.

Brian looked at Jack uncertainly, not able to imagine what he was about to do.

"Okay, this is our condom." Jack said as he held up the sock that now looked sort of like a white, fuzzy bagel.

Brian slowly nodded that he understood.

"When you take a condom out of its package, it's rolled up something like this. You need to pay attention to which way it's rolled, so that it rolls down correctly." Jack said, then demonstrated by unrolling the sock slightly.

It took a moment, but Brian finally realized the difference and said, "Okay, yeah."

"Put your hand up and I'm going to show you how to put it on." Jack said seriously.

"So I'm pretending that my hand is my cock?" Brian asked to confirm.

"Yeah. Now, do you see how I'm pinching the tip?" Jack asked as he placed the sock over Brian's hand. "That's to leave a little reservoir for your semen to collect in when you cum."

Brian nodded that he understood.

"Then you roll it down, all the way down to the base." Jack said as he demonstrated by rolling the sock down Brian's arm.

"Do condoms come in different sizes?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes. I think you could probably use a 'regular', but if that turns out to be too loose, you might try 'snug fit'." Jack said, then continued, "Some

condoms are lubricated, but either way, having some water based lubricant handy wouldn't hurt."

"I wouldn't know what kind to buy." Brian said thoughtfully, then hesitantly added, "And that's if I could even make myself go in and buy it. I mean, I'd be really embarrassed to buy condoms or stuff."

"Well, I won't buy it for you. But I'll go with you to see that you're getting what you need." Jack said seriously.

Brian smiled, then said, "Yeah. I think that if you went with me, I'd be able to do it."

"Um, I'm sure I'm forgetting something." Jack said slowly, then shook his head and said, "It wouldn't hurt for you to do a little research on the subject, just in case."

Brian nodded that he would.

"Okay. Condoms have expiration dates. Don't use an old one because it's more likely to break. Don't keep a condom in your wallet, for 'just in case', for the same reason." Jack said seriously.

"Yeah. I remember hearing that before." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Okay. You've got the condom on. Let's just say you've already got in there and shot your load. The next thing you really need to pay attention to is correctly removing the condom." Jack said as he looked Brian in the eyes to convey his seriousness.

"Wouldn't you just roll it back up and take it off?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes. But there's something else that you need to do first. Once you've had your orgasm and shot your load, you need to take good hold of the condom at the base of your cock..." Jack said, then demonstrated by grabbing around the sock on Brian's arm, "...and withdraw from your partner. Once you're out and away, *then* take off the condom. If you can, try to withdraw while you're still mostly hard, it'll just make it easier."

"It sounds complicated." Brian said quietly.

"Hearing about it all at once like this *does* make it sound that way, but most of this stuff is 'how to'. As long as you start off learning to do it the right way, it's not all that much to remember." Jack said with a smile.

Brian slowly nodded.

"Okay. So you've withdrawn. Now, we take it off." Jack said as he rolled the sock up Brian's arm. When he got to the hand, he gathered the sock at the end and slid it off, then tied a knot in the sock and set it aside.

After a moment of consideration, Brian said, "Okay. I think I understand."

"Good. Because it's your turn." Jack said as he untied the sock and started to roll it up again.

"Thanks for teaching me this, Jack. I don't think my dad would ever talk to me about something like this." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. You're probably right about that." Jack said with a chuckle, then handed the sock to Brian.

"Pinch the tip." Brian said as he held up the sock by the toe.

"Right. And remember to always use a fresh condom for each individual sex act. Never take a condom off and then put it back on, even if you didn't cum." Jack said as Brian put the sock over Jack's fingers and started to roll it down his hand.

"Is that right?" Brian asked as he finished unrolling the sock.

"That's great, Brian." Jack said with a smile.

"Okay. I used a water based lubricant, screwed, cummed, and now I'm ready to take it off." Brian said seriously, then took hold of Jack's forearm and said, "I hold the condom at the base of my cock until I'm completely out and away. Then I roll it up..."

Jack smiled as he nodded.

Brian mimicked Jack's earlier action of gathering the sock at the end to contain the cum, then tied the sock before setting it aside.

"That's great, Brian. Like I said before, you'll need to do a little research to make sure you have up-to-date and accurate information. But I think that now you have enough of the basics that you should be able to understand what they're talking about." Jack said seriously.

"Yeah. I think that's what was so confusing before. I'd read or hear something, but I didn't know enough to make sense of it." Brian said thoughtfully.

"I don't know if people are intentionally vague about this stuff, but I really think a lot of kids have the same problem and just need to be shown." Jack said honestly.

"You know, I'll never be able to look at a rolled up sock again without thinking of this." Brian said with a smile.

Jack smiled at the comment, then said, "You know what? You've really accomplished a lot the past few days. I'm in a mood to celebrate!"

"Really? How?" Brian asked curiously.

Jack smiled, then said, "Hot chocolate."

* * * * *

After sitting for a while and sipping hot chocolate, Brian quietly said, "This is weird."

"How so?" Jack asked curiously.

"Just sitting here, doing nothing, I feel like I should be bored out of my mind, but it's nice. I can't think of anything else that I'd rather be doing." Brian said honestly.

"You know, even if this was the only thing you got out of being up here, I think it would make the whole trip worth it." Jack said warmly.

Brian looked at him curiously, silently asking for more of an explanation.

"It's hard to explain, but I think it's important." Jack said thoughtfully, then continued, "I've noticed that people seem intent on filling every waking moment of their days with distractions so that they never have to deal with a quiet moment in their own company."

"Yeah. If I had my phone here, I'd probably be listening to music or playing games until I ran the battery out." Brian said honestly.

"What benefit do you think you'd get from doing that?" Jack asked curiously.

"None, I guess. I'd just be wasting time." Brian said thoughtfully, then grinned at Jack and added, "Like I'm doing right now."

"I don't think this is a waste of time. We're having a meaningful discussion, voicing our opinions, and considering each other's points of view. That's not just a positive thing, but in your situation, it's an important skill that you need to develop."

After a moment, Brian quietly said, "I guess I never thought of talking to people, you know, like, one on one, as being a skill."

"I know. A lot of people just assume that their kids will pick up their verbalization skills and develop their cognitive abilities while they're at school. And I suppose that most of them do. But as far as I can see, there's

no one watching to see that ALL the kids are learning to express themselves in meaningful ways. In every group there are outliers and it seems that no one is trying to help them."

"What about the teachers?" Brian asked thoughtfully.

"How many kids do you have in your classes, you know, on average?" Jack asked seriously.

"I don't know, about twenty-five or thirty, I guess."

"And how much time do you spend with each of your teachers each day?"

"Forty-five minutes for each class period." Brian answered immediately.

"Okay. Then how many class periods do you have a day?"

"Seven, if you don't count lunch." Brian said slowly as he realized the way the numbers were adding up, even though he wasn't really sure of the point Jack was leading him toward.

"So, let's say that in one day a teacher sees about 200 students. How many of those students do you think he or she has time to sit down with and talk to, one-on-one?"

"Not many." Brian said with a nod.

"Besides, kids who are having difficulties usually do their best not to draw any attention, so it makes it that much more difficult for the teacher to spot them."

"And that's assuming that the teacher even cares at all. Some don't. They're just putting in their time so they can draw a paycheck." Brian said frankly.

"I guess when I talk about teachers, I usually hold up my dad as the standard. But you're right. There are some who couldn't care less about the students. Those are some of the most boring classes ever."

"Tell me about it. Mr. Young just sits there and reads aloud from the text book. I think the whole class could drop dead right there in front of him and he wouldn't even notice as long as we were quiet about it. He'd just keep droning on and on." Brian said with a slight smirk.

"Yeah. Well, he's, like, a thousand years old. My dad had him as a teacher when he was in high school and he said that Mr. Young was an old man then." Jack said frankly.

"I have him for my first period social studies class. What a thing to wake up to." Brian chuckled.

As Jack was about to respond, his words were cut off by the sudden and violent sound of rain pounding the roof.

"Wow." Brian said in a small voice as he looked upward.

"Don't worry. It should just last a few minutes, then it'll probably slow to a drizzle." Jack said a bit loudly, to be heard over the deluge.

Brian gave no indication of hearing as he stared mutely at the ceiling.

Jack watched Brian carefully and determined that, while Brian was understandably shaken by the sudden swell of the storm, he didn't seem unusually frightened.

After a moment, Jack quietly said, "I know it's early, but why don't we go ahead and get into bed?"

"Do you really want to go to bed already? I mean, I'm not even sleepy."

"Going to bed doesn't necessarily mean sleeping." Jack said with a grin.

Brian arched an eyebrow at Jack, hesitant to ask what he meant by that.

Jack laughed at the expression, then said, "We can get undressed and get in our sleeping bags, then I'll turn out the light, then... we'll see what happens. Think of it like a sleep-over. We can talk or tell ghost stories or... who knows? But on a rainy windy night, being toasty warm in a sleeping bag sounds like a pretty good idea to me."

"Oh, okay. I thought you meant we were going to be jacking off or something like that." Brian said frankly.

"Well, what does or doesn't happen inside your sleeping bag is none of my business. Just be sure to clean up after yourself." Jack said honestly.

Brian blushed a little as he said, "Let's go to bed."

"Give me a minute to take care of the fire and I'll be right there." Jack said with a smile.

Brian skinned out of his clothes and climbed into his sleeping bag while Jack fussed with the stove for a minute before adding wood.

"Comfy?" Jack asked with a grin as he approached the bed.

"Yeah. This is nice." Brian said contentedly.

Brian watched silently as Jack undressed. Just a day or two before, Brian would have been nervous and trying not to look. But Brian was comfortable enough by now to watch Jack without shame.

As Jack pulled off his sweats and underwear, he noticed Brian watching him and was happy to see that Brian wasn't nervous and embarrassed, neither was he leering at him lecherously. Brian's look was simply one of mild interest.

Once Jack was comfortably ensconced in his sleeping bag, he turned to Brian and said, "I thought that maybe we could talk for a while or maybe tell stories."

"What kind of stories?" Brian asked curiously.

Jack shrugged and said, "Whatever kind you like."

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "I can't think of anything."

"I've already told you all kinds of stuff about my dad, but being here like this reminds me of the times that we've come up to the cabin. Would you like to hear about that?" Jack asked curiously.

"Sure, that sounds nice." Brian said with a smile as he snuggled a little bit tighter into his sleeping bag and got comfortable.

"I guess I was about nine or ten when we came up here for a few weeks during summer vacation." Jack said distantly.

"It must be nice having a dad who is off from school at the same time you are." Brian said absently.

"Yeah. I guess so. That's the way it's always been, so I never thought too much about it."

Brian nodded that he understood.

"Well, when I was about ten, Dad and I came up here and I thought it would be like all the other times we visited. But I guess he figured out that I was growing up and he wanted to have a 'man to man' talk with me."

"I thought you said that you asked about that stuff and already knew most of it." Brian said with interest.

"Yeah. But I didn't know to ask about everything. So Dad decided that it was time to fill in some blanks and tie all the bits and pieces together so I could see the bigger picture." Jack said thoughtfully.

"I wish my dad would have done that." Brian said quietly.

"I do, too, Brian. But like I told you before, it's not too late. It's just now getting to the point where you need to know this stuff, so you haven't missed out on anything. By the time we're done, you'll know all that you

need to know and you'll probably be in a much better place than most of your classmates." Jack said frankly.

"Thanks." Brian whispered appreciatively.

Jack was silent for a moment, then finally said, "You know how I told you about me and my dad always sharing a bathroom and stuff?"

Brian nodded.

"Well, I guess he noticed the changes in my body. He could see that I was growing up and knew that it wouldn't be long before I needed to know at least the basics."

Brian watched as Jack seemed to be lost in thought.

Finally, Jack continued, "I don't know how it is for anyone else, but that trip was one of the best that I can ever remember. I felt so close to my dad. It's like he was entrusting the secrets of the universe to me."

"Um, I don't want to make you mad by asking. But I'm kinda curious." Brian said timidly, then asked, "Did your dad show you how to jack off?"

Jack gave an embarrassed chuckle, then said, "He didn't *show* me, but he explained it well enough that when I was ready to try, I was able to figure out what to do."

"I just wondered. I mean, I can't even imagine my dad talking to me about something like that, so I didn't know how a *real* dad would handle it." Brian said honestly.

"Well, the only thing close to that that happened was that we went to the hot spring and while we were naked, he pointed out the differences between us, so I'd have a good idea of what changes were about to happen."

As Brian looked down sadly, Jack noticed the expression.

"Brian, you didn't miss out on anything. I'm doing for you what my dad did for me." Jack said gently.

"I know. And I really appreciate that. I guess it just bothers me that my dad didn't care enough to do it himself." Brian mumbled.

"I can understand that." Jack said gently, then continued, "Sometimes, life's not fair."

Brian chuckled and nodded his agreement.

"I guess the reason I wanted to tell you about the trip with my dad was so I could share with you what it was like. It was a really special thing for me and I want for you to share in it." Jack said with difficulty.

"I understand, Jack. And thanks. Listening to the way you talk about spending time with your dad makes me feel good. I mean, it's like you said, you're 'sharing' that with me. I feel like a part of it and it makes me happy."

"You are a part of it Brian. What my dad did for me is what I'm trying to do for you. They're not separate events, they're part of a chain. You're a part of that chain now, back into history and on into the future."

"You get poetic when you're naked, don't you?" Brian asked playfully.

Jack chuckled and said, "Yeah, I guess I do."

* * * * *

As the evening continued, Jack shared more and more stories about his life and how it was to grow up with a single father.

Brian mostly listened, occasionally interjecting a comment, but for the most part just absorbing the warm and loving tales of a family which was so foreign to him and yet a family of which he was also now a part; A link in the chain.

While telling about a scuba trip he and his dad had taken in the Florida keys, Jack glanced over and noticed that Brian had fallen asleep.

He smiled at the sight.

Brian looked so innocent and untroubled.

Jack couldn't help but worry if what he was doing was going to be enough to prepare Brian for the realities of the world when he returned to his old life and his old school.

Even though he was incredibly comfortable and the sound of the rain outside was soothing, sleep was elusive.

Jack kept going over and over everything he had witnessed and been told, in an effort to do all that was in his power to help Brian.

If there was any advice he could give, any skill he could help Brian develop, if there was any nugget of wisdom he could impart, Jack wanted to be sure that Brian received it.

If, for some reason, Brian wasn't able to cope... Jack didn't know how he would deal with it.

Jack had been told repeatedly by his father and others that Dillon's suicide wasn't in any way his fault. And for the most part he accepted it.

But there was still this little voice in the back of his head that told him that if he had done more, if he had cared more, if he had been a better brother, if he had done *something*, that his brother would still be alive.

Helping Brian wasn't a burden and Jack was genuinely happy to do it. But he was finally realizing the position he had put himself into. If they returned to the 'real world' and Brian couldn't handle it or, even worse, if Brian... Jack forced himself not to pursue that train of thought.

He just knew that if *anything* happened to Brian, he would feel largely responsible and it might ultimately destroy him.

Chapter 7

The next morning when they awoke, it was still cold, rainy and windy.

Both Brian and Jack had to brace themselves against the cold before hurrying outside to make a mad dash to the outhouse.

Even though it took a few minutes more than a stop at the tree line, at least they were able to do their business under a shelter instead of standing in the cold drizzle.

Once they were back inside the cabin, Jack and Brian worked together to make a good, filling breakfast of fried eggs and grits with toast. Before doing the dishes, Jack put the large, cast iron pot of beans on the stove to cook.

Once the kitchen chores were done, they spent the rest of the morning relaxing in the cabin, just enjoying each other's company. They talked, sang, played silly made up games and even had one bout of gentle wrestling.

At noon they enjoyed a very satisfying lunch of bean soup. Jack had added canned ham and diced tomatoes along with some seasoning which made it absolutely delicious. Just after the lunch dishes were done, the rain stopped. Although, from the look of the clouds, they were fairly sure that it would be raining again soon, the pair went outside to enjoy the smell of wet, nourished earth and the glimpses of sunlight that managed to make their way through the clouds to sparkle on the wet leaves.

All too soon, the dark heavy clouds once again filled the sky and the rain started pouring in earnest.

The wind blowing rain against the window drew Brian to look out. Slowly, Jack joined him and they stood for a long silent moment.

"Even this is beautiful." Brian whispered.

Jack put a hand on Brian's shoulder, but remained silent as he watched the spectacle of nature at work.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" Brian quietly asked, still staring out the window.

"Assuming that it stops raining, I have quite a few things in mind. They're mostly just strength training exercises that you'll be able to use when you're on your own." Jack said honestly.

"Couldn't I do that in here?" Brian asked curiously.

Jack shrugged, then said, "I suppose you could. And if it's still raining tomorrow we'll probably do that. But I think being outside where you can run and go full-out is a much better environment for stuff like this. That way you'll be less likely to look at the exercises as a chore that you have to perform and more as something that you can do to feel good and make yourself stronger and healthier."

Brian slowly nodded that he understood.

Somehow the storm seemed to have made them both quiet and introspective. The morning had been playful and spirited. The evening was less so, but not at all depressed. Just quiet.

Finally, as they got ready for bed, Jack asked Brian if he'd like a bedtime story.

Brian chuckled at the offer, but finally admitted that it sounded nice.

As they lay in the bed, snuggled into their sleeping bags, Jack quietly told a long involved tale about a haunted house and a group of energetic teenagers.

Brian closed his eyes and could picture everything that Jack was telling him. As the story unfolded, Brian realized that he was enjoying it more than any movie he had ever seen.

When the story was finally over, Brian simply whispered, "Thanks, Jack."
"Goodnight, Brian."

* * * * *

The door slammed open as a gust of cold wind rushed into the cabin.

Brian sat upright in his sleeping bag and strained to see in the absolute darkness. For just a moment, Brian was remembering the story of the haunted house that Jack had been telling earlier.

Suddenly, the beam of a flashlight shone into the room.

"Who is it?" Jack called out from beside him, and it sounded like Jack was getting out of his sleeping bag.

It was hard for Brian to see what was going on with the way the flashlight was swinging around, but finally, he realized that whoever had entered was trying to get the door closed.

"Jesus! Fuck! It's cold out there!" A man's gruff voice growled.

"Dad?" Jack said in surprise, then called, "Brian, get my dad some of my sweats while I get a light on. He's got to be soaked to the skin."

It took a moment for Brian to grasp what was going on with his sleep fogged mind, but finally the words sank in and Brian climbed out of his sleeping bag.

By the time he had his feet on the floor, Jack had a match lit and was working to get the oil lamp going.

"It's not just raining cats and dogs. There's fucking cows and horses, too." Coach Reed said from the darkness by the door, sounding like he was trying to catch his breath..

As the light from the lamp finally began to fill the room, Brian was able to see well enough to pick out some sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

"Come on, Dad. Get out of those wet clothes before you catch pneumonia." Jack said as he rushed to the stove.

Brian stood and walked toward Coach Reed, holding the sweats, when he noticed the surprised look in the coach's eyes.

"Did I interrupt something?" Coach Reed asked cautiously as he looked from Brian to his son.

"Yeah, Dad. I was fucking the snot out of him when you walked in." Jack said impatiently as he added wood to the stove, then flashed his father a typical 'teenager' look.

Brian felt himself go pale at the statement and thought that his knees might give out.

"Hey! With you two running around stark naked, what am I supposed to think?" Coach Reed asked in his defense.

"We weren't running around. We were sleeping... In separate sleeping bags." Jack said firmly, then added, "Are you just going to stand there and drip, or are you going to get out of those wet clothes?"

Coach Reed chuckled as he started to undress, then said, "It does look like I'm a little bit overdressed for this party."

"How about we meet you half-way? If you'll put on some sweats, so will we." Jack asked as he stepped away from the stove toward his side of the bed.

Coach Reed leaned down to untie his boots when he noticed that Brian was still standing naked before him, holding the sweats for him to wear.

"You can put those on the table if you want. This could take a minute. Wet shoelaces are a bitch and a half to untie."

Brian stood for a moment, then the words finally seemed to make their way to his brain and he stammered, "Yeah... okay."

"Brian." Jack said firmly as he pulled on his sweats.

After a moment to put down the clothes he was carrying, Brian looked at Jack with question.

"You're going 'mouse' again. Stop it." Jack said as he looked Brian in the eyes.

It took a moment for Brian to understand what Jack was saying, but finally it made sense to him and he made a conscious effort to calm down.

"How was your drive?" Jack asked his father, allowing Brian a moment to collect himself and also to dress.

"How do you think? Because of the rain, I couldn't take the shortcut and had to drive halfway around the mountain to take the road. Then I had to hike the long way from the clearing in pouring rain and high winds. I was actually a little bit worried about you two. We don't get a lot of storms this heavy so far inland."

"There've been a few surges, but nothing to really worry about. We've been perfectly comfortable." Jack said frankly.

"It's stopped raining." Brian said slowly, then walked to the door.

"You have got to be kidding!" Coach Reed said as he followed.

All three stood in the doorway and heard nothing but silence in the wake of the spectacular storm.

"Figures!" Coach Reed finally said in a huff, then walked back into the cabin.

Jack gripped Brian's shoulder firmly, then leaned in and whispered, "Everything's fine, Brian. Trust me."

Brian took in a deep breath to calm himself, then turned to the sight of Coach Reed peeling rain soaked pants off his legs.

"Close the door. It's cold." Jack said casually as he walked to his side of the bed again.

"Yeah." Brian muttered as he absently reached behind him to shut the door, not taking his eyes off of Coach Reed for an instant.

"Here, Dad. You'll want to towel off before you put on the dry clothes." Jack said as he placed a towel on the table beside the sweats.

Brian finally realized what he was doing and glanced down to find that he was half hard in his sweats. It wasn't immediately noticeable, but Brian was self conscious about it, nonetheless.

"I left right after classes let out this afternoon and it rained the entire time. I was hoping that it would ease up by the time I got here, but it turns out that I arrived just in time for the worst of it. I actually thought about spending the night in the truck, but decided to make the hike up here since I was so close." Coach Reed said casually as he toweled off his hair.

The sight of Coach Reed had Brian frozen in his tracks. He had always known that the coach was a handsome man, but had never considered what he would look like naked. The coach was in good shape for a man of his age. Brian couldn't take his eyes off the man's furry chest and legs.

"Brian, I'm fixing some tea for dad. Would you like some?" Jack asked casually from the kitchen, where he was filling the kettle from the water jug.

"Um... yeah. Sure." Brian stammered, then thought to ask, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. I've got it." Jack said casually.

Jack's words had snapped Brian out of his daze and he walked to the table, trying to look casual as he did so.

From his new vantage point at the table, Brian got a good look at Coach Reed's cock. The first thing that popped into his mind at the sight was that Coach Reed's cock looked almost exactly like Jack's. He was hairier, but beyond that, they were virtually identical.

"So how've things been going up here the last few days?" Coach Reed asked casually as he started to towel himself dry.

When Brian looked the Coach in the eyes, he realized that he'd been caught looking and could feel a blush rising up his cheeks.

"Great. We've figured out a few things and I've been doing what I can to help Brian. But I'm really glad that you're here. I think I've done about as much as I can on my own." Jack said cheerfully.

"What about the bullying? Did you figure out what that was all about?" Coach Reed asked as he stood, then walked beside Brian to pick up the sweat pants.

Brian couldn't resist the urge to look at Coach Reed's cock again. It was right there, close enough that he could reach out and touch it.

"Yeah. It turns out that Brian's growing up a little bit faster than his classmates. His dad never talked to him about what happens when you grow up... or anything else, for that matter." Jack added thoughtfully.

As Coach Reed pulled up his sweat pants, Brian looked up and said, "Since I didn't know it was normal, I wouldn't get naked in front of the other guys. They started teasing me because I was so shy."

"So, is that why you two were naked when I got here?" Coach Reed asked curiously.

"No. We were naked because it's the most comfortable way to sleep." Jack said from the kitchen.

"Jack's been helping me to try and get over my shyness, but I guess I'm still having a little trouble with it." Brian said timidly.

"It sounds like his family is really shy about nudity, so being naked and seeing other people naked sometimes freaks him out." Jack said frankly, then added, "But he's already a lot better than he was."

Coach Reed nodded at his son, then glanced at Brian consideringly.

"I can make myself do it, if I need to." Brian said quietly, then timidly asked, "Do you want to see?"

"You don't have to." Coach Reed said gently.

"I know. But I think it'll help if I know that I can make myself do it. I mean, if I can show you, then the guys at school shouldn't be that big of a deal, right?"

"Alright, if you feel that you need to." Coach Reed said as he looked Brian in the eyes.

Brian stood from his place at the table, then, before he could lose his nerve, pulled the sweat pants down his thighs and held his sweatshirt up out of the way.

He only stood that way for a few seconds, but it felt like forever as the coach looked at his body appraisingly.

"Jack says that I'm normal and that before long, the other guys will catch up to me." Brian said as he quickly pulled up his pants.

"Yes. You're all at that age." Coach Reed said reassuringly.

"Besides that, Brian's dad never taught him anything about... well, anything. So I've been showing him about pitching, catching, running... you know, guy stuff." Jack said as he placed two steaming mugs of tea on the table.

"Thanks." Jack's father said gratefully as he immediately picked up the mug.

"Hold on." Jack said, then rushed to the other side of the kitchen.

Coach Reed watched curiously, then broke into a smile when he saw what Jack was bringing back for him.

"Thanks." Coach Reed said with a chuckle as he accepted a miniature candy cane from his son.

Brian cautiously accepted another miniature candy cane from Jack, then noticed the aroma coming off the tea.

It was peppermint tea.

By the time Brian had his candy cane unwrapped, Jack had joined them at the table.

"When I left, you said you didn't think you were going to be able to make it this weekend. Did something happen?" Jack asked his father curiously.

"Sort of." Coach Reed said, then let out a long sigh.

"Something bad?" Jack asked cautiously.

"Yes. Very bad." Coach Reed said frankly, then continued, "We were scheduled to have a meeting this afternoon after classes let out, and from the tone of the announcement, we were all pretty sure that it was going to be something we didn't want to hear. That's why I thought I wouldn't be able to make it, because I figured that the meeting would drag on for hours, then I'd be dealing with the fallout."

"So what happened?" Jack asked curiously.

"The meeting lasted less than ten minutes. It was really just an announcement. Starting next year, there will no longer be a physical education program at our school." Coach Reed said in a flat tone.

"How can they do that?" Jack asked in wonder.

"According to the preliminary test scores, our students aren't reaching their full academic potential. Our school district is in danger of losing a significant portion of their funding. So non-academic classes are going to

be trimmed or completely cut to help prepare our students more fully." Coach Reed said in a slightly condescending tone.

"In other words, they're going to teach to the test." Jack said darkly.

"Yes. In their mad scramble for the almighty buck, they're going to sacrifice God only knows how many students." Coach Reed said darkly.

"Sacrifice? How?" Brian asked curiously.

"What they're planning on doing is teaching the things... well, you can hardly call it teaching." Coach Reed amended, then continued, "They're going to force the students to memorize a series of correct answers to pointless questions for the sole purpose of passing some standardized tests. Once the tests are taken, the school will most likely continue to receive its funding, but the students will have wasted all that time never learning a single thing that will ever be the slightest bit of use to them."

"Are you going to lose your job?" Jack asked quietly.

Coach Reed smiled, then said, "No. I've got the teaching credentials and enough seniority that I shouldn't have to worry about that."

Jack slowly nodded.

"But if I have a choice in the matter, I don't want to be a part of this future that they're planning. I think that as soon as we get back, I'm going to start making inquiries and see if there are any openings for an athletic director in any of the private schools in the area."

"So there won't be any more gym class?" Brian asked absently.

"No. And they're in the process of cutting anything else that's not on the test that's not explicitly required by state law. So I'm expecting that the art and music programs are also on the chopping block." Coach Reed said regretfully.

