Spider

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Chapter 1

"Gentlemen, thank you for being so patient." Mrs. Usher said as she walked briskly into the room and settled behind her desk before either man could react.

"That wasn't a problem; we had plenty of paperwork to keep us busy. Your secretary has been piling it on us for nearly an hour." One of the men said frankly.

"But we'll be happy to wait as long as you want, if this means that you're finally going to allow us to be foster parents." The other quickly added.

"Dr. Grant, Mr. Stone, before we go any further, I'm afraid that I must be frank with you." Mrs. Usher said gravely, as she looked at the two men seated before her.

"Please feel free to call us Cliff and Ben."

She paused for a moment before saying, "Regardless of whatever public opinion is saying this week, or what new social revolutions are going on outside this institution, I feel that my job is the same as it ever was. That being, to do my best to match each child that has been given into my care with a family that can love and nurture them, so they can become well rounded, stable adults."

"And you assume that we can't do that, because we're gay." Dr. Grant said dispassionately.

"All things being equal... yes, that would be my opinion." Mrs. Usher said seriously, then sighed and quietly added, "But as it turns out, all things are not equal."

Both men waited for her to expound on her vague statement.

"Gentlemen, the child that I'm considering placing in your care has some special needs that you appear to be uniquely suited to deal with."

"Can I assume that means that you're giving us a gay child?" Ben asked cautiously.

"No... Well, at least, not that I'm aware." Mrs. Usher said to Ben, then turned her attention to Cliff and said, "The child that I'm thinking of, his name is JD, has been through a level of abuse that... let's just say that I've seen more than my share in the past twenty-five years, and when I saw what had been done to him, I was shocked."

"Excuse me for asking, but does this mean that the child needs some sort of ongoing medical care that the department of social services is unwilling to provide?" Cliff asked carefully.

"If that were the case, would you refuse to take him?" Mrs. Usher countered.

After a moment, Cliff reluctantly said, "No, of course not. I just wanted to be clear about what was expected of us and why we were chosen."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that you wouldn't refuse him for being 'less than perfect'. And to answer your original question, to the best of my knowledge, JD isn't in any need of medical attention. What is expected of you is to help JD to have a happy childhood, and eventually grow into a successful adult. And as to why you were chosen... well, there are a few reasons."

Cliff and Ben waited expectantly.

"Dr. Grant, since you are a pediatrician, I am sure that you have experience dealing with distressed children, and also have practice at keeping a bit of professional detachment when dealing with certain things. I believe you will need both of those skills quite a bit in the coming weeks, should you commit to this course of action." Mrs. Usher said ominously, then turned her gaze to Cliff's partner.

"And Mr. Stone, I am given to understand that you are a novelist and work primarily from your home. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Ben said cautiously.

"I believe that, at least in the beginning, JD is going to need a level of attention that parents working outside the home would be unable to provide." Mrs. Usher said carefully.

"So you chose us because I understand children and Ben works from home?" Cliff asked suspiciously, not believing that those were her only criteria.

"Yes. And there is also the fact that JD is absolutely terrified of women." Mrs. Usher said quietly. "If I were to walk into the room where JD is, right now, he would, in all likelihood, cease all movement and become nearly catatonic. If I were to approach him or speak to him, he would withdraw to a point where it might be days before he returned to anything resembling his normal behavior."

"If he can't stand to be around women, how does he function?" Ben asked slowly.

"It's been difficult. We do our best to keep him isolated from the female members of the staff, but that isn't easy." Mrs. Usher admitted with resignation. "Right now, for instance, the other children his age are playing outside, but JD is in the library, reading. There's no way we can shuffle the staff around all day, to accommodate one child."

"I bet it's going to be a relief to get him placed so things can get back to normal." Cliff said seriously.

"Perhaps." Mrs. Usher conceded, "But my primary concern is that JD find a stable home where he can begin to grow and develop. All we're able to do for him here is maintain him. In short, we don't have what he needs."

"Which is?" Ben prompted.

"To put it simply, a family." Mrs. Usher said bluntly. "He needs the type of individual attention that is very difficult to provide in an institutional setting."

"So, is that it? I mean, he's afraid of women. Is that his only problem?" Cliff asked cautiously, feeling that Mrs. Usher was purposely leaving out some important details.

"JD is very nearly uncommunicative. On a good day, he'll find ways to make us aware of his needs, mostly through gestures." Mrs. Usher said quietly.

"So he's physically able to speak, but unwilling?" Cliff asked carefully.

"Yes. Physically, he is able. Emotionally, he is either unwilling or unable. He's been traumatized to a point that... well, our staff psychologist has worked with JD at some length, but he hasn't been able to make any significant progress. It's our hope that in a home environment, JD may be able to become secure enough to open up and start communicating."

"Do you think we can handle it?" Cliff asked his partner quietly.

"Absolutely. I haven't even seen him and I already know that I'd never be able to forgive myself if I backed out." Ben said with an anguished look into his lover's eyes.

"Then you're decided?" Mrs. Usher asked hopefully.

"Yes. We'll do it." Cliff said, as he looked her in the eyes.

"There's one last thing, before I take you to meet him." Mrs. Usher said as she pulled a file folder from the bottom drawer of her desk. "I feel that it's necessary for you to see these, so you'll have at least some idea of what JD is dealing with."

Cliff and Ben both sat forward as she opened the folder. After a pause, she turned it on her desk and scooted it forward, so they could both see.

"Holy God!" Ben exclaimed as his eyes filled with tears. "He's just a baby!"

"At the time these were taken, we estimated that he was six years old. He's spent a lot of time in the hospital since then. He's seven now." Mrs. Usher said quietly.

"How is he even alive after this?" Cliff asked in disbelief.

"The police officers that took these photos believed him to be dead when they found him. These were the crime scene photos they took while they waited for the coroner to arrive. I hear that the coroner nearly fainted when he realized that JD was alive."

"But how could anyone... my God! He's hanging from meat hooks..." Ben asked as he desperately wiped the tears from his eyes.

"The damage was, indeed, significant, but, somehow, no vital organs were pierced." Mrs. Usher said as she averted her eyes from the graphic photos. "It appears that someone purposefully, and very skillfully, suspended him on those hooks. We can only speculate as to why."

"Are these patterns painted on him some type of religious design?" Cliff asked quietly.

"Perhaps. But the police detectives haven't been able to match them to any existing religious cult." Mrs. Usher said professionally, then added hesitantly, "But it's not paint; those are tattoos."

"But... they're covering nearly his whole body." Ben said in a pleading voice, almost begging her to say it wasn't true.

"Yes. He always wears long sleeved, turtle neck shirts, and gloves, to hide them." Mrs. Usher said in a voice that betrayed a little of her welling emotions.

"Something about the tattoos looks strange... what are these ridges?" Cliff asked as he pointed at one of the more detailed photographs.

"The police report calls it ritual scarification. The skin has been repeatedly cut, spread apart, and burned, to cause that type of scarring. The detectives that I spoke with say that this level of scarring would have taken years to achieve." Mrs. Usher said quietly.

"This poor little boy must have been tortured every day of his entire life." Cliff said as he looked at one picture after another.

"We may never know that for sure. JD refuses to answer any questions about anything that happened to him before he arrived here. He just shuts down when he's asked." Mrs. Usher said in a voice that revealed her own emotions were about to get out of control.

"If I were him, I don't think I'd want to remember it either." Cliff said absently as he carefully examined the photos.

"It's possible that he doesn't remember anything. Although his medical tests don't show any brain damage, it's possible that some of the drugs in his system when he was found did something to his memory. The lab tests weren't able to identify them all. I suppose it's also possible that all the memories are still there, but he's repressing them out of some sort of survival instinct. I certainly wouldn't blame him for that."

"Oh my God!" Ben gasped as Cliff turned over a photograph and revealed the next one in the stack.

Mrs. Usher glanced at the picture before saying, "Of course, all the piercings and such have been removed. The doctors say that he has healed without complication and shouldn't have any lasting effects from the damage to his genitals." Mrs. Usher said, then discreetly used a tissue to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Were there any indications of sexual abuse... I mean, besides this?" Cliff asked reluctantly.

"No. It appears that whatever prompted this... mutilation, wasn't sexual in nature. The police are still operating under the theory that it's some sort of religious rite." Mrs. Usher said as she gathered the pictures back into the folder. "If you're still sure that you want JD to come and live with you, I'll take you to him now."

"Absolutely." Ben said immediately, then hesitated and quietly continued, "But before we meet him, I would like to know one thing."

"What is that, Mr. Stone?"

"What does JD stand for?"

"John Doe." Mrs. Usher said, as she looked him in the eyes. "He either doesn't remember, or won't tell us his real name and the police still have no clue as to his true identity."

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"This is our library. I can't go any further, or JD will see me and have a bad reaction. Just go in and talk to him. Mr. Cooper, our staff psychologist, will join you in a few minutes and take you to JD's room to gather his things." Mrs. Usher said as she peeked into the room through the window.

"Thank you for doing this, Mrs. Usher. I can tell that you'd be more comfortable placing JD with a straight couple. I really appreciate that you're going against what you've believed for years, just to do the right thing for him." Ben said gently.

"Please don't think too poorly of me, Mr. Stone. It's not that I believe that gay people are somehow unworthy of having children. It's just been my experience that same sex couples tend to have less stable home lives than traditional heterosexual couples. But I suppose with all the divorce and single parents these days, there may not be much of a difference anymore.

I hope for JD's sake that you two will be the exception to what I've always believed is the rule."

"We'll do our best." Cliff said, then motioned for Ben to walk with him into the library.

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"Can I help you, gentlemen?" The middle aged librarian asked as Cliff and Ben walked in.

"We're just here to talk to JD." Ben said simply.

"Are you police?" The librarian asked cautiously.

Cliff smiled, then said, "No. We're going to be JD's foster parents."

"You? Both of you?" The librarian asked incredulously.

Cliff and Ben both slowly nodded.

"Usher is going to let a gay couple be foster parents?" The librarian asked in shock.

"Is that a problem?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Not at all! Maybe the dark ages are finally coming to an end. I never thought I'd live to see it." He said happily.

"I think we're kind of a test case for her. So we'll do our best to make it so others can get the chance." Ben said with a gentle smile.

"If you need anything... ANYTHING to help JD, just call me. My name's Andy." The librarian said seriously.

"It's nice to meet you, Andy. If anything comes up, we'll give you a call." Ben promised.

"JD likes to read. Make sure you take him to the bookstore and library often." Andy said firmly, then gently added, "I think it's the only escape he has."

"We'll be sure that he has plenty of reading material." Cliff assured.

"Now, if you'll excuse us, we're going to meet our son." Ben said with a watery smile.

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"JD?" Ben said gently, "May we sit with you?"

The little boy glanced from one man to the other, then went back to reading his book without acknowledging them.

Ben was startled by JD's arresting blue/gray eyes. The boy was small and had neatly trimmed dark brown hair, but all his features were just a backdrop, framing those large, intense eyes that looked like cold steel.

"I'm Cliff, and this is Ben. We'd like very much to take you to our home so you could live with us. We've heard that you don't like to talk much. But we need for you to find some way to let us know if that would be okay with you." Cliff said carefully.

JD looked up from his book, at Cliff, impassively.

"Like I said, my name is Cliff. I'm a pediatrician... that's a doctor especially for kids." Cliff said as he tried to get some sense of what JD was thinking or feeling.

After a moment to consider, JD turned to Ben and seemed to be waiting.

"I'm Ben and I'm a writer. The librarian said that you like to read, so it sounds like we could be a pretty good team." Ben said with a smile.

JD looked at Ben for a moment longer, then turned his full attention back to his book.

Ben flashed a desperate look at his lover, hoping that Cliff had found something in their interaction that would give them reason to hope.

Both Cliff and Ben watched as JD turned the page of his book and continued to read.

"If there's anything you want to know about us, just find a way to let us know what it is and we'll tell you." Ben said anxiously.

JD didn't give any reaction and seemed to be devoting his full attention to his book.

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"How are things going in here?" a young looking man in his late twenties asked pleasantly as he approached the table.

"Okay, I think." Ben said hesitantly.

"We were just asking JD if he'd like to come live with us." Cliff added cautiously.

"Well, it looks like JD is engrossed in his book, right now, so why don't we talk while we wait for him to finish the chapter?" the man asked cheerfully.

"Are you Mr. Cooper?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yes. I see that my reputation precedes me. I bet JD's been saying all kinds of nice things about me." Mr. Cooper said with a grin.

"Not to us." Cliff said honestly.

"Mrs. Usher said that you'd be joining us." Ben added quietly.

"I should have guessed. By the way, the grown ups are welcomed to call me Ron, " he said with a smile. "So what kind of a place is JD going to be moving to? I'd like to have some idea of where he's going. Wait! Let me guess.... a tiny one-bedroom apartment with a single naked light bulb for both heat and light."

"It's a little bit nicer than that." Ben said with a chuckle. "We have a three bedroom house, north of town."

"Three bedrooms? I see two of you... do you have any plans for the third bedroom?" Ron asked in a leading tone.

"Well, actually, that's why we're here. We're looking for just the right person to fill it. We thought JD might be a perfect fit." Cliff said playfully.

Ron glanced to see if JD were going to give any reaction.

After a moment, Ron asked, "So this house of yours, is it surrounded by pavement, like this place?"

"Oh no. We have a great big yard with lots of trees." Cliff said cheerfully.

"And a pool." Ben added helpfully.

"A pool... table?" Ron asked with a grin.

"Well, yes, we do have one of those in the basement. But I was talking about the swimming pool in the back yard." Ben said with a smile.

"I see... Your place sounds a lot nicer than mine. I tell you what, if JD doesn't want to go with you, can I come?" Ron asked with exaggerated hopeful wide eyes.

"Well, I don't know... JD **is** our first choice." Ben said in a wavering tone.

JD slowly closed his book, then stood and walked away from the table.

"Too much?" Cliff asked with concern.

"Just watch." Ron said with a sly smile, then tilted his head in JD's direction.

The three men watched as JD took the book to the librarian to turn it in.

A moment later, JD walked back to the table and picked up his backpack.

Ben and Cliff looked at each other, then at Ron, with question.

"I think that means that he's ready to go and just waiting on you two." Ron said with a grin.

"Well, I think one of you guys should lead the way. I don't know my way around here." Cliff said with a loving smile at the boy beside him.

"I can never remember which kid goes in which room. JD, why don't you show us the way?" Ron said cheerfully.

JD glanced at the three men, then started toward the door.

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Cliff and Ben were impressed with the tidy bedroom. There were two sets of bunk beds, two tall dressers lining the walls and a large circular table with four chairs off to the side, just under a window. There was enough open floorspace to make the room feel spacious and comfortable.

"JD, why don't you get your things together while I show our guests around?" Ron asked pleasantly.

Even though he didn't give any indication of hearing Ron's words, JD walked to one of the dressers and started to gather his clothes.

"This is really nice. Somehow I thought it would be more... I don't know... depressing." Ben said honestly.

"It's not always a happy place, but we do our best to try to keep things upbeat." Ron said with a smile, then looked curiously at what JD was doing as he continued. "As childcare facilities go, this is one of the better ones."

Cliff and Ben watched as JD took a small pile of folded clothes and placed them on one of the beds.

"What do you suppose that's about?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I think JD is wanting to leave some things behind, for his roommates." Ron said and suddenly seemed to be fighting back tears.

"What is it?" Ben asked gently.

"With everything these kids have been through... sometimes it just amazes me how people who have so little can give so freely." Ron said as he got himself back under control.

They watched as JD hoisted himself up so he could place another bundle of clothes on the top bunk.

"I suppose there's some business we should discuss before it's time for you to go." Ron said as he tore his gaze away from JD.

"Mrs. Usher's secretary already had us fill out a ton of paperwork. As far as I know, everything's done." Cliff said seriously.

"I'm talking about JD's therapy appointments. Since he's in foster care, you can bring him back here to meet with me, if you want. But if that's going to be too far out of your way, I can recommend some state certified psychologists in your area." Ron said professionally. "After he's had some time to settle in, call me and we'll work it out."

"My office is only about five blocks from here. We should be able to make it work." Cliff said frankly.

"Are you talking about the Professional Building on Bleaker?" Ron asked curiously.

"Yes. I've been there for about two years." Cliff said seriously.

"I seem to remember something in your file saying that you're a pediatrician." Ron confirmed.

"Yes. That's right." Cliff said cautiously.

"I didn't realize we had a pediatrician that close. Would you mind if I made some inquiries about getting you listed as one of our certified physicians?" Ron asked hopefully.

"What would that entail?" Cliff asked slowly.

"We'd bring you kids, you'd treat them, the state would pay for it. We already have two or three physicians listed, so you wouldn't be getting the whole lot. But there have been times when it would have been nice to have a doctor a little bit closer by." Ron said frankly.

"Go ahead and make your inquiries. When I can see your proposal in writing, I'll be able to give you a more definite answer." Cliff said seriously.

"I'll get the wheels in motion right away, then. Expect to be hearing from me sometime in the next week or so." Ron said with a smile.

"Guys." Ben said to draw their attention, then gestured toward the door.

JD was standing by the door with a small cloth duffel bag in his hand and his backpack slung on his back.

"I guess this means that he's ready to go." Ron said with a tender smile at the boy.

"Can we call you if we run into problems? I foresee some communication issues in our future." Cliff said frankly.

"Sure, here's my card. Please feel free to call me at any time." Ron said as he handed his business card to Cliff.

"Are you all ready to go?" Ben asked as he walked to JD's side.

Without looking back, JD walked out the door.

"Good luck." Ron said as he watched Cliff and Ben follow the boy into the hall.

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"We're going to need to get him a booster seat." Cliff said as he checked to see that JD was secured.

"Isn't he kind of old to need a car seat?" Ben asked hesitantly.

"What I'm talking about is a booster. It just raises him up so the seatbelt fits him correctly, so that in the event of an accident he'll be properly restrained." Cliff said seriously.

"This is one of those pediatrician things, isn't it?" Ben asked with a grin.

"Not just pediatricians. I'm sure anyone who's ever had to rescue or treat a child who wasn't properly restrained in a vehicle accident would tell you the same thing. For just a few dollars and a few minutes of your time, you can significantly increase your child's chances of surviving an accident." Cliff said frankly.

"I'll pick one up tomorrow." Ben said quietly.

"It would probably be out of your way. I can get one on the way home from work." Cliff said casually.

"How are you doing back there?" Ben asked as he turned to look into the back seat.

JD didn't give any indication that he had heard the question as he looked out the window.

"Is it autism?" Ben asked quietly, hoping that JD wouldn't overhear.

"There's a whole range of criteria to make that determination." Cliff answered slowly, "But my gut is telling me 'no'."

Ben looked at his partner hopefully, waiting for more of an explanation.

"I think Mrs. Usher may be right. Even though JD has some of the classic autistic 'tells', I believe that what we're seeing is his natural defensive reaction to an unimaginable trauma." Cliff said carefully.

"What can we do to help him?" Ben asked quietly.

"Be strong, and let him know that we care." Cliff said with a slight shrug as he drove. "Give him the safety and security that he should have had all his life."

"Are you sure about doing this?" Ben asked with concern.

"**Now** you ask." Cliff responded with a cheeky grin, then at the look of concern in Ben's eyes he confidently whispered, "Yeah. I'm sure."

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"Here we are!" Ben said happily.

"Do you want to see your new home?" Cliff asked with a smile into the back seat.

JD didn't reveal any emotion, but opened his car door and picked up his luggage.

"It's just about dinner time; why don't we show JD his room and give him some time to unpack while dinner is cooking?" Ben asked cheerfully.

"Sounds good. Then, after dinner, we can give JD the grand tour." Cliff said happily as he unlocked the front door.

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"Well, this is it. I hope you like it here." Cliff said as he led the way into the entry hall.

JD slowly looked around and seemed to be getting pale.

"I bet all of this is kind of overwhelming. Come on, and I'll show you your room." Cliff said as he started walking.

Ben noticed the wide eyed expression on JD's face and was worried for a moment that the little boy might pass out.

"Are you okay?" Ben whispered as he knelt at the boy's side and gently put an arm around him.

Cliff stopped at the hallway and watched as JD turned and returned Ben's hug with all his might.

"It's okay, JD. You're safe here." Ben whispered.

"Why don't you show JD to his room while I get dinner started." Cliff said warmly at the sight.

JD suddenly pulled away from Ben, then ran to Cliff and hugged him firmly around the waist.

"Or... we could both show him his room." Ben said as he slowly stood.

"I like that plan even better." Cliff said, then coaxed JD to release his hold.

"Come on up here where I can hug you back." Cliff said, then hoisted the boy up onto his hip.

After a moment to find his grip, JD nestled into Cliff's shoulder and hugged him.

"I think that if you wanted, we could make this a three-way hug." Cliff said to Ben with a grin.

"That would be great, as long as JD doesn't mind." Ben said as he approached.

JD continued to hold onto Cliff with his right arm, but freed his left and held it out to Ben, inviting him into the hug.

"Thanks, JD." Ben said, then moved in to hug both his lover and his new son.

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The trio maintained their hugging formation down the hall and through the door to JD's room.

"Well, JD, here we are. This is your room." Cliff said happily.

He felt the boy's hug suddenly go slack.

"Let's let him explore." Cliff whispered, then gently placed JD on the floor.

"He dropped his duffel bag in the entry hall. I'll go get it." Ben said before rushing out of the room.

JD slowly wandered, carefully touching everything with his gloved hands, as if, by touching, he was convincing himself that it was real.

Ben returned and stopped in the doorway to watch the silent boy exploring his new surroundings.

"JD, you can stay in here and unpack your things if you want. Or you can come with us and keep us company while we make dinner." Cliff said gently.

After a moment, JD stopped his roaming and turned to face Cliff.

"What do you think that means?" Cliff asked Ben curiously.

JD put his arms up and waited.

"Either he's signaling a touchdown or he wants to be picked up." Ben said with a smile.

"I can do that." Cliff said happily, then hoisted the boy onto his hip again. "We're off to the kitchen."

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As they entered the kitchen, Cliff carefully lowered JD to the floor and allowed him to stand. "I was thinking about doing some spaghetti with meatballs. Is everyone okay with that?"

JD didn't give any sign of hearing the question, but instead, walked to the refrigerator and started looking through the shelves and drawers.

"Maybe he doesn't like spaghetti." Ben offered cautiously.

"No. I think spaghetti is universally 'kid approved'. Let's just wait and see what he's doing." Cliff said carefully.

Cliff and Ben watched as JD started carrying vegetables to the counter by the sink.

"I think he wants to help us make dinner." Ben said in realization.

"What a wonderful idea! Our first meal as a family will be prepared by the whole family." Cliff said with a grand smile.

"How about I get to work on the pasta and sauce, so you're free to work on the meatballs?" Ben asked thoughtfully.

"If you'll also take on the garlic bread, you've got a deal." Cliff said with a grin.

"Did you pick up any French bread?" Ben asked curiously.

"Even better. I bought a loaf of garlic bread. Just heat and serve. But I'd rather not have to deal with it while I'm up to my elbows in ground meat." Cliff said frankly.

Both men turned at the sound of a chair being scooted across the kitchen floor.

JD climbed up on the chair, then removed his gloves and began to wash the vegetables under the tap.

"We'd better get to work or JD is going to be ready to eat before we've even started." Ben said with a loving smile at the boy.

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Both men kept careful watch on the young boy and had matching expressions of indecision and concern when they saw him take a paring knife from the knife rack to cut up the vegetables.

Since JD seemed to know what he was doing, they let him do as he wanted, but both were devoting more attention to what JD was doing than to what they were each working on.

When JD stopped moving for what seemed a moment too long, Ben casually walked over to investigate.

JD was looking at his finger, which had a small dot of blood on it. He seemed to be transfixed by the sight.

"Oh, you cut yourself. Come over here, so we can take care of that." Ben said as he lifted the boy onto his hip and walked him to the sink.

"And WHO is the pediatrician here?" Cliff asked playfully.

"Hmmm... let me see. That would be the guy with his hands in a bowl of ground meat." Ben said, giggling. "Don't worry about this, love. Let me handle your light work."

Ben sat JD on the kitchen counter beside the sink as he turned on the cold water tap.

"We're just going to rinse this off for a few seconds and see if it stops bleeding on its own." Ben said, as he held the boy's finger under the running water.

After a few seconds, Ben turned off the water and examined the finger carefully.

Ben noticed the barbed wire pattern tattooed on the back of each finger, but forced himself to focus on JD's index finger, which had stopped bleeding and seemed none the worse for wear.

"It looks like it stopped all on its own." Ben said happily, then guided JD's finger to his lips and said, "A kiss will make it all better."

JD watched curiously as Ben made a show of kissing his injured finger.

"There, you should be good as new." Ben said happily, then gave JD a quick kiss on the cheek before placing him gently on the floor.

JD stared at his finger for a moment, then brought up his other hand and felt his cheek.

"Do you need any help with that salad you're making?" Ben asked gently.

JD blinked, then walked to the island where he had been working and climbed back onto his chair.

"You should have gone into medicine. You've got a healing touch." Cliff said warmly, as he placed formed meatballs on a baking sheet.

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"Would you look at this salad? I might think about becoming a vegetarian with food that looks this good." Cliff said as he took his place at the dinner table.

"I'll make sure to keep everything we need for salad in store." Ben said with a warm smile.

"Is everything ready?" Cliff asked as he looked around.

"I'm just waiting on the garlic bread to be finished. Go ahead and start dishing it up and the bread should be done when you're ready to eat." Ben said as he used salad tongs to get himself a decent-sized portion of salad.

JD was sitting and watching them, not making any move to serve himself.

"Hey, JD. You live here now. This food is for all of us, so dig in. If you want something you can't reach, just point." Cliff said as he served himself some spaghetti.

"That looks kind of messy. Maybe we should do it for him." Ben said thoughtfully.

"The only way he'll figure out how to serve himself spaghetti without making a mess is by trial and error. If he spills a little, we'll clean it up." Cliff said without concern. "Here you go, JD. We've got plenty, so take as much as you want."

After a moment to consider, JD carefully used the serving spoon and fork to guide a portion of spaghetti onto his plate.

"Hey, he did that better than you did!" Ben said with a chuckle.

"Beginner's luck." Cliff said with a barely restrained grin.

"Here's some extra sauce to top it off with and some meatballs." Cliff said as he moved the bowl of meatballs and sauce where JD could reach them easily.

JD looked at the bowl of sauce, then at Cliff with indecision.

"There's plenty. Just take as much as you want." Cliff said assuringly.

After a moment of hesitation, JD carefully moved two meatballs to his plate, then looked at Cliff with question.

"If you still want another one when you've finished that, you can help yourself to more." Cliff assured.

JD seemed to accept the statement, then spooned some extra sauce over his spaghetti and meatballs.

"I have some Parmesan cheese if you'd like some. Just crank the handle like this and it will shred it onto your food." Ben said, then demonstrated on his own plate.

After he had finished, he placed the cheese grater on the table in front of JD.

"I think the garlic bread should be ready now. I'll be right back." Ben said happily as he quickly walked into the kitchen.

Cliff watched as JD carefully shredded cheese onto his spaghetti. His attention was once again drawn to the gloves that the boy was wearing.

"You know, JD. Here at home with us, you don't have to hide yourself." Cliff said gently.

JD stopped all movement, but didn't look at Cliff.

"It's entirely up to you, but if you ever decide that you don't want to wear your gloves, or if you'd like to wear a short sleeve shirt, Ben and I won't mind at all." Cliff said carefully.

"Garlic bread's ready." Ben said happily as he placed a platter filled with sliced garlic bread in the center of the table.

Cliff watched as JD slowly placed the cheese grater beside his plate.

"Here's a garlic bread for you, JD. You don't have to eat it if you don't like it." Ben said and placed a slice of the crunchy garlic bread on the edge of JD's plate.

After a moment of hesitation, JD slowly started to eat his meal.

"Hey, JD. This salad is wonderful. Thank you for making it for us." Ben said happily.

JD didn't give any obvious reaction, but Cliff noticed that his movements seemed to relax a little bit.

* * * * *

"Well, that was a fantastic meal. What would you guys think if we went ahead and had the grand tour now, then come back and do dishes after?" Ben asked cheerfully.

"That sounds good to me. I think I could use a little walk around after all that food. What about you, JD? Would you like to see your new home?" Cliff asked hopefully.

JD got out of his chair and stood, he seemed to be waiting for what was going to happen next.

"Well, you've already seen the kitchen and dining room, so how about we start with the bedrooms?" Cliff suggested helpfully.

JD turned to face Cliff, then put his arms up.

"Touchdown!" Ben said with a grin.

"Do you want to carry him? I'd hate for you to feel deprived." Cliff said with a smile at his partner.

"He's looking at you. I can only assume that means that you're our designated child carrier,." Ben said playfully, then added, "I'm sure I'll get my turn while you're at work tomorrow."

"Fair enough." Cliff said, then walked to JD and picked him up.

Before he had taken two steps, JD had one of his hands extended to Ben, inviting him into the hug.

"Thank you, JD. I'd be happy to join you." Ben said warmly and put an arm around Cliff and JD.

* * * * *

"Well, this is my bedroom." Ben said as they entered. "I usually sleep with Cliff, but sometimes, if I'm working late, or if one of us is having trouble sleeping, I'll sleep in here."

"I think he's noticed your library." Cliff said as he watched the young boy looking at the massive bookcase filling one entire wall of the room.

Cliff gently put JD down and watched as he walked to the bookcase to feel the books with his gloved hand.

"Oh, that's right. I almost forgot to mention, Andy, your librarian friend, told us that you like to read." Ben said happily. "You're welcome to come in here and help yourself to any books that you want, whenever you're in the mood to read something."

JD turned and looked at Cliff and Ben with a disbelieving, yet hopeful, look in his eyes.

"Really. Anytime you feel like reading, be it day or night, you can come in here and choose any book you want." Ben said quietly, warmed to his soul to see the smallest trace of a smile come across the somber boy's face.

Ben was surprised when JD ran to him and hugged him tightly around the waist.

He chuckled a little, then gently said, "If there's anything else you need, to be happy here, just find a way to let us know."

Cliff watched the scene with a tender smile and felt for the first time since meeting JD, that they might actually be able to get through to him.

There was hope.

* * * * *

"Nothing much to see, here." Cliff said as he carried JD into the next room. "This is our bedroom. Bed, dresser, exercise bike/clothes hanger."

"If you wake up in the middle of the night and want to find us, this is where we'll be." Ben added gently.

"But what if we're..." Cliff trailed off, then glanced at Ben urgently.

"We'll tackle that if it becomes a problem. For now, JD needs to know where to find us if he gets scared." Ben said firmly.

Cliff thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"Let's go down to the game room." Ben said with a grin at JD. "You're going to love this."

* * * * *

Cliff let JD down and watched as he explored the finished basement.

"The TV over there is for video games. Over here we have the pool table and dart board." Ben said as he gestured around.

"Maybe we should hold off on the darts for a while." Cliff said seriously.

"No playing with the darts unless one of us is with you." Ben said toward JD, who was still exploring the room.

JD walked to the video game area of the basement, then looked curiously at two overstuffed recliners, off to the side.

"That's our reading nook." Ben explained happily. "Some nights are just perfect for sitting in a comfortable chair and reading the night away."

JD looked at Ben and actually gave a small, hesitant smile of anticipation.

"I think that tonight might just be one of those nights." Cliff said tenderly when he saw the reaction.

"Dishes first." Ben said decisively, breaking the spell.

"Do we have to?" Cliff whined playfully.

"Yes. We do." Ben said firmly, then gestured toward the stairs. "No fun until after the chores are done."

To their surprise, JD walked up the stairs ahead of them.

* * * * *

By the time they had reached the top of the stairs, JD already had a chair pulled up in front of the sink and hot water running.

"We have a dishwasher, JD. You don't have to do that." Ben said quickly.

JD turned and looked at Ben curiously.

"If you'll scrape the plates off and hand them to me, I'll load them into the dishwasher. While we're doing that, Cliff can deal with any leftovers and then give me the pots and pans." Ben said as he opened the dishwasher.

JD picked up a plate and looked at it, then at Ben curiously.

"Here's a rubber spatula. You can use it to scrape the loose stuff off the plate and into the trash, right there. Then hand it to me." Ben said as he pointed.

JD scraped a few stray spaghetti noodles off the plate, then handed it to Ben.

"That's just right." Ben said happily. "Just keep doing that until I have all the dishes."

JD took the next plate and seemed to be a little more sure of himself as he scraped it off.

"It looks like we'll have enough meatballs left over for some meatball subs." Cliff said with a grin.

"Sounds good to me. What do you think, JD? Would you like some meatball submarine sandwiches later this week?" Ben asked happily.

JD didn't react, but continued to hand dishes to Ben.

"Here, I'm done with this." Cliff said as he held out the bowl from the meatballs and sauce.

Before Ben could take it, JD snatched the bowl from Cliff's hand and started to scrape the excess sauce out of it.

"He takes his work seriously." Cliff said with a chuckle.

"A good work ethic is important." Ben said with a tender smile. "And I think that anyone who works this hard deserves to be rewarded."

"How do you mean?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Well, I think that if JD helps us out with cooking and cleaning, he should get an allowance." Ben said before accepting a handful of silverware from JD.

"Good idea. But if he does anything above and beyond normal chores, he'll need to be paid extra. I don't want JD to ever think that he's only here to work for us." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Agreed." Ben said as he glanced at the sink and noticed that they had finished all the dishes. "But I think we're just about done with the chores, for now."

"JD, if you'll wipe down the sink area. Ben can get the dining room and I'll take care of the stove." Cliff said with a smile.

"I'm on it." Ben said as he closed the dishwasher, and started it going.

JD took off his gloves, then rinsed out a dishrag and started to wipe down the counter tops around the sink.

"The kitchen looks as good as new." Cliff said happily as he finished wiping down the stove.

"The dining room is good too." Ben said as he walked back into the kitchen.

"Well then, what do we have planned for the rest of the evening?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I get the feeling that JD would enjoy some time to read." Ben said with a tender smile at the young boy. "JD, why don't you go into my room and pick out a book for yourself? Then we can go down to the basement and enjoy a few hours of relaxing."

JD gave Ben a quick smile, then walked quickly out of the kitchen.

Cliff looked at Ben with concern.

"I think he's happy here." Ben said honestly, answering the unasked question.

"It's so hard to tell." Cliff said anxiously.

"Come on, love. Let's spend some quality time with our son." Ben said with a watery smile as he draped an arm around his partner.

* * * * *

"I didn't think of it before, but we may need to get some new furniture." Ben said as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"What were you thinking of?" Cliff asked curiously.

"We only have two comfortable chairs, and three avid readers." Ben said frankly.

"Oh. I see what you mean." Cliff said thoughtfully, then added, "We'll figure something out."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs drew their attention.

"What did you find to read?" Ben asked as he walked to meet JD at the foot of the stairs.

After a moment, JD cautiously held out the book so Ben could take it.

"Meta-Mythological Dynasties?" Ben said with a chuckle of surprise.

JD looked up at him with a hint of anxiety in his eyes.

"Don't worry, JD, I've already said that you can read anything that you like. I'm just surprised by your choice." Ben said as he handed the book back. "Come on, let's go get comfortable."

"Isn't that one of yours?" Cliff asked as he followed Ben and JD into the 'reading nook'.

"Yeah. I wrote that about... four years ago, I think." Ben said as he settled into one of the plush recliners. "Come on up here, little man. We've got more butts than chairs. So we're going to have to double up."

JD looked at him curiously, but went along willingly as Ben drew him into the chair.

"Hey! Look at that, you two fit in there just perfectly." Cliff said with a tender smile.

"I kind of thought that we would." Ben said as he reached across JD to get the book he had been reading.

JD had already opened his book and was reading with his nose about six inches from the page.

"It's bad for your eyes to read in the dark." Cliff said as he turned on the reading light between the chairs.

JD looked up with surprise, then smiled at Cliff.

"You're welcome." Cliff said with a grin, then settled into his own chair.

* * * * *

They had been reading quietly for a while when Ben felt a little hand tapping on his arm.

"Did you need something, JD?" Ben asked curiously.

JD shifted the book off his lap to where Ben could see it more easily, then pointed at a passage of text.

"Oh, yeah. That's kind of difficult to explain. Basically, Khaos was the essence of disorder before anything that could be considered 'real' existed. When Kosmos formed, he took the stuff that was floating randomly and without purpose and began to organize it and give it form. What this is really saying is that Khaos continues on, trying to undo the work of his younger brother and return the universe to the empty, peaceful place that it once was." Ben said carefully.

JD sat quietly for a moment, then slowly shifted the book back to his own lap.

"Isn't that a little bit advanced for a seven year old?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Probably, but if he's enjoying it, what's the harm?" Ben asked with a one armed shrug.

"I'm just worried about him reading something that might further traumatize him." Cliff said frankly.

"I can't think of anything in my library that should bother him. I'm fairly selective about what I read." Ben said thoughtfully. "There may be a few books with adult themes, but I'm pretty sure that all of those are positive and healthy examples of loving relationships."

Cliff looked at the little boy, snuggled into Ben's side, reading as though nothing else in the world existed to him.

"And just so you know, JD's not the first one to ask me about that passage of text. I've had four or five other people ask me about the same thing." Ben said frankly, then quietly added, "Of course, they were all college students."

"I don't know how we would go about testing him for his reading level. But it looks like he may be off the chart." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"I think it's a few years before they test for that in school. Most seven year olds are just learning the absolute basics about reading. They probably couldn't read a 'real' book if they tried." Ben said as he watched JD turn the page.

"From what I've seen, most high school graduates these days couldn't either." Cliff said frankly.

Ben nodded his agreement, then went back to reading his own book.

* * * * *

"Well, it's been a long, exciting day, JD needs to get his sleep, and I have to work in the morning." Cliff said as he slipped a bookmark into his book before setting it aside.

"I think I might have dozed off for a minute or two while I was reading." Ben said with a chuckle.

"How about you, JD? Are you about ready for bed?" Cliff asked as he slowly stood.

JD flipped to the next page in his book, then held it out for Ben to see.

"Good idea. Finish that chapter, then we'll get ready for bed." Ben said gently.

"I'm heading up. I'll make sure everything's closed up." Cliff said as he started walking toward the stairs.

"I didn't realize it was so late. Why don't you go on to bed and let me take care of it. You have to be up early." Ben said sympathetically.

"I won't give you any argument. I feel like I'll be asleep before my head hits the pillow." Cliff said, then trudged up the stairs.

Ben reached to the side table beside the chair and grabbed a bookmark. Before he could put it in his book, he stopped and reached back for a second one.

Just as he was placing the first bookmark into his book, JD looked up from his own book and closed it with his finger holding his place.

"Here you go." Ben said as he offered the second bookmark.

JD smiled as he accepted the bookmark, then carefully marked his place before closing the book all the way.

"You can leave your book right here, if you want." Ben said as he sat his book aside.

JD held the book tight against his chest, looking as if he would fight if Ben tried to take it away.

"It's fine if you want to take it with you. I was just thinking that Cliff and I do most of our reading down here, since it's such a comfortable spot and it has the right lighting." Ben said as he coaxed JD to get out of the chair.

JD stood, still holding the book close to him and looking cautious.

Ben smiled as he stood, then said, "I promise, JD. I'm not going to try to take it away from you."

After a moment, JD seemed to relax a little, so Ben said, "Let's go up and get ready for bed."

* * * * *

"I guess since you're seven years old, that you don't need for me to bathe you or anything like that." Ben said as they walked toward JD's room. "Let's get your bedclothes together, then I'll show you where to find everything that you'll need in the bathroom."

JD walked into his room and reverently placed the book on his bed.

"Do you have pajamas or anything like that with you?" Ben asked as he waited by the door.

JD opened his duffel bag and pulled out a pair of what looked to be very well worn sweat pants and a sweat shirt.

"Those look comfortable, but I think you're about due for some new ones." Ben said casually. "I tell you what, I have some work that I have to get done in the morning, but maybe I'll take you shopping in the afternoon and we'll get you a few things."

JD took a small vinyl pouch out of his duffel bag, then walked to stand by Ben.

"If you're ready, I'll show you where to get cleaned up."

* * * * *

"Towels, soap, shampoo. It's all pretty easy to find, I think." Ben said casually as he walked around the bathroom. "You have a shower stall or a bathtub to choose from. Since we aren't in any hurry, you can shower or bathe, whichever you feel like."

JD was walking around the bathroom and Ben couldn't tell from his expression if he was even hearing what he was being told.

"Do you have a toothbrush?" Ben asked curiously.

JD took his vinyl case to the vanity by the sink and opened it to reveal a small toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

"Well, it looks like you have everything you need, then. I'm going to be in my room, just across the hall, if you need anything." Ben said seriously.

JD looked up at Ben with those large blue/gray eyes, and Ben couldn't even begin to guess at what was going on in his mind.

"When you're done with your bath, I'll come in and say 'goodnight'." Ben said gently before closing the door.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of quiet, Ben heard the sound of the shower starting up.

"Bubble bath." Ben said aloud as he added it to his shopping list.

He didn't have any experience raising children, but he remembered being a child and had always enjoyed playing in a tub full of frothy bubbles.

With a smile, he also added 'bath toys' to his list.

After a few minutes of wandering thoughts, Ben turned his attention back to his list of tasks for the coming day.

He had recently finished writing his latest book and was doing a last review before sending it off to his publisher.

Although it would take some time to read through the whole thing, he would be able to set it aside and attend to JD if he needed anything. In fact, with JD's passion for reading, he might very well be able to make it through the entire manuscript without interruption.

He heard the shower stop and listened carefully, worried that JD might have some sort of problem in the unfamiliar bathroom.

The boy was so quiet that Ben couldn't guess at what he was doing until he heard the sound of the water running in the sink.

"Good boy." Ben muttered, knowing that JD was brushing his teeth.

A few minutes later, he heard the bathroom door open and the sound of little bare feet walking quietly across the hall.

Ben slowly got up from his chair with a smile on his face.

'Our son.' He thought to himself, once again amazed at the wonderful gift they had been given.

* * * * *

"Are you all ready for bed?" Ben asked gently as he walked into JD's room.

JD looked at Ben suddenly, then hopped on the bed and rushed to hide his hands and bare feet under the edge of the blanket.

"It's okay, JD. I know all about the tattoos." Ben said as he walked slowly into the room. "I can understand if you're shy about them. But if you're worried about what I'll do if I see them, you don't need to be."

The expression in JD's eyes was uncertainty with a tinge of fear.

"JD, Mrs. Usher told us all about you before we ever agreed to be your foster parents. We chose you just the way you are." Ben said with a gentle smile.

There was a moment when JD seemed to be considering the words, then he relaxed a little.

"Now, snuggle down into the blankets and get comfortable. It's time for sleep." Ben said gently.

JD took the book off his bed and placed it carefully on the bedside stand.

"I'll probably be awake before you are, tomorrow. I have some work to do in the morning, so you'll be able to find me in my room. That's the one right next door." Ben said as he pointed at the wall. "Just come in and get me when you wake up."

A blank stare was JD's only response.

"We'll be in Cliff's room at the end of the hall if you need us for anything at all during the night." Ben said gently as he brushed a few strands of damp hair off JD's forehead.

As Ben was about to get up, JD hesitantly pulled one of his hands from under the blanket and held out his hand with his index finger extended, like he wanted Ben to look at it.

Ben took the offered hand, then looked at the finger carefully.

JD's tiny cut from earlier wasn't even visible.

Ben was about to say as much when he saw the expectation in JD's eyes.

In a flash of insight, Ben knew what JD wanted.

He took the finger to his lips and kissed it, then leaned in and gave JD a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Goodnight, JD. Have a good sleep."

JD seemed to be frozen in place for a moment, then he lunged forward and gave Ben a fierce hug.

Ben chuckled at the reaction, and returned the hug more gently.

"Remember, if you need me, I'm just at the end of the hall." Ben whispered.

JD finally released the hug and settled back onto the bed.

After a moment, Ben stood and walked to the door.

As he turned off the light, he whispered, "I love you, JD."

Chapter 2

"Good morning, love. Did you sleep well?" Ben asked groggily.

"Just fine. Go back to sleep." Cliff whispered as he got out of bed.

"I wish I could, but last night I realized just how much work I have to get done this morning." Ben said as he forced himself to sit up.

"Did you have any problem getting JD to go to bed?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Oh, no. He was a perfect little angel." Ben said with a broad smile.

"Still, I should have been there with you." Cliff said regretfully.

"It really wasn't a problem, and besides, you needed the sleep; your patients deserve a well rested doctor to care for them." Ben said frankly.

"Thanks for being so understanding." Cliff said as he sat on the edge of the bed, then leaned in to give Ben a loving kiss.

"Mmmm. Good morning." Ben purred.

"I'd love to show you how good a morning it can be, but I need to jump in the shower." Cliff said as he reluctantly stood.

"While you're doing that, I'll make us some breakfast." Ben said as he scooted to the edge of the bed.

"Just as long as it's something quick. I don't have much time to spare." Cliff said frankly.

"Isn't that why you have a 'waiting' room?" Ben asked with a grin.

"Oh sure. You do know that the only thing worse than a sick cranky kid is one who is bored out of his mind because he's been made to wait too long, don't you?" Cliff said with a chuckle.

"Go on, then, get cleaned up. Breakfast will be ready by the time you're out of the shower." Ben said as he pulled on a bathrobe.

* * * * *

Later, as Ben was sitting at his computer, reading over his manuscript, the phone ringing broke his concentration.

"Hello?" Ben answered cautiously, not able to imagine who would be calling so early.

"*Hello. This is Ron Cooper. We met yesterday.*"

"Oh, right. Good morning, Ron. This is Ben, what can I do for you this morning?" Ben asked as he relaxed back into his chair.

"*Well, I'm sorry for calling so early, but I just had to check to see how things are going with JD, before my first appointment. I guess the little guy got to me a lot more than I realized, and I'm kinda worried about him.*" Ron admitted shyly.

"I can certainly understand that. I've known him for less than a day, and I'm already totally hooked." Ben said casually, then added, "But everything's fine."

"*Did he have any nightmares last night?*" Ron asked cautiously.

"No. I didn't hear a peep out of him all night. He was sleeping soundly last time I checked on him." Ben said happily.

"*Oh, that's good. Maybe this is going to work out, after all.*" Ron said, sounding relieved.

"It's been working, so far. I have to say that I'm really surprised, though. I didn't expect JD to be such a tactile child. He's always wanting to be held and picked up." Ben said frankly.

"*Really?*" Ron said with surprise. "*JD was very resistant to any displays of affection while he was here. He wouldn't let anyone touch him.*"

Ben thought about it for a moment, then said, "Well, maybe it's different when it's his idea."

"*I'll consider it a very encouraging sign. Has he talked at all?*" Ron asked curiously.

"Not a single word. But he's been really good about letting us know what he wants. I don't know that his speaking would make much of a difference."

"*I'm so glad that this is working out, so well. I didn't want to give you any additional pressure yesterday, but you should know that you two are JD's last hope at a normal life.*" Ron said seriously.

"How do you mean?" Ben asked curiously.

"*Well, unfortunately, as sweet as JD is, there's no way he could stay here long term. If we hadn't found a good family to place him with, our only other option, given his condition, would have been a mental hospital.*" Ron said frankly.

"Does he need to be in a mental hospital?" Ben asked reluctantly.

"*Oh no. Not at all.*" Ron said immediately. "*But to put it bluntly, it would be a place we could have put him, so we can focus on helping the constant flow of children who go through our system.*"

"Oh God! That's horrible." Ben gasped.

"*I know. And I promise you, it doesn't make me sleep any better at night.*" Ron admitted reluctantly. "*But sadly, there are times when budgets, staffing and other resources force us to make those decisions so we can help as many kids as possible. I'm just very glad that it didn't have to come down to that in JD's case.*"

"Me too." Ben said quietly, then remembered something he had been thinking about earlier, "What should we do about school for JD? I mean, I can't imagine him being able to go into regular classes the way he is now."

"*No, I think that would be a recipe for disaster.*" Ron agreed. "*Why don't you give him a week or so to get settled in and comfortable. While he's acclimating, you can check into hiring a tutor or maybe even home schooling him. He was in the hospital most of last year, so he would probably need a tutor to get caught up to his grade level, anyway.*"

"I don't know about that. He was reading a book last night that I'm pretty sure was college level. And I could tell that he understood it." Ben said frankly.

"*Yeah. Well, there's no doubt that he's a little reading sponge.*" Ron said with a chuckle, "*But he'll still need the help in his other subjects, I'm sure. Besides that, the state requires their 'standardized tests' be given to every child, so you'll need to prepare him for that. No matter how brilliant he is, the test score is all that CPS will see, and base their decisions on.*"

"I'll do my best." Ben said frankly.

"*I am certain you will.*" Ron said gently.

"I was thinking about taking JD to the store today, to get some clothes and things. How do you think I should go about that with him being afraid of women?" Ben asked carefully.

"*I think you'll have to use your own best judgment on that one.*" Ron said honestly. "*From the sound of it, you've already made more progress with JD than I ever did. You'll need to test his limits every so often, so if you think he's ready, I'd say, give it a try.*"

"I'll have a talk with him about it later and take it from there." Ben said thoughtfully.

"*That sounds like a good plan.*" Ron said happily, then quickly added, "*I have to get to work, now. Remember to call me if you have any problems at all.*"

"I will." Ben promised. "Thanks for checking on JD."

"*I had no choice, I love that kid.*" Ron said with a chuckle, then quickly said, "*Gotta go. Bye!*"

"Bye." Ben said, but heard the click in his ear before the word had fully left his mouth.

Ben smiled, then went back to proofreading his manuscript.

* * * * *

A movement out of the corner of his eye caused Ben to look up.

JD was standing in the doorway, dressed in faded blue jeans and a white turtle neck shirt. He was up and awake, but still looking a little bit sleep rumpled.

"Good morning, JD. Did you sleep well?" Ben asked with a smile.

He didn't expect a response, so wasn't surprised when JD continued to stand and stare at him.

"Well, since you're up, how about we make some breakfast?" Ben asked as he stood.

JD continued to stare, then very slowly began to raise his arms.

"Of course." Ben said with a chuckle, then walked over and picked JD up.

* * * * *

"You can have eggs, cereal, pancakes or waffles. All you have to do is find a way to let me know what you'd like." Ben said as he lowered the boy to stand on the floor.

JD walked to the refrigerator and took out a carton of eggs.

"Eggs and toast. A very sensible choice." Ben said happily, then looked on with surprise as JD pulled a chair over to the stove.

"No, JD. I don't want you using the stove." Ben said seriously.

JD turned to look at Ben, and somehow, his huge blue/gray eyes looked even bigger as he silently begged.

Ben felt his resolve crumbling, then a vague memory surfaced of something his mother had done for him, when he was JD's age.

"I have an idea. Wait right there. This will only take a minute." Ben said as he rushed out of the kitchen and into the pantry.

He returned a moment later to find JD standing on the chair in front of the stove, waiting patiently.

"Okay, here's the plan." Ben said as he walked to JD's side. "I'm a bit worried about you working around an open flame with the gas stove. So here's an electric skillet, for you to use. You can still cook breakfast for yourself, but this way, you're not as likely to catch yourself or the house on fire."

Ben noticed JD's expression and could tell that he didn't understand.

"Come on over by the refrigerator, and I'll show you how this works." Ben said, as he sat the electric skillet on the counter.

Ben smiled as he watched JD get down, scoot the chair over, then stand on it beside him.

"First, plug the skillet in right there." Ben said as he pointed at the outlet.

"Now, set the temperature control to 350. I think that should be about right." Ben said, as he watched JD carefully.

"That's good. You're going to need some butter or oil, so you can go get that, now, while it's heating." Ben said slowly.

JD got down off the chair, then went to the refrigerator and took out a stick of butter.

"We should use the butter from the table, first." Ben said as he hurried to get it.

JD put the stick of butter back in the door of the refrigerator, then accepted the butter dish from Ben.

"I'll get you a spatula." Ben said as he reached beside him to a container of utensils on the counter.

JD accepted the spatula, then used it to scoop up about two teaspoons of the butter.

Ben smiled, happy to see that JD had a good idea of what he was doing. He noticed that JD had left the eggs by the stove, so he moved them beside the electric skillet.

"While you're doing that, I'll make some toast." Ben said as he kept careful watch on what JD was doing.

When the butter started sizzling, JD adjusted the temperature down a little bit, then cracked two eggs into the skillet.

A moment later, JD hopped down off the chair and walked to the stove.

"Did you need something?" Ben asked curiously.

JD tried to reach to the back of the stove top, but couldn't quite make it.

"Oh, I see, salt and pepper." Ben said suddenly, then reached them down for him.

JD rushed back to his chair, then quickly turned the eggs over.

The toaster popping up startled Ben. He had completely forgotten what he was doing.

"Plates are in the cupboard right in front of you." Ben said as he buttered the toast.

JD gave Ben a quick smile, then opened the cupboard and took down a plate.

"Remember to unplug the skillet when you're done." Ben said as he walked to the refrigerator to pour a glass of juice.

By the time he returned with the juice, JD had his eggs on the plate and was carrying them toward the dining room.

"You can eat that here, at the kitchen table, if you want. We usually only use the dining room if we're going to be sitting down to a full meal together." Ben said casually.

JD diverted from his original course and placed his plate on the kitchen table.

"I hope you like orange juice." Ben said as he sat the glass by JD's plate.

Ben smiled as JD scooted the chair from the counter back over to the table.

JD sat down in his chair, then looked up at Ben, as if he was waiting for something.

"Oh, no. I had my breakfast a couple hours ago." Ben said quickly, then thought for a moment before adding, "But I could use a cup of coffee. Go ahead and start and I'll be there in a second."

JD turned his attention to his food and began to eat.

Ben poured himself a cup of coffee and took the seat across from JD.

He smiled to himself as he watched JD dunk the corner of his toast into the runny yolk of his egg.

Even though JD had been through things that Ben couldn't imagine, he was happy to see JD doing something so typically childlike.

"You make fried eggs better than Cliff does." Ben commented absently.

JD looked up from his plate curiously.

"It's true." Ben said with a shrug. "He may be a brilliant doctor, but he can't make fried eggs worth anything. Maybe one of these mornings, we could make him breakfast in bed, you can make the eggs. I know he'd like that."

JD briefly smiled, then went back to eating his breakfast.

"When you're done with that, I'll show you how to clean the electric skillet." Ben said thoughtfully. "That way, it'll be ready if you want to cook something else later."

JD stopped his chewing long enough to smile at Ben again.

* * * * *

As Ben was waiting for his computer to boot up, he glanced at JD and said, "Well, I have some work that I have to get done this morning. So if you'd like, you'd be welcome to sit in here with me and read, while I do my work."

JD walked out of the room and returned a moment later with his book.

"You can pull up a chair or stretch out on the bed. Just make yourself comfortable." Ben said as he got settled in at his computer.

After a few minutes of reading his manuscript, Ben glanced over to see what JD was doing. He jumped a little when he found JD standing right behind him, reading over his shoulder.

"Would you like to read my new book?" Ben asked with a smile.

JD's answering smile was more of an answer than Ben had expected.

"Let's see..." Ben said as he considered, then realized the perfect solution.

"I bought this netbook to use when I travel. But I ended up needing a full sized laptop, this thing was just too small for me to get anything done." Ben said as he picked up the small laptop computer from the lower shelf of his desk.

"This should be perfect for you." Ben said happily as he booted it up.

"Give me a second to make a copy of the file, then you'll be able to read at your own pace." Ben said with a smile.

He cleared off a little space beside him at the desk and gave JD his own little dedicated workspace.

"Okay. You're all loaded up and ready to go. Here are the 'page up' and 'page down' keys. That's probably all you'll need for right now." Ben said as he checked to see that the screen was tilted at a good angle for JD.

"Let me know if you need anything else." Ben said with a smile before getting back to his own computer.

* * * * *

A tapping on Ben's arm drew his attention away from his reading.

"What's up?" Ben asked curiously.

JD pointed at a passage of text on his screen.

Ben read it, then asked, "Yeah. What about it?"

JD started hitting the 'page up' key repeatedly. When he finally stopped, he skimmed over the page of text and quickly found what he was looking for.

Ben read the passage that JD indicated, then started to chuckle.

"It looks like you caught me." Ben said with a smile. "Our hero started the day with brown eyes and ended the day with blue ones."

JD looked up at Ben curiously.

"Let me fix it." Ben said gently, then changed the word on the screen. "There you go. All better, now. He officially has blue eyes."

JD looked at the screen, then up at Ben with wonder.

"Yeah. That's the great thing about being an author. If you don't like something, you can make changes." Ben said with a grin at JD's awestruck state.

JD reached up to touch the keyboard, but then slowly withdrew his hand.

"How about this?" Ben said thoughtfully. "Why don't I set up the word processor so you can write your own story?"

JD slowly turned and looked at Ben cautiously.

"You know what it's like when you read. Sometimes when you're reading something, the author doesn't do what you would have done. He turns left when you wanted him to turn right. Well, when you're the author, you get to make those decisions. Go ahead and tell a story the way you think it should be told." Ben said as he opened a new window on the screen.

"And if you get tired of writing, you can just use the mousepad to click on that tab and you'll be right back where you left off in my story." Ben said happily.

JD looked at Ben, then down at the small laptop.

Ben watched as JD started to type, using the two-fingered 'hunt and peck' method.

Once he was confident that JD was going to be able to use the word processor, Ben went back to work on his manuscript.

* * * * *

Ben found a few passages of text that he wasn't entirely happy with, so he decided to rewrite them so they would be a little more understandable.

As he was finishing, he noticed that JD had stopped typing and was watching his every move.

He glanced over and saw that JD was looking at his gloved hands and trying to position his hands the same way on his smaller keyboard.

"I tell you what, JD. While we're out shopping today, I'll pick you up a typing tutor. It will teach you how to use all your fingers when you're typing." Ben said casually.

JD stared at Ben for a long moment, then went back to typing using his 'hunt and peck' method.

Ben glanced at the time on his computer and was surprised at how late it was.

"But I think that right now would be a good time to take a break and have some lunch." Ben said with a smile.

* * * * *

"How about I put together some sandwiches for us. And if you like, you can dish up some of the salad you made yesterday." Ben said as he opened a loaf of bread.

JD walked to the refrigerator and retrieved the bowl of salad.

"Here are some plates." Ben said as he handed the plates down from the cupboard.

JD took the plates and transferred them to the table.

"Since I don't know what you like, I'll go ahead and make a plate of sandwich fixings and let you build your own." Ben said as he placed lunch meat on a plate.

He glanced over and saw that JD was carefully dishing salad onto both of the plates at the table.

Ben walked to the refrigerator and took out a tomato and a head of lettuce, then said, "We have milk, juice and water here to drink."

As he placed the head of lettuce in the sink, he added, "I think there are some sodas in the bottom shelf of the fridge if you'd like one of those. We don't drink them often, I usually just have water."

Ben noticed movement at his side and saw JD reaching for the cabinet.

"What do you need?" Ben asked as he opened the cabinet door.

He followed JD's reaching hands and realized that he wanted the drinking glasses.

Ben chuckled as he said, "Yeah, we'll probably need those."

JD took the glasses to the table, then proceeded to take the water pitcher and the milk jug from the refrigerator.

"That'll work." Ben said with a smile.

"I'm going to have mustard with my sandwich. Go ahead and get whatever you'll be wanting and put it on the table." Ben said as he finished placing lettuce leaves on the plate.

"I think that's everything we're going to need." Ben said as he placed the plate on the table. "Get some bread and build whatever kind of sandwich you'd like to eat."

JD looked around the table, then got off his chair and started scooting it across the floor.

Ben watched curiously to see what JD was doing.

A moment later, JD returned with a package of hamburger buns.

Ben thought about it for a moment, then said, "Sure, why not?"

JD moved his chair back to the table, then proceeded to make himself a ham and cheese sandwich on a hamburger bun.

"You know, that looks good. I think I'll try one of those." Ben said, then took a hamburger bun from the package.

As he was finishing, JD scooted the mustard jar toward him.

"Thanks." Ben said with a smile.

"This is really good." Ben said, sounding impressed. "I guess I'll need to keep hamburger buns on hand for something other than hamburgers."

After a few quiet minutes of eating, Ben finally decided that it was time to talk about their plans for later in the day.

"I've noticed that we need a few things around the house. Plus I'd like to pick up some new pajamas for you and maybe another pair of gloves." Ben said, trying to sound casual.

JD looked up from his food, paying Ben due attention, but not reacting otherwise.

"You see, the thing is, Ron, you know, Mr. Cooper back at the home, he told us that you have a problem whenever you're around women." Ben said slowly.

JD's expression froze and it was like Ben could see the light go out in his eyes. It was like the little boy that had been there a moment before was gone, suddenly replaced with a wax figure.

Ben considered the reaction that JD had to the mere mention of women and decided that there was no way that he would be taking JD to the store after lunch. But maybe with Cliff's help...

"Like I was saying, I'm going to need to go to the store for a few things." Ben continued slowly. "And if you'd like to go with me, so you can pick things out for yourself, you'd be welcome to come with me."

JD didn't move or give any obvious reaction, but Ben could see a flicker of something in JD's eyes that revealed that he hadn't completely shut himself down.

"If you wanted to come, Cliff or I could carry you. I know you like that. And if we come across any women while we're out, you could just hold on to us and we'll keep you safe." Ben said cautiously, knowing that one wrong word might leave JD sitting and staring for hours on end.

JD still wasn't moving, but his expression seemed more thoughtful than vacant.

"And if you don't want to go, one of us will stay home with you." Ben said seriously. "You don't **have to** do anything. It's your choice."

JD seemed to be thinking, but all in all, Ben felt that he might have handled the conversation the right way.

"We won't be doing that until after Cliff gets home this evening." Ben said as he injected cheer into his voice. "I just wanted to mention it to you now so you can think about it and decide what you want to do."

JD got out of his chair, then walked around the table to stand in front of Ben.

Before Ben could try to guess at what JD wanted, the boy raised his arms.

"Sure." Ben said with a chuckle, "Come on up here."

* * * * *

Ben spent the rest of the afternoon reading and was finally able to finish proofreading his manuscript. JD was at his side the entire time, hunting and pecking on his small laptop with single-minded dedication.

"Oh wow. I don't know about you, but I need to get up and move around after sitting for so long." Ben said as he stood and slowly stretched.

JD continued to type, not reacting to Ben's words at all.

"Take a break when you've finished your thought. I'll be in the kitchen, fixing us a snack." Ben said casually then waited a moment for any reaction.

Of course, there was none. So Ben went into the kitchen and started looking through the refrigerator. He was considering what kind of snack he could make with the meatballs when he remembered something.

He took down a notebook from the top of the refrigerator, then found the recipe that he wanted.

After a moment of reading, he went to the pantry to see if he had all the ingredients that he needed.

* * * * *

JD walked into the kitchen to find Ben carrying an armload of packages.

"Pull up a chair. We've got some cooking to do if we're going to get this done before Cliff gets home." Ben said as he sat the packages on the island.

Ben sorted everything out in front of him, then looked at the recipe again. He was about to say something, but the beep of the microwave drew him away.

He returned to the island to find JD reading the recipe carefully.

"What do you think? Can you manage it?" Ben asked curiously.

JD pointed with one gloved finger at the first item on the recipe.

"I've got the butter right here. It should be just soft enough for you to work with." Ben said as he sat the butter on the island right beside the mixing bowl.

JD glanced at the stove, then looked at Ben curiously.

"Yeah. I've already got it preheating." Ben said with a grin.

JD looked at the recipe again, then went to work.

Ben watched for a moment to see that JD understood how to follow the instructions.

After watching JD carefully measure out white and brown sugar, Ben quietly said, "I'll get the baking soda ready for you to use."

Ben carefully dissolved a teaspoon of baking soda in two teaspoons of hot water. When he turned back to the island, he saw JD trying to mix together the butter and sugars. He was holding the bowl with one hand while struggling to stir with the other.

"Let me show you how to do that." Ben said gently as he walked to JD's side.

JD stopped and looked at Ben cautiously.

"Here, like this." Ben said as he took the wooden spoon from JD's gloved hand and picked up the bowl.

He steadied the bowl against his chest and gave a few slow stirs with the spoon.

"You have better leverage this way." Ben said simply, then placed the bowl on the counter top in front of JD.

There was a moment of hesitation, then JD picked up the bowl and tried to mimic Ben's actions.

"Hold it a little bit lower, and you can tilt it." Ben said, then helped JD move the bowl into a more comfortable position.

"There you go. That should work just fine." Ben said with a smile as he took a step away.

JD started mixing, then smiled up at Ben when he realized how much better it worked.

"If you want, I'll add ingredients while you stir." Ben said slowly, watching carefully for JD's reaction.

After a moment, Ben supposed that JD would have stopped stirring and given him 'the look' if he had objected.

Ben carefully cracked an egg, then added it to the batter.

He detected a slight smile as JD continued to stir.

Ben added another egg and waited for a moment for it to be incorporated into the batter before adding vanilla.

JD's stirring was much smoother with the added liquid. Ben noticed that JD was leaning slightly to read the recipe for what was next.

"Baking soda." Ben announced as he held up the small cup.

After adding the baking soda, Ben also added a little salt.

When the batter was smooth and fully mixed, Ben said, "Here's where it get's tough. What do you think about changing places with me?"

JD looked up at Ben curiously.

"I'll mix while you add ingredients for a while. When you add the flour, it gets harder to mix." Ben said seriously.

JD's response was to place the bowl on the counter.

"I know the recipe doesn't call for it, but I think the cookies turn out better if you use sifted flour. So measure the flour into the sifter, then while you sift, I'll mix." Ben said seriously.

JD absently nodded and Ben fought not to react to the casual action. Whether JD knew it or not, he was being lured out of his self-imposed isolation.

As JD sifted flour, Ben continued to stir.

When the last of the flour was sifted into the dough, Ben said, "Now you have a decision to make. The recipe calls for two cups of chocolate chips, but as you can see, we have chocolate, white chocolate, butterscotch and peanut butter chips. It's up to you to decide which kind of chips we'll be using."

After a moment to consider, JD took the package of chocolate chips and started pouring them into the measuring cup.

At about the one cup mark, JD stopped, then took the package of white chocolate chips.

"Good choice. My mouth is already watering." Ben said with a grin.

JD looked up with an actual smile before filling the measuring cup to the two cup mark.

"Add them in the bowl." Ben said as he started stirring again.

JD unceremoniously dumped the measuring cup into the mixing bowl, then started filling it with walnuts.

Ben glanced at the clock, then said, "This is going to work out fine. Cliff should be getting home at just about the time these come out of the oven."

JD had a trace of a smile and the smile had reached his eyes.

The warmth in Ben's heart was nearly overwhelming as he could see the transformation in the boy before him.

"I think it's done. I'll get the baking sheets so you can start scooping." Ben said as he walked to the cabinet by the stove.

JD scooted the bowl in front of him, then looked at the recipe again.

Ben wiped down the baking sheets with a dry towel, then sat them on the island. "Just scoop up big spoonfuls and drop them on the pan. They don't have to be pretty, they're going to spread out as they bake."

After the first clump of dough hit the pan, Ben said, "Now leave a little room between them so they have plenty of room to spread out. We have two big pans so there's no need to crowd them."

JD absently nodded, then put another clump of dough on the pan.

"Perfect." Ben said happily. "While you're doing that, I'll get to washing some of these dishes."

JD glanced at Ben and smiled before turning his full attention back to his work.

* * * * *

"If we're going to be doing this very often, I'm going to need to get a stand mixer, like my mom had. It'll make the job a lot easier." Ben said casually as he washed the dishes in the sink.

JD was scraping the bowl to get enough dough together to make the last clump.

Ben dried his hands on a dishtowel as he walked over to the island to check on JD.

"Those look perfect." Ben said with a smile. "Here's a timer. Set it for ten minutes while I put the pans in the oven."

"Now that the cookies are baking, all that's left to do is wash the mixing bowl. And, of course, the one who mixed the dough gets the honor of licking the spoon."

JD looked at Ben curiously, then at the spoon.

"It's okay. The cookies are in the oven, so you're allowed." Ben said gently.

JD cautiously picked up the spoon, then took a tentative taste.

His reaction to the taste was a broad smile.

"Yeah. I know." Ben said with a grin.

JD hesitantly offered the spoon to Ben.

"No. That's all for you." Ben said warmly.

JD happily licked the rest of the dough off the spoon as Ben took the mixing bowl to the sink.

"Scoot your chair over to the sink and wash the last of the dishes while I clean down the counter." Ben said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Something smells good!" Cliff said as he walked into the kitchen.

"JD's been cooking." Ben said proudly.

"I can't wait to try some." Cliff said as he put an arm around Ben and gave him a quick kiss.

JD walked in front of the pair and looked at Cliff as he put up his arms.

"I missed you too, JD." Cliff said warmly, then leaned down to pick up the boy.

"Come here and give me some sugar." Cliff said before kissing the boy on the cheek.

As JD snuggled into the hug, the timer went off.

"I'll take care of that." Ben said as he moved to the stove.

JD watched from Cliff's arms as Ben transferred the cookies to a cooling rack beside the stove.

"Those look good." Cliff said hungrily.

"JD made them. I just coached him." Ben said with a smile.

"So what's on the agenda for tonight?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Well, I was thinking that we need a few things from the store. I talked to JD about it earlier, and we haven't decided if he's going to the store or not."

"Hmm. Yeah, I can see some problems with that." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"I was thinking that if we all went together, that one of us could hold JD while the other runs interference." Ben said slowly. "That way JD could go out with us and do things and we could keep him safe."

Cliff considered for a moment, then pulled back to look at JD and said, "You know that you're safe when I'm holding you, right?"

JD looked Cliff in the eyes, but didn't give any obvious reaction.

"I tell you what. If you're scared, you can hold on to me. I won't let anyone hurt you." Cliff said gently. "You can even close your eyes if that helps."

After a moment, JD closed his eyes and rested his head on Cliff's shoulder.

"I guess that's settled." Ben said with a smile at the tender sight.

"So are those cookies about ready?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"Just about. Would you like some coffee to go with them?" Ben asked casually.

"That sounds perfect." Cliff said as he snuggled the boy held tight to his chest.

"Have a seat while I get it ready." Ben said as he began to set up the coffee maker. "How was your day?"

"Mostly the usual. A few sore throats, one sprained wrist and a boy with a pencil eraser stuck in his ear." Cliff said as he carefully sat down, continuing to hold JD as he did so.

"How did he manage to do that?" Ben asked with a chuckle.

"I've learned not to ask." Cliff said with a grin.

Ben took the milk jug and two glasses to the table while the coffee was making.

"JD, do you want to pour us some milk?" Ben asked casually as he walked back to the stove.

After a quick hug, JD got down off Cliff's lap and carefully poured two glasses of milk.

"This morning you were saying that you had a lot to do today. Were you able to get it all done?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yes. In fact, JD even caught a mistake that I totally missed. I finished the manuscript about an hour ago and sent it off to my editor." Ben said happily.

"It sounds like you might need to put JD on your payroll as a proofreader." Cliff said with a chuckle.

"It's possible." Ben said frankly as he placed a plate full of cookies on the table.

Cliff took a paper napkin from the middle of the table, then took two cookies from the plate.

JD watched him, then took two napkins and put two cookies on each.

He placed one napkin by each glass of milk.

"Thank you, JD." Ben said as he sat a cup of coffee in front of Cliff.

"Mmmm. This has to be the best cookie that I've ever tasted." Cliff said in a low voice.

Ben smiled at the reaction, then picked up a cookie and took a bite.

"Oh, wow! That **is** good!" Ben said with actual surprise.

JD smiled with pride, then carefully took a bite of his own cookie.

"So, what do we need from the store?" Cliff asked as he relaxed back into his chair.

"Pajamas, maybe some new gloves, I thought about getting JD a few toys." Ben said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "And I wanted to get JD a typing tutor program."

"Typing tutor?" Cliff asked with surprise. "Isn't he a little young for that?"

"He's typing already, the tutor will just make it easier for him." Ben said frankly.

"It sounds like we should be able to get everything we need at Target." Cliff said casually.

"That's what I was thinking." Ben said before picking up his second cookie.

"JD, try this." Ben said, then dunked the edge of his cookie into his milk.

A puzzled stare was JD's first reaction, but finally he took his cookie and tried dunking it.

JD's eyes went wide as the taste registered.

"Good, huh?" Ben asked with a grin.

Another quick dunk was JD's answer.

* * * * *

"Hop up on the booster seat, little man." Cliff said as he stood outside the back door of the car.

JD looked curiously at the large, chair-shaped cushion, then slowly climbed onto it.

"See that? Now you can see everything without having to stretch." Cliff said as he belted JD into the booster seat.

Ben looked over his shoulder to see JD looking around curiously.

"Any plans for dinner?" Cliff asked as he got into the passenger seat of the car.

"I wanted to wait and see what you felt like having." Ben said honestly.

"Hmm... well, I think that since we're going out to the store anyway, we could go out to a restaurant." Cliff said carefully.

"I thought about that too, but I think JD is taking a big enough step by going to the store. What would you think about driving through somewhere?"

"We could do that." Cliff said thoughtfully, then suddenly added, "If you wouldn't mind going a little bit out of our way, I could phone in an order to Harry's for carry out."

"Hey, that'll work." Ben said happily. "I can't get enough of their blackened chicken."

"I've noticed." Cliff chuckled.

"How you doing back there, JD?" Ben asked as he looked into the rear view mirror.

To his surprise, JD met his gaze and had a slight smile on his face.

"Good. We'll be there in just a minute, so just sit back and enjoy the ride." Ben said happily, remembering the solemn, unresponsive passenger they had had the day before.

"Now remember, I'm going to be holding on to you. So all you need to do if you get scared is hold on to me a little bit tighter to let me know how scared you are. If it gets too bad for you, I'll take you out to the car." Cliff said gently.

JD turned his gaze to Cliff and gave a hesitant smile.

"Good boy. I'm proud of you for being willing to try." Cliff said gently.

JD's smile widened at the words.

* * * * *

"It doesn't look too busy." Ben said absently as he easily found a convenient parking space.

"Yeah. It looks like early on a weeknight is the time to go shopping." Cliff said as he internally braced himself for the coming expedition.

When the car came to a stop, Cliff automatically got out and went to the back door to help JD.

To his surprise, JD didn't have any trouble getting the seatbelt off. He was sitting in the booster seat, waiting patiently.

"Come on, little man." Cliff said gently as he lifted JD out of the seat. "Just remember what I told you. Hold on to me as tight as you need to so I'll know how you're feeling."

JD put his arms around Cliff and rested his head on Cliff's shoulder.

Ben smiled at the scene as he walked with Cliff and JD across the parking lot and into the store.

* * * * *

"JD, look at these." Ben said as he pointed at a selection of gloves.

The boy's tension seemed to ease slightly when he saw what Ben was pointing at.

"They've got a better selection than I expected, but not much in your size." Ben said thoughtfully.

"Hey, look at those." Cliff said as he pointed to a pair of fingerless gloves.

"That's exactly what I was looking for." Ben said happily, then picked up the gloves. "But they're adult sized."

"These look like children's sizes. Let's see what they've got." Cliff said curiously.

"Well, I like this pair, with the design on the back. But since I'm not the one who's going to be wearing them, I suppose it's not up to me." Ben said frankly.

"JD, I'm going to put you down so you can get a better look at the gloves and maybe try them on if you're interested." Cliff said gently before letting the boy down.

There was a moment when JD seemed to be frozen in place, but finally his interest in the gloves got the better of him.

"That pair has a matching beanie." Ben said as he pointed to another pair of gloves.

"So do these, and they're blue and gray. I think they'd look great on JD." Cliff said happily.

JD cautiously slipped his glove off his right hand and tried on a pair of black gloves with a skeletal hand drawn in white on the back.

"That's cute." Ben chuckled.

"And anatomically accurate." Cliff added in an impressed voice.

Ben rolled his eyes slightly, then noticed that JD was looking at the blue and gray gloves with interest.

"Look at this." Cliff said as he moved a little further down the aisle.

"What is it?" Ben asked curiously.

"These gloves aren't for winter. They're just for show."

"And for girls." Ben added seriously.

"Yeah, but they're not frilly or anything." Cliff defended.

"I guess not." Ben said slowly.

"I just thought these might be more comfortable than those winter gloves he's been wearing. If nothing else, it would be something he could wear around the house." Cliff said seriously.

Ben nodded, then said, "Put them in the basket. We'll give them to JD and he can decide if he wants to wear them or not."

Cliff looked through the selections and found two pair of small black gloves.

"What did you decide on, little man?" Cliff asked happily.

JD was holding the black skeleton gloves and the blue and gray gloves, with a conflicted look on his face.

"Good choice." Cliff said decisively. "Put them in the cart."

JD looked up at Cliff with confusion.

"You can have both pairs of gloves. That way you can choose what you want to wear, just like you choose your shirts and pants when you get dressed in the morning." Cliff explained slowly.

JD looked down at the gloves in his hands for a moment, then up at Cliff with a smile.

"Ready to head to the pajama department?" Ben asked with a smile.

JD quickly put the gloves into the cart, then thrust his arms into the air.

"Touchdown." Ben said with a chuckle.

Cliff smiled as he leaned down to pick up the boy.

* * * * *

"Can I help you find anything today?" A sales clerk asked as she approached.

Cliff felt the arms around him tighten and JD's face press into his shoulder.

Ben automatically walked to intercept the woman and said, "No. We're finding everything just fine."

"I'll be on the next aisle if you need anything." The woman said cautiously as she noticed the obviously terrified child.

"Thank you." Ben said politely, then waited for her to leave.

After a moment, Cliff whispered, "She's gone now. Are you okay?"

JD's hold on Cliff relaxed slightly.

"What else do we need to get?" Cliff asked with a worried look into Ben's eyes.

"Toys." Ben said as he put two pairs of sweat pants into the cart.

"Can it wait?" Cliff asked with concern.

"No. I don't think so." Ben said seriously.

At Cliff's look of surprise, Ben explained, "He's seven years old and he has **no** toys. None at all. We don't need to buy out the store, but I really think it's important to get him **something** to play with."

"Let's go." Cliff conceded.

* * * * *

Cliff looked up and down the aisle before cautiously letting JD down to stand on his own.

"Go ahead and look around. See if there are any toys that you'd like to have." Cliff said gently.

JD looked at the games for a moment, then started roaming down the aisle, looking at things.

Ben stayed slightly ahead of him as Cliff trailed slightly behind.

Finally, JD found a yellow dump truck and picked it up.

Ben and Cliff both smiled as JD got down on the floor and started driving it around.

After a moment of just standing and watching, Cliff said, "Go ahead and put that in the cart, JD."

JD looked up at Cliff as if he had forgotten he was there.

"We're buying that for you. Put it in the cart." Cliff said more quietly.

JD looked at the truck in his hands, then up at Cliff with disbelief.

"Yes. Really." Cliff said insistently.

JD walked to the cart that Ben was pushing then, rather than drop the truck in, he offered it to Ben.

It took a moment for Ben to realize what JD was doing.

"Sure, I'll put it in the cart for you. We wouldn't want it to get banged up." Ben said gently.

JD gave Ben a quick smile, then turned to Cliff and raised his arms.

"You can pick out another toy if you'd like." Cliff said tenderly.

JD continued to stand with his arms held high.

"Alright then. Did we get everything?" Cliff asked as he hoisted the boy onto his hip.

"We still need to get the typing tutor. But I thought we could get that on the way to the registers." Ben said frankly.

"I was thinking that even though JD has been a real trouper tonight, we might not want to tempt fate by taking him through the checkout." Cliff said slowly.

"I agree. Go on ahead and I'll meet you at the car." Ben said with an appreciative smile as he handed Cliff his keys.

"Be thinking about what you want to eat. I'll get the phone number and we can place the order before we leave."

"Good plan." Ben said with a smile, then leaned in and gave JD a quick kiss before saying, "I'll see you in a few minutes, little man."

JD smiled slightly, then cuddled into Cliff's chest.

* * * * *

"What was the damage?" Cliff asked as Ben opened the car door.

Ben took the keys from the ignition as he said, "Less than $200. Really reasonable for as much as we got."

Cliff nodded his agreement as he watched Ben load the bags into the trunk.

Ben came around to the passenger side and opened JD's door.

"I thought you'd like to have this with you." Ben said as he handed him the yellow truck.

JD accepted the truck with a smile.

Cliff watched as JD held the truck, almost reverently. It was like JD just couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that it was really there.

"Did you get the number to Harry's?" Ben asked as he settled into the driver's seat.

"Yes. Are you ready to order?" Cliff asked as he took out his phone.

"I was ready back in the store." Ben said frankly.

Cliff held the phone to his ear, then a moment later he said, "I'd like to place an order for carry-out for Dr. Grant."

"I'll have a catfish platter." Cliff said, then handed the phone to Ben.

"I'd like the blackened chicken with a side of red beans and rice." Ben said with a hungry smile.

After a moment, Ben asked, "What do you have on your kid's menu?"

"Hamburger, chicken strips, fish, shrimp, macaroni & cheese or a corn dog?" Ben asked into the back seat.

Cliff watched curiously and couldn't see any change in JD's expression.

Ben nodded, then said into the phone, "Chicken strips."

After a moment, Ben looked at JD again and asked, "Grilled or fried?"

Cliff watched JD even more closely, trying to detect any clue as to what the boy wanted.

"Fried." Ben said into the phone, a moment later he said, "Yes. Twenty minutes will be just perfect."

Cliff accepted the phone from Ben, then looked into the back seat again.

JD had a slight smile on his face, while he played quietly with his truck. On any other child, Cliff probably wouldn't think anything of the expression. But to see JD smiling, for no particular reason, warmed his heart to the point that it threatened to spill over into tears.

* * * * *

When they got home, Cliff took the carry-out food to the kitchen while Ben brought the bags into the living room.

All three had good appetites and enjoyed the meal immensely.

Cliff cleaned up after dinner as Ben took JD to his room to go through the purchases.

"I'm going to wash the clothes we bought before you wear them. Sometimes if you don't do that, they itch." Ben said as he removed tags and labels.

JD walked cautiously to the bed and picked up one of the pairs of gloves.

"What would you think about cutting the ends of the fingers out of the black pair?" Ben asked casually.

JD looked up at him curiously.

"I noticed when you were typing today that with your gloves, your fingertips are bigger than the keys. If we cut the end of the fingers off the gloves, then you could still cover your tattoos, but you'd also be able to type." Ben said conversationally.

JD slowly took off his worn black glove and slipped on a black glove with the skeleton pattern on the back.

Ben stopped what he was doing to check to see how the gloves fit.

"Those look good. Come into the kitchen and we'll fix them up for you." Ben said as he picked up the pile of clothes.

* * * * *

"If you've got anything that needs washed, I'll be doing a load of laundry in the morning." Ben said as he walked through the kitchen.

"I can't think of anything." Cliff said as he tied the kitchen trash bag closed.

Ben placed the clothes in the laundry room, then walked back into the kitchen to find JD waiting by the island.

"I don't know if anyone has ever told you this, but when you carry scissors, you should carry them like this, with the point away from you." Ben said as he demonstrated, then added, "And, of course, you should never run with them."

Cliff watched the impromptu lesson with a smile.

"Now that you know that, I can ask you to bring me the scissors if we need them for something." Ben said happily, then said, "Show me where you want your gloves cut off."

JD looked down at his hands, then up at Ben curiously.

"The fingerless gloves they had at the store were cut just above the second knuckle. If we cut yours like that, then a little bit of your tattoos would show. Then again, if you cut it lower, the material might bunch when you flex your finger. So you need to decide how much of your fingers you're willing to let us see. I think, the shorter the fingers, the more comfortable your glove is going to be." Ben said thoughtfully.

"And you have other pairs of gloves. So you can cut these down and still have those to completely cover your hands when you're around other people." Cliff suggested helpfully.

Ben nodded his agreement.

JD looked down at his hands and considered for a moment before hesitantly pointing to the second knuckle.

"Okay." Ben said happily. "I'm going to cut it a little bit long, then we can trim it back to where you want it."

Ben waited for a moment, then quietly said, "Give me your glove."

JD slowly took the glove off, then dropped it on the counter top, quickly hiding his hand after dropping it.

Ben took the glove and snipped off one of the fingers. He glanced to see if JD was having any adverse reaction to the sight, but he seemed to be fine.

Snip, snip, snip. And the job was done.

"Here, try it on before I do the other one." Ben said as he offered the altered glove to JD.

There was a long moment before JD shyly raised his hand long enough to take the glove.

He slipped the glove on, then looked at his hand curiously.

"Let me see." Ben said as he leaned in a little closer.

JD held his hand out.

The barbed wire pattern carried on down each of JD's fingers and terminated at the fingernail. But the pattern seemed to work well with the black gloves and the overall effect was pleasing.

"You can barely see the tattoos. If someone didn't know they were there, they probably wouldn't notice." Cliff said with a smile.

Ben looked at the hand again and thought that Cliff was exaggerating quite a bit, but still, if it would make JD more comfortable, at least around them, he was willing to go along.

"That looks good. Go ahead and give me the other one and I'll do it to the same length."

JD handed over the second glove more easily than he had the first.

Ben quickly made the alteration, then handed the glove back to JD.

"Now you officially have choices. You can wear your full gloves or your cut down gloves." Ben said happily.

"And you also have the sheer gloves, in case the ones that you're wearing are hot." Cliff added.

Ben nodded, then said, "But for right now, I think it's time for your bath. Go on and get your things together and I'll start your bath water."

JD looked up at Ben cautiously.

"Trust me. You'll like this." Ben said as he looked JD in the eyes.

After a moment, JD slowly turned and walked to his room.

"What's the plan?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I bought bubble bath and a few bath toys, including a rubber ducky." Ben said with a cheerful smile.

"For him or for you?" Cliff asked with a grin.

"It's one of my happy memories. I hope it will end up being one of his." Ben said, then asked, "Want to help me get it ready?"

"I'd love to." Cliff said as he started to walk with Ben.

* * * * *

JD walked into the bathroom and stopped just inside the door.

"I think I got the water just right for you." Ben said happily.

JD looked at the sudsy bathtub, then back at Ben with question.

"It's fun. You can get in the tub and play with the suds and the toys until your toes shrivel up." Ben said with an ear to ear grin.

JD's incredulous stare made Cliff break into laughter.

"Give it a try." Ben said with good humor. "What have you got to lose?"

For a moment it looked like JD might have an answer.

"Here are your bath toys. Just go ahead and have fun. Don't forget to brush your teeth before you go to bed. And we'll be in to say goodnight when you're all done." Ben said as he handed JD a net bag with a boat, a submarine and a wind-up scuba diver, along with the aforementioned duck.

* * * * *

Ben and Cliff were in their bedroom, and had become engrossed in the paying of monthly bills. When Ben realized that it had been over an hour since they had left JD in the bathroom, he hopped up and hurried to the door.

"What's wrong?" Cliff asked as he also stood.

"JD. We need to say goodnight." Ben said as he walked into the hall.

"I'm sure he's fine." Cliff said as he followed.

"I know. I just want to make sure he's in bed and give him a kiss goodnight." Ben said as they walked into JD's room.

The light was already off, but there was enough light spilling into the room that they could see that JD was sound asleep with his arm wrapped around the yellow dump truck.

Ben felt the tears falling down his cheeks and put an arm around Cliff to hold him.

