

Holiday Handoff

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Chapter 1

"What are you staring at?" The young teenage boy asked defensively.

"The Nazi Flight Attendant told me to sit over here. Do you mind?" I asked, trying not to sound like his words had bothered me.

"Whatever. I don't own the airport." The boy said, then looked away.

"You don't? Then it's a good thing I didn't tell you what a nice place you have here." I said sarcastically.

He glanced over at me just long enough to roll his eyes.

"I'm Collin." I said more quietly.

"Christian." He said under his breath, as he watched another group of passengers hurrying out of their gate.

"I guess you're waiting for a connecting flight too." I said uncertainly, just wanting to keep the conversation going.

"Holiday handoff." He said absently as he continued to look away.

I puzzled over the reply, and finally decided to ask, "What does that mean?"

"It means my parents got divorced and the judge, in his 'infinite wisdom', decided that I'm supposed to be shipped back and forth across the country every time there's some stupid holiday." He said sourly.

"Oh. Me too." I said quietly.

He finally turned to look at me and said, "From the sound of it, you're new to the 'shared custody' routine."

"Yeah. My parents just finished their divorce about a month ago. I'm on my way to spend Christmas with my dad." I said with dread in my voice.

"Get used to it. I've been doing this for years. I used to think it was kinda kewl to get to travel so much, but now it just plain sucks." Christian muttered under his breath.

"So is it nice wherever you're going?" I asked uncertainly.

"Nice? There's a lot of words I can think of to describe what I'm about to have to deal with, but 'nice' isn't one of them." Christian said frankly.

"Really? What's wrong?" I asked with concern.

"My dad's new girlfriend is a real bitch. She acts like I'm trying to take my dad away from her, so she's going to work the entire holiday to hog all his attention and make me feel like I don't belong there." Christian said frankly.

"Ouch. That really sucks." I said with a wince at the bitter words.

"Me and my dad don't really get along that well. But competing with the 'she dog' for his attention gives me something to do to kill the time until I get shipped back to Mom." Christian said in a tired voice.

"I hope nothing like that happens to me..." I said, as I trailed off into thoughts of my dad.

"Any idea of what you'll be doing?" Christian asked with, what seemed to be, mild interest.

"Not really. I've only talked to my dad once since he moved out, and he just said that he had everything planned out for when I got there. He's going to show me around the city and stuff." I said quietly.

Christian nodded, then muttered, "That sounds kinda nice."

"Yeah." I responded, then continued, "I just don't know how it's going to be with his new boyfriend being there. It might end up being like it is with you and 'she dog'."

"Boyfriend?" Christian asked with surprise.

I froze in place, just realizing what I'd revealed.

"It's okay man. Actually, I think it's kinda kewl." Christian assured.

"Really?" I asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Really." He said with a smile.

Okay, Christian isn't really that cute or anything. He has this shaggy mop of brown hair that looks like a dust bunny gone wild and his body is kind of skinny and... just nothing really to talk about. But when I saw his smile...

...nice smile.

"Have you met your dad's boyfriend yet?" Christian asked, seemingly oblivious to my staring at him.

I fought to find the words to answer him and finally stammered, "Um, yeah. Just once. His name is Marc and he seems kinda nice."

"Maybe it won't be so bad then." Christian said quietly.

I nodded that I heard, and secretly wished for him to give me another one of those smiles.

"Your flight's about to board. Come on." A flight attendant said as he approached.

I looked up to see that it wasn't mine.

"Well, good luck Collin. I hope everything works out for you." Christian said as he picked up his carry-on bag and stood.

"Yeah. I hope things work out for you too. Maybe the 'she dog' will choke to death on her Christmas turkey or something." I said weakly.

Christian chuckled and said, "I can dream."

"Come on." The flight attendant said and led Christian away.

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"There you are." My flight attendant said in an aggravated voice.

"I'm right where you told me to be." I said slowly.

"Come on kid, we're running late. They're almost done boarding." The skinny little geek flight attendant said as he tried to act tough.

I slowly picked up my carry-on bag and dutifully followed him toward our departure gate.

"Hurry up. They won't hold the flight for you." He said forcefully.

"Then I'll catch the next one." I said without concern.

Some of Christian's attitude must have rubbed off on me.

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As we stepped onto the plane, the geek caught a female flight attendant just inside the door and said, "He's all yours."

She accepted my ticket from him, then glanced at me and nodded.

The little geek then turned and hurried back off the plane.

"I'm Janice. This flight is open seating so just find a seat wherever you want. If you need anything just press the call button and someone will get it for you." She said quickly.

"Okay." I said, feeling a little less hostile.

Janice at least 'pretended' to be nice.

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I walked back through the plane and decided that I wanted to sit as far in the back as possible.

I'm not, like, totally afraid of flying or anything, but it does make me a little nervous.

I figure that sitting in the back is probably best because I've never heard of a plane 'backing' into anything.

When I finally cleared the last cluster of overweight, sweaty passengers trying to stuff 20 gallons of luggage into a 10 gallon overhead compartment, I found an open seat in the second to the last row on the plane.

"So you're going to Orlando too?" A familiar voice asked.

I looked at the seat next to mine and was surprised to see Christian sitting there smiling at me.

Smiling.

At.

Me.

It's a good thing the seat was empty because I felt my knees get weak at the sight.

Once I was finally seated I glanced at him to find him looking back at me expectantly.

I realized what he was waiting for and stammered, "Yeah. Orlando."

Christian chuckled at my flustered response, then said, "I'm glad. If I've got someone to talk to on the way there, I won't have time to think about how bad it's going to be."

I looked into Christian's eyes and realized just how much he was dreading the coming holiday.

My mouth took off talking before I even had a chance to think about what I was going to say, "If your dad and 'she dog' don't care if you're there or not, maybe you could come over and spend some time with me and my dad."

"Really?" Christian asked with surprise.

"Why not? I'm not sure of all we're going to do, but I bet it'll be a lot more fun than what you're going to do." I said frankly.

"It's kinda gotta be." Christian said weakly.

"I know my dad won't mind. He's really easy going most of the time." I said hopefully.

"Well, I don't think my dad will care one way or the other. I'm pretty sure the only reason he wanted to get shared custody of me was for another way to piss off my mom." Christian said frankly.

"It sounds like it's really bad for you." I said quietly.

Christian considered for a moment, then said, "Sometimes it is. Mom has to work her ass off to keep us going. She's usually alright, but she's so busy all the time that I get kind of overlooked. Then... well, I told you about Dad."

"Yeah." I whispered.

"So what about you?" Christian asked, and it seemed like he was trying to change the subject.

I shrugged and said, "Mom doesn't have to worry too much about money. My grandparents are kinda loaded so they're helping her out. She's got a pretty good job doing... well, I'm not really sure what she does. I know she told me but it ended up sounding like 'blah, blah, blah'."

Christian giggled and said, "I know how that is. When my mom talks about her work I kind of tune her out too. I know she feels like she needs to share it with me but I really don't care about who's sleeping with who in her office."

I nodded my agreement.

"What about your dad?" Christian asked with interest.

Before I could answer, I was interrupted by a female voice on the intercom telling us to put our seatbelts on.

"Like seatbelts are going to do a whole lot of good if this thing takes a header into the side of a mountain." Christian said sourly.

I chuckled as I put on my seatbelt, then said, "It might keep us from taking an unexpected flight if there's turbulence."

Christian considered for a moment, then said, "Actually, I think I might enjoy that."

"Are you boys all belted in?" A young female flight attendant asked, then reached down to be sure that both our seatbelts were tight.

Christian looked at me and I could tell that he was fighting to contain a really nasty, sarcastic remark.

I smiled, but said nothing until the flight attendant worked her way up the aisle to the next row of seats.

"Last year I got felt up when they checked my seatbelt." Christian said frankly.

"Really?" I asked with surprise.

"Yeah. The guy who did it was kinda cute." Christian said hesitantly.

I could tell by his expression that he was watching very carefully for my reaction to his thinly veiled admission.

"Too bad he wasn't on this flight." I answered, hoping it was the right thing to say.

Christian smiled and said, "Yeah. But I guess since he's not, we'll just have to figure something else out."

"Like what?" I asked cautiously, not entirely sure what I had opened myself up to.

"Ever heard of the 'mile high club'?" Christian asked with a smirk.

My eyes went wide at the question.

Yes, I had heard of it. But I never, ever considered that I'd have the chance to do something like that.

"I mean, it's okay if you're not into stuff like that..." Christian said cautiously as he continued to watch my expression carefully.

"I am." I said immediately, then added more quietly, "Or, I'd like to be."

Christian gave me one of those beautiful, glorious smiles.

"The toilet is right over there. Let's wait for a little bit until the seatbelt sign goes off and give the people with tiny bladders a chance at the john, then we'll make our move." Christian said with a wicked smile.

"What are we going to... I mean, I've never..." I trailed off as icy tendrils of fear mixed with excitement spread through my body.

Christian gave me a medium intensity smile before saying, "As far as I'm concerned, as long as we do 'something' in there. It counts. We have a little while before we'll be able to do it, so let's figure out what we'd like to do."

I nodded hesitantly, not trusting my voice at that point.

"I'm guessing from the way you're suddenly sweating that you're not ready for 'all the way'." Christian said quietly.

I reluctantly nodded.

"Me either. Well, maybe I am. But I don't think I want to do that for the first time in an airplane toilet." Christian said frankly.

I felt a little relief wash over me at the statement.

The sound of the plane's engines powering up stopped further conversation.

We taxied out onto the runway and within a few minutes we were enjoying the sensation of increased g-forces and lifting into the air.

"Was it good for you?" Christian asked with a chuckle.

I looked at him with question at the unusual statement.

"You just look like you really enjoyed that." Christian said with a fond smile.

"Yeah. I did. This is only the third time I've ever flown." I admitted shyly.

"Well, you'd better get used to it because if your parents have the same kind of custody deal as mine you'll be flying back and forth across the country every time the banks are closed for a holiday."

"I was kind of scared about doing this at first, but now it doesn't seem like it's so bad." I said honestly.

"Sometimes it's really boring. Every now and then it's even a little bit scary. When you're wearing one of these badges, it's telling everyone that you're traveling without your parents. Just a piece of advice. Don't use the bathroom in the airport." Christian said seriously.

"I'll remember that." I said cautiously, then quietly asked, "Did something happen to you?"

"No. But it almost did. Now I just make sure to take care of my business before I go to the airport. If I have to go, I wait until I get on the plane." Christian said frankly.

I nodded quietly.

"Anyway, have you decided how far you'd like to go when we join the club?" Christian asked with a devilish grin.

"I don't know what the choices are." I said shyly.

"Have you ever heard of a hummer?" Christian asked slowly.

"Like the car?" I asked hesitantly, pretty sure that's not what he meant.

"No, not like that. Tell me, what do you think about blowjobs?" Christian asked with an amused smile.

"I'm in favor of them." I said hesitantly.

"Me too." He said with a chuckle, then continued, "As long as you're in favor of them, I think I know what I want to do." He said with a smile.

"Are you going to tell me?" I asked uncertainly.

"Nah. I'd rather it be a surprise. Just make sure to remind me to bring my iPod before we go in there." Christian said with a secretive smile.

"Can I get you gentlemen anything?" The flight attendant asked from beside us.

"Blankets." Christian answered immediately.

I looked at him with question.

"Okay. Here you go. Do you need anything else?" She asked pleasantly as she handed each of us a blanket.

"Nope. We're good." Christian said with a smile.

I looked at Christian with question.

"Put the blanket over your lap and we'll have a little fun before we join the club." Christian said with his devilish smile back in place.

As soon as I realized what he was saying, I rushed to spread the blanket over me.

"Collin. I think this year I'm going to have a very Merry Christmas." Christian said as he looked me in the eyes.

"Hopefully this will only be the first." I said, then slid my hand under the blanket in his lap.

Chapter 2

"Don't worry, it's going to be fine." Galen said assuringly.

"I really shouldn't be here. This time should be for you and your son." Marc said quietly.

"We've already been through all this. Pretending that we're not a couple isn't going to make anything any easier. It'll just take that much longer for Collin to accept the way things are now." Galen said with concern at Marc's apprehension.

"But what if he doesn't want to accept the way things are? What if he sees me as a home wrecker? What if he thinks I'm the one who caused his parents to get divorced?" Marc asked in a worried tone.

"If that happens I'll explain things to him. Please give him a chance to accept you before you give up." Galen said as he turned the car into the airport parking lot.

After a long moment of silence between them, Marc finally said, "I'll try. But if it's obvious that he can't accept me, I'm going to stay in a hotel so you two can enjoy your holiday together."

Galen got out of the car, then said, "Marc, we're living in your house. If we can't work things out any other way, I'll take Collin to a hotel."

Marc shook his head and said, "It's our house. And I don't think I could stand being there without you."

Galen walked to Marc's side and said, "Then I guess we'll just have to stick it out together."

"I guess so." Marc said quietly.

"Come on. His flight should be landing any minute." Galen said with a smile.

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"I'm here to pick up my son, Collin Anderson." Galen said to the flight attendant at the desk.

"Let me see... there he is, the passengers are still deplaning, so it might be a minute. If you'll just show me your ID and sign here you'll be ready to go." The flight attendant said professionally.

Galen produced his ID, then signed where he was told to.

"Thank you Mr. Anderson, your son should be off the plane any minute." The flight attendant said and finished with a false smile that said, 'We're done. Move.'

"Let's wait for him by the windows." Galen said to Marc at his side.

Marc nodded and followed apprehensively.

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"There he is. He must have sat all the way in the back." Galen said speculatively.

Marc strained to look where Galen was pointing and finally found Collin among the passengers leaving the plane.

"Come on." Galen said, as he patted Marc on the shoulder.

Marc forced himself to start walking as he felt the apprehension gnawing in his stomach.

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"Collin! Over here!" Galen called out as he approached his son.

"Dad?" Collin called in return as he searched for the source of the voice.

A moment later, Galen was able to work his way through the flow of passengers and came face to face with his son.

Marc slowed his pace as Collin spotted his father and ran to hug him.

"How are you doing? Is everything alright?" Galen asked with concern at his son's uncharacteristic warm greeting.

"Everything is great." Collin said, as he hugged his father tightly, then he quickly said, "Come over here, there's someone I want you to meet."

"Okay..." Galen said, uncertainly.

Collin took his father by the arm and began to pull him away, then suddenly stopped.

"You too Marc. There's someone I want you to meet." Collin said happily.

Marc smiled with relief as he hurried to Galen and Collin's sides.

"Christian, this is my dad, Galen, and this is his boyfriend, Marc." Collin said in an excited, yet somewhat formal tone.

Galen and Marc were both surprised by Collin's willingness to introduce them as boyfriends.

"It's nice to meet you, I'm Christian." the young teenager said with a timid smile.

Marc smiled in return, but noticed something in Christian's expression. He couldn't pin down exactly what it was, but there was something like worry barely hiding behind Christian's smile.

"I invited Christian to come over to visit us during the Christmas holiday, that's okay isn't it?" Collin asked hopefully.

"I don't know..." Galen began to say as he looked at Marc with question.

Marc saw the anxiety flare in Christian's expression for an instant before he expertly hid it.

"I think that would be fine." Marc said, as he turned and looked Galen in the eyes.

"Are you sure?" Galen asked hesitantly.

"Yes." Marc said definitely, then turned his full attention back to Christian.

Marc reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a business card then said, "This has my work, home and cell phone numbers on it. Just call us as soon as you're ready to come over to visit and I'll come and get you."

Christian accepted the card and cautiously asked, "When is it okay to call? Should I wait until the weekend?"

Marc looked at Christian's anxious expression carefully as he considered, then said, "No, you don't have to wait unless you want to. Just call whenever you're ready and I'll be there."

"Thanks." Christian said with a hopeful smile and carefully put the business card into his pocket.

"Would you like for us to wait here with you until your father comes?" Collin asked hopefully.

"No. It would probably be better if you didn't. It's not that I don't want you to meet him, but he's usually in a pretty bad mood from the airport traffic and stuff." Christian said cautiously.

"Call soon." Collin said quietly.

Christian smiled gently and said, "I will. I promise."

Collin and Christian looked at each other, both obviously wanting to say something more, but also both aware that they were in the middle of a busy airport arrival gate.

"Come on Collin, we need to be going." Galen said as he put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Yeah." Collin said reluctantly, then turned to Christian and said, "Bye."

Christian shook his head and said, "Later."

Collin broke into a smile and said, "Yeah. Later."

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"This is all you brought?" Galen asked as they retrieved Collin's luggage.

"Yeah. I don't need much." Collin said dismissively.

"Well, at least we won't need to rent a cart to haul it." Galen said as he picked up his son's suitcase.

"I can carry it Dad." Collin said seriously.

"I don't mind. Come on, let's get out of here." Galen said as he started walking.

"Did you have a good flight?" Marc asked Collin hesitantly, just trying to make some kind of conversation.

"Yeah, it was totally awesome." Collin said with a glow of happiness.

Marc shared a surprised look with Galen at Collin's ebullient response.

"Is it really going to be okay if Christian comes over? I know I should have asked you before I invited him but, well... is it okay?" Collin asked apprehensively.

Before Galen could answer, Marc said, "It's fine, Collin. I'm glad you'll have a friend to spend time with while you're here."

Galen considered Marc's words for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"Thank you, both of you." Collin said as he moved between Marc and Galen and put his arms around both of them.

"Still worried about him accepting you?" Galen asked with a chuckle.

"Not as much now."

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"Here, ours is over here." Marc said as they walked through the rows of cars in the parking garage.

"Which one?" Collin asked curiously.

"The blue one." Marc said, then waited for Collin's reaction.

"The really really old one?" Collin asked uncertainly.

"That's the one. But I prefer to call it a classic." Marc said with a smile.

"Oh, um. Yeah... is it safe?" Collin asked uncertainly.

"Is it safe? You have enough metal in this car to build six modern cars and you'd have enough left over to build a lawn storage shed." Marc said frankly.

Collin considered that as Marc opened the trunk.

"Holy crap! A family of six could live in here." Collin said as he looked at the huge trunk.

"Pretty much." Marc said with a smile as he took Collin's suitcase and put it into the trunk.

"Now for the down side of owning a classic. Backing this barge out of a parking space." Galen said as he walked to the driver's side of the car.

"Why don't I drive us home so you can spend time with your son?" Marc asked seriously.

"Sure. No argument here. I really love driving this car, but it's so big that I hate trying to back it out." Galen said as he handed the keys to Marc.

"It's all part of the fun." Marc said with a grin, then glanced at Collin and said, "Get in so we can get going."

Collin opened the back door and climbed into the car.

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"I don't think I've ever been in a car this big before." Collin said as he put on his seat belt.

Rather than respond to Collin's statement, Marc started the engine.

Collin's mouth fell open as he felt as well as heard the rumble of the car's engine.

"That's a 450." Galen said over his shoulder.

"I always set off a few car alarms when I start it up." Marc said with a chuckle as he shifted into reverse.

"I never really cared too much about cars... but maybe that's because I was never in one like this before." Collin said as he felt the vibration of the engine coursing through his body.

"Well, not all the cars were like this back in the 60's. This one's been souped up a little to emphasize some of the finer points." Galen said as he watched Marc carefully maneuvering the car out of the parking place.

"I just know that I love it! This car is great!" Collin said happily.

"The best is yet to come." Marc said as he finally finished backing out.

Collin looked at Marc in the rear view mirror curiously, but didn't ask what he meant.

"Remember to hold her back until we get out of the airport." Galen said carefully.

"I'll do my best." Marc said with a smirk.

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"So Collin, are you hungry or sleepy or anything?" Galen asked his son as he looked into the back seat.

Collin considered for a moment before answering, "I guess I'm a little bit hungry. All I had was some peanuts on the plane."

"How about we take you to the house to drop off your luggage, then we can go out to a restaurant?" Marc asked casually.

"Sure, I guess." Collin said uncertainly.

"Is there something else you'd rather do?" Galen asked cautiously at his son's lukewarm response.

"Well, I've been running and going and doing all day so I really don't feel much like going out. But if you want to go out, it's not a big deal." Collin said hesitantly.

"Truth be told, I don't feel much like going out either. I just wanted to do something special to welcome you." Marc said seriously.

Collin smiled and said, "You don't have to do anything like that for me. I'd feel a lot better if we could just relax somewhere quiet for a while."

"Then it's settled. When we get to the house I'll make us all something to eat." Galen said cheerfully.

Marc looked at Galen with concern, but restrained his objections and dutifully turned his attention to the road before him.

"I saw that." Galen said playfully to Marc at his side.

Marc glanced at Galen with question.

"You just gave me that 'Oh God! He's going to try to cook' look." Galen said with a chuckle.

"Can you cook?" Collin asked cautiously from the back seat.

Galen looked at his son and said, "Not very well. I never had to cook before so I'm just learning. I'm sure I'll be able to open a can of something... But I'd really like to be the one to fix your first meal with us."

Collin smiled and said, "Thanks Dad. That sounds nice."

Marc glanced in his rear view mirror at Collin and saw the loving smile directed at Galen.

As Marc guided the car into the driveway of their house, he felt that things might actually work out.

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"If you'll show Collin his room, I'm going to get dinner started." Galen said as he lifted Collin's suitcase out of the trunk of the car.

"I could help you if you want." Marc offered cautiously.

Galen smiled at the offer and said, "Maybe next time. It's kind of important to me to do this."

Marc nodded that he understood, then moved toward Galen to give him a quick kiss.

Galen automatically responded to the movement, but before he could kiss Marc, he turned to see his son watching them.

Galen flashed Marc an apologetic look, then turned toward the house.

An expression of disappointment ghosted over Marc's face, but then he noticed that Collin had picked up his suitcase and was waiting patiently.

"Come on Collin. I'll show you where to put that." Marc said as he began to walk toward the house.

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"This is your room, the bathroom is over there." Marc said as he led the way into the room, then stood aside.

Collin looked around and said, "This is really nice. I didn't know what to expect when I left home. I kinda thought that I'd be sleeping on the couch."

"Nope. You get a queen sized bed and a room that's all your own. You can even put up posters and get some things to fix it up if you want. Even when you have to go home, we're going to keep this room just for you." Marc said cautiously as he watched for Collin's reaction.

Collin put his suitcase on the bed, then turned to face Marc and said, "Thanks Marc. I appreciate you being so nice to me."

Marc was taken aback by the sincere thanks and gently smiled as he responded, "Thank you too Collin. I've been really nervous about you coming to visit."

"Me too." Collin admitted shyly, then continued, "But seeing my dad happy makes all the difference."

Marc's curious look prompted Collin to continue.

"I never knew that Dad was unhappy while he was with Mom. I just thought that he was always kind of serious and a little bit grumpy. That's just the way he was."

Marc slowly nodded that he understood.

"Now I can see that he's happy and he's like a real person now... a whole person. He's a lot more relaxed and I feel like he's somebody that I want to get to know... does that make any sense?" Collin finished uncertainly.

Marc smiled and said, "Yes Collin. It makes perfect sense. Would you like to see the rest of the house before we have dinner?"

"Sure."

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"Well, the kitchen is through that door, but I don't want to interrupt your father. He might think we're checking up on him." Marc said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I'll see it later." Collin said gently.

"Next to the kitchen is the dining room." Marc said as he gestured at the open doorway.

Collin peeked into the room, then looked at Marc expectantly.

"We usually eat in the kitchen. I think we'll have Christmas dinner in the dining room, but that's probably the only time we'll be in there." Marc said casually, then gestured absently as he said, "Stairs."

Collin glanced at the staircase, then followed Marc across the hall to another doorway.

"The door at the end of the hall is the garage and this is the living room." Marc said as he stood by the door.

Collin looked into the living room and noticed that there was a Christmas tree set up, but it didn't have any decorations on it.

"Your father thought it would be nice for us to do the decorating together." Marc said quietly.

Collin smiled and said, "Yeah, that does sound nice."

"I think that's about it. You can unpack or relax in here until dinner." Marc said in an uncertain tone.

"Where is your room?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Upstairs. We have a suite of rooms up there." Marc said casually.

Collin looked around the living room and finally settled into place on the love seat.

"Would you like to watch some TV?" Marc asked uncertainly.

"Not really. After all the airports and planes and stuff today, the quiet is nice." Collin said honestly.

"I can understand that. Can I get you a drink or anything? I think we have hot chocolate..." Marc said uncertainly.

"Marc. I like you." Collin said as he looked up into Marc's eyes.

"What?" Marc responded automatically to the seeming non sequitor.

Collin stood and faced Marc before saying, "You don't have to try so hard. I already like you."

"Thanks Collin." Marc said in a flustered voice, "I guess I'm still a little nervous about you being here and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing."

"I'm not sure either. But you being all stressed out isn't helping." Collin said honestly.

"I'll try to lighten up." Marc said quietly.

"Maybe this will help." Collin said, then pulled Marc into a hug.

After a moment of hesitation, Marc slowly put his arms around Collin and gently held him.

"I've been thinking about it and, if you wanted, we could try to be a family." Collin said as he continued to hold Marc firmly.

Marc hugged Collin a little bit tighter as he thought about the words.

"I mean, you don't have to... but I thought it might be nice..." Collin trailed off uncertainly.

"I've always wanted a family. I just never thought it could happen." Marc whispered.

Collin looked up to see tears in Marc's eyes.

He resumed his hug full force.

After a long moment, Marc finally said, "Thanks Collin."

Collin's only response was to nod into Marc's chest.

Marc finally released Collin from the hug and smiled down at his lover's son who had accepted him so completely.

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing?" Galen asked as he walked into the living room carrying a platter.

"We're fine." Marc said with an honest smile directed at Collin.

"It's going to be a little while before dinner is ready so I decided to bring you something to snack on." Galen said as he placed the platter on the coffee table.

Collin looked at the platter curiously. There was an assortment of crackers surrounding... something white. It was sort of creamy looking with pink and green things mixed into it.

"What is it?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Please just try it before you judge it." Galen said hopefully.

Marc hesitantly took one of the crackers, then scooped up a little of the white stuff.

Collin watched Marc's expression carefully, knowing that he would say it was good even if it was hideous.

Marc slowly considered the flavor, then looked to Galen and said, "This is really good."

Collin couldn't tell if Marc was being honest or just acting like it was edible.

Galen smiled with accomplishment, then looked at Collin hopefully.

Collin dutifully took a cracker and scooped up some white stuff.

It took a moment for the taste to register, but he was surprised to find that he actually liked it.

"This is really great! What is it?" Collin asked as he reached down to the platter to get some more.

"Soft cream cheese with some chopped up ham and green onions." Galen said with a smile at his son's reaction.

"That's it? For such a simple recipe it has a fantastic flavor." Marc said as he waited for Collin to finish so he could get another cracker.

"One of the ladies I work with was talking about how much better this is than buying a cheese log." Galen said with pride.

After a moment to finish his cracker, Collin said, "I'm glad she did. This is really good."

"If you're going to be cooking like this, I may just let you take over the kitchen." Marc said, then popped the next cracker into his mouth.

"I don't think I'm ready for that yet, but I wouldn't mind sharing the kitchen with you." Galen said with a loving grin at Marc.

Marc gave a shy smile and moved in to give Galen a quick kiss, but Galen backed away and glanced at Collin.

"Come on Dad. Marc is your boyfriend and you need to act like it. If you don't kiss him, I will." Collin said frankly.

Galen and Marc were both stunned by the statement and neither knew how to respond.

After a moment, Collin said, "I warned you." then walked up to Marc and gave him a quick, firm kiss.

As Collin stepped back, he looked at his father who was staring at him with disbelief.

"Now don't make me have to do that again." Collin said with a grin.

"You... you..." Galen stammered in shock.

Collin rolled his eyes and said, "I just did that so you'll know that it's okay if you two kiss in front of me. I'm not going to freak or be grossed out or anything. In fact, it makes me feel like I'm in the way here when you act like you can't touch each other in front of me."

Galen stared for a moment longer, then looked at Marc with question.

"He's right love. Acting like we're not a couple isn't doing any of us any good." Marc said gently.

Galen nodded, then slowly took a step toward Marc and looked him in the eyes.

Collin watched as the pair seemed to be frozen, both waiting for the other to make the first move.

"If you don't hurry up and kiss him..." Collin began to say when Galen moved in to give Marc a firm kiss.

Collin smiled at the scene before him, then reached down to get another cracker.

* * * * *

The phone ringing interrupted the kiss that had gone on longer than either expected.

"Do you want me to get that?" Collin asked hesitantly.

"No, it's probably for me... my work." Galen said as he reluctantly released Marc from the hug.

Collin nodded and watched as his father answered the phone.

"Hello?" Galen answered.

Marc and Collin both became concerned at the myriad of emotions running across Galen's face.

After a moment of listening, Galen held the phone to his chest and quietly said, "Marc, it's for you. It's the police."

Chapter 3

"This is Marc Stone." Marc said cautiously.

"What's wrong?" Collin asked his father with concern.

"I don't know. The guy just identified himself as a police officer and asked to speak to Marc." Galen said, as he watched Marc's expression.

Marc listened carefully and finally said, "Yes. I know where that is. We'll be there in about ten minutes."

Galen and Collin exchanged glances of question.

As Marc hung up the phone, Collin noticed that the color seemed to have drained out of his face.

"What's going on?" Galen asked in a small voice.

"We may need to be gone for a while. Go turn off the stove and I'll tell you in the car." Marc said with distraction.

Galen stared at Marc with concern for a moment, then rushed out of the room.

"Is everything okay?" Collin asked timidly.

"No. Far from it." Marc whispered, then patted his pocket to be sure that he had his car keys.

"I'm ready." Galen said as he rushed back into the living room.

Marc gave Galen a pained look and said, "Let's hurry."

* * * * *

"Can you tell us what's going on now?" Galen asked as Marc backed the car out of the driveway.

"It's Christian. He's in the hospital." Marc said and seemed to choke on the last word.

"Christian? MY Christian? How? What happened? Was he in a car accident?" Collin asked in panic.

"No. It wasn't an accident." Marc said darkly.

"Then what happened? Why is Christian in the hospital?" Collin asked desperately.

"If you'll give Marc a chance to answer he'll tell us what he knows." Galen said in a sympathetic voice as he looked at his son.

Collin nodded at his father, then looked at Marc in the mirror imploringly.

"I don't know much. All the police officer told me was that Christian's father beat him up. When they asked him if there was someone they could call for him, he gave them my card." Marc said quietly.

Silence fell over the occupants of the car as they thought about the words.

"He never said that his dad hit him." Collin finally said in a hollow voice.

Galen looked at his son and felt his heart break at the sight of Collin with tears welled in his eyes.

"He said that his dad's girlfriend treated him like he didn't belong here, but he never said anything about his dad hitting him." Collin said to his father in a whisper.

"It's not the kind of thing that you go around telling people." Marc said quietly from the driver's seat.

Collin looked in the mirror at Marc's eyes and saw the pain in his expression.

"You knew?" Collin asked cautiously.

"No. Not really... I just suspected." Marc said as his gaze met Collin's for an instant.

"But how? You didn't speak more than a dozen words to him." Galen asked in confusion.

"It wasn't anything that he said, it was something in his eyes. That's why I told him to call me whenever he was ready." Marc said honestly.

"I'm really glad you did that. I guess I'm still being obtuse and taking everything at face value. When I looked at Christian, I just saw someone that Collin had met while he was traveling." Galen said regretfully.

"And I wouldn't want you to be any other way. You tend to look at the surface of things and base your judgments on the things you know to be true because you've verified them with your own senses. I, on the other hand, am more likely to speculate on what's going on inside a person's mind and the motives behind their actions. The down side to that is that there are times when I'm wrong. Neither way is foolproof, but I think that between us we have everything covered fairly well." Marc finished with a gentle smile directed at Galen.

"Are we almost there?" Collin asked anxiously from the back seat.

"Just about. We're going to the Arnold Palmer Children's hospital." Marc said as he turned more of his attention to the increasing traffic.

Galen wanted to offer his son some words of assurance that everything would be alright, but without knowing more of the situation, he couldn't honestly make that promise.

"We're here." Marc said as he made the turn-off into the hospital parking lot.

Collin looked through teary eyes at the large hospital building in front of them and felt a fresh stab of pain, knowing that Christian had been hurt.

"Collin, I need you to listen to me." Galen said firmly.

Collin turned his attention to his father as Marc searched for a parking place.

"Remember that Marc and I are here to help you. Don't go in there and feel like you have to deal with this all by yourself. We're all a part of this, we're in this together." Galen said seriously as he looked into Collin's eyes.

After a moment for the words to register, Collin reluctantly nodded.

"Hang on. This is going to be tight." Marc said as he maneuvered the car into a narrow parking place.

"You're going to need a can opener to get out." Galen said as he watched Marc inch the massive car forward.

"Well, our other choice is to cruise the parking lot and hope that we can find a decent parking place before Christian is released." Marc said with annoyance.

"Go ahead. You're doing fine." Galen said quietly, knowing that Marc wasn't trying to make it difficult.

"I'll just get out on your side. There should be enough room for you to get out." Marc said as he stopped the car and set the parking brake.

"Good plan. Let's go." Galen said as he carefully opened his door.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, a police officer asked me to come down here. My name is Marc Stone." Marc said to the woman at the reception desk.

"Wait over there." She said curtly as she pointed, then pressed a button on the phone and said over the public address speakers, "Officer Bridges, please come to Emergency Admitting. Officer Bridges, Emergency Admitting."

"God! I hope they're treating Christian nicer than that." Collin said as he walked with his father and Marc.

"I'm sure they are." Galen said in a whisper as he stopped and waited.

"Mr. Stone?" A man asked as he approached the trio.

The man had a swollen lip and his left eye seemed to be a little bit puffed up.

"That's me. Officer Bridges?" Marc asked quickly.

"Yes. Come with me, we have a few things we need to discuss before you see Christian." Officer Bridges said, then motioned for them to follow as he walked away.

* * * * *

"Before we begin, I want you to know that I'm not 'officially' here. What I'm about to tell you, I didn't 'officially' tell you. And if things turn out the way I expect, no one can know that I had any part in these events." Officer Bridges said seriously.

"Okay..." Marc said reluctantly.

Officer Bridges looked at Galen and Collin and waited for them to agree before he continued.

"Alright. I was at the airport seeing someone off and just happened to be in the right place at the right time to see Christian's father haul off and hit him." Officer Bridges said cautiously.

Marc, Galen and Collin were all frozen by the statement.

"He got a few more good hits in before I could get over to them." Officer Bridges said with regret.

"How is Christian?" Collin asked as his eyes filled with tears.

"The doctor's in with him right now but from the look of him, I'd be willing to bet that he's going to be fine." Officer Bridges said with conviction as he looked into Collin's eyes.

Collin tried to restrain his tears and devoted his full attention to the officer so he would continue.

"Let's see... So it turns out that Christian's father was blind stinking drunk when he arrived at the airport. Something set him off and he started hitting Christian right there in the arrival gate in front of everyone. By the time I got across the room to them, there were already two or three uniformed officers on the scene."

Collin's eyes went wide as the tears started falling.

"I tried to get Christian away from him and... well, as you can see, I got pulled into the fight." Officer Bridges said shyly.

"So what happened to Christian's father?" Galen asked hesitantly.

"I was focused on protecting Christian, so I can't give you a blow by blow description of the fight. But it got pretty ugly and, well, let's just say that once Christian's father gets out of the hospital, he will be going directly to jail." Officer Bridges said frankly.

Galen and Marc both nodded their understanding as Collin looked up at Officer Bridges with large eyes filled with despair.

"Okay. So now you know the background. Here's the part you can't tell anyone." Officer Bridges said in a lower voice.

All three automatically moved closer to hear.

"Since I got knocked around a little bit, I had to go to the hospital to get checked out. Christian and I rode to the hospital in the same ambulance and we had a few minutes to talk in private. I don't know if it was because he was knocked senseless or if it was because I fought to protect him, but for whatever reason, I guess he felt like he could tell me some things... I can't... I can't repeat them..." Officer Bridges stopped and wiped his watery eyes before continuing.

"That boy doesn't have a single person in his life who really cares for him."

"What about his mom?" Collin asked as his tears freely fell.

Officer Bridges shook his head and said, "Christian knows that she uses him as an excuse to get child support and as a way to antagonize her ex-husband. He said that he tries to pretend that she's just busy and would pay attention to him if she had more time... but he really does understand the truth."

"Isn't there something we can do to help him?" Marc asked desperately.

"I was hoping you'd ask." Officer Bridges said with a weak smile that looked strange with his fat lip.

"What can we do?" Galen asked seriously.

"What would you be willing to do?" Officer Bridges asked in return.

"I don't understand what you're asking." Marc said slowly.

"Would you be willing to take Christian into your home? Would you accept financial responsibility for him? Would you love him?" Officer Bridges asked in a frank tone that almost sounded like a challenge.

"Please help him." Collin whispered as he looked from Marc to his father with imploring eyes.

"But he's a complete stranger to us. We don't know anything about him." Galen said carefully.

"We know he needs someone to care for him. Isn't that enough?" Collin asked desperately.

Galen looked into his son's eyes, then over at Marc with indecision.

"We're going to help him." Marc said decisively, then turned to Officer Bridges and asked, "What do we have to do?"

"Let me make a quick phone call, then I'll take you to see Christian." Officer Bridges said as he took out his cell phone and stepped away.

Galen turned to Marc and whispered, "Are you sure?"

"Look at Collin, then ask me again." Marc said frankly.

Galen looked at Collin who had his full attention focused on the police officer. The tears were still running down his cheeks and the anguish he was feeling could clearly be seen in his eyes.

"You're right. There's no way I could ever look him in the eyes again if I refused to help." Galen whispered.

Marc slowly nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

A moment later Officer Bridges walked back to the trio and said, "Someone will be here in a few minutes to help sort everything out. I'll take you in to see Christian now and when our help gets here you can make your final decision."

"Who are we going to be meeting?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I'd really rather not say at this point because I'm not sure if he'll come here himself or send someone else to take care of it. I just called him and let him know that there's a kid in trouble and that if someone doesn't do something quick, that he's going to be in even worse trouble."

"How do you mean?" Marc asked curiously.

"Let's just say that I know how the so called 'Child Protective Services' operate. They do fine for some kids in some situations. But putting Christian into their custody would be like a death sentence. He needs to be somewhere that he'll be loved." Officer Bridges said seriously.

"Then why don't you take him?" Galen asked quietly.

Officer Bridges looked away for a moment, then said, "I'd really like to... more than you know. But the God's honest truth is, if I took Christian into my home, chances are that I wouldn't be in a position to find other kids

that need help. If everything goes right today, Christian will be the fifth child I've had a part in rescuing. Are we ready?"

"One last question before we go in." Galen said quickly.

Officer Bridges looked at Galen with question.

"Why us?" Galen asked hesitantly.

"Because Christian chose you."

* * * * *

"He's right in here." Officer Bridges said seriously.

"I'm sorry, but he can't have visitors. He's in protective custody until we can get CPS to send someone down here." the police officer at the door said seriously.

"I think that if you check, you'll find that Marc Stone has already been cleared to visit." Officer Bridges said professionally.

The officer looked down at his clipboard, then asked, "Is one of you Mr. Stone?"

"I am." Marc said and automatically showed the officer his ID.

"Alright, you three can go in." the officer said as he made a note on the clipboard.

"How's the father?" Officer Bridges asked quietly.

"Actually, the last I heard, he wasn't doing too well. I guess his liver wasn't in very good shape before the fight and it's a lot worse after. They're saying he's got about a fifty-fifty chance."

"Glad to hear it." Officer Bridges said coldly, then motioned for the others to follow him into the room.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, but how did my name get on that list?" Marc asked as they entered the room.

"I put it there. I'm also the one who is supposedly contacting CPS." Officer Bridges said quietly, then in a louder voice he said, "Excuse me Doctor Reynolds, would it be alright for Christian to have some visitors?"

The doctor smiled at the group and said, "Yes. I have a feeling that visitors will do as much good for Christian as anything I can do."

"Are you alright?" Collin asked as he ran across the room and pulled Christian into a hug.

"I'm about one hundred percent better now that you're here." Christian said as he hugged Collin desperately.

Marc and Galen stood just inside the door of the room and watched the two boys.

"I'll give you some privacy so you can visit. I'll return shortly." Doctor Reynolds said before continuing out the door.

"I need to go too. I have a few things to check on, and it would be best for me to be ready to escort our help in when he or she arrives. Remember, if anyone asks, you didn't talk to me." Officer Bridges said seriously, then hurried out of the room.

"I wonder what's up with that?" Marc asked curiously.

"I think it's all part of how he helps the kids. He acts like a heartless part of the system so he can find the kids who need to be rescued from it." Galen said uncertainly.

Marc thought for a moment, then said, "If that's what he's doing, then may God bless him."

Galen put an arm loosely around Marc and said, "I'm with you, love. God bless him."

* * * * *

"Dad! Marc! Come over here. Christian wants to talk to you too." Collin said with excitement.

"Shh. We're in a hospital." Galen said as he walked to Christian's bed with Marc at his side.

Marc took in a hitch of breath at the sight of Christian with a black eye and a bandage covering his left ear.

"How are you doing Christian?" Marc asked with concern.

"Well, my head is hurting like crazy, but things have stopped spinning and the ringing in my ears is almost gone." Christian said honestly.

"Would you mind if I gave you a hug?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Really?" Christian asked with surprise.

"Yeah. If that wouldn't be too weird for you." Marc said shyly.

"Sure. Bring it on." Christian said as he shifted to the edge of his bed and held open his arms.

Marc moved forward and gave Christian a firm hug.

"I'm glad you're alright." Marc said quietly into Christian's good ear.

"Thanks." Christian whispered in return.

Galen moved to Collin's side and said, "If I had any doubts if we were doing the right thing, that settled it."

"What are you talking about? What right thing?" Christian asked as he released Marc and looked at Galen expectantly.

"I... um... well, to tell you the truth. I'm not really sure." Galen said shyly.

Christian looked at Galen for a moment, then looked at Collin with question.

"There's supposed to be someone coming who will be able to help you." Collin said reluctantly.

"Social Services." Christian said with a roll of his eyes, then continued, "Just tell them that my case worker is named Melinda Ortega. They can probably phone it in."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure the help we're going to be getting isn't from Social Services." Galen said cautiously.

"That's good, because the kind of help I get from Social Services isn't any kind of help at all." Christian said frankly.

"How so?" Marc asked with concern.

"Mom does this thing every time I come down here. She calls social services on Dad and accuses him of abuse. We go through a bunch of hearings and BS, then everything gets put off when I get sent back up to Michigan." Christian said frankly.

"What happens when you get to Michigan?" Marc asked cautiously, having a feeling that he already knew.

"Same thing in reverse. Dad calls the CPS and accuses Mom of neglect. Then the CPS people make all kinds of promises and shit about how things are going to be better, then... I'm sent back here." Christian finished with a defeated shrug.

"It's definitely time for us to take you away from all that." Marc said seriously.

"How?" Christian asked incredulously as he looked at Marc with suspicion.

"If I knew more, I swear that I'd tell you. But we're trusting what a friend of yours said. He believes that the person who is coming is going to be able to give you some real help." Marc said as he looked into Christian's eyes.

"A friend? Of mine?" Christian asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. The guy that you rode with in the ambulance." Collin said seriously.

"Oh? I really don't remember him too well. From what the doctor was saying, my brain got kind of sloshed or something when I got hit. Some things are still kind of foggy." Christian said slowly.

A knock on the door stopped further conversation.

Everyone looked at the door and waited as an older man peeked in and asked, "Christian, would you mind if I come in?"

"Judge Robison?" Christian asked with surprise.

The man walked into the room followed by Officer Bridges.

"How are you feeling?" Judge Robison asked with concern.

"Okay I guess. But seeing you here, outside the courtroom, I'm starting to think that I might be hallucinating." Christian said in wonder.

"You're not hallucinating, I'm really here." Judge Robison said with an amused smile.

Christian reluctantly accepted Judge Robison's assurance, then glanced around the room before saying, "Um, Judge Robison, this is Collin and his dad and Marc."

"Galen Anderson." Galen said as he offered his hand.

"Judge Jamie Robison. You can call me Jamie if you like." Judge Robison said in a low voice.

"Thank you Jamie. This is my life partner, Marc Stone." Galen said as he gestured to Marc at his side.

Christian's gaze shifted to Marc and a mild look of surprise came over his face.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Stone." Judge Robison said seriously.

"Please call me Marc."

Jamie nodded that he would.

"I suppose we should get down to business... Officer Bridges, I have a feeling that you already know what you'd like to see happen here, so perhaps you could fill us all in?" Judge Robison asked in a tone that was more of a command than a suggestion.

"Yes Your Honor... I'm sorry, I mean Jamie." Officer Bridges said in a flustered voice.

"It's okay Maurice, just tell me what's going on." Judge Robison said in a more gentle voice.

"His father did that to him." Officer Bridges said as he gestured toward Christian.

Judge Robison looked at Christian, then back to Officer Bridges, knowing that there had to be more.

"Christian and I shared an ambulance ride and he told me a few things. I did some checking to verify them... then I called you." Officer Bridges said carefully.

"You've been spending too much time around the lawyers Maurice. Just say what you mean to say, we're not in court." Judge Robison said frankly.

Officer Bridges smiled and said, "Sorry about that. Christian is a victim of the system as much as he is of abuse and neglect. He has been in local courts seventeen times over allegations of abuse from his father. Two of those times were in your court..." Officer Bridges trailed off with apology.

Judge Robison looked at Christian again and was obviously trying to remember him.

"Due to the shared custody arrangement that his parents have, before a case can be resolved, he is sent to live with his mother."

Judge Robison nodded slowly.

"Unfortunately, the same thing has been happening in Detroit. There are eleven unresolved cases pending over allegations of criminal neglect." Officer Bridges said as a note of anger began to grow in his voice.

Christian clutched Collin to his side, and was in obvious pain.

"Do you need me to call Doctor Reynolds?" Marc asked with concern.

"No, I just have a headache and the loud talking hurts." Christian said with an apologetic look at Officer Bridges.

"Sorry Christian, I'll keep it down." Officer Bridges said more gently.

"So we have this boy being shipped back and forth across the country with pending investigations going at both ends." Judge Robison asked slowly.

"Yes your honor." Officer Bridges said seriously.

Judge Robison looked at Officer Bridges and waited.

"Oh. I mean Jamie." Officer Bridges said quickly.

Judge Robison nodded, then said, "So I'm guessing that you asked me to come down here so that I can try to break Christian out of this bureaucratic cycle where nothing is ever brought to resolution."

"Well, it would be great if you could do that, but what I had in mind was more immediate. Rather than call the CPS out and have them start up yet another case report that will likely never be completed, I thought you

might consider giving Marc Stone temporary custody of Christian until there can be a hearing." Officer Bridges said in an imploring voice.

"Of course it would be possible for me to do that, but what is the sudden urgency?" Judge Robison asked suspiciously.

"It's only three days until Christmas." Officer Bridges said quietly.

Judge Robison looked away for a moment, then at Marc and Galen who were both listening with expressions of concern and anticipation.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Judge Robison asked seriously as he focused on Galen.

"Yes Jamie, if there's any way you can arrange it, I think we'd all like for Christian to join us for Christmas." Galen said carefully.

Judge Robison looked at Marc with question.

"Before I answer, I need to ask you a question privately." Marc said apprehensively.

Judge Robison gestured to the far side of the room and asked, "Would this be private enough?"

"That would be fine." Marc said as he started to walk.

* * * * *

"What did you say to him?" Christian asked suspiciously as Marc and Judge Robison returned to his bedside.

"I said 'yes'." Marc said with a forced smile.

"Bullshit! If that's what you were going to say, you would've said it over here." Christian said firmly.

Marc looked into Christian's distrusting eyes and quietly said, "I'm sorry Christian. I shouldn't have lied to you. What I said to Judge Robison isn't something that I can talk to you about yet, but I promise that it's nothing bad."

Christian looked at Marc with an appraising eye for a moment, then looked at Judge Robison with question.

"Everyone, would you mind letting Christian and me talk privately for a moment? I promise that it won't be long." Judge Robison said as he looked around the group.

Officer Bridges looked at Judge Robison with question, wanting to know if that included him.

Judge Robison nodded, indicating that he could stay.

* * * * *

"Christian, do you understand what we've been talking about?" Judge Robison asked seriously.

"Yeah. You're trying to decide if I can go and spend Christmas with those guys." Christian said frankly.

"That's only part of it, but let's deal with that first. How would you feel about spending the holiday with them?" Judge Robison asked as he watched Christian's expression closely.

"Well, from what I've seen so far, they might be alright. The only thing that's bothered me at all about them is that thing about Marc talking to you over on the other side of the room. I don't like for people to keep secrets from me." Christian said frankly.

"Well, do you like getting Christmas presents?" Judge Robison asked casually.

"Sure, doesn't everyone?" Christian asked in return.

"One of the things that makes a present special is that you don't know what it is before you open it, right?" Judge Robison asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah." Christian said hesitantly.

"So try not to think about what Marc asked me as a secret, but instead, think of it as a present that he hasn't given you yet." Judge Robison said carefully.

Christian nodded slowly as he considered what Judge Robison was saying.

"What would you think if you stayed with Collin and his family during the holiday, then we could make some more permanent decisions in a formal hearing after the holidays?" Judge Robison asked in thought.

"I suppose we could do that. It would sure as hell be better than going to Dad's house or back to Detroit." Christian said frankly.

"Good. Then that's what we'll do. Maurice and I will work on gathering the facts and getting everything lined up so we can get some kind of permanent resolution for you when all else is said and done." Judge Robison said seriously.

Christian gave a defeated chuckle and said, "Good luck with that."

Judge Robison looked at Christian with question at the unusual reaction.

Christian's eyes revealed the depths of his emotional pain as he whispered, "Nothing ever changes."

* * * * *

"When I arrived, I thought Maurice might be overstating the need for me to get involved, but after speaking to Christian, I think he was exactly right in calling me here." Judge Robison said to the group just outside Christian's room.

"Please just tell us what we have to do to help him and we'll do it." Marc said seriously.

"Take him home with you and show him that he has a reason to hope for something better." Judge Robison said as he looked Marc in the eyes.

"Does he have a reason to hope?" Galen asked cautiously.

Judge Robison turned his attention to Galen and said, "That's going to be entirely up to you."

"But what if we decide that we want to..." Marc trailed off, then looked at Collin, obviously not wanting to voice his question.

"Trust me when I say that I have the resources to draw on to make sure that Christian never has to go back to either of his parents. What these next few days is going to determine is where he's going to go after the hearing." Judge Robison said firmly.

"Can't he stay with us?" Collin asked desperately.

Before Marc could answer, Judge Robison said, "That is a possibility, but now is not the time for you or him to make any long term decisions. All of

you need to spend some time together and decide how you would like things to turn out. You might also consider what is the best thing for Christian... sometimes doing what's right isn't as easy as doing what you want."

Collin reluctantly nodded that he understood.

"Are we ready to go back in?" Marc asked hesitantly.

"One last thing." Judge Robison said, then turned his gaze toward Marc.

"About that matter we discussed, as soon as you decide... tell him. Don't wait until the hearing." Judge Robison said seriously.

Marc nodded slowly.

Collin looked at Marc with question, but knew without asking that Marc wouldn't talk about it until he was ready.

* * * * *

"How are you two doing?" Judge Robison asked warmly as he led the way into the room.

"Morris was just telling me about this other guy who he knows who got beat up by his grandfather and now he's got lots of friends and is studying to become an engineer." Christian said happily.

"It's Maurice." Officer Bridges said quietly.

"Oh, okay." Christian said without concern, then looked at Collin with question.

"Then I guess everything has been decided. You're going to be spending Christmas with us... Is that okay with you?" Collin asked hopefully.

"Sure, that sounds great... when can we go?" Christian asked hopefully.

"I think the doctor will want to check you over one last time before we can leave." Judge Robison said frankly.

"I'll get him." Officer Bridges said quickly as he started walking toward the door.

"Thanks Maurice." Christian called out, then winced in pain.

"Does it hurt a lot?" Collin asked with concern as he walked to stand beside Christian's bed.

"No. Just when there's a loud noise." Christian said frankly.

"Collin, are you going to have a problem sleeping on the couch? We don't have another spare room where Christian can stay." Marc asked with concern.

"I just kinda thought we could share my bed. It's plenty big enough." Collin said honestly.

Galen looked at his son with concern before reluctantly saying, "Christian may not be comfortable with that kind of arrangement. Boys your age... should have their own space."

Collin looked at his dad with confusion at the statement.

"He's afraid that we'll freak out if we sleep in the same bed and get boners." Christian said frankly.

Collin looked at Christian with surprise, then at his father with question, silently asking if that was really what he meant.

"Some people equate 'sleeping together' with having sexual contact. And sometimes when you share a bed... things happen. I'd rather not take the chance of a misunderstanding causing problems for you two when we can prevent it by planning ahead." Galen said carefully.

Even though Christian knew that Galen and Marc were gay, he couldn't be sure about how they would react to knowing that he was too. And besides, it wasn't his place to 'out' Collin to his father.

"We already had sex." Collin said as he looked his father in the eyes.

"You what?" Galen asked in a stunned voice.

"We. Had. Sex."

Christian smiled to himself at Collin's willingness to acknowledge their relationship so openly.

Galen stared at his son as a thousand different thoughts raced through his mind.

After a moment, Collin asked, "Which word didn't you understand?"

"But you just met for the first time today..." Galen said in an absent voice.

"Yeah. So?" Collin said as he stared into his father's eyes.

"Were you safe?" Marc asked with concern.

Collin had his full attention focused on his father and didn't seem to hear the question, so Christian decided that he'd do his best to answer.

"Well, it depends on what you consider safe." Christian said frankly.

Marc looked at Christian with full worry at the statement.

"Do you think we could talk about this later?" Christian asked, then looked over at Judge Robison.

"Oh, don't mind me." Judge Robison said with a smile.

"You don't have a problem with this?" Galen asked cautiously.

"Not at all. If your son and Christian are sexually active, then I think it's a good thing that they're with a committed couple who can give them some sound advice." Judge Robison said seriously.

"Oh, they'll be getting some advice alright." Galen said as he glanced at Collin.

* * * * *

The door opened to reveal Officer Bridges and Doctor Reynolds.

"Sorry that took so long. It *is* the emergency room." the doctor said as he walked to Christian's side.