"How can they get away with that?" Brian asked quietly.

"Because we allow it." Coach Reed said frankly.

Brian looked at him with question.

"The government officials, the school districts and the local schools all work for us. They only have authority because we 'give' it to them. The moment that they stop working in the best interest of the children, which is their job, we should be standing there and forcing them back into place and insisting that they do their jobs. But, instead, the apathetic public seems to think that it's someone else's problem, someone else's fault and

someone else's responsibility to fix. Until they wake up and realize that it's 'their' failure, it's only going to spin more and more out of control." Coach Reed finished sadly.

"Way to cheer us up, dad! What else've you got?" Jack asked with a grin.

"Your mom called last night." Coach Reed said with a barely restrained smile at his son.

"Y'know, I'm just fine with talking about the decline of public education." Jack said with a grimace.

Coach Reed smiled and waited.

Finally, Jack reluctantly asked, "Okay. Fine. What did she want?"

"To talk to her son." Coach Reed said with an angelic smile that even Brian wasn't believing.

Jack tilted his head and gave his father a distinctly 'teenage' look.

Brian had to admit that he was impressed at the amount of ire that Jack could compress into a single glance.

Coach Reed chuckled, then said, "She called to offer you a job working at Russel's office."

Jack stared at his father for a few seconds, then shook his head in wonder.

"What's wrong?" Brian asked Coach Reed curiously.

"Russel is my step-dad... who I hate." Jack answered matter-of-factly, then added, "So naturally, Mom is trying to fix it so I can spend eight hours a day working with him."

"Why do you hate him?" Brian asked Jack with concern.

"Because he's a total douche nozzle. Forget the fact that he's fucking my mom, which doesn't earn him any points for good judgment in *my* book. The guy is a walking, talking stereotype, constantly looking for a reason to be offended. I have to watch every single thing I say and do around him because as soon as I let my guard down for a second, he's accusing me of being a bigot."

"Jack's right. Russel's played the part of the injured party so many times that everyone's sick of hearing it."

"So I guess this means that you're not going to take the job." Brian said hesitantly.

"Russel is a nurse in a plastic surgeon's office. I can't imagine what kind of horrible things I would have to do if I worked there. I'd probably be sweeping up old noses and carrying buckets of liposuctioned ass out to the dumpster all day long." Jack said consideringly, then added, "Honestly, I'd rather dig ditches than work with Russel."

"I'd rather get punched in the balls than work with Russel." Coach Reed said with a grin at his son.

Jack considered for a moment, then said, "I'd rather give grandpa a full body massage than work with Russel."

"Happy ending?" Coach Reed asked hesitantly.

Jack nodded seriously.

"I'd rather suck cottage cheese out of your mom's douche bag than work with Russel." Coach Reed said firmly.

Jack gave a full body cringe, then said, "Actually, I think I'd rather work with Russel."

Coach Reed thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Come to think of it, so would I, but it would be close."

Both men looked up at the sound of Brian's laughter and watched as he laughed himself silly, clutching his sides.

* * * * *

Once Brian's laughter calmed, he noticed that both Jack and Coach Reed were looking at him with amusement.

"Sorry. You guys are funny." Brian muttered.

"Yeah. We're a regular Laurel and Hardy." Coach Reed said with a grin.

"Who?" Brian asked in puzzlement, then looked at Jack with question.

"Don't worry about it. That's just one of those geezerly things that dads sometimes say." Jack said with a smile at his father.

"Brian, do you have any questions for me that Jack wasn't able to answer for you?" Coach Reed asked in an obvious attempt to ignore his son's comment.

After a moment to consider, Brian said, "Yeah. Jack said that since you're such a great dad and you let him know what to expect before it happened, that he never went through the things that I am. So, if you wouldn't mind

telling me, I was wondering if you were shy at my age and how you got past it."

"It seems that my son has been experiencing some convenient memory loss." Coach Reed said with a grin at Jack, then turned to Brian and said, "In truth, there were a few months when Jack was incredibly shy around me."

"I don't remember that." Jack said seriously.

"Do you remember waking up before six in the morning so you could shower before I woke up?" Coach Reed asked curiously.

Jack thought for a moment, then slowly said, "Yeah. But I don't remember what that was all about."

"You were getting boners every five minutes and it was freaking you out." Coach Reed said frankly.

"Oh! Right! I was scared to death that you'd see me getting a boner when I was in the bathroom with you and you'd think that I was lusting after your body." Jack said thoughtfully.

Coach Reed smiled and said, "You were so worried about it that I didn't even want to bring up the subject. But eventually you seemed to deal with it on your own."

"Yeah. The boners stopped being so often and so random. And besides, waking up at five thirty in the morning flat out sucked. I'd rather let you see my boner than have to drag my tired ass out of bed that early every... single... day."

After a long silent moment, Brian cautiously asked, "Coach Reed, were you ever shy? I'd really like to know how you dealt with it."

"I'd really prefer it if you'd call me Cameron or Cam. I'd rather leave the 'Coach' at school." Coach Reed said frankly.

Brian nodded and waited hopefully.

"Actually, as I recall, I was something of a late bloomer. Well, maybe not. I spent a lot of time with my brother and his friends, all of them were a year or two older than me. All I remember is that they were all developing and I was still a little boy."

"Did they tease you about it?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. They wouldn't dare! My brother wouldn't let any of his friends tease me about anything like that. He always protected me." Cameron said

distantly, then added, "I remember this one time when we were all out in the yard, back behind the shed. I guess someone had to piss or something like that. I really don't remember now how it started, but it ended up with all of us with our pants around our ankles and whacking off together. I don't know, that might have been the first time..."

Brian could feel his cock getting hard and could hear the sound of his pulse thrumming in his ears.

"One of the guys, Oliver, I think, he was my brother's best friend. Anyway, he was being all shy and looking around and finally asked my brother if he could touch his cock. Of course, what guy's gonna say no to that? So all of us were just standing out there jerking away while my brother got his first hand job."

"So you weren't ever shy about that stuff, huh?" Brian asked quietly.

"I was shy..." Cameron said thoughtfully, "But there's no way I was gonna let my brother see that I was afraid of anything. So even though I was the smallest one there, I whipped it out and jacked off with the best of them. So, yeah. I was scared to death, especially that first time. But I did it anyway."

"I think that's where Brian is, right now." Jack said frankly.

Brian and Cameron both looked at Jack with question.

"He's still shy. He's afraid. But he *is* able to make himself do it." Jack said frankly.

"So, have you two been jacking off together or anything like that?" Cameron asked curiously.

"No. I thought that would be going too far. I showed Brian what to do and left him to do it on his own." Jack said quietly, then looked to see if his father approved of his decision.

After a moment of consideration, Cameron said, "Yeah. That's probably best. I mean, if you guys had done it, I wouldn't have been bothered by it in the least. But this way Brian can save his first *real* sexual encounter for someone closer to his own age."

"Yeah. I think you're right. I remember how it was for me and... well, I just wouldn't want it to have been any other way." Jack said distantly.

"Jerry?" Cameron asked curiously.

"Yeah. One of the times when you took us up here, you had to go down to the truck for something and you let us stay in the cabin while you were gone." Jack said with a smile at the memory.

"If it's the time I'm remembering, the teenage hormones were thick in the air between you two. I took that walk down to the truck to get away before I embarrassed myself. I was really hoping you two would do something so we could get back to enjoying our trip." Cameron said distantly.

"Does that mean you were turned on?" Brian asked in wide eyed wonder.

"Sure. Most times it doesn't take that much to get a guy going. I don't know if it was pheromones that did it or what, but I sure as hell didn't want Jack and Jerry to see me all hot and bothered." Cameron said frankly.

"So you walked down to the truck and jacked off?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Twice, I think." Cameron said distantly, then looked at Brian and said, "You've got to understand, I've been single for a *really* long time. I don't get much action and I usually only take care of myself when I just *have to*."

"Why's that? I mean, you're not old or fat or ugly or anything. I bet that there's got to be a lot of women who'd want to go out with you." Brian said curiously.

"Yeah. Well, there's no shortage of eligible women, that's for sure. I guess maybe it'd be easy to accuse me of being gun-shy about getting into another relationship. But honestly, the way I look at it, if there's a woman over the age of thirty-five who's single, there's probably a really good reason for it. There's no way I want to go slogging through the dregs of the dating pool on the off chance that I'll somehow find the one woman in this hemisphere who isn't a psychotic bitch."

"It sounds like you and Jack have the same luck with women." Brian said with a sympathetic look at his friend.

"I've noticed." Cameron chuckled, then said, "What was that one girl's name? The one who was all high and mighty about being a vegetarian and always smelled like pot? April? Enid?..."

"Averil." Jack said darkly, then turned to Brian and said, "When I'd been dating her for about a week, she came over to visit while I was in the shower, getting ready for our date. Dad let her in and, well, he'd better tell you, I only got to see the end of it."

"The girl starts rubbing up against me like a dog in heat, then before I even know what happened, she's got her hand down my pants!" Cameron said frankly.

"Of course, that's when I walk into the living room and see what's going on. I guess it was a good thing that the first thing I saw was the shocked look on Dad's face, otherwise I might have been mad at him. Instead, I just let her know that I wasn't willing to share my girlfriend with my father and told her to leave."

"You *could've* let her finish." Cameron said as he looked askance at his son.

"Next time. Promise." Jack said with a grin at his father.

"So, are all your dates that bad?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. They usually crash and burn on a completely different level. Averil was the only one who ever made a move on my dad." Jack said, then looked at his dad curiously and hesitantly asked, "Wasn't she?"

"Well, Julie flirted with me a little, but since I didn't flirt back, it never went any further than that." Cameron said reluctantly.

"You should've gone for it. She slept with just about everyone else I ever met, why not you, too?" Jack said bitterly.

"I can't say that I'd never do that, because sometimes when you're there, in that moment..." Cameron drifted off with a helpless shrug. He finally continued by saying, "But I'd never *set out* to do that. I'd never intentionally hurt you."

"I know, Dad. I've always known that." Jack said with a smile.

After a long quiet moment, Brian reluctantly said, "Do you want to tell your dad about the letter.."

It took a moment for Jack to realize what Brian was talking about, but as soon as he did, his eyes clouded over with pain.

"What's going on? What letter?" Cameron asked as he looked from Jack to Brian curiously.

Brian looked to Jack, not having the first clue of how to even approach the topic.

"It's best..." Jack started to say, then seemed to think better of it and got up from the table.

A moment later he came back with the folded piece of paper and handed it to his father as he whispered, "Just read it."

* * * * *

There was a flash of pain in Cameron's eyes, but no other obvious outward reaction.

When he turned to Jack, about to speak, his throat made a 'click' that sounded loudly and clearly throughout the room.

"He said he loved me." Jack whispered to his father as the tears that were welled in his eyes started to overflow.

"I never doubted it. Not for a minute." Cameron said with a smile to his son, even though there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

Brian sat silently, wanting to do something to offer comfort to Jack and Cameron, but not knowing what he could possibly do that wouldn't just make everyone uncomfortable.

"It's after midnight, we should probably get to bed." Cameron choked out as he tried to get his tears under control.

"Do you need to be up early for some reason? Or is this just an old age thing?" Jack teased as he wiped his eyes.

"I'll show you old, you little smart ass." Cameron said with a grin.

"Seriously, Dad. There's no reason for us to rush to bed. None of us has to be up at any certain time. "

"I suppose not." Cameron conceded.

"Would you like something to eat? I could make you up some eggs or something if you like." Jack asked with concern.

"No, thanks. I'm fine." Cameron said gratefully.

"Have you thought about what you want to do about the sleeping arrangements?" Jack asked seriously.

"I brought the cot, it's in my backpack." Cameron said frankly.

"I can sleep on the cot, if you want." Jack said quietly.

"No. I brought the cot. It's mine." Cameron said playfully.

"A little possessive, aren't you?" Jack chuckled.

"I've been looking forward to laying down on my cot since I started walking in that monsoon. And I'm damned sure going to do it." Cameron said firmly as he walked across the room and began to unpack his backpack.

"Fine with me. I just thought you might like a nice soft mattress." Jack said honestly.

"Not tonight. Let's see how I feel in the morning. I may feel like trading with you tomorrow night." Cameron said warmly.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Brian asked timidly.

Cameron smiled at Brian, then said, "Yes. It seems that some water got into my backpack. You could help me hang things up by the stove so they can dry."

Brian glanced over at the stove and noticed for the first time that there were two nylon ropes strung across the room, close to the ceiling.

"Yeah. Sure." Brian said as he stepped forward. He accepted a stack of clothes that were wet, mostly on one side, then went about the work of hanging them on the clothes lines by the stove.

"Jack, you know how to set up the cot, don't you?" Cameron asked as he extracted the cot from his backpack.

"Let's see, I've only done it about a million times." Jack said with a roll of his eyes.

"If it collapses tonight, *you're* sleeping on the floor tomorrow night." Cameron said firmly.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Jack said with another eye roll, then started setting up the cot.

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"I brought plenty of food." Jack said as he saw his father examining the ice chest.

"Yeah, well I didn't want to take the chance of Brian getting scurvy or rickets or beriberi from the complete absence of anything with nutritional value in his diet." Cameron said as he stood.

"But the dehydrated stuff doesn't need to be refrigerated." Jack said in his defense.

"Neither do most fruits and vegetables." Cameron said frankly, then extracted two plastic shopping bags from the backpack and handed them to Jack.

After a moment to look in the bags, Jack reluctantly said, "Point taken."

Cameron took three more bags out of the backpack and carried them to the ice chest.

"Wow, it looks like you brought a lot of food." Brian said with a smile.

"Not that much, really. But hopefully you'll enjoy having a little more variety in your diet." Cameron said frankly.

"So, Santa, what else did you bring us?" Jack asked with a chuckle.

"Well, little boy, since you've been so good this year, I brought this especially for you." Cameron said, then handed a small plastic box to his son.

Jack looked at the box, then at his dad with a smile as he said, "Thanks, Dad."

Brian looked at the box of hand wipes, then at Cameron with question.

"Jack gets funny about germs. He actually used to be a lot worse about it when he was a kid. Now, I think he manages it within reason, so I just accept it as part of who he is." Cameron said calmly.

"So, it's like a phobia or something?" Brian asked cautiously.

"It's a compulsion. But I've been to a psychiatrist about it, and it's really not a problem anymore. If you think about it, we're not so different from each other. You have a phobia, I have a compulsion. It's not so severe that either of us needs to worry too much about it. We both have the willpower to manage as long as we have our friends and family to support us." Jack said seriously.

Brian thought about that for a moment, then said, "Thanks, Jack. That really makes a lot of sense. And if you're able to manage your thing, then I'll find a way to manage mine."

"Sounds like a plan. You ladies do what you want. I'm ready for some sleep." Cameron said as he sat his empty backpack aside.

Jack looked around, then announced, "I'm ready, too. What about you, Brian?"

After a moment of thought, Brian said, "I need to visit the lava-tree, then I'll be ready."

Jack nodded that he had heard, then watched as Brian pulled on his coat and stepped into his boots.

* * * * *

Once Brian was outside, Cameron quietly asked, "How is he, really?"

"I think he's okay. But I'm really glad you're here. I've done everything I can think of to help him, and I'm afraid that it's not enough or that I've missed something." Jack said anxiously.

"After breakfast tomorrow, it might be helpful if you find an excuse to need to be alone so Brian and I can have a chance to talk." Cameron said seriously.

Jack pulled his father into a hug as he whispered, "Thanks, Dad."

"Hey, you're the one doing *me* a favor by coming up here with Brian and helping him." Cameron said gently, then thought to ask, "By the way, how are *you*?"

"I'm about a thousand times better now that you're here." Jack said as he continued to hug his father.

"Just relax and let me handle it for a while. You've done good, you've earned a rest." Cameron said gently.

The door opening drew their attention.

"We were just..." Jack began to say as he pulled away from his father.

"It's okay. You missed your dad." Brian said dismissively as he walked to his side of the bed.

* * * * *

Brian was tired and didn't even look to see if anyone was watching as he skinned out of his sweats and climbed into bed.

Less than a minute later, Brian felt the bed shift and heard Jack getting into his sleeping bag.

After a long quiet moment, Brian whispered, "Jack?"

"Yeah?" Jack responded.

"You know earlier, when you were talking about your mom. I was just wondering... do you hate her?" Brian asked quietly.

"I'd have to care about her a whole lot more than I do to hate her."

Brian thought about the response, but didn't want to press Jack for more.

To his surprise, Jack continued, "When my parents got divorced, my mom cut all ties with me. She didn't visit me or call or write or anything. She totally excluded me from her life, like I was never born, like I never existed. Then, after Dillon's death, she suddenly got this idea that she has some kind of 'right' to be my mother again."

Try as he might, Brian couldn't even imagine being in Jack's position.

"Do you blame your mom for Dillon's death?" Brian heard himself ask before he was even aware of the question.

As Brian waited, he realized that Jack must have fallen asleep and not heard the question.

'Just as well'. Brian told himself as he settled in to sleep.

After another long moment, he barely heard Jack's voice whisper, "Yes."

Chapter 8

The sound of movement in the cabin awoke Brian. He contemplated remaining in bed for a while, because he felt like he could still use some more sleep. But, in the end, his curiosity got the better of him.

As he climbed out of the sleeping bag, he remembered two things. First, he was naked. Second, Jack's father had arrived in the early hours of the morning. Taken separately, both were good things. But at the realization, Brian felt a moment of panic, since he couldn't remember where he put his sweat pants when he went to bed.

"Do you drink coffee?" Cameron, dressed in only boxer shorts, asked in a whisper as he folded down his cot.

Brian's fear eased as he saw Cameron's casual expression. Brian was naked. Cameron could see him. And it was obviously no big deal.

"Yeah." Brian answered, then added, "Since about three days ago."

Cameron nodded and gave him quick grin at the statement, then put his folded cot beside his backpack.

Brian looked around and spotted his sweat pants and sweat shirt draped over the crates he was using as a dresser.

* * * * *

After dressing, Brian walked into the kitchen and automatically grabbed two of the empty water jugs. He stopped long enough to pull on his coat and boots, then continued on out the door.

The air was cold and the grass was crisp with frost.

On the way to the spring, Brian stopped to relieve himself at a convenient tree.

After filling the water jugs, he started walking back to the cabin.

His warm breath puffed out as a hazy cloud in the frigid air.

The world seemed so fresh, as if the rain had washed it clean and everything was like new.

Ignoring the weight of the water jugs he was carrying, Brian slowed his pace to take time to appreciate the beauty of his surroundings.

* * * * *

As Brian walked into the cabin, he saw that Cameron was working busily in the kitchen.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Brian asked quietly, so as not to wake Jack.

"You've already done it. Thanks for getting the water." Cameron said appreciatively, then continued, "But you should get out of those wet clothes before you catch a chill."

Brian shrugged, then went to his side of the bed to choose some clothes to wear for the day.

Once he had made his selections, Brian began to skin out of his damp clothes and didn't realize until he was pulling on his underwear that Cameron was watching.

He met Cameron's gaze and gave him a look of question.

"You said that you're shy. I'm not seeing it." Cameron said simply.

Brian felt a smirk come across his face as he said, "I think you're seeing all there is to see."

Cameron chuckled, then went back to work at the stove.

* * * * *

Once Brian was completely dressed, he walked to Cameron and asked, "Is there anything I can do now? Jack taught me how to make toast."

"That sounds like him." Cameron said with a grin, then added, "We'll be having biscuits this morning. But if you want to help, you could mix up some orange juice with that water you just brought."

"Orange juice?" Brian asked with surprise.

"Yes. I brought a can of frozen juice. It's in the ice chest. I'm betting you guys have depleted all your vitamin C with that dehydrated food of Jack's." Cameron said with a grin.

"Well, I don't know anything about the nutrition and stuff, but his food tasted good. I'd rather have food that tastes good than food that's good for me." Brian said in Jack's defense.

"Let's see if we can manage to have both." Cameron said warmly.

"What do you want me to mix the juice in?" Brian asked as he looked around.

"There's a pitcher in the cabinet over there." Cameron said with a gesture.

Brian nodded, then went to work.

* * * * *

"Good morning." Jack said with a contented smile as he scuffled into the kitchen, looking sleep ruffled.

"The coffee's just about ready if you want to get cleaned up for breakfast." Cameron said as he put canned biscuits on a baking sheet.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jack asked as he looked around.

"Too slow. Brian already beat you to it." Cameron said with a glance at Brian, who was washing and slicing some apples.

"Be right back." Jack said with a grin as he walked to the front door and slipped on his coat and boots.

* * * * *

When Jack returned, he noticed that Brian was sitting at the table sipping a cup of coffee.

As he cleaned his hands with a hand wipe, he asked, "How are you this morning, Brian?"

"I'm good. How about you?" Brian asked casually as he watched Jack pour himself a cup of coffee.

"Fantastic. I love being up here with Dad." Jack said with a smile at his father.

Brian turned his attention to Cameron and said, "From what Jack's been telling me about how awesome you are, I can understand why."

"I'm just a dad. Nothing special." Cameron said humbly.

"We figured out that Brian's dad sucks. So you probably looked like 'Super Dad' compared to him." Jack said frankly.

"Jack, that's not a nice thing to say." Cameron gently scolded.

"It may not be nice, but it's true. My dad sucks." Brian said firmly.

"I've met your father, Brian." Cameron said as he matched his gaze, then paused to consider. Finally, he continued, "Actually, come to think of it, he was kind of a dick."

"That's my dad." Brian said with a sigh of resignation.

"But he did allow us to try and help you. He didn't HAVE to agree to that." Cameron said seriously, then leaned down to check the fire in the stove.

"I guess so." Brian said noncommittally.

"The fire's ready. Who wants to help me cook?" Cameron asked with a grin.

Brian and Jack both immediately stood from their places at the table.

"Jack, you're on gravy. Brian, steaks. As soon as I have these biscuits baking, I'll start on the eggs." Cameron said seriously.

"I've never cooked steaks before." Brian said hesitantly.

"The steaks are seasoned and the skillet's already at the right temperature, so all you have to do is cook the steaks about three minutes on each side." Cameron said simply.

"I don't have a watch." Brian said anxiously.

"Guess. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on you and I'll let you know if you're doing it wrong." Cameron said casually.

"Okay." Brian said hesitantly, then picked up the plate of raw steaks from the counter.

"Just a second." Cameron said quickly, then added a spoon of something to the skillet that started to sizzle and slightly smoke. Once it had melted, he said, "Go on."

Brian quickly placed the steaks into the skillet, then asked, "What was that?"

"Lard. It needed a dab of fat to cook the meat right." Cameron said frankly, then worked his way in between Brian and Jack. They both scooted over slightly to give him room as he placed another skillet on the stove, behind Brian's.

"I think we need a bigger stove." Jack chuckled as he waited for his saucepan of water to come to a boil.

"No. I think this is just right." Cameron said as he put one arm around each of them.

"Should I turn them yet?" Brian asked as he watched his steaks cooking.

"Another minute, I think." Cameron said, then stepped away from the stove long enough to scrape up some butter onto his spatula at the counter.

When the butter hit the hot skillet, it began to sizzle.

Cameron walked back to the counter and picked up a carton of eggs.

Brian watched in amazement as Cameron cracked the eggs into the skillet one handed.

"Brian likes his yolks broken." Jack said quietly.

"I can do that." Cameron said happily.

Brian turned his attention to his skillet and decided that it was time to turn his steaks.

Using a fork, he turned them over without any difficulty.

"Would you get us some plates to serve from when the steaks and eggs are done?" Cameron said as he tended the frying eggs.

Brian nodded, then walked to the shelf where the plates were stored and took two down.

When he returned to the stove, he saw that Jack was adding a pouch of dry country gravy mix to a saucepan of water.

"Thanks, Brian." Cameron said gratefully as he accepted a plate from him.

Brian smiled, then looked at the steaks, trying to decide if they were ready to be taken out of the skillet.

"The gravy's done." Jack said as he took his saucepan off the stove.

"Would you go ahead and take out the biscuits? They should be about ready." Cameron said as he started taking the fried eggs out of the skillet.

Brian decided that it had been about three minutes since he had turned the steaks and started transferring them to the plate.

"Brian, take these to the table and I'll get the skillets off the stove." Cameron said as he handed Brian his plate.

As soon as Brian had the steaks and eggs placed in the middle of the table, Cameron approached with more plates and silverware.

Brian looked over to the kitchen area to see Jack moving biscuits from the baking sheet to a large wooden bowl lined with a towel.

"Glasses." Cameron said absently as he walked back toward the kitchen.

Brian looked at the table and realized that there was something more he could do. He went to the stove and picked up the coffee pot, then walked to each place around the table and topped off everyone's coffee.

"Is that it? Is everyone ready to eat?" Cameron asked as he looked around.

Jack took that opportunity to flash his dad one of his 'typical teenager' looks.

Brian studied the expression carefully, knowing that sooner or later he would be able to make good use of it.

"Just eat." Cameron said with fond aggravation.

Brian took his seat and waited to see if they were going to do anything more before eating.

Cameron reached across the table and snagged a steak with his fork.

At the same time, Jack was taking biscuits from the bowl and splitting them open.

Brian picked up the plate of eggs and found two that had been cooked with broken yolks and moved them to his plate.

After that, he grabbed a steak, two biscuits and some of the apples he had sliced earlier.

As soon as he was finished filling his plate, Jack passed the gravy to him. Brian followed Jack's example and covered his split open biscuits.

"What have you guys been doing up here the past few days?" Cameron asked casually as he started to eat.

"We've scouted the area for fallen trees and gone up to the hot springs. With the rain, there wasn't a chance to do much else." Jack said frankly.

"Were you two about to go stir crazy?" Cameron asked with a grin.

"I suppose that might depend on your definition of crazy. We did some story telling and singing. Anyone watching us might have thought we were nuts, but we had a pretty good time, didn't we, Brian?" Jack asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I never would have thought that doing something like that could be so much fun." Brian said timidly.

"That reminds me, Jack, I brought your guitar. I left it in the truck so it wouldn't get wet." Cameron said seriously.

"Thanks, Dad. I'm glad you brought it." Jack said happily.

"What do you guys have planned for today?" Cameron asked casually.

Brian looked to Jack with question.

"I was going to show Brian some exercises that he can do when he gets home to help him with strength and coordination." Jack said frankly.

"Would you mind very much if we put that off for a while and did something that we can't do at home?" Cameron asked hopefully.

"No problem. You could even show them to Brian during his gym class if you wanted to." Jack said simply, then curiously asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"Have you taken Brian to the ridge yet?" Cameron asked with a smile.

"No. We didn't have a chance." Jack said, apparently surprised by the suggestion.

"This looks like it's going to be a perfect day for it. In fact, we could hike up, build a fire and have lunch and then spend the afternoon up there." Cameron said thoughtfully.

"If we're going to do that, I'd really like to have my guitar." Jack said slowly.

"Then you can hike down to the truck while we hike up to the ridge. By the time you join us, we should have the fire going and be about ready for lunch." Cameron said with a smile.

"Yeah. That sounds good." Jack happily agreed.

"And that would also give Brian and me a chance to talk." Cameron said as he turned his attention to Brian.

For a moment, Brian looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

"It's nothing to worry about." Cameron said with a chuckle at the expression, then continued, "I'm sure you and Jack have talked about a lot of different things since you've been up here. Now that he's done the groundwork, I can follow behind him and maybe fill in some blanks or give you a different point of view about things."

Brian thought about the words for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"Just remember to take it easy on him, Dad. From the sound of it, he's pretty much grown up without a father, so you might come off as intimidating if you don't watch it." Jack said seriously.

"No." Brian said as he turned his attention to Jack. "He doesn't need to take it easy on me. The only way I'm going to stop being a doormat is if I learn to speak up for myself."