Cliff gave Ben a chaste kiss on the side of the head, then slowly guided him to walk out of the room.

Chapter 3

"Good morning, love. Have you been awake long?"

"Not too long. I've just been thinking."

"What about?"

"What would you think about inviting Todd over for dinner tonight?"

"Yeah. That sounds nice."

"Good. Then call me if he's coming so I'll know how many I'm cooking for."

"Why don't you invite him?"

"Because he's your friend."

"Todd is OUR friend."

"He's only my friend because he's your friend."

"I thought you liked Todd."

"I do. He's friendly and laid back and lots of fun to be around."

"So why don't you think of him as your friend?"

"Because my friends tend to be self-obsessed, needy, and usually bipolar."

"What does that say about me?"

"Not as much as it says about me. Will you invite him over?"

"Sure. I'll call him when I go to lunch."

"I bet you wake him up."

"No bet. That's pretty much a sure thing with Todd."

"Yeah. I remember you saying that he doesn't like to emerge from his cocoon before the crack of noon."

"So why do you want me to invite Todd over?"

"So JD can meet him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And... why do you want JD to meet Todd? Not that I'm against the idea, I'd just like to know what you're up to."

"Because Todd has some really nice tattoos. I thought that if JD is around someone else who has tattoos, maybe he'll develop a little better attitude toward them, and by association, himself. You know, give him a sense of normalcy about his appearance."

"But if Todd reminds JD of whoever tattooed him, it might frighten him and make things worse."

"I suppose that's possible, but I really think that it's the right thing to do. JD has been making incredible progress, and I think it's probably good for him to keep challenging his boundaries. I'm afraid that the longer JD lives with a poor self-image, the harder it will be for him to see the beautiful person that he is."

"Well, if it were anyone but Todd, I might be worried about it. But he's so good natured, I can't imagine him scaring anyone."

"I think so, too."

"Guess what time it is."

"Is it time for you to go to work, already?"

"Actually, no. I asked Brynna not to schedule anyone before nine for me today. I talked to Raj about it yesterday before I left, so he knows I'm going to be late."

"So what time is it?"

"Time for me to show you just how much I love you."

"Mmm... I like that answer."

* * * * *

Ben booted up his computer, then just sat and sipped coffee while he contemplated how wonderful his life had become. He was still riding a euphoric wave from the enthusiastic lovemaking earlier.

He felt so incredibly blessed. On top of having the opportunity to raise and care for a wonderful little boy with a tremendous heart, he also had been gifted with a lover who would do something so incredibly romantic, for no other reason but the love they share.

Finally, Ben turned his attention, at least a little, to the screen in front of him and began checking his email.

There wasn't anything of consequence, so he closed down the email program and opened the word processor.

As it came to life, his eyes were drawn to the little laptop off to the side.

Tears welled in his eyes as he remembered JD hunting and pecking on the little keyboard. When he and Cliff had talked about the possibility of becoming foster parents, he had fallen in love with the idea. But the reality was so much more than he ever imagined. The realization washed over him that by writing, JD was saying, in his own way, that he wanted to follow in Ben's footsteps... in essence, JD was silently saying, 'I want to be like my Daddy'.

A tear fell down Ben's cheek at the enormity of what he and Cliff were doing. This wasn't babysitting, just keeping JD fed, clothed, and relatively happy. They WERE JD's parents. His eventual success or failure was, in large part, theirs to determine. And considering how many cards JD already had dealt against him, he would need every advantage they could give him.

Ben stood and forced himself not to pursue that train of thought. He glanced at the little laptop computer again, then walked to the living room to retrieve the typing tutor program, where he had left it the night before.

* * * * *

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" Ben asked gently to the sleep rumpled little boy in his doorway.

JD absently scrubbed at one eye, then looked at Ben and shyly smiled.

"Good." Ben said with a chuckle at the reaction. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry... for waffles."

JD put his arms up, and was wearing a full smile.

"And I think waffles require smokie sausages." Ben said as he picked JD up and gave him a firm hug.

"If you want, you can make the batter."

* * * * *

After breakfast was finished, Ben introduced JD to the typing tutor program.

It only took a minute or so of trying to type before JD went to his room and got his new fingerless gloves.

Ben watched with pride as JD worked on the typing tutor with single-minded determination.

* * * * *

After a few hours of performing file maintenance and doing back-ups, Ben found himself without any outstanding tasks. He knew from experience that his editor would be emailing him with requests for clarification or to verify his references, but that probably wouldn't happen for a few days. He might even make it to Monday before his publisher needed anything from him for this phase of the book.

"JD, why don't you find a good stopping point, then come into the kitchen and help me make some sandwiches?" Ben asked casually.

JD glanced up from the computer for an instant, but immediately turned his attention back to the screen and started typing.

Ben smiled for a moment, then slowly walked out of the room.

* * * * *

As Ben expected, he hadn't even had time to get everything out of the refrigerator before JD was in the kitchen, at his side.

"Well, since you came up with such a good sandwich yesterday, I thought I'd put you in charge of sandwich making, today." Ben said as he placed the sandwich supplies on the island.

"While you're doing that, I'll find the picnic basket and try to get everything else we need together." Ben said with a smile.

JD looked at Ben curiously.

"Just make the sandwiches, and you'll see, in a few minutes." Ben said happily before walking into the pantry.

JD looked after him for a moment, then went to work assembling sandwiches for both of them.

* * * * *

"Go get your truck. You're going to need it." Ben said as he finished packing the last of their picnic supplies into the basket.

JD gave Ben another curious look, then hurried to his room.

Ben checked to see that his cell phone was turned on, then he picked up the basket and waited for JD to return.

JD skidded into the room with the yellow dump truck held in both arms.

"Off we go, then." Ben said, then led the way to the back door.

JD followed cautiously.

"Remember us telling you that we have a big yard? Well, here it is." Ben said as they stepped out into the sparkling sunlight.

JD looked around in wonder.

The main feature of the back yard was a modest sized, but very nice swimming pool.

As JD looked around he could see that the back yard seemed to go on and on.

"Come on." Ben said, then offered his hand.

It took a moment for JD to overcome his surprise, but he finally took the hand and held it firmly.

"It's so nice this morning, I was thinking that a picnic in the back yard would be just perfect. We can't stay inside all the time." Ben said as they walked at a casual pace.

After passing the pool, they walked for a minute or so before they reached the edge of the mowed lawn. Beyond that point, everything was wild.

"I know it doesn't look like it, but this is a path." Ben said as he pushed some weeds aside and flattened them as he walked on them.

"Just up ahead is a nice clearing, and I think it's going to be the perfect place for our picnic." Ben said happily.

JD's head was swiveling in every direction as he tried to take in all the sights.

"Here we are." Ben said as they reached an outcropping of rocks.

"And do you see down there?" Ben said in a grim voice. "I think we need someone with a dump truck to cart away some of those loose rocks."

JD looked up at Ben with amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Go on. I'm just going to lay things out, then maybe I'll read for a while." Ben said as he took one step up and was on top of the flat rock.

* * * * *

JD did, indeed, haul away many, many of the crumbled rocks.

Ben watched, appreciating the tranquility of their surroundings and the unparalleled joy of watching a happy child at play.

Eventually, JD stopped playing and climbed the rock to sit by Ben.

Without a word, Ben laid out their meal.

They both sat silently and ate, enjoying the sparkling sunlight and the slightest breeze.

When the food was finished, JD remained at Ben's side and eventually fell asleep with a tiny smile on his face.

Ben couldn't resist the urge, and placed a feather-light kiss on the top of his head, before settling back to watch JD sleep.

* * * * *

"I'm taking lunch." Cliff called toward the receptionist's station from his doorway.

Brynna nodded that she had heard him, then went back to typing something on her computer.

Cliff walked to his desk, then dialed the number of one of his best friends.

"*What the fuck do you want?*" An angry voice muttered, barely coherently.

"Most people say 'hello'." Cliff quipped with a smile.

"*Do you know what time it is?*"

"12:45 in the afternoon. Did I wake you?" Cliff asked playfully.

"*What was your first fuckin' clue?*"

"I just wanted to call to invite you over for dinner tonight. If I waited any later, you might make other plans." Cliff said frankly.

"*Cliff?*"

"Yeah. Good morning, sunshine." Cliff said with an irritating amount of cheer.

There was a growl on the other end of the line.

"So, can you make it? My house, at six?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"*Um... what's the occasion?*" Todd asked slowly, finally starting to sound more awake.

"Ben and I have been given the honor and privilege of being foster parents to a wonderful little, seven year old boy." Cliff said happily.

"*Wait! Seriously?*" Todd said quickly. "*You got a kid?*"

"That's right. And I was hoping that you could come over tonight and meet him." Cliff said warmly.

"*Yeah. Absolutely. I can't wait!*" Todd said happily.

"Okay, we'll be expecting you at six." Cliff said with a gentle smile, knowing that Todd was sincerely happy for them.

"*Oh, um. Wait.*" Todd said slowly, "*Would it be okay if I brought someone with me?*"

"A new boyfriend?" Cliff asked with surprise.

"*No. Nothing like that, he's straight... well, mostly.*"

"Mostly?" Cliff asked with amusement.

"*It's a long story that I'll let him tell you if he wants to. Let's just say, we're not dating. But he's a great guy and I like having him around.*" Todd said frankly.

"He sounds like someone I'd like to meet. Feel free to bring him along." Cliff said with a smile.

"*I'll see you at six. Thanks for the invite.*" Todd said sincerely.

"Of course, but I hope you know that you're always welcome at our house." Cliff said honestly.

"*Yeah, I know. But still... thanks.*"

"I'll see you at six." Cliff said with a tender smile.

"*See ya then.*" Todd said before hanging up.

* * * * *

Ben's cell phone ringing woke JD from his light sleep.

After checking the caller ID, Ben quietly said, "Hi, love."

"*How are my two favorite people in the world doing today?*" Cliff asked gently.

"We were just having a picnic on the big rock in the back yard." Ben said with a tender look at JD.

"*Sounds nice.*" Cliff said with a smile, then added, "*I just wanted to let you know that Todd said he'd come, and he's bringing someone with him.*"

"A date?" Ben asked with surprise.

"*He says no. They're just friends.*" Cliff said consideringly.

"Friends is nice." Ben said with a smile.

"*I was thinking that since it's such a gorgeous day out, what would you think about steaks on the grill?*" Cliff asked curiously.

Ben thought for a moment, then said, "It is a perfect day for it, but... I'll need to go to the store."

"*Oh. I hadn't thought of that.*" Cliff said thoughtfully.

"How about I see what I can do? If we end up having tuna casserole, it's not going to ruin the evening." Ben said frankly.

"*I guess not.*" Cliff said with a smile. "*I should be home on time.*"

"I hope so, because if we're having steaks, I'm going to be counting on you to cook them."

"*It's a deal*." Cliff chuckled.

"I'll see you soon." Ben said warmly.

"*I love you*." Cliff whispered.

"I love you too." Ben whispered in return.

"*Before you go, let me talk to JD*." Cliff said quickly.

"He doesn't talk." Ben said with a grin as he motioned for JD to 'come here'.

"*Smart ass, just put him on*." Cliff chuckled.

"Your pappa wants to talk to you." Ben said with a smile, then stopped and puzzled over his choice of words.

JD cautiously held the phone to his ear.

Ben watched as JD's eyes lit up and a smile spread across his face.

A moment later, JD handed the phone back to him.

"See you soon, bye." Ben said gently.

"*Bye*."

* * * * *

"Well, JD, I don't know if you heard what we were talking about, but we need to go to the grocery store. I only need a few things, so it's just going to take a few minutes. But if we don't go, we won't be able to have steaks or salad tonight." Ben said as he watched for JD's reaction.

"When we get there, just hold on to me tight and close your eyes if you need to. I promise that I won't let anything happen to you." Ben said as he gathered the remnants of their picnic.

"Don't forget your truck." Ben said as he picked up the picnic basket.

JD hurried down off the rock and quickly grabbed his dump truck.

* * * * *

"See, this isn't too bad." Ben said as he carried JD through the store.

JD was holding on tightly, but didn't seem to be having too much trouble.

After picking out some nice steaks and plenty of vegetables for salad, Ben braced himself for trying to get JD through the checkout.

When he got to the front of the store, he was relieved to find that they had a male cashier on duty.

Even though his checkout line was a little longer than some others, Ben was happy to wait.

A few women in the other lines looked curiously at JD, recognizing that he was terrified, but thankfully, none of them approached.

When Ben and JD finally got to the checkout, the cashier quietly asked, "Is he alright?"

Ben could see the concern in the young man's eyes, so he quietly said, "JD is afraid of women."

The cashier looked Ben in the eyes and wearily said, "Work in a grocery store for a while, you will be too."

Ben gave a sympathetic nod, then started bagging groceries with one hand.

"Do you need some help with that?" A teenage girl asked as she approached.

As much as Ben wanted to say 'yes', so she would carry the bags out to the car for him, he could tell from JD's death grip on him that there was just no way.

"No thank you. I can get it." Ben said politely.

The girl looked at him uncertainly, but eventually moved to the next checkstand to help that customer.

"I can help you with that, if you'd like." The cashier said gently.

Ben looked up and noticed that the checkstand's light was turned off and there was no one behind him in line.

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that." Ben said gratefully, then looked to see the cashier's name on his nametag.

Ben read it, then read it again.

"Zeb?" He finally asked. He just couldn't help it.

The cashier looked up, then recognizing Ben's puzzled expression he said, "Short for Zebediah."

"I'm sorry." Ben said with a wince.

"Me too." Zeb said with a weary chuckle, then loaded the last bag into the shopping cart.

* * * * *

When they reached the car, Ben opened the trunk as Zeb positioned the cart so that it wouldn't roll away.

"You know, when I was his age, I was scared of just about everything." Zeb said conversationally.

"Really? How did you overcome it?" Ben asked curiously.

Zeb directed his response more toward JD than to Ben, "The person I loved most in the world, my Uncle Jonah, told me that being scared is natural. It's okay to be scared. But sometimes you need to make yourself go ahead and do things, even if you're scared of them."

"I think that's some very good advice." Ben said sincerely, "Thank you for sharing it with us, Zeb."

JD chanced a look up from Ben's chest and met Zeb's curious gaze, then hesitantly smiled.

"I hope it helps." Zeb said with an ear-to-ear grin. "I'd better get back in there before the dragon lady notices that I've left the lair."

"Thanks for helping us." Ben said with a smile.

"I'm glad to do it for a kindred spirit." Zeb said with a tender smile at JD, before heading back into the store.

Ben watched Zeb go, then quietly said to JD, "It looks like you made a new friend."

* * * * *

As soon as Ben got the groceries into the kitchen, he immediately went to work on making marinade for the meat.

"This would be better if I'd known yesterday so the steaks could have soaked all night. But this should still be good." Ben said as he quickly added ingredients to a mixing bowl, then furiously whisked them together.

As Ben was getting shallow pans out of the cabinets, JD pulled a chair over to the counter so he could watch what Ben was doing.

"This is marinade. It adds flavor to the meat and makes it a little more tender." Ben explained as he carefully positioned the steaks in the pans.

"Once this is done, there's nothing else to do for a while." Ben said as he poured the marinade over each steak.

"So you'll have time to work on your typing tutor, read, write or play with your truck, whatever you want to do." Ben said as he pulled out some plastic wrap to cover the pans.

JD seemed to be at a loss and just stood there, staring.

"Whatever you decide, I'll be in on the computer for a few minutes. I had a few ideas while we were on our picnic and I'd like to get them down while I still remember them." Ben said quickly as he cleared space for the steaks in the refrigerator.

JD finally seemed to come to a decision, then got down off his chair and scooted it back to the kitchen table.

"But just so you know, I'm going to be counting on you for help with dinner. So you need to be ready for work." Ben said frankly.

JD gave Ben a quick grin before walking out of the room.

* * * * *

As Ben finished cataloging the last of his ideas, he glanced over to see JD working studiously on his typing tutor program.

He watched as JD followed the prompts and tried to gain speed. The program was giving him simple three letter words at the moment, and JD was doing extremely well.

Ben looked at the clock and decided that it was just about time for them to begin the dinner preparations.

"When you're at a good stopping point, come into the kitchen. We're having company tonight, and there's a lot to do." Ben said as he stood.

JD glanced at Ben and nodded quickly before turning his full attention back to the screen.

Ben wanted to hug the boy, he could tell from JD's ready responses that he was so close to where he needed to be. Just a little bit closer and he would be speaking. Ben was sure of it.

But he knew that drawing attention to it wouldn't help anything, and might very well chase JD back into his self-imposed isolation. So Ben held his tongue and went into the kitchen to begin preparing dinner.

* * * * *

When JD walked into the kitchen, he found Ben with a big bowl full of fresh green beans.

Ben noticed him watching and said, "I've got this. There's a bag of baking potatoes by the sink. Would you wash them, please?"

JD gave a quick smile, then hurried to the kitchen table to grab a chair.

"When you're done with that, we're also going to need a salad. We should have everything you'll need." Ben said as he broke the stems off the green beans.

Ben jumped when a little pair of arms wrapped around him.

Before he could react, JD was on his way back to the sink to do his work.

* * * * *

"Honey, I'm home!" Cliff called as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm so glad that you are!" Ben said as he stepped away from the stove long enough to give Cliff a firm and heartfelt kiss.

"So how was your day?" Cliff asked curiously as he noticed that JD was diligently working on a large salad.

"We went to the store and JD was great. He didn't have any problems at all." Ben said proudly. "And, as you can see, he's been helping me in the kitchen and is making another of his vegetable masterpieces."

"From the looks of that salad, we may not even need steaks." Cliff said in an impressed voice.

"I'm sure Todd won't see it that way." Ben said with a chuckle.

"Probably not." Cliff said with a grin. "It looks like JD is nearly finished with the salad, though. Are you going to need his help with anything else?"

Ben thought for a moment, then said, "No. The potatoes are baking, so all I really have left is the green beans."

"JD, when you're finished there, why don't you come out back and help me with the grill?" Cliff asked hopefully.

A look of surprise was JD's first reaction, then a smile.

"Good. I'll be waiting on you." Cliff said, then walked out the back door.

"Pay attention to what he tells you. Cliff may not be able to make good fried eggs, but he can grill a really good steak." Ben said as he waited for his kettle of water to boil.

JD hopped down off his chair, then walked to Ben and took his hand.

"Did you need something?" Ben asked curiously.

JD pulled Ben over to the island and waited for his reaction.

"That salad looks great. I think everyone will enjoy it." Ben said, then squatted down to give JD a quick hug.

"Now I think you should go out back and learn all of Cliff's steak grilling secrets." Ben said before giving JD a quick kiss on the cheek.

JD smiled, then hurried out the back door.

Ben stood slowly, then walked to the window over the sink to watch Cliff and JD at the bar-b-que grill.

* * * * *

Just as Ben was starting to take the green beans out of the boiling water, the doorbell rang.

He ran to the back door and called out, "I think they're here. Can you get the door?"

Before he could receive an answer, he hurried back to the stove, hoping the green beans hadn't crossed the invisible line from blanched into boiled.

"We've got it." Cliff said as he walked into the house with JD on his hip.

Ben smiled at the sight, then worked to skim the last few green beans out of the boiling water.

* * * * *

"Hi Todd, come in." Cliff said happily as he opened the door wide and stood aside.

"Cliff, I'd like for you to meet my roommate, Wil." Todd said happily.

"It's nice to meet you, Wil. Why don't you guys come into the kitchen so we can do the formal introductions with Ben." Cliff said as he closed the door.

Todd and Wil waited for Cliff to lead the way.

* * * * *

"Hi Ben." Todd said as he walked into the kitchen.

"That's as formal as Todd gets." Cliff said conspiratorially to Wil.

"I can do formal." Todd said with playful indignation. "Dr. Clifton Grant, M.D. and Mr. Benjamin Stone, may I introduce you to Mr. William Hale, a good friend and aspiring bartender."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Cliff said with a gentlemanly bow.

"It's very nice to meet you, too." Wil said with a chuckle.

"And, may I introduce you to the newest member of our family, JD." Cliff said proudly as he held JD in his arms.

"Hey, little guy." Todd said with a smile.

JD buried his face into Cliff's shoulder.

"He's a little shy about meeting new people." Cliff said tenderly.

"Yeah. So's Wil." Todd said frankly, garnering a reproachful look from Wil.

"Well, if we're going to have steaks tonight, then I need to get out back and start cooking." Cliff said frankly.

"Could you use some company?" Todd asked casually.

"Sure." Cliff said as he headed for the back door.

* * * * *

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Wil asked quietly.

"Yeah. You can set the table if you like." Ben said casually. "Plates and glasses are here, and the silverware's in that drawer."

Wil went to the cabinet, then quietly asked, "Did Todd say that your last name was Stone?"

"Yeah." Ben said, over his shoulder.

"Are you from Orlando?" Wil asked cautiously as he carried plates to the dining room.

"Yes. I am." Ben said slowly, as Wil walked back into the room.

"My mom's maiden name is Stone." Wil said as he looked Ben in the eyes.

"Oh. Well, I haven't really kept in touch with the family very much..." Ben trailed off.

"Me either, for about a year now." Wil said regretfully, then carried drinking glasses into the next room.

Ben could see how much that admission hurt Wil.

Ben worked for a moment, chopping some cloves of garlic, then after Wil returned, he cautiously asked, "Do you have someone in your family named Ellen Stone?"

"Yes! She's my great grandmother!" Wil said happily.

"If I'm remembering right, Ellen was married to Harold Stone. Is that right?" Ben asked as he turned his attention back to his skillet.

"Yeah. Grandpa Harry." Wil said quickly.

"My great grandfather was Kendrick Stone, Harold's brother. We called him Grandpa Rick." Ben said in an absent tone.

"Did he pass away?" Wil asked cautiously.

"I'm sure he must have, by now." Ben said, then heaved a sigh. "I've sort of been exiled from the family, for being gay. None of them will talk to me or have anything at all to do with me. So I have no idea what's happened with the family in the past few years."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Wil said quietly.

Ben shrugged, then said, "You get used to it, and besides, now I'm starting my own family."

"Yeah. You got a cute kid." Wil said with an honest smile.

"So, did you also get kicked out of your family for being gay?" Ben finally asked. From Wil's earlier reaction, it seemed that Wil might be receptive to talking about it.

"Yes and no." Wil said slowly. "Yes, I got kicked out of my family, but no, it wasn't for being gay. When I came out to my parents, they weren't, like, happy or anything, but... they could've been a lot worse."

"I'm glad to hear that." Ben said sincerely.

"Of course, after I went through all the hell of coming out to them, I met this girl and... well, it turns out that I'm not as gay as I thought I was." Wil finished with an ironic chuckle.

"I bet your parents were happy about that." Ben said with a smile.

"Oh my God! You should have seen the way they treated her. The girl who made their son straight! It ended up that they loved her a whole lot more than I did." Wil finished with a weary smile.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out." Ben said quietly.

Wil shrugged, then as he was gathering silverware out of the drawer, he absently said, "It'll happen someday."

"So are you looking for Mr. Right or Mrs. Right?" Ben asked curiously.

"Either. I'm not picky." Wil said with a grin, then walked into the dining room to put out silverware.

Ben turned his attention back to his skillet and thought about asking Wil about what happened to cause his parents to break ties with him. In the end, he decided that it would be better to change the subject and let Wil bring it up if he felt like talking about it.

When Wil returned from the dining room , Ben cautiously asked, "Do you have a cousin, Marc?"

"Uncle Marc." Wil corrected quickly. "Yeah, do you know him?"

"He spent the summer at my house one year, back when we were teenagers. That was back when our families still got along." Ben said, then added the green beans to the hot skillet, making an impressive cloud of steam.

"He's one of my favorite uncles. I haven't talked to him for quite a while." Wil said a bit sadly.

"He's the only member of your family that I had a chance to get to know. But I really liked him." Ben said frankly, then started stirring the green beans around in the skillet.

"Is there anything else that I can do?" Wil asked as he looked around.

"Not right this minute." Ben said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "But there is something that I should probably warn you about.

"What's that?" Wil asked curiously.

"Well, one of the reasons that we invited Todd over tonight was so that JD could see his tattoos. I just wanted to give you a little advance warning in case JD doesn't react well." Ben said honestly.

"If he might have a problem with it, then why..." Wil trailed off in confusion.

Ben moved the skillet off the burner, then quietly said, "The reason JD is wearing a turtle neck shirt and gloves is because he has tattoos covering nearly his entire body. He keeps them hidden all the time and I'm hoping that seeing someone like Todd who is a nice person and is proud of his tattoos will help JD feel better about his own."

Wil slowly nodded, then said, "Maybe it will be a good thing for him. As role models go, you could do a lot worse than Todd."

Ben smiled and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"There's beer in the cooler." Cliff said as he gestured to the ice cooler by the back door.

"Maybe just one." Todd said with a grin.

"I really had to twist your arm." Cliff chuckled.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Todd asked as he retrieved a beer.

"No. I have my assistant chef right here. So I think I'm good to go." Cliff said as he opened the grill.

There was a hiss and sizzle as Cliff quickly placed the first steak.

Todd moved to his side and noticed that JD was watching Cliff's every move.

"Ben was thinking that JD might be interested in seeing your tattoos." Cliff said casually as he continued to load the grill with meat.

"Do you want to see, little guy?" Todd asked, happily.

Without waiting for an answer, Todd quickly skinned his long sleeved T-Shirt off over his head.

JD stared at the lattice of the interwoven tribal tattoo that covered half of Todd's torso, from shoulder to hip on one side, leaving the other side untouched.

"That's some nice work. How far down does it go?" Cliff asked curiously.

"About half-way down my thigh. I was going to do more, but I really like the way it turned out. I think I'm done for a while." Todd said honestly.

Cliff carefully lifted the edge of one of the steaks to see the underside, then started turning them all over.

JD watched what Cliff was doing, but every few seconds, his attention would return to Todd's tattoos.

"Man, those steaks smell good." Todd said with a hungry grin.

"Well, about two more minutes and they'll be done. Would you go in and get a platter from Ben? I forgot to bring one." Cliff asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'll be back in a second." Todd said as he walked toward the house, pulling his shirt back on as he went.

Cliff glanced over to see JD staring at Todd walking away.

"See? Todd has tattoos and we don't treat him any different from anyone else." Cliff said toward the grill.

A moment later he glanced back at JD to find him staring at the back door of the house.

* * * * *

"JD made the salad." Ben announced as everyone took their seats around the dining room table.

"I thought Cliff was joking when he called JD his assistant chef." Todd said in an impressed voice. "Hey, little guy, this looks really nice."

JD smiled at the compliment.

"Everyone, dig in. We don't stand on ceremony here." Cliff announced to the table.

"Everything looks great." Wil said as he put some butter on his baked potato.

"On behalf of my helper, thank you." Ben said with a grin at JD.

"Do you want some sour cream for your potato?" Cliff asked as he placed the dish of sour cream by JD's plate.

JD scooted it away, then took a scoop of butter.

"Wil and I were talking in the kitchen and found out that we're related." Ben said casually.

"Really?" Cliff asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I guess we're... would it be second cousins?" Wil asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, something like that. I never was very good at genealogy." Ben said consideringly.

"Cliff, these steaks are great." Todd said in a low, appreciative voice.

"Thank you. But my steaks are only good. It's Ben's marinade that makes them great." Cliff said honestly.

"What do you use?" Todd asked curiously before taking another bite.

"It's just thrown together. Steak sauce, soy sauce, honey... you know, like that." Ben said casually.

"Well, if I ever decide to cook steaks for someone, I'll need to get you to tell me how to make it." Todd said honestly.

"I'll be happy to talk you through it." Ben said with a smile.

JD tapped Cliff on the arm, then pointed toward the bowl of salad.

"Sure." Cliff said gently, then picked up the salad and placed it by JD's plate so he could serve himself.

"He doesn't talk?" Wil asked curiously.

Cliff and Ben shared a look, before Cliff quietly answered, "No. At least, not yet."

Wil could tell that they would all be a lot more comfortable if he didn't pursue that topic of conversation.

"When I visit my sister, her kids are like little banshees. I don't mind at all if JD likes to be quiet." Todd said with a grin at the boy.

Wil vigorously nodded his whole-hearted agreement.

JD gave Todd a warm smile.

Cliff and Ben gave a collective sigh of relief that JD didn't react badly to the topic being brought up.

* * * * *

"Would anyone be interested in a game of pool?" Cliff asked when everyone was finished eating.

"You know it!" Todd said cheerfully.

"Do you have to work tonight?" Ben asked curiously.

"Naw. We're both off. It hardly pays for the bar to be open on week nights. They don't need us until the weekend." Todd said casually.

"But we do a week's worth of work on those three nights." Wil said frankly.

"I bet." Cliff said with a chuckle, then gestured for everyone to follow.

"We'll be down in a minute." Ben said quietly.

Cliff nodded, then led Todd and Wil toward the basement stairs.

* * * * *

"JD, would you help me clear the table? I want to get the leftovers put away." Ben asked hopefully.

Without hesitation, JD started gathering the dishes and carrying them into the kitchen.

Ben was about to tell him to just stack the dishes in the sink and that they could do them later, but realized that considering JD's size, it was easier for him to scrape the dishes and load them directly into the dishwasher.

While JD was doing that, Ben made sure the few leftovers were all put away.

* * * * *

"JD, why don't you come over here so I can show you how to play pool?" Cliff asked with a smile.

After a moment of hesitation, JD walked to Cliff's side.

"Go ahead, Todd. When it's my turn, I'll show JD what to do." Cliff said happily.

Todd nodded, then took his shot.

"Nice break." Cliff said in an impressed voice, then said to JD, "He got a stripe and a solid in on the break, so he can choose which balls he wants to go for."

"I'll take the little ones." Todd said, then placed the striped ball back on the table.

"That means he wants solids." Cliff explained quietly.

Todd missed the shot and stepped away from the table.

"Do you see the way the balls are laid out on the table? I need to see which striped balls are lined up to give me the best shot." Cliff said, then let JD down off his hip.

Cliff moved around the table, then pointed at the twelve ball and said, "This looks like my best shot."

"Here, little guy. Let me help you see." Todd said, then lifted JD to give him a better view of the table.

Cliff smiled at the sight, then said, "I'm going to try to knock the cue ball into the twelve ball so the twelve goes into that corner. Watch."

JD watched carefully as Cliff lined up the shot and sank the twelve ball in one easy move.

"Now the cue ball is in a different place, so I have to see where my next best shot is from here." Cliff explained as he walked around the table.

Ben and Wil watched with matching smiles at JD's look of intense concentration.

"Hey, Wil. Would you mind being the designated driver tonight?" Todd asked hopefully as he lowered JD to the floor.

"Sure. No problem." Wil said casually.

"Good. Then I'm going to get a beer. Does anyone else want one?" Todd asked as he looked around.

Ben shook his head as Cliff said, "I could use one."

"JD can take my turn if I'm not back in time." Todd said before walking up the stairs.

A look of surprise was JD's first reaction, followed by a look of question directed at Cliff.

"It's just a game. Don't stress out about it." Cliff said before leaning in to take his next shot.

He missed the shot then smiled at JD. "It looks like it's your turn."

"I'll help him." Ben said quietly as he walked up to the table.

He picked JD up and pointed out the available shots for the solid colored balls.

"You don't want to knock in the eight ball. That ends the game. But the rest of the solids are yours to choose from." Ben said gently, then lowered JD to stand on his own.

Cliff handed him a cue stick, then stood aside as JD lined up his shot.

It took a little stretching, but JD was able to move into position and get a good angle.

"Hold on." Cliff said quickly. "Let me show you how to hold the cue."

Cliff leaned over JD and guided him into the correct position.

After a moment of intense concentration, JD cautiously tapped the cue ball, moving it about two inches.

"You need to hit it a little harder." Cliff said as he picked up the ball and put it back in it's original place. "Try again."

JD once again lined up the shot, then hit the cue ball more firmly.

There was a satisfying 'snick' as the cue ball impacted its intended target, but the four ball went nowhere near the pocket JD was aiming for.

"That was good." Cliff said happily. "With a little practice, you'll be a pool shark in no time."

"Good try." Ben agreed with a smile.

"Here you go." Todd said as he handed Cliff a can of beer.

"Thanks." Cliff said happily, then said, "JD took your shot, he didn't make it, but he came really close."

"I'm sure I couldn't have done any better myself." Todd said warmly.

"It looks like these guys are going to be at it for a while." Ben said quietly to Wil, "Would you like to check out our video game collection?"

"Sure!" Wil said with a huge smile.

"Come on over here." Ben said as he guided Wil to the other side of the room.

* * * * *

"What shot do you think I should take?" Cliff asked as he held JD on his side.

After a moment to consider, JD pointed to the nine ball, then to the side pocket.

Cliff thought about it for a moment, then said, "It's worth a try."

He lowered JD to the floor, then walked around the table to make his shot.

Todd sat his beer aside, then skinned his T-Shirt off over his head as he said, "I thought basements were supposed to be cold."

"When we had the basement finished, we made sure that it was well insulated so it would be a decent temperature in here." Cliff said casually. "I guess the heat of so many bodies is making it warm, but it's not bad."

Todd picked up his beer, then gave JD a quick smile.

Cliff took his shot, but didn't make it in.

"Nice try." Todd said as he walked to the table.

Cliff stood beside JD and watched as Todd lined up his next shot.

He glanced down and could see that JD had his full attention on Todd's tattoos.

Todd made the shot and Cliff responded, "Nice."

"JD, do you want to take my next shot? I'm thirsty." Todd asked as he stepped up to JD and handed him his cue.

After a moment of hesitation, JD took the cue and walked slowly to the table.

Cliff noticed that JD kept stealing glances at Todd, and looked uncertain.

Finally, JD sat the cue aside for a moment and pulled off his gloves.

Cliff smiled at the action.

JD then picked up the cue and walked to the table to line up his shot, looking to be every bit the pool playing professional.

He seemed to be about to take his shot when, instead, he sat the cue aside again.

Cliff watched curiously, then his eyes went wide when he saw JD starting to pull his shirt up.

He wanted to call Ben so he could witness the bold step that JD was taking, but didn't want to spook the boy.

Slowly, JD skinned the turtle neck shirt off over his head, then looked around nervously.

"Holy fuck!" Todd gasped when he saw the tattoos.

Cliff felt panic rise up inside him, not knowing what he could do to protect JD from having his self image crushed after making such a bold move.

"Todd!" Cliff said sharply, wanting to get his attention, but not scare JD.

It took a moment, but Todd finally looked up.

Cliff gave Todd an urgent look, then looked with concern at JD.

Todd gave a nod of comprehension, then looked JD in the eyes as he said, "That's some beautiful work."

JD seemed to be frozen in place and Cliff was worried that this all might have been a horrible mistake.

"Do you mind if I look?" Todd asked gently as he slowly walked to JD.

Cliff gave a silent sigh of relief as he watched Todd go to his knees so he could look at JD's tattoos and ridged scars more closely.

"This is some incredible work." Todd muttered in true appreciation.

JD was watching Todd's expression carefully and finally seemed to relax.

Cliff took a step closer, wanting to see for himself.

When he had looked at the photographs, he could only see what horrible things had been done to a young child. But seeing JD before him, in the flesh, he could begin to appreciate the artistic beauty in the designs.

If JD were going to be permanently marked, at least it wasn't with something pornographic or satanic. The spiked designs were unconventional, but definitely beautiful.

Todd cautiously reached up and trailed his finger across one of the ridges that ran down the middle of one of the large barbed patterns.

JD wriggled away from the touch and seemed to be fighting back a giggle.

"Tickles, huh?" Todd asked with a smile.

JD held still as Todd continued to examine the intricate designs.

Cliff looked carefully at JD's expression to find that he seemed to be enjoying the attention.

"Wil! Come over here, you've got to see this." Todd suddenly called toward the video game area.

JD looked nervous, so Cliff put a hand on his shoulder to reassure him.

"Try to relax. Todd's right, you look great." Cliff said gently.

JD looked up at him uncertainly, but after examining his expression, broke into a nervous smile.

Wil and Ben walked around the pool table and froze at the sight.

"Isn't this some amazing work?" Todd asked seriously. "Look at this, here."

After a moment to get over the shock, Wil walked to Todd's side and looked at the pattern he was indicating.

"God! The detail work is incredible." Wil said in amazement.

JD seemed to relax a little bit more, turning slightly when Todd or Wil needed a better view.

Cliff felt an arm come around his waist and was happy to return the hug.

"I hate the pain he must have gone through, but I agree that the tattoos are very well done." Cliff said quietly.

"I only care that JD was comfortable enough to take off his shirt. I was afraid that he would spend the rest of his life ashamed of his body and trying to keep it covered." Ben said as he held Cliff firmly.

"I doubt that he'll be running around shirtless anytime soon, but maybe after this, he'll feel comfortable enough to wear a regular T-Shirt or at least take off the gloves while he's at home.

"Just as long as he's happy." Ben said as he watched their guests fawning over JD.

"How do you think that would look on me, on my bicep?" Wil asked as he pointed at a design on JD's forearm.

"As long as you wrap it around a little, like they did on JD, I think it would look great." Todd said seriously.

"JD, do you think you could come with me when I get my tattoo done, just long enough so I can show the guy what I want?" Wil asked hopefully.

JD looked at Wil with surprise, then at Cliff with question.

"Just let me know when you want to do it and we'll meet you there. I don't want JD to be around while it's being done." Cliff said frankly.

Wil rolled his eyes and said, "Of course not. I just don't want it to get messed up because the guy doesn't understand what I want. I mean, if he makes a mistake, it's kinda forever."

"Fair enough. As long as JD doesn't mind, I'll be happy to take him down there." Cliff said with a smile.

"Thanks." Wil said shyly.

"JD, it's your shot." Todd said as he pointed at the forgotten pool table.

After a moment of looking around, JD picked up the pool cue and lined up his shot.

He didn't drop the ball, but he came much closer to his target this time.

"That was a really good try." Todd said as he gave JD a quick squeeze on the shoulder.

JD smiled up at him, then at Ben and Cliff who were still holding each other.

Cliff gave Ben a quick kiss before stepping forward to take his shot.

* * * * *

The pool games continued on longer than any of them would have predicted. Wil and Ben joined the game and part of the fun seemed to be what kind of creative excuses they could come up with to allow JD to take their turn.

Finally JD's repeated yawns announced to everyone that it was time to call it a night.

After going upstairs, Ben put a hand on Wil's shoulder to draw him aside.

"I'm glad that after all these years, I've finally found someone that I can call my family." Ben said quietly.

"Yeah. I'm glad too." Wil said shyly. "And I'm really glad that you turned out not to be a total asshole. I mean, being a Stone..."

"I understand." Ben said with a chuckle, then quietly said, "Just remember that we're family. Blood family. So I want you to keep in touch. And if you ever need anything at all, I want you to call me."

"Thanks Ben." Wil said as he gave Ben a quick hug. "And you can call me, too. I'm at Todd's, so I know you have the number."

"I'll do that." Ben said happily and finally released Wil from the hug.

"You ready to go?" Todd asked from the front door.

"Ready when you are." Wil said cheerfully.

Todd tossed his keys to Wil, then walked out the door.

Cliff, Ben and JD waved from the doorway and watched them go.

"So, little man, did you have a good time tonight?" Cliff asked as he squatted at JD's side.

A firm hug was JD's immediate answer.

"Why don't you go and take your bath while your Pappa and I tidy things up?" Ben asked gently.

JD looked up at him and nodded, before hurrying away.

"Did you see that?" Cliff asked in wonder.

"Yes." Ben said with a smile that threatened to bubble over into tears. "I've seen him do that two other times when he was busy and distracted. But that's the first time I've seen him consciously give a direct answer to a direct question."

"It looks like your instincts about Todd were right. I'm so glad you thought of that." Cliff said tenderly.

"I don't know that it's going to make any difference in the long run, but at least we gave it a try." Ben said thoughtfully.

"It's progress." Cliff said as he held Ben close to his side, "Whether it turns out to be big or small, it's definitely progress."

"Come on Pappa, let's get this place cleaned up so we can get our son tucked into bed." Ben said playfully.

"Whatever you say, Daddy."

Chapter 4

Ben awoke, immediately sensing that something was... out of place. Not necessarily wrong, but just not as it should be.

He glanced at the clock beside his bed to find that it was 5:30 in the morning. Cliff was beside him and was sound asleep.

Ben sat up and listened, trying to determine what had awakened him.

Slowly and quietly, Ben got out of the bed and pulled on his robe as he walked to the door to investigate.

In the hall, he noticed a faint light under the door of his bedroom which he recognized as being from the reading light by his bed.

Suddenly there were soft clicking sounds coming from the room. Ben walked to the door and slowly opened it to investigate.

JD was sitting at the computer desk, typing on the little laptop computer like an old pro.

Ben could see that JD wasn't wearing his gloves and seemed to be completely absorbed in his work.

"It's not even six in the morning. What are you doing up?" Ben whispered as he slowly walked into the room.

JD jumped at the sound and quickly hid his hands under the edge of the desk.

"You don't have to hide yourself from me, JD." Ben said quietly. "Remember last night when Todd was here?"

JD watched uncertainly as Ben slid into the other chair at the desk.

"I saw your tattoos then and I didn't say 'Oh! You poor baby!' or make any kind of fuss at all, did I?" Ben asked seriously.

JD's unblinking stare was the only answer he received.

"This is your home, JD. And I want you to be comfortable. I want you to know that you can walk around this house in just your underwear if you want to." Ben said gently.

JD's eyes widened a little as his look became more cautious.

"That was just an example. I don't expect it." Ben chuckled, "Please, just try to relax and be happy here."

JD's gaze fell to his lap for a moment, then he slowly raised his hands to the keyboard of the little laptop computer.

"I tell you what, little man. I still need another hour or so of sleep. Stay in the house, remember that you're not allowed to use the stove and, most important, that I love you very much." Ben said, then leaned in to give JD a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'll be in Cliff's room if you need me for anything." Ben said as he slowly stood.

Ben saw JD looking up at him, but couldn't get a clue as to what was going on behind those intense eyes.

"I'll see you in an hour or so." Ben said then gave a little wave before exiting the room.

* * * * *

"Did you make coffee?" Cliff asked groggily.

"I set it up last night, but I haven't started it." Ben said into his pillow.

"I think I smell coffee." Cliff said slowly, sounding confused.

Ben turned his head slightly and took in a slow, deep inhale, then said, "Yeah. That smells like coffee."

"But how... JD?" Cliff asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. He was up about an hour and a half ago, typing something. He must have started the coffee maker while he was making himself breakfast." Ben mumbled.

"Do you think he's okay in the kitchen all by himself?" Cliff asked with concern.

"Yeah. He knows what he's doing and how to be safe." Ben said, then flopped over in bed to look at Cliff.

"We should really be in there to supervise him." Cliff said as he scooted to the edge of the bed.

A sound outside the bedroom door drew their attention.

The door opened slightly, then stopped.

"JD? It's okay if you want to come in." Ben said gently.

Ben and Cliff shared confused looks and waited for what was going to happen next.

Finally, JD slowly pushed the door open with the corner of a tray that he carried.

"What have you got there, little man?" Cliff asked with surprise.

JD walked to Cliff's side of the bed and held out the tray, offering it to him.

Cliff and Ben looked at the tray to find fried eggs, buttered toast, smokie sausages and a cup of coffee.

"Is this for me?" Cliff asked with surprise as he accepted the tray.

JD smiled briefly, then turned and walked out of the room.

"Thank you." Cliff quickly called after him, then turned to Ben and said, "He made me breakfast in bed."

"And it looks good." Ben said in an impressed voice.

"Yeah! I can't wait to try it." Cliff said seriously, then shifted around on the bed so that he could put the tray on his lap.

Ben smiled at the wonderful, thoughtful thing that JD had done for Cliff. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't noticed that JD had returned until he felt something touch his elbow.

"Oh! Thank you, JD." Ben said happily as he accepted a tray, identical to Cliff's.

As soon as Ben had the tray, JD hurried out of the room again.

"I wonder what prompted this?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I'm going to take it as a sign that he's happy here." Ben said frankly.

"I hope so." Cliff said consideringly, then took a bite of his breakfast.

"This looks so good." Ben said with almost child-like enjoyment.

"The eggs are absolutely perfect." Cliff said in a low, appreciative voice, then noticed JD walking into the room, carrying a third tray.

It took a moment for Ben to realize what JD was doing, but when he did, he happily said, "There's plenty of room. Come on up."

"Hand me your tray, so it won't spill." Cliff said quickly as he reached forward.

JD handed him the tray, then climbed onto the foot of the bed.

"Here you go." Cliff said happily as he handed JD's tray back to him.

"You made a very good meal, JD. Everything is just right." Ben said with a smile.

"And the eggs are absolutely perfect." Cliff added seriously.

JD cast his eyes down to his own plate and timidly smiled.

"I'm so glad that it's finally Friday. It'll be nice to have a few days off so that we can relax together." Cliff said honestly.

"Well, it looks like I've accomplished everything that I need to for this week, so you can count me in." Ben said happily.

JD looked at the two men curiously, then turned his attention back to his food.

"There must be a million things that the three of us could do this weekend." Ben said thoughtfully.

After a moment, Cliff quietly asked, "You can't think of anything either, huh?"

Ben chuckled, then quietly admitted, "Not a thing."

"Well, we have all day to make plans. You can call me at work if any of the plans involve me picking up anything on the way home." Cliff said thoughtfully, then took a long, slow drink of his coffee.

"Hey, JD." Ben said gently.

When the boy looked up, Ben continued, "Thank you for making breakfast for us. It's really good and we appreciate it."

Cliff nodded his agreement.

JD smiled as he ducked his head shyly.

"So what are my two favorite people in the world going to be doing today while I'm slaving away at work?" Cliff asked to draw attention away from JD, not wanting him to feel too uncomfortable.

"Well, I think JD was typing something, so he'll probably go back to work on that. I have the household stuff to do, you know, laundry, vacuuming, that sort of thing." Ben said frankly.

"If you want to wait until tomorrow, I can help you with the household stuff." Cliff offered.

"I'd rather we all three have our extra things finished so we're free to enjoy the entire weekend together." Ben said with a smile.

"That does sound nice." Cliff admitted.

"Don't worry. I've got JD to help me if the chores get to be too overwhelming." Ben said with a grin at the boy.

"I won't worry. I know you're in good hands." Cliff said with a smile.

"How are you doing for time?" Ben asked as he glanced at the bedside clock.

"I have plenty of time to enjoy this breakfast before I have to get ready for work." Cliff said happily.

Ben sat for a moment, seeming to want to say something and at the same time, seeming not to.

"Something wrong?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"I have to go to the bathroom." Ben said frankly.

"Okay..." Cliff said slowly, not seeing the problem.

"I don't want to get out of bed in front of JD... like this." Ben said urgently.

"Oh!" Cliff said in sudden comprehension, then looked toward the foot of the bed and said, "JD, would you hand your daddy his robe? It's right over there on that chair. I'll hold your tray for you."

JD quickly handed his tray to Cliff, then scrambled off the bed and hurried to get Ben his robe.

"Thank you, JD." Ben said gratefully.

"You'll have to forgive Ben, he's shy." Cliff said to JD as he handed the boy his tray of food.

"I don't think it's necessarily being shy to cover myself in front of a child." Ben said frankly, then as he walked to the bathroom, he added, "I'm sure Mrs. Usher would agree."

"I'm sure she would." Cliff called after him, then whispered to JD conspiratorially, "He's shy."

JD smiled, then went back to eating his breakfast.

* * * * *

"Hey, Little Man, are you ready to take a break from typing?" Ben asked from the bedroom doorway.

JD looked up from his laptop and seemed to be considering the question.

"I'm making some chicken soup for lunch and thought you might like to make us some grilled cheese sandwiches to go with it." Ben said simply.

JD looked at Ben curiously, then stood and raised his arms.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Ben said as he picked JD up.

* * * * *

From the way JD reacted to Ben's prompts, he had apparently never made grilled cheese sandwiches before. It took a little extra instruction, but JD was able to make the grilled cheese sandwiches in his electric skillet.

When they sat down to eat their lunch, JD was all smiles at the simple, yet tasty, new food he had made.

While they were cleaning up from lunch, the ringing phone interrupted them.

After checking the caller ID, Ben quietly said, "Hi, love."

"*How are my two favorite people in the world doing today?*" Cliff asked gently.

"We're good. We just finished our lunch and were cleaning up." Ben said happily.

"*Well, what would you think about dinner and a movie tonight?*" Cliff asked happily.

"Um, I'm not sure how JD would do with going out..." Ben said hesitantly.

"*Actually, for what I have planned, we won't have to go out at all.*" Cliff said frankly. "*I thought it might be nice to swing by the video rental place on the way home, then drive through for something to eat. You won't have to bother with cooking or clean-up. You can devote your entire evening to enjoying the movies.*"

"The movies sound great, but I was planning to have leftovers tonight." Ben said slowly.

"*Will the leftovers hold for a day or two?*" Cliff asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'm sure everything will last that long." Ben said thoughtfully.

"*Good. Then be ready to kick back and relax when I get home. Tonight is officially going to be a family night.*" Cliff said happily.

Ben smiled, then said, "I like the sound of that."

"*Can I talk to JD for a minute?*" Cliff asked hopefully.

Ben didn't even hesitate, he just held out the phone and said, "Your Pappa wants to talk to you."

JD smiled as he accepted the phone.

Ben watched as JD's eyes lit up and his smile glowed.

A moment later, Ben accepted the phone from him and said, "I love you. Hurry home."

"*I'll be there as soon as I can. I love you too.*" Cliff said warmly, then hung up the phone.

Ben smiled, then, on impulse, picked up JD and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You're a good kid, did you know that?" Ben asked warmly.

JD looked at Ben with uncertainty.

"You just are." Ben said happily. "I just thought that you should know how I felt."

JD seemed to consider for a moment, then leaned in and gave Ben a firm hug.

"You're welcome." Ben whispered.

* * * * *

"How was your day?" Ben asked as he greeted Cliff at the door.

"Actually, very good. Do you remember me telling you about a boy named Jay Sean?" Cliff asked as he walked in, carrying three very full plastic bags.

"Isn't that the little boy with leukemia?" Ben asked, then quietly said, "Here. Let me help."

Cliff handed him one of the bags, then said, "That's right. Except now I suppose you could say that he's the little boy 'recovering' from leukemia."

"Recovering?" Ben asked as he stopped in the kitchen doorway.

"It looks like it's going to be a complete remission." Cliff said happily.

"That's wonderful!" Ben said with a grand smile.

"Days like today are why I became a doctor." Cliff said dreamily, then turned his attention to the bags he was carrying. "Where's JD?"

"In my bedroom on the computer." Ben said frankly.

"I hope he's not visiting any inappropriate sites." Cliff said as he started unpacking the bags.

"No. I stop in every so often to check on him. So far as I know, he hasn't even opened the browser. He's been completely focused on the word processor." Ben said seriously.

"Oh? What's he writing?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I don't know." Ben said slowly. "I haven't wanted to ask to see it. I mean, it seems to me that he's expressing himself, even if it's only to himself. I don't want to take the chance of interfering with what might end up being a bridge for him back to our world of communication."

Cliff considered for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"I see KFC with all the trimmings. What movies did you get?" Ben asked curiously.

"Just a few of the classics." Cliff said shyly.

Ben raised an eyebrow, then went to the bag of videos to see for himself.

"Pinocchio, Toy Story, Shrek... I think one of us will be entertained tonight." Ben said with a tender smile.

"Would you have chosen something different?" Cliff asked with a grin.

"No. This is perfect." Ben said quietly, then gave Cliff a slow, lingering kiss.

* * * * *

"Come on over here and sit on the couch with us. We're going to watch a movie." Ben said as Cliff loaded the DVD player.

JD hesitantly walked to the couch and was picked up and snuggled as soon as he was within reach.

"Your Pappa picked out some good movies. I hope you enjoy them." Ben said as he settled JD on the couch beside him.

"Is everyone ready?" Cliff asked as he took his seat on the other side of JD.

"Ready when you are." Ben said happily.

Cliff pressed 'play' on the remote, then settled back to watch the movie.

* * * * *

After about five minutes of 'Pinocchio', Ben noticed that JD was restless.

"Is something wrong?" Ben asked curiously.

JD gave him an urging look, then got up on his knees and looked over the back of the couch, toward the bedrooms.

"Do you want to go back to your writing?" Ben asked sympathetically.

JD's eyes silently spoke his response. 'Please!'

"Well, tonight is for the family to spend time together, so I don't want you in the other room." Ben said seriously.

Disappointment filled JD's eyes.

"But, if your Pappa doesn't mind, I could bring the netbook in here and you could type while we're watching the movie." Ben said cautiously, then looked at Cliff for his reaction.

"Since JD doesn't seem to be enjoying the movie, I suppose that would be a reasonable compromise." Cliff said cautiously.

"Pause the movie and I'll get the laptop." Ben said as he stood.

"Do you want to keep watching it? I can put something else on." Cliff said seriously.

"I haven't seen this since I was JD's age. I'd like to see it again." Ben said, then walked to the bedroom with JD at his side.

* * * * *

Ben and Cliff sat, cuddled together, watching Pinocchio while JD was sitting at the coffee table, typing away, oblivious to all that was going on around him.

"That must have been a really good typing tutor program. Look at him go." Cliff commented absently.

"Yeah. But I think JD deserves most of the credit. The program showed him what to do, but it was his determination that got him to this level. He really worked to learn it." Ben said honestly.

"Good part." Cliff said quickly as he pointed at the TV.

Ben turned his attention forward and became engrossed in the movie again.

* * * * *

After the movie ended, Cliff hesitantly asked, "Do you want to try another movie?"

"Only if you want to. I don't think JD is interested." Ben said frankly.

"Maybe we'll try another one tomorrow." Cliff said, then turned off the TV.

"So what would you like to do now?" Ben asked curiously.

"I'm kind of interested to see what's going to happen next in the book I was reading." Cliff said with a shrug.

"Yeah. I've got a book that I've been meaning to read for a few weeks now, tonight would be the perfect time to start on it." Ben said happily.

"JD, we're going to read now. You're welcome to join us if you'd like." Cliff said seriously.

After a moment, JD looked up from the laptop and seemed to be considering.

"It's completely up to you. You can keep writing if that's what you'd prefer." Ben said gently.

JD thought for a moment longer, then gave Ben and Cliff a quick smile before going back to his typing.

"I'll be right back." Cliff said with a chuckle, then gave Ben a quick peck of a kiss before walking toward the basement stairs.

Ben walked to the stereo and put on some soft, instrumental music before going to his bedroom to retrieve the book that he wanted to read.

* * * * *

In the course of time, Ben ended up cuddled into Cliff's side as they both read. JD continued to type on his laptop on the coffee table, just as content as he could be.

"Does anyone want some popcorn?" Cliff asked suddenly.

JD looked up from his computer as Ben looked up from his book.

"I was planning on it for movie night, but nothing says that we can't have it anyway." Cliff said honestly.

"Yeah. Popcorn sounds good." Ben said with a smile as he sat up, to allow Cliff to stand.

"I'll be back with it in a few minutes." Cliff said with a smile.

* * * * *

Ben was always impressed with Cliff's ability to make popcorn.

No matter how he tried, and even though he imitated Cliff's every move, his popcorn never turned out to be quite as good.

"I thought that rather than have all of us stretching, I'd just make JD his own bowl." Cliff said as he placed a small glass bowl on the coffee table. He took a larger bowl to the couch and handed it to Ben.

He waited for a moment for what he knew was to come.

Ben took a bite of the popcorn and smiled with appreciation. "Perfect. As always."

Cliff smiled, then asked, "So, what would everyone like to drink? I'm having root beer."

"That sounds good to me." Ben said casually.

Cliff looked at JD to find him looking back with a vacant stare.

After a moment to wait for more of a reaction, Cliff finally said, "Three root beers, coming up!"

"How's the writing coming along?" Ben asked quietly.

JD gave Ben a considering look, and seemed to be on the verge of answering, like a response was perched on the tip of his tongue. Finally, the look faded and JD got up and walked out of the room.

Ben considered the reaction and made a mental note to discuss it with Cliff later, when they were alone.

JD returned to the living room a moment later, carrying a book.

Ben was surprised when JD sat on the couch beside him, rather than going back to his place at the coffee table.

After leafing through the book for a few seconds, JD finally stopped and pointed to a passage of text.

Ben read it, then considered his answer carefully.

"Yes. I was using examples from Phoenician and Greek mythology to emphasize the drift in perception regarding love and war." Ben said slowly.

JD looked at Ben with aggravation, then pointed at the passage of text again, stabbing his finger at one particular name.

"Astarte? What about her?" Ben asked curiously.

JD's expression spoke as clearly as words, saying "Exactly! What about her?"

Ben chuckled, amazed by JD's ability to communicate only through facial expression. "Just wait here for a minute. If you're interested in Astarte, I have just the book for you."

JD's reaction was to break into a delighted smile.

Ben rushed out of the room just as Cliff came in carrying three tall glasses of root beer.

"JD, I think you're going to like this. I bought the good stuff." Cliff said happily as he sat the glasses on the coffee table. He hurried to the side table beside the couch and got coasters, then sat out the glasses of root beer where they were within easy reach for everyone.

After a moment of hesitation, JD went to the coffee table and picked up his glass.

He looked at Cliff, as if asking, 'Are you sure?'

Cliff nodded to encourage him to continue.

JD took a hesitant sip, then stopped to consider the taste.

A smile of wonder slowly filled his expression.

"Yeah. I know." Cliff said happily, then took a sip of his own root beer.

* * * * *

"Here you go, JD. Chapter five will probably have as much information as you're ever going to find on Astarte." Ben said as he offered JD the book.

"Homework?" Cliff asked teasingly.

"He had a question, so I'm helping him find the answer." Ben said simply, then sat and picked up his glass.

Cliff watched JD leafing through the book, then stopping at chapter five.

After taking a sip of root beer, Ben smiled and said, "Mmm. I'm glad you got the good stuff."

"Yeah." Cliff said with a grin, then asked, "Is that another college level book that he's reading?"

Ben considered for a moment, then responded, "Actually, I think most libraries would classify that book as reference material. It's not organized to be read like a story, it's more a collection of facts put into order so they can be quickly referenced."

"Is it one of yours?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yes. One of my early ones." Ben said slowly, "When I was working on my Master's, there were some gaps in reference materials for certain ancient cultural belief systems, so when I graduated, I worked to fill the gaps."

The sounds of clicking drew their attention to JD at the coffee table.

"I guess he found what he was looking for." Cliff said as he rested back.

"Yeah. But I can't imagine what that might be." Ben said slowly.

"I'm sure we'll find out eventually." Cliff said without concern, then offered the popcorn bowl.

Ben snuggled back into Cliff's side and took a small handful of popcorn.

Most of the remainder of 'family night' was spent with the two men sitting comfortably alternately reading and watching JD type.

* * * * *

"Good morning, sleepy head." Ben said as he sat on the edge of JD's bed. "I didn't want to let you sleep any longer. Sometimes sleeping too much can feel worse than not sleeping enough."

JD looked at Ben curiously, then broke into a smile.

"Good. I'm glad you're not angry with me for waking you up." Ben said gently, then leaned in and gave JD a quick hug.

"Don't bother changing clothes. Just grab your blanket and come with me." Ben said as he stood.

JD was obviously surprised by the request, but picked up his blanket and followed.

* * * * *

"I don't know if you've ever had the pleasure of goofing off on Saturday morning, but when I was your age, this was the most wonderful day of the week." Ben said as they walked into the living room. "Go ahead and get comfortable."

As JD climbed onto the couch, Ben turned on the TV and flipped through the channels, finally settling on one. "Here we go, this looks good."

JD looked at the television curiously, then at Ben with question.

"You can go ahead and wrap yourself in the blanket if you like. Just wait here for a minute." Ben said quickly, then raced out of the room.

JD glanced at the door, then cocooned himself in the blanket.

* * * * *

"Here we go. Saturday morning isn't complete without some ultra-sugary breakfast cereal." Ben said as he handed JD a bowl of brightly colored hoops.

JD hesitantly accepted the bowl, then looked at Ben with uncertainty.

"Just give it a chance." Ben said as he took a seat on the other end of the couch.

JD took a bite of the cereal, but didn't give any reaction.

Ben watched as JD slowly ate and noticed that he didn't seem to have any interest in the cartoon that was playing.

"Here's the TV remote if you'd like to watch something else." Ben said as he passed the remote to JD.

After a moment to look over the remote, JD pointed it at the TV and turned it off.

"Not a fan of TV. I'll remember that." Ben said quietly.

JD looked at him for a moment, then sat his half-finished bowl of cereal on the coffee table.

Ben watched curiously to see what JD was going to do.

It took a moment for JD to untangle himself from the blanket, but finally he got off the couch and stood before Ben with a serious look in his eyes.

Ben couldn't begin to guess what JD wanted him to do until JD slowly held out his hand, with his index finger extended.

"Sure, come here, little man." Ben said and pulled the boy onto his lap, then made a point of kissing his index finger before also kissing him on the cheek.

JD snuggled into Ben's side, then stretched up a little bit to return Ben's kiss.

"I think I understand now." Ben said contentedly, "You're not a fan of TV, and you're not a fan of sugary cereal, but you are a fan of me."

JD responded by snuggling tight into Ben's chest.

* * * * *

"Good morning." Cliff said as he shuffled into the living room.

"Good morning, love." Ben said gently. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"Yeah. Thanks for letting me sleep in." Cliff said as he sat on the other end of the couch. "What's going on in here this morning?"

"We're just having a little cuddle time." Ben said warmly.

"It looks comfy. Is there coffee made?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"Yes. And I think all of us could do with some breakfast." Ben said frankly.

JD shifted to look up at him hopefully.

Ben smiled at the reaction and said, "If JD wouldn't mind helping me, we'll have breakfast ready in no time."

"It sounds like a plan." Cliff said happily as he stood.

* * * * *

It seemed that JD wanted to make fried eggs, but Ben was finally able to convince him that they needed more variety. He showed JD how to make an egg wash and then demonstrated making a piece of French toast in the electric skillet.

That was all it took. After that, JD was a French toast making machine.

While JD made a mountain of French toast, Cliff fried some bacon and Ben cleaned and sliced a variety of fresh fruit.

"That looks perfect, JD." Ben said as he looked at the platter of French toast. "But it needs one final touch."

JD watched curiously as Ben dusted the French toast with powdered sugar from a shaker.

The look on JD's face was one of pure delight.

* * * * *

"You've been teaching JD a lot of cooking. I think it's my turn." Cliff said slowly while they enjoyed their breakfast.

"I think JD must have cooked before, because I haven't had to teach him that much." Ben said honestly.

"Either way, I'd like to show him how to make my world famous chili tonight." Cliff said with a smile.

Ben gave him an incredulous look.

"What?" Cliff asked defensively.

"I'd hardly call it 'world famous'." Ben said hesitantly.

"Well, maybe not. But it's good." Cliff relented.

Ben considered for a moment, then nodded, "It IS good."

"So what do we have planned between now and then?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Well, I was thinking that, if no one had an objection, we could go to the library later today."

Ben and Cliff both watched as JD's eyes lit up with delight.

"I'll take that as approval." Ben said tenderly.

"Do you think we'll need to worry about 'female trouble'?" Cliff asked cautiously.

Ben chuckled at the choice of words, then said, "JD's been able to get through Target and the grocery store without any problems, so I don't think the library should be too much trouble. He'll probably be so focused on the books that he won't even notice who's around him."

"I don't know. I've noticed that the women at the library seem to circle like vultures when a man walks in." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Maybe if we go in holding hands, they'll leave us alone." Ben suggested helpfully.

"I'm not so sure. Having a good looking guy like JD with us is probably going to draw them full force." Cliff said playfully.

Ben considered for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"I'm not saying that we shouldn't go. I'm just saying that we need to be prepared." Cliff said frankly.

"We can do the blocking routine, like we did at Target." Ben said with a nod.

"And if that doesn't seem to be working, one of us can take JD to the car while the other checks out the books." Cliff said slowly.

"It sounds like we've got a plan." Ben said happily, then noticed that JD was watching and seemed to be happy with their preparations.

* * * * *

JD had spent the majority of the morning in the living room working on the laptop on the edge of the coffee table. After about an hour, Ben got the power cord so that JD wouldn't have to worry about running low on battery power.

They enjoyed a light lunch of tuna sandwiches and salad, then piled into the car and left for the library.

JD held tight to Cliff's chest as they entered. When they were finally well away from the collection of three middle aged women at the front desk who Ben internally dubbed 'the Graeae', JD finally relaxed enough to be let down.

Ben and Cliff watched with matching smiles as JD's excitement escalated at the seemingly endless supply of books to choose from.

After the initial wonder wore off, JD went to work, searching for the books that he wanted.

Since it seemed that JD wasn't having any problems, Cliff ventured off to see what audio/video materials were added to the collection since his last visit.

Ben followed JD, allowing him to choose his own course.

When JD finally came to a stop, Ben was surprised to find that it was a section of the library that he was very familiar with.

At home, it didn't strike him as odd that JD seemed to have an interest in mythology, since the majority of reading material in his library was on that subject.

A touch on his arm drew his attention and he found JD looking at him hopefully.

"What is it that you need?" Ben asked quietly.

JD pointed to one of the upper shelves urgently.

"Oh, you need a little boost?" Ben asked with a smile, then picked JD up onto his hip.

JD looked down the row of books for a moment, then finally made his selection.

"Actually, I have that one at home." Ben said quietly.

JD looked at him curiously, then carefully put the book back on the shelf.

He ran his gloved finger down the row of books, then began to take another one.

"I have that one, too." Ben said gently, then added, "In fact, I wrote it."

JD looked at Ben with question.

"See there, the author's name? That's me, Benjamin Stone." Ben said quietly. "It's just like my book that you were reading on your laptop, except that this one has been published."

JD's eyes went wide as he seemed to REALLY get the concept that Ben was trying to convey.

Slowly, JD pointed at Ben, then at the book with question.

"That's right. I wrote it." Ben said slowly.

JD glanced at the shelf, then pointed at another book, further down.

Ben looked to see which one it was, then shyly said, "Yeah. I wrote that one too."

JD grinned at the admission.

"How about, since I'm familiar with the subject, I help you pick out a book?" Ben asked gently.

JD didn't give any reaction, so Ben started working his way down the shelf, muttering to himself all the way.

"No, I've got that one at home. That one's rubbish, there's not a single new idea in the whole thing. This one's better, but not by much. I wrote that one... Here, I think you'll enjoy this one, it's a good read." Ben finally said as he selected a book from the shelf.

JD smiled at him as he accepted the book.

* * * * *

"Are you finding everything you need?" one of the three ladies from the check-in desk asked as she approached.

JD held tightly to Ben and buried his face into his chest.

"Yes. We're fine." Ben said immediately.

"The children's section is over this way if you'd like to find something for the boy." She persisted.

"No. We're fine. Thank you." Ben said shortly, hoping she would take the hint and leave them alone.

Apparently, she didn't take hints. She seemed to be about to take another step closer when Cliff turned the corner and saw what was going on.

"Excuse me, but I just saw some teenagers making out over in the gardening section. It looked like the boy was rounding second base and about to steal third." Cliff said gravely.

The woman looked at him with surprise, then hurried away.

"Thanks." Ben said with relief.

"Are you about done looking around?" Cliff asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I get the feeling that JD would be more comfortable if we went home now." Ben said with concern as he felt JD's tense little body clinging to him desperately.

"Do you just want the one book?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yeah. We picked it out before... She arrived." Ben finished with a glance in the direction the woman had gone.

"If you want to take JD to the car, I can check the books out and meet you there." Cliff said gently.

"Thanks, love." Ben said with a grateful smile, then hurried to get JD out of the library.

* * * * *

"JD, please come back to me." Ben whispered as he stroked the boy's straight brown hair.

Ben waited but got no hint of a response. JD's large, usually expressive eyes were vacant, staring sightlessly at some distant nothing.

The encounter in the library hadn't been bad. Cliff had interceded before she even had a chance to get close, so Ben couldn't understand what had bothered JD so much.

He finally decided that it was probably something he would never know. There was a chance that JD didn't even know what had caused this reaction. The tone of her voice, a hint of her

perfume, or maybe a particular phrase she used when she spoke had triggered one of JD's painful memories.

"It's okay, JD. You're here with me now and you're safe." Ben said gently.

"How's he doing?" Cliff asked as he opened the passenger side door.

"Nobody's home. The porch light isn't even on." Ben said frankly.

"Do you want me to drive?" Cliff asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Please. I'm going to stay back here with JD." Ben said as he handed Cliff his keys.

Cliff watched JD and his complete lack of response for a moment before starting the car.

* * * * *

Once they arrived at the house, Ben guided JD into the living room and sat him on the couch.

When Cliff walked in a few minutes later, Ben quietly asked, "Is there anything we can do for him?"

"No." Cliff said simply. "Medically, there are things I could do that might snap him out of it, but he's in this state for a reason. He's either protecting himself or healing from something. Until I determine that this is actually hurting him, I'm reluctant to do anything that might make matters worse."

"I just feel so helpless. It's killing me to just sit and watch him like this." Ben said in anguish.

"Well, sometimes, things that are pleasant or familiar can draw a person out of a catatonic state." Cliff said thoughtfully.

Ben thought for a moment, then dashed out of the room.

"Please JD. Your Daddy needs you to come back." Cliff whispered as he gently stroked JD's much smaller gloved hand.

"I brought you your truck." Ben said as he carefully placed the yellow dump truck on JD's lap.

Cliff fought not to react when he saw the slightest movement in JD's eyes.

He couldn't be sure that it wasn't just wishful thinking on his part until he felt JD's hand starting to pull away from his.

"JD?" Ben gasped.

"Don't hover. Let him be for a minute. I think he probably needs to get his bearings." Cliff said quietly, then gestured for Ben to sit beside him.

JD slowly bent his head and looked down at the truck in his lap.

Cliff and Ben both held their breath and watched as he brought up one gloved hand to feel along the plastic truck's bed.

Finally Cliff quietly said, "If you remember, Mrs. Usher told us that he's been unresponsive for a full day when something like this happened before."

"Yes, but I thought he was getting better." Ben said as tears filled his eyes.

"I think he is." Cliff said reassuringly, "But I think any mental health professional will tell you that the road to recovery is rarely a straight one. There are twists and turns and usually a few bumps along the way."

Ben slowly nodded that he understood.

JD looked up from his truck, then around the room slowly, as if trying to determine where he was.

"You spaced out a little bit at the library, but you're home now, where it's safe." Cliff said with an encouraging smile.

JD's curious look turned to concern when he noticed the tears in Ben's eyes.

"Your Daddy was worried about you. Actually, we both were. But now that you're at home and safe, we're both going to be fine, so don't worry about us." Cliff said gently.

JD seemed to be deep in thought as his gaze slowly fell to the truck in his lap.

"Well, if we're going to be having chili for dinner, I should get it started soon. It's going to need to cook." Cliff said as he stood.

JD hesitantly looked up from his truck, not quite meeting Cliff's eyes.

Cliff leaned down a little, then quietly said, "If you want to help me, I'll show you my secret recipe."

"I thought you told me that you got that recipe out of a magazine when you were in college." Ben said with a grin.

"The foundation recipe, yes. But I've made improvements since then." Cliff said, then looked at JD with question. "Who knows, maybe JD will help me to improve it even more."

JD glanced from Ben to Cliff, then slowly put his arms into the air.

"That's what I had hoped." Cliff said happily.

Ben leaned in and took the truck from JD's lap so Cliff could lift the boy onto his hip.

"Now remember, JD. When you're making chili, the recipe is just to start you off..."

* * * * *

Ben was content to sit at the kitchen table and quietly watch Cliff and JD making the chili.

He hadn't really had the opportunity to see JD and Cliff interact much. The two of them together were a sight to be seen.

Cliff knew how to talk to JD on his level without being patronizing.

And it was obvious to Ben that JD was listening to his every word.

* * * * *

Ben was able to maintain a feeling of underlying serenity through dinner and the games of pool that followed. At the end of the night, as he stood in JD's bedroom doorway with Cliff at his side, a feeling of clarity washed over him.

They had taken their first real steps as parents today.

Keeping JD clothed and fed and even relatively happy were things that anyone could do. They were things that Mrs. Usher could have arranged for JD without too much trouble. But today, when JD hit one of the 'bumps' on his road to recovery, Cliff and Ben had helped him past it. They had reacted with love and concern for their child... and it had been enough.

As JD lay sleeping, one arm curled around his yellow dump truck, Ben couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the responsibility that they had taken on. Were they strong enough? The sight of that little boy, so withdrawn and damaged, was more than enough of an answer.

They had to be.

* * * * *

The following week turned out to be much less eventful than Ben could have imagined.

During their days together, JD and Ben had fallen into a comfortable and familiar routine. While Ben was answering questions for his editor about his latest book, he was also forming the outline for his next book.

All the while, JD was working on the small laptop, with single-minded determination. Ben was understandably curious about what JD was writing, but he felt strongly that it was JD's own personal business and as sacred as a diary. All Ben needed to see was JD typing without his gloves, and he knew that even though the gains were slight, JD was, indeed, making progress.

There were a few tense moments when Ben took JD to his first therapy appointment. They arranged it with Ron so that Ben would drop JD off with him, then Cliff would pick him up when he got off work. JD's wide, soulful eyes watching Ben leave nearly tore Ben's heart out. But by the time Cliff brought him home, JD seemed to be perfectly happy.

When Friday night came around again, they tried another movie. This time JD was able to tolerate over five minutes of the movie before he left, and returned with the netbook.

After the event at the library, they decided to hold back from taking JD out in public, as much as possible, just to give him time to build up a sense of security and work more things out.

Occasionally, Ben and JD did have to visit the store for necessities, and each time, they would stop by to visit with Zeb when they checked out.

With Thanksgiving approaching, Ben was in need of a few items that he didn't normally keep in the kitchen. As Ben carried JD into the store, he noticed that the boy's grip wasn't quite as tight as it used to be. As long as no women approached them, he would be fine.

Ben quickly added the items he needed to the cart, then went to the checkout, hoping beyond hope that Zeb was working that day.

"Look who's there." Ben said happily as he pointed toward the check stands.

JD timidly looked up from Ben's chest, then followed his pointing finger.

Ben was pleased to see a smile come over JD's face. Zeb had been friendly to JD and called him a kindred spirit when they first met. It seemed that JD had accepted those words, because every time they met, since, JD was happy to see him.

* * * * *

"Good afternoon, Zeb. How are you doing today?" Ben asked pleasantly.

"All is well with the world." Zeb said casually as he began to scan groceries, then smiled at the boy clinging to Ben's chest, and asked, "How are you doing, JD?"

A timid smile was the boy's response.

"I'm glad to hear that." Zeb said with a smile at the boy, then glanced up and said, "I'm sorry ma'am. I'm closed."

Ben looked up to see that Zeb had already turned off the light on his check stand.

JD's gentle tapping drew Ben's attention.

"Did you need something?" Ben asked gently.

JD pointed to Zeb.

"Yes. That's our friend, Zeb. What about him?" Ben asked cautiously.

JD looked around, then pointed at a magazine just past the register.

"Is something wrong?" Zeb asked curiously as he rang up and sacked their groceries.

"I don't know. JD wants something, but I can't tell what it is." Ben said slowly.

Zeb followed JD's pointing finger and finally took the magazine from the rack.

"Were you wanting to buy this magazine?" Zeb asked slowly as he looked at the traditional Thanksgiving dinner depicted on the cover.

JD got a look of frustration, then pointed forcefully at Zeb, then at the magazine cover. He gave Ben an urgent look, stressing the importance of his message.

"Oh! I see." Ben said with sudden realization, "JD wants me to invite you over to our house for Thanksgiving."

Zeb glanced down at the magazine, then smiled at JD as he said, "Thank you, JD. It's very nice of you to ask."

"I suppose you're already planning on spending Thanksgiving with your family." Ben said in a leading tone, giving Zeb a way to gracefully decline if he wanted to.

"Actually, my family doesn't celebrate it." Zeb said uncomfortably.

Ben was surprised by the admission, but quickly said, "We're not going to be doing much more than having a special meal, but you'd be very welcome to share it with us."

"No. It's a time for you to be with your family." Zeb said quietly.

"Maybe for some. But for the rest of us, it's for spending time with the people we enjoy. Please think about it, I know JD wants you to come, and you honestly would be welcome." Ben said, then noticing the total on the register, he swiped his debit card.

JD looked at Zeb with pleading eyes, begging him to accept.

"I don't have a car... I probably can't make it." Zeb muttered as he accepted the tender on his register.

"Here, let me write down my phone number and address. If you can't find a ride, call me, and I can come and get you." Ben said as he wrote quickly.

Zeb accepted the paper from him, then said, "Hey! This is only about two blocks from here."

"Yes. It's practically around the corner." Ben said happily as Zeb walked around the check stand to take their cart.

"Since you live so close, I won't need a ride. What time would you like for me to be there?" Zeb asked with a trace of excitement.

"The actual dinner is going to be later in the day. But I'm going to have things set out to snack on all day long. Let's say that anytime after noon would be fine." Ben said thoughtfully, then pointed toward his car in the parking lot.

"Like I said, I've never celebrated Thanksgiving before, so I don't know what it is that you do... can I bring something?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"I already have everything for the dinner. But if you'd like to bring something for dessert, that would be great. I have pumpkin pies, but you're welcomed to bring anything else that you'd like." Ben said as he opened the trunk of the car.

"Yeah. I'll do that." Zeb said happily.

"What do you think about that, JD? Zeb said he'd join us for Thanksgiving." Ben asked the boy in his arms.

JD gave a beaming smile in response.

"Thanks for inviting me, JD." Zeb said with a gentle smile at the boy. "I'll see you on Thursday."

"We'll see you then, Zeb." Ben said happily as he opened the car door.

Zeb pushed the empty shopping cart back toward the store, then paused and waved at JD before going inside.

"Thanks for inviting him, JD. I think the holiday is going to be a lot more fun with him around." Ben said casually as he let JD down, so he could get into his booster seat.

* * * * *

After carrying the groceries into the house, Ben noticed that JD seemed to be lost in thought.

"What's going on, Little Man?" Ben asked curiously.

JD considered for a moment, then started to roll up his sleeve.

Ben froze in place as JD revealed the stark, sharp black tattoos on his pale skin.

When JD had the sleeve rolled up to his elbow, he started to trace one particular design with his fingertip.

Ben couldn't make sense of what the symbol could be. He could tell that it was the abstract representation of something, he just couldn't quite figure out what.

When JD saw Ben's confusion, he tapped his finger on the tattoo, then tapped his bicep.

"Oh! You mean Wil!" Ben chuckled. "That's the tattoo he wants to get!"

JD smiled with relief, then pointed at the kitchen table.

"You want to invite Wil to dinner?" Ben asked cautiously.

JD slowly nodded, as if waiting for something more.

Ben thought for a moment, then the pieces came together in his mind, "You want me to invite Todd and Wil to have Thanksgiving dinner with us."

JD nodded with a big, happy smile.

Ben looked at the clock, then said, "I might still be able to wake Todd if I call him right now."

JD looked at Ben curiously.

"Ask your Pappa, it's kind of a running joke between him and Todd." Ben said as he picked up the phone.

After a moment to find the number in the phone's internal phonebook, Ben pressed a button and it dialed.

"*Hello?*" Todd's weary voice answered.

"Hi Todd, it's Ben. Did I wake you?" Ben asked quietly, not wanting to be abrasively cheerful.

"*No. I've been up for about three minutes. I'm just waiting on the coffee... what's up?*" Todd asked in a raspy voice.

"I was just calling because JD wanted me to invite you and Wil to spend Thanksgiving with us." Ben said with a smile at the boy who was listening to every word.

"*Did he start talking?*" Todd asked blearily.

"No. But he finds ways to let us know what he wants." Ben said frankly. "So, can you make it?"

"*Um... Let me think...*" Todd drifted off, then finally said, "*No. I already told my sister that we'd go to her house.*"

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that." Ben said slowly.

"*Hang on. I'll let you talk to Wil. I think he'll probably jump at the chance not to have to go to my sister's house. Her kids drive him up the wall.*" Todd said bluntly, then started knocking.

"*Wil. Get your ass up. Your cousin's on the phone.*" Todd bellowed, then said gently into the phone. "*He'll be right with you.*"

"Thanks, Todd." Ben chuckled.

A moment later, Wil said, "*What's up, Ben?*"

"JD wanted me to invite you and Todd over for Thanksgiving dinner." Ben said frankly.

"*Yeah. Um, Todd's already made plans.*" Wil said regretfully.

"He said that you'd probably enjoy spending the day with us more than with his family." Ben said simply.

"*You got that right. His nieces are the illegitimate spawn of Satan.*" Wil said as though it were a simple statement of fact.

"Oh... In that case, would you like to spend Thanksgiving with us?" Ben asked as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

"*Yeah, sure. Can I bring anything?*" Wil asked automatically.

"You can bring something for dessert if you like. I'll have pumpkin pies, but you're welcome to bring anything else." Ben said happily.

"*Yeah. Okay... What time?*" Wil asked curiously.

"We'll be having dinner later in the day, but anytime after noon will be fine." Ben said happily.

"*Hang for a sec.*" Wil said, then set down the phone.

A moment later there was a clatter as he picked the phone back up, then he said, "*Todd said he'll drop me off on the way to his sister's so I'll probably be there around one.*"

"That sounds great." Ben said happily.

"*Yeah. Thanks for inviting me. This is going to be a whole lot better than listening to Todd's sister try to explain away whatever the hellspawn did to their latest puppy.*" Wil said frankly.

"I'll pass your thanks along to JD. It was his idea." Ben said proudly.

"*I'll remember to thank him when I get there.*" Wil said fondly.

"Wil?" Ben said quietly.

"*Yeah?*" Wil said cautiously, recognizing Ben's serious tone.

"I'm glad you're coming. It's nice to have family again." Ben said gently.

After a moment, Wil quietly said, "*Yeah. For me too.*"

"See you Thursday." Ben said quickly.

"*See ya then.*" Wil responded before hanging up.

"Todd couldn't make it, but Wil said he'd love to have dinner with us." Ben said as he watched for JD's reaction.

JD smiled at the news.

"Is there anyone else that you'd like to invite, while I'm at it?" Ben asked curiously.

JD's response was to go to Ben and hug him firmly around the waist.

"You're welcome, JD. It's your home, too, so you should be able to invite people over if you want." Ben said as he gently returned the hug.

Chapter 5

Ben worked on planning and preparations during the days leading up to Thanksgiving.

JD spent most of his time at the kitchen table, typing on his laptop. But when Ben could think of something for him to do, JD was always happy to lend a hand.

Finally, Thanksgiving day arrived and Ben woke early to get the turkey into the oven.

Most of the morning was spent making finger foods to be put out at various times throughout the day. JD delighted in making the wide variety of Hors d'Oeuvres that Ben had chosen.

Cliff had spent the morning making sure that they had plenty of good movies and music to choose from to keep them entertained, as well as making sure that they had an ice chest loaded with beer, sodas and bottled water.

A knock on the door made everyone look up. It was time for the holiday to begin.

* * * * *

"Hello. You must be Zeb. I'm Cliff."

"Yes. I hope it's okay that I'm here." Zeb said nervously to the man he'd never met before.

"Of course. Please come in. Can I take that?" Cliff asked as he looked at the covered container in Zeb's hands.

"Yeah. It's an angelfood cake. I hope that's alright." Zeb said quickly.

"I'm sure everyone will enjoy it." Cliff said happily as he took the cake from Zeb.

"Ben and JD are in the kitchen, if you'd like to visit with them. It's right through there." Cliff said as he pointed.

"Thank you." Zeb said quietly, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Hi Zeb! I'm glad you could make it." Ben said happily.

"Thank you again for inviting me." Zeb said nervously.

"JD, would you like to get something out for Zeb to snack on?" Ben asked casually as he peeled sweet potatoes.

"That's okay. I don't need anything." Zeb hurried to say.

"It's going to be a while before we have dinner, so we made plenty of food to snack on to get us by until then. It's no trouble, it's already prepared." Ben said casually.

JD proudly placed a platter with a variety of different cheese and cracker combinations on the kitchen table, by Zeb.

"Do you need any help in here?" Cliff asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"No. JD's just about finished with the salad and I'll be done with the sweet potatoes in a few minutes. We shouldn't have much else to do until just before dinner." Ben said happily.

"Then why don't I show Zeb around while you guys are finishing up?" Cliff asked pleasantly.

"Sounds good." Ben said with a smile, then leaned in and gave Cliff a quick kiss.

Zeb gasped at the sight, then looked around in panic.

"Is something wrong?" Ben asked cautiously.

"You're homosexuals?" Zeb asked in a small, panicked voice.

"Yes." Ben said slowly, then quietly added, "It never occurred to me to mention it. I hope that's not a problem."

Zeb jumped slightly at the feeling of little arms wrapping around his waist. JD's large hopeful eyes were staring up at him, begging him not to leave.

"Zeb, I promise, you're just invited for dinner. We're not going to do anything to you." Ben said gently.

Zeb looked at JD for a moment longer, then reluctantly raised his eyes to look at Cliff and Ben.

"I'm sorry if I insulted you." Zeb said quietly. "I didn't mean to."

"That's alright. I just hope this won't make you too uncomfortable." Ben said with concern.

"I think, that if you'll be patient with me, I'll be okay, in time." Zeb said slowly.

"We can do that." Cliff said gently. "What do you say, Zeb? Would you like a tour of the place?"

"Yes. Thank you." Zeb said timidly.

JD looked at Ben with imploring eyes.

Ben didn't even have to guess at what JD was asking, he just nodded his agreement, then watched Cliff lead Zeb and JD to the basement stairway.

* * * * *

"We've got it!" Cliff called in response to the knocking on the door.

Ben finished wiping down the countertops, then glanced at the unfinished salad on the island.

He decided to wait for a few minutes and see if JD wanted to work on it again.

As he surveyed the kitchen, he felt confident about his dinner preparations. Everything was done that needed to be done. He would be able to spend time with their guests until just before dinner.

On impulse, Ben took one of the baking sheets of prepared hot Hors d'Oeuvres out of the refrigerator and slid it into the oven.

* * * * *

"Wil! Come in, how are you doing today?" Cliff asked happily.

"I'm doing great. I'm really happy to be invited." Wil said honestly.

"I'm glad. But I hope you know that since you're family, you don't need an invitation. You're always welcome here." Cliff said seriously, then put out a hand and continued, "Here, let me take that from you."

"Ben said I could bring dessert, so I brought Devil's Food cake." Wil said casually, then noticed the stranger timidly standing behind Cliff.

"Zeb, this is Ben's cousin, Wil." Cliff said pleasantly, then continued, "Wil, this is Zeb, a friend of JD and Ben's."

"It's nice to meet you." Wil said as he looked into Zeb's brown eyes.

It took Zeb a moment, but he finally shook Wil's offered hand and slightly smiled in greeting.

"Let's go check on Ben in the kitchen. From the way he was talking, he should be just about finished with cooking for a while."

JD looked at Cliff suddenly, then dashed away.

Zeb and Wil both gave Cliff identical looks of question.

"I think that means that he forgot to do something in the kitchen." Cliff said honestly, then added, "Let's go through the dining room so I can put this cake with the other desserts."

* * * * *

"Hey Wil, how are you doing?" Ben asked happily.