"How are you feeling Christian?" the doctor asked more gently.

"It only hurts a little bit... except when there's a loud noise." Christian said honestly.

"Well, if you'll let me have a minute to look at you, I should be able to give you something for the pain so you can be on your way. Officer Bridges says that you have a safe place to go." the doctor said as he pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket.

"Yeah. These guys said I could stay with them for a few days until the judge here can figure out what to do with me." Christian said simply.

"It sounds like it could be fun." the doctor said casually, then held up his index finger and said, "Hold your head still and follow my finger with your eyes."

Christian followed the travels of the finger for about a minute before the doctor seemed satisfied.

"You can take the bandage off your ear tomorrow if you like. Just try to keep the wound from getting dirty." the doctor said, then picked up the cup of pills he had carried into the room with him.

"This is a mild pain reliever." the doctor said as he handed the cup to Christian, then poured a small cup of water.

"Are these gonna knock me out?" Christian asked cautiously.

"No, they'll just ease the pain a little. You can buy these over the counter." the doctor said gently.

Christian took the pills, then accepted the cup of water from the doctor and washed them down.

The doctor turned to face Galen and Marc as he said, "Christian is going to need some non-aspirin pain reliever for the next few days. Besides that, just see that he doesn't overdo it too much. His body has been through a trauma and healing takes a lot of energy."

"We'll take good care of him." Marc said with assurance.

"Judge Robison, may I assume that it's acceptable for me to release Christian into these gentlemen's care?" the doctor asked professionally.

"I'll have all the official paperwork filed first thing in the morning. You have my personal assurance that it's alright." Judge Robison said seriously.

"Will Christian have to come back for a follow up?" Marc asked cautiously.

"No. I think he should be just fine. But if he starts having serious pain or anything else that concerns you, then bring him in and we'll have another look at him." the doctor said casually.

"I will. Thank you Doctor Reynolds." Marc said seriously.

"Have a Merry Christmas... all of you." Doctor Reynolds said to everyone as he left the room.

Marc turned to look at Judge Robison and asked, "Do you need any kind of information or anything from us before we take Christian home?"

"I already have all of that." Officer Bridges answered before Judge Robison had the chance.

"You do?" Marc asked curiously.

"I did a basic background check before I called you. I wanted to be sure we weren't sending Christian off to stay with some escaped mental patient or anything." Officer Bridges said frankly.

"Okay. I can understand that." Marc said with resignation.

"So is that everything? Can we go?" Galen asked as he looked around the room.

"Yes. I hope all of you enjoy your holiday. Maurice will be contacting you as soon as we have everything squared away so we can have an official hearing." Judge Robison said in a friendly tone.

"Thank you Jamie, and I hope you have a very Merry Christmas." Marc said sincerely.

Judge Robison smiled and nodded.

"Jamie, if you and Officer Bridges don't have other commitments on Christmas Eve, you'd be welcomed to come over to spend it with us... I think you already know where to find us." Galen finished with a smile.

"Actually, I do have plans. But thank you for the kind offer." Judge Robison said sincerely.

"Well I don't have any other plans and I would be glad to attend." Officer Bridges said frankly.

"Good. How does 7:00 sound?" Marc asked happily from Galen's side.

"That sounds perfect, I'll see all of you then." Officer Bridges said with cheer.

"Here's my card in case you need to get in touch with me for anything." Judge Robison said as he handed his business card to Marc.

"Thank you Jamie." Marc said as he looked at the card.

Judge Robison smiled at the sincere thanks, then left the room followed by Officer Bridges.

"Then I guess that's it. Do you have anything that you need to get before we leave?" Galen asked as he looked at Christian curiously.

"Nope. This is it." Christian said as he picked up a jacket from the chair beside the bed.

"What about your luggage?" Marc asked with concern.

"It's still at the airport... we never made it that far." Christian said reluctantly.

"That's no problem. We could swing by on the way home and get it." Marc said as he looked at Galen with question.

"And we could also drive through somewhere and pick up something for dinner. I'm pretty sure that what I had cooking is ruined." Galen said apologetically.

"Can anyone think of anything else we need before we get on the road?" Marc asked slowly.

"Do you have the not-aspirin things that Christian is going to need?" Collin asked quietly.

Marc considered for a moment, then said, "I probably have some at the house, but I'm sure it won't be enough. We'll need to stop along the way and pick some up."

"It sounds like we have quite a bit to do. We'd better get to it." Marc said, then started walking toward the door.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, you there." A woman's voice called as the group walked down the hallway.

"Yes?" Marc said as he turned.

"You have some forms to fill out before you can leave." She said as she rushed to join them.

"Oh, okay." Marc said hesitantly as he accepted a clipboard from her.

He lifted the clipboard so he could write on it, then froze in mid motion.

Galen looked at the boys to find them as puzzled as he was.

Finally Galen asked, "Marc, is there something wrong?"

Marc held out the clipboard so that Galen could see it and pointed.

Galen blinked to be sure that he was reading it right, then turned to Christian and asked, "Your last name is Stone?"

Chapter 4

"Yeah. Christian Nathaniel Stone." Christian said as he looked around the hallway of the hospital uncomfortably.

"Since you two have the same last name, do you think there's any chance that you're related?" Galen asked, directing his question more toward Marc than Christian.

Marc considered for a moment then said, "I really don't know. I guess it's possible."

"Are you okay? Do you need to sit down?" Collin asked with concern at Christian's wilted expression.

"No, I'll be fine. I guess I'm just tired." Christian said in a small voice that revealed his exhaustion.

"Right. This should just take a minute." Marc said, then went back to filling out the forms on the clipboard.

"Code Blue. ICU Four. Code Blue." Sounded over the public address system.

The woman who had brought the clipboard got a look of panic and quickly said, "Will you drop that off at the nurses station when you're finished?"

"Sure. It'll just..." Marc started to say as she rushed away.

There were about nine other people running down the hall and all of them funneled into one room, just about ten feet away.

"Do you think that's..." Galen began to ask, but was silenced by a glare from Marc.

"Galen, why don't you take the boys out to the car so they can relax? This could take a few minutes and there's no reason you should have to stand here and wait." Marc asked as he handed Galen the car keys.

"Sure thing." Galen said gently, then turned to face the boys and said, "Come on guys. Let's get some fresh air."

"I like that plan." Christian said with a small smile of relief.

Collin nodded his agreement and casually put an arm around Christian as they started to walk slowly down the hallway.

Galen gave Marc a look of question and received a serious nod as his response.

Galen nodded in return, then walked to catch up to the boys.

* * * * *

As soon as Christian was outside the entrance to the emergency room, he stopped and took in a long, slow breath.

"Is anything wrong?" Collin asked with concern.

Christian slowly smiled, then said, "No. But after being in that hospital, the fresh air is nice."

Collin took in a deep breath, then slowly released it before saying, "Yeah. I guess it is."

"The car is over this way." Galen said quietly, not wanting to disrupt the tranquil mood.

"Do we need to rush?" Christian asked as he looked at Galen curiously.

"No. I guess not."

Christian gave a little chuckle at Galen's expression, then said, "I just feel like a ton of weight's been lifted off of me. And now being out here in the fresh, night air... it's like freedom. I'd just like to take a minute to enjoy it."

Galen broke into a warm grin and said, "Then we can stand out here and enjoy it for as long as you want."

After a long, contemplative moment, Galen continued, "I guess I'm so used to running around, hurrying to work, hurrying home... I'm always hurrying... I wouldn't even think about stopping to enjoy the night air."

"Do you really have to work that hard all the time?" Collin asked his father with concern.

"No. Not all the time. I suppose that I just get caught up in the pace of everything and forget to let myself wind down."

"Are you going to have to work over Christmas?" Collin asked with an expression that was somewhere between cautious and poised for disappointment.

"Just tomorrow for half a day. After that, I'm off until the new year." Galen said happily.

When he saw Collin's reaction to the announcement, he was mildly surprised. But when he saw the same expression on Christian's face, it really brought the realization home.

Both his son and Christian actually wanted to spend time with him.

"Kewl." Collin said with a smile at his father.

"Oh dear, you boys weren't fighting were you?" An unfamiliar voice asked from behind them.

The trio turned as one to see an elderly woman looking at Christian with sympathy.

"Excuse me?" Galen asked the woman cautiously.

"My grandsons fight like cats and dogs. By the time they're your age, they'll probably be putting each other in the hospital too. You should be ashamed!" The woman said as she glared at Collin.

"But we weren't..." Collin began to say.

"Weasel bite." Christian said gravely before Collin could finish.

The woman's eyes went wide with shock at the strange words.

"It just came out of nowhere." Christian said as he made a show of caressing the bandage on his ear.

It took a moment for Collin to realize what Christian was doing, but as soon as he twigged to the fact, he quickly said, "It just about took his whole ear off. And I guess I must have hit him in the eye when I was trying to get it off him."

"It really wasn't his fault. He was trying to help me." Christian said in a whisper.

"My goodness." The old woman said in horror.

"But the doctor says I'm gonna be fine." Christian added, doing his best to look pitiful and wounded.

"That's not what happened." Galen said with a stern gaze at Christian.

Both boys looked at Galen with pleading expressions, silently asking him to play along.

"The doctor said you *might* be fine. We won't know for sure until the rabies tests come back." Galen said gravely.

Christian nodded, then looked down at the ground sadly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry... I hope you'll be alright. I'll hold you in my prayers tonight." The elderly woman said sympathetically to Christian, then whispered to Collin, "Take good care of him."

"Thank you ma'am." Christian said in a whisper as he caressed his bandaged ear again.

"I will. Thank you." Collin said as he looked at Christian with sympathy.

The elderly woman looked at them a moment longer, then turned to walk into the hospital.

As soon as she was out of sight, Christian and Collin both broke into laughter.

As soon as he could catch his breath, Christian said, "Your dad is so cool!"

"Yeah. He is." Collin agreed as he looked at his father with admiration.

"I thought you guys were going to wait on me in the car." Marc said as he walked out of the hospital.

"We just stopped for a few minutes to enjoy the fresh air." Galen said with a secretive smile at the boys.

"Oh... are you about done?" Marc asked cautiously as he looked at the trio.

Galen and Collin both looked at Christian with question.

"Yeah. We're done." Christian said with a smile that seemed to be on the verge of breaking into a laugh.

"It's over this way." Galen said with a grin as he gestured casually toward the parking lot.

As the boys led the way, Galen looked at Marc with question.

'Later' Marc mouthed, then also began to walk.

* * * * *

"How's your head?" Collin asked quietly.

"No one's complained so far." Christian said automatically.

"Huh?"

Christian broke into a smile and said, "It's fine. I guess those not-aspirin things kicked in. It doesn't hurt anymore."

Collin looked at his father and Marc who both seemed to be trying to hold in their chuckles.

Before Collin could give it too much thought, he spotted the car.

"There it is, the blue one." Collin said as he pointed.

Christian looked down the row of cars, then back at Collin with question.

"It's really awesome. Trust me." Collin said happily.

"It looks really old." Christian said reluctantly.

Collin moved closer to Christian's side and whispered, "Yeah. That's what I said too."

"Is it safe?" Christian asked in a tone that sounded concerned.

"Yep. It's as safe as being in a tank." Collin said with a grin.

* * * * *

"Do you want me to drive?" Galen asked as they approached the back of the car.

"No, that's alright. I'll drive." Marc said as he glanced at the boys.

"Are you sure?" Galen asked, not wanting Marc to feel like he was their chauffeur.

"I'll drive." Christian offered quickly, then looked from one man to the other with hope.

Galen and Marc turned simultaneously to stare at Christian, their expressions conveying the depth of their unified 'no'.

"Guess not." Christian said in a whisper to Collin at his side.

"How about this? You guys can wait here and I'll back the car out, then I'll slide over and Galen can drive us on our errands." Marc asked seriously.

"I like that plan." Galen said with a smile, then moved in to give Marc a quick kiss.

Collin and Christian shared a look, then Christian whispered, "It's kind of creepy when old people do it."

"Shh. Don't let them hear you say that. You wouldn't *believe* what I had to do so they'd be comfortable enough to kiss in front of me." Collin whispered in return.

Christian studied Collin's expression for a moment, then asked, "Tell me later?"

Collin nodded, then both boys were startled by the rumble of Marc starting the engine.

Car alarms started going off up and down the row of parked cars as Christian clutched his hands over his ears and winced with pain.

Collin guided him to stand aside as Marc slowly and carefully backed the car out of the narrow parking space.

* * * * *

"Are you okay? Does it hurt too much?" Collin asked with concern as he followed Christian into the back seat of the car.

Christian considered for a moment, then said, "No. It just hurt for a minute when the engine started because it was loud and all of a sudden. Now it doesn't hurt at all."

"Good. I don't want you to hurt." Collin said quietly as he fastened his seat belt.

Christian smiled at Collin and whispered, "It's been a long time since anyone's felt that way for me. Thanks."

"Anytime." Collin said with a weak smile as he tried to look past Christian's black eye and bandaged ear.

"Do we need to go anyplace else before the airport?" Galen asked as he settled into place in the driver's seat.

After a moment of silence, Galen continued, "Then here we go."

* * * * *

As soon as they got out of the parking lot, Galen expertly made his way to the nearest on-ramp to the I-4 interstate which was only a few blocks away.

Both boys were looking out the windows, silently watching the scenery pass them by, when the car suddenly accelerated.

The sound of the car's engine filled their ears as the feeling of the engine's vibration coursed through both their bodies.

Although neither boy realized it, both were wearing matching expressions of awe as the car accelerated onto the interstate.

"Like that?" Galen asked with a grin into the rear view mirror.

Collin's mouth dropped open slightly, like he was going to answer, but no sound came out.

"That was the COOLEST thing EVER!" Christian said with amazement as the vibration of the engine coursed through his body.

Marc and Galen shared an amused look at his reaction.

Both boys broke into giggles as they enjoyed the feeling of the car's acceleration.

A feeling of good cheer and hope filled the car; hope that the coming holiday would be a wonderful experience for all of them.

* * * * *

"Oh shit." Christian exclaimed as he scrambled to get something out of his pocket.

"What's wrong?" Collin asked with immediate concern.

"My iPod." Christian said as he pulled the music player out of his pocket.

Marc turned around in his seat at the sound and a look of sympathy came over his face at the sight.

"I worked all last summer to earn the money to get this... it's the only thing that I ever bought for myself. It's all I have that's really mine." Christian said in a low voice as tears filled his eyes.

Collin looked at the broken device and felt his heart break at Christian's pain.

"Maybe it's not as bad as it looks." Marc said as he looked from one boy to the other.

"It's totaled." Christian said as his tears started to fall.

"Christian, let me have a look at it. Maybe it's something that can be repaired." Marc said as he held out his hand.

After a moment of indecision, Christian reluctantly handed the broken iPod over to Marc.

Collin scooted over slightly, as much as his seat belt would allow, and pulled Christian into a hug.

After a long silent moment, Marc finally said, "This is more Galen's area of expertise, but it looks like the damage is mostly cosmetic. There's a good chance that the internals can be salvaged."

"Really?" Christian asked in a tiny voice that betrayed a glimmer of hope.

Before Marc could answer, Galen guided the car off the freeway and everyone's attention turned to the entrance of the airport.

"Marc, would you mind taking Christian in to get his luggage? That'll give me a minute to look at it." Galen asked as he drove around the short term parking to find a spot to park.

"No problem." Marc said, then turned to look at Christian with question.

"Do you really think you can fix it?" Christian asked as he tried to meet Galen's eyes in the rear view mirror.

"I don't know yet." Galen said as he guided the car into a parking space, then continued, "Go get your luggage and I should be able to tell you when you get back."

As Christian and Collin were undoing their seat belts, Galen said, "Collin, would you stay here with me?"

"Oh, um, sure Dad." Collin said, then settled back into his seat.

* * * * *

Once Marc and Christian were out and away from the car, Collin leaned forward to look at what his father was doing and asked, "Do you think you can fix it?"

After a moment to examine the iPod and consider, Galen hesitantly answered, "I think that's going to depend on you."

Collin looked at his father with surprise.

"Did you bring your iPod with you?" Galen asked as he turned and looked into his son's eyes.

"Um, yeah. I mean, it's in my carry on bag, back at the house." Collin said as he looked at his father uncertainly.

"There's no way I'm going to be able to repair this broken display, but if the internals aren't too damaged, I should be able to repair this by swapping out the damaged parts. Will you be willing to sacrifice your iPod so I can repair his?" Galen asked his son gently.

Collin smiled as he said, "Yeah. You know I'm not much into music and stuff like that. But even if I was, it wouldn't matter. I'd do just about anything to make Christian happy."

Galen nodded that he had expected the answer, then said, "When we get back to the house, bring your iPod to me, then keep Christian occupied while I do my work."

"Thanks Dad." Collin said as he looked at his father with admiration.

"How are you doing?" Galen asked his son with concern.

Collin chuckled and said, "I don't really know. I was all nervous about coming here and seeing a new town and meeting Marc. Now that I'm here, the only thing I can even think about is Christian."

"Do you think you love him?" Galen asked his son cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Collin said, "Yeah. I think maybe I do. I'm just scared."

"What are you scared of?" Galen asked as he looked at his son in the dim lighting of the parking garage.

"I'm just scared that I may be feeling more for Christian than he feels for me." Collin said as he looked at his father with regret at saying the words.

Galen felt a moment of pride and relief to know that his son wasn't following his emotions blindly.

"Why do you think that is?" Galen asked gently, as a prompt for Collin to delve deeper into his feelings.

Collin considered the question for a moment before answering, "Well, the way that Christian and I met, you know, in the airport.... then we sat together on the plane. I just don't know if Christian would have done the same thing if it were someone besides me. I don't know if he really likes me or if I'm just... convenient."

"Collin." Galen said to his son to gain his full attention.

After a moment lost in his thoughts, Collin finally looked up into his father's eyes.

"I think maybe what you're feeling is something like 'it's too good to be true'. I know that I felt that with Marc and I think it's probably something that a lot of people have to deal with at the beginning of a relationship." Galen said, holding his son's gaze.

"So do you think Christian really likes me? You know, the way I like him?"

Galen looked at his son with regret and said, "I wish I could answer that, but I really don't know. This is something that the two of you are going to have to work out for yourselves. I'm sure that Christian has some doubts and worries too. It's natural when you're just starting out, and given the unlikely way that he came to be with us... it's probably even worse for him. Just take it slow and be sure of your feelings before you take any big steps."

Collin thought about his father's words, then slowly nodded that he understood.

"But even if he isn't feeling the same thing that you are, he's still a wonderful boy and I'm sure he'll be a good friend. Hold on to that." Galen said to his son, hoping that he was right.

Collin looked at his father with question.

"Some relationships work out. Some don't. Even if things don't work out exactly the way you want them to, I think Christian is a good person and will be a loyal friend. Make sure that no matter what else happens, that you never let that go. If you two can at least be friends... that's not so bad." Galen finished with a feeling that his words were inadequate.

"I'll try to remember that."

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Christian?" Marc asked gently.

"My head's not hurting at all now." Christian said as they approached the entrance of the airport.

"I'm glad to hear that, but what I was really asking is how you're doing with everything that's happened and all the sudden changes." Marc said as they continued to walk.

When the silence between them seem to have gone on too long, Marc glanced at Christian and found that he seemed to be lost in his thoughts.

* * * * *

Christian was still considering how he felt as he and Marc walked into the baggage claim area.

"Let's check over there." Marc said as he pointed at a pile of luggage by a door at the back of the large room.

Christian nodded, then said, "I don't know if it's because I'm so relieved about not having to stay with my dad or maybe everything just hasn't caught up to me yet, but right this minute, I don't feel anything... I mean, I feel like I'm okay."

"Just let me know if you're having any problems." Marc said gently as they stopped before the stack of unclaimed luggage.

"Thanks." Christian said uncomfortably, then pointed at the pile and said, "I think that brown one is mine."

As Marc took a step toward the luggage, an airport employee dressed in coveralls stepped out of the back room pushing a four wheeled cart.

"Did you need some help with something?" the young man asked as he looked at Marc appraisingly.

"Christian thinks that brown suitcase might be his." Marc said, then noticed that the young man's coveralls had a name patch that said 'Davey'.

"This is unclaimed luggage that's been here for a while. I'm here to take it to the lost and found." Davey said, sounding like he might not let Marc look at the suitcase.

"The police took me to the hospital before I could pick up my luggage. I just got out." Christian said as he took a step closer to Marc's side.

Davey gave Christian a sympathetic look, then cautiously said, "I could get in trouble for doing this. Only the customer service reps are supposed to give out lost and found."

"Does your suitcase have your name on it?" Marc asked Christian absently, as he considered what else they might have to go through to claim the luggage.

"Yeah. It should have one of those luggage tags from the airport. I remember filling it out." Christian said in a rush.

"Could you look to see if that brown suitcase has a tag with the name 'Christian Stone' on it?" Marc asked Davey in an urging tone.

"Yeah. I guess I can do that." Davey said and pulled the suitcase out of the stack of luggage.

"Yeah. 'Christian Stone', just like you said." Davey said as he handed the suitcase to Marc.

"Are you going to get in trouble for doing this?" Marc asked Davey with concern.

"Only if I get caught." Davey said with a nervous little chuckle.

"Well, thanks for taking care of us Davey. We left some people waiting in the car so we've got to go." Marc said, then noticed that Christian was holding out his hands, offering to carry the suitcase.

"Yeah. I've got to get back to work. Take care of yourself Christian." Davey said before turning to load the luggage onto the cart.

Christian noticed the look of concern in Marc's eyes before he turned to leave.

"What's bothering you?" Christian asked, suspecting that he knew what Marc was feeling, but not understanding why.

"I just hope he doesn't get into trouble for helping us." Marc said honestly as they walked.

"But you don't even know him." Christian said, hoping that Marc would explain why he was so concerned for a complete stranger.

"It doesn't matter if I know him or not. He went out of his way to help us, so that kind of makes him our friend."

"Yeah. I guess so." Christian said as he thought about Marc's different way of dealing with people.

He knew that in the same situation, his dad would have screamed and cursed until he got his way. And his mom would have gone to Davey's boss and whined, playing the role of the victim, until she got what she wanted.

As they approached the main exit, Marc quietly asked, "Are you still feeling okay?"

"Yeah. I'm really fine." Christian said, still not quite sure he understood the way Marc seemed to care about the people around him.

* * * * *

"That didn't take too long." Galen said as Marc climbed into the passenger seat of the car.

Before Marc could respond, Christian quickly asked, "Do you think you'll be able to fix my iPod?"

"Yeah. I can't be sure without my test equipment but from what I can see here, I think so." Galen said with a gentle smile at the boy.

"Thank you Mister... um... I'm sorry, I forgot your name." Christian finished in an embarrassed mumble.

"Anderson. But I'd really prefer it if you'd call me Galen."

Christian considered for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Could I call you something like Uncle Galen? It would just feel wrong for me to call you by your first name since you're old and stuff."

"I'd really like that, Christian." Galen said with a gentle smile, knowing that Christian was trying to be respectful in his own bumbling way.

"Thanks for trying to fix my iPod, Uncle Galen. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to make it up to you." Christian said in a small voice that indicated that he wasn't comfortable or at all used to being grateful to anyone.

"Well, there is one thing I can think of..." Galen said as he turned in his seat to look Christian in the eyes.

Before Christian could ask, Galen continued, "...try to relax and have a Merry Christmas."

Christian broke into a smile and said, "Okay. I'll really try."

Galen smiled at the answer so sincerely spoken, then started the car.

* * * * *

"There's a convenience store about a block from the airport. If you'll stop in there, we can get Christian's non-aspirin pain reliever." Marc said from the passenger seat.

"You're the navigator." Galen said with a grin as he drove slowly through the airport parking lot.

"I am? Then I guess I'd better start planning our *next* stop." Marc said cheerfully, then turned toward the back seat and asked, "Are you guys hungry for anything in particular?"

Collin noticed that Christian was also waiting for him to answer.

"I'm hungry, but not for anything special." Collin said apologetically.

"How about you Christian? What sounds good to you?" Marc asked casually.

"Well. I was kind of thinking that maybe a Dairy Queen burger would be pretty good about now." Christian said cautiously.

"That will work out fine. There's a Dairy Queen on the way home." Marc said with a smile.

"Um, no there isn't." Galen said cautiously, then glanced at Marc with question.

"Sure there is, you just need to get off the freeway one exit sooner. Then it's right on the way." Marc said cheerfully, then at Galen's incredulous look, he continued, "I'm the navigator, trust me."

Collin and Christian both giggled at the conversation.

Marc glanced at the boys in the back seat and broke into a grin.

"This will just take a minute, then we'll be on our way to Dairy Queen." Marc said as Galen guided the car into the convenience store parking lot.

Galen set the parking brake, but left the motor running.

After Marc had hurried out of the car, Galen turned in his seat and asked, "How are you guys doing?"

"I'm good." Collin said immediately, then looked at Christian with question.

"I'm fine. But it's kind of strange to have you guys asking me all the time." Christian said, looking from Collin to Galen timidly. He felt that even though he was being honest, by saying the words he was being ungrateful for their concern.

"Well, if you'll promise to tell us if you're not feeling well, we'll try to fight the urge to ask." Galen said, not sounding offended at all.

"Yeah. Okay. If it starts hurting, I'll tell you right away." Christian said reluctantly, but was relieved that he hadn't upset Galen or Collin.

"Well, then we'll try to ask you about... half as much. How's that?" Galen asked with a grin.

Christian was surprised for a moment, but then saw the humor in what Galen was saying and said, "It's a deal."

The car door opening stopped further conversation.

"We would have been better off stopping at the grocery store. I can't believe the prices in there." Marc said as he handed a box of non-aspirin pain reliever to Christian.

"I have some money. I can pay you back." Christian said quietly as he looked at the box, trying to find the price tag.

Marc was so surprised by the offer that he couldn't think of what to say.

"When we told the judge that we'd be willing to take care of you, that included things like aspirins. You don't have to pay us back now or ever." Galen said firmly.

"Are you sure?" Christian asked in a small voice.

"Completely sure. Now if my navigator is ready, we're off to Dairy Queen." Galen finished with a questioning look at Marc.

"Yeah. Ready when you are." Marc said absently as he fastened his safety belt.

"You guys be thinking about what you want to order because I'm planning to drive through." Galen said as he started backing the car out of the convenience store parking lot.

Everyone in the car was ravenous by the time they reached the house.

The smell of the food in the carry-out bags was absolutely heavenly.

"I can't believe how hungry I am right now. Back in the hospital I was feeling like I'd never want to eat again." Christian said as he got out of the car, carrying two bags of food.

"Well, we bought extra so everyone should be able to eat their fill." Marc said with a smile at Christian as he walked toward the house.

"Hey. This place is nice." Christian said as he stopped for a moment to check out his surroundings.

Collin looked around, surprised that he hadn't even noticed when he had arrived earlier in the day.

The house was a neat little place and looked like it had been recently painted.

The lawn was nicely trimmed, but not overly so. It just looked like someone took the time to keep it nice and neat.

"Christian, if you don't mind we'll have our dinner, then come back out and get your luggage." Marc asked as he unlocked the front door.

"Sounds good to me." Christian said as he followed Marc inside.

"Collin." Galen said, stopping his son before he could go into the house.

"If you'll get me your iPod now, I'll take it up to the study with Christian's so I can get to work after we eat." Galen said in a whisper.

"Yeah. Thanks." Collin said, then rushed past his father into the house.

* * * * *

"Do you have enough drinks?" Galen asked from the kitchen doorway.

"The boys each got a milkshake, but I could use a coke." Marc said as he and Christian unpacked the food from the carry-out bags.

"Be right back." Galen said, then stepped back into the hall.

"Here it is." Collin whispered as he handed his father his iPod.

"Go out to the garage and get two cans of coke from the fridge while I put these up in the study. I'll meet you back here." Galen said in a low, conspiratorial voice.

Collin nodded, then hurried down the hall to the doorway that led to the garage.

* * * * *

Just as Galen was coming to the bottom of the stairs, Collin appeared with two cans of coke in his hands.

"Ready to eat?" Galen asked his son with a smile.

"Sure." Collin said happily and was surprised to feel his father put an arm around his shoulders to guide him into the kitchen.

Even though Collin had always known that his father loved him, physical displays of affection like a hug, had been few and far between.

* * * * *

"You guys didn't start without us did you?" Galen asked with a smile as they walked into the kitchen.

"No. We just finished laying it out. But if you'd been a minute later..." Marc trailed off in a teasing tone.

"Well, we're here now. So let's eat." Galen said as he took his seat at the table.

Collin sat the cans of coke next to his father, then took the only vacant seat which was obviously his because it had his milkshake.

"Dig in!" Galen said as he began to unwrap his burger.

Christian was happy to see that his surrogate family were behaving so casually.

When he met Galen and Marc, his first impression from the way they dressed was that these guys must have some money and that would mean that they were probably stuck up. But after being around them for a while, Christian was starting to feel more at ease. They were just regular people.

"We should go to Dairy Queen more often. I had forgotten how good their food is." Marc said in a contented voice.

"Yeah. This really is good." Galen said as he was enjoying the food. Even though the burgers were excellent, he knew that they were even better because he was enjoying them with his son.

Collin and Christian both agreed with what was being said, but their mouths were too full to say anything to that effect.

* * * * *

"I guess I don't need to offer to help you with the dishes tonight." Galen said as he started clearing away the evidence of his meal.

"No. Not unless the dinner you were going to make needs to be cleaned up." Marc said as he looked around.

"Oh yeah. It's still in the oven." Galen said as he slowly stood.

"What's going on?" Christian asked as he stuffed his food wrappers into a paper bag.

"Dad was making dinner for us when the police called Marc." Collin said frankly.

"Oh. I'm sorry if I messed up your plans." Christian said quietly.

Galen pulled a casserole dish out of the oven and stared at the contents with a sour expression.

"From the look of it, you might have saved us." Marc whispered to Christian, then pointed at the dish in Galen's hands.

"Do you think there's any way to save it?" Galen asked cautiously.

"It would help if I knew what it was." Marc said slowly, not wanting to sound overly critical of Galen's attempt at cooking.

"It's something like chicken stew with canned biscuits on top. They're supposed to make a crust." Galen said as he looked at the pale pile of goo.

"Oh, a pot pie. Well, I don't think there's any way we can salvage this since it's been heated but not fully cooked. But if it had been allowed to cook all the way, I bet it would have been great." Marc finished with a smile.

"Really?" Galen asked hesitantly.

"I wouldn't lie to you, not even to spare your feelings." Marc said as he looked Galen in the eyes.

"Yeah. I knew that. I guess I'm just insecure about my cooking and needed to hear it." Galen said timidly as he looked at Marc with love.

"Just scrape that into the garbage and fill the pan with water so it can soak. After that, I think it would be a good time to have that talk with the boys." Marc said seriously.

"Wow. This sounds like something that's gonna suck." Christian said honestly.

"I'll try not to make it too bad. Let's go in the living room where we can be comfortable." Marc said as he led the way out of the room.

"I'll be right in." Galen said to the boys, then watched as they left.

* * * * *

"First of all, you aren't in trouble." Marc said, then looked at both boys to see that they had received the message.

"But since you boys have said that you're sexually active, Galen and I feel that it's important that you understand some things about relationships." Marc said with difficulty.

Galen rushed into the room, still drying his hands on a dish towel and asked, "What did I miss?"

"Not in trouble." Christian said frankly.

"Need to understand relationships." Collin said in exactly the same tone.

Galen smiled at the boys and said, "Thanks."

"Between Galen and I, we've had a variety of experiences and probably made every mistake that you can possibly make in a relationship. Hopefully hearing about the mistakes we made will keep you from doing the same things someday." Marc said carefully.

Colin and Christian shared a look of dread, then devoted their full attention to Marc.

"When I was about your age..."

* * * * *

Both boys sat and stared at the door that Marc and Galen had just walked through.

They had been sitting for nearly an hour listening to one relationship horror story after another.

"I can't believe my dad stayed with mom for as long as he did. It sounds like he was in hell." Collin said in a bewildered tone. He just couldn't believe that he had been so oblivious and had missed everything that was going on around him.

Christian slowly shook his head, not disagreeing, but just in amazement at what the two men had been through before meeting each other.

"I don't want to go through that." Collin finally said as he turned to look at Christian.

"I was just thinking the same thing." Christian said reluctantly.

"How can we keep from making their mistakes?" Collin asked quietly.

"From the way it sounded to me, every time they thought they were in love, everything went to shit." Christian said frankly.

Collin thought back through the stories they had just been told and slowly nodded.

"So no matter what happens. We can't be boyfriends. We can't fall in love." Christian said firmly.

Collin wanted to protest the statement, but given the weight of the evidence just presented to them, he reluctantly began to agree when a thought came to him.

"Can we still have sex?"

Christian considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Yeah. I think we can do that."

"Good." Collin said with relief.

"I think we'll be fine doing everything else, just as long as we don't love each other." Christian said seriously.

"Okay." Collin said cautiously, then remembered his father's words from earlier, and continued, "As long as we can at least be friends... that's not so bad."

Christian smiled at the words and said, "Yeah. Friends."

"Do you want to go talk to the old guys and let them know we're okay?" Collin asked with a smile.

"Sure. Let's go." Christian said, then leaned close to Collin's ear and whispered, "I don't love you."

Collin froze in shock at the words. He felt a physical sensation, like he'd been stabbed in the chest. He reluctantly turned to look at Christian, and was about to speak when he noticed the warmth in Christian's eyes.

In a flash of insight, he understood.

Collin slowly put one arm around Christian's shoulders and gave him a gentle hug, then whispered, "I don't love you too."

Chapter 5

Marc and Galen were sitting in silence at the kitchen table. Both men were apprehensive as they watched the doorway and tried to formulate reasons to hope that the boys weren't too bothered by the stories that they had told.

The sound of movement broke the silence and both adults looked up with concern at Collin and Christian walking into the kitchen.

The expressions that the boys wore didn't give any clue as to their moods.

After a tense moment of silence, Collin walked to his father and leaned down slightly to give him a hug.

"Are you alright?" Galen whispered.

"Yeah Dad." Collin said gently, then continued more strongly, "Thanks for caring enough to tell us about what you went through."

Christian heard the words so sincerely spoken, and before he could think better of the idea, he walked to Marc to try to show his own appreciation.

Christian moved close to Marc's ear and whispered, "Thanks Marc. I've never had anyone talk to me straight up and honest like that before... you know, like I'm an adult. I'll try not to screw up, so maybe you'll keep talking to me that way."

Marc pulled back enough to look Christian in the eyes before saying, "Don't worry about it Christian, everyone screws up sometimes. Galen and I both know that. The thing that shows whether you're an adult or a child is if you can take responsibility for your actions."

Christian hesitantly nodded that he understood.

"You're what, thirteen?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Thirteen and a half." Christian said seriously.

Marc smiled at the response, then continued, "Galen and I will try to keep that in mind and treat you as a young man, but you need to let us know if we slip up and accidentally treat you like a child. "

"I will. Thanks." Christian whispered, then pulled Marc into a hug.

After a brief silence, Galen cautiously said, "Marc, if you'll go get Christian's luggage out of the car, the guys can get unpacked while I start to work on the iPod."

"Sounds like a plan." Marc said as he released Christian from the hug and stood.

"Come on guys. As soon as you're unpacked, we have a few more things to do before we can call it a night." Marc said as he draped an arm loosely around Christian's shoulders.

Collin smiled at the sight of Christian being held so gently and walked to join Marc and Christian at the door.

* * * * *

"From the look of the luggage you brought, you guys should be able to share the chest of drawers in the guest room without a problem. Is that okay with both of you?" Marc asked casually as they walked down the hall, toward the front door.

"Sounds good to me." Collin said with an ear-to-ear grin.

Marc chuckled at Collin's cheerful response as he released Christian from the hug to open the front door.

* * * * *

"You said that we have other stuff to do tonight... can you tell us?" Christian asked as the trio walked to the car.

"Sure. I just thought that when you guys are finished unpacking, we could decorate the Christmas tree." Marc said with a smile.

"Sounds good." Collin said casually as he stopped beside the car and waited for Marc to open the trunk.

Collin noticed Christian's distant look and quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing... I just always wanted..." Christian began to say, then looked around, as if searching for something.

"What is it Christian?" Marc asked as he took the suitcase out of the trunk and sat it on the ground.

"I just..." Christian muttered, then looked into Marc's eyes and quietly said, "All my life, I always wanted to have a real tree at Christmas... but now it feels like I'm not really here... like it's a dream."

Before Marc could formulate a response to Christian's words, Collin casually said, "Some people think that life is just a dream."

Christian looked at Collin uncertainly for a moment, then broke into a smirk as he asked, "Those people wouldn't happen to be rowing boats, you know, gently down a stream, would they?"

Collin made a show of thinking about it before saying, "Now that you mention it, they might be."

Marc chuckled at the exchange as he closed the trunk of the car.

"Mr. Stone! How are you doing this evening?" A woman's voice called out from the end of the driveway.

"Mrs. Rhodes." Marc responded with a smile, then in a lower voice, said to the boys, "Come on over here and meet our neighbor."

* * * * *

"Good evening Mrs. Rhodes. I'm surprised to see you out of the house this late." Marc said as they approached.

"We're all willy-nilly this evening because we're getting ready for our trip."

"Oh? I didn't realize that you were going anywhere. I hope that this is a vacation and not a business trip." Marc said with a smile.

"It's going to be our first *real* vacation in years. We're going to visit Harry's family for the holidays... my in-laws." She added a bit sourly at the end.

"Maybe there will be enough Christmas spirit to make it enjoyable." Marc said with an understanding smile.

"If the Christmas spirit is the only spirit being served, then it will be." Mrs. Rhodes said frankly.

Marc nodded his understanding, then asked, "Would you like for us to keep an eye on the place while you're gone?"

"If you wouldn't mind. I had thought about asking you, but Harry said that you two would probably be going out of town to enjoy the holiday in some exotic place." Mrs. Rhodes said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"No. We're staying right here. We've got the boys with us this holiday, I can't imagine anyplace that I'd rather be."

"Oh? And who are these young men?" Mrs. Rhodes asked as she turned her attention to the boys.

Before Marc could answer, Collin said, "I'm Collin Anderson and this is Christian Stone. It's nice to meet you Mrs. Rhodes."

"It's very nice to meet you as well." Mrs. Rhodes muttered absently, then turned to Marc and said, "I didn't know that you and Mr. Anderson had children."

"We don't live here. We're just here for Christmas." Collin said quickly, not wanting Marc to have to explain Christian's presence.

Mrs. Rhodes smiled gently at Collin, then glanced at Christian's bandaged ear and black eye with concern.

"I suppose I'd better get back in there. I have a million things left to do and I know I'm going to forget something." Mrs. Rhodes said wearily.

"Do you need us to pick up your mail while you're gone?" Marc asked cautiously.

Mrs. Rhodes froze in thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know if Harry remembered to stop the mail or not. If you could check it for us, we would appreciate it."

"I'll do that. Just stop by when you get back and we'll have it waiting for you." Marc said with a smile.

"Thank you so much." Mrs. Rhodes said sincerely, then glanced back at her house and said, "I really have to go."

"I hope you both have a wonderful holiday." Marc said as she started walking away.

"Thank you. And I hope you and yours have a happy holiday as well." Mrs. Rhodes said just before disappearing behind the tall hedge that divided the property.

"She seemed nice." Collin said casually as he turned back toward the house.

"Yes. We were really lucky to get such good neighbors." Marc agreed as they began to walk.

"I bet she thinks that I'm your son." Christian said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"I know. I probably should have explained that to her." Marc said in an apologetic tone.

"Nah. This was a lot easier than the truth." Christian said casually, then in a more serious voice, continued, "I mean, as long as you don't mind her thinking that I'm yours."

"Mind? I'd be as proud as I could be if it were true... I just don't like lying." Marc finished weakly.

Christian stopped and looked at Marc with surprise as Collin said, "I had a feeling that you felt that way."

"You did?" Christian asked in a bewildered tone.

"Yeah, Marc strikes me as being really honest."

"Oh, that." Christian muttered, then quickly added, "Yeah. He does seem like that."

As the trio reached the house, Marc said, "Why don't you guys go get unpacked? I have a few calls that I need to make."

Collin and Christian glanced at each other, then nodded their agreement to Marc.

"Just give a yell up the stairs when you're done and we can get started on the tree trimming." Marc said with a smile.

"Sounds good." Collin said with a grin, then turned to Christian and said, "I'll show you our room. You're going to love it."

* * * * *

"Is something wrong?" Collin asked as he flopped his suitcase onto the bed, then opened it.

"No. Not really." Christian said, then slowly moved to do the same.

"How do you want to do this? Top and bottom or left and right?" Collin asked as he looked at the dresser.

"Bottom." Christian said automatically, then blinked and asked, "Wait. What are we talking about?"

"Where do you want to put your stuff in the dresser?" Collin said simply, then asked, "What did you think I was asking?"

"Never mind." Christian said quickly, then continued, "I'll take the bottom drawers if that's okay."

"Yeah. Fine. This'll just take a minute." Collin said as he took neatly folded stacks of clothes out of his suitcase and sat them in the dresser drawer.

When he had finished, he noticed that Christian was sort of staring off into space.

"Do you need another one of those not-aspirin things?" Collin asked with concern.

Christian blinked, then shook his head absently.

"If you talk about it, maybe I can help." Collin said gently.

Christian slowly nodded, then quietly said, "I really like it here with your family. I just don't know what's going to happen after Christmas."

"Lobster people are going to come up out of the ocean and enslave the human race." Collin said simply.

"What?" Christian asked in a bewildered voice.

"Yup. Great big lobster people are going to come up out of the ocean and they're going to be really pissed off." Collin said seriously, then added, "I mean, can you blame them?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Collin smiled and said, "What I'm really saying is that anything could happen after Christmas. It doesn't hurt to prepare for tomorrow, but you have to live in today."

Christian thought about the words, then slowly nodded.

"I'm done if you want to unpack now." Collin said as he closed his suitcase, then slid it under the bed.

"Yeah." Christian said, then stopped and asked, "Lobster people?"

Collin giggled and nodded.

* * * * *

"Marc! We're done." Collin called up the stairs.

"I'm in here." Marc's voice called from the living room.

Collin and Christian walked into the room to find Marc standing in front of the bare Christmas tree, looking at it critically.

"Do you think it would look better by the door?" Marc asked cautiously.

Collin and Christian looked at the spot Marc was indicating, then back at the tree which was set up in the corner of the room.

"I think it's better here. You can see it from wherever you're sitting in the room." Collin said speculatively.

"Yeah. And it would probably be easy to accidentally bump into the tree if it was by the door." Christian said with a nod.

"I guess you're right." Marc said with one last look at the tree, then turned to the boys and said, "I just wanted to be sure we had it where we wanted it before we started decorating."

"Shouldn't Dad be here for this?" Collin asked with concern.

"We'll call him down once we've brought in the decorations. I'll need you guys to help me bring everything in from the garage." Marc said with a trace of enthusiasm in his voice.

"I'm ready when you are." Collin said cheerfully.

"Christian. If you start feeling tired, or your head starts hurting, just let me know." Marc said seriously.

"Just how many decorations are we talking about?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Enough." Marc said with a smile as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"So Marc, just how many Christmas trees are we planning to decorate?" Christian asked as he looked at the multitude of boxes they had brought in from the garage.

"Just one. But I also have some other decorations for the rest of the house." Marc said with a grin.

"Only one house? It looks like enough for at least two." Christian said frankly.

Marc chuckled and said, "Help me unpack this stuff. We'll set the tree stuff aside for now and work on the rest of the decorations."

"Just tell us what to do." Christian said, obviously not knowing where to start.

* * * * *

"Who is Lionel?" Collin asked as he pointed at the name on the box.

"Just set that over by the tree. There should be two more that go with it." Marc said as he carefully unwrapped a Santa figurine wrapped in tissue paper.

"Nativity?" Christian asked from another set of boxes.

"You can set that one up on the coffee table. Just put the magazines in the hutch underneath." Marc said as he placed the tiny Santa on the side table next to the couch.

"I don't think they have this many Christmas decorations at the mall." Christian said as he moved to the coffee table.

"I like Christmas." Marc said with an unrepentant shrug.

"I think maybe we got a wrong box. This one says 'dining room'." Collin said cautiously.

"No. That's the table cloth, place mats and other Christmas dining room things."

"I'll just put it in on the dining room table." Collin said with an amused grin at Marc.

"I don't know how this is supposed to go." Christian said as he unwrapped the delicate ceramic ornaments.

Marc glanced over to see the little pieces of the nativity scene scattered around the coffee table.

It struck him as sad that Christian obviously didn't have a clue about what the nativity set represented.

"How about this? Why don't you just scoot everything together for now, then later, I'll read you the story and you can put things where you think they should go." Marc asked gently.

"Sure." Christian said, then started moving the pieces of the set together.

Marc stopped and watched for a moment, noticing how much care Christian was taking to be gentle.

Collin walking back into the room snapped Marc out of his thoughts and he took notice of the tiny elf in his hand, waiting to join Santa and Mrs. Claus on the side table.

* * * * *

"You have *GOT* to be kidding." Collin said as he looked at Marc.

"What did you find?" Marc asked curiously.

Collin reached into the box before him and pulled something oval and fluffy out for Marc and Christian to see.

"Oh yeah." Marc said with a giggle.

Christian stared at the thing for a moment longer, recognizing the crude Santa face, but trying to figure out what it was when he realized. "No way!"

"It was a gift from my mother." Marc said defensively.

"You aren't going to use it, are you?" Collin asked cautiously.

"It's only for a week, maybe two." Marc said weakly.

"Where?" Collin asked, then looked to see if Christian was going to back him up.

"Your bathroom is the only one on the main floor." Marc said, having the feeling that he was going to lose the coming battle.

"It's your house." Christian said reluctantly, and noticed that Collin looked like he was ready to fight.

"But if that fluffy toilet seat cover causes the lid to fall while I'm taking a leak... I'm pissing on it." Christian continued seriously.

Collin nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"How about this? Put it in the bathroom under the sink, and if we have company, one of you guys go in and put it on." Marc asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Christian said, then added, "But I don't see why we can't just leave it in the box."

"My mom knows how much I enjoy Christmas. She went to a lot of trouble to find something for me that I didn't already have." Marc said honestly. "I want to show my appreciation for her thoughtful gift by using it."

"So you really put this thing out every year?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Yes. But the last couple years I was alone and that was the guest bathroom. I have my own bathroom upstairs that I would use most of the time." Marc said simply.

"I guess I can see that." Christian said consideringly.

"Look at all this stuff." Collin said as he dug deeper into the box.

"What you got?" Christian asked curiously.

"One of those weird little rugs that fits around the bottom of the toilet, some different sized towels, a soap dish, I'm afraid to ask what these things are..." Collin said as he held up a little Santa face on a curved piece of metal.

"That's a shower curtain hook." Marc said with a chuckle.

"You're shittin me!" Christian said before he realized it.

Marc let out a laugh at the reaction, then said, "There should be another box that goes with this one. It has the shower curtain, the wastebasket, lotion dispenser and the nightlight.

"Um, Marc... I understand that you love Christmas..." Collin said hesitantly. "...But at a certain point it becomes kinda creepy and, you know, like a stalker or something."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'obsessive'." Marc said with a smile. "But like I told you, my mom bought this for me. I admit that it's a little over the top but... it's Christmas."

"I'll go put this in the bathroom for later so we can get started on the tree." Collin said as he put the fluffy toilet seat cover back into the box.

* * * * *

"Is that everything?" Collin asked as he looked at the stack of boxes beside the tree.

"I think so. We're ready for your father now." Marc said as he surveyed the room.

"Do you want me to go get him?" Collin asked hopefully.

"No. I'll get him. Why don't you two start unpacking the boxes by the tree so we'll know what we have to work with. We'll need lights first, then garland, then the ornaments, then tinsel. Most of the rest will go under the tree." Marc said seriously.

"I'm afraid to imagine..." Collin said in a weary voice as he looked at the stacks of boxes.

Marc chuckled and said, "It's going to be wonderful. Trust me."

* * * * *

"What do you think?" Collin asked as soon as they were alone.

Christian looked around the room, then at the stack of boxes that was nearly as big as the tree.

"I think Marc must have been really lonely." Christian said softly.

Collin froze at the unexpected response.

"...he's worked so hard to try and be happy." Christian said distantly. "Can you imagine how lonely it must have been to have all this... and no one to share it with?"

After a moment to consider, Collin said, "No... I can't imagine."

Christian nodded, then looked at Collin with question.

Collin nodded his agreement to the unvoiced question then said, "We'll make sure it's the best Christmas he's ever had."

Christian smiled, then went to work unpacking the boxes of tree trimmings.

* * * * *

"Sorry that took so long. Galen should be down any minute." Marc said as he walked back into the living room.

"I think we're just about done unpacking stuff... except for the train set. I don't have a clue about that." Collin said honestly.

"That goes around the bottom of the tree when everything else is finished." Marc said happily.

"That's what I thought, but since neither one of us has had a train set before, you'll have to set it up." Christian said seriously.

"Well, if you guys wouldn't mind, I'll show you how to set it up. I think it would be more fun to do it together." Marc said honestly.

"Yeah. We could do that." Christian said, then grinned at Collin, knowing that he would go along with it.

"I'm in the mood for some hot chocolate. Do you guys want any?" Marc asked hopefully.

"Sounds good." Christian said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Me too." Collin said with a smile.

"Why don't you guys take five? We'll start back in after the hot chocolate break." Marc said with a smile.

"Plan." Christian said with a single nod, then got up to go to the couch.

Collin grinned at Christian, then slowly stood to do the same.

* * * * *

"Good God! It looks like the North pole exploded in here!" Galen said as he walked into the living room.

Collin and Christian both broke into laughter at the statement.

"Here you go Christian. I think everything works, but you should check it out." Galen said as he handed the iPod to Christian.

Collin gave his father a smile of appreciation as Christian stared at the iPod in his hands.

"You really fixed it." Christian said in wonder.

"I'm just glad I could help." Galen said gently.

Christian suddenly stood and pulled Galen into a hug without warning.

Galen chuckled and returned the hug as he smiled at Collin.

"What did I miss?" Marc asked from the living room doorway.

"Dad fixed Christian's iPod." Collin said with a smile.

"I thought he would be able to." Marc said warmly, then turned and asked, "Collin, would you help me carry in the hot chocolate when it's ready?"

"Sure." Collin said happily as he stood.

* * * * *

"I wish I had a dad like you." Christian said into Galen's shoulder.

"I wish that too Christian." Galen said as he held the boy firmly in his arms.

"Thanks for telling Judge Robison that you wanted me here for Christmas. It's already the best Christmas that I ever had."

"I have a feeling that this Christmas is going to be special for all of us for a lot of different reasons." Galen said softly, then pulled back slightly to look into Christian's eyes. "We're all glad that you're here with us."

Christian looked at Galen with disbelief evident in his eyes and whispered, "Yeah, but I don't know why."

"Because you're you... That's it." Galen said as a smile crept onto his face.

"Huh?"

"We like you Christian... it's just that simple." Galen said honestly.

"So it's not because you... feel sorry for me because I got beat up?" Christian trailed off in a whisper.

"Nope." Galen said simply. "If you remember, we invited you over back at the airport before any of that happened."

Christian stared at Galen, still not able to fully believe what he was saying.

"You're just going to have to accept that we think you're a great guy and that we want to spend time with you." Galen said with a full smile.

"I'll try." Christian said quietly, then turned when he saw Marc and Collin walking into the room.

* * * * *

"I thought the hot chocolate might be just a little bit better with some iced sugar cookies." Marc said as he sat a tray of mugs on the edge of the coffee table.

"I love those." Galen said with a boyish smile as he watched Collin place the plate of sugar cookies beside the hot chocolate.

"I hope everyone likes marshmallows in their hot chocolate." Marc said as he handed a steaming mug to Christian.

"Oh yeah. Marshmallows are the best." Christian said happily.

"Watch out, it's really hot." Marc hurried to say as Christian brought the mug to his lips.

"Yeah. After everything else that's happened, you don't want to end the day by burning your lips off." Collin said as he accepted his mug from Marc.

"That's right. And I'm depending on your help with the Christmas tree." Marc said seriously.

"From the look of all the boxes, it will probably take all of us." Galen said as he looked at the mass of ornamentation.

"It looks like more because it's spread out. The boys organized it so the decorating should go fairly smoothly." Marc said as he looked over the piles of things critically.

"Well, as fussy as you are about things, I'm sure it's going to take a while." Galen said, then an 'Oh Shit!' expression came over his face.

"Fussy?" Marc asked as he turned to face Galen fully.

"Oh, I, um..." Galen bumbled, then turned to the boys and said, "Guys, help me out here."

"You stepped in it. You clean it up." Collin said to his father as he tried to restrain a grin.

"Fussy?" Marc repeated as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"What I meant was that you pay attention to detail so that everything turns out just right." Galen said weakly, hoping that it was good enough.

Marc looked sternly at Galen for a moment, then an almost imperceptible smile started to break through.

"Come here." Marc whispered.

Galen smiled and scooted a little closer to Marc, knowing that he wasn't in trouble after all.

"Thanks for putting up with me and my fussy ways." Marc said then turned and pulled Galen into a deep kiss.

Collin glanced at Christian and was surprised to see a look of confusion on his face.

"What's wrong?" Collin asked curiously.

"I thought they were going to fight." Christian said in a small voice.

Collin froze, knowing from Christian's reaction that he must have witnessed some horrible fights in his life.

"Galen and I try to understand each other." Marc said as he snuggled Galen to his side.

"He knows that I can't help saying stupid things sometimes." Galen said shyly.

"That's right." Marc said with a chuckle. "And besides, I *am* a very detail oriented person... Fussy."

Collin smiled at the sight of his father being held so tenderly.

"Galen, on the other hand, is a very objective oriented person. As long as it works, he doesn't worry about the small stuff." Marc said, then in a stage whisper he said to the boys, "He's kind of an oaf."

"So you two kind of make up for each other's faults." Collin said speculatively.

"In a way. Being detail oriented isn't really a fault in my line of work. I'm a software engineer, so the detail work is very important in what I do." Marc said honestly. "Galen is a hardware designer, so his mindset is perfect for the work he does."

"So that's why you could fix my iPod? Because you build computers?" Christian asked curiously.

"Pretty much." Galen said as he enjoyed snuggling into Marc's side.