"That's right." Jack said with a proud smile at Brian.

Cameron looked Brian in the eyes, then nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"What have you got there, Brian?" Cameron asked curiously as he noticed that Brian was packing a smaller backpack.

"Just the shovel, toilet paper and the first aid kit, so far." Brian said frankly.

Cameron nodded his approval, then asked, "Would you have enough room in there to carry some firewood?"

"Sure. I guess so." Brian said cautiously.

"I'd just like to have some dry kindling to start the campfire when we get there. Once the fire is going strong, we can use the wood we find up on the ridge." Cameron said frankly.

Brian nodded, then took the tool belt off the nail on the wall that had the hatchet and small hand saw on it.

Cameron smiled broadly at the action. He was amazed at how well Brian had adapted to life at the cabin in such a short time.

* * * * *

Once both their backpacks were packed, they left the cabin and walked directly into the woods.

"How are you doing, Brian?" Cameron asked quietly.

After a moment to consider, Brian answered, "Right here, right now, I'm really okay."

"But you're worried about what's going to happen when you go back." Cameron said, completing the thought.

"Yeah. Jack says that it won't be the same when I go back because *I'm* not the same. I guess I'm just having trouble knowing what to expect." Brian said frankly.

"I think that's perfectly reasonable in your situation." Cameron said honestly, then added, "Just remember, that if things get too bad, you can always come to me. You don't have to face it all by yourself, anymore."

Brian glanced at Cameron curiously for a moment as they walked, then he said, "I think that was one of my problems."

"What's that, son?" Cameron asked with interest.

"As bad as things ever got, I never even once thought about talking to anyone about it. I was trying to handle it all on my own..." Brian trailed off in wonder.

"Those days are gone forever. No matter how things turn out, Jack and I will be there for you." Cameron said frankly.

"But what if..." Brian started to say.

"What if, what?" Cameron prompted.

"What if I can't handle it? What if I go back and I'm the same goofy dork that I was before?" Brian asked anxiously.

"Jack and I will be there for you. No. Matter. What." Cameron said firmly.

"Thanks, Coach... I mean, Cam." Brian stammered.

* * * * *

"I can imagine with all that rain, that you two probably had a lot of time to talk. How did that go? Was Jack able to answer all your questions?" Cameron asked curiously.

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. At least, I can't think of anything at the moment that I need to talk about."

* * * * *

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Brian said, "Jack and I have been talking about Dillon quite a bit."

"It's hard for us to talk to each other about him. I guess the feelings are still too strong." Cameron said frankly.

"Yeah. I could see that with Jack." Brian said quietly, then added, "But I think he felt better after we talked."

Cameron nodded his understanding.

"You're doing all this. I mean, helping me and stuff, because of him, aren't you?" Brian asked curiously.

Cameron walked in silence and considered carefully before answering, "The best way I can answer that is to say that, if Dillon hadn't ever come to live with us, then I might not have been as sensitive to your situation."

"I'm sorry that he died." Brian said quietly.

Cameron nodded as they continued to walk, then hesitantly asked, "Does Jack blame me?"

Brian turned and looked at Cameron with question.

"...For Dillon's death." Cameron elaborated.

"We didn't talk about that, but from what he *did* say, no, I don't think he blames you at all." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Jack wasn't there when it happened." Cameron said absently and it took a moment for Brian to realize what he was talking about.

"I thought Dillon was in his room like he usually was. He liked to stay to himself. It wasn't until I went out to get something out of the garage that I found him..." Cameron trailed off as tears began to fall.

Brian felt his own eyes welling with tears at the sight of Cameron's pain.

"He hanged himself." Cameron choked out.

Brian couldn't hold himself back anymore. He pulled Cameron into a firm hug to do what little he could to try and ease his suffering.

"I can't imagine losing someone you love, like that." Brian whispered as he held Cam tightly.

"It's funny, when I got married, and Jack was born, I thought I had the perfect life. I never even imagined that anything bad could happen. I thought I had everything I could ever want." Cam said distantly, pulled out a wadded up tissue and blew his nose, then shifted Brian to his side so they could continue walking.

"What happened to make it all fall apart?"

"Sylvia, my ex wife. I suppose, now that I think about it, she was just going through the motions, playing the part of the dutiful wife. And I was stupid or blind enough not to notice how often she was 'visiting with friends' or how she rushed away to take the three dozen phone calls she'd get each night. It turns out that for the last two years of our marriage, she was having an affair... probably more than one."

"I don't understand how anyone could do that." Brian said quietly.

"Me either. I can understand one of those 'in the heat of the moment' things, but what she did was intentional, planned out and long term."

"So when you found out, you left her?"

"It wasn't quite that simple. The way that I found out that she was having an affair is that she turned up pregnant. Our sex life had pretty much dried up by then. She was always pissed off about something, or not in the mood. Suffice it to say that there was NO WAY her baby could possibly have been mine." Cameron said bitterly.

"So you left?"

"No. I wanted to find a way to hold everything together, for Jack. I thought he needed a home. I managed to hold on until after Dillon was born. But somehow in Sylvia's mind, her fucking some other guy and getting pregnant with his kid was *my* fault. She made it her mission to make my life miserable. And *that* she did very well. I put up with it for a while, but then I could see the effect it was having on Jack, and I wouldn't stand for that. So that's when I left."

"You really hate her, don't you?" Brian asked cautiously, recognizing the tone in Cameron's voice.

"Yes, I'm ashamed to say that I do. More than words can say." Cameron admitted quietly.

"You know, holding on to the hate is keeping it alive and isn't doing anyone any good. It's poisoning Jack. Maybe you could find a way to forgive your ex wife for sleeping around." Brian said cautiously.

"That's not why I hate her. I understand human weakness. I mean, yeah, I was betrayed by her and that hurt me, but, in time, I would have forgiven her for it. I probably wouldn't have stayed married to her, but I would have been able to let it go, eventually."

"Then why *do* you hate her so much?"

"When Dillon came to live with us, he told me that once, when he was fighting with his mother, he said that he wanted to come live with me. That's when she told him that I'm not his father. She told him that he's nothing to me, no blood relation, and that that's why, when we divorced, that I didn't take him with me, too. Because he was someone else's kid and I didn't want him."

"That's horrible!" Brian gasped.

"There was no reason for her to have done that. Her only motivation could have been to hurt him. Dillon had built up defensive walls a mile high, but she found the chink in his armor." Cameron said darkly, then quietly added, "I'll never be able to forgive her for that."

"No wonder he was such a mess." Brian whispered.

"The thing that kills me is that it's partly true. I had this *brilliant* idea. I made a deal with Sylvia that we would have a simple 'no-fault' divorce to avoid a long, ugly court battle. I told her that if I could get sole custody of Jack, she'd have Dillon, then we'd split everything else down the middle and she could have the house. If she didn't agree to the plan, I'd bring up her infidelity in court and she'd have to fight me for every last scrap of the marital assets. So, in a way, I sacrificed Dillon so I could get full custody of Jack." Cameron said regretfully.

"But what were the chances that you would have ended up with both of them if you hadn't done it that way?" Brian asked curiously.

"Somewhere between slim and none, considering the attitude of the courts toward fathers, the most I could have realistically hoped for in the divorce was joint custody. And I couldn't do that to Jack. It would have destroyed him. We were so close that I don't think he could have handled it if he were forced to stay with Sylvia and could only visit with me on weekends and holidays."

"What about Dillon's father? Didn't he want him?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Dillon's father was a married man with children of his own. He never acknowledged that Dillon was his, and never once tried to take any responsibility for him."

"What about the step-dad, Russel?" Brian asked cautiously.

Cameron gave a snort of derision at the name, then said, "He didn't come along until later. But Russel was probably the exact WORST thing for Dillon at that time in his life. That kid was in a fuck of a lot of pain and doing his best to deal with things. Then this asshole shows up out of nowhere, being all buddy-buddy and brimming over with psycho-babble and false platitudes. I don't blame Dillon for one minute for rebelling against it. The man's so condescending and full of himself that it's all I can do not to punch him in the face every time I see him."

"I can't stand people like that." Brian said with a nod.

"So, Dillon felt like he had no one. When he asked me if I was really his father, I couldn't lie to him. I told him the truth as gently as I could. But as soon as I confirmed to Dillon that I wasn't his biological father, he seemed to accept that *all* of what his mother had told him was true. After that, he never really talked to me again. I tried to tell him that I wanted him and that as far as anyone would ever know, that he was *my* son, but he wouldn't hear it. From that day on, Dillon acted like I was no one to him."

"But what about that note? He said he loved you." Brian asked quietly.

After a long silence, Cameron finally said, "I don't know. All this time I've believed that Dillon thought of me as just another in a long line of adults who lied to him and conspired to ruin his life. Now, to know that he loved me, even if it was only for the moment when he wrote that letter, it makes me have to go back and reexamine every day that we had together."

"Jack doesn't know any of this, does he?" Brian asked cautiously, only vaguely aware of the woods around them as they walked.

"No. I'll probably tell him, someday, but he's still too emotional when it comes to Dillon. Telling him now would only hurt him for no good reason."

Brian nodded, then quietly said, "The more I hear about Dillon, the more I wish I could have known him."

"I wish that, too, Brian. I think that you two could have understood each other. Maybe having someone to share his pain... It doesn't matter now, he's dead and we're alive. Wallowing in 'what might have been' won't improve anything for him or anyone else. We really need to concentrate on the here and now, so that we can do everything possible to get you past *your* problems." Cameron said with a tender smile toward the boy at his side.

"Don't worry about me, Cam. No matter what happens to me, no matter how bad it ever gets, I promise that I won't kill myself. I'd never do that to Jack... or to you." Brian said sincerely.

"Thank you." Cameron said in a whisper, then continued more firmly, "But we're going to try for something a little bit better than that. If all goes well, we're going to try to get you to a point where you're *happy*."

"Last week, I couldn't even imagine being happy." Brian said quietly, then turned to look Cameron in the eyes as he said, "Now, I really believe it's possible."

"Then let's go for it!"

* * * * *

"We're here." Cameron said with a smile as they finally walked out of the seemingly endless sea of trees.

Brian looked around curiously, then noticed what looked like a circle of stones on the rise just ahead of them.

"You're not afraid of heights, are you?" Cameron asked as he led the way.

"I never have been." Brian said casually.

Cameron smiled at the words, then stopped at a log by the circle of stones and took off his backpack.

Brian was about to do the same when he looked past Cameron and froze.

Of course, Brian had heard the term 'breathtaking' before, but he had never actually experienced the sensation.

Beyond Cameron was the most remarkable sight that Brian had ever encountered.

Lush, verdant green trees and rolling hills spread out before him like a vast, endless ocean. From their vantage point, Brian could see white, puffy clouds intermittently drifting among the low, rolling hills below him. The diminishing hills in the distance were obscured by a haze that gave the illusion of them rolling on, continuing into infinity.

"Wild, huh?" Cameron said with a grin as he watched Brian's expression of awe.

Brian just nodded. He had no words to express even a fraction of what he was feeling.

"We'll be able to sit up here and enjoy this all day. But we have some things we need to get done right now, if we're going to have the fire going before Jack gets here." Cameron said gently.

Brian stood and stared for a moment longer, then blinked and said, "Um, yeah. What do we need to do?"

"Drop your pack, then we can start scouting around for some good firewood." Cameron said warmly.

After another moment of staring, Brian finally responded, "Yeah. Okay."

* * * * *

The search for firewood went surprisingly well. It seemed as though the storm that had pounded the cabin so mercilessly the night before had barely even touched this higher elevation. The wood was a bit damp, but not 'soaked' and was in plentiful supply.

Once Brian and Cameron had cut and carried a good supply of wood up to the campsite, Cameron finally went about the business of building the fire.

"Is there anything I can do?" Brian asked as he watched.

"Nope. You've done it." Cameron said with a smile, then continued, "Once this fire is going strong, all we need to do is sit back and enjoy it."

"How long do you think it's going to be before Jack gets here?" Brian asked as he looked back at the treeline.

"Half an hour, maybe. But he'll be coming from that direction." Cameron said as he pointed up the ridge.

Brian looked where Cam was pointing, then at Cameron with question.

"Unless he has a reason to go back to the cabin, it'll be faster and easier for him to hike up to the dirt road, then cut straight across to the ridge.

Although Brian didn't know enough about the terrain to fully understand, he easily accepted Cameron's explanation.

"While we've got a few minutes alone, how would you like to talk about your 'situation?'" Cameron asked cautiously.

Brian reluctantly nodded, then quietly said, "Being up here. I actually forgot about that for a while."

"Good. That's one of the reasons we thought that this would be a good thing for you." Cameron said frankly.

Brian looked at him curiously.

"I'm not speaking about you specifically, but in general, people sometimes get caught up in a vicious cycle where the same stimulus and the same emotions keep feeding and fueling each other in an endless cycle. I think, in many cases, just taking a break can be the best thing to break out of that endless loop so a person can look at their situation objectively." Cameron said contemplatively.

Brian considered the words as he slowly nodded.

He hadn't always been bullied and picked on. Until this school year began, he had just been 'one of the guys'.

The teasing and harassment had caused him to react in a way that, as Jack had pointed out, invited more of the same.

"Plus," Cameron said, drawing Brian's attention back to him, "You just looked like you needed a break."

Brian smiled at the words and honestly said, "Yeah. I really did."

"What do you think you're going to do when you get back?" Cameron asked seriously.

"Well, I guess the first thing is, try not to act afraid, like a scared little mouse all the time. Jack says that when I act like that, it's like I'm inviting people to treat me badly."

Cameron slowly nodded, then said, "Don't accept *too* much responsibility for their treatment of you. What Jack said is true to a point, but their behavior was wrong. No matter how you behaved or reacted, some things are never acceptable."

Brian thought about the words and realized that Cameron was right.

"I suppose, at your age, it's easy to look at everything going on around you and see only how it relates to you personally. As you get older, you'll see that quite a bit of that is just your own mind playing tricks on you. The world is going to keep on going and things are going to keep on happening, with or without you."

"So jerks are going to act like jerks whether I'm there or not." Brian said speculatively.

"Right." Cameron said with a grin, then continued, "Understanding that, you'll know that you don't need to take their attacks on you quite so personally."

"Because if they weren't attacking me, they'd probably be doing the same thing to someone else." Brian said quietly, continuing the thought.

"Yes. They're a bunch of bratty kids whose parents should be ashamed of what they've allowed to happen." Cameron said frankly.

"Their parents?" Brian asked slowly.

"Yes. I know the parents have all kinds of excuses about the schools and about peer pressure and garbage like that, but the fact of the matter is that kids learn from their parents. I've had to talk to more than a few parents over the years about discipline problems, and usually before they've even opened their mouths, I can see where the kid gets it."

Brian chuckled at Cameron's expression.

"Just a piece of advice, Brian." Cameron added seriously.

Brian nodded and waited expectantly.

"If you ever get called into a parent teacher conference concerning your kid's behavior, dress for the occasion and, for God's sake, don't show up drunk." Cameron said with a pained expression.

Brian laughed aloud at the words and nodded his agreement.

"Forgive me if I offend you, but I can't think of any better way to ask this." Cameron said in prelude, then at Brian's nod, he continued, "Since I've met your dad, I can tell that you didn't pick up his personality. So I'm guessing that your mom is a mousy little doormat."

Brian gave an unconcerned shrug, then said, "Pretty much."

"So, you've imprinted on her and when you're faced with a bully, you're using the only set of coping skills that you've ever had the opportunity to witness." Cameron said frankly.

Brian's eyes went wide, as what Cameron said made perfect sense to him.

"I'm sure your mom is a perfectly lovely person, but I think we need to break you away from her example and find a better way for you to deal with bullies."

"I'm open to any suggestions." Brian said simply.

"Face it." Cameron said as he looked Brian in the eyes. "Don't back down. Don't slink away. Stand up for yourself and speak your mind. You don't have to be long winded or dramatic about it. Just state the facts, plain and simple."

"Jack said that attitude and honesty would probably make the bullies stop." Brian said thoughtfully.

Cameron chuckled, then said, "Yeah. Jack is a zen grand master when it comes to attitude. But he's probably right. Being frank and honest is the most important part, but some attitude would probably help to drive it home."

Brian nodded slowly.

"Come here." Cameron said gently.

Brian looked at him curiously.

Cameron held out an arm in invitation.

Brian moved to Cameron's side and was pulled into a firm, one-armed hug.

"You looked like you needed that." Cameron said warmly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Brian said as he enjoyed the feeling of being held.

"I'm guessing that since your dad's such a flaming asshole, that he thinks you're 'too old' for hugs, or some shit like that." Cameron said derisively.

"I guess. Maybe he hugged me when I was little, but honestly, I don't really remember. But I know that there's no way he'd do it now." Brian said quietly.

"Hugs are a symbol of the bonds that we share with people. The physical contact reinforces our connection with them. I hug my mom and dad every time I see them, and you've seen me with Jack." Cameron said honestly.

Brian thought for a moment, then quietly said, "But in my family, we don't ever hug. And when you talk about the bonds that we share... if we have them at all, they're probably not very strong."

"What would you say if I said that when we get back, you could come to live with me and Jack? You'd never have to lay eyes on either of your parents ever again?" Cameron asked cautiously.

"I'd say, 'Okay'." Brian said simply.

"You wouldn't feel any hesitation about leaving them, about not seeing them or hearing from them?" Cameron asked curiously.

"No. I really don't think I would." Brian said honestly, then explained, "I think the only thing that keeps me there is a lack of other options. If there was a way that I could really move in with you and Jack, without it being a big problem for anyone, I'd do it, in a heartbeat."

"How do you think your parents would feel if you did that?" Cameron asked quietly.

Brian chuckled at the question, then said, "Them? Feel? I'm sorry, but as far as I can tell, they don't feel anything at all, ever."

"What about your mom?" Cameron asked carefully.

Brian shook his head, then quietly said, "She goes along with anything my dad says. So if my dad accepted it, she would, too."

Cameron sadly nodded, then said, "I think, that to become a fulfilled person, that you need to have bonds to other people. Everyone needs that support sometimes."

"I already have that with you and Jack. I already know that you'll be there if I need you, and if you two ever need me for anything at all, I'll be there for you, too." Brian said seriously.

"Yes, Brian. I'm glad you understand.." Cameron said reassuringly, then quietly asked, "But what about your parents?"

"They had their chance." Brian said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence before Cameron finally said, "I think I can understand why you feel the way you do, but just try to keep one thing in mind."

"What's that?" Brian asked curiously.

"People grow and change. It's not always in a good way, but sometimes it is. In time, they may surprise you. Please don't harden your heart toward them. Leave the possibility open that someday you can have the bond with your family that you should have always had." Cameron said solemnly.

After a moment to consider, Brian quietly responded, "Yeah, I guess. But as far as I'm concerned, the next move is up to them."

Cameron chuckled, then said, "That's all I'm asking. Hopefully, someday you'll be glad that you didn't give up on them."

"As long as I have you and Jack, I don't think I'll have any regrets either way." Brian said honestly.

Cameron renewed his hug around Brian's shoulders as he looked past the fire at the vast sea of trees beyond the ridge.

* * * * *

"If you could sum it up in just a few words, what have you learned while you've been up here with Jack?" Cameron asked curiously as he looked off into the distance.

"Be brave. Be honest." Brian said thoughtfully, then smiled and returned Cameron's one armed hug as he said, "Be family."

"Those are some pretty good lessons. If you're willing to follow through with them, I think that they'll serve you well." Cameron said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Hey! Did you guys get bored without me?" Jack asked as he approached with his guitar in it's case, slung on his back.

"Somehow, we managed." Cameron said with a grin at his son.

Brian realized that he was still being held by Cameron. For a flash of an instant, he had the urge to pull away, to hide from Jack that he was enjoying being held.

But, before he could take any action, the more sensible part of his mind assured him that not only would Jack think that it was a wonderful development, but also that it didn't matter what Jack or anyone else might

think. Being held, expressing caring and showing his emotions weren't things to be hidden. They were glorious wonderful things that he had wanted all his life and should be celebrated.

"I was thinking that we could do a little bit of serious business and get it out of the way before we kick back and relax." Cameron said, a bit loudly, so Jack could hear him as he approached.

"Sure. What did you have in mind?" Jack asked curiously.

"Well, since we're going to have to be leaving tomorrow, I was thinking that now might be a good time for us to discuss what you've discovered about Brian's situation and what you've come up with to deal with it." Cameron said casually as he watched Jack take off his guitar.

"Sounds good." Jack said simply, then as he was taking his seat on the log, at his father's other side, he continued, "Well, I suppose the main problem has been that Brian is growing up, but no one gave him any clue about what was going to happen."

"So, Brian, when your body started changing, you were afraid and thought that something was wrong?" Cameron asked to Brian at his side.

"Yes and no." Brian said thoughtfully, then looked up at Cameron as he continued, "I mean, it's not like I woke up one day with a horse cock and freaked out or anything like that. But it was growing bigger and getting hair and just... changing. All I knew is that I was different and I didn't want anyone to see."

"Okay, Brian. You know what? Even if your father had sat you down and told you exactly what was about to happen to you, most likely you would have still reacted the same way. It's a scary time of life and your reaction to it wasn't unusual. Since you're the first in your peer group to develop, there wasn't anyone around you going through the same thing to let you know that it was perfectly normal." Cameron said carefully.

"In other words, no matter how prepared you were, since you were the first of your group to start to develop, you would have most likely felt the same way." Jack said with a nod.

"Okay, but knowing that doesn't really change anything." Brian said quietly.

"Brian, stand up and whip it out. Right here, right now." Jack said firmly.

"Jack!" Cameron said in a scolding tone.

"He needs to know that he can do this." Jack said to his father firmly, then turned to Brian and continued, "Think of this as your final exam. If you can

do this, then I have no doubt that you'll be able to manage in the locker room or anyplace else that you need to get naked."

Brian looked to Cameron to see if he were going to object, but only received an encouraging nod.

Slowly, Brian stood from Cameron's side and turned to face the father and son.

With slightly shaking hands, he unzipped his pants, then unbuttoned them.

Cameron and Jack sat motionless, with equal expressions of encouragement, waiting for him to reveal himself.

Finally, Brian took hold of his boxer shorts and pulled his shorts and his pants down, nearly to his knees in one move.

"You did it!" Jack said with a smile.

Brian felt a slight trembling in his legs, like they wanted to give out. Then, to his horror, he felt his cock starting to rise.

"You'd better put that thing away before you put someone's eye out." Jack said with a grin.

Brian quickly reached down and pulled up his pants and underwear in one movement.

"Okay. So you've just dropped trou right in front of me and the coach here. Remember that." Jack said firmly.

"That's right, Brian. I can't say that undressing with your classmates will be easy, but I have no doubt at all that you'll be able to manage it." Cameron said with a slight smile and Brian could hear a note of pride in his voice.

Once Brian had his pants all zipped and fastened, he sat on the log at Cameron's side.

He started slightly when Cameron's arm came around him to give him a casual hug, but he absolutely loved the sensation.

"I guess the next thing is obvious. The teasing." Jack said frankly.

"Mr. Hammond called an assembly yesterday morning to outline the school's zero tolerance policy. I can't say that that will stop the teasing, but at least it should make the students think twice before they take it too far. At least they'll know that we're watching and that if they're caught, that there will be consequences." Cameron said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I'm sure that's *exactly* what's going to happen." Jack said with a roll of his eyes.

Cameron chuckled at his son's blatant sarcasm, then said, "I'm not saying that it will stop the teasing and harassment. But it should keep the situation from escalating. Bullies are going to bully, no matter what. But the people who tag along with them might not be quite so quick to join in, knowing that they could get into serious trouble for it."

"How serious?" Brian asked curiously.

"They'll be expelled. There's no second chances, no *warnings*. They're expelled on the spot. Of course, if there's physical violence involved, we'll also call the police." Cameron said frankly.

"Wow!" Brian said as his eyes went wide.

"Although I agree with the need for the school to do *something*, I'm not on board with this solution. It's a one-size-fits-all solution that doesn't allow for extenuating circumstances. It's an abdication of responsibility for the school to put a rule like this in place. No one has to *decide* anything, so they won't be held to account." Cameron said thoughtfully.

"Old people sometimes wander off on tangents." Jack said to Brian conspiratorially, then looked at his father and said, "I think we were talking about what *Brian* should do about teasing and harassment."

"Right." Cameron said with a grin at his son, then continued, "From what Brian has already told me, you've given him some good advice on that. That being, to stand up for yourself and be honest."

"Yeah. I know it won't be easy for him, especially the first time, but I've made sure that he can take a punch if he needs to, so he shouldn't shrink back if he has to face off with someone." Jack said seriously.

"That sounds right." Cameron said thoughtfully, then turned to Brian and said, "But if it turns to physical violence, I need for you to come to me or go to the office and report it, immediately. Even if you think you can handle it, by reporting it you may be protecting someone smaller and weaker than you are from being seriously hurt, later."

Brian thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Yeah. If it'll protect someone else, I'll report it."

Cameron renewed his hug with Brian as he said, "And if at any time during the day you need me for anything at all, just come to the gym and find me. It doesn't even have to be an emergency. If you're just having a hard day and need a hug or someone to listen to you, I'll be there."

"Thanks, Cam." Brian said slowly as something teased at the back of his mind.

Jack and Cameron watched and waited for Brian to sort through his thoughts.

Finally, Brian looked up and said, "You know, I never had that before."

"What's that, Son?" Cameron asked curiously.

Slowly, Brian said, "Someone to talk to. Someone who would listen... or even give me a hug. I have a feeling that knowing that you and Jack are there for me is going to make more of a difference than anything else. As bad as everything else got, I think the worst thing was feeling so alone. I mean, yeah, everything else was miserable. But knowing, without a doubt, that no one cared, was the worst part."

"You never need to feel that again, Brian." Jack said gently as he watched his father hugging Brian to his side.

"I suppose that leads us to your next challenge. Your family." Cameron said seriously.

Brian let out a quick laugh that surprised both Cameron and Jack.

"I believe you about everything else, but I'm pretty sure the family thing is a complete loss. You guys are already more my family than they've ever been." Brian said frankly.

"I haven't asked before but..." Cameron trailed off, seeming to be searching for the right words.

Brian waited expectantly, but couldn't begin to guess what Cameron might be about to ask him.

Finally, Cameron quietly asked, "Do they hurt you?"

"No. Never." Brian said immediately.

"What about... sexually? Has anything ever happened like that?" Cameron asked cautiously, and seemed to be forcing the words out of his mouth.

Brian shook his head, then said, "My parents don't even hug me. Nothing like that has ever happened."

"I didn't think so, but I thought it was important to ask. It would kill me if I found out later that they had been abusing you and I had never even asked you about it." Cameron said quietly.

Brian put an arm around Cameron's back and leaned his head against Cameron's shoulder as he said, "Yeah. Thanks for asking. And I promise, that if something like that *was* happening, that I'd tell you."

After a moment of watching his father and Brian sitting together, Jack finally asked, "So, do you have any suggestions about what Brian can do about his parents?"

"Only what you've already told him. Be brave. Be honest." Cameron said simply.

Brian pulled away from Cameron slightly to give him an inquiring look.

"Be honest about what you want and be brave enough to ask for it. The answer might be 'no', but at least they'll know what you want, even if you don't get it." Cameron said honestly.

"I'll try to keep that in mind, but I don't think that anything I do will change things at home." Brian said honestly.

"If it turns out to be a problem, then you can talk to me or Jack about it. We'll brainstorm and come up with something else." Cameron said frankly.

"As long as I've got you guys, I'm not worried about *them*." Brian said with a smile.

"You've got us, and you'll always have us." Jack said seriously.

Cameron smiled at his son's words and nodded his agreement.

"Well, if that's settled, can we eat?" Jack asked hopefully.