"I'm just SO happy to be here. I can't even tell you how happy I am." Wil said honestly.

Ben chuckled, then said, "I'm going to have to meet Todd's nieces, someday. They sound really 'special'."

"Special?" Wil said and seemed to consider before continuing, "Yeah, I guess they're special in a demented sociopathic sense of the word."

"JD and I have a few minutes left before we're finished in here. But after that, we have the entire afternoon free to watch movies, play pool, play video games... I think we even have a few board games around here somewhere, if you'd be interested in that." Ben said casually.

"I almost forgot..." Wil said seriously as he turned to face the boy at the island, "Thank you, JD. Thank you very much for inviting me."

JD smiled warmly.

"Before we start anything else, would anyone like a drink?" Cliff asked then gestured to the ice cooler.

Ben chuckled and said, "That's right. Where are my manners?"

Wil walked to the chest and dug around in the ice for a moment before coming up with a beer for himself.

"What would you like, Zeb?" Wil asked casually.

"I'll have to see what the choices are." Zeb said timidly.

Wil stood aside and held the lid of the ice chest open so Zeb could be free to explore.

Ben noticed the gesture and exchanged a concerned look with Cliff.

An uncertain look was Cliff's only response.

JD got down off his chair, then walked to Ben and took him by the hand.

"Are you done?" Ben asked with a smile, then followed JD to the island.

The large and elaborate salad was nothing short of a masterpiece.

"That's absolutely perfect." Ben said as he gave JD a hug.

"Hey, yeah! Good work, JD!" Wil said as he walked to the island.

"JD made this all by himself?" Zeb asked with surprise.

"That's right. He's really an excellent chef." Cliff said proudly.

"And this Thanksgiving dinner would have been a whole lot harder without his help." Ben said frankly.

JD shyly buried his face into Ben's side to hide his embarrassment.

"Would anyone like to go to the game room for a few games of pool?" Cliff asked pleasantly, to take a little of the focus off the embarrassed boy.

Ben glanced at the timer by the stove, then said, "Hold on for just a minute."

Before Cliff could ask, Ben opened the oven and took out a baking sheet.

"JD, would you get a spatula and help me?" Ben asked as he walked to the island.

He flopped a potholder onto the island, then rested the hot baking pan on top of it.

JD scooted his chair so that he was at Ben's side.

"I'll get a plate." Ben said quietly, then dashed to the cupboard.

Cliff, Wil and Zeb watched as JD expertly transferred the little pastries from the baking sheet to the plate.

"Those look wonderful." Cliff said hungrily.

"I'm glad, because we made them for you to enjoy." Ben said happily, then added, "Help yourself, just be careful. They're still pretty hot."

JD rushed to the kitchen table and came back with a handful of paper napkins.

"Thank you, JD." Cliff said before taking one of the pastries from the plate.

"What are they?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"Puffed pastry, filled with garlic and herb feta cheese and green onions." Ben said simply.

Cliff took a cautious bite, then said, "Oh... oh, that's good."

"I'm glad you like it. And we still have some cheese and crackers for those not feeling as adventurous." Ben said as he relocated the platter of cheese and crackers from the kitchen table.

"Ben, this is really good." Wil said appreciatively.

"Well, JD made them. All I did was put them in the oven when the doorbell rang." Ben said frankly.

"I think JD needs to come over to my house sometime. I don't know if our stove has ever been turned on." Wil said frankly.

Ben smiled, then noticed the puzzled expression on Zeb's face.

"Are you okay?" Ben asked gently.

"This is the best thing that I've ever tasted." Zeb said in wonder.

Cliff and Wil shared a smile at the comment as Ben said, "I hope you'll find some other things that you like even better before the day's over."

"Is everyone ready for the game room, now?" Cliff asked hopefully.

Everyone made sounds of agreement.

"JD, let's grab the snacks and take them down with us." Ben said quietly.

JD took the cheese and crackers as Ben took the pastries.

* * * * *

Once they reached the game room, Wil drew Ben to the video game area where they ended up talking at least as much as game playing.

JD immediately went to Zeb and tried to guide him to the pool table.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to play that." Zeb admitted shyly.

JD looked up at Cliff hopefully.

"Well, there's only one way to change that." Cliff said seriously. "If you want to play a game with JD, I'll show you what to do."

"We won't be... gambling, will we?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"No. We play strictly for fun." Cliff said gently.

"Then I suppose there wouldn't be any harm." Zeb said nervously.

"Please try to relax, Zeb. Today is all about relaxing with friends and having fun." Cliff said quietly.

"I didn't realize it before, but I guess I'm not very good at doing that." Zeb said shyly.

"Just like with pool, you'll improve with practice." Cliff said assuringly, then added, "It looks like JD's ready to break."

* * * * *

After a few games to get Zeb familiar, Cliff finally teamed up with him to play against Wil and JD.

It took a while, but Zeb finally got comfortable enough to relax and enjoy himself.

Ben watched them play and would occasionally slip away and check on things upstairs, only to return with another platter or tray of snacks for everyone to enjoy.

Even though they had been in the game room for hours, it only felt like a short time, and everyone was surprised when Ben called them upstairs for dinner.

Cliff made sure everyone found their way upstairs and was as in awe as any of his guests at the beautiful display of food that filled their table.

"Before we begin, I just want to say one quick thing." Cliff said as he stood. "This is Thanksgiving, the day that we remember what we're thankful for. I'm thankful for a lot of things, but most of all, I'm thankful for all of you, our friends and family. That's it! Let's eat!"

Chuckles spread around the room as everyone started filling their plates.

"What is this?" Wil asked curiously as he looked at one of the dishes.

"Cranberry dressing. It's one of those things you'll either love or hate. There's no middle ground." Ben said frankly.

"Thanks for the warning." Wil said with a chuckle and took one small spoonful.

"What's wrong, Zeb? Don't you see anything that you like?" Cliff asked when he noticed Zeb's empty plate.

"My family... we never celebrated this holiday. I don't know what most of these things are." Zeb said hesitantly.

"Well, then just try things. If you don't like something, we won't be offended. If you find something you do like, have seconds, there's plenty." Cliff said frankly.

Zeb seemed hesitant, but finally started taking small portions, so he could try things.

"So, does your family not celebrate holidays for religious reasons?" Wil asked curiously.

"Yes." Zeb said quietly.

Wil waited for a moment to see if Zeb were going to expound on his answer, but finally just let it lay.

"Ben, this has to be the best turkey I've ever tasted. It's absolutely perfect." Cliff said happily.

"I'm glad you like it." Ben said timidly.

"Hey, you're right! This is really good!" Wil said with surprise.

"Thanks." Ben said with a chuckle.

"How are you doing, Zeb?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"So far, everything that I've tried has been very good." Zeb said shyly.

"You can see how much food we have here. Please, eat as much as you like." Cliff said seriously.

"Yes. Thank you, I will." Zeb said quietly.

"JD, how are things going with you?" Cliff asked with a smile, already knowing the answer.

A quick smile was as much of a response as JD could give before going back to his eating.

"How about you, Wil?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Are you kidding! This is awesome!" Wil said happily.

"Awesome." Cliff said with a proud look at Ben.

"I couldn't have done it without my helper." Ben said with a glance at JD.

* * * * *

"I couldn't eat another bite." Wil said as he slowly stood from the table.

"I don't think I've ever eaten that much before." Cliff said as he joined him.

"You guys go on into the living room, and JD and I will catch up to you in a few minutes." Ben said as he started gathering serving dishes.

JD got up from his place at the table, then looked at Ben curiously.

"What?" Ben asked cautiously.

JD walked to the sideboard and looked at the pies and cakes.

"You've got to be kidding! If I eat another bite I'll split right open." Ben said with a chuckle.

JD looked at the cakes, then at Ben again.

"We're going to go into the living room to watch some television. In a while, after dinner's settled, we'll have dessert." Ben said seriously.

JD seemed to be considering for a moment, then went back to work, clearing the table.

* * * * *

"Shouldn't we help them clean up?" Zeb asked as they walked into the living room.

"Trust me, the most help we can give them is to stay out of their way." Cliff said frankly. "Ben and JD have their own little system for cleaning up after dinner."

"JD's really amazing." Wil said distantly.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who sees it." Cliff chuckled, then made a sweeping gesture to offer his guests seats.

Zeb took a seat in a well cushioned chair as Wil settled in at one end of the couch.

"Does anyone like football?" Cliff asked as he picked up the remote.

"No!" Wil barked, then said more quietly, "I'm sorry, I just really can't stand sports."

"I don't like sports, either." Zeb said supportively, more to Wil than to Cliff.

"Fine by me." Cliff said casually.

Wil seemed to be relieved that no one was going to make a big deal about it.

"I went through the movies and found a few that we might enjoy." Cliff said as he picked up a stack of DVDs. "I don't know what you guys like, but I think I've covered all the bases."

"Nice selection." Wil said as he looked through the stack of movies, then stretched to hand the stack to Zeb.

"My family... we didn't watch television or movies. So I don't know about any of these." Zeb said shyly, "I'm sure that if you pick something you like, I'll enjoy it, too."

"You haven't seen any of these?" Wil asked in amazement.

Zeb reluctantly shook his head.

"What do you think we should start with?" Cliff asked uncertainly.

"Wizard of Oz." Wil said immediately.

"Wizard... is it about witchcraft?" Zeb asked nervously.

"It has witches and wizards in it, but it's all in a fantasy world." Cliff said seriously. "As long as you're able to distinguish fantasy from reality, this isn't anything that can harm you."

Zeb thought about Cliff's words for a moment, then quietly said, "You must think I'm some kind of ignorant child."

"Not at all." Wil said quickly to reassure him. "We think that you were probably raised by some very strict parents who were very sure of their religious beliefs."

Zeb's eyes went wide in wonder.

"There's nothing wrong with that." Wil said, as he looked at Zeb seriously. "And as long as you don't try to tell us what **we** should believe, we won't try to tell you what **you** should believe."

"And if you're not comfortable watching this movie, then we'll find something else. We just want everyone to be comfortable and enjoy themselves today." Cliff said honestly.

"It seems that you understand me better than I could have hoped." Zeb said quietly, "So, if you think that this wizard movie is something worth watching, I will try to keep an open mind."

"Okay. But if you're uncomfortable, just tell me and we can stop the movie at any time. No one will be upset with you." Cliff said gently.

"Thank you for being so nice to me." Zeb said quietly. "No one has been so kind to me since I've been away from my family."

"Are you Amish?" Wil asked hesitantly.

Zeb was surprised by the question, but then a look of understanding came into his expression, "No. But from what little I know of the Amish people, I suppose there are some similarities in the way I was raised."

"So you had electricity and cars." Will guessed.

"Yes." Zeb said with a smile, then added, "But my parents wouldn't allow us to have a television, or go to movies. The only friends I was allowed to have were those that they chose for me."

"What about at school? They couldn't control who you were friends with there. Could they?" Wil asked quietly.

"I was home schooled. So were most of the children of our church." Zeb said regretfully.

"It sounds like a pretty lonely life." Wil said sympathetically.

Zeb slowly nodded.

"Are we ready to start the movie?" Ben asked as he and JD walked into the living room.

"We were just waiting on you two." Cliff said with a tender smile, feeling that Ben had come in at the perfect time.

JD went immediately to the coffee table and opened the netbook that he was carrying.

"He doesn't like TV or movies." Ben explained quietly. "Rather than him being alone in another room while Cliff and I watch movies, JD is welcome to stay in here with us and read or write or play with his toys."

"So we still get to spend time together, even though we're not all doing the same thing." Cliff added as he loaded the DVD into the player.

"That sounds like a great way of doing it." Wil said with a smile at JD.

"It only happens about once a week. Usually, we're all doing something together like reading or playing pool." Ben said frankly.

"Everyone ready?" Cliff asked as he looked around. "Then it's time for the movie."

* * * * *

Wil, Ben and Cliff were entertained more by watching Zeb's reaction to the movie than by the movie itself.

Every time something would happen on the screen, Zeb's expressions revealed exactly how he felt about it.

He cowered when Dorothy was afraid, laughed when Dorothy was happy and openly cried on more than one occasion.

By the end of the movie, all the men had felt as emotionally drained as if they had visited Oz themselves.

"So, what did you think of the movie?" Wil finally asked.

"That was... It was so beautiful! It was amazing!" Zeb said joyously.

"I'm really glad you liked it." Wil said honestly.

"When I've saved enough money, I need to buy a television. That was incredible!" Zeb said with an ear-to-ear grin.

"JD, will you please go start the coffee? I think it's just about time for dessert." Ben said quietly.

All conversation in the room stopped when Ben said 'the word'.

He looked around, then said, "It's waiting for you in the dining room."

All the men immediately stood and filed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Wil, can you help me in the kitchen for a second?" Ben called from the kitchen doorway.

After a moment to put down his dessert plate, Wil walked into the kitchen.

"Even though I know better in my head, my heart is forcing me to butt into something that's none of my business." Ben said cautiously.

"Yeah. That settles it. You're family." Wil said with a chuckle, "What's up?"

"It's about Zeb." Ben said as he looked into Wil's eyes.

"What about him?" Wil asked, feigning ignorance.

"You know." Ben said firmly.

Finally, Wil dropped the act and quietly said, "Yeah. I know."

"He's an innocent. If you'd seen the way he reacted when he found out that Cliff and I are gay, you'd know not to even think about going there." Ben said frankly.

"I'm not! He's just so... lost. I can't help but want to help him discover the world that he's been denied all his life and shelter him from some of the realities he can't possibly understand, yet." Wil said imploringly.

"I feel the same way." Ben said gently, then added, "But I just get the feeling that the way you're looking at Zeb is as something potentially more than friends."

Wil shook his head, then said, "I understand what you're saying and why you're worried, but I'm not going to make a move on him. I promise."

"Thanks. But that's not the promise that I want you to make." Ben said quietly.

Wil looked at Ben inquisitively.

"I'd rather you promise that you won't make a move on him... until he's ready." Ben finished with a smile.

Wil grinned, then said, "Yeah. I might actually be able to keep that promise."

"Good. Besides, there's a chance that he's totally straight and wouldn't be interested, anyway." Ben said casually.

"Yeah. I know. And even if he isn't **totally** straight, the church could still have messed with his mind enough that it'll never happen." Wil said regretfully.

"Just take it slow." Ben said gently.

"I will." Wil said with a smile. "Thanks, Ben."

* * * * *

"I can't believe how late it is." Ben said as he closed the front door. "As soon as your Pappa gets back from dropping off Wil and Zeb, I think we all need to go to bed."

JD looked up at Ben with tired but happy eyes, then hugged him gently around the waist and rested his head against his stomach.

"I know, Little Man. Me too." Ben said tiredly, "But it was a good day. All the food turned out. Everyone had a good time. I couldn't have wished for anything more."

"I tell you what, why don't you skip the bath, tonight and just brush your teeth and go right to bed?" Ben said gently. "I'll be in in a minute to give you a kiss goodnight."

JD looked up at Ben, then slowly nodded.

"I love you." Ben whispered, then bent down to give JD a quick kiss on the cheek.

JD returned the kiss, then shuffled away, toward the bathroom.

Ben watched him go as he sighed to himself in contentment.

* * * * *

"So, do you have any plans for tonight?" Cliff asked casually, knowing instinctively that Ben was already awake.

"I hadn't really thought about it. Did you have something in mind?" Ben asked, as he turned in the bed.

"Not exactly. I just feel like, after yesterday, I'd like to get out of the house and do something." Cliff said frankly.

"I don't know about that. After that thing at the library, I'm really worried about taking JD out in public." Ben said frankly.

"I know. And I think keeping him at home for the past week has been just what he needed, to recover from that. But he also needs to be challenged from time to time. If we don't find a way to acclimate him to being around people... around women, he's going to have a very lonely future." Cliff said honestly, then added, "And the longer we wait, the harder it's going to be for him."

"So, what do you want to do?" Ben asked hesitantly.

"I thought we could go downtown and do a little Christmas window shopping." Cliff said simply.

"On Black Friday? It's going to be a madhouse!" Ben said anxiously.

"Exactly." Cliff said seriously. "It's my hope that JD will see the forest instead of the trees. With so many people, all at once, he may not react the way he would if he were face-to-face with just one person."

"Well, you're the doctor." Ben said hesitantly.

"Yes. I am." Cliff said gently. "But that doesn't matter, right now. You're the one who spends the most time with JD. You've had a better chance than I have to get to know him and to understand his personality. I'm not saying that this is what we should do. I'm offering my opinion and asking for yours."

Ben smiled, then leaned in to give Cliff a quick kiss.

When the kiss ended, Cliff pulled back slightly and asked, "So, what do you think?"

"I think we should give it a try." Ben said decisively. "As long as one of us is holding JD and he knows that we'll take him home if it gets to be too much, I think it may be okay."

"We can tell JD over breakfast and see how he reacts." Cliff said thoughtfully, then smiled as he added, "I think I'd like to make breakfast this morning."

"If you have JD help you, get him to do the eggs. He's really proud of them." Ben said seriously.

"He has good reason to be." Cliff agreed. "But I'm in a mood for scrambled eggs and cheese."

"As long as you clean the skillet." Ben said seriously.

"Don't I always?" Cliff asked with a smile.

Ben arched an eyebrow and waited.

"I forgot one time!" Cliff finally admitted.

"Forgot? More like hid the skillet in the oven!" Ben said frankly.

"I must have been running short on time." Cliff said, thoughtfully.

"Running short on ambition is more like it." Ben said sternly, but was unable to keep a smile from breaking through.

"Come on. I want to get breakfast started before JD beats me to it." Cliff said as he sat up.

* * * * *

"Good morning, JD. I didn't realize you were awake." Cliff said as he entered the kitchen.

JD looked up from his netbook and smiled briefly.

"I decided to make breakfast this morning. How does cheesy scrambled eggs and toast sound?" Cliff asked cheerfully.

JD smiled as he got up from his place at the table and walked to Cliff's side.

"Do you want to help?" Cliff asked quietly.

A smile was JD's answer.

"Why don't you chop up some onions and bell peppers for me. I should be ready for them by the time you're done." Cliff said as he got to work.

* * * * *

Ben walked slowly into the kitchen and directly to the coffee maker.

"Thanks for starting the coffee, JD." Ben said, as he poured himself a cup.

JD flashed him a quick smile, then went back to work.

Ben saw the netbook sitting on the table and paused for a moment before taking a sip of coffee.

He smiled and set his coffee on the table before walking away with purpose.

* * * * *

Ben returned to the kitchen with his laptop and set it up next to JD's netbook.

As Cliff and JD worked on preparing their breakfast, Ben booted up the laptop and checked his email.

"Did you have some work to do?" Cliff asked curiously as he scrambled the eggs in a bowl.

"Not really." Ben said casually. "But I thought I'd get the laptop set up so that I can join JD in a writing session if inspiration should strike.

"So the difference between this and work would be..." Cliff asked playfully.

"The difference would be that I'm writing for fun. Just because I feel like it." Ben said frankly.

"So, will you be working on one of your paleo-theosophical books?" Cliff asked, then poured the egg mixture into the hot skillet.

Ben chuckled at the question, then said, "I haven't decided, yet. I may decide to do something else for a change. Maybe I'll write a story about a hunky doctor and his compelling, yet strangely quiet, son."

"It sounds like a best seller, to me." Cliff said happily as he stirred the eggs around, then quickly said, "Okay JD, I'm ready for you."

Ben watched as JD hurried to the stove, carrying a bowl of chopped peppers and onions.

Cliff took the bowl and dumped the contents into the skillet, then gave it a quick stir.

JD seemed surprised by the action.

"And now, the cheese." Cliff said as he took handfuls of shredded cheese and dropped it on top of the egg mixture.

He stirred the eggs a few times, then put a lid on the large skillet and moved it off the burner.

"Now it's time to make toast, get drinks and set the table." Cliff said to JD with a smile.

JD scooted his chair from the island to the counter by the refrigerator where the toaster was.

"I guess that means that I'm setting the table." Cliff chuckled.

"You can reach things a lot better than he can." Ben said frankly.

"Good point." Cliff said casually, then said to JD, "Watch your head, little man, I'm going to need in that cupboard."

JD backed out of the way and allowed Cliff to get the cupboard door opened.

Cliff moved in and gave JD a quick snuggle before grabbing some plates.

"I hope you're not planning on having that laptop on the table during breakfast." Cliff said, as he placed the stack of plates on the table.

"No. Of course not." Ben said as he put the lid of his laptop down. "I just wanted to get it set up in case inspiration struck suddenly."

"Is there an inspiration storm brewing that I should know about?" Cliff asked playfully.

"The forecast is uncertain at this point." Ben said with a smile, then added, "It could happen."

Cliff heard the toaster pop up and watched as JD took the toast out and put more bread in.

"Would you like some milk or juice with breakfast?" Cliff asked as he set the plates around the table.

"No. Coffee's fine." Ben said gently.

Cliff nodded, then hurried back to the cupboard.

* * * * *

When everyone was settled in around the table, Cliff raised the top of the skillet with a flourish, presenting his scrambled eggs for their approval.

Ben chuckled at the theatrics, but finally said, "Very nice."

"Thank you." Cliff said appreciatively, then extended a hand, silently asking for Ben's plate.

Ben handed it to him and watched as Cliff added a generous helping of scrambled eggs.

Rather than hand the plate back to Ben, Cliff handed it to JD and asked, "Would you like to give your Daddy some toast?"

JD accepted the plate, then added toast before passing it on to Ben.

"Thank you." Ben said to JD, then turned to Cliff and said, "And thank you."

Cliff graciously nodded as he took JD's plate and gave him a good portion of eggs.

He then filled his own plate and held it out toward JD and said, "Toast me, Little Man."

JD giggled, then added two pieces of toast to Cliff's plate.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of eating, Cliff casually said, "Your Daddy and I were talking this morning and thought that it might be a good day to go window shopping downtown."

JD looked at Cliff curiously, obviously not understanding the term.

"We'll just walk around and go from shop to shop looking at things. We may decide to buy something, but will probably just look around and get ideas for Christmas." Cliff explained gently.

JD seemed to get the meaning of what Cliff was trying to say.

"I just wanted to let you know now, so that it won't be a surprise to you later." Cliff said cautiously.

He watched JD's expression carefully, but didn't see any anxiety in the boy's expression.

"And if you let us know if you see something that you'd like, we might even be able to get you a new toy." Ben added helpfully. "Your toy box still has plenty of room left in it."

JD turned his attention to Ben and smiled.

Cliff noticed that it wasn't happy as much as tender. If he had to put a caption on that expression, it would be 'I love you for loving me'.

* * * * *

Cliff spent most of the morning reading, while listening to the sound of 'dueling laptops' on either side of him.

Every now and then he would look at Ben and JD to find them wearing matching expressions of concentration as they typed on their respective keyboards.

When it was time for lunch, Ben announced that they were going to have Thanksgiving leftovers.

Cliff wasn't thrilled by the announcement, having had more than his fill the night before, but it turned out that Ben and JD made some very tasty turkey salad sandwiches. JD's choice to make the sandwiches on buns that had been toasted in his electric skillet turned out to make them even better.

During the afternoon, Cliff put on the television and lazily half-watched a football game while his men continued their writing.

All-in-all, it was a perfectly comfortable and relaxing day.

* * * * *

"Remember, JD, all you have to do is squeeze me to let me know how you're feeling. If it gets too bad for you to manage, we'll take you home." Cliff said assuringly as they walked from their parking place.

JD cuddled close to Cliff and seemed to be at peace.

There was a bit of a chill in the air, but the atmosphere was energized with all the holiday shoppers out and about.

Ben seemed to have been drawn into their excitement as he led the way from one storefront to the next.

Occasionally, they would go into a shop, but for the most part, they were just ambling along without any particular destination in mind.

Cliff noticed something different in Ben's movements that caught his attention.

Ben had moved away from the storefront that they were approaching and seemed to be slowing down.

Cliff looked past him and saw a woman staring at them.

She was dressed in a black leather skirt and a red and black bustier. Her hair was an overprocessed, bleached blonde Mohawk and every inch of her exposed skin was covered with tattoos. She had a series of hoop earrings in diminishing sizes where one eyebrow would have been. Beyond that, she seemed to have at least one of every other type of piercing imaginable covering her face.

All of that was just a backdrop, however. The thing that caused Cliff to stop dead in his tracks was the sight of her eyes. They were an arresting, icy steel blue/gray.

She took a step toward them, and Ben reacted immediately, blocking her from getting anywhere near JD.

Cliff looked down with concern and found JD looking at her curiously. His grip hadn't tightened and he didn't show any obvious signs of being afraid.

"Is he one of you?" she asked Ben, and both men were caught off guard by her Irish accent.

"He's our son." Ben said cautiously, then glanced back to see how JD was doing.

The woman broke into a bright smile at his words and it was a duplicate of JD's smile.

"They told me, when he was birthed to me, that he could be one of you. He could, if I made him right." she rambled.

"Who are they?" Ben asked cautiously, then noticed that Cliff had taken out his cell phone.

He sternly shook his head at Cliff, then turned his attention back to the woman.

"The aethers! They whisper on the wind, they do. The aethers don't speak to your kind of folk. But they tells me that if I made him right, he could be one of you lot that live in homes and has cars and such like. People like me, we can't be that way. We're cursed, we are."

"Cursed by who?" Ben asked slowly, as he noticed that she had begun to sweat.

"That you'd be asking!" she said with a snort. "The aethers don't share such things with the likes of me. But him... they tells me that if I make him perfect, even for a second, he can be freed from the curse."

"How did you make him perfect?" Cliff asked, still holding the phone opened in his hand.

"First, I gave him the markings, but only the best. I learned the art, I did, and when I could create beauty, I gave that to him." She said seriously, then faltered as she admitted, "But the aethers don't care about skin and such. To be perfect for them, you have to have the answer inside."

"The answer to what?" Ben asked cautiously, thinking that he already knew.

"The answer to this!" She said expressively as she gestured around them, then looked Ben in the eyes and asked, "Why?"

"So, did you find the answer?" Ben asked slowly.

She shook her head in frustration, apparently at the inability to make herself understood. "I can't go to the place where the answer is. I'm tainted. The curse calls us toward the answer, but the taint prevents us from ever reaching it."

Ben glanced back to see how JD was doing. He seemed to be almost in a trance, but he wasn't catatonic. He was paying his full attention to the woman before them.

"But him, he never made the choices, he doesn't wear the taint. So I took him there, I did. I took him to the place that none of the rest of us can go." She said in a voice that seemed to be starting to quiver.

"How? How did you take him there?" Cliff asked firmly.

"The drugs that make you crave and crawl. They taint you. But the others, they open you up. They clear your mind and allow you to truly see." She said distantly.

"Psychotropic drugs." Cliff said gravely.

"But they's not enough. They open your eyes, they do. But they won't take you there. The yogis, they know. So do them witch doctors and them that walks on coals. They know what will take you there." she said with certainty.

"So you suspended him on hooks." Cliff said quietly as he felt a tear falling down his cheek.

"That I did!" She said proudly. "I opened him up so he could see, then I set him loose to find it. It took me years to find the right way. That last day, I gave him the drugs that took his mind to the edge, then I used the hooks to take his body to the edge. There was nothing else for me to do. After that, he would either be perfect and free from my curse, or he would be dead."

"So you left him?" Ben asked in a whisper.

"That I did!" she said firmly. "I left him and called the police to come and find him. If he was to live free of the curse, he couldn't be with me. I could bring the curse down on him again. It's easy for you and your kind to become one of us. Becoming one of you is near to impossible."

Before Ben or Cliff could ask anything more, the woman turned to JD and asked, "Did you learn the answer?"

JD slowly nodded his head, and carefully took one of his gloved hands and extended it to her in invitation.

Cliff automatically tightened his hold on JD, determined that the woman wouldn't have any chance of stealing him away.

She hesitantly placed her right hand into his outstretched gloved hand and waited expectantly.

Ben was having to fight back his parental instincts to keep from pushing the woman away from his son.

Cliff could feel that JD's other hand that was wrapped around him was holding on firmly. From the tension in the little boy's body, he could tell that JD was afraid, but at the same time he was willingly holding the woman's hand.

JD looked at the back of her fingers, which were tattooed with vine patterns that terminated at the silver painted fingernails. He took hold of her index finger and drew it to his lips and lightly kissed the fingertip.

He looked into her eyes and quietly said, "A kiss will make it all better."

JD released the finger, then went back to holding tightly to Cliff.

The woman looked at her fingertip with puzzlement, then whispered, "Thank you."

Ben looked at JD with concern, but could tell that he wasn't having a problem. He was simply soaking in the feeling of safety and security of being in his Pappa's arms.

The woman now had sweat running off her and was looking around nervously, as though she were about to dash away.

As she seemed about to leave, Ben hurried to ask, "What's his name?"

She stopped and looked at Ben thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "You know, I don't think he ever told me. I've always just called him 'Spider'."

Before Ben could ask any more questions, she hurried away and was swallowed up by a crowd of Christmas shoppers.

Cliff quickly dialed his cell phone with his thumb as he said, "I'll take a cab. Go ahead and take JD home while I file a police report."

"Is that really necessary?" Ben asked cautiously.

"She's a child abuse suspect, so, as a doctor, I'm required by law to report it." Cliff said seriously, then quietly added, "Think about what she did to JD. Think about what you saw in those pictures. Do you want her on the loose so she can try to 'perfect' some other child?"

"You're right, of course. I'll see you back at the house." Ben said with resignation as he took JD from Cliff's arms.

"I'll be home as soon as I can." Cliff said gently, then pressed the 'send' on his phone to initiate the call.

Ben looked down at JD and found him staring off into the distance.

He couldn't fault the boy for that. After the encounter, he felt like he could use a few minutes to sit quietly and process what had just happened.

* * * * *

JD was silent on the drive home, and only seemed to be marginally aware of his surroundings.

He wasn't in a catatonic state like had happened before, JD seemed to be distracted and lost within himself.

Ben guided JD into the house and sat him down on the couch in the living room.

JD went along willingly and didn't give any indication that he was even aware of his surroundings.

"I'm going to call Ron, you know, Mr. Cooper." Ben said quietly as he sat in the armchair. "I think that you might need some help understanding what just happened... In fact, I might need some help understanding it."

Ben waited to see if JD were going to give any reaction.

As he reached for the phone, JD slowly turned his head to reveal those big blue/grey eyes filled with tears.

Ben went to his knees before JD and whispered, "You're safe here. She can't hurt you anymore. You know that, right?"

"Don't cry, Daddy." JD said in a voice that held the slightest hint of an Irish accent.

Those words pushed Ben past the limit of his self control and he openly cried as he pulled JD into a firm hug.

JD returned the hug as he cried into Ben's shoulder.

* * * * *

As their tears finally subsided, Ben finally moved from kneeling on the floor to sit beside JD.

"She's nuts, isn't she?" JD asked with watery eyes that were still red from crying.

"Yes. I think she is." Ben said gently.

"But she loves me." JD said hesitantly. "That's why she did this to me. Because she loves me. She wanted to make me beautiful and perfect so I could be something better than what she is."

"Yes. I think that's true." Ben said with a watery smile.

"Am I beautiful?" JD asked cautiously.

"Absolutely." Ben said without hesitation, then added, "And perfect, too."

JD smiled at the answer and hugged Ben tightly.

Ben returned the hug gently and held JD close.

He felt the boy relax in his arms and realized that JD had fallen asleep.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Cliff asked with concern as he walked into the living room.

"I think he's emotionally exhausted, but otherwise, he seems to be doing fine." Ben said quietly, then asked, "How did things go with the police?"

"They knew exactly who I was talking about from the description. They're looking for her now, they seem confident that they'll find her before very long." Cliff said assuringly.

"What about JD? Were they able to get any information about him, now that they know her identity?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Not so far." Cliff said with resignation. "Her name is Megara Delaney. She showed up in town about two years ago. She's been picked up a few times for public intoxication and disorderly conduct, but nothing serious. They were able to trace her movements for the past five years or so, up and down the East coast from police reports, but there was no indication that she had a child."

"So, he may not 'officially' exist?" Ben asked hesitantly.

"It's beginning to look that way." Cliff said seriously.

After a long silence, Ben quietly asked, "In your medical opinion, is there any conceivable way that she would ever be a fit mother?"

"No." Cliff said frankly. "I could tell just by looking, that she's suffering from the effects of long term drug abuse. Even if we leave that aside, she's stark raving mad."

Ben nodded, then looked at Cliff with question.

"We need to see what the police come up with..." Cliff said carefully. "...But as soon as things have settled down, I'll get my lawyer working on it."

"Good." Ben whispered, "He deserves a real family."

"He already has one." Cliff said as he looked at the sleeping boy with a tender smile, "All that's left is for a judge to say the words over us, to make it official."

"I'm so happy to hear you say that. I know we haven't discussed it before..." Ben began to say, but was interrupted.

"I know. I love him too." Cliff said gently.

"I love you too, Pappa." JD mumbled in his sleep.

Ben pulled Cliff to his side as his big strong partner, Dr. Clifton Grant, was reduced to tears.

Chapter 6

Ben awoke to the sensation of being wrapped in warmth and love.

He smiled before his eyes had even opened.

The house was quiet and he knew that, since it was Saturday, no obnoxious alarm would be waking them. Cliff was home for the rest of the weekend and JD...

His eyes snapped open as he remembered what had happened to JD the night before.

As he turned to look at Cliff, he noticed that a small tuft of brown hair was resting on the pillow between them. Hair and eyes were all that the blanket revealed.

Ben felt a moment of panic as he realized that JD must have crawled into bed with them at some point during the night, and that he and Cliff were both naked.

As he was considering how he might be able to sneak out of bed without waking JD, a pair of blue/gray eyes opened and focused on him.

Ben's concerns about being naked were forgotten in an instant as those steel blue eyes looked at him anxiously.

"Good morning." Ben whispered, then leaned in to give JD a gentle kiss on the cheek, wanting desperately to assure him that he was safe and welcomed.

JD smiled and shifted so he could hug Ben firmly.

"Can you still talk?" Ben asked quietly, hoping not to wake Cliff.

After a moment to consider, JD slowly nodded.

Ben smiled at the silent response, and couldn't keep from chuckling a little bit.

JD gave a little-boy giggle at the humor of answering that question silently. Ben laughed quietly and hugged him closer.

"I should wake up to happy sounds every morning." Cliff said with a smile as he turned onto his side to look at Ben and JD.

"Good morning, love." Ben said gently.

"Good morning. I see that we have company." Cliff said with a tender smile and appeared not to be bothered by it at all.

JD shifted himself around, onto his other side, then put his arms around Cliff and gave him a firm hug.

Cliff returned his hug for a moment, then got a curious look on his face.

Ben watched with concern as Cliff lifted the edge of the blanket and peered underneath.

Cliff had a considering look for a moment, then it faded as he returned JD's hug and finished by giving him a kiss on the top of his head.

JD finally released Cliff from the hug and rested back, looking like a happy little boy.

After a moment, JD's look became pensive, then he finally asked in a whisper, "Is my real name Spider?" directing the question more toward Ben than Cliff.

Ben was once again taken aback by JD's slight Irish accent.

"Do you want it to be?" Cliff asked gently.

JD turned to look at him curiously.

Cliff realized that even though JD could talk now, that he had become accustomed to speaking non-verbally, so they should expect a large share of his communication to still be silent.

Finally Cliff quietly said, "We've been calling you JD because that was what they told us they called you at the Home."

"I think that the name Spider was given to you by someone who loved you." Ben said thoughtfully. "Whether she was good or bad, right or wrong, she loved you. So I think that Spider is your... 'love name'. It's not like a regular name. Only the people who love you get to call you that."

JD seemed to be considering for a moment, then returned his curious gaze to Ben.

Even though Ben had become quite good at interpreting JD's expressions, he still couldn't read the boy's mind. "You have a question?"

"Do you have a love name?" JD asked cautiously.

Ben chuckled and shyly admitted, "My mom used to call me 'Sweet Pea'."

JD smiled, then said, "Since I love you, do I get to call you that?"

"You've already given me your love name. You call me Daddy." Ben said gently.

JD thought about it for a moment, then broke into a broad smile, which both Ben and Cliff had come to know as JD's agreement.

"You don't have to talk about this if you don't want to, but I've got to ask..." Cliff trailed off as he backed away slightly to get a better view of JD's reaction. "...last night, why weren't you afraid of your mother?"

"I was." JD said simply.

"But you were nearly paralyzed with fear from the encounter with the woman at the library, and she was a complete stranger. I just want to understand." Cliff said gently.

JD thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I guess, at first, I was too scared to be scared."

Cliff nodded slightly, indicating that he understood what JD was trying to say.

"But then I felt you holding me and Daddy was there, keeping her from getting too close. And she wasn't as big and scary as I remember her. She was..." JD trailed off, searching for the right word, finally he quietly said, "...pathetic."

"I just can't believe that you held her hand." Ben said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, that's because I remembered what Zeb told me." JD said shyly.

"What was that?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Zeb said that it's okay to be scared. But sometimes you need to make yourself go ahead and do things, even if you're scared of them." JD said frankly.

"Good advice." Cliff said warmly.

"When I saw her standing there, talking to us, I was still afraid, but it was different. I knew I was safe and I felt sorry for her because... She had to have had a momma and a pappa somewhere, but I don't know if she ever understood love enough to feel it. Maybe what I told her will help her to figure it out." JD seemed to be in discomfort and absently brought his hand up to massage his throat. In a whisper he continued, "I feel really sorry for her."

"So do I." Ben said honestly.

Cliff had about a million questions that he wanted to ask JD, but he knew that too much, too soon, would be overwhelming for him. And JD seemed to have reached the limit of his talking for a while, so he slowly said, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm getting hungry and I could really use a cup of coffee."

JD looked at Cliff with wide, hopeful eyes.

"Of course you can help. You go ahead and get started and we'll catch up to you in a minute." Cliff said gently.

"I love you, Pappa." JD whispered as he pulled Cliff into a quick hug and kissed him on the cheek.

Without hesitation, he turned himself around and whispered, "I love you, Daddy." and gave Ben a firm kiss too.

Ben's eyes went wide when he felt JD's body press against him.

Before he could think of what to say, JD extricated himself from the blankets and climbed out of the bed.

Ben and Cliff watched silently as JD's naked little tattooed body hurried out the door.

"I know that Mrs. Usher wouldn't approve, but I think that JD was probably feeling especially vulnerable last night and needed to feel that he was accepted by us. I don't think we should make an issue of it unless it becomes a habit." Cliff said frankly.

"Yeah. There's nothing like skin on skin contact to make you feel safe and loved." Ben said gently, then leaned over to give Cliff a firm kiss.

Cliff responded to the kiss, putting all his welling emotions into the expression of love.

When the kiss finally broke, Ben was a little bit dazed.

"We'd better get going before JD ends up cooking the whole breakfast." Cliff said gently.

"Yeah." Ben said with a goofy smile.

Cliff chuckled at the expression as he got out of bed.

* * * * *

By the time Ben and Cliff made their way into the kitchen, JD already had the majority of the meal well underway.

Cliff took care of pouring coffee and juice as Ben took over the toast making duties, leaving JD with the eggs and sausages.

As they settled in around the table, Cliff watched JD carefully, looking for any signs that he was bothered at all or having any difficulty with what had happened the previous night.

Finally, he determined that while JD was unusually quiet for a child of his age, that he didn't appear to have any of the classic manifestations of a post traumatic stress disorder.

"JD, do you know why you weren't able to talk before now?" Cliff asked carefully, trying to sound casual.

After a long, thoughtful moment, JD slowly answered, "Not really. I could hear you and understand you, well, mostly, but the thoughts in my head didn't want to come out as words. It's not like I was trying to talk and couldn't. There just weren't any words there to use. I knew that I used to talk before, but I just couldn't remember how."

There was a note of frustration in JD's voice that told Cliff not to pursue the topic any further just now. After everything JD had gone through, he didn't need to be subjected to an interrogation and they had plenty of time.

He decided to make JD's first day as a full participant in the world to be one of happiness, filled with everything that he enjoyed.

* * * * *

Although Cliff would have been willing to pack the family up and go to Disney World on a moment's notice, JD and Ben seemed to be perfectly happy doing their rendition of dueling laptops while he sat on the couch and watched football.

Even though JD could talk, it seemed that they had fallen back into the familiar routine of being silent.

A few times Cliff was actually startled when JD would speak suddenly, asking Ben how to spell a certain word or about some obscure fact in mythology.

Of course Ben, being the scholar that he was, would usually answer the question in a monologue that was far beyond the scope of the original question.

Cliff had particularly enjoyed an impromptu twenty minute dissertation on the origin and symbology of the caduceus.

"What would you guys think about inviting Todd and Wil over tomorrow night?" Cliff asked curiously.

"It's the weekend, so they're probably working. But if they're available, I think it would be great." Ben said frankly.

"What about you, little man? Do you think you'd enjoy some company?" Cliff asked gently, warmed to the depths of his soul to know that his foster son could give him a response.

"Yeah. I love Uncle Todd and Uncle Wil. If they're coming, I want to fix something really nice for them." JD said happily.

"They love your cooking, so that would be great." Cliff said warmly as he picked up the phone.

* * * * *

Both Ben and JD seemed to have run out of steam at just about the same time and were sitting looking at their respective laptops.

"I think we need to take JD shopping." Cliff announced into the quiet room.

From Ben and JD's matching looks of question, Cliff would be ready to swear that they had always been father and son.

"Ben was saying that you didn't bring that many clothes with you, and those that you have are wearing thin. Now that you can talk, you can let us know what you do and don't like." Cliff said seriously.

"And while we're at the store, we can go down the toy aisle to see what else they have." Ben said with a happy smile.

"For him or for you?" Cliff asked with a grin.

"I'll let you know when we've seen the toys." Ben said playfully.

"What do you say, JD? Are you up to a trip to the store?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"What if I..." JD began to say, then trailed off.

Cliff could see the anxiety in JD's expression.

"Come on up here, little man." Cliff said as he held out his arms.

JD got up off the floor by the coffee table and climbed onto Cliff's lap.

After a long moment of hugging, Cliff gently said, "Just because you can talk now doesn't mean that we expect you to behave any differently. If you still want to be held, we'll hold you. I promise that we'll be here to keep you safe for as long as you want us to be."

"Thank you, Pappa." JD said into Cliff's shoulder. "I was afraid that you wouldn't want to hold me now."

"You never have to worry about that, my precious little Spider." Cliff said as he held JD firmly in his arms.

Ben noticed the beginnings of tears in Cliff's eyes as he fought to hold back his own.

* * * * *

"Do you want something short sleeved?" Ben asked gently, not pushing but wanting for JD to at least think about it.

JD looked at Ben curiously, obviously wanting to know more.

"I think a plain white t shirt would look nice on you. That would kind of contrast your tattoos." Ben said casually.

"I think a tank style tee would be good." Cliff said thoughtfully.

JD looked at Cliff with confusion at the comment.

"You know, scoop neck, no sleeves." Ben said casually as he looked around, then found what he was looking for.

"Here. Like this." Ben said as he presented the package to JD.

"Wife beaters." JD whispered as soon as he saw the package.

"Yeah. I guess some people call them that." Ben said with a chuckle.

"Why?" JD asked curiously.

"I'm not sure." Ben said evasively, not wanting to get drawn into the topic of domestic abuse in the middle of Target.

"Do you think you'd wear something like that?" Cliff asked casually, coming to Ben's rescue.

"Lock used to wear shirts like this." JD said thoughtfully, then quietly added, "I could try, but would you be mad if you bought them for me and then I didn't wear them?"

"No. We won't be mad at all." Ben said gently. "It'll be just like the gloves, another choice and entirely up to you."

"Okay." JD said quietly as he handed Ben the package of t shirts to put into the cart.

"I think we've had enough clothes shopping for one day. I don't know about anyone else, but I'd like to look at the toys now." Cliff said as he injected cheer into his voice.

JD's only response was to thrust his arms into the air.

"Touchdown." Ben said warmly.

Cliff picked JD up and held him firmly for a long moment before walking slowly with Ben to the toy department.

* * * * *

"You don't have to buy me stuff." JD said quietly, still in Cliff's arms.

"We like buying you stuff." Cliff said honestly.

JD pulled away slightly with a look of confusion.

"You enjoy cooking for us, don't you?" Ben asked seriously.

JD slowly nodded.

"It's kind of like that. You like doing something nice for us, we like doing something nice for you." Ben said happily.

After a moment, JD seemed to accept the words.

"Here we are, do you want down so you can look around?" Cliff asked gently.

It took a moment, but JD finally nodded.

Cliff let him down to stand on his own, then stood back so JD could easily see all his choices.

Once again, JD was drawn to the aisle where he had gotten his yellow dump truck.

Ben and Cliff shared a smile as they watched JD slowly work his way down the aisle, sometimes touching things with his gloved hand.

When JD reached the end of the aisle, he turned, seemingly without any real interest in any of the toys available.

Ben looked around, searching for something else that might be of interest to him when Cliff noticed the frozen expression on JD's face.

He hurried to JD's side, afraid that he might have seen a woman, or something that was causing him to flash back on a painful memory.

When Ben noticed, he hurried to JD's other side.

It only took a moment for Cliff and Ben to see what had caused JD to freeze in his tracks.

There, on the feature shelf at the end of the aisle, was a display of firetrucks.

Cliff and Ben watched as JD slowly reached out his gloved hand and carefully trailed his fingers over the ladder on top of one of them.

"Pick one out, JD." Cliff said gently.

JD turned suddenly and looked at Cliff with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Even though he could use his voice, JD's eyes could still speak as clearly as they ever had. Right that moment they were saying, 'Really!?'

"Pick out the one you want and give it to your Daddy." Cliff said gently.

JD quickly turned to face the shelf again, then began to look carefully at each one.

Although they couldn't tell what criteria JD had used to judge the firetrucks, neither had any doubt that before it was over that JD had indeed, found the best one.

As Ben accepted the firetruck from JD, he quietly asked, "Would anyone like some ice cream on the way home?"

JD seemed to think about it for a moment, then quietly said, "I don't really like ice cream that much."

"You don't?" Ben asked with surprise.

JD shook his head, then quietly said, "But I like french fries."

"Well, I happen to know of a place on the way home that sells ice cream AND french fries." Ben said happily.

"It sounds like we have a plan. What do you think, JD?" Cliff finished gently.

JD looked up into his eyes, then slowly nodded.

"Do you think you're up to going through the checkout?" Cliff asked JD, trying to sound casual.

"I think I can do it, if I have to." JD said quietly.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Cliff said warmly, then added, "But you don't have to. How about I take you out to the car?"

JD slowly nodded.

"Would you like to be carried?" Cliff asked gently.

JD looked up at him and seemed to be conflicted.

"You know how nice it feels to be held?" Cliff asked as he looked into JD's eyes.

JD slowly nodded.

"It feels nice for me too." Cliff said honestly.

"Do you want for 'me' to carry 'you' out to the car?" JD asked with a grin.

Cliff made a show of thinking about it, then said, "Maybe next time."

JD smiled at the idea.

"Why don't we try something a little bit different?" Cliff asked gently.

JD looked at him curiously.

"Climb on my back and I'll give you a piggy back ride." Cliff said as he squatted down.

JD was still looking at him curiously.

"Come on, it's fun." Cliff urged.

Finally, JD nodded his acceptance.

"Climb on up there and hold on." Cliff said as he turned slightly.

Ben watched as JD awkwardly draped himself over Cliff's back.

"Hold on around his neck, but don't choke him." Ben suggested carefully.

JD did as he was told, then instinct took over as Cliff slowly stood.

His legs wrapped around Cliff and he held on firmly.

"When we're outside sometime I'll let you ride on my shoulders. That's fun too." Cliff said as he made sure that JD wasn't going to slide off of him.

"I'll meet you two out at the car." Ben said with a smile at the sight of his partner and their son engaging in such a wonderfully 'normal' father-son activity.

* * * * *

Cliff and Ben were snuggled together on the couch, supposedly reading, but both had their full attention on JD who was playing with his new firetruck.

Even though the firetruck could make three different sounds when you pushed the buttons, they noticed that JD seemed to prefer to make his own sounds.

And wherever the firetruck went, the dump truck was soon to follow.

Cliff noticed something seemed familiar about the sounds that JD was making for the firetruck. As he paid more attention to the sounds, he realized that they were vocalization exercises.

At some point JD must have met with a speech therapist and been given exercises to do to prevent vocal chord atrophy.

Cliff's mind started to wander again as he watched JD happily playing.

He pondered the fact that nothing he could possibly say or do could make the moment they were sharing one bit more perfect.

* * * * *

"What's that smell?" Cliff asked curiously as he awoke.

Ben opened his eyes, then took in a slow, deep inhale. "Waffles?"

"Did you show JD how to make waffles?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yeah. A few weeks ago." Ben said as he slowly sat up in bed.

"He really is something else." Cliff said with a tender smile.

"I'm not around kids very often, but I really think we hit the jackpot." Ben said frankly.

Cliff chuckled and said, "We did. Trust me."

"I guess we'd better get up. Breakfast will probably be ready soon." Ben said as he got out of the bed.

As Ben walked into the bathroom, Cliff watched his bare butt appreciatively.

* * * * *

There was a gentle tapping on the bedroom door.

"Come in." Cliff said quietly.

JD carefully toed open the door, then walked into the room carrying a tray of food.

"As much as I appreciate breakfast in bed, I hope that you don't feel like you have to do this." Cliff said honestly as he accepted the tray.

"I don't. But I like to do something special sometimes, just like Daddy likes to go on picnics in the backyard." JD said frankly, then walked around the foot of the bed, toward the door.

Just then, Ben walked out of the bathroom and didn't realize until he was two steps into the room that he was standing naked in front of JD.

After a glance at Ben, JD walked to the chair by the door and picked up Ben's robe.

He walked to Ben and handed it to him, then pulled him down for a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Good morning, Daddy." JD said gently, then turned and walked out of the room.

Ben quickly pulled on his robe, then looked at Cliff with question.

"I get the feeling that JD doesn't have any issues with nudity or, at least, male nudity." Cliff said thoughtfully. "I say we don't worry about it until or unless it becomes an issue."

"But if Mrs. Usher finds out, we could lose JD." Ben said anxiously.

"If she were to find out, hopefully she'd be fair minded enough to talk to JD about it first and realize that it's just one of those things that sometimes happens. JD's not being traumatized by it and there's absolutely nothing sexual going on." Cliff said frankly.

"You have more confidence in her than I do." Ben said honestly, then smiled when JD walked into the room with another tray.

"That looks good." Ben said happily as he accepted the tray.

"Of course it does. You showed me how to make it." JD said with a grin.

Ben smiled warmly as he watched JD walk out of the room again.

"You know." Cliff began playfully, "His daddy can do anything."

Ben turned to reveal the tears in his eyes.

"Eat your breakfast before it gets cold." Cliff said gently.

* * * * *

JD walked into the bedroom carrying his own tray and automatically handed it to Cliff before climbing onto the foot of the bed.

Once he was settled into place, JD asked, "What are we going to do today?"

"Todd and Wil said that they have to work tonight, so I told them that we'd have dinner at five. That way they can still have dinner with us before going to work." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"I just need to review the writing I did yesterday so I'm ready to start fresh in the morning." Ben said casually, then added, "It shouldn't take me long."

"What about you, JD? What would you like to do today?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I thought, maybe I could go outside." JD said hesitantly, watching carefully for their reactions.

"Sure, just stay in the back yard close enough where you can hear us call and be sure to stay away from the pool." Cliff said slowly.

"Can I take my trucks down to the rock?" JD asked hopefully.

Cliff thought about it for a moment, then said, "That would be fine. Just be sure to let one of us know if you're going to be anywhere else."

"I will." JD said happily.

* * * * *

"Hey, JD. Do you mind if I join you?" Ben asked as he walked down the path.

"I don't mind." JD said as he loaded loose rocks into the bed of his dump truck.

"Good. I just thought that I could do my work out here with you, then when I'm done we could go in and make lunch." Ben said as he climbed onto the rock.

"Where's Pappa?" JD asked curiously, keeping the majority of his attention on his playing.

"Doing things with the cars. You know, checking the oil and stuff like that." Ben said as he waited for his laptop to boot.

There was a long moment of silence and Ben got the feeling that JD wanted to say something, so he waited patiently.

"I'm glad you came out here." JD said, then looked up to meet Ben's eyes and quietly admitted, "I was kinda scared out here all alone."

"Being alone can be scary." Ben said gently, then added, "But it's just like Zeb told you, being scared is natural. It's okay to be scared. But sometimes you need to make yourself go ahead and do things, even if you're scared of them."

JD looked up at Ben curiously, momentarily back to his silent state.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that being alone isn't always a bad thing. If you can learn to be comfortable in your own company, then you'll be a lot better off than most people I've met." Ben said thoughtfully. "Too many people let a fear of loneliness drive them to make choices that are bad for them and they end up stuck in a situation where they're not happy for no other reason than they're too afraid to leave."

"So it's better to be alone?" JD asked slowly.

"Oh no. I'm not saying that." Ben said with a chuckle. "What I'm saying is that if you can be comfortable being alone, then you'll never allow yourself to be controlled by someone else for fear that they'll leave you."

"Like a boyfriend?" JD asked curiously.

"Or a girlfriend." Ben said with a smile.

JD crinkled his nose, but didn't voice his thoughts.

"I guess what I'm really saying is that being alone isn't always a bad thing and you don't have to be afraid of it." Ben said frankly.

"But you said that a lot of people are." JD said slowly.

"Yeah. At least, in my experience." Ben said simply.

"They must not have had anyone to tell them that being alone isn't always bad." JD said thoughtfully.

"No. I don't think that message gets passed around too much these days." Ben said warmly, realizing that JD understood the point that he was trying to make.

JD seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Would you like to play with me? You can have the firetruck."

Ben smiled at the offer and was about to decline, but then thought better of it and said, "I haven't played in a while. You'll need to show me what to do."

JD smiled a broad smile as Ben climbed down off the rock.

* * * * *

Ben and JD looked up in unison at the sound of a ringing doorbell.

"They're early." Ben said absently as he peeled potatoes.

"Are there any carrots left?" JD asked curiously from the island.

"I peeled all of them, but I haven't cut them up yet. Go ahead and take whatever you need. They're in the sink." Ben said, focusing most of his attention on his potato peeling.

"I can do without them if you need them." JD said cautiously.

"No. I'm just making a pan of roasted vegetables. I don't need a certain amount of any one thing. I'm just using up the last little bits of what we have laying around." Ben said casually.

"How's it going, Ben?" Todd asked cheerfully as he walked into the room.

"I'm good. How are you guys today?" Ben asked pleasantly.

"We had a good night at work last night. We both made good tips, so we'll have a place to live for another month." Todd said happily.

"Congratulations." Ben said with a smile.

"How are you doing today, JD?" Wil asked as he watched JD taking two carrots out of the sink.

"I'm doing good." JD said with a cheerful smile.

Wil stared at JD with disbelief for a moment, then looked at Ben with question.

"He started talking Friday night." Ben said happily.

"What can I get you guys to drink?" Cliff asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Anything..." Todd said as he stared at JD, then quickly amended, "No alcohol, of course."

"I've got just the thing." Cliff said as he went to the refrigerator.

"So, how did this happen?" Wil asked quickly.

Ben looked at JD to see if he wanted to explain.

After scooting his chair back to the island so he could work, JD said, "I just remembered how to talk. I guess I forgot for a while."

"How are you? I mean, are you doing okay?" Wil asked with concern.

JD put down his knife and wiped his hands on a towel before getting down off the chair. He walked directly to Wil and gave him a firm hug.

"I think that means that he's fine." Cliff said with a tender smile.

"And that he appreciates you asking." Ben added gently.

JD released Wil from the hug, then walked to Todd to hug him just as firmly.

"It's good to see you too, JD." Todd chuckled.

"Even though he can talk now, sometimes it's easier for him to express himself the way that he's used to." Cliff said frankly as he mixed two drinks.

"Good. Because I don't get nearly enough hugs." Todd said as he held JD gently.

"I was meaning to ask, how did things go with your nieces?" Ben asked curiously.

Todd smiled as JD pulled out of the hug and went back to work, then turned his attention to Ben and said, "Screaming, swearing, throwing food... they learned a few new anti-gay slurs since my last visit. One of them I hadn't ever heard before. I was kind of impressed."

Cliff handed Wil and Todd each a tall iced drink.

Ben winced as he said, "It sounds like a nightmare."

"About average." Todd said with a shrug, then added, "Wil told me what a wonderful time he had over here."

"Well, we'll probably be doing just about the same thing on Christmas Day if you'd like to see for yourself. You're both invited." Cliff said frankly.

"Yeah. It'd be great if you could join us." Ben added hopefully.

"My sister's probably going to be expecting me." Todd said hesitantly.

"If you say that you'll come, I'll cook something special for you." JD said seriously.

"You will?" Todd asked with surprise.

JD nodded.

"Well, my sister 'expects' me, but you 'want' me. So I think, just this once, I'll go where I'm wanted." Todd said gently.

JD smiled happily before turning his full attention back to his salad.

Todd took a sip of his drink, then looked at Cliff and asked, "What the hell is this?"

"Pomegranate juice and cranberry tea." Cliff said with a smile, then added, "You said 'anything'."

Todd looked at the rust colored drink in his glass, then back at Cliff uncertainly.

* * * * *

"This looks really great!" Todd said as he looked at the food sat out on the table.

Cliff smiled as he said, "When we were talking about inviting you over, JD said that he wanted to fix you something special."

"Thanks, JD." Todd said honestly.

"Where did you learn to cook?" Wil asked curiously.

"We used to live with a man named Lock. He was really nice and let me help him in the kitchen all the time." JD said distantly.

"He sounds nice. What was he like?" Cliff asked carefully, wanting to encourage JD to talk without making him feel like he was being questioned.

"Lock was nice. I remember him telling my... her, not to tattoo my face. He told her that if she ever did, it would ruin me." JD said distantly.

Concerned glances flew around the table, but JD's attention was focused on the memory and he didn't notice.

"I remember thinking that Lock was being weird saying that because he had tattoos on his face and he was one of the nicest people I'd ever met." JD said thoughtfully.

"What happened to him?" Ben asked quietly.

After a moment JD sadly shook his head and quietly said, "I don't know. I can't remember."

"It sounds like you were really lucky to find someone like Lock who cared about you." Todd said frankly.

"Yeah." JD said quietly. "I loved him almost as much as I love my daddy and my pappa."

"I grew up without a dad. When I was your age I would have given just about anything to have a man in my life who loved me." Todd said seriously.

"Me too." Wil said quietly.

"I thought you lived with both your parents." Ben said cautiously.

"I did. But I was never what my father wanted me to be." Wil said in a weary tone.

"What did he want?" Cliff asked curiously.

"A jock." Wil said frankly. "I was never an athlete and never wanted to be one. But my father had a dream that I would be a success at every sport and the captain of every team. Since I didn't end up with a major league sports contract, he sees me as a failure."

"What about your mom?" Ben asked with concern.

"She's a screaming bitch." Wil said simply, as though he were stating a known fact.

"That doesn't sound like a very good home life." Ben said cautiously.

Wil shrugged, then said, "Better than some, worse than others. But I can't believe that after the childhood I had, that I'm not in prison or a drug addict."

"You turned out just fine." Ben said gently.

"Thanks, Ben. It's good to know that you think so." Wil said quietly.

"So, do you have any brothers or sisters?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yeah. A younger sister, Kirsten." Wil said casually, then added, "She's kind of hateful and self-centered. I wish there was something that I could do to help her, but she's built up such a wall around her that even if I could talk to her, I doubt that it would do any good."

"If she's growing up the same way that you did, then she'll probably come around." Cliff said seriously.

"I think it's different for her because she's a girl. My dad never had any expectations for her." Wil said thoughtfully.

"I don't know if that's better or worse." Ben said with a dire look.

Wil shrugged again, then said, "Sorry for being such a downer. By the way, this food is great."

"Thanks." Ben chuckled.

"JD, do you have any brothers or sisters?" Todd asked curiously.

Cliff and Ben shared a look of surprise that they hadn't thought to ask.

"No." JD said quietly, then timidly added, "I always wanted a brother, but now I understand what would have happened to him if I had one. So I'm glad that I don't."

"How did you get the tattoos?" Todd asked carefully.

"My... Mom..." JD said, choking on the word, "...she was nuts and thought that if she could make me perfect that she'd break a curse on me. She thought that giving me lots of tattoos and drugs would make me that way."

Wil's eyes went wide at the statement.

"I guess none of us really drew the lucky straw when it came to parents." Todd said frankly.

Wil couldn't hold back a laugh at the statement.

Soon everyone, including JD, had joined into the laughter.

* * * * *

After Wil and Todd left to go to work, JD and Ben cleared away the dinner dishes and cleaned up the kitchen.

Cliff went into the living room and rested back on the couch to start reading his book.

When JD walked into the living room, he asked, "Can we go downstairs?"

"Would you like to play some pool?" Cliff asked as he put his book down.

"No. I think I'd like to read and it's more comfortable down there." JD said honestly.

"You know, I think you're right." Cliff said with a smile. "Go tell your Daddy where we're going to be."

JD smiled, then ran back into the kitchen.

* * * * *

The sound of Cliff's alarm clock jolted Ben out of a sound sleep.

After turning off the alarm, Cliff quietly said, "Go back to sleep."

"I have work to do." Ben said as he forced himself to sit up in bed.

"Do you have a lot planned?" Cliff asked with interest.

"Well, first of all I'll have to see what's accumulated in my inbox. I haven't checked my email since I sent off my updated list of citations." Ben said frankly.

"I don't see why that couldn't wait for a while." Cliff said honestly.

"Well, after I have that taken care of, I want to get back to researching for my next book." Ben said shyly.

"Already? You usually take a week or two off before you dive into the next one." Cliff said seriously.

"Yeah. I know. But this time is different." Ben said shyly.

"What did you come up with?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Nothing solid. Let's just say that I'm going to do some investigating about what the aethers have to say." Ben said frankly.

"But didn't she just make all of that up?" Cliff asked as he shifted onto his side to look at Ben more comfortably.

"There are at least **some** elements of an established mythology. I'm going to do some investigating and try to track it down and put it into context with Megara's distorted world view." Ben said slowly, "She saw herself as something different than us, another tribe, if you will. I want to see if there's any mythological basis for her beliefs."

"So if you find what you're looking for, you'll examine the old mythology and apply it to the goths and punks of today?" Cliff asked speculatively.

"Yes. At least, that's my plan at this stage. Depending on what I find, I may end up taking it in another direction." Ben said seriously.

"If you end up doing it, I'd like to read it when you're finished. It sounds really interesting." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Thanks, love. I'll let you know as soon as it's ready." Ben said with a smile, then leaned in to give Cliff a quick kiss.

"Mmmm... As much as I'd like to take this to it's natural conclusion... I have to get ready for work. There's no way I can afford to be late after a four day weekend." Cliff said regretfully.

"I know. Maybe we'll turn in early tonight." Ben said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"I'm just worried that if we do that, JD might walk in on us." Cliff said quietly.

"Let's just play it by ear. If we can get him to bed early, we might be able to manage a little time for us." Ben said warmly.

"I'd like that."

* * * * *

When Ben started looking through his emails, he found that he had three messages from his literary agent asking for him to call her immediately.

Since the contracts had already been signed for his last book and he hadn't started the next one, he didn't know what she could want.

"*Good morning, Mason Associates, how may I direct your call?*" A perky voice answered.

"Julie, it's Ben. Is Beth Anne in the office yet?" Ben asked hopefully.

"*Oh, hi Ben. Yeah. She told me to put you through as soon as you called.*" Julie said quickly, then asked, "*What did you do?*"

"I don't know." Ben said honestly.

"*Hold on and I'll get her.*" Julie said quickly, and before he could respond, she put him on hold.

Ben waited somewhat patiently as he racked his brain, trying to figure out what she could possibly want to talk to him about.

Finally, the call was picked up.

"*What the hell is wrong with you?*" Beth Anne asked abruptly.

"Excuse me?" Ben said quietly.

"*In all the years that I've known you, you've been so anal retentive that you take the sofa cushion up with you when you stand, then all of a sudden you send me something like this out of the blue*." She said dramatically.

"What is it that I sent you?" Ben asked hesitantly.

"*Anathema Mythique*." She said sternly, "*Does that ring any bells?*"

Ben thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Not really."

"*Look, Ben. I think it's great that you're finally taking my advice and writing something more mainstream. And I agree with you that using a pen name is a good idea to differentiate this from your collegiate work. Although 'JD Stone' isn't very imaginative*." She said frankly.

"Wait. Did you say JD Stone?" Ben asked slowly.

"*Yeah. What does JD stand for, anyway?*" Beth Anne asked curiously.

"John Doe." Ben said honestly as he realized what had happened.

"*You would think a writer would have more imagination.*" Beth Anne said in a tone of long suffering.

"Listen, Beth Anne, I think I know what happened. JD is my foster son and he must have accidentally sent you the file he's been working on." Ben said seriously, thinking that he should have removed the email contacts from the netbook before he let JD use it.

"*Yeah. Right*." Beth Anne said sarcastically, then quickly continued, "*I'd love to sit here and play games with you all day long, but I have work to do. I wouldn't normally do this with a novella, but this thing reads like it's a novel and a half. I've already sent out three teasers to publishers. If you're going to go through with this 'JD Stone' persona that you've created, then I'm going to need a new bio, a head shot and new professional contact info, since I'm assuming that you'll want to keep your mainstream correspondence separate from your academic.*"

"You're not listening to me, Beth Anne. I didn't write it. My son did. His name is JD." Ben said firmly.

"*Your son? You're not kidding?*" Beth Anne asked slowly.

"No. I wouldn't ever joke about JD." Ben said seriously.

"*But, are you telling me that a kid wrote that?*" Beth Anne asked slowly.

"Yeah. He's kind of special." Ben said and couldn't help but smile.

"*I read that thing three times and I'm still not sure that I know what it was about. All I know is that I cried my eyes out over a stupid headless monster all three times.*" Beth Anne said seriously.

"A headless monster?" Ben asked cautiously.

"*Haven't you read it?*" Beth Anne asked suddenly.

"No. I didn't know he had finished it." Ben said honestly.

"*Read it, then call me back. I think you'll agree that it's got a shot at being a mainstream hit.*" Beth Anne said seriously.

"I'll ask him for a copy as soon as he wakes up." Ben said disbelievingly.

"*Okay. I've really got to go. Make sure to give that man of yours a big sloppy wet one for me. Ta.*" She said, then hung up the phone before he could respond.

Ben sat and stared at his computer for a moment as he tried to absorb what Beth Anne had just told him.

* * * * *

"Good morning, JD. Did you have a good sleep?" Ben asked gently when he saw JD standing in the doorway.

JD nodded slightly and it was obvious to Ben that he wasn't fully awake.

"Why don't you come over here and sit with me? I want to talk to you about something." Ben asked gently.

JD shuffled over to him and seemed to be almost boneless when Ben picked him up.

After a moment of holding JD on his lap, Ben quietly said, "My literary agent called this morning and told me that she got the file that you sent her."

"Did she like it?" JD asked curiously.

Ben smiled at the question and said, "She loved it. She said something about crying her eyes out about a headless monster."

"Fvuva. Yeah, that part's sad." JD said thoughtfully.

"Can I read your story?" Ben asked hopefully.

"It's gone. I sent it away." JD said quietly.

"You deleted it?" Ben asked curiously.

"No. I 'sent' it." JD repeated.

"So you went to 'File', then 'Send To'?" Ben asked slowly.

"Yeah. I saw you do that a couple times." JD said seriously.

Ben chuckled, then said, "When you do that, you only send a copy of the file, the original is still on your computer."

"Oh, good. Because I'd like to read it again before I start on my next story." JD said seriously.

"Before you do that, do you think I could read it?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Yeah." JD said with a smile. "That's only fair. You let me read yours."

Ben leaned down and gave JD a quick kiss on the top of his head, then said, "Just let me make a quick copy of the file for myself, then we can both go into the living room and read where it's more comfortable.

"Can we have breakfast first?" JD asked hopefully.

"Sure. In fact, we can have whatever you want." Ben said peacefully.

"I want to try to make Pappa's cheesy scrambled eggs. Those were good." JD said seriously.

"That sounds nice. Just let me know if you need my help with anything." Ben said gently.

After a long moment of thought, JD quietly asked, "Do we have any ham?"

"Not lunchmeat style, but I think I may have a chunk of ham in the freezer." Ben said thoughtfully.

"I just think Pappa's cheesy scrambled eggs would be really good with some thick slices of ham." JD said honestly.

"Ham steaks." Ben said with a smile.

At JD's curious look, Ben clarified, "That's just another way of saying thick slices of ham."

JD nodded, then said, "If you can fix the ham, I can fix the rest."

"Okay, then let's go make breakfast."

Chapter 7

"You don't look like you're enjoying it." JD said anxiously.

"Well, while I'm reading it, it doesn't seem like natural speech." Ben said slowly.

"What do you mean?" JD asked curiously.

"Like this part..." Ben said seriously, then began to read aloud, "*Veterans of the two great wars stood by malingering and harrumphing...*"

"That's because you're reading it wrong." JD interrupted. "This is supposed to be an epic. It's got to be grand and lyrical or it'll just sound stupid."

"Then maybe you could read it to me the right way so I can understand." Ben said simply.

JD moved closer so he could see the screen, then after a moment, he started in a low dramatic voice, with his accent slightly more pronounced, "*Veterans of the two great wars stood by malingering and harrumphing, not caring a whit or a nonce of the politics of the day.*"

Then his voice rose in pitch and volume as he continued, "*But all the while they sharpened their swords, preparing for the day when their services would once again be valued. For they knew, all too well, that moments of peace are purchased with blood.*"

Then JD broke into full volume with an accent as thick and sweet as honey, "*And on that gruesome day of blood and fear, those who disregarded the veterans as wastrels and vagrants, looked upon them with new eyes filled with hope, seeing their salvation.*"

JD's voice dropped back to its original low volume as he finished, "*And those good men went off to fight yet again, perchance to die, their services paid in full with the looks of reverence of their kin and clan filling their hearts as they trundled off to war.*"

JD waited for a moment for a reaction, then quietly asked, "What do you think?"

Ben blinked, then absently said, "I'll tell you as soon as the shivers stop going up and down my spine."

JD smiled at the reaction, then sat back to allow Ben to continue reading.

* * * * *

As JD watched Ben anxiously, he noticed tears beginning to form in Ben's eyes.

"Is something wrong?" JD asked with concern as he automatically moved closer to Ben to hug him.

"Fvuva." Ben said as he reached around JD to get a tissue.

JD glanced at the screen to see where Ben was in the story, then turned and picked up the box of tissues as he said in a heavily accented voice, "I'm thinking you'll be needing the whole thing."

Ben wiped his eyes and spared JD a glance before going back to reading.

* * * * *

Ben had stopped reading and was sitting, staring blindly at the screen. As he slowly began to come back to himself, he realized that JD was holding him firmly.

"Thank you, JD." Ben whispered, then slid an arm around JD's back so he could return the hug.

"Why did you stop reading? Don't you like it?" JD asked quietly.

Ben didn't even have to think about it. "It was wonderful."

JD smiled at his father's words.

"When I was young, probably just a little bit older than you are, I discovered my first book about mythology." Ben said distantly. "Reading it was like being transported to another world. That little paperback book changed my life. It made me who I am today."

After a moment to consider, JD nodded his understanding.

"Your story made me feel that way again." Ben said honestly as he looked into JD's eyes.

JD broke into a huge smile as he understood what Ben was saying.

Ben pulled JD closer, feeling that he didn't have adequate words to convey his appreciation of JD's story.

"The reason I stopped reading is because I think I need some time to process what I've just read. Your writing is so... substantial. It's impossible for me to read it quickly." Ben said carefully, wanting to convey his meaning without sounding like he was being overly critical.

"Yeah. That's the kind of books that I like to read. The ones that make you think." JD said seriously.

"Sometimes I get criticism about my writing being too 'high brow' and I'm accused of being unnecessarily wordy." Ben said conversationally.

"Do you think I should try to dumb it down?" JD asked hesitantly.

"No." Ben said immediately. "Absolutely not."

JD looked at him curiously, obviously wanting more of an answer.

"Your writing is perfect just the way it is. You wouldn't be doing your readers any favors by changing your style of writing." Ben said honestly.

JD pulled Ben into a firm hug and rested his head against Ben's shoulder.

* * * * *

After long, relaxing minutes of holding and being held, Ben quietly asked, "So, JD, where did your interest in mythology come from?"

"I read a lot of mythology while I was in the hospital. At first it was really hard to understand, but after a while they were some of my favorite kinds of books. Most of the other books that they had were little kid books and were really boring." JD finished with a wrinkled nose.

Ben smiled at the words, but remained silent.

"I hadn't read any mythology for a while until I got here and started reading '*Meta-Mythological Dynasties*'." JD said thoughtfully.

"But that's a really advanced book." Ben said carefully.

"It's like it was written just for me." JD said frankly. "I've been reading lots and lots of books, and most of them you have to read and read and read through lots of boring stuff before you find anything that makes you think. I like the books like yours that you have to think about to really understand them."

"I guess that makes us even, then." Ben said with a smile.

JD looked at him with question.

"If my book inspired you, then we're even, because your book has certainly inspired me." Ben said happily.

"Then you'd better hurry up and write your next one, because I already can't wait to read it." JD said with a grin.

"I'll see what I can do. But for right now, I think we should take a break and have lunch." Ben said as he closed his laptop.

"Can we have a picnic today?" JD asked hopefully.

Ben seemed to be about to agree, then thought better of it.

"I think that before we make any plans, I should call Mr. Cooper at the home and let him know that you're able to talk." Ben said reluctantly.

"I should still be able to talk on Thursday. I can just tell him then." JD said simply.

Ben smiled, but said, "I really need to call him, now. In fact, he's probably going to be upset with me for not calling him as soon as you spoke."

"I won't tell him, if you don't want me to." JD said frankly.

"It's important that you're always honest with Mr. Cooper. He's your psychologist, and it's his job to help you figure things out. If you don't tell him the truth, or if you hold back from telling him things, then he may do the wrong things to try and help you, because he doesn't have good information on which to base his decisions." Ben said seriously.

JD thought about Ben's words and finally nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

Ben found Ron's business card and dialed the number as JD watched him carefully.

"*Ron Cooper.*" Ron answered quickly.

"Hi, Ron, this is Ben Stone. Is this a good time?" Ben asked cautiously, caught off guard by Ron's abrupt greeting.

"*There's no such thing today.*" Ron said in a weary voice, then continued, "*What can I do for you, Ben?*"

"Are you sitting down?" Ben asked slowly.

"*Just tell me.*" Ron whimpered.

"Friday night we took JD downtown to do some window shopping." Ben said carefully.

"*Oh, no. How bad was his reaction?*" Ron asked, obviously bracing himself to receive bad news.

"Actually, I would have to say that he did pretty well, until... we ran into his mother." Ben said reluctantly.

There was a moment of silence before Ron finally asked, "*How is he?*"

"I don't really know what happened, or why. But I guess the shock of seeing her snapped him out of whatever it was that kept him from talking." Ben said frankly.

Another moment of silence fell as Ron digested the statement.

Finally Ben added, "JD can talk."

"*WHAT?!*" Ron barked.

Ben took the phone away from his ear for a moment, then carefully brought it closer as he said, "Since the encounter with his mother, JD's been able to talk normally."

"*You need to bring him down here right away! I need to...*" Ron said before drifting away.

"When do you want us to be there?" Ben asked cautiously.

"*Wait. I'm booked solid today. Thanksgiving was really rough on the kids this year. I'm up to my ears in depressed children. I want to be able to sit down with JD and have a long talk with him, but the earliest I could do that is... well, I'll have to stay late.*" Ron said regretfully.

Ben thought for a moment, then smiled as he had an idea.

"What would you think about coming over here for dinner when you get off work?" Ben asked hopefully. "That way you could talk with JD as much as you want and you can also get a good home cooked meal."

After a long moment of silence, Ron said, "*A home cooked meal sounds really, REALLY nice.*"

"Great! Then just come right over as soon as you get off work and we'll be expecting you." Ben said happily.

"*I don't get through until five; That's not going to be a problem for you, is it?*" Ron asked cautiously.

"Not at all. That's when Cliff gets off, too. So it's not going to be any inconvenience at all." Ben said honestly, then thought to ask, "Do you need directions?"

"*No. I'm familiar with the area. I'll be there just as soon as I'm finished here.*" Ron said in a voice that sounded like he was smiling, then Ben noticed a low sound in the background.

As he listened more carefully, he realized that it was the sound of someone crying.

"*I've got to go. I'll see you in a few hours.*" Ron said quickly.

"Yeah. We'll see you then." Ben said sympathetically.

* * * * *

"Hi, Brynna, is Cliff available to talk?" Ben asked hopefully.

"*He's in with a patient right now. I'd guess he'll be in there for about five more minutes.*" Brynna said frankly.

"Would you just let him know that we're going to have company coming over for dinner tonight? I don't want him to be surprised." Ben said honestly.

"*Yeah. I'll tell him.*" Brynna said distractedly, then added, "*Gotta go. Madhouse.*"

"Bye." Ben said with a chuckle, then hung up the phone.

* * * * *

"Instead of a picnic, how would you feel about a trip to McDonalds?" Ben asked JD with a smile. "I can carry you in to get our order, then we can eat at one of the tables outside... that's kind of like a picnic, isn't it?"

JD looked uncertain.

"After McDonalds, we could go to the store and get something nice for dinner since Mr. Cooper is coming over." Ben added carefully.

Finally, JD reluctantly nodded.

"We can get you extra French fries." Ben said in a wheedling tone.

Slowly, JD broke into a smile and nodded in earnest.

* * * * *

The McDonald's visit went off without a hitch, and the trip to the store was actually kind of pleasant since JD was able to give his opinion on the food choices. Together they decided on what would be a very nice dinner for Ron's visit.

Ben noticed an uncharacteristic sadness in Zeb's eyes as he worked, ringing up the customers in front of them.

"Do you work ALL the time?" Ben asked playfully as he and JD finally made it to the front of the line.

"It seems that way sometimes. But it looks good on the paycheck, so I don't complain." Zeb said with an honest smile as he automatically turned off his light. Then he asked, "How are you doing today, JD?"

"I'm good." JD said with a cheerful smile.

Zeb's eyes went wide, then he looked at Ben with question. He stood staring for just a moment, then seemed to realize where he was and started to ring up their groceries again.

"It's a long story, but you already know the best part." Ben said with a loving look at the boy in his arms.

"This is wonderful! I'm really happy for you." Zeb said with a broad smile, then said to JD, "It's great to be able to talk with you."

JD shyly buried his face into Ben's chest.

Ben chuckled at the action, then said, "He's not quite a chatterbox, yet, but we're working on it."

"$56.20." Zeb said as he bagged the last of their groceries.

Ben swiped his debit card, then as soon as he had his receipt in hand, he followed Zeb to the door.

* * * * *

"How are things with you, Zeb?" Ben asked curiously, getting a sense that all was not well from his expression earlier.

"I'm having some problems." Zeb said evasively, then quietly added, "I'll figure it out."

"Why don't you come over to dinner tonight and we can talk about it. Sometimes an outside point of view helps." Ben said frankly as they walked across the parking lot.

"I wish I could, but I just started work a few minutes ago. I won't be getting off until nine tonight." Zeb said unenthusiastically.

"What about tomorrow?" Ben asked curiously as he opened the trunk of his car.

"Yeah. I'm working early tomorrow, so I could make it. When do you want me to be there?" Zeb asked with a smile as he automatically loaded the groceries into the trunk.

"Well, dinner will be around 5:30 or 6:00, but if you showed up early, we could talk for a while first." Ben said casually.

Zeb's smile became one of fondness as he said, "Yeah. That sounds nice. Thanks, Ben."

"We'll see you then." Ben said happily as he closed the trunk.

"I'll see you tomorrow, JD." Zeb said as he waved.

JD enthusiastically waved in return.

* * * * *

After bringing in the groceries, Ben noticed that there was a message waiting for him on the answering machine.

"*Dr. Grant, this is Detective Carson, we spoke Friday night. I just wanted to let you know that you can rest easy, we have Ms. Delaney in custody. We'll get back with you if we need a further statement after we've questioned her. Have a good day.*" The woman's voice said professionally.

"Did you hear that?" Ben asked over his shoulder.

"I hope they can help her." JD said quietly.

"I'm sure they will." Ben said as he walked over to pull JD into a hug.

"She hurt me so much... shouldn't I hate her?" JD asked quietly.

"No." Ben said gently as he squatted to be closer to JD's eye level. "If you did hate her, I'd be doing everything I could to make you see that she's mentally ill and not responsible for her actions. What you're feeling is just right and I'm very proud of you."

JD slowly moved in to give Ben a hug.

Ben returned the hug, then stood with JD still in his arms.

"As much as I would love to spend the entire afternoon hugging you, we need to get cooking if we're going to have the fancy dinner that you planned." Ben said gently.

"I just said that we should have shrimp." JD objected.

"And that you know how to make breaded fish fillets." Ben said with a smile.

"I do!" JD said quickly.

"And that with fish, that we would NEED to have French fries." Ben chuckled.

"Well, you can't have a fish dinner without chips." JD said frankly.

"And, of course, fish and chips absolutely has to have coleslaw, real home made coleslaw, to go with it,." Ben said warmly.

"Do you think we should have something else?" JD asked curiously.

"No. I'm not disagreeing with your choices, I'm just saying that you chose everything that we're having for dinner tonight. You planned the meal." Ben said frankly.

JD thought for a moment, then shyly giggled as he said, "Yeah. I guess I did."

"It sounds like a great meal to me, and besides, I think your Pappa will be very happy to find out that we're having something besides leftover turkey." Ben said with a smile.

JD giggled again and nodded.

"Let's get started. We've got quite a bit to do." Ben said as he carried JD into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"How are my two favorite people in the world doing today?" Cliff asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Pappa!" JD said joyfully as he ran to Cliff with his arms thrust into the air.

"How's my little Spider?" Cliff asked as he picked up the boy and gave him a firm hug.

"Daddy read some of my story and really liked it and we went to the store and saw Zeb and then we came home and we're making dinner and I think you're really gonna like it." JD said as he hugged Cliff tightly.

Ben noticed the tears of joy welled in Cliff's eyes. He was too choked up to do more than smile at his partner and share a loving gaze.

After a long moment of cuddling, JD kissed Cliff on the cheek, then released his hug, signalling that he was ready to be let down.

"Brynna said that you called and said that we were going to have a dinner guest. Can I assume that Zeb is going to be joining us tonight?" Cliff asked as he lowered JD to the floor.

"We invited him, but he had to work." Ben said as he peeked into the oven. He then added, "I called Ron and let him know about JD's progress. He really wanted to talk to JD, but was booked solid, so I invited him to dinner so that they could talk."

"Are we having fish?" Cliff asked as he looked around.

"Yes. I hope that's alright." Ben said as he turned away from the stove.

"That's perfect!" Cliff said with a smile. "What would you think about the Vinho Verde to go with it?"

Ben considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That sounds really nice."

Cliff leaned in to give Ben a quick but firm kiss, then hurried off to their small wine storage area in the basement.

* * * * *

When the doorbell rang, JD and Ben looked up in unison.

"Do you want to greet our guest? He's here to see you, after all." Ben said gently.

JD hopped down off his chair at the island, then ran to answer the door, calling, "I got it!" as he went.

As Cliff walked up the basement stairs, he said, "I never imagined that life could be so wonderful."

Ben smiled at the words as he nodded.

* * * * *

Ron glanced around at the neatly kept lawn as he waited for the door to be answered.

"Hi, Mr. Cooper." JD said with a broad smile as he opened the front door.

"Hello, JD." Ron said in a somewhat shocked voice.

Although he had intellectually known that JD could speak, he still hadn't been fully prepared to hear his voice.

Before he could react, JD said, "Please, come in."

"Thank you." Ron said in a hesitant voice as he watched JD carefully.

As soon as Ron was inside, JD closed the door and said, "Daddy and Pappa are in the kitchen."

"How are you doing, JD?" Ron asked as he looked at the boy with concern.

JD smiled at him and said, "I'm really good."

Ron looked carefully at JD's expression, trying to put his finger on what seemed to be different about him.

"Come on." JD urged as he offered Ron his gloved hand.

With a smile, Ron accepted the boy's hand and allowed himself to be led into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Ron? Did you have any trouble finding the place?" Cliff asked as Ron and JD walked into the kitchen.

"No problem at all. Thank you for inviting me." Ron said as he looked around.

"We should have done it sooner." Ben said frankly.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" Cliff asked as he watched JD walk to the island and climb onto a chair.

Ron followed Cliff's gaze, then absently said, "No, thank you. I'm fine."

"The fish is just about ready, how's that coleslaw coming?" Ben asked as he peeked into the oven again.

"Almost done." JD said as he stirred a lemon colored mixture in a bowl.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I think we've got it covered. We should be ready to sit down to dinner in just a few minutes." Ben said frankly.

"I'll pour the wine, then." Cliff said, then turned to Ron and asked, "I hope you don't mind a little wine with dinner."

"No. I don't mind at all." Ron said as he watched what JD was doing.

* * * * *

JD scooted his chair over to the sink, then took off his gloves and rolled up his sleeves to the elbow before thoroughly washing his hands.

Ron watched curiously, noticing that JD didn't seem to be at all anxious about his exposed skin as he scooted the chair back over to the island.

JD noticed Ron watching him and said, "This is the really gooey part."

Ron didn't understand what he meant, but when JD started to pour the thick lemon colored mixture into a large bowl of cabbage Ron got the idea.

JD scraped the last of the slimy mixture out of the mixing bowl with the side of his hand, then dived in with both hands, half-way up to his elbows, to mix the cabbage and dressing to make coleslaw.

"Yep. That's how you do it." Ben said with a grin as he paused to watch JD mixing the large bowl of slaw.

"Are the chips done?" JD asked without slowing his mixing effort.

Ben peeked into the oven, then said, "About a minute left."

* * * * *

JD pulled his hands out of the coleslaw, then looked at the sink, seemingly unsure of how to get over there to wash his hands without making a mess.

"Could you use some help?" Ron asked as he stepped forward.

"Yeah." JD said with a shy giggle.

Ron picked JD up off the chair and quickly carried him over and sat him on the countertop by the sink.

"Thanks." JD said as he began to wash his hands.

"JD, when you're done washing up, would you take Mr. Cooper into the dining room?" Ben asked as he pulled first one, then another cookie sheet out of the oven.

"Yeah." JD said happily as he dried his hands on a dishtowel.

Ron noticed that JD rolled down his sleeves and put on his gloves before hopping down off the kitchen counter.

"Come on. It's in here." JD said as he offered his gloved hand to Ron to guide him.

* * * * *

"We don't stand on ceremony here, just dig in. We have plenty." Cliff said as he began to fill his plate.

"This looks really good." Ron said in an impressed voice, then added, "When you said a home cooked meal, I imagined... well, not this, anyway."

Cliff chuckled, then said, "Ben and JD tend to take 'home cooking' to a whole new level. Both of them are really excellent chefs."

"In fact, JD is the one who planned out the meal. So I was his assistant chef." Ben said as he looked at JD with pride.

"Everything looks great." Ron said honestly, then took a bite of his fish.