Christian cautiously took a sip of his hot chocolate, hoping that it wasn't still too hot. After a moment for the taste to register, a look of surprise came over his face. "This is really good."

"Thanks." Marc said with a smile.

"No." Christian said quickly. "I mean this is really REALLY good. I've never tasted hot chocolate this good in my life!"

Marc chuckled at Christian's statement, then said, "That's probably because this isn't instant."

"It's like... like sex." Christian said, then took another drink.

At the look of absolute bliss on Christian's face, Collin hurried to get his own hot chocolate from the coffee table.

"Remind me to get more cocoa next time I go to the store." Marc said to Galen with a chuckle.

"Count on it." Galen said, then leaned forward to get a sugar cookie.

"Wow. This *is* really good." Collin said with appreciation.

"I'm glad you like it. Do you want some cookies?" Marc asked casually.

"Did you make these?" Christian asked as he took one of the cookies from the plate.

"No. I bought these at the store." Marc said as if he were admitting to a mortal sin.

"They're really good." Galen said as he snuggled closer to Marc.

"Yeah. They are." Marc said, then scooted down a little bit to give Galen a kiss on the cheek.

"Freaky." Christian muttered as he watched.

"What was that?" Marc asked as he looked at Christian curiously.

Christian blinked, then realized that he had spoken out loud.

"Oh, I just... I've never seen anyone get along like you two." Christian said shyly.

"Think about how weird it is for me." Collin said to Christian frankly.

"Does it bother you?" Galen asked his son with concern.

"No." Collin said immediately. "No way."

At Galen's concerned look, Collin felt compelled to explain, "You and Mom never really did anything like... that."

Galen sadly nodded and said, "Just please don't feel like your mother is at fault for any of that. Every year that we were married, I became a little more emotionally distant. At the end, it was like we were two strangers who happened to live in the same building."

"You being gay couldn't have helped." Christian said frankly.

Galen smiled at the comment and considered his words for a moment before responding, "I really don't know if that had anything to do with it."

Collin and Christian were sitting silently with equal curious stares, both obviously wanting to know more.

"I was trapped in a marriage to someone I didn't love. But I didn't even realize how stagnant my life had become until one day last May..."

Both boys saw the smile on Marc's face at the statement.

"A group of specialists were called to Orlando for this big 'Super Secret' project they were doing." Galen said distantly.

"What kind of project was it?" Christian asked quickly.

"A secret one." Galen said with amusement.

"All we're allowed to tell you is that the project is called 'Libra'." Marc said honestly.

"Right." Galen confirmed, then continued, "So while I was there, I was teamed to work with a software engineer."

"Marc?" Collin guessed.

Galen nodded, then said, "Since I was a stranger in town, Marc very graciously offered to show me around."

"He seemed so... lost." Marc said with a fond smile.

"Before the first week was over, we were spending every waking moment together." Galen said distantly.

"What about the NON-waking moments?" Christian asked with an impish grin.

"Oh no. Nothing like that happened." Galen said quickly.

"Galen was a perfect gentleman." Marc said seriously.

"My part of the job only lasted for three and a half weeks. Then it was time for me to go back home." Galen said with a pained look at Collin.

"You remember that I was telling you earlier about how I was trapped in a loveless relationship? That was when I finally realized it."

"So after being here with someone you could enjoy spending time with and could talk to, you went back home to an empty, lonely, private hell." Christian said speculatively.

Galen considered the words and finally said, "Actually, yes. I didn't think about it in those terms, but that's exactly what happened."

"Is that why you got really friendly all of a sudden?" Collin asked cautiously.

Galen chuckled and nodded before saying, "After spending time with Marc, I could see what we were missing in our lives. I was doing my best to become interested in your life and... communicate."

"It was really freaky. Dad went away for three weeks, and then when he gets back he's being all friendly and wanting to spend time with me..." Collin said frankly, then in a slightly quieter voice, he continued, "I thought maybe he was dying."

"So how did you end up here?" Christian asked curiously.

"If I hadn't been called to work in Orlando, I probably would have been content to continue on, just dragging myself through each day for no other reason but to get it over with. But since I had a taste of what life *could* be like... it was only a matter of time." Galen said distantly.

"But when did you figure out that you're gay?" Christian asked insistently.

Galen blinked as he snapped out of his thoughts, then said, "I'm not sure that I am gay."

"If you're not, then you've got some heavy duty explaining to do to that guy who's snuggling you." Christian said with a chuckle.

Galen took hold of one of Marc's hands and said, "I needed help understanding what was wrong with my life and how to fix it. The only person I could think of, the only person I wanted to talk to about it, was Marc."

"When he called, I had no idea what a roller coaster we were about to get onto." Marc said with a chuckle.

Galen nodded and said, "I don't know exactly when it happened. It might have been the day we met, or it might have been sometime during the months that we spent talking on the phone... but somewhere along the way, I fell in love."

"With a guy." Christian said in a leading tone.

"With a person. If Marc had been a woman, I don't have any doubt that I would have fallen just as much in love." Galen said warmly.

"But didn't the whole 'it's a guy' thing kinda bug you?" Christian asked carefully.

"A little, right in the beginning. But I was so in love... I would have done just about anything to be with Marc." Galen said with a dopey smile.

"So you're a straight guy who fell in love with a dude." Christian asked cautiously.

"Oh no. I don't mean for it to sound like that." Galen said quickly then scooted up so that he could put an arm around Marc.

"After the divorce, I came to Orlando to stay with Marc until I could get on my feet and start a new life." Galen said happily.

"And one thing led to another?" Christian asked cautiously.

"The first night I was here, Marc confessed that he had feelings for me." Galen said shyly.

"I was attracted to Galen from the first day that we met." Marc said with a smile.

"I can't even tell you how scary it was for me, but I decided that if Marc felt that way for me, I'd at least give it a try." Galen said as a blush started to rise up his cheeks.

"I tried to be gentle." Marc said as he glanced at Galen.

"It was the most beautiful..." Galen trailed off with a goofy smile.

"I guess that means you liked it." Christian said with a chuckle.

"It was like a whole new world opened up to me. Like it had been there the whole time and I just never saw it." Galen said with an awestruck expression.

"I'll take that as a yes." Christian said with a smile, drawn in by Galen's elation.

"So does that mean that you aren't attracted to guys except for Marc?" Collin asked cautiously.

Galen considered for a moment, then said, "I wasn't attracted to men before Marc, but now I'm learning to appreciate the beauty of the male form."

Collin slowly nodded that he had heard.

"Hey Collin, do you like looking at guys?" Christian asked casually.

Collin looked at his dad, then at Christian with panic in his eyes.

"It sounds like we're all on the same team here. So it's okay to talk about it." Christian said frankly.

Collin looked at his father again and saw only concern reflected back at him.

"Yeah. I like to look at guys." Collin admitted shyly.

"Me too." Christian said as he reached over to put a hand on Collin's shoulder.

"Well, if you guys are finished, I think we'd better get to work on this Christmas tree before it gets any later." Marc said with a gentle smile at the boys.

"I was wondering about something." Collin said as he looked at his father hesitantly.

"What's that?" Galen asked, noticing that Collin was reluctant.

"Well, I guess I just don't understand... when you and mom got divorced... she was really... I don't know... angry." Collin said as though he was fighting to get the words out.

Galen nodded slowly, waiting for Collin's question.

"But after you moved away, it seemed like she was okay again. I mean, like, overnight." Collin said in puzzlement.

Galen smiled and said, "I think you can thank Marc for that."

At Collin's inquisitive look, Galen continued, "You'd have to talk to your mom about it to be sure. But I got the feeling that when we divorced, she felt like she somehow failed. Like she didn't do enough to make the marriage work. But when I told her about Marc and I becoming a couple, she seemed to realize that she wasn't to blame for anything. I suppose that in her mind, me being gay was the root of all our problems and that let her off the hook."

As Collin thought about the words, Christian asked, "So does she act like it's your fault now?"

Galen chuckled and said, "No. She's been really understanding about everything and has given us her blessing and best wishes."

"Wow." Christian said, obviously having difficulty even imagining someone reacting like that.

"Collin, you should call your mom and let her know that you got here safely." Galen said to his son. "You wouldn't want her to worry."

"She didn't say I was supposed to call her." Collin said simply.

"It would still be better if you did. It's just the courteous thing to do." Galen said frankly.

"Okay Dad." Collin said, then looked around and asked, "Where's the phone?"

"It's right here." Marc said as he gestured to the phone on the end table. "But you can use the phone in the kitchen if you'd like to speak privately."

"Yeah. Thanks Marc." Collin said shyly, then slowly left the room.

"Do you need to make any calls Christian?" Marc asked quietly.

"No. I'm alright." Christian said in a low voice.

Marc nodded his acceptance of the answer.

"I suppose we should get to work now." Marc said as he looked again at the bare tree.

"One more cookie." Galen said as he leaned forward and snatched one off the plate.

Marc smiled at the move, then snuggled close to Galen when he sat back.

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"How is your mom?" Galen asked as Collin walked back into the living room.

"She's fine. She said that she's going to spend Christmas at Grandma's house." Collin said with a smile.

"That's good. I'm glad she's not going to be alone." Galen said gently.

"Is everyone ready to decorate the tree?" Marc asked into the ensuing silence.

Nods of agreement went around the room, then all attention turned to Marc, waiting for his instructions.

"We're going to need to start with the lights since they're going to take the most time." Marc said carefully.

"I've never seen Christmas lights like this before. They're kinda weird." Christian said cautiously.

"They do look a little strange at first, but once they're lit, I think you'll like them." Marc said with a smile, then continued more seriously, "The thing is that they all need to be upright before we do anything else."

"Well, that should take forever." Christian said sourly.

"Not if we all work at it. Let me show you the first one, then we can get started. I think we have six strands here, so there's enough for everyone. The power strips are already behind the tree and we have extension cords in the box with the lights." Marc said seriously.

"You've got this down to a science." Collin said in an impressed voice.

"Years of practice." Marc said with a smile, then quietly asked, "Collin, would you hand me the first strand?"

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"I'm out of lights. Do you want me to start on the garland?" Christian asked Marc cautiously.

"Sure." Marc said as he concentrated on getting his light secured to the branch in an upright position.

"How do you want me to do it?" Christian asked, then cautiously added, "I've never done this before."

"Imagine how it would look if the tree were covered with snow. How it would seem to drape over the branches." Marc said thoughtfully, then added, "It works best if you start at the top and work your way down."

Christian waited for a moment to be sure that Marc didn't have any other instructions for him, then began to cautiously place the garland on the tree.

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"How's that?" Christian asked when he had finished the first garland.

Marc stood back and looked at the tree critically.

"I'd have to say..." Marc trailed off, as if to consider his words carefully. "...perfect."

Christian smiled at the response.

"If you want to keep going with the garland, Collin can start hanging the ornaments where you've already finished." Marc said consideringly.

"What do you need me to do?" Galen asked as he slowly stood.

"Do you remember that switch that I asked you about last week? I'm going to need it now." Marc said frankly.

"Oh yeah. It's upstairs in one of the supply boxes." Galen said thoughtfully, then quietly added, "I might need your help to find it."

"We'll be back in a few minutes guys. Yell if you need anything." Marc said before following Galen out of the room.

After a long moment of silence, Collin quietly asked, "How you doing?"

Christian considered for a moment, then said, "Actually, I'm feeling pretty good."

Collin smiled and went back to work, carefully hanging ornaments on the tree.

"How are you?" Christian asked gently.

"Fine." Collin said automatically.

Christian considered for a moment, then asked, "Really?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I was just thinking that if I learned all that stuff about my dad... it might be a little bit freaky." Christian said cautiously.

Collin reached down and took another ornament from the box before saying, "It was a little bit strange talking about it, but... it's okay."

"Good." Christian said with a smile.

"You about done with that?" Collin asked as he noticed that Christian was placing garland on the lowest branches of the tree.

"Yeah. I wonder what else I could do while I'm down here." Christian said with a devilish smile as he glanced toward Collin's crotch.

"My dad and Marc will be back any second." Collin whispered as a blush rose up his face.

"Yeah." Christian said with a grin, then whispered, "That makes it more exciting."

"I don't..." Collin began to say, but his words were cut off when Christian began to slowly pull down his zipper.

"We shouldn't..." Collin said in a trembling voice that betrayed his excitement.

"How are you guys doing?" Marc asked as he led the way into the room.

"I'm finished with the garland, I was about to help Collin with the balls." Christian said with a grin.

"That's good. We've got the switch so no one will have to crawl under the tree to turn the lights on and off." Marc said, oblivious to Collin's flustered state.

"Where do you want me?" Christian asked as he took an ornament from the box.

Collin didn't seem to be able to form any words and simply pointed to a place on the tree.

"Your fly is down." Christian said casually, then went to the indicated spot on the tree to hang his ornament.

Collin quickly reached down and zipped up his pants, then glanced around to see if Marc or his dad had any idea of what was going on.

"This is going to work just fine. We'll even have an outlet for the train." Marc said happily as he plugged the power strips into outlets on the switch.

"I thought this would be just what you needed." Galen said as he carefully uncoiled the cord.

"Marc, do you want us to use all of these balls?" Christian asked as he noticed that they had quite a few left.

"We'll just have to see how it looks when you're finished. Nothing says that we have to use them all." Marc said frankly.

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"Marc, you need to see this." Galen said as he stared at the tree with wide eyes.

"What is it?" Marc asked curiously, then walked to Galen's side.

"The ornaments..." Galen trailed off, hoping that he wouldn't have to explain.

"They look fine. Very evenly distributed." Marc said slowly, not knowing what Galen's problem was.

"Here, maybe this will help." Galen said, then flipped the switch on the end table beside him.

All the red bubble lights lit up, causing the tree to nearly glow.

"Beautiful." Marc said with a smile.

Collin and Christian backed away from the tree to see the whole thing lit up.

Galen took in a slow breath, then carefully said, "There are two ornaments under each light."

"Yeah. So?" Marc said, appreciating the overall look of the tree.

Galen gave a small shake of his head, then said, "Each bubble light looks like an erect little penis, and the ornaments are hanging like testicles."

There was a long moment of silence, then Marc said, "I wonder how that happened?"

"I wonder." Galen said dryly, then looked askance at his son.

"Oops." Collin said with a blush rising up his cheeks.

"I like it." Christian said frankly.

After a moment, Marc said, "Actually, so do I."

"Are you saying that you want to keep it that way?" Galen asked cautiously.

"Sure. It doesn't bother me." Marc said frankly.

"I think it needs one more thing." Christian said quickly.

"What's that?" Marc asked curiously.

Christian went to one of the boxes in the floor and carefully picked up some tinsel.

He walked to the tree and carefully put the tinsel in place, being careful to keep his body blocking everyone else's view.

"There." Christian said with accomplishment, then stepped away from the tree.

"Imagine it like that on every light." Christian said happily.

"Pubes." Collin said with a chuckle.

"Or icicles gathered on the branches of our holiday tree..." Marc said in a dignified voice. "...if anyone should ask."

"So you mean that we're going to keep it like this?" Galen asked cautiously.

"That depends on what everyone thinks about it. I wouldn't want to keep it this way if anyone is ashamed of it." Marc said frankly.

"I think it's great." Christian said immediately.

"I like it." Collin said, then looked to his father with question.

"I'm not ashamed. But we're going to be having company in the next few days. I wouldn't want to offend any of our guests." Galen said carefully.

"It's not 'in your face' obvious. Anyone who would make the association must have a demented, dirty mind to begin with." Marc said frankly.

"Hey!" Galen said in playful mock offense.

Marc chuckled at the reaction, then said more seriously, "I think our tree is beautiful and I would be proud to share it with anyone I would invite into our house."

Galen considered for a moment, then nodded.

"Should we get to work on the tinsel then?" Christian asked hopefully.

Marc glanced at Galen with question, then after receiving a nod, said, "Go for it."

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"What next?" Collin asked as he stepped back to look at the tree.

"We need to put the top on the tree." Marc said simply.

"Shouldn't we have done that first?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I wanted to see how the rest of the tree was going to turn out. I have three different toppers, and I didn't know which one would look best." Marc said as he knelt down and opened a cardboard box.

"Makes sense." Galen said as he moved closer to see what Marc had.

"We have a silver star with white twinkle lights..." Marc said as he placed it on the floor in front of him.

"...A gold winged angel..."

"...And a multi-colored rotating star."

"Angel." Collin said firmly.

After a moment to consider, Christian slowly nodded his agreement.

"What do you think?" Galen asked Marc quietly.

"I like all three, so it doesn't matter to me." Marc said frankly.

"Same here. So I guess we're going with the angel." Galen said, then flipped the switch to turn off the tree lights.

"Any idea of how we're getting her up there?" Collin asked curiously.

"Him." Marc corrected quietly.

"Do what?" Collin asked with confusion.

"The angel, it's a him. His name is Mikey." Marc said frankly, then continued, "If your father will brace me, I can reach the top with the foot stool."

"Let's do it." Galen said as he moved in front of the tree.

"Christian, would you get that extension cord right there and hand it up to me when I'm ready?" Marc asked as he pointed.

"Got it." Christian said as he moved around the side of the tree.

"Collin, will you hand Mikey up to me once I'm in place?" Marc asked as he positioned the stool where he wanted it.

"I'll be ready when you are." Collin said as he carefully picked up the delicate ornament.

"I've got you." Galen said as he held onto Marc's hips to be sure that he wouldn't fall.

"Collin." Marc said and held out a hand.

With a little bit of a stretch, Collin carefully handed Mikey up to Marc.

"Let me help." Collin said as he moved to his father's side and helped him to keep Marc steady.

"I've just about got it." Marc said slowly, then quickly added, "Christian. Hand me the cord."

"Here you go." Christian said as he reached the cord up to Marc.

"Stay there for a second." Marc said as he plugged it in.

"Now run the cord behind the tree." Marc said as he pulled the cord out where Christian could get a good grip on it.

"Yeah. Okay." Christian said, then took his end of the cord and worked it around so that it was out of sight.

Marc kept hold of the top of the cord to be sure that Mikey wouldn't be pulled off the top of the tree by all the movement.

"How's that?" Christian asked cautiously.

Marc gently pulled on the cord, then tentatively let it go.

"I think that's fine. It doesn't feel like it's pulling too much." Marc said carefully.

"Are you ready to light it up?" Galen asked as he and Collin finally released Marc so he could get down off the step stool.

"Yeah. Go ahead." Marc said, then moved the step stool aside.

Galen flipped the switch and the entire tree lit up with a warm glow.

The angel on top was illuminated with soft white light which seemed the perfect compliment to the red glow of the rest of the tree.

"It's the most beautiful tree I've ever seen." Christian said in wonder as he absently put an arm around Collin.

"I think so too." Marc said, then without realizing, did exactly the same as Christian as he put his arm around Galen.

"Can we wait on the rest until morning? It's getting late." Galen asked hopefully.

"I think that's a good idea. The train will take a while to set up and I think we've all had a very long day." Marc said gently.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Collin said quietly.

"I guess if you guys will carry the empty boxes out to the garage, I'll spread up the couch." Galen said thoughtfully.

"For who?" Collin asked cautiously.

"You. I thought we settled that back at the hospital." Galen said frankly.

"No. Nothing was decided." Collin said and seemed to be gearing up for a fight.

"If anyone should be sleeping on the couch, it should be me." Christian said quickly.

"Hold on guys. I think we're losing sight of what we're doing here." Marc said quickly. "Christian, please be honest with us. How do you think you would be most comfortable tonight?"

"Honestly? I think it would be nice to sleep with Collin." Christian said as he looked Marc in the eyes.

"Does anyone have a problem with that?" Marc asked as he looked around.

"Will you guys promise not to fool around?" Galen asked simply.

Before Christian could answer, Collin quickly asked, "Will you?"

"Collin, I'm your father and I'm responsible..." Galen began to say when he was interrupted.

"I'll tell you what." Collin said angrily. "Why don't *you* sleep on the couch for the rest of the holidays. And when they're over, *you* fly back and stay with Mom until Easter, while *I* stay here with my boyfriend."

"Collin!" Galen was in full parental mode. "That will be about enough!"

"Hey, that's what you taught me. If you want to know if something's right, turn it around and imagine yourself in the other guy's shoes. You know, when I met Christian on the plane, we were just two guys who thought the other looked hot, fooling around to kill some time on the flight..."

Christian nodded.

"But when Marc said that Christian had been hurt I realized that he was more than some hot looking guy, I realized that I *do* have feelings for him. Then when I saw him in the hospital, I realized I was falling in love with him. So if it's fair for you to tell me I have to do that, it's fair for me to tell you the same thing. You and Marc wanted so much for me to accept your relationship and your love for each other. Why can't you do the same for me?" Collin said as the tears he had been fighting back began to come out, then he dashed out of the room.

Marc, Galen and Christian stared at each other blankly for a moment.

"I think I could have handled that better." Galen finally said.

"Yeah." Marc whispered. "You suck."

Galen looked at Marc with surprise at the statement.

"Christian? Do you have any thoughts before we try to sort all of this out?" Marc asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Christian slowly shook his head and said, "I think it's too late to do anything. He said the 'L' word. So no matter what you do now, someone gets hurt."

"What do you want to do?" Marc asked, knowing on some level that Christian was right.

"I want to hold him and let him know that things will be alright." Christian said reluctantly.

Marc nodded, then said, "Galen? Do you know what you need to do?"

"Yes. I need to let him know that I'm an insensitive goon sometimes and that I love him and trust him to behave responsibly." Galen said, watching Marc's eyes carefully to see that he was getting it right.

"It'll do for a start." Marc said, then quietly added, "An apology might not hurt."

Galen nodded, then glanced at Christian and said, "Sorry about ruining the night. We *almost* made it."

Christian reluctantly smiled and said, "Yeah. Almost."

Galen took a deep breath to brace himself, then walked out of the room.

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After a knock on the door, Galen hesitantly asked, "Can I come in?"

"Yeah." Collin answered reluctantly.

Galen slowly walked into the room and found his son laying on the bed with his face buried in the pillow.

"I'm sorry." Galen said as he cautiously sat on the edge of the bed.

"I know." Collin said into his pillow.

"If you want, we can make a deal between us right now and maybe we won't have this problem anymore." Galen said cautiously.

After a moment, Collin asked, "What kind of a deal?"

"Well... I guess you've noticed that I'm not very good at picking up on other people's feelings..." Galen said in prelude.

Collin finally lifted his face from the pillow and asked, "Ya think?"

Galen gave his son a weak smile and said, "That's why I need for you to tell me. Really spell it out for me just like you did in there... except maybe without the yelling."

After a moment to consider, Collin reluctantly nodded.

"If you'll be honest with me, I'll be honest with you and maybe we can avoid anymore problems like this." Galen said hopefully.

"Are you going to make me sleep on the couch?" Collin asked his father as he sat up to look him in the eyes.

Galen smiled at his son as he said, "No. In fact, I'm not even going to ask you not to fool around."

Collin's eyes went wide at the statement.

"That is, if you'll make a deal with me." Galen amended.

"What kind of a deal?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Nothing bad, I promise." Galen said, then noticed Collin's impatient stare. "Before you and Christian take anymore big steps, stop and think about what Christian has been through and what he's feeling."

Collin looked at his father inquisitively, not knowing exactly what question he was wanting to ask.

"I love you and I don't want to see you hurt." Galen told his son gently. "But if you were hurt. I think you could handle it. You know that your mother and I will be there for you however you need us."

Collin hesitantly nodded that he understood.

"I have a feeling that Christian is a pretty tough kid, but if something does hurt him... he has to face it on his own." Galen continued darkly.

Collin nodded again.

"So here's the deal. Think about what you're doing and how it will affect Christian. If you have any doubt at all, I want you to come to me or Marc and ask our advice." Galen said seriously.

"I don't get it." Collin said quietly. "Like what?"

"I'm asking you to think about consequences and think through your decisions. If you have any doubts or questions about the decisions you'll be making, I want you to talk to one of us so we can help you." Galen said frankly.

"But you'll let me decide." Collin asked cautiously.

"You and Christian." Galen said with a nod.

Collin took in a deep breath, then looked his father in the eyes and said, "Okay. It's a deal."

Galen smiled, then pulled Collin into a hug.

"Thanks Dad." Collin said as he returned his father's hug. "I'm sorry I acted like a kid in there."

"I treated you like a kid and you responded like a kid. So what do you say we call it even?" Galen asked hopefully.

"Sounds good to me."

* * * * *

After a long moment of standing and staring at the doorway that Galen had just passed through, Marc slowly turned to Christian and asked, "Can I give you a hug?"

Christian looked at Marc for a moment, then gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"I'm sorry that happened." Marc said as he enveloped Christian in a gentle hug.

"Yeah. Me too." Christian said quietly.

Marc waited for a moment, then asked, "What do you think is going to happen between you and Collin?"

"I don't know." Christian mumbled into Marc's chest.

Marc slowly nodded, then asked, "What do you think you'd like to happen?"

"How bad would you freak out if I said that I wanted us to be like you and Galen?" Christian asked hesitantly.

"I wouldn't freak out at all." Marc said softly.

"I think that if he really does, you know, feel that way... that I might want to give it a try." Christian said reluctantly.

Marc hugged Christian a little more firmly to assure him, then said, "Do you mind if I give you a little warning about the Anderson men?"

"Like what?" Christian asked as he pulled out of the hug and looked Marc in the eyes.

"If Collin is anything like his father, you're going to need to understand your own feelings and be sure of what you want before you consider what he wants." Marc said slowly.

"That sounds kind of selfish." Christian said hesitantly.

"It isn't really." Marc said, then gestured to the couch, inviting Christian to have a seat.

"When I look at Collin, I can see a lot of his father in him." Marc said as he stared at the tree.

Christian slowly nodded.

"When it comes to practical things, Galen is wonderful at making decisions. If we needed to have some work done on the house or were trying to start up our own business, I'd feel comfortable letting him take the lead and just offer my opinion when I felt that I had something to contribute."

"But when it comes to our relationship... he's a buffoon." Marc said frankly.

"That bad, huh?" Christian asked with a grin.

"Worse." Marc said with a pained smile. "I have to spell out exactly what I expect of him. He is completely immune to subtle hints. Romance is like a foreign language to him. And if I let him get away with it, he'd never lift a finger to help out around the house."

"So he wants to be in control and make you, like, the housewife?" Christian asked slowly.

"No... well, at least not intentionally." Marc said with a pained smile.

"I don't get it." Christian said as he turned to face Marc more fully.

"If I let him, he would probably do like you just said and control everything. But the funny thing is, that if I wanted, he would gladly give up that control to me and let me make every single decision that effects us both." Marc said frankly.

"Somehow, that doesn't sound much better." Christian said hesitantly.

"It isn't." Marc said honestly. "The way we've made it work so far is to communicate with each other. We don't sugar coat it or try to spare each other's feelings. We just lay it out there and explain exactly what we expect... and sometimes what we'll settle for."

Christian slowly nodded that he understood.

"If things work out between you and Collin, I want to be sure that you go into it knowing what you want to happen." Marc said seriously.

"But is it worth it? I mean, it sounds like if you make one wrong move, you're stuck paying for it for a long time." Christian asked slowly.

"Is it worth it? Oh yes." Marc said with a huge smile. "Galen is incredible. Not only is he a genuinely good person, but I know without a doubt, that he loves me completely. He's devoted to me and would do anything to make me happy."

"Wow." Christian said with surprise.

"I can't imagine anyone else that I'd want to be with. And as far as the work, you can think of it as an investment. If you can get the communication and ground rules working early on, it gets easier and easier as you both get more comfortable with it. In fact, I think I can safely say that every day is just a little bit better than the one before." Marc finished with an expression of joy.

"Okay. Yeah. I could go for that." Christian said quickly.

"Then keep what I told you in mind and if you have any questions at all, you ask me and I'll help you." Marc said seriously.

"Why?" Christian asked, but before Marc could respond, he restated his question. "I mean, why are you doing this for me?"

"Because when I was your age, I had to figure things out all on my own. I didn't have anyone who I could ask for advice." Marc said frankly. "I like you Christian and I don't want you to have to feel that."

"Oh... thanks." Christian said, thrown a little off balance by the statement.

"Oh yeah, it's also because I think Anderson men should come with instruction manuals. These guys will drive you crazy until you figure out where they're coming from." Marc said with a smirk.

"I'm beginning to see that." Christian said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"How are things going in here?" Galen asked as he walked into the living room.

"Pretty good. How are things going back there?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Just fine. Collin will be out in a minute." Galen said happily.

"Let's see. You have to work in the morning, right?" Marc asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. For half a day." Galen said seriously.

"Then why don't you take my car? I have a few errands to run in the morning and I think the guys would be more comfortable in the Fairlane." Marc asked casually.

"Sure. I don't mind, but you may need to remind me." Galen said with a note of apology in his voice.

"Just trade keys with me now, then there's no chance of forgetting." Marc said frankly.

Galen chuckled as he reached into his pocket and said, "You know me too well."

"Sorry about that." Collin said as he walked into the living room.

"It's no problem as long as you're alright." Marc said honestly.

"Yeah. I'm fine now." Collin said shyly.

"Good. I'm glad. Is there anything else that needs to be done before we call it a night?" Marc asked as he looked around.

"Christian, where do you want to sleep?" Galen asked quietly.

"With Collin, as long as no one has a problem with it." Christian said, then looked at Marc with question.

"I assume you're okay with that Collin." Galen asked simply.

"Well DUH." Collin said with a roll of his eyes.

Galen fought down a smile at his son's response.

"Well, if that's all settled, let's call it a night." Marc said as he tried to keep the chuckle out of his voice.

"Good plan." Galen said happily, then turned to the boys and said, "I hope you two have a wonderful night. I'm really glad both of you are here."

"Me too. Goodnight." Marc said with a smile.

"Dad?" Collin called out before his father could get out of the room.

Galen stopped by the doorway and looked at Collin with question.

"Condoms?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Nightstand." Galen said, then continued on out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you have some plans that I should know about?" Christian asked as he walked with Collin to their room.

"What? Oh that." Collin said in realization, "Me and my dad had a talk about stuff. That was just my way of making sure he really meant what he said."

"Huh?" Christian asked hesitantly.

"Trust me, it doesn't matter. I'm wiped out. I'll probably be asleep before my head hits the pillow." Collin said frankly as he walked into the bathroom.

Christian smiled and said, "Oh, good. I'm glad we're on the same page."

"But who knows what's going to happen in the morning." Collin said from the bathroom.

"I can't wait to find out." Christian said as he started getting ready for bed.

Chapter 6

Christian blinked his eyes and felt momentarily disoriented.

In a rush, the realization came to him that he was sleeping beside a person who he didn't know the day before.

He was in a house full of complete strangers and yet, in some indefinable way, he felt more at home at this moment than he had felt since before his parents' divorce.

A sound of movement drew his attention and he turned to see a shadow move across the sliver of light under the bathroom door.

Slowly, driven by curiosity, Christian made his way to the bathroom.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry Christian, did I wake you?" Marc asked quietly as he worked to attach Santa face shower curtain hooks to the brightly colored Christmas village shower curtain.

"I... I don't know." Christian said blearily. "What are you doing up so early? It's still dark out."

"This is about the time I usually get up to get ready for work. I thought I'd get some of the little jobs done around the house while you guys were sleeping." Marc said as he continued to attach the little jolly Santa faces.

"Makes sense." Christian said, then walked to the toilet.

"Do you want me to leave you alone for a minute?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Not unless you think you won't be able to control yourself." Christian said as he lifted the toilet seat.

"If I get any urges, Galen is asleep upstairs." Marc said with amusement. "You're safe."

"That's what I figured." Christian said, then sighed as he began to relieve himself.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Marc asked quietly.

After a moment to finish his business, Christian responded, "Actually, my head is kind of throbbing. I think maybe that's what woke me up."

"Then why don't I get you something for that?" Marc asked as he sat the shower curtain aside.

"You don't have to do that. I can get it." Christian said automatically.

"I don't mind." Marc said as he went to the counter by the sink and picked up the unopened box of non-aspirin pain reliever that he had given to Christian the night before.

"Thanks." Christian mumbled as he watched Marc open the box.

As Marc searched to find the perforation to open the tamper-proof plastic film covering the bottle, Christian hesitantly asked, "Where is the soap?"

"I haven't put it out yet, it's in that bag beside the sink." Marc said, then smiled as he finally got the plastic wrap from around the top of the bottle.

Christian looked in the bag, then cautiously took out a small cake of soap in the shape of a Christmas tree.

"You don't want me to use this, do you?" Christian asked as he held out the soap for Marc to see.

"Sure. It's soap. It's here for you to use." Marc said with strain as he fought to get the child-proof cap off the bottle.

"But it's one of your decorations." Christian said hesitantly.

"It's soap, Christian. What's the point of having it if you don't use it?" Marc asked frankly, then smiled as the cap finally released.

"Okay." Christian said as he took the clear cellophane film off the small decorative soap.

"Son of a bitch!" Marc said past clenched teeth when he saw the foil seal inside the bottle.

"How is someone with a bad headache supposed to go through the twenty-five steps to break into this bottle?" Marc asked in frustration as he tried to catch the edge of the foil with his fingernail.

Christian chuckled as he washed his hands, then stopped when he caught the fragrance of the soap.

"Hey. This smells nice." Christian said, then held out the soap so Marc could also smell it.

"I like that." Marc said with a smile. "Very Christmassy."

Christian chuckled as he sat the cake of soap in the Santa soap dish beside the sink, then rinsed his hands.

"If you're finished, why don't you let the cold water run for a few seconds so you can take these pills... If I can ever get them out of this bottle." Marc said with frustration as he fought to peel the foil away.

Christian smiled to himself as he turned on the cold water tap.

"Naturally." Marc muttered with frustration, then went about the business of trying to fish the wad of cotton through the small neck of the bottle.

"Do you need some help with that?" Christian asked with amusement.

"No. Now I'm committed to finishing it myself." Marc said with determination.

"I guess you could come in and wake me up when you've got them out." Christian said with a chuckle.

"Pour yourself a glass of water, smartass. I'll have these out before you're done." Marc said as he twisted his little finger around in the bottle, trying to catch hold of the cotton.

"Before I'm done with what? High school?" Christian asked with a cheeky grin as he picked up the little North pole tumbler beside the sink.

"Got it." Marc said with triumph.

Christian stared at Marc for a moment, then said, "If you celebrate something like opening a bottle of aspirin, your life must be a constant party."

"Yeah. That's me. The party guy." Marc said dryly, then held out two of the non-aspirin pain relievers to Christian.

"Thanks." Christian said, then took the pills and washed them down with water.

"Would you mind if we talk for a minute before you go back to bed?" Marc asked quietly.

"Sounds serious." Christian said as he sat the tumbler beside the sink.

Marc nodded, then said, "I've been keeping track of how your father is doing."

Christian looked at Marc with surprise.

"Yesterday while we were at the hospital... that 'code blue'... that was him." Marc said quietly.

"Did he die?" Christian asked cautiously.

"No." Marc said immediately, then amended, "I suppose that they would probably tell you that he was 'technically' dead... his heart stopped. But they were able to get it restarted."

Christian nodded that he understood what Marc was saying.

"His heart stopped two more times last night, but at some point during the night, his condition stabilized. He's been upgraded from critical to serious." Marc said as he looked into Christian's eyes.

"So that means that he's going to be alright?" Christian asked carefully.

"No. That means that he's now at a point where it's not as likely that he could die at any moment." Marc said frankly.

"But he could still die." Christian said, continuing the thought.

"Yes Christian. He could." Marc said honestly, then continued, "The thing the doctors are most worried about is the damage to your father's liver."

"Makes sense." Christian said as his voice broke on the last word.

Marc automatically pulled Christian into a hug as he said, "They've got some more tests and things to do, but they seem pretty sure that the only real hope that he's got is a liver transplant."

After a moment to think about the words, Christian quietly asked, "What are his chances?"

"The doctor that I talked to said that when you're dealing with transplants, there's just no way to predict when one will become available." Marc said quietly.

Marc continued to hold Christian in his arms, waiting to see how he was going to handle the new revelations.

"I know it's wrong to wish that someone was dead but..." Christian began to say.

"Stop." Marc said firmly.

"But..." Christian tried to continue.

"Christian. Please, whatever you do, don't finish what you were about to say." Marc said as he held Christian even tighter.

After a long silent moment, Christian whispered, "Okay. I won't."

"Why don't you go back in and try to get some more sleep?" Marc asked gently.

"Yeah. That sounds good." Christian said quietly.

"Just let me know if there's anything that you need, to be more comfortable." Marc said as he released Christian.

"I will. Thanks Marc." Christian said with a small smile.

* * * * *

"Good morning!" Marc said from his place in front of the kitchen stove.

"Good morning Marc." Collin said cheerfully, then walked to his father who was sitting at the kitchen table and gave him a quick hug. "Good morning Dad."

"Good morning Collin. Did you sleep well?" Galen asked as he turned in his seat to return the hug.

"I slept great." Collin said with a grand smile.

"How are you doing this morning Christian?" Marc asked with concern when he noticed Christian standing in the doorway.

"I'm good." Christian said quietly, then slowly made his way across the kitchen and gave Marc a quick hug.

Marc sat down his wooden spoon and returned Christian's hug before saying, "Why don't you boys have a seat at the table? Breakfast is almost ready."

"I figured it was. It smells great!" Collin said as he moved from his father's side to take the seat next to him.

Christian smiled at Collin's cheerful response, then walked to the table to take the seat on Galen's other side, across from Collin.

"Well, I thought that since I had the time, I'd make up a batch of homemade biscuits and some sausage gravy this morning." Marc said happily.

"That sounds wonderful." Collin said with a radiant smile.

"You certainly are cheerful this morning, Collin." Galen said, then took a long sip of his coffee.

"You wake up to a hummer then see if you can keep from smiling the rest of the day." Collin said with a grin at Christian.

Galen coughed, then struggled to put down his coffee cup without spilling it.

"Dad. Are you okay?" Collin asked with concern as he scrambled to his father's side.

Galen coughed, then coughed again.

"Here." Marc said quickly as he handed some paper towels to Collin.

Collin passed the paper towels to his father and watched helplessly as Galen continued to cough into the paper towels.

After a moment, Galen took the paper towels away from his face and took in a deep breath.

"I'm fine. The coffee just went down the wrong pipe." Galen said, then used the paper towels to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"But you're okay?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think some went up my nose." Galen said, then started blowing his nose on the paper towels.

A sound drew Galen and Collin's attention to the other side of the table.

Christian was sitting there, trying desperately not to laugh but obviously losing the battle.

"It's not that funny." Galen said as he tried to compose himself.

"Yes." Christian gasped. "It is."

Collin smiled at Christian's reaction and began to laugh along with him.

"Guys, will you move things from the middle of the table so I have a place to put the gravy?" Marc asked, trying to restrain his own chuckles.

Christian and Collin both worked to scoot things out of the way.

Marc flopped a hot pad in the middle of the table, then carefully placed a skillet full of bubbling gravy in the center.

"That smells great!" Collin said with delight.

"Just wait until you try the biscuits." Marc said as he moved back to the stove.

The three at the table watched as Marc opened the oven and carefully pulled out a large pan loaded down with biscuits.

"Galen. How many do you want?" Marc asked as he approached the table.

"Three." Galen said seriously.

"There you go." Marc said as he pulled three biscuits off the pan with a pair of tongs and sat the biscuits on Galen's plate.

"Those look like something out of a TV commercial." Christian said as his mouth watered.

Marc chuckled at Christian's version of a compliment as he placed two biscuits on Christian's plate.

"I think I could handle three." Christian said frankly.

"As you can see, I have plenty, so you can go back and have as many as you can eat." Marc said as he also placed two biscuits on Collin's plate.

"But Galen has to go to work, so he needs to get all of his in one go." Marc continued as he placed two biscuits on his own plate.

"I wish you didn't have to go." Collin said to his father seriously.

"It's just for half a day, then I'll be here with you until the end of the holiday." Galen said, warmed to the depths of his soul to know that his son wanted him.

"And even if Galen were here, we'd still have a ton of things that need to be done today. You probably wouldn't get much of a chance to spend time with him until the afternoon." Marc said frankly.

"What do we have to do?" Collin asked curiously as he split open his biscuits which were still steaming hot.

"Just the boring household stuff. Bank, store, you know, stuff like that." Marc said as he waited for Christian to finish with the gravy.

"We could just hang around here if that would be easier." Christian said frankly, then handed the ladle to Marc.

"I thought that this might be a good chance for you two to see some of the city. I don't know how exciting it will be, but it should be more interesting than sitting inside all day." Marc said frankly.

"I don't know. I bet Christian and I could find something to do to keep us entertained." Collin said with a grin.

Marc chuckled and said, "I bet you're right. But I still think it would be good to get out of the house this morning."

"Yeah." Christian said with a smile at Marc, then glanced at Collin and said, "And I can be just as entertaining outside the house."

"Are you sure you don't want to wait until I can go with you?" Galen asked Marc cautiously.

"I'm sure." Marc said gently. "I know that the guys will behave responsibly."

"Hey Marc. This breakfast is really awesome." Christian said happily.

"I'm glad you think so. I like to make biscuits and gravy for breakfast whenever I have the time." Marc said with a smile.

"If you eat like this all the time, Dad should be big as a cow." Collin said with a grin at his father.

"More like a bull." Marc said with a teasing smile at Galen.

Galen flashed a look of warning at Marc as Christian tried to restrain a giggle.

"Let's just say that Marc keeps me busy enough that I work off the extra calories." Galen said to his son.

"Oh." Collin said, completely missing the double entendre.

"I've got to go." Galen said as he looked at the clock on the wall.

"We'll probably be leaving right behind you. Call on the cell if you need to get in touch." Marc said as he walked around the table to Galen's side.

"Have a good day." Galen said gently as he moved in to give Marc a kiss.

Collin smiled as he watched his father and Marc openly expressing their love.

"I'm going for more." Christian whispered as he stood.

Collin glanced in time to see Christian heading toward the stove to get more biscuits.

"Plan." Collin said playfully as he picked up his plate and hurried to Christian's side.

* * * * *

"We're a little behind schedule. I guess I underestimated how much you guys could eat." Marc said as they walked out the front door.

"Don't blame us. You're the one who made such a fantastic breakfast. If you would have just fed us cold cereal, we would have been ready in plenty of time." Collin said frankly.

"I'll keep that in mind." Marc said with a smile as he locked the door of the house.

"Your car really needs to be washed." Collin said as he looked at the large blue car in the driveway.

"I agree. Except that it's not my car. It's your father's." Marc said as he gestured for the boys to go to the car.

"Maybe we could surprise him and take it through the car wash while we're out doing stuff this morning." Christian suggested as Marc unlocked the passenger door.

"Do you want shotgun?" Christian asked Collin curiously.

"No. You go ahead." Collin said with a smile.

Christian nodded and opened the door, then reached in and unlocked Collin's door.

"A car wash wouldn't do much good. The paint is just too oxidized. What this car needs is a good old fashioned wax job. The problem is, Galen wants to do it himself." Marc said, then got into the driver's side of the car.

The boys both got in and fastened their seat belts.

Marc started the engine and both boys broke into big grins at the feeling of the vibrations running through their bodies.

* * * * *

"Where to first?" Christian asked as soon as they were out on the open road.

"My work." Marc said casually.

"I thought you said you were off for the rest of the holiday." Collin said cautiously.

"Oh. I am." Marc said, then made the turn onto the freeway.

"Then why are you going in to work?" Collin asked when it was obvious that Marc wasn't going to volunteer an explanation.

"Let's call it a personal project." Marc said with a grin.

"My dad is in love with a spy." Collin said dramatically.

Marc laughed at the statement, then said, "We prefer to be called covert operatives."

"Seriously Marc, you're a computer programmer. Why do you need to go in to work on your day off?" Collin asked from the back seat.

"You'll find out in just a minute." Marc said as he pulled off the freeway.

The boys both looked out of the car at the mass of business buildings.

"Which one is yours?" Collin asked, completely forgetting their conversation of a moment before.

"Up ahead on the right." Marc said as he noticed Collin's wide eyed look of wonder.

"The one with the gate?" Christian asked with excitement.

"That's the one." Marc said, then pulled into the driveway and up to the guard station.

Marc rolled down his window then as he held out his ID he said, "Marc Stone and two visitors."

The guard nodded, then looked down at a tablet computer in his hand before saying, "Collin Anderson and Christian Stone?"

"That's right." Marc said, then took his ID when the guard handed it back.

"Mr. Thompson got everything cleared for you. The south lot is all yours." The guard said with a trace of a smile.

"Thank you and Merry Christmas." Marc said with his smile turned on full blast.

"Merry Christmas." The guard responded with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"How did he know our names?" Collin asked quietly.

"I told him." Marc said casually as he drove past the building and to a large empty parking lot at the far side.

"When?" Christian asked curiously.

"When I called my boss and asked for permission to bring you two here with me. This is a secure location, so they keep track of everyone who enters or leaves the property." Marc said as he drove toward the middle of the large, empty parking lot.

"How long are you going to be in there?" Collin asked, getting a little spooky feeling at being in such a deserted place.

Marc pulled the car to a stop, then said, "I'm not going in."

"What are we doing here then?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Scoot over and I'll tell you." Marc said, then got out of the car and closed the door.

"Scoot over where?" Christian asked Collin in confusion.

Collin shook his head, every bit as bewildered as Christian about what was going on.

Christian's door opening caused both boys to turn quickly.

"I told you to scoot over." Marc said as he stood outside Christian's door.

"Over to your side of the car?" Christian asked uncertainly.

"Well, it's going to be pretty hard for you to drive it from over here." Marc said as he tried to restrain his grin.

"Drive? Me?" Christian asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah." Marc said with a smile. "Scoot."

"Ouch!" Christian yelped.

"What's wrong?" Collin asked immediately.

"I forgot to take the seatbelt off." Christian said shyly, then after releasing the seat belt, scooted himself over in the seat.

Marc was fighting down his chuckles as Christian took his place behind the wheel.

"First of all, you're going to need to adjust your seat. Bring it far enough forward that you can reach the pedals without having to stretch." Marc said instructively.

"Um, how do I do that? I'm used to everything being electronic." Christian said as he looked at Marc helplessly.

"There's a lever under the seat. When you pull it, you'll be able to scoot the entire seat forward or back." Marc said seriously.

Collin leaned forward to watch Christian's every move, having the feeling that he would probably be doing the same before the day was over.

* * * * *

Marc gave Christian some basic instructions before Christian finally started the car and inched them slowly forward.

It took a little bit of time, but eventually Christian was becoming comfortable with starting and stopping the car.

After driving the car around the parking lot for a while, getting Christian used to turning, Marc decided to try for something a little more difficult.

"Collin, would you like to help Christian with the next part of the lesson?" Marc asked with a smile into the back seat.

"Sure, what can I do?" Collin asked hopefully.

"Get out and help guide Christian as he tries to back into a parking space." Marc said with a secretive smile.

"How do I do that?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Get behind the car, out of Christian's way, and let him know if he needs to go left or right and how much further he has to go to be parked correctly." Marc said seriously.

"You're not going to run me over, are you Christian?" Collin asked cautiously.

"No promises. You'd better be ready to jump out of the way." Christian said with a look of apology.

"Okay. I can do that." Collin said with a grin, then got out of the car.

"Just go slow and try to get comfortable with handling the car while you're backing up. Don't forget to use your mirrors." Marc said slowly.

"Okay." Christian said nervously.

"One more thing." Marc said seriously.

After a moment, Christian turned to look at Marc curiously.

"Backing up takes quite a bit of practice. I don't expect you to be able to do it right away. Try to relax and if you start going the wrong way, just pull forward and try it again." Marc said quietly.

"Okay. Thanks Marc." Christian said and gave Marc a weak, nervous smile.

After a glance behind the car, Marc quietly said, "Go ahead. It looks like Collin is ready to guide you."

The next few minutes were a true learning experience for Christian.

For a while it seemed to Christian that every time he turned the wheel, the car turned in the exact opposite direction that he intended.

Marc had to use every bit of self control at his disposal to keep from breaking into laughter at the alternating looks of panic and frustration as Christian tried to maneuver the car into just one parking space.

"I'm sorry this is taking so long Marc. I must be an idiot. I should be able to do this." Christian said, and seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"If you'll remember, Galen has trouble backing up too and he's been driving for years. It just takes a while to learn." Marc said gently.

Christian thought about the words, then took in a slow, deep breath before trying again.

Marc watched Christian's look of intense concentration as he carefully turned the car and was finally able to get the car backed into the parking space on the first try.

"I did it!" Christian said with a whoop of excitement.

"Yes Christian. You did." Marc said with a glow of happiness at Christian's accomplishment.

The back door opened and Collin jumped into the car, nearly vibrating with his excitement.

"You did it perfect!" Collin said, then leaned over the seat to give Christian a quick hug.

Marc smiled at the scene, then quietly said, "Christian, why don't you go ahead and drive around the lot a few times, then when you're ready, you can come back to this space and back in again."

"Yeah." Christian said happily.

Collin immediately sat back in his seat and looked at Marc with joy and admiration.

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"Christian. Pull over and stop the car." Marc said seriously.

"Did I do something wrong?" Christian asked as he slammed on the brakes.

"No. I've got a phone call and I don't want you driving unless I'm able to pay my full attention." Marc said, then opened his phone.

"Hi Mom."

"Yeah. Until after New Year's Day." Marc said, then flashed an apologetic look at Christian.

A puzzled look came over Marc's face as he asked, "Excuse me? A change in what plans?"

"No." Marc said darkly. "This is the first I'm hearing about it."

"Mom, that's not true and you know it." Marc said firmly. "I have a cell phone, a home phone, a phone at the office and voice mail on all three. The only reason Denise didn't get in touch with me is because she didn't want to. And if I'm not wanted, I'm not going."

"Nice try mom. But before you talk to me about the importance of family, I think you should have that talk with Denise. She's the one who planned a 'family' Christmas celebration then 'forgot' to invite her gay brother." Marc said as tears welled in his eyes.

There was a long moment of silence as Marc listened and seemed to calm slightly.

Collin and Christian shared concerned looks, then turned their attention back to Marc.

"Where?" Marc asked abruptly.

"When?"

"Am I supposed to bring anything?" Marc asked, not sounding entirely happy with what he was agreeing to do.

"I can't speak for Galen, but I'll make sure he knows that he's invited." Marc said, then glanced at the boys and continued, "Oh, do you remember that I was telling you about Galen's son visiting for the holiday? Some things happened and we ended up with two boys instead of one."

"Collin and Christian."

"Right."

"They're both about fourteen." Marc said and tried to force a smile onto his face for the boys.

"Okay Mom. But there's one thing that you need to know." Marc said in a warning tone. "If Denise or any of that bunch start in on Galen or the boys, then this will be the last time. Ever."

"I know Mom. But there are worse things than living without your family."

"Like watching the people you love being persecuted just for being themselves."

Marc gave an ironic little smile, then said, "I love you too Mom."

As soon as Marc had hung up the phone, Christian asked, "Where and when?"

"Tonight. At my sister Linda's house."

"We've got to go. Huh?" Collin asked hesitantly.

"No." Marc said firmly, then turned to face Collin fully.

"I have to go. You two are invited and expected, but if you choose not to go, no one will blame you one bit." Marc said honestly.

"Why do you have to go?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I can't really explain it. They're my family and... well, that means something." Marc said weakly.

"I'll take your word for it." Christian said frankly.

Marc gave Christian a sad smile and said, "As much of a pain in the ass as they can be, I wouldn't wish to be without them."

Christian nodded that he heard.

Marc looked at the time on his cell phone, then asked, "Collin, are you ready for a turn in the driver's seat?"

"Um... no." Collin said in a conflicted voice.

Marc looked at Collin curiously, knowing that a fourteen year old boy would normally jump at the chance to drive a car.

"We're not going to judge how you drive." Marc said cautiously. "This is just for fun."

"That isn't it." Collin mumbled.

"What is it then? I mean, if you don't mind me asking." Marc asked gently, concerned by Collin's sudden change in mood.

"It's stupid." Collin said in a whisper.

"C'mon Collin. Spill it." Christian said firmly.

Collin smiled at Christian, then hesitantly said, "I just... I wanted for my dad to be the one to teach me how to drive."

Marc blinked with surprise at the statement, then said, "I didn't even think of that."

"I told you it was stupid." Collin mumbled as he looked down.

"It isn't stupid at all." Marc said immediately, then continued, "And I can't even imagine how important this will be for Galen. I really should have thought of it."

Collin looked at Marc curiously, apparently assessing the honesty of his statement, then broke into a smile.

"But once he's taught you, you'd better come to me to learn how to back up. Your father really isn't the one who should be teaching that." Marc added with a grin.

"Okay Marc. I'll remember." Collin said, still appearing to be a little bit shy.

"Well Christian, are you ready for more driving?" Marc asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Christian looked into the back seat and cautiously asked, "Are you sure you don't want to?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. Go for it." Collin said with a smile.

"Okay. Where am I going this time?" Christian asked as he started the car again.

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"Pull over Christian. We still have some other things that we need to do this morning." Marc said seriously.

"Already?" Christian asked as he carefully stopped the car.

"You've been driving for over two hours. Your butt should be numb by now." Marc said with a chuckle.

"Hey! I'm the one who's supposed to be thinking about Christian's butt." Collin said playfully.

Marc smiled as he said, "Scoot your numb butt over here Christian."

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After taking his place in the driver's seat, Marc turned and looked at Christian thoughtfully.

"Is something wrong?" Christian asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all." Marc said distantly.

"Then what is it?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Do you remember back in the hospital, when I talked privately with Judge Robison?" Marc asked slowly.

"Yeah." Christian said, then glanced at Collin to see if he had any clue about what was going on.

"Okay. Here it is..." Marc said in prelude. "The thing I was worried about and had to ask Judge Robison was... I was worried that if you stayed with us for the holiday, that Galen and I might get attached and when the holiday was over we wouldn't be able to stand to let you go. You know, when the judge decided what's going to happen to you next."

Christian bit his lower lip as he tried to hold in the tumult of emotions that suddenly erupted within him.

"Christian. While we've still got a few days, I need for you to be thinking about something." Marc said as he was finally able to force himself to meet Christian's worried gaze.

"What?" Christian forced out in a gasp as tears welled in his eyes.

"Okay. This is only if you want to. It's totally up to you." Marc said as he tried to keep his voice steady. "But after Christmas, when we go to court, I would like to try to adopt you."