"Ah, the stomach speaks." Cameron chuckled.

"I'm a growing boy." Jack said with a mischievous grin at his father.

Cameron reached behind him into the backpack, then said, "Then you'd better eat."

Jack caught the bag of marshmallows with a smile, then looked from the bag in his hands and to the fire with question.

Cameron was smiling angelically, waiting for Jack to say something about it.

"Fine! I'll get us some toasting sticks!" Jack said as he stood, tossing the bag of marshmallows back to his father.

"I'll help you." Brian said immediately as he stood.

"Did you bring your tool belt?" Jack asked as he stopped walking.

"Yeah, it's right there by my backpack." Brian said as he turned to pick it up.

"You can usually make due with a pocket knife, but having a saw with you makes it a lot easier." Jack explained as he led the way toward the treeline.

Cameron watched fondly as the two boys, acting nearly like brothers, walked away.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Jack asked quietly when they entered the trees.

"Yeah. I'm great." Brian said with an honest smile.

"Do you think we covered everything that you'll need before you go back?" Jack asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think so. I'm still scared of having to go back and face everything, but I'm pretty sure I can do it." Brian said frankly.

"That looks like a good toasting stick. Why don't you cut it while I look for another one." Jack said as he pointed.

"Where should I cut?" Brian asked curiously.

"Make it about three or four feet long. That way you won't have to worry about sitting too close to the fire while you're cooking your food." Jack said as he slowly walked away.

Brian took the small handsaw off his tool belt, then walked to the branch to begin cutting it.

* * * * *

While the boys were gone, Cameron unpacked their food and made sure that they had everything that they would need, close at hand.

Once that was done, he settled into his place on the fallen log and looked out over the expansive view as he thought about Brian's situation and the advice they had given him.

He still felt a little bit anxious about Brian returning to school, not being able to predict how Brian or the other kids would react. But in the end, he resigned himself to the fact that there wasn't anything else they could do.

When he had seen Brian being relentlessly teased and tormented, he could see that Brian just didn't have the skills needed to handle it. Leaving things as they were would have assured that Brian would end up permanently scarred or even possibly dead.

Although he couldn't be sure that what he and Jack had done was the right thing. At least it was something. He had taken it upon himself to help this boy who wasn't his son or his responsibility, just because it was the right thing to do.

Knowing that brought him a sense of relief about what was to come in the next few days. Right or wrong, at least he had done *something*. And it was the right thing. He was sure of it.

However, sometimes even when you do everything right, things still turn out wrong. So if things ended up not working out as well as he would have liked, he honestly believed that he could endure whatever was to come, holding onto the knowledge that he gave it his best effort.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to eat?" Jack asked happily as he walked out of the trees with Brian following close behind.

"Oh yes. As good as our breakfast was, I think I burned it all off on the hike up here." Cameron said with a smile at the boys approaching.

"Here you go." Brian said as he handed one of the two sticks he was carrying to Cam.

"Thanks, Brian." Cameron said gratefully.

"Bust out the hot dogs, Dad! I'm starving over here!" Jack said playfully as he cleaned his hands with a hand wipe.

"Catch." Cameron said as he pitched the package of hotdogs to his son.

"Do I need to put my eyepatch on?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. I think it'd be better if you just relaxed for right now." Jack said as he slit open the package of hotdogs with his pocket knife.

"That's right. From here on out it's all about relaxing. I think you've had enough lessons and emotional revelations for one trip. Now it's time to just enjoy yourself." Cameron said with a grin.

"Is there anything I need to know about this? I've never been camping or anything like that before." Brian said as he accepted the open package of hotdogs from Jack.

"Hey, I've already trained you to be a master at toasting things over a fire. This should be no big deal for you." Jack said as he speared two hotdogs on the end of his toasting stick.

Brian smiled at the words then, after selecting two hotdogs for himself, passed the package to Cameron.

"If you toast them slow, they'll get hot all the way through. Just be careful not to burn them." Jack said as he carefully held his hotdogs near the flame of the open campfire.

"You can burn them if you want." Cameron said frankly.

Brian looked at him with surprise.

Cameron smiled, then continued, "Some people like a little burned flavor. It makes it taste really cooked instead of a factory made, steam table warmed thing that never has any variation from one time to the next."

After a moment, Jack said, "Dad's right. If you burn it, just a little bit, then it tastes like 'camping'."

Brian glanced from one man to the other, then turned his full attention to his toasting hotdogs.

"Buns?" Jack called out as he pulled his hotdogs away from the fire.

"Bread. Deal with it." Cameron said as he held up the loaf of bread.

"We really *are* roughing it, aren't we." Jack said in a tone of exaggerated suffering.

"You can just eat the damned things off the stick if it bothers you so much." Cameron said playfully.

Brian giggled at the exchange, then pulled his hotdogs away from the fire to see if they were done.

"Did you bring any mustard or ketchup?" Jack asked as he pulled his hotdogs off the stick.

"Yeah." Cameron said, then pitched a small plastic bag toward Jack.

Brian looked at the bag curiously, noticing that it didn't appear to have a mustard or ketchup bottle in it.

Once Jack was finished putting his hotdogs onto pieces of bread, he rummaged in the plastic bag and came back with two packets of mustard.

Brian grinned when he saw that, thinking how smart that was.

"Here." Jack said, then passed the loaf of bread to Brian.

"Thanks." Brian said, then began to prepare his hotdogs.

"Before you start eating, I made sure to bring all the trimmings." Cameron said as he reached behind him, one handed, then came back with a bag of potato chips.

"What? No salad? I thought you were all worried about our vitamins and stuff." Jack said playfully.

Cameron rolled his eyes, then reached back into the backpack and came up with an orange.

Jack laughed, but happily accepted the orange from his father.

"Did we bring any plates?" Brian asked as he felt like he was juggling.

"I didn't think about it." Cameron said regretfully.

"I did!" Jack said happily, then opened his backpack and started handing out plates.

"Okay. You earned your lunch today." Cameron said with a grateful smile at his son.

Jack smiled at his father, then opened the bag of chips and put some on his plate.

Cameron snagged the plastic bag of condiments and took a few for himself before passing the bag to Brian.

Just as Brian was finishing putting mustard onto his hotdogs, Cameron offered him the bag of chips.

"Thanks." Brian said with a smile.

"Mmm..." Jack moaned as he took his first bite of the hotdog.

"Yep." Cameron said with a smile, then handed an apple to Brian.

"Thanks." Brian said again, then thought to ask, "Do we have anything to drink?"

"Yes. I've got some spring water. But my hands are kind of full right now. Can you get it yourself?" Cameron asked hopefully.

"Sure." Brian said as he sat his plate aside and stood.

"You'll need these." Jack said as he pulled some small containers out of his backpack.

Brian accepted them from him and looked at them curiously. They appeared to be something like small pill boxes.

Hesitantly, he opened one up and the plastic container had a series of concentric rings inside.

"Turn it upside down." Jack offered between bites of his food.

Brian did so and was amazed to see that the concentric rings snugly fit against each other to form a collapsible cup.

"That's cool." Brian said with a smile.

"Yeah. I've always thought so." Jack said with a grin.

Brian quickly got over his wonder and got the collapsible cups set up before going through Cam's backpack and pouring glasses of water for all three of them.

"Thanks, Brian." Jack said as he accepted his water.

Brian smiled, then handed the next one to Cameron.

"Thanks." Cameron said with a smile.

Brian carried his own water back to his place on the fallen log and picked up his plate.

When he took his first bite of the hot dog, he realized that Jack was right. Having the hot dog toasted over the open fire, with a few slightly burned spots *tasted* like camping.

Chapter 9

"Are you ready for another one?" Cameron asked as he presented the second package of hot dogs to Brian.

"No, thanks. I couldn't eat another bite." Brian said with a quick smile.

"Jack?" Cameron asked to his other side.

"I'm good." Jack said with a lazy grin.

"I guess it's better to have too much than too little." Cameron said as he packed the hot dogs back into his backpack.

"Look at that." Jack said distantly as he stared off into the endless valley below them.

"Yeah. Being here, like this. It's hard to imagine that there's anything wrong in the world." Cameron said wistfully.

As much as he didn't want to break the delicate mood, Brian reluctantly said, "I'll be right back."

Cameron turned and looked at him curiously.

"I just need to go behind a tree." Brian explained casually.

Cameron nodded, then turned forward again to look at the view.

* * * * *

As he walked away from the campfire, Brian was once again struck by the sense of contentment that he was feeling.

Of course, being here, away from his problems could account for some of it. But he felt something else, like an inner peace that had found its way into his soul.

As Brian found a convenient tree and went about doing his business, he thought about what was causing the feeling.

Although he couldn't be sure, he got the sense that it came from knowing, without a doubt, that Jack and Cameron cared about him and had promised never to desert him.

Whatever the source, Brian felt like he had a little flame, flickering inside him, lighting him from within. Be it hope, faith, love or some other emotion that he didn't have a name for, he just knew it was there, and felt it radiating out from him. Through his smile, his voice, his attitude... even his eyes.

As he walked back toward the campfire, he smiled at the feeling that he could only describe as inner joy. Nothing was causing it, it had no reason for being and yet, there it was.

"Here you go." Jack said as he held out the box of hand wipes toward Brian.

"Thanks." Brian said as he pulled one free from the box, then went to his place on the log beside Cameron.

"I was thinking that, if Jack would agree to it, we could have a little campfire sing-along." Cameron said with a grin.

"Do you have any idea how hokey that sounds?" Jack asked cautiously.

"Yes. Just as hokey as it sounded to me when your grandfather would suggest it. But it always ended up being fun." Cameron finished frankly.

Jack seemed to consider for a moment, then finally nodded his agreement.

"Do I have to do anything?" Brian asked curiously.

"If you know the song, join in. If not, sit back and enjoy the show." Cameron said with a smile.

* * * * *

It took a few minutes for Jack to get his guitar out of its case, but finally he was set up and ready to play.

"Brian. This one's for you." Jack said as he started strumming the guitar.

Cameron nodded his head with approval when he recognized the melody of the song that Jack had chosen.

As Brian sat and looked out over the seemingly endless hills and trees flowing into the distance, Jack started to sing.

"Whenever I need to leave it all behind

Or feel the need to get away

I find a quiet place, far from the human race

Out in the country

Before the breathin' air is gone

Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime

Out where the rivers like to run

*I stand alone and take back somethin' worth rememberin'
Whenever I feel them closing in on me
Or need a bit of room to move
When life becomes too fast, I find relief at last
Out in the country
Before the breathin' air is gone
Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime
Out where the rivers like to run
I stand alone and take back somethin' worth rememberin'
Before the breathin' air is gone
Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime
Out where the rivers like to run
I stand alone and take back somethin' worth rememberin'
Before the breathin' air is gone
Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime
Out where the rivers like to run
I stand alone and take back somethin' worth rememberin'
Before the breathin' air is gone
Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime...
I stand alone..." 2*

In all his life, Brian had never had a song touch him so deeply. Every note, every word resonated within his soul.

"Good one." Cameron said quietly.

Brian finally snapped out of the spell he was under and quickly said, "Yeah. That was great! I've never heard that one before. Did you make it up or is it a real song?"

"It's a real song." Jack chuckled, then added, "I found it when I was listening to some of Dad's old records."

"What's that?" Brian asked curiously.

Jack rolled his eyes a little as Cameron looked down and shook his head.

"It's like a CD, but a lot bigger. They used to use them for music in the old, old days." Jack said with a grin.

"Oh yeah. I remember seeing them in pictures and stuff. Didn't you have to crank them up to make them play?" Brian asked curiously.

"Some of the older ones, yes. But eventually they made some that would work on electricity." Jack said with a smile at his father.

Brian nodded that he understood.

"How about we teach Brian some of the traditional campfire songs, so he can join in?" Cameron asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I know some of the classics." Jack said with a smile at his father, then started playing.

Brian settled in to listen when Jack began to sing.

"Great green gobs of greasy grimey gopher guts, Mutilated monkey meat..."

* * * * *

After hours of singing and laughing by the campfire, Cameron suddenly asked, "Who's ready for some s'mores?"

"Some what?" Brian asked curiously.

There was a moment of silence, and Jack was finally the one to ask, "Are you serious?"

Brian nodded, then looked from Jack to Cameron with question.

"Brian, you'd better brace yourself, because this is going to be the greatest thing that's ever happened to you." Jack said dramatically.

"Even better than..." Brian trailed off, then made a few jerks of a vaguely masturbatory motion.

"Make that the second greatest thing, but it's still pretty awesome." Jack said frankly.

"If you'll get him started on the marshmallows, I'll get everything else set out." Cameron said seriously.

"On it." Jack said as he accepted the bag of marshmallows from his father.

"What do I have to do?" Brian asked curiously.

"Well, this is where your toasting skill is really going to be put to the test. What you've got to do is toast marshmallows until they get really soft and gooey, but not so gooey that they fall off the stick and into the fire." Jack said as he handed two marshmallows to Brian.

"That doesn't sound too hard." Brian said slowly.

"Well, right when the marshmallows are done, you take the stick over to dad and let him kind of make a sandwich with them using chocolate and graham crackers." Jack said seriously, then motioned for Brian to put the marshmallows on his stick.

"That sounds like it'd be a really big mess." Brian said cautiously.

"Not if you have someone toasting while the other one is making s'mores. If you try to do it all by yourself it can get out of control, quick." Jack said frankly.

Brian nodded that he understood and moved his marshmallows close to the fire to toast them.

"Okay. It looks like you're good to go. Toast them slowly, and when you think they're ready, give dad a yell and take them to him. I'm going to be over here toasting some, too." Jack said as he moved to Cameron's other side to get his own toasting stick.

"How many do we have to do?" Brian asked curiously.

"Just keep going until Dad tells you to stop." Jack said frankly.

"And if we end up with an extra toasted marshmallow or two, I'm sure we'll find some way to deal with it." Cameron said with a grin.

"I'm sure." Brian said with a smile at Cam.

"You're getting close, Brian. It's starting to droop." Jack said in warning.

"You'd better be watching your own, Son." Cameron said with a grin, just as Jack's marshmallow burst into flames.

"Crap!" Jack exclaimed, then quickly blew out the flaming marshmallow.

"You see, Brian? That's what happens when you pay attention to someone else's business and ignore your own." Cameron said with a cheeky grin.

"How's this?" Brian asked as he moved his marshmallow away from the fire and toward Cameron.

"It looks perfect, Brian." Cameron said with a smile.

"It looks perfect, Brian." Jack mimicked in a mocking tone, then pulled the burnt marshmallow off the end of his stick and ate it.

Brian chuckled as Cameron made a sandwich around his marshmallows, then slid the completed masterpiece off the end of his toasting stick.

"Brian's ahead of you, one to nothing. Are you going to stand for that?" Cameron asked playfully as he handed Brian two more marshmallows.

"Load me up, Dad. I'll show both of you."

* * * * *

As Jack had predicted, s'mores turned out to be the second greatest thing to ever happen to Brian.

All three of them ate and talked and laughed until the sun began its descent toward the horizon.

"Brian, would you give me the shovel? I need to get this fire settled before we leave." Cameron said seriously.

"Sure." Brian said and reached back into his backpack.

"If we leave right now, we should get back to the cabin just as it's getting dark." Cameron said seriously, as he started digging just inside the stone circle and turning the bed of faintly burning coals so that they would be buried.

"Brian, help me clean up." Jack said as he started gathering things.

Although they hadn't made a mess, most of the things that came out of the backpacks had not yet found their way back in.

"So, Brian. What did you think about sitting around a campfire?" Cameron asked with a smile as he continued to work to be sure that the fire wouldn't start back up after they left.

"Well, it's more fun than it sounds. I mean, sitting around a fire for a couple hours... it sounds really boring, but it was great." Brian said honestly.

"How'd you like the s'mores?" Jack asked with a grin.

Brian took that opportunity to flash Jack one of his 'typically teenager' looks for asking such a silly question.

"Whoa, Brian! Look at you go!" Jack said with a grin.

"Yeah. I felt the backlash from that one all the way over here." Cameron chuckled.

Brian broke into a smile at the praise.

"I think that's it. Let's go!" Cameron said as he walked to the log and picked up his backpack.

Brian took the shovel and folded it down before stowing it.

With one last look at the amazing view, Brian turned and followed Jack and Cameron into the trees.

* * * * *

As they walked, conversation was mostly light and fairly general. There wasn't any discussion at all of Brian's situation back in the 'real world'.

It was just getting dark when they reached the cabin. Cameron walked in first, followed by the boys.

"If you guys don't mind too much, I'd like to call it an early night, tonight. Jack and I have a lot of driving ahead of us tomorrow." Cameron said as he took off his backpack.

"Yeah. I don't think I got enough sleep last night. I felt fine this morning, but right now, I'm kinda wiped." Jack said frankly.

"I think the hiking wore me out. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Brian said as he took off his backpack and started to unpack it.

"It's quite a walk, but it was worth it, wasn't it?" Cameron asked Brian curiously.

"I couldn't dream of a place as nice as that. Yeah. It was totally worth it." Brian replied with a smile.

Cameron smiled in return as he also started to unpack.

"Is there anything we need to do tonight to get ready for tomorrow?" Jack asked as he looked around.

"No. We aren't going to be leaving too early, so we'll have plenty of time to have a good breakfast and pack things up in the morning." Cameron said as he carried a few things to the ice chest by the wall.

Jack nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed and started to strum his guitar.

As far as Brian could tell, Jack wasn't playing any particular tune. But he didn't mind that at all. The music was beautiful to his ears and he enjoyed it as much as he had ever enjoyed any of his music at home.

"Dad, do you want the cot or the bed tonight?" Jack asked casually as he continued to play.

"The bed, if you wouldn't mind. I slept well enough last night, but I'm really used to a softer mattress." Cameron said frankly.

"Okay. You know that I can sleep anywhere." Jack said absently.

Cameron chuckled, then said to Brian, "You could prop that boy up in a corner and he'd sleep comfortably through the whole night."

"It's a gift." Jack sighed dramatically, then broke into a smile.

"Brian, do you want to see how to set up the cot?" Cameron asked with a grin at his son.

"Yeah. Sure." Brian said as he put the empty backpack aside.

"First, you unfold it like this..."

* * * * *

Once the cot was set up, Jack moved his sleeping bag over and began to undress.

Brian thought it was a little early for bed, but decided to go along with it.

"What did you bring for breakfast in the morning?" Jack asked his father casually.

"You'll just have to wait until morning to find out." Cameron said with a grin as he started to lay out his sleeping bag.

Brian glanced over to see if Jack were going to undress completely.

As Jack pulled down his pants, he glanced over at Brian and gave him an encouraging smile.

Although Brian felt a little bit hesitant, he had already proven to Jack and Cameron that he could be naked in front of them, so he continued on until, he too, was completely undressed.

Once he had his clothes more or less folded and put out of the way, he climbed into his sleeping bag.

"You know, when I suggested that Jack bring you up here, I never thought that you'd be so comfortable with it." Cameron said casually as he started to undress.

"I wasn't at first, Jack can tell you that. But he kept after me until I finally realized that it's no big deal." Brian said as he relaxed back in warmth and comfort.

"The first night, I thought he was going to have a heart attack or a stroke." Jack chuckled from the cot.

As Cameron finished undressing, Brian noticed once again how hairy his body was. It wasn't unattractive or excessive, but it was still something of a curiosity to Brian.

"Is something wrong?" Cameron asked as he followed Brian's gaze.

"No. I've just never seen anyone so hairy before." Brian said honestly.

Cameron chuckled, then said, "That's just something that happens as you get older."

"So, it's not just puberty, huh?" Brian asked curiously.

"No, Son. You keep changing your whole life." Cameron said as he walked to the oil lamp and adjusted the wick down before blowing it out.

* * * * *

Brian felt the bed shift as Cameron climbed into the sleeping bag beside his.

"Thanks for doing all this for me, Cam." Brian said quietly.

"I would have done more if I could, but I had to work. It's Jack that did most of it." Cam said frankly.

"Yeah. But still. Thanks." Brian said quietly. He wanted to say more, but felt like he didn't have adequate words to express what he was feeling.

Before he could give it anymore thought, he fell into a deep and restful sleep.

* * * * *

The smell of coffee caused Brian to wake up with a smile on his face.

"Well, it's about time! I thought we were going to have to drag you out of bed." Jack said playfully.

Brian sat up and noticed that both Jack and Cameron were fully dressed and that the cot had already been folded down.

"Hey! I let you sleep in yesterday. It was my turn." Brian said with a smile as he got out of bed.

"The coffee's almost ready, if you want some."

Brian raised his arms over his head and gave a long, bone cracking stretch before answering, "That sounds great."

"Put some clothes on, nudist." Jack said with a playful grin.

"Yeah. Yeah. You spend all this time getting me to where I'm not scared to be naked in front of you, then you bitch and complain when I don't jump right into my clothes first thing in the morning." Brian grumbled as he dressed.

Cameron laughed at the comment and could tell that Jack didn't have an answer for that.

"I've got to visit the lava-tree." Brian said as he walked to the door and slipped into his boots.

Jack smiled and nodded as he watched Brian slip on his coat, then walk outside.

* * * * *

For the first time since arriving at the cabin, Brian didn't participate in making breakfast.

Jack and Cameron had most of it on the table by the time he got back inside.

After cleaning his hands, Brian settled into his place at the table and took a sip of his coffee.

"There's not a lot to do to pack up, so I guess we'd better make our plans now so we can just pack and go." Cameron said frankly.

"I figured that with all the rain that we'll probably have to take the long way down." Jack said thoughtfully.

"Yes. Even though we *might* be able to make it out, there's no need for us to take the chance of getting bogged down in the mud." Cameron said seriously.

"So, I guess the only thing that's left to be decided is who will Brian be riding with?" Jack said simply.

"Well, if you two wouldn't mind, I thought that Brian could ride with me until we stop for lunch. Then he could ride with you the rest of the way

back into town." Cameron said as he looked at both boys for their reactions.

"Like 'shared custody', huh?" Jack asked with a smile.

"Something like that. I just thought that it would be a good chance for Brian to ask any last questions of either of us that he might need to." Cameron said frankly.

"Are you okay with that, Brian?" Jack asked curiously.

"Yeah. It sounds great." Brian said with a smile.

* * * * *

As Cameron had predicted, there wasn't much to do to pack things up. Both Cameron and Jack had so much experience with it that they didn't even need to ask each other what needed to be done.

Brian helped out where he could. He started by packing his clothes into the backpack that he had carried up to the cabin, mostly the way that Jack had packed them.

Once he was done with that, he helped out by doing things like dumping out the water jugs and gathering the unused rolls of toilet paper, until finally there was nothing left to do.

As they walked away from the cabin, Brian felt a twinge of sadness.

He didn't let it overpower him, but he acknowledged within himself that he would miss the cabin and hold the memory of his time there close to him as a very special time in his life.

* * * * *

The walk down to the trucks was actually very easy, if long. The three didn't talk much along the way, but all of them seemed to be feeling a sense of loss at having to leave.

When they arrived at the trucks, Brian put his backpack into the back of Jack's truck, since he would be riding with Jack when they arrived back in town.

Then he gave Jack a quick hug before walking back and getting into Cameron's truck.

There was a little bit of 'off-road' driving, but nothing like when he had ridden with Jack. Cameron took the most direct route to get them onto a dirt road and they stayed with it until it let out onto a gravel one.

By the time they had reached actual 'paved' roads, Brian had thought of something that he wanted to say.

"Cam." Brian said quietly, wanting to get his attention without startling him, since they had been riding in silence for so long.

"Yes?" Cam responded equally quietly.

"I know that I sort of said this last night, but I wanted to say thank you for... I don't know... noticing that I was having a problem, and then doing something about it." Brian said awkwardly.

Cameron could hear the sincerity in Brian's statement, and took a moment to formulate a thoughtful response. Finally, he said, "Do you want to know why I did it?"

"Yes." Brian said immediately.

"Because it was the right thing to do." Cameron said honestly, then continued, "Many times, the *right* thing isn't the popular thing and it's certainly not the easy thing. But you know, deep down inside, that it needs to be done. I saw what you were going through and I knew that helping you was the right thing."

Brian thought about the words as the miles passed by outside the truck.

Finally, he broke the silence again, by saying, "In the past three days you've been more of a father to me than my own dad has been in my whole life."

Cameron reached over and put a hand on Brian's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze, then he said, "I may not be your father, but I am *a* father. So remember that if you ever need me for anything, inside school or out, I'll be available to you."

Brian smiled at the words, then quietly responded, "I knew that."

* * * * *

When the car pulled to a stop, Brian looked around curiously.

"Time to gas up. If you need to make a pit stop, now would be a good time." Cameron said as he slowly got out of the truck.

As Brian walked toward the bathroom, he could see Jack's truck pulling into the gas station.

Brian waved at him before continuing on, into the bathroom.

* * * * *

It was a silly thing to get sentimental about a gas station bathroom, but Brian couldn't help but remember how scared he had been when Jack had stopped to get gas on their way up.

He smiled when he remembered that he had told Jack that he didn't know if he was ready because he didn't know where he was going. And Jack had told him to keep on with that attitude.

As Brian was washing his hands, he looked into the mirror and was surprised by what he saw.

His hair wasn't nice and neat, the way he usually kept it. In fact, it was kind of oily and looked like it could stand a good washing.

His face looked... different. Leaner, maybe. Or it might just be that he had gotten some sun. For whatever reason, he looked physically different from the way that he remembered himself.

The squeaking of the bathroom door caused Brian to look up and he smiled when he saw Jack.

"Dad sent me in here to see if you fell in." Jack said as he walked past Brian and directly to the urinal.

Brian laughed and said, "No. I was just remembering when you brought me here before. It seems like such a long time ago."

"I know what you mean." Jack said with a smile as he nudged Brian out of the way so he could wash his hands.

Brian smiled as he waited for Jack to be finished.

"I think Dad needs for you to go into the store with him." Jack said frankly.

"What for?" Brian asked curiously.

"He ordered some food for lunch and they're cooking it now. He probably wants you to wait for the food to be ready so he can get a chance at the toilet." Jack said frankly.

"Oh. Okay." Brian said as he walked toward the door.

"I'll see you again when we stop for lunch." Jack said as he waved.

Brian smiled and waved before hurrying to find Cameron.

* * * * *

"If we don't stop soon, Jack's just going to have to do without. That food smells wonderful." Brian said as his mouth was watering.

"Yes. That little gas station has some of the best burgers around. They cook everything to order, right there in front of you so you know for sure that it's fresh." Cameron said with a smile.

"I can't believe that with all the wonderful food that I've had while I've been at the cabin that anything could smell as wonderful as these burgers." Brian said seriously.

"Well, I'll just give you a little hint. They taste even better than they smell." Cameron said with a grin.

After a momentary disbelieving look, Brian finally said, "Step on it! Cam!"

* * * * *

"Finally!" Brian said as he got out of the truck.

"Jack, you'd better be glad I was there to defend your food. I swear, Brian was ready to eat all of it." Cameron chuckled to his son.

"Oh yeah, like I'm not exactly the same way every single time we come back from the cabin." Jack said with a roll of his eyes.

"Come on. Break out the food!" Brian said desperately.

Cameron chuckled, then said, "Jack, do you want to open your tailgate so we can use it as a table?"

"On it!" Jack said as he rushed away.

"Brian, help me carry this stuff." Cameron said as he opened the back driver's side door of his truck.

"Yeah!" Brian said happily.

* * * * *

When Cameron took the food out of the white paper bag, he revealed that he had bought three burgers for each of them along with a large sleeve of fries.

There were also three large sodas in a cup carrier, which Brian had carried to the back of Jack's truck.

Brian's first bite of the burger was pure bliss. Cameron was right. Although the smell of the burgers was incredible, the taste was even better.