"JD made most of it. I just tended it once it was cooking." Ben said honestly.

"Except the chips. I was gonna deep fry them." JD said frankly.

"I think they're healthier when they're oven fried." Ben said simply.

"I don't know about healthy, but they're good." JD said with a smile, then took a bite of one of the thick cut french fries.

"This fish is fantastic!" Ron said in amazement.

"That's JD's breading." Ben said with a nod.

Ron savored the taste of the fish for a moment, then took a sip of his wine.

Cliff smiled at the curious look that came over Ron's face as he sniffed the wine, then took another tentative sip.

"That's a Portuguese wine called Vinho Verde." Ben said informatively.

"I never could find a good wine to go with fish, then Ben introduced me to this." Cliff said as he raised his glass.

"I would've picked beer." JD said frankly.

Everyone looked at JD with surprise at the statement.

JD noticed their surprised looks and timidly added, "To go with this kind of a meal."

After a moment, Ron nodded thoughtfully and said, "A nice dark beer would go well with this."

JD smiled at the fact that Ron had taken his opinion seriously.

"We really appreciate you coming all the way out here to talk with JD after the long day you've had." Ben said honestly.

"It's no problem. When one of the kids is hurting, it really tears me up inside. I've been told my entire career that you're not supposed to get personally involved with the clients... but I just can't be that way. I can't help it. I care what happens to them. Coming out here and seeing JD doing so well has made the whole day worth it." Ron finished with a smile at JD.

"Well, when we're finished with dinner, you and JD can sit down and talk about things. I'm sure you have a few questions for him." Cliff said to Ron, but was watching JD's reaction carefully.

"I think my first objective will be to find out what triggered JD's remarkable recovery. I'm sure knowing that will help us progress most effectively." Ron said thoughtfully.

"Before, it's like I was just a thing that had to be put somewhere that someone had to take care of. When Daddy and Pappa showed up and said that they wanted me, that's what made the difference." JD said introspectively. Then he looked up and quietly added, "For the first time since I woke up in the hospital, I **wanted** to get better."

Ron stared at JD with surprise.

Cliff noticed and playfully asked, "Do you have any other objectives? It looks like we could breeze through them tonight."

Ron smiled, then said, "No. I think we'll be talking about this objective a little bit more before we're finished."

"Do you like banana cream pie?" JD asked Ron quickly.

Ron looked at him curiously, mostly due to the abrupt change in topic, before answering, "Yes, I do. Very much."

"Good. That's what I bought for dessert and JD was worried that you might not like it." Ben said with a smile at JD.

"I like just about anything... except my own cooking." Ron finished sheepishly.

"Is that why you were so excited about a home cooked meal?" Ben asked curiously.

Ron slowly nodded, then said, "I live alone, so it's not really worth it for me to cook very much. I have mostly microwavable things and I eat out a lot."

"I remember how that is." Cliff said frankly.

"What did you do for Thanksgiving?" Ben asked curiously.

"I volunteered to work at the home so the staff with families could take the day off." Ron said uncomfortably.

"So you don't have any family?" Cliff asked curiously.

"My parents died when I was ten." Ron said slowly, then quietly added, "I spent my teenage years being shuffled from one foster home to another. When I was about fourteen, I was sent to see a counselor for depression. He helped me in a lot of ways. I guess that's why I ended up deciding to be a counselor."

"I'm glad you were able to find someone who cared." Cliff said sincerely.

"It was dumb luck, really." Ron said distantly. "Like JD, until I met Dave, I didn't really care if I felt better or not. I saw myself as being of less value, less than a *real* person. Finding a person who cares is what makes all the difference."

After a long silent moment, Ben said, "I think it may be more than that."

Ron looked at him curiously.

"You cared for JD. It was obvious from the way that you called to check on him in the mornings before you started work." Ben said thoughtfully.

"He did?" JD asked with surprise.

"Yes. Ron's been calling every few days to see how you're doing." Ben said with a tender smile at the boy, then to the rest of the group, he continued, "But I think what made the difference for JD was to know that he was **wanted**. It wasn't just to know that we cared or were worried about his well being, but that we actually wanted him to be a part of our family."

JD got out of his chair and walked around the table to stand by Ron. After a moment of hesitation, JD put his arms around Ron and hugged him firmly.

"Thanks for caring about me. I thought you were just doing your job, like everyone else." JD said quietly.

Ron returned JD's hug with one arm and quietly responded, "I really do care about you, JD. So remember that if you ever need to talk about anything."

JD nodded as he renewed his hug with Ron.

"If everyone has had their fill of dinner, how about we have our coffee and dessert in the living room?" Ben asked with a tender smile at the scene before him.

JD released Ron from the hug and hurried to his place at the table and began gathering dishes.

"Leave that for now and we'll take care of it later." Ben said gently, then added, "Would you like to show Ron into the living room?"

"Can I show Mr. Cooper my room first?" JD asked hopefully.

"I think that's a great idea." Ben said happily, then added, "I'll meet you in the living room just as soon as the coffee's finished."

"C'mon, Mr. Cooper. Daddy and Pappa bought me some really great toys!" JD said as he took Ron's hand to draw him away.

Ben and Cliff shared a smile as they got up from the dining room table to walk together into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Ben was just setting out the coffee and plates of pie when Ron and JD walked into the living room.

"Are we expecting an emergency?" Cliff asked playfully when he noticed that Ron was carrying JD's firetruck.

"It's always best to be prepared." Ron responded with a smile as he glanced at the boy beside him.

"I was showing Mr. Cooper my toys and he said that we could play while we talk if I wanted." JD said happily as he hugged his yellow dump truck tightly.

"Well, if it's okay with you guys, we can have our dessert now, then Cliff and I can go do the dishes and give you two a chance to talk privately." Ben said as he tried to restrain his loving smile at JD.

"Yeah! I've been wanting some of that pie since before we left the store!" JD said frankly.

All the adults shared an amused look at the boy's words.

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Ben and Cliff cleared the table and took care of the dishes in virtual silence.

Once their chores were done, they took seats at the kitchen table and watched the doorway with concern.

A few times while they waited, either Ben or Cliff would seem to be about to say something, but in the end, silence reigned.

Both men looked up in unison as Ron walked into the kitchen.

"May I?" Ron asked as he indicated a chair.

"Please do." Ben said immediately.

"JD said that he'd wait in the living room while I spoke with you." Ron said as he took his seat, then chuckled slightly as he said, "I just can't believe how relaxed that JD is here, with you two. It's like seeing a completely different child than the one I saw at the home."

"So, in your professional opinion, how is he?" Cliff asked apprehensively.

Ron considered for a moment, then responded, "When I arrived, JD was the perfect host when he invited me into your home. Then I got to see him participating in family activities, by that, I mean his cooking. At dinner I witnessed him engaging in conversation as an equal participant. Then, after dessert in the living room, I was able to observe JD's method of play, which was joyful and perfectly normal for a boy of his age."

Cliff and Ben waited in equal breathless states for Ron's conclusion.

"Based on those observations, to which you were also witness, I think I can safely say that JD seems to be functioning in a very positive and healthy way." Ron said seriously, then concluded with a smile.

"I sense a 'but' about to be dropped on us." Cliff said hesitantly.

Ron regretfully nodded and said, "But... when you consider all that JD has been through and the remarkable recovery he appears to have made, I think it's safe to assume that he's going to have ongoing issues; his fear of women, for example."

Cliff slowly nodded his agreement.

"But, I think that the longer JD lives in this environment of safety and security, the better he'll be able to work through his problems when they do eventually surface." Ron said carefully.

"Is there anything that you recommend that we should do, or not do, to help JD?" Ben asked cautiously.

"No. Whatever you're doing seems to be working just fine." Ron said seriously, then added, "Just a word of warning, though."

Ben and Cliff both looked at him anxiously, hanging on his every word.

"Don't let the events in his past and his fragile state become the most important things in your lives." Ron said as he looked from man to man. "I'm not saying that you'd do that, but sometimes parents, especially new ones, have a tendency to focus on an obstacle to the exclusion of all else. Acknowledge it, make allowances for it when you need to, but don't let it become the fulcrum of your family dynamic."

Ben and Cliff both slowly nodded that they understood what Ron was saying.

"I haven't really had a chance to sit down with both of you at once before; do you have any questions for me?" Ron asked curiously.

"Well..." Ben said, then looked at Cliff apprehensively for a moment before continuing, "We haven't discussed this in any detail, but, I'm pretty sure we feel the same way about it."

"Would you like for me to give you a minute?" Ron asked cautiously.

"No. I guess I just need to say it." Ben said nervously, "In your personal and professional opinion, what would you think about us adopting JD?"

Ron noticed that the look of surprise on Cliff's face melted into pure love.

After a moment to consider his words carefully, Ron slowly said, "Personally, and speaking as an orphan who grew up in the system, I'd have to say that the whole idea of being adopted is like a dream come true. However, speaking professionally, I've seen the adoption process turn the dream into an absolute nightmare."

Cliff and Ben both waited for Ron to explain.

"I'm going to give it to you in a nutshell, since JD's waiting on us." Ron said in prelude. "Although I would certainly support you and I believe that Mrs. Usher would also, it's likely that CPS would recommend against your adoption without ever saying that it's because you're a gay couple. And if Senator Johnston has his way, CPS won't even have a say in it."

"Leaving that aside, these things can drag out for months or years. During that time, JD would have to go through interviews with multiple doctors, psychologists, case workers and the like; many of them women. I really don't want to discourage you, but please think very carefully before you take this step. Even the strongest and most stable families can be severely impacted by the financial and legal burdens of adoption."

"I didn't realize that there was so much involved." Ben said distantly.

"When it comes to adoption, it's never simple. But I think that in your case, you'll really need to do a cost/benefit analysis before you make any decisions. Talk to a good lawyer..." Ron said, then looked upward as he asked, "Is that an oxymoron?"

Cliff and Ben smiled at the question.

"Anyway, my advice is to talk to a lawyer, maybe talk to a few parents who have been through the process, and ask a lot of questions. If you decide to do it, go in with your eyes open, armed with knowledge and realistic expectations." Ron said seriously.

"But if we do decide to do this, could JD handle it?" Ben asked cautiously.

"I can promise you that it won't be easy for him, but to get him adopted... I feel safe saying that whatever you have to go through, he'll tell you that it's worth it." Ron finished gently. "If you choose to do this, we'll find a way to get him through it."

"I think you've given us a lot to think about." Cliff said quietly. "I'm going to do like you said and start talking to people."

"Remember that JD needs time to adjust to his new home and adapt to having a sense of security." Ron said seriously, "There's no rush to get this done."

Ben and Cliff both nodded their understanding.

"I'm going to go in and say 'goodbye' to JD." Ron said as he stood, then playfully added, "I need to be going, I can't be out late on a school night."

"Thanks for coming by to check on JD." Ben said as he and Cliff walked with Ron to the door.

"I couldn't help it. I love that kid." Ron said, then walked into the living room.

* * * * *

After Ron left, Cliff and Ben decided to spend some time with JD to make sure that Ron's visit hadn't bothered him.

JD was happily playing with his dump truck and fire truck, then stopped and looked over his shoulder and found his parents watching him.

"Is something wrong?" JD asked cautiously.

"No. Everything's fine." Ben said gently, then patted the cushion beside him and said, "Why don't you come over here and sit with us for a minute?"

JD looked from Ben to Cliff, then slowly walked to take a seat on the couch between them.

After a moment, JD hesitantly asked, "Did I say something wrong to Mr. Cooper? I did just what you said and told him the truth."

"No. That's exactly what you were supposed to do." Ben said gently. "And Ron didn't talk to us about what you told him. He's your counselor, he won't tell us anything that you said."

"We just wanted to make sure that your talk with Mr. Cooper didn't bother you." Cliff said seriously. "I think you know that you can talk to us at any time, but we wanted to sit down with you now in case anything is bothering you."

JD thought for a moment, then looked from Ben to Cliff before shaking his head.

"Good enough." Cliff said with a chuckle and pulled JD in for a quick hug.

"I think we've had enough seriousness for tonight. It's still a while before bed. What do you feel like doing?" Ben asked as he enjoyed the sight of Cliff holding JD so tenderly.

"I think I'd like to read my story again so I can get ready to start on my next one." JD said as he snuggled into Cliff's side.

"You know, I think I've had enough processing time. I'm ready to read some more." Ben said gently.

"Well, if it won't distract you too badly, I've had a really tough day and I'd like to veg out in front of the TV for a while." Cliff said frankly.

"That sounds perfect." Ben said with a loving smile as he started to stand.

"Yeah. I like it when we're all together." JD said as he also stood.

"I'll get our laptops." Ben said as he started walking toward the door.

"Thanks, Daddy. I'm gonna get Pappa a beer." JD said as he headed toward the kitchen.

Cliff watched his two favorite people in the world walk out of the room, then picked up the remote.

* * * * *

The next day seemed somewhat unusual in it's absolute normalcy.

Ben woke early and was already working on the outline for his next book when JD scuffed into his bedroom.

Before long, JD was sitting at the desk, working on his own story.

They were both so caught up in their writing that Ben almost forgot that Zeb was coming over for dinner.

When he reminded JD, they decided to put their heads together and come up with a really special meal for their friend.

* * * * *

The sound of the doorbell ringing caused Ben and JD to look up in unison.

"That should be Zeb, do you want to get it?" Ben asked from the stove.

"Yeah. The salad is done." JD said happily as he hopped down from the chair.

As JD hurried to answer the door, Ben walked to the island to see JD's latest vegetable masterpiece.

He shook his head as he returned to the stove. JD had once again taken a simple salad and made it into a work of art.

After tasting the soup he was making, he heard JD leading Zeb into the kitchen.

"Thanks for inviting me over to dinner. I didn't want to show up empty handed, so I brought a peanut butter cake, I hope that's okay." Zeb said hesitantly.

"That's perfect. All I had was the last few pieces of pie from Thanksgiving. Thanks to you, everyone is going to be able to have dessert tonight." Ben said happily as he accepted the chocolate iced cake.

Zeb smiled at the fact that his contribution to the meal was appreciated.

"Have a seat at the table. Cliff won't be home for a little bit and this soup needs to cook for a while." Ben said as he tidied things up.

"It sure smells good." Zeb said as he took his seat.

"I hope you like it. I haven't made this soup since college, but it was always one of my favorites." Ben said as he walked to the table to take a seat.

"Wow. You went to college." Zeb said in wonder. "I can't even imagine what that must have been like."

"I think it's a different experience for everyone. It was a really important time in my life. It was thanks to my time in college that I was able to take a look at myself and discover who I really am." Ben said distantly.

"Do you mean that that's when you figured out that you were gay?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"Not exactly." Ben said with a smile. "I knew that I was gay before college, but I had never really accepted it. I guess what it boils down to is that I looked at all the pieces of my life and figured out how they fit together. My being gay was one of those pieces, but there were also several others."

"That sounds like something I could use." Zeb said quietly.

"The good news is that a college isn't required for you to do something like that. Just some time and some determination is all it takes... and having a few friends doesn't hurt." Ben finished with a smile.

Zeb nodded that he had heard.

"What's bothering you, Zeb?" Ben asked with concern.

"It's really nothing. It's just this guy, at work, named Rex. He's usually working about the same time that I am and he's always picking on me and embarrassing me." Zeb said darkly.

"How are my two favorite people in the world today?" Cliff called out as he walked into the kitchen.

"Pappa!" JD crowed as he ran to hug Cliff.

"We're doing fine. Come in and sit down. Zeb was just telling us about a problem that he's having at work." Ben said as he stood and gave Cliff a quick peck of a kiss.

"Yeah. There's this guy named Rex and he's a real asshole." JD said frankly.

Ben hid his smile and turned away to keep from laughing.

After a moment to collect himself, Cliff gently said, "I'd prefer it if you didn't use that word. It makes you sound like a gutter punk."

JD thought for a moment, then said, "Okay."

Cliff gave JD a quick kiss, then put him down so he could take his seat at the table.

"Zeb was just saying that this Rex person was picking on him and intentionally embarrassing him." Ben said, still smiling a little at JD's antics.

"He just says and does things to humiliate me, usually in front of everyone when we're in the break room." Zeb explained.

After a moment of thought, Cliff quietly said, "Zeb, would you please take off your shirt?"

Zeb looked at him curiously for a moment, but finally complied; his pale skin giving testament to his modesty.

"I think that's why Rex is giving you trouble. He could never do what you just did." Cliff said seriously.

"He can't take off his shirt?" Zeb asked incredulously.

"You didn't ask for me to explain. You trusted me to know what I was talking about. I think Rex looks at you and sees something that he can never be and it's eating him alive." Cliff said frankly.

"What does he see?" Zeb asked cautiously and seemed to be afraid of the answer.

"That you're innocent, trusting and a genuinely good person." Cliff said simply.

"Most people at work treat me like I'm a stupid kid. But the way you say it, it sounds like a good thing." Zeb said uncertainly.

"It is. I think that your parents must have raised you right, with strong values, for you to turn out to be such an upstanding person." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"But, they taught me that homosexuals are sinners that are condemned to hell." Zeb said anxiously.

"So maybe they weren't right about every single thing that they believed. That doesn't mean that they weren't right about anything." Cliff said frankly.

Zeb contemplated the words as Ben, Cliff and JD watched silently. Finally he seemed to remember where he was.

"You can put your shirt back on." Ben said quietly.

"Oh, yeah." Zeb said and scrambled to pull on his shirt.

"So, I don't know what to tell you about Rex, but maybe understanding **why** he's such an asshole will make it easier for you to deal with him." Cliff said frankly, then winked at JD, eliciting a giggle from the boy.

"I really think it will. It'll make it easier to ignore his insults knowing that he's being that way because of something that's wrong with him, not something wrong with me." Zeb said thoughtfully.

"Yes. That's a great way of looking at it." Ben said happily, then announced. "And if my assistant chef is ready, dinner is served."

"Do you want us to go into the dining room?" Cliff asked curiously.

"No. Stay right where you are." Ben said as he walked to the stove.

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"I give up. What is it?" Cliff asked after his second spoon of soup.

"Tortilla soup." Ben said with a grin.

"It's wonderful." Cliff said with a smile.

"Daddy showed me how to make it." JD said happily.

"It really is good. Is it hard to make?" Zeb asked curiously.

"No. It's real easy." JD answered before Ben could reply. "If you want, I can make a copy of Daddy's recipe for you."

"I've been meaning to ask." Ben said thoughtfully, as he looked at JD, "Most kids your age can't read more than a few simple words. Where did you learn to read so well?"

"In the hospital." JD said simply. "Since I didn't talk and didn't like TV, some of the nurses and some of the other kids helped me learn how to read. Then, once I knew how to read a little, I started reading all the time; all day, every day."

"I seem to recall Ron saying that you were in the hospital for over a year, is that right?" Cliff asked curiously.

JD shrugged and said, "Ten days or a thousand, there's no difference when they're all exactly the same."

"I guess being in the hospital, there wasn't much to mark the time." Ben said distantly.

JD shook his head, then turned his attention back to his meal.

"This salad is great. Did you make it, JD?" Zeb asked with a smile.

"Yeah. When Daddy said that he was gonna make Tortilla Soup, I decided to make a Mexican Salad. Lock taught me how to make it." JD said happily.

"Well, it's great." Zeb said as he smiled at JD.

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"I know you've probably told this story a lot already, but how did you start talking again?" Zeb asked curiously as they ate.

"I did it because of you." JD said simply.

Ben and Cliff shared a curious look at JD's statement.

"What did I do?" Zeb asked hesitantly.

"Well, a bunch of stuff happened a long time ago, and because of it, when I woke up in the hospital, I couldn't talk. Daddy and Pappa loved me anyway, but no matter how much I tried, I

just couldn't figure out how to make words again. Then on Friday, Daddy and Pappa took me downtown to do some shopping and, um... stuff happened and I was scared. All I would have had to do was squeeze Pappa and he would've brought me home. But instead, I remembered what you told me about doing stuff even when you're scared of it. Because I didn't give into it and chicken out, now I can talk." JD finished with a smile of accomplishment.

"I'm glad it helped." Zeb said weakly as he looked at Ben and Cliff curiously.

"I was there and saw the whole thing and I doubt that I could have explained it any better." Ben said with a chuckle.

Cliff looked around the table and noticed that everyone was just about finished with their meal. "JD, why don't you take Zeb into the living room while your Daddy and I clear the table. We'll be in in just a minute."

"Okay, Pappa." JD said happily as he got up from his chair.

* * * * *

"Do you like to read?" JD asked as he walked with Zeb into the living room.

"Not really. My parents used to make me read things all the time. Now that I don't live with them anymore, it's nice not to have to." Zeb said timidly.

"Sometimes Pappa likes to watch TV when he gets home from work. I don't watch TV, but Pappa could probably show you where the really good TV shows are, if you asked him." JD said happily.

"Why don't you like to watch TV?" Zeb asked curiously.

As he was asking the question, Cliff and Ben walked into the living room.

JD thought about the question for a moment, then walked out of the room.

"Did I upset him?" Zeb asked quietly.

"I don't think so." Ben said as he glanced down the hallway to see what JD was doing.

A moment later, JD walked into the living room with a book.

"When you remember stuff, you remember it like it was written down, like in this book. Okay?" JD asked uncertainly.

"Um, yeah. Sure. I guess." Zeb said hesitantly.

"Well, for me, it's like all the pages fell out of the book. And when they were put back in, some of the pages are missing and the rest didn't get put back in the right place." JD said slowly.

"I don't understand." Zeb said apologetically.

"I was telling you that Lock taught me how to make a Mexican Salad. I can't remember when that happened, I mean, what happened before it and what happened next. I remember things, but they don't fit together." JD said with frustration.

"So why does that make you not want to watch TV?" Zeb asked curiously.

Cliff and Ben were standing silently, waiting for JD's answer.

"When you watch TV, the scenes change. You're watching one thing, then it flips over to another thing, then back to the first thing, then there are commercials and it makes me feel like I do when I'm trying to remember. It feels really bad and scary, so I don't like to look at the TV very much." JD said honestly, then looked at his parents and softly added, "I really wanted to watch movies with you. But I just couldn't make myself do it."

"That's okay, son. We're not upset that you didn't watch TV with us. If we knew that it bothered you, we wouldn't have even asked." Cliff said as he moved forward and pulled JD into his arms.

"I like that you asked. It's nice to be wanted. I'm just sorry that I can't be like other kids." JD said, then hugged Cliff tightly.

"You can do things that other kids your age haven't even thought of. So don't think for one minute that you're less than them because you can't watch TV. Besides, they call it the 'idiot box' for a reason." Cliff finished with a chuckle.

"Zeb, would you help me with the dessert? I think these guys could use a minute." Ben asked with a smile.

"Sure, Ben." Zeb said with a matching smile as he followed.

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After Zeb left and JD had gone through his nightly bath routine, Cliff and Ben stood in JD's doorway and watched by the light from the hallway as JD slept.

Both men were emotionally raw after the events of the past few days, and yet, given the choice, neither would change a single thing that had happened.

"He's happy. He's healthy. And even though Ron said that he's going to have challenges to face, I have a feeling that the worst is behind us." Ben said as he held close to Cliff's side.

"It looks like it's going to be smooth sailing from here on out." Cliff said as he returned Ben's hug.

Chapter 8

The next day JD and Ben seemed to be of one mind, both sitting at their computers and working diligently on their own projects.

Occasionally, one or the other of them would stop to ponder a question, or consider the best way to phrase something, but for the most part, the clickity, click, click of keyboards was constantly chattering in their ears as they each concentrated on their work.

A lunch of cold sandwiches along with cheese curls was the only interlude in their productive day.

Neither was aware of the passage of time as they were each engrossed in their own private world of fantasy.

* * * * *

"Dr. Grant, Ron Cooper is holding for you on line one. Do you have time to talk to him?" The office receptionist asked from his doorway.

"Yes. I'll take it. Thank you, Brynna." Cliff said, then answered the phone. "Hi Ron, what's going on?"

"*Cliff, am I catching you at a bad time?*" Ron asked cautiously.

"Not at all. What can I do for you today?" Cliff asked pleasantly.

"*I was wondering if you'd have time to come over to the Home to meet with me?*" Ron asked anxiously.

"Is something wrong with JD? From the way you acted at dinner, I thought that he wasn't having any problems." Cliff asked in a rush.

"*No. JD's fine. This is something else. Will you be able to meet with me?*" Ron asked hopefully.

"Um, let me see. Give me a second." Cliff said as he pulled up his patient schedule on his computer. "Actually, since I've already seen my last patient for the day, I don't have anything to do, now, that can't be done later. I could be there in about ten minutes if that wouldn't be too soon."

"*That would be great. Just go directly to Mrs. Usher's office when you get here. We'll be expecting you.*" Ron said with relief.

"What's going on, Ron?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"*It would be better if I told you in person. I'll see you in a few minutes.*" Ron said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll be there as soon as I can." Cliff said slowly, then absently said, "Bye."

* * * * *

"Dr. Grant, it's so good to see you." Mrs. Usher said when Cliff walked into her office. "Please have a seat so we may begin."

"Um, thank you." Cliff said cautiously as he took the offered seat.

"When you and Mr. Stone petitioned to be foster parents, there was a stipulation in the agreement..." Mrs. Usher began to say, but Ron cut her off.

"Please, just ask him. Don't make this sound like a demand." Ron pleaded.

Mrs. Usher stopped and considered for a moment, then nodded her agreement. "Dr. Grant, last night we received into our care, a young boy who has been abused... in a manner... such that..."

Ron noticed that Mrs. Usher seemed to be having difficulty finding the right words, so he continued the thought for her, "As near as we can tell, he's been held captive in an apartment on the South side of town for most, if not all, of his life."

"Yes. It also appears that he has been kept restrained much of the time. Tied to a bed." Mrs. Usher added quietly, obviously fighting to keep herself from crying.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Cliff said cautiously. He then hesitantly asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Perhaps." Mrs. Usher said with a glance at Mr. Cooper, then said to Cliff, "Given your remarkable success with JD, we immediately thought that you and Mr. Stone might be able to help this boy; his name is Jody."

"Cliff, he can barely walk. He's absolutely terrified of everyone and everything. I'm assuming that's because his whole life, he's only ever seen the inside of his apartment and now he's suddenly been thrust into the outside world." Ron said in a desperate, urging tone.

"So you want Ben and me to be his foster parents." Cliff said slowly, seeking confirmation.

"Yes." Ron said immediately. Then, in a more controlled voice, he continued, "The way things are, there are very few options for us. The next best option for placing him would be a group home for disabled children. And I'm sure that they would take very good care of him. But I really think that with your family, he might have an opportunity for something so much better."

"And how do you feel about it, Mrs. Usher?" Cliff asked slowly, not able to believe that she had changed her opinion of gay people completely since their first meeting.

"I agree with Mr. Cooper. My job is the same as it ever was. That being, to match each child given into my care with a family that can love and nurture them, so they can become well rounded, stable adults. I believe that your family is, by far, the best chance that Jody is going to have." Mrs. Usher said sincerely.

"If you'd like, I could take you to meet him." Ron said hopefully.

"No." Cliff said quietly. "At least, not yet."

Mrs. Usher and Ron looked at him with surprise.

"This isn't a decision that I can make on my own. I'm going to call Ben and have him bring JD here. If you'll tell them what you just told me and answer any questions they might have, then we'll consider it as a family." Cliff said seriously.

"That sounds like a very wise decision." Mrs. Usher said with an admiring smile.

"Then, if you'll excuse me for a moment..." Cliff said as he took out his cell phone.

"Of course." Mrs. Usher said with a casual smile as Ron nodded.

* * * * *

"*Hi love, are you on your way home?*" Ben asked curiously.

"No. Actually, I'm at the Home having a meeting with Ron and Mrs. Usher right now." Cliff said frankly.

"*Is something wrong?*" Ben asked with concern.

"Yes. But it isn't about JD. I called to ask if it would be possible for you to bring JD down here right now?" Cliff asked hopefully.

"*Sure. We lost track of time and haven't started dinner yet, so we could leave right away.*" Ben said cautiously.

"Yes. Please do. We'll explain everything when you get here." Cliff said firmly.

"*We're on our way.*" Ben said cautiously, then quickly added, "*I love you.*"

Cliff smiled and said, "I love you, too."

* * * * *

When Cliff closed his phone, he noticed that Ron and Mrs. Usher were looking away, trying to give the appearance that they hadn't been listening to his side of the conversation.

"So, while we're waiting, would you care to fill me in? Who did this to Jody? Where are they now? Does he have any family?" Cliff asked seriously.

"As I said before, this just happened yesterday, so we don't really have a lot of answers. But we'll tell you what we know." Ron said seriously.

Ron glanced to Mrs. Usher, and she began to tell the story. "There was some sort of accident that damaged a gas line in the South part of town. As a result, the custodian of Jody's apartment building had to go from apartment to apartment to relight the pilot lights on hot water heaters and stoves and such. He knocked and there was no answer, so he let himself into the apartment and found Jody tied to the bed frame."

Cliff could tell that Mrs. Usher was fighting to keep her emotions under control.

"The custodian immediately called the police and they, in turn, called us. After Mr. Cooper collected the child, the police waited for the resident to return to the apartment and later arrested her. She's in police custody now."

Ron nodded, then added, "The detectives that I talked with are pretty sure that the woman isn't Jody's parent or legal guardian. So far, she's refused to answer any of their questions."

"So he might have been abducted?" Cliff asked thoughtfully.

"That's one of the possibilities. With so little information to go on, it's hard to even guess at this point." Ron said with a defeated shrug.

"So, tell me again why you need for Ben and me to take him? Even though his situation was horrible, it still sounds like he's in a lot better shape than JD was." Cliff asked slowly.

"No. He really isn't, at least, not emotionally." Ron said quietly. "JD's reaction to his trauma was to shut down. He stopped talking or interacting with the world around him to help distance himself from his pain. Jody is feeling his pain. He's afraid and grieving and a million other things that he doesn't understand or know how to handle."

"And it's going to take time for him to deal with his issues." Mrs. Usher said frankly, then added, "Unfortunately, time is a commodity that we don't have in abundance. Children are brought to us, we do our best to determine their needs and get them placed with a family as quickly as possible to free up the bed for the next child who needs it." Mrs. Usher said frankly.

"So, you don't have any long term residents here?" Cliff asked cautiously, he had never thought to ask before.

"Actually, we do have a few, but they're older children who've been in the system for years. After a certain age, it's nearly impossible to place them, so we offer to allow them to stay here, with the understanding that they help the younger kids and first timers deal with their new situation." Ron said quietly.

"Sort of like trustees." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"If you like. But it's the closest thing to a stable home that I'm able to give them." Mrs. Usher said regretfully.

"It's going to be a few minutes before Ben gets here. I think I'd like to meet Jody now, if you'd like to introduce me." Cliff said to Mrs. Usher quietly.

"Yes. I think that's a very good idea." Mrs. Usher said with a pleased smile, "Mr. Cooper, would you take care of the introductions? I'll wait here for Mr. Stone and JD to arrive."

"Of course." Ron said as he stood. "We'll be right back."

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"What else can you tell me about him?" Cliff asked as he walked down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

"Not much. With JD, we didn't know things because he wouldn't talk and couldn't remember. In Jody's case, I think he just doesn't know. It seems that he's been denied any type of social interaction or sensory stimulation. I don't think he's even had any exposure to radio or TV. He literally doesn't know anything about anything outside the apartment he was living in." Ron said frankly, then gestured toward one of the bedroom doors.

"I thought you couldn't remember which kids went in which rooms." Cliff said with a grin.

"That was just my way of encouraging JD to interact with us." Ron said with a sly smile.

* * * * *

Ron looked around the bedroom, then cautiously asked, "Where's Jody?"

"In there." An older teenage boy said as he pointed at the closet.

"Any idea why?" Ron asked cautiously.

"It's dark and quiet. I think he needs that." the boy said frankly.

"Cliff, this is Michael, but everyone calls him Junior." Ron said with a smile.

"Yeah. It seems like every third guy who comes through here is named Mike." Junior said with a roll of his eyes.

"It's nice to meet you, Junior. My name is Clifton Grant, you can call me Cliff." He said as he offered his hand.

As they shook hands, Ron said, "Cliff is one of JD's foster parents."

"You got JD? How is he?" Junior asked with excitement.

"He's doing great." Cliff said with a smile, "In fact, he's started talking and even smiles now."

"Really? That's wonderful. The whole time he was here, I don't remember ever seeing him smile." Junior said thoughtfully.

Cliff thought back and couldn't begin to count the number of smiles he had seen in the past weeks.

"Hang on, I've got something for you to give to him." Junior said as he hurried to one of the dressers and opened the top drawer.

"If you'll hold on to it, you can give it to him yourself. He should be here in about five minutes." Cliff said seriously.

"He's coming here? You're not... bringing him back here, are you?" Junior asked with a devastated look in his eyes.

"Only to visit, I swear." Cliff said quickly to assure the young man.

"Oh, good. I know how crappy it feels to get sent back. And with the way JD was last time I saw him... I don't know if he could handle it." Junior finished quietly.

"Just a visit. I promise." Cliff said with an assuring smile.

"Jody? Are you okay?" Ron asked quietly as he opened the closet door a crack.

There was no answer, so Ron opened the door a little wider.

What Cliff saw broke his heart.

The young boy, four or five years old by his estimate, was curled into a tight fetal ball in the floor of the closet. All Cliff could see was an angular tangle of rail-thin limbs and a tuft of wheat blond hair. The sight somehow reminded him of a pile of fallen clothes hangers.

"I don't think he slept very well last night." Junior said with a concerned look into the closet, then quietly added, "It was like he was afraid of the bed."

"Then we should probably leave him be, for now, and let him get his rest." Ron said as he eased the door shut.

"I thought he was okay. That's why I didn't come and get you." Junior said cautiously.

"I know you were watching over him. You did fine." Ron said gently. "I guess we should get back to the office before Ben and JD get here."

Before Junior could ask, Cliff said, "I'm pretty sure we'll be bringing JD in here as soon as we're done in the office, so you'll have a chance to talk to him then."

"Thanks." Junior said happily.

* * * * *

"So, are you going to tell me the truth now? Or am I going to have to start playing detective?" Cliff asked as he and Ron walked out of the bedroom.

"I'm sorry. How do you mean?" Ron asked slowly.

"Come off it, Ron. Your story doesn't add up. You received that boy *last night* and you're giving him to us today? I may not work in social services, but I *am* familiar with how bureaucracies work. NOTHING happens that fast." Cliff said as he stopped in the hall.

Ron had a look of indecision, that slowly turned to resolve.

"I didn't tell you this, and you can't repeat it, not to anyone. Not even Ben." Ron whispered.

Cliff slowly nodded.

"You're right. There are a few of us who are bending the rules for Jody's sake. The police detectives that are investigating the case have been around long enough to know what happens to kids like Jody. He's severely traumatized and barely able to stand upright. If he gets thrown into the system, he'll probably get labeled 'special needs' or worse, 'developmentally disabled', then he'll be tossed in some convenient dead-end corner where he can be forgotten. The nature of the system is to flow, and anyone who disrupts that flow is relegated to some inconspicuous bureaucratic void where they won't sully anyone's placement statistics or success rate."

Cliff was horrified at what Ron was telling him.

"I don't mean to sound like it's some kind of great conspiracy. It isn't. It's just a lot of low-level people, making a lot of low-level decisions that will result in making each of their jobs just a teeny bit easier. But the end result is that kids like JD and Jody are seen as 'too much trouble' and end up paying the price for being something other than the standard, run-of-the-mill, foster child." Ron said frankly.

Cliff thought about that for a moment, then quietly asked, "So what did you do?"

"The police detectives who found Jody called me instead of following procedure and calling the CPS office. That's nothing illegal, mind you, just irregular." Ron explained slowly.

Cliff nodded that he accepted what Ron was saying.

"Then, I took Jody to a pediatrician friend of mine to get an honest evaluation of his condition. I'm not saying that a CPS doctor would have knowingly lied about Jody's condition, but they're all so jaded that they would have probably treated Jody like a case number instead of a living, breathing person."

"Why didn't you call me?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"I hadn't planned on telling you any of this. But even if I had, I wouldn't want to put you in the position of being the attending physician of your own foster child. Down the line it might raise some questions that we don't want asked." Ron said frankly.

Cliff nodded that he understood.

"I brought Jody here and got Junior to watch after him while I filled Mrs. Usher in on what was happening." Ron said seriously.

"I'm really surprised that Mrs. Usher would be willing to bend the rules, even a little bit." Cliff said honestly.

"She does what's best for the kids. That's her priority." Ron said simply. "It only took a few minutes of conversation before we were decided that your family was our only real hope for Jody."

"What about the police investigation? If this all just happened yesterday, what can I expect?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Expect some very understanding police detectives to visit you and ask Jody a few questions." Ron said seriously. "I promise, they won't push him and will do anything to keep from scaring him. But they need answers and Jody might be their only hope of finding them."

"I guess, as long as they're on Jody's side, that I can try to restrain my overprotective fatherly instincts." Cliff said reluctantly.

"Do that." Ron said firmly, then added, "And do your best to keep Ben from finding out about any of this. The fewer people who know, the better."

Cliff nodded, then quietly said, "Alright, but if something like this happens again, I want you to keep me in mind. I'd be willing to tread into the gray area if it would help a child."

Ron smiled and nodded his agreement before saying, "We'd better get back to the office or Ben and JD are going to end up waiting on us... with Mrs. Usher. I can't imagine any way that that will go well."

"Right." Cliff said with a smile, then gestured for Ron to lead the way.

* * * * *

Cliff and Ron walked into Mrs. Usher's office to find that Ben hadn't arrived yet.

Before they could even be seated, their attention was drawn by movement in the doorway.

"I'm sorry we took so long. The traffic was worse than I expected." Ben said as he hurried in with JD in his arms.

"Rush hour. I should have thought of that." Cliff said casually, obviously not at all bothered.

Ben gave Cliff a hopeful look then glanced at JD.

Cliff smiled, knowing what Ben was trying to say without words.

"Come here, little man. Your Pappa needs some sugar." Cliff said as he gently took JD from Ben's arms.

As soon as Cliff felt the tense little body held tight against him, his parent alarm went off. With Junior's words about being 'sent back' still fresh in his mind, he hugged JD a little more tightly to reassure him. After a moment, he finally realized that JD was probably just nervous because Mrs. Usher was in the room.

"So, why did you need us here?" Ben asked curiously.

"They've got a boy here named Jody who has some pretty serious problems." Cliff said frankly as he rubbed small circles on JD's back, trying to soothe him, "Ron and Mrs. Usher seem to think that he would benefit from being our foster child."

"Seriously? You'd allow us to take in another foster child?" Ben asked happily.

"Yes. That's what we were hoping." Mrs. Usher said quietly.

"What do we need to do?" Ben asked quickly.

"Well, the first thing I think we need to do is ask JD if he would like to have a little brother." Cliff said frankly, then looked at the boy in his arms. "He's a part of our family, so his feelings need to be taken into account."

A wide eyed stare was JD's only response.

"What do you think, JD? Would you like to have a younger brother?" Ben asked gently.

JD turned his head slightly to look at Ben, then hesitantly nodded.

"Well, I think that if you asked Mrs. Usher very nicely, she might let you." Cliff said slowly, feeling that this was an opportunity for JD to test his limits.

JD turned to look Cliff in the eyes for a moment with evident fear, but finally turned away to look at Mrs. Usher.

"Please. Mrs. Usher. Please may I have a brother?" JD asked in a barely audible voice.

Mrs. Usher couldn't answer immediately, she took a few tissues from a box on her desk, then dabbed at her eyes before saying, "Yes, JD. If you're all three agreed, then I think I have just the right little brother for you."

"Thank you." JD said timidly, then buried his face into Cliff's shoulder.

"He's made remarkable progress." Mrs. Usher said in wonder.

"Yes. He's our special little man." Ben said as he placed a hand on JD's back to offer his own assurance.

Ron smiled at the scene, then said, "Then we mustn't keep JD waiting. Let's go get him a brother."

* * * * *

"Hi JD!" Junior said joyfully. "How are you doing?"

"Hi." JD said timidly. "I'm good."

"You look good." Junior said happily. "And I think you've grown a little bit since the last time I saw you."

"Really?" JD asked with surprise, then wriggled around in Cliff's arms to try to look down at himself.

"How's Jody doing?" Ron asked cautiously.

"I think he's still asleep." Junior said with a concerned look at the closet.

"JD. There's a boy in the closet over there. His name is Jody. I was thinking that maybe you could go in there and ask him if he wants to come home with us." Cliff said gently as he let JD down to stand.

JD looked up at Cliff uncertainly, but made no move toward the closet.

"You can let him know that it's okay to be scared and that we won't hurt him." Cliff said as he looked JD in the eyes.

Finally, JD nodded and walked slowly to the closet.

"Are you sure that this is a good idea?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Yes. As much for JD as for Jody." Cliff watched JD carefully for any sign of trouble.

* * * * *

JD slowly opened the closet door, then froze when he saw the smaller boy, curled into a ball.

"Can I come in?" JD asked cautiously.

The younger boy's light brown eyes opened, and his gaze fixed with JD's.

"I won't hurt you. I promise." JD said as he knelt on the floor in the closet doorway.

Finally, the little boy hesitantly nodded.

JD scooted himself a little bit closer and said, "My Pappa said that if you wanted, you could come and live with us and be my brother."

Jody's eyes widened and he curled a little tighter into himself.

"My Pappa and my Daddy are really nice. They don't scream at me or hit me or hurt me at all, ever." JD assured.

"But I'm scared." Jody whispered.

"My Pappa told me to tell you that it's okay to be scared." JD said seriously, then added, "Please come live with us. I want you to be my brother."

"You... *want* me?" Jody asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. I really, really do." JD pleaded.

Jody hesitantly inched forward, then put his hand on JD's gloved hand.

Very slowly, JD turned his hand over and took Jody's hand and held it.

"See? I won't hurt you." JD said with a smile.

Jody looked past JD at the people standing outside the closet and seemed to shrink back in fear.

"If you're scared, you can hold on to me. I won't let anyone hurt you." JD whispered.

"Really?" Jody asked hopefully.

"Yeah, really. If I'm going to be your big brother, then that's my job." JD said seriously.

Jody finally closed the distance between them and hugged JD firmly.

"Now, if you get scared, just hold on to me and I'll keep you safe. You can even close your eyes if that helps." JD said in a soothing voice.

"Okay." Jody whispered.

JD coaxed Jody to stand, never letting go of him.

"You ever thought of going into child psychology?" Ron asked Cliff with a grin.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to have all the psychology I can handle with these two." Cliff said frankly.

"We're ready." JD said as he held Jody firmly against his chest.

At first, Cliff thought that Jody was holding onto JD purely out of fear, but something about his posture made Cliff realize that Jody was holding himself upright by hanging onto JD.

"Do we need to get anything together for him?" Cliff asked curiously.

"He doesn't have much. I'll get it." Junior said as he rushed to the dresser.

"Thanks, Junior." Cliff said with a grateful smile.

"Pappa, can Junior come live with us, too?" JD asked hopefully.

Cliff looked down into JD's wide, hopeful eyes and tried to find the words to explain why that couldn't happen.

"JD, I've only got a few months before I'm eighteen. At least if I stay here, I've got a place to live until I finish high school." Junior said with regret.

"He's right. This is the best place for him to be, right now." Ron added quietly.

JD nodded, but obviously wasn't happy.

"Would there be any way that Junior could come over and visit for a night or a weekend sometime?" Ben asked hopefully, directing his question mostly at Ron.

"I don't see any problem with that." Ron said slowly, then amended, "In fact, since you two are state approved foster parents, I know that there wouldn't be a problem."

"What do you think, Junior? Would you like to come over to the house this weekend and visit with the boys?" Ben asked with a smile.

"Um... Yeah. Sure. That'd be great!" Junior said with surprise at the offer.

"I usually get out of work at around five, so why don't I swing by here on Friday just after five and pick you up?" Cliff asked casually.

"Yeah. Sure." Junior stammered. "I mean, yeah. I'll be ready."

"That sounds great." Cliff said with a smile.

"JD, I got this for you." Junior said as he held out a cloth bundle.

"What is it?" JD asked, his arms still full of terrified little boy.

Junior unfolded the bundle to reveal a black turtle neck shirt.

"I was helping go through some donated clothes and found this. So I held it out for you." Junior said quietly.

"Thanks, Junior." JD said with a smile, then turned to Cliff and said, "I think Jody needs to go home now. He's starting to shake. I think he's really scared."

Cliff looked at the horribly thin boy and could see him trembling. He couldn't tell if it was from fear, or from the strain of trying to hold himself up.

"Guys, I think it's about time for us to go. Who wants a piggy back ride out to the car?" Cliff asked playfully.

JD's eyes lit up, but then he remembered Jody and looked at him with question.

"It's really fun." JD whispered.

"I'm scared." Jody whispered in return.

"If you want to do it, I'll hold your hand all the way out to the car." JD offered seriously.

Jody thought about it for a moment, then timidly said, "I don't know how."

"Just watch me, I'll show you." JD said quickly, then released Jody and walked to Cliff with his arms up, signaling that he wanted to be picked up.

"You know the routine, little man." Cliff said as he turned to face away, then squatted down.

JD draped himself over Cliff's back, held on around his neck and brought his legs around his waist.

A moment later, Cliff hoisted him into the air.

"Wanna try?" JD asked with a smile.

Ben noticed that Jody looked very unsteady, but didn't want to draw attention to the frightened boy by saying anything about it.

"Climb on." Ben said gently as he squatted down.

After a moment of hesitation, Jody awkwardly climbed onto Ben's back.

"Just relax, Jody. I won't let you fall." Ben said quietly as he slowly stood.

"Pappa, I promised Jody that I'd hold his hand so he wouldn't be scared." JD said urgently.

"Well, promises are important." Cliff said as he walked to stand beside Ben.

It took a moment for Jody to settle into place, but Ben was careful to take gentle hold of Jody's legs, so there was no possibility that he would fall off. Finally, Ben glanced over his shoulder and asked, "You two all set, back there?"

"Yeah. We're all ready to go." JD said with a giggle as he held out his hand to Jody.

After a few hesitant starts and stops, Jody finally felt secure enough to release his stranglehold on Ben's neck and take hold of the gloved hand that was being offered.

"I'll carry your stuff out for you." Junior volunteered as he picked up the small bundle of Jody's clothes.

"Thanks, Junior." Ben said with a grateful smile.

* * * * *

"Who's riding with who?" Ben asked carefully as they slowly walked down the hall.

"I think the boys should ride with you. Your car is bigger and you've got the booster seat." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Speaking of which..." Ben began to say.

"I'll pick one up tomorrow." Cliff interrupted.

"Is there anything we need to do as far as paperwork?" Ben asked Ron curiously as they walked at a casual pace down the hallway.

"We'll have a few things for you to sign, but we don't have them ready for you right now. We'll either mail them or I might bring them by your office. Since this is being listed as an 'emergency placement', we can get Jody taken care of first, then deal with the paperwork when we have to." Ron said frankly.

"Is it an emergency?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Yes." Ron said simply, then added, "As wonderful as Junior has been to look out for Jody, there's no way we could have kept Jody here like this for more than a day or two. We aren't set up to be able to devote so much attention to just one child. We still have a responsibility to the others."

Before Cliff could comment on Ron's statement, Junior rushed ahead of them and opened the door.

"Thanks." Ben said with a smile.

"You guys still okay back there?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yeah!" JD said happily.

"This is nice." Jody said more quietly as he snuggled against the warm body that was carrying him.

* * * * *

When they reached the cars, Cliff let down his passenger, then faced Junior and said, "It was nice to meet you, Junior. We'll see you on Friday."

"Yeah. Thanks for inviting me." Junior said quickly.

* * * * *

"How are we going to do this?" Ben asked as he opened the rear passenger door.

"I suppose we should put Jody in the booster, since he's smaller." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Jody, I'm going to let you down now. Then we're going to take you to your new home." Ben said as he squatted.

It took a moment for Jody to realize that he was supposed to let go, but finally he was standing on the ground, just outside the car.

"I'm going to lift you into the booster seat. Don't worry, I won't hurt you." Ben said gently as he noticed that JD was already in the back seat on the driver's side.

"You're light as a feather." Ben said with surprise, then looked at Cliff with concern.

"We'll get some weight on him." Cliff said with quiet assurance.

As soon as Ben pulled the seat belt around the boy's waist, Jody began screaming uncontrollably.

"What is it? Did I hurt you?" Ben asked as he released the seat belt and backed away from the shrill sound.

"Jody, what happened?" Cliff asked from the driver's side door.

"Daddy? Pappa? Can I talk to Jody for a minute to find out what's wrong?" JD asked hopefully.

"We'll be right out here if you need us." Cliff said before backing away.

Ben flashed Cliff an uncertain look, but took a few steps back as well.

* * * * *

Cliff and Ben watched as JD climbed out of the car.

"Did you find out what was wrong? Did I hurt him?" Ben asked quickly.

"Jody says that where he was living before, they used to tie him up and then they'd leave him... sometimes for all day." JD said quietly.

"So he's afraid of being restrained." Cliff said, internally kicking himself for not thinking of it.

"I guess we can let him ride without a seat belt for now." Ben said hesitantly.

JD shook his head firmly. "I don't want Jody to get hurt. I'll show him how to open the seat belt so he'll know he can get out of it whenever he wants. Then I'll hold him so he'll know he's safe."

"You're going to be a great big brother." Ben said with a proud smile.

JD shrugged shyly, then ran back to the car.

"I'll see you at home." Cliff said gently, then gave Ben a quick kiss.

Ben smiled as he watched Cliff go to his own car.

* * * * *

When Ben looked into the back seat, he couldn't hold back his smile.

Somehow, JD had managed to get both Jody and himself to fit onto the booster seat that was made for one child.

Jody seemed to be content with JD's arm around his shoulders and the safety belt strapped around both of them.

"Don't worry, Jody. We'll be home before you know it." Ben said gently, then started the car.

"JD said that we have to wear this because you love us and don't want us to get hurt if the car gets hit." Jody said frankly.

"Yes. That's exactly right." Ben said as he slowly backed out of his parking space.

"Daddy? Is Jody going to sleep with me?" JD asked cautiously.

"Well, I was thinking that if I moved in with Cliff, you know, full-time. Then you could have my room and Jody could have your room." Ben said thoughtfully, then added, "That way you'd be in the room with all the books."

"But what if Jody wants to sleep with me?" JD asked slowly.

"Well, I guess that depends on whether or not you want him to sleep with you." Ben said frankly.

He glanced into the rear view mirror and found a pair of blue/gray eyes looking back at him curiously.

"As long as you want Jody to sleep with you and he wants to sleep with you, then there's no problem. Well, unless you don't get enough sleep. Then we'll have to make some adjustments." Ben said slowly.

* * * * *

"Daddy. Jody needs to use the bathroom." JD said seriously.

Ben looked into the rear view mirror and could tell that Jody was afraid of his reaction.

"Do you think he can make it to the house?" Ben asked cautiously.

JD whispered to Jody, then Jody whispered back.

Finally JD looked up and said, "No. He has to go really bad."

Ben looked around where he was driving, then signaled to make a right turn.

As he had hoped, Cliff also signaled, then followed as Ben drove the two blocks to a public park.

"There's a public bathroom right over there." Ben said as he pulled into a parking place.

Jody had the seat belt off before the car had come to a complete stop.

"Jody, do you need to be carried?" Ben asked carefully, mostly for forms sake.

From the look of the boy, he doubted that Jody could make the short walk all by himself.

Jody reluctantly nodded.

"Then, come on." Ben said as he got out of the car.

* * * * *

"Problem?" Cliff asked with concern.

"Jody needs a bathroom break." Ben said frankly as he walked around the car.

"Please, let me take him." Cliff said with concern.

"Sure. I wouldn't want you to feel deprived." Ben said with a grin.

Cliff opened the back passenger door, then easily lifted Jody off the booster seat.

"I guess you get to keep me company." Ben said with a smile at JD.

"Jody might need me." JD said seriously, then let himself out the driver's side.

* * * * *

"Pappa, I can take him in, if you want." JD said as they walked up to the restroom.

"Okay. I'll wait out here. Just call me if you have any trouble." Cliff said seriously.

JD nodded, then helped Jody to walk the few steps in to the toilet.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen!" A queeny voice said, drawing Cliff's attention.

"Leo? I haven't seen you in... years." Cliff said with surprise.

"Look at this! Dr. Clifton Grant trawling for dick in a public park. I'm soooo happy that I lived to see the day." Leo said delightedly.

"I'm not here for that." Cliff hurried to say.

"So did your boytoy finally dump you and find someone closer to his own age?" Leo asked quickly, obviously not expecting an answer.

"Pappa. Jody's done." JD said as he walked out of the bathroom with Jody at his side.

Jody looked up at Cliff and seemed to be waiting for something.

"Like this." JD whispered, then put his arms up.

Jody looked up at Cliff, then thrust his arms into the air.

Cliff picked the younger boy up and easily settled him on his hip.

"Leo, these are my sons, JD and Jody... mine and Ben's." Cliff said proudly.

"Can we go now?" Jody asked timidly.

"Of course, angel." Cliff said, then gave Jody a quick kiss on the cheek before walking past Leo.

JD walked a few steps, then stopped. He looked up at Leo and locked eyes with him before saying, "You're a dick."

Before Leo could respond, JD dashed away to follow his Pappa and his new brother.

* * * * *

The rest of the ride home went without incident, although the boys seemed to be constantly whispering to each other.

"Jody, I need for you to hold me when we go in because it's so pretty it might make you pass out." JD said seriously.

Ben and Cliff shared a smile and both remembered how shaky JD had been when he arrived.

After a moment, Jody nodded and put his arms around JD.

Ben hurried ahead of them to unlock the door, then stood aside as JD slowly guided Jody into the house.

"Is it from malnutrition?" Ben asked in a whisper.

"Partly. I think it's also muscle atrophy from being restrained so much." Cliff said grimly.

"What can we do for him?" Ben asked in a pleading voice.

"Keep him well fed and let him play with his big brother. I think that if we're just patient, it will all sort itself out." Cliff said honestly. "Some physical therapy might help speed his recovery, but we'll only do that if he's up to it emotionally."

* * * * *

"Where's our apartment?" Jody whispered to JD as he nervously looked around.

"This is our house. We get to live in the whole thing." JD said with a smile.

Jody looked around again, but couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the concept.

"Who wants to help me make dinner?" Ben asked as he walked past the boys.

"We'll help!" JD said immediately, speaking for both of them.

"Well, come on into the kitchen so we can get started." Ben said happily, then grinned at Cliff who was carrying Jody's things down the hall to the bedrooms.

* * * * *

"JD, I'm counting on you for a salad." Ben said as he turned on the oven.

"But Jody's going to need my help." JD said with concern.

"Don't worry. You'll be able to help him if he needs you. But I don't think he'll have any problem." Ben said, then started digging around in a lower cabinet.

Jody was standing beside JD, not knowing what he was supposed to be doing.

"Boys, before you start anything else, I need for you to wash your hands." Ben finally said as he stood with a stack of mini loaf pans.

JD rushed to the table to get a chair, then scooted it in front of the sink.

Ben wiped out the pans and watched as JD helped Jody up onto the chair, then showed him where the soap was.

As soon as the hand washing was done, Ben said, "Now, Jody, if you'll get up on a chair at the table, I'll bring you the things that I need for you to do."

JD watched Jody walk unsteadily to the table, then looked at Ben with concern.

"Go ahead and start the salad. I'll take good care of him." Ben said gently.

It seemed for a moment that JD was going to argue, but finally he walked to the refrigerator and began to take out the ingredients that he would need.

"Okay Jody, this is your first job. I need for you to take these heels of bread and tear them up into little bite-sized pieces." Ben said as he placed a mixing bowl with bread slices in it on the table.

Jody looked up at him uncertainly for a moment, then started tearing the bread.

While Jody did that, Ben gathered ketchup, onion soup mix, Italian seasoning and a package of ground meat, lining them all up on the table before Jody.

"Okay, now this is going to get a little bit messy. I hope you're ready for it." Ben said with a grin.

Jody looked up with question.

"I'm going to add things into your bowl and I want you to mix them with your hands. Just squish it around until it's all mixed together really well." Ben said with a smile.

Jody looked into the bowl, then hesitantly put his hands in.

"First, the meat." Ben said, then tore the plastic off the top of the meat tray and dropped the contents into the bowl.

Jody looked up at Ben again.

"Go ahead, mix the meat in with the bread. When you've got it going, I'll start adding other things." Ben said encouragingly.

Jody finally took the plunge and started mixing the meat and bread with his hands.

JD was watching from his position at the island, and Ben noticed that he had a smile on his face.

"I think it needs some ketchup now." Ben said, then proceeded to squirt a long stream of ketchup into the bowl.

Jody looked up at him with surprise at the action.

"Mix." Ben said with a grin.

Jody continued to squish the slimy mixture through his fingers.

"Some onion soup mix, to make it yummy." Ben said, then poured half the pouch of dried onion soup mix on top of the pinkish goo.

"Some Italian seasoning, to make it *molto bene*." Ben said with an atrocious accent as he sprinkled a teaspoon of the seasoning into the bowl.

"And some water, to make it... um, wet." Ben said as he added a little splash of water to the mixture.

"So, once that's mixed, we'll be ready to put it in the pans." Ben said cheerfully, then lined up the mini loaf pans on the table.

"Now, Jody, for your next trick, I'd like for you to take the meat in your hands and form it into little loaves, big enough to fit in these pans." Ben said with a smile, then asked, "Do you think you can do that?"

Jody slowly nodded, then started forming the mini loaves.

"While you're doing that, I'm going to get started on some mashed potatoes." Ben said, then walked into the pantry.

JD hopped down off his chair and hurried to Jody's side.

"How are you doing?" JD asked quickly.

"This is icky." Jody whispered as he held up his hands, coated with the raw meat mixture.

"Yeah. But I bet it's going to taste really good when it's cooked." JD said honestly.

Jody looked into the bowl, then at JD uncertainly.

"Just wait, you'll see." JD said, then gave Jody a quick hug before hurrying back to the island.

"Hi guys." Cliff said as he walked into the kitchen. "It looks like you're hard at work."

"Jody's making us meatloaf." JD said proudly.

"That sounds good." Cliff said with a smile.

"Are you here to help?" Ben asked as he walked back into the kitchen with a pan of potatoes.

"No. Actually, I'm here to steal away one of your helpers if you can spare him for a few minutes." Cliff said frankly.

"Sure. It's going to take about an hour for everything to finish cooking, so I think they'll have free time." Ben said as he sat the pan of potatoes on the table.

"How close is Jody to being done?" Cliff asked curiously.

Ben watched as Jody carefully put the last formed meatloaf into its pan.

"Just about." Ben said, then picked up the ketchup and squirted some on the top of each loaf. "I've just got to put these in the oven, then he's good to go."

Ben picked up two of the pans, then said, "Do you want to help him? I need those other two pans."

Cliff lifted Jody from the chair and stood him on his feet, then handed him the two remaining pans.

"See Jody? We put these in the oven and in about an hour they'll be meatloaf." Ben said as he carefully put the first two pans in.

Once they were in place, he took the other two pans from Jody and put them into the oven, too.

"I think he may need to do some hand washing before he goes with you." Ben said with a smile.

"That would probably be good." Cliff said with a chuckle, then lifted Jody to sit on the counter beside the sink.

"So, what do you need Jody for?" Ben asked curiously as he put a pan of water on the stove.

"I just want to have a quick look at him, to be sure that he's healthy." Cliff said dismissively.

"You're going to be doctoring on Jody?" JD asked slowly.

Cliff was very aware of the sharp knife that JD had in his hand at that moment.

"I'm just going to look him over. No shots, no pills, he won't even have to turn his head and cough." Cliff said seriously.

JD put down his knife and climbed down off his chair.

"It looks like you're getting two patients for the price of one." Ben said with a grin.

"It looks that way." Cliff said uncertainly, but knew that JD wouldn't let Jody go alone without a fight.

"Come on, this will only take a few minutes." Cliff said as he lowered Jody to the floor.

JD was immediately at his side, helping him to walk.

Cliff and Ben shared a look before Cliff finally led the boys out of the room.

* * * * *

"Please relax, Jody. I'm not going to do anything that will hurt. I just want to listen to your lungs and look into your eyes, ears and throat to make sure that you're healthy. How would it look for a doctor's kid to get sick without him knowing about it?" Cliff asked frankly.

"You're a doctor?" Jody asked in a shaky voice.

"Yes. But I'm the good kind of doctor." Cliff said gently.

"He's a pediatrician, that means he went to school to learn how not to be mean to kids." JD added helpfully.

Jody looked uncertain.

"JD, come here and let me listen to your chest for a minute so Jody can see that it's nothing to be afraid of." Cliff said gently.

Jody watched carefully as JD stepped forward.

Cliff took his stethoscope and listened to JD's chest for a moment.

"Breathe in deep." Cliff said quietly.

After a moment, he said, "Let it out."

"Breathe."

"Exhale."

"Good. Everything sounds fine." Cliff said happily.

"I passed?" JD asked curiously.

"That's right. You passed the breathing test with flying colors." Cliff said with a smile.

"It didn't hurt, not even a little bit." JD said to Jody seriously.

After a moment of indecision, Jody reluctantly nodded.

"Just sit still for a moment." Cliff said gently as he listened to Jody's heart.

"What do you hear?" JD asked curiously.

"Come here." Cliff said, then took off his stethoscope.

"Put them on, then put it right there." Cliff said quietly.

JD listened for a moment, then started to smile.

"Yeah. I know." Cliff said with a smile at JD's expression.

"I want to hear." Jody said in a small voice.

"Here." JD said as he handed the stethoscope to Jody.

Cliff and JD watched as Jody listened carefully to his own chest.

After a moment, he said, "I want to hear you."

JD stepped forward without hesitation and presented his chest for Jody to listen.

After a moment, Jody giggled.

"Now, if I may, I'll check your lungs by listening to you breathe." Cliff said as he held out his hand for the stethoscope.

"How do you do that?" JD asked curiously.

"I just listen. If there's something wrong I'll be able to hear it." Cliff said frankly as he put his stethoscope on.

"Like how?" JD asked with interest.

"If I heard a gurgling sound, I'd know that something wasn't right, so I'd know to investigate further." Cliff said to JD, then turned to Jody and said, "Breathe in deep for me and hold it."

Jody took a deep breath, as JD had done earlier.

"Good, now let it out slowly." Cliff said as he listened carefully.

"How does he sound?" JD asked anxiously.

"Perfect." Cliff said with a smile, then glanced at Jody and said, "Breathe deep... Exhale... Good. Jody passed his breathing test, too."

JD's smile was luminous at the announcement.

"Now, I'm just going to look in your ears and eyes for a minute. Then we'll be done." Cliff said gently.

"Will you do it to JD first?" Jody asked shyly.

"Sure, as long as JD doesn't mind." Cliff said simply.

JD looked uncertain, but finally nodded his agreement.

Cliff took his penlight out and said, "Just hold still and look at me."

JD remained still, but flinched a little when Cliff shined the light on one of his pupils.

Before he could ask what Cliff was doing, he had switched to look at the other eye.

"That didn't hurt, did it?" Cliff asked with a smile.

"No, but it was weird." JD said frankly.

"I never promised you no weirdness, just no pain." Cliff said with a grin, then looked at Jody with question.

It took a moment, but Jody finally nodded his head in agreement.

Cliff quickly looked at his eyes, paying careful attention to his responses.

"Everything looks good there. You passed the eye test." Cliff said happily, then took a tongue depressor out of his bag.

"Open wide." Cliff said with a smile.

Jody looked at him strangely for a moment, then hesitantly opened his mouth.

Cliff gently used the wooden paddle to hold Jody's tongue down and angled the flashlight so that he could get a good look at Jody's throat.

What he saw made him inwardly curse, but with JD and Jody watching his every move, Cliff fought to maintain a cheerful facade.

"Good healthy tonsils. That's what I like to see. You passed the mouth test." Cliff said quickly, then dropped the tongue depressor into the waste basket by the couch.

"Are we done?" JD asked hopefully.

"Almost. I just have one more thing to check." Cliff said as he took another instrument out of his bag. "I just need to take a peek into Jody's ears."

"Are you going to look at his brain?" JD asked with surprise.

Cliff chuckled, then said, "No. It only works like that in cartoons. I'm just looking for any signs of infection. Kids your age are prone to ear infections, and they're a lot easier to treat if they're caught early."

JD waited for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Is he okay?"

"Yes. Jody is just fine. He passed his ear test." Cliff said happily as he put his instrument away.

"Does that mean we can keep him?" JD asked hopefully.

Cliff was surprised by the question and could see that both boys were waiting expectantly for his answer. As much as he wanted to explain to the boys, he felt any but the simplest answer would probably be misconstrued.

"Yes. We can keep him." Cliff said gently.

JD broke into a full, happy smile, then hugged Jody firmly as he said, "You get to stay! You're really going to like it here. I promise."

Cliff noticed that Jody seemed to be a little bit overwhelmed, being the focus of JD's attention.

"Let's go back to the kitchen and see if your Daddy needs some help with dinner." Cliff said gently.

Within a heartbeat, both boys had their arms thrust into the air.

Cliff debated for a moment, not knowing if his back could handle the load, but one look into the boys' eyes let him know that he really had no choice in the matter.

"Come on up." He said, then lifted a boy in each arm.

Chapter 9

"Hey Daddy, I brought you some helpers." Cliff said cheerfully as he walked into the kitchen.

"That's good. Because I have a half finished salad on the island that's wanting some attention." Ben said as he stood over the stove, chunking potatoes into a pot of boiling water.

JD kissed Cliff on the cheek, then released his grip, his signal that he was ready to be let down.

"Do you have anything that you need for Jody to do?" Cliff asked curiously.

"If you wouldn't mind helping him, you two could set the table." Ben said as he finally finished with his potatoes.

"Actually, I need to make a call. But it should just take me a minute." Cliff said as he looked at Ben with question.

"That's fine, this is going to need to cook for a while, so there's no rush." Ben said with a loving smile at his partner.

Cliff carefully placed Jody on a chair, then left the room at a deliberate pace.

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After searching the desk, Cliff found the business card with Ron's number.

"Hello?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Ron, it's Cliff. I need to get the names of the police detectives assigned to Jody's case." Cliff said without prelude.

"Sure, but is something wrong?" Ron asked with immediate concern.

"I did a quick evaluation of Jody to assess his overall health and found signs of forced oral copulation. I'm required by law to report it to the police, and I thought that telling his detectives would be the best way to do that." Cliff said honestly.

After a long silence, Ron quietly said, "I know about the damage to his throat. The pediatrician that examined him also reported that Jody shows signs of being anally raped. The damage is consistent with long-term, repeated abuse."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cliff asked in astonishment.

"I'm really sorry about that. Please, let me explain." Ron said reluctantly, then quietly continued, "If I had told you about it before you got to know him, you might have decided that it was too much for you to handle. I thought that Jody's well-being was too important to take that risk. I'm sorry for misleading you. My only defense is that I was trying to do what was best for Jody."

After a moment to consider the words, Cliff reluctantly admitted, "You're probably right. We might have thought it was more than we could deal with."

"And now?" Ron asked hesitantly, obviously afraid of the answer.

"There's no way we could turn our backs on him now. For better or worse, Ben and I will see him through whatever he has to face." Cliff said in resignation.

"What about JD? How is he handling this?" Ron asked with concern.

Cliff chuckled, then said, "JD is as happy as he can be. He said he's always wished for a little brother."

"I just hope that the reality of it will live up to his expectations." Ron said slowly.

"I'm not worried about that. JD is a good boy with an enormous heart." Cliff said with a smile.

"Yes. He is." Ron agreed, then continued in a more professional voice, "I'm going to contact the police detectives on Jody's case and they'll probably be calling you later tonight."

"Thanks, Ron." Cliff said quietly.

"By the way, I've meant to ask, what have the detectives on JD's case said about what's going on with his mother?" Ron asked curiously.

"Nothing. I got a call back from the detective who took my report, but no one has ever contacted us about JD." Cliff said honestly.

"That might be for the best. Just let me know if they contact you." Ron said carefully.

"What are you worried about, Ron?" Cliff asked cautiously.

After a long thoughtful moment, Ron responded, "Let's just wait and see how it plays out. You've got enough on the plate in front of you without having to worry about something that might not ever happen."

Cliff didn't know how to respond to that.

"The microwave just went off, so my dinner is ready. Call me if there's anything else I can do." Ron said quickly.

"I'll do that. I'll see you tomorrow when I pick up the boys from their counseling appointment. I assume you'll want to see them both." Cliff said absently.

"Yes. That will work out best. I'll see you then." Ron said with a smile in his voice, then hung up the phone.

Cliff slowly stood and thought about Ron's words, then returned to the kitchen to set the table, with Jody's help.

* * * * *

It turned out that Jody's 'helping' consisted of him clinging to Cliff's side and carrying one plate at a time as Cliff ferried him back and forth from the dining room to the kitchen cupboard.

Ben watched with amusement, also keeping an eye on JD so that he didn't injure himself by paying more attention to his new brother than to his salad making.

"It's time for the meatloaf to come out of the oven. I think Jody will want to be here for this." Ben said with a grin.

Cliff carried Jody to the oven and waited for the unveiling.

"You remember the meat that you mixed up? Well, here it is." Ben said as he opened the oven door.

Jody stared at the mini loaf pans with wonder.

Using potholders, Ben pulled the oven shelf out slightly, then took the loaf pans out and sat them on the stove top.

"We need to let them cool down just a little bit so they can firm up. But can you smell that? It won't be long before we're ready to eat." Ben said happily.

"And Jody made the meatloaf?" Cliff asked, wanting to be sure that Jody understood that it was his accomplishment.

"That's right. I think JD started a family tradition. When you join our family, you get to cook something for the whole family." Ben said with a smile at Jody.

"What's left to do?" Cliff asked as he looked around.

"I need to mash the potatoes. You guys could get the drinks." Ben said hopefully.

"We can do that." Cliff said with a smile.

Ben watched curiously as Cliff whispered with Jody. After a moment, Jody gave a timid nod.

Cliff smiled, then carried Jody to stand in front of Ben.

"What do you want to drink?" Jody asked shyly.

"I think I'd like a glass of milk." Ben said with a contented smile.

"Then our next stop is the refrigerator." Cliff said happily, then carried Jody away.

"How's the salad coming, Little Man?" Ben asked as he mashed potatoes by hand with an old-fashioned potato masher.

"I'm done. I wanted to make it extra nice for Jody." JD said timidly.

Ben left his potatoes for a moment so he could walk to the island.

"Wow. That is one beautiful salad!" Ben said in an impressed voice.

"Do you think Jody will like it?" JD asked cautiously.

"I'm sure he will." Ben said with a smile, then thought to ask, "Do you know where my camera is?"

"You mean the one beside your computer?" JD asked slowly.

"Yes. Would you go and get it for me? I can't really leave this right now." Ben said as he went back to mashing potatoes.

"Yeah." JD said before racing out of the room.

"Where's JD?" Cliff asked as he returned to the kitchen with Jody clung to his side.

"Getting something for me." Ben said frankly as he added a splash of milk to the potatoes.

"That's pretty." Jody said as he pointed at the salad on the island.

"Yes. JD made that." Cliff said with a smile.

"He made it extra nice because you're here." Ben added frankly.

"He made it for me?" Jody asked hesitantly.

"He made it for all of us, but he made it especially pretty because you're here and he wanted you to enjoy it." Ben said honestly, then took a spoon and tasted the mashed potatoes. He scrunched up his face and gave a slight wince.

"Not good?" Cliff asked when he saw Ben's expression.

"Needs salt." Ben said, then quickly grabbed the salt container.

"Here it is." JD said as he hurried into the kitchen, carrying the camera.

"Good. Will you get up on your chair so I can take a picture of you with your salad?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Really?" JD asked with surprise.

"That's right. It's beautiful work, there should be a record of it." Ben said before tasting the mashed potatoes again.

The smile on his face gave evidence that the salt improved the mashed potatoes greatly.

"Can you take a picture of Jody, too?" JD asked hopefully.

"Sure. I plan on taking his picture with his meatloaf." Ben said honestly.

JD smiled at the announcement.

Ben snapped three or four pictures of JD, just to be certain that there would be a good one.

"Go ahead and take the salad to the table." Ben said quickly, then turned to Cliff and said, "Would you put Jody on the chair?"

"I'd rather hold him." Cliff said frankly, then quietly added, "It's been a long day for him. I don't know how long he'd be able to stand."

"Okay. That will be fine." Ben said, then hurried to take the meatloaves out of their pans and place them on a serving platter.

"Those look fantastic." Cliff said as his mouth watered.

"Jody did some good work." Ben said gently as he fussed over the platter to make it look just right.

"Now squat down a little bit." Ben said as he backed up and looked through the camera.

"Jody, look at me." Ben said slowly.

After a long hesitant moment, Jody looked up, then broke into a smile.

Ben quickly snapped the picture, then two more, just to be safe.

"JD, would you like to have a picture of you and Jody together?" Ben asked with a smile.

"Yeah!" JD said enthusiastically, then climbed onto the chair and immediately pulled Jody into a hug.

Cliff slowly backed away, knowing that JD would support his new brother.

"I guess I don't have to tell you to smile." Ben said before snapping the picture.

After a few more clicks, Ben finally lowered the camera.

"Well, now that that's out of the way. Who's hungry?" Ben asked as he set his camera aside.

Cliff and JD immediately said, "I am!"

"Then let's eat." Ben said as he picked up the platter of meatloaf and carried it into the dining room.

"JD, what do you want to drink?" Cliff asked quickly.

After a moment to consider, JD said, "Milk would be good."

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"What's the matter, Jody? Aren't you hungry?" Ben asked with concern.

Jody's eyes filled with tears as his lower lip started to quiver.

"Let me talk to him." JD said to his parents, then climbed onto the chair with Jody and put an arm around him.

Cliff and Ben watched curiously as the boys whispered to each other.

Finally, JD moved off the chair and walked around the table so he was standing right before Cliff and Ben.

"He says he's never had food like this. He doesn't know what to do." JD said quietly. "All the food he's ever had was the kind in a wrapper that you eat it with your hands."

"Will you show him what to do?" Cliff asked JD hopefully.

JD nodded, then quietly said, "But it'd help a lot if you didn't watch him while he's eating, at least until he gets used to it."

"We won't stare at him while he's eating, but we might look at him if we're talking to him." Ben said gently.

JD seemed to consider, then finally nodded his agreement.

"Okay, then, let's enjoy this meal!" Ben said loudly enough for Jody to hear.

JD went back to his place, then scooted his chair over so that it was closer to Jody's.

"This is a fork, you hold it like this." JD said quietly as he demonstrated.

"Mrs. Usher said that he hasn't ever experienced anything outside the apartment where they found him. It looks like we're going to have to teach him the absolute basics." Cliff said slowly.

"I'm sure JD will be a lot of help with that." Ben said thoughtfully.

"Yes. But I can imagine that JD and Jody might get frustrated if he can't master all these new skills quickly. We really need to keep an eye on them to see that they aren't making unrealistic goals." Cliff said frankly.

"Good! You did it." JD said happily.

Ben and Cliff glanced over to see that Jody was happily chewing a bite of food.

"Isn't it good? You made that!" JD said happily.

Jody looked down at the meatloaf on his plate, then at JD in wonder.

"Yeah! I know!" JD said joyfully. "Do you want to try some of the salad? I made it really good, just for you."

Jody looked down at the salad on his plate, then looked at JD nervously.

"Just watch me, I'll show you how." JD said confidently.

Jody watched as JD slowly speared some leaves of lettuce with his fork.

"Then you eat it, like this." JD said happily, then demonstrated.

Jody glanced at Cliff and Ben who appeared to be talking to each other, then hesitantly tried to get some salad onto his fork.

JD watched his progress and seemed to be about to say something, but was just able to hold himself back as Jody finally was able to get a single piece of lettuce.

"Yeah! Just like that." JD said happily.

Jody smiled at him briefly, then guided the fork to his mouth.

"Mashed potatoes are next. They're easy." JD said, then scooped up some mashed potatoes on his spoon.

Jody watched, then mimicked his movement and was soon enjoying a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Now you've had some of everything, so you shouldn't have too much trouble." JD said happily.

Jody still looked nervous, but was able to repeat his earlier success as he continued to eat.

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The meal took longer than most, simply because Jody was having difficulty mastering the use of eating utensils.

When they were finally done, Cliff stood and waited for what he knew was to come.

Both boys were soon standing before him with their arms in the air.

"JD, why don't you ride with your Daddy? You wouldn't want him to feel left out, would you?" Cliff asked, then flashed an urgent 'help me' look at Ben.

"But Jody might need me." JD said anxiously.

"If Jody needs you, I'll carry you over to him, just like we did at the home." Ben said seriously.

"Okay." JD finally said, reluctantly.

"You know that I love you, right?" Ben asked quietly as he lifted JD on to his hip.

JD nodded casually, as though it never occurred to him to think otherwise.

"Well, because I love you, I like it when I get a chance to hold you like this." Ben said gently.

JD looked at Ben curiously for a moment, then moved in to give Ben a firm hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, too, Daddy."

"Have we figured out the bedroom situation yet?" Cliff asked as he held Jody in his arms.

"I think that for right now, we should be flexible on that one." Ben said thoughtfully.

"JD, would you mind if Jody shared your room for a night or two? We'll see how he does, then decide what to do next from there." Cliff asked gently.

"It's scary being alone at first. I want Jody to stay with me." JD said frankly.

"Just let us know if either of you is having a problem so we can help." Ben said gently.

JD increased his hug on Ben, then whispered, "I will, Daddy."

"Good." Ben whispered in return, then gave JD a quick kiss on the cheek.

"How about we give Jody a tour of the house?" Cliff asked suddenly.

"Can we play pool?" JD asked hopefully.

"I bet that Jody's tired after all the excitement we've had today. I think that we should show him around, and then maybe spend some time in the living room." Cliff said in a leading tone.

"Jody, can you read?" JD asked curiously.

After a moment of hesitation, Jody reluctantly shook his head.

"That's okay! I can teach you how. It's fun!" JD said happily.

Cliff and Ben shared a look of uncertainty, but neither had the will to discourage JD from teaching his new brother the thing that he enjoyed so much.

"First stop, the bedrooms." Cliff said, then carried Jody out of the room.

Ben held back a little, then quietly said, "You'll need to remember to be patient with Jody. He's younger than you are, so he might not be able to do everything that you do."

"But he doesn't know anything about anything! I want to teach him how to cook and read and write and type and... and everything!" JD said quickly.

"I know. But think about this..." Ben said carefully, "How would you feel if I sat you down and made you learn how to sew a quilt?"

JD scrunched up his nose a little, then hesitantly said, "It sounds kind of boring."

"Yeah, it does to me, too." Ben admitted with a smile. "But some people enjoy quilting. What I'm trying to say is that Jody may not be interested in everything that you are. Go ahead and show him things, but if you see that he's not enjoying the things that you like to do, try something else. Help him to figure out what *he* enjoys."

"Are you guys coming with us or not?" Cliff asked from the doorway.

"Yeah. We'll be right there." Ben said toward Cliff, then quietly said to JD, "Just think about it."

JD nodded, then snuggled against Ben as he was carried out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"This is going to be our room!" JD said as they entered.

Ben let him down and watched as JD ran to the toy box and started pulling out the small collection of toys that he had accumulated since his arrival.

"See? These are my favorites! I have a dump truck and a fire engine." JD said proudly.

"Do you want to go look at the toys?" Cliff asked Jody quietly.

Jody shook his head and held on to Cliff more firmly.

"The next time we go shopping, we'll be sure to take Jody down the toy aisle so he can pick out some toys for himself." Ben said with a smile at the timid boy.

JD looked at Jody, then at Ben with confusion.

"Remember, not everyone likes the same things." Ben whispered.

JD's gaze went back to his toys and he seemed to be having difficulty with the concept that, to Jody at least, they weren't the greatest toys ever.

"I know what!" Cliff said happily, drawing all attention to him.

"Why don't we all go in the living room? That way Jody can have a chance to relax for a while and deal with all these new things before we start throwing more at him." Cliff said cheerfully.

JD looked up at Cliff cautiously, then down at his toys.

"You can bring your toys into the living room to play if you'd like." Ben suggested quietly.

After a moment of thought, JD said, "I think I'd like to work on my story."

Ben smiled at the answer and said, "Me too. Let's go get our laptops while Cliff and Jody get settled into the living room."

JD looked curiously at Ben for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "Come on, Daddy."

* * * * *

By the time Ben and JD had their laptops and cords all gathered up, Cliff and Jody were already settled in together on the couch.

"Hit that button, right there." Cliff said as he pointed at the power button on the remote control.

Jody cautiously did as he was told, then his entire body jerked with surprise when the television came on.

"All you have to do is push that same button again to turn it off." Cliff said gently.

Jody looked up at Cliff uncertainly for a moment, then cautiously pressed the button, while watching the TV at the same time.

When the screen went blank, Jody broke into delighted giggles.

Ben put a hand on JD's shoulder to snap him out of his staring and encourage him to continue on to the coffee table, where he could set up his little netbook.

"Now, when you want to watch TV, all you have to do is push that button and it's on." Cliff said gently.

Jody looked down at the remote, then up at the TV. Cliff smiled as he watched Jody trying to hold the remote where he could see the TV as he pressed the button.

When he finally turned the TV back on, Cliff hugged him gently and gave him a kiss on the side of his head.

"That was great, Jody." Cliff said warmly, then quietly added, "Now, do you see this button with up and down arrows on it? That will change the channel. You can use that to look around until you find something that you want to watch."

Jody experimentally pressed one of the buttons, then marveled at the television when the program changed.

"Go ahead and change the channel, this isn't actually a show, it's a half-hour long commercial for a washcloth." Cliff said frankly.

"Why is that guy screaming?" Jody asked timidly.

"Because he wants you to buy his washcloth." Cliff said honestly.

"If you buy it, will he be quiet?" Jody asked hopefully.

"No, he'll keep screaming so you'll buy more. Go ahead and change the channel." Cliff said with a loving smile at his newest son.

* * * * *

Ben noticed that JD seemed to be having trouble concentrating on his work. Every few minutes his attention would shift to Jody and Cliff cuddled together on the couch.

"You know, if you ever want a hug, I'd be happy to hug you." Ben said gently.

JD was startled for a moment that he had been caught staring, then said, "I know, Daddy."

"You know, you're going to be at home with Jody all the time, all day, every day. It's good that your pappa is getting to spend a little time with Jody." Ben said carefully, watching for JD's reaction.

Finally, JD slowly nodded.

"How's your story coming?" Ben asked with a smile.

After a moment to consider, JD slowly said, "I know what I want to say, but I'm having trouble figuring out how to say it."

Ben smiled warmly, then said, "You and me, both."

JD looked at Ben with surprise.

"It gets easier with practice, but there's always a little bit of a struggle in crafting the words to really convey your meaning." Ben said honestly.

"Yeah!" JD said with a grin.

"If you get stuck on something, just ask for my help. If you tell me what you're trying to say, then maybe if we put our heads together we can come up with a good way to say it." Ben said warmly.

JD and Ben both winced when the television channel changed to a really annoying infomercial.

"Do you want to go into the other room where we can write with less distractions?" Ben asked carefully.

"No. I want to do stuff with Pappa and Jody." JD said immediately.

"You're right. Tonight isn't about the writing, it's about all of us doing the things that we enjoy, as a family."

* * * * *

The phone ringing drew everyone's attention.

"I've got it." Cliff said as he awkwardly reached around to the end table without dislodging Jody from his chest.

"Hello?" Cliff said as he checked to see that Jody was comfortable.

Jody's full attention was on the television.

After a moment, Cliff said into the phone, "Good evening. Yes, I'm Dr. Grant."

"Oh, yes. Thank you for calling so quickly."

After a long moment of listening, Cliff carefully said, "I see. Yes, I think that's a good idea, but before I agree, you should be aware that my other son, JD, is absolutely terrified of women."

"Yes. I think that's best." Cliff said as he glanced to see if JD was listening to his side of the conversation.

It appeared that JD was working on his story and paying him no attention, although Cliff suspected that JD was very good at 'looking like' he wasn't paying attention.

"That sounds good. Do you need directions?" Cliff asked casually.

"We'll see you soon." Cliff said pleasantly, then hung up the phone.

"Are we having company?" Ben asked curiously.

Cliff looked down at Jody, who was snuggled close to his chest, then quietly spelled out, "P-O-L-I-C-E."

JD looked up from his laptop with wide, frightened eyes.

Cliff made a quick shushing motion, then gently said, "It's just for a visit."

JD seemed uncertain, then looked to Ben for assurance.

The concerned look on Ben's face didn't exactly put him at ease.

"What do they want?" Ben asked in a voice that betrayed his concern.

"To visit. That's all." Cliff said gently as he looked into Ben's eyes, then he glanced at JD.

Ben followed his gaze, then realized that he was unintentionally causing JD to be afraid.

"Well, if they're coming over for a visit, maybe we can make them something to snack on." Ben said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Him." Cliff corrected, "There's only one of them coming."

Ben nodded, then asked, "JD, would you like to help me fix something for our company?"

After a moment of thought, JD quietly asked, "What do they eat?"

Ben chuckled at the question, then encouraged JD to walk with him out of the living room.

* * * * *

After making some snacks to be served later, JD and Ben went back to the living room and were soon clicking away on their respective laptops.

Cliff and Jody were watching TV together.

It seemed that every few minutes, Jody would find something in what they were watching that he didn't understand and timidly ask Cliff about it.

Although, television might have many shortcomings, in this circumstance, it was a godsend. Jody was getting to learn about a variety of new things in the outside world in a safe and nonthreatening way.

Finally, the sound of a knock on the door caused everyone to look up from what they were doing.

"You guys relax. I'll get it." Ben said as he stood and placed his laptop on the coffee table.

A moment after Ben walked out of the room, JD stood and followed.

Jody was transfixed on the television and completely unaware of anything happening in the room.

* * * * *

"Hello." Ben said as he opened the door.

"Dr. Grant?" The large man asked cautiously.

"No. I'm Ben Stone. Cliff is in the living room with Jody." Ben said carefully.

"I'm Detective Booker. I called Dr. Grant earlier about visiting with Jody to see how he's doing." The detective said in a calm, professional voice.

"Yes, please come in." Ben said as he backed away from the door and gestured for the detective to enter. Ben nearly tripped over JD who was hiding behind his legs.

"Are you going to take Jody away?" JD asked in a small voice, still mostly hidden.

"No. I'm just here to make sure he ended up in a good place where he'll be happy." Detective Booker said in a gentle voice.

"He's my little brother, and I'm going to take really good care of him." JD said in a small voice that betrayed his fear.

Detective Booker smiled at JD and quietly said, "I'm glad that Jody is going to have a big brother to take care of him. When I found him, he was very scared and completely alone."

JD put an arm around Ben's waist and held on with a firm grip as he said, "He's gonna be happy here. I promise."

"Detective Booker, I know this may be an unusual question to ask, but do you have any tattoos?" Ben asked slowly.

After a moment to get over the unusual question, Detective Booker responded, "Yes. I have a few of them."

"I think that JD might be a little bit more comfortable around you if he could see for himself that not only are you a police detective, but also a regular person like him." Ben said in a leading tone.