Christian stared at Marc with wide eyes as a tear escaped down his cheek.

"I don't want you to answer now. Take as much time as you need to think about it and decide what you want to do. I'm sure that Judge Robison is going to have plenty of other choices for you to consider." Marc said seriously.

"You... you want to be... my dad?" Christian asked in a voice that was nearly a sob.

"Yes Christian. More than anything." Marc said as tears started forming in his own eyes.

"This is great! We could be like brothers!" Collin said with a glorious smile.

Marc chuckled and said, "I suppose you could look at it that way."

Christian sat silent as another tear glided down his cheek.

"I'll give you some time to let this sink in. We'd better get going." Marc said as he wiped his eyes.

"Thanks." Christian whispered distantly as he seemed to be staring off into space.

Marc smiled at Christian's dumbfounded state as he started the car.

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After stopping at the guard shack for a moment, Marc took them back onto the road, back toward the freeway.

"Where are we going next?" Collin asked curiously. "Or is it another surprise?"

"No surprise. We're going to the mall. It should be opening any minute." Marc said with a smile.

"The mall? That's cool. But why are we going there?" Collin asked, feeling that Marc was withholding information.

"Well. I thought you guys might like the chance to do a little last minute Christmas shopping. Besides, this may be our only chance to go shopping without Galen." Marc said, then accelerated the car as he merged into the traffic on the freeway.

"I don't have much money." Christian said quietly from Marc's side, finally seeming to come back to himself.

"I'm going to swing by the bank first to get some money for all three of us." Marc said casually, glad to see that Christian was finally coming out of his shock.

"I can't take your money." Christian said hesitantly, obviously at war within himself at saying the words.

Marc glanced at Christian with surprise, then broke into a smile as he asked, "Have you ever heard of a Christmas Club savings account?"

"No." Christian said slowly, then looked into the back seat to see if Collin understood what Marc was asking.

Collin shrugged and shook his head.

"I have this special bank account set up, so that every time I get paid, a little bit of money automatically gets set aside for Christmas. That's the money that we'll be using today. So you don't need to feel funny about it, it's not like I'm just giving you money. This is what the money was set aside for, you're just helping me use it." Marc explained, then turned the car off the freeway.

"That's a really smart way of doing it. That way you don't have to worry about having enough money to have Christmas." Collin said with a smile.

"I suppose." Marc said casually. "By doing it this way, I also don't have a stack of bills waiting for me in January."

"I guess if this is what the money was meant for, it's okay to take it." Christian said in a conflicted voice.

"Good." Marc said as he turned the car into the drive-thru lane at the bank.

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As the group got out of the car, Marc went through the cash in the envelope and pulled some out.

"I think this should do it." Marc said as he handed some money to Christian.

"This is..." Christian began to say, then counted the money again to make sure he wasn't mistaken. "This is two hundred dollars."

"Yeah. But with buying for three people and mall prices... it should be about right." Marc said, then handed some cash to Collin.

"Thanks Marc." Collin said as he quickly counted the money, then shoved it into his pocket.

Christian smiled at the way Collin had taken the money with such ease and slowly put his own money away.

"I parked on this side of the mall so we could start out at this pharmacy." Marc said as he led the way toward the mall.

"Why? Do you need some drugs or something?" Christian asked curiously.

"No. Nothing like that." Marc said with a smile. "But I'm betting that this place will have something that will make our shopping adventure a lot more fun."

"Viagra?" Christian asked with a grin.

Marc laughed, then said, "Not quite that much fun."

* * * * *

"Ah, just what I was looking for." Marc said as he found a small display rack of inexpensive watches near the check stand.

"I don't get it." Christian said cautiously.

Marc picked up three nearly identical watches and walked to the checkout.

"If you want to keep your gifts a secret, you'll need to be on your own for at least a few minutes. With these watches, we can agree where and when

to meet up again." Marc said as he laid two twenty dollar bills on the counter with the three watches.

"Wow. You really have this down to a science." Collin said in wonder.

"I try to think ahead." Marc said casually, then added with a grin, "It's part of being fussy."

Both boys chuckled at the statement as Marc accepted his change.

"Are you guys ready for the shopping adventure to begin?" Marc asked as he led the way toward the mall entrance of the store.

"Oh yeah!" Collin said with excitement.

Christian smiled at Collin's enthusiasm and realized that he was feeling at least as excited as Collin.

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"Okay guys. Whenever you spot a store that you want to visit, just let me know where you'll be and when you plan to be done." Marc said as they slowly walked.

"Can't we just meet back here in, like, two hours?" Christian asked curiously.

"I'm afraid not. I'm responsible for you two and I couldn't let you go off on your own for that long." Marc said seriously.

"You don't trust us?" Collin asked in a wounded tone.

"Sure I do Collin." Marc said as he automatically pulled Collin into a one-armed hug. "But I don't trust the rest of the world."

"I don't trust the world either Marc. Is it okay if I go in there? I'll be back in ten minutes." Christian asked as he pointed at the store they were approaching.

"Sounds good." Marc said with a smile. "I'll meet you right here in ten minutes."

Collin looked at Christian with question, not knowing if he was invited or not.

"You can come with me if you want." Christian said seriously.

"Okay." Collin said happily, then turned to Marc and confirmed, "Back here. Ten minutes."

Marc nodded as he watched the two boys walk away.

* * * * *

"Do you want to talk about it?" Collin asked as soon as he and Christian were alone.

"What?" Christian asked automatically, then realized what Collin was asking, "No. Not yet."

At Collin's concerned gaze, Christian continued, "I just haven't really wrapped my brain around it yet. Give me a little bit to sort it out."

"Yeah. I can do that." Collin said with a smile, then asked, "So do you have any idea of what you want to buy?"

"I don't have a clue. I want to buy something nice, especially for Marc. But I've only known him for one day. I don't know what he already has and what he likes." Christian said in a worried voice.

"He likes Christmas." Collin said frankly.

Christian thought about it for a moment, then said, "That's a GREAT idea. We already know all the Christmas stuff that he has and we know that when someone gets him a new Christmas thing that he really appreciates it and uses it. Even if it's a fluffy toilet seat cover." Christian finished with a chuckle.

Collin smiled at the fact that Christian was happy.

"What about your dad? What kind of stuff does he like?" Christian asked seriously.

"I don't know." Collin said thoughtfully. "I guess he likes electronics stuff. I think most years he gets stuff like that for Christmas."

"What about after Christmas? Does he ever use any of it?" Christian asked carefully.

"Not really. I think he liked the universal remote I got him last year. He used that." Collin said uncertainly.

"Okay. I think he's probably got enough electronics then. I mean, he's a hardware designer. If he wants something electronic, he can probably make it for himself." Christian said frankly.

"I never thought of that." Collin said distantly.

"So what else does your dad like? What does he do for fun?" Christian asked carefully.

"I don't know." Collin said in a whisper.

Christian could tell that Collin was bothered by the fact that he didn't have an answer.

"I guess if you don't count getting drunk and being an asshole, I don't know what my dad likes doing either." Christian said frankly.

Collin slowly nodded, acknowledging that he had heard.

"Maybe we can come up with something that he can do with Marc? I bet that whatever it is, he'd enjoy just about anything as long as they were doing it together." Christian said thoughtfully.

After a moment, Collin slowly nodded and said, "That could work."

"If we can come up with something really nice, maybe I can just get one gift for both of them." Christian said carefully.

"Yeah. And if you need to, I could put some of my money with yours." Collin said seriously.

"Okay. It sounds like we've got a plan. Now all we need to do is come up with something that Marc and your dad would enjoy doing together."

* * * * *

"I was about to go looking for you guys." Marc said as the boys approached.

"Sorry we're late. There's a lot of stuff to look at and it's easy to lose track of time." Collin said frankly.

"Yeah. It is." Marc said with a smile.

"Hold on." Christian said as he looked at the bags Marc was carrying.

"You've been to two stores while we've been looking around one?" Christian asked in wonder.

"Three actually. One of the stores was sold out of what I was looking for." Marc said with a grin.

"We need to take shopping lessons from Marc." Collin said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. It looks that way." Christian said seriously.

"So where do you guys want to look next? Or do you need some more time at this store?" Marc asked frankly.

"I think we need to walk around for a while and look at the other stores. We have some ideas, but haven't decided on anything yet." Collin said in thought.

"Yeah." Christian agreed. "Maybe if we look around we'll find what we're looking for."

"Well, if you don't have anything specific in mind, maybe we could stop in at a couple of clothing stores while we're walking and pick up a few things." Marc said as he started to walk.

"What did you need?" Christian asked curiously.

"I was thinking that maybe you two would like something new for tonight, that is, if you're planning on going to visit with my family." Marc said with a glance at the boys.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess." Collin said with a questioning look at Christian.

"If you want." Christian said quietly, having a funny feeling about Marc spending money on him.

"It won't hurt to look. Maybe you'll find something that you like." Marc said casually.

"I guess so." Christian said uncertainly.

"Let's go to the car and drop off these bags, then we can start." Marc said as he pointed toward the exit door.

* * * * *

"Those would look good on you." Collin said as he looked at the pair of pants that Christian had selected.

"I don't know." Christian said in a considering voice.

Marc looked at the pants, then said, "Those are nice, but I think these might look better."

Christian turned to see what Marc had found and smiled.

The pants that Marc was holding were slim cut black cargo pants.

"I like those." Christian said before he could help himself.

"Pick out your size and go try them on while we try to find something for Collin." Marc said happily.

"I like them too." Collin said frankly.

"I think this style would look great on Christian, but I think you need something designed for someone with a larger frame." Marc said with a considering look at Collin.

"Are you calling me fat?" Collin asked curiously.

"No. Not at all." Marc said with a chuckle. "But you don't have the same body type as Christian. He's very slender, those pants should compliment him. You need something like..."

Collin watched as Marc searched around.

"This. Find your size and try it on." Marc said as he moved to another display rack.

Collin looked carefully at the stone washed denim jeans, then back at Marc with indecision.

"Just try them on before you decide." Marc said seriously.

Collin looked through the rack and finally found his size.

"Can I help you?" A teenage sales clerk asked as he approached Marc.

"No. I don't think so. I'm just trying to find some things for the boys." Marc said with a smile.

"We've got some tee combos over on that table that should work pretty good with the jeans." The boy said as he pointed.

"Let's see if Collin likes the jeans before we do that. He didn't seem too happy with them." Marc said honestly.

"Those are probably the most comfortable pants that we have in the place. Once he puts them on, he won't want to take them off." The sales clerk said frankly, then noticed a customer approaching the cash register.

"Yell if you need me." He said as he rushed away.

"Yeah." Marc said with a smile, then turned as Christian walked up to him, wearing the black cargo pants.

"Perfect." Marc said with a smile, then motioned for Christian to follow him.

"Do you really like them?" Christian asked uncertainly.

"Yes. But not with that shirt. It's too baggy." Marc said honestly as he looked at the folded tee shirts on the table.

"Here. Long sleeve under, short sleeve over. Hurry before Collin gets out." Marc said with a smile.

Christian took the shirts and hurried back to the fitting room.

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"How does it look?" Collin asked as he walked out of the dressing room, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

Marc looked at Collin for a moment, then shook his head.

"Hold this and let me see what I can do here." Marc said, then handed Collin a tee shirt as he squatted down.

Collin glanced at the shirt in his hands, then looked down suddenly as Marc tugged his pants down.

For just a moment, Collin thought Marc was going to 'pant' him right there in the middle of the store.

"These are meant to be worn low-rise." Marc said as he finally got the jeans to fit low on Collin's hips.

As Collin was about to say something, Marc lifted Collin's shirt a little and started to straighten out the waist band on his underwear so that it was even.

"Um. Should you be doing that here?" Collin asked with a blush as he looked around.

"Yeah. Unless you want me to go into the fitting room with you." Marc said as he stood.

Collin looked at Marc with question, waiting for the verdict.

"Go back in and try on that shirt. It'll look better with these pants than the one you're wearing." Marc said honestly.

"Okay." Collin said hesitantly.

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"Is this right?" Christian asked cautiously as he walked out of the fitting room.

"Tuck in the long sleeved shirt. Then it'll be fine." Marc said seriously.

"It's kind of tight." Christian said as he quickly tucked the bottom of the shirt into his pants.

"This style of shirt is supposed to fit close to your body. It's just right." Marc said, then moved around to look at Christian from behind.

"How is it?" Christian asked hesitantly.

"I think you look great. Come over to the mirror." Marc said as he walked with Christian back to the fitting rooms.

"Marc?" Collin's voice called.

"Yes?" Marc asked as he stepped away from Christian and the mirror.

"I think this shirt is the wrong size." Collin said hesitantly.

"Too tight?" Marc asked curiously.

"Too short." Collin said frankly.

"Come out and let me see." Marc said as he stepped back, so Christian would have an unobstructed view.

"See? It's not long enough." Collin said, then looked at Christian with wonder. "Wow. You look... wow."

Christian chuckled and said, "Thanks. You look pretty 'wow' too."

Collin looked down at himself and said, "I think this shirt needs to be longer."

"No. That's just how it's supposed to look." Marc said honestly.

"Really?" Collin asked uncertainly.

"Look in the mirror, then ask me that." Marc said, then glanced at Christian.

"I don't um..." Collin began to say, then broke into a big grin.

"It looks good." Collin said in realization.

"Yeah. That shirt highlights the broadness of your chest, and being cut to that length allows it to emphasize your waist, which if you'll notice, isn't the least bit fat." Marc said gently. "Even though I'm not a big fan of the 'sagging' look, this really does suit your body type."

"It looks awesome Collin." Christian said honestly.

"Thanks." Collin whispered shyly to Christian, then turned to Marc and said, "I like it."

"We still have some work to do." Marc said, drawing both boys' attention.

"You need new shoes." Marc said, then held up a hand before either boy could protest.

"No argument, both of you NEED new shoes for these outfits." Marc said seriously.

"Okay Marc. I guess you're right." Christian said reluctantly.

"Yeah. You just proved that you know best." Collin said as he looked at himself and Christian in the mirror.

"Right. Both of you go back in and put on your regular clothes." Marc said decisively.

Collin and Christian shared an amused look, then went into their separate dressing rooms to change.

* * * * *

After collecting the clothes from the boys and leaving them with the clerk at the register, Marc led them to the back of the store and said, "Christian, boots. I'm thinking something like army style. Collin, high tops or maybe a cross trainer. Go."

As the boys started looking through the different shoes, Marc walked back toward the front of the store and started looking through the pants and shirts again.

After making a few selections, he dropped them off at the register, then walked to the back of the store again.

* * * * *

"What have you found?" Marc asked as he approached.

"What do you think of these?" Christian asked as he held up a large black boot.

"My first impression..." Marc said in a pained voice. "...you're going to break an ankle. The style is nice but the platform look went out when I was in high school."

Christian nodded, then went to put the display shoe back in its place.

"Do you like this?" Collin asked as he held up a very colorful shoe.

"All I can say is..." Marc said reluctantly. "Go. Go. Power Rangers."

At Collin's confused look, Marc said, "Try for something less... cartoonish. I'm thinking white."

Collin nodded as he sat the colorful shoe aside.

"How about this?" Christian asked, drawing Marc's attention.

Marc held out his hand and looked at the boot carefully. It appeared to reach mid-calf and had very long, closely spaced laces. It had a thin sole and no heel to speak of.

"It's not exactly what I was thinking of, but it would make an interesting statement. It looks something like a wrestler's boots." Marc said consideringly. "Look around some more and if you don't find any that you like better, we'll get them."

Christian nodded, then looked to see what Collin had found.

"Converse?" Marc said with surprise. "That's very 'old school' of you Collin. I think it will work just fine. Look around for another minute or two to make sure that there's nothing you like better."

"You mean besides the Power Ranger shoes?" Collin asked with a giggle.

"Actually, my first impulse was to say Powerpuff Girls, but I was trying to be nice." Marc said with a smirk.

Collin glanced back at his first choice of shoes and nodded that it was a valid description of the color scheme.

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"\$846.25." The clerk said without a flinch.

"Holy shit!" Christian said as he went pale.

"Marc, that's way too much." Collin said immediately.

"Don't you just love thrifty kids." Marc said with a chuckle to the sales clerk as he laid out nine, one hundred dollar bills.

"After hearing the spoiled brats whining in here all day, I think it's kinda nice to see some kids who actually give a damn about how much they're spending." the sales clerk said honestly.

"Marc. Seriously. You can't spend that much on us." Christian said firmly.

"Christmas Club. Remember?" Marc said as he accepted his change. "I sat this money aside to spend at Christmas. You've got to remember that money has no value unless you use it. Hoarding it doesn't make your life one bit happier."

"Okay. I get that." Christian said slowly. "But NINE HUNDRED FREAKIN DOLLARS?"

"Grab the bags boys. We still have more shopping to do." Marc said with a chuckle.

"Happy Holidays." The store clerk said as he fought down his laughter.

"Merry Christmas." Marc said with a smile as he waited for Collin and Christian to gather all the bags.

Chapter 7

As they walked to the car to drop off their bags, Marc asked, "Any idea of where you want to look next?"

"I don't know. I thought I had an idea, but while we were walking through the mall, I didn't find anything at all." Collin said helplessly.

"Would you guys like to go to a different mall? The Skyview Plaza isn't very far away. Maybe you'll find something there." Marc asked slowly.

Collin looked at Christian and received a shrug in reply.

"I guess so. It'd really help if we had a better idea of what we were looking for." Collin said quietly.

"I'm in the same situation Collin. I want to get you guys something that you'll really like, but I haven't been around you enough to know what you enjoy." Marc said frankly as he opened the trunk of the car.

"I had an idea for Uncle Galen." Christian said reluctantly.

"Really? Can you tell us or is it something you want to be a surprise for everyone?" Collin asked curiously.

"Well. I remember you saying how you want your dad to be the one to teach you how to drive." Christian said hesitantly.

"Yeah." Collin said slowly, trying to imagine how that could be anything like a Christmas present for his father.

"Then Marc said that Uncle Galen wants to wash the car himself and do a really good job of it." Christian continued.

"I think I see where you're going." Marc said with a delighted smile.

Collin glanced at Marc with aggravation, then turned to Christian and said, "Well I don't see it. What do you want to do?"

Christian smiled at Collin's impatience, then said, "I was thinking that if you wanted to, we could buy your dad all the stuff that he would need to do a really good job of cleaning up his car, then we could volunteer to help him do it."

Marc gave a pleased smile and nodded his approval.

"So it'd be like us giving him a gift that's something that he really wants AND it gives us something that we can do together." Collin said thoughtfully.

"I mean, it's only if you want to." Christian hurried to say.

"Yeah. It's a great idea." Collin said with a quick smile.

"I have a pretty good idea of the things Galen is going to need, so I can take you to an auto store and help you pick things out." Marc said with a grin.

"Yeah. And we can give it as a present from all three of us if you all want to." Christian said as he glanced at Marc with question.

"I think this will mean more to Galen if it's from you boys." Marc said gently. "Besides, I already have his present."

"The way you plan things, you've probably had it for two months." Christian said with a teasing smile at Marc.

"A month and a half." Marc said with an unrepentant shrug, then added, "It's part of being fussy."

Both boys chuckled at the statement.

"So do you want to go to another mall, or are you ready for the auto store?" Marc asked as he closed the trunk.

"I don't know. I mean, we know what we need to get at the auto store, but I don't have a clue about what to get at the mall." Collin said frankly.

"Yeah. You're hard to buy for, Marc." Christian said as he looked Marc in the eyes.

"Not really." Marc said as he met Christian's gaze. "Anything you get me, I'll automatically like because you got it for me."

"Yeah. But we want to get you something that you'll really enjoy and use all the time... but we don't know what kind of things you enjoy."

Marc shrugged and said, "Good luck with that. I don't really do much outside of work except spend time with Galen."

"You're a big help." Collin said with a roll of his eyes.

"Sorry. But I really don't have any hobbies or collections or anything." Marc said frankly. "I'm a fairly boring guy."

"You're not boring, you're just hard to buy for." Collin said immediately, then noticed that Christian seemed to be lost in thought.

"Do you have an idea?" Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah." Christian said distantly, then turned to Marc and asked, "Is it okay if we go back into the mall now? I just figured out what I want to get you."

"Sure." Marc said with a curious look at Christian.

"Come on." Christian said quickly as he hurried toward the mall entrance.

* * * * *

"I'll meet you guys in the food court in fifteen minutes." Marc said hesitantly.

"Yeah. But don't be worried if it takes us a few extra minutes. It looks like it's starting to get busy." Christian said as he looked around.

"Fair enough." Marc agreed, then walked away.

"Can you tell me now?" Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah. I think I figured out the perfect gift for Marc, and it's something that him and your dad can do together." Christian said happily.

"Yeah? What is it?" Collin asked curiously.

"A video game." Christian said in triumph.

"Isn't Marc a little bit old for that?" Collin asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. That's what I thought at first, but then when Marc said that thing about not having a hobby or a collection, I remembered how some of the guys from school were talking about their video game collections and how some of their parents would kind of try to take over their games." Christian said seriously.

"It would be something Marc and Dad could do together." Collin said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. The big trick will be to find games that they'll like playing." Christian said frankly.

"We can ask the sales clerk guy. We've only got, like, thirteen minutes. We'd better hurry." Collin said suddenly.

"C'mon."

* * * * *

"Sorry Marc!" Collin said as he rushed into the food court.

"Where's Christian?" Marc asked with immediate concern.

"He's going to meet me at the car. I wondered if I could get the keys from you so we could stash the gifts?" Collin asked hopefully.

"Are you coming back here when you're done?" Marc asked as he handed the car keys to Collin.

"Yeah. We just realized that you'd probably figure out your gift if you saw the bag." Collin said quickly.

"I'll be waiting right here for you." Marc said with a smile at Collin's excitement.

* * * * *

"No problems?" Collin asked as he approached Marc's car.

"Nope." Christian said happily. "I can't believe I just spent almost all my money and the sales clerk didn't even blink."

"Yeah." Collin said as he unlocked the trunk. "I was thinking that since you spent most of your money on Marc, I'll spring for the stuff for my Dad and we could put both our names on both the gifts."

"That's what I was thinking too." Christian said quietly.

"What's wrong?" Collin asked immediately when he heard the sullen note in Christian's voice.

"I'm not going to have enough money to get you anything nice." Christian said reluctantly.

"How about this? When we're done getting my dad's gifts, why don't we put our money together and split it down the middle? That way we'll both get to spend the same on each other and neither of us will have to worry about it." Collin asked as he closed the trunk.

"Yeah. I guess that'd work, as long as you don't mind." Christian said slowly.

"I already got my best Christmas present. You're here." Collin said in a light hearted tone as he playfully hugged Christian to his side.

"Yeah. Me too." Christian whispered shyly as they started walking back toward the mall.

* * * * *

Marc was sipping a cup of coffee when the boys approached.

"So, are we done here?" Marc asked casually.

"Yeah. I think we need to go get Dad's gift before it's too late." Collin said happily.

"Would you guys like to get a snack before we do that? I mean, since we're here in the food court?" Marc asked seriously.

"Cookie." Christian said in a surprisingly good 'Cookie Monster' voice.

Marc looked at Christian with surprise at the response.

"Cookie." Collin said with a grin as he tried to suppress his chuckle.

Collin's response was all the prompting that Christian needed. As soon as he started walking toward the small cookie shop, Collin immediately followed.

Marc smiled as he watched the boys walking away, marveling at the utter contentment that he was feeling.

* * * * *

"Hey Marc. I noticed that your coffee needed a cookie to go with it." Christian said as he approached the table.

"Chocolate chip?" Marc asked hopefully.

"White chocolate macadamia..." Christian said hesitantly.

"Even better." Marc said with a grand smile, then gratefully accepted the cookie from Christian.

"So after the auto store, where are we going next?" Christian asked as he dropped into a chair.

Marc glanced to be sure that Collin was nearly back to the table before saying, "After we're done with our shopping, I was thinking that we could meet Galen at the house and then go for haircuts."

Christian's gaze snapped toward Marc in an instant and the look in his eyes was the textbook definition of 'fight or flight'.

Marc didn't want to laugh, but Christian's reaction was so immediate and extreme, that he couldn't help but react to it.

Finally he was able to get his chuckles under control enough to say, "Don't worry Christian, I wasn't meaning you."

Christian seemed to relax a bit at the words, but was definitely still on guard.

"I had already planned on Galen and I getting a trim today, and since we're going to visit with my family this evening, it really is a good time." Marc said frankly.

"And..." Christian prompted suspiciously.

"And if either of you wanted to get a haircut, this would be a good time to do it, but I'm not going to pressure you." Marc said, hoping that Christian could hear the sincerity in his voice.

"I can't remember when I got my last haircut, so I guess it's probably about time." Collin said without concern.

"Okay." Christian said reluctantly. "You just wouldn't believe how hard I've had to fight both my parents to be able to keep my hair like this. Hating my hair is, like, the only thing they agree on."

"I like your hair." Collin said gently.

"Thanks." Christian said and resisted the urge to go over and give Collin a hug.

"Well, if we're all finished with our cookies, we'd better get this show on the road." Marc said before finishing off the last of his coffee.

Collin popped the last chunk of cookie into his mouth, then followed Marc and Christian to the trash cans.

"Evelyn? This is Marc Stone, I was just wanting to see if you could possibly squeeze in one more..." Marc was saying into his cell phone as they walked out of the mall, but suddenly stopped.

"Whoa. Hold on. I scheduled this over a week ago. What do you mean you can't..." Marc started, but was stopped again.

"Evelyn. I know it's Christmas. That's why I scheduled the appointment so far in advance." Marc said in an increasing voice.

"You know what? Just forget it! Bye." Marc said then stabbed the 'end' button on his phone with his thumb.

"Problems?" Collin asked quietly as he noticed that Christian was lagging behind them with an uncertain and concerned look in his eyes.

Marc took a long, slow breath, then said, "I'm going to have to spend an evening with my family, the last thing I need is to get attitude from someone I'm not even related to... and that I'm paying."

Collin chuckled at the statement, then slowed his pace enough so he was walking even with Christian before pulling him into a casual hug of silent assurance.

"Well guys, what do you think the chances are of finding a decent hair stylist at literally the last minute, two days before Christmas?" Marc asked as they approached the car.

"Somewhere between slim and none?" Collin said timidly.

Marc nodded, then fished in his pocket and came out with the keys.

"I have one other thing to try before I give up all hope." Marc said as he held out his keys to Christian.

"I'm driving?" Christian asked with surprise.

"Yeah. In your dreams. Now unlock the car while I make a call." Marc said with a chuckle before going through the address book on the phone to find a number.

* * * * *

"Any luck?" Collin asked from the back seat as Marc got into the car.

"I don't know yet. I'm waiting for a call back." Marc said a bit anxiously.

"The hairdressers hotline?" Collin asked with a grin.

"Something like that. I remember, a while back, my boss was telling us something about taking his kids to get haircuts and he mentioned that the hairdressers were friends of his. So I thought I'd take a chance and see if he could pull some strings and get us in." Marc said honestly.

"Well, if he can't, it shouldn't be a big problem. Your hair doesn't look bad." Collin said seriously.

"Yeah. It's nice." Christian agreed.

"I just want to do everything I can to make tonight go as smoothly as possible." Marc said quietly and betrayed a little bit of the nervousness he was feeling.

"Just remember that no matter what happens tonight, you've still got us." Collin said as he leaned forward in his seat.

"Yeah." Christian said with an encouraging smile.

"Thanks guys. That put everything right back into perspective for me." Marc said, sounding quite a bit calmer than a moment before.

Marc's cell phone rang and he had it to his ear immediately.

"Allen?" Marc asked hopefully.

Collin and Christian waited silently and watched Marc's expression for any clues as to whether it was good or bad news.

"No. Actually, two-fifteen is perfect. Are you sure it isn't going to be any problem for them?" Marc asked happily.

"That's fine. I'd rather wait around for a few minutes than look like a Muppet in all this year's Christmas pictures." Marc said then turned when he heard Christian's chuckle from beside him.

"Thanks again Allen. I really appreciate you doing this for me." Marc said sincerely.

"We'd love to, but we have people coming over. Actually, I was going to invite you and your family to come over to our place if you didn't already have plans." Marc said in an apologetic tone.

"Really? That would be great! I hope it works out that way." Marc said happily.

Collin and Christian exchanged curious glances at Marc's words, then shared a mutual shrug.

"However it works out, I hope you and your family have a wonderful holiday." Marc said, then a moment later he hung up the phone.

"I'm guessing from that smile that it's good news." Collin said with a smile, drawn into Marc's happiness.

"Yeah. And we'd better get moving if we're going to stay on schedule. Skyview Plaza or the auto store first?" Marc asked as he started the engine.

"The auto store, that way we'll know how much money we're going to have left to spend on each other." Collin said honestly.

"Are you running short? Do you need more money?" Marc asked with concern.

"No." Christian answered immediately.

Collin looked at Christian for a moment, then said, "We'll let you know after the auto store."

"We can do that." Marc said as he pulled the car out of the parking lot.

* * * * *

"Here all this time I thought all you needed to wash a car was a bucket, a water hose and a few rags." Christian said as he climbed into the car.

"That's all you need to get the dirt off, but what we're doing is a lot more than that. The paint is oxidized and I doubt that the car has had more than a rinse off in the past three decades. We need all the tools and brushes and compounds to do the job correctly." Marc said as he started the car.

"I can't believe how long that took." Collin said as he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

"Actually, it took longer than I thought it would too." Marc said honestly.

"Do I sense a change in plans?" Christian asked as he slowly turned to face Marc.

"That's up to you guys." Marc said honestly.

After noticing that he had both boys' attention, he continued, "If I understood you correctly, you said that the only gifts that you have left to buy are for each other. Is that right?"

"Yeah." Both boys answered in unison.

"Then there wouldn't be any reason that Galen couldn't join us while you're doing that shopping, right?" Marc asked in a leading tone.

"No. I didn't even think of that." Collin said as a smile spread across his face.

"So, if you guys don't have any objections, we can go home right now and we should have time to stow the gifts before Galen gets home." Marc said happily.

"Where are we going to put all the car stuff? We almost filled up your trunk and that trunk is big enough to park a car in." Collin asked seriously.

"Do you remember the loft in the garage where all the Christmas stuff was stored? I think we should be able to fit everything up there pretty well now that all the Christmas stuff is put out." Marc said cheerfully.

Christian shook his head in wonder and muttered, "I never realized that being fussy was so cool. You really get stuff done."

"Thanks Christian." Marc said quietly and Collin was surprised to see the tender look in Marc's eyes in the rear view mirror.

The glimpse of that expression hit Collin like a physical force. For just a flash of an instant, he had a sense of the emotions that Marc was feeling toward Christian.

Collin glanced to the passenger seat to find Christian looking at the scenery passing them by.

He sat back in his seat and made a promise to himself that he would do anything and everything in his power to make sure that Christian and Marc would be able to stay together.

* * * * *

"Hey Dad!" Collin said cheerfully as soon as his father got out of the car.

"What did you do?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I didn't do anything, why would you think that?" Collin asked as he ran to his father to give him a hug.

"Maybe it's just fatherly instinct, but I don't think I remember seeing you look this guilty since we got you potty trained." Galen said frankly.

Collin giggled as he led his father toward the front door of the house.

"If you don't tell me, I know that Marc will." Galen said firmly.

Collin chuckled, then said, "I didn't do anything wrong. Come in the house and tell me how your day was."

Galen froze, then looked back at the driveway.

"Where's my car?" Galen asked then looked sternly at his son.

"It's in the garage." Collin said as he took his father's arm and tried to get him moving toward the house again.

"And what is my car doing in the garage?" Galen asked as he reluctantly began to follow.

"Isn't that where cars are supposed to go?" Collin asked as he opened the front door.

"No. At least, not for as long as I've owned it." Galen said with a glance back at the garage.

"Would you like something to drink? I bet you're thirsty." Collin said as soon as he was inside the house.

Galen closed his eyes and seemed to be silently counting to ten.

"Collin, did you wreck the car?" Galen asked with a tone of dread.

"No! It's nothing like that. I promise." Collin said as he hugged his father again.

"Then will you please just tell me what's going on?" Galen asked imploringly.

Collin chuckled, then said, "Okay Dad. We went Christmas shopping this morning and got home about two seconds before you did. So Marc asked me to get you into the house while him and Christian put the gifts away."

Galen let out a gust of breath in relief, then gave Collin a firm hug.

"You really love that car, don't you?" Collin asked with a grin.

"It's more than a car to me. It's kind of a symbol of my new life." Galen said quietly.

"I don't understand." Collin said honestly.

"I guess your mother would accuse me of having a midlife crisis... and she might be right. But whether it was because of the divorce or me just wanting to reclaim my youth, that car is probably the only impulsive, impractical thing that I've bought in over a decade." Galen said distantly.

"Why?" Collin asked as his father guided him to sit on the couch.

Galen took a seat in the chair next to him and continued, "I suppose that I *could* have bought a car like that anytime I wanted. But I was caught up in what I *should* do. I was trying to be a responsible adult, doing all the things that responsible adults do."

"So what changed?" Collin asked curiously.

"When I got here I couldn't remember what it was that was holding me back from doing the things I wanted. When Marc's brother-in-law showed me the car, I knew that I shouldn't buy it, but I couldn't come up with a single reason not to." Galen said contemplatively.

"I'm glad you bought it. I love your car." Collin said warmly.

Before Galen could respond, a noise from the hallway interrupted them.

"Did too!" Christian said with a grin as he walked into the living room.

"Did not!" Marc said as he followed just a few steps behind.

"Tell me what happened." Galen said with an exaggerated aire of impatience.

"Marc saw his gift." Christian huffed.

"I did not!" Marc said immediately.

"I told him to turn around while I put his gift away, and when I turned back he was watching me." Christian said accusingly.

"When I heard the plastic stop rustling, I knew that you were done and I turned around." Marc said, matching Christian's tone.

"How much did you see, Marc?" Galen asked firmly.

"Not much." Marc admitted shyly.

"A ha!" Christian said with triumph.

"So I saw that you got me something in a white plastic shopping bag. That narrows it down to 95% of the stores in the mall." Marc said with irritation.

"I thought we could trust you." Collin said in a grave tone.

"You can." Galen said as he put an arm around Marc, "Except when it comes to gifts."

"Now you tell us." Christian said with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm sorry Christian, I didn't think one peek would hurt." Marc said quietly.

"Okay. But one more peek, and it's a lump of coal for you, Mister." Christian said sternly.

Marc nodded as he hugged Galen tightly.

"Did you guys get everything put away?" Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's all stashed..." Christian said, then looked at Galen as he slowly continued, "...where we said."

"You don't have to worry about Galen. He's trustworthy." Marc said seriously.

"How are we doing for time?" Collin asked curiously.

Marc glanced at the clock on the side table, then seemed to consider.

"Well, if we leave now, we can rush to get something to eat and take a chance of missing our appointment at the hairdresser's. Or we can take our time and be hungry while we wait to get our hair cut." Marc said, not sounding particularly thrilled with either choice.

"Is anyone starving hungry?" Galen asked as he looked around.

"I'm okay right now, but I don't think it'll be too long." Collin said honestly.

"I could eat." Christian said frankly.

"Marc, is there anyplace decent to eat near Evelyn's? I can't think of any." Galen asked slowly.

"Evelyn won't be doing our hair anymore. We're going to a little shop downtown." Marc said slowly, watching for Galen's reaction.

"Any good eating places nearby?" Galen asked, seemingly without concern.

"There's a little sandwich shop on the corner. I don't think I've ever been in there, but it always seems to be busy." Marc said thoughtfully.

"I'm pretty hungry, so I say we go for it. That way we can eat until the very last second if we need to." Galen said to the group.

"Sounds good to me." Marc said with a shrug, then looked at the boys with question.

Collin and Christian shared a look, then in unison, they said, "Plan."

Both the adults chuckled as they led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Hello. My name is Marc Stone. Allen Thompson called ahead for us." Marc said hesitantly to the hairdresser who was currently styling an elderly woman's silvery blue hair.

"Oh yes. He said you just needed trims. I don't think it should be any problem." The hairdresser said as he kept the majority of his attention on his work.

"Thank you for working us in on such short notice. I really appreciate it." Marc said quickly.

The hair dresser put his styling brush down and turned to Marc with a pleasant smile.

"Let's go ahead and get one of you in the chair so I can..." the hairdresser said, then his gaze fixed on Collin. "Oh dear."

"What's wrong?" Marc asked with immediate concern.

"Eric love, I need you up here." the hairdresser said in an anxious voice.

"I'm working on Mrs. Henderson right now. Can't it wait a minute, Bobby?" A voice called from the back room.

"No. I don't think it can." Bobby said with a pained expression.

After a moment, Eric walked around the partition.

"What's so important? I was in the middle..." Eric said, then stopped at the sight of Collin.

"See?"

"Oh dear." Eric said with a wince at the sight.

"How do you want to handle this?" Bobby asked as he turned askance and put a hand on his chin in a considering posture.

After a moment, Eric said, "Call Joaquin and ask him if he can come in early to help us out... will you be able to manage by yourself until then?"

"I don't know..." Bobby began to say, then glanced at Collin. "Yes. I'll find some way to make it work. Just, for God's sake, do something to help him."

"Go finish up Mrs. Henderson and I'll get started. When you get her under the dryer, call Joaquin." Eric said firmly.

"Yes love." Bobby said as he rushed away.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Collin asked with confusion as Eric gently guided him to a chair.

"Don't worry. No one blames you. We realize that someone did this to you." Eric said assuringly, then moved around Collin to look at his hair from a different angle.

"Is there something wrong with my hair?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Be honest. How old are you?" Eric asked quietly.

"I'll be fourteen in a few months." Collin answered slowly.

Eric winced at the answer, then gently said, "No one over the age of 8 should have this hairstyle."

"But I've always had my hair like this." Collin said in confusion.

"I have no problem believing that." Eric said, then seemed to give up on finding an easy place to start and picked up a spray bottle.

While Eric was misting Collin's hair, he glanced over at Galen and asked, "Are you the father?"

"Yes. But before you blame me for anything, he lives with his mother and this is his first time visiting me since the divorce." Galen said quickly.

Eric seemed to be considering the words for a moment, then as he picked up a pair of scissors, he said, "If his mother was responsible for this, I can see why you're divorced."

Marc couldn't restrain his chuckles and leaned in to give Galen a quick peck of a kiss on the cheek.

Eric raised an eyebrow at the display of affection, then broke into a smile as he started taking small snips of Collin's hair.

* * * * *

"Joaquin will be right in. I told him it was an emergency." Bobby said as he rushed to the front.

"Would you have time to work on Mrs. Smithson now?" Eric asked in a voice of deep concentration.

"I can wait for Joaquin. I just need a wash and set and he's always so gentle with me." Mrs. Smithson said quietly.

"Thank you Millie." Eric said gently, then turned to ask Bobby, "Do you have time to help one of these gentlemen?"

"I left Mrs. Henderson to bake for 10 minutes and Phyllis just needed a touch-up. She's already done." Bobby said quickly.

"Who wants to be next?" Eric asked with a glance at the front of the store.

Marc gestured for Galen to go ahead.

When Eric saw him stand, he whispered to Bobby, "He's the father."

Bobby looked down at Collin, then at Galen who was approaching.

"I had nothing to do with his choice of hairstyle." Galen said before Bobby could accuse him of anything.

Bobby gestured for him to sit, then said, "But you saw it. That hairstyle only looks good on 6 year old boys and female Olympic figure skaters."

"...from the 1970's." Eric added over his shoulder.

Bobby nodded, then looked at Galen's hair critically for a moment. Finally Bobby said, "I can see from this that it wasn't your fault. This is a very nice style for you."

"Thank you." Galen said hesitantly, expecting a barbed comment at any moment.

"I'll just trim this up for you. It won't take a minute." Bobby said as he moved in to get to work.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Can you still work me in?" A woman asked desperately as she rushed in the door of the salon.

"If you can wait about five minutes, we should be able to." Bobby said as he paid close attention to what he was doing to Galen's hair.

* * * * *

"Is my hair really that bad?" Collin asked Eric quietly.

"It's just a very bad style that any self respecting stylist should have steered you away from long before this." Eric said as he continued to cut Collin's hair.

"Some of the guys at school called me 'Helmet Head' a few times, but I just thought they were being jerks and didn't worry too much about it." Collin said honestly.

"Count yourself lucky. Stylists call this cut a 'Mushroom Cap', but barbers refer to it as 'The Dickhead'." Eric said frankly.

"Really?" Collin asked with a squeak.

"You won't need to worry about it any more. I'll have you looking like a teenager before you know what happened to you." Eric said in a voice of deep concentration.

"Thanks." Collin whispered, then tried to glance at the mirror without turning his head.

The chair that he was in was at such an angle that seeing himself was impossible, but he was happy to find that he could see Christian in the mirror.

Collin relaxed and stopped worrying about what Eric was doing as he watched Christian and Marc talking in the waiting area.

* * * * *

"All done." Bobby said with accomplishment as he removed the apron from around Galen's neck.

"That was quick." Galen said with surprise as he stood and looked at himself in the mirror.

"Years of practice." Bobby said happily.

"This looks great. Thank you." Galen said in an impressed voice.

"Glad to do it." Bobby said as he gestured for Galen to go to the waiting area.

"Where do you need me?" A young man who looked like a surfer asked as he hurried into the room.

Christian looked at him curiously, since he seemed to be completely out of place in a hair salon.

"Joaquin." Bobby said, then gestured toward the waiting area, "Mrs. Smithson."

Mrs. Smithson stood as Joaquin smiled warmly and said, "Hi Millie, come on back and we'll get started."

Christian noted that Joaquin's casual appearance and friendly demeanor made him very approachable. He just seemed like genuinely a nice guy.

"Are you ready?" Bobby asked Marc pleasantly.

"How much longer?" The woman beside Marc asked impatiently.

"Just a few minutes, he's only getting a trim. You can get in the chair by the window if you want and I'll be right with you." Bobby said gently.

"Yes. Thank you." She said timidly, seeming to have just realized that she had interrupted.

"Ready?" Bobby asked as he gestured Marc toward the chair.

Rather than answer, Marc walked over and took the seat that Galen had just vacated.

* * * * *

"Bored out of your mind yet?" Galen asked as he sat down beside Christian.

"I'm okay." Christian answered half heartedly.

"I noticed that there's a toy store next door. I'm finished, if you want to go look around for a few minutes." Galen suggested quietly.

Christian flashed him an incredulous look, then seemed to get an idea.

He patted his pocket to make sure he had his half of the money that he and Collin had split after leaving the auto store, then said, "Y'know, I think I would like to go over there."

"Let me tell Marc where we're going to be." Galen said, as he stood.

Christian glanced over at Collin and met his gaze in the mirror.

Collin immediately smiled when he saw Christian looking at him and Christian couldn't help but smile in return.

"If we're not back before they're finished, Marc will come and get us." Galen said as he walked to Christian's side.

"Okay." Christian said distractedly, then waved at Collin as he turned to leave.

* * * * *

"Do you need to be on your own for this shopping, or can I come with you?" Galen asked as they walked into the small 'Mom & Pop' toy shop.

"You can come with me if you want. I'm just going to look for a toy car for Collin." Christian said frankly.

Galen followed along silently for a moment, but then felt compelled to say, "As far as I know, Collin has never had any interest in cars."

As Christian looked over the selections before him, he absently said, "This isn't so much about the car as it is something else."

Galen puzzled over Christian's words for a moment, then watched as Christian seemed to have found what he was looking for.

"Do you think Collin will like it?" Christian asked as he handed the toy car to Galen.

"From what he said at breakfast this morning, I'm sure he'll cherish it." Galen said with a chuckle as he handed the Hummer back to Christian.

* * * * *

"They're still working on him." Christian said with surprise as they walked back into the salon.

"But Marc's done." Galen said as he held out an arm to invite Marc into a casual hug.

"I think Eric reached the lowest substrata of hair a few minutes ago, so it shouldn't be much longer." Marc said as he gave Galen a quick hug, then moved to take his seat again.

"Wow! Look at that pile of hair on the floor. Who would have thought Collin was carrying around that much." Christian said in wonder.

"Imagine how he's going to look in his new clothes." Marc said speculatively.

Christian thought about it for a minute, then broke into a grin as he said, "I can't wait."

"New clothes?" Galen asked curiously.

"We just picked up a few things while we were Christmas shopping this morning." Marc said dismissively.

"Excuse me." Bobby said as he approached the trio.

They looked up in unison, but it was obvious that he was talking to Christian.

"Yeah." Christian answered hesitantly.

"I was just wondering if you'd like a little spritz of product to add some shine to your hair, you know, just to perk it up a teeny bit?" Bobby asked as he held up a spray bottle.

"Um... Sure. I guess." Christian said hesitantly.

"Come over by the mirror, I'll spray it on, then the rest will be up to you." Bobby said happily.

"Yeah. Okay." Christian said as he walked to stand in front of the mirror.

"If you snip one hair on that boy's head I will personally see that your cosmetology license is revoked. His hair is perfect." Eric said firmly.

Bobby rolled his eyes at Eric and simply said, "He needs a spritz."

Eric glanced at Christian, then went back to work on Collin's hair as he muttered, "Alright then."

After a few sprays from the spray bottle, Bobby left Christian alone to fuss over his hair.

* * * * *

"That looks nice." Marc said as Christian walked back to the waiting area.

"Yeah. It really does and it's not all sticky like most of the hair junk that I've tried." Christian said happily.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Eric said in a booming voice from beside the partition.

Everyone turned with surprise at the sound.

"May I present to you! The new and improved..." Eric said loudly, then seemed to falter.

Eric leaned close to the partition and whispered, "What was your name again, Sweetie?"

"Collin." a voice whispered in return.

Eric straightened and boomed, "The New and Improved... Collin!"

A moment later, a very shy and nervous looking Collin stepped out from behind the partition.

Galen, Marc and Christian all stared in shock for a moment at the complete transformation.

None of them expected that something as simple as a new hairstyle could make him look so much older and more mature.

Christian was especially amazed because Collin didn't just look older, but was also drop dead gorgeous. He felt his heart skip a beat as he gasped, "Wow!"

"You look great!" Marc said in wonder.

Galen stared in amazement, not able to find any words to express what he was feeling.

His little boy had grown up and turned into a teenager... in half an hour.

"Do you really like it?" Collin asked shyly.

"What's important is, do you like it?" Eric asked as he guided Collin to stand in front of the mirror in the center of the partition.

Collin took a moment to study his reflection, then with a giggle in his voice he said, "Yeah. I do."

"Then my work here is done." Eric said happily.

"Why don't you guys go on out and meet me at the car?" Marc asked as he stepped toward the cash register with his wallet in his hand.

"Okay." Collin said happily, then turned back to Eric and said, "Thanks. I really like it."

Eric nodded, then turned his attention to Marc.

"Thanks for doing that. You're a miracle worker, he looks one hundred percent better." Marc said as he glanced toward the door.

"It really made my day to be able to see him smile like that." Eric said happily, then in a more casual voice, continued, "That will be \$58.00."

"I'd like to get some of whatever that was that Bobby sprayed on Christian's hair, he really liked it." Marc said quickly.

"Just a second." Eric said, then rushed over to Bobby who was hard at work.

After a moment of whispering, Eric returned to the register carrying a spray bottle.

"That will be \$66.00." Eric said as he added the new item to the total on the register.

"Do you allow tipping?" Marc asked before taking the money out of his wallet.

"Absolutely." Eric answered immediately.

"Then keep the change." Marc said as he handed Eric a \$100 bill.

"Thank you." Eric said with a smile.

"Merry Christmas." Marc said happily as he left.

"And a Happy New Year." Eric called in return.

* * * * *

"Uncle Galen?" Christian asked cautiously as they walked toward the car.

Galen put his key in the driver's side door, then looked at Christian with question.

"Would it freak you out really bad or anything if I kissed Collin?" Christian asked hesitantly.

Galen chuckled as he opened the door, then said, "No, it wouldn't freak me out. But you'd better be sure that you'll be able to let it go at just a kiss. He's looking pretty good right now."

Christian looked at Collin, then said, "I'd better wait till we get back to the house."

Collin blushed, but was obviously enjoying the attention.

Galen got into the car and unlocked the back door, then leaned across the seat to unlock the other two doors.

When Collin and Christian got into the back seat, time seemed to stand still for a moment as they sat and looked at each other.

Galen watched the pair, recognizing something in their matching gazes.

The spell was broken by Marc opening the passenger side door.

"Did the boys tell you about us going to visit my family tonight?" Marc asked, not noticing the smitten gazes being exchanged in the back seat.

"Your family?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I guess they didn't." Marc said anxiously, then continued, "Apparently, my sister Denise has been planning a family holiday celebration for a few weeks now and she forgot to mention it to me. Mom called this morning to let me know that the party is going to be at my sister Linda's house."

"Forgot?" Galen asked as he met Marc's eyes.

"You don't have to go, but I... well, you're invited." Marc stammered.

"So is this why we're getting new clothes and haircuts all of a sudden?" Galen asked cautiously.

"No. I mean, I was planning on us doing this anyway so we'd all look our best for the Christmas pictures." Marc said nervously.

"Dad. He made the hair cut appointments over a week ago." Collin said from the back seat.

"But your regular hairdresser crapped out on us." Christian added helpfully.

"Evelyn crapped out?" Galen asked with a barely restrained grin.

"Pretty much. I don't think we'll be going back to her." Marc said with a look of apology at Galen.

"Good. I like this place a lot better." Galen said as he started the car.

"Me too." Marc agreed, then looked into the back seat and asked, "How does the new hair style feel Collin?"

"It's weird, I feel like my head's about ten pounds lighter." Collin said cheerfully.

"I think it is from that pile of hair that he cut off of you. They're going to need a lawn tractor to haul all of it off." Christian said with a chuckle.

"I like my new hair, but I still like yours better." Collin said as he looked at Christian with an undisguised leer.

"I was thinking about driving through to get us some sundaes on the way home, but it looks like we need to get those two behind closed doors ASAP." Galen said with a grin.

"We'll behave." Collin said immediately, his attention momentarily diverted by the word 'sundae'.

"Dairy Queen?" Galen asked as he pulled up to a stop light.

"Yeah!" Collin answered happily.

"Sounds good." Christian said with a tender smile at Collin's enthusiasm.

"Good call." Marc whispered lovingly at Galen.

* * * * *

"Did you guys set all your new clothes aside when we unpacked the car?" Marc asked as they pulled into the driveway.

"Yeah. It's all still in the garage, right beside the door." Christian said seriously.

"Then I think we should start getting ready. We're going to have a long drive ahead of us." Marc said frankly.

"Long drive?" Collin asked curiously as he got out of the car.

"It's about an hour and a half to my sister's house." Marc said with an apologetic look.

"Oh." Collin said quietly as he looked at Christian.

"I'll share my iPod with you. One ear piece for each of us." Christian said with a grin.

Collin thought about that for a moment, then looked at Marc and asked, "Only an hour and a half?"

Galen and Marc exchanged a smile as they walked toward the house.

* * * * *

"We've still got plenty of time, so there's no need to rush." Marc said as they walked into the living room.

"Do we need to bring anything? I hate to go to a gathering empty handed." Galen asked with concern.

"I asked my mom, but she said that I just need to bring all of you." Marc said quietly.

"It sounds like a set-up to me." Christian said frankly.

Marc glanced at Christian, and was surprised to hear Galen say, "I agree."

At Marc's inquisitive look, Galen continued, "I'd feel a whole lot better if we brought something to contribute. I'd feel like we were freeloading if we show up without anything."

"Even my dad wouldn't go someplace without bringing a bottle of Jack or a 12-pack... of course by the time we got there it would be a 9-pack." Christian finished weakly.

Collin gave Christian a quick squeeze from the side.

"What can we take?" Galen asked curiously.

"I suppose we could stop off at the liquor store and get a nice bottle of wine." Marc said uncertainly.

"So you're thinking we'll have more fun if we get hammered on the drive up?" Christian asked with a chuckle.

"We might." Marc said with a grin, then continued, "I was just trying to think of what we could bring."

"Dad, could you make some more of that cream cheese stuff that you made for us? It was really good and I bet everyone would like it." Collin suggested quickly.

Marc looked at Collin with surprise, then at Galen with question.

"The woman who told me how to make it said that you can make it look better by rolling it in slivered almonds, so it really does look like a cheese log." Galen said speculatively.

"Do you have what you need to make one?" Marc asked thoughtfully.

"No, but there's not that much to it. I know I could get it done before we leave." Galen said with a little enthusiasm.

"Don't forget the slivered almonds and a variety of crackers." Marc said as he seemed to be deep in thought.

"Why don't you just go with him? It's not going to take that long is it?" Christian asked frankly.

"I suppose I could." Marc said, then looked at Galen with question.

"Will you guys be okay on your own for a few minutes?" Galen asked hesitantly.

Collin smiled, then said, "We'll just be getting ready. Don't worry about us."

"Alright. We'd better go if we're going to get everything done in time." Marc said decisively.

"Right." Galen said as he started walking toward the door.

"Boys." He said from the doorway.

Collin and Christian both looked at him curiously.

"Have fun." Galen said with a mischievous smile and a wink before closing the door and locking it behind him.

* * * * *

"What do you want to do?" Collin asked with a hint of nervousness in his voice as he realized that they were alone.

"I think we should do like Marc said and start getting ready." Christian said as he started walking toward the bedroom.

Collin was confused by the reaction, but followed along slowly.

"Of course, getting ready involves us both showering... what do you say?" Christian asked with a devilish smile.

"I say 'yes'." Collin said a bit shyly.

"Um, there's one thing I think we should talk about before we do that." Christian said uncomfortably as he sat on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes.

"What's that?" Collin asked with concern.

Christian gestured for Collin to come over and sit down beside him.

"You know that thing we were talking about last night, you know, about not loving each other?" Christian asked as he seemed to be focused on his shoes.

"Yeah." Collin said quietly.

"I don't think I can do it." Christian said in a whisper. "I can't not love you."

"Me either." Collin said in a matching tone.

Christian turned his head and looked Collin in the eyes before quietly saying, "I *do* love you."

"I love you too, Christian." Collin said as tears started to well in his eyes.

Christian allowed his shoe to fall to the floor, then moved in to give Collin a firm hug.

"I'm scared." Collin whispered.