"Brian, what do you see out here?" Jack asked as he gestured toward the scenery.

As Brian looked around, he could see the beauty of the place. It was exquisite. The field before them was filled with beautiful little flowers, seemingly of every color in the rainbow. The trees further off looked like an old growth forest that had never been touched by man.

"It's beautiful." Brian said in wonder.

Jack chuckled, then said, "The last time you were here, you said it was nothing."

Brian puzzled over that for a moment, then looked around curiously.

When he looked up and down the stretch of road with no other cars on it in either direction, the memory came back to him.

"This is the same place?" Brian asked with surprise.

"We always stop here. It's the first place when we leave town that looks like it hasn't already been spoiled by people interfering with it." Jack said seriously.

"It really is beautiful here. I can't even say why I feel that way, it's just... special." Brian said distantly.

"It must be if it made you forget your hamburger." Cam said with a grin.

Brian looked down at his hand and his briefly absent hunger returned with a vengeance.

* * * * *

Once they were on the road again, Brian was quietly riding beside Jack, enjoying some of his bizarre music.

They were on the highway and more and more signs of 'civilization' were popping up on the landscape before them.

"Jack?" Brian finally said.

"Yes?" Jack responded.

"I love you." Brian said as he kept his gaze forward.

"I knew that." Jack said with a grin, then added, "And I love you, too."

"I know." Brian said quietly.

There were a thousand different emotions boiling inside Brian, but he didn't know what he was feeling.

As the miles passed by outside the SUV, all Brian could do was stare ahead of them and reassure himself that, no matter what happened, he would have Jack and Cam.

* * * * *

As they drove down the street, Brian felt his dread building at the sight of the familiar houses of his neighborhood.

"I'll get these clothes back to you as soon as I've washed them." Brian mumbled.

"They're yours, now. Dad and I don't have any use for them." Jack said frankly.

Brian slowly nodded that he had heard, then absently muttered, "Thanks."

"In fact, why don't you keep the backpack too? That way you'll have it for the next time we go to the cabin." Jack asked casually.

Brian looked up in surprise, then asked, "We can go again?"

Jack smiled, then said, "Count on it. How does Thanksgiving weekend sound? That'll give us plenty of time to enjoy it."

"Yeah!" Brian said joyfully.

"Which house is yours?" Jack asked as he pulled onto Brian's block.

"Right there." Brian said as he pointed.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Jack asked cautiously, as he pulled up in front of the house.

"No, thanks." Brian said quietly, then looked at Jack with tear filled eyes as he said, "I really *do* love you."

"I love you too, Brian." Jack said, just as sincerely.

"I know you do." Brian said with a pained smile, then got out of the SUV and walked to the back to retrieve his backpack.

Jack hurried to write something down, then handed Brian a piece of paper.

"If things get too bad, call me. I'll come and get you." Jack said seriously.

"I think it'll be alright." Brian said quietly, then added, "But I may call you anyway, just because."

"That'd be fine, too." Jack said with a grin.

After hefting his backpack onto his back, he walked to Jack and hugged him firmly.

Jack returned the hug, then whispered, "Brian, your dad might see."

"Fuck him." Brian said seriously, and continued the hug a moment longer.

Jack chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I think you're ready."

Brian giggled, then released Jack from the hug.

* * * * *

"Oh baby! Are you alright?" Brian's mother asked as she dashed out the front door.

"I'm fine, mom." Brian said as he looked at her cautiously. From her expression, he couldn't tell if she was surprised by the different way he was dressed or if she were looking him over for signs of injury.

"Where did they take you? Did they hurt you? Do you need anything?" she asked in a nearly panicked voice.

"I'm fine." Brian repeated, then said, "But I need to do some laundry before it gets too late, so I'll have clean clothes for tomorrow."

"All your laundry is all done. Your room is all clean and I even changed your sheets." She said quickly.

Brian smiled, then said, "Thanks, mom. But the clothes I want to wear are in this backpack."

"Let me take care of that for you. I know you must have had a long drive... I can't even imagine..." She said in a tearful voice.

"Mom. I'll take care of it. Really. I'm okay." Brian said, then leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

Mrs. Weston looked at her son with surprise.

Brian smiled, then walked past her and into the house.

* * * * *

As Brian walked into the living room, he found what he expected. His father was sitting in his favorite recliner, with the remote control in his hand, and watching the television.

"You better?" Mr. Weston asked, barely glancing away from the TV.

Brian looked at his father as if seeing him for the first time.

This wasn't the larger-than-life self-superior being that Brian imagined when he thought of his father. This was a man. A flawed and very human man.

Brian had thought that when he finally saw his father that it would be a confrontation of epic proportions. But the man lounging in the recliner, emotionally unavailable and doughy around the middle, didn't inspire any anger in him, only a feeling of disgust.

"Yeah." Brian said simply, then continued on through the room and into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"I can get that." Brian's mom said as he unpacked his clothes from the backpack.

"It's my mess. I'll take care of it." Brian said simply as he made sure that there wasn't anything in any of the pockets.

"I wouldn't mind." Mrs. Weston insisted.

Brian turned to his mother then looked her in the eyes before saying, "I'd mind. If I don't start doing things for myself, how am I going to be able to get along when I'm on my own, someday?"

His mother's eyes filled with tears at the statement.

Brian very nearly gave in and let her have the 'pleasure' of doing his laundry, but was able to maintain his resolve as he loaded his clothes into the washer.

After a moment, he turned to his mother and quietly asked, "How much soap do I use?"

"I'll show you." She said quickly, and rushed to his side.

Brian decided that it would work. He was determined that he wasn't going to let his mother do everything for him. But he could allow her to help, and to teach him the things he didn't know.

"Thanks, Mom." Brian said as she handed him a cap full of liquid laundry detergent.

* * * * *

"Are you hungry? I have roast and potatoes left over from dinner, or I can make you some soup and quesadillas." Mrs. Weston asked as soon as Brian had the washer going.

"Mom. I can get it." Brian said as he looked her in the eyes, then firmly continued, "I'm sure that you've been working hard all day. Why don't you relax and if I need something, I'll get it myself. I promise that if I need something that I don't know how to do, that I'll ask you."

Mrs. Weston looked at her son uncertainly, but finally nodded.

Brian smiled, then gave his mother a kiss on the cheek before saying, "Thanks, mom. I love you."

"I love you, too." She whispered in return, and it was obvious that she was crying.

* * * * *

The return home hadn't been nearly as 'explosive' as Brian had anticipated. It was his father's reaction that he had been most worried about, and all the worry turned out to be for nothing.

Brian found a spot by the closet where he could put the, now empty, backpack.

As Brian stood back and looked around his room, he realized that some changes would have to be made.

First and foremost, the boy-band posters would *have* to go. He wasn't a teenage girl, and he had no idea why he had ever thought that they were cool.

He was going to put that off until later, but all their smiling, 'too cute' faces peering at him made him decide to deal with it immediately.

Once that was done, he went to his closet and started going through his clothes.

It didn't take long for him to realize that there was very little that could be salvaged.

He was about to take them all out and start stuffing them in garbage bags when he had a wicked little thought.

Looking back at the clothes again, with the new idea in mind, he began to smile.

* * * * *

Brian walked into the kitchen and found his mother fussing over things, just as he had expected.

"The next time you go to the store, could you please pick up some black dye for me?" Brian asked hopefully.

"What do you need to dye?" His mother asked curiously.

"I need it for some of my old clothes. While I was gone, I figured out that the clothes I've been wearing are kid's clothes. If I want people to take me seriously, I need to start dressing more grown up." Brian said honestly.

"And you think you're going to look grown up by wearing all black?" His mother asked hesitantly.

"No. Not *all* black. But there are some things like the white jeans and that light green shirt that I don't think I'll wear anymore. If we dye them, then I won't need to get a bunch of new clothes all at once." Brian said honestly.

"I'll get the dye when I do my shopping." Mrs. Weston said simply, then added, "I made a plate of food for you. It should be about ready."

As she said the words, the timer on the microwave beeped.

Brian smiled, then said, "Thanks, Mom."

* * * * *

After finishing a plate of roast and potatoes, Brian walked into the living room to find his father still sitting in front of the television.

"Would you mind if I go and play golf on Saturday?" Brian asked hopefully.

"How much does it cost?" His father asked, never taking his gaze off the television.

"I don't know yet. But I thought I'd make sure it was okay with you before I call the golf course." Brian said honestly.

"Do you think you're going to have a lot of work to make up from missing school?"

"I don't know for sure, but if I do, I'm sure it won't take the whole weekend." Brian said frankly.

"If it doesn't cost too much, yeah." Mr. Weston finally said.

"I'll let you know as soon as I find out." Brian said happily.

"Who will you be going with?" Mr. Weston asked curiously.

"Coach Reed and his son. The coach is going to teach me how to play." Brian responded automatically, surprised that his father was interested.

Mr. Weston nodded, then looked toward the television as he asked, "While you were gone, did they... hurt you?"

Brian was shocked by the question, and had a momentary urge to lash out at his father for daring to ask, when, after all, *he* was the one who had handed Brian over to a complete stranger.

"No. I'm fine." Brian said firmly, then added, "Thanks for sending me. It helped."

Mr. Weston looked at his son, and in that moment, Brian felt his anger and resentment melt away. That one look, that fleeting glance, revealed to Brian that his father was fully aware of all the ways that he had failed him. The anger that Brian had felt was replaced by a fresh wave of disgust. It wasn't his father's failure that disgusted him, it was his father's lack of effort to make things right, that he didn't know if he would ever be able to forgive.

Brian's father seemed to have his full attention back on the television.

Knowing that their conversation was officially over, Brian turned and walked into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Brian checked the washing machine to find that 'someone' had taken his clothes and put them in the dryer.

"They'll be done in about fifty minutes." Brian's mom said as she walked into the laundry room.

"Thanks, Mom." Brian said quietly, then thought to say, "While I was gone, we figured out that there might be something wrong with my eyes. I think I need to see an eye doctor."

"What's wrong, Baby?" His mother asked with concern.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. That's why I need to see an eye doctor so we'll know for sure." Brian said frankly.

"I'll call tomorrow and make an appointment." Brian's mother said gently.

"Thanks, Mom. I love you." Brian said as he pulled his mother into a gentle hug.

She stood rigidly for a moment, but finally tentatively returned his hug.

* * * * *

Brian glanced into the living room on his way to his bedroom. He found exactly what he expected. His father was sitting and watching some syndicated sitcom that he'd probably already seen a thousand times.

With a shake of his head at the absurdity of his father's chosen way of life, Brian walked into his room and spotted his school backpack, sitting on the floor beside his desk.

The first thing he did was take out the cell phone and turn it on so he could check the battery level.

He loved his phone. Admittedly, he didn't use it to make calls very often, if at all. But he had always loved being able to have his videos, music and games easily accessible on one device. The only drawback was that the thing tended to eat batteries the way a fat girl eats potato chips.

Once it had played its little start-up song and finally settled on the main menu screen, Brian gave a sigh of resignation and connected it to its charger.

Looking around his bedroom, he reflected on what Jack had said about the 'real world'. Everything around him seemed hollow and without any real purpose. The few models that he had built were on display, but what good were they, really? As he thought back, he recalled that each of them had been gifts that he had been given and that he had assembled them because... that's what you do with models.

He walked to his dresser and picked up a spiral bound notebook. It was filled with doodles and sketches and he smiled at the silliness of some of them.

A slight tapping drew his attention and he turned to find his mother standing in his bedroom doorway.

"Do you need anything?" She asked timidly when she saw that he had noticed her.

"No, Mom. I'm fine." Brian said as he sat his notebook aside.

"Your father said..." She began to say, then trailed off.

Brian nodded, prompting her to continue.

"He told me about the problems you've been having. And I just wanted to know..." She trailed off again.

Brian waited, fairly certain that if he waited long enough, she'd finally spit it out.

Her gaze fell to the floor, then in a voice so low it could barely be heard, she asked, "Did I cause it?"

After a moment to see if she were going to elaborate on the question, Brian finally said, "No. I did."

Brian's mother looked at him with surprise.

"Most of the problems that I've been having are because I'm growing up." Brian said frankly.

She stared at him for a moment, and Brian couldn't begin to guess at what was going on in her mind. He honestly couldn't tell if she understood what he was saying or not.

"Your clothes should be done drying anytime, now." She said quietly, then turned and left the room.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." Brian said in puzzlement, feeling that he had missed something in their conversation.

* * * * *

Just as Brian walked up to the dryer, it stopped.

There was an empty laundry basket sitting on top of the dryer, so he placed it on the floor, then unloaded the warm, sweetly scented clothes into the basket.

As Brian passed by the living room with his basket of clothes, he glanced in and found his father looking back at him.

Brian didn't have an actual name for the expression he gave his father, it was more or less instinctive, but he knew that it involved a head tilt, a slight eyeroll and just a hint of a smirk.

The surprised look on his father's face gave him satisfaction as he continued on to his room.

* * * * *

Once all his clothes were neatly folded and put back in the backpack, Brian decided that he needed a nice long shower.

Although he loved every single minute of the time he had spent at the cabin and wouldn't want to change a single thing, the fact was, he felt grubby and knew that he probably stank.

When he opened his underwear drawer, he stopped all movement.

The Y-front cotton briefs were all neatly folded and lined up like little soldiers, ready for inspection. After wearing boxer shorts for just a few days, Brian couldn't imagine stuffing himself into a tight little pair of briefs again.

Brian shook his head as he closed the drawer, then went to the backpack and retrieved a pair of the freshly washed boxer shorts.

Next, he opened the bottom drawer of his dresser and took out some pajamas.

He stared at them for a moment, wondering if there was any way he could get by with just sleeping nude, but finally forced himself to just go ahead and wear them.

* * * * *

Once he was in the bathroom, Brian felt the long day catching up with him. Undressing seemed to take an unreasonably long time, but he was finally finished and nearly dragged himself into the shower.

As nice as the hot water felt on his skin, all he wanted to do at that exact moment was forget everything and go to bed.

Even though he was tired, he took a very thorough shower. Afraid that, if he didn't, he might smell like campfire smoke at school the next day.

As he soaped his more intimate areas, he considered taking a few minutes to 'relieve his tension' but, in the end, decided that all he really wanted was to go to bed.

* * * * *

Once Brian was out of the shower and toweled dry, he pulled on his night clothes, completely by habit. It wasn't until he saw himself in the mirror that he stopped to question what he was doing.

The pajamas that he was wearing weren't 'kiddie' or anything like that. They were covered with broad medium blue and light blue vertical stripes and were certainly worthy of any adult, except... He saw his image in the mirror and all he could think was that he looked like a timid little mouse of a person who felt like he had to hide the shameful thing that was his body, even in his own house... in his own room... in his own bed... in the dark.

Brian briefly considered taking off the pajamas, but finally decided that it would be too much bother and just walked across the hall to his room and went to bed.

* * * * *

As Brian lay, just on the edge of sleep, he could feel a knot of anxiety within him. He didn't have to wonder about what it was. He knew, without a doubt, that he was feeling nervous about having to go to school the next day. The teasing... the name calling... the locker room... the shower...

* * * * *

"You need to wake up. Breakfast will be ready in just a few minutes!" Brian's mother said cheerfully.

Brian opened his eyes and directed his teenage 'death glare' at his mother, hoping that it would make her disintegrate.

Unfortunately, all it did was make her look at him uncertainly.

"Yeah. I'll be right there." Brian said dutifully, then forced his tired body to get out of the bed.

All those days of being allowed to sleep until he felt rested made it extra difficult to get up and go when he felt like he could easily sleep for another hour or so.

After a step or two, Brian felt a pulling sensation and looked downward to find the source.

He had an erection, and it was twisted in his boxer shorts and pajama bottoms, forcing it to stick out at a weird, unnatural angle. After shifting his clothes around and settling it into a more comfortable position, Brian looked down at his crotch and firmly said, "No! Stop asking."

* * * * *

By the time Brian had done his morning business and dressed for school, the erection was gone and forgotten.

Just as he sat down to eat, his father walked into the room, still tucking his shirt in.

Since Brian was running a little bit late, he buttered his toast and took a bite without thinking.

As the flavor registered, he suddenly realized one major difference between Jack's cooking and his mom's. He glanced at the 'butter' dish to find that it was, in fact, margarine. To make matters worse, it wasn't a particularly good brand of margarine.

"You'd better hurry." Brian's father said between bites of food.

Brian looked at the clock, then started shoveling food into his mouth as fast as he could manage, so he'd be able to go to school with a full belly.

Chapter 10

The clock has struck, the hour has come, the dream is over.

Brian walked into his school and marveled at how different it seemed. Nothing had changed, yet everything appeared to be smaller and somehow less 'real' than before.

"Hey *Princess!* We thought you'd run off to find your prince charming!" A boy said from ahead of him in the hall.

Brian was surprised when the anxiety and fear that he had been expecting didn't try to overpower him. He didn't really feel anything.

"Hey, Toby. I just had to go out of town for a couple days." Brian said casually as he walked by, then asked, "Did I miss anything?"

"Well, we thought you were gone, so we already got another Princess to take your place." Toby said with a grin.

Brian stopped and looked at Toby with question.

"From what I hear, he got 'outed' at his old school, so his parents moved him here so he could get away from all the teasing." Toby said with delight.

"He came HERE to GET AWAY from teasing?!" Brian asked incredulously.

"Yeah. And the day after he started, Doug came to school and told everyone that his cousin goes to Myron's old school and he told us all about it."

Before Brian could say anything else, he heard the first bell ring and had to hurry to get his things together for class.

* * * * *

His first class was social studies and was just as boring as ever. Mr. Young was an extremely elderly stick figure of a man with no personality whatsoever. The man wore a perpetual grimace and gave the impression of being sick and physically exhausted at all times.

Brian was surprised to find that after missing three days of school, he hadn't actually missed anything at all. He was able to pick up right where he left off.

The next class period was going to be the big test.

Gym Class.

Brian walked into the locker room and was surprised that no one seemed to even notice him.

He changed into his gym clothes and noticed that everyone's attention seemed to be focused on a smaller boy that he hadn't met before.

Since they were supposed to change and go directly to the field, there wasn't time for anything to happen, except a few whispers and snickers that Brian couldn't really hear.

* * * * *

Once they were out on the soccer field, everything changed.

Coach Reed had a small group gathered around him and everyone else was waiting in front of the bleachers.

Brian could see that a group of boys were gathered into a tight knot and that the new kid was standing by himself.

Brian walked up to the boy and said, "I heard that you're gay. I just thought it was important to let you know that I don't hate you for it."

Myron stared at Brian with wonder at the statement.

"I don't *like* you for it, either. I just thought you'd like to know that not everyone feels the same as those jerks." Brian finished as he tilted his head toward the huddle of boys.

Myron stared for a moment longer, then hesitantly nodded.

"My name is Brian."

"I'm Myron." The boy responded quietly.

"Hey look! The princess has finally found her prince!" One of the boys called out in delight.

"Jealous?" Brian asked as he turned.

The boy flashed him a fairly decent version of the 'Whatever' look.

"No, really. If you're over there, all worried about what we're doing, you must be interested." Brian said with a grin, then conspiratorially asked, "Which one of us were you hot for, anyway?"

"I don't want either one of you fags!" the boy screamed as he stepped forward to face off with Brian. He was one of the leaders of the boys who had been tormenting Brian for weeks.

Brian felt his heart racing as he held his ground and looked Danny in the eyes. If Danny chose to punch him, he was prepared to hold his place and not give him the satisfaction of even flinching.

"Danny, go to the office! You've been told that that behavior won't be tolerated." Coach Reed said firmly as he approached.

Brian watched as an anxious expression crossed Danny's face and he seemed to pale a little bit.

"It's not his fault, Coach, I provoked him." Brian said quickly, before he could really think through what he was doing. It just seemed wrong for Danny to get into trouble when *he* had been egging him on.

"I suppose that since you missed the assembly outlining our Zero Tolerance policy, that you didn't know that things had changed." Coach Reed said carefully, and it was clear to Brian that his speech was more for the benefit of Danny and Myron.

"What it boils down to is that we won't tolerate ANY physical attacks of any kind or verbal attacks of a personal nature." Coach Reed said to the increasing gathering that now included over half of the class.

"You can still rag on each other for being slow, clumsy or just an all around horrible soccer player. But the personal stuff is off limits. Harassing someone for being black, Jewish, gay, poor or whatever, there's no place for it here."

Brian looked around and could see everyone soaking in the coach's words. Whether they knew it or not, everyone in Coach Reed's class respected him and wanted to do their best to make him proud.

"I'm not telling you what to believe or how to feel. I'm just saying that bullying behavior won't be tolerated. If you choose to break that rule, you'll have to face the consequences. And before you take that step, let me tell you. It's not worth it." Coach Reed said earnestly.

Brian screwed up his courage and said as clearly as he could, "I'm sorry, Coach. I didn't mean to get anyone in trouble."

Coach Reed smiled and said, "That's fine, Brian. No harm done. Now let's get out on the field and see if you guys can figure out how to play this game."

* * * * *

After just over half an hour of spirited play, Brian walked to the field house with the rest of the class. He hadn't had any spectacular moments, but he also hadn't made any monumental goofs and embarrassed himself. All things considered, he'd call it success.

As the class approached the side of the field house, the girls went left as the boys went right, to go to their separate locker rooms.

Brian could feel his pulse pounding, and not just from the exertion of playing soccer.

This was the moment he had been both fearing and anticipating.

Now that they were away from 'adult supervision', Brian knew that things had the potential to get ugly.

"Are the *princess* and her *prince* going to run away together, now?" One of the boys asked in a mocking voice.

"Lay off, Gerry. You don't want to get us in trouble with the coach." Danny said quietly to his friend.

Brian walked to stand in front of Gerry and said, "If you want to see my cock so bad, just ask."

The locker room went silent as everyone waited for Gerry's reaction.

"I don't want to look at you! FAGGOT!" Gerry snarled.

"Really? Then what's this all about?" Brian asked, not backing down.

Gerry didn't seem to have an answer, so Brian looked around the room as he said, "All I've ever done is be shy and not want to get naked in front of people. He's the one who wants to see what everyone looks like naked. And you think *I'm* the one with a problem?"

Nervous looks and a few whispers flew around the locker room.

Brian noticed that Myron was hurrying to pull off his shirt. The boy was probably going to make a mad dash for the door as soon as he had his regular clothes on, just as Brian would have done only a week before.

"I'm all sweaty. I need a shower." Brian said as he walked to his locker, then looked over to Myron and said, "Some of these guys are scared of you. So you can shower while I do, if you want. I promise that I won't cause you any trouble."

Myron froze with his gym shorts halfway down his legs as he felt the stares of everyone in the locker room on him.

"I'm not showering with a FAG!" Gerry barked.

"Then wait for us to finish. We won't take long." Brian said simply, as he finished gathering his soap and towel.

Myron seemed to be at a loss for what to do, but Brian felt that he had done as much as he could for the boy. Besides, he was about to face his one biggest fear.

Brian quickly took off his shoes and socks, then pulled the t shirt off over his head. He forced himself not to look around to see if anyone was watching as he took the final step and pulled off his gym shorts and underwear at the same time.

"Holy fuck!" Gerry gasped when he saw Brian's cock.

"Yeah. And they're worried about showering with *you*." Brian said to Myron with a grin, doing his best to hide his nervousness.

Myron was staring at Brian's cock every bit as much as Gerry.

Brian picked up his towel and draped it around his waist before walking into the shower room.

* * * * *

A moment after he turned on the water of his shower, Brian saw Myron walking timidly into the room.

"Were you serious... I mean, is it really okay?" Myron asked hesitantly.

"Sure. We'd better hurry though, so the little boys can get a chance at the shower." Brian said with a grin.

Myron gave Brian a quick smile that looked a little bit forced.

Brian turned his attention to showering.

The sound of movement drew his attention and he saw Danny walk into the shower room and take off his towel.

"You. Stay over there. Okay?" Danny said to Myron.

"Okay." Myron said quietly, then went back to quickly showering.

"Thanks for taking the heat with the coach." Danny said as he walked to the shower beside Brian's and turned it on. "My dad would've killed me if I got into trouble."

"No problem." Brian said simply, not feeling nearly as nervous as he thought he should.

"You're really not bothered about showering with a gay?" Danny asked as he glanced over at Myron.

"No. The worst that could happen is that he might want to do something with me and I'd have to say 'no'." Brian said simply.

"He *might* try to jump you." Danny said seriously.

"And I *might* kick his ass if he tried." Brian responded simply.

Danny looked at Brian thoughtfully, then over at Myron who was shorter than either of them and slightly overweight. The boy looked like he'd never done much in the way of physical activity.

Brian had finished washing. After one final rinse, he turned off his shower and walked over to get his towel.

"We'd better hurry up so the scared little boys in the other room won't be stinking up our classes the rest of the day with their sweat." Brian said as he toweled himself dry.

Myron finished a moment later and hurried to get his towel.

* * * * *

"It's safe to shower now." Brian said as he walked into the locker room, followed by Myron.

"Did you fuck him?" Gerry asked Brian defiantly.

"No. *He* fucked *me*." Brian said simply.

From the expressions on the boys' faces, it was apparent that about half of them believed him.

Brian rolled his eyes and said, "Get real! We were in there for less than five minutes. All we did was shower."

Danny walked into the room with a towel draped around his waist and said, "You guys had better hurry and shower. I don't want to be smelling your nasty funk in class."

Brian got his regular clothes out of his locker, then, as he was about to dress, he noticed that Myron was looking at him hesitantly.

When Myron saw that Brian had noticed him, he quietly said, "Thanks."

Brian started dressing as he casually said, "Like I said before, I don't hate you because you're gay and I don't like you because you're gay. It really doesn't matter to me."

Danny looked at Brian curiously and seemed to be thinking over his words.

* * * * *

"Get the fuck out of here, faggot!" A voice screamed, then Gerry was pushed out of the shower room.

Gerry was standing, dripping and naked, looking like he didn't know what to do.

"Ready?" Brian asked as he looked over at Myron.

Myron quickly closed his locker and nodded.

Brian's eyes met Danny's, then he quietly said, "I bet he could really use a friend right now."

Danny glanced at Gerry, who seemed to be on the verge of tears, then responded, "Yeah. I've got it."

Brian nodded, then started walking toward the door with Myron at his side.

* * * * *

Nearly out of sight at the side of the field house, Coach Reed watched and waited apprehensively for any sign of a problem. Just as he was about to walk into the locker room to check out things for himself, he saw Brian and Myron walk out, side by side.

Cam gave an internal sigh of relief as he could see for himself that neither of them were showing signs of either physical or emotional distress.

Before he could withdraw into the shadows, Brian spotted him and gave him a brief smile and a nod to confirm that, indeed, all was well.

Coach Reed smiled in return and watched as Brian and Myron walked away at a casual pace toward the main school building.

* * * * *

As Brian slowly walked to his next class, which was English, he reflected on the fact that he had always wanted a puppy. But as he glanced to his side and saw Myron following along faithfully, he began to understand the old saying about 'Watch out what you wish for...'

Brian walked into the classroom and went directly to his desk.

He was relieved to see that Myron's desk was on the other side of the room. It wasn't that he didn't want to make a new friend. He was just cautious because he had the feeling that Myron had the potential to become awfully clingy. After being alone for so long, having the boy constantly underfoot might be more attention than he could handle.

As the classroom began to fill, the sound of chatter increased. The teacher was at the front of the room and kept looking up, apparently taking attendance. As soon as the bell rang, she put down her pencil and stood.

"Brian, would you come up here?"

Jack's words came back to him, telling him that the hardest part was learning when NOT to use the 'teenage' attitude. Unbidden, the facial expression that said 'BITCH!' had crossed his face as he stood. He couldn't help but speculate as to why he had been singled out.