The detective looked at Ben curiously for a moment, then started to unbutton the sleeve of his shirt.

"We're supposed to keep any tattoos hidden, because the department says that they look unprofessional." Detective Booker said as he rolled up the sleeve.

JD was watching from his safe position behind Ben's legs, but hesitantly ventured forward when he saw the tattoo on the detective's forearm.

Detective Booker knelt down and offered his right arm to JD, for his inspection.

The body of the tattoo was somewhat vague and undefined, but it was surrounded by large wings, framing it.

"This one is an angel. I got it to remind me that before anything else, I'm here to help." Detective Booker said in a gentle tone to JD.

Finally, JD left his secure place by Ben's legs and took the offered arm.

He traced the image on the man's forearm for a moment with his index finger, then hesitantly turned his head up to look the police detective in the eyes.

After a long silent moment, JD released the detective's arm and cautiously pulled the sleeve up on his right arm, to reveal the intricate web of tattoos.

Without a word, JD pointed to one particular tattoo on his arm and began to trace it with his finger.

Detective Booker stared at the tattoos on the child's arm for a moment, then followed JD's finger and realized that the pattern he was tracing was of a small angel.

"Look at that! We have nearly the same tattoo." The detective finally said in surprise.

"See, JD? Detective Booker is a real person, just the same as you and me." Ben said quietly from behind his son.

"My friends call me Gerry." Detective Booker said, mostly to JD.

"I'm JD."

"It's nice to meet you, JD." Detective Booker said quietly.

"You just want to see that Jody is okay?" JD asked cautiously.

"Yeah. When I met Jody, I promised him that he'd end up in a better place. I just wanted to come here so I could be sure that I kept my promise." Gerry said gently.

"My daddy and my pappa are really nice. They don't yell at me or hit me or hurt me or anything. Jody's gonna like it here." JD said in a small voice.

"I believe you, JD. Do you think I could go in and visit with Jody now, just so he'll know that I kept my promise?" Gerry asked quietly.

JD seemed to be conflicted for a moment, but finally nodded his agreement.

"Jody's in the living room, watching TV with Cliff. JD, why don't you take Gerry into the living room while I get us something to snack on?" Ben asked quietly.

JD glanced up at Ben, then slightly nodded.

Detective Booker noticed that JD was careful to roll down his sleeve before he offered his gloved hand.

Once JD had Detective Booker in hand, Ben left for the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Pappa, this is Gerry, he's a police detective." JD said as he led Gerry into the room by the hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Gerry. I'm Cliff. Please excuse me for not getting up." Cliff said from his place on the couch where Jody was snuggled tightly into his side.

"That's fine. I just stopped by to visit for a few minutes. How are you doing, Jody?" Detective Booker asked gently.

At the sound of his name, Jody finally turned his attention away from the television.

"Let's turn this off while we have company." Cliff whispered as he took the remote control from Jody's hand.

"Do you remember me, Jody? We talked yesterday." Detective Booker asked as he carefully took a seat on the couch, the other end from Cliff and Jody. JD was standing by the arm of the couch, watching everything cautiously.

After a moment to consider the question, Jody uncertainly nodded.

"I told you that I'd make sure you ended up someplace nice. Do you like it here?" Detective Booker asked with a tender smile.

"JD said that he wants me to be his brother." Jody said in a nearly nonexistent voice, then added, "No one ever wanted me before."

"It's nice to be wanted." Detective Booker said with a smile, then asked, "What about your new parents? Are they treating you nice?"

Jody considered the question, then turned his head to look at Cliff, who he was laying mostly on top of. Finally, Jody said, "Yeah."

"JD, would you help me?" Ben asked from the living room doorway.

It took a moment for JD to tear his gaze away, but finally he looked toward Ben and nodded.

"That's all I came for, really. I just wanted to be sure that you were happy." Gerry said as he looked into Jody's light brown eyes.

"I got to help JD and Daddy make supper, tonight." Jody said timidly, then added, "It was real good."

Gerry smiled at the statement, then said, "Well, if they had you helping them, I guess that means that you're part of the family."

After a moment of thought, Jody slightly nodded his agreement, seeming not to be certain of it.

"If your parents don't mind, I'm going to be coming by to check on you every now and then, just to be sure that you're still happy. Would that be alright with you?" Detective Booker asked gently.

Jody stared off into space for a moment, then turned around and looked at Cliff with question.

"I think it would be wonderful if you'd stop by to visit as often as you like." Cliff said assuringly.

"Would you like some snacks?" JD asked as he placed a platter with several small finger foods on the coffee table.

Gerry looked at JD with surprise at the offer.

"Daddy said that since we was gonna have company, it'd be nice to make you something to snack on." JD quickly explained.

"Well, normally I wouldn't, but these look too good to pass up." Gerry said as he looked over the variety of snacks being offered.

"Can I get you something to drink? We have coffee and sodas and juice and milk." JD asked hopefully.

"I think some coffee would be nice, but just a small cup. I can't stay long." Gerry said, slightly stunned by the offer.

JD dashed out of the room as Ben passed him in the doorway.

"Did JD make those?" Cliff asked curiously as he looked at the tray of snacks.

"Yes. He prepared everything when he knew we were going to have company. I put the hot hors d'oeuvres in the oven when Gerry arrived, but JD took care of everything else." Ben said proudly.

Gerry picked up a napkin, then carefully took one of the puff pastries.

"Be careful, that might still be hot." Ben cautioned, then turned to Cliff and asked, "Would you like anything to drink?"

Cliff glanced at the boy in his arms, then said, "I think some root beer might be nice. And Jody would probably enjoy some, too."

"One regular and one child-size, coming up." Ben said with a grin.

Once again, Ben and JD passed each other in the living room doorway.

"Do you like cream or sugar or anything in your coffee?" JD asked, then placed a surprisingly complete coffee service on the coffee table.

"No. Just black, but thank you." Gerry said with surprise at the young boy's manners.

JD poured a cup of coffee, not quite full, then offered it to Gerry on a saucer.

"Thank you." Gerry said with a smile.

Jody was staring at the tray of snacks and seemed to be holding onto Cliff more tightly than before.

"Would you like a snack, Jody?" JD asked as he picked up the tray and offered Jody a napkin.

"Didn't you make that for Gerry?" Jody asked in a whisper.

"I made it because Gerry was coming over, but I made enough for everybody to have some. Go ahead, just pick out whatever you think looks good." JD gently encouraged, and Gerry took notice of JD's accent.

After a moment of indecision, Jody hesitantly took a cracker with summer sausage and cheese stacked on it.

"Those are really good." JD said with a smile, then turned to Cliff and asked, "Would you like some, pappa?"

"Yes. Thank you." Cliff said with pride in JD's behavior.

JD handed him a napkin, then held the platter as Cliff selected something to snack on.

"I'll put your root beer on the table." Ben said quietly as he placed two glasses of root beer on the end table beside Cliff.

"Thanks." Cliff said with a loving smile up at Ben.

"How do you like your snack, Jody?" Gerry asked curiously.

"This is real good!" Jody said happily around his mouthful of food.

Although Cliff's first instinct was to tell Jody not to talk with his mouth full, he held it back. He didn't want to do anything that might discourage the boy from eating in his frail condition.

"This pastry is amazing. My wife is a good cook, but I don't think she ever made anything that tastes like this." Gerry said in amazement.

"I can write down how to make it, if you want." JD offered quickly.

"No. You don't have to bother." Gerry said with surprise at the kind offer.

"It'll just take a second." JD said before dashing out of the room.

"Did I understand that right? Did JD make all this food?" Gerry asked cautiously.

"Yes. He prepared everything. I think he's still too young to use the stove by himself, but he planned and prepared everything else while I supervised." Ben said proudly.

"Jody, I think you ended up in a very good place." Gerry said with a smile at the small boy still clinging to Cliff's chest.

Jody nodded his agreement at Gerry, then his gaze shifted to the platter of snacks.

"I'm going to have another one, would you like some more?" Gerry asked as he picked up the platter.

Jody hesitantly nodded.

Gerry offered the platter to him and Jody selected one of the puff pastries.

"I had that last time, those are really good." Gerry said with a smile, then took one of the cheese and cracker combos from the tray.

Jody smiled at Gerry, then carefully took a big bite of the flaky crunchy pastry.

"Here, I wrote down how to make it. It's real easy." JD said as he hurried back into the room.

Gerry accepted the index card from JD, then said in surprise, "You've got really good handwriting."

JD shrugged, then walked to the coffee table to get himself one of the snacks.

* * * * *

Conversation continued on for a few minutes on general topics until Gerry finally excused himself to leave.

"Cliff, could you walk me out?" Gerry asked, trying to sound casual in his inquiry.

"Sure." Cliff said carefully, understanding that Gerry wanted to talk privately without alerting the boys.

"JD, why don't you show Jody where to wash his hands after those snacks?" Cliff asked gently.

"Yeah! Come on!" JD said happily.

Cliff carefully stood Jody before him and made sure that he had his footing before letting him go on his own.

"I need to pee." Jody said in a small, frightened voice as he looked timidly at Cliff.

"Go with JD. He'll show you where it is." Cliff said gently.

Jody walked somewhat unsteadily to JD as all the adults watched.

"I'll walk you out." Cliff said to Gerry in nearly a whisper, then glanced at Ben and smiled.

Once they were both in the hallway, Gerry quietly said, "Ron told me that you needed to make an official report of suspected abuse, so I wanted to get that out of the way while I'm here."

"Thank you. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, since Jody was already the subject of an investigation." Cliff said frankly, then gestured toward the front door, inviting Gerry to talk with him outside.

"You did just right. If you ever have any questions or concerns about anything to do with Jody, call me, anytime, day or night." Gerry said as he offered Cliff his business card.

"This is more than a job to you, isn't it?" Cliff asked curiously as they reached the front door.

"This time, yeah." Gerry said frankly.

"We'll take good care of him, I promise." Cliff said as he looked Gerry in the eyes.

"I believe that you will." Gerry said honestly, then broke into a smile as he said, "But I think that having JD on his side will probably do more good for him than anything any adult could come up with. That boy has really impressed me."

"He's our special little man." Cliff said warmly, then switched to a professional voice as he opened the door and asked, "So, what did you need to know for my official report?"

* * * * *

When Cliff came back from his talk with Gerry, he found Ben alone in the living room.

"Where are the boys?" Cliff asked curiously.

"JD *asked* me if they could take a bath." Ben said with a smile.

"I guess your investment in those bath toys is about to pay off." Cliff said as he settled into his place on the couch.

"I hope they have fun." Ben said with a wistful smile.

"I think they will." Cliff said quietly.

"I should probably go in and check on them." Ben said thoughtfully.

"I think they'll be fine for a few minutes. JD will call us if there's any problem." Cliff said as he scooted over on the couch a little bit so he could snuggle next to Ben.

"When we first started trying to be approved as foster parents, I never imagined that we could get a child as wonderful as JD. Now that we have Jody... I don't have words." Ben said quietly.

"I know." Cliff whispered, then they both went silent as they heard splashing and giggling coming from the bathroom.

* * * * *

Getting the boys to bed took less effort than either of the adults would have imagined. The boys weren't necessarily happy with the idea at first, but neither of them fought it.

Soon, both boys were loosely tucked into JD's bed, side by side. Jody seemed to be nervous, but JD was able to put him at ease with just a few gentle words.

As Ben and Cliff were about to leave the room to let the boys try to sleep, Ben had a thought.

He walked to the edge of the bed and sat down.

Both boys watched in fascination as Ben made hand gestures, telling the story while singing them a bedtime song.

The itsy bitsy spider crawled up the water spout.
Down came the rain, and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain,
and the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.

* * * * *

A shriek from the depths of hell ripped Cliff and Ben out of their peaceful sleep.

Before Ben could get his bearings enough to realize what was going on, Cliff was already out of bed and running for the door as he pulled on his robe.

As the reality of the situation finally dawned on Ben, a fresh wave of panic flooded over him and he fumbled to get out of the bed and put on his robe as quickly as possible.

* * * * *

By the time Ben got to the boys' bedroom, Cliff was kneeling in the closet doorway, speaking in a low gentle voice.

Ben took a step toward the closet, then noticed the wide-eyed terrified expression that JD wore as he sat up in his bed, clutching the blanket tightly around him.

"Are you okay, Little Man?" Ben asked gently as he walked to the bed and carefully sat beside JD.

"I didn't do anything wrong to Jody! I promise!" JD said as tears fell down his cheeks and he seemed to be on the edge of bursting into full sobbing.

Ben pulled JD into a firm hug, then whispered, "I know, I know."

"He started saying stuff. I thought he woke up and was saying something to me, but I don't think he was really awake." JD said as he clutched to Ben desperately.

"Could you make out what he was saying?" Ben asked gently as he rubbed small circles on JD's back.

"No. Not really. I could just tell that he was real scared." JD said in a voice that sounded quite a bit calmer than just a moment before.

"I'm sure he's just having some bad dreams about the things that happened before he came to stay with us. It may take a while before he knows for sure that all of that is over and he's really safe." Ben said tenderly, then gave JD a kiss on the top of his head before he renewed his hug.

"But it's nice here. He's safe now." JD said in a conflicted voice.

"Yes. He is. But from what little we know about Jody's life before he came to live with us, I think it's safe to say that it was very different. So far, he's only known one way of life, so it's probably going to take some time for him to adjust to being in a new situation." Ben said carefully, hoping that JD would understand.

"So, even though it's nice here, it's still scary because it's different?" JD asked carefully.

"Yes. I think that's a big part of it. But I think it also has something to do with the fact that Jody hasn't ever been outside his apartment before. Even though I don't know everything you've been through, I know that you've been in the hospital and the Home before coming to us. So you've had some experience at dealing with changes. Jody's never had to face anything new or different." Ben said softly, then noticed that Cliff was standing, carrying Jody in his arms.

"But what can I do to help Jody not be afraid? I want to help him, but I don't know what to do." JD said quietly and sounded to be on the verge of tears.

"I don't know if there's a right answer to that. I think that all we can really do is try different things until something works." Ben said apologetically.

"I'm going to take Jody into the living room for a few minutes to talk with him. Would you guys mind making him some warm milk to help him get back to sleep?" Cliff asked as he stopped in the doorway.

"Go on. We'll take care of it." Ben said as he looked at his partner adoringly.

Cliff smiled at the expression, then continued out of the room with Jody in his arms.

* * * * *

"Hot milk sounds kind of gross." JD said as Ben carried him into the kitchen.

"I agree. But if your Pappa says that that's what's best for Jody, then that's what we're making." Ben said as he placed JD on the floor to stand.

"Can I help?" JD asked hopefully.

"You can do a lot more than help. I'll talk you through it so you can make it in your electric skillet. That way, if Jody needs warm milk again some other time, I'll know that I can ask you to fix it for him." Ben said with a smile at his son.

JD smiled up at Ben and quietly said, "Yeah."

* * * * *

"Can you give us a minute or two?" Cliff asked as Ben and JD walked into the living room with the warmed milk.

"Sure. I'll just leave this here." Ben said as he quickly placed the mug on a coaster on the coffee table.

JD was confused, but accepted Ben's hand and walked out of the living room without protest.

* * * * *

"Why doesn't Pappa want us in there?" JD asked quietly once they were alone.

"I think that he and Jody are talking about something that's very difficult. We need to be patient and give your Pappa time so he can help Jody deal with what's bothering him." Ben said carefully.

"But Jody can talk to me! I want to help him!" JD said in a voice that revealed his frustration.

Ben pulled JD into a firm hug, then quietly said, "I know you do. But I think that the best way we can help Jody right now is to give him time to talk privately with Cliff. I'm sure we're both going to have plenty of chances to help Jody in the next few weeks."

JD slowly nodded into Ben's chest, then looked up suddenly at the sound of movement in the doorway.

"I think Jody is calmed down enough that he can try to get back to sleep, now." Cliff said as he walked into the kitchen, carrying Jody gently in his arms.

"Let's go, then. I'll clean this up once the boys are in bed." Ben said as he lifted JD onto his hip.

"I made the mess. I can clean it up." JD said quickly.

"No, Spider. It's more important for you to be with your brother right now. He needs you. I'll take care of it." Ben said gently, then gave JD a kiss on the cheek.

Cliff smiled at the action, then led the way out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Jody..." Ben began to say, then amended, "Both of you, if you get scared or need us for anything at all during the night, you can come to our bedroom."

"You won't be mad?" Jody asked cautiously as he searched Ben's eyes.

"No. Not at all. You can ask JD about it if you like and he'll tell you. We won't be mad, even a little bit." Ben said with an assuring smile.

Jody seemed to be uncertain, but finally gave a reluctant nod.

"Goodnight boys. Have a good sleep." Ben whispered, then leaned in and gave each of the boys a kiss on the cheek.

As soon as Ben had stood, Cliff took his place and kissed each of his sons goodnight.

"Remember to come and get us if you need anything at all." Ben said gently from the doorway.

A look of apprehension crossed Jody's face, then he turned and quickly whispered something into JD's ear.

Both men watched and waited.

Finally, when Jody was finished whispering, JD looked at his parents and asked, "Would it be okay if we leave a light on for Jody? He says that when he woke up in the dark he forgot where he was and thought that maybe he'd dreamed coming here and was really back in his old home."

"I'll leave the hall light on for you. That should be enough light for you to remember where you are, and it'll also help if you need to get up and go to the bathroom before morning." Ben said gently.

"Thanks, Daddy." JD said with a loving smile at Ben, then turned to Jody and asked, "Is that okay?"

Jody slowly nodded.

"Goodnight boys." Cliff said gently before withdrawing into the hallway.

Ben made a point of leaving the bedroom door open about a foot wide as he followed.

* * * * *

"I suppose we should wear something to bed in case we have company." Ben said as he walked into the bedroom after cleaning up the kitchen.

"Yes. I think that would be best, just for a night or two, until Jody gets settled in." Cliff agreed.

"You and Jody were talking pretty seriously in the living room. Is it anything I should know about?" Ben asked as he walked to his dresser to get a pair of boxer shorts.

"Yes. Come over here." Cliff said as he patted the spot next to him on the bed.

Ben quickly pulled on the boxer shorts, then climbed onto the bed to sit beside his partner.

"I really wish I didn't have to tell you about this, but since you're going to be taking care of the boys by yourself, you should really be aware of everything that's going on." Cliff said as he put an arm around Ben and held him gently.

"What is it? Just tell me." Ben said with concern at Cliff's words.

"I guess there's no delicate way to put this." Cliff said in prelude, then quietly continued, "According to what Detective Booker has been able to put together and what Jody just told me, it seems that the woman who held Jody captive was prostituting him out to pedophiles."

Ben froze in shock at the words.

"There's no telling how long it's been going on, but when I examined Jody, I could see signs of forced oral copulation. That's why I called Detective Booker, so I could make a report." Cliff continued as he held Ben firmly to his side.

Ben continued to sit rigidly and stare as he fought to process the new information.

"Although I didn't check for myself, Ron told me that when Jody was examined yesterday, that there were also signs of anal rape." Cliff continued more quietly, wanting to get all of it out in one go so he wouldn't have to say it again.

"How could anyone..." Ben started to say as tears began to fall down his cheeks.

"I don't know, love. I realize that JD's mother was mentally ill, so I can forgive what she did to him. But what was done to Jody was purely evil. It was perpetrated by a woman who knowingly held him captive and actively sought out men to pay her for the 'use' of Jody." Cliff said bitterly.

"I don't know what to do for him. How can we help him deal with... I can't even imagine what his life must have been like." Ben said as his tears freely fell.

"I think that all we'll be able to do is our best. I think that's all that anyone could do in this situation." Cliff said gently.

"I don't know if I can handle it." Ben said as he turned to look at his partner with fear in his eyes.

"You can. We can. We have to. Because our only other option would be to give him back to Ron and Mrs. Usher and hope that they can find a place for him that isn't absolutely horrible." Cliff said seriously, then added more quietly, "I couldn't do that to Jody. No matter what it takes, no matter how strong we have to be for him, we're keeping him."

"I didn't mean..." Ben stammered, but Cliff silenced him with a kiss.

"I know. You were just voicing your fear, not saying that you didn't want Jody." Cliff reassured him.

"Do you think he's alright?" Ben asked as he looked toward the bedroom door with concern.

"He has JD to watch over him. If there's any problem at all, I know that JD will come and get us." Cliff said as he pulled Ben close to comfort him.

"When we talked about being foster parents, I never imagined... I thought it would be hugs and cuddles, maybe the occasional skinned knee." Ben said distantly as he returned Cliff's hug.

"I know. But if you could go back and change anything, would you do it differently?" Cliff asked in a soothing voice.

Ben thought for a moment, then said, "No. I wouldn't change a single thing."

"Me either." Cliff said with a smile, then moved in to give Ben a firm kiss that was more comforting than passionate.

After a moment to enjoy the wonderful feeling, Ben glanced at the clock and said, "You'll have to get ready for work in a few hours, we should get some more sleep."

"Yes. I have a feeling that tomorrow is going to be a very long day... for both of us." Cliff said frankly.

"I love you." Ben whispered as he snuggled into Cliff's shoulder.

Cliff reached awkwardly with his free hand until he found the light switch on his nightstand and turned off the lights.

"I love you, too, Ben." Cliff said as he brought his free arm around to encircle Ben in a protective hug.

Chapter 10

Ben awoke early, as he was sometimes known to do. Cliff was sound asleep at his side, and he was happy to find that the boys hadn't joined them during the night.

After taking a few minutes to clean up, Ben quietly made his way into the boys' room to check on them.

He was only slightly surprised to find Jody curled into a fetal ball in the closet on the floor, with JD wrapped around him.

Ben silently watched the boys sleeping for a moment, then took a blanket from the bed and draped it over them, before leaving the room.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, this morning?" Ben asked pleasantly as he sat at the kitchen table with his morning coffee.

"How are the boys?" Cliff asked as he walked to the coffee maker.

"They were fine, the last time I checked on them. They were both fast asleep in the closet on the floor." Ben said frankly.

"That won't work for the long term, but I suppose that, for now, it's best that they work out that they're in a safe place, and that a bed doesn't pose any danger for them." Cliff said as he carried his coffee to the table.

"Maybe we should look into a hammock or a bean bag chair for Jody, maybe even a sleeping bag. If he has such bad memories associated with sleeping on a bed, maybe we should provide him an alternative until the memories can have a chance to fade." Ben said thoughtfully.

Cliff slowly nodded as he thought about the suggestion, then turned at a movement in the doorway.

"Good morning, JD. How are you doing? Did you sleep well?" Ben asked softly.

"Pappa, can I tell you something?" JD asked seriously.

"Of course, you can tell me anything at all." Cliff said in the tone of a vow.

"I need to tell you something." JD said urgently as he began to back away.

"I take it that you need to speak to me privately." Cliff said slowly and glanced at Ben to see if he had any idea of what was going on.

It was obvious from the look on Ben's face that he didn't.

Cliff took one quick sip of his coffee before following JD out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Come here. Tell me what's got you so worried, Little Man." Cliff said gently as he coaxed JD to sit next to him on the couch.

Instead, JD climbed onto Cliff's lap and put his arms around him.

"What's worrying you this morning, Spider?" Cliff asked soothingly.

"Last night, after Jody had his bad dream, he talked to me about what happened, where he used to live." JD said quietly.

"What did he tell you?" Cliff asked softly, not wanting to take the chance of causing JD further worry, by addressing issues that JD hadn't learned about, yet.

"Jody said that Ruby, the lady that he used to live with, she kept him tied up and sometimes, she brought men home and let them... They hurt Jody. They did nasty stuff to him, and she let them. She'd beat him if he screamed or tried to stop it or run away." JD said as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I know, Spider. That woman was a horrible person and she allowed awful things to be done to Jody. The police have her in jail now, where she can't hurt anyone else. You don't have to worry. Jody is safe, here with us." Cliff said seriously.

"That's why he's scared, isn't it? Does he think we're gonna do that stuff to him, or that we'll let someone else do that?" JD asked worriedly.

"I think that deep down inside, Jody is very afraid. And even though a part of him knows that we'd never hurt him, another part is too afraid to take a chance and believe it." Cliff quietly explained.

"What can we do so Jody won't be afraid all the time?" JD asked anxiously.

"We can love him and do what we can to make him happy." Cliff said simply.

"But we did that yesterday, and it didn't work. He's still scared." JD said seriously.

Cliff smiled at the response, then gently said, "If it doesn't work the first time, then we'll keep doing it. It's just like when you're afraid around a woman. You know we won't let her hurt you, but you still feel scared. We keep on holding you and proving to you that you're safe, and little by little, you're starting to believe it."

After a moment to think about it, JD quietly admitted, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Just keep on being the great kid that you already are. I'm sure if you'll do that, Jody will eventually figure out that he's ended up in a safe place." Cliff said warmly.

A movement caused Cliff to turn, and he couldn't contain his smile when he saw Jody standing in the doorway, wearing what was obviously one of JD's turtleneck shirts and a pair of his gloves.

"Why don't you take your brother into the kitchen and say good morning to your daddy? I need to get ready for work." Cliff said gently.

JD quickly turned and saw Jody standing in the living room doorway.

"Thanks, Pappa!" JD said immediately as he hopped off Cliff's lap.

Cliff stood and quietly said, "Come here, Jody, and give me some sugar."

Jody hesitantly stepped forward, obviously not understanding what Cliff was talking about.

Cliff scooped the boy into his arms and proceeded to give him a long, heartfelt hug.

JD watched the scene with a tender smile.

* * * * *

"Can I make breakfast?" JD asked hopefully, as he looked around to see if anything were cooking.

"I thought you might want to, so I already prepped some things for you and put them on the bottom shelf in the refrigerator. I don't know what you feel like cooking, but you should have everything you need to make your Pappa's cheesy scrambled eggs. And I made sure to cut some ham steaks, if you want to fry them up." Ben said with a smile.

"Jody, do you want to help me?" JD asked hopefully.

After a moment to consider the question, Jody walked to Ben's side and thrust his arms into the air.

"Of course." Ben said warmly, and picked the boy up onto his lap.

"Will you be able to manage alright, on your own?" Ben asked as he cuddled Jody to his chest.

"Is Cheesy Scramble Eggs and ham and toast enough?" JD asked to be sure.

"That sounds perfect to me." Ben said happily.

JD walked past Ben and Jody to get a chair from the table, then scooted it to the sink so he could wash his hands in preparation for cooking.

* * * * *

"How are my favorite people in the world doing this morning?" Cliff asked cheerfully, as he walked into the kitchen.

When Jody heard his voice, he immediately turned and thrust his arms into the air.

"I see where I rate." Ben chuckled as Cliff picked up the boy from Ben's lap.

"You get the boys all day, don't begrudge me a few minutes of cuddling." Cliff said warmly as he held the boy in his arms.

Although JD was devoting an inordinate amount of attention to Jody and Cliff, he was able to manage a very satisfying breakfast.

* * * * *

"I have to put you down, now. I have to go to work." Cliff said gently to the boy in his arms.

Jody tightened his hold on Cliff and refused to let go.

"Pappa will be home later today. In fact, since you have a therapy appointment with Mr. Cooper, today, he's going to pick you up and bring you home." Ben said gently.

Jody didn't acknowledge the words and continued to hold on to Cliff with a death grip.

"I have to go now. I'll see you tonight." Cliff said gently as he finally pried Jody's arms from around him and stood him on the floor.

Ben immediately picked Jody up and held him as Cliff started for the door.

The sounds of Jody's sobs were still ringing in his ears as he got into his car.

* * * * *

It took a while for Jody to calm down, but eventually, he did.

Ben was tidying the house, doing minor cleaning chores, just to get them out of the way while JD entertained himself by working on his netbook and Jody aimlessly searched through the television channels.

Finally, chores complete, Ben announced that they needed to go to the store to pick up a few things.

Both the boys seemed unconcerned by the announcement.

"Jody, you're going to need to change into some regular clothes before you leave. That shirt and those gloves are too big for you." Ben said honestly.

"But I want to be like JD." Jody said with wide hopeful eyes.

"Then we'll go to the store and I'll get you some turtleneck shirts and gloves that are the right size for you." Ben said reasonably.

Although Jody wasn't completely onboard with the plan, with Ben's help he changed into his own clothes and they were on their way to the store.

* * * * *

As they entered the store, Ben placed Jody into the child carrier, where he fit just perfectly.

JD looked up with his wide, steel-blue eyes, as if asking, 'What about me?'"

"You can either walk beside me, or push the cart. What do you want to do?" Ben asked simply.

JD thought for a moment, then stepped to Ben's side.

As they crossed the store, approaching their first destination, they encountered a woman, looking at a display rack on one side of the center aisle.

Without a word, Ben stopped the cart and hoisted JD onto his side, then, with one hand, he proceeded to push the cart.

* * * * *

The search for turtlenecks was surprisingly easy, they had two choices, take it or leave it. Ben bought all three gray turtleneck shirts that were Jody's size. As he was about to step away, he picked up three more in JD's size.

The glove section had three pairs in Jody's size. Ben watched as the boys discussed the merits and disadvantages of each pair. Jody tried each pair on at least twice. Finally, after much soul searching, Jody was able to settle on a pair of black knit gloves with little pompom bangles on the wrists.

As soon as that was decided, JD started looking at gloves for himself. Of course, Jody felt that he was obligated to help, since JD had helped him. Ben settled in to wait, then glanced at the gloves that Jody hadn't chosen and put them in the cart.

The first two stops had seemed to take an unreasonably long time. Ben was happy to find that neither boy had any interest, whatsoever, in pants, underwear, socks or shoes. He was able to quickly and easily pick out what best fit Jody.

JD knew where they were going next before they pulled onto the aisle. A smile lit up his face and he hurried to where all the toy cars and trucks were kept.

"Would you like some toys, Jody?" Ben asked the quiet boy in the cart.

Jody looked up at him blankly, as though he didn't understand the question.

"How about I put you down so you can look around? That way, if you see something that you'd like to have, you can take a closer look at it." Ben said as he lifted the boy out of the child carrier seat on the cart.

Jody seemed to wander aimlessly, not really interested in anything he was seeing.

"Do you want a dump truck like mine? Here's one just like it." JD asked happily.

Ben wasn't sure how Jody could show less interest than he was already doing, but somehow the boy managed it.

"There are more toys on these other aisles. Maybe you'd like a different kind of toy?" Ben asked gently.

Jody walked to his side and looked up with question.

"JD, we're going to be on the next aisle if you need us." Ben said and waited for JD's nod before walking away with Jody.

* * * * *

Ben was amazed. There had to be at least two dozen different Lego sets filling the shelves before them. And, somehow, Jody picked the only one of all of them that was marketed specifically for girls.

The fact of the matter was, even if Ben had been given the honor of raising girls instead of boys, there is no way that he would ever purchase the pink princess monstrosity. However, it turned out that the shocking pink Lego shaped box, full of princesses and ponies, was the only toy that Jody had picked up to look at.

After a moment to look at the other sets, which seemed to be of the same line, but marketed for boys, Ben picked up two of them and placed them in his cart. If Jody liked his pink princess Lego set, he could have it, but at least with the additional sets, he would have a variety of other Legos to use to augment it.

"Come on, Jody. Let's go see what your brother found." Ben said softly.

Jody looked at the pink box in his hands one last time before putting it back on the shelf.

"You can have that. I told you that we were going to get you a toy today." Ben said frankly.

Jody looked up at him, and for a moment, it was as though he was shopping with JD again. Even though Jody was silent, his eyes conveyed his every emotion.

"Yes. Really. Go ahead and pick it up. I don't want to leave your brother alone for too long." Ben said with a smile.

Jody's eyes lighted with delight, then he hurried to gather the putrid pink princessy Lego set into his arms.

* * * * *

"What did you find there, Little Man?" Ben asked as he approached with Jody tagging along behind.

"It's a police car. Gerry probably drives one like this. Can I have it?" JD asked hopefully.

"Sure. Put it in the cart." Ben said warmly.

JD walked to the cart and gently placed the car right on top of the two Lego sets that Ben had chosen.

"Come on up here, Jody. We're going to go to the checkout now." Ben said before picking the boy up and placing him in the child carrier seat.

* * * * *

Checking out turned out to be quite a bit more challenging with two boys than it had been with one.

Jody behaved well enough. All his attention was focused on the pictures on the box he was holding.

JD, however, was terrified and seemed determined to choke the life out of him as he held on for dear life.

As Ben looked around, he had to admit, it *did* look like a feminist rally had just let out, somewhere in the back of the store.

Just as he was getting JD to release his grip enough to allow him to breathe, Jody quietly said, "I gotta go to the bathroom."

"Can you hold it until I pay for this?" Ben asked cautiously, already suspecting the answer.

Jody shook his head firmly.

Ben quickly looked around and was relieved to see that the customer restrooms were just across from the registers, not more than twenty feet away.

"JD, can you do me a big favor and take your brother to the bathroom while I pay for this?" Ben asked hopefully.

It took a moment for JD to gather his courage, but finally he nodded that he would.

"Thank you." Ben said with relief, then gave JD a quick kiss before letting him down to stand.

"I gotta go. NOW!" Jody said urgently.

"I know." Ben said as he lifted Jody out of the child seat, "Go with JD, he'll take you to the bathroom."

Ben watched the two boys hurry away, then noticed the cashier standing, waiting on him.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that." Ben hurried to say.

"It's no trouble at all. How will you be paying?" The cashier said pleasantly.

"Credit." Ben said with surprise by the cashier's kind attitude.

After Ben slid his card, and signed, he said, "I just wanted to thank you for being so patient. I really appreciate it."

"It's no problem." The cashier said warmly, then glanced around before whispering, "I'm paid by the hour."

Ben chuckled, then turned suddenly when he heard JD's voice call, "JODY!"

He wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry at the sight of the little boy trying to run to him with his pants and underwear around his ankles.

"Come here, Sweetheart." Ben chuckled as he squatted down and received the frightened little boy into his arms.

"A man came into the bathroom while we were in there and it scared him." JD said as he quickly approached.

"It's fine." Ben said as he pulled up Jody's underwear and pants. "Everything's fine."

Once Jody was all buttoned up, Ben picked him up and put him into the child seat of the cart.

Feeling the stares of everyone in Target fixed on him, he turned and asked JD, "Ready to go?"

JD moved close to his side and hugged him tightly.

Ben lifted JD onto his hip, then calmly pushed the cart out of the store.

* * * * *

It was unfathomable that when they arrived back at the house, it wasn't even noon yet. Ben wanted so badly to sit down and relax after the harrowing experience of shopping with the boys, but there were still things that needed to be done.

"Well, why don't you guys go into the living room and play with your new toys? I need to get your new clothes washed so you can wear them." Ben said pleasantly.

As he was unpacking the car, he noticed the two Lego sets that he had purchased without Jody noticing. He decided to allow Jody to enjoy his new toy for a while, then, when he had the chance to fully explore all the great things he could do with it, Ben would provide the new pieces so he could build on what he had already done.

Once the laundry was going, he glanced at the clock and decided that it was time to think about preparing lunch.

He walked to the refrigerator and immediately noticed the mini-meatloaf from the night before and thought about making meatloaf sandwiches.

As he was about to start, another use for the meatloaf came to mind and he put it back in the refrigerator.

Instead, he walked into the living room and asked, "JD, would you like to make lunch for us, today?"

"Yeah!" JD said happily.

Jody seemed to be focused on his Legos, he wasn't snapping them together, he seemed to be inspecting each piece as he took it out of it's bright pink, Lego shaped case.

Ben saw no problem with leaving him to it, and walked with JD into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Within a minute of sitting down at the kitchen table, Jody was at his side with his hands thrust into the air.

"Touchdown." Ben said warmly as he lifted Jody to sit on his lap.

"When's Pappa coming home?" Jody asked hopefully.

"Well, the day is about half over, right now. So it's just going to be a few more hours." Ben said gently.

"Is grilled cheese and ham sandwiches okay?" JD asked from the open refrigerator door.

"That sounds wonderful. I think a little of that salad from last night to go with it would be wonderful." Ben said as he continued to cuddle the boy in his arms.

"Okay. But I wanna make some special dressing to go with the salad. I think it'll go good with the ham." JD said seriously.

"I can't wait to try it." Ben said honestly.

* * * * *

JD was right.

The vinaigrette that he put together went perfectly with the sandwiches.

Ben hadn't been paying attention to what ingredients JD had used, but was sure that JD hadn't been using a recipe. The vinaigrette was just another in a long line of examples of JD's amazing talent in the kitchen.

Just as at breakfast, Jody ate his meal, perched on someone else's lap.

Ben didn't mind at all. He was enjoying the feeling of holding someone who needed and wanted him.

However, whenever JD would look across the table at them, he definitely had the look of someone who was feeling left out.

"So, I was thinking about what we could do this afternoon." Ben said slowly as he tried to remember if there were anything else needing to be done.

JD turned his attention to Ben and waited with interest.

"I was thinking that since Jody can't read, that maybe you could read some of your book to him." Ben said as he watched carefully for JD's reaction.

After a long, thoughtful moment, JD finally said, "Yeah. I think he'll like it."

"Good. I need to clean up after lunch. If you want to get your netbook, you can start and I'll be in as soon as I'm done." Ben said with a smile.

"I can help you clean up." JD said cautiously.

"No. That's okay. It'll just take a few minutes." Ben said happily as he stood Jody on his own two feet, then stood, himself.

* * * * *

"You can play with your blocks while I'm reading, if you want. It's okay." JD assured him.

Jody went back to his bright pink Lego bucket, where he had been playing before lunch and waited.

"It takes a minute for it to turn on." JD explained as he placed the netbook on the coffee table and pressed the power button.

Jody watched him a moment longer, then opened his Lego box and started to examine the individual pieces, again.

Once the little laptop was finally booted, JD opened the word processing program that he used and waited for it to come up.

When it was finally ready, JD went to the 'file' menu, then 'open'.

"Just about ready?" Ben asked as he walked in and sat on the couch, behind JD.

"Almost." JD said as his file loaded.

"Why don't you come up here by me, Spider?" Ben asked gently.

JD was surprised that Ben had used his 'love name' but happily gathered up his netbook and scooted onto the couch beside Ben.

After putting an arm loosely around JD, Ben quietly said, "I think we're all comfortable, now. Whenever you're ready."

As JD began to speak, his Irish accent was notably more prominent.

It wasn't just the action of the story, or the lyrically dramatic style of JD's writing that made the story so enthralling. The emphasis and conviction in JD's voice drew Ben in and he couldn't help but visualize the entire, epic adventure playing out before his mind's eye.

In those few, rare moments when he could focus on the present, Ben could tell that Jody was just as enthralled as he was. Although he doubted that Jody understood half of what he was hearing, he was captivated by JD's style of storytelling.

At a certain point, between epic campaigns, JD stopped and quietly said, "My throat is getting raw."

Ben quickly looked at the time, then said, "That's fine. Maybe we can do this again for a while, tomorrow. We need to get ready to go anyway."

At JD's curious look, he responded, "You and your brother are going to visit with Mr. Cooper at the home, today."

JD nodded that he understood.

"I was thinking that, if you wanted, we could make up a nice plate of food for Mr. Cooper. We could give him the last mini-meatloaf, some mashed potatoes, and a nice portion of that salad you made. And if you have any left, you could send some of that salad dressing we had at lunch." Ben said happily.

"No. It wouldn't go right. The bottle dressing we had last night goes good with meatloaf." JD said with certainty.

"You're the chef." Ben said with a smile.

"I might need your help. I need a cup or something for the salad, so he can heat the plate without it." JD said seriously, then turned to look up at Ben and said, "Even though it's small, I want to make sure that the salad is extra nice for him."

"I'm sure that he's going to appreciate it." Ben said warmly, then noticed that Jody had joined them in the kitchen.

Ben automatically picked him up and moved to the table, so he could sit and place Jody on his lap.

"Do you remember Mr. Cooper from the home?" Ben asked him gently.

Jody slowly nodded.

"I'm going to take you over to his office this afternoon so that he can talk to you."

Jody nodded again.

"When you're done talking to Mr. Cooper, your Pappa is going to stop by the home so that he can pick you up and bring you back here." Ben said as he watched for any sign that Jody was comprehending what he was saying.

The blank expression that Jody was wearing didn't give any hints, but the boy *did* nod, possibly to indicate that he understood.

* * * * *

Ben had suspected that Ron would be happy to receive a home cooked meal. But when JD and Jody explained that they had cooked the food themselves, Ron was smiling bigger than ever.

As much as Ben had thought that he had prepared the boys, and himself, for leaving them with Ron. The reality turned out quite differently than expected.

As the office door closed, he could see JD's sad eyes and the tear stained cheeks of Jody. Ben had to wipe a few tears away before he was ready to drive over to Cliff's office, to poke his head in to say 'hi' and to move the booster seat into his car.

* * * * *

As Mr. Murphy dictates, if you're at the house 23 hours a day, you'll get all your phone calls during the one hour that you're out.

As he walked into the house, the flashing light of a waiting message greeted him.

"*For someone who works at home, you sure are hard to catch. Anyway, I've got some good news for you and your new son. Just based on the teaser, mind you, I've received a solid offer from a reputable publisher for JD's manuscript. Before you say it, I already know, it doesn't happen this fast. What can I say? Beginners luck? Whatever. This is one of the big fish and it looks like we've got him hooked. Call me.*" Beth Anne, his literary agent, said firmly.

It took a moment before the shock wore off, but Ben finally went to his office and dialed the number.

"*Good afternoon, Mason Associates, how may I direct your call?*" A pleasant voice answered.

"Hi Julie, it's Ben. Is Beth Anne still in the office?" Ben asked hopefully.

"*Oh, hi Ben. Yeah. I heard the good news. I can really see you with a kid. That's great. Beth Anne's been waiting for your call. Hold on.*" Julie said happily.

"Thanks, Julie. I appreciate it." Ben said sincerely, and before he could respond, she put him on hold.

"*How are you doing, Poppa*?" Beth Anne chuckled as she answered the phone.

"Actually, I'm Daddy, Cliff's Pappa. But we're doing fine." Ben said with a smile.

"*God, Ben, in case I didn't say it before, I'm really happy for you.*" Beth Anne said warmly.

"Thanks." Ben said timidly.

"*Well, enough of the sentimental crap. Down to business.*" Beth Anne said firmly.

"Right." Ben chuckled, then continued, "JD is my foster son. I'm not exactly sure how the legalities work out about him earning money. I'm probably going to have to end up setting up a trust for him, but I'm going to need to be really sure that there's no way some greedy bureaucrat can dip into his college fund and wipe it out before he ever has a chance to use it."

"*Honestly, I don't know how that works, either. You need to do what you do best and get in touch with a lawyer and get all anal retentive on him. Make sure all those t's are crossed and all those i's are dotted before the first dollar rolls in.*" Beth Anne said firmly.

"And, before we can even consider agreeing to anything, we're going to need a proof copy. I don't want JD's name going on something that some dyslexic illiterate editor has hacked to pieces." Ben said seriously.

"*I've already got that covered. The proof should be delivered to you either today or tomorrow.*" Beth Anne assured him.

"Great. I'll get to work on the legal side of things and see how best to protect JD from unscrupulous people who want to siphon off his money. I may need for you to stall the publisher a little bit so I can get everything in line." Ben said frankly.

"*That's a switch, isn't it? Us trying to get a publisher to move SLOWER?*" Beth Anne chuckled.

"Kids can turn your world upside down." Ben laughed.

"*I suppose you would know.*" Beth Anne said warmly.

"Oh, that reminds me. JD has a younger brother, now. His name is Jody." Ben said happily.

"*Really? You've gone from zero to two kids in just a few weeks? How is the esteemed Dr. Grant handling that?*" Beth Anne asked cautiously.

"Cliff is absolutely loving every minute of it. I've never seen him so happy." Ben said honestly, then quietly added, "Even after as long as we've been together, only now does it feel like we're something more than 'boyfriends'."

"*Give that man of yours a big wet one for me. As soon as you've approved the proof and are ready to talk money, give me a call back. The ball's in your court*." Beth Anne said playfully.

"Got it." Ben said seriously. Before he could say bye, she had already hung up the phone.

* * * * *

After taking a few minutes to tidy things and to check to see that they had everything that they needed, to make dinner, Ben went to his computer and started to work.

He felt guilty that he hadn't done any work the entire day, but looking back, he couldn't think of anything he could have done differently.

As Ben was getting heavily into research mode, he heard the front door open.

"Look who I've got." Cliff said as he walked into Ben's study.

Ben couldn't help but smile at the sight of the two boys clung to Cliff's sides.

"Who wants to come down here and give Daddy a kiss?" Ben asked warmly.

Both boys seemed to be considering the question carefully, but finally it was JD who released his hold on Cliff enough to be let down.

The expression on Cliff's face was a relieved 'Thank you'.

After a kiss and a long, warm hug, Ben quietly asked, "Who wants to help me make dinner?"

"Do you want to have salad?" JD asked quickly.

"Absolutely. And I was thinking that while you're doing that, I'd make some oven fried chicken and some wilted greens with bacon and garlic." Ben said with a smile.

JD crinkled his nose a little at the mention of the greens.

"I only ask that you taste them. If you don't like them, you don't have to eat them." Ben said assuringly.

"If you're having oven fried chicken, I know just what kind of salad we should have. Jody, do you want to help me?" JD asked hopefully.

"I don't know how." Jody said cautiously.

"Don't worry. I'll show you. It's easy." JD said happily.

"Okay." Jody said reluctantly.

"Why don't I let you down, so I can go and get changed?" Cliff said to Jody before putting him down to stand on his own.

"It sounds like we've got a plan. Let's do this!" Ben said as he led the boys out of the room.

* * * * *

JD carefully explained to Jody how to tear up iceberg lettuce by hand, then took a few leaves and showed him.

As soon as Jody was diligently working on the lettuce, JD went to work on prepping the rest of the vegetables.

Ben smiled as he went through the familiar routine of dredging and flouring pieces of chicken before browning them in a hot, cast iron skillet.

By the time Ben had the chicken in the oven, Jody was just about finished with the lettuce.

Ben watched as JD put his collection of prepared ingredients into the large bowl with the lettuce, then he pulled his chair over to the sink and encouraged Jody to go with him so they could both wash their hands.

Although Ben could stand and watch the boys all day, he had other things to do, so he took three different bunches of greens out of the refrigerator and started to cut off the stems.

When the boys were finished with hand washing, Ben took his turn at the sink and thoroughly washed the greens. Just as he was about to start chopping them down into smaller pieces, giggles from the island drew his attention.

He turned and couldn't help but smile at the sight of JD and Jody, up to their elbows, 'tossing' the salad.

Ben was certain that by the time the boys were done, the salad had been tossed more thoroughly than any salad had ever been tossed before. Finally, JD dragged his chair back to the sink, then helped his new brother to wash his hands.

"That was fun." Jody said as JD gently soaped his arms up to the elbows.

"Yeah. And it's not as icky as the meatloaf you made last night." JD said honestly.

Almost as soon as the hand washing was done, Cliff walked into the kitchen in his regular clothes.

Both boys ran up to him with their arms thrust high into the air.

"Touchdown." Ben laughed.

Cliff gave him a withering look, then went through the process of picking up two boys at the same time.

"What does 'touchdown' mean?" Jody asked curiously.

"It's from football. But Uncle Wil really hates it and it makes him mad, so you don't want to talk about it in front of him." JD said seriously.

"Okay. I won't. But what's football?" Jody asked, then noticed that Ben and Cliff were listening with interest.

"It's this thing so that a bunch of big guys who say they're not gay have a reason to shower together and jump on each other and slap each others butts and stuff like that." JD said slowly, making sure that Jody was comprehending his words.

Jody slowly nodded, then asked, "So what's 'touchdown'?"

JD thought for a moment and finally said, "I think that's what happens when one bunch of guys proves to another bunch how gay they're not."

Jody stared at JD thoughtfully for a moment, then looked up at Cliff and asked, "Pappa? Is that right?"

Cliff considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Pretty much."

"Your Pappa likes to watch football, sometimes. Maybe you'd like to sit and watch it with him." Ben provided helpfully.

"How is everything going in here? Do you need any help?" Cliff asked as he looked around.

"No. I don't think so. I'm just about done prepping these greens. I'll start them in the skillet in about ten minutes or so, just before the chicken is done." Ben said consideringly.

A knock on the door surprised them. Ben and Cliff exchanged looks to see if either of them were expecting anyone to visit.

"I think my two helpers and I will get it." Cliff finally said, and walked out of the kitchen with a boy carried on each side.

* * * * *

"Zeb! It's wonderful to see you. Please, come in." Cliff said happily.

"Thank you." Zeb said timidly, then smiled at JD and said, "It's good to see you again, JD. Do you have a new friend?"

"This is Jody. He's my new brother." JD said proudly.

"Really? Wow!"

"Jody, this is Zeb. He's our friend and he's really smart. Sometime, if you're scared about something, talk to Zeb and he'll tell you how you can do stuff anyway, even if you're scared of it." JD said seriously.

Jody looked at Zeb with wide eyes, then slowly nodded.

JD let loose his grip on Cliff and was promptly let down to stand on his own.

"Daddy's in the kitchen, making supper." JD said as he took hold of Zeb's hand and guided him to walk away.

Cliff smiled at the action and quietly followed.

* * * * *

"Daddy, Zeb's here!" JD said happily, announcing their arrival.

"Hello, Zeb. It's wonderful to see you. How are things going?" Ben asked happily.

"Actually, things are going really well. That's kind of why I'm here. I just had to tell someone about it."

"Have a seat and tell us what's going on. Can you stay for dinner?" Cliff asked as he walked to sit down at the table.

"I didn't come here for that..." Zeb hurried to explain.

"Are you hungry or not?" Ben asked bluntly.

"Well, yeah but..." Zeb started to say.

"You're staying." Ben said simply, then turned to JD and asked, "Would you mind setting the table?"

"Do you want eat in here or in the dining room?" JD asked simply.

"In here's fine." Ben said decisively.

"So, Zeb. What's your good news?" Cliff asked curiously, holding Jody on his lap.

"Oh, yeah. Well, do you remember that I was telling you about a guy at work named Rex?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"The asshole. I remember." Cliff said, then looked over at JD and winked.

"Yeah. That's him. Well, this morning, he started in on me again, just like he always does. Well, I remembered what you told me, you know, that it's not my problem, but something wrong with him."

Cliff and Ben both nodded that they remembered.

"Well, um, I don't remember exactly what it was that he said that made me finally speak up, it was something like that I was an inbred dumb hick or something like that. So, I said something like, 'I'm sorry that your life is so pathetic that you have to put down mine to feel better about yourself. But despite what you think of me, I'm happy with my life. And, you know what? Every day it just keeps getting better.'."

"What'd he have to say to that?" Cliff asked with a chuckle.

"He said that I'd think that because I'm nothing but a loser." Zeb said frankly.

"That sounds like something an asshole would say." Cliff said with a nod.

"Well, then I said, 'I'd rather be a loser than a bitter, mean-spirited winner, like you. By the way, just so there's no misunderstanding later, we're not friends. I don't like you. I may have to work with you, but other than that, don't talk to me. I don't want to have anything to do with you.'."

"I bet he didn't know what to say to that." Ben chuckled.

"I don't know. The people clapping and cheering in the breakroom was too loud for me to hear him. Anyway, after that, he left the break room and even though he was still working, I didn't see him the rest of the day." Zeb said happily.

"Way to go, Zeb. *That's* how you do it." Cliff said with a single nod.

"We're proud of you, Zeb. I bet that things are going to get a lot better at work for you now that you've found your voice." Ben said warmly.

"I couldn't stop smiling all day. And lots of the people I work with stopped by my register to tell me that they thought I did great." Zeb said with an ebullient smile.

Ben glanced at his skillet, then back at the table before asking, "JD, could you see that everyone has what they want to drink? I'm about to put it on the table."

JD happily got up and started getting drinks for everyone.

* * * * *

Zeb ended up staying after dinner and spending the majority of the evening with the family, just sitting in the living room and talking the night away.

It wasn't until Ben told the boys that it was time for their bath that Zeb realized how late it was and decided to leave.

Each time Ben or Cliff walked by the bathroom door, they heard splashing and giggling and were assured that the boys were having a good time.

Once the bath was finished, JD saw to it that Jody got dressed for bed.

By the time that Cliff and Ben went in to check on them, both boys were settled into bed and nearly ready to fall asleep.

"Do you guys think that you'll be able to sleep in the bed all night, tonight?" Ben asked gently.

"If Jody gets up, I'm gonna go with him to keep him safe. I think he's still partly asleep when he does that. I think it makes him feel better when I'm there, holding him." JD said honestly.

"You're probably right. But, tonight, if you think about it, bring a blanket with you." Ben said before leaning in to give JD a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Actually, I think I'm going to put a blanket or something down in the closet floor, to give them some sort of a cushion." Cliff said decisively.

"What about that featherbed? It's on the shelf next to the washing machine?" Ben asked quickly.

"Perfect. I'll be right back." Cliff said as he hurried away.

"Pappa's going to fix a soft place for you to sleep, in case you wake up in the night and don't want to be in the bed." Ben said gently.

Jody slightly nodded, confirming that he had heard.

"You two have a good sleep." Ben said as he leaned across JD to give Jody a kiss on the cheek.

"This should work just fine." Cliff said as he carried the large, overstuffed comforter.

Ben continued to sit on the edge of the boys' bed as he watched Cliff fold the featherbed to fit the space.

"You guys have a good sleep." Cliff said warmly as he leaned in to give each boy a kiss.

"Thank you, Pappa." Jody whispered.

"Remember that you can come into our room and crawl into bed with us if you're feeling afraid during the night." Cliff said gently.

Jody slightly nodded as he closed his eyes.

Ben and Cliff walked to the door, then stopped and looked back at the two boys, who appeared to already be asleep.

* * * * *

"Did anything happen today?" Cliff asked as he settled into bed with Ben.

"I got a call from Beth Anne. She's received a solid offer for JD's manuscript." Ben said quietly.

"Oh? How much?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I didn't ask. I don't like to talk dollar amounts until we've come to terms about artistic control and things like that. It puts too much strain on my integrity." Ben said frankly.

"We'll need to see to it that CPS doesn't find a way to get their hands on JD's money." Cliff said cautiously.

"I know. I already told Beth Anne that we'd be looking into that. I'll work on it tomorrow." Ben said sleepily, then thought to ask, "Did Ron have anything to say about the boys?"

"Not really. You know how he is, he's so careful to not say anything wrong, he ends up not saying anything at all. But the general tone he gave off was that they're both doing fine. We're supposed to keep on doing what we've been doing." Cliff said slowly.

"You should have seen Jody at the store, today. He got spooked while he was in the bathroom and ended up running out with his pants down." Ben said with a smile.

"Was he okay?" Cliff asked with concern.

"He's fine. In fact, I think he was too scared to even be embarrassed." Ben said sleepily, then slowly said, "Remember to pick up Junior after work tomorrow."

"I have it written in my appointment book." Cliff said calmly.

"What do you think about what happened with Zeb?"

"I think he always had that in him. If we did anything, we just gave him permission to let it out." Cliff said warmly.

"I really like Zeb. I think that it's a shame that such a nice guy is all alone." Ben said with concern.

"Don't even think about playing matchmaker. Someone always gets hurt." Cliff said in warning.

"I don't need to play matchmaker... well, except to invite Zeb and Wil over at the same time. But that's all I'll have to do with it. Nature will take it's course." Ben said seriously.

"Unless nature doesn't go the way you want it to, then you'll intervene." Cliff said with a smile.

"I would never..." Ben started to say, then broke into giggles before shyly admitting, "...yes I would."

"I can see some issues preventing them from getting together, but if they can overcome those obstacles, I think they could work out." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Tomorrow's likely to be a long day. We'd better get to sleep." Ben said softly.

"Love you." Cliff said as he rolled onto his side.

"Love you, too." Ben responded with a smile, then turned onto his side so he could give Cliff a quick, gentle kiss.

Chapter 11

Ben awoke next to his beloved partner and enjoyed a tranquil, untroubled moment.

Although the urge was strong to wake Cliff and show him just how much he was loved, Ben thought better of it and quietly slipped on his robe, then left the room.

He tiptoed into JD's room to check on the boys and was surprised to find that they weren't there. From the disheveled state of the featherbed in the closet floor, the boys had slept there at some point during the night. But, even so, Jody hadn't had a night terror. So that could be counted as progress.

When Ben walked into the kitchen, he was greeted by the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the sounds of industrious children working to prepare breakfast.

"Good morning." Ben said quietly.

Jody, who had been sitting at the kitchen table, studiously working on buttering toast, nearly jumped a foot in the air at the sound.

Jody hopped down off his chair and ran to Ben, with his arms held high in the air.

Ben scooped him up into his arms and gave him a long cuddle.

As he was holding Jody, Ben looked across the kitchen and gently asked, "How are you doing this morning, Spider?"

"I wanted to make you breakfast in bed." JD said in a slightly sulky voice.

"Thank you for thinking of that, but how about we save breakfast in bed for the weekends? If we do it too often, it stops being special." Ben explained as he awkwardly leaned down, with Jody still in his arms, to give JD a quick, one armed hug and a kiss on the top of his head.

"Yeah." JD reluctantly agreed, then seriously added, "You either need to let me use the stove or I'm going to need another electric skillet. I can't cook everything the way I want to like this."

After a long, thoughtful moment to consider, Ben finally said, "Why don't we do both? I think you've proven that you're responsible enough that you can start using the stove. But that's only when I'm able to be in here with you, to supervise. The next time I'm at the store, I'll pick up another electric skillet so you'll be able to cook more than one thing at a time when I'm busy with other things."

"Thanks, Daddy." JD said with a smile, apparently happy with the compromise.

"I tell you what. Since it looks like you're just about finished making breakfast, I'm going to go in and wake your Pappa." Ben said as he carried Jody back to the kitchen table and placed him back in his chair.

"Hold on." JD said seriously as he got down from his chair beside the stove.

Ben watched as JD scooted the chair, then climbed back on and took two coffee mugs down from the cupboard.

"Pappa needs his coffee." JD explained as he hurried to the coffee maker to fill the mugs.

"Thank you, JD." Ben said with a smile as he accepted two cups of coffee from his exceptionally mature and responsible son.

* * * * *

"Good morning, love. I was just going to wake you." Ben said as he walked into the bedroom, carrying the two cups of coffee.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" Cliff asked before stretching dramatically.

"Yes, in fact, I did. As far as I can tell, Jody didn't have a night terror last night." Ben said as he moved around the end of the bed to place Cliff's cup of coffee on his nightstand.

Cliff scooted into a sitting position and got settled before picking up the coffee.

"The boys are making breakfast for us. It should be ready in a few minutes." Ben said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You *do* realize that with Junior visiting, we're going to have *three* children to watch after?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Only for the weekend, and I'll have you here to back me up. I'm not worried." Ben said before taking a sip of his coffee.

"I get the feeling that Junior's a really good kid. I see something in him... I'm not sure what it is." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"We've got all weekend to figure it out." Ben assured him, then quickly added, "But breakfast is probably just about ready. We wouldn't want for it to get cold."

"Right." Cliff said, then took another sip of his coffee before getting out of bed.

* * * * *

"Pappa!" JD crowed as he jumped down off his chair.

"Good morning, Spider." Cliff said as he gave his eldest son a warm hug.

Jody was off his chair a moment later, standing before Cliff with his arms raised into the air.

After putting down his coffee cup, Cliff was somehow able to pick up both boys and cuddle them simultaneously.

Ben watched the scene with a tender smile, then casually walked to the coffee maker and refilled his mug.

"Something smells good. Did you make us breakfast?" Cliff asked as he carried the boys to the kitchen table.

"I made cheesy scrambled eggs with sausages and mushrooms." JD said proudly.

Ben placed his coffee mug on the table, then went to retrieve Cliff's and refill it.

"That sounds really good. I don't think I've ever made it that way." Cliff said as he reveled in the feeling of being adored.

"I buttered the toast." Jody said quietly.

"Some buttered toast sounds like it will really hit the spot. I can't wait to try some." Cliff said before turning his head to give Jody a kiss on the cheek.

"The cheese should be melted just right, now." JD said as he released his grip on Cliff, signalling that he was ready to be put down.

"Just sit down and I'll put it on the table." Ben said as he disconnected the cord from the back of the electric skillet.

Cliff put the boys down and took his customary place at the table.

The sound of a scooting chair filled everyone's ears as JD moved the chair he had been using back to the kitchen table.

"JD, do you want to unveil your masterpiece?" Ben asked as he placed a slotted spoon within JD's reach.

"Okay." JD said happily, then lifted the lid off the top of the electric skillet.

"That looks wonderful!" Ben enthused, then took the lid from JD, since there wasn't any convenient place for him to put it down.

"And it smells great, too." Cliff added with a smile at his son.

"Jody, do you want to make sure that everyone gets some toast?" Ben asked as he returned to the table.

A beaming smile was Jody's answer.

Although Miss Manners might not have approved of the way Jody handed out the slices of toast with his bare hands, no one at the table would consider doing anything to diminish the joy that the boy was obviously feeling by presenting his contribution to the family meal.

Each of them, in turn, handed their plates to JD so that he could give them portions of his gooey, cheesey scrambled egg masterpiece.

Cliff took a bite of his scrambled eggs and considered the flavor for a moment before saying, "This is really good, JD. You might want to write down the recipe so you'll remember how you made it."

Ben smiled at Cliff, and was thinking of what a wonderful thing that was for him to say to JD, to boost his self-confidence. Then he took his first bite.

When the taste registered, Ben was genuinely surprised. He realized that Cliff hadn't been praising JD's cooking insincerely, the cheesy scrambled egg variation that JD had come up with actually *was* worth preserving in a recipe.

"I cut up the sausages and cooked them with the mushrooms, first. Then I cooked the cheesy scrambled eggs like you showed me and added the sausages and mushrooms back in just before I put in the cheese." JD explained.

"It's perfect." Cliff said before taking another bite.

When Ben turned his attention to Jody, he noticed that the boy had decided to use a spoon, rather than a fork to eat his scrambled eggs. He seemed to be doing quite well with the unfamiliar utensil.

"The toast is very good, Jody. You buttered it just right." Ben said before taking another bite of his food.

Jody stopped eating long enough to smile at Ben, then dug back into his food with gusto.

When Ben noticed Cliff's speculative gaze focused on Jody, he made an internal note to ask him about it later, when there weren't so many small ears around.

"Do you *have to* go to work today?" JD asked Cliff in a slightly whining tone.

"I'm afraid so." Cliff said regretfully, then added, "But the good thing is that after I'm done with work, I'm going to pick up Junior and bring him back here so you two can visit with him."

"Junior's nice." Jody said between bites of food.

"I think so, too." Cliff said to him warmly.

Ben glanced at the clock and was surprised.

"If you want to hop in the shower, I'll take care of your dishes." Ben said gently.

Cliff looked at the clock, then quickly said, "Thanks."

Ben watched as Cliff walked around the table and kissed each person in attendance before hurrying out of the room.

"Why does Pappa have to go?" Jody asked sadly.

"Because he has a job to do. Your pappa helps sick little kids to feel better." Ben explained gently.

"But I want him to stay here and make *me* feel better." Jody said poutingly.

"When he gets home tonight, you're going to have him here all weekend." Ben said as he slowly got up from the table and started collecting empty dishes.

"Me and Jody will do the dishes." JD announced as he scooted off his chair.

"Are you sure?" Ben asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I want to show him how to help." JD said seriously.

"Okay. But you let me know if you need me to do anything." Ben said as he sat the dishes back on the table and returned to his seat.

"Jody, if you'll bring me things, I'll scrape them off and put them in the dishwasher." JD said confidently.

Ben couldn't tell if JD noticed or not, but whenever Jody would return to the table, Ben would hand him the next thing that needed to be carried, rather than making him have to climb or stretch to reach things.

Before long, the dishwasher had been loaded and all that was left was to clean the electric skillet.

Ben nearly laughed at the sight of two kitchen chairs, side by side at the sink, with a boy standing on each as JD very carefully explained and demonstrated electric skillet cleaning.

When JD was finished, Ben followed behind and wiped down the table and countertops, but otherwise the boys had done an amazing job of cleaning up after the meal.

* * * * *

"I have a few things that I need to get done. If you boys want, you can play in the living room for a while." Ben said pleasantly.

"Do you want to play with your blocks?" JD asked Jody curiously.

Jody thought about it for a moment, then shook his head.

"Do you remember how to turn on the TV?" JD asked simply.

Jody's face lighted and he hurried to get the remote control.

JD slipped out of the room for a moment and returned with his netbook.

Once Ben was assured that the boys were going to keep themselves entertained for a few minutes, he went into his room to make an appointment to speak with a lawyer about the legalities of establishing a trust fund for JD.

* * * * *

As much as Ben wanted to sit down and work on his writing, knowing that the boys were in the other room made it impossible for him to focus on his work. He was afraid that if he became too involved in what he was doing he might miss some indication that the boys needed him for something.

So, he ended up going around the house, doing some household chores that needed to be done anyway. He did sweeping, mopping, dusting and laundry, to name a few, all the while keeping an eye on the boys.

As Ben was cleaning the shelves of the refrigerator, the sound of the doorbell caught his attention.

By the time Ben had dried his hands, JD had already answered the door.

Ben watched from the living room doorway as JD signed his name, then accepted a small package from the delivery driver.

"What do you have there?" Ben asked as he stepped into the entry hall, although he already suspected.

"I don't know, but it has my name on it." JD said excitedly.

"Why don't we go into the living room and open it?" Ben asked with a smile.

* * * * *

"What is it?" Jody asked as JD fought the packaging.

"That's what we're trying to find out." Ben said honestly, then gently asked JD, "Why don't you get the scissors so you can cut the tape?"

As JD was hurrying out of the room, Ben gently reminded him, "Remember how I told you to carry scissors, and remember not to run."

A moment later, JD returned, carrying the scissors pointed toward the floor and moving at a reasonable pace.

Ben and Jody watched as JD struggled to get the tape cut and the box opened.

"It's a book." JD said in puzzlement.

"Oh? What book is it?" Ben asked as he was barely able to restrain his smile.

JD read the cover and his eyes went wide with surprise.

"What was that?" Ben asked with a grin that he couldn't contain.

"Anathema Mythique." JD muttered in disbelief.

"This is your proof copy. The publisher went ahead and threw together a rough draft copy of your manuscript so you could get an idea of what it's going to look like in print." Ben explained, but knew that JD wasn't really comprehending his words.

Ben could completely understand. He still remembered the feeling of wonder when he held his first proof copy. Later, when JD was better able to focus, Ben would sit down with him and let JD know what he needed to do as far as approving edits and style changes, and the like. But for now, he decided to just let JD enjoy the moment.

* * * * *

JD seemed to be drifting on his own private cloud, so Ben decided that, just this once, he would go ahead and prepare lunch for the boys on his own.

About five minutes into his lunch preparation, Jody appeared in the kitchen and put his arms into the air, wanting to be held.

Ben did his fatherly duty and held the boy for a few minutes, then placed him on a chair at the table and continued making lunch.

He was actually surprised that JD hadn't noticed their absence and ended up sending Jody to find his brother and tell him that lunch was ready.

When JD arrived in the kitchen, he was still carrying his book, with his finger marking the place where he had been reading.

Ben took a post-it note from the side of the fridge and gave it to JD to use as a bookmark.

As soon as JD had taken his first bite of the tuna sandwiches that Ben had prepared, he seemed to have been snapped out of the stupor he had been in since his book had arrived.

"What you have there is the tentative edit copy. Some editors at the publishing company went through your story and fixed all the little things like spelling, punctuation and capitalization. In the box, you're probably going to find a few pages, outlining the corrections that they've made. You can ignore that, if you want. I've always found it easier to go through the word processor document and look at the corrections that way." Ben said carefully, not quite sure if JD were comprehending his words.

"They changed my story?" JD asked cautiously.

"Yes. But you're the author. You have complete control. When you're ready, you can go through and look at all the changes they made and decide if they're right or wrong. In my books, at least, most of the things that they change are minor. I look at the change that was made and consider if my way or their way best conveys my meaning." Ben explained slowly.

"So, if I spell something wrong, they fix it?" JD asked cautiously.

"They let you know that they think it's spelled wrong. You get to decide which way you want it to be spelled in the final copy." Ben said seriously.

"So, the book, it has all the changes that they made, so that I can see what the story's like if I don't want anything changed back?"

"Yes. If you don't feel like going through the whole document and approving each one of their changes individually, then you can read the proof copy that they sent you and see how it reads as a whole. If it still says everything you want it to say, then you can accept it 'as is'." Ben confirmed.

"What's this?" Jody asked as he held up the second half of the sandwich that he had been eating.

"I made you tuna salad with walnuts and apples. Do you like it?" Ben asked with a smile.

"I don't know." Jody said with an expression of deep consideration, before diving in for another bite.

"Let me know when you've figured it out." Ben said as he smiled to himself.

* * * * *

JD was uncharacteristically energetic after lunch.

In an effort to direct some of that energy to creative use, Ben rifled through his stationery supplies and found a nearly forgotten box of colored pencils. That and a few sheets of paper from the printer provided all that was needed to divert the boys' attention for a few hours.

Of course, Jody needed a lot of guidance, having never been encouraged to draw before. Ben ended up going through a few coffee table books that had inspirational images so that Jody would have something interesting to draw.

He directed JD to do artwork related to his book. JD wasn't enthusiastic at first, but soon became engrossed in the task. When Ben turned his attention back to Jody, he was surprised to find that Jody was doing a reasonably good job of duplicating the photograph before him. It wasn't necessarily a work of art, but given the supplies that Jody had to work with, Ben doubted that he could do any better.

When JD finished his picture, Ben looked it over critically, then suggested places where he might add a little more detail. He wasn't trying to discourage JD's efforts but at the same time he wanted for JD to get used to a little gentle criticism.

Fortunately, JD took the suggestions in the spirit they were intended and went back to work, adding details and definition to his overall picture.

When it came time for Ben to critique Jody's picture, he honestly couldn't find a single thing that he would change. The picture that he had been copying from the large, paperback book

with glossy, full color photographs had been a collection of visually interesting examples of architecture.

Was it an exact copy?

No.

But Jody had been able to reproduce the proportions fairly accurately and had given emphasis to the primary lines of the building. Ben only had a passing interest in art and had all but given it up completely when he made the decision to express his creativity in writing.

Be that as it may, he could see that Jody had a good eye. He didn't know if that natural talent would develop into something more. But he decided to do everything in his power to encourage it.

* * * * *

When Cliff pulled up in front of the Home, he found Junior wearing a backpack, and waiting outside the main door.

"How are you doing today, Junior?" Cliff asked as he approached.

"Wow! You came! I was afraid you weren't going to." Junior said happily.

Cliff thought how sad it was that Junior was primed for disappointment. However, he kept those thoughts to himself and said, "Let's go inside. I probably have to sign you out, or something."

Although Junior seemed to be well past ready to be far away, he nonetheless followed Cliff back into the building.

* * * * *

When it came time to sign Junior out, Cliff noticed that the sign-out sheet asked for an anticipated time of return. Their original plan had been for Junior to spend the night, but Cliff supposed that it might be better to err on the side of caution and sign him out for the entire weekend. He was sure that they wouldn't have nearly as much problem if Junior came back early as they would if he came back late.

Once they were in the car, Cliff quietly asked, "How are you doing, Junior?"

"I haven't been invited to go anywhere in... I think it's been a couple years!" Junior said happily.

"I don't know how exciting it's going to be, but I hope that you'll have a good time." Cliff said honestly.

"It'll just be nice not to be there for a little bit. I mean, I know being there is better than being in a bad home or out on the streets but sometimes... I don't know. I guess I just want to feel what it's like to be in a normal home, for a little bit." Junior quietly explained.

Cliff didn't know if he had the *cajones* to describe his home as 'normal', but he was more than willing for Junior to spend some time with them, if it would make him feel better.

As their ride continued, Cliff thought to ask, "What do you plan on doing when you get out of school?"

"I don't know." Junior said quietly, then quickly added, "Mr. Cooper's helping me try and find a job so I can afford to get an apartment and take care of myself. But most of the jobs that I can do are 'paper hat' jobs. I mean, I don't mind working hard. That's not the problem. But those jobs don't give enough hours and don't pay enough for someone to live on his own. And if I can't live on my own... I'm on the street."

"Don't they have some sort of a program in place for residents who become adults while they're in the childcare system?" Cliff asked curiously.

"No. A lot of kids run away before they can 'age out'. The ones who don't, usually end up homeless, in prison or dead." Junior said frankly.

"Or they get jobs and end up having happy lives... right?" Cliff suggested hopefully.

"Not so much." Junior said regretfully, then added, "At least, I don't know of anyone who made it."

"How much longer do you have before this is a problem?" Cliff asked thoughtfully.

"Mrs. Usher said that I can stay at the Home until I graduate. So I have until next summer." Junior said quietly.

"Good. Then I tell you what, I've got some friends. Let me do a little checking around and see what I can find for you." Cliff said seriously.

"If you could do that, it'd be great. I don't care what kind of work it is. I'll do anything." Junior said in a rush.

Cliff had to fight back the tears in his eyes, partly because he didn't want Junior to see, but mostly because he was driving. Once he got himself under control he finally said, "I'll see if we can't find something that you'll enjoy doing."

* * * * *

"We're home!" Cliff called out as he led the way into the house.

The sounds of two happy kids heralded the arrival of JD and Jody as they scrambled into the entry hall.

Both boys went immediately to Junior and seemed to be determined to hug the stuffing out of him.

There was a moment when Junior seemed to be on the verge of being overwhelmed by the enthusiastic attention directed at him. But he was soon wearing a grand smile, knowing without a doubt that he was in a place where he was wanted.

"Come in the kitchen! We're about to start making dinner and we need your help." JD said urgently as he pulled on one of Junior's arms.

"Hey! Guys! What about me? Didn't anyone miss Pappa today?" Cliff asked in an overly dramatic, wounded tone.

Jody immediately stood before Cliff and thrust his arms into the air.

"Come on up here and give me some sugar." Cliff said as he picked the boy up.

"Junior!" JD said impatiently and started pulling his arm more insistently.

"Go on. I'm right behind you." Cliff told their guest.

"What's the rush?" Junior asked as he started walking.

"We gotta make dinner!" JD insisted.

* * * * *

Cliff took the opportunity to enjoy a nice, long cuddle with Jody as JD started issuing orders with all the authority of a master chef.

Ben walked casually into the kitchen, then asked, "What's JD doing?"

"Making dinner, it seems." Cliff said simply and was surprised by the fact that JD appeared to be working completely under his own initiative.

"I was thinking that we could go out for dinner, since we have company." Ben said frankly.

"We already started cooking." JD called in a rush over his shoulder, before turning his attention back to Junior.

Cliff and Ben shared a look, then Ben cautiously asked, "Do you need any help?"

"Would you turn the oven on? I'm going to need it at three-fifty." JD said quickly.

"I'm going to go change. Give me a yell if our little master sergeant oversteps his bounds." Cliff said as he coaxed Jody to release him.

"Jody! Can you tear up some lettuce for me?" JD called from his place by the stove.

Light brown eyes, filled with indecision, looked up at Cliff.

"Go help your brother. I need to change clothes. Don't worry, I'll be right back." Cliff said gently, then gave Jody a quick kiss on the top of his head before stepping away.

"The oven's on. Did you need anything else?" Ben asked as he stood away from the kitchen counter.

"Cashews." JD said simply.

Ben waited for a moment to see if there were anymore orders forthcoming, then walked to the pantry.

* * * * *

"Where did you need these?" Ben asked as he returned.

JD paused for a moment, then asked, "Would you mind helping me? When I did all of this in my head, I got it done faster."

"Um, sure. What do you need me to do?" Ben asked cautiously.

"We need some kind of a heavy bag, like a freezer bag or something, about a gallon size." JD said thoughtfully, then turned his attention to Junior, who was chopping some fresh herbs.

Ben retrieved a gallon sized zippered freezer bag and returned a moment later.

"Would you hold it open for me?" JD asked seriously.

Ben did so, then cautiously asked, "What are you cooking?"

"Lamb." JD said as he opened the bag of cashews.

"But we don't have any... did you get it out of the freezer?" Ben stammered.

"Yeah. Don't worry. I'm doing a quick thaw. They'll be ready for me about the same time I'm ready for them." JD said seriously as he poured cashews into the freezer bag.

"What are these for?" Ben asked cautiously.

"Pappa! Can you help me, too?" JD asked hopefully.

Ben turned and saw that Cliff, now dressed in casual attire, had just walked into the kitchen.

"Sure, Spider. What did you need for me to do?" Cliff asked as he approached.

"Daddy, would you give that to Pappa?" JD asked as he set the rest of the cashews aside.

"What are we doing?" Cliff asked as he accepted the bag and looked curiously at the cashews.

"Lamb." Ben said simply, then flashed Cliff a sympathetic look.

"Daddy, would you mind peeling some potatoes for me?" JD asked hopefully.

"How much do you need?" Ben asked cautiously.

"Enough for the five of us. I just want to boil them, I'm not going to mash them or anything." JD said as he hurried down off his chair, then dragged it to the island and climbed back on.

As JD stretched toward the pans hanging over the island, Ben quickly asked, "What were you needing?"

"I don't know, yet. Can I see that one?" JD asked as he pointed.

Ben handed the heavy saucepan down to him and waited.

JD held the pan for a moment, then shook it a little, presumably to check it sturdiness.

"Are you ready for this?" Junior asked from beside the stove.

"Almost." JD said, then handed the pan to his pappa before asking, "Would you take this and smack those cashews about five or six times to crumble them up?"

Cliff smiled, then said, "I can do that."

"Do you need anything before I start on the potatoes?" Ben asked cautiously.

"I'm going to need to boil the potatoes, so I guess you can get the water started heating." JD said seriously.

"Or you can, since I'm here to supervise." Ben said frankly.

The sound of a loud **WHACK** caused everyone in the kitchen to turn at once.

"Not too hard, I don't need cashew butter, I need cashew crumbs." JD said quickly.

"There's no pleasing some people." Cliff said with a smile, then smacked the bag of cashews a little more gently.

"Junior, as soon as Pappa's done, take all those herbs you just chopped and throw them in the bag with the cashews." JD said seriously.

"I'm almost done." Jody called out from the table.

"Okay. Good. As soon as Pappa's done, I'm going to get him to help you with the next part." JD said as he hurried to scoot his chair back over to the sink.

"I didn't realize that I'd been recruited to do more than take out my hostilities on this bag of nuts." Cliff said honestly.

"Please, Pappa, it's nothing bad, I promise." JD begged.

"Of course. I'll be happy to help Jody. I was just saying that I wasn't expecting it." Cliff said, then handed the bag of crushed nuts to JD.

"Thanks, Pappa. Would you help Jody peel some carrots?" JD asked hopefully.

* * * * *

Although it didn't seem like it at times, JD's vision of dinner did, in fact, come together.

As the family sat down around the table, JD happily announced, "Since Junior helped cook dinner, he's part of our family, now."

Ben was about to say something, but Cliff beat him to it. "Let's see what it tastes like, first."

JD's eyes went wide at the statement.

"Would you pass me the salad?" Cliff asked in a seemingly casual voice.

JD sat frozen for a moment longer, then scrambled to pass the bowl of salad to his pappa.

After serving himself, Cliff asked, "What did Junior make, again?"

"He chopped all the herbs for the crust on the lamb and then he made the mint sauce." JD said quickly.

"Well, then, pass them this way." Cliff said as he sat the bowl of salad aside.

Ben tried to restrain his smile as he passed the lamb and mint sauce across the table.

Junior was looking around uncertainly, apparently not sure if they were being serious, or not.

"It sure smells good." Cliff said as he put a lamb chop on his plate.

JD, Jody and Junior were all sitting and watching, waiting for Cliff to take a bite.

"Go ahead. Don't let the food get cold." Cliff said as he passed the platter with the lamb to JD.

JD flipped a lamb chop onto his plate and passed the platter without ever looking away from Cliff.

"Could I have some of those potatoes?" Cliff asked as he pretended not to notice everyone's attention focused on him.

Ben handed the bowl of potatoes to Jody, who passed it on to Cliff without taking any for himself.

Cliff put some of the potatoes on his plate, then asked, "So, what kind of potatoes are these?"

"Boiled. Served with parsley butter sauce." JD said anxiously.

Cliff picked up his fork and knife. Just short of cutting into his lamb chop, he stopped and looked around. "Isn't anyone else eating?"

JD finally tore his gaze away from his pappa and glanced around the table before jumping out of his chair. "Aren't you hungry? It's really good! I promise!"

"I don't know. We had such a good lunch..." Ben said slowly.

JD's wide steel-blue eyes looked up at Ben and pleaded.

"Well, maybe a bite or two. Ben finally relented.

While this was going on, Jody and Junior were scrambling to fill their plates.

Once JD was satisfied that everyone had a plateful of food, he hurried back to his seat.

Cliff picked up his knife and fork again as JD, Jody and Junior watched his every move.

Just as he was about to cut into the lamb chop, he stopped and looked toward Ben and asked, "So, how was your day?"

"JD received the proof copy of his book this morning." Ben said with a smile.

"Really? That was quick. I wonder how they were able to print a book that fast." Cliff said slowly.

"They probably took it to Kinkos. Are you going to eat or not?" JD asked as tears of frustration started to well in his eyes.

Cliff put his silverware down.

At that moment, JD realized that he might have gone too far.

"Junior." Cliff said seriously.

You could have heard a pin drop as everyone waited for Cliff's next words.

"Welcome to the family." Cliff finished with a smile.

JD and Jody were out of their chairs in an instant and were soon hugging Junior from both sides.

Cliff watched the scene for a moment, then cut himself a piece of lamb chop.

"This lamb is incredible, JD." Cliff said in astonishment.

JD looked up from his hug with Junior and timidly said, "Yeah. I had help."

* * * * *

"Even though I was there when you made all this, I still can't believe that you did it." Junior said in amazement.

"It wasn't me, it was all of us. Everyone helped. Including you." JD said seriously.

"Ease up, Spider. Give him a minute." Cliff said to his son with a warm smile.

"Spider? Why do you call him Spider?" Junior asked curiously.

"That's my love name." JD said simply.

After a moment to see if a further explanation were going to be forthcoming, Junior finally asked, "What's a love name?"

"It's a special name that only the people who love you get to call you." JD explained.

"It's just another way that we can let JD know that we love him and that he's a special part of our family. I suppose it's sort of like having a secret handshake or something like that." Ben said thoughtfully.

"Do I have a love name?" Jody asked curiously.

Cliff and Ben shared a concerned look at the question.

However, before either of them could construct a reasonable response, JD said, "Squid."

"Why Squid?" Junior asked cautiously.

Cliff and Ben remained silent, but were understandably interested to know that answer for themselves.

"Because he's squishy and cute and has long skinny legs, just like a squid." JD said, as though it were obvious.

There was a long moment of silence, until Cliff finally asked, "Is that okay with you, Squid?"

"Uh huh." Jody said, and finished with a giggle.

* * * * *

By any measure, the meal had been a great success. Everyone had eaten their fill, and in some cases, a bit more.

As they were clearing the table, Cliff noticed something different and asked, "Did we get some new art work?"

JD saw that Cliff had stopped to look at the two drawings that were now prominently displayed on the refrigerator door, held in place with magnets.

"Daddy axed us to draw pictures for him." Jody said seriously.

"These are really very good." Cliff said as he took a step closer.

"Mine's supposed to be one of the twelve mountain giants from my book." JD said before continuing toward the dishwasher.

"What's your's Jody?" Cliff asked curiously.

"A picture from a book. Daddy said it was good." Jody said honestly.

"It's very good. In fact, if no one would mind, I'd very much like to have both of these framed so that I can put them up in my office, at work." Cliff said frankly.

"Really? You want to show people our pictures?" JD asked as he loaded scraped-off dishes into the dishwasher.

"Of course. I want to show off how talented my kids are." Cliff said with a smile, then got back to the business of helping to clear the table.

"Then we need for Junior to draw you a picture, too." JD said seriously.

Cliff turned to see Junior looking back at him with an expression of surprise at being volunteered.

"If Junior wants to draw something, I'd be proud to display it in my office." Cliff said decisively.

* * * * *

When the after dinner cleanup was complete, Ben looked around and asked, "What does everyone want to do now?"

The boys looked at each other, but no one seemed to have an answer.

"JD, do you feel like you're up to approving edits, tonight?" Ben cautiously suggested.

"No. That's... work. I don't want to do that when Junior's here." JD said thoughtfully.

"Good point." Ben said as he nodded his approval.

At Junior's curious look, JD explained, "I wrote a book."

"You did?" Junior asked with surprise.

JD seriously nodded, then dashed out of the room.

Junior looked to Cliff and Ben for further explanation.

"He wrote a book... seriously." Ben said with a sympathetic smile at Junior's disbelief.

"Here!" JD said as he offered his proof copy to Junior.

"Let's all go into the living room so Junior can give it a good, long look." Ben said before Junior could do more than look at the cover.

* * * * *

"JD Stone... That's you?" Junior asked as they walked.

"Yeah. I never really had a last name before, so I used Daddy's." JD explained.

"All I've ever heard you called is JD. I never even thought that you might not have a real name." Junior said quietly, disturbed by the thought.

"JD's just the name they gave me at the hospital. It stands for 'John Doe', which is the name they use for someone whose name they don't know." JD said honestly, then thought to ask, "What's your last name?"

"My official name is Michael David Galindo-Ortiz Jr, but there's so many Michaels and Davids running around, that calling me Junior's just easier for everyone." Junior said shyly.

"Maybe, in some circumstances, but if other people weren't a concern, what would you *want* to be called?" Cliff asked curiously.

"I don't understand what you're asking." Junior said frankly.

"I just wondered if you'd like to be called something else when there aren't any other Michaels or Davids around." Cliff said simply.

"I've been called Junior for so long that that's how I think of myself, now." Junior said thoughtfully.

"Okay. I was just curious." Cliff said with a smile.

Junior nodded and seemed to be grateful that Cliff wasn't going to pursue the topic any further.

"I suppose that being a doctor, that I'm a little more sensitive than some people about things like that. When I'm at work, most people refer to me as 'Doctor' and don't ever use my name at all. It's not exactly 'dehumanizing' but when I get home, it feels really good to be called by my name... or my love name, which is 'Pappa'." Cliff finished with a smile at his boys.

There was a moment of silence that followed, which was interrupted by JD asking, "Do you want to hear some of my book?"

Junior looked to Cliff and Ben to see if they had any preference in the matter.

"I love listening to JD read aloud." Ben said frankly.

"Okay. Yeah." Junior said with a smile at his young friend.

Jody was cuddled into Cliff's side on the couch, which was becoming his usual place when Cliff was at home.

Ben was on the other end of the couch and Junior had settled into the nearby armchair.

JD collected the 'proof copy' of his book from Junior, then snuggled in beside Ben before opening the book to read.

* * * * *

A knock on the door drew everyone's attention.

During nearly half an hour of reading, no one else had spoken a word.

Everyone had been enthralled by JD's dramatic storytelling.

"I'll get it." JD said enthusiastically as he hopped up from the couch.

"Wow." Junior gasped in astonishment when the spell he had been under finally released him.

"Yeah." Cliff absently agreed.

"JD really wrote that?" Junior asked in amazement.

"Every single word." Ben confirmed.

"It was like... I had chills. And in that part when they were going into battle, I felt my heart speed up." Junior said in wonder.