"Of what?" Christian asked, knowing he was also scared, but not sure of what.

"I'm scared of loving you, then something happening so I can't be with you." Collin admitted quietly.

"I know. When the lobster people rise up, they're going to keep us apart." Christian said with a weak smile.

"Yeah. That sounds just like them." Collin said with a chuckle.

"Face it Collin, all we've got is right now. When things finally do fall apart, do you want to look back at all the things we did or at all the things we wished we would have done?" Christian asked quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Collin said, "The first one."

Christian smiled and said, "Me too. What do you say? Do you feel like showering with me?"

"Yeah." Collin said, feeling completely at peace with the idea.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to do something." Christian said suddenly.

"What?" Collin asked with concern.

"This." Christian said as he moved in to give Collin a deep, firm kiss.

Involuntarily, Collin's arms snaked around behind Christian's back and pulled him closer.

Neither of the boys wanted the kiss to end, and neither resisted the pull of gravity that drew them back onto the bed.

Chapter 8

"Are we showering yet?" Collin asked between feverish kisses.

After another moment of trying to capture Collin's tongue with his own, Christian absently said, "Yeah. I think so."

Collin moved both of his hands down and grabbed Christian's butt firmly, drawing Christian in closer to grind against his crotch as he said, "Good. It's important to be clean."

Christian gasped with surprise at the sensation of being pulled on top of Collin, in between his legs. And at the hands on his butt, guiding him, forcing him to grind and hump so animalistically.

"Dirty can be good too." Christian whispered, barely remembering the conversation that they were almost having.

Collin worked his hands under Christian's shirt and slid them up his sides, not having any specific destination in mind but just roaming wherever the passion took them.

"I want you naked." Christian whispered into Collin's ear, then began to tongue his way down Collin's neck.

"Marc and my dad will be home soon." Collin whispered with regret.

"They've got to know what we're doing, so they won't barge in on us." Christian said assuringly, waiting to see what Collin's reaction was going to be.

"Is the door locked?" Collin asked as he started to pull off his shirt.

"No." Christian said with a grin as he quickly stood. "I'll get it."

"Wait. Don't." Collin said as he tossed his shirt aside. "I actually kind of like the idea that they could walk in on us at any moment."

"Hell yeah!" Christian said as he started shucking off his clothes like he was in a race.

When he was nearly finished, he noticed that Collin was sitting on the bed watching him, not making any move to undress.

"We don't have a lot of time. Hurry." Christian urged.

"You're beautiful." Collin said in an entranced whisper.

Christian smiled at the statement, then held out a hand to Collin, inviting him to take it.

When Collin did, Christian pulled him up to stand.

"Thank you." Christian said before moving in to give Collin a tender kiss.

When he felt a hand moved to his butt, he whispered against Collin's lips, "You need to lose those pants if you want anything good to happen."

"Oh, yeah." Collin whispered in return.

Collin made a valiant effort to take off his pants without breaking his kiss with Christian.

Christian moved his hands down Collin's back, then over his butt.

Taking a firm hold, he turned Collin slightly so he could guide them down to the bed together.

The way they landed on the bed, with Collin more or less on top, encouraged Collin to start thrusting his rampant erection into Christian's thigh.

Christian froze for a moment, then whispered, "Did you hear that? I think they're back."

Collin gave a low growl as his muscles tensed and he nearly vibrated with his passion.

"What do you want to do, Collin? We probably have time to do one thing." Christian whispered, trying to maintain his rational thought for just a moment longer. "You choose."

"Yeah." Collin gasped, then started sliding down the bed so he could get between Christian's legs.

When Christian realized what he was doing, he quietly said, "Swing around here and we can sixty-nine."

"Next time. You said it was my choice, so this time is all for you." Collin said, then started licking his way up the inside of Christian's thighs.

Even though Christian thought there was some reason he should protest, the ability to form words and sentences was temporarily beyond him.

As Collin began to engulf him, there was a slight tapping on the bedroom door.

"We're home." Marc called through the door.

"Okay!" Christian called out in a yelp.

"Don't take too long." Marc said with amusement in his voice.

"Yeah." Christian squeaked, then laid back and gently rested a hand on the back of Collin's head.

"Oh God!" Christian gasped when he felt the low humming in Collin's throat. "I've created a monster."

* * * * *

"You boys look like you had a good shower." Marc said knowingly, as the boys walked into the living room.

"The best." Collin giggled.

"You two look great!" Galen said with wonder at the sight of Collin and Christian both freshly showered and in their new clothes.

"Does my ear look okay?" Christian asked with concern. "It feels like it's about twelve times its normal size."

"The stitches are barely noticeable." Marc said with a grin as he examined the boys critically, then added, "Collin, come over here."

Collin hesitantly walked to Marc, not knowing what he intended to do.

"You've got to get used to wearing clothes like this." Marc said, as he tugged Collin's pants down slightly, then adjusted the waistband of his underwear, so it was even.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." Collin said timidly.

"I hardly recognize you." Galen said in amazement to his son.

"But you like it?" Collin asked cautiously.

"I love it. You look perfect." Galen said with a glowing smile.

"Both of you look perfect." Marc added with his own smile directed at Christian.

"Thanks." Christian mumbled shyly.

"Go ahead and grab anything you want to take with you. We need to leave soon." Marc said gently.

"Do you want to take your car?" Galen asked curiously.

"No. I think I'd rather take the Fairlane." Marc said seriously. "Even though we'll need to stop for gas, I think we'd all be more comfortable with the extra room."

Galen nodded his agreement.

"I just need to get my iPod and I'll be ready to go." Christian said thoughtfully.

"Grab your jackets, too. It might get chilly." Marc said seriously.

Collin and Christian gave identical nods, then hurried out of the room together.

"Do you think we need to have a talk with them about sexual responsibility? It looks like they're starting to get serious." Galen asked Marc quietly.

"We'll probably need to have that talk sometime, but not right now." Marc said peacefully. "I think the boys know that they can come to us and ask us about anything that's bothering them. Let's just let them have some time to enjoy what they've got."

"Yeah. Seeing them so happy... it's better than anything." Galen said with a smile at the doorway.

"Come here." Marc whispered.

Galen smiled and immediately moved into Marc's open arms.

"You're such a great dad." Marc said tenderly, then moved in to give Galen a gentle kiss.

"We're ready." Collin said from the living room doorway.

"Give us a minute." Marc said with a smile, then moved in to give Galen another kiss.

Collin and Christian both smiled at the sight, recognizing the love that Galen and Marc were feeling.

* * * * *

"So what can we expect when we get there?" Christian asked, when they were finally out on the open road.

"It's probably going to be like a visit to the dentist, except longer and more painful." Marc said frankly.

"Sounds nice." Christian said sarcastically.

"Well, just like going to the dentist, it's something that needs to be done, and we just have to get through it." Marc said apologetically.

"Is there anything we should not talk about or anyone we should watch out for?" Galen asked from the driver's seat.

Marc chuckled, then said, "No. If we're going to be damned, let's be damned for being ourselves."

"Are we going to be damned by them?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Oh yeah." Marc said with a sympathetic smile into the back seat. "That's pretty much a given."

"Why are we doing this, again?" Christian asked slowly.

"They're my family." Marc said simply.

At Christian's expectant gaze, Marc continued, "We need to do this so they'll understand that you're my family, too. I love you guys. So whether they accept or reject us doesn't really matter."

Christian seemed to consider the words for a moment, then he finally said, "Yeah. We *are* a family."

"Will there be anyone else around our age there?" Collin asked Marc cautiously.

"Oh yeah. I have quite a few nieces and nephews." Marc said cheerfully.

"Good." Christian said before Collin could respond. "That'll give us something to do."

At Collin's questioning look, Christian continued, "We can search through the kids to see if there's anyone worth hanging around with. That should kill a few hours."

"Plan." Collin said with a nod.

Marc smiled as he glanced at the boys in the back seat.

* * * * *

"Are we there yet?" Collin asked in a playful, whiny kid's voice.

"Not yet." Galen chuckled.

"We've still got about an hour." Marc said with amusement.

"Do you want to listen to some music with me?" Christian asked to his side.

"Yeah. Sure." Collin said gently.

Christian took out his iPod, then offered one of the ear buds to Collin.

"I should have thought to bring a splitter so they could each have a pair of headphones." Galen said when he noticed.

"I think it works better this way." Marc said gently when he saw that Collin and Christian were cuddled together, each wearing one of the ear buds.

* * * * *

"Boys, we're here." Marc said into the back seat.

"Already?" Collin asked with disappointment as he sat up.

Marc chuckled at the response as he watched Galen pulling into the driveway in front of the expansive house.

"Oh my God! It's huge!" Christian said as he finally looked out the window.

"Yeah. Linda and Dave just moved in here about six months ago, so this is my first time seeing it." Marc said frankly. "It's bigger than I expected."

"They must be loaded." Christian said in awe.

"Not as far as I know, but they must be doing okay to have such a big house." Marc said frankly.

"So Linda is your sister, right?" Galen asked curiously.

"Right. And I don't think you'll need to worry about her." Marc said thoughtfully. "I wouldn't exactly call her 'accepting', but she doesn't go out of her way to be nasty to me."

"Sounds nice." Christian said sarcastically.

"Comparatively... yeah." Marc said anxiously.

"Who's that?" Collin asked as he noticed a car pull in behind them.

"My brother Frank and his wife Sandra." Marc said happily. "Come on, I want to introduce you."

Collin and Christian exchanged an uncertain look, then undid their seatbelts and slowly got out of the car.

By the time the boys were standing, Marc had already run to give his brother a firm hug.

"Maybe this won't be so bad." Galen said quietly to the boys.

At their matching incredulous stares, Galen quietly said, "Never mind."

"Come over here, guys." Marc said urgently.

Galen and the boys walked as a group to join Marc.

"Frank and Sandra, this is my boyfriend Galen, his son Collin and, with any luck, my soon-to-be son, Christian." Marc said happily.

"That's wonderful. I'm so happy for you." Frank said as he hugged his younger brother again.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Galen said for all of them to the timid woman at Frank's side.

"Yes. It's nice to meet you too." Sandra said quietly.

"Are you looking forward to this as much as I am?" Marc asked with amusement in his tone.

"You know it." Frank said with a weary chuckle.

"Can I have the keys so I can get the fig bars out of the trunk?" Sandra asked timidly.

"Do you need any help carrying things?" Galen asked her as she accepted the keys from her husband.

"No. But thank you." She said quietly as she walked to the back of the car.

"Would you boys get the cheese and crackers?" Galen asked as he held out the keys.

"Sure thing." Christian said immediately as he snatched the keys out of Galen's hand.

"And make sure the doors are all locked." Galen called after the boys.

"I hear that Jordan's been put away for a few years, so the cars will probably be safe." Frank said casually.

"I wasn't implying anything." Galen said quickly, concerned that he might have unintentionally insulted Marc's brother.

"Don't worry about it." Frank said easily. "I was just mentioning that one of our nephews, who has some habits that require large amounts of capital, won't be joining us this year. So all of our hubcaps should be safe."

"Should be." Marc said with a grin at his brother, then guided him to start walking when he noticed that Sandra had joined them with a platter of cookies.

* * * * *

When the door opened, a well dressed woman said, "Oh, look at all of you, come in, come in."

"Who's that?" Collin asked Marc in a whisper.

"Denise." Marc responded hesitantly.

"Oh Sandra! Don't you look lovely this evening. I just never get tired of seeing that dress."

"Hi Denise." Sandra said in her best attempt at being cheerful. "I see you've found a beautiful new dress for the occasion."

"Yes. And believe me, I had to search high and low to find it." Denise said in an exasperated tone.

"It's certainly festive." Sandra said consideringly, then sweetly added, "What a shame that they didn't have it in your size."

"Round one goes to the away team." Marc whispered as he watched Frank and Sandra walk past Denise into the wide open living room full of chatting people.

It took a moment for Denise to regain her composure before she turned to Marc and said, "I see you made it."

"Yeah. I guess my invitation got lost in the mail." Marc said simply.

"And I see you brought your... I don't know what you people call it." She said as she looked at Galen sourly.

"Boyfriend." Marc said simply.

"Who else do we have here?" Denise asked, as if not hearing Marc's response.

"This is Galen's son, Collin, and my soon-to-be son, Christian." Marc said firmly, watching carefully for Denise's reaction.

"You think you're going to adopt?" Denise asked slowly.

Marc nodded, bracing himself for whatever she was about to hit them with.

She shook her head as she said, "Those boys should be taught proper values in a good Christian home. The people of the great state of Florida won't let a couple of sodomite heathens adopt helpless children."

"First of all, Collin doesn't need to be adopted. He's Galen's son." Marc said firmly. "Second, our sexuality has nothing to do with our ability to raise children. Third..."

"It's none of your business." Galen interrupted.

Marc looked at Galen with surprise, then to his sister and nodded his agreement.

Denise seemed to be about to say something, but then seemed to think better of it and quietly said, "We're putting the kids in the family room, over there, until dinner."

Before anyone could respond to that, Denise walked to the front door and stepped outside.

After a long silent moment, Christian hesitantly asked, "Was she born a female?"

Marc and Galen both broke into chuckles at the question.

"Believe it or not, you're not the first person to ask me that." Marc said as he pulled Christian into a quick hug, then turned to Galen and said, "I'll get the boys settled in, then I'll join you in the living room."

* * * * *

"Come on in here so you can get to know the other kids." Marc said as he guided the pair into a room off the hall.

"I thought we'd be hanging out with you and dad." Collin said cautiously.

"What fun would that be?" Marc asked in a forced, cheerful voice that neither boy was buying. "Take the chance to meet some new people, maybe you'll make some friends."

Before either boy could refute the statement, Marc guided them to a boy who was standing alone and looking out the window.

"Jorry, I'd like for you to meet Collin and Christian." Marc said cheerfully as he walked up to the boy and gave him a quick hug. "It's their first time here. Would you mind showing them around?"

"Sure thing, Uncle Marc." Jorry said as he briefly returned the hug.

"I'll be in the living room if you guys need me for anything." Marc said to Collin and Christian quickly. "I don't want to leave Galen at their mercy for too long."

"We'll be fine." Christian said assuringly to Marc as he watched him go.

* * * * *

"So, Jorry. What's up?" Collin asked casually.

"My name is Jorry. That's short for Jor-El." The boy said automatically, then continued with full sarcasm, "And I'm just here, basking in the holiday spirit."

Christian heard Jorry's words and smiled as he said, "I think we already have a winner."

At Jorry's questioning look, he continued, "We were planning to search for a favorite person to hang around with while we're here... it looks like you're it."

"Hey! Do you guys want to sing some Christmas carols?" An older boy asked with excitement as he approached the trio.

"I don't think so." Collin said with a wince.

"No." Christian said firmly.

"I'd rather impale myself on a candy cane." Jorry said with a note of disgust.

"Oh, come on! It'll be fun!" the boy asked with an almost maniacal level of Christmas cheer.

Before Collin or Christian could think of what to say, Jorry looked the boy in the eyes and said, "Fuck off, Brucey."

Bruce blinked at the crude response, then shrugged and started humming Christmas carols to himself as he wandered away.

"Is he for real?" Christian asked with wonder.

"Nope." Jorry said immediately. "He's fake all the way to the bone."

Christian nodded that he could easily believe the assessment.

"But if he can find an excuse to get you alone, he'll suck your dick." Jorry added unenthusiastically.

"Really?" Collin asked with surprise.

"Yeah. But don't get too excited about it." Jorry said frankly. "He's not that good."

"Well, even a bad blowjob is still pretty good." Christian said cautiously.

"I guess so." Jorry said with a noncommittal shrug. "But Brucey just makes it feel... dirty. Like he's doing you this big favor while he's doing it, then like it's all your fault when he's done. I guess in his mind, doing it that way makes him not gay."

"That doesn't sound like too much fun." Collin said quietly.

"Just like anything else in this family, something that's supposed to be fun is made into something ugly." Jorry said absently, then added. "Unfortunately, the 'dickhead gene' is very strong in the Stone family."

"You seem to be immune." Collin said carefully, not quite used to such barbed sarcasm.

"Those that have it, don't seem to realize just how lame they are. I keep fighting it but..." Jorry said and ended with another shrug.

"I guess that when you stop fighting, you'll know it's too late." Christian said with a grin.

Jorry nodded, then asked, "By the way, who the hell are you guys?"

Christian fought to keep from laughing as he said, "I'm Christian Stone and this is my boyfriend, Collin Anderson."

Jorry blinked, then slowly said, "Wait. I thought Uncle Marc was the one who hooked up with a guy named Anderson."

"He did, that's my dad." Collin offered hesitantly.

After a moment of mulling it over, Jorry shook his head and said, "I'm sure I'll hear the whole story a few dozen times before the night's over... you know, in whispers, like it's some big dirty secret."

"It's no secret." Collin said frankly. "My dad and Marc don't hide who they are or what they mean to each other from anyone."

Jorry seemed to ponder the words, as if he couldn't imagine anyone living that way.

"But I'll tell you what *is* a dirty secret." Christian said in a playful, conspiratorial tone. "Collin touched me... down there."

Jorry feigned a look of shock at Collin, then said, "You naughty boy."

Collin felt the blush rising up his face and couldn't think of any way to respond.

"God! I love it when he does that." Christian chuckled.

"At least you'll have someone to help get you through this thing." Jorry said frankly.

"How bad does it get?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Think of your worst nightmare. Then you're almost there." Jorry said sourly. "Oh yeah, and for an added bonus, after dinner Grandpa is going to want to get all the kids to sit around while he reads 'Twas the Night Before Christmas'."

"I've seen stuff like that on TV. It doesn't seem so bad." Christian said cautiously.

"It's boring as hell. It's uncomfortable. And by the time he's done, your butt will be numb." Jorry said grimly.

"Hmmm... I think we could come up with a few uses for a numb butt." Christian said with a wink at Collin.

Jorry chuckled at the statement, then said, "Maybe it won't be so bad with you guys here."

"Do you have any hints for surviving one of these family get togethers?" Christian asked hopefully.

"Just be quiet and try to stay under their radar. Keep telling yourself that it will eventually end and that you won't have to go through it again for another year." Jorry said frankly.

"Plan." Christian said with a decisive nod.

Collin smiled to relate his agreement.

* * * * *

"I guess since this is your first time, you don't know who any of these people are." Jorry said frankly.

"Nope. And Marc didn't even give us any warning on the way here about what to expect." Collin said honestly.

"I doubt that Uncle Marc knew what to say. I've never heard him say an unkind word about anyone... and I can't think of too many kind words to say about this bunch." Jorry said as he looked around.

"That bad?" Collin asked quietly.

"No. Worse." Jorry said frankly. "I suppose I'd better give you the lowdown so you'll know what you're dealing with."

"That girl with the big hair, that's Kirsten. She's a bipolar drama queen." Jorry said casually. "If you catch her in a lucid moment, she's tolerable. When her meds are balanced, she's toward the top of the family list. On a bad day... avoid. No matter what you say to her, there's no right answer and she'll draw you into a fight."

"How do you know if she's having a good or bad day?" Collin asked cautiously.

"By the height of her hair." Jorry said without having to give it a moment of thought. "And from the look of her tonight, we shouldn't even be in the same room with her."

Collin and Christian exchanged a cautious look at the statement.

"Of course, you've already met Brucey." Jorry said as he looked to Kirsten's right. "I suppose that I should warn you about him. He'll stab you in the back in a heartbeat. Anything you say to Brucey will most likely be repeated and used against you."

"Nice." Christian said sarcastically.

"In his mind, he's perfect so he feels justified pointing out the faults in others." Jorry said with a shrug. "I think it's some Christian voodoo thing about casting the first stone."

"Should I take that comment personally?" Christian asked playfully.

At Jorry's uncomprehending look, Christian clarified, "My name is Christian Stone..."

"Oh yeah... Clever." Jorry said flatly, then glanced past Brucey and said, "The twins over there are Erik and Erika."

"Do they always dress the same or is that just a Christmas thing?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I'm not sure. They're from up here, so I usually only see them at Christmas." Jorry said frankly.

"Where are you from?" Collin asked curiously.

"Orlando." Jorry answered simply.

"Us too." Collin said with a smile.

"I thought so, since you came with Uncle Marc." Jorry said frankly.

"So what are the wonder twins like?" Christian asked curiously.

"Blond, beautiful, and dumb as a box of rocks." Jorry said in a considering voice. "As long as you're not expecting them to do anything more interesting than stand there and be beautiful... they're alright."

"Who's the old guy watching TV?" Christian asked curiously.

"Uncle Chuck." Jorry said unenthusiastically. "He's a sports zombie. Nothing outside of ESPN exists to him."

"Sounds like fun." Christian said sarcastically.

"Yeah." Jorry said with an ironic chuckle. "He's 'watching us' while the other adults are doing their thing in the living room."

"I can think of worse things." Christian said honestly.

"I hate him." Jorry said flatly.

The words were so casual and flippant that it would be easy to disregard them, but Christian caught a tinge of sincerity in Jorry's expression.

"Why?" Christian asked, in spite of himself.

Jorry stopped for a moment, as if only just considering the thoughts behind his words. Finally he said, "Uncle Chuck pays more attention to the TV than to me, or anyone else. I hate him for that. I'm a person who is worthy of people's time and attention... at least, that's what my therapist tells me."

"You're in therapy?" Collin asked curiously.

"Not at the moment. But I have been... a few times. I guess it's nice that my parents have the money to pay someone to listen to me and act like they care."

"Is it?" Christian asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Jorry shrugged and said, "Well, no. But it beats the alternative."

"Who's that kid watching us?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Which kid?" Christian asked, impressed at the number of offspring the Stone family produced.

"The kid over by the fire, the one in the purple shirt." Collin said as he fought the urge to point.

"Don't worry about him. That's my little brother Nick." Jorry said absently.

"Is he alright?" Collin asked cautiously.

Christian smiled at the question and said, "I think what Collin wants to know is if he's been overcome by the 'dickhead gene' yet."

"Oh no." Jorry said with a smirk. "He's a pain in the ass sometimes, but I wouldn't trade him for any other kid in this house."

Christian looked around, then hesitantly said, "I don't know if that's saying much."

"You've got a point." Jorry admitted, then said, "But Nick is alright. He's just shy around new people, so he's watching us to see if you guys are okay."

"Why don't you tell him we're alright so he can join us?" Collin asked hopefully.

"Because I'm not sure that you *are* alright... I mean, since I found out that you touched Christian... down there." Jorry finished with a devilish smile.

As expected, Collin blushed at the words and Christian fought to contain his giggles.

"Before we go over there, there's one thing that you need to know." Jorry said seriously.

Collin and Christian both settled down and gave Jorry their full attention.

"No one is allowed to tease Nick about his name." Jorry said firmly.

Christian nodded his agreement as Collin cautiously asked, "What's wrong with his name?"

"I told you about the 'dickhead gene', well it went into full bloom when it was time to name us. I've learned to put up with the stupid jokes, but Nick is younger and hasn't learned not to take it personally yet."

"It's his name... that's pretty personal." Christian said quietly.

"Yeah. But one of these days he'll figure out that it's *their* fault." Jorry said as he tilted his head in the general direction of the living room. "Then he can join me on my quest for revenge."

"No teasing. I promise." Collin said seriously.

"Oh no! You can go ahead and tease the hell out of him. It's good for him. Just don't tease him about that one thing." Jorry said quickly.

"Got it." Christian said with a nod.

"Good. Then let's go over by the fire and see if he wants to hang around with us." Jorry said with a smile, then became more serious as he looked at Collin and said, "But I'm watching you."

Collin flashed a scorching look at Christian before walking with Jorry toward the fireplace.

* * * * *

"The flames look like angels' wings." Nick said absently as the three boys approached.

"Oh yeah. I forgot to mention that he's a little pyromaniac too." Jorry said with a grin.

Nick gave a little shrug, obviously not the least bit concerned by the comment.

"I checked out the new guys and I think they're okay." Jorry said more gently.

"The 'dickhead gene' hasn't kicked in yet?" Nick asked as he looked Collin and Christian over.

"Not yet... and Christian is the only one you've got to worry about. Collin isn't a Stone." Jorry said carefully.

Nick pointed and asked, "Christian?"

Christian nodded and gave Nick an assuring smile.

"And you're Collin."

"Yeah. Nice to meet you." Collin said quietly.

"I was just filling them in on who everyone is." Jorry said casually.

"Did you warn them about Kirsten?" Nick asked immediately.

"First thing." Jorry said with a grin at his brother.

Nick turned to look at Collin and Christian before saying, "She has issues."

"Like you don't." Jorry said with a chuckle.

Nick shrugged, not bothering to dispute his brother's comment.

"Brucey hasn't been bothering you, has he?" Jorry asked his brother cautiously.

"Nah. He knows better." Nick said with a grin up at his older brother. "He knows that you'd break his dick off if he tried anything."

"You'd better believe it." Jorry said firmly.

Collin and Christian shared a smile at the exchange.

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah! YEAH!" Chuck screamed at the TV, then thrust his arms into the air. "Shit YEAH!"

Jorry glanced at him for a moment to see if he was done, then looked back to Collin and Christian and said, "Score-gasm."

"Oh." Christian chuckled.

"He's gonna send Kirsten to get him a beer now." Nick said seriously.

"Honey!" Chuck said as he motioned to the girl with the too-tall hair.

She immediately let out an indignant huff and rolled her eyes, then stomped toward the door.

"It looks like you've got this 'family holiday' thing all worked out." Christian observed.

"All the world is but a stage and we are merely players." Jorry said poetically, then added, "When you've seen this show a few times, it's easy to figure out what comes next."

"Jorry." Nick said in an anxious voice.

"What?" Jorry asked automatically.

When Jorry looked down, he noticed that Nick was pointing at the open door.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Jorry asked with concern.

"I think it's going to be bad tonight." Nick whispered, obviously meaning for only his brother to hear.

"Bad? How?" Jorry asked cautiously.

"I just saw him go past." Nick said with another glance at the doorway. "He's been drinking."

Jorry let out a sigh of resignation, then said, "I guess it's official. The holiday can begin."

"What's wrong?" Collin asked with concern, not able to hold it back anymore.

"Our dad, when he drinks... the 'dickhead gene' pretty much takes full control." Jorry said quietly.

"How bad does it get?" Christian asked darkly.

"Usually he just turns into a loud obnoxious asshole." Jorry said quietly.

"And other times?" Christian asked in a leading tone.

"Well, sometimes he gets real friendly and wants to play with us... and he gets really rough." Jorry said with a worried look toward the living room.

"Not this time." Collin said seriously.

"What?" Jorry asked with confusion.

"Christian, what do you think dad and Marc would say if we asked them if Jorry and Nick could stay over at our place tonight?" Collin asked carefully.

"I'm pretty sure they'd go for it, and if we told them the reason, then I know they would." Christian said thoughtfully.

"Jorry, do you think your mom would let you?" Collin asked firmly.

"Stay with you? Over at Uncle Marc's house?" Jorry confirmed. "I think her answer would be either 'no' or 'hell no'."

"Why?" Collin asked with confusion.

"Because Uncle Marc's gay." Jorry said frankly.

"So?" Collin asked in puzzlement.

"You really don't know?" Jorry asked cautiously.

Collin shook his head and waited, hoping someone would explain it.

"My mom thinks gay people molest little kids." Jorry said carefully.

"Why would she think that?" Collin asked, barely able to comprehend such a sweeping generalization.

"I guess because her preacher must have said it." Jorry said with a shrug.

"She believes that whatever he says comes straight from God."

"You've got a really screwed up family." Christian said frankly. "And coming from me, that's saying something."

Jorry nodded with regret.

"No. We're not going to let it go that easily." Collin said with renewed commitment.

"Do you have a plan?" Christian asked cautiously.

"No. But we're not going to leave these guys to have to face their father when he's drunk. Someone has to do something about it and it looks like we're it." Collin said firmly.

"Maybe we should talk to the dads." Christian said slowly.

Collin shook his head, then said, "They'll try to talk us out of it and tell us it's none of our business."

"Well, actually, it isn't." Christian said with an apologetic look at Jorry.

"When one of my friends is being hurt, I make it my business." Collin said with determination, then continued more quietly, "The only way this will work is if you guys are with me."

"Yeah. Sure." Christian said quickly. "I got nothing to lose."

Jorry shrugged and said, "I guess it beats just accepting it."

"What about you, Nick? Do you understand what we're talking about?" Collin asked gently.

"Yeah. Let's do it. I'd want to go stay at Uncle Marc's even if Dad *wasn't* about to turn into a total asshole."

"Good. Because we need to go into the living room and do this before I lose my nerve." Collin said with a smile.

"What do you need us to do?" Jorry asked cautiously.

"Just show me which one is your mom, then back me up when it's time." Collin said seriously.

"Do you know what you're going to say?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I don't have a clue." Collin continuing the exact same, serious, tone of voice.

Christian began to chuckle and said, "Marc called it. You're just like your dad."

* * * * *

"Mrs. Stone?" Collin asked cautiously, now much less sure of himself.

"I'd prefer it if you'd call me Aunt Ruth."

"Yes Ma'am... I mean Aunt Ruth. Christian and I were wanting to know if it would be alright if Jorry and Nick came over to spend the night at our house." Collin said carefully.

Ruth glanced toward Marc, then said, "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not? We live in the same town and I know that the guys would have fun over at our place." Collin persisted.

"We wouldn't want to disrupt the Christmas plans..." Ruth said in a somewhat flustered voice.

"What plans are those? The plan where your husband gets drunk and hurts one of the kids?" Collin asked as his anger began to rise.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Ruth said in a gasp.

Before Collin could dig himself in too deep, Christian stepped forward and said, "Sure you do. You know how it is. He gets liquored up and thinks it would be a lot of fun to play with Jorry and Nick. Fun for him anyway. I've been through it with my own dad, and I'm here to tell you, it ain't fun for the kid being played with."

"Jor-El. Nixon. What have you been telling these boys?" Ruth asked in an authoritative voice that drew the attention of everyone in the room.

"They didn't tell us nothin." Christian said as he looked her in the eyes.

"When I arrived at the airport a couple days ago, my dad was already drunk and ready to play. That's where I got this black eye and the stitches in my ear."

"I saw it when Jorry and Nick noticed that their father was drinking. Both of them knew what was coming. That's why we're in here. We're asking you if we can take them over to our house to protect them... since you obviously won't."

"Nolan has NEVER hurt the boys." Ruth said, feeling the stares of everyone in the room.

"Do you mean he hasn't broken any bones yet? Or that he hasn't drawn blood yet? Because I could see it in how they reacted to seeing their father drunk. He *has* hurt them." Christian said seriously.

"Boys." Marc said quietly as he approached with Galen at his side.

"And if the only reason you won't let them come over to our house is because Marc is gay and he might molest them. I'll tell you right here in front of everybody. Jorry and Nick will be safe. I'll watch out for them myself. I *will* protect them." Christian said as a proud declaration.

"Is that why you never let the boys visit?" Marc asked as he looked at his sister-in-law with shock.

"It's unnatural. It's against God's will." Ruth muttered, as though she was repeating words that she was being told without understanding what they meant.

"Ruthie, you've known me since I was younger than Nicky. I would never hurt anyone, much less a child." Marc said as he tried to will her to meet his gaze.

"I'm trying to raise my children to believe in Jesus and to know that people like you are wrong." Ruth said as she seemed to regain at least a little of her coherence.

"That would be the blond haired, blue eyed, American Jesus, I assume." Galen said simply. "You know, the one that looks down on anyone who isn't straight, white, wealthy, protestant and in perfect health."

Ruth turned her attention toward Galen, but seemed at a loss how to respond.

"Just remember that Jesus didn't rub shoulders with the elite. He walked among the prostitutes and tax collectors. He was a living example of what he asked of his followers." Galen said firmly, then asked, "Tell me, Ruth, have you ever actually spoken to a homeless person? A street walker?"

"Thanks, Dad, but I think we're waaaaay off topic now. I'm trying to get Aunt Ruth to let Jorry and Nick come over and spend the night." Collin said seriously.

"You have an interesting way of asking." Galen said with a grin.

"I learned it from you." Collin said, then noticed that everyone was watching them.

"Maybe we should just leave." Marc said as he looked around the family gathering.

"You will NOT!" A strong female voice said from across the room.

Everyone turned to look at an elderly woman in a wheelchair glaring at the group with icy menace.

"Grandma Ellen, I was just..." Ruth began to say, but was silenced when the old woman's glare moved to her alone.

"Ruthie, if you want to fuss and worry about something, be a proper wife and attend to that husband of yours. If the boys want to have a sleep-over at Marc's house, what harm could it do?"

"He's a homosexual! And they're just helpless little babies." Ruth said as tears started streaking down her cheeks.

"Don't turn the water works on for me, Ruthie. I've seen it. I'm not impressed." Ellen said frankly, then turned to Marc and said, "Marc. You hurt those boys and you'll answer to me. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am." Marc said immediately.

"And he knows I mean it." Ellen said in Ruth's direction. "The boys will be as safe as in your arms... maybe safer, considering the condition of your husband. Where did Nolan run off to?"

"I just saw him puking on the roses out front." A voice said from amongst the family lounging around the room.

"Ruthie. Try to get some coffee into him and see if you can get him sober enough to sit at dinner with us." Ellen said with a pained expression, then looked around the room and said, "The rest of you. Nora and Gene have gone to a lot of trouble to put together this family celebration. When they get out of the kitchen, you'd better look like you're having the time of your lives. Got it?"

A chorus of "Yes Ma'am." sounded through the room as Ruth ran out.

"Are we hosting a sleep-over?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Yeah. You don't mind, do you?" Christian asked with a grin.

"No. But it might have been nice to have been asked." Marc said seriously.

"I'm sorry, Marc. We were just worried..." Christian began to say, but was interrupted.

"Uncle Marc?" Nick asked quietly.

"What is it, Nicky?" Marc asked gently, then squatted down to be on Nick's eye level.

"Please don't be mad at Christian and Collin. They was only trying to help us." Nick said softly.

Marc smiled and said, "I'm not mad at all, Nicky. I was just telling Christian so he'll know to ask first next time."

"Next time? So we'll get to do it again?" Nick asked hopefully.

Marc thought for a moment, then said, "Let's see how tonight goes first."

"How is everyone doing in here?" An older man asked as he walked into the living room.

Collin and Christian had to fight to keep from laughing at the way everyone started acting like they were having a good time, all at once.

"Let's get out of here. Now I understand why all the old people are kept in a separate room." Jorry said as he guided Nick to walk with him.

"Plan." Christian said, then on impulse, gave Marc a quick hug.

"See ya at dinner." Collin said to his father, then gave him a quick hug and a peck of a kiss on the cheek.

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"You've got some special boys there." A voice said from behind Galen and Marc.

"Jon! I didn't see you come in." Marc said with a smile and gave the man a quick, friendly hug.

"We just got here a few minutes ago." Jon said happily, then asked, "How are you doing, Galen? How are you liking the car?"

"I'm good, and the car is great. I love it." Galen said with a smile.

"As I was saying, I'm impressed by those boys. What's your secret?" Jon asked in what appeared on the surface to be a casual voice.

"Actually, I think we're just lucky. I don't really know of anything we've done that is any different from any other parent." Galen said frankly.

Jon nodded at the response.

"What's up, Jon? Is something wrong with the kids?" Marc asked with concern.

"Well, I'm sure you've heard about Jordan." Jon said hesitantly.

"Not really. Frank mentioned something about it when we got here but I don't know any details." Marc said quietly.

"He got sent up for five years on a list of charges as long as your arm." Jon said quietly. "The next day, his girlfriend dropped the kids off at our house, then she skipped town."

"Ouch." Marc said with a wince.

Jon nodded, then said, "Hailey is away at college, so it's just me and Elaine dealing with everything... we thought we were done raising kids."

"From what I hear, you're never really done raising them." Galen said gently. "I don't know anything about your family, but from the sound of it, I can imagine that your son probably needs his father more now than he ever did before."

Jon seemed to consider the words for a moment, then quietly said, "I didn't think of that."

"As you may have noticed, my son seems to have inherited some rather... proactive tendencies." Galen said carefully, then quickly added, "From his mother."

"Right." Marc said with a roll of his eyes.

"It might get him into trouble someday. And whether I agree with him or not, I know that I'll be there afterward to help him pick up the pieces." Galen said frankly.

"Yeah. And I think I just figured out your parenting secret." Jon said with a weak smile. "You never give up."

"That's actually his secret to everything." Marc said with a fond smile at Galen.

"I guess it's an Anderson thing." Galen said happily.

"So where is Elaine? I bet she needs a hug from her baby brother right now." Marc said as he looked around.

"I don't know. Linda took her somewhere when we arrived so she could take care of the babies." Jon said quietly.

"I'm going to go find her." Marc said decisively. "And I haven't seen Linda yet either."

"Then you'd better go. This is her house, after all." Jon said with a smile at Marc.

Marc was about to leave, then paused and looked at Galen with question.

"I'll hang around here with Jon. If nothing else, we can talk about cars." Galen said with a reassuring smile.

Marc returned the smile, then dashed off to find his sister.

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"Thanks, guys." Jorry said as they walked back into the family room.

"I hope we didn't cause too much trouble for you by doing that." Collin said cautiously.

"Mom will probably milk it for a few months, like she's the victim somehow. But if it wasn't this, it would have been something else." Jorry said frankly. "The drama never ends."

"I need a kiss." Christian whispered into Collin's ear.

Much to Christian's surprise, Collin turned and gave him a quick, firm kiss.

It wasn't passionate, and it only lasted a few seconds, but Collin did it without the slightest hint of hesitation or embarrassment.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Nick asked with surprise at the action.

"Yeah." Collin said happily.

"My boyfriend's name is Danny." Nick said with a smile.

"Shhh... you shouldn't talk about that here. Someone might hear you." Jorry warned as he looked around.

Collin and Christian exchanged looks of concern.

"I know what you're thinking, you know, about pride and stuff. But you saw our mom out there." Jorry said frankly. "Imagine being ten years old and having *that* turned on you, full blast, all day, every day."

"Got it." Collin said with a nod.

"Yeah. I know that I couldn't handle it." Christian said honestly.

"But when you're over at Marc's house with us, we can talk about it all you want." Collin said to Nick assuringly.

"Okay." Nick said happily.

"Excuse me." A voice said from behind them.

Collin noticed that it was the nurse that had been pushing Grandma Ellen's wheelchair.

"Mrs. Stone asked me to come and invite you to speak with her." the woman said seriously.

"Which one of us?" Collin asked curiously.

"All four of you." the nurse said simply.

Looks of question went around the group, and in some undefinable manner a consensus was silently reached.

The group of boys gathered behind the nurse and followed her out of the room.

Chapter 9

"Please don't think too badly of me, but if Denise swoops in to attack, I'm out of here." Jon said bluntly.

"That's okay, Jon. I understand." Galen said with a chuckle. "She really does hate gay people, doesn't she?"

"Oh yeah." Jon said with a smirk at the understatement, then quietly added, "And she hates Marc in particular."

"I can see that, but I don't understand why." Galen said gently. "Marc is such a decent, wonderful person. I can't imagine anyone not loving him."

"Well, I think that's actually part of the problem." Jon said frankly. "She lost her high school sweetheart to Marc."

"Really? Marc never mentioned anything about that." Galen said inquisitively.

"I wasn't there personally, but from what Elaine has said, it sounds like they were a group of teenagers discovering themselves and each other. In the end, Denise got hurt and Marc ended up with Javier."

Galen stared at Jon with surprise.

"All these years later, Javier is long since gone, but the hurt still remains."

"So that's why Denise hates him so much." Galen said with a shake of his head.

"Well, yeah. That and the fact that Marc is prettier than she is." Jon said frankly.

"You think so, too?" Galen asked with a smile.

"Galen. I may be straight, but I'm not blind." Jon said with a grin.

"I wasn't implying anything about you. I just love Marc so much that I'm not sure that I'm seeing him objectively." Galen said honestly.

"Galen, my friend, I sincerely hope that you can stay in that love induced fog for as long as possible. Reality isn't all that it's cracked up to be."

"Seriously Jon, how bad is it?" Galen asked gently.

Jon seemed to be considering for a moment, then a look of resignation came into his expression.

"This thing with Jordan has really thrown a wrench into everything. The money was a little bit tight before, due to Hailey's college expenses, but we could have managed it."

"And now?" Galen prompted.

"Now... the bills from Jordan's lawyer just keep coming and coming. Plus we have Jaxon and Jazmine to take care of. My insurance doesn't cover them and they're both underweight. The doctor bills are going to add up quick."

"Let me ask you something." Galen interrupted.

Jon stopped and looked at Galen with question.

"Knowing what you do now, what would you have done differently?" Galen asked simply.

Jon thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"So you've done your best and things still went to hell. That's how life works sometimes. Just remember that you've got your friends and family to help, if you need it."

"I'm not going to ask anyone for money." Jon said immediately.

"That's your choice." Galen said simply. "But what I was thinking was maybe getting one of your sisters or brothers-in-law to babysit the twins so you and your wife can take a break and spend some time with just the two of you as a couple. After that, the two of you should be able to look at your situation and decide what's next."

"I thought you were a computer designer, not a therapist." Jon said with a smirk.

"I'm a computer designer who recently had to decide if his marriage was worth saving. So I've done a little research and have an idea about some of the pitfalls and priorities. You and Elaine need each other right now. Everything else won't seem nearly so big and overwhelming when you're facing it together."

After a moment of thought, Jon nodded and said, "I think you're right. Elaine really could use a break from all of it."

"I know that Marc will want to help as much as I do." Galen said sincerely, then added, "But just so you know, Collin's mother took care of him most of the time when he was a baby. I'd be willing to babysit one weekend, but you'd have to show me what to do."

Jon smiled at the offer, then said, "After I've talked with Elaine, I may be getting back with you about that."

"Good." Galen said happily, then added more seriously, "And if you need any other kind of help, keep us in mind for that, too."

"I will." Jon said past his welling emotions.

"I wonder what's taking Marc so long." Galen said as he glanced at the doorway, trying to change the subject to prevent Jon further discomfort.

"When you're with the babies, it's easy to lose track of time." Jon said, as he followed Galen's gaze.

"Yeah. I remember losing quite a few hours in the rocking chair when Collin was an infant." Galen said in fond remembrance.

"Good. Then you have the kind of baby experience that's most important." Jon said with a grin.

At Galen's questioning look, Jon continued, "Anyone can see that they're fed and changed. But I need to know that they'll be with people who'll love them. After what their mother did... they deserve at least that much."

"They'll get it. I promise." Galen said gently.

* * * * *

"Thank you, Ginny." Mrs. Stone said as the four boys followed the nurse into the room.

"Come over here, Nick and give your Grandma Ellen a hug."

Nick glanced nervously at his brother, then reluctantly took the few steps to his great grandmother and gave her a very gentle hug, seemingly afraid of hurting her if he held her too tightly.

"Such a good boy." Grandma Ellen said, as she patted his back.

Nick took this as an indication that the hug was over and pulled away.

Without prompting, Jorry took his brother's place and very carefully gave the elderly woman a hug.

"Look at you, Jorry. You're getting so big." Grandma Ellen said with a tone that was sort of a weary amusement.

"Yeah. I've been working on it." Jorry said quietly.

Grandma Ellen chuckled, then gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek as she patted his shoulder.

Collin and Christian both recognized that the patting seemed to be their code that the hug was finished.

Jorry took a step back and stood beside his brother, then glanced at Collin and Christian

"Now, who have we here?" Grandma Ellen asked as she looked Christian in the eyes.

The old woman's intense gaze took Christian by surprise and caused him to falter for a moment.

"Grandma Ellen, I'd like for you to meet my new friends, Christian Stone and Collin Anderson." Jorry said, somewhat formally.

"Stone, you say?" Grandma Ellen asked curiously.

"Yes Ma'am." Christian said respectfully. "Marc and I were both surprised when we found out that we had the same last name."

"What's your father's name?" Grandma Ellen asked, inquisitively.

"Nate... erm, Nathaniel." Christian said nervously.

Grandma Ellen sat silently for a moment, obviously casting her memory back and trying to find the name.

Finally she shook her head in defeat and asked, "Do you know your grandfather's name?"

"Dad wouldn't talk about him, but I think I remember my mom saying once that his name was Walter." Christian said reluctantly.

"Oh really?" Grandma Ellen asked with surprise.

"Did you know him?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I should say so!" Grandma Ellen said with delight.

Christian waited expectantly.

"Although, I never thought Walter would have any legitimate children to carry the family name." Grandma Ellen chuckled to the nurse over her shoulder. "He had a penchant for the married ladies."

When her attention turned back toward Christian, she could see the desperate questions in his eyes.

"Walter was the first member of the Stone family that I ever met." Ellen said distantly as she seemed to be looking into the past. "In fact, if not for Walter, I might not have ever met my Harry."

"So does that mean that I'm related to Marc?" Christian asked hesitantly.

"Well, if we assume that your Walter Stone is the same one I'm remembering, then yes. Let me see..." Grandma Ellen said as she drifted off, then looked to her nurse and asked, "Christian and Marc would be second cousins, right?"

"I'm not sure, but it sounds like they share a common great grandfather. If that's the case, then yes, they are second cousins." Ginny said thoughtfully.

"We'll look at it more later, just to be sure." Grandma Ellen said decisively. "Would you make a note, dear?"

"Yes Ma'am." Ginny said quickly, then rushed to grab a spiral bound notebook.

"Collin, was it?" Grandma Ellen asked as she turned her attention to him.

"Yes, Ma'am. Collin Anderson." Collin said shyly.

"And how did you come to be here with us?" Grandma Ellen asked curiously.

"My dad and Marc are a couple. So Marc invited us to come here tonight to meet his family." Collin said hesitantly, watching carefully for Ellen's reaction.

Ellen nodded slowly, then glanced at Christian and asked, "How is it that Marc brought you?"

"It's kind of a long story..." Christian said, reluctantly.

"The most interesting stories are." Grandma Ellen said with a grin.

Christian nodded, looking to be slightly more at ease.

"My parents divorced a few years ago. It was ugly. I guess the judge must have got as sick of it as the rest of us. So rather than making a real decision, he gave both of them shared custody of me." Christian said thoughtfully.

"Maybe if he would have picked one or the other of them to have custody, they might have been able to get over it and move on. But me having to travel back and forth between them has kept the hurt fresh and alive between them." Christian said reflectively, then quietly added, "I think maybe that they hate each other so much, that some of it spilled over onto me."

Grandma Ellen looked concerned, but nodded for him to continue.

"Well, since it's Christmas, it was time for me to be with dad. On the trip here, I met Collin." Christian said with a glance and a smile to Collin at his side.

"When we got to Orlando, Collin introduced me to his dad and Marc, and they invited me to come over and visit with them during the holiday... you know, just for something to do." Christian said as he returned the majority of his attention back toward Grandma Ellen. "They went home and then my dad showed up at the airport to pick me up."

Without thought, Collin moved closer to Christian and put one arm around him to offer him comfort.

Christian smiled at the move, then continued, "When my dad showed up, he was drunk... I mean, really drunk."

"I really don't remember what happened next very well. I must have said or did something to piss... I mean, make him mad." Christian said with an apologetic blush.

Grandma Ellen smiled and nodded for him to continue.

"Like I said, I don't remember much except that he punched and kicked me until the cops jumped in and dragged him off me." Christian said distantly.

Nick moved from beside his brother to Christian's other side and also began to hug him.

Christian smiled as he draped an arm around the younger boy and said, "The next thing I remember clearly is being in the ambulance and the cop there asking me if there was anyone they could call for me. I gave them Marc's card... and after a bunch of stuff, it ended up that Marc and Uncle Galen said that I could stay with them over Christmas and that they'd take care of me."

"How are they taking care of you?" Ellen asked gently.

Christian smiled and said, "I'm happier right now than I can ever remember being. Marc and Uncle Galen and Collin have been great."

"And their... proclivities... don't bother you?" Ellen asked cautiously.

Christian puzzled over the question for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Are you asking if it bothers me that they're gay?"

Ellen nodded and waited expectantly for an answer.

"Even if I wasn't gay, it still wouldn't bother me." Christian said thoughtfully, "Marc and Uncle Galen are both good people... probably the best people that I've ever met."

Ellen seemed to be considering the response, then looked at Collin with question.

"I'm gay too." Collin said proudly, "Christian and I are boyfriends."

Ellen seemed surprised by the declaration, then slowly turned to look at Jorry, standing on his own, a few feet away from the other boys.

"Jorry, are you going to be comfortable staying at Marc's house now that you know about this?" Ellen asked gently.

Jorry smiled at the question, then answered, "I don't think being gay or straight is really that important. What matters is if a person is good or bad. I know that Uncle Marc is a good person and these guys seem okay."

"My feelings exactly." Grandma Ellen said with an approving smile at Jorry. "After what I witnessed in the living room, I just wanted to be sure about what you were getting into. You and your brother are very special to me."

"We are?" Jorry asked cautiously.

Before Grandma Ellen could answer, a woman's voice from the hallway called, "Jorry honey, where are you baby?"

"Crap. It's mom." Jorry said under his breath.

At Grandma Ellen's curious look, Jorry explained, "She only calls me 'Jorry honey' when she wants something."

"I bet she's gonna try to stick us with 'The Pooper'." Nick said as he stepped to his brother's side.

"What's that?" Collin asked curiously.

"Our little sister. All she does is scream and poop." Nick said frankly.

"Nicky's right. Mom dumped 'The Pooper' on Aunt Linda when we got here, so I'm betting that Aunt Linda just found mom and gave her back." Jorry said as he looked at the door.

"And you believe your mother is going to make you watch after your sister while she enjoys the gathering?" Grandma Ellen asked curiously.

Jorry nodded.

"Unless she can find someone else to dump her on." Nick said with resignation.

"Why don't you boys go back to the family room now?" Grandma Ellen said sweetly, then glanced at Ginny and said, "I think I need to have a little talk with Ruth."

Ginny nodded once, then headed out of the room.

"Thanks Grandma Ellen." Jorry said as he moved in to give her a quick gentle hug.

"It's my pleasure Jorry." Ellen said with a chuckle as she returned the hug.

"I love you Grandma Ellen." Nick said as he took his turn.

"I love you too Nick." Grandma Ellen said, then gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Collin and Christian shared a smile at the touching scene.

"Come over here Christian. Until I have proof to the contrary, I'm considering you part of the family, so you're entitled to your share of hugs." Grandma Ellen said as she looked him in the eyes.

Christian seemed somewhat reluctant, but by the time he was receiving his hug, he appeared to be at peace.

"Come on Collin. Being my great-grand nephew's boyfriend makes you a part of the family too." Grandma Ellen said with delight.

Collin happily moved forward and hugged the elderly woman.

"You four should go and try to have some fun now. I'm sure dinner will be ready soon and you'll need to sit still and behave so it's best if you get it out of your system." Grandma Ellen said as she released Collin from the hug.

The four exchanged glances to see that everyone was ready, then moved as a group toward the door.

"There you are!" Ruth said as she walked into the room carrying a fussy baby. A moment later, Ginny followed her into the room.

"Come in Ruth, and have a seat. We need to talk for a minute." Grandma Ellen said seriously.

"Of course." Ruth said immediately, then turned to Jorry and asked, "Jorry honey, will you take your sister..."

"The boys are doing something for me right now, Ruthie. Come in and sit down." Ellen said in a more commanding voice.

Jorry was the first one out of the room, but was quickly followed by the others.

* * * * *

"How are you doing love?" Marc asked as he walked to Galen's side.

"I'm fine. Jon has been good company." Galen said with a smile.

"I just spent some quality time with your grandkids, Jon. Those are some beautiful babies." Marc said with a broad grin.

"Considering all the cards that have been stacked against them, I'd have to say that they're two little miracles." Jon said tenderly.

"Well, I can't argue with that." Marc said with a chuckle.

"I should go in and watch them for a while so Elaine can have some time to visit." Jon said as he glanced at the doorway.

"I think she'd like that." Marc said gently.

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"Grandma Ellen really saved our asses." Jorry said as they walked back toward the family room.

"Is it really that bad watching your sister?" Collin asked curiously.

"She screams and cries all the time." Jorry said frankly.

"And poops." Nick added from Jorry's side.

Jorry nodded his agreement, then continued, "You can't do anything else while you're taking care of her. You can't even think."

"There's Dad and Marc." Collin said as he pointed into the living room as they passed.

"They look like they're doing okay." Christian commented as they continued to walk.

"Give it time." Jorry said darkly.

Collin chuckled at the response as Jorry led the group across the room to what seemed to be his favorite place, by the window.

"Would one of you boys go down to the basement and find the serving platters for me?" An elegantly dressed woman asked as she poked her head in the doorway.

"Yeah, Aunt Linda. I'll do it." Brucie said as he bounded up from his chair on the other side of the room.

"I bet he's going to 'need help'. Does anyone want to go get a Christmas treat?" Jorry asked in a bored tone.

Christian looked at Collin with question, letting it be known with his expression that Collin was free to go if he wanted to.

"I think Christian has the only Christmas treat that I'm going to want." Collin said frankly.

Christian smiled at the answer and nodded, silently agreeing that he felt the same way.

"Would one of you guys help me? If the box with the platters is on a top shelf, I'll need help getting it off." Brucie asked as he approached.

Collin shook his head as Christian said, "No."

"It looks like you're going to need to get it off with someone else." Jorry said frankly.

"I'll help you." Erik said as he walked up to Brucie's side.

Brucie glanced at him appraisingly for a moment, then broke into a smile and said, "Great! Come on!"

There was a moment of silence as everyone watched them leave.

Finally, Collin asked, "Do you think Erik has any idea of what he's getting into?"

"Probably not." Jorry said thoughtfully, then seemed to cheer up as he said, "Maybe it'll be good for him, you know, like an early Christmas present."

"But how will he handle the way Brucie treats him afterward?" Collin asked with concern.

"Don't worry too much about that. Erik is clueless. Brucie's drama will probably fly right over his head. It may work out so everyone ends up getting what they want out of it. No harm, no foul."

"I hope so." Collin said quietly, not feeling particularly assured.

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"So, how did your visit go with your sister?" Galen asked pleasantly.

Marc chuckled before saying, "Well, if things get ugly, I think I'll have a few more allies."

Galen looked at Marc curiously.

"Linda and Dave are really upset with Denise, and Linda isn't at all happy with Ruth." Marc said frankly.

"I thought you said that Linda and Denise were close." Galen said cautiously.