But finally, he made his way to the front of the classroom to stand before Ms. Schnaubel.

"Stand over here." She said pleasantly, then called out, "Melissa, come on up. Over here, in the center."

Brian stood aside and watched as Melissa Hauber walked up the aisle to take her place before the teacher.

Once Melissa was in place, Ms. Schnaubel said, "Let's see... Toby. Come on up here and join us. Stand over there."

Toby Stanton looked a little bit nervous as he also walked to the front of the room.

"We're going to have a competition today. These are our team captains. Brian, pick your first team member." Ms. Schnaubel said firmly.

Brian didn't even have to think about it. He immediately said, "Danny."

As much of a jerk as Danny MacAlistair could be, he was undeniably the smartest student in the class. Ever since they had been in first grade together, Brian couldn't remember Danny ever getting anything but a perfect grade on every assignment. Brian had always thought that what Danny had in brains, he lacked in personality. However, considering their brief talk in the locker room, Brian felt that he might be willing to reevaluate his opinion of Danny.

"Pick Gerry next." Danny said as he walked to Brian's side.

"We need brains, not bullshit. I'm picking Chowdhry." Brian said firmly.

Danny seemed to be about to argue, then considered Brian's words carefully.

"Okay. But not Chowdhry. Pick Emily next, otherwise Melissa will choose her after Kendra. And Emily is the keeper of the brain in their little clique." Danny said seriously.

Brian thought about Danny's words and decided that he was right. Melissa would most likely pick her friends in order of 'best friend' and 'next best friend'. If he chose Emily first, Melissa's team would be at a disadvantage.

As soon as Toby had finished choosing his first teammate, Brian called out, "Emily."

The entire, multi-headed teen female organism that was the 'cheerleader wannabe' clique flashed their combined death glares at Brian, making him want to slink away and hide.

Emily grudgingly walked to the front of the room to stand with Danny and Brian.

"Now I'm picking Chowdhry." Brian said as he looked at Danny to see if he agreed.

"But he doesn't even speak English. How's he going to be any help?" Emily whined.

"He may not speak it well, but he's studied the hell out of it. He probably already knows more about grammar than any of us will ever learn." Danny said frankly.

Brian smiled, glad to know that Danny agreed with his choice.

As soon as it was Brian's turn to choose again, he called out, "Chowdhry."

Brian looked at the other teams and noticed that Melissa had, as expected, picked her friends. The perky and popular were finding their places, one by one, at Melissa's side. She must have assumed that Ms. Schnaubel was going to be hosting a popularity contest... or maybe a swimsuit competition.

Toby, on the other hand, seemed to think the upcoming competition was going to be some kind of a sporting event. He seemed intent on assembling the best collection of athletes that the class had to offer. Unfortunately for Toby, Brian had already snatched up the only one of the bunch that exhibited any evidence of higher brain function.

"Gerry now?" Danny asked.

"Adam." Brian said seriously.

"But he's probably one of the worst students in the class." Danny said slowly.

"That's because he's late so often and is always falling asleep in class. But when he's awake, I've noticed that he's really smart." Brian said honestly.

"So we just have to make sure to keep him awake." Danny said thoughtfully.

"He should be fine. It's first period and right after lunch that he's pretty much worthless." Brian said seriously.

Before he could say any more, it was his turn to choose again and he called out, "Adam."

Adam Johnson looked up with surprise at the sound of his name. He was familiar enough with the pecking order to know that he should have been one of the last students picked.

There were a few snickers from the unchosen and from Toby's team, but Brian was confident in his decision.

Brian turned to face Danny and quietly said, "That's half the team. So far, I've done the 'smart' thing. From here on out, I'm doing the 'right' thing."

"What do you mean?" Danny asked cautiously.

"It means that I'm going to make some choices you may not agree with. But I'm in charge and they're my choices to make. We have the four biggest brains in the class on our team, now it's time to make someone happy."

Danny looked at Brian curiously, not having a clue of what he was talking about.

When Brian's turn came around again, he said, "Jarritt."

A moment of silence fell over the room. Then the sudden high pitched, droning sound of Jarritt's excited laughter filled everyone's ears as he stood and joyfully ran to the front of the room.

Jarritt Bender had Down's Syndrome and this was his first year being 'mainstreamed' into regular classes. Brian had always felt bad for Jarritt because he could see the disappointment in the boy's eyes when he was the last one chosen, no matter what it was they were choosing for.

At a glance, Jarritt didn't appear to be that much bigger than Brian. But when Jarritt ran to the front of the room and gave him a bear hug, Brian thought his spine was going to snap.

Once Brian was able to get his breath back, he noticed that Ms. Schnaubel seemed to be fighting to hold back her tears.

Brian turned his attention to the diminishing number of classmates that he had to choose from. He turned to Danny and said, "I doubt that anyone is going to pick Myron. So I can pick him on my last go. Out of who's left, who do you think I should pick?"

Danny looked around and his eyes met Gerry's. After a moment, Danny turned to Brian and asked, "You're going to pick Myron, for sure?"

Brian nodded.

"Then I say, pick Alison." Danny said quietly.

Brian looked at Danny with surprise.

"If you have both Gerry and Myron on your team, you're asking for trouble. Alison isn't likely to cause us any trouble... in fact, I'm not even sure she can speak. Have you ever heard her talk?" Danny asked curiously.

"Yeah. Once in third grade." Brian said with a grin, then noticed that it was his turn to pick again.

"Alison!"

Brian could see the crestfallen look on Myron's face.

He started to feel bad about not picking him sooner, but decided to stand by his decisions.

When his turn came around again, there were three students left.

Brian wasn't at all happy to see that Gerry still hadn't been chosen. Normally Gerry would have been one of the first to be selected, just after Danny.

"Myron." Brian called out and watched as Myron stood and slowly walked to the front of the room. He didn't look happy, but at least he looked slightly relieved.

Brian watched curiously as Toby walked to Melissa and started talking to her. Their whispered conversation went on for a few seconds, then Melissa reluctantly called out, "Gerry."

Brian blinked with surprise.

He didn't know exactly what had happened in the shower room, or anything that went on after he and Myron had left the locker room. But he would never have guessed that Gerry would be so completely ostracized by his peer group.

"Come on, Jenny. You don't have to feel bad. You weren't picked last, I just asked Melissa if I could have you on my team, so you really were chosen." Toby said encouragingly.

The girl's sad look eased somewhat as she walked to join her team.

"Well, now that we have teams, let me tell you what's going to happen." Ms. Schnaubel said in a voice that was a little bit too cheerful to be believed.

"Team leaders, you break your teams into pairs. Each team will have the chance to earn 10 points per round. There will be four exercises. The most difficult one will be worth four points, an easier exercise will be worth three points, and so on. The team leaders will choose who gets which question, based only on the point value. They won't see the question itself. When I call 'ready' for the four point exercise, those pairs will step forward and try to earn four points for their team. Whichever team has the most points when the class bell rings, wins." Ms. Schnaubel explained.

There was a moment of quiet as everyone waited to be told what to do next.

"Team leaders, it's time for you to select who is going to work on which level of difficulty." Ms. Schnaubel said firmly, then added, "You have two minutes."

Brian thought for a moment, then said, "Danny, Emily, Chowdhry and Adam, stand over here."

It amused Brian when he recognized more than one 'who the hell do you think you are' glare from the named individuals, but eventually they all did as he said.

"Danny, pick who you want out of who's left." Brian said simply.

After a moment of thought, Danny glanced at Brian and smiled before saying, "Jarritt."

Jarritt ran to Danny's side and Brian was sure he had never seen anyone happier in all his life.

"Emily?" Brian asked, then waited for her decision.

"Um... Alison." Emily said seriously.

Brian couldn't speculate as to a reason for her choice, but ended up just chalking it up as 'a girl thing'.

"Chowdhry?" Brian prompted.

"If he would be agreeable. I believe I would work well with Myron." Chowdhry said past his heavy accent.

Myron looked surprised, but happily walked to Chowdhry's side.

"I guess you're stuck with me." Brian said to Adam.

"I wouldn't call that 'stuck'." Adam said with a smile.

"Danny, you get the four pointers. Chowdhry, three. Emily, two. And Adam and I will tackle the little one pointers." Brian said to his team.

Danny looked over their team, then confidently said, "We are going to kick so much ass!"

Brian smiled and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

As Danny and Jarritt were putting their answer to their four point question on the white board, Myron walked to Brian and quietly asked, "Why didn't you pick me before the last round?"

Brian looked around and could see that everyone else in their group was listening for Brian's answer.

"Because I wanted to give Toby and Melissa the chance to do the right thing." Brian said seriously, then, at Myron's look of confusion, he continued, "Just think about how good it would have felt if someone besides me picked you. It would've been great. I didn't really expect them to pick you, but I thought it was important to give them the chance."

As Myron was considering Brian's words, Alison quietly asked, "Why did you pick me?"

"Because Danny asked me to. He thought you'd be a better team player than anyone else that was left. Well, except Myron. I had already told him that I was picking Myron on the next round." Brian said frankly.

Alison seemed happy with the answer and Myron actually smiled.

"Jarritt and Danny have earned their team FOUR points!" Ms. Schnaubel called out triumphantly.

Brian smiled at Jarritt's bouncing excitement as he walked with Danny back to the group.

"Was it tough?" Brian asked Danny cautiously.

"With my teammate to help me, it wasn't a problem." Danny said with a grin at Jarritt.

As Brian watched Chowdhry and Myron walk forward to try to earn three points for the team, he caught sight of Gerry who was giving him a death glare.

"You'd better watch your back after class. It looks like Gerry's about ready to pop a gasket." Danny said honestly.

"Yeah. And I don't think his gaskets were all that tight to begin with." Brian said absently.

Danny chuckled and Brian noticed Gerry's death glare increase by about forty percent intensity.

"Myron and Chowdhry have earned their team THREE points!" Ms. Schnaubel called out joyfully.

"Good work!" Brian said with a smile for the returning champions.

"I'm serious. Gerry might try to do something to you. He's really pissed off and he blames everything on you." Danny said, drawing Brian's attention back to him.

"Everything? Like what? I wasn't even there when whatever it was happened." Brian said cautiously as he watched Alison and Emily walk toward the front of the room.

"You know how Gerry is always goofing around in the shower. Well, no one ever really thought anything about it until you said that stuff today. I guess when he was in there he tried a little 'grabass' and no one thought it was funny." Danny said gravely.

"He should have known better." Brian said with a shake of his head.

"Yeah. But... I don't know, somewhere along the way, I must have started growing up. Gerry still hasn't. He still goofs around like a little kid and doesn't get that people take it seriously." Danny said gravely.

Brian slowly nodded as he looked toward the front board and saw that Alison and Emily were still working on their problem.

"For a while now, I've been feeling uncomfortable being around him, the way he behaves." Danny said quietly.

"Do you have a little brother?" Brian asked curiously. He didn't really know anything about Danny's personal life.

"No. It's just me. Why?" Danny asked curiously.

"Because I think you have one now." Brian said frankly, then noticed that Emily and Alison were returning from the board.

"Why me?" Danny asked hesitantly.

"If his problem is that he's immature, then he needs someone more grown up to help guide him. You're his friend and, besides, who else would he trust like that?"

Before Danny could respond, Brian and Adam started walking toward the front of the room, exchanging 'high fives' with Alison and Emily, for winning them two points.

Brian glanced over at Adam to find an expression of admiration looking back at him. It was an unfamiliar thing for Brian, and he had to admit that he liked the feeling.

* * * * *

In the end, Brian's team won the competition by an impressive margin. In fact, they got every single question asked of them correct.

As Brian was getting ready to leave for lunch, Ms. Schnaubel walked up to him and quietly said, "Thank you, Brian. I've been at my wits end trying to think of what to do for Jarritt. You've made that boy happier than he's been since he joined this class."

"I just tried to do what's right." Brian mumbled shyly, then hurried out of the room.

As soon as he stepped out the classroom door, Brian found most of the boys in the class waiting for him.

"Everyone hates me now and it's because of you!" Gerry snarled as he stepped into Brian's personal space.

Truth be told, Brian was slightly taller than Gerry and outweighed him by a few pounds. But Gerry still gave the appearance of being bigger by virtue of his attitude.

"And now you made Danny not like me and he's being friends with the *retard!*" Gerry spat.

Before Brian could react, Danny grabbed onto Gerry's arm and spun him around.

"Brian and Myron can stand up for themselves, so you can say whatever you want about them. But Jarritt can't. It's not okay to treat Jarritt badly. It's NEVER okay." Danny said firmly as he looked into Gerry's eyes, then firmly asked, "Got it?"

After an intense moment of absolute silence, Gerry hesitantly nodded.

Brian looked around at the public scene they were creating and decided to move them somewhere a little bit more private.

"Come on. We can't do this here." Brian said, then started walking away.

The entire group started to follow, but Danny was able to warn the majority of them away with a glance.

By the time they reached the seldom used hallway by the east stairs, only Gerry, Danny, Myron, Chowdhry and Jarritt were with him.

"You know what, Gerry. You're right. It's all my fault." Brian said seriously.

Gerry looked at him with surprise.

"I wasn't trying to get anyone to be mad at you. But it's still my fault. If you want to hit me for causing you all this trouble, you can. I won't hit you back." Brian said frankly.

Gerry looked around uncertainly, obviously wanting to, but afraid of getting into trouble.

"Guys, if he hits me, will you all promise not to tell on him?" Brian asked as he looked around.

It took a moment, but finally everyone, even Jarritt, agreed.

"Go ahead." Brian said as he looked Gerry in the eyes.

Gerry hesitated for a moment, then pulled back and hit Brian square in the jaw.

Brian grabbed his face and turned away as he hunched down a little.

"Okay, Gerry. That's enough." Danny said firmly, then added, "Go on to the cafeteria before word gets out that you're fighting."

Gerry looked a little bit pale, but quickly nodded and rushed away.

"Are you alright? Do you need to see the nurse?" Danny asked Brian with concern.

Brian slowly turned and looked around cautiously for a moment before standing up and breaking into a smile.

"No. I'm fine. Gerry hits like a little girl."

* * * * *

When they arrived in the cafeteria, Brian immediately went to the food line, along with the others.

When they finished making their selections, Danny casually asked, "Do you want to sit with us?"

Brian was surprised by the offer, since he had been excluded from the table where his former friends ate since the beginning of the school year. He was about to accept when he noticed Myron at his other side.

"I won't let Myron sit alone." Brian said, even though he desperately wanted to be included as 'one of the guys'.

"Give me a sec." Danny said, then, with Jarritt at his side, carried his tray over to the table where Gerry, Adam and Toby were already seated and a few more of the guys were just sitting down.

"You don't have to." Myron said quietly as he looked up at Brian hesitantly.

"Yes. I do." Brian said frankly, then added, "Not for you, for me. I'd be ashamed of myself if I turned my back on you, just because you're gay."

"Thanks." Myron whispered as he looked down.

"Come on." Danny called from about halfway to the table as he gestured at Brian.

"Both of us?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Come on." Danny said and gestured more urgently.

"Come on." Brian whispered to Myron, then started walking.

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"Gerry said that he punched you out for saying that stuff about him." Toby said cautiously.

"Yeah. He punched me right in the jaw." Brian said frankly, then rubbed his jaw for effect.

"So, did you take back what you said about him?" Toby asked as he watched Brian carefully.

"Yeah. I guess I was wrong about all that." Brian said seriously, then glanced at Gerry before continuing, "Gerry's alright."

"What about..." Toby asked then gestured at Myron, at Brian's side.

"He's gay. It's not a big deal unless you make it one." Brian said simply.

"That's right." Danny interjected.

Brian glanced around the table to see that everyone seemed to be thinking about how they felt about that.

* * * * *

The rest of the conversation at lunch was just general things about classes and what was going on with people that they all knew.

Myron didn't join into the conversation, and no one spoke directly to him. But, by the same token, no one behaved badly toward him either.

As Brian was eating, he couldn't help but notice that Adam's tray was loaded down with nearly all sweets.

"Aren't you going to have any 'real' food?" Brian asked him cautiously.

"Naw. Real food sucks. Desserts are awesome." Adam said with a grin, then opened another cream filled oatmeal pie.

Brian cringed at the sight, just imagining the taste of that much cloying sweetness, but kept any further opinions to himself.

* * * * *

By the time Brian was sitting in Mr. Hyde's math class, he was noticing that his jaw was beginning to ache a little. He really hadn't thought that Gerry's punch had done much damage. But, apparently, Gerry's 'little girl' punch had at least been able to cause a bruise.

"Brian." Mr. Hyde called out from the front of the room.

At the sound of his name, Brian looked up from his textbook, wondering what he had missed.

"Mr. Hammond wants to see you in his office." Mr. Hyde said seriously.

"Yes, sir." Brian said as he gathered his things.

Whispers and 'Ooohs' went around the room as Brian got up to leave.

* * * * *

When Brian walked into the office, he wasn't surprised to find Mrs. Hampstead, the school's secretary, on the phone.

Even though he wasn't one to get into trouble, he had visited the office enough to know the routine.

He took a seat in the waiting area and hoped that Mr. Hammond wouldn't make him wait too long.

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After what seemed like an hour, but was in reality less than five minutes, Mr. Hammond walked down the hall and said, "I'm ready for you, Brian. Will you come back?"

Brian stood without comment and followed Mr. Hammond down the hall.

* * * * *

"What happened to your face?" Mr. Hammond asked cautiously.

"I bumped into the door on my locker." Brian said seriously as he met Mr. Hammond's gaze.

"You know, I've been around for a little while. I'm not buying it." Mr. Hammond said frankly.

Brian nodded, then said, "Since I got back, I heard about the school's zero tolerance policy."

"Yes. It's actually been in place for a while, but we've been a bit lax about reminding the students of it." Mr. Hammond said slowly.

Brian nodded, then continued, "So, under the zero tolerance policy, if one student were to hit another one, then that student would automatically be expelled. Right?"

"Yes. He, or she, would have the right to request a hearing to sort through the details of the incident. But he, or she, would be expelled in the interim, and remain so until the student is found to no longer be a threat to other students. Admittedly, most just forego the process and end up going to other schools."

"Then, if that's the case, I definitely bumped into my locker door." Brian said firmly.

Mr. Hammond looked at Brian for a moment, then quietly said, "If you're afraid of some sort of retaliation, there *are* things that I can do to help."

"No. Thank you. I don't have any hard feelings toward my locker door, and I don't think it's mad at me anymore either. It was just a one time thing." Brian said seriously.

Mr. Hammond nodded, then said, "Understood."

Brian smiled that Mr. Hammond was willing to let it go.

"I asked you in here to see how you're doing." Mr. Hammond said frankly.

"I'm fine." Brian said simply.

"When Coach Reed told me about his plan to help you, I wasn't sure if it was such a good idea." Mr. Hammond said cautiously.

Brian realized that Mr. Hammond knew everything, and gave him a quick smile before saying, "Honestly, everything is fine. While I was gone I learned a lot of things that have really helped me. I think everything is going to be okay now."

"And how are the other boys treating you?" Mr. Hammond asked cautiously.

"Pretty much like nothing ever happened." Brian said with a chuckle, then added, "I think Myron being here has a lot to do with that."

"Yes. It's unfortunate that news of his... orientation... spread so quickly." Mr. Hammond said quietly.

"Maybe it's not as bad as you think." Brian said honestly.

At Mr. Hammond's look of surprise, Brian said, "I think that his coming here and trying to hide who he is would've just caused more trouble for him later on. I mean, yeah. It's not going to be easy for him, but I think it's going to be 'better' for him if everyone knows who he really is, right from the start."

"Still, I wish there were a way to protect him from what he's going to have to face." Mr. Hammond said regretfully.

"Why? So you can dump him out into the real world when he's eighteen without any skills to deal with it?" Brian asked challengingly.

Mr. Hammond stared at Brian in shock for a moment, then quietly said, "I remember you as being a timid boy, barely willing to speak. What happened to you?"

"I found my voice." Brian said with a smile, then seriously added, "I'm trying to help Myron. I won't say that you shouldn't worry about him, but I promise that he's not going to have to face it all alone."

"Thank you, Brian. That takes an incredible load off my mind." Mr. Hammond said honestly.

"It's funny to know that there are people actually looking out for us. The whole time I've been in school, I've always felt like I was on my own. Now, knowing that you and Coach Reed are making sure that we're okay... it's a good feeling."

"If you ever have any problems or concerns, all you ever have to do is ask." Mr. Hammond said sincerely.

After a moment of thought, Brian cautiously said, "Well, there *is* one thing that you might be able to help me with..."

* * * * *

By the time Brian was done talking to Mr. Hammond, it was nearly time for his next class.

It was a good feeling when he joined up with his classmates and felt included.

With the exception of having to endure nearly an hour of incredibly boring lecture about history, the rest of Brian's day passed relatively smoothly.

Brian was at his locker, putting his books away. He was feeling good about his first day back and looking forward to telling Jack all about it when Adam came running up to him.

"Brian, come quick! It's Myron! They're going to beat him up!" Adam screamed, then turned and ran down the hallway, back toward the back of the school.

* * * * *

Since Adam hadn't told Brian where they were going, all Brian could do was try to keep up.

Finally, Brian realized that they were headed toward the area behind the school where the students waited for their busses to arrive.

Brian could see that Danny was standing forward, seemingly defending Myron. Toby and Jarritt were at Danny's side, and Gerry was standing a step or two behind them, not necessarily standing with them, but not standing against them either.

As soon as Brian and Adam got to the increasing gathering, they worked their way forward until they were also at Danny's side.

"Get outta my way, Danny. I'm gonna beat the gay out of that little faggot!" A larger boy snarled.

"No, Wayne. You're not. Why don't you just leave Myron alone. He's not doing anything to you. This is wrong." Danny said firmly.

"What do you care? He's GAY!" One of the older boys barked at Danny.

Brian didn't know all of what had been said before he arrived, so he waited to see how Danny was going to respond.

To his surprise, it was Gerry's voice that spoke out from behind them.
"Yeah! He's gay. But he's *our* gay! You leave him alone!"

A bustle of activity behind them caused Brian to turn, and he saw Coach Reed approaching quickly.

"What's going on here?" Cameron asked as he worked his way to the front of what now was a crowd.

"We were just introducing our new friend, Myron, to the guys from the other classes." Brian said as he faced Cam with a hopeful look.

Coach Reed looked around the gathering and said, "Those of you who ride the bus had better get going. They're not going to wait on you forever."

"Thanks, Coach." Danny said with a relieved smile.

Cameron returned the smile and nodded at Danny, then watched as he hurried to one of the waiting busses.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Myron." Gerry said as he walked with him to see him safely onto the bus.

Myron looked a little bit uncertain, not sure what had just happened, but finally said, "Yeah, thanks."

Gerry nodded as he watched Myron withdraw into the bus and find a seat.

Once the crowd had dispersed, Cameron walked to Brian's side and quietly asked, "So, how was your day?"

"Good." Brian said with a small smile.

"Are we still on for this weekend?" Cameron asked casually as they walked.

"Yeah. I can't wait."

* * * * *

When Brian left the school, he turned the opposite direction from what he normally would.

As he walked, he puzzled over the fact that he could have done this at any time. He'd never thought to do it before.

After only two blocks of walking, Brian had arrived at his destination.

* * * * *

Brian walked into the building and directly to the front desk before saying, "I'm Brian Weston. My school counselor called and asked if it would be okay if I could visit my grandpa, Andy Weston."

"Yes. I think Andrew would very much appreciate a visitor. Do you know the way?" The nurse asked with a warm smile.

"Yeah. Can I just go back?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Would you sign here for me?" She asked as she held out a clipboard.

Brian quickly signed his name, then looked to see if there was anything else.

"Enjoy your visit." She said with a smile, then watched as Brian walked away.

* * * * *

When Brian walked into his grandfather's room, he was glad to be greeted with a happy expression.

Brian wanted to say something, but his grandfather was watching the door and seemed to be waiting for something.

"Is it okay that I came to visit?" Brian finally asked cautiously.

"Yes. Of course." His grandfather said distractedly, then looked at the door again.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Brian asked as he turned to look at the door.

"Didn't your father bring you?" Grandpa Andy asked cautiously.

"No. I came on my own. I just got out of school." Brian said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Grandpa Andy broke into a wide, toothless grin.

"How are you doing today?" Brian asked cautiously, still uncertain of his welcome.

"My grandson came to visit me, so I'm doing great." Grandpa Andy said happily.

"Is it okay that I came by myself?"

"It's more than okay." Grandpa Andy responded peacefully.

Brian smiled, finally knowing for sure that his Grandpa actually wanted him there.

"Tell me, Brian. What brings you around here, today?" Grandpa Andy asked as he gestured to a chair by the bed, offering Brian a seat.

"I don't know. I guess I just realized that I can come and visit you whenever I want to. I don't have to wait for my dad to decide it's time."

"So how's life treating you, Brian?" Grandpa Andy asked tenderly.

"Honestly, it's been a little bit rough lately, but it's getting better." Brian finished with a smile.

Grandpa Andy nodded and didn't seem to need a more detailed explanation.

"How are you?" Brian thought to ask.

Grandpa Andy chuckled, then said, "Nothing ever changes here. I'm the same as I always am."

"Is that good or bad?" Brian asked cautiously.

"It is what it is. Good, I suppose. It just gets a little bit lonely." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"Well, now that I know I can come by and visit, maybe it won't be as lonely for you." Brian said hopefully.

Grandpa Andy flashed him another quick, toothless grin, then said, "I'd like that."

After a long moment of silence, Brian hesitantly asked, "Do you know... Why is my dad such a..."

"Peckerhead?" Grandpa Andy offered pleasantly.

Brian chuckled, then said, "Yeah."

"I blame your grandmother. She doted on the boy. He acted all big and full of himself around other kids, a bully, really. But when he was at home he was a whiny little pansy." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"He hasn't changed much... except now he bullies mom." Brian said honestly.

"I've always wanted to feel sorry for your mother, but I've never quite been able to manage that. She knew what she was getting into. Her father was a lot like him."

"Her father? You mean my other grandfather? Do you know him? What's he like? I've never met him." Brian asked quickly.

"I only met him at the wedding, but I'd have to say that he's probably one of the most unpleasant people I've ever met." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"Oh. I just thought... I always wondered what my mom's family was like." Brian said regretfully.

"I can think of one example. At the wedding *Doctor Werner* stood up and announced... I think his exact words were, 'Now that you're married, she's your problem'. Then him and his wife left. This wasn't at the reception, mind you. The son-of-a-bitch said it right there in the chapel."

Brian stared at his grandfather with disbelief.

"And, so far as I know, that was the last your mom ever heard from her family."

"Wow! That sucks." Brian said as he tried to imagine how that had made his mother feel.

"Even so, your mother went into the marriage knowing what to expect. She knew what an overbearing prick your dad was and went ahead and married him anyway. So she's made her bed, now she has to lie in it." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"With 'him'." Brian said with a crinkled nose.

Grandpa Andy chuckled and nodded before saying, "I'm surprised to see that you turned out so well, what with your father being..."

"...a Peckerhead?" Brian offered with a smile.

"Yes." Grandpa Andy said warmly.

"I was having some problems. My coach at school noticed that I wasn't prepared for... well, much of anything, so he fixed it so I could spend a few days with a guy who could teach me all the stuff that my dad was supposed to." Brian said frankly.

"I'm glad to hear that." Grandpa Andy said with a smile, then slowly asked, "What's your coach's name?"

"Cameron Reed." Brian responded immediately.

"It can't be! Little Cammy is a coach? That's wonderful!" Grandpa Andy said with a chuckle.

"You know Coach Reed?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Hell, I knew that boy when he was still shittin' yellow." Grandpa Andy said with another toothless grin.

"I'll have to tell him you said that. I'll be playing golf with him and his son this weekend." Brian said happily.