* * * * *

"It's Gerry." JD said happily as he led Detective Booker into the living room.

"Hello, Gerry. It's nice to see you." Cliff said pleasantly, then thought to add, "I don't know if you two had the chance to meet at the home, but I'd like to introduce you to Michael, the newest member of our family."

"Another one!?" Gerry asked with surprise.

Cliff laughed delightedly, then explained, "Well, we haven't 'legally' adopted him but, even so, I'm proud to claim Michael as my son."

Gerry could see the emotional impact that the statement was having on Junior and quietly said, "I remember seeing you before, but I don't think we were ever introduced. It's nice to meet you, Michael. I'm Detective Booker from the Tallahassee Police Department, but you can call me Gerry, if you like."

It took a moment for Junior to gather his emotional control, but he finally said, "Yeah. It's nice to meet you, too."

"So, Gerry, were you just in the neighborhood or did you have some official business to conduct?" Cliff asked curiously.

"A little of both, actually." Gerry said pleasantly, then flashed Cliff a look that indicated that it was more urgent than he was letting on.

"Could we get you some coffee or anything?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Yes. Some coffee would be nice. And while you're getting that, maybe Jody and I could talk for a minute." Gerry said in a leading tone.

Cliff gave a discreet nod, then scooted Jody off his lap as he said, "Jody, why don't you keep our guest company while we get him some coffee and snacks?"

"Can I have some, too?" Jody asked hopefully.

"Snacks, yes. Coffee, no." Cliff said, then leaned in to give Jody a kiss before walking toward the door.

Ben helped Cliff to quietly get JD and Junior out of the room.

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"What's going on?" Junior asked quietly when they were finally in the kitchen.

"You know a little bit about why Jody was at the home, right?" Cliff asked carefully.

"A little." Junior said hesitantly.

"I get the feeling that Gerry needs to talk to Jody privately for a few minutes to gather some more information about what was done to him." Cliff said seriously.

"What are you doing, Spider?" Ben asked as he started the coffee pot.

"Making snacks." JD said simply.

"Do I need to start the oven?" Ben asked as he watched what JD was doing.

"Three-fifty." JD said in concentration as he placed a bowl of little smokey sausages into the microwave.

"Do you need any help?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"I got this." JD said confidently as he went to the refrigerator.

Junior and Cliff stood back and watched as JD quickly put together some 'pigs in a blanket'.

"I think I need to ask JD to teach me how to cook." Junior said in astonishment.

"Actually, I don't think you'll need to ask. Just by being here, you've already been recruited." Cliff chuckled.

Junior remembered the tasks that he'd been asked to perform to prepare dinner and smiled his agreement.

* * * * *

"Is anybody ready for some snacks?" Ben asked as he led the way into the living room.

"Oh, yeah. That really smells good. Thank you." Gerry said with a smile.

"I got your coffee. Black, right?" JD asked as he handed a filled cup to Gerry.

"Exactly right." Gerry assured him.

Cliff looked at Gerry inquiringly and received a covert nod of confirmation that he had had sufficient time alone with Jody.

"Would you like some pigs in a blanket? JD made them." Ben asked as he held out the tray to Gerry.

"If you guys keep spoiling me like this, my wife's going to get mad at me." Gerry chuckled as he took one.

"Do you want the recipe?" JD asked suddenly.

"No. Thank you, JD." Gerry said, then took a bite.

"Can I have one?" Jody asked hopefully.

Ben smiled as he held the tray so that Jody could reach it.

"Um, JD. I changed my mind. This tastes incredible." Gerry said in amazement.

JD smiled, then said, "I'll be right back."

"How does he do it?" Gerry asked before popping the rest of the snack into his mouth.

"I honestly don't know." Ben admitted.

"These piggy blankets are good!" Jody said past his mouthful.

"Yes, they are." Cliff chuckled.

* * * * *

General conversation ensued for a few minutes, but shortly after the last of the 'pigs in a blanket' were gone, Gerry excused himself and returned to duty.

Before they could get involved in anything else, Ben quickly said, "I've realized that I need to pick up a few things at the store. Would anyone like to go with me?"

"On Friday night, one week before Christmas? Are you insane?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Yes. And, yes." Ben finished with a grin.

"Are you up to a trip to the store, Spider?" Cliff asked curiously.

JD considered the question for a moment. When his considering gaze finally settled on Junior, JD quietly said, "Yeah."

"Michael? Do you mind?" Cliff asked to be sure.

Junior smiled at Cliff's use of his true name, then quietly responded, "Sounds good."

* * * * *

Although Junior didn't make any complaint, both Cliff and Ben knew that he couldn't be comfortable, wedged between the two booster seats.

JD and Jody, however, couldn't have been happier about the way things turned out. Being on either side of Junior, both of them felt that they had him all to themselves.

To his credit, Junior did his best to hold simultaneous conversations and make each boy feel like he was paying special attention only to them.

By the time they reached Target, both Cliff and Ben were sure that Junior must be ready to get out of the car.

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Inside the store, the boys made it clear that they wanted Junior to escort them.

As usual, Jody rode in the child carrier of the shopping cart. Junior pushed the cart and JD was his faithful escort, never more than an arm's reach away.

Cliff and Ben followed behind and watched with matching smiles.

Everyone seemed to be surprised when Cliff asked that they begin their shopping expedition in the sporting goods section of the store.

When he started looking at sleeping bags, Ben caught on to what he was thinking.

"Since both the boys sleep in JD's room, Junior could use mine." Ben said quietly.

"What kind of a sleepover would that be?" Cliff asked with a grin.

Ben couldn't help but agree with his reasoning.

After a few minutes of looking through the available selections, JD finally asked, "Why are you looking at sleeping bags?"

"So you guys can camp out in the living room, if you want to." Cliff said frankly.

"All of us?" JD asked with surprise.

"Doesn't that sound like fun to you?" Ben asked curiously.

"I don't know. I never even thought of doing something like that, before." JD said honestly.

Neither Cliff nor Ben felt like mentioning that JD and Jody were basically already camping out at some point, each night.

"I've always heard about people doing stuff like this with their friends, but I've never been able to do it before." Junior told the boys quietly.

No further discussion was needed.

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When they left the sporting goods department, with a cart filled with three sleeping bags, Ben diverted them toward the housewares department.

It wasn't until Ben pointed out one particular electric skillet that JD started paying attention to what they were doing.

However, once JD realized what was going on, he carefully looked at each of their choices and asked several questions.

When all was finally said and done, JD asked that they buy an electric griddle rather than a second electric skillet. He reasoned that about half of what he normally cooked could be prepared more easily on a griddle.

JD was so caught up in dreams of what he could do with his new small appliance, that he nearly walked straight into a woman who was walking onto the aisle.

As soon as he was aware of what was going on, JD ran directly to Cliff and hugged him tightly.

"Excuse us." Ben said quietly, then led their way off the aisle.

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JD was a little more subdued than usual when they walked onto the toy aisle and didn't want to let go of Cliff.

Jody wasn't the least bit interested.

Junior, as one might expect, was past the age where toys were of much interest to him.

So, contrary to everyone's expectations, they were able to leave the toy department without making any additions to their cart.

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When they reached the checkouts, the number of women present was astounding. It appeared that, in Tallahassee at least, men didn't go Christmas shopping.

When JD realized that he was virtually surrounded by women, he went to Junior and somehow, without ever saying a word, convinced Junior to pick him up.

When Jody noticed JD's level of fear, he also became afraid, and it was Cliff who ended up picking him up out of the cart and holding him close, all the way out to the car.

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JD was quiet all the way home.

When they arrived at the house, JD went into the living room and sat silently on the couch.

Cliff and Ben could tell that he wasn't in one of the near-catatonic states that he used to fall into. However, he wasn't anywhere near his typical, energetic self.

Jody was obviously picking up on his brother's emotional state and was sure to stay close to Juniors side.

Cliff looked at Ben and was surprised to find him smiling.

At Cliff's curious look, Ben quietly said, "I think I know *just* what we need."

"What's that?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Cookies." Ben said with a grin.

JD didn't move, but his eyes shifted in Ben's direction.

When Ben didn't volunteer more, Cliff cautiously asked, "What kind?"

"I don't really know. I found some on sale when I was shopping. I think the bag just said 'Cookies' on it." Ben said thoughtfully, then discreetly glanced in JD's direction in time to see him flinch.

Cliff followed Ben's glance, then asked, "Do we have any ice cream to go with them?"

"I think I remember seeing some ice milk in the back of the freezer, that's about the same..." Ben began to say, but was interrupted.

"We can make some really good cookies for you, if you'll let us use the oven." JD said firmly.

"Junior? How would you feel about supervising the boys, while they're in the kitchen?" Ben asked seriously.

"What would I have to do?" Junior asked cautiously.

"I would appreciate it if you would handle putting the cookies into the oven and taking them out when they're done. JD can take care of everything else." Ben said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. I can do that." Junior said confidently.

"Good. Let us know when the cookies are ready. Be sure to call us if you need anything." Ben said happily.

"Come on." JD said firmly.

Junior and Jody immediately followed.

"That was sneaky." Cliff said with a grin at his partner.

"Yeah. But it worked." Ben said in his defense.

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When the cookies were finished, they were presented with a flourish worthy of fine dining cuisine.

As expected, everyone enjoyed the incredible taste, but along with that, the boys were also filled with the feeling of accomplishment and of being trusted.

After the cookies had been consumed, the family fell into what was fast becoming their nightly routine.

JD and Ben each brought out their laptops so that they could work on their own projects. Cliff and Jody cuddled on the couch as they watched TV.

Junior was in the armchair, sometimes watching the TV and sometimes talking quietly with either JD or Ben. It turned out to be a casual, relaxing evening filled with some of the most mundane activities imaginable, and yet it was everything that Junior had been longing for.

At a certain point it was decided that it was time to prepare for bed.

Cliff, Ben and Junior cleared the furniture from the middle of the living room, leaving a large open space for the sleeping bags.

Once that was done, JD decided that he and Jody needed for Junior to keep them company while they took their baths. Ben cautiously asked Junior if he minded very much.

Junior laughed at the question, then told him that, at the Home, he was often asked to help the younger residents or those who had been severely traumatized, to get cleaned up.

* * * * *

As Cliff and Ben prepared for bed, they could hear the occasional giggle or splash coming from the bathroom and, at one point, they even heard Junior laugh.

"So, are you feeling a little bit better about letting Junior spend the night?" Ben asked as they settled in for sleep.

"I wasn't really worried about *him*. I just know how full your days are, watching after two boys. Three might be overwhelming." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"I think that, if anything, Junior's made it easier." Ben said honestly.

"Yeah. I noticed that, too. He's really good with the boys." Cliff said softly, on the edge of sleep.

"Yes. And he's very responsible. I think he's going to be a good influence on them." Ben agreed.

There was a long moment of silence.

Finally, a soft snore came from Ben's side of the bed.

Cliff remained quiet as he considered what might be going on for Detective Booker to stop by, unannounced, to talk with Jody.

Chapter 12

Ben's eyes flew open at a tapping sound.

"Did you hear that?" Ben asked as he looked around uncertainly.

"Hear what?" Cliff asked groggily.

The tapping sound repeated, then the door slightly opened and a little wheat blond head peaked in.

"JD wants to know if we can come in." Jody said cautiously.

Ben looked over himself and Cliff to be sure that they were presentable, before saying, "Yes. Come on in. That's fine."

Jody withdrew for a moment.

Ben quickly adjusted the pillows behind him so that he could comfortably sit up in bed.

Cliff was doing the same when Jody opened the door and stood aside, clearing the way for JD and Junior, each carrying lap trays filled with breakfast foods.

"How long have you guys been up?" Ben asked with a delighted smile as the tray was placed over his lap.

"For as long as it takes to cook breakfast." JD said simply.

"I guess that makes sense." Ben chuckled, then looked curiously at his plate. "Did you make homemade biscuits?"

"Yeah. We didn't have any buttermilk, so I had to sour some milk to do it. But besides that, they should be okay." JD said as he looked at the biscuits consideringly.

"If you're going to use the oven, I'd rather you come and get me so that I can supervise."

"Junior was there and he did just like you said last night."

Ben glanced at Junior and could tell that he was worried that he might have overstepped his bounds by allowing JD to bake.

"You're right, JD. Junior's old enough and mature enough to be trusted."

"We'll be right back." JD said with an immediate smile, then ran out of the bedroom, with Jody following right behind him.

"Is it really alright?" Junior asked to be sure.

"It's fine, Junior. Just as long as you know that I expect you to tell JD 'no' if he asks to do something that could potentially harm him."

"Yeah. Don't worry. I'm the only one who handled the hot pans and stuff."

"Good. Thank you."

"Junior, yours is on the tray table, by the refrigerator." JD said as he carried another tray into the room.

Jody was following along, like an ever faithful puppy.

"Go on, Squid. Get up on the bed so I can put this down." JD said as he stood aside.

Jody obediently climbed onto the foot of the bed by Ben's feet and sat with his legs straight,

so that JD could place the tray over his lap.

"Try the biscuits." Cliff whispered, drawing Ben's attention.

Ben reluctantly tore his gaze away from Jody long enough to find a split and buttered biscuit on his plate and take the top off of it.

"I buttered the bikkits" Jody proudly announced.

Ben had to fight down his smile as he took a bite.

The flavor was almost overwhelming. The butter, the flaky biscuit, and the almost imperceptible tang of the soured milk all merged into a perfect storm of flavor in his mouth.

"Is it okay?" JD asked as he walked into the room, carrying another lap tray as Junior followed with one of the tray tables that they kept in the living room.

"Okay? JD, this may very well be the best biscuit that I've ever tasted in my life." Ben said honestly.

"It'd be better if we had buttermilk." JD said as he offered his tray to Cliff to hold so that he could climb onto the bed.

After another bite of his biscuit, Ben finally said, "Remind me to buy buttermilk the next time we go to the store."

Cliff was about to inject his own praise into the conversation, but then he noticed the discomfort in Junior's expression as he tried to unobtrusively set his tray table in front of the chair by the bathroom door.

"You can just drop that robe on the floor." Ben said to Junior casually, when he noticed what Junior was doing.

Cliff had an idea of what might be bothering Junior, but resolved himself to speak to him about it later, when there weren't so many little ears present.

"So, how was it sleeping in the living room? Did you all sleep comfortably?" Ben asked, mostly directing his question to the boys at the foot of his bed.

"The sleeping bags were too hot, so we slept on top of them and I got the blankets from the beds for us." JD said between bites of food.

"Good thinking." Ben said with a smile, then noticed that although Jody was using a spoon instead of a fork, he seemed to be keeping up with his older brother, bite for bite.

"Do we have anything planned for today?" Cliff asked into the silence that followed.

"If you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on things around here for a little while, I've got quite a bit of work that I haven't been able to get done this week." Ben said regretfully.

"How bad is it?"

"Not terrible, but it could take me a few hours to clear out."

Cliff turned his attention to the boys and asked, "Did you guys have anything planned?"

The boys looked from one to another before JD finally said, "I guess that I could read Junior and Jody some more of my book."

"I'm sure everyone would enjoy that." Cliff said with a smile, then glanced at Junior to find that he seemed to be pleased with the suggestion.

* * * * *

When the breakfast was finished, the boys collected all the trays and went to the kitchen to clean up.

After returning from the bathroom, Cliff quietly asked, "Do you need for me to do anything while you're working?"

"No. The housework is all caught up. There shouldn't be anything needing to be done. I just desperately need some time so that I can focus on my work."

"I'll do my best to keep the boys from disturbing you."

"If it's something important, I don't mind if you interrupt me. What I need more than anything is to be able to devote my full attention to what I'm doing without having to listen for what the boys are up to. In the past week, I haven't been able to get ANY of my work done."

"Got it. You go ahead and do what you need to do and I'll watch after the boys for a while."

"Thank you." Ben said sincerely before leaving their bedroom to go to his office.

* * * * *

Cliff walked into the kitchen to refill his coffee and was happy to see that everything had been cleaned up.

From there, he went to the living room where he found JD reading aloud to Junior and Jody who were snuggled together in a cushioned chair.

Cliff quietly walked past JD and sat on the other end of the couch from him.

It didn't take more than a few sentences for Cliff to become enthralled in JD's story telling.

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When JD reached what was either a logical break in the story, or the end of a chapter, he stopped and announced that his throat was getting tired.

"That's fine, Spider. Thank you for reading to us. It was a wonderful treat." Cliff said sincerely.

"Yeah. If all stories were like that one, I'd probably be reading all the time." Junior interjected.

"Is it okay if I write, now? While I was reading that, I got some ideas for my new story." JD asked hopefully.

"Do you have everything you need? Your Daddy's hard at work right now and we don't need to interrupt him." Cliff asked cautiously.

"I brought my laptop in here last night, just in case I woke up with any ideas." JD said as he took the netbook from underneath the coffee table.

"Good thinking." Cliff said with a smile, then looked at Junior and asked, "While JD's doing that, would you like to choose a movie for us to watch?"

"Um, no... not really. Actually, I was wondering if, when you had the time, if maybe I could ask you about something."

"As far as I know, I have nothing but free time right now."

Junior looked from JD to Jody with frustration, suggesting to Cliff that Junior might want to talk privately.

"Jody? Since JD's done reading, do you want to watch some TV?" Cliff asked as he held out the remote control toward him.

Jody seemed to be torn by the decision, but finally got out of the chair that he had been sharing with Junior, then hurried across the room to accept the remote from Cliff.

"Junior, why don't you come over here so that we can talk while the boys are entertaining themselves?" Cliff asked in what he hoped sounded like a casual voice.

Jody moved to the floor beside the coffee table, where his Lego set was located, then turned on the television.

Junior moved to the couch and sat down a respectable distance away from Cliff, near enough so that they could speak somewhat privately.

Cliff looked around and verified that JD was in the process of getting his netbook ready to use and Jody was opening the lid of his Lego set as the TV chattered in the background.

"So, what's on your mind?"

"I don't know if I can talk to you about this..." Junior trailed off uncertainly.

"Well, remember that I'm a doctor, so I'm used to dealing with embarrassing topics."

"It's not that... I mean, not really." Junior stammered. "It's just that, you know, when you ask a teacher or someone like that about some stuff, they either get mean and nasty or preachy with you or they tell you that they'll get fired or arrested or something if they talk to kids about certain things."

"Yes. I can think of a few circumstances where that might be true." Cliff said with a nod. "Go on."

"Well, when someone has parents, they can ask them about those things and even if it's weird for them or something, at least they've got someone to go to..." Junior trailed off in frustration, unable to properly articulate what he wanted to say.

"Let me stop you right there for a moment."

Junior gave him an anguished look, certain that Cliff was about to tell him that he couldn't help him either.

"Junior... Michael, I'm a doctor. Not only am I allowed to talk to you about sensitive subjects that your teachers or counselors might be forbidden to discuss with you, but I'm also legally obligated to never talk to anyone else about anything that we've discussed."

"Really? You mean that I can ask you *anything* and you're not allowed to tell Mr. Cooper or anyone else about it?"

"Yes... Well, for the most part. I mean, if you told me that you're planning to murder someone, then I'd break confidentiality and call the police. But other than a few extreme circumstances like that, the law protects Doctor-Patient Confidentiality."

"But I'm not your patient."

"Do you have a dollar?"

"Um... Yeah. I think so."

"Can I see it?"

Junior pulled a wallet that looked older than he was out of his pocket and fished out a dollar

bill.

"Open your mouth."

After a moment of hesitation, Junior cautiously did so.

Cliff made a show of looking into his mouth, then snatched the dollar out of his hand as he rested back on the couch.

At Junior's puzzled look, Cliff said, "In my professional opinion, *as your doctor*, your tonsils look fine. Now, would you like to discuss anything else while we're here?"

It took a moment for Junior to catch on to what Cliff was doing, but once he did, he broke into a smile.

"Honestly, you're free to ask me anything that you want and I'll do my best to help you. But now I'm legally bound not to share anything that you tell me. It just gives you an added layer of protection..."

"Like those pantyliner things that they're always advertising?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Just like that." Cliff chuckled.

The chatter of the television became noticeable as Cliff waited for Junior to formulate his question.

"I've been wanting to find someone to ask about this stuff for a long time, and now I don't know what I want to ask first."

"You can ask me whatever you want, whenever you want."

"Do I have to pay you a dollar each time?"

"No. I'm your doctor from now on, until you say that I'm not. And even then, I still wouldn't legally be allowed to break confidentiality."

"Okay. I just thought of one. When you're shaving, how far down are you supposed to shave before you stop?"

"That's one of those things that comes down to personal choice, but if you're interested, I'll tell you my thoughts on the subject."

Junior immediately nodded.

* * * * *

After a discussion of several things related to male hygiene, some of them rather personal, Cliff felt that Junior was comfortable enough that he might be able to introduce a more sensitive subject.

"Would you mind if I asked you something?"

"Do I have to answer?"

"No. I guess not. I was just kind of curious about what was bothering you when you brought us breakfast in bed this morning. I could see that you were upset about something but there's no way that I can try to fix it if I don't know what's wrong."

"I don't know what that was." Junior said frankly, "I mean, I know that you and Ben are a gay couple and that's never bothered me. Honestly, I don't even think about it. But then I saw the two of you in bed and... I don't know, I guess it became 'real' or something. It's not like I was

grossed out or anything like that, it's just that... I don't know. I saw you two in bed and... the way I look at you changed."

"In a bad way?"

Junior thought about that for a moment, then said, "I don't know if it's good or bad. It's like before, I had this one label on you, and then when I saw you like that, all of a sudden, that label wasn't right anymore and I had to figure out what the new label was."

"What label did you come up with?"

"I don't know. In fact, I don't even know what the old label was, I just know that how I thought about you and Ben changed all of a sudden and it kinda threw me for a minute."

"I can accept that. Let me know if you figure out what the new label says, I'd be interested to know."

Junior nodded that he would.

"So, do you have any questions about male sexuality or anything along those lines?"

"No. They talk about stuff like that at school all the time. I've seen slideshow presentations, videos and even a puppet show about that. But it's the stuff that you're supposed to do every day to keep yourself clean and healthy that they just kind of figure that someone else already told you about."

"Remember. I'm your doctor, now. You can ask me anything."

"Okay. I will."

* * * * *

When the phone rang, Cliff immediately reached over to the side table and picked it up.

"Grant-Stone residence."

"*Cliff, is that you?*"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"*It's Ron Cooper. Were you serious about helping me out if I needed you?*"

"Yes. Of course. What did you need, Ron?"

"*Is there any way you could drive over here... and bring your medical bag?*"

"Sure. I guess so. What's up?"

"*My usual pediatrician has other commitments right now and I need an honest evaluation. Are you up to it?*"

"Yes. Are you at the home?"

"*Yeah. I hate to ask, but I've got a funny feeling and... just get here as quick as you can.*"

"I'm on my way."

"*I'll see you in a few minutes. Thanks.*" Ron said before hanging up the phone.

* * * * *

"Is something wrong?" Junior asked with concern.

"Mr. Cooper just needs me to look at one of the kids at the home." Cliff said as he stood, then

thought to ask, "Would you keep an eye on the boys while I'm gone?"

"I guess so."

"Just watch after things and if you have any problems you can go to Ben and let him know and he'll take care of it."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Thanks, Michael." Cliff said warmly, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

Junior could see through the window as Cliff pulled out of the driveway.

Since he had been talking with Cliff, he really didn't have anything going on and didn't know what to do next. The children's program on the television wasn't of any interest to him. From the way that Jody was paying all his attention to the Lego blocks, he guessed that no one else was interested in it either.

As Junior watched, he noticed that Jody seemed to be taking each individual Lego block out of the carrying container and examining it carefully.

"Do you want to know what else you can do with those?" Junior asked as he moved off the couch so that he was sitting on the floor with Jody.

It took a moment for Jody to realize that Junior was talking to him.

"Watch this." Junior said as he picked up two of the blocks and snapped them together.

Jody stared in wonder at what Junior had just done.

After a moment of hesitation, Jody experimentally picked up two more blocks and duplicated Junior's accomplishment.

"If you snap a bunch of these together, you can make a house or even a little city, if you want."

"Can we do this?" Jody asked as he picked up the container and showed Junior the picture on the side.

"I don't know, but we can try." Junior said simply, then added, "Go ahead and dump all the blocks out where we can see them and we'll see what we can do."

Jody's eyes lighted with delight at the thought, then he quickly poured the remaining contents onto the floor between them.

In the background was the chatter of the television and the clickety-click of JD studiously typing on his little laptop.

* * * * *

Junior lost all track of time as he and Jody worked together to reconstruct the princess and pony scene depicted on the side of the Lego box.

"Did I miss anything?" Cliff asked as he walked into the room.

Junior looked at him with surprise, then over at the clock above the television.

"No. We've been doing this since you left."

"It looks like you've got quite a project going there. I like that." Cliff said with a smile as he

walked to his customary place on the couch and sat down.

"Was it a big problem at the home?"

"Mr. Cooper just wanted for me to look at one of the new kids, to be sure that she was alright." Cliff said simply, then thought to ask, "Did you guys leave me any lunch?"

"We haven't had lunch yet." Junior answered, then realized that it was long past time.

"Hmmm. I wonder what we can do about that." Cliff said speculatively, then looked at JD with a smile.

"Junior, can you help me?" JD asked as he closed the lid on his little laptop.

"Yeah, just tell me what I need to do." Junior answered as he stood.

"Jody. I'm going to need lots of bread buttered." JD said as he looked at his younger brother.

Without a word, Jody automatically stood to help JD prepare the meal.

"Do you need my help with anything?" Cliff asked, fairly certain that he already knew the answer.

"Could you go and check on Daddy? He hasn't come out of his room since breakfast." JD asked as he started walking toward the doorway.

"How long do you figure until lunch is ready?"

JD paused in the doorway for a moment and finally answered, "About twenty minutes."

"I'll let him know." Cliff said as he got up from the couch.

* * * * *

After a gentle knock on the door, Cliff quietly stepped in and asked, "How's it going?"

"I'm making good progress. I can't believe that I let things get this far behind." Ben said honestly, then noticed the time and said, "I got so busy that I forgot lunch! The boys must be starving by now."

"Actually, I think that they all got so involved in what they were doing that they forgot, too. All three of them are in the kitchen, fixing it, now."

"I think that if I keep after it, I should be able to get all my work done before dinner, then I'll be able to enjoy the rest of the weekend with you and the boys." Ben said as he stiffly stood.

"I think that everyone is just fine with spending a nice quiet Saturday afternoon doing the things that they enjoy. Just go ahead and take all the time you need. We're doing fine."

"Do you think that we should be in the kitchen to supervise?" Ben asked as he looked toward the door.

"No. I'm sure that Junior's got it under control. JD said that lunch would be ready in about twenty minutes." Cliff assured him, then grinned as he asked, "What do you think we might be able to do in twenty minutes?"

"Right this minute, what I need to do most is to go to the bathroom."

"Not *exactly* what I had in mind."

"I'm sorry. I've been sitting there since this morning. Excuse me." Ben said before dashing away.

Cliff couldn't help but smile as he slowly walked out of the room.

* * * * *

As Cliff drifted into the kitchen, he saw that JD had his troops hard at work and was, himself, working on the countertop beside the stove.

"How's it going in here?" Cliff asked casually.

"Do you still want to help me?" JD asked hopefully.

"What do you have for me to do?"

"I'm heating the potatoes from last night in the microwave. When they're done, could you kind of just smash them a little, then dump them into the electric skillet?"

"Whenever you ask for my help, it seems to be to do something aggressive. Are you trying to tell me something?" Cliff asked with a smile as he walked to the sink to wash his hands.

"I think you're big and strong. That's just the best way I can think of to use it." JD said simply before turning his attention back to the electric skillet before him.

"I can accept that." Cliff said with a chuckle, then saw that Junior was stationed at the griddle, toasting hamburger buns.

Beside him, JD had the electric skillet filled with loose lunchmeat style ham.

"It looks like the electric skillet is in use." Cliff said frankly.

"By the time you're done with the potatoes, it won't be." JD said simply, then hopped down off his chair and ran to the refrigerator.

"How you doin, Squid?" Cliff asked as he drifted over to the kitchen table where Jody was buttering hamburger buns.

"JD says that I gotta hurry cause Junior needs these done."

"Yes. It's best not to mess with JD's timetable." Cliff said with a grin.

The sound of the doorbell caused everyone to look up at the same time.

"I'll get it." Cliff said simply, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Zeb! It's wonderful to see you. How are you doing today?" Cliff asked as he stood back to invite Zeb into the house.

"I'm doing fine. I got ready for work a little bit early and thought that I'd stop by and see how you're doing."

"Actually, we got thrown a little behind schedule, so we're just making lunch. Everyone's in the kitchen." Cliff said as he automatically led the way.

* * * * *

When Cliff walked into the kitchen, he was happy to see that Ben had joined them.

"Look who came to visit." Cliff said pleasantly.

"Zeb!" JD said happily and jumped off his chair so that he could run over and give Zeb a big hug.

"You remember Jody, don't you?" Ben asked as he gestured toward the table where Jody was

looking back at them uncertainly.

"Yeah. Hi." Zeb said and waved at him.

Jody waved uncertainly in return.

"Zeb, I'd like for you to meet Junior." Cliff said pleasantly.

"Did you adopt him, too?"

"Just about." Cliff said playfully, then said more seriously, "Junior's visiting for the weekend, but even so, we're still counting him as a member of the family."

"It's nice to meet you, Junior."

"Nice to..." Junior began to say when he was interrupted.

"Junior, your buns!" JD barked.

"What? Oh!" Junior said and frantically started pulling toasted hamburger buns off the new electric griddle.

"If you will excuse me, JD has a job for me to do." Cliff said as he walked to the sink to wash his hands again.

"Come on over to the table, Zeb, and tell us what's going on." Ben said invitingly.

"Nothing really. I just got up and got ready for work and realized that I was really early... I just thought I'd stop by..." Zeb trailed off with a shrug.

"Have you eaten?"

"No. I was going to..."

"JD, do we have enough for one more?"

"I wouldn't be much of a cook if we didn't." JD immediately responded, then called out, "Jody, can you butter one more bun for me?"

"Okay." Jody automatically responded.

"Really. You don't need to go to the trouble." Zeb tried to explain.

"Trouble? I have a feeling that JD thrives on chaos." Ben chuckled.

When the timer on the microwave beeped, Cliff immediately walked over to it and as he was reaching for the handle, JD quickly said, "Pappa, those things steam really hot. You'll need a mitt."

"Yes, sir." Cliff said as he moved to the drawer where the towels and potholders were kept.

After looking around at the bustling chaos of the kitchen, Ben cautiously asked, "Do you need any help with anything?"

"Would you set the dining room table? With this many people, I think we should eat in there." JD asked before hopping down off his chair, then dragging it quickly over to the sink.

"Yeah. I'd be happy to." Ben said as he got up from his place at the kitchen table.

"Are they all ready?" Junior asked Jody as he ran to the kitchen table with an empty plate.

"Yeah." Jody said as he set his butter knife aside and started loading the buttered buns onto the plate.

"Thanks, Jody. Those look good." Junior said before hurrying back to the griddle.

"What did you mean by 'smash'?" Cliff asked as he looked at the potatoes in the bowl.

"You're not trying to kill them, just make them sorry that they ever met you." JD said as he ran to the refrigerator.

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"You start with something round and make it flat with one hit. It doesn't have to be perfect, just whack it and move on." JD said as he carried the salad from the previous night's dinner and placed it on the island.

"Okay. I think I can do that." Cliff said, then started looking through the utensils to try and decide which one might do the job best. When he came across a wooden mallet, he smiled.

"JD, is your electric skillet supposed to be smoking like that?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's just right. It's ready for Pappa's potatoes." JD said as he began to clean and wash a head of lettuce in the sink.

"Do you want me to do the lettuce?" Jody asked as he approached his brother.

"No. I'm only using a little bit so this will just take me a minute." JD said as he hopped off the chair, then ran the dripping head of lettuce over to the island.

As he was turning around, he saw that Jody was scooting the chair over to the island for him.

"Thanks, Squid." JD said gratefully and climbed onto the chair as soon as it was placed.

"Do I need to do anything to the smashed potatoes before I put them in the skillet?" Cliff asked as he crossed the room.

"No. Just dump them in." JD said as he ripped lettuce at a rapid pace.

After dumping the potatoes, and waiting for the resulting hiss of steam, Cliff asked, "Do I need to stir them?"

"Nope. That's it. I'll finish them off when I'm done here." JD said as he finished ripping up the lettuce.

When JD looked down beside him, he saw that Jody was looking up at him hopefully; wanting something more to do.

"Will you wash your hands, then toss the salad for me?" JD asked his younger brother with a smile.

"Yeah!"

"You'll need your own chair, I'm going to need this one." JD said as he hopped down.

"Okay." Jody said as he hurried toward the table.

"JD, I'm just about done with the bread." Junior said as he carefully moved toasted buns to a plate.

"Good. Then take the meat that I already heated and make piles of it on the griddle, each one about the size of a bun. When you've got six, then put a slice of the cheddar cheese on each of them. When you're done with that, put a top bun on top of the cheese, so it will trap the heat and make it melt." JD said while he was moving his chair so that he'd be in front of the electric skillet.

"How..." Junior began to ask.

"Use the tongs." JD said as he started to turn the 'smashed' potatoes.

"Right." Junior said as he noticed that the utensil had already been set out beside the griddle for him.

"I told you that you'd be learning some cooking, whether you wanted to or not." Cliff chuckled as he washed his hands again.

"I don't know what I'm learning, except to always listen to JD." Junior said with a grin as he proceeded to do what JD had told him.

"When it comes to cooking, I'm learning that too."

"Junior, are they ready?" JD asked suddenly.

"Just about." Junior answered as he hurried to finish.

"Then all that's left is to use a turner spatula to pick up the meat and put it on the bottom buns. You can hold it by the top bun to balance it as you move it." JD said simply as he started to pull the fried potatoes out of the skillet.

"What do you need help with?" Cliff asked as he looked around.

"Would you help Jody clean up?" JD asked without looking up from the potatoes.

When Cliff looked toward the island, he couldn't help but smile at the little boy up to his elbows in salad greens.

"I think that's as mixed as you're going to get it." Cliff said as he approached, then gently asked, "Would you like for me to carry you over to the sink so you can get washed up?"

Jody looked at Cliff for a long thoughtful moment, then nodded energetically.

"Come on, Angel." Cliff chuckled as he picked the boy up off the chair.

"What do I do now?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Take those into the dining room and put them in the middle of the table, then sit down. It's ready." JD said as he moved his bowl of potatoes near the edge of the counter before he climbed down off the chair.

"Let's go into the dining room. It looks like they're just about ready." Ben said to Zeb as he passed through the kitchen with a drink in each hand.

"Are you ready for the salad to go in?" Cliff asked as he worked on getting the last traces of lettuce off of Jody's arms.

"Yeah. And grab the dressing in the gravy boat on the top shelf in the fridge. I made it just for this meal." JD said as he walked through the kitchen carrying his potatoes.

"You look like you're good to go." Cliff said as he gave Jody a firm hug before setting him down on the floor.

Cliff glanced toward the stove. There was no doubt that some intense cooking had been going on, but he could see that both the electric skillet and the griddle had not only been turned off, but were also unplugged. So he decided that everything else that needed to be done in the kitchen could wait until after they'd eaten.

* * * * *

"So, Zeb, how are things going?" Ben asked as everyone settled in around the dining room table.

"Things are great. I guess one of the reasons that I got ready for work so early is because I can't wait. Now that I don't have to worry about Rex acting like a jerk, I'm looking forward to going to my job."

"Zeb was having some problems with a bullying coworker." Cliff explained to Junior.

"That's one of the things that I'm worried about when I get a job." Junior said honestly.

"Junior's going to be finishing high school in a few months, so he's going to have to find a job so that he'll be able to move out on his own." Ben told Zeb quietly.

"This is good!" Jody said suddenly.

The boy's exclamation drew everyone's attention in time to see him take another large bite of his toasted ham and cheese sandwich.

There was a long silent moment as everyone enjoyed their food. It was finally broken by Junior timidly saying, "Zeb is an unusual name. Is it short for something?"

"Zebediah." Zeb said simply, obviously used to having to answer the question.

"It must be nice to have an interesting name like that. Mine is Michael. It's so boring that no one remembers it."

"I used to hate my name, but whenever I'd say something about it, my sisters would jump all over me and tell me that my name was a lot better than theirs, so I wasn't allowed to complain about it."

"Were their names bad?" Junior asked curiously.

"I don't think so, but they got teased a lot at school, so I guess maybe they were."

"What are their names?" Junior asked before taking a bite of his smashed potatoes.

"Gomer and Dorcas."

"Yeah... Okay, Michael's not so bad." Junior finally admitted.

"Neither is Zeb." Ben said with a smile.

"How are you doing for time, Zeb? You're not running late, are you?" Cliff asked cautiously.

Zeb glanced at his watch before saying, "I was planning to stop somewhere to eat before I went into work today. Thanks to you feeding me, I don't need to rush."

"I'm glad it worked out that way." Cliff said with a smile.

"What kind of work do you do?" Junior asked curiously.

"Usually I'm a cashier. Sometimes they put me to doing other things." Zeb said casually.

"Do they need any help?"

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Then there's only one job that they'd hire you for, that's cart clerk. It pays minimum wage and you don't get many hours. As far as I know, they're not hiring right now, but I'll keep my eyes open for you."

"I'm going to do some asking around at work." Cliff said seriously. "I'm sure that between us, we'll find you a decent job."

"Thanks. I'm just worried about what's going to happen when I graduate." Junior said honestly.

"What are your grades like, Junior?" Ben asked curiously.

"They're usually pretty good, I guess."

"Have you thought about going to college?"

"No. You've got to have money to do something like that. I'm worried about having a place to live in a few months."

"There's all kinds of grants and scholarships that can help you. If you can get financial aid and a part time job, you might be able to manage."

"And if you're able to get a degree, then you'll be likely to get a much better job once you're done with college." Cliff said with a nod.

"I like my job, but there's no future in it. If I had the chance to go to college, I'd do it." Zeb said honestly.

"Have you looked into it?" Ben asked curiously.

"No. I've mostly been focused on keeping a roof over my head and food on the table." Zeb said frankly.

"It's been a few years since I was in college, but I think I still remember a few things about the process." Ben said slowly, then glanced at Cliff.

"It's been longer for me, but I work with a few people who've been through it recently. In fact, Brynna is just about finished with community college and will be moving on to start on her bachelor's degree this summer. I could ask her for some advice or maybe even arrange it so that you could meet with her, since she has up-to-date experience on how these things work."

"Do you really think that I could go to college?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Sure. I don't see any reason why you couldn't." Ben said honestly.

"But college is for rich kids. I don't have any money at all. They'd never let me in."

"They'll never let you in if you don't try. But I think that if we all put our heads together, we might be able to come up with a way to make it happen." Cliff said seriously.

"That is, if you want to. Going to college 'just to go' sounds like a recipe for disaster. You'll need to go into it with a vision so that you'll have something to fight for and a goal to reach." Ben added.

"I never even thought about me being able to go to college before. I'm going to have to think about it." Junior said in an overwhelmed tone of voice.

"The same goes for you, Zeb. If you're interested, we'll do some investigation and see what options are available to you." Cliff said in his direction.

"I'm like him. I haven't even dreamed about it, so I don't know what I'd do if I got the chance to go." Zeb said quietly.

"For now, just think about it. Take some time to investigate the possibilities and dream about what you'd like to do, when you've got the credentials to do what you want." Ben said warmly.

"Zeb, how are you doing for time?" Cliff asked cautiously.

After a glance at his watch, Zeb said, "It's getting close. I should be leaving soon."

"JD, this is an amazing lunch. Thank you." Ben said with a warm smile at his son.

"It wasn't just me. Everyone helped."

* * * * *

After seeing Zeb to the door, Cliff pulled Ben aside and quietly asked, "You need to go back to work now, don't you?"

"Yeah. But just for a few hours. I'm almost done."

"Why don't you go ahead and get started and I'll see that the kitchen gets cleaned up?"

"So, no tinkering in the garage today?"

"I need to save something for tomorrow." Cliff said warmly, then got more serious and said, "Enough stalling. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll finish."

* * * * *

When Cliff walked into the dining room, he was happy to see that the boys had already cleared the table.

Walking into the kitchen, he found Junior stationed at the sink while JD was instructing Jody on how to properly position the dishes in the dishwasher.

"Do you guys need any help?"

After a moment to consider, JD finally said, "I think we've got it."

Cliff accepted him at his word and took a seat at the kitchen table so that he could watch them work.

* * * * *

"Spider, can you come over here for a minute?"

It took a moment, but once JD was certain that Jody and Junior knew what needed to be done, he hurried to the table to see what Cliff wanted.

"Have you thought about dinner, yet?"

"Not really. We used up the leftovers from last night, so it'll have to be a full meal."

"Well, after the production that you put on for lunch, I was thinking that none of us is probably going to get hungry until later tonight, and even then, we're probably not going to be in the mood for an elaborate meal."

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

"So, what would you think about having pizza delivered?"

"I like pizza, but I wanted to do special things since Junior's here."

"But special things stop being special when that's all you do. Besides that, it's entirely possible that Junior will look on pizza as being something special."

JD slowly nodded again.

"I just wanted to go ahead and talk to you about this now, before you had the chance to make

any elaborate plans. Besides, there's nothing saying that we can't change our minds and throw together a Peking Duck, at the last minute."

"We don't have any plums." JD said absently as he thought over Cliff's proposal.

Cliff smiled at the statement, then waited for JD's reaction.

"Is it okay if I ask Junior about it, or did you want it to be a surprise?"

"I suppose it would be best to ask. It's always possible that Junior doesn't *like* pizza."

"Okay. Thanks Pappa." JD said as he rushed forward and gave Cliff an unexpected hug.

Cliff chuckled with surprise.

After a moment of hugging, JD broke away, then hurried across the kitchen to talk with Jody and Junior.

A few minutes later, JD happily announced, "They both like pizza!"

* * * * *

Ben finally finished his work in the early evening and ventured into the living room to find what was possibly the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

On the couch, Cliff was sitting and reading the proof copy of JD's book.

At the other end of the couch, JD was typing with single-minded dedication.

On the floor by the coffee table, Jody and Junior had an elaborate little house built and they seemed to be in the process of building another.

Ben stood in the doorway for long minutes, just drinking in the sight and appreciating everything that he had been blessed with.

* * * * *

When Cliff looked up from his book and noticed Ben, standing in the doorway, he quietly asked, "Are you done?"

"Yes. I'm free for the rest of the weekend."

"Then why don't you come over here by me? I've been missing you."

"I know. I'm sorry. I feel like I should have been able to keep up with everything so it wouldn't interfere with our weekend..."

"Shhh... I wasn't accusing you of anything. It is what it is. I was just saying that I've been missing you."

After a moment to consider, Ben quietly said, "I've been missing me, too."

"What's that?" Cliff asked curiously at the unusual statement.

"The person who I was, who I've always been, seems to have been consumed by 'Daddy'." Ben said distantly, then continued, "Do you remember when we were 'us', not just Daddy and Pappa?"

"How do you mean?

"I don't know. I feel like I'm going insane. It's like I'm losing myself, I'm losing everything that I was. I used to be a writer, a guest speaker, and a respected contributor to various magazines."

"Don't forget 'hot sexy lover'."

"Now I'm 'daddy', twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Who I was is gone and this is all that's left."

"It sounds like you need to get away."

"No. I'm not saying that. I love the boys. Please don't think for a minute that I don't want them here or that I want to leave them. I'm just saying... I don't know what I'm saying. I just feel like everything that I've worked my entire life to achieve is slipping away from me, and I don't know what to do to stop it."

"Love, I'm not talking about you leaving the boys, at least, not for more than a few hours. But I think you're right. I get a break from it when I go to work each day, so it doesn't hit me as hard. I think you need some time off every now and then." Cliff said thoughtfully, then broke into a smile as he said, "What would you think if, one night this week, we went out to dinner at a shamefully expensive restaurant, then maybe to a movie or a club for a few hours?"

"We can't. The boys need us to be here."

"What if we got Junior to stay with the boys? He's mature and responsible. The boys love him. We can give him my cell phone number so that he can call if he has any problems or questions."

"They *do* love him... And I think he'd appreciate the chance to earn some extra money."

Cliff sat forward on the couch so that he could see around Ben, then asked, "Junior, how would you feel about coming over on Wednesday night to stay with the boys while Ben and I go out for the evening?"

"Yeah. Sure. That sounds like fun."

"How does fifteen dollars an hour sound?"

"For what?"

"For babysitting."

"Really? I mean, yeah. That sounds great!"

"I'll pick you up from the home on Wednesday just after five."

"I'll be ready."

Cliff rested back into the couch, then turned to Ben and asked, "Is that okay with you?"

"Now you ask."

Cliff quirked an eyebrow and waited.

"Yes. That's very okay with me."

"Good." Cliff said happily, then added, "Next, we're going to have to work out something so that you can get a little time for yourself during the week, so you don't have to play catch-up on the weekend."

"I don't know what we can do."

"Maybe Zeb would like to earn a little extra money watching the boys during the day so that you can work?"

"No. I mean, we should talk to him about it and see if he'd be willing to do it, just as a fallback position if Junior isn't available sometime. But I wouldn't want to pay someone to

watch the boys while I'm working. It sort of defeats the purpose of working at all when what I earn gets paid right back out in babysitting wages."

"Maybe we can set up some sort of a nanny arrangement or something like that."

"Whatever we're going to do, we're not going to do it before Christmas, so let's not worry about it right now."

"When did you want to do the Christmas decorations?"

"I was thinking that tomorrow might be the perfect time. That way Junior could be included."

"I like that plan."

"Thanks for being so understanding." Ben said as he cuddled into Cliff's side.

"I love you. Understanding is part of the deal." Cliff said before turning to give Ben a quick but gentle kiss.

"Pappa? Can we have pizza now?" Jody asked hopefully as he cautiously walked toward the couch.

"Of course, Angel. Would you ask everyone if they'd like pepperoni or if they'd like something else?"

"Uh huh!" Jody happily responded, then hurried over to ask Junior and JD what they wanted.

* * * * *

The pizzas were ordered, delivered and promptly eaten.

Although everyone absolutely adored JD's cooking, the simplicity and ease of having pizza delivered was an absolute joy. To top it off, it was some really good, tasty pizza.

Once the pizzas were consumed, everyone settled back to enjoy their individual projects in the group setting.

Ben had taken out his laptop.

When Cliff looked at him with concern, Ben explained that he felt like 'writing for pleasure'.

If Cliff hadn't already known what that meant, one look at JD, tapping away on his keyboard, was evidence of how immersive and entertaining writing could be.

Cliff noticed that when Junior and Jody completed recreating the scene depicted on the front of the Lego box, Junior made suggestions of how they could modify the design and also made up simple little stories that they could act out using their princesses and ponies. Cliff watched with a tender smile as Junior, in essence, taught Jody how to play.

* * * * *

"Would you look at how late it is!" Ben said suddenly, snapping them all out of whatever spells they had fallen under.

"When did that happen?" Cliff asked with surprise.

"Boys, bath time."

"Can Junior go with us?" Jody asked timidly.

"Sure. If he wants to."

"Do you want to? Please?"

"Yeah. Do you want to do the bubble soap again like last night?" Junior asked as he stood.

"Yuh huh." Jody said as he hurried to stand up, then forced his hand into Junior's.

"JD, are you coming with us?" Junior asked as he walked to where JD was typing.

"I've got an ogress to finish off before I can stop. It'll just take me a couple minutes."

"We'll go ahead and get the water started." Junior said with a smile, then led Jody out of the room by the hand.

* * * * *

When JD was finally finished with his typing and was in the process of shutting down his netbook, Ben quietly asked, "So, how's the story going?"

"It sounds good in my head. I'll have to read it tomorrow and see how it sounds for real."

"I know how that is."

"Pappa, you were right about the pizza. After the lunch we had, the pizza was really good for dinner." JD said as he set his laptop on the shelf under the coffee table.

"Are you going to need to charge your netbook tonight?" Ben asked curiously.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. I thought about going in and getting the cord this morning but I didn't want to interrupt you while you were working."

"If you need something like that, don't worry about bothering me. I understand what it's like."

"Okay." JD said easily, then quickly added, "I've got to hurry or Jody's going to be done with his bath before I even get started."

Cliff and Ben watched as JD hurried out of the room.

As soon as they were alone, Ben quietly asked, "Do you want to help me shift the furniture so the boys will have a place to sleep?"

"Sure." Cliff said as he stood.

* * * * *

After hugs and kisses all around, Cliff and Ben finally left the boys in the living room and retired for the evening.

"I love you." Cliff said quietly, once they were both in bed.

"I love you, too."

"I've been thinking about what you said about us becoming 'Daddy' and 'Pappa'."

"What about it?"

"I have the feeling that we might be looking at it the wrong way."

"How so?"

"We *are* 'Daddy' and 'Pappa' now. It's not the situation that we're in. It's something that's happened to change us. I have the feeling that we're both fighting it, trying to hold on to what we were instead of embracing who we're becoming."

"I haven't thought about it like that, but I can see what you're saying."

"Taking this step, having the boys here, it's made us grow into something more than we were

before."

After a long moment to consider, Ben quietly asked, "Are you saying that you think that we might be growing apart?"

"No. I don't think so. We're not to that point yet." Cliff quickly assured him, then continued, "But I think that we *could* grow apart if we don't pay close attention to what we're doing."

"For example..."

"In the rush to adapt our lives to care for the boys, we're each making different decisions and accommodations. Even though we're doing it for the same reasons, it seems as though we might easily end up veering off in different directions."

"What do you suggest that we do about it?"

"I think, for this to work in the long term, that we're going to need to be sure that we keep our focus on each other rather than on the boys."

"That sounds good in theory, but I don't know what you're suggesting." Ben said honestly, then explained, "I don't know what that means in practical terms."

"I'm saying that I think that if we each focus only on the boys and make all of our decisions based on what's best for them, that we'll eventually lose sight of each other and end up leading separate lives."

"But if we focus on *us* first, then we can make our decisions regarding the boys with a unified vision..."

"It sounds kind of simplistic, and it's probably more easily said than done, but I think that it's something that we need to address now, before it can develop into something that could drive a wedge between us."

"Considering what my life has been like the past few weeks, I can see what you're saying about the focus being only on the boys. I guess that it's time for me to take a good long look at my priorities."

"I think that goes for both of us. This has had a lot more of an impact on you than it has on me since I'm not here all the time. But, even though I've tried to be supportive, I don't really know all of what you're going through on a day-to-day basis, so I don't have a clear idea of what I can do to take some of the pressure off of you."

"I don't know either. I've been fighting the change, trying to do things like I've always done them and that's been creating all kinds of stress. I'm not sure what changes need to be made, but now that I'm aware of the problem, I can be on the lookout for things that I can do differently to adjust my life to better fit around my new priorities."

"Remember that I'm here for you, however you need me."

Ben smiled, then turned on his side and gave Cliff a loving kiss.

Cliff enjoyed the kiss, but then reluctantly added, "But I won't be able to help you if I don't know what kind of help you're needing."

"We'll figure it out."

"If we're going to be putting up the Christmas decorations tomorrow, we'd probably better get to sleep. With three boys, it could turn out to be an adventure."

"Every day is an adventure, now."

"Goodnight. I love you."

"I love you, too. Goodnight."

Chapter 13

The electronic chirping of a phone broke the silence in a most unwelcome way.

"What?" Ben asked as he startled awake.

"It must be about one of my patients. Go back to sleep." Cliff said as he turned on his bedside lamp.

"I should have married a nice mortician." Ben grumbled as he closed his eyes.

"Then you'd have to put up with the smell." Cliff said before picking up the phone and saying, "This is Dr. Grant."

When Cliff was silent for a few minutes, Ben wasn't sure if he'd fallen back to sleep or not, but came fully awake when he heard Cliff gravely ask, "How bad are we talking about?"

Ben opened his eyes and looked at Cliff with concern.

"I assume that you're not calling me just to keep me up-to-date on the situation. What do you need for me to do?"

Ben got the sense that whatever Cliff was talking about wasn't one of the run-of-the-mill emergencies that sometimes cropped up to drag tired doctors from their nice comfy beds.

"When?" Cliff asked as he stood and started walking across the room.

Ben had to fight not to interrupt Cliff to demand some answers to all the questions that were buzzing around in his mind.

"I'll be ready." Cliff said before turning off the phone.

Ben watched with concern as Cliff hurried to dress.

"What's going on?"

"I've got something that I need to take care of. Apparently time is an issue." Cliff said before hurrying into the bathroom.

Ben sat and thought while he waited for Cliff to return.

"Who was that?" Ben asked cautiously as Cliff emerged.

"I really can't say." Cliff said regretfully to his beloved partner.

"Is it going to be dangerous?"

"I don't think so. But if things go really wrong, I may need for you to post bail." Cliff said with an apologetic glance in his direction.

"What have you gotten into?"

"There really isn't time for me to explain. I'm asking you to trust me on this. No matter which way things go today, I'll tell you everything when I get home."

"Do you really have to do this? Can't you just say no?" Ben asked as he, too, got out of bed.

"Trust me when I tell you that if I said no, I'd probably regret it for the rest of my life... I've got to go now. If anyone calls asking for me, just tell them that I got called out on an emergency and that you don't know where I'm going." Cliff said as he sat down to pull on his shoes.

"I *don't* know where you're going."

"Yeah. Just like that. I've got to hurry." Cliff said as he finished tying his shoes.

"I love you." Ben said tentatively, not knowing what else to say.

"I love you too." Cliff responded, then pulled Ben into a firm kiss to prove that he wasn't just saying the words.

* * * * *

Ben watched from the bedroom window as Cliff hurried to the curb and climbed into the passenger side of an unfamiliar car.

He glanced back at the bed, debating the idea of trying to go back to sleep. In the end he decided against it. There was simply no way that he was going to be able to sleep while he was worrying about what Cliff was doing.

* * * * *

Although he wasn't consciously aware of any noise or anything being out of place, Junior's eyes opened and he was startled to see a silhouette standing in the doorway, just a few feet away.

"I was just checking on how the boys were doing." Ben explained in a whisper.

"Is everything alright?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Yes. There's nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep." Ben whispered, then withdrew from the living room.

* * * * *

"What are you doing?" Junior asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Making a mess." Ben replied with a half-hearted chuckle.

"I can see that." Junior said as he looked at the floury mess spread over the majority of the kitchen island.

"To be honest, I just needed something to do to work off some nervous energy. Now that I think about it, I probably should have gone downstairs and played some video games. This is going to take forever to clean up." Ben chuckled.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Don't worry about it. It's awfully early. Why don't you try and get some more sleep?" Ben suggested with a smile.

"Why don't *you*?" Junior challenged.

Ben looked carefully at Junior and could see the determination in his eyes.

"Cliff got called away for some sort of an emergency. Even though I'm sure that it's nothing dangerous, it's got me on edge. That's really all there is to it."

"Maybe you'd feel better if you weren't hanging around in here, all by yourself. Even if you don't want to talk about it, just not being alone can make you feel a whole lot better."

Ben considered for a moment, then said, "Company sounds like a good idea."

"Good. Now, can you tell me what it is that you're trying to do here?" Junior asked as he looked at the mess.

"Pie crust." Ben said weakly, then added, "It sounded really simple the way the cookbook described it."

"Maybe we'll have better luck if we work on it together."

"I hope so. Since I had the time, I was wanting to make something really nice that JD and Jody would enjoy."

"I get the feeling that they'd love peanut butter on toast if you made it for them."

"Hopefully, if we put our heads together, we can come up with something a little bit better than that."

"Where do you want me to start?" Junior asked as he gave up on trying to determine what needed to be done first.

"The cookbook is over there by the stove. Would you take a look at the pie crust recipe? I'm sure that I must have missed something." Ben said as he started gathering bowls and canisters.

* * * * *

"Where's Junior?" JD asked in a sleepy voice as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm right here, helping your dad make breakfast." Junior answered.

"Did I sleep too late? If you were going to cook, why didn't you wake me up?"

"We didn't wake you up because we wanted to treat you to a nice breakfast, the way that you've done for us so many times." Ben said frankly.

"But I'd rather cook than eat."

"I realize that, but you know how good it makes you feel when you cook something and everyone enjoys it? Well, give someone else a chance and don't hog all the glory. I want to feel like that too. And maybe so does Junior."

JD considered that for a moment before reluctantly saying, "Yeah. I guess that was kind of selfish of me."

"You are absolutely *not* selfish. Just about everything you do is for someone else, and you enjoy doing it. I'm just saying that it's important to keep a balance. Let us do things for you every now and then so that we can show you how much we appreciate you."

"And if I always do it myself, it stops being special." JD said as he nodded his agreement with Ben's words.

"That's true. And besides all that, if you do all the cooking, when are you ever going to get to try anything new or different?"

"Okay." JD said happily, then started looking around the kitchen as he asked, "What are you making for breakfast?"

"You'll have to wait for it to be served to find out." Ben said with a teasing grin.

"Aww, man!" JD whined.

"If you want to find out what Junior and I made for you, then you'd better go wake Jody and see that both of you are dressed and ready to start the day. We'll probably have breakfast on the table before you're done." Ben said with a smile.

JD seemed to be about to argue, but instead turned and dashed out of the kitchen.

"Now I see it." Junior said distantly as he stared at the door that JD had just passed through.

"What's that?" Ben asked curiously.

"What you get out of being here with the boys. At first it looked to me like it was all give and no take on your part. But I think I'm starting to understand."

"I'm just starting to understand it myself, Junior. But all I can tell you is that it feels right."

* * * * *

"Is it ready?" JD asked hopefully as he raced into the room.

Before Ben could answer, Jody rushed into the kitchen and thrust his arms into the air.

"Good morning to you, too, my angel." Ben said as he picked Jody up and gave him a firm hug.

When Ben looked back toward JD, he noticed that he was impatiently waiting for an answer.

"If you're ready to eat, go ahead and take a seat at the table." Ben said happily.

JD hurried to take his place, then waited impatiently as Ben carried Jody to a chair and sat him down.

"Do I need to wake up Pappa?" JD asked suddenly.

"No. Your pappa got called out this morning. He'll be back later." Ben said as he turned to walk to the stove.

"It's Sunday. Isn't it his day off?" JD asked, obviously wanting to understand.

"Your pappa's a doctor. Every now and then one of his patients needs him outside of business hours. When that happens, he does his best to be there for them so that he can help them. Not every doctor does that. It's one of the things that shows what a special person your pappa really is." Ben explained while taking a pan out of the oven and carrying it back to the table.

After placing the pan in the center of the table, Ben looked around, waiting for a reaction.

"We're having pie for breakfast?" Jody asked uncertainly.

"It's a quiche." JD informed him, then added, "I usually think of quiche as being more of a 'brunch' thing. But that's probably just because it takes so long to cook."

Ben cut the quiche into wedges, then slowly began to give portions to everyone at the table.

"Don't eat it just yet, Jody. Give it a minute to cool off. I wouldn't want for you to burn your mouth." Ben warned as he put a slice on Jody's plate.

"You made the pie crust yourself, didn't you?" JD asked as he carefully examined the food placed before him.

"Yes. Well, Junior and I did. How can you tell?" Ben asked curiously as he took his seat.

"Store bought pie crust is either paper thin or already formed in the pan with fancy crinkled ridges." JD said honestly.

"I think we were pushing our luck getting it that thin." Junior said frankly.

"I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with it. Lock used to say that when you get something that's not exactly perfect, you know that someone took the time and trouble to make something special for you with their own two hands, rather than open a can or defrost something from the freezer." JD said with a slight wistful smile.

"I think it's had enough of a chance to cool. Go ahead and give it a try, just remember to go slow and be careful." Ben said, mostly to Jody, then added, "Blow on it if it's still too hot."

Jody looked around the table to see which utensils everyone else was using then picked up a fork.

He still tended to hold the fork like he was going to use it to stab someone, but beyond that little idiosyncrasy he seemed to have figured out how to make it work reasonably well.

JD carefully took a bite, then after a moment of chewing, he closed his eyes and slowly said, "Spinach, onion... I taste some swiss, but there's another cheese. I don't know what that is."

"Muenster." Ben said with a smile.

JD slowly nodded.

"I'm glad with all the work that we did that it turned out this good." Junior said happily.

"Quiches can be very forgiving. You can modify them a dozen different ways and they'll usually turn out alright. Of course, if you start out with a bad crust, there's very little you can do to salvage it." Ben said honestly.

"This is the kind of pie crust that Lock always liked. He said that it tastes 'real'." JD said seriously.

Ben looked around the table to see how everyone was doing. When his gaze stopped on Jody, the boy cheerfully announced, "This is good!"

* * * * *

When breakfast was over, Ben automatically went to start doing the dishes. Although JD tried to convince him that since he had cooked, he shouldn't have to, Ben finally got him to go into the living room with Jody and Junior.

The earlier flour fiasco notwithstanding, Ben and Junior had 'worked clean' throughout most of their breakfast preparation and there really wasn't that much to do.

Once everything was cleaned up, he walked to the living room and stopped in the doorway. JD was studiously typing on his little laptop, using his typing lessons for all they were worth.

Jody and Junior were sitting beside the coffee table and seemed to have exactly recreated the scene from the front of the Lego box in every putrid pink princessy detail.

A sudden thought assaulted Ben and he hurried away from the living room.

* * * * *

"I don't know if you guys are interested, but I thought Jody's princess might like a new house or a car. Do you think you can do anything with this?" Ben asked as he placed a large blue tub of Legos between Junior and Jody on the floor.

Ben had expected Jody to be excited and to react joyfully.

Nothing prepared him for the silent boy, frozen in place.

"Do you want some help with it?" Junior asked cautiously, as mystified as Ben at Jody's lack of reaction.

Tears started welling in Jody's eyes, then proceeded to fall down his cheeks.

"What's wrong, Jody?" Ben asked in a whisper as he knelt at the boy's side.

Jody didn't answer verbally, but threw himself at Ben, nearly knocking him over, and hugged him with every ounce of strength at his command.

"You're welcome." Ben said softly as he gently returned the hug.

Jody didn't give any indication that he was going to let go anytime soon and Ben couldn't think of one good reason why he should have to.

* * * * *

After long minutes of hugging, Jody finally let loose of Ben enough to stretch up and kiss him on the cheek.

"So, does this mean that you like your new toy?" Ben asked warmly.

"I like you." Jody answered sincerely.

Ben was taken aback by the response, but it only took him a moment to say, "I like you, too."

Jody hugged him firmly again, but this time just for a moment before he turned his head to look at the blue tub of Legos.

"If you're ready, we can see what we can build with this." Junior offered quietly.

"JD, do you want to help us?" Jody asked hopefully.

Ben glanced at JD and was surprised to find that he wasn't typing and had been paying attention to what Jody was doing.

"Maybe for a little bit." JD said before scooting away from his laptop.

"Do you want to help us, too, Daddy?" Jody asked with an angelic smile.

"I can't think of anything that I'd rather do." Ben said as he shifted around to sit next to Junior.

* * * * *

The Lego session continued on and Ben noticed that JD and Junior seemed to be having nearly as much fun as Jody as they played.

They might have continued on playing into the afternoon if not for an unexpected knock at the door.

Ben's heart raced as he remembered what Cliff had said about 'posting bail'. On his trip from the living room to the front door, a hundred different horrific scenarios played out in his mind.

"Wil? It's not even noon! What are you doing up?" Ben asked with surprise.

"We had a visitor this morning and I needed to talk to someone. I hope you don't mind." Wil said anxiously.

"Not at all. The boys are in the living room, please come in." Ben said as he stood aside to allow Wil and Todd entry.

"Could I talk to you, I mean, in private for a minute? I don't want to talk about this in front of the kids." Wil said nervously.

"Sure, come on into the kitchen. Can I get you anything to drink?" Ben asked as he led the way.

"Do you have any beer?" Todd asked immediately.

Ben looked at him with surprise.

"Wil's been freaking out for the past two hours. I need something to take the edge off." Todd explained.

"I don't think we have any upstairs, but there's probably some in the mini-fridge in the basement." Ben said uncertainly.

"I'll find it." Todd said before breaking away from the pack and heading toward the basement door.

"What's got you so upset?" Ben asked as they walked into the kitchen.

"This guy, I think he said that his name was Hammerstein. He woke us up this morning to deliver a letter." Wil said uncomfortably.

"A summons?" Ben guessed.

"Worse." Wil said gravely, then continued, "It was an invitation to the 'Stone Family Christmas Celebration'."

Ben looked at him with surprise, then cautiously asked, "What's wrong with that?"

"They found me... or maybe they knew where I was all along. They shut me out of their lives for a whole year and then all of a sudden they want to reel me back in." Wil said grimly.

"Then don't go." Ben said simply.

"Yeah." Wil said, then let out a long sigh before continuing, "The thing is that I really *do* want to go. I want to know how Kirsten is doing and all the rest of the family. I hate myself for even caring, but I do!"

"Then go." Ben said reasonably.

"It's in Orlando." Wil said in defeat.

"And Todd doesn't want to drive you that far?" Ben guessed.

"He probably would if I asked him to, but I wouldn't do that to him. My family is mean and nasty to the people they *like*. I hate to think about how bad they'd treat someone who wasn't related to them at all." Wil said frankly.

"I'm your cousin, remember? I know very well what kind of toxic people we have in our family." Ben said simply.

"Yeah. I didn't forget..." Wil said uncomfortably, then continued, "Actually, if I decide to go, I was wondering if you'd want to go too."

"When is it?" Ben asked cautiously.

"This Thursday." Wil answered immediately.

"Oh, damn. I'm having my eyelids scraped that day. There's no possible way I could reschedule." Ben said with mock aggravation.

Wil blinked with surprise at his answer.

Ben smiled at his expression, then explained, "I can think of several painful and humiliating things that I'd much rather do than spend an evening with our relatives."

"Don't you miss them?"

"Of course I do, but they chose to exile me from the family for being gay. I'll be damned if I'll go back to them asking them to take me back."

"Your family and mine don't get along anymore. So the people who kicked you out won't be there. You won't be asking them for anything."

Ben thought about that for a moment, then said, "I honestly don't have any desire to reconnect with my family. There's a lot of bitterness there... on both sides. The drive to Orlando is miserable and I'm not a lot of fun on a road trip. But if you decide that you *really* want to go, I'll drive you."

"Really?"

"I don't give a damn about them but *you're* my family. I'd do anything for you."

"I'm still not sure if I want to go or not. One minute I'm like 'yeah' and the next I'm all like, 'Oh HELL no'."

"I understand. Just be sure to call me when you come to a decision so I can arrange for a babysitter." Ben said with a gentle smile at his cousin.

"Maybe you should think about bringing the boys along, too. I mean, if you think it'd help. It might do them some good to know that they have more family than just us."

"My first impulse is to keep the boys as far away from that pit of vipers as humanly possible, but since JD has taken the name Stone, I suppose it might be good for him to meet a few of the other members of the family." Ben said thoughtfully, then added more firmly, "I'll have to think about it."

"I'll be sure and call you when I've made a decision either way."

"Why don't you come into the living room and visit with the boys for a few minutes. That way, even if you decide not to go, you'll know that you actually *do* have family."

"Yeah. But first I need to go down and get Todd before he drinks your mini-fridge dry."

As Wil started walking toward the basement door, Ben quickly said, "By the way, good call about not having this talk in front of the boys."

"Yeah." Wil said with a grin at him, before opening the basement door.

* * * * *

"Is this a cop thing or is there a reason why you won't tell me what we're doing?" Cliff asked as Gerry continued to drive.

"There's a reason."

Cliff waited for more, but before he could ask another question, Gerry pulled to a stop at a wrought iron gate.

"This is private property. Please leave." A uniformed security officer said firmly.

"I understand, but I have some urgent business to discuss with Senator Montague. Time is an issue." Gerry stated firmly, yet respectfully.

"Everyone has urgent business. Call his secretary and make an appointment."

"Please just give this message to the senator right away and ask him if he'll give me five minutes of his time." Gerry said as he handed the security officer a sealed envelope.

"Keep an eye on them." The officer said to his partner before walking out of their little guard shack and getting into a golf cart.

"Senator?" Cliff asked in a whisper.

Gerry flashed him a warning glance, then turned his attention back to the security officer who was watching their every move.

* * * * *

Some minutes later the security officer that was watching them received a call on his radio.

After listening for a moment, he released the gate and motioned for Gerry to pull through.

Cliff was impressed with the immaculately kept grounds that led to a sprawling mansion.

"You still haven't told me about what I'm supposed to do." Cliff said informatively.

"I know."

As they pulled up in front of the massive porch, they recognized the security officer that they had first spoken with.

Gerry led the way to the door with Cliff following a step behind.

* * * * *

Not a word was spoken as the group walked through an enormous entry hall and past a curved marble staircase.

To Cliff it seemed like they were just going to keep walking and walking through the seemingly endless mansion, but eventually they arrived at an open door and their escort stood aside and motioned for them to enter.

Without having to be told, Gerry closed the door behind them once they were both inside.

"Senator Montague, before we begin, please allow me to say what an honor it is to meet you in person. I'm sure that when future generations look back on us, you'll be held up as an example for your unwavering stance on 'traditional family values'." Gerry said as he and Cliff approached the senator's desk.

"Thank you for saying so, but since this *is* Sunday morning, do you think that we could dispense with the niceties and cut to the chase?" The senator asked hopefully.

"Yes, sir. Of course. I'm a police detective, Detective Booker from the Tallahassee PD. During the course of an investigation I happened to come into possession of some rather damaging video evidence regarding a certain notable elected official caught in an indiscreet moment.

"I have no desire to damage the official's career, but I'm uncertain how I should proceed with this matter. Since you're a long serving and well respected politician, I was hoping that you might be able to help me do the right thing." Gerry finished hopefully.

"Well, I suppose I'd have to know what type of evidence you were talking about if I'm to know what to do about it." Senator Montague said frankly.

"I thought of that. I brought you a sample of some of what we recovered." Gerry said as he took an unmarked DVD in a plain white paper sleeve out of his pocket and handed it to the senator.

Cliff watched as the senator opened the tray, then inserted the DVD into his computer.

It took a few seconds for the computer to figure out what to do with the DVD, but it eventually started to play.

The video was of poor quality, but it was good enough that Cliff could make out that it was an empty motel room.

A young girl walked into the frame with her back toward the camera.

Although Cliff couldn't see her face, from his experience as a pediatrician, he estimated from the shape of her body that she was probably twelve or thirteen years old.

The senator tapped the keyboard and the video suddenly stopped. "Yes. I am regrettably aware of this. Since you're asking for my advice of what to do with this 'evidence' that you've collected, I will advise you to give it to me and allow me to deal with the matter personally."

"I couldn't trouble you with that. I'll see that it's appropriately disposed of. What I wanted your help with is about the girl that was in the video. She was thirteen at the time the video was made. She gave birth to a child, a son, just a few days after her fourteenth birthday. Unfortunately, there were complications, most likely due to her young age, and she died shortly thereafter." Gerry said carefully.

"How tragic. But what is it that you were wanting my help with?" The senator asked, sounding to be increasingly impatient.

"As you can see from the video, her pimp was in the habit of recording her time with her clients and considered the baby to be a living piece of DNA evidence that he could use to blackmail the child's biological father to keep the entire story quiet."

"Yes. Yes. That's unfortunate, but could we, perhaps, cut to the chase? What do you want from me?"

"All I want is for that girl's illegitimate child to be granted an adoption and have his name legally changed with no questions asked. Not only will that provide the child the possibility of a decent future, but it will also end the long term blackmail that has been paid to the pimp who, until yesterday, had possession of the videos." Gerry said carefully.

"I still don't see what part you expect me to play in all of this." Senator Montague said warily.

"I just thought, with all the political connections that you have, that you might know someone who could expedite an adoption to a gay couple, then permanently seal the records."

"A *gay* adoption? In Florida!? Are you serious?" Senator Montague asked in astonishment.

"If you can make this happen, there will be no public notice given, no attention drawn to it. It's just a simple little family court matter that can be dispensed with in a matter of minutes." Gerry said in a wheedling tone.

"And if I were to find such a 'progressive' judge and encourage him to do as you say, then the rest of the evidence..." The senator let the rest of his question trail off.

"...would go away. No further mention would be made of it and, of course, no further financial obligations would be expected from the official."

"What about the pimp? You didn't say, but do you have him in custody?" The senator asked cautiously.

"Yes. His name is John Davis, but on the street he goes by the name Night. He's been put in with the general population in the county lockup and it seems that word has gotten out that he's been responsible for pimping out a four year old boy to child molesters. I doubt that he's thinking too much about blackmail at the moment and chances are that shortly he won't be in

any condition to reveal anything that he knows. But the fact of the matter is, that even if he *did* talk and someone *did* listen, there wouldn't be any evidence to back up his story." Gerry said confidently.

"Who is this you brought with you?" Senator Montague asked as he looked at Cliff uncertainly.

"I asked Cliff to be present so that he would be aware of everything that was said, and everything that was promised. He hasn't seen the evidence, he's simply a person of good character that I brought here to witness this meeting." Gerry said frankly.

"I suppose that you have to take such precautions these days. Regardless, I may know of someone who owes me a favor to help mitigate the situation with the child. But when it's done, can I be assured that this will be the end of it?"

"Yes, Senator. We have no interest in blackmail, politics or stirring up a media frenzy. We simply want to see this ended once and for all, for the child's sake."

The senator pressed a button on his desk and a moment later, a well-dressed man entered the room from a discreet side door.

"Hawkins, would you show these gentlemen to the breakfast room?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll join you in there, after I've made a few calls." Senator Montague called after them.

* * * * *

Cliff and Gerry were silent as they followed the suited man down hallways through the enormous house.

When they arrived at their destination, both were surprised to see an elegantly dressed woman sitting and sipping coffee.

"This is a surprise. I was expecting Beauregard."

"The senator will be joining you shortly." The man, Hawkins, said formally.

"Honey, you always say that and more often than not I'm left here to sip my coffee on my own."

Hawkins didn't dignify her statement with a response. In fact, from the way that he turned and left the room, it was as though she hadn't spoken at all.

"Please forgive Hawkins. The poor dear was born without a personality. I'm Penelope Montague. Please have a seat and join me for some coffee."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm Gerald Booker and this is Clifton Grant. Please call us Gerry and Cliff." Gerry said as he took the lead and took a seat at the table.

Cliff followed his example, then waited as Penelope moved a little cart to the table side with a complete coffee service.

"I know better than to ask my husband's business associates what they're doing here. But I'd be interested to know a little something about you. You'd think that a senator's wife would have the opportunity to meet new people all the time, but the fact of the matter is that I usually end up getting shuffled off to some dusty back room to gossip with the same six or eight other senators' wives." Penelope said as she poured the coffee.

"Well, there's not much that I can say. I'm a police detective, so the most interesting stories I have to tell are usually about things that I'm forbidden to talk about." Gerry said regretfully.

"I'm a pediatrician, so I have doctor patient confidentiality preventing me from saying very much either." Cliff added.

Penelope looked back and forth between them for a moment, then broke into a smile before saying, "Although I enjoy a good puzzle, I don't think I'm up to the challenge of figuring out what business you might have with my husband."

Cliff looked away, hoping that he wouldn't inadvertently divulge anything with his expression. As he was looking around, something unusual caught his eye.

He glanced at Gerry just in time to catch his attention. As unobtrusively as he could, he pointed at one particular framed picture on the wall.

Penelope noticed and said, "That's our youngest son, Douglas. He was five when that was taken. He's away at college now."

"You must be very proud." Cliff said as he continued staring at the picture.

"We certainly are. Douglas is currently attending Harvard Law. We're hoping that one day he'll be able to step into his father's shoes." Penelope said proudly.

Cliff noticed darkness in Gerry's expression, but decided that he didn't know enough about the man to make any assumptions.

"Do you have any children, Detective Booker?" Penelope asked curiously.

"Not yet. But my wife and I are certainly having fun trying." Gerry answered with a rakish grin.

"What about you, doctor? Any children?" Penelope asked as she picked up a plate of pastries and offered them to Gerry and Cliff.

"Yes. We have two sons..." Cliff started to say, then quickly amended, "..or three, depending on how you look at it."

Penelope looked at him strangely for a moment, then cautiously asked, "How does that work?"

"My sons are five and seven years old. They've sort of adopted a teenager to be their older brother. Fortunately, he's a really good boy and I think that he's going to be a good example for them."

* * * * *

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." Senator Montague said as he walked into the room. Cliff was struck by just how insincere Senator Montague sounded in his apology.

"I bent a few ears and twisted a few arms. Tomorrow at one pm you're going to have a hearing before Judge Steven Hawkes at the Alachua County Courthouse in Gainesville. When you arrive, just mention my name to the bailiff and Judge Hawkes has assured me that they'll work you into their docket." Senator Montague said professionally.

"Thank you, Senator. Thank you for seeing us at such an inconvenient time. We'll get out of your way now." Gerry said to the senator, then turned to his wife and continued. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Montague. Thank you for the coffee and the pleasant conversation. Hopefully we'll be able to talk again soon."

"Yes. That would be nice." Penelope said with a smile.

Without further adieu, Gerry led the way out of the breakfast room, where the uniformed security officer that had escorted them in was waiting for them.

* * * * *

They walked with the officer through the house in silence, their footsteps echoing in the expansive hallways emphasizing the lack of conversation.

When they reached their car, the officer stood and watched them leave.

As they approached the gate, it opened before them. Gerry gave a courteous nod to the officer in the guard shack as they passed.

Once Cliff was assured that the greatest potential for excitement was past, he decided to confirm a few of his suspicions.

"Did you notice how much Jody looked like that picture of Douglas? They could be brothers." Cliff said in what he hoped sounded like a casual inquiring tone.

"Half-brothers, actually." Gerry said simply.

Cliff waited for more, but Gerry didn't seem to be inclined to talk about it.

Just as Cliff was about to prod him for a little more information, Gerry unexpectedly added, "I hope his looks are all he inherited from that family."

Cliff decided that since Gerry had said that much that he might as well go ahead and ask, "Senator Montague is Jody's biological father, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"So the senator had sex with a thirteen-year-old girl?"

"Yes."

"Is that what was on that video?"

"On that one, yes. There were other videos chronicling him in multiple encounters with various girls."

"And you're just going to let him get away with it?"

"That man has a lot more influence than you can imagine. He has some dark and powerful friends in low places, if you know what I mean. You don't want him as your enemy."

"But what's to stop him from raping even more little girls?"

"Nothing at all."

"Shouldn't we do something or tell someone?"

"If you're suggesting what I think you are, you'd be taking on a battle that you can't possibly win. Is it a perfect solution? No. Not at all. But I think it's the best possible thing that we can do for Jody."

"So we go to this judge friend of the senator's and he lets us adopt Jody and then... what?"

"You go forward with your lives like none of this ever happened."

"It just seems so wrong..."

"If you want justice, you're welcome to try. Go get your cape and tights and do what you feel you have to. Just leave me out of it."

"So Jody has to overcome what was done to him while everyone who hurt him and his mother just gets off scot-free?"

"The doctors haven't had enough time to cross their t's and dot their i's, but I'd lay good money that Ruby is nearly eaten up with cancer. Now that she's in lockup and can't 'self-medicate' I expect that she'll probably be suffering for every single minute for the remainder of her miserable waste of a life. Night will be lucky if he survives long enough to stand before a judge. As for the senator... well, sometimes you just have to hope that there is such a thing as karma."

"Why did you bring me along?"

"Just like I told the senator, I brought you so that you'd know what was said and what promises were made. It's not only so that I'll have a witness to back me up if the senator says that I threatened him. It's also because you and Ben may decide to move to the other side of the country or even the other side of the world. I think it's important for Jody's sake, that he have someone with him who knows the whole story."

"What are you going to do with the evidence?"

"Me? Nothing. My partner is taking care of that while we're doing this. If all goes to plan, she and I will never speak of it again. Basically, we're going to do our best to act like it never happened."

"I still feel like justice isn't being served in all of this."

"It's time to put on your big boy pants and accept the fact that sometimes life isn't fair. If everything had proceeded as per standard operating procedures, the evidence would have been catalogued, the senator would have found out about it, everything would have been suppressed and no one would have been better off. Doing it this way, at least Jody *might* have a chance at a decent future with a stable loving family."

After a long thoughtful moment, Cliff quietly said, "I can't decide if you're a hero or a villain in all of this."

"I'm just a guy who found a kid in trouble and gave a damn about what was going to happen to him. My motivation in this begins and ends with Jody."

"If that's true, then why were you willing to take the chance of putting him in danger by doing this at all?"

"You don't understand. Jody has been in danger since the moment he was rescued. If we'd followed procedure and taken Jody to CPS, he'd probably either be dead or permanently missing right now. Not only did I know that Ron would do what's best to help Jody, but also that Night wouldn't know to look for him there."

"Does Ron know about what you're doing?"

"Ron knows what he needs to know to help Jody. He understands that there's more going on than I'm telling him and he knows better than to ask about it."

"I had the feeling that something was going on that I wasn't being told about, but I didn't have any clue that it was this serious."

"Even with Ron's help, there was still a chance that Night would have found you. If Night had been able to find out where Jody had been placed, he and his goons could have shown up on your doorstep at any time. What we just did will hopefully get Jody out of danger, once and for all."

"Is there anything else that we can do to protect him?"

"If I think of anything, I'll do it. I think you've seen enough by now to know that. The best thing you can do right now is to help Jody build up so many good memories that his earlier life will just fade away and be forgotten."

"I think that we're well on our way to making that happen. JD should be *excellent* in helping us with that."

"From what I've seen of him, I'd have to agree."

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Wil and Todd had originally intended to stop in just long enough to get Ben's advice, but once they went into the living room with the boys, any plans that they might have had were forgotten.

Jody and Junior were proudly demonstrating their Lego building prowess while JD occasionally interjected some interesting point about the story he was writing.

Ben didn't even bother asking if Wil and Todd were going to stay for lunch. When the time came, he automatically went into the kitchen to prepare something quick and easy.

Of course, as soon as JD was aware of what he was doing, he immediately went to the kitchen and volunteered to make a salad to go with lunch.

In the end, everyone enjoyed a long and relaxing meal with good food and good company.

None of the others present had any idea of the amount of anxiety that was welled within Ben, seeking an outlet.

* * * * *

After finally seeing Wil and Todd to the door, Ben remembered what else they had planned to do on Sunday.

JD had already gone back to his writing, although he had just started, so interrupting him wasn't quite as much of an issue.

Jody and Junior seemed to be discussing different plans for future Lego construction.

From what Ben could see, there probably wouldn't be a better time to enlist their aid.

"Boys, we've got a job to do and I'm going to need your help." Ben said loudly enough to gain their attention.

All three of them looked up with matching inquisitive looks.

"If you guys can shift the Legos out of the way and put what you're not using back in the tub, I'm going to get you to help me carry things down from the attic." Ben said seriously.

"Jody's little. He can't carry stuff." JD immediately protested.

"There's a lot of things to carry and some of them are little, like Jody. Don't worry. Everyone will have a chance to do their part." Ben assured him.

JD seemed dubious, but closed his laptop before going over to help Jody and Junior clear away their unused Legos.

* * * * *

"Don't tell Ben." Gerry said, breaking the long silence that had fallen between them.

"I'm not in the habit of lying to him. And he's going to want to know about what happened today."

"Just keep in mind that anything you tell him could potentially come back to bite us in the ass. The fewer people brought in on this, the better."

"The minute you brought me in, you brought Ben in, too."

"You're a smart man. I'm going to have to trust you to only say what needs to be said. Remember that if any of this gets out, it will come back to haunt Jody."

"I won't lie to Ben." Cliff said firmly, then continued more quietly, "But there's no reason for me to burden him with every detail."

"Do what you feel that you have to, then do your best to let it go and move on."

"I understand what you're saying. Us obsessing over any part of this will only lead to trouble."

"Right."

* * * * *

"What are we doing?" JD finally asked when he was handed boxes to carry.

"We're getting the Christmas decorations out so that we can set up our Christmas tree. Take those to the living room." Ben answered simply.

"I don't think I've ever done that before." JD said uncertainly as Ben went up the folding stairs back into the attic.

"It's not hard. I helped trim the trees at a few of the different foster homes I was at and it was kinda nice." Junior assured him.

"Here Junior, you get the tree." Ben said as he emerged from the attic carrying a long narrow box that seemed to be in less than pristine condition.

"What am I going to carry?" Jody asked in a small voice.

"I have some very important boxes for you. They're small and light, but they're very special. You get to carry the ornaments." Ben said as he handed the long box to Junior.

"I'll wait for you, Squid." JD assured him, then added, "In case you need any help."

Ben smiled as he went back up the stairs.

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After about a dozen trips each, the boys were looking at the collection of boxes in the living room.

"What do we do now?" JD asked, feeling that they should be doing something more.

"Well, trimming the Christmas tree is a family tradition, so I want for us to wait until your pappa gets home before we do that. Right now, I'm going to shift the furniture around a little

bit and get the tree set up. I thought that while I'm doing that, *someone* might like to make us some Christmas cookies to enjoy."

"Can Junior help us?" JD asked hopefully.

"Well, if he doesn't, then we'll all be snacking on cookie dough." Ben chuckled.

"I like cookie dough." Jody interjected.

"Well then, I bet if you help JD and Junior make the Christmas cookies, that you might get the chance to taste some." Ben said with a warm smile at him.

"Come on!" JD said happily as he led his troops toward the kitchen.

Ben watched them go, then looked toward the door and quietly asked, "Cliff, where are you?"

* * * * *

The sound of the front door opening had Ben on his feet in a heartbeat.

Before Cliff could get the door closed behind him, he was engulfed in a hug and kissed within an inch of his life.

"Everything's fine. I'm alright." Cliff tried to assure his distraught partner.

"What happened? Where did you go?" Ben was finally able to ask.

Before Cliff could answer, he noticed that JD, Jody and Junior were all lined up in the entry hall, and Jody had his arms thrust into the air.

"There's quite a bit to it. I'll tell you all about it once the boys are in bed." Cliff said quietly, then released Ben from the hug so that he could pick up his youngest.

Ben wasn't happy with the answer, but understood that whatever Cliff had to tell him was probably something that the boys would be better off not knowing about.

"We waited until you got home to do the Christmas tree." JD proudly announced.

"Really?" Cliff said with a smile at him as he tried to put Jody down.

Jody was having none of that, so despite what his back might have to say on the matter, Cliff valiantly managed to pick JD up and cuddle him while continuing to hold Jody.

"Do you still have cookies in the oven?" Ben thought to ask.

"Oh crap! I'll get them!" Junior said suddenly as he dashed out of the room.

"Are you hungry?" Ben asked Cliff with concern.

"Ravenous. We drove straight through." Cliff said wearily as he finally gave in to his body's demands and set the boys down.

"From where?" Ben asked cautiously, knowing that Cliff didn't want to talk about what he'd been doing in front of the boys.

"Tampa." Cliff answered simply, then slowly stood back up, massaging his lower back as he did so.

Although Ben wanted to ask more, he knew that it wasn't the right place or time to do so.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll fix something for you." Ben finally said.

"We'll get it!" JD immediately volunteered.

"Okay, Spider. But just remember that you're only cooking for one. Don't start cooking a rack of lamb or anything like that." Ben warned.