"They always have been. But I guess Denise has been planning to have this get together at her house since Thanksgiving. Then, two days ago, it seems that Denise suddenly noticed that she lives in a small house and doesn't have anywhere near enough parking for everyone."

"So all of this was dumped on Linda at the last minute." Galen said speculatively.

"Yeah. Linda and Dave have been struggling with finances since buying this place, so they really didn't need this sudden stress on top of all of that." Marc said quietly.

"I can imagine." Galen muttered thoughtfully.

"So Linda's been running around for two days trying to pull things together. And Denise has been 'helping' by calling her constantly and telling her things that need to be done." Marc said with a withering look.

"Ouch. I can see why she'd be upset." Galen said with a wince.

"Oh, but Ruthie was the one to add insult to injury." Marc said with an ironic chuckle.

"How so?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I guess Linda and Denise were kind of tag-teaming the door, getting everyone settled in. When Ruth arrived, Linda let her in and wanted to see the baby... the next thing she knows, she's standing there, holding a screaming baby and Ruth is nowhere to be found." Marc said as he tried to restrain a chuckle.

"Oh no." Galen said, trying to not join Marc in laughter.

"So after all the work and worry of the past few days, the time is finally here and Linda is trapped in the back room trying to get Ruth's daughter to quiet down." Marc said with a shake of his head.

"Do you think we should go back and offer to help her out?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I already offered, but Linda wouldn't hear of it. It seems that her 'shit threshold' has been reached." Marc said bluntly, then quietly added, "Her words, not mine."

"What's she going to do?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I don't know, but I wouldn't want to be Ruthie or Denise when she does it." Marc said frankly.

"Well, if there's nothing that we can do to help Linda, I suppose all that's left for us to do is to get good seats for the show." Galen said with a smile.

Marc nodded his agreement, then thought to ask, "How was your visit with Jon?"

"We had a good talk, but from the sound of it, him and Elaine have their hands full." Galen said frankly.

Marc sadly nodded and said, "Elaine told me a little bit of what it was like going through the trial with Jordan... I can't even imagine what it must have been like."

"It's not over yet." Galen said regretfully. "From what Jon was saying, they're just about broke."

"Try 'in debt up to their eyes'." Marc said quietly.

"And they've got a daughter in college and two babies to care for." Galen said with a shake of his head.

Marc nodded, then quietly said, "I hope you don't mind, but I told Elaine that we'd be willing to watch the babies one weekend to give them a little time off."

"I don't think it will be a problem." Galen chuckled, then added more quietly, "I told Jon the same thing."

"How are you guys doing?"

"Linda. I'd like for you to meet my boyfriend, Galen." Marc said quickly.

"It's nice to finally meet you. I'm glad that my sister's plans were foiled and that you could make it." Linda said a bit shyly.

"I'm glad too. You have a beautiful home." Galen said warmly.

"Thank you. Have you met everyone?" Linda asked curiously.

"Not really. Everyone has been leaving us alone." Galen said honestly, "But all things considered, that may be best."

Linda chuckled then whispered conspiratorially, "Enjoy it while you can."

Galen smiled and said, "I'll do that."

Linda then turned to Marc and asked, "Have you seen Denise around?"

"She's over there by the snack table. Guarding it, I think." Marc said as he looked across the room.

Linda rolled her eyes, then muttered, "I bet she's trying to push people to eat those nasty crab puffs of hers."

"That sounds like something she'd do." Marc said with a grin.

Linda nodded, then said, "From the look of things in the kitchen, dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Marc asked hopefully.

"No. It's all just finishing touches at this point." Linda said seriously, then looked Marc in the eyes and said more quietly, "I'm really glad that you're here."

"I am too, Lin. It's good to see you." Marc said gently.

Linda smiled, then gave Marc a quick hug.

Galen watched and smiled, feeling that this moment had made the entire trip worth it.

* * * * *

"There's Brucie." Nick said as he looked at the door.

"Do you think they did it?" Collin asked, not being able to find any clues in Brucie's expression.

"Probably. Once Brucie gets you alone, it's pretty much going to happen." Jorry said frankly.

"I wonder where Erik is." Collin asked with concern.

"Maybe he went to his room. Him and Erika live here." Jorry said frankly.

"Oh, I didn't realize that." Collin said distractedly.

"You're really worried about him." Christian said with concern from Collin's side.

"Yeah." Collin admitted shyly. "I am."

"I'm sure he'll be alright." Jorry said, not sounding particularly certain of it. "Let's not worry about it."

"If that just happened to Nick, would you want him to be alone right now to figure it out by himself?" Collin asked seriously.

"No. I wouldn't want that." Jorry admitted quietly. "We can go and try to find him if you want."

"I think we should." Collin said, then turned at a movement and saw Erik walking slowly into the room.

The first thing that Collin noticed was that Erik looked worried.

"Let's go see how he's doing." Collin said decisively and started walking.

Jorry looked at Christian with question.

"I know. Just go with it. From what I hear, his dad's the same way." Christian said quietly as the group walked.

"How are you doing, Erik?" Collin asked as he approached.

Erik looked at Collin with confusion.

"Erik, this is Collin and this other guy is Christian." Jorry said quickly.

It appeared at first that Erik was about to speak, but after a moment it seemed more likely that he either didn't know what to say, or that if he tried to speak, he might burst into tears.

"Come on over here where we can talk." Jorry said and motioned for the group to follow him back to his secluded spot by the window.

Erik seemed to be hesitant at first, but eventually went along.

"It's okay Erik. You can talk to us." Jorry said quietly.

"But you don't like me." Erik whispered.

Jorry seemed to be about to refute the statement, then thought better of it.

"I don't *not* like you." Jorry offered weakly.

At Erik's uncomprehending stare, Jorry continued, "It's not like I hate you or anything. We just don't have anything in common."

"Until now." Christian said simply.

Erik glanced at Christian, then back at Jorry with question.

"You don't have to worry about us, Erik. We're not going to cause you any trouble. We can just see that something is bothering you and want to help if we can." Collin said gently.

"I think I did something wrong." Erik whispered.

"I think it's more likely that you were talked into doing something that you weren't ready for." Collin said gently.

Erik looked at Collin with surprise at the statement, then asked in a shuttering voice, "You know?"

Collin looked at Jorry to see if he wanted to explain.

"You aren't the only one Brucie has asked for help." Jorry said frankly.

"I thought... he said...." Erik stammered as tears filled his eyes.

"Don't worry about what he said." Collin said firmly, drawing Erik's attention. "Whatever Brucie said to you wasn't the truth, it was what he wanted the truth to be."

"Huh?" Erik asked with confusion.

Jorry shook his head in frustration, then looked Erik in the eyes and said, "Did Brucie talk you into doing something?"

Erik hesitantly nodded.

"And when it was done, did he tell you that you had done something bad and that it was your fault?" Jorry asked carefully.

Erik nodded again.

Jorry seemed to falter and looked to Collin and Christian helplessly.

"Erik, what you did wasn't wrong, you just did it with the wrong person." Collin said gently. "When it's with the right person, it's wonderful and it makes you feel beautiful and special and... just perfect."

"But... does this mean I'm gay?" Erik asked in a whisper.

"No." Christian said immediately. "Something like this doesn't mean anything like that at all."

"He's right, Erik. Someday you'll fall in love with a woman... or a man. And when that happens, you'll know if you're gay or straight." Collin said seriously.

Erik looked around the group as he seemed to be considering the words.

"I'm not sure which way I am yet." Jorry admitted shyly. "So you're not alone."

"It sounds like you two have something else in common now that you can talk about." Christian said with a smile.

"Yeah." Jorry said to Christian, then turned to Erik and said, "If you ever need to talk about this stuff, or anything else, you can call me."

Erik considered the words for a moment, then hesitantly smiled and said, "Yeah."

Collin smiled, relieved that Erik seemed to be feeling better.

"So, did all you guys... do that with Brucie?" Erik asked cautiously.

"No. Just me." Jorry said carefully. "But I know he's been with David and Will... and Jordan."

Erik's eyes went wide at the admission, then he hesitantly asked, "But what should I do... I don't want that to happen again."

"Now that you know what he's really asking when he asks for your 'help', you can just tell him 'no'." Jorry said frankly.

"And if he gives you any trouble, you can tell Jorry. Brucie won't mess with him." Nick said seriously.

Jorry smiled and gave his younger brother a quick hug.

"Thanks for talking to me. I think I need to find Erika now." Erik said quietly.

"She's over there, by the tree." Jorry said as he pointed.

"Thanks Jorry." Erik said with a sincere smile, then turned and walked across the room to join his sister.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" Collin asked quietly.

"Probably." Jorry said, then added, "But if he's not, he knows that he has people that he can talk to."

Collin nodded his agreement to the statement.

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Although the boys were all more or less participating in general conversation, it was unspoken and known to all that they were watching Erik and Erika's conversation across the room.

The conversation suddenly stopped as they watched the smallish, delicate fair haired girl walk away from her brother and approach Brucie.

Collin glanced at Christian to be sure that he had noticed what was going on.

Erika tapped Bruce on the shoulder and waited until he turned around to face her.

The boys couldn't tell if she said anything to him or not, but they were silent as they watched her slowly put a hand on his shoulder.

"What do you think..." Collin started to ask, then stopped when, in a flash of movement, Erika suddenly kned Bruce in the groin.

As he began to double over, Erika brought her fist up in an uppercut to meet his jaw.

All the boys watched as the small, delicate girl laid Bruce out flat with one punch. He hit the ground like a sack of potatoes.

At the sound of the commotion behind him, Uncle Chuck muttered without looking away from the TV, "Hey, hey! Stop screwing around."

The four boys continued to watch from their secluded spot by the window as some of the other kids in the room gathered around Brucie to see if he was seriously hurt.

"Mental note, don't mess with Erika." Christian said absently, breaking the silence.

"Or Erik." Collin added as he stared at Brucie, who was now curled into a ball in the floor.

Jorry slowly nodded.

"Do you think he's going to be okay?" Nick asked as he watched Brucie with concern.

"No." Jorry said immediately, then added, "But that's only because he wasn't okay to begin with."

Nick rolled his eyes at his brother, then said in a condescending tone, "I mean, do you think he needs a doctor or something?"

Jorry flashed a grin at his brother, then looked at Brucie appraisingly.

"No. Actually, I think he's alright now. He's just milking it for the attention." Jorry said slowly.

Collin and Christian both looked at Brucie more carefully and could easily see signs that he was being overly dramatic to elicit sympathy from the small group gathered around him.

"Dinner's on the table. Everyone come into the dining room." A woman called into the room from the doorway.

Collin, Christian, Jorry and Nick moved toward the door in unison.

"Is something wrong with Brucie?" She asked as she noticed him laying in the floor.

"I've been asking myself that for years." Jorry muttered as he walked past her.

Collin and Christian tried to restrain their chuckles as they followed along.

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"Oh, come on in. Jorry, you too Nick, you sit right over here." Denise said as she ushered him into the dining room.

Jorry rolled his eyes and let out an aggravated sigh as he walked to the place she was indicating at what seemed to be a kitchen table at the side of the room.

"The 'kids' table." Christian whispered to Collin at his side.

"And I made up a place just for you boys." Denise said as she motioned for Collin and Christian to follow her.

They walked away from the kids table and around the end of the truly massive dining room table that dominated the room.

When it became obvious where she was leading them, Christian slowed his pace and said, "No way."

"We just have to get through it." Collin said, not looking any happier than Christian. "For Marc."

Christian sat down in the folding chair at the battered little card table in the corner of the room, then reluctantly muttered under his breath, "For Marc."

"No, no Frank, not there. Over here." Denise said as she scurried away.

"So we get to sit by ourselves on the other side of the room." Christian grumbled.

"Yeah. I feel soooo welcomed." Collin said sarcastically, not holding back his own displeasure at this development.

"Marc, you and your.... whatever, can sit over there." Denise said as she pointed to the far side of the main table.

"I guess that makes you a son of a whatever." Christian said with a grin.

"Works for me. Like I want to be classified as one of *them*." Collin said with a slight tilt of his head toward the main table.

"This is going to suck." Christian said sourly. "Let's just get it over with."

"Yeah. Then we can get the hell out of here." Collin said firmly.

"How are you boys doing?"

Both boys turned to see Marc looking at them with concern.

"We were doing fine until that bitch decided that we weren't good enough to sit with 'decent' people." Christian said frankly.

Marc looked back at the massive 'main' table, then back at the card table.

"Give me a minute." Marc said, then rushed away.

Collin and Christian watched as Marc went to talk to the woman who had called them to dinner.

A moment later, Marc ducked out through the main door.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Collin asked curiously.

"I don't know. But whatever it is, it can't be worse than this." Christian said frankly.

Collin looked down at the rickety old card table, and couldn't help but agree.

Marc walked back into the room, carrying two folding chairs, then made a motion with his head at Galen, indicating for him to follow.

"No Marc, you and your... you're supposed to be over here." Denise said quickly.

"I'm eating with my family, Neesie." Marc said as he continued to walk the length of the room. "Deal with it."

Galen was walking down the opposite side of the long table and met Marc at the end.

"You don't mind do you?" Marc asked as he offered one of the folded chairs to Galen.

"Not at all." Galen said immediately as he accepted the chair and unfolded it.

"Scoot out the table a little bit." Marc said as he walked behind Christian.

"What are you doing Linda? You're supposed to be over here?" Denise asked in an aggrieved tone.

"I'm sitting with my family." Linda said as she moved a chair over to the 'kids' table.

"Can I sit with you and Dad?" Brucie asked Denise as he stood from his place at the 'kids' table to make room for Linda.

"I suppose so. Come on over here baby." Denise said in a defeated tone.

"I'll get us some plates and utensils." Marc said as he got up and pushed in his chair.

The murmur of conversation seemed to dissolve as soon as Grandma Ellen entered the room in her wheelchair.

Ginny pushed her to a place at the end of the table, then took a step back and waited patiently.

"Nolan, move down. Ginny needs a place to sit." Grandma Ellen said firmly.

"I thought Ginny could get something to eat in the kitchen, after we're done." Denise said quickly.

"You thought wrong." Grandma Ellen said as she looked Denise in the eyes.

Without a word, Nolan got up from his place and relocated to an empty spot further down the table.

Marc appeared at the side of the table and started placing plates and silverware for Galen and himself.

Silence fell over the room as everyone waited to see what was going to happen next.

"Denise, where do you want us?" Jon asked as he and his wife walked into the dining room, each carrying a baby.

"Down at the end. There's a playpen in the corner where you can put the babies down." Denise said quickly, then guided other people to their seats.

"Are you boys alright?" Marc asked quietly.

Collin looked to see if Christian was going to answer. When it was apparent that he wasn't, Collin said, "We're better now that you're here."

Christian nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"How about you? How are you doing?" Collin asked, directing his question more at his father than at Marc.

"You know, I'm okay." Galen said with a considering smile.

"Good." Collin said happily.

"Why aren't we eating?" Grandma Ellen asked in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

The four at the card table looked around and found that everyone seemed to be seated and no one had any food on their plates.

"I thought we might go around the room and have everyone tell a little bit about how their family are doing this year. You know, just to bring everyone up to date." Denise said cheerfully.

"Denise, you're the biggest gossip in three states. I'm sure you know what's going on with everyone here and have already spread the word to the rest of the family." Grandma Ellen said seriously. "I'm 96 years old and I'm hungry. Start passing the food."

Chuckles went around the room along with murmurs of agreement.

"I love her." Marc said with an admiring chuckle.

"Yeah. She's great." Collin said as he looked down the length of the room at Grandma Ellen.

"Did you get a chance to talk to her?" Marc asked with surprise.

"Yeah. She wanted to talk to us and Jorry and Nick before we went back to our house tonight." Collin said frankly.

Marc glanced back at Grandma Ellen with concern at the statement.

Christian noticed and hurried to say, "It's really fine. She wasn't being mean or anything at all. She was just making sure everyone was okay with the 'gay' thing. I don't think she was worried that you'd do something as much as she was worried that Jorry or Nick might not really understand what was going on and then might get freaked out when we got home."

Marc looked from Collin to Christian, then quietly said, "I guess I'm used to my family automatically thinking the worst about me. It's hard for me to assume that anything they say or do isn't automatically an indictment of me or my life."

"That sounds reasonable to me." Collin said offhandedly. "Speaking strictly as the son of a 'whatever'."

"Hey, do you guys want some food?"

They turned as one to see Frank holding out a platter of ham toward them.

"Yeah. Thanks, Frank." Marc said quickly, then got up to accept the platter of ham.

"Here boys, take what you want." Marc said as he held the platter over the center of the card table.

"Do you want some, Marc?" Christian asked as he served himself.

"One slice." Marc said with a grateful smile.

Christian quickly relocated a slice of ham from the platter to Marc's plate.

As soon as Marc handed the platter back to Frank, he was handed a large bowl of mashed potatoes.

"This could take a while." Marc chuckled to Frank.

"Thank Denise's expert planning." Frank said seriously, "I imagine she'll be wolfing down seconds before the last of her guests has a chance to eat." Frank said seriously.

Marc nodded, then carried the mashed potatoes to the card table.

"Do you want some?" Christian asked as he dug into the bowl of mashed potatoes.

"No, I saw some sweet potato casserole when I was in the kitchen. I think I'll have that instead." Marc said conspiratorially.

"I'm having both." Galen said as he helped himself to a decent size portion of the mashed potatoes.

Marc waited for everyone to be finished, then went back to the table

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"Watch out for the deviled eggs. Denise made them." Marc said as he held out a relish tray for everyone to help themselves to eggs, pickles and olives.

"How bad could they be?" Galen asked cautiously.

"I guess that depends on how much you like horseradish." Marc said frankly.

"That settles it. The woman is evil." Galen said with a shake of his head.

"Is that about all of the food?" Christian asked, looking at his mounded plate.

"Yeah. I see some gravy headed this way, but I think that's it." Marc said as he worked to maneuver a few olives onto his plate, one handed.

"Good. I'm starved." Christian said frankly.

"Then start eating. I think everyone else has, except maybe the kids' table. They're still getting food." Marc said before heading back to the main table.

"This sucks." Collin said frankly.

"Some things do. You just have to get through them." Galen said with resignation.

"Gravy?" Marc asked as he brought a gravy boat over to the table.

"Right here." Galen said as he pointed at his plate.

Marc grinned at the boys, then dutifully poured gravy over Galen's mashed potatoes.

"Do you boys want any?" Marc asked as he stood.

"Could I have some butter? That's how I usually like my mashed potatoes." Collin asked hopefully.

"I'll see what I can do." Marc said as he moved back to the main table.

"Come on guys, dig in before it gets cold." Galen said as he started cutting his slice of ham.

His cutting motion caused the whole card table to shake.

"Nice." Christian said sarcastically, then held on to the sides of the card table to brace it and said, "Try now, Uncle Galen."

Galen grinned at Christian, then cut his piece of ham into some decent bite sized pieces.

"Here you go Collin. Do you need anything else?" Marc asked as he looked around the table.

"I think I'm set up, but you and Dad might like something to drink." Collin said as he looked up to meet Marc's eyes.

"Drinks. Right." Marc said seriously, then walked away from the table.

"Does someone want to brace it so I can cut my ham?" Christian asked as he looked around the table.

"I've got you covered." Galen said immediately and held the table to steady it.

As Christian cut his ham, Galen asked, "How about you Collin, do you need to cut your ham up?"

"Yeah. Just let me finish with the butter." Collin said quickly.

"Here you go, love." Marc said as he placed a drink beside Galen's plate.

"Thanks." Galen said with a grateful smile as he continued to hold the card table steady.

"What are you doing?" Marc asked curiously.

"Collin, show him." Galen said as he took his hands away from the card table slightly.

As Collin started cutting his ham, the top of the table started to rattle with the motion.

Galen quickly took hold of the tabletop, then said, "If you want to cut up your ham, now would be a good time."

"Thanks, love." Marc said with a grin.

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"How are you guys doing?"

Everyone looked up to find Erik standing shyly by the table, looking at them.

"We're fine. How are you?" Collin asked with concern.

"Oh, I'm fine." Erik said quickly, then quietly added, "Mom just wanted me to come over and see if you guys needed anything since you got stuck over here in BFE... whatever that means."

"Tell her we're fine and that we appreciate her checking on us." Marc said gratefully.

Erik nodded, then rushed back to the 'kids' table.

"I can't believe how fast he's growing up." Marc said distantly as he watched Erik sit down beside his mother.

Collin and Christian shared a look and came to immediate agreement that they shouldn't share just how much growing up Erik had done recently.

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"When everyone is finished, we're going to have coffee in the living room. Dessert will be served in there." Denise said loudly.

"I wonder if we're invited." Christian said casually.

"What do you mean?" Marc asked curiously.

"Well, they separated us from you as soon as we got here, then tried to stick us in the corner away from everyone else at dinner. So I'm betting that when we go in there, they'll probably find another way to make it obvious that we don't belong here." Christian said frankly.

"I tell you what, Christian. If they do that, we'll leave." Marc said firmly.

"What about Jorry and Nick?" Collin asked quietly.

"We'll ask them if they want to go too." Marc said simply.

"Sounds good." Christian said with a decisive nod.

"Do you think Erik could come over too?" Collin asked quietly.

"Did you already invite him?" Marc asked hesitantly.

"No. But we had a chance to talk to him and he seemed nice." Collin said quickly.

"Well, I wouldn't have a problem with Erik coming over except that he lives up here. Getting him back home would be a long trip." Marc said gently.

"I see what you mean." Collin said with disappointment. "It just would have been nice."

"How about this? I'll talk to Linda and Dave and let them know that you'd like to visit with Erik. That way, if they have plans that take them to Orlando sometime, they could stop by on the way into town." Marc said cautiously.

"Yeah. That'd work." Collin said with a smile.

"So, are we done here?" Galen asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. It looks like it. Let's go see what's in store for us in the living room." Christian said as he stood.

"Remember, if it's too bad. We'll leave." Marc said gently.

"Yeah. I'll remember." Christian said with a smile at Marc.

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"Marc." A man's voice said from behind the group.

"Hi Nolan. I don't think you've met Galen and the boys, Collin and Christian." Marc said hesitantly.

"Hi." Nolan said to the others absently, then looked at Marc and said, "Ruth said that the boys are going to stay over at your place tonight."

"Yes. Collin and Christian thought it would be fun to have a sleep-over." Marc said cautiously.

Nolan glanced at the boys without revealing any emotion, then quietly said to Marc, "She said some other stuff."

Marc nodded slowly.

"I would never hurt them." Nolan said as he looked into Marc's eyes. "I love those boys."

"Come back and tell me that when you're sober and I'll talk about it all you want." Marc said seriously.

A weird smile came across Nolan's face, then he loudly whispered, "I'm really hammered."

"It shows, Nolan." Marc said regretfully.

"Anyway... Um, what was it?" Nolan asked into the air, then said, "Oh yeah. Ruthie wanted me to let you know that she'll be bringing the boys some things... you know, pajamas and stuff."

"Fine." Marc said quietly.

Nolan nodded, and looked like he was going to say something else, but then lost his train of thought again and wandered away.

"Is that your brother?" Christian asked quietly.

"Yeah. My oldest brother." Marc said as he watched Nolan walk out the dining room door.

"He's got a problem." Christian said frankly.

"More than one." Marc said simply. "Imagine being married to Ruthie."

"Yeah, um. I'd rather not, if you don't mind." Christian said with a pained look.

Marc chuckled and nodded his agreement.

"Come on guys. The living room awaits."

Chapter 10

As the boys walked into the living room along with Marc and Galen, they heard Jorry say, "Aunt Denise?"

Chuck turned around and looked at Jorry with confusion.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Uncle Chuck, you and Aunt Denise look the same from behind. Have you seen where she is?" Jorry asked hopefully.

"Over there." Chuck said slowly.

"Thanks." Jorry said, then glanced at Collin and Christian and gave them a covert wink before rushing away with Nick at his side.

"That little imp. He did that on purpose." Galen said with surprise.

"Chuck is probably going to be worrying about that until next Christmas." Marc said as he fought to contain his chuckles.

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"I'm so glad all of you were able to make it." An older woman said as she approached.

"Mom, you already know Galen. I'd like for you to meet Collin and Christian." Marc said a little bit nervously.

"It's very nice to meet you. You're welcomed to call me Grandma Nora." she said to the boys. "I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you earlier, but Gene and I had to help in the kitchen to be sure that we had everything ready in time for dinner."

"The meal was very good." Collin said quickly.

Christian nodded his agreement as he watched Marc's mother cautiously.

"Well, thank you. I'm only sorry that you were stranded at a separate table from the rest of us." Nora said sincerely. "I promise you that Denise won't get the chance to arrange anything like that again."

Christian reluctantly smiled. Although he was automatically expecting the worst from Marc's family, he believed that Marc's mother really felt bad for what her daughter had done.

"You boys should take a seat on the floor over there. Gene is almost ready to read 'Twas the Night Before Christmas' to all of us." Nora said warmly.

"What about dessert?" Collin asked suspiciously.

"Don't worry, young man. You won't miss out. We'll be serving coffee and dessert after the reading." Nora said with a tender smile at him, then quickly added, "In fact, if you'll excuse me, I need to see that we have the coffee making."

"We'd better go." Collin said as he started to walk away from the group.

"Just a minute." Christian said to Collin, then turned away from him and took one step, motioning to Marc.

"What are you doing?" Collin asked inquisitively. Marc was looking confused as well.

"Checking the instruction manual." Christian said with a grin.

Marc smiled, getting it, and leaned close to find out what Christian wanted to ask.

"Do you think Collin would mind it too much if I sat with him... I mean, you know, like, held him?" Christian asked hesitantly.

"As much as I'm sure Collin would enjoy that, I don't think he would enjoy the reactions from the rest of the family." Marc said with regret.

"Yeah. I guess it's best not to kick the hornet's nest." Christian said with resignation.

Marc nodded, then said, "Especially when you're inside it."

* * * * *

"Come on, everyone. Let's all gather around Grandpa Gene so he can read to you." Denise said in an overly cheerful voice as she tried to herd the group of children into the open space in front of the recliner.

The cheerful 'motherly' smile fell away when she spotted Collin and Christian approaching.

Rather than say anything to them, she simply turned away and started talking to the smaller children to try to get them to sit down and stay still.

"You know." Collin began in a considering voice, "From this angle she does kind of look like Chuck."

"I'm still not convinced she was born a female." Christian said with a smirk.

"Do you want to sit off to the side?" Collin asked as he looked around.

"Nope." Christian said seriously. "I want to sit smack dab in the middle. If that man-woman is going to try to ignore us, I want to at least make her work at it."

"Plan." Collin said with a grin, then took a seat in the floor, in front of Grandpa Gene, behind a few of the younger kids.

Christian sat down at Collin's side, leaving a respectable distance between them, but still close enough that they could talk if they wanted to.

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"Is that everyone?" Marc's father, Grandpa Gene, asked from his seat in the leather recliner.

Most of the children in the room were already seated on the floor in front of him.

A few others reluctantly left their parents to join the increasing group.

Jon and Elaine left the adults that were surrounding the room and took seats on the floor amongst the children. Each of them was holding a tiny baby in their arms.

Grandpa Gene looked around the room, then noticed spiked up brown hair hiding behind the shoulder of his daughter, Linda.

"We're just waiting for you, Kirsten." Grandpa Gene said sternly, "You're not too grown up to be counted among the children."

After a moment, Kirsten stomped forward and dropped to the floor in front of Gene's chair.

A quelling glance from Gene effectively silenced the adults who were quietly muttering to each other. Finally, Gene said in a clear, firm voice, "'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;"

"I'm gonna puke!" Nolan said suddenly, then made a mad dash out of the room.

After a long moment of silence, Grandpa Gene continued, "The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there."

The grumbling fussy cries of a baby began to escalate into full fledged shrieks.

"Excuse me." Ruth mumbled before hurrying out of the room with the wailing baby in her arms.

Jorry and Nick shared a dark look.

"The children were nestled all snug in their beds, while visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;"

"Come here." Jorry whispered to his brother, then guided Nick to scoot back and sit between his legs.

Collin and Christian smiled as Jorry enclosed his brother in a comforting hug from behind.

"And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap, had just settled down for a long winter's nap."

Christian jumped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder and quickly turned around to see Marc looking at him with question.

It took a moment for Christian to understand what Marc was asking, but when he finally realized, he nodded his agreement.

"When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter."

Collin smiled as he noticed that Christian was leaning back into Marc's hug.

"Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the shutters and threw up the sash."

Collin wasn't the least bit surprised when he felt his father's arms encircle him from behind and was utterly content to sink back into his father's warm embrace.

"The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below."

The sound of a giggle drew Christian's attention and he turned in time to see Erik being drawn into a hug by his mother, Linda.

"When, what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer."

Erika smiled at the sight of her brother being hugged so tenderly, then started when she felt her father, Dave, scoot in behind her and cuddle her gently.

"With a little old driver, so lively and quick, I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick."

"You're a saint." Jorry giggled into his brother's ear.

Nick wriggled back into his brother's embrace with a smile of ultimate peace.

"More rapid than eagles his coursers they came, And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name;"

"Mama?" Brucie called plaintively as he looked at his mother.

After a hateful glare at Marc, Denise finally walked to sit beside her son and pulled him into a loose, one-armed hug.

Collin noticed a man watching, and he suspected from the man's features that he was probably Brucie's father. The expression on his face was easy to read and held only one simple message, 'I feel left out.'

"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen! On, Comet! on Cupid! on, Donder and Blitzen!"

At that moment, the baby in Elaine's arms cooed loudly with delight, sending a wave of chuckles throughout the room.

"To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall! Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"

Kirsten was looking around the room, apparently looking for her father.

Collin noticed the downcast look in her eyes when she didn't find him and felt a pang of sympathy for the ill-tempered girl.

"As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly, when they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky."

A movement drew Collin's attention, then he smiled as he saw Brucie's father, moving to tentatively sit beside Kirsten.

"Do you mind?" He asked quietly.

"Thanks, Uncle James." Kirsten said shyly as she snuggled against his side, into his cautious hug.

"So up to the house-top the coursers they flew, with the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too."

"Is this okay?" Marc whispered into Christian's ear with concern.

Christian took a moment to consider what he was feeling. It was hard for him to put names to the feelings that he had little or no experience with.

Finally, he turned his head slightly and whispered to Marc, "I love you."

"And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof, the prancing and pawing of each little hoof."

Ruth walked back into the room carrying the baby, who was making low growling noises that sounded somewhat demonic in nature.

"As I drew in my head, and was turning around, down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound."

Collin saw the look on Ruth's face when she noticed that nearly every child in the room had a parent holding them... except her children. They were holding on to each other.

"He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot, and his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;"

"Go! Go! Go! FUCK YEAH!!!" sounded from the next room in the pause between verses.

Collin and Christian shared a look, then in unison said, "Scoregasm."

"I'll get him." A woman said past gritted teeth, then stalked impatiently out of the room.

The scowl on her face immediately betrayed her to be the mother of the ill-tempered Kirsten.

"A bundle of toys he had flung on his back, and he looked like a peddler just opening his pack."

"A peddler?" Nick asked with confusion, then elaborated, "Like someone who rides a bike?"

"No. Back when grandpa was a kid, it meant someone that went door to door to sell things." Jorry said gently.

"On a bike?" Nick asked thoughtfully.

"Maybe." Jorry said with a grin, then hugged his brother firmly.

"His eyes -- how they twinkled! his dimples how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!"

"Dad's nose gets like that sometimes." Nick commented absently.

"Yeah, but not from the cold weather." Jorry said frankly.

"His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow, and the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;"

"Like a bow?" Nick asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Like a bow and arrow. Not twisted like a ribbon bow." Jorry answered seriously.

"Oh." Nick said with realization, then turned his attention back to the story.

"The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth, and the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath;"

Nolan walked into the room and stopped just inside the doorway.

Ruth's glare of undisguised hatred nearly singed the air as it fell on him.

"He had a broad face and a little round belly, that shook, when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly."

Nick giggled at the mental image of the round little man jiggling.

"He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf, and I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;"

"I guess he's not the only one." Jorry said with amusement into his brother's ear.

"A wink of his eye and a twist of his head, soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;"

Half of the people in the room had more of their attention focused on Ruth and Nolan than what Grandpa Gene was saying.

"He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work, and filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk."

"Who's the jerk?" Nick asked curiously.

Jorry glanced back at his father, but said to his brother in a quiet voice, "He's talking about a jerky movement, not a jerky person."

Nick made another "Oh" of comprehension as he turned his attention back to the story.

"And laying his finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;"

Jorry waited for Nick's next question, but to his surprise, Nick seemed to have no problem at all with the concept of a levitating Santa.

"He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle, and away they all flew like the down of a thistle."

"Down of a thistle?" Nick asked in confusion.

"Um... You got me on that one." Jorry said honestly.

"But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight, 'Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night.'"

"I want a divorce." Ruth snarled at her husband, then elbowed past him and out of the room with the fussing baby in her arms.

"Happy Christmas to all." Jorry said ironically.

Grandpa Gene looked at his son standing by the doorway with a puzzled look on his face, then around the room at everyone else trying to pretend that they hadn't heard Ruth's declaration.

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"What would you all think if I handed out some presents before we have our dessert?" Grandpa Gene asked hopefully.

A collective cheer went up from all the kids in the room, and a silent sigh of relief emanated from all the adults.

"This year, Grandma Ellen wanted to be the one to buy the gifts for everyone. So if you like your gift, you need to thank her." Grandpa Gene said seriously.

"You need to thank her either way." Grandma Nora corrected gently.

Gene smiled at his wife and nodded his agreement.

"The first gift I have is for Jaxon and Jazmine." Grandpa Gene said warmly to Jon and Elaine.

They both stood from the floor, each holding a baby in their arms.

Grandpa Gene held out an envelope to them, then waited for Jon to open it.

"Thank you!" Jon said with surprise to his father-in-law, then at Gene's sideways glance, Jon turned to Grandma Ellen and said, "Thank you, this will be so much help!"

"You're very welcome." Grandma Ellen said with a warm smile.

"What did you get?" Denise asked curiously.

"Two \$500 gift cards to Babies-R-Us." Jon said with a joyous smile as he held up the plastic cards for everyone to see.

Marc and Galen exchanged a smile at Jon and Elaine's happiness, knowing that the gift was sincerely appreciated.

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Collin and Christian watched as, one after another, all the children in the room were called forward to receive their presents.

Nick had received a boxed set of books. Both Collin and Christian thought that it was kind of a weak present, but Nick seemed to be happy enough with it.

Jorry had received a 'Mall Money' gift card, so he could buy something nice for himself.

Again, Collin and Christian thought the gift was kind of lame, but Jorry was apparently thrilled by the idea of being able to go and buy his own present.

When Gene called Erik and Erika forward to receive their gifts, Grandma Ellen motioned for Ginny to hand them their very large, very flexible presents.

"These quilts were hand stitched by my mother, your great, great grandmother. Since you're both so responsible, I thought it would be good to pass these along to you now." Grandma Ellen said gently.

Erika opened her gift first and stared at the beautiful, lightly colored quilt in her hands.

"Thank you Grandma Ellen; it's wonderful." Erika said in astonishment.

Erik opened his gift more slowly and found that his quilt was more darkly colored, but no less beautiful than his sister's.

"Thanks!" Erik said happily.

Ellen nodded with a tender smile, knowing that the gifts were sincerely appreciated.

"The next gift is for Brucie." Gene said, then waited for him to walk up to the chair.

After opening the gift, Brucie looked at the old book in his hands with puzzlement.

"This was your great grandfather's journal. He was a truly good man of exceptional character. It's my hope that by reading his words, you might be able to discover some of those traits in yourself." Grandma Ellen said gently.

"Thank you." Brucie said uncertainly.

Ellen chuckled, not at all offended that he didn't understand the significance of the gift.

"Kirsten, this is for you." Grandpa Gene said as he held out a small velvet box with a ribbon tying it closed.

After a moment to untie the ribbon, Kirsten opened the hinged lid and stared at the contents with wonder.

"What did you get?" Brucie asked from beside her.

"Put it on, I think you'll look lovely." Grandma Ellen said gently.

With shaking hands, Kirsten took something that sparkled out of the box, then absently handed the box to Brucie.

The room went silent as Kirsten turned to show off the tiara, sparkling with dozens of little diamonds.

"Wow! You're pretty!" Brucie said with amazement.

Kirsten blushed, then looked around the room to see everyone else's reactions.

"You're very beautiful." James said to her gently.

"Thank you." Kirsten whispered to him, then turned to Grandma Ellen and said, "Thank you, Grandma Ellen, I love it."

"Ever since you were just a little girl in pigtails, I've known that one day I would give this to you. I think you're old enough now to appreciate it." Grandma Ellen said with a smile, "And I hope that someday you'll be able to pass it on to one of your children or grandchildren."

"I will, Grandma Ellen, I promise." Kirsten said in a stunned voice as she reached up to feel the tiara on her head.

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"I suppose since Nolan and Ruth are otherwise occupied, I'll set their gift aside." Grandpa Gene said as he took a small box and placed it on the floor beside his chair.

Collin and Christian shared a look. Although they really hadn't been 'expecting' a gift, they had both held out the slightest hope that they would at least be acknowledged in some way.

"Linda and Dave, this gift is for you." Grandpa Gene said as he held out an envelope.

Dave walked forward and took the envelope. Linda hurried to his side and watched as he opened it.

There was a long moment of silence as the two stared at the piece of paper in their hands.

"Thank you." Dave whispered in awe.

"Not me." Grandpa Gene said quietly, "Her."

"Ellen, we can't..." Dave began to say.

"Yes, we can." Linda interrupted. "Thank you, Grandma Ellen. We'll put this to very good use."

"That's all that I ask." Ellen said with a smile.

"What did you get?" Denise asked curiously.

"\$50,000.00." Linda said in an absent voice that betrayed her shock.

After a long moment for everyone to absorb that, Gene said, "Denise and James."

Denise hurried to her father and waited anxiously for him to hand her their gift.

She quickly opened it and stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment.

"What is it?" James asked cautiously from his wife's side.

"It's a deed." Denise said slowly, then looked at her Grandma Ellen with question.

"That land has been in the family since before the Civil War. The time has come for me to entrust our heritage to the next generation." Grandma Ellen said seriously, then added, "I wanted to make this Christmas special by passing down some of the family heirlooms. I gave each of you the gifts that I thought suited you best."

"Thank you." Denise said in a bewildered voice.

"Thank you, Ellen. We'll take very good care of it." James said with a sincere smile as he met her gaze.

Ellen nodded at James, happy that at least one of them could see the significance of the gift.

"Where are Chuck and Louise?" Grandpa Gene asked as he looked around the room.

"I think they're going to be busy for a few more minutes." Dave said as he glanced at the doorway and could hear Louise's muffled voice in the next room, and she didn't sound at all happy.

After placing another gift aside, Gene said, "Frank and Sandra."

They walked up to the chair, side by side.

Gene handed them an envelope and waited anxiously for their reaction.

Frank looked at the card inside, then at Grandma Ellen with question.

"Even with Ginny's help, I'm getting too old to stay in that big old house. As soon as I have everything arranged, I'll be moving to an assisted living center." Grandma Ellen said quietly.

"But... it's your home." Frank said with astonishment.

"Harry and I had a wonderful life and raised a houseful of children in that place. That's my wish for the two of you. The accounts are set up so that you shouldn't have to worry about anything." Grandma Ellen said with a content smile. "Take the house and make it your home."

"Thank you, Grandma Ellen." Frank said in shock.

Sandra had tears running down her cheeks and could only nod her agreement to her husband's words.

"Jon and Elaine." Gene said quietly.

They walked up to the chair, each holding a sleeping baby.

"Here you go." Gene said gently as he handed them an envelope.

"Would you mind?" Jon asked timidly, then handed the baby in his arms to Gene before opening the envelope.

Elaine looked at the piece of paper, then at Grandma Ellen and gasped, "Thank you!"

"Thank you." Jon said quietly as tears welled in his eyes.

"Just take good care of your family; that's all the thanks I need." Grandma Ellen said gently.

"I think that with \$50,000.00, we might be able to do that." Jon said in a tearful voice.

"Don't forget Jaxon." Gene said as he offered the baby back to Jon.

"Thank you." Jon whispered as he accepted the baby into his arms.

"Marc and Galen." Gene said, then smiled when his youngest son approached.

Gene checked the tag, then handed a small, velvety box to Marc.

After accepting the box, Marc turned to where Galen could see as he opened it.

From the shape and size of the box, it was no surprise to find that it contained a ring.

The ring was simple gold and not elaborately decorated at all. In fact, the only real decoration on the entire ring was the large red stone that was set in the center. It caught the light in the room and returned it in fractured red brilliance.

"That was your grandfather's wedding band." Grandma Ellen said quietly.

"It's beautiful." Marc said slowly, then looked her in the eyes as he continued, "Thank you."

"Just so you know, that's not a ruby, that's a red diamond. Those are extremely rare." Ellen said seriously.

Marc looked down at the ring again, then smiled up at Galen with question.

Galen understood the unvoiced question, and responded with an incredulous 'Are you sure?' look.

Marc took the ring out of the box, then carefully placed it on Galen's left hand, on the third finger.

"You can't do that!" Denise exploded.

"Hush, child. That's exactly why I gave it to him." Ellen said sternly, then added more gently, "And I hope that Marc and Galen can find at least some measure of the love that I had with my Harry."

"Collin and Christian." Gene said quietly, still watching Marc and Galen with a smile.

Both boys were surprised to be called, but walked together to receive their gift.

"Merry Christmas, boys." Gene said as he handed them a strangely long and thin box.

After a little urging from Collin, Christian began to unwrap the present.

When it was finally completely open, both boys stared inside.

"Christian, that sword was one of my husband's most prized possessions, it belonged to his grandfather." Grandma Ellen said quietly, then added, "Which means that it belonged to your great-great-great-grandfather."

"Have you gone senile? You can't give that to him! That kid's probably just some gutter trash that Marc picked up so him and his 'friend' could have their sick, twisted..."

"Get out of my house!" Dave barked.

Denise went silent and looked at Dave with surprise.

"I've put up with a lot from you Denise, but this time you've gone too far." Dave said as he looked her in the eyes. "Marc and his friends are guests in my home and as their host I won't allow *anyone* to treat them disrespectfully. Now get out!"

"You can't..." Denise began to say, then looked at Linda urgently, silently asking her to intercede.

"I agree with Dave. If you can't control yourself and behave decently, then you should go home where you won't humiliate the rest of your family with your bad behavior." Linda said frankly.

"Brucie! James! We're leaving!" Denise barked in a blast of fury as she stomped out.

Bruce hurried to follow his mother out of the room.

James looked around and quietly said, "Sorry." before slowly walking out to follow his wife.

Marc, Galen, Collin and Christian were all in mild shock and looking around, half expecting another attack.

"I'm sorry that happened." Dave said as he walked up to Marc.

"Thank you." Marc said in a disbelieving voice.

Dave looked around, then conspiratorially whispered, "I've been looking for a good excuse to throw that spiteful bitch out of my house for the last twenty years."

"Thank you for defending the boys." Galen said sincerely.

Dave nodded, then turned to the boys and said, "I'm sorry that happened. You really *are* welcomed here."

"Thanks." Collin said quietly.

"Yeah. Thanks for doing that." Christian said with a small, honest smile.

* * * * *

"What do you think we should do with this?" Christian asked as he looked at the sword carefully.

"Well, if it was really your great-great-however-many-times-grandfather's, then you should keep it someplace where we can see it, maybe in the living room or in our bedroom." Collin said seriously.

"But what if I can't stay with Marc?" Christian said anxiously.

Collin shrugged, then said, "Then leave it with Marc until you can get the judge to listen to you and let you stay where you want to."

Christian looked at Collin with surprise for a moment, then broke into laughter.

"Did I say something funny?" Collin asked slowly.

"No. I can just see what Marc means about you being just like your dad." Christian said with a chuckle.

"Is that a bad thing?" Collin asked cautiously.

Christian looked around quickly, then grabbed Collin's arm and pulled him behind the Christmas tree.

Before Collin could say a word, Christian gave him a firm kiss.

Collin immediately returned the kiss, and the rest of the world faded out of existence for him.

* * * * *

"Do you boys want some dessert?" Marc asked cautiously from in front of the Christmas tree.

"I'm getting mine now." Christian chuckled as he came up for air.

"You'll have time for that later." Marc said, trying to keep the chuckle out of his voice.

"Okay, Dad." Christian said with a grin as he slowly walked from behind the tree.

"Dad?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Christian said happily. "Collin just made me realize that I was being fussy and worrying about the small stuff. But maybe this once I need to look at things like him and Uncle Galen do. No matter what we have to go through to get there, you *are* going to be my dad."

Marc pulled Christian to his side to give him a quick hug, then pulled Collin to him with the other arm and gave him a quick kiss on the top of the head.

"Hey, you guys are going to miss the desserts." Galen said as he approached.

"We're on our way." Marc said cheerfully as he started to walk with a boy under each arm.

* * * * *

"Oh my God! What's that?" Christian asked as he pointed at one of the selections.

"That's Ruthie's Spiced Gumdrops Pie." Marc said with a queasy look. "Get some if you want, but I wouldn't eat it on a dare."

"This one looks kinda weird, but it might be good." Collin said as he pointed to a large cake pan.

"That's my mom's dump cake. It's ugly as sin, but it tastes great." Marc said as he scooped out a piece for himself.

"Why do they call it dump cake?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Because you take all the ingredients and just dump them in the pan. No mixing required." Marc said simply. "Try some, and if you like it, I'll make it at home sometime. I have the recipe."

"Okay." Christian said hesitantly as he took a small piece of the vaguely cobbler looking cake.

"I've got to have one of those." Collin said as he reached to the back of the table to get a fig bar.

"If you like it, let Sandra know. I know she'll appreciate it." Marc said honestly.

"I'm so full from dinner, I don't know if I'll have room for any of this." Galen said as he looked over the table. "What one thing would you recommend?"

"Knowing your taste, I'd say that you'll like the chocolate pudding cake, down there at the end. It's too rich for me, but I think that you'll enjoy it with a cup of coffee." Marc said thoughtfully.

* * * * *

A strange silence seemed to fall over the room full of people, enjoying their desserts.

Marc looked up and followed the stares of the people around him.

"Wil! I'm so glad you could make it." Marc's mother said as she broke from the crowd and rushed to greet him.

"Who's that?" Collin whispered, intrigued by the dark, dangerous looking young man.

"My nephew, Wil." Marc said with a smile.

"Not the most popular Stone in the quarry, from everyone's reaction." Christian commented casually.

"Well, no. I don't really know much about what's happened the past year, but I'm sure it has something to do with Jordan. They were always best friends." Marc said thoughtfully, then added, "And he's not a Stone, he's a Hale. Louise and Chuck are his parents."

"Who are those people with him?" Collin asked curiously, noticing the two well dressed men standing in the doorway behind Wil. Each of them was carrying a young boy.

"I don't know." Marc said as he looked at the men, then said, "Maybe they're friends of Wil's."

"Yeah. I'm sure every goth punk has a couple of lawyers as friends." Christian said sarcastically.

Galen chuckled at Christian's words and gave him a quick, casual one-armed hug.

"Let's go over and talk to them. Wil's got to be one of my favorite nephews." Marc said before starting across the room.

Collin and Christian shared a look, then automatically followed.

* * * * *

"I'm glad you could make it, Wil. How are you doing?" Marc asked cheerfully as he approached.

"I'm good." Wil said simply, then looked curiously past Marc at Galen and the boys approaching.

"Wil, I'd like for you to meet my boyfriend, Galen, and our sons, Collin and Christian." Marc 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?" One of the men behind Wil said cautiously.

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 the man 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 a young blond haired boy.

"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 the other man 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." Christian suggested helpfully.

"Good idea." Marc said with a smile at Christian. "It's right this way."

Marc, Galen and the boys led the way down the hall and through another doorway.

* * * * *

"You okay, buddy?" Ben asked the boy in his arms.

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." Christian said with a cheeky grin.

"Thanks. I'll remember that." Galen said in a playful gruff voice.

"What do you say, JD? Do you want to go play with the boys?" The man with Ben asked the boy in his arms.

The boy raised his head and Marc nearly gasped at the sight of the large, blue/gray eyes. They were absolutely captivating.

"Okay." The boy, JD, said quietly.

"Before you go..." Ben said, "Everyone, this is my husband, Cliff and our sons, JD and Jody."

"Jady and Jody?" Christian 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, it was immediately noticeable to everyone how thin and frail the boy looked.

"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 went along 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.

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.

Marc noticed Ben's immediate concern and said, "That's Jorry and Nick. Don't worry about them."

Ben seemed to be trying to relax as he explained, "My boys have been through a lot and they're kind of fragile right now."

"Collin and Christian will take good care of them. They're really good boys." Marc said in a reassuring voice.

Ben nodded, but his eyes kept straying back to the fireplace where the boys were gathered.

* * * * *

"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. Cliff and Ben's boys were probably too young to be able to deal with that kind of an emotional scene.

"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.

Jody, the younger boy, was so thin that he looked gawky and angular. He had thick wavy wheat-blond hair and light brown eyes.

In contrast, the older boy had straight brown hair and the most startling steel blue eyes that Collin had ever seen.

"You two don't look like brothers." Collin said absently before he could think better of it.

"Neither do you." JD responded, somewhat 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-J's." 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 J's and the non-J's." Nick said happily.

"Here you are!" A woman's voice bellowed into the room.

Collin and Christian glanced up to see Grandma Nora standing in the doorway.

As they looked around, both were surprised to see that Cliff and Ben were now with them, each holding a boy in their 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.

A moment later, Collin and Christian were relieved to see JD raise 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 tried 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.

Christian broke away from the group of boys and walked directly to Marc's side.

"I'm sorry, Marc. I know you don't want me using bad language, but someone has to say it. That is the creepiest fucking Santa I've ever seen."

Chapter 11

"I don't know, I think more people should have a grungy goth Santa." Wil said with a grin.

"I know the costume is a little bit old, but it isn't really that bad." Marc said hesitantly.

Christian shook his head at the statement, then said, "It must be because you remember this from back when it didn't look quite so freaky. But I'm with Wil, it's kinda awesome."

Marc looked again at 'Santa' and realized that there was some validity to Christian's observation. The Santa suit was severely discolored and ragged and the yellowed wig and beard looked dirty and were sticking out in all directions. Leaving sentimentality aside, 'Santa' looked disturbingly like a morbidly obese homeless person.

A shriek of terror sounded as one of the parents tried to take their three or four year old to visit with Santa.

Marc noticed Linda's downcast stare at the holiday 'festivities', and stepped to her side as he quietly said, "It's not so bad."

"Well, at least it can't get any worse." Linda said as she looked at her family who were trying to behave as if they were having a good time.

"Hey Linda, do you have a plunger?" Chuck asked loudly from the living room doorway.

Marc tried valiantly to hide his amusement, but wasn't up to the task.

"Shut up." Linda said with a quick glare at him, then after a slight huff of breath, started walking toward the door.

* * * * *

"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.

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, but Christian was able to hear.

"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.

* * * * *

"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, knowing that *this* was what a family should be like.

* * * * *

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.

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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"Well, young man, what can Santa do for you this Christmas?" Santa asked in a very fake sounding low voice.

Christian smiled, then said, "Actually, I just came up here so Jody wouldn't feel like he was away from everyone who protects him."

"As long as you're here, why don't you tell me what you'd like for Christmas?" Santa asked gently, dropping the fake tone of voice completely.

Christian looked at Santa with surprise.

"What could it hurt?" Santa prodded.

Christian chuckled, then said, "I don't know. I mean, everything is great right now. So I guess if I could have one Christmas wish, it would be for things to work out so I can stay with Marc and Uncle Galen. I really like it there."

"What would it take to make that happen?" Santa asked curiously.

"For Judge Robison to think it's a good idea, I guess." Christian said frankly.

"Judge Jamie Robison?" Santa asked curiously.

"Yeah. Do you know him?"

"I'm Santa, I know everyone." Santa said with a chuckle.

"Right." Christian said with a smile.

"You're really happy with Marc?" Santa asked seriously.

"He's like the dad that I always wanted... that I should have had all along." Christian finished quietly.

"Don't give up hope. Things have a way of working out for the best as long as you're willing to work for them." Santa said frankly.

"Hey, I thought Santa was supposed to 'give' you your Christmas wish, not make you earn it!" Christian said playfully.

"It's the things you earn that have the most value to you." Santa said sagely.

Christian thought about his iPod and slowly nodded.

"It's time to let Jorry have a turn. I don't think he's visited with Santa for quite a few years, now." Santa said with a smile.

"Thanks." Christian said as he got up from Santa's lap.

"Merry Christmas."

* * * * *

"Hey Erik, how are you doing?" Collin asked as he spotted the blond boy nearby.

"I'm okay. How are you?" Erik asked, seemingly not understanding why Collin was asking.

"If you've got a second, there's some people I'd like for you to meet." Collin said honestly.

"Um, yeah. Sure." Erik said uncertainly, then followed a few steps.

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

After a moment for the room to quiet and for her to collect her thoughts, Ellen said, "Nothing can destroy a family like money matters. My Harry remembered that too late. For those of you not familiar with the family history, here's a summary of what happened. I will try to keep it brief."

"When my father-in-law passed away, he left the family business to his children. Harry, Kendrick and Walter were in business together for a time, but always seemed to be working against each other. It was a constant

struggle, but they kept afloat year after year, making enough of a living to support their families and live relatively comfortably. Looking back, I suppose those were the good days. As the business grew, both Walter and Kendrick seemed to lose interest in the day-to-day operations of the company. Harry wanted his brothers to be happy, so he offered to buy them out of their shares of the business. They were happy to accept the money and be relieved of the burden of going to work each day doing something that didn't interest them."

"After that, Walter left for... God only knows where, but he disappeared and I don't think Harry ever heard from him again. Walter seemed to have gotten the notion that Harry bought him out just to be rid of him. From time to time, Harry would get the occasional report that Walter had been seen somewhere, usually doing something scandalous... that was his way." Ellen said fondly.

"Kendrick, on the other hand, took the money from the buy-out and put it to good use. He used it as seed money to invest in several small businesses. From what I've heard over the years, he did very well with that." Ellen said thoughtfully.