"Cammy has a son? Is he your age?" Grandpa Andy asked with interest, then added, "You need to ask Cammy to stop by and visit with me sometime so we can catch up."

"I will, and Cam's son is older than me, nineteen, I think." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm just glad that you're going to be spending some time around some good, decent people. I've been wanting to talk to you about that for ages, but I never could with 'him' around."

"Yeah. Dad kind of likes to dominate the conversation." Brian said with a nod of understanding.

"He won't put up with any conversation that doesn't revolve around him. Spoiled little rat faced brat..." Grandpa Andy trailed off in a grumble.

"Rat face? I'll have to remember that." Brian said with a grin.

"I've got a million of them." Grandpa Andy said slyly.

Before Brian could respond, the phone in his backpack started ringing.

After taking it out, Brian rolled his eyes and said, "Hi Mom."

"I just stopped by the nursing home to see Grandpa for a few minutes. I'll be home in about half an hour."

Brian listened for a moment, then held the phone away from his ear, looked at his grandpa and rolled his eyes.

Grandpa Andy smiled and nodded in sympathy.

"I will." Brian said as he put the phone back to his ear.

"I won't." Brian said with another eye roll.

"Mom, I'm like, eight blocks from the house. Don't have a spaz attack. I'll be home in half an hour!"

After a few seconds of listening, he quietly said, "Yeah. I love you, too, Mom. Bye."

"She likes to keep you on a short leash, huh?" Grandpa Andy asked past a chuckle.

"I think she'd still have me in diapers if she could get away with it." Brian said as he put his phone away.

"Well, it sounds like you're doing a fine job of cutting the apron strings, so I'm not worried." Grandpa Andy said happily.

"Well, it's either cut them or get strangled by them." Brian said with a resigned look.

"Growing up is tough." Grandpa Andy said simply, then added, "And just so you know, growing old isn't any easier."

"Gee. Thanks." Brian said dryly.

"It's all about learning, my boy. You've got lessons to learn every step of the way. Once you've learned them, it gets easier... for a while."

"Until it's time to learn the next lessons." Brian said with a nod.

"That's life." Grandpa Andy said simply.

"Well, I'd better get going if I'm going." Brian said regretfully.

"And before your mother has a fit of apoplexy." Grandpa Andy said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. And she'll be having apple-plexes all over the place if I don't leave right now." Brian said as he pulled on his backpack, then leaned over to give his grandfather a hug and said, "I love you, Grandpa."

"I love you, too, my boy. Be sure to stop by and visit again soon." Grandpa Andy said as he returned the hug.

"Hey. I go to school about two blocks from here. So you'll probably get sick of seeing me before very long." Brian said with a smile as he walked to the door.

Grandpa Andy watched Brian leave the room, then quietly said, "I very seriously doubt that."

Chapter 11

As soon as Brian walked in the door, his mother asked him, "And just what do you think you were doing at the old folk's home?"

"I was visiting with Grandpa Andy." Brian said simply and didn't appreciate his mother's prying.

"You know, I worry about you when you don't get home on time. Anything could have happened to you." His mother said as she started to get teary eyed.

Brian stared at his mother with surprise for a moment, then calmly said, "First of all, I've never been late before. Not even once. So I don't know why you're making it sound like I'm intentionally hurting you by being late all the time. Second, I've got my phone. If you ever want to know where I am and if I'm okay, you can call me, just like you did today. Third, I don't know why it matters to you that I visited Grandpa Andy, but you don't need to try to make me feel guilty about it. I didn't do anything wrong, and I'm not going to say I'm sorry."

Mrs. Weston's lower lip began to quiver, then she quickly dashed away.

A part of Brian wanted to run to his mother and apologise. But a bigger part was disgusted by his mother's use of guilt and histrionics to try and manipulate him.

Finally, Brian just shook his head and walked to his bedroom to start on his homework.

Although there wasn't a lot of work for Brian to catch up on, after missing three days of school, he did have a bit more than usual. It was such that if he worked diligently, he might be able to get it all finished before dinner.

* * * * *

The math problems he was working on were 'busy work', as usual, given by Mr. Hyde to make it seem like he was accomplishing something. He seemed to have a set-in-stone lesson plan, and a little thing like the fact that the students already knew the lessons wouldn't divert him from it in the least. So all of them trudged on, day after day, week after week, hoping beyond hope that someday he might happen on to something that the whole class hadn't learned the previous school year.

The sound of the front door slamming alerted Brian to the fact that his father was home. He closed his math book and put it back into his backpack.

Brian took in a deep, calming breath and braced himself before getting up from his desk and walking out of the room to face 'the family'.

* * * * *

Brian walked into the kitchen to find exactly what he would expect to find on any other day at this time. His mother was just starting to put dinner on the table.

"Do you need any help?" Brian asked from just inside the doorway.

His mother flashed him a quick, petulant look that informed him that she was still upset that he had stood up to her.

With a shrug, he walked to his place at the table and took a seat.

After a few minutes of sitting and watching her ferry items around, from the kitchen to the table, he turned at the sound of movement and saw his father walk into the room.

As was customary, Brian's father had gone directly to his room and taken off his button up shirt and was now wearing his untucked undershirt as he took his place at the table.

"Brian went to visit your father today." Brian's mother said coldly as she put a bowl of salad in the middle of the table.

Mr. Weston looked at his wife, then at Brian curiously.

At first, Brian felt the need to explain his actions, but was able to hold his tongue and at least wait until he was asked a question before defending himself.

After a moment of silence, Mr. Weston finally said, "I should do that, too. I'm overdue for a visit."

Brian was a little bit surprised that his father hadn't found a reason to be upset by his action.

"He didn't call to let me know that he was going to be late." Brian's mother said with a tinge of venom, then gave Brian a dark look as she took her seat at the table.

Mr. Weston considered for a moment as he started to put food on his plate, finally he said, "Annie, you need to cut the cord, already. The boy's growing up. There's nothing wrong with it if he wants to have a little time to himself after school. He doesn't need to explain his every move to you."

Both Brian and his mother were surprised by the declaration.

Mr. Weston then turned to Brian and said, "But, if you're going to be late for dinner. You call and let your mom know."

"Yeah. I will." Brian stammered.

Mr. Weston nodded, then looked away from Brian toward something past him on the table.

Brian followed his gaze and automatically picked up the casserole dish and passed it to his father.

"How was work today?" Brian asked cautiously. Their family had never been much for dinner conversation, but Brian thought that it was important to at least give it a try. His time with Cam and Jack had shown him how nice it was to engage in conversation while enjoying a meal.

"It amazes me how people think that just because they show up at the job site that they've fulfilled their duties for the day. More and more often, it seems like the new hires think that if someone isn't standing over them, telling them exactly what to do, every minute of the day, that they're just supposed to stand around doing nothing." Mr. Weston said absently, then handed the casserole dish back to Brian.

As he scooped a portion of the creamy noodley casserole onto his plate, Brian said, "It's probably from twelve years of being in school. All day, every day, we're told what to do and when to do it. If we try to do anything but exactly what we're told, we get into trouble."

Mr. Weston chewed his bite of food for a moment, then finally said, "You know, you may be right about that."

"I made apple flips for dessert!" Brian's mother said quickly.

Brian and his father gave her matching uncertain looks at the abrupt change in topic before Mr. Weston slowly said, "That sounds nice."

She smiled at the insincere praise, then went back to eating her meal.

There were a few minutes of silence, then Mr. Weston asked, "How was your first day back at school?"

Brian considered for a moment, then said, "On a scale of one to ten, I'd have to give it about a nine. And that's only because I'm saving a 'ten' for when I score a winning goal in soccer, or something like that."

Mr. Weston gave his son a brief smile and a slight nod before going back to his dinner.

The conversation faltered after that, but Brian was still willing to call it a success. They had had, at least a small amount of dinner conversation and no one seemed worse off for having had the experience.

* * * * *

"Would you like some help?" Brian asked his mother when the meal was finished.

She flashed him another dirty look, then started carrying the dishes to the sink.

Brian puzzled over that, wondering why she was holding onto her anger over such a simple little thing, but finally he just walked into the living room to find his father settling into his chair in front of the television.

"Can we talk?" Brian asked his father carefully.

Mr. Weston turned the volume down on the television, then looked at Brian expectantly.

"Is there any way that we could go and do something together?" Brian asked quietly and felt unaccountably nervous.

"What did you have in mind?" Mr. Weston asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Like fishing or camping or something." Brian mumbled, feeling like a five year old child.

"Brian, I work really hard. I have to be on the go and aware of every detail of what's going on every minute of every day. When I get home, all I want is a little peace." Mr. Weston said frankly.

Brian slowly nodded.

There was a long moment that would have been silence except for the quiet chatter of the television. Finally, Mr. Weston asked, "Are you gay?"

Brian was floored by the question. There was no build up, no hint that it was coming.

"The other boys are calling you *princess*, I just wondered if that was the problem." Mr. Weston asked slowly.

"I... um... I don't know." Brian said as he wasn't quite able to meet his father's eyes.

After a long, quiet moment, Brian finally looked at his father, finding him waiting expectantly for more of an answer.

"The reason the guys called me princess was because I wouldn't get undressed after gym class." Brian said quietly.

The television noise sounded in the background for a long moment until Mr. Weston finally prompted, "Why not?"

"This summer, I started, um... growing up... I mean.. um... down there." Brian mumbled.

At Mr. Weston's uncomprehending stare, Brian got flustered and blurted out, "After being normal all my life, all of a sudden, I've got a cock like a mule!"

Mr. Weston's eyes went wide, then his eyes involuntarily drifted down Brian's body.

"I didn't know anything about puberty or what's normal when you grow up, so I was embarrassed to get naked with the other guys in my class because I figured they'd think I was weird or something." Brian rushed to explain.

"And now?" Mr. Weston asked cautiously.

"Today, I did it. I got naked and took a shower at school. I think about half the guys in the locker room just about fell over when they saw it." Brian smiled at the memory.

"But it's okay? They stopped teasing you?" Mr. Weston asked firmly.

"Yeah, mostly. But because of the stuff that I learned while I was gone, even when they did tease me a little, it didn't bother me. It's like, now that I know that I'm not a freak, they can say whatever they want and it's fine." Brian finished happily.

"Well, I'm glad that worked out for you." Mr. Weston said quietly.

"Yeah. But that's not all that I learned about, while I was gone. There's a bunch of other stuff, and some of it I'm going to need your help with." Brian said seriously.

"Like what?" Mr. Weston asked cautiously.

"Dad. All these problems that I've been having lately are because I'm growing up." Brian said frankly, then quietly added, "I'm not done yet."

There was a long quiet moment, then Mr. Weston reluctantly admitted, "I don't know what to do."

"Me either. But I figure that if we can do stuff together, sometimes, that maybe we can figure it out." Brian said hopefully.

Brian's father slowly nodded as he considered what Brian was saying.

"There was one other thing that I'd kinda like to talk to you about." Brian said nervously.

"What's that?" Mr. Weston prompted.

"I... um... you see, it's like... I never know what you expect of me. When I'm quiet, you get mad because I don't speak up for myself, but when I say something, you tell me to shut up. It's like that with everything. No matter what I do, it seems like it's the wrong thing. Do you think, maybe, sometimes, you could let me know what you want?" Brian finished in a quiet, hopeful voice.

After a long introspective moment, Brian's dad finally said, "My dad, your grandpa, enrolled me in every sport that was offered at my school, and he wanted me to be the first and the best at all of them. I gave it all that I had, but I was never good enough in his eyes. When you were born, I promised myself that I'd never do that to you."

"Yeah. I can see why that would suck. But you felt bad that you couldn't achieve the goals that Grandpa set out for you. I think I feel just as bad, because I can't achieve anything for you, because you never set *any* goals for me." Brian said imploringly.

"All day, every day, I'm chasing after a dozen people at work, setting goals for them and doing my damnedest to keep them on task. I don't think I can do it here, too. I just don't have anything left to give." Mr. Weston said regretfully.

Brian stood and thought about his father's words. After all the anxiety that he had built up in preparation for 'the talk', it ended up not being nearly as explosive as he had imagined.

Finally, Brian took in a deep breath to brace himself, then said, "I don't think this is going to work."

"What's that?" Mr. Weston asked curiously.

"If you can't meet me halfway, if you can't make an effort, then I think that maybe I need to go somewhere else." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Are you threatening to run away from home?" Mr. Weston asked slowly and seemed slightly amused at the idea.

"No. Not like that. I'm just talking about moving somewhere else where I can have someone to help me." Brian said as he looked his father in the eyes.

"Where do you think you're going to go?" Mr. Weston asked challengingly, and his voice was starting to rise.

"I don't know. But there are people who would be willing to help me find a good place. My counselor at school probably has the connections to work something out, maybe he could even get me into that camp out by the Southcrest Ranch, I hear that that place is almost like a resort." Brian said thoughtfully.

"You really want to leave?" Mr. Weston asked cautiously, seeming to be somewhat deflated when Brian didn't react to his change in mood.

"No. That's not my first choice. But, like I said, I can't do this alone. I know that Coach Reed and Jack would be willing to help me learn the stuff that I need to know, but I wouldn't ask them to do that. They've already helped me so much that I can never repay them." Brian said distantly.

"What did they do?" Mr. Weston asked quietly.

Brian looked at his father curiously, not quite understanding what he was asking.

After a moment, Mr. Weston finally clarified, "What did they do for you that I didn't?"

"Lots of things. They spent time talking to me. They listened. They asked questions. They explained things to me when I didn't understand. They let me know that what's been happening to me is normal and about what to expect next. We laughed, we cried, we hugged... we even got naked." Brian finished with a giggle.

Brian's father looked up with shock and seemed to be about to go off on a tirade.

"Dad! I was shy about my body and how it was changing. They just made sure that I could manage around other guys, you know, like, in the locker room and stuff. Nothing weird happened!" Brian said forcefully.

After a moment, Brian's father hesitantly said, "So, because of that, you were able to go to school today and get naked in the shower. And, in doing so, you removed the reason for the other boys to torment you."

"Yeah. Exactly." Brian said with relief.

After a long, thoughtful moment, Brian's father said, "I don't think I could have done that for you."

"Probably not, but you could've explained things so that when the time came, I would've known what to expect. I freaked out! I thought I was, like, a mutant or something!" Brian finished in a squeak.

Brian's father gave a slight smile of sympathy, then quietly said, "I guess, I mean, you're still so young. I suppose it never occurred to me that you might need... me... like that."

"You're my dad! Of course I need you!" Brian said in a petulant, teenage tone.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you." Mr. Weston said as he looked Brian in the eyes to convey his sincerity.

"You know what? I don't even care about that, now. Coach Reed and Jack took care of all that for me, so you don't even have to worry about it. All I want is for you to help me from here on out." Brian said frankly.

"What do you want me to do?" Mr. Weston asked cautiously.

"Mostly, what you're doing right now. Talk with me. Listen to me. Give me advice. Let me know what to expect." Brian said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "And let me know what you expect of me. I'm serious, it drives me crazy when you tell me to do two opposite things, almost in the same breath."

"I'll see what I can do." Mr. Weston said with the beginning of a smile.

"That's all I'm asking." Brian said frankly.

Mr. Weston nodded, then cautiously asked, "How are you now? Is there anything you need to talk about?"

Brian could see the hope in his father's eyes, but could only think of one question that he hadn't already found the answer to. Finally, he decided that he'd give it a try.

Although Brian didn't have much faith or hope when it came to his father, if he gave him this one chance, it might just be enough to form some sort of a bond.

"Okay. I'll understand if you don't know, or if you don't want to talk about it. I can just ask Coach Reed tomorrow." Brian said in prelude and could feel a fine sheen of nervous sweat covering his face.

Mr. Weston nodded as he waited for Brian's question.

"Okay. When I was in my last period class today, I was just sitting there and all of a sudden, I got, like, this total raging hardon boner." Brian said as he could feel a scarlet blush wash over his face.

"It was really uncomfortable for a minute, but I don't think anyone noticed when I reached down there and adjusted it. Anyway, it just happened. I wasn't thinking anything or doing anything to cause it. And I was just wondering, what if that happened in gym class? I mean, if the guys ragged on me that bad for not showering with them, what're they gonna say if I go in there and bone up in front of everyone?" Brian finished desperately.

Brian's father considered for a moment, then quietly said, "First of all, that's normal."

After a moment to see that Brian accepted it, Mr. Weston said, "Second, if you're in a situation, like sitting in class or something like that, if you just ignore it for a few minutes, it should go away on it's own."

Brian nodded that he understood and accepted that.

"As far as gym class... well, I can only tell you what I used to do." Mr. Weston said, and Brian could see a slight, nervous sweat on his upper lip.

"Before I would go to gym class or football practice, I'd go to the bathroom and jack off." Mr. Weston said in a voice that ended in a whisper.

"You did?" Brian asked in wonder.

Mr. Weston nodded, then quietly said, "I'd go into the bathroom stall, whip it out, and jack off into the toilet. Once I had that out of the way, I knew that it'd be fine for at least a few hours."

"Wow. I mean, um... yeah. That sounds like it could work." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Maybe your coach has another way to deal with it. If you feel comfortable talking to him about it, you could ask him." Mr. Weston said as he looked Brian in the eyes.

"No. I... um... no. I think you answered my question. I'll give it a few days and then if I'm having a problem, I might ask him." Brian said a little bit nervously.

Mr. Weston nodded, then quietly asked, "When you said that you wanted to go and do things, you said camping and fishing. Those things take a lot of time, is there something that you'd like to do that's a little bit closer to home?"

"Sure. There's lots of things we can do. Maybe we could go to a game sometime or even just play catch in the back yard." Brian said cautiously, watching closely for his father's reaction.

"We could do that!" Mr. Weston said suddenly, then glanced at the window before saying, "It's still light out. We could do it right now."

"I don't have a baseball or anything like that." Brian said regretfully.

"Well, that's why they have stores. Let me go put on a decent shirt and we can go get one now." Mr. Weston said with a smile, then watched for Brian's reaction.

"Sure. Let's do it." Brian said happily.

* * * * *

Once they were in the car, Mr. Weston quietly asked, "How did you become interested in sports all of a sudden?"

"I think the only reason I wasn't interested before is because I felt like I was watching something I could never be a part of. Since I couldn't catch or throw, I didn't want to watch other people out there having fun doing stuff that I couldn't." Brian said honestly.

"I remember when I tried to teach you to catch. I got you a baseball and glove for your fifth birthday. But no matter what I tried, you just couldn't seem to get the hang of it." Mr. Weston said distantly.

"I know." Brian said regretfully, then quietly added, "You got so mad at me that you threw the baseball and glove away."

"I'm sorry, Brian. I acted like an overgrown child. I guess I had built up some unrealistic expectations. Ever since you were born, I had been imagining doing things like playing catch with my son. Then when the day finally came that I thought you were old enough... I'd never seen anyone so clumsy."

"Yeah. Jack figured out that there's something wrong with my eyes. I don't know what it is, but I have trouble following anything moving toward me or away from me or figuring out where it's going. Jack says it's something to do with my depth perception." Brian said seriously.

"We'd better get that looked at." Mr. Weston said with concern.

"Yeah. I asked mom to make an appointment with an eye doctor. Coach Reed and Jack didn't seem to think it was anything to be worried about. I

might have to wear glasses or something, but it shouldn't be any worse than that." Brian said honestly.

"Well, that's good." Mr. Weston said thoughtfully.

"And we figured out that if I close my right eye that I can throw and catch pretty well. I'm still not good with the whole 'depth' thing, but I can manage pitching and catching." Brian said as he glanced at his father.

"I'm glad to hear that." Mr. Weston said quietly, then added, "And since I know that you have a problem with depth perception, I'll understand if you don't 'master' it right away."

"Thanks, Dad." Brian said with a smile at his father.

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When they arrived at the department store, Brian walked with his father to the sporting goods department.

"So, which sports are you interested in?" Mr. Weston asked as they looked around.

"I don't know. Until last week, I never wanted anything to do with any of them. I was kind of bitter because I knew that I'd never be able to play any of them." Brian said seriously, then thoughtfully added, "I guess if I had to pick one, that I'm kinda interested in it would be soccer, because we're learning that in gym class. It seems fun."

Mr. Weston immediately walked to the soccer balls and picked one out.

Brian smiled at the action, then said, "What about you? If we're going to be doing this together, we should do what you enjoy, too."

"Well, I actually always liked playing catch. I'm not very interested in baseball, but throwing the ball back and forth is fun." Mr. Weston said distantly.

"Yeah. I think I might enjoy that, too." Brian said with a smile.

Mr. Weston handed the soccer ball to Brian, then walked to the next aisle where the baseballs were, and picked one out.

After getting gloves for them both, he led the way to the checkout at the front of the store.

* * * * *

As they were driving home, Mr. Weston quietly asked, "Do you have a lot of work to make up from missing school?"

"No. I did most of it before dinner. There's just some assigned reading for Mr. Young's class, but I don't have to worry about it. He's just going to stand in front of the class, tomorrow, and read it to us, anyway. I'll just have to remember to stay awake."

"Mr. Young? Do you mean that frail old man with the permanent scowl?" Mr. Weston asked curiously.

Brian chuckled, then said, "That's him. He's my social studies teacher. He's horrible."

"I know. I had him when I was in school. That man was an ancient relic back then. He's got to be close to a hundred years old by now!" Mr. Weston said with a glance at his son.

"Personally, I think he spends each day feeding off the life force of the students. That's why we all feel so drained when his class is over." Brian said with a grin.

Mr. Weston chuckled, then said, "Yeah. That would explain it."

Brian smiled, then realized that, somehow, without even really trying, him and his father were talking and enjoying each other's company.

As he reflected on the unbelievable development, Jack's words came back to him, saying that things wouldn't be the same when he returned, because he wouldn't be the same.

* * * * *

"Where have you been?!" Mrs. Weston shrieked as soon as Brian and his father walked in the front door.

"We had to go to the store for a few things." Mr. Weston said to his wife with a curious look.

"When I finished cleaning the kitchen, I came out to the living room and everyone was gone!" She said as her eyes filled with tears, then she whispered, "You left without me."

Brian watched with astonishment as his father walked to his mother and pulled her into a hug.

He couldn't believe that any adult would react so dramatically over such a simple thing.

"Annie, Brian and I are going out to the back yard for a little while before we lose the light. You can grab a folding chair and join us out there if you'd like." Mr. Weston said gently to his wife.

"Do you want me to?" Mrs. Weston asked into her husband's chest.

"Of course." Mr. Weston said with a slight smile, then leaned in to give his wife a kiss on the cheek.

Brian's mother slowly nodded as she continued to hold her husband desperately.

"Let's go, Brian. Daylight's a wastin'." Mr. Weston said as he guided his wife to walk with him toward the back door.

* * * * *

As Brian walked out the back door, he pulled his rolled up bandanna out of his back pocket.

As he was putting it on his head and covering his right eye, his father asked, "What are you doing?"

"If I don't do this, I won't be able to catch anything and my pitches probably wouldn't go anywhere near you." Brian said honestly.

"I made an appointment for you with the eye doctor. The first opening they had is Friday of next week. I hope that's okay." Brian's mother said as she unfolded a lawn chair at the side of the yard.

"Yeah. That's fine." Brian said as he put on the baseball glove and flexed it a few times to try and get it flexible enough to use.

"Will you be able to get by alright until then?" Mr. Weston asked with concern.

"Yeah. I don't have any trouble seeing things like the board at the front of the room or reading, so the only time it's a problem is when I'm having to do something that requires depth perception. And I can just close my right eye if I need to." Brian said without concern.

"Are you ready?" Mr. Weston asked as he pounded the baseball into his glove a few times to get it flexible.

"Yeah. Just take it easy on me until I get warmed up." Brian said as he leaned slightly forward and readied himself to catch the ball.

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Even though Brian had no depth perception and had only a scant few days of practice at pitching and catching, he turned out to be just about on par with his father's ability.

They pitched the ball back and forth between them until the sun finally completely sank below the horizon.

"That was fun." Brian said as they walked toward the back of the house.

"You're not bad. I can't wait to see how you do when you have both eyes working." Mr. Weston said seriously.

"Yeah. And you're pretty good for being out of practice." Brian said in a mildly impressed voice.

Mr. Weston smiled at the words and pulled his son into a casual, one armed hug as they walked inside.

Brian marveled at the action. He honestly couldn't remember his father ever hugging him before.

* * * * *

Brian walked into his bedroom and once again noticed the spartan appearance with the walls now devoid of any posters or decorations. He pondered over what kinds of things he might want to get to decorate his room as he gathered the things he would need for his shower.

While showering, he reflected on how drastically his life had changed in just one week. The despair that he had been carrying since the beginning of the school year, was notably absent.

As he soaped his body and felt the relaxing effects of the warm water sluicing down his back, he realized that the despair had been with him longer than that. Although it hadn't been as pronounced as it was recently, he had been carrying a weight of regrets about not being the son that his father had always wanted. And to a lesser degree, the disappointment that he had felt in himself for never being 'as good as' the other kids in school.

Brian turned to rinse the soap off his front as he smiled, astounded that, somehow, he seemed to be getting everything he had always wanted.

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After getting out of the shower, Brian toweled himself dry, then looked at the pile of clothes that he had brought with him to change into.

He smiled to himself, then gathered the clothes and walked out of the bathroom and across the hall to his bedroom, wearing only the towel.

After putting things away, he climbed into his bed, feeling the exquisite sensation of clean sheets against his naked skin.

A moment after his head hit the pillow, he had already fallen into a glorious and contented sleep.

* * * * *

"Brian. You need to get up. Breakfast will be ready in just a few minutes." His mother said from his bedroom doorway.

As he reluctantly opened his eyes, he saw his mother staring at the tent further down in the covers.

His first reaction was to try to hide himself but he was able to restrain that urge and looked his mother in the eyes as he said, "Give me a couple minutes. I'll be there as soon as I'm ready."

Brian's mother hesitantly nodded, then dashed out of the room.

As Brian got out of bed, he smiled to himself, then walked casually across the room to close the door.

He looked down at the rampant erection demanding his attention and muttered, "And *you* had better behave yourself, today."

After a moment, Brian sighed, then walked to the backpack that Jack had given him and retrieved the petroleum jelly.

* * * * *

"It's probably cold by now." Brian's mother said as he walked into the kitchen, now dressed for school.

"I needed a few extra minutes to get ready. If it's going to be a problem, I can start making breakfast for myself." Brian said as he took his place at the table.

"No. I'll just start giving you a little more time to get ready in the morning." Mrs. Weston mumbled as she busied herself at the stove.

Brian shrugged, then thought to ask, "Do we have any butter?"

"It's right there on the table." Mrs. Weston said as she stopped her frenetic activity for a brief moment.

"This is margarine. Do we have any *real* butter?" Brian asked hopefully.

"It's all the same, and this is a lot cheaper." Mrs. Weston said as she went back to work.

"No. It's not the same at all. Real butter tastes a lot better. Is there any way you could pick some up for me the next time you go shopping?" Brian asked hopefully as he spread the margarine on his toast.

"You know, butter is all fat. The margarine is a lot better for your cholesterol." Mrs. Weston said as she quickly carried a plate of food to the table.

"Mom. Please? I just want to enjoy my food. This stuff may taste right to you, but to me, it tastes artificial and plastic." Brian implored.

"I'll pick up some real butter the next time I go shopping." Mrs. Weston said in a resigned tone.

"That sounds good." Mr. Weston said as he walked into the kitchen, still buttoning up his shirt.

Mrs. Weston stopped what she was doing and looked at her husband with question.

"That margarine stuff we've been eating tastes like plastic." Mr. Weston said as he started to eat.

Mrs. Weston huffed as she dropped something in the sink, causing it to clatter, then walked to the table carrying her plate.

"Is something wrong, Annette?" Mr. Weston asked curiously.