"I was actually thinking of beef wellington, but how about a ham and cheese sandwich with salad, instead?" JD asked with a playful smile.

"That sounds incredible, JD. I can't wait." Cliff said warmly, then on impulse leaned down to give the boy a quick kiss on the cheek.

JD had a beaming smile as he raced away to the kitchen with Jody following a step behind.

Finding that they were alone for a moment, Ben cautiously asked, "Is there anything that you can tell me right now?"

"Yes. We're going to have a court hearing in Gainesville tomorrow, so we're going to need to get the boys proper clothes for that." Cliff said seriously.

"Court? For what?" Ben asked in confusion.

"I'll give you the details later. Right now, I need to call Raj and see if he's going to be able to cover my appointments for tomorrow." Cliff said regretfully.

"I missed you." Ben said quietly.

"I missed you, too. But when this is all said and done, I think that you'll agree that it was worth it." Cliff said assuringly.

"I'll just have to trust you on that." Ben said with a weak smile, then added more firmly, "Go make your calls."

* * * * *

Cliff thoroughly enjoyed his sandwich and honestly could have eaten another. However, he knew that the boys had prepared an abundance of Christmas cookies and were waiting for him to join them in the living room before they had any.

Once he was in the living room, the entire family enjoyed cookies and milk, or coffee, for the adults. Once that was done, Ben took charge, enlisting everyone's aid in trimming the Christmas tree.

He delegated duties by height, which seemed to work well.

Both JD and Jody needed a little instruction on how to hang Christmas ornaments without clustering them too tightly together, but Ben was happy to see that Junior had stepped up to help the boys.

In some sense, decorating the tree only seemed to take a matter of minutes. The entire family were working together toward a single goal. But in actuality, time was passing by and there were still a number of things that needed to be done.

Regretfully, Cliff finally announced that everyone needed to get ready to go to the store. Before Junior could go to put on his shoes, Cliff quietly told him that he needed to gather his things so that they could drop him off at the home on the way back from the store.

The devastated look in Junior's eyes was impossible to miss. If Junior had broken down into tears, Cliff would have only been a moment behind him.

Fortunately, Junior was able to keep his emotions in check and went to get his overnight bag.

* * * * *

Although shopping at Target wasn't an unusual thing for the family, each trip seemed to bring its own unique adventure.

The boys were bored out of their minds in the boys clothing department, not the least bit interested about what their parents wanted to buy. Junior, however, drifted away to the men's department and seemed to be enthralled by the selections before him.

Once Cliff and Ben had gathered the essential items that they would need for the court hearing, Cliff casually walked over to Junior and asked, "Do you see anything that you like?"

"Yeah! Everything on this rack is discounted and they've got some really nice stuff!" Junior said in amazement.

Cliff looked at one of the items that Junior had been inspecting and was surprised to see that it was reduced by well over fifty percent.

"Well, since they're such a bargain, why don't you pick out a few things?" Cliff asked reasonably.

"I couldn't let you buy me stuff. It wouldn't be right." Junior said in a conflicted voice.

"Think of it as an early Christmas gift. Go on. We're probably not going to find deals like this very often. It'd be stupid to pass them up." Cliff encouraged.

"Anything I want?" Junior asked in a wavering tone.

"Within reason. Go ahead, Michael. I'll leave you to decide what you want and you can catch up with us in the toy department." Cliff said warmly before walking away.

* * * * *

The visit to the toy department was unlike any of the trips before. Now that Jody better understood what Legos were and what he could do with them, he wanted to inspect every single set that was available.

Ben and Cliff both knew that there was no way that they would be getting out of the store without at least one Lego set in their basket.

* * * * *

After leaving the store, Cliff drove them to a fairly nice chain restaurant where they were able to sit as a family and enjoy a nice, satisfying meal.

Although JD was a bit antsy, since there were women around. He was well insulated from them by his family and was able to get through the meal with minimal discomfort.

As they pulled up in front of the home, any joy that any of them might have been feeling was now absent.

Cliff's original plan had been to pull up out front and let Junior out, then watch to make sure that he was safely inside before pulling away.

However, once the car stopped, the boys got out and gave Junior long, heartfelt hugs. Ben and Cliff also got out of the car, and once the boys were done, they also took their turns hugging Junior.

As Cliff was releasing Junior from their hug, Jody stepped forward and asked, "Junior, can I call you Bubba?"

"Why do you want to call me that?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Because you're not my brother, like JD is, but you're *almost* my brother... you're my bubba." Jody explained reasonably.

"That makes perfect sense." Ben chuckled affectionately.

"Okay, Jody. You can call me Bubba if you want to." Junior said warmly to the boy.

"Now you've got a love name, just like me and Spider." Jody happily announced.

Junior looked at Cliff and Ben with surprise at the announcement.

"It looks like you do." Cliff confirmed with a smile.

* * * * *

"So, can you tell me now?" Ben asked as soon as he and Cliff were alone in their room.

"We went to Tampa..." Cliff began to say, but was interrupted.

"Who is 'we'?" Ben asked seriously.

"Detective Booker." Cliff answered.

"Okay, you and Gerry went to Tampa. Go on."

"We had a meeting with someone who could arrange for a judge to allow us to adopt Jody, then change his name and permanently seal the records." Cliff said carefully.

"Someone? Who is 'someone'?" Ben asked firmly.

"Gerry learned some more details about Jody's history and came up with a plan for us to be able to leave all of that in the past. Me telling you about it will just make it that much more likely that it will continue to haunt us." Cliff quietly explained.

"So, you're not going to tell me?" Ben asked cautiously.

"If there's something that you really want to know, I'll tell you about it. But unless you feel really strongly about it, I'd rather that we just move forward." Cliff said honestly.

"Okay. I guess that I don't need to know everything. But I'd really like to know more about Jody's past. Is there anything you can tell me about that?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Jody's mother was a thirteen-year-old prostitute. She died in childbirth. The woman who held Jody captive apparently had the same pimp." Cliff said carefully, then waited to see if Ben wanted to know more.

Ben thought about that for a moment, then quietly said, "You're right. Let's move forward."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Goodnight."

Chapter 14

Ben gasped as a sudden sense of panic startled him awake. There were a variety of things needing to be done and he couldn't help but feel that they might not be able to get them all done in time.

"Before you say it, I already know." Cliff said from beside him, with his eyes still closed.

"How long have you been awake?"

"I'm not sure if I ever went fully to sleep."

"Are you worried about accepting the responsibility of adopting Jody or is it the unorthodox way that the adoption is being done?"

Before Cliff could respond, Ben continued, "Or is it about some of the stuff that happened yesterday that you haven't told me about. Or do you think maybe he's too traumatized and that we might not be able to get him past all that was done to him?"

"E. All of the above." Cliff quietly admitted as he finally opened his eyes.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I think that I've already said everything that's important about the decision. If I chose not to do this, for whatever reason, I'd never be able to look at myself in the mirror again."

"So are you saying that even though it's really too soon for us to be making this decision, that this might be our only chance to do what's best for Jody?"

"That's the long and short of it."

"Well, if there's no other choice, then I guess that we'll just have to accept it and carry on."

"That's the plan for today. I don't know exactly what's going to happen, but we'll do everything in our power to make it so that Jody will end up being our son."

"What about JD? Isn't it going to look unfair to him that he was here first but Jody is getting adopted and he isn't?"

"As soon as we have Jody's situation settled, I'll get to work on legally adopting JD. Maybe already having an adopted son will make that easier."

"I wouldn't count on it. Remember what Ron told us about the adoption process."

"I know. But I can't imagine us going forward without doing everything in our power to adopt him. Even if it ends up taking years, we're going to do it, without a doubt."

"Then I guess that we'd better get started."

* * * * *

When Ben walked into the kitchen, he was only slightly surprised to see JD and Jody hard at work, making breakfast for the family.

"Did everyone have a good sleep?" Ben asked as he automatically gave JD a hug.

"Squid didn't wake up, even once last night." JD proudly announced.

"Good work, Squid! Give Daddy some sugar." Ben said as he moved to the island and scooped Jody up into a hug.

"Is Pappa going to have breakfast with us?" JD asked hopefully.

"He has some work to do on the computer right now, so that he'll be able to spend the rest of the day with us. But he'll come in and join us when breakfast is ready." Ben explained as he finished his hug with Jody and stood him back on his chair.

Ben then walked to the stove where JD had the electric skillet and griddle, side by side on the countertop by the stove and tried to get a sense of what he was doing.

"I'm about to start the eggs, so breakfast should be ready in about four minutes." JD said quickly, then looked toward Jody and added, "If the toast is done."

"I'm almost done with what you gave me." Jody said as he concentrated on his buttering.

Ben was certain that no toast before had ever been buttered with such dedication and determination.

"Well, if it's almost ready, I'll go get Cliff." Ben finally said with a tender smile as he started toward the door.

"Pappa needs his coffee!" JD announced in a warning tone.

"Of course. Thank you JD." Ben said with a grin as he altered his course toward the coffee maker.

* * * * *

"I can't remember why I ever settled for soggy cereal for breakfast. This is a great way to start the day." Cliff said as he took his seat at the table.

"Were you able to get everything done that you needed to?" Ben asked between bites of food.

"I've done all that I can from here. I'm sure that Raj and Brynna will be able to handle the rest. At least I didn't have many patients scheduled. I usually keep it light on Mondays to allow for extra walk-ins who were able to wait until after the weekend."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Plan? I thought you were coming up with the plan. I've just been busy getting the day off from work." Cliff said playfully, then winked at JD who was looking at him uncertainly.

"I think that since you're the one who knows all of what's going on, you'd probably better take care of it." Ben said with a grin.

"What's going on?" JD asked as he looked back and forth between his parents.

"We need to go to court in Gainesville." Cliff answered simply, then waited for JD's next question.

"Are you in trouble?"

"No. It's nothing like that. We just need to talk to the judge for a few minutes and ask him a question. Depending on his answer, he may decide to sign some paperwork for us. That's about it. Lot's of boring stuff, really." Cliff said with a nearly convincing smile.

"When Lock had to go talk to the judge, he went away and... I don't think I ever saw him again. I don't know... it's hard for me to remember which stuff happened first." JD said gravely and seemed to be struggling with his disorganized memories.

"This is a different judge and a different situation. The judge will probably just ask us a few questions and then hopefully sign some paperwork for us. That's about it." Cliff assured him.

"But before we do that, we're going to have to get you guys dressed up so that you'll be ready to meet the judge."

"Why?"

"To show respect for the judge and the court. It just lets him know that you're serious." Cliff answered with a confident smile.

"So that's why you got us new clothes yesterday?"

"You needed a few sets of nice clothes anyway, but we bought them yesterday so that you'd have them for court today." Ben explained.

"I was thinking that if we leave a little before ten, that we should have time to stop for lunch. And that gives us a little wiggle room if we run into traffic or construction or anything like that along the way." Cliff said seriously.

"Is your laptop all charged up?" Ben asked JD curiously.

"Yeah. I plugged it in before I went to bed."

Ben smiled at the reaction, then explained, "We're going to be driving for a couple hours, so I wanted to be sure that you'd be able to read or write, if you wanted to."

"But if I do that, won't Jody be bored?"

"If you notice that he's bored, maybe you could read to him."

"Can I take my Legos?" Jody asked hopefully.

"I don't think you'd have a place to set them up." Ben said with a desperate look at Cliff.

"Do we have any movies on DVD that Jody might enjoy?"

"I can think of a few. What did you have in mind?"

"We both have laptops with built-in DVD players. Since Jody enjoys watching television, that might be a good distraction for him."

"That's an excellent idea."

"Don't forget to bring headphones."

"I'll remember."

* * * * *

After a few calls to his office to assure himself that none of his patients were going to suffer due to his absence, Cliff walked into the living room to find Ben and the boys gathering what they were going to take with them.

Cliff stood wide eyed for a moment before asking, "Do I want to know what this is about?"

"Jody wanted to be dressed like JD. The turtleneck doesn't look bad with the jacket and he already agreed to take off the gloves before we go into court." Ben cheerfully explained.

Cliff looked from Jody to JD and back before saying, "Alright then, I guess we're ready to go."

* * * * *

The drive went more smoothly than one might expect with two young boys in the car.

The first few minutes were a little awkward, getting the laptop positioned so that Jody was comfortable.

The only challenge that they faced on their trip was to keep both the boys neat and clean until they reached the courthouse. In retrospect, the stop at the drive-thru just after arriving in Gainesville might not have been such a good idea, but it *was* lunchtime and the boys needed to eat. But taking the boys into court hungry was potentially worse.

They actually ended up arriving at the courthouse more than twenty minutes early, which worked out well since they had to pass through security with the boys. One of the security officers at the metal detector was kind enough to tell Cliff where Judge Hawkes courtroom was located, so there wasn't any further delay.

When they arrived in Judge Hawkes courtroom they found one of the double doors propped open, the court was apparently in recess for lunch. Cliff cautiously walked up to the only person in the courtroom, a uniformed police officer, and told her who he was.

"Yes. Judge Hawkes asked me to wait here for you. I'll let him know that you're here."

Before Cliff could respond, she hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

When the judge walked into the courtroom, every parental instinct that Cliff had screamed out.

The man was not happy.

"Who wants to tell me what's going on here?" The judge asked tersely as he took his customary seat behind his desk.

"Your Honor..." Cliff began to say, but was interrupted.

"Save the formality for open court. Get up here and tell me what you're expecting from me and why, because I don't care what the senator *thinks* I owe him. If I don't like your answer, it's not going to happen."

Cliff glanced at Ben with concern before walking across the room to stand directly in front of the bench.

"Jody is our foster son. All we're trying to do is adopt Jody and get his records sealed so that nothing from his past can come back to haunt him later in life."

The judge released a sigh of frustration before slowly saying, "I'm assuming that there's a lot more to it than that. You've got two minutes to tell me what's going on. If you haven't swayed me by then, I'm dismissing you and convening court."

"Jody's mother was a thirteen-year-old prostitute and his father is an influential government official. The prostitute's pimp has been blackmailing the sen... official, threatening to tell about Jody's existence, knowing that the video evidence and Jody's DNA could prove paternity. All we're wanting to do is protect Jody and do our best to close the door on his past. If we can adopt him, change his name and have his court records sealed, that will be the end of it." Cliff explained reasonably.

"Which one is Jody?" The judge asked as he looked across the room at the two boys, standing side by side by the door they had entered through.

"The younger one." Cliff answered quietly.

"I see." The judge said with a shake of his head, then added, "I must remember to ask how Douglas is doing at college."

Although Cliff knew to whom the judge was referring, he didn't feel that it would be appropriate for him to comment.

"I'd like to speak to Jody privately for a moment." The judge said to Cliff, then turned to his bailiff and said more loudly, "Suzanne, would you escort the younger boy to the conference room?"

Rather than answer verbally, the bailiff simply stood and walked toward Ben and the boys by the door.

JD immediately grabbed onto Ben and nearly climbed him, desperately seeking safety in his arms.

Jody was obviously frightened when the uniformed woman approached them, but the bailiff's gentle tone and soft smiles, along with Cliff's encouragement finally convinced Jody to go with her.

"I'll have a talk with the boy and we'll see what happens from there." Judge Hawkes said as he got up from the bench.

"Please be gentle with him. He's just starting to feel secure." Cliff asked earnestly.

"I do have *some* experience talking with traumatized children." Judge Hawkes informed him in a no nonsense tone as he walked toward the door.

Cliff slowly walked to Ben, who was still holding JD, and put his arms around them both.

* * * * *

"Jody is asking for his brother. JD, would you come with me?" The bailiff asked as she walked into the room.

JD's grip had loosened since the bailiff had left, but at her return, JD renewed his grip on Ben with surprising strength.

"When JD was younger, he was horribly abused and has since been absolutely terrified of all women." Cliff quietly explained.

"The judge wants him in the conference room. If you'll bring him, I'll keep my distance." The bailiff said simply, letting it be known with her tone that her offer was as much of a compromise as she would be willing to make.

"If you'll show me where we need to go, I'll carry him." Ben said quietly as he tried to soothe JD by slowly rubbing his back.

"They're going to start letting people into the courtroom in a few minutes. Stay back in the gallery and the judge will call on you if he needs you for anything." The bailiff said before walking toward the door.

Ben flashed a helpless look at Cliff before following.

* * * * *

"Daddy!" Jody crowed when he saw Ben walking into the conference room, carrying JD.

"How are you doing, Squid?" Ben immediately asked as he awkwardly knelt down to give Jody a hug with his free arm.

"That black man is asking me all kinds of weird questions." Jody said frankly.

Ben glanced at the judge and was relieved to see that he wasn't offended by Jody's words. "That's his job. He asks a lot of questions so that he can decide what's right and wrong. He must be really good at it if a whole bunch of people trusted him enough to elect him and make that his job."

"I *do* have other matters that require my attention." The judge interrupted. "If you would be so kind as to leave us alone for a moment, I will finish my interview."

"Yes, Your Honor." Ben said respectfully, then had to fight JD a little to get him to let go.

"Remember that you're the big brother. Stay here with Jody and remind him of how to be brave and face his fears." Ben said as he held JD's steel blue gaze.

"Is *she* going to stay?" JD asked nervously as he glanced in the direction of the bailiff.

"I'll stay right here unless the judge orders me to do otherwise." The bailiff informed him.

"Go over and talk to the judge right now. I'll be in the courtroom with your pappa when you're finished.

JD obviously didn't want to, but finally seemed to gather enough courage to take a step away.

"I'll be in the next room if you need me." Ben said to the room in general before reluctantly walking toward the door.

* * * * *

"What do you think is taking them so long?" Ben asked Cliff nervously.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that the judge is getting filled in on JD and Jody's personal histories. That could take a few minutes."

"I just wish that there were something more that we could do."

"This is our chance to build up our strength and calm ourselves. There's a very good chance that the boys are going to need us to be strong for them. You know how JD gets after he's had a traumatic experience."

"I didn't realize that being a parent would entail quite so much helplessness."

"Remember what I do for a living, Ben. I see it every day. Believe me, it's normal."

Before they could say anything more, a uniformed officer and two professionally dressed people opened the doors of the courtroom before allowing a group of people in.

Ben and Cliff watched silently, waiting to see if any of the people entering the room were JD or Jody.

People were speaking in hushed whispers and Cliff imagined that they were speculating on what might be keeping the judge past the time he had scheduled court to reconvene.

"If you're supposed to be in courtroom 3F, you're in the right place. If not, then you'd better leave now." A woman's voice boomed from the back of the courtroom.

Both Cliff and Ben were somewhat relieved to see that it was Judge Hawkes' bailiff.

As she admonished those in attendance to turn off their electronic devices and be respectful, Cliff and Ben kept watching the door, silently willing JD and Jody to walk through.

Once the bailiff's instructions were delivered, she announced the cases that were on the docket to verify that the interested parties were present. All the while, Ben and Cliff continued to watch the door, waiting for their children to return.

Their anxiety increased as the bailiff finished speaking. The courtroom fell into silence, awaiting the judge's arrival.

* * * * *

Time seemed to stand still. Just as Ben and Cliff had nearly reached the point where they couldn't bear to wait anymore, Judge Hawkes walked into the courtroom with a boy under each arm.

When the boys spotted their parents, they broke away from the judge.

The judge had a smile on his face when he first entered, but it seemed to fade as he made his way to the bench and took his customary seat.

"All rise." The bailiff announced, then did her customary job of announcing the judge to all parties and stating for the record all the details about the court's jurisdiction.

"This court is in session. You may be seated. I have a matter to conclude just now, but while I'm doing that, would the parties for the first case on the docket make their way to the front and prepare yourselves?" Judge Hawkes asked the courtroom, then spoke specifically to Cliff and Ben and said, "Would you come up here so we can dispense with this?"

The ten or so steps across the courtroom were some of the longest and most agonizing of either of their lives.

"I'm making quite a few assumptions here, so if you notice that I've made an error or object to any of my rulings, this is your one and only chance to say so." Judge Hawkes cautioned.

It took a moment for Cliff and Ben to realize that the judge was waiting for their agreement before proceeding.

"Yes, Your Honor. We understand." Cliff finally said for both of them

"Are you ready Carlene?" Judge Hawkes asked a woman nearby.

She pressed a few buttons on the electronic equipment before her, then nodded in the judge's direction.

"First things first, pursuant to your initial request, this court is inclined to grant the adoption of the child, Jody Ford. It is so ordered." Judge Hawkes said, then tapped his gavel. Before anyone could react, the judge continued, "I expect to have papers to that effect in my possession before the close of business tomorrow, so that I can sign them."

"Yes, Your Honor." Cliff immediately agreed.

"In related business, this court is also inclined to grant the adoption of the child formally known as John Doe 256. It is so ordered. Paperwork by the close of business tomorrow." Judge Hawkes said, then tapped his gavel again.

"How did you..." Ben began to ask, but was silenced with a single glance from the judge.

"Continuing on, it is the order of this court that, to aid in the child's emotional well-being, Jody Ford have his name legally changed to match that of his adoptive father. Henceforth, the aforementioned child shall be known as Jody Grant." The judge said, then tapped his gavel

once before turning to Cliff and saying, "Provide the paperwork requesting the name change with the adoption paperwork."

"Yes, Your Honor." Cliff repeated as he fought to contain his emotional reaction to the revelation that Jody had chosen to take his surname.

"It is the order of this court that the child known only as John Doe 256 have his name formally changed to match that of his adoptive father. Pursuant to the child's request, henceforth the aforementioned child shall be known as Jayden Delaney Stone." Judge Hawkes said before tapping his gavel, then he turned to Ben and said, "Paperwork before the end of business tomorrow."

"Yes, sir... Your Honor." Ben stammered.

"One final thing, it is the order of this court that any official records or paperwork dating prior to this day, December 20th, 2004 pertaining to the child now known as Jody Grant, will be sealed by this court until such time as this court deems their disclosure to be necessary." Judge Hawkes declared, then banged his gavel again.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone waited for what was going to happen next.

"Pending the receipt of the paperwork that I requested, this matter is concluded." Judge Hawkes said firmly.

"Thank you, Your Honor." Cliff said sincerely.

Judge Hawkes then turned toward the court reporter and nodded once in her direction.

She pressed a button, then nodded in response.

"Jayden, remember what I told you." Judge Hawkes said, as he stood a little to be able to look JD in the eyes.

"I will." JD promised.

"Good. Then we're done here. Go on now, I have work to do." Judge Hawkes said with a smile.

Cliff and Ben took that as their cue and led the boys out of the courtroom.

* * * * *

"Will you drive? If we're going to have any hope of having all the paperwork submitted in time, I'm going to have to call in a few favors and get things started right away." Cliff asked as they exited the building with Jody in his arms.

"How did we do?" JD asked as they walked.

"I think that you must have done such a good job at being a big brother that the judge decided that you and Jody should *both* be adopted so that you can be brothers for real." Ben said warmly as he put an arm around JD's shoulders.

"So are you *really* my daddy now?" JD asked cautiously as he craned his neck to look up at Ben.

After a moment to consider, Ben reluctantly admitted, "I think so, but I'm not exactly sure what the judge just did in there."

"If I'm understanding it right, rather than have both of us adopt both boys, like a traditional married couple, Judge Hawkes ordered that each of us is adopting one of them. I suppose that in some warped way, maybe that makes more sense to him than allowing both boys to be

adopted by a gay couple." Cliff said slowly, then pointed with his free hand when he spotted their car.

"The boys are ours forever. That's what's important to me." Ben said honestly.

As Ben was getting into the driver's side, Cliff was getting his phone out and turning it on.

"How do you think the judge was able to find out their legal names?" Ben asked when they were all settled in their seats.

"He asked us." JD volunteered.

"You knew that your legal name was John Doe 256?" Ben asked warily.

"Yeah. They called me that at the hospital all the time. Well, not when they were talking *to* me, but usually when they were talking *about* me." JD answered, then added, "They never called me that at the home, though."

"Jody? Did you know that your last name was Ford?" Cliff asked curiously.

"That's what Ruby told me. She lies a lot, but that's what she said."

"I guess we just never thought to ask." Ben said speculatively.

"And remember that JD wouldn't talk at all when we first met him. There wasn't really much of an opportunity to ask." Cliff reminded him, before pressing a button and holding his phone to his ear.

Ben knew better than to continue their conversation, so he turned his focus to his driving.

* * * * *

"Brynna? Do you have a minute? I need you to look up a number for me."

"Everything turned out fine. I have a strict deadline. I'll fill you in on the details when I come into work. Can you look up the number for Lyle McBride for me?"

Ben glanced into the back seat to find the boys talking in excited hushed whispers.

"Thank you, Brynna. With any luck, Lyle will be willing to help me out. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodbye."

As soon as Cliff had disconnected the call to his office, he quickly dialed another number.

"Lyle, it's Dr. Grant. I know that this is kind of a lot to ask, but I'm just leaving court and the judge ordered that adoption paperwork be filed with the court before the close of business tomorrow. I was hoping that maybe you could find the time or recommend someone who could help me out."

"Actually, it's for two kids... my foster sons."

"Yes. Both of them. Before the close of business tomorrow."

"Right. Everything. All the paperwork that the judge needs to sign to close this case once and for all."

"No. Thank you for offering but the case has already been presented and the judge has already ruled. All we need is the paperwork."

"He *was* named Jody Ford. The judge ordered that his name be changed to Jody Grant."

"Oh yeah. He wants that paperwork too."

"I have no idea. Let me ask." Cliff said into the phone, then turned to the back seat and asked, "Jody, do you know when your birthday is?"

Jody's blank stare was all the answer that Cliff needed.

"No. He doesn't know. Can we wait on that for a while and just fill in what we already know?"

"***Four hundred dollars an hour?!***"

"No, no. I agree. Waiting is **bad**. If it's okay with you, I'm going to put us on a three-way call with someone who should have access to all of JD and Jody's official records."

"Good, then I'm going to put you on hold for about twenty dollars... I mean a few minutes then, if all goes well, I'll be back with Ron and we can get this going."

* * * * *

"Ron? Are you sitting down?"

"Well, as much as I'd love to make you guess, the meter's running. We're leaving Gainesville right now. 'Why' is a long story that I can't afford to tell you, but suffice it to say that we went to court, saw a judge, he ruled that Ben and I can... actually, have, adopted Jody and JD. So I'm calling to see if you'll agree to join a three-way call with a family law attorney that I'm acquainted with through my practice. He needs some official information about the boys that I don't have access to on the road from Gainesville to Tallahassee."

"Actually, there's two reasons for that. First, the judge ordered that we have all the necessary paperwork for the adoption and name changes submitted to the court and ready for him to sign before the close of business tomorrow."

"Second, the lawyer is charging me four hundred dollars an hour while he's waiting on hold for our three-way call to begin."

"Thank you, Ron. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"What? Oh, yes. Jayden Delaney Stone and Jody Grant."

"Stop or you're going to make me cry. At four hundred dollars an hour I can't afford unnecessary emotionalism. I mean, I *literally* can't afford it. Are you ready to join?"

* * * * *

"No. I guess I didn't explain that. From my understanding of the judge's decree, I alone am adopting Jody and Ben alone is adopting JD. He didn't explain his reasoning, he just made his ruling and called it settled."

"Really?"

"I guess the judge *was* on our side. I just kind of assumed that it some kind of backhanded way of doing the right thing for the boys while still taking a jab at us."

"Yes, Lyle, that makes perfect sense. There's no real reason to make things unnecessarily complicated."

"Ron, will you give Lyle the 'official' information about the boys? When he's ready, I'll give him the new name change information."

"No, Ron. Jody came up with that all by himself. I never even suggested it to him."

Cliff muted his phone, then turned to Ben and quietly asked, "How much of your tax information do you know off the top of your head?"

"Not much, but depending on what you want to know, I may have what you need on my laptop."

Cliff nodded, then unmuted his phone before saying, "We're in luck. If you'll tell me what you need to know from Ben, he's confident that he can probably find it for you."

"The judge already made his ruling, so do you really need all this information?'

"This is just to give lawyers a reason to be able to charge so much, isn't it?"

"Premium rate?! No! Don't do that! I'm sure that your four hundred dollars an hour rate is perfectly equitable and worth every single penny."

"I can't tell you what he said verbatim, but he essentially told us that he approved Jody Ford's adoption, then that Jody should have his name changed to match that of his adoptive father, making him Jody Grant. He also ordered that once all the paperwork has been completed, Jody's official records will be sealed."

"Do you need to know that for the paperwork?"

"Ron works for CPS and I'm Jody's foster parent, so there are certain things we would rather not disclose unless it is absolutely necessary. Given your professional experience and that information, coupled with the judge's order, you should be able to come up with one or two likely scenarios. I promise, whatever you come up with, the reality is worse."

"Yes. JD's adoption is the same except that the judge didn't order that his records be sealed."

"True. If he *had* records, it might be more of an issue."

"Sorry, Lyle, I keep forgetting that you don't know the history. It appears that JD didn't officially exist until he was found near death by the police. Ron can correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm under the impression that JD's age, date-of-birth, and just about anything personal about him was entirely made up on the spot by someone from CPS just to fill in some blanks."

"Thanks, Ron. If you didn't have his information, I don't know who I would have called next."

"Good. Then let's get this going. The meter's running."

* * * * *

When Cliff finally ended his call, Ben reluctantly asked, "Is everything okay?"

"There are still a lot of things that could go wrong, but with Lyle and Ron's help we might be able to get everything done in time." Cliff said uncertainly.

"Is there anything we can do right now?"

"Being on the road, what we *can* do is very limited." Cliff said frankly.

"I realize that. I was thinking more of what we can do when we get home." Ben said honestly.

"Can we call Zeb? I want to tell him that we got adopted!" JD asked hopefully.

"I don't have Zeb's number. I don't know if he even has a phone." Ben said honestly.

"We'll invite him over the first chance we get." Cliff assured him.

"Maybe we can stop by the store on the way home and see if he's working." Ben helpfully suggested.

"What about Wil and Todd? Can we invite them, too?" JD asked excitedly.

"Yes. I have Todd's number. I can call him right now." Cliff said warmly.

"Can we invite Mr. Cooper too?" Jody asked quietly.

"Of course we can. In fact, if you two would like, I can ask if Junior would be available when I ask Ron." Cliff said with a smile.

"Pappa? Will you ask Mr. Cooper not to tell Junior? I want it to be a surprise." JD asked hopefully.

"Well, I can't be sure if Ron already told him or not, but I'll be sure to ask him." Cliff promised, then turned his attention to his phone and said, "Todd? Do you and Wil have any plans for tonight?"

After a moment of listening, Cliff smiled and said, "Good. Then why don't you come over for dinner?"

"We'll be back in town in about an hour. I expect dinner to be at around six, so just try to arrive before then."

"Do what?"

"We don't expect it, but do what you feel that you need to."

"We'll see you then. Bye." Cliff said before hanging up the phone.

"What was that all about?" Ben asked curiously.

"Todd was just saying that he and Wil would bring some snacks or something so they wouldn't always be freeloading."

"They don't have to do that, but I can respect that they want to."

"I think that's one of the things that I like about Todd. He's so laid back and easygoing that I don't really expect him to go out of his way. But every now and then he'll do something really thoughtful to demonstrate just how much he appreciates our friendship."

"I know that you've been friends with Todd for years, but I don't remember if you've ever mentioned how you two met. I can't imagine you two travelling in the same social circles."

"We met when we discovered that we were both dating the same guy at the same time. We were both surprised and pissed off and hurt by it. We ended up going out and having a few drinks together to talk it out and ended up becoming really good friends." Cliff said with a smile of fond remembrance.

"That guy must have really been something if you and Todd were both attracted to him. I can't imagine your tastes intersecting too often."

"Javi was pretty to look at, and he knew how to pluck at your heartstrings to make you fall in love with him. But once the spell was broken, I realized that he was dead inside. It was all a game that he played for his own amusement. He didn't care what kind of emotional trauma he was causing for other people. In fact, I think he got a kick out of it."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"I wish I could tell you some great story about karma or revenge, but from what I heard, when word got out about what he was really like, he just moved back to Orlando, where he came from." Cliff said as he dialed his phone again.

"Good riddance."

Cliff nodded, then said into the phone, "Ron? I know that I've taken up a lot of your time today, so I'll make this quick. Jody wanted me to invite you over to our house tonight as kind of a celebration. Can you come?"

"Great! The boys were also wanting to know if Junior would be available. They want to share their good news with him."

"We'll plan on him coming. Would you be sure not to tell him the good news? The boys want to tell him themselves."

"Thanks, Ron. I'll do my best not to interrupt you again." Cliff said with a smile.

"Bye."

* * * * *

"Daddy, do you know what we're going to be cooking for dinner?" JD asked from the back seat.

"I hadn't really thought about it. Did you have something in mind?"

"I thought that, if you wanted to, that Pappa could cook some steaks on the grill. I think everyone would like that."

"From what I heard on the weather, they're not sure if it's even going to hit fifty degrees today."

"Is it supposed to rain?" Cliff asked thoughtfully.

"No. It should just be a little bit windy." Ben answered.

"Well then, I suppose that if I had someone to help me, I might be able to do it." Cliff said with a smile as he glanced into the back seat.

"I'll do it!" Jody immediately crowed, much to Cliff's surprise.

"And I'll help Daddy make the side dishes. I know just what kind of salad I'd like to make." JD said happily.

"Do you think we can handle that?" Cliff asked Ben uncertainly.

"We're going to be stopping by the store to invite Zeb anyway, so I can pick up everything that we'll need while we're there."

"It sounds like we've got a plan."

* * * * *

"Are you okay, JD?" Ben asked as they walked into the grocery store.

"Why are Pappa and Jody staying in the car?"

"I think it's because they'd rather do nothing than go shopping. Some people are like that."

JD noticed a woman walking toward them and immediately buried his face in Ben's chest and held him close in a death grip.

"He's just shy." Ben explained to the woman when she noticed.

After a moment, Ben quietly said, "It's okay. She's gone."

It took a moment for JD to loosen his grip, but he finally seemed to gather his emotions.

"I really *do* know that not every woman's going to hurt me. It's just when I see them, I stop thinking. All I am is afraid." JD explained with difficulty.

"It's going to take time, Spider. But if you'll just remember how you were when you first came to us and compare that to how you are now, you'll see that you've already made phenomenal progress. Just keep doing your best and your pappa and I will do what we can to make sure that it's enough. You don't have to face this all by yourself."

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too Spider." Ben said sincerely, then asked, "Are you up to helping me plan what to have with the steaks for dinner?"

"Yeah!" JD said happily, mostly back to his usual self.

* * * * *

"Pappa? JD said that 'cause of what we said to the judge guy, that him and me aren't foster kids anymore. He said that now we're *real* kids."

"As far as I'm concerned, foster kids *are* real kids. But what JD told you was right. Now, in the eyes of the law, both you and JD are completely and entirely our children, as though you'd been born into our family."

"JD said that it'd be okay if I told the judge guy that I wanted to be your son and have your last name. That's okay, isn't it? Daddy's not gonna get mad at me for not picking his name like JD did? Is he?"

"Your daddy is as happy as he can be that JD chose to take his name. I'm just as happy and honored that you chose to take mine."

"Good. 'Cause when I grow up I wanna be just like you."

Cliff wanted to respond but found that he couldn't speak around the lump in his throat.

* * * * *

"Is that everything that we'll need?" Ben asked as he walked alongside JD, who was pushing their cart.

"Yeah. Do you think we'll have enough time to make the twice baked potatoes or should we just do regular baked potatoes and let everyone do the toppings that they want?" JD asked seriously.

"I'll leave that up to you. In fact, if you think that we have time, maybe we could do both. That way anyone who doesn't like something in the twice bakes can top their own."

"Yeah. But we might have to ask Pappa to wait for a little bit so we'll have enough time for the potatoes to bake."

"I don't expect everyone to show up at the same time, so waiting a little bit to start the meat might be a good idea."

"Yeah."

* * * * *

"Zeb!" JD said to draw his attention.

"Hello, JD. Wow! Don't you look nice." Zeb said with a quick smile, then turned his attention back to the customer in front of him.

JD waited until it was their turn at the register before responding, "Daddy and Pappa took me and Jody to Gainesville today. Can you come over to our house for dinner?"

Zeb blinked in surprise at the two seemingly unrelated things, then looked at Ben inquiringly.

"We're having kind of a celebration and the boys wanted to know if you'd like to have dinner with us."

"I'm off at five today. If that's not too late, I'd love to." Zeb answered honestly as he rang up their order.

"Five will be just fine. In fact, from the look of things, you should have a few minutes to relax with the family before dinner will be ready."

"That sounds great. I'll be there."

"Good. We'll be expecting you." Ben said as he realized that Zeb had finished ringing them up.

"Are you going to need help out to your car?" Zeb asked as he watched Ben swipe his card.

"No. I've got my helper with me. But thank you for offering." Ben said with a smile as he accepted the receipt from Zeb.

"I'll see you a little bit after five."

"Remember to bring your appetite."

"That won't be a problem."

* * * * *

"Mission accomplished. We got everything that we're going to need for dinner and Zeb said that he'd be by a little bit after five." Ben explained once he and JD were back in the car.

"Good. Considering traffic, I wouldn't expect Ron and Junior to arrive much before six. That should work out just fine."

Ben looked into the back seat, then asked JD, "How does that work for your potato plans?"

"I think I should be able to make the baked potatoes both ways."

"I'm sure that everyone will enjoy them."

* * * * *

Upon arriving at home, Ben immediately instructed the boys to go to their room and change into their regular clothes while he and Cliff took the groceries to the kitchen.

"Jody said that he wants to grow up to be just like me." Cliff quietly confided.

"I know how that feels. When JD said that he wanted to be a writer, I can't even describe what it meant to me."

"They're our sons now. We've committed ourselves to them for the rest of our lives."

"I think we did that the first moment that we met them. All we did today is make it official."

"I suppose that you're right. It's just that before, there was always the looming threat that some bureaucrat somewhere would decide that one or both of the boys would be better off somewhere else and that we'd have them torn away from us. But now... they're ours."

"Even though I don't know exactly what you did yesterday to make this possible, I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Things turned out better than I could have ever imagined. I'm just going to accept it and move on."

"I think that's probably best."

"Do we need to start cooking anything right now?" JD asked as he hurried into the kitchen, dressed in his regular clothes.

"Well, considering how much we're going to have going on later, I suppose that it might be a good idea to get the potatoes baking and get the salad out of the way." Ben said thoughtfully.

"Okay! But I'm going to need Jody's help with the salad. We're a family so he's going to need to make something, too." JD said before rushing out of the kitchen.

"I suppose that I'd better go ahead and find a mallet so I'll be ready when it's my turn to help." Cliff said with a grin.

"Remember to allow a little extra time to account for Jody's 'help' on the grill." Ben said in a warning tone.

"Before the boys start working on the salad, I'm going to steal Jody away for a few minutes and show him how to prep the grill and get it heating."

"Be sure that you let him know that he's not to be using the grill without adult supervision." Ben cautioned.

"Wow. The judge's decree isn't even twenty-four hours old and you've already become an overprotective parent." Cliff said teasingly.

"Do you think that Jody *should* be allowed to use the grill unsupervised?" Ben asked as he turned his full attention to his mate.

"No. It's just the way that you said it sounded like an old mother hen who's been parenting for years." Cliff chuckled.

"Thank you." Ben said in a dignified tone, then went back to unpacking the groceries.

* * * * *

"Why do we have to do this?" Jody asked as he watched Cliff cleaning the grill.

"So that the grill will be clean and ready to use when we're ready to cook. Come over here and let me show you how."

Jody hesitantly stepped to be right beside Cliff.

"Watch what I'm doing and then I'll let you do a little bit."

* * * * *

"Do you need any help with anything before I start on the marinade?" Ben asked as he walked into the kitchen after changing out of his suit.

"No. Since the potatoes are baking, the salad is really all that I can do right now. But I'm glad that you're doing the marinade. I forgot all about that and your steaks are really good." JD said as he peeled carrots.

"Why don't you make the marinade this time? You've got a good palate and I think that you might be able to come up with something that everyone will enjoy." Ben said with a smile.

"Will you help me? I haven't made marinade before." JD asked hopefully.

"Of course. I'll tell you my standard base recipe, then you can add one or two complimentary flavors to make it yours."

* * * * *

"Are you going to need Jody's help with the salad?" Ben asked quietly.

"He's helping Papa with the grill, so I'll do it." JD said simply.

"That's not going to throw you behind, is it?"

"No. This will be fine. The potatoes are the only things I'm worried about."

"We've got plenty of time. You'll see."

* * * * *

At the sound of a knock on the door, JD quickly said, "That must be Zeb! I'll get it!"

Ben smiled as he watched JD hurry out of the kitchen.

As JD ran to the door, he was met by Cliff carrying Jody.

"I got it!" JD insisted as he hurried ahead of them.

Cliff slowed his pace and watched as JD opened the front door.

"Hi, Zeb! Come in!" JD said happily.

"Thanks." Zeb said timidly as JD ushered him inside.

"How are you doing today, Zeb?" Cliff asked warmly.

"Fine. Everything's been great since I stood up to Rex. It's funny how worrying about what Rex was going to do seemed to be such a big part of my day. Now it's suddenly gone and my days just seem to fly by."

"I'm sure that eventually, some other turmoil will rear it's ugly head and you'll have to fight to overcome it, too. Life's just that way." Cliff said casually as they walked.

"We got adopted!" JD blurted out as they were walking toward the kitchen.

"Really?" Zeb asked with surprise and looked at Cliff inquiringly.

Cliff thought for a moment about what to tell Zeb and finally said, "That's right. We adopted both boys. They're our sons now."

"Wow. Just like that?" Zeb asked in puzzlement as they walked into the kitchen.

"Hello, Zeb. How was work?" Ben asked cheerfully.

"It was fine... You adopted the boys today?" Zeb asked cautiously.

"Yes. We invited you over to join in our celebration." Ben said with a smile.

After a moment to digest all of what he'd been told, Zeb noticed that JD and Jody were both looking at him uncertainly.

Since Jody was still in Cliff's arms, Zeb leaned down and gave JD a firm hug as he said, "Congratulations JD. I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks. I never thought that I'd ever have real parents of my own. I thought that was something that only happened to other kids." JD said as he returned the hug.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. We're your parents now and forever." Ben said warmly.

After a moment more of hugging, Zeb released JD and noticed Jody looking on uncertainly.

Zeb wasn't sure if Jody would accept a hug from him, but walked to Cliff's side and put his arms out in offer.

Jody stretched toward Zeb and Cliff reflexively transferred the skinny boy into Zeb's waiting arms, so as not to drop him.

"I'm glad that you got adopted, Jody." Zeb said as he gently hugged the boy.

"I'm glad, too. I never had a pappa or a daddy before." Jody muttered as he expressed his joy through hugging.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of hugging, Jody squirmed in Zeb's arms and signaled that he wanted to be let down.

As soon as his feet hit the floor, Jody hurried back to Cliff and thrust his arms into the air.

Cliff indulgently smiled and picked Jody up again.

"Zeb, are you hungry? Would you like something to snack on?" Ben asked curiously.

"I wouldn't want to spoil my appetite for dinner."

"It's still going to be a while. Why don't you guys go into the living room and I'll bring you something in a few minutes?"

"I think that's his way of telling us that we're in his way. Come on." Cliff said with a grin before walking out of the kitchen with Jody in his arms.

Zeb followed without comment as JD and Ben went back to their dinner preparations.

* * * * *

Cliff sat on the couch and shifted Jody slightly so that he was resting on his lap.

They sat that way for only a moment when Jody decided to get down and go back to his Legos.

"Zeb, have you ever played with Legos before?" Jody asked curiously.

"I've seen them, but I don't think I've ever played with them. My parents didn't think that kids should have toys. They expected us to learn to use practical items from an early age, even if it was beating the bottom of a soup pot with a wooden spoon." Zeb said thoughtfully.

"Do you wanna help me play?" Jody asked hopefully.

"Sure. But you may have to show me what to do." Zeb said as he slid out of the chair to join Jody on the floor next to the coffee table.

Cliff didn't think that he'd ever seen anything so precious as Jody's expression when he realized that he was going to get to 'teach' something to someone else.

* * * * *

"I brought you some snacks." JD said a little while later as he walked into the living room.

"Is that just for Zeb, or did you bring enough for everyone?" Cliff asked curiously.

"It's for everyone. Daddy just told me to tell you not to spoil your dinner." JD said as he placed the tray on the coffee table.

"Piggy blankets!" Jody said happily as he got up off the floor.

"Be careful, Jody. They just came out of the oven. They're still hot." JD warned.

"I'll blow on them first." Jody assured him.

"Make sure you take really little bites until you're sure that they're cool enough to eat." JD instructed.

Cliff was proud of JD's protectiveness of his younger brother and his willingness to explain things.

"What's in the bowl?" Zeb asked curiously as he picked up one of the pigs-in-a-blanket.

"I made up a little honey mustard dipping sauce, just in case someone wants it." JD said simply before leaving the room.

"I can't believe how you guys eat." Zeb chuckled as he dipped the end of his snack into the dipping sauce, just enough to get the taste of it.

"I think we just probably have a different variety from what you're used to. Most likely, I'd be saying the same thing if you were the one cooking." Cliff said frankly.

"I don't really cook. I know how to fry a hamburger patty or make a sandwich, but that's about it. About once a week, I'll spend a little extra money and go out to eat... well, fast food. I can't really afford a place that uses plates. But I doubt that you'd look at my cooking as being something exotic."

"Maybe not, but from the sound of it, eating your cooking might remind me of my college days. It sounds an awful lot like what I used to do."

"I've been thinking about what you said about college. Part of me still thinks that it's an impossible dream, but I'll never know if I don't investigate the possibility." Zeb said before taking another bite of his snack.

"Things have been kind of busy since I talked to you and Junior about that, so I haven't really had the opportunity to look into it. But after tomorrow, I should be able to talk to Brynna and a few other people to try and get an idea if it's doable."

"How is Junior?"

"He's fine, as far as I know. He and Ron should be here sometime around six for dinner."

"It's funny, I look at him and it seems like he's so much younger than I am, but we're actually probably only a few months different in age."

"He's still in high school and is being provided for. You're out living on your own. It makes sense that you would feel a lot older than him."

"I guess so. But it still seems strange."

* * * * *

"I've got it!" Cliff called toward the kitchen, in response to the knock on the door.

"Are we too late?" Wil asked immediately when the door opened.

"No. In fact, we're still expecting a few more guests. Please come in."

"Where can I put these?" Wil asked as he held up two plastic wrapped plates of loaded crackers.

"Do they need to be heated or anything?"

"Nope. Summer sausage and cheese. No heating necessary."

"Then let's take them into the living room."

"Actually, they're awesome when you warm them up." Todd quickly interjected.

"True." Wil admitted.

Cliff stopped and looked at the plates of snacks for an instant before saying, "I think today is worthy of awesome. I'll take them into the kitchen if you guys want to go on into the living room."

"I need to say hi to Ben. I'll go." Wil said and started walking away before Cliff could object.

* * * * *

"Hi Ben. How are things going?" Wil asked casually. As he walked into the kitchen.

"It's been a great day so far, but now that you're here it's even better." Ben said with a grin.

"I got adopted!" JD happily announced.

"That's what I heard. I guess that makes me your... it wouldn't be uncle, would it?" Wil asked Ben slowly.

"Second or third cousin, more likely. We'll have to compare family trees sometime and figure it out."

"I never was good at that stuff. Let's just say that JD and Jody are my nephews and anyone who has a problem with it can worry about the details themselves." Wil suggested with an easygoing smile.

JD looked back and forth between Ben and Wil, trying to understand what they were talking about.

When Ben noticed, he quietly said, "Wil and I are cousins. Now that you're legally my son, that makes him your cousin, too. Todd's our friend and I think of him as being a part of our family, but Wil was *born* into my family."

Ben's explanation didn't seem to ease JD's confusion, but eventually he seemed to accept it and hurried to Wil to give him a hug.

"Would you take this?" Wil asked quickly as he offered the plates of snacks to Ben.

"You didn't have to bring anything." Ben said as he accepted the plates.

"Mona gave us a Hickory Farms basket for Christmas. Todd and I thought that everyone might enjoy it." Wil said as he returned JD's hug.

"I'm sure we will." Ben said with a smile.

"The guys suggested that we might heat them up a little bit, just enough to melt the cheese." Will quickly added.

"Good idea. The oven's already going, so this'll just take a minute." Ben said immediately, then began to transfer the cracker sausage and cheese combos onto a baking sheet.

"If you're my family, does that mean that your last name is Stone, too?" JD asked curiously.

"My mother was a Stone, but my last name is Hale." Wil answered gently.

"Is it because your mama's name was Stone that makes us related?" JD asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess that's right." Wil answered easily.

"These will be ready in a few minutes. Can I get you anything to drink?" Ben asked as he returned from the oven.

"Maybe in a little bit. But I bet that Todd's probably about ready for a beer by now." Wil said frankly.

"When isn't he?" Ben chuckled good naturedly.

Wil looked around and noticed that the ice chest wasn't set up as it had been before.

"We should still have some beer in the fridge in the basement. I haven't checked on it recently. We may need to make a run to the store for some more." Ben said thoughtfully.

"I'll go check." Wil said with a smile, then looked down to JD who was still hugging him and asked, "Do you want to help me?"

JD quickly looked around the kitchen, apparently to confirm the progress of whatever task he had been undertaking, then said, "Yeah."

* * * * *

"Beer run!" Wil announced when he walked into the living room.

"I should have thought about that when we were at the store." Cliff said with a shake of his head.

"Don't worry about it, Cliff. We've got it." Todd said as he stood.

"Do you want to ride along, Zeb?" Wil asked with a smile at him.

"I'm too young to buy beer." Zeb said quietly.

"Actually, so am I. I'm old enough to sell it, but not to buy it." Wil said simply.

Zeb nodded that he understood.

"We'll stay in the car while Todd goes in and gets it. The beer's mostly for him anyway." Wil said simply.

"Yeah. It ain't nothin but somethin to do." Todd said with an inviting smile at him.

"Can I go, too?" Jody asked hopefully.

Todd, Wil and Zeb all looked at Cliff to see his reaction.

"I think it will be good for Jody to get out of the house for a few minutes. I'll get you his booster seat." Cliff said as he also stood.

"We're just going a few blocks." Todd said cautiously.

"The boys understand that they need their booster seats whenever they ride in the car. We need to be consistent." Cliff said simply.

"Okay. Let's get it done." Todd said easily as he led the way to the door.

* * * * *

"Where did everyone go?" JD asked as he carried the warm snacks into the living room.

"To buy beer. They'll be back in a minute." Cliff answered.

"I'll take these back so I can heat them again when they get back." JD said decisively, then looked around the room once again before asking, "Where's Jody?"

"He went with them. Don't worry. He'll be right back." Cliff said with a smile.

JD seemed to be disturbed by the answer, but didn't say anything as he quietly left the living room.

* * * * *

When JD heard the door open, he hurried out of the kitchen.

Ben automatically put the snacks back into the oven to heat them slightly so the cheese would be melted.

As Todd and Wil carried the beer in, JD rushed past them and pulled Jody into a hug as he asked, "Did you have fun?"

"Zeb and Wil are nice. They talked to me while Todd went into the store." Jody said from his brother's embrace.

"It scared me when I knew that you were gone and I wasn't going to be there to protect you." JD said honestly.

"You know that if Jody's with us that we'll protect him." Wil said gently.

"Yeah. I guess I know that. But I'm his big brother. It's my job."

Wil got a pained look at the announcement and carried the beer that he was carrying toward the kitchen.

"Did I say something wrong?" JD asked curiously at Wil's reaction.

"He's a big brother, too." Todd said to JD, then turned to Cliff and added, "Zeb put the booster back in your car. Remember to lock it up."

"I will. Thanks." Cliff said as he watched Todd follow Wil.

* * * * *

Once the beer was put away and everyone was back in the living room, JD presented the snacks that Todd and Wil had brought with them.

"I love this stuff." Wil said after taking one of the crackers.

"Yeah. Even though I'd like to have it all year, having them now makes it feel like Christmas." Todd agreed.

"I think you're right." Cliff said happily.

"This is really good! How did you make it?" JD asked with surprise at the delicious flavor.

"It's just cheese, sausage and crackers... and a little spot of sweet hot mustard on each one. I just put together the things that were in the gift basket. Well, except for the strawberry candies. Todd ate all of those." Wil finished with a smile at him.

"I can't get enough of those things." Todd said unrepentantly.

"Pappa? Can we get some more of this? I want to see if I can make it as good." JD asked hopefully.

"I don't do the shopping very often. Make sure to ask your Daddy so he can pick some up when he finds a display." Cliff said warmly.

JD grabbed a cheese and cracker snack on a napkin before dashing out of the room as he called out, "Daddy! You gotta try this!"

Chuckles went around the room at JD's excitement.

"It looks like you're getting good with those Legos, Jody." Wil said as he looked at the structure Jody was building.

"Zeb's helping me!" Jody said happily.

"Could you use some more help?" Wil asked with a smile.

"Sure! I got lots and lots of Legos." Jody said eagerly.

Cliff noticed that Wil had chosen to sit on the floor beside Zeb, almost close enough to touch.

"Tell me what we're doing here and I'll do what I can to help." Wil said and his attention seemed to be more focused on Zeb than Jody.

Cliff and Todd exchanged a look, but neither said anything. Instead, Cliff turned on the TV and started searching the menu to see if anything interesting were on.

* * * * *

A knock on the door sounded and JD could be heard calling out, "I got it!"

"That should be Ron and Junior. They're our last invited guests, so now the party can really begin." Cliff explained.

Chapter 15

Ron and Junior broke into matching smiles when they heard JD's voice calling out, "I got it!"

When the door finally opened, JD smiled at the pair and eagerly invited them in.

"Hi JD. I hope we're not too late." Ron said warmly.

"No. You're right on time. Everyone else just got here too." JD assured him as he led them inside, then thought to ask, "How are you doing, Junior?"

"I'm fine, but Mr. Cooper wouldn't tell me about what's going on." Junior explained as they followed JD down the hallway.

"We're having a party and we wanted you to be here." JD said cheerfully as they arrived at their destination.

* * * * *

"Pappa, Daddy needs me in the kitchen." JD abruptly announced before dashing out of the living room, leaving the new arrivals standing in the doorway.

"Then I suppose that introductions fall to me." Cliff said simply as he stood, then continued, "I can't remember who's met who already, so for everyone's benefit, Ron and Michael, I'd like for you to meet Todd, Wil, Zeb and, of course, I think everyone knows Jody." Cliff said as he indicated each person in turn.

"Jody Grant!" Jody proudly insisted.

Cliff smiled warmly at his son and responded, "That's right. As of today his name is officially Jody Grant."

"You changed his name?" Junior asked cautiously.

"Yes. Do you remember the new clothes that we bought for the boys? That was so that they would be ready to go to court today." Cliff said with a smile.

"What about JD? Did you get his name changed too?" Zeb asked curiously.

"Yes. But we'll explain that at dinner." Cliff said simply, then quickly added, "Speaking of which, if we're going to have steaks for dinner tonight, I need to go out to the grill and get them started, it should be at just the right temperature. Anyone who wants to help can join me."

"Yeah." Todd grunted as he stood to join Cliff.

Ron nodded, indicating that he would go, too.

"Jody? Do you want to go with us? I may need your help." Cliff asked hopefully.

"You want me to help you?" Jody asked with surprise.

"Of course. If I get busy, I may need you to turn one or two of the steaks for me. Come on." Cliff finished with a tender smile at his son.

Jody considered that for a moment, then got up from in front of his Legos and followed Cliff, Todd, Ron and Junior out of the living room.

* * * * *

"Hi Ron. Hi Junior. How are you doing today?" Ben asked pleasantly as the group walked into

the kitchen.

"We're fine. Thanks for inviting us." Ron said for both of them.

"We're glad to have you, but I have to admit that it was the boys' idea." Ben said honestly.

"Do you think the steaks have marinated long enough?" Cliff interrupted as he gathered the shallow pans of meat.

"They should be fine." Ben assured him.

"Do you need any help in here?" Junior asked as he looked around the kitchen, which seemed to have every surface covered with a different recipe being prepared, all at once.

"I'm sure that if you hang around for a minute or two our little master chef will come up with something for you to do." Ben said with a warm glance in JD's direction.

"I'm going to stay in here." Junior told his companions.

"Guys, I'm going to need some help carrying everything." Cliff said as he finally gave up and set the trays of meat back down.

"That's what we're here for." Todd said as he stepped forward to help.

Once Todd had his arms loaded, he also gave Ron a few things to carry and made a point of giving Jody the grill utensils, so that he would know that he was making a contribution to the cooking, just the same as the adults.

Ben, JD and Junior watched as the group finally left, via the back door.

* * * * *

"So, JD, have you thought of anything that I can do to help you?" Junior asked curiously.

"I think Daddy and I have everything timed so that we can handle the cooking part, but could you count how many people we have eating and make sure that there's enough room at the dining room table for everyone?" JD asked thoughtfully as he searched through the vegetable crisper.

"Sure! I'll check on that!" Junior said immediately before dashing away, into the dining room.

"Good thinking, Spider. That didn't occur to me." Ben said honestly.

"Didn't you buy some green onions?" JD asked as he finally looked up from the drawer he had been rummaging through.

"I put them in a glass on the window sill. They usually wilt when I put them in the refrigerator." Ben said absently as he drizzled honey into a sauce that he was making.

"They won't get the chance." JD said with determination as he closed the refrigerator.

* * * * *

As Zeb and Wil sat in front of Jody's half-finished Lego creation, Wil quietly asked, "How have you been, Zeb?"

"Pretty good. I had some problems at work, but everything seems like it's going to be okay now." Zeb answered with a contented smile.

"What about at home? You live alone, don't you?"

"Yeah." Zeb sighed, then continued, "I don't know if I'd call it a *home*. It's just a place to eat

and sleep before I have to go back to work."

"I know how that is. I guess I'm just lucky that I fell in with Todd so that I can have something to look forward to when I'm off work."

"I kind of wish that I had something like that, but I don't even know where to start." Zeb said as he absently snapped another Lego piece into place.

"I think you've already started." Wil said with a smile, then explained, "You're here, having a life, being part of something that's not work related."

"I guess I am."

"What's wrong?"

"I guess it's from the way that I was raised. My whole life I've always been told that growing up was a certain thing and now that I'm getting older, it's nothing like that."

"Are you talking about getting married and starting a family and all that stuff?"

"Yes. And becoming part of the church and participating in the community... I don't know, I guess I feel like I'm a failure because all the things that I've always been told makes a person a success are things that aren't happening for me... and what's worse, I don't want them to happen."

"It sounds like you grew up with lots of expectations being laid on you. I've got the opposite problem. When it became obvious that I had no talent or interest in sports, no one had any expectations of me except to be a failure."

"I guess that maybe both of us need to take a step back and redefine *success* for ourselves. Other people's definitions don't seem to be working for us."

"I think that may be one of those things that's easier said than done." Wil mumbled as he also added pieces to the Lego structure.

"You're probably right. But we've got Ben and Cliff and they're both successes by anyone's definition. I know that they'd be willing to help us figure things out."

"Yeah." Wil acknowledged, then continued, "It's funny. Just a few weeks ago I didn't know that Ben even existed and now I think of myself as being part of his family. It's a weird jump and I'm not sure how it happened so fast."

"It's something like that for me..." Zeb began to say but was interrupted.

"Guys! Do you think that you could help me move the kitchen table into the dining room?" Junior asked from the living room doorway.

"Sure. No problem." Wil said as he stood.

Zeb immediately followed his lead.

"If you guys don't mind helping me, Ben's got table cloths and stuff so that we can make everything look nice for the dinner." Junior explained as they walked out of the room.

"We don't mind at all." Wil said with a grin at Zeb as they walked.

* * * * *

"Wow! You guys really went all out! Look at this layout!" Cliff said as he led the way into the dining room.

"You have Wil, Zeb and Junior to thank for that. All I did was tell them where things were when they asked." Ben explained.

"Good job, guys." Cliff said appreciatively.

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"JD, since the steaks are so large, I thought that you and Jody might want to split one." Cliff carefully suggested while everyone was filling their plates.

"Yeah." JD easily agreed, then turned to Jody and asked, "How do you like your steak cooked?"

The blank stare he received in return reminded JD once again that Jody had yet to experience much of the world.

Before JD could rephrase his question, Jody quickly said, "I like that one!" as he pointed.

"Why?"

"I just like it!"

"Okay." JD said as he followed Jody's pointing finger then transferred Jody's chosen steak to his plate before anyone else could claim it.

"Since this is so big, do you want to share it with me?" JD asked to be sure.

"Yeah!"

JD quickly cut the steak in half, then transferred the smaller piece to Jody's plate.

"JD made twice baked potatoes, but there are also regular baked potatoes and various toppings, if you prefer that." Ben announced.

"You guys are amazing." Wil said with a grand smile as he made his selections from the middle of the table.

"What kind of dressing is on the salad?" Todd asked curiously as he took a portion for himself.

"I made it to go with the dinner. I don't think it really has a name." JD said simply as he added things to both his and Jody's plates.

"Sounds great!" Todd said with a hungry grin.

"I selected a nice red wine to go with dinner, but we also have sodas and juices on the sideboard for those who would rather." Ben said as he automatically filled Cliff's glass.

Zeb looked uncomfortable at the announcement, but then noticed the variety of other options available to him. Finally, he walked to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of fruit punch.

Before he had finished, Wil was at his side, preparing to pour a glass of fruit punch for himself. When Zeb noticed, Wil quietly explained, "I'm the designated driver."

Once it appeared that everyone had all their dinner selections made, Cliff stood and looked around the table before saying, "Thank you all for being here. Today has been a wonderful day, but what makes it complete is being able to share our happiness with all of you. Please enjoy this meal."

"Can you tell us what's going on now?" Junior asked hopefully.

"Go ahead and start and we'll tell you while we're eating." Cliff assured him.

Junior didn't need to be told twice, and apparently neither did anyone else at the table.

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"Bubba?" Jody asked in a small voice, which drew everyone's attention.

"What's up, Jody?" Junior quietly asked the boy at his side.

Rather than answer verbally, Jody poked the steak on his plate with his spoon, then looked at Junior with despair.

"Would you like for me to cut that up for you?" Junior quietly offered, barely restraining a tender smile.

"Yeah. Me and Pappa made it. I bet it's real good."

"I bet you're right."

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Once everyone had started eating, Cliff finally said, "For those who don't already know, the short explanation for us having this celebration today is the adoption of JD and Jody into our family."

"Really?!" Junior asked in astonishment.

Ron flashed a warning glare in Cliff's direction, but managed to hold his tongue.

"Yes, Michael. Following a series of highly unlikely events, things worked out so that we had a fleeting opportunity to adopt both of the boys. We decided to take it." Cliff confirmed.

"You mean, like, full adoption? Like, it's done?" Todd asked to confirm.

"I'm sure that we'll have a few things to do to get the boys' legal identities cemented, but the fact that they had their names changed might actually make it easier to explain the need for new documents." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"It seems weird to me that you changed their names. I mean, that's just about the most personal thing that a person has. It just seems wrong to change it." Junior said uneasily.

"I understand what you're saying and how serious it is. But *we* didn't change their names. That's something that the boys came up with while they were talking with the judge." Cliff explained.

"I want to be a writer, like Daddy, so I picked his last name." JD said simply.

"You did more than that. You also picked a first and middle name." Ben said seriously.

"I picked my first name a long time ago, before I even met you. Back in the hospital I used to think about what it would be like to have a real name."

"I noticed that you chose to use your mom's last name as your middle name. I'm surprised you did that." Ben said honestly.

"She's my mom." JD said simply, as though that explained everything.

"I think it was an excellent choice." Ben assured him.

"Besides, this way, my initials are still JD."

"So, what name did you decide on?" Wil asked curiously.

"Jayden Delaney Stone." JD said proudly.

After a moment to consider, Wil smiled and said, "That *is* a nice name."

"My name is Jody Grant!" Jody interjected.

"That's a nice name, too." Wil said sincerely.

"JD and the judge helped me pick it out." Jody said earnestly.

"I just told Jody why I took Daddy's name. I didn't talk him into it or nothing." JD quickly explained.

"Whatever you and the judge did, you must have done it right, because Jody ended up with a perfect name." Wil assured him.

"I couldn't have chosen better myself." Cliff said tenderly to his son.

* * * * *

"So, Wil, have you heard anything else about the family gathering on Thursday?" Ben asked curiously.

"Not so far." Wil said frankly, then quickly asked, "You're still going, aren't you?"

"I promised that I'd drive you. But I'm still undecided about the boys going along." Ben said honestly.

"What are we talking about?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Wil's been invited to the annual Stone Family Christmas debacle in Orlando and asked if I'd go along." Ben said simply.

"Sounds hideous." Cliff said frankly.

"Some things are." Ben responded a nod, then continued, "But this could end up being one of those things that I might end up regretting if I automatically reject it based on hurt feelings."

"Or you might regret going." Cliff added simply.

"That's entirely possible. But this is a meeting of Wil's part of the family more than mine. Maybe it won't be so bad."

"Just keep telling yourself that." Cliff said with a grin, then asked, "So what were you saying about the boys?"

"Wil suggested that it might be good for the boys to get to know some of their more distant relatives." Ben said simply.

"Well, I suppose that, from a clinical perspective, it might be a good opportunity to challenge the boys." Cliff said consideringly.

"So you *want* to go?" Ben asked disbelievingly.

"No. But I think it's an unprecedented opportunity that has the potential of being something rewarding."

"So you're willing to put yourself through it for the boys' sake?"

"Try thinking about it like a colonoscopy. You know it's going to be miserable, but there's a remote chance that it might end up being worth it." Cliff said frankly.

"I think that given the choice..." Ben began to say, but trailed off.

"Did you say that it's this Thursday?" Cliff asked to confirm.

"Yes. That's right."

"I asked Brynna not to schedule any appointments Thursday afternoon, so I should be able to close the office early." Cliff said thoughtfully, then turned to Wil and smiled before saying, "We will be happy to go with you."

"I think *happy* might be pushing it a bit. But I agree that there's a remote possibility that we won't end up regretting it." Ben reluctantly admitted.

"What time do you think we should leave here to get there in time?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"The invitation said that dinner would be at six, so I figure that we could leave here around four." Wil said thoughtfully.

"If we leave here at four, there's no way we'll arrive in Orlando in time for dinner."

"Yep. That's the plan." Wil said simply.

After a moment to consider, Ben nodded and said, "Good thinking."

"I promise that if things start going badly, we'll pack everyone back in the car and come back to Tallahassee. We'll do our best to make it an exciting adventure for the boys." Cliff assured his mate.

"I have a feeling that it's going to be an adventure no matter which way things go." Ben said frankly.

"After seeing how you did Thanksgiving, I sort of just assumed that you learned how to host a successful holiday from observing your family." Zeb said frankly.

"I suppose that I did in a way. I just tried to remember every detail of everything that they did." Ben said simply, then added with a smile, "Then I did the exact opposite."

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"JD." Jody whispered none too subtly.

"What do you need, Squid?" JD asked curiously.

"Can I have more of that?" Jody asked as he pointed at the twice baked potatoes in the center of the table.

"Sure. I made plenty for everyone." JD said as he stretched and was able to grab one.

"Everything's good, but those are really *really* good!" Jody enthused.

"I'm glad you like them. Eat as much as you want." JD said proudly.

"How can he even eat that much? As skinny as he is, it should be physically impossible." Todd wondered aloud.

"He has some catching up to do. I'm just glad that he's not a picky eater." Cliff said frankly.

Just about everyone around the table had stopped to watch Jody enthusiastically start into his second twice baked potato.

Cliff noticed that Junior seemed to be tearing up and quietly asked, "Are you okay, Michael?"

"What?" Junior asked suddenly, then realized what Cliff was asking and responded, "I was just remembering how Jody was at the home and how worried I was about him. Seeing him now gives me hope."

Cliff smiled at the response, then looked around at all the people surrounding the table before saying, "Why don't all of you come back this weekend and spend Christmas day with us?"

"Sure. As long as you'll be able to forgive me for dragging you to Orlando." Wil said timidly.

"There's no need to worry about that." Cliff assured him.

"But that doesn't mean that we won't tease you about it afterward." Ben quickly interjected.

"It's a deal." Wil said with a quick smile in Ben's direction.

"What do you say, Ron?" Cliff asked with a smile directed at him, then added in a wheedling tone, "Home cooked food."

"As much as I'm sure that I would enjoy that, I'm afraid that I won't be able to attend. I already promised to work at the home on Christmas day." Ron said regretfully.

"We understand. You're going to be taking care of the kids. We wouldn't get in the way of that." Ben promised.

"Trust me, being invited over to celebrate with you and your family on your special day is just as good as Christmas as far as I'm concerned." Ron said sincerely.

"Then, in the spirit of celebration, I'm going to have another one of JD's twice baked potatoes. I swear, these things are addictive." Cliff said as he reached to serve himself another.

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Everyone was enjoying their meal along with some light, general conversation when JD suddenly got up from the table and bolted out of the room.

All eyes turned to Cliff and Ben, seeking an explanation.

Just as Cliff was about to tell them that he had no idea what was going on, Ben quietly said, "I think JD was just assaulted by inspiration."

As if to prove Ben's point, JD walked into the dining room with his netbook open, anxiously waiting for it to boot.

"I suppose that it's about time that we started letting the boys know about dining etiquette." Cliff said consideringly.

"While I agree with the sentiment, I wouldn't want to do anything to disrupt JD's concentration while he's in that special, inspired place in his thinking." Ben said seriously.

"You're probably right. We wouldn't want to discourage him from pursuing his higher creativity. We'll only worry about it if his sudden inspirations start causing problems."

As everyone watched, JD began typing as fast as he was able.

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When JD's spate of typing finally subsided, Ron quietly asked, "Is everything okay?"

It took a moment for JD to come back to the present, but he finally said, "I've been stuck on this one scene in my story and I just now figured it out. I had to hurry and write it down before I forgot."

"It sometimes happens that way with me. You've got to take the inspiration when and where you get it." Ben explained.

Ron seemed to be somewhat dubious, but didn't voice any concerns that he might have about what he had just witnessed.

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When the dinner was complete, Cliff suggested that they move the party downstairs so that all of them could enjoy a few games of pool. JD was reluctant to go until Ben reminded him that he could take his computer with him and continue his writing.

Wil took it upon himself to instruct Zeb on some of the finer points of video game play. Ron and Junior teamed with Cliff and Todd, respectively, and enjoyed many games of pool. Jody stayed nearly glued to Cliff's side, which worked well to handicap his performance and make the play more evenly matched.

Once Ben had finished cleaning up after dinner, he went to the basement and found JD in the 'reading nook' studiously working on his story. It wasn't long before Ben had his own laptop out and they were doing their rendition of dueling laptops, oblivious to all that was going on elsewhere in the basement.

To an outside observer, it might have looked like a rather mundane evening, considering that it was supposed to be a celebration. But those in attendance were all caught up in the feeling of being included as parts of something larger than themselves. Despite their varied pasts, they were all enjoying being included and interacting as members of a family.

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At some point a consensus was reached that it was time to call it a night. Wil and Todd offered to drive Zeb home, since it was on the way.

Although the boys were a little wound up after having company, their baths served to calm them down and put them into the right frame of mind to prepare for bed.

Once Ben and Cliff were able to get the boys settled, they dragged themselves to bed and were asleep before five minutes had passed.

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"Daddy! Pappa! Something's wrong with Jody! Come quick!" JD screamed from the doorway.

Ben and Cliff both jolted awake in a moment of panic. By the time Cliff reached the bedroom door, JD was already running down the hallway.

Ben was just entering the hallway when he saw JD and Cliff frozen in place, staring disbelievingly with the light from the bedroom illuminating them.

"What's wrong?" Ben asked as he approached.

"We might need to call Ron." Cliff said gravely.

Ben looked into the bedroom and was shocked to hear Jody grunting and growling as he punched and clawed at the bed.

"Do you think he's awake?' Ben asked cautiously.

"I doubt it." Cliff said slowly as he carefully watched Jody's every move.

"Should we try to wake him up?"

"Give him another minute or two. I'd like to try and get some sense of what's going on inside his head."

"Is Jody gonna be alright?" JD asked timidly.

"Yes. We'll make sure of it." Ben assured him as he pulled JD close.

Jody let out a shrill scream, then began punching the mattress with all his might.

Cliff stepped forward and snatched Jody up into his arms. The small frail boy went wild at the sensation of being held; biting, kicking, screaming and clawing.

"Jody, you're safe. No one here's going to hurt you." Cliff tried to soothe.

A low rage-filled growl was Jody's response as he twisted his body spasmodically, trying to free himself.

"Jody, it's Pappa. Listen to me. I love you. I'm not going to hurt you." Cliff urged him to understand.

"Pappa?" Jody asked in a small voice as he stopped fighting.

"That's right, Jody. It's Pappa. Daddy and JD are here, too." Cliff said gently.

Jody's rage began to calm as the foreign concept worked its way into his slowly emerging consciousness.

"What's wrong with Jody?" JD asked in a trembling whisper.

"He just had a bad dream." Ben quietly assured him.

"But he was awake. He was. Hitting and hurting and..." JD trailed off as he buried his face in Ben's side.

"Have you ever heard of sleepwalking?" Ben asked gently as he rubbed JD's back to soothe him.

"I've heard about it, but I don't think I know what it is." JD answered honestly.

"Well, in Jody's case, I think that he was really asleep but something deep inside him felt like it needed to act out."

"Was I being bad?" Jody asked in confusion.

"No, my little angel. You were just having a really vivid dream and you didn't realize for a little bit that what you were seeing wasn't real." Cliff explained as he held his newest son close.

"Should I make Jody some warm milk to help him go back to sleep?" JD asked quietly.

"Ask your Pappa about that." Ben said simply.

"Let's try going back to sleep without it first, then if anyone's having trouble, we can warm some milk for them when it's needed." Cliff responded thoughtfully.

"Daddy, can we sleep with you? I don't want to try to sleep again in here." JD asked hopefully.

"I think that sounds like a very good idea. Let's go." Cliff said as he carried Jody out of the room.

"Is Jody going to be alright? He scared me. It's like he wasn't him anymore." JD asked quietly.

"He'll be fine. All of us together will make sure of it." Ben said as he hoisted JD onto his hip and carried him.

JD snuggled tight, accepting his daddy's words.

* * * * *

Tuesday morning everything seemed to be strangely well. Neither of the boys appeared to be suffering any aftereffects of the the previous night's ordeal. The same couldn't be said for Cliff, who seemed to have to struggle to get awake and aware enough to get ready to face the day.

Fortunately, things seemed to settle into normalcy as the morning progressed. After seeing Cliff off to work and making sure that the boys were fed and able to entertain themselves for a few minutes, Ben made a point of contacting a lawyer to arrange a trust fund to be set up for both boys. He was pleased to learn that the lawyer, Salvador Luck, wouldn't need to see him in person until the papers were ready for him to sign. He was able to arrange everything over the phone and leave Mr. Luck to his work.

The rest of the day progressed without incident. Ben wasn't able to get any of his own work done but his time with the boys was just what all of them needed.

When Cliff got home from work he was exhausted, basically seeing two days worth of patients in one. The quiet night at home with his beloved mate and their children was enough to make his whole day worth it.

Although everyone slept well, JD and Jody *did* migrate to the closet floor at some point during the night.

The morning shaped up to be much the same as the one before. Ben watched after the boys, providing the attention both of them were craving.

It wasn't until Cliff arrived home that anything out of the ordinary occurred.

Ben was in the kitchen and heard the front door open. He wasn't surprised to see Cliff when he walked into the room, but when Junior followed him in, Ben was astounded.

"You didn't forget about our date night, did you?" Cliff asked with a grin which was proof enough that he already knew the answer.

"I wish you had called to remind me. I'm already making dinner and I can't leave it as it is." Ben said regretfully.

"Next time I'll call in advance to remind you. But I don't mind us having dinner here with the family, then going out together to do something special with just the two of us. To me it's kind of the best of both worlds." Cliff said frankly.

It was only then that Ben noticed that Junior was no longer in the room with them.

When Cliff noticed his reaction, he said, "I think Junior went into the living room to visit with the boys."

"Then I'd better finish making dinner so we can carry on with this evening." Ben said lovingly, then looked Cliff in the eyes as he added, "Thank you for remembering about our date night. That makes it even more special."

"Of the two of us, you're the romantic one, but every now and then I can get it right." Cliff said with a grin.

"You're perfect." Ben said before giving Cliff a brief but heartfelt kiss.

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The meal with Junior and the boys was at the same time both energizing and relaxing.

Both Cliff and Ben felt twinges of uncertainty, leaving their new sons in the care of someone

else, although neither gave voice to their misgivings.

After getting into the car, Ben cautiously asked, "So, did you already have something in mind for our 'date night'?"

"I had originally thought about us going out to a club, but this morning I realized that SATURDAY is Christmas. We don't have ANY Christmas gifts for the boys."

"I kept putting it off, telling myself that we still had plenty of time, but we're driving Wil to Orlando tomorrow and Friday is Christmas Eve. This is really our only opportunity."

"Although this isn't exactly the same as us having a night off to relax, at least we'll be doing something together." Cliff quietly reasoned.

After a moment to consider, Ben gently responded, "I'm not disappointed. We're going to the store to buy Christmas gifts for our kids. Just take a minute to think about how amazing that is."

"In the abstract, it sounds like the fulfillment of a dream, although I suspect that the reality of shopping the week before Christmas might be something less than joyous." Cliff finished with a grin.

"It's probably one of those experiences that we'll look back on fondly."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah. Most likely."

* * * * *

When they arrived at the store, it was busier and more crowded than either had imagined.

They were lucky enough to find shopping carts in the parking lot, on the way to the store. Once inside, they were packed elbow to elbow with other adults vying for position as they worked their way toward the toy department. There was no shortage of kids, either.

Although he hadn't considered it consciously, on some level Cliff had assumed that Ben already had a plan.

"What are we buying?" Cliff asked loudly to be heard over the people surrounding them.

"Grab anything by Lego. I'll grab Tonka. We can meet up in 'Home & Office' and compare notes after that." Ben called back to him.

"I'll see you there." Cliff agreed before moving his cart into an opening in that direction.

Ben had more of a struggle, but he eventually got his cart turned in the direction that he wanted to go.

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"How did you fare?" Ben asked as Cliff approached.

"As nasty as some of these people are, it's a wonder they get the opportunity to procreate." Cliff said frankly.

Ben chuckled, then asked, "How did your search for toys go?"

"I was able to get two of the delux Lego sets. Maybe combined with what he's already got, he'll be able to make something spectacular with them." Cliff said honestly, then thought to ask, "How did your search go?"

"JD's a little harder to please. I picked up three different trucks that I think he might like to have. I can't really justify buying him more because I doubt that he'd play with them."

"We should probably look at getting them a few more presents. Neither boy has much in the way of personal possessions."

"Actually, that's why I wanted to meet up with you in the home and office section. It might be nice if we get JD a few 'tools of the trade' to encourage his writing career."

"But won't that leave Jody feeling left out? He still hasn't begun to learn to read."

"Remember those pictures that the boys made for us? I think that we should encourage Jody's artistic expression as much as we do JD's writing."

"Yes. From a clinical standpoint, I think it would be healthy for Jody to have something that he can achieve and accomplish that's all his own. That way it won't be as likely that he'll feel like he's constantly in his brother's shadow."

"Good. Then I think we've got our next monumental task laid out; writing supplies for JD and art supplies for Jody."

"I don't shop as much as you do, so I'm not as familiar with the store. Do you know where the art supplies are?"

Rather than answer verbally, Ben simply pointed upward.

"On the ceiling?" Cliff guessed in bewilderment.

Ben rolled his eyes, then pointed toward the sign, hanging from the ceiling, two aisles away that said 'Arts and Crafts'.

"Now I see where JD gets it." Cliff muttered before pushing his cart away, leaving Ben on his own to search through the 'Home and Office' treasures.

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"Did you find anything good?" Ben asked as he pushed his cart into the arts and crafts section.

"Yes. And before you tell me that I'm going overboard, keep in mind that Jody has never been exposed to any kind of creative activity before. I would like for him to have the opportunity to try out as many things as possible."

"I happen to agree with you. Besides, if I were to tell you that you were going overboard, then you'd be able to say the same thing about the presents I'm buying for JD."

Cliff looked at Ben's cart, then cautiously said, "It isn't *that* much."

"I'm not done yet. They have a very small, very generic selection of books here. I'd like to get JD some really good books to serve as a foundation for the library that I'm sure he'll someday assemble. To do that, I'm going to need to go to an actual *book* store."

"Do they even still have those?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"They're not as plentiful as they once were, but there are still a few around. Those of us in the trade know where to find them." Ben said with a grin.

"So, after we're done here, we're going to need to go to a bookstore." Cliff said to confirm.

"Yes." Ben confirmed, then hesitantly continued, "Among other places."

"Where else are we going?" Cliff asked slowly.

"Well, I was thinking that since Todd is such a close friend of yours and since we've found out that Wil is my family..." Ben trailed off uncertainly.

"Where else are we going?" Cliff prompted.

"At various times when Wil and Todd have come over to visit, Wil has mentioned how much he and Todd enjoy playing video games and how much better our game system is than theirs." Ben rambled.

"Can't we buy them a game console here?" Cliff asked curiously.

"We *could*, but this place doesn't have much of a selection of games... even when they're not being picked over by Christmas shoppers. I thought that we might go to an electronics store and pick up a console and a decent assortment of the essential games for them." Ben said reasonably.

"I'm not saying 'no', but have you considered how it's going to make them feel if we buy them an expensive gift and they aren't able to respond in kind?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Yes. But if Christmas with my family has taught me anything, it's that life can be tough. It's a token of our love for our friends and family. They'll just have to suck it up and deal with it."

"You should write Christmas cards." Cliff teased.

"Do you *really* think it's a bad idea?" Ben asked cautiously.

"No. It's not a bad idea at all. You couldn't get away with doing something like this with casual acquaintances, but family and friends get special treatment." Cliff said with a nod.

"And with any luck, this will help them understand just *how* special they are to us." Ben said seriously.

Cliff slowly nodded his agreement, but seemed to be a million miles away.

"What is it?" Ben asked cautiously.

"What about Michael? I assume that you already have something in mind for him." Cliff said slowly.

"I can't say that I really know him all that well, at least, not well enough to know what kind of a gift that he'd enjoy." Ben said frankly.

"But..." Cliff prompted.

"But I thought that every teenager would probably enjoy getting an iPod and some gift cards for music." Ben said frankly.

Cliff once again nodded, not so much in agreement as in comprehension.

"Did you have something else in mind?" Ben asked curiously.

"I didn't really think about it before, but you know what's going on in Junior's life right now, don't you?"

"He's worried about what's going to happen to him after high school." Ben said cautiously.

"As you said, we don't really know that much about his day-to-day life, but I think it's safe to assume that he isn't being set up for success." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"So what do you have in mind?" Ben asked curiously.

"What do you think that we could do to help guide him onto the right path?"

"You want to get him a job for Christmas?"

Cliff laughed, then said, "I'm sure that it would ease his mind if I could arrange that. But what I had in mind was a little more personal for him."

"I can't guess what you're getting at. You're going to have to tell me." Ben said frankly.

"I'd like to get him a computer... well, a laptop. Not exactly top-of-the-line, but something adequate to serve his current needs and get him pointed in the right direction." Cliff said seriously.

"It could open some doors for him." Ben said consideringly.

"It's a tool. If he does nothing productive with it, it'll do him no good. But I think he'll have a lot more prospects with it than without it." Cliff said honestly.

"What about Zeb?" Ben asked cautiously.

"I don't really know him as well as you do. Based on his reaction to 'The Wizard of Oz', I thought it might be nice to get him a portable DVD player and a few classic DVDs."

"That would be GREAT! Not only do I think that he would appreciate the sentiment of the gift, but I know that he'd have a great time discovering a whole new world of movies." Ben said with a smile.

"I'm glad you think so. But did you have something else in mind for him?" Cliff asked curiously.

"No. I was actually at a loss for what to get him. I think your idea is great. But..."

"But what?"

"Well, think about what you just said about Junior. Wouldn't the same things apply to Zeb?"

"How do you mean?"

"What kind of a future can Zeb look forward to, continuing on, living paycheck to paycheck in a dead end job? Don't you think that we could give him the same tools and opportunities that you're talking about giving to Junior?" Ben asked thoughtfully.

"I honestly can't imagine what he would do with those tools, but I agree that he should at least have the opportunity to break away from the hopeless future that he seems to be headed toward."

"Although computers will be a nice start, they're both going to need our guidance and encouragement." Ben said resignedly.

"They'll have it." Cliff said firmly, then turned as he seemed to notice something on a little rack at the end of the aisle.

"What's that?"

"Gift cards."

"Who do you want to get those for?"

"Michael and Zeb."

"For what?"

"New clothes. It will depend on what opportunities each of them decide to pursue, but whether it be an academic or professional pursuit, they'll need to look the part."

"You know, from the looks of it, we're going to be spending a lot more on our friends and family than we are our own kids."

"Our kids will have what they need when they need it. Michael and Zeb are starting out at a disadvantage. We're just helping to give them a fighting chance."

"So you're not worried about how much all of this is going to cost?"

"Not really. We've saved up quite a bit of money just for the fact that we haven't had anything to spend it on. I don't think it'll hurt to let loose just this once." Cliff said with a smile.

"Then what would you think if I went ahead and got Junior the iPod and Zeb the portable DVD player?" Ben asked cautiously.

"I think that'd be fine."

"If you want to pick out some gift cards, there's something else that I want to pick up while we're here."

"What's that?"

"I saw a display of Hickory Farms baskets on the center aisle. I'd like to get one of the big ones for Wil and Todd."

"Pick up one for us, too."

"You got it. I'll meet you back here."

* * * * *

"This isn't the way home. Where are we going now?" Cliff asked anxiously.

"I think you'll be happier if I don't tell you." Ben quietly answered.

"You can't possibly want to go to another store. We don't have three square inches of space left to put anything." Cliff pleaded for Ben to understand.

"I've already thought of that." Ben assured him.

"Where are we going?"

"Toys 'R' Us."

"Oh God." Cliff said in a withering voice.

"I just thought of something else that both the boys absolutely *need*." Ben said firmly.

"What?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Bicycles."

"I'm fairly certain that neither of them can ride."

"It's going to be up to us to change that."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"It's a rite of passage for a child; their first taste of freedom. I think that that's something that both of the boys desperately need. If you'll put your pediatrician hat back on for a few minutes, I'm sure that you'll agree with me."

"But where are you going to put them? You couldn't even fit a *picture* of two bicycles in here right now."

"I already thought of that. I'm going to buy a bike rack and hook it to the back of the car."

"You sound like you're not going to change your mind about this." Cliff said speculatively.

"I know that I'm right."

Cliff was silent for a moment, but finally reluctantly admitted, "Yeah. You're right."

"All we're getting are the two bikes and the rack. It shouldn't take that long. Then all we'll have left to do is wrap and hide the presents when we get home."

"Don't forget that I'll need to drive Michael back to the home when we get back."

"Oh, that's right. I *did* forget that."

"And I have to go to work in the morning, so I can't be up *all* night."

"I know."

"We'll find some way to make it work. If we don't get all the presents wrapped, we'll just make time to work on them later."