"I suppose that should have been the end of the story. And if it had been, then everyone would have been happy. But then the most tragic thing happened. The Stone family business that had been in the family for generations, suddenly... flourished. Harry's good investments, sound business practices and the good will of clients and competitors alike coalesced into a 'perfect storm', if you will. The company was operating at optimum efficiency and pulling in so much money, they literally didn't know what to do with it. Because as Harry used to say, money that's sitting and doing nothing has no value."

"Some of you may wonder why I said this was tragic." Ellen said, then slowly looked around the room. "The end result of all that money has been nothing but heartache. Kendrick resented Harry, feeling that he had been cheated out of his birthright. Their children... our children... we did our best to shelter them. But looking around this room, I can tell you that many of the hurts and heartaches that still carry on today stem from the largess of those bountiful years."

Ellen felt sadness in her heart at the hungry looks of hope and anticipation in the eyes of most of the adults in the room. She knew that look too well, and nothing good ever came of it. But the course was set, so the only thing to do was to stick to it.

"I can see that many of you have already guessed at what I'm leading up to." Ellen said frankly. "I've been administering the Stone family business holdings in Harry's stead since his passing. In accordance with his wishes, as stated in his will, I'm going to liquidate the business assets and holdings of his estate and distribute them to the family."

A rush of excitement passed through the assembled group.

"The disbursement will go as follows, once again, in accordance with Harry's wishes." Ellen said 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.

"I'm just going to read the highlights of this. Most of it's a bunch of legal mumbo jumbo that doesn't make a lick of sense." Grandma Ellen said in prelude, then began reading aloud, "At the reading of this document, my personal assets will have already been distributed to my loving wife, Ellen and to our surviving children."

"...my greatest regret is that I didn't choose to liquidate the family business holdings and distribute the assets at our father's passing. For the sake of some prideful, imagined thing called 'the family legacy', I held on to the business and allowed money to drive a wedge between us and destroy our family. No amount of money can restore what we've lost."

"It was later that I realized what a fool I had really been. The series of choices that I made led me to this day, to the writing of this will, and the realization that it is time to take the thing that caused so much heartache and woe, the thing that destroyed my relationship with my brothers, and pass it on to my children and their children so it can destroy them as well."

"To compound my failure, my beloved Ellen is burdened with the task that I couldn't bring myself to accomplish during my life. So, to that end, it is my wish that the businesses and holdings I worked all my life to accumulate, be liquidated and distributed in the following manner."

"I'll just paraphrase this next bit. It's a little bit too thick with legalese to be understood easily." Ellen said honestly, then continued, "At a time chosen by the executor, me, the family should be gathered. Only those present will be eligible to receive a share of the inheritance. Since we have representatives from Walter and Kendrick's branches of the family with us tonight, I feel that this is the perfect time to do it. I know Harry would have been pleased."

Some murmurs of excitement went around the room at the announcement as one by one everyone was realizing what Grandma Ellen was about to do.

"Harry gave his reasons for this next part, something about 'a shameless money-grubbing pit of vipers', but I'll skip right to the chase. You can read it later if you're interested." Ellen said frankly, then continued, "It was Harry's wish that only the youngest members of each family line will be the heirs, those under 18 receiving their inheritance in the form of a trust. The inheritance will be a single share given to that family branch, divided amongst those eligible."

The stunned silence that had filled the room pleased her.

"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 judgement 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.

From his place at Christian's side, Collin looked around curiously at everyone's frozen stares 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.

He felt love swell in his heart as he saw his dad holding Marc in a casual hug, watching the spectacle unfold. In all his life, Collin had never felt so close to his father, so 'in tune'. It was a wonderful feeling and a bond that he never imagined that he would experience.

Suddenly, he felt Christian's hand take hold of his and squeeze it gently.

Collin turned to face him and saw Christian mouth the words 'love you'.

With a smile, Collin mouthed, 'love you, too'.

Suddenly, a change in Ellen's tone of voice drew Collin's 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."

* * * * *

As the group broke up, Ellen motioned Gene down next to her. In a much lower voice than she had used for the distribution, she said, "As my executor, you need to know this, just in case, but be very sure not to let a word leak to the rest of these." She made a sweeping gesture that made clear whom she meant. "I'll be having Christmas dinner at your sister's, and do the same distribution there. And I have a lawyer lined up to do the same for me at your brother's out West. With the three special distributions you'll notice in your father's notes, that will cover the whole family." She sighed. "And I will finally have done what Harry wanted."

Gene's answer was not in words. Instead, he just gave his frail, wheelchair-bound mother a loving embrace.

* * * * *

"What did all that mean?" Jody asked quietly.

"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.

"What are you two scheming?" Grandma Ellen asked as she approached Nolan and Louise.

They shared a look before Louise said, "We're going to contest the will."

"You're welcomed to try, but Harry and his lawyers made sure that the will was iron clad. So you'll accomplish nothing except lining your lawyer's pockets with your hard earned money. I suggest that you accept it and be happy for your children's good fortune." Grandma Ellen said frankly.

"We'll see." Louise said darkly.

* * * * *

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 follow him.

"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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

"Ready?" Galen asked as he walked up to the boys.

"Just about." Collin answered for them. The four boys waved goodbye to JD and Jody.

"Keep in touch." Marc said to Ben as he pocketed the slip of paper with Ben's address, phone number, and e-mail.

"We will." Ben responded, a promise implicit in his words.

"Come down to visit when you get a chance." Marc said to Wil. "You'll always be welcome."

"Thanks for coming." Dave said as he walked up to see them off. "I'm sorry for..."

"Don't be." Galen said firmly. "You're not responsible for Denise or Ruth, and you and Linda made us feel welcome. Much more than we could have expected."

"You're always welcome here." Dave replied sincerely.

"Come back up and visit us when you can." Erika said from her place, tucked under her father's arm.

Slowly, Marc and Galen made their way out to the car, making sure that all the boys were accounted for.

"Here, Christian." Marc said, handing him a set of keys. "Go unlock the car."

With a grin, Christian took them and darted ahead to do what Marc had asked.

Everyone else followed along at a slower pace.

Chapter 12

As Galen pulled out of the driveway, Marc smiled as he said, "This is probably the nicest Christmas gathering my family has ever had."

"Seriously?" Christian asked incredulously.

"Last year Dad and Uncle Chuck got into a fistfight and the cops came and Mom was crying and... actually, now that I think about it, that was kind of fun." Jorry finished with a smile.

"And the year before that, half the family got food poisoning from Denise's 'Roast Duck with Walnut Stuffing'." Marc said with a queasy look.

"I was real lucky, I didn't have a chance to get sick. I threw up just from the taste of it." Nick said frankly.

"Yeah. I remember that the next day, Mom was sitting on the toilet and puking into a bucket and kept screaming for me to turn up the furnace." Jorry said with a chuckle in his voice.

"Yes. Christmas is always a special time for our family." Marc said with a wistful smile.

"Where's your sword? Did you forget it?" Jorry asked Christian suddenly.

"No. I put it in the trunk. I figured that it'd just be in the way with all of us crammed into the back seat." Christian said honestly.

"I don't feel crammed." Nick said frankly.

"Me either. This car is huge." Collin said with a smile.

"Yeah. It's great! I wish we had a car like this." Nick said excitedly.

* * * * *

After stopping for gas on the way out of town, Galen began the long drive home.

When Jorry noticed Christian's distant expression, he curiously asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I was just remembering back there at Linda's house, I saw Collin looking out of your window..."

"My window?" Jorry interrupted.

"Yeah. The one you were hanging out beside when we got there. You seemed to like that place." Christian finished with a shrug.

"Oh, okay, yeah. So Collin was looking out the window, so what?" Jorry asked curiously.

"Well, when I was looking at him, that corny Shakespeare line went through my head. I know it sounds silly." Christian finished shyly.

"Which line?" Collin asked from the other side of the back seat.

"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun." Christian said distantly.

"Well, actually, it was the North, and the only thing you can see out there is Aunt Linda's compost heap." Jorry said with a glance at Christian.

Collin didn't seem to hear Jorry's words as he said, "Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, Who is already sick and pale with grief, That thou her maid art far more fair than she:"

"Maid? Which one is the maid?" Jorry asked with a chuckle.

"Are you sure you really want to know that much about us?" Christian asked frankly.

Jorry looked at Christian beside him, then around his brother at Collin before answering, "Collin's the maid, he's got to be. I don't think you'd let someone else be the dude."

Christian gave a noncommittal shrug, then said in a lyrical voice, "Be not her maid, since she is envious; Her vestal livery is but sick and green And none but fools do wear it; cast it off. It is my lady, O, it is my love! O, that she knew she were!"

"Hey! You really know this stuff!" Jorry said in sudden realization.

"Yeah. It just stuck with me." Christian said simply.

"She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that? Her eye discourses; I will answer it. I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks: Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, Having some business, do entreat her eyes To twinkle in

their spheres till they return." Collin said as he leaned around the pair of brothers to look at Christian lovingly.

Jorry turned toward Collin with surprise, but before he could say anything, Christian responded, "What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars, As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven Would through the airy region stream so bright That birds would sing and think it were not night. See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand! O, that I were a glove upon that hand, That I might touch that cheek!"

"Aye, me." Nick said, obviously responding to Christian's words, then grinned at his brother sheepishly.

"You too?" Jorry asked his brother with surprise.

"She speaks: O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art As glorious to this night, being o'er my head As is a winged messenger of heaven Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds And sails upon the bosom of the air." Collin said with a wicked grin at Christian, then his gaze shifted to Jorry.

Christian followed his gaze and finally even Nick joined in.

With all eyes upon him, Jorry finally dropped his head in resignation and said, "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet."

All the boys cheered and Marc was laughing and clapping from the front seat.

"I knew you knew it!" Christian said with a big grin at Jorry.

"Well. Yeah. But I just always thought it was a really stupid idea for the school to tell a bunch of teenagers to read a story about two kids who were in love and couldn't work it out any other way but to kill themselves. I mean, DUH! Way to teach some life skills, people!" Jorry groused.

"I usually don't get into romantic stuff, but for some reason, the Shakespeare, especially Romeo & Juliet, it stuck with me." Christian said frankly.

"I think I read it about six times before I really understood it, but something about it made me keep reading it over and over. I couldn't stop until I felt like I 'got it'." Collin said distantly.

"So you didn't read it for school?" Jorry asked cautiously.

"No. I think I saw a movie and kinda liked it, so I checked it out from the library and read it." Collin said frankly.

"You're weird!" Jorry said with an incredulous look at Collin.

"Does that mean that you're 'normal'?" Christian asked challengingly.

Jorry made a show of thinking about the question for a moment before saying, "Point taken."

* * * * *

As time passed by, the boys moved on to recounting the events of the evening as the adults sat silently and listened.

Every now and then, Galen would look over at Marc and see a loving and contented smile on his face. He concluded that all the turmoil of the recent hours was worth it to see Marc at peace.

"I'm glad you boys are getting to spend the night. I hope you have a good time." Marc said into the back seat.

"I never ever thought we'd get to stay overnight at your place, Uncle Marc. This is gonna be great!" Nick said happily.

"I'll do my best to make it entertaining." Marc said warmly.

"What's a orgy?" Nick asked curiously.

"What!?" Marc choked out.

"Mom says that you have orgies at your house every night and I don't know what that is." Nick explained calmly, then asked, "Are we gonna have one?"

Before Marc could think of an answer, Christian said, "An orgy is a naked party for grown ups. Dad and Uncle Galen don't do stuff like that, but your mom probably says that because she doesn't really know what it is that they do, so she just assumes that they're doing the worst thing she can imagine."

Nick was silent for a moment as he digested that information.

"Thanks, Christian." Marc whispered sincerely.

Christian smiled in response, happy to know that Marc appreciated his help.

"It's really great that you and Uncle Marc can talk about stuff." Jorry said distantly.

"Huh?" Christian asked with confusion.

Jorry gave a slight shrug, then explained, "My dad would freak if we ever tried to talk to him about anything like orgies or... well, pretty much anything to do with sex. I just think that it's nice that you have someone to talk to about that stuff."

"Marc's your uncle, so you have someone, too." Collin interjected.

Jorry turned and looked at Collin uncertainly.

Christian nodded his agreement to Collin's words, then said, "I get where you're coming from. I could never talk to my mom or dad about anything serious. Mom would find some way to turn it around and make it about her and my dad... He'd just get pissed off. That's the way he deals with things, by getting mad and not really dealing with them."

"Jorry, if you or Nick ever have any questions, you can always come to me and ask. Even though talking about some of this stuff can be uncomfortable, I'd much rather talk to you about it than have you try to make judgements and decisions with incomplete or inaccurate information." Marc said into the back seat.

"What's so great about butt sex?" Nick asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"What?" Marc asked in surprise.

"I'm gay. I've got a boyfriend. We've never done anything but kiss each other, but someday we're going to want to do more. I heard that gay guys have butt sex. But that sounds gross to me." Nick said frankly.

"You said that if they had any questions that they could ask." Christian said past a barely restrained chuckle.

It took a moment for Marc to gather his wits, but finally he looked Nick in the eyes and said, "Butt sex is just one of the things that two men can do

together, but it isn't the only thing or even the most important thing. If you and your boyfriend enjoy kissing, then you should do that. If, sometime later, you decide that you'd like to do something more, then you can try other things."

"Yeah. Just think about it like when you and your boyfriend are together, you're in a big gay cafeteria." Christian said with a smile at Marc, then turned to Nick and continued, "There's all kinds of things that you two can choose from. There's no right or wrong answer, it's all just choices."

"I'd like a big helping of sixty-nine with a side of kissing." Collin said with a grin at Christian.

"Coming right up!" Christian responded happily.

"So he doesn't have to do sex to my butt?" Nick asked slowly.

"No. Certainly not at your age, and maybe not ever. That's something for you and your boyfriend to decide together, and you don't have to decide right away or even anytime soon." Marc said gently.

"And remember, Nick." Galen said from the driver's side, drawing everyone's attention to him, "If there's something that you don't feel right about, you can always say 'no'. When it comes to your body, you're in charge."

Marc smiled at Galen, then looked into the back seat and said, "That's right. If your boyfriend wants to try butt sex and you don't want to, then tell him 'no'."

"Danny doesn't want to do that to me, he says that he's afraid that it will hurt me. I was the one who wanted to do it because if that's what gay guys do, then we should be doing it." Nick explained seriously.

Before Marc could respond to that, Christian said, "What gay guys do is love each other. How you show your love is up to you and your boyfriend. If all you ever decide to do is kiss and hug, you'll still be just as much in love as anyone else."

"Yes. And don't worry about what other people say. Most of them don't know what they're talking about anyway." Collin said frankly.

"Yeah. Like mom. She says all kinds of stuff that you know isn't right, but she says it like she knows that it's true." Jorry said seriously.

Nick smiled up at his brother, then gave him a firm hug.

"We're all here for you if you ever have any questions." Christian said with a smile at the scene.

"That's right. Even if you're just not sure about something, you can ask and we'll help you." Marc said with a smile that matched Christian's.

Nick snuggled into his brother's side and wore an expression of peace.

* * * * *

The excitement of the day seemed to have caught up to the boys. Jorry and Nick were loosely holding on to each other. They wore matching drowsy expressions as they each fought to stay awake.

Collin and Christian were sitting on opposite sides of the brothers, both silently watching as the scenery, shrouded in darkness, passed by outside the windows.

Christian looked ahead with interest when Galen slowed the car slightly.

The glow of the headlights fell on a solitary figure walking along the side of the highway, in the middle of nowhere.

There was a spark of recognition and before he could even think, Christian called out, "Stop the car!"

"We're not going to be picking up a hitchhiker in the middle of the night." Galen said simply, but firmly.

"That's Joaquin! You know, from this morning when we got our hair cut!" Christian said urgently.

Galen thought for a moment, then pulled the car to the side of the road.

Before the car had come to a complete stop, Christian had his seat belt off and was opening the door.

"Joaquin! Is that you? Are you alright?" Christian called out as he ran down the side of the road.

Galen and Marc shared a worried look, but didn't voice their concerns.

* * * * *

"Who are you?" Joaquin asked hesitantly with a trace of fear in his voice as the teenager approached.

"My name is Christian. I saw you this morning when we were getting haircuts." Christian said as he stopped walking to look Joaquin in the eyes. The first thing that caught his attention was that Joaquin appeared to have either been beaten up or in a car accident.

After a moment, Joaquin reluctantly said, "I'm sorry but I don't remember you."

"That's okay." Christian said dismissively, then quietly asked, "Are you alright?"

"I've been better." Joaquin said with a weary chuckle, then at Christian's concerned gaze he said, "I'll be fine."

"I'm guessing that you need a ride, come on." Christian said as he motioned for Joaquin to walk with him to the car, then asked, "What happened?"

"It's kind of a long story. Let's just say that my big Christmas weekend ended before it began with me being thrown out of a moving car in the middle of nowhere." Joaquin said wearily and Christian noticed that he was walking with a limp.

"Bad boyfriend?" Christian asked sympathetically.

After a long hesitant moment, Joaquin said, "He wasn't really my boyfriend. He was just some guy who I thought was kinda cute. I feel so stupid for even getting into the car with him. I really do know better."

Before Christian could say anything to reassure him, they had arrived at the car.

"Do you need a doctor?" Galen asked as soon as Joaquin was close enough that he could hear.

"No. I'm just scraped and bruised, but thanks." Joaquin said as he stopped outside the car door.

"Come on. We'll give you a ride back to Orlando." Galen said gently.

"Thanks. But I can't give you anything for gas. My wallet and my keys were stolen." Joaquin said in a pained and embarrassed voice, still standing outside the car door.

"It's okay, Joaquin. We don't want anything from you." Galen said with assurance.

"Okay. Thanks." Joaquin reluctantly said, then climbed into the rear passenger seat.

Marc opened the front passenger door and said, "Christian, you can sit up front with me."

Christian watched to be sure that Joaquin was able to get his injured body into the car without help, then walked forward and took the seat beside Marc.

* * * * *

"Were you in an accident?" Marc asked as Galen pulled back onto the road.

"No. I, um, met this guy and I thought he was nice..." Joaquin drifted off.

"From the look of you, I'm guessing he wasn't." Jorry said frankly.

"No. Not really." Joaquin said quietly.

"So what happened?" Marc asked with concern.

"He said that he lived outside of town. He just kept driving and driving. He drove us out here to the middle of nowhere, then he pulled a gun on me. After he robbed me, he told me to get out of the car... but he wouldn't stop. He said... he said that he was gonna shoot me if I didn't jump." Joaquin finished in a trembling voice and fought to hold back his tears.

"You need to call the police." Marc said as he took out his cell phone.

"No. I just want to go home and forget that this night ever happened." Joaquin said as a tear escaped down his cheek.

"If you don't report it, then what's to stop this guy from doing the same thing or even something worse to someone else? If you won't do it for yourself, do it for the next poor guy who falls for this guy's charm." Collin said from the other side of the back seat.

"Yeah. Okay." Joaquin whispered, then accepted the phone from Marc.

* * * * *

As Joaquin talked quietly on the phone to the police, everyone else in the car tried their best not to listen to his side of the conversation.

Collin and Christian shared a few long, loving looks as the sound of the car's engine filled their ears.

Finally, Joaquin mumbled, "Thank you." then handed the phone back to Marc.

"So what did the police say? Are they going to be able to get this guy?" Marc asked curiously.

"They didn't sound too hopeful." Joaquin said regretfully.

"You said that he took your keys. Do you have a landlord or someone who can let you in?" Marc asked with concern.

"Actually, the cop that I talked to said that since he has my wallet and keys, that it's probably not safe for me to stay at my place. They'll go in with me so I can get some stuff, but they said that I should stay with friends or family for a few days." Joaquin said shakily.

"Do you have anyone you can call?" Marc asked gently.

"No." Joaquin whispered sadly, then suddenly looked up and said, "Wait, um... Eric and Bobby would probably let me stay with them."

"Do you have their number?" Marc asked as he held his phone up.

"No. It's on my speed dial." Joaquin said regretfully.

"He got your phone, too?" Christian asked with concern.

"Yeah." Joaquin whispered.

"We'll be at the house soon and you can call from there." Christian said gently.

"Thanks for being so nice to me." Joaquin said as he looked up to meet Christian's eyes.

"It's just something that I learned from my Dad." Christian said warmly with a glance at Marc.

* * * * *

Marc looked with concern into the back seat and could see the emotions flitting across Joaquin's face as he thought about what had happened to him, and almost happened.

"Are you okay?" Marc asked gently.

Joaquin looked at Marc uncertainly for a moment, then quietly admitted, "I don't know."

"I promise that things will look better once you've had a few minutes to sit quietly and let things settle down." Marc said with concern.

"Marc's right. Once we get home, you can sit down for a few minutes and let the shock wear off before you make any important decisions." Galen said from his place in the driver's seat.

"I bet some of Marc's hot chocolate will make things better." Christian added seriously.

Marc gave a reluctant smile and said, "I don't know if my hot chocolate is up to this challenge."

"I have faith in your hot chocolate, Marc." Christian said with a grin, "I KNOW it'll make things better."

After listening to the playful banter, Joaquin seemed to be more at ease as they continued back toward Orlando.

* * * * *

"Home sweet home." Galen said as he pulled into the driveway.

"Nick fell asleep." Christian whispered.

"Jorry, do you think it would be best to wake him, or just carry him in and put him to bed?" Marc asked curiously.

"If you let him sleep now, he'll be up in the middle of the night. And let me tell you, if Nick's up, everyone's up. He doesn't know how to be quiet." Jorry said frankly.

"Wake him up, then." Marc said gently,

"Christian, do you want to help me get the things out of the trunk?" Galen asked hopefully.

"Sure, Uncle Galen." Christian said with a wide smile.

"Come on Nicky, wake up." Jorry said gently.

After a moment, Nick cracked open one eye to look at his brother.

"We're at Uncle Marc's house." Jorry said quietly.

Nick's eyes popped open, then he looked around to verify it for himself.

"Let's go inside. You guys are going to love our Christmas tree." Collin said as he got out on his side of the car.

Nick looked at Collin curiously as Jorry said, "It's a tree. How special can it be?"

"You'll see." Collin said with a grin, then fell into line behind his father as he walked toward the front of the house.

* * * * *

"Joaquin, I'm going to make that hot chocolate, like we were talking about earlier. Forgive me for saying so, but you look like you're on your last nerve. How about you take a few minutes to clean up, then spend some time in the living room with the boys. Once we've had our hot chocolate you can tackle the things that you need to do." Marc said quietly.

"That sounds good, but am I going to be in the way?" Joaquin asked uncertainly.

"Not at all. And if it turns out that you can't get in touch with anyone, or that no one can come and get you tonight for some reason, then you can stay here. We're already hosting a sleepover tonight so I promise that it won't be any extra trouble for us." Marc said honestly.

"Thank you." Joaquin said quietly.

"I'll show you where the bathroom is." Marc said with a gentle smile.

"Wait!" Collin called and ran past them and out of the living room.

Marc looked to Christian with question.

"Toilet seat cover." Christian said with a grin.

Marc nodded and chuckled at the response.

* * * * *

Christian walked to the Christmas tree and flipped the switch, then smiled as the tree came alive, giving off a warm red glow.

"I bet even Santa Claus doesn't have this much Christmas stuff." Nick said as he looked around the living room in wonder.

Jorry absently nodded as he seemed to be unable to look away from the Christmas tree.

"It's really beautiful." Joaquin said quietly as he looked around.

When Collin walked back into the living room, Marc walked to Joaquin's side and gently said, "I'll show you to the bathroom now, so you can get cleaned up."

It took a moment for the words to register, but finally Joaquin nodded and whispered, "Thanks."

"Is this how gay people decorate for Christmas?" Jorry finally asked, directing his question mostly toward Christian.

After a chuckle, Christian said, "No. I don't think so. Marc just loves Christmas and wants to celebrate it."

Jorry looked at the tree again with its unique configuration of ornaments, then back at Christian with question.

"Okay. Maybe that is a gay thing." Christian conceded shyly.

"Are these presents?" Nick asked carefully as he looked at the plain cardboard boxes on the floor by the tree.

"No. We didn't get to finish all the decorating." Collin said as he casually put an arm around Christian.

"Jorry looked around quickly, then asked, "You're going to decorate more?"

"Just a little bit." Christian said with a grin.

* * * * *

When the bathroom door closed, Joaquin stopped and took in a long slow shuddering breath.

Marc had been right, he felt like he was on the verge of losing it.

As he looked at himself in the mirror, the scraped and bruised face that looked back at him was almost that of a stranger.

As he stared, he wondered how he had gotten to this point.

He had a job and an apartment and, outwardly, seemed to be doing well. But in his personal life, he had been taking bigger and bigger risks. Tonight was a perfect example. He accepted a ride with a complete stranger, holding onto the slightest hope that this one might be 'the one'.

And one 'sperm of the moment' decision made by his overly hormonal sex deprived brain had nearly gotten him killed.

A knock on the door startled Joaquin out of his daze and he absently noticed that he was crying.

"I brought you some sweats in case you'd like to take a shower." Marc said through the door.

"I... um... thank you." Joaquin said timidly, then opened the bathroom door slightly.

"Just take as long as you need and try to feel better. I'll have some hot chocolate waiting for you when you're done." Marc said gently as he handed Joaquin some gray sweats.

"Thanks." Joaquin whispered and seemed to be fighting back his tears.

"Remember, you're safe now. No one here is going to hurt you." Marc said gently.

"I'll try." Joaquin said as he tried to force a smile onto his face.

Marc returned the smile, then left his guest to get cleaned up.

* * * * *

"How is he?" Galen asked as Marc walked into the living room.

"The same as anyone else who was robbed at gunpoint then forced to jump out of a moving car, I suppose." Marc said frankly.

"I can't even imagine how he must have felt." Galen said honestly.

"How are the boys?" Marc asked as he looked at the group of boys gathered, sitting on the floor in front of the tree.

"Jorry seems to have taken charge of the train set. If you want it set up any particular way, you'd probably better jump in there." Galen said with a smile.

"No. I'll be interested to see what they come up with." Marc said as he cuddled into Galen's side.

* * * * *

Galen and Marc sat quietly and watched the boys set up the train set.

Finally, Marc reluctantly said, "I'd better start the hot chocolate."

"Do you need any help?" Galen asked curiously.

"No. There's not much to do. Besides, I think it's best if one of us stay in here with the boys." Marc said honestly.

After a moment of thought, Galen said, "You know, I think I'd feel perfectly comfortable leaving the boys on their own. I think Collin and Christian are responsible enough that I wouldn't worry about them in the slightest."

"I think you're right" Marc said as he stood, then leaned in and added in a whisper, "But let's not tempt fate."

Galen smiled as he nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

Joaquin timidly walked into the living room wearing the gray sweats and with his hair still damp from the shower.

"How are you feeling, Joaquin?" Galen asked as he gestured to offer the young man a seat on the couch.

"Better." Joaquin said quietly.

"I'm glad to hear that. Why don't you relax? Marc should be in with the hot chocolate any minute now." Galen said warmly.

Joaquin nodded, then his attention seemed to be drawn to the group of boys gathered around the bottom of the Christmas tree.

Before Galen could say anything more, Marc walked into the room with a tray loaded down with steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

"Remember to be careful, it's hot." Marc cautioned as he placed the tray on the coffee table.

"Jorry, you're going to love this!" Christian said as he broke away from the group of boys to claim a mug for himself.

Collin was only a step behind Christian in making his way to get a steaming hot mug of chocolate.

"It's hot chocolate, what's the big deal?" Jorry asked as he approached the coffee table.

"It's not just hot chocolate, it's gay hot chocolate." Christian said with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

"Careful, Nicky. It's still pretty hot." Marc cautioned as he watched Nick pick up a mug.

When Jorry took his first tentative sip of the hot chocolate, everyone waited to see what his reaction was going to be.

After a moment to consider, Jorry finally said, "I guess mom is going to be having a hissy fit now, because I don't think I'll ever be able to drink straight hot chocolate again after having this."

Good natured chuckles went around the room and even Joaquin was smiling at the comment.

"It's just real hot chocolate, made the traditional way, on the stove, instead of an instant mix." Marc said quietly.

"I'm pretty sure I could come up with some really clever metaphor about gays and straights from that explanation, but I'm enjoying this too much to think about it." Jorry said before taking another appreciative sip of his hot chocolate.

Marc glanced at Joaquin to see how he was doing and noticed that he seemed to have his attention fixed on the nativity scene that was clumped together in the middle of the coffee table.

"We didn't have time to get everything completely set up when we put up the tree. Some things like the train set and the nativity scene were sort of put off until later." Marc quietly explained.

"And Marc was going to tell us about what it means instead of just setting it up, himself." Collin added helpfully.

"I just wanted to get my bible so we can be sure we're doing it the right way. I know where everything goes, but I don't think I remember all the details of the story." Marc said frankly.

Joaquin looked around the gathering, then quietly said, "I think I remember all of it. I wouldn't mind showing them... I mean, if that's okay."

Marc was surprised by the offer, but before he could formulate a response, Galen said, "I think that would be great."

"Let me get this tray out of your way, and you can tell the story whenever you're ready." Marc said as he picked up the empty tray and sat it on its edge beside the couch.

"Okay. Let's see." Joaquin said as he looked at the figurines, and finally found the one that he wanted.

"Back, a long time ago, there was this girl." Joaquin said as he held up the figure of Mary.

"She was a good girl. I mean, you know, one of those really really good people like you sometimes meet." Joaquin said as he placed her figurine on the table.

"Well, Mary was engaged to this guy named Joseph." Joaquin said as he held up another figurine, then continued, "He was a good guy and everyone was pretty happy about how things were going for them."

Joaquin sorted through the figurines, then picked up one with wings.

"So, that's how it was, then, all of a sudden, there was this magnificent bright light and an angel appeared to Mary. You can imagine how shocked she was to see that, but then he tells her that she's going to have a baby." Joaquin said frankly.

Marc smiled as he noticed that all four boys were sitting across from Joaquin and paying him their full attention.

"Well, Mary wasn't one to be back talking an angel, but she had to tell him that it was impossible for her to be pregnant because she wasn't married yet." Joaquin said seriously.

"Girls get pregnant all the time without getting married." Nick said slowly.

"Yeah. But you see, Mary was a virgin. She'd never had sex with Joseph or any other guy. Like I said before, she was a good girl, so she did like she was supposed to and didn't sleep with any guy so that her husband would be the first and only man to ever be with her." Joaquin said as he watched to see if Nick understood.

As Nick slowly nodded, Joaquin could see by the expression of his eyes that he really got the explanation.

"Okay, so the angel tells her that this baby of hers is going to be the Son of God." Joaquin said as he looked around at all the boys.

"Did she ask the angel if he was smoking crack?" Jorry finally asked.

Joaquin smiled, then said, "No. Because Mary was a good girl who had faith in God, she accepted the word of His messenger, the angel. I mean, that just kind of proves what kind of a good girl she was, because anyone else would have been freaking out and saying 'seriously?'. But not Mary. She was devout and faithful and put her trust in God."

"Wow." Nick said as he began to grasp what Joaquin was saying.

"Okay. So now we can skip a few months ahead. Mary and Joseph get married. There was this big complicated thing going on that really doesn't matter, but what it comes down to is that even though Mary was pregnant, you know, like, out to here." Joaquin said as he held a hand out before him, "Her and Joseph had to travel to this other town, called Bethlehem."

"When they got there, all the hotels and stuff were all filled up. I mean, it's not like they were homeless or anything. They had the money to get a room, but there just weren't any. So anyway, there they were in this town that they didn't live in with no place to stay. Finally, this one guy sees that Mary's just, like, miserable and tired and about two seconds from dropping that kid, so he tells them that, if they want, they can stay in his stable. I mean, yeah, it's not like being invited into the house, but at least it's a place with a roof and someplace where she can lay down."

Joaquin pushed a few of the figurines out of the way, then put the Mary and Joseph figures into the little stable.

"Okay, so remember that this was a stable. So it wasn't, like, really clean or sweet smelling or anything like that. There were cows and donkeys and lambs and probably some chickens there. So, that night in the barn with all

the animals, Mary's baby was born. Since Mary and Joseph were far away from home, they didn't have anything for the baby, like a cradle or anything like that. So, when they put the baby down to sleep, they did the only thing that they could think to do and lined the animals' feedbox with straw. That feedbox was called a manger." Joaquin said as he placed the little tiny manger in front of the Mary and Joseph figurines.

All the boys were riveted as they listened to the story.

"Now, out in the country, way away from Bethlehem, there were these guys who were shepherds. That means that they were farmers who took care of sheep. Back then, the shepherds would take their sheep out to graze and stay with them to see that they were all okay and no wild animals attacked them. So, anyway, these shepherds were out there, taking care of their sheep, when all of a sudden an angel appears to them and just about scares them half to death. I mean, like, seriously. Who wouldn't be scared if that happened?" Joaquin said frankly, then continued, "The angel tells them to calm down, that he's not going to hurt them. He says that he's there to tell them some great news. He tells them that that night a child was born who would save the world. Well, the shepherds decide that they want to go and see this 'savior' for themselves."

"When they get to Bethlehem, they go and see the baby Jesus for themselves and are amazed by him. In fact, they're so amazed that they go off and start telling anyone who'll listen about the wonderful thing that they've seen, and praising God because everything was exactly as the angel had told them."

"Okay. Now about this same time, there were these three guys from the East. They're called the wise men. If you think about what it means to be wise, you'll probably get a pretty good idea of what these guys were like. I mean, they weren't poor, they weren't uneducated, they weren't the kind of guys who'd run off and do stuff without a good reason. People who knew them, trusted in their judgement. On the night that Mary's baby was born, they saw a great light and, I guess because they were wise, they knew that it meant the birth of a great new king."

"They travelled and when they reached him, they left gifts of gold and other expensive stuff as a tribute to him. So I guess that means that shepherds who were just regular hard working men and the wise men who were rich and respected, all agreed that this child was the Son of God and the Saviour of the World." Joaquin said as he put the last few pieces of the nativity scene in place.

"Wow. Look at that." Nick said as he pointed to the set, now completely organized as it should be.

"You know, I've probably heard that story a hundred times, but I don't think I ever really understood it before." Jorry said as he looked at the nativity set with wonder.

"Thank you for telling us the story, Joaquin." Marc said warmly from Galen's side.

"Yeah. Thanks for letting me do it." Joaquin said shyly, then asked, "Do you think I could borrow your phone and a phone book? I really need to call Bobby and Eric before it gets too late."

"Of course, come with me to the kitchen, that way you can make your call in private." Marc said gently as he stood.

* * * * *

Once Marc and Joaquin were out of the room, Galen asked, "So how are things going with the train construction?"

"Good, I think. We've just about got all the track laid out." Christian said happily.

"Yeah. It just looks like we've got a lot more stuff than we'll need." Jorry added frankly.

"Well, knowing Marc, he probably has enough to set up three train sets." Galen said with a chuckle.

"If you want to finish that up, I can put away the empty boxes." Christian said as he walked back to the tree.

"Sure. Just give me a minute to see that I've got all the parts that I need." Jorry said as he hurried to Christian's side.

"Dad." Collin said as he walked to his father.

Galen looked up at Collin curiously.

Collin sat down beside his father and pulled him into a firm hug.

"What's this all about?" Galen asked gently as he returned the hug.

"Just because I love you." Collin said simply.

Galen held his son and whispered, "I love you, too."

* * * * *

"Were you able to get in touch with them?" Marc asked as Joaquin walked back into the living room.

"Yes. They should be here in a few minutes. They don't live that far away." Joaquin said quietly.

"How are you doing?" Galen asked with concern.

"I'm fine." Joaquin said automatically, then quietly added, "It's just, being here with a family... at Christmas... I've missed that. Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary. We're happy to have you here, I only wish that it were under better circumstances." Galen said honestly.

"Me, too." Joaquin whispered as his emotions threatened to spill over into tears.

"I think the boys are about to get the train set running. Why don't you take a seat so you can witness the maiden voyage." Galen said with a warm smile.

Joaquin nodded and took a seat on the couch.

* * * * *

Soft Christmas music filled the room as everyone watched the train dutifully chugging its way around the track at the bottom of the Christmas tree.

A knocking on the door jolted everyone out of their tranquil mood.

Galen went to answer the door as Joaquin stood and prepared to leave.

As soon as the two men entered the room with Galen, they walked directly to Joaquin and took turns giving him firm hugs that conveyed their concern for him.

Once Bobby and Eric seemed to have assured themselves that Joaquin was safe, Galen stood forward and said, "Bobby and Eric, I know you've already met our boys, but in case you don't remember their names, this is Christian and Collin."

Bobby looked both boys over, then said, "I must say that you're looking quite different from when I saw you this morning. I would like to take this opportunity to applaud you on your clothing choices. You two look fantastic."

"Thanks." Collin mumbled shyly as Christian nodded happily.

"And over here, we have Marc's nephews, Jorry and Nick." Galen said with a smile.

"My goodness, aren't you just adorable?" Bobby said with a grand smile.

"Nick is. I'm a teenager." Jorry said in a flat tone that didn't invite argument.

Bobby chuckled at the words and responded, "Of course."

"Please, come in and sit down. I know that you didn't come here to socialize, but please don't feel as though you have to rush off." Galen said honestly.

"As nice as that would be, I'm afraid that we will have to be going." Bobby said regretfully, then turned to Joaquin and said, "Joaquin, you've got to stop taking risks like this. Too many people care about what happens to you."

"No one cares about me." Joaquin responded, seemingly without thinking.

"Blanche, please!" Bobby huffed, "I can think of at least a dozen people who care about you very much. Granted, most of them are elderly women, but you can't deny that they adore you."

Joaquin seemed to be about to argue, when Eric interjected, "And since the day we met you, Bobby and I have cared for you like you were our son."

"Now you've done it." Bobby huffed as he looked up at Eric for a moment, then said, "You know, now he's going to want an allowance."

Before Eric could respond, Joaquin rushed in to pull both of them into a hug.

When the hug seemed to have gone on a little too long, Galen noticed that Joaquin seemed to be crying into Eric's shoulder.

"Let's give them a minute." Marc whispered.

Bobby must have heard, because he quickly said, "No. We really do need to be leaving. Please forgive us for intruding on your family."

"It's no intrusion. We're all just glad that Joaquin wasn't seriously hurt and that he has someone to take care of him." Galen said as he put a casual arm around Marc.

"And, if you haven't made other plans, all three of you would be welcome to have Christmas dinner with us." Marc added hopefully.

"Unfortunately, Eric and I have made other plans..." Bobby said regretfully.

"More like, we were ordered to attend." Eric muttered to his partner.

"How about you, Joaquin? It won't be anything fancy, but I know that the boys would love having you here... we all will." Marc asked hopefully.

"Are you sure?" Joaquin asked uncertainly.

"Of course! In fact, I'm planning a big breakfast at around eight on Christmas morning. There will be food enough for everyone, so you'd be welcome to attend and then you could just plan to spend the entire day. If you don't make it to breakfast, then you can just stop by whenever you like and stay as long as you want."

"Thanks." Joaquin whispered.

"Yes, thank you." Eric said gratefully. "It would tear us apart if we had to think of Joaquin being alone on Christmas. We'd invite him to go with us, but the almighty Agnes, himself, has commanded..."

"Don't start, love." Bobby interrupted, then added, "We need to be going."

Eric nodded.

"It was a pleasure meeting all of you. Thank you again for helping Joaquin." Bobby said as he and Eric started toward the door with Joaquin held protectively between them.

"We'll see you on Christmas." Marc called after them hopefully.

Joaquin turned back and gave Marc a slight smile and a nod before continuing outside with Eric and Bobby.

When Galen returned from walking Bobby, Eric and Joaquin to the door, he walked up to Christian and pulled him into a quick hug.

After a moment, Galen released him and said, "I think you did a really good thing tonight."

Christian looked at Galen with confusion, obviously not knowing what he was talking about.

"Who knows what would have happened to Joaquin tonight if you hadn't spotted him. I'm really proud of you." Galen said frankly.

Christian seemed to be at a loss for words, so he stepped forward and buried his face in Galen's shoulder as he hugged him firmly.

* * * * *

A tranquil mood seemed to have fallen over the living room as everyone watched the train running around and around its little set of tracks.

The mood was shattered by a knocking on the door.

"I've got it." Marc said before Galen could get up from the couch.

Galen watched as Marc left the room and tried to think of who might be visiting them so late in the evening.

* * * * *

"Hi Nolan. How are you doing?" Marc asked as he gestured for his older brother to come into the house.

Marc could tell from Nolan's expression and his posture that he was more or less sober now.

"I brought some pajamas and a change of clothes for the boys... Ruthie also wanted me to check on them." Nolan said timidly.

"Come on in. The boys are in the living room, they just finished setting up the train under the Christmas tree." Marc said as he ushered Nolan deeper into the house.

Nolan looked into the living room for a long moment, then backed away without announcing his presence to his sons.

"I was just about to make some coffee if you'd like some." Marc said cautiously.

"Ruthie is expecting me." Nolan said reluctantly.

"If you have a minute, I'd really like to talk to you. It's kind of important." Marc said seriously.

After a long hesitant moment, Nolan finally nodded his agreement.

Marc stepped into the living room doorway and found Galen's inquiring gaze fixed on him. With a tentative movement of his hand, he gestured to get Galen to follow him.

* * * * *

"Nolan, you need to get help. You're on the verge of losing everything." Marc said without prelude as he went about the business of making coffee.

After a moment, Nolan slowly nodded, then said, "The funny thing is, I can't seem to make myself believe that that's a bad thing."

Marc and Galen were stunned by the comment.

"Each day when I leave for work, I think about how easy it would be to just... go, and keep going... and never come back." Nolan said distantly.

After a long silence, Galen finally asked, "Why don't you?"

"Habit, I suppose." Nolan finally said with a shrug.

"What about the kids?" Marc asked gently.

"What about them?" Nolan asked wearily. "Do you really think that they're better off with me in their lives?"

"I can't answer that." Marc admitted reluctantly, then added, "But it seems to me that Jorry has had to grow up a lot, taking on the role of protector and 'father' for his little brother. He deserves better."

"You don't know what it's like, being married to Ruthie." Nolan said as he looked Marc in the eyes.

"Thank God." Galen muttered.

"You know, we had to get married. I wasn't ready. I never wanted it. But I'd knocked her up so I did what I had to do." Nolan said quietly, appearing not to have heard Galen's comment.

"Really?" Marc asked curiously, then heard the last few gurgles as the coffee maker finished.

"I was a horny teenager and my little sister's friend had a crush on me. What guy's going to turn down some pussy when it's practically being thrown at him?" Nolan asked frankly, then looked from Galen to Marc before saying, "Sorry, I forgot who I was talking to."

"So you didn't love her?" Marc asked with concern as he carried a cup of coffee to Nolan and placed it before him.

Nolan snorted in amusement, then said, "I didn't even like her. She was just convenient. But then she got pregnant and I was stuck, so I married her."

"But then she had the miscarriage." Marc whispered as he took his seat.

"Yeah. There's no way I could have divorced her then. Even I'm not that heartless." Nolan said with a weary shake of his head.

"But finally Jorry came along." Marc said gently, seemingly to change the subject.

Nolan gave a slight smile, then said, "We'd gotten to where we'd have sex about once every year or so. It surprised the hell out of me when Ruthie turned up pregnant, but I was happy, too. It was like, after all this time, I was finally going to get my reward for all the hell I'd gone through with getting married in the first place."

"So what happened?" Galen asked curiously.

Nolan gave a little shrug, then said, "It was kinda fun for awhile, being a father, having a son. But she was there, all the time. It was like she was jealous of Jorry. Anytime I gave him attention, she was there, wedging herself between us, trying to be sure that all our attention was only on her. She wanted to be the center of everything."

"So you finally gave up trying." Galen said quietly.

"Giving Ruthie what she wants is usually the best way to keep the peace. Well, except that what she wants is constantly changing and that

sometimes she wants completely opposite things at the same time." Nolan said frankly.

"Women are sometimes that way." Galen said with a nod.

Nolan took a sip of his coffee, then distantly said, "If I had it to do all over again, maybe I'd be gay. I remember when I used to hang out with the guys. We had fun. We could talk and joke and just be ourselves. No one ever demanded anything. It was all just... easy."

"Trust me, Nolan. Being gay doesn't make your life easy." Marc said frankly.

"But if you enjoy hanging out with the guys, you can still do that." Galen added quietly.

Nolan shook his head as he said, "Ruth would only make my life miserable... I mean, even more miserable."

Marc nodded that he could accept that reasoning.

"It's sounding more and more like a divorce might be the best thing for all of you." Galen said honestly.

"I need to hold it together for the kids. They deserve to have two parents." Nolan said distantly. The words sounded like they had lost all meaning and were just mindlessly being repeated like a chant or a mantra.

"Step back and look, Nolan. It's broken. It's not working, the way it is. Whether you divorce or not, something needs to change. That's what your kids deserve. Something better." Galen said seriously.

Nolan looked at Galen with surprise at the frank words.

Galen smiled in understanding, then said, "My situation wasn't all that different from yours. I was in a loveless marriage, going through the motions. One day, there was a 'wake-up' call and I realized that it didn't have to be that way. Even though I was right there, doing what I thought I was supposed to, for all intents and purposes, my son was growing up without a father. Once I realized that, I took steps to improve my life. I worked toward being fulfilled and being happy with myself. After I did that, things with Collin just fell into place."

Nolan nodded thoughtfully.

"What I'm really trying to say is that you seem to be focused on what you should do and what's best for the kids. By trying to do for everyone else, no one is happy. Be yourself. Do what it takes to be happy with who you are. That's the best thing you can do for everyone." Galen said imploringly.

Nolan thought for a moment, then looked at Marc and asked, "What about you, little brother? While we're on the subject, do you have any words of wisdom?"

"I was just going to say, 'Get sober and grow a pair'. But I think Galen's idea sounds better." Marc said with a smile at his brother.

Nolan weakly smiled, then said, "I don't know what I'm going to do, but I think you're both right; it's time for a change."

The warble of a cellphone stopped further conversation.

Nolan looked at the display, then dropped it back into his pocket without answering it. "Thanks for watching the boys. It's probably best that they won't be at home tonight."

"They can stay for as long as they need to." Marc said reassuringly.

"After you and Ruth have had your talk, if you need a place to spend the night; we've got one." Galen said frankly.

Marc smiled at Galen, obviously happy that he had made the offer.

Nolan stood slowly, seeming to be at a loss for words.

Marc and Galen also stood, waiting for his reaction.

Without warning, Nolan pulled his youngest brother into a firm hug.

"You're the first one in... years..." Nolan started to say, then began again. "It's been years since anyone's cared anything about me."

"All of us care, Nolan. And we'd help if you'd let us." Marc said gently.

Nolan pulled out of the hug, then held out his hand to Galen.

After shaking the offered hand, Galen said, "If you ever need to talk, you know where to find us."

Nolan looked Galen in the eyes and nodded.

"Good." Galen said sincerely, then walked with Nolan and Marc to the door.

* * * * *

"It's getting late. Have you boys considered what you'd like to do about sleeping arrangements?" Marc asked as he walked into the living room with Galen at his side.

"I was thinking that, if you wouldn't mind it, we could do it like a real sleepover and all of us sleep in the living room." Collin said hopefully.

"Does anyone have a problem with that?" Marc asked as he looked around the room.

"Maybe I should..." Jorry said frankly, then clarified, "You know, sleeping with three gay guys. But for some reason, I'm really okay with it."

"Collin, why don't you come with me and I'll show you where I keep the extra blankets. After that, I'll leave it to you guys to figure out how you want to do it." Marc said with a smile.

"Thanks, Uncle Marc. You're the best." Nick said happily.

"I'm glad you think so, Nicky." Marc said warmly, then gestured for Collin to follow him out of the room.

* * * * *

Once the boys had finished making their 'nest', they were all settled in, feeling peaceful and relaxed.

"I like it here. It's weird how everyone's always so happy." Nick said distantly.

"Yeah. It's the same for me. My dad and mom hate each other so much that I think it spills over into everything else in their lives." Christian said frankly.

"I hope I'm never like that." Nick said honestly.

"I don't think you have to worry about that, Nick. Jorry wouldn't ever let that happen to you." Collin said warmly.

"That's right. I'd kick your scrawny little butt from here to next Tuesday if you tried it." Jorry said firmly.

"I know you would." Nick giggled, then quietly added, "Thanks."

Everyone drifted on a wave of contentment after that until each of the boys finally fell into a deep and restful sleep.

Chapter 13

An annoying electronic warble broke the silence of the bedroom and Galen reflexively reached out an arm to press the 'snooze' button on his alarm clock.

It was once again silent, but only for a moment.

The shrill, annoying sound began to repeat and Galen hit the snooze button with a little bit more force, somehow believing in his sleep fogged mind that the alarm didn't stay silent because he just didn't hit it hard enough.

Beside him, Marc stirred and mumbled, "I've got it."

As the electronic trill sounded a third time, Galen finally realized that it wasn't the sound of his alarm clock.

The sound stopped abruptly and a moment later Galen heard Marc quietly say, "Hello?"

As Galen glanced at his bedside alarm clock and saw that it was 3:26 in the morning, his foggy mind cleared enough to realize that it must be something serious if someone was calling them at such an hour.

"James who?... wait, back up." Marc said semi coherently.

Galen reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, then scooted up into a sitting position.

"Fine. I get that you're sorry, but why are you calling? I've known you for almost sixteen years, and you've never spoken ten words to me." Marc said with annoyance obvious in his tone.

Galen tried to force himself to come more awake so he could puzzle out what was going on from Marc's side of the conversation.

"Oh? He is?" Marc asked with surprise, then turned to look at Galen with concern etched on his face.

"Yes, of course. But it's the middle of the night. Why don't you come over for breakfast in the morning and we can help you sort this all out?" Marc asked hopefully.

Galen looked at Marc curiously, since he still hadn't received enough clues to get a handle on what was going on.

"Don't worry about that. We hosted a sleepover last night, so I had already planned on feeding four hungry boys. Trust me, there'll be more than enough." Marc said warmly.

Galen listened carefully, still hoping that he could glean some small speck of a clue about who was calling and why.

"Do you need directions?" Marc asked curiously.

After a moment and a slight nod, Marc said, "That's right. I plan on us sitting down to breakfast at eight. If you want to come a little earlier than that, we can talk while I'm cooking."

There was a pause, then Marc smiled slightly as he said, "We'll see you then."

Galen watched as Marc hung up the phone, then waited for an explanation.

"That was James." Marc said distantly as he stared at the opposite wall.

"James who?" Galen asked cautiously.

"Denise's husband." Marc said, as he turned with an expression of concern.

"Why in God's name would Denise's husband be calling us at 3:30 in the morning?" Galen asked incredulously.

"Honestly, I don't know. He was so distraught that he wasn't making sense. Maybe if he has a few hours to cool down, he'll be able to tell us at breakfast." Marc said frankly.

"But doesn't he hate us?" Galen asked cautiously.

Marc considered for a moment, then slowly said, "I've never really thought about it. I've always sort of looked at him as an extension of Denise. But I can't recall one time in all the years that I've known him that he's ever said anything derogatory or unkind to me."

"I'm guessing he's also never said anything supportive to you, either." Galen said seriously.

"No. He's always seemed to avoid me..." Marc said distantly.

"Until he needs you for something." Galen said flatly.

Marc turned to look at Galen and quietly said, "If you could have heard the panic in his voice... I don't know what his problem is, but there's no way I could walk away from someone in that kind of distress without at least trying to help."

Galen considered for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "That's what I love about you. You're so caring and giving to everyone around you."

"And here all this time I thought it was my cute ass that attracted you." Marc said with a grin.

"Well, yeah! That, too. But it sounds so superficial when I say it." Galen said as he moved in to give Marc a tender kiss.

After a long minute of kissing, Marc finally pulled back enough to say, "We'd better get some sleep. I get the feeling that this has all the makings of a very, very long day."

"Just remember, it's not you facing all this, it's us." Galen said as he looked deeply into Marc's eyes.

Marc nodded and quietly said, "All of us. I'm absolutely amazed at what a source of support the boys have been today. I've always thought that teenagers were, by definition, completely self-centered."

"I know what you mean. I've been carrying around this image of Collin that I've formed over the years. The young man that we met in the airport is nothing like the boy I thought I knew. I don't have words to tell you how proud I am of him." Galen said as he rested back on his side of the bed.

"I look at Christian and I'm amazed at how loving and trusting he is. Just from the little bit that we've learned about his past, I can see that he has every excuse to be bitter and angry and to blame the world for the inequities of his life. But somehow, he was able to open himself up to us and risk his fragile, battered heart one more time... quite frankly, I'm in awe of him." Marc said quietly.

"Face it. We've got some amazing boys." Galen said as he reached over to take Marc's hand into his.

"Yes. We do." Marc said tenderly, then raised their joined hands and kissed the back of Galen's.

"Goodnight." Galen said as he reached over with his free hand and turned off the bedside lamp.

"Goodnight. I love you." Marc whispered into the sudden darkness.

"I love you, too." Galen whispered in return.

* * * * *

Despite going to bed later than usual and being awakened in the wee hours of the morning, Marc's internal clock woke him up without fail at the usual time.

Although he would have dearly loved to get some more sleep, the more practical side of his nature drove him to get up and start his day.

After dressing, he decided to get some housework out of the way before he needed to start on breakfast.

He went into the downstairs bathroom and gave it a quick, once-over, cleaning, before going into the attached bedroom to change the bedclothes.

As soon as he opened the door, he froze in his tracks.

Collin and Christian were laying on the bed, completely naked, in the sixty-nine position.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were in here. I thought, I mean, I guess I assumed that you were still asleep in the living room." Marc said nervously, as he started to back out of the room.

"Marc!" Collin said suddenly, causing Marc to stop and chance a look at him.

"It's okay." Collin said, as he looked Marc in the eyes.

Marc gave a slight nod and withdrew from the room, feeling the tingle of a blush coloring his face.

After a moment for his racing heart to calm down, Marc began to puzzle over how two simple words from Collin had completely changed what had been an incredibly embarrassing moment for all of them into a moment that they would someday be able to look back on with a fond smile.

With a slight chuckle to himself and an amused shake of his head, Marc gathered the used towels and picked up the laundry hamper, so he could get the majority of his housekeeping done before he needed to start breakfast.

* * * * *

"Good morning, Marc" Collin said cheerfully as he walked into the kitchen.