"Everything's changing." Brian's mother said with frustration.

"Yes. But as far as I can tell, that's a good thing." Brian's father said frankly.

"No. I don't want things to change. I know what I'm supposed to do and what I'm supposed to say. If things change... I'll be lost." She said as tears filled her eyes.

"We'll figure it out together." Mr. Weston said gently to his wife.

"If it means this much to you, I'll eat the margarine." Brian quietly offered.

Mrs. Weston chuckled past her tears, then said, "No. I'll be fine. I'm just a little bit frightened by so much change in such a short time."

"You're not going through this alone, honey. We'll get through it just fine." Mr. Weston said assuringly.

Brian glanced at the clock, then quickly said, "I'd better hurry and go."

"Hold on a minute, and I'll drop you off on my way to work." Mr. Weston said casually.

"Won't that make you really early?" Brian asked as he stopped in the kitchen doorway.

"Yes. But I don't feel like waiting until the last minute today. Go on, get your stuff." Mr. Weston said as he stood from his place at the table.

* * * * *

Brian rushed into his bedroom and grabbed his school backpack. After taking his cell phone off the charger, he was about to walk out the door when a sudden thought came to him.

He dashed to the camping backpack and relocated the petroleum jelly to his school backpack before hurrying out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you have any plans for tonight?" Mr. Weston asked his son as he drove the scant few blocks to Brian's school.

"No. Not so far. Did you have something in mind?" Brian asked curiously.

"Well, if you wanted to, you could check on the Internet when you get home and see if there are any games being played tonight." Mr. Weston asked as he pulled the car to a stop about half a block from the school.

"What kind of game?" Brian asked as he picked up his backpack.

"It doesn't matter. You pick whatever you'd like and we'll go after dinner." Mr. Weston said with a smile.

"Yeah. Okay." Brian said happily as he opened his car door.

"Have a good day, Brian." Mr. Weston said warmly.

On impulse, Brian leaned over and gave his father a quick, firm hug as he said, "You, too."

Brian got out of the car and waved at his dad as he pulled away from the curb.

* * * * *

"Was that your dad?" A voice asked from behind Brian.

"Hey, Toby. Yeah, he decided to go into work early and dropped me off." Brian said casually as he fell into step at Toby's side.

"I was wanting to ask you..." Toby started to say, then seemed to reconsider.

"Go ahead. Ask me anything." Brian said simply.

"How can you not be freaked out a little bit by being around a gay guy?" Toby asked a little bit nervously.

"Myron's just like us, except that, someday, when he falls in love, it's going to be with a guy. So, unless Myron tells me that he's in love with me, then how he feels about guys and girls really doesn't have anything to do with me at all." Brian said thoughtfully.

"But wasn't it creepy when he saw you naked... I mean, knowing that he might be thinking about... you know, doing stuff to you." Toby asked hesitantly.

Brian thought about it for a moment, then admitted, "Yeah. Maybe it was a little bit creepy, at first. But it's kinda like what Coach Reed was saying to us yesterday, all of us are free to think and feel whatever we want. It's only the things we *do* that matter to anyone else. Unless he *does* something, it's not a problem."

Toby slowly nodded as they approached the front door of the school.

"Hey, Princess!" A voice called out from behind them.

"Hey, Gerry. How are you doing today?" Brian said with a smirk at the silliness of the nickname he had been saddled with.

"Do you guys want to come with me to the busses? I want to make sure that Myron doesn't have any trouble with those guys from yesterday." Gerry said seriously.

"Sure. But why are you worried about Myron all of a sudden?" Brian asked curiously as he changed direction to walk toward the back of the school.

"Well, yesterday when we were all out by the busses, I could see all you guys standing there, ready to get beat up just to protect a fag. And that's when I got it. You guys were out there because Myron is one of us... our class, I mean. That's when I figured out that it wouldn't matter if it was Myron or you or me who was getting picked on. All you guys would be doing exactly the same thing, because that's just what you do. You protect your own." Gerry said seriously.

Brian grinned at Toby, then said, "That's right, Gerry. We protect our own. It doesn't matter if they're gay or have down's syndrome or even if it's a girl. We belong to each other, and when things get tough, we may be all that we've got to depend on."

"Yeah. It's good to know that someone's got your back. But the only way that works is if you're willing to cover everyone else's back when they need you to." Toby said frankly.

Gerry smiled with accomplishment, obviously feeling proud of himself for figuring it out.

"Do you know which one is his bus?" Brian asked as he looked at the line of busses parked beside the school.

"No. But it looks like almost all of them are here." Gerry said as he looked around.

In less than half a minute, Toby said, "There he is!"

Brian followed Toby's pointing finger and saw Myron walking away from one of the busses with his gaze mostly directed toward the ground, walking alone toward the school.

"Hey, Myron. How are you doing?" Gerry called out as he ran up to the boy.

Myron looked up at the sound of his name, then he looked around curiously at the familiar faces.

"Are you doing alright?" Gerry asked as he fell into step at Myron's side.

"Yeah. I think so." Myron said cautiously.

"Don't worry. No one's going to mess with you." Gerry said seriously, then looked at Brian and Toby before continuing, "We've got your back."

Myron looked curiously at his three escorts, then whispered, "Thanks."

"There's Danny." Gerry said happily, then called out, "Hey, Danny! Over here."

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Danny looked up at the sound of his name and broke into a smile at the sight of Gerry, Toby and Brian escorting Myron from the busses.

"Hey, guys. How is everything today?" Danny asked as he altered his course to join his friends.

"Everything's fine so far. We just came back here to make sure no one would give Myron any trouble before he could make it to class." Gerry said with a note of accomplishment in his voice.

"Good thinking, Gerry. We probably need to give the other classes a few days to get used to things before we can be sure that Myron's going to be safe on his own." Danny said seriously.

Myron looked like he wanted to shrink into nothingness, but he continued on with the group as they entered the building.

"I'm supposed to meet someone out front. If you guys want to go on to class, I'll meet you there in a few minutes." Danny said casually.

"Who are you going to meet? Have you got a *girlfriend*?" Gerry asked in a slightly mocking tone.

"No, Ger. Jarritt's parents called my house last night, trying to figure out what all had happened yesterday that got Jarritt so excited. After we talked for awhile, they said that they wanted to meet me, so I said that I'd meet them out front when they dropped Jarritt off." Danny said frankly.

"Is it okay if we all go along? We're all gonna protect Jarritt if he needs it, so his folks need to see that you're not the only one watching out for him." Gerry said seriously.

"Yeah. Okay, Ger. Just... don't be too energetic around them. I get the feeling that they're really protective of Jarritt and I don't want to give them a reason to think that we're going to get him into trouble." Danny said honestly.

Gerry looked at Danny uncertainly, apparently not quite getting what he was saying.

"He means, 'shut up'." Brian said without any harshness behind the words.

"Oh. Okay." Gerry said happily, not giving it a second thought.

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As the increasing group of boys walked out to the curb in front of the school, they noticed Jarritt slightly bouncing in the passenger seat of an older model station wagon.

By the time they reached the car, Jarritt was out of the vehicle and joyfully bouncing his way to greet his friends.

"Is one of you Danny MacAlistair?" An older woman asked as she got out of the driver's side of the car.

"I am. These are my friends Gerry, Brian, Toby and Myron." Danny said as he indicated each boy in turn.

"It's nice to meet all of you. After hearing Jarritt talk about all of you last night, I just felt like I needed to come here and meet you in person." She said timidly.

"You don't need to worry. Jarritt is one of us. We'll make sure that no one messes with him." Gerry said firmly.

Danny glanced at him and Gerry suddenly seemed to remember that he wasn't supposed to say anything and quickly clamped his mouth shut.

"Thank you. I'm very glad to hear that. I was originally against this 'mainstreaming' idea, but I never imagined that it would be possible for Jarritt to be accepted by a peer group." Mrs. Bender said with the beginnings of tears glistening in her eyes.

"The first bell is about to ring. We need to get going." Danny said carefully.

"Oh. Yes. Of course." She said quickly, then added, "Thank you, again. All of you."

"Bye, Mom!" Jarritt called out from his place at Danny's right side.

"Bye." Mrs. Bender responded and waved, before getting back into her car and slowly driving away.

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The first class of the day was, once again, Mr. Young's social studies class. It took every bit of Brian's focus and energy to stay awake, when faced with the monotone droning sound of Mr. Young's voice as he read aloud from the textbook.

After what seemed like nine hours, but was in reality just shy of forty-five minutes, the bell rang to signal the end of class. Brian glanced around and broke into a smile before gently shaking Adam's shoulder to wake him up.

"Five more minutes." Adam mumbled into his open textbook.

"It's time for gym class. You need to wake up." Brian chuckled as he shook Adam's shoulder again.

Adam made a sound that sounded halfway between a snort and a snore before he slowly raised his head and looked blearily around the room.

"Time for gym." Brian said with a grin.

"Ungh!" Adam grunted, then closed his textbook and got up, catching his backpack with one finger as he stood.

"Seriously, Adam. You really need to start getting more sleep." Brian said as he walked out of the room at Adam's side.

"I would, except that when it's bedtime, I'm wide awake. It seems like no matter what I do, I can't get to sleep before one in the morning." Adam said in an exhausted voice.

"Have you been to a doctor about it?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. My Aunt can't afford to take me to the doctor unless it's something serious, you know, like gushing blood or if something's about to shrivel up and drop off." Adam said frankly.

"Well, you really need to find a way to deal with it before you get into trouble." Brian said with honest concern.

"Yeah. From what my Aunt said, if I'm late one more time, they're going to expel me." Adam said in a grave tone.

"Well, just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you. You're one of the guys, and we wouldn't want you to leave." Brian said seriously.

"I know. But... it's just a matter of time." Adam said, then went silent as they walked into the field house to change.

* * * * *

Brian had to admit that as they played soccer, not only was his class improving at the game, but he was actually having *fun*. He was riding a slight adrenaline buzz as he walked into the locker room with everyone else.

"Hey, do we want to shower in shifts, like yesterday?" Toby asked as he looked around.

"Myron, if you don't mind, why don't you go on in and start your shower? Then, anyone who doesn't have a problem showering while he does can get theirs out of the way at the same time. Anyone who has a problem with it can just wait a few minutes until he's finished." Danny suggested reasonably.

A few shrugs and nods went around the room and it was agreed.

Brian was about to get ready to shower when he glanced down at his crotch and noticed a very slight thickening down there.

With a sigh, he dug into his backpack and palmed the small container of petroleum jelly and started toward the bathroom stalls. Before he could

make it out of the room, Adam asked him, "Brian, are you going to wait to shower?"

"No. But I need to make a pit stop first." Brian said frankly, then continued on his way.

* * * * *

Brian wasn't sure if it was a leftover effect from the adrenaline of playing soccer, or just the fact that he could hear the other guys, only a scant few yards away from him that made what he was doing seem forbidden and dangerous. But for whatever reason, it didn't take him more than about thirty strokes to bring him to the most intense, mind boggling orgasm to date. This one actually curled his toes.

* * * * *

As Brian walked into the shower room, feeling sluggish and sated, Gerry called out, "Hey, Princess! We saved you the spot next to Myron!"

"Thanks, Gerry." Brian said in an obligatory tone as he hung his towel on a hook, then walked to the shower beside Myron's and quietly asked, "Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah. Believe it or not, I'm starting to feel like I can be myself here. No one has said anything mean to me all day... well, except Gerry, but I know that he's teasing, just trying to be funny, so that's okay." Myron said seriously.

Brian smiled, then said, "I'm glad that you get that about Gerry. I can see how it would be really easy to be offended by him since he's kinda loud and pushy."

Myron chuckled, then said, "Believe it or not, I used to be a lot like that."

"Really?" Brian asked with surprise.

"Yeah. That's why it's easy for me not to get mad at Gerry for being a jerk. I already know not to listen to what he's saying and to pay close attention to what he isn't." Myron said thoughtfully.

Before Brian could ask what he meant, Myron turned off his shower and walked to the hooks to get his towel.

As Brian was starting to lather himself, he heard Myron call out, "The fag's out of the shower! It's safe!"

A chuckle spread through the shower room and Brian finally felt certain that Myron was going to be alright.

"How are you doing, Brian?" Cameron asked as Brian walked out of the field house.

"I don't even have words to tell you how good things are." Brian said with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. But if at any point, things start turning badly, remember that I'm as close as the nearest phone. Jack and I are still available if you need us." Cameron said frankly.

"I know. I never doubted that, even for a minute." Brian said with a smile, then suddenly remembered something and quickly said, "I visited my Grandpa Andy after school yesterday and while we were talking, I mentioned you and he said that he knew you."

"Andy? Weston?" Cameron asked cautiously.

Brian nodded quickly.

"Old Man Weston is your grandfather?" Cameron asked suddenly.

"I guess so. I've always called him Grandpa Andy." Brian said frankly.

"Of course! I haven't thought of him in... years. How's he doing?" Cameron asked with a big smile.

"Well, he's in a nursing home. But he's not really bad sick or anything. I don't know much about it, but I guess he fell down and broke his hip and it didn't heal right or something like that, so he went into the nursing home because he couldn't do everything that he needed to do to take care of himself. You'll have to ask him about it, that's all I know." Brian said honestly.

"I'd really like to see him again." Cameron said with a distant smile.

"That's good, because he asked me to ask you to visit him." Brian said frankly.

"He did?" Cameron asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I think his exact words were, 'Tell Little Cammy that I'd like to visit with him so we can catch up.'" Brian said with a grin.

"That man..." Cameron said with a chuckle, then continued, "No one else ever thought to call me 'Little Cammy', not even my own father. I need to tell my father that Old Man Weston is still around. I know that he'll want to visit with him, too."

Brian smiled at Cameron, then noticed that the rest of his classmates were starting to make their way toward the school.

"I've got to get to my next class. Tell Jack that I'm probably going to call him after school today." Brian said quickly.

"I'll let him know. Have a good day." Cameron said as he watched Brian hurry away.

* * * * *

When they arrived in English class, Brian was surprised to see that the desks had been organized into groups of four.

With the way the desks were arranged, he couldn't tell where he was supposed to sit.

"Brian, you're going to be teamed with Danny, Jarritt and Adam, today. Just pick a block of desks, then catch your teammates when they walk into the room." Ms. Schnaubel said seriously.

After dropping off his books at a nearby desk, Brian waited for his team to arrive as he listened to Ms. Schnaubel repeat the instructions to the other teams.

Once the final class bell rang, Ms. Schnaubel called out, "We're going to be doing some group writing projects today. Remember that the most basic form of creative writing calls for an introduction, a body and a conclusion. I'll be grading on form, grammar, spelling and punctuation, so leave yourselves plenty of time for proofreading."

After a moment to see that everyone had gotten the message, she continued, "I've selected the subjects, but to make it fair, I've put them all into this bowl. Each team send someone forward to select your topic, then you can get started."

Danny immediately leaned over and quietly asked Jarritt to go get their topic. Brian smiled at him, genuinely appreciating the gentle way he treated Jarritt.

* * * * *

At the end of English class, Brian felt good about their assignment.

He had contributed some ideas about what direction they should take their story. It turned out that Adam was surprisingly good at expressing himself in writing. And, of course, Danny was a proficient proofreader. As he was

proofreading, Danny would make a point of asking Jarritt's opinion about certain things, so that he would feel included.

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As Brian was eating his lunch and listening to the general chatter around the table, it suddenly occurred to him that he and Myron weren't invited to sit at the table with the other boys.

Things had progressed to the point where it was automatically assumed by him and by everyone else, apparently, that he and Myron would naturally be included in anything that the rest of the boys were doing.

* * * * *

The rest of the day flowed past without incident.

Brian did have to fight the urge in Mr. Hyde's math class to stand up and demand to be given an assignment that he hadn't already completed in the middle of the previous year. But, other than that, it was a very uneventful afternoon.

Finally, classes were over and Brian happily walked the two blocks to visit his grandpa.

"I'm here to visit with my grandpa, Andy Weston." Brian said at the front desk.

"I think everyone in this building knows who you are by now, Brian. Your grandfather has been telling everyone about you since you left yesterday."

Brian smiled at the words as he signed his name on the clipboard, then said a brief, "Thanks," before hurrying back to his grandfather's room.

* * * * *

"Hi Grandpa! How are you doing today?" Brian asked as he walked into the room.

"The best I've been in ages." Grandpa Andy said with a warm smile.

"Before I forget, I talked to Coach Reed today and gave him your message. He said that his father would also probably like to visit with you, so don't be surprised if both of them show up before very long." Brian said with a smile.

"That's good. It would be nice to see David again, it's been too many years." Grandpa Andy said with a distant smile.

"Yeah. That's what Coach Reed said, too." Brian said happily.

"So, how was your day?" Grandpa Andy asked warmly.

"Really good. But I want to tell you about last night, first. It was AWESOME!" Brian said joyfully.

"Really. What is it that happened that was so... awesome?" Grandpa Andy asked with an indulgent smile.

"Well, first of all, I talked to my dad. I figured he was going to be a big jerk and not listen and maybe even yell at me or ground me or something. But he was really great! We talked and he listened and... well, it's like, for the first time, ever, we're really acting like a father and son." Brian said happily.

"I'll have to take your word for it. I can't even imagine your father being that way." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"Honestly, I couldn't have imagined it either. But he's been TOTALLY cool about stuff. Anyway, after that, we wanted to play catch, but we didn't have a baseball or anything, so he took me to the store so we could buy one. I didn't even know it was possible for him to get out of his recliner between the hours of six and ten o'clock." Brian finished with a grin.

"Well, I hate to admit it, but he got that from me. After a day of work, all I wanted to do was get off my feet and enjoy a little peace and quiet."

"Yeah. Dad's like that, too. But last night, after we got back from the store, we went to the back yard and played catch until it got dark. It was SO awesome. We've never done anything like that before." Brian finished with a chuckle.

"I remember your dad mentioning that you didn't seem to have any skill when it came to athletics. I just figured you inherited that from him." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"Yeah. Dad said that when he was growing up, you signed him up for every sport that was offered, but then you never encouraged him or anything." Brian said slowly.

"I *did* encourage him. I went to all his games." Grandpa Andy said simply.

"But did you ever tell him that he did a good job?" Brian asked curiously.

"No. But that's because he never did. I could see that he was out there, really trying and giving it his all. But in the end, he was average on his best day."

"You could have told him that you were proud of him for trying." Brian said quietly.

"We didn't do it that way in my day. Back then, not everyone got a trophy just for participating. Winning meant something. Losing was a bitter, hard pill to swallow, but winning was sooo sweet..."

"I guess I can see that." Brian said thoughtfully.

"Your dad was NOT a good athlete. I kept signing him up for sports because I thought that he might improve with practice, but he never really did. In the end, it was his schooling that he did best at. That boy always had a head for numbers. After high school, I took on a second job for a while so we could help him pay for college. I'm proud to say that he went in there and took full advantage of the opportunities he was given. He graduated near the top of his class." Grandpa Andy finished with a considering look.

"Did you ever tell him that you were proud of him?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes! I did!" Grandpa Andy said firmly, then quietly added, "I'm not sure if he heard me though. He seemed always to focus on his failures and disregard his achievements."

"I guess that's easy to do when you see yourself as a failure to begin with." Brian said introspectively.

"You don't feel that way about yourself, do you, Brian?" Grandpa Andy asked hesitantly.

"No. But I *have* felt that way before, so I can understand what it's like." Brian said frankly.

"I'm glad to know that you and your father are getting closer. I wouldn't have bet on that happening, but I'm glad that it is." Grandpa Andy said warmly.

"Yeah. And it's weird, but we're not as different as I always thought we were. We've actually got things in common." Brian said consideringly, then broke into a smile and added, "We even had the same boring teacher."

"Who was that?" Grandpa Andy asked with interest.

"My social studies teacher, Mr. Young. Dad said that he was old and boring back when he was a kid in school." Brian finished with a chuckle.

"*Mortimer* Young?" Grandpa Andy asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think so." Brian said uncertainly.

Grandpa Andy snorted with laughter, then said, "If he's the same one I'm thinking of, I had him as a teacher when I was in school."

"NO WAY!" Brian said in amazement.

"I think our class was the first class that he ever taught. My GOD! What a boring man! I can still recall after all these decades how that man would stand up in front of the room and read straight from the book for the *entire* class." Grandpa Andy said emphatically.

"That's him! That's *exactly* what he does, every single day!" Brian laughed.

"That man's got to be close to a hundred years old by now." Grandpa Andy said with a shake of his head.

"He looks it." Brian said frankly, then checked the time on his cell phone.

"Do you have to go already?" Grandpa Andy asked with disappointment.

"Yeah. In a few minutes. There's some stuff I need to do before dinner..." Brian trailed off, then broke into an ebullient smile.

Grandpa Andy watched and waited expectantly for what wonderful thing Brian had just remembered.

"What are you doing tonight?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Having dinner and watching TV out in the commons, I suppose." Grandpa Andy responded hesitantly.

"What would you think about going to a game with us tonight?" Brian asked with a smile.

"What kind of a game?" Grandpa Andy asked slowly.

"I don't know yet. I still have to find out who's playing tonight. But even if it's just little league, it'll still be fun to watch. What do you say? Do you want to go?" Brian asked hopefully.

"The wheelchair is so much bother..." Grandpa Andy began to say.

"Oh yeah. It takes, like, an extra minute and a half to set that thing up or fold it down. Big deal!" Brian said with a roll of his eyes.

"Your father might not want me to go along." Grandpa Andy said frankly.

"I'm sure the only reason he didn't include you in the plan is because he just didn't think of it. I mean, he asked me this morning while he was driving me to school, so I'm pretty sure it was just off the top of his head." Brian said seriously.

Grandpa Andy looked at Brian uncertainly.

"Okay. Yeah. I admit it. Dad's kind of a peckerhead. But since we talked, I realized that he's not as bad as I thought he was. I think that if you can get him past that '*poor little me, my daddy isn't proud of me, wah, wah, wah*' thing he's got going on, that you'll see that he's not so bad." Brian said frankly.

Grandpa Andy burst into full laughter at Brian's words.

Brian smiled and waited for his grandfather's answer.

"If you can get the peckerhead to agree to it, then yes, I'd like to go." Grandpa Andy said with a smile.

"Leave it to me." Brian said confidently.

* * * * *

"Are we still on for this weekend?"

"Yes. I've got the price list and my dad's already said it's okay."

"Dad told me that things are working out for you at school, but how's everything else?"

"Jack, it's like day and night. I can't believe this is the same house, that these people are the same family. It's like I've come back to a completely different WORLD!"

"I'm relieved to hear that. Even though I did what I believed was the right thing for you, there was no way of knowing how it would work out when you applied what I taught you in a real life situation. I would have felt responsible if things had gone wrong."

"Well, I hope you'll feel just as responsible for things going right. I can't say that everything is exactly perfect right now, but it's so much better than it used to be that I can't even tell you all of it."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. Happier than I've ever been."

"That's what all of this was about. That's all I really wanted."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I think I just had another one of those profound moments."

"Really? Tell me."

"I just figured out how one person not only changed my life, but also the lives of just about everyone I know. I don't even want to imagine what my life would be like right now if it wasn't for Dillon."

The End

"Be Brave. Be Honest. Be Family."

Chapter 12

"Please, quiet down. We'll start the dance in just a few minutes."

Slowly, the crowd of teenagers began to pay attention to what was going on on the stage.

"The votes have been tallied and we have the results. I'm sure that it won't be a surprise to anyone that this year's homecoming king is the captain of the football team and has also maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average all the way through high school. Everyone, put your hands together for your new king, Daniel MacAlistair."

Heartfelt applause rose up through the hall, as a handsome young man stepped onto the stage, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Brian applauded along with everyone else, pouring out his adoration for Danny. Jack was his big brother and held a special and very different place in his heart. But Danny was, undeniably, his best friend.

The announcer stepped forward and reverently placed a crown on Danny's head.

When the applause died down, the announcer said, "And this year's homecoming queen has the distinction of being the senior class president as well as the goalkeeper of our soccer team for the past two years. Everyone, join me in celebrating the new queen, Brian Weston."

There were some laughs, but also sincere applause as Brian made his way up onto the stage.

Brian broke into uncontrollable giggles when the announcer put the tiara on his head.

As he looked out over the crowd, he spotted Jack and his fiancée, Amanda, standing just inside the door of the gymnasium. They both wore matching expressions of pride for Brian on their happy faces. Jack's quest for a new job, new friends and a new girlfriend yielded favorable results on all three fronts. Brian had been there to encourage Jack every step of the way, just the same way that Jack had always been there for him... and always would be.

"If everyone will clear the dance floor, it's customary for the King and Queen to have the honor of the first dance." The announcer said, and wasn't able to restrain his smile.

Once Brian and Danny were on the dance floor, the music started and Danny pulled Brian close.

After a few steps, Danny firmly said, "I'm the king, I lead."

"Fine." Brian said with resignation and stopped trying to take control of the dance.

"Admit it, you're enjoying this." Danny said as he glided Brian around the dance floor.

"Yeah. I guess so. It's fun, and I'll remember this night forever." Brian said honestly.

Danny smiled at the answer as he waltzed Brian around the dance floor.

Brian caught a glimpse of Jarritt standing in the crowd, dressed in his tuxedo. The thing that caught Brian's attention most was the stark white flower on his lapel. One day, Danny had made Jarritt a paper airplane, in an attempt to keep him entertained. That moment changed Jarritt's life forever. Since that day, with the encouragement of all his friends, Jarritt taught himself the art of origami. Everyone who knew Jarritt was proud of him for mastering the delicate art, but most importantly, Jarritt was proud of himself.

"You arranged this, didn't you?" Brian asked speculatively as they danced.

"I voted for you." Danny said simply, then added, "I really don't know who was behind the 'write-in' campaign, but everyone I talked to thought it was a wonderful idea."

"Well, I'll do my best to fulfill my duties to the best of my ability." Brian said in a dignified voice before breaking into laughter.

"You had enough of this yet?" Danny asked seriously.

"What did you have in mind?" Brian asked curiously.

Rather than answer verbally, Danny raised a hand and motioned to two girls who were giggling hysterically.

As Danny turned him, Brian saw the girls give each other an uncertain look, then take hold of each other and dance out onto the floor to join them.

Howls of laughter rang through the gymnasium at the new development.

Brian couldn't restrain his smile as the girls waltzed over to them.

"Switch partners?" Danny asked as they passed the other couple.

"Sounds kinky." Kendra, Danny's girlfriend, called out playfully.

"I'm that kind of a guy." Danny responded unrepentantly.

As Brian and Danny released each other, Brian noticed that there was one other couple on the dance floor with them. Myron and Gerry, both in their tuxedos, danced around the floor as if no one else in the world existed. Gerry was simply an older version of his younger self, but Myron's appearance was drastically different. He had lost the 'baby fat' that he once carried and had grown into an incredibly handsome young man. If asked, any girl in school would describe him as 'dreamy'.

Brian looked into the eyes of Melissa, his girlfriend of the past two years, and could see the love and pride shining for him. He noticed the paper flower on her dress and smiled. Kendra and Melissa had spread the word about Jarritt's flowers, and by homecoming, nearly everyone in their class had received a flower that was handmade by Jarritt and airbrushed by Danny to match their outfit. Brian and Melissa each wore brilliant blue roses while Danny and Kendra were wearing matching red.

"I never in a million years would have dreamed that I would be dating the Homecoming Queen." Melissa said with a broad smile as she returned his loving gaze.

"You should have seen it coming. After all, I used to be a princess."

"...and they all lived happily ever after."

The End

(1) Breakfast at Tiffanys, Deep Blue Something - source:
<http://www.lyricsondemand.com/onehitwonders/breakfastattiffanyslyrics.html>

(2) Out in the Country, Three Dog Night - Source:
<http://www.threedognight.com>