"Do you think that we should put some of the presents under the tree, so that the boys will have the opportunity to speculate about what the presents might be?"

"A few of the smaller ones, maybe. But just remember that either boy may not be able to understand that the presents aren't to be opened until later. I wouldn't want to set them up for failure or run the risk of one of them feeling like they'd ruined Christmas or disappointed us somehow. It might be better if we just keep them put away until Christmas morning."

"If you don't risk them failing, you also don't risk them succeeding. Even if one of them makes a mistake, it's likely to be more of a growth experience than keeping them locked inside a protected bubble where they never have the chance to do anything wrong."

"Normally I'd agree with you, but it's Christmas. I'd like for them to have happy memories to dispel some of the bad ones that both of them carry."

"I'd like that too. But we can't *give* them those memories. They have to participate and be a functional part of the celebration for it to have any meaning to them. Otherwise our Christmas celebration will have no more meaning for them than watching a Christmas special on TV."

"I actually know what that feels like." Cliff said quietly.

"How's that?"

"My family did that one year... well, probably more than one year, but there's one that I remember in particular; all of us sitting in the living room, silently watching a surrealistically happy family on television having a joyous and wholesome Christmas celebration, basking in each others' company... and occasionally breaking into song for some inexplicable reason."

"Sounds hideous."

"What was yours like?"

"For us, all of the turmoil and heartache that's been simmering all year long finally comes to a boil on that most special night of the year. In the weeks leading up to Christmas I remember my mom ranting and raving about everything everyone in the family had ever done to offend her in any way. Never forgive. Never forget."

"I'm glad you didn't inherit that from them."

"It's part of me. I carry it with me. Just watch. If someone hurts one of the boys I'm fully capable of carrying a grudge against that person every single day for the rest of my life."

"What about JD's mother?"

"She's a special case. She's insane. I sincerely hope that she can get the help that she needs."

"What about the woman who held Jody captive?"

"Were it within my power to do so, I would cause her to suffer at least as much as Jody has. And I would revel in drawing out her misery for as long as I possibly could." Ben said as a simple statement of fact.

"Well, from what Gerry told me, Ruby is probably going to suffer a horrific death from late-stage cancer."

"Good."

"Oh my God." Cliff gasped when he saw the Toys 'R' Us parking lot filled to overflowing.

"It's not as bad as it looks. We already know what we're here for, so we'll just grab it and go."

"You're assuming that we'll even be able to find a place to park." Cliff said in wonder at the sea of cars.

"We'll find one... eventually." Ben said weakly.

* * * * *

"Two bikes and a bike rack, that's what you said, isn't it?" Cliff said as they struggled to maneuver two fully assembled bicycles AND a basket of other purchases out of the store.

"It would have been irresponsible for us to get the boys bicycles without the proper safety gear. I would think that a pediatrician would be the first to think of that."

"I agree that safety is important. But I'm just wondering where we're going to put all of this."

"I'm sure that we'll be able to jam a few more things in the back, but I was thinking that maybe you could carry what's left in your lap." Ben cautiously suggested.

"Next year, we're going to spread our Christmas shopping out over the course of a month in several trips."

"Before we worry too much about that, maybe we should figure out how we're going to assemble the bike rack so that we can get the bikes home." Ben said as he waited for Cliff's reaction.

"Where's the toolbox?" Cliff hesitantly asked.

"As far as I know, it's in the compartment with the spare tire." Ben reluctantly admitted.

Cliff was silent as they walked (and walked and walked) across the parking lot to the remote corner where they had eventually been able to find a parking space.

"Let's see what it takes to assemble the rack. But if it's too bad, I'm going to call someone for help. As far as I know, Wil and Todd are off tonight." Cliff said frankly.

"From the size and shape of the box, we might not need to assemble it at all. It just looks like a frame and a few straps." Ben said in his defense.

"*Nothing* is ever that easy." Cliff said as they finally reached the car.

"I would think that a pediatrician would be more upbeat and optimistic."

"Walk a mile in my shoes... wait, I think you just did, from the store to this parking space."

"Funny." Ben said flatly, as he started to break the bike rack out of its packaging.

"While you're doing that, I'll see what else I can fit into the back seat." Cliff said as he left Ben to his work.

* * * * *

"Cliff. I could use your help here." Ben said a few minutes later.

"How bad is it?" Cliff asked as he backed out of the passenger side of the car.

"No tools required. All we have to do is hook it on and strap it into place. I was just hoping that you could hold the frame in place while I make sure that all the straps are pulled tight."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Hold it there."

"I've got it."

"You know, this thing can hold four bikes so we *could* take the boys somewhere and all of us go bike riding together sometime."

"Let's just see if we can get the bikes home with this thing before we start making any long term plans." Cliff said dubiously.

"Agreed." Ben said as he tightened the last strap into place.

"Is that it?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"Now we put the bikes on, then I'll go through all the straps and make sure that they're snug."

"I don't know. It looks flimsy."

"Of the choices available, this was one of the better ones." Ben assured him.

"I know. But I still don't know if I trust it."

"Would you put the other bike in place while I get the Velcro straps tightened on this one?"

"Yeah. I'll get started on it."

"Is this really bothering you that much?"

"No. It just got me to thinking."

"About what, if I may ask."

"We need to get wills made up."

"Come on! Christmas shopping isn't *that* bad."

"What happens to Jody if something happens to me. As I understand what the judge told us, Jody is *my* son. There is no legal relationship between you and me to compel the judge to give you custody."

"Don't we have that 'right of survivorship' paperwork filed somewhere?"

"Yes. But as far as I know, that doesn't have anything to do with the kids or our guardianship of them. Try looking at it this way, there are no legal protections automatically put into place for us. We have to be sure that we've covered all the bases ourselves. While there's always the

chance that a judge might decide that Jody is best left where he is loved and feels safe, there's nothing to compel or even encourage him to leave Jody with you."

"Or JD with you." Ben said thoughtfully.

"I know that we won't be able to do anything in the next few days, but this is something that we really can't afford to put off. We need to get the legalities sorted out so that we'll know that the boys will be taken care of."

"What happens to the boys if something happens to both of us at once? We should probably decide who we want to watch after them." Ben said slowly.

"I agree that it would be wise to make those arrangements, but the likelihood of us both dying at the same time is remote at best. We can probably wait on that."

"Yeah. It's not like we'd ever be out together without the boys... like we are tonight. And we wouldn't ever find ourselves in a situation where the car is dangerously overloaded and where we've just installed a dubious bicycle rack on the back... that could never happen."

"Okay. Point taken." Cliff conceded with a grin, then asked, "So, who do you think should get custody of the boys if we're both incapacitated or killed?"

"I have absolutely no idea. But like you already said, we can't do anything about it right now anyway. Between now and the time we can talk to a lawyer about it, we should think about who we know who *can* and *will* take the boys in."

"No one immediately jumps to mind."

"I know. But even if we can't find the *perfect* new parents for JD and Jody, we can at least arrange for them to be somewhere that they'll be kept together and know that they'll be loved."

"Okay. I can think of a few people who might be able to fill that role."

"I think I'm done with this. Are you ready to go?" Ben asked as he finished tugging on each of the straps to assure himself that they were tight.

"I suppose so. I'm just worried that we're forgetting something... or someone in all our plans." Cliff said frankly.

"Well, if we missed anything, we wouldn't have a place to put it. If we suddenly remember, we'll just have to make another trip."

"You're right. Let's go home."

* * * * *

"Did you have a good date?" Junior asked as he turned off the TV.

"I can honestly say that it's unlike any date that I've ever had before." Cliff said with a grin at Ben.

"Everything's fine here. The boys went to bed on time."

"Thank you for watching them for us. If you're ready, I'll drive you home." Cliff said pleasantly.

"Um, yeah. I didn't bring anything with me, so I'm ready."

"I'll be moving things into the garage while you're doing that." Ben said easily.

"Don't overdo it. I'll help you when I get back." Cliff assured him.

"It's not too late. I can help you if you need it." Junior quickly offered.

"No. Thank you, Michael. You've been a tremendous help already. We've got it from here." Cliff said gratefully.

"Okay. Then I guess I'm ready."

* * * * *

The ride back to the children's home was quiet for the most part, but Junior finally broke the silence by quietly saying, "Thanks for letting me watch the boys. I know that they count on me a lot at the home, but it's different. I don't really do anything important, I just help out, but someone's always there if I need them. No one ever *really* trusted me before."

"Well, just be sure to let us know if you start feeling a little bit *too* trusted. By that I mean, let us know if we're asking you to do too much. You need to be able to have your own life." Cliff said concernedly.

"As soon as I figure out what that means, I'll get right on that."

"I can understand how it might feel like you don't have any choices. But I promise you that Ben and I will do everything that we can to see that you have as many choices as possible."

"You've already started doing that. I never even thought about me going to college until you and Ben brought it up."

"So you've been thinking about it?"

"Yeah. I mean, I haven't *done* anything. But I've looked at some stuff on the Internet and even talked to Mr. Cooper about it a little bit."

"What did he have to say about it?" Cliff asked curiously.

"He said that before I fall in love with the idea of going to college, that I should decide what I'd like to do as a profession. He said that it'll help to keep me motivated if I can form a vision of the future and keep working toward that goal."

"Wise words." Cliff said with a nod, then added, "When I was your age, I had already decided that the one and only thing that I ever wanted to do was to be a doctor. If we hadn't been able to manage the finances or if I hadn't been able to pass the entrance exams, I don't know what I would have done. I didn't have an alternate strategy. Later, when I started my residency, I discovered how much I liked working with children and helping them to overcome their illnesses and that's when I decided to specialize in pediatrics."

"So the medicine came first and the kids came second?"

"Yes." Cliff confirmed, then continued, "Before I entered medical school I never had an opportunity to be around children. I didn't hate them or anything, but I didn't have any special attachment to them either."

"And now not only do you get to work with kids every day, but you also get to come home to kids of your own."

"To tell you the truth, that kind of came out of left field. Although Ben and I went to talk to Mrs. Usher to convince her to let us take in a foster child, we actually had no idea of what we were getting into. I guess that if I were going to give you some advice about choosing a career, it should be about that. Don't let romantic ideas and preconceived notions about a thing cause you to make permanent, life-changing decisions. Find out about the reality. Talk with people

who've been through it and can tell you how things *really* are."

"Does that mean that you wish that you didn't adopt JD and Jody?" Junior asked with concern.

"No! Not at all." Cliff quickly assured him, then explained, "I'm just saying that Ben and I didn't have any clue about the *reality* of being parents. We went into it with a very sweetly sanitized, 'safe for television', concept of what parenthood was like. It was all hugs and cuddles with the occasional skinned knee."

"But the real world doesn't work that way." Junior said, obviously understanding what Cliff was trying to convey.

"I think the helplessness is the worst part. In my arrogance I had assumed that as a pediatrician I'd automatically have all the answers. I'd do anything in the world to help Jody forget some of the horrors that he's lived through... and I suppose by the same token, I'd do anything to help JD remember some of the missing parts of his life. But in the end, all I can do is try to help them deal with what life has handed them. I can be there when they need me and hold them through their tears, but there's not much else that I can do. I can't make the monsters go away. It tears me apart."

"You may not be able to make the monsters go away, but you're there to help them fight the monsters. I know a lot of kids who don't have that much." Junior said honestly.

"Well, just remember that if you ever have any monsters to face, that Ben and I will be here for you whenever you need us." Cliff assured him as he turned into the parking lot of the home.

"I already knew that. My future is a monster and you're already helping me." Junior said before opening his car door.

"Do you need for me to go with you and sign you in?" Cliff asked after him.

"No. I've got it from here." Junior assured him.

"Hold on. I haven't paid you yet!" Cliff said quickly, before Junior could close the door.

"For what?"

"Babysitting. Not only are you helping us out, but this gives you a chance to earn a little money." Cliff said as he pulled a few bills out of his wallet.

"Okay. Thanks." Junior said uncertainly.

Cliff handed him the money, then said, "We'll probably be asking you to watch the boys again sometime after Christmas."

"Wait. This is too much." Junior said before counting the money a second time.

"No. It's right. Fifteen dollars an hour plus tip." Cliff said with a smile.

"Thanks! I mean, REALLY!" Junior said in amazement.

"If I don't see you before Saturday, expect me to stop by at around eight in the morning to pick you up."

"For what?"

"Christmas. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll be ready!"

"See you then."

* * * * *

"How are things going here?" Cliff asked as he walked into the living room, which looked like Santa's workshop had exploded all over it.

"Next year, we start earlier." Ben said as he tried to get a piece of wrapping paper to lay flat long enough to get some tape on it.

"Let me help you." Cliff said as he raced to the rescue.

"Thanks." Ben said gratefully, then added, "I was able to get most of the smaller gifts wrapped and under the tree, but some of these bigger things are being uncooperative."

"Don't worry, I'm here now. I'll help you."

"I left the bicycles in the garage. I don't think either of the boys have ever gone in there, so I doubt that they'll accidentally find them."

"What about these baskets? Do you want to wrap them?"

"No. I don't see the sense in that. Just don't confuse the two baskets. The one with the extra strawberry candies is for Todd and Wil."

"I don't think I'm the one you'll need to worry about. I'm pretty sure that JD would be eager to put the contents of those baskets to good use." Cliff said frankly.

"Maybe we should put Todd and Wil's basket in the garage, just to remove the temptation. I bought the other basket for us to use and he won't have to wait until Christmas to have access to it."

"I'll do that now, before we get sidetracked." Cliff said as he picked up the strawberry candy laden basket, then thought to ask, "How much more do you have to do?"

"I've just got a couple boxes left. They should be easy to wrap. If you'll take them to the garage when I finish them, we'll be done in no time." Ben said while continuing to work.

"Are you sure you don't want to leave the bigger gifts in here by the tree? If we tell the boys not to mess with them, I'm sure that they'll leave them alone." Cliff said reasonably.

"I'm not too worried about the boys, but I just think that the big presents will be in the way. I don't want to be tripping over them until Christmas morning."

"That makes sense. We've got a nice big living room, there's no reason for all four of us to be huddled in one corner because the Christmas tree and presents have taken over the room."

"If you'll stick a bow on this one, it's done. You can take it."

"Is this Junior's laptop?" Cliff asked as he looked through the bag of stick-on bows.

"Yes. Although it doesn't matter. His and Zeb's are exactly the same."

"Michael and I talked for a few minutes when I drove him home." Cliff said as he finally selected a blue bow, then continued, "I'm more convinced than ever that we're doing the right thing for him."

"Regardless whether Zeb and Junior use the tools we give them, helping them is the right thing to do." Ben said with certainty.

"We're going to need to continue to help them. I know we can't make decisions for them or

force them to take advantage of opportunities, but we can support them with our insights and try to motivate them." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"So what you're saying is that we're not giving them gifts so much as commitments?" Ben asked curiously.

Cliff nodded, then said, "Whether they ever realize it or not."

"If you'll stick a bow on this last one, I'll start cleaning up. If we go to bed right now, we *might* be able to manage a few hours of sleep." Ben finished with a weary smile.

"Unless Jody has another night terror." Cliff added.

"Well, I guess sleeplessness is just a natural part of parenthood. At least we've been able to avoid poopy diapers." Ben said as he started gathering scraps of paper into a bag.

"Remember what I do for a living." Cliff said tiredly.

"Oh, right." Ben said with a grin, then amended, "Well, at least *I've* been able to avoid poopy diapers."

"I'm going to put this in the garage. I'll meet you in the bedroom."

"I'll be there in a minute."

Chapter 16

After seeing Cliff off to work, the rest of the family fell back into their routine of dealing with the breakfast dishes and starting their day.

Eventually they were gathered in the living room sharing a quiet moment, each pursuing their own interests, when the phone interrupted their tranquility.

Ben stretched from his seat on the couch and picked up the phone, turning it on with his thumb as he said, "Hello?"

After a moment of listening, Ben cautiously said, "No. You didn't wake anyone up. We've been up for hours. Besides that, we're always happy to hear from you."

After another moment of listening, Ben smiled, then said, "Yes. Of course. You're welcome here anytime."

Ben got a surprised look, then stammered, "Oh. Okay."

Before JD or Jody could ask what was happening, Ben stood so that he could return the phone to its cradle.

"What's going on?" JD finally asked, sensing that something was wrong.

"I'm not sure, but it shouldn't take long to find out. From the sound of it, Wil should be here any minute." Ben said cautiously.

"I thought he was coming over after lunch, so we could drive him to Orlando." JD said honestly.

"Yeah. I thought so too." Ben reluctantly admitted, then continued, "I got the impression that whatever changed wasn't something that Wil planned or was within his control."

A sudden spate of knocking jolted the entire family, even though they were more or less expecting it.

"I'll get it!" JD proclaimed as he stood, leaving his little laptop at the end of the coffee table.

Jody likewise abandoned his Lego construction project and bounded after his brother.

* * * * *

"Change of plans." Wil said from the doorway, with a boy hugging him on either side.

"I thought Todd was going to be dropping you off around 1:00 today." Ben said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. That's the 'plans' I was talking about." Wil said frankly, then explained, "Todd got a frantic call from his sister a little bit ago saying that she needs him to come over early to help salvage their Christmas dinner before the in-laws show up, expecting to be fed. Apparently, the demon spawn fed the turkey to the dog or the dog to the turkey or something like that. Whatever it is, they need Todd there early to... I don't know, clean up the crime scene or something."

"Well, I'm glad you won't have to deal with that. It sounds exhausting." Ben said frankly.

"Yeah, but the in-laws are so cool. They're like, so high-and-mighty, better than everyone else and they look at us like we're the dirt under some commoner's fingernail."

"How is that cool?'" Cliff cautiously asked.

"The cool part is Todd and his sister trying everything to get their approval. I mean, they'll *never* get it, but it's funny as hell to watch them try."

"Funny in a pathetic, sad way?" Ben guessed.

"Yeah. Like that." Wil confirmed, then thought to add, "So I'm early. You said you didn't mind."

"No. It's great! We love having you here. There just won't be much for us to do between now and the time we have to leave for..." Ben was saying as ominous music started playing, seemingly from nowhere.

"Hang on. Business." Wil said as he struggled to get a cell phone out of his jeans pocket.

"Since when do you have a cell phone?" Ben asked curiously.

"Since Mona gave it to us for work. This way she can call us if she has some extra jobs for us." Wil said, then put the phone to his ear and said, "What's up, Mona?"

Ben and the boys watched as an expression of surprise came onto Wil's face.

As they continued to watch, surprise morphed into interest, then on into something that might be happiness.

"Yeah. Yeah. Got it. Thanks!" Wil stammered before closing the phone.

"Does she have a job for you?" Ben cautiously asked, not able to interpret the latest change in Wil's expression.

"No. That was Mr. Hammerstein." Wil said hesitantly.

"Did he give you bad news?" Ben asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all. In fact, it's really good news if you think about it." Wil absently muttered.

"Then what's bothering you?" Ben asked curiously.

"I just realized, Mona got us this old burner phone so that she could call us if she needed to, so she could maybe get us some extra work. We've never given anyone else the number, but somehow Mr. Hammerstein knew what number to call to reach me." Wil said slowly.

"You said he's a private investigator, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I guess this means that he's pretty good at it." Wil said frankly.

"So, what did he call you about?"

"Apparently, the Stone Family Christmas cavalcade of misery and despair has been relocated to Tallahassee."

"Well, that's... convenient, at least, for us, I guess. Why in the world would they have it here when the whole family lives in Orlando?" Ben asked cautiously.

"He didn't tell me that part. But he *did* say that Aunt Linda would be the one hosting it. He gave me the address and it's one of those McMansions on the other side of town."

"I know just the ones you're talking about." Ben confirmed, then followed by muttering, "Overpriced, pretentious crap."

"Yeah. That's them. And I can see Aunt Linda and Uncle Dave feeling right at home in one of those boxy eyesores." Wil said frankly.

"All this time I thought the family was so far away that they might as well be on another world. Now to find out that we've actually got relatives who live locally is kind of a shock." Ben said not all together happily.

"If they're living in one of those pretend playhouse monstrosities, then they practically *are* in another world." Wil countered.

"True. The chances of us running into each other down at the Piggly Wiggly is remote, at best."

"Right." Wil confirmed, then hurried to ask, "But you're still going, aren't you? I mean, this way, if they start being themselves, you can leave and you won't even have to drive a long way to get home." Wil said honestly.

"Yeah. I suppose so. And besides, being so close, we could even make it in time for dinner, if you wanted to." Ben finished with a smile.

"Skipping the dinner has nothing to do with the drive. It's all about being trapped in a no-win social situation with monsters." Wil said frankly.

"I couldn't have said it better." Ben said simply, then turned and asked, "What do you think we should have for dinner tonight, Spider?"

"Something simple. If I take a few minutes now to make some croutons so that they'll be cooled down for later, then we could have a nice fettuccine alfredo and a Caesar salad... and maybe some homemade bread sticks to go with it... if someone will work the oven for me." JD said seriously.

"Do you think you could talk Wil through it?" Ben asked with a smile in his direction.

"Yeah. It'd be nice to have Uncle Wil's help. So that way we can cook it together as a family." JD said seriously.

"If you want us to cook it as a family, will you have something for Jody to do?" Ben asked warmly.

"I have a really important job for him. Romaine lettuce is best when you tear it up by hand instead of cutting it. So, with Jody's help we're going to make the best caesar salad that you've ever tasted." JD said in the tone of a vow.

"You had *me* at fettuccine." Wil said honestly.

"That'll be good too." JD said confidently.

* * * * *

"Pappa's home!" Jody suddenly crowed as he sprang up from his Lego workshop and bolted for the door.

The movement was so abrupt and unexpected from the quiet boy that the others couldn't do much more than look at each other to confirm that it really *was* an unexpected reaction.

When Cliff and Jody didn't immediately walk through the living room door, Ben, JD, and Wil looked at each other with increasing concern.

"What's this I hear about a change of plans?" Cliff asked as he entered the room with Jody wrapped around him.

"Wil's change of plans was because Todd's sister had a family crisis." Ben said diplomatically.

"Demon spawn." Wil added for the sake of clarification.

"After that, Wil was notified that the Christmas Dinner and Inquisition will be held in Tallahassee this year." Ben said seriously.

"Doesn't your family live in Orlando?"

"Yes. But apparently Wil's Aunt Linda bought a house on the other side of town, one of those mansions." Ben said unenthusiastically.

"So the whole family has invited themselves over to mooch off the relative who made the big time?" Cliff guessed.

"Looks that way." Ben said simply.

"Yeah. It sounds like something they'd do." Wil confirmed.

"So you're saying that they actually changed the location to another city within twenty-four hours of the event?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"The private detective guy, Hammerstein, called me this morning. That doesn't mean that they decided anything today." Wil said honestly.

"Except to invite you." Ben quietly added.

"I'm betting that there's a few of them who would rather that I didn't go." Wil said honestly.

"Good. Then we'll have a chance to ruin their Christmas for them. Consider it something like a present." Ben said with a mischievous grin.

After a moment to consider, Wil broke into a reluctant smile and said, "Yeah. I'll do that."

"So, if it's being held here in town, then we won't have to rush around preparing for a road trip." Cliff said with a smile of realization.

"Nope. You're officially off for your Christmas break now. You can kick back and relax, or do whatever else you feel like." Ben said warmly.

"Later, I'm going to need you to help me with something in the kitchen." JD quickly told Cliff, before he could commit to doing something else.

"Does it involve me smashing something for dinner?" Cliff asked as he carried Jody over to the coffee table, where he could pull JD into a one-armed hug with his free arm.

"I already got the mallet set out for you." JD said as he reveled in the feeling of being held so lovingly.

Cliff softly chuckled as he continued to hold his children.

* * * * *

After making a simple lunch of sandwiches for the family, JD went to work on the 'simple' dinner that he had planned.

The family had settled into the living room to work on their personal projects. But every so often JD would hurry into the kitchen, then occasionally return to the living room to ask for one or another of the family to help him in his dinner preparations.

Cliff wasn't entirely sure that it was necessary for him to break up the bacon into bits with a hammer, but since JD insisted that it was important, he couldn't think of any reason to refuse.

On one occasion when JD didn't need either Cliff or Jody in the kitchen, Cliff availed himself of the opportunity to ask Jody about his expectations regarding the impending Christmas.

Much to Cliff's surprise, Jody had gained quite a wealth of knowledge from both the television and from his older brother. While Jody didn't know some of the more obscure details of the lore, he *did* have reasonable knowledge of the traditional dinner, the concept of gift giving, and most especially of Santa.

That, in itself, presented a problem.

In the short time that Jody had been with them, he had learned to accept the reality of people giving presents without an expectation of reciprocation.

And because his older brother had told him so, Jody also grasped the concept of a benevolent fat man in a red suit who gives good children the present of their heart's desire.

That was all well and good, except for the fact that Cliff didn't have a clue *what* Jody's heart's desire *was*.

Continued gentle probing helped to verify that Jody *did* have one special toy in mind that he wanted Santa to bring him.

But no matter how many different ways Cliff tried to approach the subject, he couldn't make any progress in finding out what Jody wanted.

Feeling the impending Stone family gathering closing in on them, Cliff resolved to let the matter rest for the time being and talk to JD about it the next time they had a few minutes to speak privately.

"Uncle Wil, the breadsticks are ready to go into the oven." JD said as he exited the kitchen.

"This is what he does for relaxation, right?" Wil asked as he stood from the Lego construction zone.

"Yes. This is how he 'plays'." Cliff said frankly.

"Exhausting, isn't it?" Ben added with a grin.

"When I was his age, my idea of playing was probably a lot more energetic than his... and quite a bit more destructive." Wil said before walking out of the living room.

"Is there anything we need to be sure to do or not do before we leave for the... *visit*? Cliff cautiously asked.

"Nothing I can think of. This is mostly for Wil. I wouldn't mind saying 'hi' to a few of my more distant relatives who might attend, but I'm certainly not willing to invest an undue amount of preparation or concern to it." Ben said frankly.

"What about the boys? Do you think that they're ready for this?"

"Actually, we're going to be in a situation where we can turn around and go home at a moment's notice. If the boys start having trouble or if the relatives behave badly, we'll just leave. We have *nothing* keeping us there." Ben said confidently.

"I just wanted to be sure where you stood on things before we found ourselves in a situation where I couldn't ask you." Cliff said frankly.

"I'm expecting a few hugs, a few handshakes... maybe a few icy stares. Then, once Wil has managed to check on the people he's worried about, we can come back home and relax for a while." Ben finished with a smile at the thought.

JD leaned in the living room door and quickly said, "If you'll go into the dining room, dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

"We'll be right there." Ben said with a loving smile at the boy.

"Can I help you carry things?" Jody asked hopefully as he bounded up from the Lego structure he and Wil had been working on.

"Yeah. Just as soon as the breadsticks are out of the oven, we're going to put them in a basket and then you can take them into the dining room so that they'll be nice and hot and fresh for dinner." JD said before withdrawing from the doorway.

"Remember, this is supposed to be the best caesar salad we've ever tasted." Ben reminded Cliff as they crossed the room.

"From JD's cooking so far, I have no doubt that it will be." Cliff said honestly.

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As everyone took their seats around the dining room table, they could see that JD had put forth the extra effort to set the table, making it, its own part of the dining experience.

"This looks wonderful, don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, but I don't remember you mentioning that we were having grilled chicken."

"I guess we have hot dogs, too, if you'd rather have that." JD said uncertainly.

"No. I said I wasn't complaining. You just didn't mention that you were fixing grilled chicken for dinner." Ben hurried to explain.

"Can you think of something that would pair better with Caesar salad and fettuccine alfredo?" JD asked curiously.

"Not really." Ben reluctantly admitted.

"Everything's here. You can go ahead and start." JD said as he placed the chilled salad bowl in the middle of the table.

"This looks wonderful, JD. It looks like you went to a lot of extra trouble to get everything just right." Ben said as he began to serve himself some Caesar salad.

"I couldn't think of a better way to give the whole family a Christmas present. I mean, I could write something, but that's more personal. It would be like me giving something to *each* of you. Making a special dinner lets me give something to *all* of you." JD explained.

"If that's the case, then we should get started while everything is still hot." Cliff said firmly.

No one needed any further encouragement.

* * * * *

Conversation over dinner was light and optimistic. No mention was made of their intended after-dinner plans.

The entire family were unified in their praise for JD's perfectly executed 'simple' dinner.

While there were indications that one or another of them were intentionally dragging things out to put off the inevitable, the family eventually had all the dishes done and all the excuses exhausted. There was no avoiding it, the time to visit the extended family had arrived.

As Cliff pulled out of the driveway, Ben turned in his seat and told JD, "I'm surprised you didn't want to spend the free time this afternoon writing."

"I'm stuck on an idea for my book. Doing other stuff for a while helps me sort it out in my head." JD said simply.

"Yeah. I do that too." Ben confirmed, then cautiously asked, "Would you like to talk about it? Sometimes putting it into words makes it easier to deal with."

"It's not really part of the main story, it's something that's happening behind the veil at the same time." JD said slowly.

"It sounds interesting already." Ben said honestly.

"Behind the veil, the Gray Mother exists, defending her children until they're ready to enter the world.

"She has such fierce determination and frightening power that few will challenge her. Those who are willing to do so, most often end up having their mangled corpses fed to her children, which helps to teach them that enemies exist to be devoured." JD said intensely.

"What, if anything, does this have to do with what's happening in the main story?" Ben cautiously asked.

"It's kind of a straw man, but I think it leads the reader to question the relationship dynamic and motivations of the characters. The ferocity and protectiveness is undeniably built into the mother's nature but one could be asking, 'Is it LOVE?'." JD said seriously.

"I suppose you could answer that any way that you wanted, since everyone defines love in their own way." Ben said thoughtfully.

"But you could argue that someone who believes that the mother bird 'loves' her chicks can't have any grasp on reality at all. Their entire world is a fantasy constructed of preferred beliefs and conveniences, ignoring the real world around them." JD said seriously.

"How so?" Ben asked with interest.

"The person who believes that wild animals 'love' their young are the same people who think that if you 'believe' hard enough, if you wish for something with all your heart, that the universe will somehow give you things... just because you deserve it." JD said seriously.

"So, are you saying that you don't believe in love?" Wil asked cautiously.

"No. I'm saying that I don't automatically believe in something that 'looks like' love." JD said frankly.

"Is that the message that you're trying to convey in your main story line?"

"Not really, but by bringing it up now, the reader will probably look more closely at character motivations instead of automatically going with lazy easy answers." JD said seriously.

"Don't be surprised when they don't." Ben said with a grin.

"Do you think I should dumb it down?" JD asked challengingly.

"No. Of course not. I'm just telling you that the people who 'get it' probably aren't going to say much, while the people who don't, won't shut up about it." Ben said frankly.

"Does this whole thing about a mother's love have to do with how you feel about your own mother." Cliff cautiously asked.

"No. I know that she loves me. She's just crazy and doesn't know how to show it except to hurt me." JD said simply.

"Did Ron tell you that?" Ben asked curiously.

"We talked about it. I don't know who said it. We kind of came up with it together." JD said informatively.

"Wil, I think we're close. I'm going to need for you to tell me where we're going." Cliff said from the driver's seat.

"We're in the right neighborhood. Just look for a house with two or three dozen cars out front. If that doesn't work out right away, we can start looking at house numbers and stuff." Wil said with a teasing grin.

"I can see why you and Todd get along." Cliff muttered as he slowly drove through the well-to-do neighborhood.

* * * * *

"This one looks like a definite possibility." Ben said as they approached a house with a plethora of cars parked in front of it.

"Yeah. That's my dad's truck. We're here." Wil confirmed.

"Any last words of encouragement before we go in there?" Cliff asked as he pulled the car to a stop.

"Remember, whatever happens, no matter how bad it gets, that we love you and that we *will* be leaving, probably very soon." Ben said assuringly.

"Does that apply just to the boys?" Wil asked cautiously.

"No. Of course not. It applies to you too." Ben said without hesitation.

"Good. Because if this goes really bad, I may be needing someone to talk to about it." Wil said honestly as everyone got out of the car.

"You've got it." Ben assured him, then added with a smile, "Plus we have a few kids here that you can cuddle. Believe it or not, they can be incredibly therapeutic."

"Yes. I see how that could work." Wil said honestly.

"Are we ready?" Cliff asked as he looked over the group gathered outside the car.

"I don't know if there *is* any way to be ready for this." Wil said frankly.

"Sometimes you have to do things just because they need to be done, even if you don't like them." JD said seriously.

"With everything that he's survived, it'd probably be best to listen to him." Ben said frankly.

"Alright. Let's do this!" Wil said determinedly as he led the group toward the front door.

* * * * *

"If they don't answer, can we just go home?" Cliff asked cautiously.

The absent look in Jody's expression spoke of either his indifference or lack of comprehension of what they were doing.

"Well, with any luck, even if it's a total bust for the rest of us, the kids should get a chance to talk to Santa." Wil offered weakly as he waited for someone to answer the door.

"Santa's here?" Jody asked with obvious interest.

"I don't know if he's here right now, but he usually shows up for these things." Wil told Jody, then said more to the entire group, "It's one of the few happy memories I have of going to these things."

"I'll give it two more minutes..." Cliff was saying as the door opened.

"I wasn't sure if I heard someone out here or not. It's a madhouse in there." A man said as he opened the door and stood aside to invite them in.

"Hey Frank. How did you end up on door duty?" Wil asked with a chuckle.

"Just lucky, I guess." Frank said simply, then leaned in and added, "If I play my cards right, they might forget that I'm even here."

"Good thinking. Nice survival skills." Wil laughed, then turned to the others and said, "Guys, this is my Uncle Frank, even though I've always thought of him as more of a cousin, since he's not old and crabby like uncles usually are."

"Thanks." Frank laughed appreciatively.

"Frank, this is Cliff and Ben and their sons JD and Jody." Wil said pleasantly.

"It's nice to meet you all." Frank said obligatorily, then thought to add, "You've missed dinner, but they just put the desserts out. You can help yourselves to that if you'd like."

"Spiced gumdrop pie. I remember." Wil said queasily, then added, "I still haven't completely gotten the taste out of my mouth from last time."

"I think there are some edible offerings this year. If you like the fig bars, remember to let Sandra know."

"Fig bars. Sandra. Got it." Wil said confidently.

"Is Santa here?" Jody asked Frank hopefully.

"I haven't seen him yet, but he usually shows up around this time." Frank said indulgently to the little boy.

Jody looked up to Cliff with wide hopeful eyes as he quietly asked, "Can I see Santa?"

"We'll see what we can do to make that happen." Cliff said gently, although it sounded suspiciously like a promise.

"Standing out here in the entry hall isn't getting this over with." Ben said as he looked at the hustle and bustle through the open doorway.

"Hey! That's the spirit!" Wil said as he put a hand on Ben's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze.

"Do you remember what to do when you're scared?" JD asked Ben seriously.

"I think so. Do you want to carry me?" Ben asked with a smile.

JD laughed at the question, then answered, "That's not exactly what I was thinking of."

"Actually, there's going to be quite a few women and girls in there. It'd probably be best if you got yourselves feeling as safe and well-guarded as possible before you go in there. If you're

going to need to feel safe at all tonight, this is probably when." Wil said in an uncharacteristically serious tone.

JD seemed to be conflicted about what to do.

"Spider, why don't you let your Pappa hold you for now so that I can run interference?"

JD nervously nodded and was promptly scooped up into Cliff's arms.

"What do you say, Squid? Do you want to help me protect JD?" Ben asked gently.

Jody seemed taken with the idea that *he* could help protect JD and happily lifted his arms into the air.

"Good luck, guys." Frank said as he watched the family summoning their resolve to step into hostile territory.

* * * * *

A creeping silence washed over the room full of people enjoying their desserts.

"I never thought to ask, but these people aren't prone to acts of mob justice, like torches and pitchforks, are they?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"I know that *my* branch of the family isn't..." Ben trailed off nervously as JD increased the intensity of his hug.

The actual silence only lasted a matter of seconds, however those seemed to be some of the longest seconds that any of them had ever experienced.

"Wil! I'm so glad you could make it." A woman said loudly, in an obvious attempt to prompt others to follow her lead.

"Who's that?" Cliff asked Ben in a whisper.

"Aunt Nora. She's my cousin Marc's mom." Ben explained.

While Wil was occupied with his grandmother, Cliff and Ben both carefully watched the family gathering for any negative reactions.

Neither Cliff nor Ben would admit it in the moment, but both were feeling quite a bit stronger in their resolve due to the precious boys that they were carrying in their arms.

There were several anxious and speculative looks focused on them from around the room, but no one approached until Nora and Wil had finished their brief conversation.

"I'm glad you could make it, Wil. How are you doing?" A man about Ben's own age asked cheerfully as he approached.

"I'm good." Wil said simply, then looked curiously past the man at a group that seemed to be with him.

"Wil, I'd like for you to meet my boyfriend, Galen, and our sons, Collin and Christian." The man said happily.

"Seriously?" Wil said with surprise, then offered his hand to Galen and said, "It's great to meet you, Galen. I'm glad Uncle Marc has finally found someone."

"It's great to meet you too, Wil. Marc has nothing but nice things to say about you." Galen said sincerely.

Wil chuckled, then muttered, "He's the only one."

"Marc?" Ben tentatively asked, not wanting to interrupt.

It took a moment, but Marc's eyes went wide when he finally recognized the man.

"Ben? Oh my God! It's been... it must be ten years since I've seen you!" Marc said as he rushed to pull Ben into a hug.

Wil watched for a moment, then when he noticed Galen's concerned gaze, he quietly said, "Ben is Marc's cousin. From what Ben's told me, they were best friends when they were teenagers."

Galen seemed to wilt a little bit with relief.

"It's great to see you, Marc." Ben said as he hugged Marc with one arm, his other holding Jody securely.

"How are you doing? I've tried to get in touch with you, but no one would tell me where you were." Marc said quickly.

Ben looked at Cliff with concern, then said, "I'd love to tell you, but we need to get the boys someplace more quiet. They don't like to be around groups of people."

"Why don't we go into the family room? I don't think anyone's in there now." The older of Marc's sons suggested helpfully.

"Good idea." Marc said with an appreciative smile at the boy, then looked to Ben and quietly said, "It's right this way."

Marc, Galen, and the boys led the way down the hall and through another doorway.

* * * * *

"You okay, buddy?" Ben quietly asked Jody.

The little boy looked up at him and slowly nodded.

"Us kids can go over by the fire if you old people want to talk." The older boy said teasingly.

Ben was grateful for the joking tone, since it seemed to help release some of the tension that they had carried in with them.

"Thanks. I'll remember that." Marc's partner said in a playful gruff voice.

"What do you say, JD? Do you want to go play with the boys?" Cliff asked him gently.

"Okay." JD quietly responded, but didn't seem to be completely certain.

"Before you go..." Ben said, "Everyone, this is my husband, Cliff and our sons, JD and Jody."

"Jady and Jody?" The older boy asked with a grin, "That's cool."

"Yeah, I think so too." Ben chuckled as he placed Jody on the floor to stand on his own.

When Jody was away from Ben's body, he took a few uncertain steps before hurrying to join his brother.

"Come on, let's go over there before they start getting boring." Christian said as he motioned for the boys to follow.

JD looked at Ben and Cliff uncertainly for a moment, but after an assuring nod from Ben, he fell into place alongside Jody and walked away with the group.

"Well, even though we haven't seen each other in about a decade, it looks like we took similar paths." Marc said frankly.

"Yeah. It looks like we did." Ben said with a shy grin.

Marc's partner, Galen, looked at Cliff and Wil. As soon as he had their attention, he tilted his head toward the far side of the room.

Wil nodded as Cliff gave Ben a quick kiss on the cheek before walking away.

"What have you been doing the last ten years?" Ben asked curiously.

"Well, most of it was spent in college. But now I'm a software engineer." Marc said happily, then asked, "What about you?"

"I did college too, then I worked for a few years as a teacher. When my first book was published, I decided to become a full-time author." Ben said proudly.

"An author? That's great!" Marc said happily. "You always had such a wonderful imagination, I think that's perfect for you."

"I'm happy." Ben said sincerely.

"It shows." Marc said honestly. "And you have two of the cutest kids I think I've ever seen... well, except for mine, of course."

"Of course." Ben said with a chuckle. "I can't believe you have teenage children. It makes me feel so old."

"Collin is Galen's son. Christian... well, that's kind of complicated. But I couldn't love him more if he was my own child by birth." Marc said sincerely.

"I know exactly what you mean." Ben said warmly. "JD and Jody were our foster children. We were lucky enough to be able to give them an adoption for Christmas."

Marc could feel the tears welling up in his eyes as he said, "That's so wonderful. I wish there was some way I could do that for Christian."

"Have you asked him?" Ben asked curiously.

"Yes. We're going to have a hearing right after Christmas to get his situation sorted out. When it's all said and done, I'm hoping that Christian will legally be my son."

Movement in the doorway drew their attention.

Ben looked up at the boys anxiously.

Marc noticed and quietly said, "That's Jorry and Nick. Don't worry about them."

"My boys have been through a lot and they're kind of fragile right now." Ben carefully explained.

"Collin and Christian will take good care of them. They're really good boys." Marc said reassuringly.

Ben nodded, but his eyes kept straying back to the fireplace where the boys were gathered.

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"Thanks, guys. It looked like Marc and Ben could use a few minutes to catch up on things. I hope you don't mind." Galen said frankly, then gestured to offer them seats on one of the low, cushioned chairs.

"Not at all. I'm just glad that we found some welcoming people here. From the way that Wil described his family, I was worried that we were making a horrible mistake by coming here." Cliff said frankly.

"Maybe they've changed." Wil said with a slight shrug.

"No. They haven't." Galen said with a weary chuckle, then added, "Things got a little bit ugly earlier, but they seem to be better now."

"What happened?" Wil asked with concern.

"Oh, one of Marc's sisters is a closed-minded witch and was treating us like crap all night." Galen said frankly.

"Aunt Ruthie or Aunt Denise?" Wil asked automatically.

"Well, both of them, really. But when Denise started spewing her homophobic venom at the boys, some of Marc's family stood up for them." Galen said frankly, revealing his own surprise at the development.

"I'm sorry I missed that." Wil said with a chuckle.

"I'm not." Cliff said frankly, then clarified, "As much as I would love to see a homophobe knocked down a peg or two, the boys don't need to be seeing that."

Galen glanced at the boys, gathered by the fireplace, then nodded his agreement.

"Maybe the family is finally starting to move into the twenty-first century." Wil said speculatively.

"It's been my experience that family attitudes don't often move in a single direction. It's more like a pendulum. Just when you think they're making progress, they double back on you." Cliff said with an apologetic, weary look in his eyes.

"Been there. Done that." Galen said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Wil said regretfully. "It'd just be nice if we could all be happy again."

"You're what? Twenty?" Galen asked curiously.

"Yeah. Good guess." Wil said with a smile.

"Part of being a grown-up is realizing that you're responsible for your own happiness. Your family can't give that to you anymore. It's not their fault, it's just life." Galen said frankly.

"I suppose so." Wil said regretfully. "I just feel like they made me choose between my family and my best friend. I chose to stand by Jordan and ended up losing everyone."

"I'm sure that when you really need them, they'll be there for you." Galen said gently.

"Oh God! Is that Jorry and Nick?" Wil asked with surprise. "How did they grow that much in just one year?"

"Kids'll do that." Galen said with a chuckle.

Cliff looked at the boys entering the room with caution.

"They're good boys; you don't have to worry." Galen assured.

"Yeah. Jorry and Nicky are the best." Wil said with a smile.

* * * * *

When the group of boys arrived by the fireplace, Collin looked at the younger boys curiously.

"You two don't look like brothers." Collin said absently before he could think better of it.

"Neither do you." JD responded defensively.

"He's got you there." Christian said with a smile.

Collin chuckled, then said, "Christian and I aren't brothers by blood. But Marc is trying to adopt Christian and my dad is Marc's boyfriend so... it kinda works out."

"We weren't born brothers, either. But we're brothers now. The judge said so." Jody said firmly.

Collin could see how important that it was to the younger boy and said, "I take it back."

Jody took a step to his side and put an arm around JD.

"Come on, let's sit down." JD whispered, then guided Jody to sit on the floor.

"Is he sick?" Collin asked with concern.

"No. I mean, not 'sick' sick." JD said carefully. "The people who had Jody before us didn't feed him enough. My Pappa is a doctor, and he says that Jody's going to be fine. It's just going to take some time."

"I bet that means that you get to eat second helpings whenever you want." Christian said with a smile. "I can think of worse things."

Collin smiled at Christian's ability to diffuse a tense situation and gave him a quick hug to express his gratitude.

"Are you boyfriends?" JD asked curiously.

"Yeah." Collin said shyly. "I figured since your parents are gay, that you wouldn't have a problem with it."

JD shrugged, then said, "I just wondered. I hug Jody all the time, but I don't hug him like *that*. The way you guys hug is the way that Daddy hugs Pappa."

Christian looked at Collin and considered for a moment before saying, "I never even thought about it that way. I always just thought a hug was a hug. But it's good to know that you hug me like a lover, not a brother."

"I didn't think about it either, but I'm glad too." Collin said with a smile.

"I thought you guys left without us." Jorry said as he and Nick joined the group by the fireplace.

Jody and JD both seemed tense as the boys approached.

"It's okay, guys. Jorry and Nick are really alright." Christian said assuringly.

"Jorry and Nick." Collin said formally, "I'd like for you to meet our new friends, JD and Jody."

"JD, Jody and Jorry? I feel left out." Nick said playfully.

"You're not left out, you're with us other non-Js." Christian said as he gave Nick a quick hug around the shoulders.

"Yeah. If we decide to play something, we've already got our teams. The Js and the non-Js." Nick said happily.

"Here you are!" A woman's voice said delightedly from the doorway.

Cliff and Ben were across the room in an instant and before anyone knew what had happened, each was holding a boy in his arms.

"Is something wrong?" Christian asked curiously, feeling that he had missed something.

"Long story." Ben said gently.

"I need for all the children to go into the living room. Santa is going to be here any minute!" Grandma Nora said with excitement.

"It looks like someone's been hitting the Christmas cheer a little too hard." Christian muttered under his breath.

Ben chuckled at the statement, then whispered, "Are you okay, buddy?"

"Yeah." Jody said peacefully as he enjoyed being held.

"How are you doing, Spider?" Cliff asked in a whisper.

"I'm okay." JD said in a trembling voice.

"Do you want to go home?" Cliff asked seriously.

"No. Squid needs to talk to Santa." JD said quietly before raising his head enough to look Cliff in the eyes.

"Just hold on to me, I'll keep you safe." Cliff whispered, then started carrying JD toward the door.

"What's wrong?" Christian asked Ben curiously.

"JD's afraid of women." Jody said simply.

"And we don't tell people about it." Ben reminded Jody gently.

"They're nice. They won't tease him about it." Jody said with certainty.

"No. We won't." Collin said firmly. "We never tease about the serious stuff."

"Right. And if you want, we can all help to keep JD safe." Nick said from his brother's side.

"Yeah. With all of us helping, no women will get anywhere near him." Jorry said as he gave Nick a hug.

Collin and Christian shared a look, then said in unison, "Plan."

Ben smiled at the boys, then said, "Let's go see Santa."

* * * * *

As they walked into the living room, they immediately spotted Cliff holding JD, just inside the door.

JD had his face pressed firmly into Cliff's chest and he seemed to be holding on with all his might.

"I need to tell JD what we're doing." Jody said to Ben firmly.

Ben smiled at the boy in his arms, then walked beside Cliff, positioning himself so that Jody could whisper in JD's ear.

Collin and Christian were relieved when JD raised his head enough to look at them.

"We've got you covered." Christian said confidently.

The boys arranged themselves around JD and Jody to block anyone who might try to approach.

Wil, Marc, and Galen stood aside, smiling at the scene.

"I guess I can see why you guys want to have kids." Wil said frankly.

"It works out as long as you get great kids like ours." Galen said honestly.

"No chance of that. My mom's already given me the curse." Wil said with a wry grin.

"The curse?" Galen asked curiously.

"Someday..." Wil began to say, and Marc immediately started to say it with him, "...I hope you'll have a kid who's JUST LIKE YOU."

Galen chuckled as Wil said, "So you see, I'm doomed. There's no way I'd have the patience to put up with a kid that's like I was."

Marc looked around, then hesitantly asked, "Where is your mom? Have you talked to her yet?"

"No." Wil said with a sigh. "And I'm probably not going to. Mom and Dad haven't talked to me in about a year."

"Why not?" Marc asked with concern.

"It's all about me being friends with Jordan. They think I'm some kind of mindless idiot who'd just follow along and do whatever Jordan did." Wil said tiredly. "When he was going to leave Orlando, he asked me to go with him. They told me if I left, I couldn't come back. I left."

"I heard a little about what happened to Jordan; I just didn't know you were involved in that." Marc said quietly.

"I wasn't. The drugs and all that happened later, after he got hooked up with that bitch of an ex-girlfriend of his. As soon as he started doing that shit, I was out of there." Wil said frankly.

"So, how are you doing now?" Marc asked slowly.

"I'm starting to get on my feet. A friend of mine named Todd is letting me stay with him. I've got a job now and pretty soon I'll have enough to be able to get my own place. It's kinda tough, but it's good too." Wil finished with a smile.

"I'm proud of you, Wil." Marc said as he gave him a quick hug. "If you ever need me, you know that I'll be there for you."

"Thanks, Uncle Marc. I'm really going to try to make this work on my own. But if things start turning to shit, I'll remember your offer."

Conversation in the room quieted as a large red and white figure strode into the room.

JD wasn't the only child clutching tightly to a parent at the sight.

The Santa suit was obviously very old and had seen better days. The wig and beard had yellowed with age.

"Santa looks like the kind of person you don't want us kids talking to." JD told Ben anxiously.

"I'm glad that you understand about dangerous people that you should avoid. But in this time and place, I think it's safe for you to talk to this one... probably."

* * * * *

A shriek of terror sounded as one of the parents tried to take their three or four year old to visit with Santa.

"Before anything else, we need to be sure that Jody still *wants* to do this."

"I don't see that being a problem." JD said with a little extra of his Irish brogue.

Ben followed JD's eyes to find Jody staring wide eyed in Santa's direction with breathless anticipation.

"I didn't think you'd have the nerve to show your face here." A woman said sternly as she approached the small group.

Christian immediately rushed away to join the formation that was protecting JD and Jody.

"Yeah. And a Merry Christmas to you too, Aunt Ruthie." Wil said dryly.

"Come on, Ruth. Wil is our nephew, we should be..." Marc began to say, but was interrupted.

"Of course you'd be on his side. Sodomites and drug addicts are cut from the same immoral cloth." Ruth said in a superior voice, then glanced at the formation of boys surrounding JD and Jody before saying, "But someone has to stand up for those who are too young and innocent to know better than to believe your godless teachings. It breaks my heart to know that those two little boys are going to grow up without a mother's love."

Before Wil or Marc could respond, Ruth took a step closer to the formation of boys protecting JD and Jody.

"If you're so worried about kids feeling loved, then why do you keep dumping your daughter off on other people to deal with? If that's what you call 'A Mother's Love' then I'll pass. Thanks." Christian said firmly.

"Yeah, Aunt Ruth. Where is your daughter right now?" Collin asked curiously.

Before she could answer, Christian asked, "And while we're on the subject of 'A Mother's Love', why do Jorry and Nick need someone they just met to step in and protect them when their father is drunk? What kind of a piss poor mother..."

"Christian!" Marc said firmly. "You need to stop before you go too far."

"Okay, Dad." Christian said quietly, then looked at Ruth, waiting for her to respond.

"You... That's not..." Ruth sputtered, then started looking around either to see if she had any allies nearby, or maybe for an escape.

"Lady, would you back off? You're scaring my kids." Cliff said firmly as he held Jody close to his chest.

"Mom? Why don't you take Nicky to see Santa?" Jorry asked his mother in a tone of voice that didn't reveal any emotions.

Nick flashed his brother an angry look, but then looked up at his mother with question.

"Yes... Come, Nixon. I'm sure you'll want to give Santa your Christmas list." Ruth said as she offered her hand.

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There was a moment of silence until it was broken by Collin asking, "Do you think that Nick is going to be mad at you about that?"

"No. At least, not when he understands that he got sacrificed to protect the younger kids." Jorry said with certainty.

"Please excuse us." Ben said quickly as he nudged his way past the wall of boys and hurried toward the door.

Everyone could tell that JD was nearly trembling from the effort of holding Ben so tightly.

Christian and Collin shared a look of concern. Before Christian could even think of what to say, Collin was already following close behind.

"Should I go after him?" Galen asked Marc quietly.

"No. He may be able to help calm JD down. I'm sure that Ben will send him back if he's in the way." Marc said with concern, not nearly as certain as his words would indicate.

"Can we go home?" Jody asked Cliff quietly.

"You know you're safe while I'm holding you, don't you?" Cliff asked gently.

"Yeah. But I don't want JD to feel bad. And he's real scared." Jody said quietly.

"You're right. JD is extremely frightened right now, but if he can have a few minutes away from everyone, I'm sure he'll start to feel better." Cliff said slowly. "But if we went home right now, then I think that JD would feel very bad because he knows that you wanted to see Santa. He'll feel bad for a long time if he thinks you missed your chance because of him."

Jody looked up at Cliff, then over at Santa in the recliner.

"We promised you when we came here that if you really wanted to leave, that we wouldn't make you stay. But please think about how much JD would blame himself if we left right now." Cliff said carefully.

"Can we see Santa now, so we can leave if JD wants to?" Jody asked quietly.

"Sure. Anything you want." Cliff said as he gave the young boy a kiss on the cheek.

Marc and Galen watched with matching expressions of tenderness.

"If you want, Jorry and I can go with you." Christian said quietly, not wanting to startle the young boy.

"You want to see Santa too?" Jody asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I've already got everything I wanted for Christmas and a whole lot more. But I wouldn't mind visiting with Santa to tell him 'thanks'." Christian said with a gentle smile at the young boy.

Jody's inquisitive gaze moved to Jorry.

"Yeah. I'll take one for the team." Jorry said with an unconcerned shrug.

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"Do you want to go home?" Ben asked as he held JD close to his chest.

"We gotta stay so Jody can talk to Santa." JD said in a trembling voice as he continued his 'death grip'.

"You don't have to worry, JD. We won't let Aunt Ruth or anyone hurt you." Collin offered quietly.

JD slowly turned his head and looked at Collin uncertainly.

"It's not just you and your brother and your dads. Me and Christian and our dads and Jorry and Nick will all make sure that you're safe." Collin said seriously.

"Just remember what Zeb said." Ben said in a soothing tone. "It's okay to be scared."

JD slowly nodded and seemed to be calming down.

"Are you guys alright?" Wil asked as he walked into the hall.

"Yeah. JD just had a little panic attack." Ben said softly.

"I think Aunt Ruth has that effect on a lot of people." Wil said with a tender smile at JD. "Don't let it get to you, man. We've got you covered."

JD seemed to be frozen for a moment, but finally released his grip on Ben and extended his arm toward Wil, inviting him into the hug.

"You're going to be fine, buddy." Wil said with a slight chuckle as he engulfed both Ben and JD in his hug.

Collin smiled as he watched the family sharing their strength.

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After a few minutes of waiting in a loosely formed line, Cliff was finally able to place Jody on Santa's lap.

"Are you okay?" Cliff asked before letting him go.

"It's Santa." Jody said as his only answer.

"I'll be over here. Just call if you need me." Cliff said gently as he stepped away to give them some privacy.

* * * * *

"Well, hello there! I don't remember seeing you here before." Santa said gently.

"Before this, I was being kept hidden, so you didn't know where I was to come visit me. But now I live in a house with a brother and a TV and Daddy and Pappa." Jody explained seriously.

"That sounds really nice. What was your name again?" Santa asked warmly.

"Jody Grant. The judge let me pick my own name and I wanted to have a name like Pappa." Jody said frankly.

"Well, Jody Grant, what would you like for Santa to get you for Christmas this year?"

"If you just let me keep what I have right now, I'll be happy. When I sleep at night I have dreams about being hit and hurt and stuff and I'm afraid that this is the dream and that when I wake up I'll be back there with them hurting me." Jody said honestly.

"I'll do whatever I can to keep that from happening." Santa quietly assured the young boy, then continued, "But is there some kind of toy or something that I can get for you that you'd like to have?"

"There's one thing, but I don't know if I'm supposed to like it." Jody said cautiously.

"Don't worry about what you're 'supposed' to like and tell me what you think a good gift might be."

"When I was watching TV, I saw these commercials for Barbie dolls, and they looked pretty and happy and like they've never known what it's like to be hurt. I think I'd like to have something like that so maybe it could help me feel that way too." Jody said thoughtfully.

"I don't think I've ever heard a better reason for someone to get a doll." Santa said simply.

"But aren't they supposed to be for girls? Do you think Daddy and Pappa and JD will be mad at me if I want a girl's toy?" Jody asked worriedly.

"I sincerely hope not." Santa said quietly, then continued with significantly more cheer, "Since you've been such a good boy this year, I will do my best to see that you get what you want for Christmas."

* * * * *

Christian and Jorry watched from their place in line as Jody talked animatedly with Santa, seeming to be completely at ease.

"Thanks." Cliff whispered at Christian's side.

"For what?" Christian asked as he looked up.

"Thanks for watching out for the boys. Neither of them are very good in a social situation, yet." Cliff said frankly, then continued, "I was afraid that with Ben and me being a same-sex couple, that the boys wouldn't have anyone treat them kindly."

"I was kind of scared of that too." Christian said honestly. "I guess maybe that's why I can understand a little bit of what JD and Jody are feeling."

"Well, Ben and I appreciate it." Cliff said with a smile at Christian. "I hope this will end up being a happy holiday memory for both the boys."

"We'll do our best." Christian said honestly, then noticed that Jody was wriggling to get down off Santa's lap.

"How are you doing, Champ?" Cliff asked as he squatted down and opened his arms to Jody.

"Santa said that since I been a good boy, that he's gonna give me what I want for Christmas!" Jody said happily.

"What's that?" Cliff asked curiously.

Jody seemed to be about to answer, but then clamped his mouth shut and thrust his arms into the air.

"Come on up here." Cliff chuckled as he pulled the boy into a hug.

Christian watched for a moment as Cliff hugged his son, then realized that it was his turn to sit on Santa's lap.

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"Is everything okay?" Cliff asked as Ben walked into the room carrying JD.

"Yes. He just needed a minute to collect himself." Ben said gently.

"I got to see Santa!" Jody said proudly.

"Oh? What was Santa like?" Ben asked with an indulgent smile.

Jody considered for a moment, then said, "He was really nice... but he smelled funny."

Cliff smiled at the comment, then said, "I noticed it too. It seems that they must have a moth problem at the North Pole."

Collin chuckled at the statement, then looked around curiously.

His mouth nearly fell open when he spotted Christian sitting on Santa's lap.

"Christian and Jorry volunteered to visit with Santa so Jody wouldn't feel like he was going up there all alone." Cliff said with obvious admiration for their thoughtfulness.

Collin smiled as he watched his boyfriend from across the room.

* * * * *

"JD and Jody. I brought someone to meet you." Collin said cheerfully.

Jody turned at the sound of his name, but it took JD a few seconds before he hesitantly turned in Ben's arms.

"This is Erik. I met him earlier and he seemed really nice, so I thought you two would like to meet him." Collin said frankly.

"You're pretty." Jody said with a shy smile at Erik as he noticed the festive Christmas sweater that he was wearing.

Erik was surprised by the declaration, but only took a moment to respond, "Thanks. So are you."

JD stared at Erik but didn't make a sound.

"This is my house, so later, if you guys feel like it, we could go up to my room. I have lots of toys, and maybe you'll find some that you like playing with." Erik said frankly.

"You have toys?" JD asked hesitantly.

Erik nodded, then explained, "I don't play with them too much now. But I still have most of the toys that I did when I was your age."

JD nodded that the explanation seemed to make sense to him.

"Thank you, Erik. I don't know how long we'll be staying, but we appreciate the offer." Ben said as he held JD protectively.

"Hang on. I want to show you something." Erik said, then dashed away.

"He's nice." Jody said with a smile.

"Yeah. That's why I thought you'd like to meet him." Collin said happily.

"This is my Christmas present." Erik said proudly as he returned.

"A blanket?" Jody asked incredulously.

"No. It's a quilt. Look. Someone took the time to take all these little pieces of cloth and stitch them together to make this." Erik said as he pointed at the pattern.

Before anyone could think of what to say next, a voice intruded on their discussion.

"Thank you, Ginny." Grandma Ellen said as her nurse wheeled her up to the little group.

"Wil, I'm so glad you could make it tonight. Come over here and give your grandma a hug." Grandma Ellen said as she held out her arms to him.

"You are?" Wil asked hesitantly, not making any move toward her.

Ellen's expression filled with sadness when she realized the source of Wil's reluctance. "Of course I am. Who do you think it is that invited you?"

"Oh, I just thought I was on the family list and got invited automatically." Wil said honestly.

"Denise handled the invitations." Marc said frankly.

Wil carefully leaned in to give his grandmother a gentle hug.

"I brought a present for you, but ended up giving it to someone else, since I thought you weren't coming. He wouldn't have received a gift, otherwise." Grandma Ellen said regretfully.

"That's fine, I didn't come for presents. Thank you for seeing that I got invited." Wil said gently.

"Nora did most of the work, but I wanted to be sure that all of the family that could possibly be here got an invitation." Grandma Ellen said honestly.

"So does that mean that David didn't want to come?" Wil asked as he stood.

"We don't know where he is." Grandma Ellen said honestly. "That's part of the reason that I made a special effort to keep track of you, young man. After that spat you had with your parents and the unfortunate business with Jordan, I made it my business to keep tabs on you."

Wil stared at his grandmother with astonishment at the effort she had put forth on his behalf.

"And before I forget to tell you, I'm very proud of how you've been able to make a decent life for yourself without any help from anyone." Grandma Ellen said with an admiring smile.

"You know about that?" Wil asked hesitantly.

"Wil, I didn't interfere in your life, but I had a private detective friend of mine keep an eye on you from a distance. If things had turned out differently for you, I wouldn't have allowed you to end up homeless." Grandma Ellen said frankly.

"Thank you, but, to be honest, I didn't do it all myself. Todd, a guy I work with, he took me in when Jordan went off the deep end with the drugs. And I've had Ben's help to deal with the stuff about my parents. Without Ben, I probably wouldn't have come here tonight."

Ellen was about to respond when a voice intruded on their conversation.

"Grandma, he's a drug addict..." Louise began to say.

"Don't start, Louise." Grandma Ellen said firmly.

To everyone's surprise, Louise actually listened to her grandmother and closed her mouth.

"Wil, you know you can come see me any time, right?" Grandma Ellen said to him as she looked him in the eyes.

"And us, you're still our grandson." Gene said gently as he and Jon joined the gathering.

"And us too." Jon added, with a baby in his arms.

"Is that Jaxon?" Wil asked in astonishment. "He's got so big!"

"Yes, it is." Jon said with a tender smile at the baby in his arms, then looked Wil in the eyes and said, "The day after Jordan got sentenced, his girlfriend dropped Jaxon and Jazmine off with us and left town."

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Jon." Wil mumbled regretfully.

"Why?" Jon asked with honest dismay, "You stood by Jordan when no one else in the family would. I got a reminder tonight of what it means to be family, and you were family to Jordan when everyone else gave up on him. Even though it ended up not working out, what you did is something to be proud of, Wil, not ashamed."

"Grandma Ellen..." Louise began to say, but Ellen cut her off.

"So who are these folks?" Ellen asked, motioning to Cliff and Ben.

"These are my friends Cliff Grant and Ben Stone, and their boys JD and Jody." Will answered proudly.

"Stone?" Ellen asked with surprise.

"He's Kendrick's great-grandson; we talked ancestors." Wil said timidly.

"That's wonderful. And what family names do the boys carry?" Ellen asked curiously.

"JD took the last name Stone when they adopted him and Jody took Grant." Wil said, feeling that it should be Cliff or Ben answering questions about their family.

A broad smile spread across Ellen's face. "Then this is the first time in years that all three branches of the Stones are represented at a family gathering. My and Harry's branch are all over the place..." she gestured broadly, "...but we have Ben from Kendrick's branch, and young Christian here from Walter's branch too."

Christian looked up, startled at being singled out.

"You two little ones, come here and give your Great-aunt Ellen a hug." she said to JD and Jody. The boys both squeezed tighter to Cliff and Ben.

"Grandma, the boys have been through some horrible abuse." Wil said quietly. "It's made them very afraid of women."

Ellen smiled warmly. "JD?"

He looked at her warily from the safety of Cliff's arms.

"As you can see, child, I'm stuck in this wheelchair. I wouldn't ever do anything to hurt you, but even if I wanted to, these old legs wouldn't let me. You could run away. But my arms still work just fine to give grandma-style hugs to little boys who are feeling scared, don't they, Nicky?"

Nick looked up at the sound of his name and quickly answered, "Uh huh."

"Now, the reason I'm telling you this." Ellen went on, "Is that I'm getting really old. And by the time you aren't afraid of women any more, I may be long gone."

"Don't say that, Mother!" Gene said lovingly.

"It's true, boy, and you know it." Ellen said to him. "So while I'm willing to wait until you're ready, JD, I want you to promise me one thing: As soon as you feel brave enough to give it a try, have your daddy bring you to see me, so we can get to know each other before I'm gone. Is that fair?"

JD's eyes were large as saucers. Hesitantly he loosed his grip on Cliff, his signal to be put down. Ben and Cliff held their breaths as he stood in front of them.

"C'mon, Jody." He said in a small voice.

"You sure?" Came the whispered response.

"Yeah."

Ben set Jody down. JD took his hand, and they slowly and resolutely walked the few steps over to Grandma Ellen's wheelchair. In unison, they hesitantly climbed up into her lap. She wrapped them in a warm hug. Slowly the tension left their small frames.

Collin was surprised to find himself applauding, and even more surprised when Christian, Jorry, Nick, Wil, Ben, Cliff, Marc, and his father joined in.

After a moment, JD quietly said, "Daddy? Poppa? Come get us."

Cliff and Ben hurried over to retrieve their boys.

"Thank you, Aunt Ellen." Ben said as tears welled in his eyes.

There was a long moment of silence as no one seemed to know what to do next.

"Would you guys like to see my Christmas gift? I left it over by the tree." Christian asked the younger boys.

JD looked over at the tree, then at Jody with question.

"We'll be right here if you need us." Ben said gently.

JD seemed to be uncertain, but slowly nodded before reluctantly walking away with the group of boys.

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"What's that?" Collin asked as he pointed at a booklet inside the box with the sword.

Christian took it out, then smiled as he said, "It's a book that tells who owned the sword and when it was made and stuff like that."

"So it's a REAL sword? I mean, that was used in wars and stuff?" JD asked with wide-eyed wonder.

"Yeah. Do you want to see?" Christian asked as he offered the box to JD.

"I don't want to break it." JD said hesitantly, then asked, "Can I read the book?"

"Sure. If you want." Christian said as he handed the book to the younger boy.

All the boys watched as JD seemed to be immediately enthralled by the story of the sword.

* * * * *

Cliff, Ben, Marc, Galen, and Wil were all silently watching the boys.

They were all startled when Grandma Ellen started talking in a loud, firm voice from the front of the room.

"Please, everyone, allow me a moment of your time, then you won't have to lay eyes on me again for another year." Ellen said sternly to the room.

As Ellen spoke, the boys automatically drifted as a group back over to Cliff and the other adults.

She told a little of the family history which only mildly interested most of the boys, however JD seemed to be hanging onto her every word.

At a certain point in the story telling, a rush of excitement passed through the assembled group.

"...the disbursement will go as follows, once again, in accordance with Harry's wishes." Ellen was saying to the family, then glanced at Ginny and said, "Make sure you get this, dear."

Ginny nodded and handed Grandma Ellen a stack of papers, then stood ready with her notebook in hand.

She then proceeded to discuss how some mass of family money was going to be distributed.

After a long pause to demonstrate that she did, indeed, have everyone's undivided attention, Ellen finally got to the point where she could discuss individual cases.

"The heirs with the last name of 'Stone' will receive a larger inheritance than the others, that being half again as large as a regular share, simply because they're responsible for carrying on the family name." Ellen said carefully, then turned the page.

After a moment of reading, Grandma Ellen said, "As executor, I am the final authority on who is eligible and what they get. Now, before you start wheedling and scheming, I'm going to spell this out in no uncertain terms. When I call your family, pay attention, because this is how it's going to be."

Ellen's gaze turned toward Marc, and he straightened his posture a little.

"Marc's last name is Stone. He's considered the youngest of his branch of the family, so he gets a large share, all his own." Ellen said seriously.

A few looks of surprise flashed around the room at the announcement.

"Christian, if I understand your situation, you don't have any legal relationship to Marc. Is that right?" Ellen asked carefully, directing her question only to him.

"I think he's my guardian. At least, the judge said that I could stay with him through Christmas." Christian said uncertainly.

"But you haven't been adopted, or anything like that?" Ellen confirmed.

"No, ma'am. Not yet." Christian said timidly.

Ellen directed her attention back to the group as she said, "Then, since Christian isn't officially adopted yet, his case is seen as completely separate. Christian, being the youngest present in the branch of Walter's family and a Stone, also gets a large share to himself, and since he's under eighteen, it will be in the form of a trust fund."

"But we don't know if he's really related to us at all! He's probably some homeless kid that they picked up off the street for their sick, perverted thrills! Just look at him!" Ruth exploded.

"Ruth, if you don't shut up, I'll have to ask you and your family to leave. And if you leave before I've distributed your inheritance, you get NOTHING. Understood?" Grandma Ellen asked in an icy voice.

After a moment, Ruth nodded.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. Benjamin Stone, descended from Kendrick's branch of the family would be eligible for a large share except that he's adopted two children, that makes him ineligible. But since one of his sons carries the last name of Stone, it's my judgment that their branch of the family receive one large share that will be split into two equal trust funds for the boys."

There were murmurs going around the room, but no one seemed to be upset enough to speak up about it.

"Ruth, where is your daughter?" Ellen asked cautiously.

It took a moment, but Ruth finally found her daughter being held by Linda's husband, Dave.

Ellen nodded, then said, "Ruth and Nolan, since your last name is Stone, your three children will split one large share of the inheritance, in the form of trust funds." Ellen said simply.

Ruth slowly nodded, and remained blessedly silent.

"Linda and Dave, since your last name is Howard, your family will be eligible for a regular size share. But only Erik and Erika will be eligible to receive the inheritance. Since David Jr isn't here with us tonight, he isn't eligible." Ellen said regretfully.

Linda seemed like she wanted to say something, but her husband put an arm around her and nodded his agreement.

"Chuck and Louise, I'm sure you've figured this out by now, but I'll say it anyway to make it official. Your last name is Hale, so your family line gets a regular share, that is to be split into a trust fund for Kirsten and a full disbursement for Wil, just as soon as the assets are liquidated." Ellen said seriously.

"But you can't do that! He'll just blow it all on drugs and booze!" Louise barked.

"Louise, if you were at all involved in your son's life, you'd know that he's a responsible young man who has been making his own way in the world without the support of his family. I'm proud of what Wil has been able to achieve all on his own and have no doubt that he'll put his inheritance to good use. But if he were to 'blow it all' as you say, what of it? It's his, not yours." Ellen said firmly.

After a moment to see if there were any more objections, Ellen continued, "Frank and Sandra, your last name is Stone and you have no children. You get a large share for yourselves."

"That's not fair!" Ruth whined.

"Life's not fair. Deal with it." Ellen said shortly, then continued, "Needless to say that since Denise, James and Brucie aren't here, they aren't eligible for a share."

"Jon and Elaine, since your last name is Masters, you're eligible for a regular share. Hailey isn't here, so she's not eligible. Even if Jordan had been here, he wouldn't be eligible because the next generation has been born. Jaxon and Jazmine will split a share in the form of trust funds." Ellen said, then waited for a moment to see if anyone had a question.

"I suppose I should clarify about the trust funds. The trustees will be appointed by ME. And I'll tell you now, it won't be anyone in the family. I want the children to have something waiting

for them when they become adults. The trust funds will cover all medical, legal and educational expenses until they are of legal age." Ellen said firmly, then looked around and waited for questions.

Ben, Cliff and the boys were frozen in place as they listened to Ellen continue on through the other members of the family, bestowing an untold number of shares to the nieces, nephews and cousins who were attending the family gathering.

Suddenly, a change in Ellen's tone of voice drew their attention back to the events at the front of the room.

"So that's it. Once the business holdings have been liquidated, those named will receive their inheritance. It was Harry's wish, and mine as well, that the next generation might avoid the mistakes of our past and not let the money overshadow the important things in their lives. This was our best attempt to set things right."

* * * * *

"What did all that mean?" Jody quietly asked his pappa.

"I think Grandma Ellen just said that she's gonna give us lots and lots of money." JD said uncertainly, then looked up at the others to see if they could explain it better.

"What do we have to do?" Jody asked cautiously.

"All we have to do is wait. We don't get anything until we're eighteen." Jorry said frankly.

"Oh. So it's not like 'real' money or anything. If we can't touch it or use it, then it isn't really real. It's just an idea." JD said thoughtfully.

"Well, yeah, maybe. But on the day that you turn eighteen, it'll be VERY real." Christian said with a grin.

JD shook his head firmly and said, "People do really stupid stuff when they start believing in money that they can't touch."

After a moment to think it over, Christian slowly nodded and said, "I think he's right. My dad... my 'real' dad always had big dreams that never worked out because he believed too much in things that weren't real. He'd do the same things over and over again and think somehow that this time they might turn out different."

"Like what?" Collin asked curiously.

"There were a few times, when I was little, he spent all our food money on lottery tickets. Mom had to go to the churches and charities to beg for enough food to get us through the week. Of course, he bought his beer BEFORE he bought the lottery tickets, but that's a whole other thing." Christian said frankly.

"That sucks." Jorry said honestly.

"At least Dad's never done that." Nick said frankly.

"He's not there yet, but give him time. He's headed that way." Jorry said sadly to his younger brother.

"Well, I guess if anyone asks you what you got for Christmas this year, you can say 'a trust fund'. It sounds kind of impressive, even if you can't do anything with it." Collin said, trying to inject cheer into the conversation.

"Yeah. If I go around telling people something like that, I'm going to get my ass kicked. Nobody anywhere wants to hear a spoiled rich kid flaunting his trust fund." Christian said frankly.

"Really?" Nick asked uncertainly, not knowing if Christian was teasing or not.

"Oh yeah. It's the same as showing off your new iPod or something. It's like, I got one and you don't! So I'm better than you!" Christian finished in a snotty sing-song voice.

Nick, JD and Jody giggled at Christian's tone.

* * * * *

The group of five adults were keeping close watch on the boys, but everything seemed to be going well for the moment.

"I kind of lost track, who over here hit the jackpot?" Jon asked as he approached with his wife at his side, each of them holding a baby.

"I guess that would be me." Marc said quietly, then tentatively held out his hands as he asked, "May I?"

Elaine transferred Jazmine into Marc's waiting arms with a tender smile.

"Are you two disappointed about being left out of the will?" Gene asked gently as he walked up and put a hand on Jon's shoulder.

"It was Grandpa Harry's decision to make, and I think I understand what he was trying to do." Elaine said gently.

"Although a little more money would have been nice, I can't even imagine how it would have changed everyone if the money had been divvied up amongst your children." Jon said frankly to his father-in-law.

"We're barely holding together as a family now. I'm sure it would have destroyed what's left." Gene said frankly, then looked at Elaine with concern and asked, "How bad are things for you now?"

"Bad." Elaine said simply. "The Christmas gift will help a lot, but... with Hailey in college and Jordan in prison and now the babies... the money will help for a while, but I just don't know how we're going to do it long term."

"I tell you what. After the holidays, why don't the two of you come over to the house and sit down with me so we can discuss your financial situation? My father left me a substantial inheritance from his personal estate, so I'm not without means to help. I'm sure that if we put our heads together, we can come up with a financial plan for you that makes sense."

"Thanks Dad." Elaine whispered as she hugged her father gently.

"I think this little lady just made a poop." Marc said cautiously, not wanting to interrupt Gene and Elaine's moment.

"If you'll hold Jax for a few minutes, I'll take care of that." Jon said with a grin.

"Can I hold him?" Wil asked hopefully and appeared to be poised for rejection.

"As long as Jax is happy, I'm happy." Jon said with a sincere smile at Wil, then turned his attention to the little girl in his arms and started talking to her in baby talk as he walked away.

"So Ben, are you disappointed about the inheritance?" Gene asked curiously.

"No, not really." Ben said honestly. "Cliff and I live well within our means and my writing career has been going well, so even though it might have been nice, we're not in any need."

"I'm really happy to hear that. I felt kind of guilty getting a large share to myself when so many others got left out." Marc said honestly.

"There's no need for you to feel guilty. This was something completely out of your control." Gene said honestly.

"I guess the reason I feel that way is because even though I know it shouldn't matter, I really wanted the money. To tell you the truth, this inheritance is going to take a load off my mind." Marc said quietly. "The job that I've been working at for the past several years is going to end before long. I make good money and have some savings and a few investments, but I wouldn't be able to go on indefinitely with no income."

"You know you'd never have to do without anything." Galen said as he bumped hips with Marc playfully.

"I know." Marc said with a loving smile at his beloved partner. "But I'll still feel better knowing that I have some money stashed away if there's not another job waiting for me right around the corner."

A moment of silence fell over the group that was broken by Wil quietly saying, "I'm just worried that I'll live down to my mom's expectations of me."

"Wil, if you're ever feeling uncertain about a decision, you can come to us anytime you want and we'll do our best to help you make a wise choice." Ben said seriously.

"Count us in on that, too. We're as close as the nearest phone." Marc said firmly.

Wil looked around and could tell that Cliff and Galen agreed.

"Thanks, guys. I'll remember." Wil said quietly.

* * * * *

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Gene asked quietly and motioned for Cliff to step away from the others.

"Sure." Cliff said hesitantly as he followed.

"You're Jody's father, right?" Gene asked as he looked around to see that no one else was listening.

Cliff smiled, not recalling anyone calling him that before, then he answered, "Yes. I am."

"Do you know what your son wants for Christmas?" Gene asked quietly.

"No. He hasn't told anyone, not even his brother. Did he tell you?" Cliff asked quickly as he glanced over by the tree to see that the boys weren't paying attention to him.

"He told Santa, and that conversation is held in the strictest confidence." Gene said seriously.

"Please, tell me. This is going to be Jody's first Christmas with us, and I want to be sure to get him the gift that he really wants." Cliff said desperately.

"Okay. I'll tell you. Just, remember that Jody would only tell this to Santa, he wouldn't tell his own brother. That means that he realizes that you might not react well to what he's asking for." Gene said quietly.

"Please, just tell me. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve." Cliff said in a begging tone.

"He wants a Barbie doll." Gene said frankly.

Cliff thought for a moment, then finally nodded and said, "That's no problem."

"Actually, it may be more of a problem for Jody than it is for you." Gene said seriously.

"How's that?" Cliff asked curiously.

"The only toy that Jody wants for Christmas is a Barbie. He's fixated on it. He won't even discuss other toys. I think that if he has this much single-minded determination as young as he is... well, it might well be an indication of his lifestyle." Gene said carefully.

"Are you saying that you think Jody's gay because he wants a doll for Christmas?" Cliff asked cautiously.

"I hate to use the word 'gay' because it implies sexual orientation, and that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking more about gender identity. From the way he tried to hide the fact from you that he wanted a doll, he already associates some sense of shame with the desire. To me that says that Jody is very fragile right now and that you need to be very careful how you handle things until he's become more secure." Gene said carefully.

"I hadn't thought of that. I'll be careful." Cliff said thoughtfully.

"Just remember that whether he wants to dress in blue or in pink, he's still your son." Gene said gently.

"That's some good advice." Cliff said with a smile.

Gene shrugged, then said, "I've got a gay son, so I've done a lot of reading about such things."

"From the fantastic things that Wil has said about Marc, I think you must have done a fine job raising him." Cliff said frankly.

"I AM rather proud of the way he turned out. Some of the others... not so much." Gene finished weakly.

"You can only do so much. Once they leave the nest, it's out of your hands." Cliff said seriously.

"I know that logically, but when I hear Denise go off on one of her rants or see Nolan destroying his life with alcohol... I feel like maybe if I had done something differently, they would have turned out better." Gene said as tears welled in his eyes.

"It would be wonderful if they could all make you proud every day. But real people sometimes make bad choices, believe wrong things and even just screw up for no good reason. It's not you, it's life." Cliff said quietly.

"Go spend time with that wonderful family of yours. And remember that JD and Jody have a Grandma and Grandpa here if we're ever needed." Gene said seriously.

"I'll take you up on that." Cliff said gently. "Ben's family cut ties with him when he came out to them. My own family... we just aren't close. So if you really wouldn't mind us visiting, I think it would be good for the boys to have grandparents in their lives."

"Consider it settled." Gene said as he patted Cliff on the shoulder.

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"Christian, will you let the others know that we'll be leaving in a few minutes?" Marc asked hopefully.

"Sure, Dad." Christian said quickly, then dashed away to find the other boys.

"You're really lucky. He's a fantastic boy." Ben said from Marc's side.

"He really is." Marc said with a distant smile.

"I'd like for us to keep in touch, maybe find a way for our families to get together and do something." Ben said thoughtfully.

"Well, since I live in Orlando, I think we may have one or two attractions that might be good for a family outing." Marc said with a smile.

"I can't even imagine what it would be like to take the boys to an amusement park. It may be a little while before we're ready for that step." Ben said frankly.

"Then we'll do something else. All you need is an open space and a Frisbee to keep the boys entertained for hours on end." Marc said with a grin.

"You're right, it's not about the activity. It's the company." Ben said with a smile.

Christian approached carrying his sword in its box and was followed by the rest of the boys.

"Jorry and Nick. If you need kisses or hugs or anything, you'd better get it taken care of now. We'll be leaving in just a minute." Marc said frankly.

Jorry looked up at Marc with a 'yeah, right' expression. But Nick seemed to be really thinking it over.

After a moment, Nick turned and shyly said, "I like you, JD. You're nice."

"I think you're nice, too." JD said honestly.

Nick quickly looked around to see if anyone was watching, then leaned in and gave JD a quick kiss, right on the lips.

JD looked at Nick with surprise, then a blush covered his face.

Nick smiled at the reaction, then waved as he walked to join his brother and said, "Merry Christmas."

"We'd better think about leaving, too." Cliff said with a tender smile at JD's shocked expression.

Seeing the blond hair and distinctive Christmas sweater, Jody quickly said, "There's Erik. Let's say 'bye' to him."

JD glanced at Nick again before walking to Jody's side and calling out, "Erik!"

"I'm Erika." the girl said as she turned around. JD tensed in sudden panic, then ran as quickly as he could to Cliff.

"What's wrong with him?" Erika asked, mystified by the boy's obvious fear of her.

"A woman hurt him... really badly... to the point he's afraid of all women." Wil explained to his young cousin in a quiet voice.

"Little boy?" Erika said gently.

JD looked at her with one eye, still pressed tight to Cliff's side, holding on with all his might.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I'd never hurt you." She paused. "In fact, if anybody scares you, you come find me and I'll kick their butt for doing it."

"She would, too." Jorry said as he and his brother stepped closer.

"Yeah! You should have seen what she did to Brucie!" Nick added with a giggle.

JD peeked at Erika with one eye, then hid his face again. What he now seemed to be feeling, though, was more shyness than fear.

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As JD and Jody walked with Cliff toward the car, they kept looking back to see what Ben and Wil were doing.

"That's how it is when you reconnect with a good friend after being apart, you're reluctant to let them go." Cliff quietly told the boys.

Collin, Christian, Jorry and Nick were standing with Galen and waving enthusiastically.

JD and Jody waved back joyfully, knowing what Cliff was talking about, since both were reluctant to leave their new friends.

"Come on. Get in the car so we can get you all strapped in while your Daddy and Wil are saying their goodbyes." Cliff said in a coaxing tone.

"We could just go over and wait with them. It doesn't take *that* long to put our seatbelts on." JD said reasonably.

"I promise you, if we go over there, we'll still be there waiting a half hour from now. Us getting in the car will hopefully get them to stop saying goodbye and go." Cliff said seriously.

JD didn't have an argument for that, or at least didn't put one forward.

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"So, *that* turned out better than I expected." Cliff said as Wil and Ben climbed into the car.

"To be honest, the bar wasn't set very high." Ben responded.

"Ben, do you know how much money they were talking about in there? Because I kept hearing about big shares and little shares but I don't know how much we're supposedly going to be sharing." Wil said in a rambling meter.

"As far as I know, no one has put a dollar amount on it. It sounded like the company has investments all over the place, each thing earning money at its own pace. As things start getting cashed in, we'll get a better idea just how much money there will be to split into shares." Ben said speculatively.

"How is this going to affect the boys? How do you think this is going to change their lives?" Cliff asked with concern.

"Just think about how much their lives have changed in the past month. I don't think this will have any significant impact on them." Ben said honestly.

"You don't have to let it change their lives, but if it's really a lot of money, it might be smart to prepare them for the day when they can actually spend it." Wil said carefully.

"Do you have any idea of how *you're* going to handle it?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Not really. I mean, it'll be great not to have to worry about making enough tips to cover rent, but if it's really a lot of money... I don't have any idea how to do that thing people do... saving? I've never had enough money to even think about doing it before." Wil said with increasing anxiety.

"To be honest, I don't know much more than you do. I know how to manage my money, but I have a feeling that what you're talking about is on a whole different scale. I'd recommend that before you even see a penny, you do some investigation about tax attorneys and money managers and things like that." Ben said carefully.

"I wouldn't even know where to start." Wil said in a lost tone.

"How about you not worry about it right this minute? Give me a chance to talk to a few people at work and get their recommendations. I get the feeling that they might know the sort of people that you'd need to talk to." Cliff said carefully.

"And if you can get things sorted out for yourself, then maybe you could help us prepare the boys for when they're older and have access to their inheritance." Ben added encouragingly.

Wil looked at the boys in their booster seats on either side of him, then quietly said, "They're asleep."

"They've earned their rest." Cliff said with a tender smile as he glanced in the rear-view mirror.

"I don't know exactly why I wanted for the boys to meet their relatives, but now I'm very glad that we did it. Thank you, Wil for suggesting it." Ben said with a smile back at him.

"I didn't notice, did you ever get to talk to the sister you were worried about?" Cliff asked curiously.

"Yeah, for a minute. She's fine. From the sound of it, she'll be ready to get away from Mom and Dad pretty soon. I told her where to find me if she ever needs me." Wil said quietly.

"That's probably the best thing that you can do for her. The rest has to be up to her if it's going to have any meaning." Ben said frankly.

Cliff nodded his agreement, then turned the car unexpectedly.

"What are you doing?" Ben asked as he grabbed for the dashboard.

"I just saw that the store was open. I need to stop in for a minute to buy something." Cliff said as he pulled into the first open parking space he could find.

"It's going to be a madhouse." Ben cautioned him.

"A certain someone from the North Pole filled me in on what a certain little angel really wants for Christmas." Cliff said quietly as he kept watch in the back seat for signs of consciousness from either boy.

"Go ahead. We'll be fine here." Ben said seriously.

Cliff leaned over and gave Ben a quick kiss before hurrying out of the car.

To Be Continued...