"I guess I don't have to ask why you're in such a good mood this morning." Marc said with a hint of a blush rising up his cheeks.

Collin giggled as Christian walked into the room.

"Good morning, Marc." Christian said as he walked to the stove and gave Marc a firm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

As soon as he was released, Marc asked, "What was that for?"

"For being so cool and not freaking out on us." Christian said with a grin.

"I'm glad I didn't disappoint you." Marc said haltingly, not sure how someone was supposed to respond in that situation.

Christian looked at him curiously for a moment, then explained, "You can say that it's okay to be gay and there's no shame in it. You can make big speeches about responsibility and freedom, and all that other horse shit, but every bit of it is just words and don't mean nothing. What happened this morning, that was real. If I had any doubts at all about being safe or accepted... that took care of it."

Marc seemed to be about to say something, but instead, held up one finger. He quickly turned over the pancakes on the griddle, then turned his attention back to Christian.

"I... I'm..." Marc began to say, then gave up and pulled Christian into a firm hug.

"Me, too." Christian whispered as he held Marc tightly.

Collin was sure that Christian had a lifetime of father/son moments that he never got to experience. Watching Christian and Marc holding each other, just seemed so very right.

* * * * *

"Here you are!" Jorry said as he walked into the kitchen, still wearing his pajamas.

"Good morning, Jorry! Did you sleep alright?" Marc asked casually as he glanced away from his griddle full of sausage links.

"Yeah, I guess so. But my mom is going to freak out if she ever finds out that I got woke up by my first gay kiss while I was here." Jorry said as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

"I didn't..." Christian stammered as Collin said, "Not me!"

Marc turned away from his griddle with a look of concern.

"No." Jorry chuckled at the reaction, then explained, "Nicky must have been dreaming about Danny. I woke up with him hugging me and trying to stick his tongue down my throat."

After a moment for the words to sink in, Christian hesitantly asked, "How was it?"

"It took me a few seconds to realize what was happening. For those few seconds, it was pretty nice." Jorry said frankly.

"So, are you ready to pick a team?" Collin asked with a grin.

"No. I think I'll be a free agent for a little while longer. But at least now I know that it isn't as gross as I thought it would be. Who knows? If it hadn't been my little brother that was making out with me, I might have gone for it." Jorry said consideringly.

"There's no need for you to make any decisions about it this morning." Marc said from the stove.

The doorbell ringing prevented any further conversation.

Marc looked at the stove, then turned to Christian and said, "Could you get that? I can't really leave this right now."

"Sure." Christian said as he hopped up from his chair.

"Collin, would you go upstairs and wake up your father? I don't want him to sleep too late or he'll feel miserable all day." Marc asked hopefully.

"Okay." Collin said with a cheerful smile.

"Can I do anything to help?" Jorry asked curiously.

"You could go in and wake up your brother. Breakfast isn't going to be finished for about fifteen or twenty minutes, so you'll have plenty of time to get him awake and dressed." Marc said as he started transferring cooked sausages to a plate.

"I love you, Uncle Marc." Jorry said as he stood.

"I love you, too, Jorry. Always have, always will." Marc said with a smile at his nephew.

* * * * *

"Oh! Um, hi." Christian said as he opened the front door.

He couldn't focus on anything but the series of butterfly bandages holding together a nasty looking jagged wound from the man's temple to his hairline.

"Hello. Marc said to come over before eight."

"He's in the kitchen. Come in." Christian said as he stood away from the door.

The man hesitantly walked into the entry hall and Christian was about to close the door when Brucie stepped in, looking timid and uncertain.

"It's down this way, you can hang your jackets there if you want." Christian said before walking down the hallway.

Both Brucie and James kept their light jackets on as they followed Christian.

* * * * *

"Look who I've got." Christian said with a grin as he walked into the kitchen.

"James! Come on in. Would you like a cup of coffee?" Marc asked as he wiped his hands on a dish towel.

"Yes. Thank you. If it wouldn't be any trouble." James said nervously.

"Christian, would you take Brucie into the living room so us old folks can talk?" Marc asked with a grin.

"Yeah. C'mon Brucie. We'd better hurry before they start getting boring." Christian said playfully.

Brucie had a conflicted look and waited for his father's nod before he reluctantly left the room.

* * * * *

At the top of the stairs, Collin peeked into a room that turned out to be an office of sorts, then looked into what seemed to be a small living room. He was about to go to the next room when he heard movement.

Venturing further into the homey little parlor, he found that the far end of the room seemed to be it's own little room, only lacking one wall to make it it's own separate bedroom.

The bed seemed enormous and Collin guessed that it was a California king.

As he stepped closer, he noticed that his father was fast asleep, cuddling his pillow.

Collin smiled at the sight of his father looking so peaceful and innocent.

Then, much to his surprise, he found himself looking at his father in a different way. Yes, this was the man he grew up with, and that he had always loved. But now, looking at his slightly tanned skin contrasted by the stark white sheets, Collin noticed that his father was really hot looking.

His thoughts weren't exactly sexual in nature, but he reluctantly admitted to himself that his father was actually quite attractive.

The sound of the front door closing jarred Collin out of his thoughts and he sat on the edge of the bed and gently shook his father's shoulder.

"Marc says it's time for you to wake up or you're going to feel like crap all day." Collin said gently.

Galen slowly opened his eyes, then after a moment for them to focus, he smiled up at his son.

"Good morning." Collin said with a smile in return.

"How are you doing today?" Galen asked as he reached out to place his hand on top of Collin's and give it a gentle squeeze.

"I'm good." Collin said automatically, then blushed as he quietly added, "Well, Marc walked in on me and Christian while we were having sex this morning. So, that was kind of embarrassing. But he was really cool about it, so everything's fine."

"He's the best person I know. And I'm a better person because of him." Galen said as he looked into his son's eyes.

"I know, Dad. It really shows." Collin said frankly.

"Have I told you how proud I am of you?" Galen asked curiously.

"Lot's of times." Collin said with a smile.

"It's worth repeating." Galen said honestly.

"Thanks, Dad." Collin said as he leaned forward and gave his father a hug.

Galen returned the hug, then said, "Tell Marc I'll be down as soon as I've cleaned up."

"Sure thing." Collin said happily as he released his father.

"How are things with you and Christian?" Galen asked as he threw back the sheet and scooted to the edge of the bed, revealing that he was wearing only boxer shorts..

Collin automatically walked to the chair beside the bed and picked up his father's robe and handed it to him as he said, "Things are amazing. I really love him."

"How do you think you're going to handle it if things don't go the way we want at the court hearing?" Galen asked as he tied his robe closed.

"It'll hurt. But we talked about it and decided that however it goes, we'd rather be able to look back on what we did instead of what we wish we'd done." Collin said frankly.

"I wish I'd been as smart as you when I was your age." Galen said as he pulled his son into a hug and kissed him on the top of the head.

"You're getting there." Collin said with a teasing chuckle.

Galen released Collin and gave him a playful swat on the behind before saying, "Go tell Marc I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Alright. I'm going." Collin laughed as he scurried away.

* * * * *

Christian noticed Brucie's anxious expression and said, "Don't worry, we don't bite."

"I've never been around..." Brucie trailed off nervously.

"Around what?" Christian asked as he stopped outside the living room door.

"Well, Uncle Marc is... you know..." Brucie said as sweat beaded on his forehead, then he leaned closer to Christian and whispered, "...gay."

"Yeah. So am I. So what?" Christian said frankly.

Brucie's eyes went wide with terror at the admission.

"You don't have to pretend with me. I know you suck cock. No one here is going to freak out if you're honest with us." Christian said frankly.

After a long moment of silence, Brucie finally forced himself to look into Christian's eyes as he quietly said, "I'll try."

* * * * *

"My God, James. What happened to you?" Marc said as soon as they were alone.

"It's kind of a long... I'm not really here about that. It's about Brucie... I don't know what to do. And I thought... I didn't know who else..." James said sporadically, and seemed to be on the verge of hyperventilation or a nervous breakdown... perhaps both.

Marc quickly put the last few cooked sausages on a plate and placed it in the oven before he walked to the table and said, "Take a few deep breaths and calm down a little bit, then tell me what happened."

James nodded, then slowly and very deliberately took in a few deep, cleansing breaths.

"Okay." Marc said gently, then quietly prompted, "I know that you were fine at Linda's last night, so maybe you can tell me what happened after you left."

James nodded, then carefully said, "Denise was fuming mad when we left, as mad as I've ever seen her. She was ranting and raving... mostly about you."

Marc nodded, not surprised in the least.

"Well, I was driving us home, Denise got a phone call. I'm not exactly sure what was said, but she went silent. I think for the first time since I met Denise, I was actually scared of her." James said quietly.

"From the look of you, I'm guessing for good reason." Marc said honestly.

It took a moment for James to collect his thoughts, but finally he continued, "Once we got home, I got the feeling that she might need to talk about whatever was bothering her, so I asked her if she wanted to talk about it."

Marc nodded, then noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye and saw Collin walking into the kitchen.

"Dad said he'll be down in a few minutes." Collin said as he looked at James curiously.

"Thank you. Go on into the living room and I'll let you know when breakfast is ready." Marc said as he looked Collin in the eyes to convey the seriousness of the situation.

"Yeah, okay." Collin said slowly, then withdrew from the room.

"So, you asked Denise if she wanted to talk." Marc said quietly, prompting James to continue.

"I don't remember much after that. Most of what I know came from the police reports. The rest, Brucie told me." James said reluctantly.

"What happened?" Marc asked with concern.

"She hit me with something, one of those fake modern art pieces that she collects. And from what the doctor said, she really did some damage. If she'd hit me a quarter of an inch lower she most likely would have killed me." James said as he finally met Marc's eyes.

"Oh my God!" Marc gasped.

"What's even worse is that she did it right in front of Brucie. He saw the whole thing." James said as he tried to gulp past the lump in his throat.

"I guess, from what the police said, Brucie thought that she had actually killed me." James said as a tear escaped down his cheek.

Marc reached across the table and took hold of James' hand to do what little he could to comfort the distraught man.

"So, Brucie called 911 and told the dispatcher that I was dead and that he saw his mom kill me. I was still unconscious, so I can only imagine what he

went through when the police arrived. But, what I do know is that Denise put up a fight when they tried to arrest her and they ended up tasering her because she was so violent and out of control." James said quietly.

Marc's eyes went wide as he tried to imagine his sister behaving like that.

"Well, of course, when the ambulance got there, they realized that I was still alive. When I woke up I was in the ambulance and Brucie was there with me, and he was crying and he told me how happy he was that I was alive..." James broke down into tears at that point and Marc got up to get a roll of paper towels from by the sink.

It took a moment for James to dry his tears and get himself under control, but finally he managed to say, "Brucie and I have never been that close. Ever since he was a toddler, he was mama's boy. So to see the relief on his face and to hear him say those words, it was like I was finally getting something I've been waiting my whole life for."

Marc nodded, prompting James to continue.

"Well, so I went to the hospital and between the police and the doctors, it was all kind of a blur. In the end, all I can tell you is that Brucie stayed right by my side, every step of the way. It took a few hours for the doctors to decide that my concussion wasn't severe enough to keep me for observation, so sometime after midnight, I was discharged from the hospital."

Galen poked his head in the door and Marc looked up at the movement.

Marc gave a subtle shake of his head and Galen immediately withdrew.

"I can't explain why, but I couldn't go back to the house. I just... there's no way I could face it yet." James said haltingly.

"Of course, that's where you were attacked. It's only natural that you wouldn't feel safe going back there right away." Marc said quietly.

James looked at Marc with surprise, then said, "Yes. That's exactly right."

Marc nodded, prompting James to continue the story.

"So I got a motel room for me and Brucie. I thought that maybe a good night of sleep and unfamiliar surroundings might help me in taking a step back, so I could look at things from a different point of view." James said slowly.

"That sounds reasonable to me." Marc said simply.

James gave a brief smile, but it fell away as he continued the story.

"What happened next is why I'm here." James said in prelude.

Marc felt his stomach tighten, not able to imagine what might have happened to bring James to his house, of all places.

"When we got to the motel room, I tried to tell Brucie how much it meant to me that he stayed with me. I don't know if he understood what I was saying, but I wanted him to know. Anyway, I told him that we'd figure everything out in the morning and we went to bed." James said and seemed to be getting slower and more hesitant as the story progressed.

Marc nodded, still unable to imagine what could have happened to bring him here.

"I guess with all the excitement and everything that happened... I don't know, maybe it was the pain medication, but for whatever reason, I couldn't sleep. I was laying there with my mind racing, trying to put the pieces together and figure out what had happened and what to do next when... I guess Brucie thought I was asleep."

Marc handed James another paper towel when he noticed the tears forming in his eyes again.

"At first I thought he was just scared from what he'd seen. I mean, when he was little, he used to crawl into bed with Denise and me when he was frightened. So I didn't say anything, I just let him think I was asleep. But then, he... I can't say it." James choked out and started crying again.

"Just tell me. I can't help you if I don't know what happened." Marc said gently, but firmly.

That must have been the right thing to say, because James collected himself and said in a low voice, "Brucie went under the covers and began to perform fellatio on me."

"Oh." Marc said with sudden comprehension.

"I was so shocked, I didn't do anything for a moment. I thought that maybe it was some sort of hallucination brought about by the blow to the head." James said desperately, and Marc could tell from his expression that he wished that it had been a hallucination.

"Finally, I was able to gather my wits enough to tell him to stop, but... he started begging me. For a moment, I felt bad for denying him what he wanted, but he's my son! I just... I don't know what I should do. I don't know what I should have done. That's why I called you. I want to do what's best for Brucie but I have no idea what that is."

The room went silent as James seemed to be waiting for some momentous 'words of wisdom' from Marc. And, as it turned out, Marc didn't have any.

So, after another moment of silence, Marc finally said, "I don't know if I'm the right person to talk to about this, but I promise that I'll do whatever I can to help you. What I do know is that what you did, telling Brucie to stop, that was the right thing. I think I may need to ask Galen's advice, if you'll allow me to discuss this with him. He's been a parent a lot longer than I have."

"If you think that's what's best. I didn't know where else to turn. You're the only... gay... person I know." James said, whispering 'gay' like it was a dirty secret.

"Okay. But we're not going to get anything settled in the next few minutes and I've got a hungry family waiting for their breakfast. The bathroom is next door down the hall, why don't you go in and splash some cold water on your face, and when you get back, breakfast should be just about ready to be served.

"Thank you, Marc. I'm so sorry for barging in on your family like this, on Christmas Eve, of all days." James said sincerely.

"Just remember, you and Brucie are my family, too. So I'm not the least bit upset that you came to me for help. That's what family does for each other."

* * * * *

As Christian and Brucie walked into the living room, they found Jorry kneeling by his brother, trying to wake him.

"Come on. Uncle Marc is going to have breakfast ready in a few minutes." Jorry said as he shook his brother's shoulder again.

"Nmpp mffr." Nick growled and turned onto his side to evade the bothersome hand on his shoulder.

"I am NOT a Nump Muffer, and if you want to eat breakfast, you need to get up and get dressed." Jorry said as he started to tickle Nick's side.

"You ARE TOO a Nump Muffer, I saw you muffing your nump right before we left for the Christmas party." Nick giggled.

"You did NOT, I had the door closed." Jorry said as he continued to try to find his brothers best tickle spots.

Brucie and Christian were standing just inside the doorway, smiling at the antics when both brothers seemed to spot them at the same time.

The laughter immediately stopped, and Jorry asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Marc invited Brucie and his dad over to have breakfast with us. So that means that they're our guests and we have to be nice to them." Christian said firmly

"I'm a guest, too, so I don't have to be nice." Jorry said flatly as he stared at Brucie.

After a moment to consider, Christian said, "I guess you're right. You don't have to be nice. But I'd really appreciate it if you'd give it a try, at least for a while to see how it goes."

"Why should I?" Jorry asked suspiciously.

"Go in the kitchen and take a look at Brucie's dad. Something's up, and it ain't good." Christian said frankly.

"Something happened to Uncle James?" Jorry asked with surprise, then turned to Brucie and asked, "What happened?"

"Um, I, um..." Brucie stammered then looked at Christian helplessly.

"Honest. Remember?" Christian asked firmly.

Brucie nodded, then quietly said, "My mom went nuts last night and kinda tried to kill my dad. In fact, the doctor said she almost did."

Christian, Jorry and Nick stared in silence for a long moment, until the silence was broken by Jorry asking, "What about your dad, is he going to be okay?"

Brucie slowly nodded and Christian could see tears in his eyes.

"Guys, why don't you go on and get changed and washed up. I think Brucie could use a minute." Christian said firmly.

"Yeah, alright." Jorry said sounding somewhat subdued.

Nick walked up to Brucie and looked up into his eyes as he said, "I'm sorry your dad got hurt. But I'm glad he's going to be okay."

"Thanks, Nick." Brucie said as he reached out to pat Nick on the head.

"Rule number one..." Jorry said firmly.

Brucie withdrew his hand and looked at Jorry curiously.

"...You don't touch Nick, ever. You do, and I swear to God, I'll break your dick off." Jorry said as he looked Brucie straight in the eyes.

After a moment, Brucie slowly nodded.

"Okay. Since your dad was hurt and things are pretty intense for you right now, I'm going to ease up on you. If you need something, I'll help you. You know, all that shit cousins usually do for each other." Jorry said seriously, then firmly added, "As long as you follow the rules."

"What are the rules?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"There's just the one, right now. If there are any more, I'll let you know." Jorry said as he looked deeply into Brucie's eyes.

"Yeah. Okay." Brucie said as he matched Jorry's gaze.

Jorry nodded, then guided his brother out of the room and to the bathroom.

* * * * *

"What'd I miss?" Collin asked as he entered the living room.

"Jorry being protective of Nick. That's about it." Christian said frankly.

"Hey Brucie, how's it going?" Collin asked as he walked to Christian's side.

Brucie looked from Collin to Christian, then his gaze fell to the floor.

"His mom tried to kill his dad last night." Christian said simply.

"Oh. Is that who's in the kitchen with Marc? I only saw him from the back." Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah. I guess that's why they're here." Christian said as he looked at Brucie curiously.

"Well, it looked like they were having a pretty intense discussion in there, so it'll probably be a few minutes before we have breakfast. Let's get comfortable." Collin said as he walked to the couch.

"Yeah. Have a seat, Brucie. I'll turn on the tree." Christian said as he walked over to turn on the switch.

Once the lights were turned on, Christian got down on the floor and worked the controls to put the little train under the tree into motion.

"You really enjoy playing with that, don't you?" Collin asked with a smile.

"I enjoy playing with something else a lot more, but I don't think Marc and Uncle Galen would want me doing that in the living room." Christian said with a devilish smile.

"Yeah. Too bad." Collin said with a weary sigh, then broke into a grin.

"You two, you're both..." Brucie hesitated.

"Yeah. Gay. Little word. Three letters. One syllable. Not hard to say." Christian said as he walked to the couch and sat by Collin's side.

Brucie stared at them and seemed to have a question, but finally the expression fell away.

"Okay. I just about pissed all over that fuzzy toilet seat cover!" Jorry said as he walked into the living room.

Collin and Christian broke into laughter at the announcement.

Nick followed his brother into the room and couldn't seem to contain his giggles.

"I told Marc that that was going to happen." Christian said frankly.

"What are you doing sitting around here looking at each other? Turn on the TV or something." Jorry said as he looked around the room.

"Actually, I think that we've probably got more drama going on than any of the TV shows." Christian said with a grin.

"Point." Collin said with a nod.

Christian noticed Brucie glancing around again, and he once again had that look like he wanted to say something.

"Come on, Brucie. I can tell that you've got something to say. It'd be best if you just spit it out otherwise you'll be choking on it all day." Christian said frankly, drawing all attention in the room to him.

"I, um. I just... I'm sorry about the way my mom treated you yesterday. That was wrong of her." Brucie mumbled.

"Well, thank you for saying so, Brucie. You're not responsible for the way your mother acts, so we don't blame you for it at all, but we appreciate that you feel bad that we were made to feel uncomfortable." Collin said seriously.

"Well said." Galen said from the doorway.

"Please tell me you're here to call us in to breakfast." Collin said quickly.

"Nope. There's a conference going on in the kitchen. It looks like it could take a few more minutes." Galen said as he walked into the room and took a seat on the arm of the couch beside where his son was sitting.

"Well, if it's going to take too much longer, what would you all think about going to McDonalds? I'm sure that by the time they're done talking, we'll all be hungry again." Christian asked as he looked around.

There were a few chuckles and everyone's gaze eventually fell on Galen, waiting for his reaction.

"Okay. Let's give them ten more minutes. If they're not done by then, we'll go to McDonalds." Galen said with a grin.

All the boys cheered except for Brucie, who was looking up at Galen with a bewildered expression.

"What? You don't like McDonalds?" Galen asked Brucie curiously.

"I do. But, you'd do that?" Brucie asked slowly.

"Sure. Marc's obviously dealing with something really serious with your dad and doesn't want to be interrupted. But the rest of us need to eat." Galen said frankly.

Brucie nodded, but didn't seem to be able to wrap his mind around what he was hearing.

"Galen, could you and Collin set the dining room table? You'll need to put the leaf in so there'll be room for everyone." Marc said from the living room doorway.

"We're on it!" Galen said happily as he stood.

"Jorry and Brucie, would you carry some food and drinks into the dining room for me?" Marc asked hopefully.

"Sure, Uncle Marc." Jorry said with a smile, then looked at Brucie curiously.

Brucie nodded, then walked with Jorry to the door.

"Nick, would you walk ahead of them and hold the doors open for them while they're carrying food so they don't spill anything?" Marc asked with a smile.

"Yeah! Okay!" Nick said happily, obviously glad to be included and given an important job.

"What about me?" Christian asked as he walked to Marc's side.

"You can help me with the scrambled eggs." Marc said as he led Christian out of the living room, then leaned in and quietly added, "And I have a favor to ask of you."

* * * * *

Once Brucie had taken the platter of pancakes and Jorry had carried the platter of sausages away, Marc looked around the kitchen to be sure that he and Christian were alone.

"Christian, I wouldn't normally ask this of you, but I'm trying to get a sense of what's going on with Brucie. His father has asked for my help, but I don't know what advice to give him because I don't have enough information about him." Marc said frankly as he cracked egg after egg into a large bowl.

"So, do you want me to pump him for information about something?" Christian asked curiously as he watched Marc add salt and pepper and then a splash of milk to the bowl.

"No, nothing like that. You're just more likely to spend time around him than I am. I was just hoping that you might keep your eyes and ears open and let me know if you get any sense of what's going on with him. If I had some sort of clue, I might be able to guide James to the resources he needs to help Brucie." Marc said seriously, then started beating the eggs vigorously with a whisk.

"Well, there's a few things that I can tell you about him right now." Christian said frankly.

"Like what?" Marc asked curiously as he began to pour the egg mixture onto the hot griddle.

"I guess the first thing is that Brucie's a real cock-hound."

"How do you mean?" Marc asked curiously as he slowly stirred the egg mixture on the griddle with a wooden spoon.

"I mean that I've heard that he'll suck any guy's dick, any place, any time. All he needs is an excuse to get someone alone for five minutes and he'll get what he wants." Christian said simply.

"Oh. That's not good." Marc said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. And to make matters worse, when he's done, he does this big guilt-trip/mind-game thing where he tries to make what he did someone else's fault. I guess he does that so he can believe that he's not gay." Christian said, then reached into the cupboard and took down a serving dish.

Marc smiled at Christian, then began to transfer the scrambled eggs to the dish.

"Marc, the guy plays the part of the victim, but he's a predator. He really screwed with Eric's head yesterday and it took all of us to get Erik to see that he hadn't done something wrong." Christian said frankly.

"You're telling me that Brucie gave Erik, my innocent little NEPHEW Erik, a blowjob?" Marc said in astonishment.

"Yeah. Erik and a lot of other guys, I've heard about six names so far, but I'm willing to bet that there's a lot more. And on top of that, I've heard Jorry

threaten Brucie a couple times now to keep him away from Nick." Christian said seriously.

"Do you really think that Brucie would do something with Nick?" Marc asked with concern.

"Jorry thinks so, and I guess he'd know since he's been with Brucie before." Christian said as he met Marc's gaze.

"I don't know what I'm going to tell James." Marc said as he reached into the drawer and took out a large slotted spoon to serve with.

"Tell him to get Brucie in to see a psychologist or psychiatrist or whatever. And the sooner the better. Spend five minutes talking with Brucie and you'll see that he ain't right in the head. I don't know if what's wrong with him can be fixed, but I'm pretty sure that leaving him the way he is will guarantee that he's going to end up in prison or dead. Not everyone is going to put up with his bullshit games." Christian said firmly.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Marc asked as he looked around to see if there was anything else he needed to take to the dining room.

Christian grabbed a hot pad and the coffee pot before responding, "Because I didn't really think about it until you asked me. All I saw was someone who made me uncomfortable, I didn't think much about why."

Marc nodded his acceptance of the answer, then led the way out of the kitchen.

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"Sorry, Love. The guys were starving to death so we started without you." Galen said plaintively.

Marc placed the serving dish of scrambled eggs in the middle of the table, then said, "Okay. But after all the hard work I put into this meal, I think you owe me something."

Galen's eyes lit up as he asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"You cook lunch. I'm going to have my hands full preparing for the dinner tonight." Marc said seriously.

"Oh. Yeah. Just let me know when you want me to fire up the grill." Galen said casually.

Marc rolled his eyes, but was soon smiling at his lover.

"This food is really good." Brucie said past a mouthful of pancakes.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it." Marc said honestly.

"I can't remember the last time I had a 'real' egg. These are wonderful." James enthused.

"You don't have real eggs at home?" Galen asked curiously.

"Well, we had them at home so Denise could make deviled eggs for everyone else, but Brucie and I were forbidden to have any. Denise worries about our cholesterol, so I haven't had an actual egg in years." James said as he spooned some more scrambled eggs onto his plate.

"Do you have a problem with your cholesterol? Marc asked with concern.

"No. In fact, there's nothing in the world wrong with any of us." James said simply, then added, "But that hasn't stopped Denise from removing all eggs, sugar, salt, white flour and whole dairy from our diets. She keeps us on a strict diet of eggs substitutes, salt substitutes, artificial sweeteners, exotic unpronounceable flours and skim milk."

"I guess that explains why her food tastes like it does." Marc said speculatively.

"What did she do to those crab puffs yesterday? I tried one and it was NASTY!" Jorry asked seriously.

"I don't know. I think it's that stuff she uses in place of cream cheese. I don't know what it is, but it has absolutely no fat at all and it smells like bad breath." James said as he spooned yet another serving of eggs onto his plate.

"Yeah, I think that's what did it." Jorry said with a queasy look.

"Dad, can we come over to Uncle Marc's for breakfast again sometime? This is really good." Brucie asked hopefully.

James looked at Brucie, then at Marc uncertainly. He obviously didn't want to deny his son such a simple request, but he also couldn't impose on Marc like that.

"How about we just set aside the last Sunday of each month for a family breakfast? James and Brucie and Jorry and Nick will all be automatically invited. We may not always have something big going on, but you'll always be invited." Marc said with a smile.

James seemed to be about to decline when Galen looked up from his phone and said, "I've entered it into my calendar as a recurring monthly event. Now there's no chance that I'll forget."

"Good. And when Nolan comes to pick you boys up, we can ask him about bringing you over for breakfast. Hey, we might even see if we can swing the last Saturday of the month and have a monthly sleepover." Marc said happily, then looked at Galen with question.

"We can try." Galen said with a smile.

"Are you guys finished already? There's still food left!" Marc said as he looked around.

"Everything was great, but I couldn't eat another bite." Galen said as he pushed his empty plate away and scooted slightly back from the table.

"And here I thought you guys were about to gnaw the legs off the table from being so hungry." Marc said with a teasing smile.

"I'll eat some more!" Brucie said and pulled the last two pancakes onto his plate.

"Eat as much as you want, Brucie." Marc said with a bittersweet smile, then noticed that James seemed to be fighting to stay awake.

"James, have you had ANY sleep in the past twenty-four hours?" Marc asked with concern.

"Does being unconscious count?" James asked slowly.

"No. It does not." Marc said firmly.

"Then, no. I haven't." James admitted quietly.

"I thought so. Come with me and you can lay down for a while." Marc said as he stood.

"No, I've got too much to do." James immediately protested.

"James. Take a step back and take a look at yourself. You're running on your last little spark of nervous energy. You're in no state to go anywhere or to make any important decisions. You need to get a few hours of sleep. You don't have to worry about Brucie or anything at all for a few hours. Just sleep and I promise that I'll wake you in time for lunch." Marc said firmly.

As James stood, he appeared to be half asleep already.

"Come on. I'll show you where the bedroom is." Marc chuckled.

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"Here's the bed. The bathroom's right through that door and if you wake up before I come back for you, you'll be able to find us in the living room, which is down the hall and to the left." Marc said as he watched James sit on the edge of the bed and take his shoes off.

"I just wanted to say again that I really appreciate that you're willing to go out of your way to help me like this. I promise that if I knew anyone else who was gay, I wouldn't have bothered you." James said quietly.

"James, you needed help, you came to me and asked. I can't even tell you how huge of a thing that is for someone who lives on the fringes of the family. I'm the one that they whisper about and make jokes about and conveniently forget to invite to family functions. Please understand, helping you isn't a bother, it's an honor."

James looked up at Marc with wide eyes.

"There's a few things I should tell you before you go to sleep so that maybe you'll be able to... I don't know... acclimate or deal with it or whatever." Marc said with difficulty.

James' wide eyed expression changed to one of concern.

"The differences between gay and straight people aren't quite as drastic as you might think. I suppose that it used to seem that way because only the most vocal and flamboyant of us were ever recognized as gay. Because of the social stigma and consequences of 'coming out', many gay people lived in the shadows, hiding who they were." Marc said distantly, then realized that he was putting James to sleep.

"My point is that the world has changed. Nowadays, being gay is simply a matter of who you love. What Brucie tried to do last night was completely inappropriate behavior. I'm not saying that blowjobs are bad. I'm actually a

big fan of them. But there's a time and a place and a context. I think that that's where Brucie's problem may lie. I think that Brucie may need professional help in identifying his pattern of behavior and changing it. I don't know if he's looking for love or acceptance or if he has some need to be in control, but he needs help identifying what he's missing and developing a healthier way of providing it." Marc said imploringly.

"So all gay people don't act that way?" James asked uncertainly.

"No. We act just like everyone else. Some of us are good and loyal friends and some of us are total jerks, just like with straight people. But the thing about Brucie is that his behavior doesn't necessarily have anything to do with his sexual orientation. He might not even be gay. I don't think we're likely to know which team he's on until we can get him past this strange, compulsive behavior. Please, don't let Denise talk you out of it or delay you. Brucie needs professional help and he needs it right away." Marc said seriously.

"You don't have to worry about Denise's opinion in this. The next time I plan on seeing her face to face is in divorce court." James said simply.

"I know that after what she did that you might not want to..."

"My father was abusive." James interrupted.

Marc froze at the statement.

"When I was five years old, I saw him punch my mother so hard that he broke her jaw. That was when she took me and my four older sisters to a battered women's shelter. The one thing I learned above all else from what my mother went through is that when your spouse raises a hand against you in anger, it's over. *'Sorry, baby', 'It'll never happen again', and 'just give me one more chance'* will get you killed. NEVER put up with abuse." James said firmly.

"I'm with you one hundred percent, James. And, if while you're going through the divorce, you need anything, someone to stay with Brucie or a shoulder to cry on or whatever, Galen and I will be here for you." Marc said seriously.

"Thank you, Marc. I was scared to death to come over here. I felt like I was walking into the den of the devil himself." James chuckled.

"I'm pretty sure I know who perpetuated that notion." Marc said with a knowing smile.

"You know, every day living with her has been like walking through a minefield. Every minute of every single day I had to watch each and every step. It's been exhausting." James said as his eyelids began to get heavy.

"Yeah, look at what you straight guys put yourselves through just to get a steady supply of sex." Marc teased.

James smiled, then said, "I've never really enjoyed sex that much. We only did it at all so we could have Brucie. When he was about four years old we tried it a few more times, hoping to give him a sister, but when it didn't happen right away, we sort of lost interest and never did it again."

"What about the other women you've been with. Was it like that with them too?" Marc asked with concern.

"I've never been with anyone but Denise. But it doesn't matter anyway. Like I said, I've never really enjoyed it that much." James said seriously.

"James, my sister is what's known as a 'lousy lay'. I used to date one of her ex-boyfriends..."

"Javier. Yes, I've heard about him just about every day for nearly sixteen years." James said as his eyes opened to about half-lidded..

"I guess you would have." Marc chuckled sympathetically, then added in a soothing voice, "Trust me, sex can be wonderful when it's with the right person."

"I don't really care about that." James said as his eyes fell closed, then he continued in nearly a whisper, "All I want now is someone nice."

"I want that for you, too, James." Marc said gently, then quietly left the room.

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Marc walked into the living room to find all the boys sitting around and watching an infomercial about a battery powered carpet sweeper.

"Christian, could you come into the kitchen for just a minute?" Marc asked quietly.

"Sure." Christian said quickly, then turned to Collin and said, "Let me know how it ends."

"Are you sure you don't want me to record it?" Collin asked with a grin.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Christian said as he finally reached Marc at the door.

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"Do you need some help with the breakfast dishes?" Christian asked curiously.

"No. I've got this." Marc said as he busied himself with scraping off the breakfast plates and stacking them in the dishwasher.

"Actually, I thought of this last night on the way home but I didn't remember to ask you about it so I wanted to make a point of asking you now before I forgot about it again."

"Okay. Shoot." Christian said casually as he rested against the table..

"I was just thinking that, now that you have a trust fund, we might want to revisit the adoption question." Marc said carefully.

"You don't want me?" Christian said in shock.

"Of course I want you!" Marc said as he stepped away from the sink to pull Christian into a firm hug.

Finally, after Christian seemed to calm, Marc quietly continued, "I was just thinking that now that you have the trust fund, you have some choices that you didn't have before. You could go back to your mother's, for example, and things would probably be a lot easier than they were before, with the trust taking care of all your educational and medical expenses."

Christian slowly nodded, as if he were waiting for something that he knew that he wasn't going to like.

"I just didn't want to hold you to something that you decided before you got the trust fund." Marc said as he looked into Christian's eyes.

"You wanted me even when I had nothing but the little bit of money I had in my pocket and a suitcase of clothes. What makes you think that this trust fund will make any difference in how I feel? I'm more at home here than I ever was at either my father's or my mother's house." Christian said honestly.

"Well, in that case..." Marc never got to finish the sentence. Christian wrapped his arms around Marc desperately and it felt like he was hanging on for dear life.

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Marc and Christian held each other for long minutes until Marc finally said, "How would you feel about helping me with something?"

"Sure, what can I do?" Christian asked quietly as he finally pulled away and started to get his emotions back under control.

"I was thinking that certain moments should be preserved and kept forever." Marc said gently.

"Huh?" Christian asked in confusion.

Marc chuckled and said, "I want to take some pictures before people start leaving. I was hoping that while I finish up in here, maybe you could get everyone to comb their hair and do whatever else they need to do to get ready for Christmas pictures."

"There's, like, no chance of us dodging this, is there?" Christian asked slowly.

"Absolutely none at all." Marc said with a smile.

"So I'll let the guys know to do it right the first time so we can all get back to kicking back and relaxing." Christian said with a decisive nod.

"That's why I asked you to do it while I'm cleaning up. I thought you might be better at motivating them to get ready before I go in there and start fussing over every little detail." Marc said as he went back to work cleaning the kitchen.

"I still think your fussiness is cool." Christian said with a grin at Marc before walking through the kitchen door.

* * * * *

After wiping down the countertops and one final pass through the dining room to make sure everything was as it should be, Marc went upstairs and got his camera and tripod.

When he walked into the living room, he couldn't help but smile at the scene before him.

Someone had closed the window blinds, so the soft red glow of the bubble lights on the tree was the focus of the room.

Everyone had their hair neatly combed and they were all standing in a stair stepped row before the tree, with Galen at the far end, being the tallest.

"Everyone certainly looks handsome today." Marc said as he set up his tripod.

"Christian said we gotta, or this is gonna take all day." Nick said frankly.

Marc chuckled, then admitted, "He might be right."

"How do you want us, Marc?" Christian asked from his place at Brucie's side.

"Jorry and Nick, come around to this side, by Galen." Marc said as he was attaching the camera to the tripod.

"Like this?" Jorry asked uncertainly.

"No, switch places. I want Nick on the end." Marc said after a glance.

"So we're good now?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Almost. Brucie, would you take one step forward and get down on one knee?" Marc asked as he looked through the camera's viewfinder and seemed to be making very delicate adjustments to the camera's position.

"Are we close?" Christian asked hopefully.

"Yes. Very close." Marc said as he checked the viewfinder one last time.

Once he seemed to be happy with the view, Marc turned his attention toward his family and said, "Now, everyone, I need to see your smiles."

"Seriously?" Collin and Jorry asked in unison.

Marc chuckled at the reaction, then said, "Yes, seriously. All I want is one good photo. So no cheesy or goofy smiles. Come on, let me see them."

It took a moment, but eventually everyone was able to put on a more or less cheerful face.

"Brucie, less teeth." Marc said as he looked at the group, then added, "Jorry, see if you can manage a less pained expression."

"I'll only do it for you, Uncle Marc." Jorry said flatly, then forced an angelic, innocent expression of happiness onto his face.

"Perfect! Everyone hold that pose and this will be over in just a few seconds!" Marc said excitedly.

As soon as he triggered the timer on the camera, Marc rushed around the group to Galen's side and smiled big for the camera.

There was a flash that seemed disproportionately bright in the darkened room, then everyone seemed to wilt with relief.

"Thanks, guys." Marc said happily as everyone started making their way toward the sitting area of the room.

"I wish my dad had been awake so he could have been in the picture with us." Brucie said in a slight whine.

"I know, Brucie, but he really needs his sleep, and if you'll help remind me, I'll be sure to get a good picture of you and him in front of the Christmas tree before you leave." Marc said gently.

After a moment to consider, Brucie smiled and said, "Thanks, Uncle Marc."

The phone ringing drew Marc's attention and he saw Galen answering it from his place on the couch.

The expression on Galen's face sent a chill through Marc, and all he could think to himself is, 'What now?'.

"I understand, thank you for calling." Galen said softly, then looked at Marc with an expression of anguish.

"What is it, Love?" Marc asked quietly, not entirely sure that he wanted to know. His plate seemed to be filled to overflowing with emotional issues at the moment.

Galen stood and gestured for Marc to follow him into the hall.

* * * * *

"What is it?" Marc whispered.

"That was the hospital. It's about Christian's father. He's taken a turn for the worse." Galen said gravely.

"Oh no." Marc gasped.

"I don't know what to do, what would be best for Christian." Galen said desperately.

Marc thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I think... no, I *know* that Christian needs to see his father. He may not think so, but years from now, I don't want him having any regrets."

"Shouldn't we ask him what he wants to do?" Galen asked cautiously.

"No. Not this time. I know that we've been trying to get the boys to be independent and make decisions for themselves, but this is one of those times when we have to be the parents and decide what's best, regardless of what they think." Marc said firmly, not looking nearly as certain as he sounded.

"What about Collin?" Galen asked cautiously.

"In other circumstances, I'd want him to go with you to support Christian, but I've got a house full of guests and I really need him here." Marc said regretfully.

"So, I take it that means that *I'm* taking Christian to the hospital?" Galen asked slowly.

"Unless you want to stay here and entertain our guests." Marc said simply.

"Right. I'd better get Christian and be on my way, then." Galen said as he patted his pocket to be sure that he had his car keys.

"You can do this. You're a great dad." Marc said as he stepped forward and pulled Galen into a hug.

"*We're* great dads. I wouldn't be worth a damn without you." Galen said gently, then moved in to give Marc a firm kiss.

After a long moment of kissing, Marc pulled away and regretfully said, "You'd better be going."

Galen nodded, then turned back toward the living room.

Chapter 14

The silence in the car was deafening as Galen occasionally glanced to his side to see how Christian was doing.

Finally, when the silence had gone on far too long, Galen quietly said, "While we have a private minute or two, we could talk about you and Collin, if there's anything you'd like some help with."

"I don't really feel like talking about that." Christian said as he kept his attention focused out the window.

"That's fine. Since I'm Collin's father, I thought that maybe I could offer a different perspective about things. I just wanted you to know that it's okay to talk if you want." Galen said, sounding casual, then added, "Would you like to talk about your father?"

"Collin and I are doing just fine. I don't know if... I mean, you know, it's getting kinda serious, at least, for me... but I'm not sure if he... you know..." Christian stammered to a standstill.

"Collin and I talked. I won't repeat what he said, just like I would never repeat anything that you told me in confidence. But suffice it to say, that he's as serious as you are." Galen said as he kept the majority of his attention on the road ahead of him.

"Good to know." Christian said as he continued to look out the window.

Galen remained silent and left Christian with his thoughts for the few remaining minutes before they reached the hospital.

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"He's going to be fine. He's got Galen to help him." Marc said quietly to Collin.

"Yeah. It just sucks." Collin said petulantly.

"Some things do." Marc agreed with a smile, then added, "Will you help me keep the guys entertained? I have about a million things that I have to take care of for Christmas dinner tonight."

"Yeah." Collin responded half-heartedly before leaving the kitchen.

Marc looked after him with concern for a moment, then got to work on his dinner preparations.

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To Galen, it seemed that the parking space that he ended up with was the absolute most remote space that could still be considered to be within 'walking distance'.

Before they had even gotten to the door of the hospital, Galen had his arm around Christian's shoulders. The boy was obviously a bundle of nerves and despite any teenage bravado that he might want to display for the world, at that moment, he needed to be held.

"We're here to see Mr. Stone. The nurse in admitting said to come here. This is his son." Galen said to the nurse overseeing the critical care ward.

"Are you here to finish what you started?" A woman's hateful voice said from behind them.

"Sheila?" Christian asked as he turned.

"I've been telling Nate that he should just cut you out of his life. You're nothing but trouble." Sheila spat with disgust.

"Funny, I've been telling him the same thing about you." Christian said defiantly.

"Could you please keep it down? This is the critical care ward." The nurse behind the desk said urgently.

"You're a mistake that ruined both your parents' lives. You should have never been born." Sheila sneered.

"Just who do you think you are? You're nothing but a freeloading bitch taking advantage of someone who doesn't have the brains or the balls to stand up to you. Like it or not, I'm his family. What you think about me doesn't matter." Christian growled past gritted teeth.

"When he dies, you're not going to get ANYTHING! I'll see to that! I don't care what his will says, I don't care if I get anything or not, I'll be happy if I can just tie it up in court until you're old and gray. Wait and see if I don't!" Sheila screamed.

"Ma'am, you're going to have to leave." A uniformed security guard said as he approached.

"You're not leaving that little monster here with my husband! He's the one who put him in the hospital to begin with!" Sheila barked as she turned on the officer.

"I've asked you nicely. Now you can either leave right now and take some time to cool off, or I'm going to call the police." The security officer said reasonably.

Sheila saw the determination in the officer's eyes and let out a growl of frustration before turning and stomping away.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone calmed down.

Galen put an arm around Christian's shoulders and quietly asked, "How are you doing?"

"I'll be okay. Let's just get this over with." Christian said in a weary voice.

Without thinking, Galen pulled Christian into a full hug and kissed him on the top of the head.

"Thanks, Uncle Galen." Christian muttered into Galen's chest.

"Mr. Stone needs his rest. I can let you in to see him, but only for five minutes." The nurse said compassionately.

"That's more than I'll need." Christian said frankly.

"This way." The nurse said quietly as she led the way.

As Galen and Christian started to walk, the nurse said, "Only one visitor at a time."

"Can you please relax that rule, just this once?" Galen asked hopefully, then explained, "Christian and his father have a somewhat... tempestuous relationship. I think it would really be best for both of them if I were there."

"Five minutes." The nurse said gently, then pulled back a curtain, revealing a very bruised and battered man on a bed, hooked to several machines.

"How's that train coming along?" Collin asked when he noticed Jorry and Nick at the bottom of the tree.

"We're just doing some detail work with the village. The train's running fine." Jorry said as he kept the majority of his attention under the tree.

"Let's go in the other room and have some fun." Brucie whispered in Collin's ear, causing him to jump.

After a moment for the words to register, Collin slowly said, "My boyfriend is visiting his dying father in the hospital right now. How could you even ask me that?"

"You're gay. What do you care? It's just fun. It doesn't mean anything." Brucie said casually.

"I care because I love Christian! I would never do anything to hurt him!" Collin barked, drawing Jorry and Nick's attention.

"But it's boring in here. Come on!" Brucie whined.

"Brucie, you really need to start thinking about someone besides yourself. You're three or four years older than me, but you act like a five year old." Collin said irritably.

"A cock hungry five year old." Jorry added with a grin.

"Not helping." Collin said with a glance at Jorry, then turned back to Brucie and continued, "If you're always focusing on yourself, whatever impulse that's going to make *you* happy in that moment, no one's going to want to be around you. You'll always be alone."

"No one likes me anyway, so it doesn't matter. I might as well do whatever I want to make me happy." Brucie said frankly.

Collin was stunned by the statement and stood with his mouth hanging open.

"Are you happy?" Jorry asked simply.

"Sometimes. When I'm, you know... doing it, I feel like someone likes me, even if it is just for a few minutes."

"You are really messed up. And coming from me, that's saying a lot." Jorry said with a shake of his head.

Collin finally found his voice again and added, "He's right. You need professional help."

"I'm not nuts!" Brucie exploded before running out of the room.

There was a moment of silence, then Jorry said, "I always thought that Uncle Marc's house would be fun."

* * * * *

Christian walked to the bedside, not knowing what he was feeling. His father looked so small and frail on the hospital bed.

"I didn't think you'd come to see me." Christian's dad, Nate, barely was able to say as he opened his eyes, just a slit.

"Yeah. Well, the people I'm staying with, they didn't give me a choice. They said that I needed to be here." Christian answered in a voice that tried to sound confident.

"Mr. Stone, I'm Galen Anderson, and no matter what happens, I'll be making sure that Christian is taken care of." Galen said gently.

"I'm sorry." Nate said as he looked at his son.

"You always are when you sober up." Christian said frankly.

"You're not going to cut me a bit of slack, are you?" Nate asked with what appeared to be an impressed grin.

"When have you ever cut *me* any slack?" Christian fired back with anger burning in his eyes.

"Christian, your father needs to stay calm." Galen said as he put a comforting hand on Christian's shoulder.

After a moment to calm himself, Christian looked up to Galen and gave him a brief smile before turning back to his father. "Dad, look at how we are with each other. Not just you and me, but She-dog and mom, too. There's no love, no support. It's not like a family at all, it's just a bunch of toxic people who get their jollies from hurting each other. I'm tired of it. At Uncle Galen's house, people help each other and push each other to succeed, they don't constantly tear each other down."

"It sounds like a way to go." Nate said in a non-committal voice.

"It's great, Dad. It's like all those syrupy crappy sitcom families that we used to make fun of, except that these people got it right." Christian said urgently, imploring his father to understand.

"If I'd gotten my head on straight a few years back, then maybe I could have chosen a path like that and things would be different now." Nate said in a weaker voice.

"It's not too late to change." Christian said with a pained smile at his father.

"Look at me, boy. I think it is."

Tears welled in Christian's eyes as he quietly said, "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry that I couldn't be what you wanted me to be... whatever that was... I never could figure it out, I just kept on getting it wrong."

"Don't worry about what I expected. None of that had anything to do with you, not really. It was me taking out my regrets on you. Listen to me, from here on out, it's what *you* expect that matters. From the look of it, you're doing pretty good." Nate said as he fought to keep his eyes open.

"I'm getting there. With Uncle Galen's help, I know that I'll be okay." Christian said as he reached up and squeezed the hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Stone needs his rest now." The nurse said as she poked her head in through the curtain.

"The nurses have Uncle Galen's phone number if you need me for anything." Christian said to his father.

"I won't." Nate said, then closed his eyes.

As Galen and Christian were walking through the curtain, the nurse quietly told them, "He needs his rest right now, but you can see him again this afternoon."

"That, right there, was probably the nicest talk we've ever had. I think it's best to leave it at that." Christian said as he held tightly to Galen's side.

"Did you try to turn him against me? Did you get him to promise to leave everything to you?" Sheila demanded from the hallway.

Christian glanced at the nurses station to find her watching them warily, poised to call security at the first sign of trouble.

"Nope. He's all yours. I'm out of it. I won't be back." Christian said as he released Galen so he could face Sheila on his own.

As Sheila seemed to be formulating a vitriolic response, Christian quickly added, "Oh yeah, one more thing, I almost forgot. Fuck off and die, you hateful selfish bitch."

Christian turned to leave and Galen followed immediately behind.

* * * * *

"What's wrong, Brucie?" Marc asked as he turned off the sink and quickly dried his hands on a hand towel.

"The guys! They said that I was selfish and nuts and needed to see a psychiatrist." Brucie said as tears slid down his cheeks.

Marc automatically put an arm around Brucie to comfort him, then jumped back when he felt Brucie's hand grope his crotch.

"No, Brucie. You can't do that." Marc said firmly.

"But I **NEED** to." Brucie whined as he stepped toward Marc again.

Marc pushed him away and said, "What you *need* is to learn how to control yourself. I don't know what the guys said to you in there, but they're probably right about you needing to talk to someone about your behavior."

"Come on, just let me, just a little. It feels good. You'll like it." Brucie begged.

"No." Marc said firmly.

"You don't love me either!" Brucie cried out as he broke down into sobs.

Marc quickly turned off the burners on the stove, then guided Brucie to walk with him, making sure to keep a respectable distance between them.

* * * * *

As he drove, Galen kept glancing over at Christian to see how he was doing.

Although Christian had walked out of the hospital with his head held high, Galen could tell that the visit had taken a terrible personal toll on the boy.

"How are you doing?" Galen finally asked.

"I don't know." Christian responded distantly.

"Your father doesn't seem to be the heartless bastard that you were imagining." Galen said softly, trying to sound casual.

"Yes he is. He's just scared. If he gets better, he'll go back to how he was. Nothing ever changes." Christian said regretfully.

"I don't know about that, but one thing that won't change is how Marc and I feel about you. You're in our hearts now and always will be." Galen said honestly.

After a moment, Christian quietly said, "I think I believe you."

"When we get home, I'll make sure that you and Collin can have some time alone together. I'm sure that will help." Galen said gently.

"Thanks, Uncle Galen. I mean, for everything. I don't think I could've said all that to him if you weren't there." Christian muttered.

"I'm glad you had the chance to say what you needed to say to your father." Galen said soothingly.

"When we went in there, I thought that I was going to tell him that I'm gay. But when we started talking, I kinda forgot." Christian said as he glanced at Galen with watery eyes.

"Well, I guess I could turn the car around. If we promised to keep it brief, the nurse might let us in long enough to wake him up and tell him, then we could leave again." Galen said speculatively.

There was a long moment of silence, then Christian began to chuckle. "Just walk in, shake him awake and say, 'Dad, I'm gay', then walk back out."

"If you want to." Galen said with a smile.

After a moment, Christian said, "No. I told him what's important. It's enough."

"You know, being gay is something that you are, not *everything* that you are. It doesn't define you, it's just one of your attributes." Galen said softly.

"I always thought that it was such a big deal, but really, it's on the same level as being left or right handed, isn't it?" Christian asked curiously.

"That's up to you. It's only as important as you make it. For some, it's the cornerstone of their identity. For others, it's just a fact of life." Galen said frankly.

"Thanks, Uncle Galen. I can see why Collin has such a cool attitude about things, having a dad like you." Christian said warmly before turning his attention out the window again.

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"Boys, I think we need to talk." Marc said as he walked into the living room.

"He tried to suck Collin's dick! We didn't start it!" Nick said as he pointed at Brucie.

"I'm not accusing anyone of anything, Nicky. And you're not in trouble. But Brucie is a member of our family and he has a problem. It's our duty to stand by him and help him." Marc said firmly.

"Okay. I'll take one for the team. Come on, Brucie." Jorry said as he started walking toward the door.

Brucie perked up at the suggestion.

"No. That's not what I meant. What I'm asking is for all of us to find ways to help Brucie to cope without indulging in inappropriate and destructive behaviors." Marc said as he looked at all the boys.

"How do we do that?" Collin asked cautiously.

"I was hoping that if we discuss it, we might come up with some ideas together." Marc said honestly.

"So, when Brucie's wanting to suck some cock, we'll do something else, instead?" Jorry asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I think that's a good place to start." Marc said with a smile.

"I guess a punch in the face is outta the question." Jorry said under his breath.

"Yes. It is." Marc said with a disapproving look at Jorry.

"So, like, a hug or something?" Collin asked uncertainly.

"Yes." Marc said with a smile, then glanced at Brucie before adding, "Hands above the waist."

"We could tell him we love him. Maybe if we said that, he wouldn't feel like he wanted the touchy kind of love." Nick offered seriously.

Marc smiled lovingly at Nicky and said, "That's an excellent suggestion."

"I have to say that I love him... without vomiting?" Jorry asked dubiously.

"No, Jorry. Lets just say that you have to tell him something positive. You don't have to use the 'L' word if you're not comfortable with it." Marc said with a grin at his nephew.

"I guess." Jorry grudgingly relented.

"Go ahead. I want to see if you can manage it." Marc said with a smile.

"Seriously? Now?" Jorry asked in a pained voice.

Marc nodded.

Jorry walked up to Brucie and, after a moment to talk himself into it, he awkwardly put his arms around Brucie and sort of hugged him.

Finally, Jorry reluctantly muttered, "You got nice hair."

"You like my hair?" Brucie asked with surprise.

Jorry quickly released the hug, then said, "Yeah. It looks soft and... you know, clean and stuff."

"Thanks." Brucie said with a radiant smile.

"Now, Brucie. I think that what the guys were saying about you seeing a mental health professional is still a good idea. But if you'll try to control yourself and the guys will follow through with this, then we might be able to get you through Christmas without an unfortunate incident." Marc said honestly.

"This is why my dad's so freaked, isn't it?" Brucie asked Marc in sudden realization.

Marc slowly nodded.

"Does he hate me now?" Brucie asked as tears started welling in his eyes.

"No, Brucie. He loves you more than anything. He was afraid that if he did the wrong thing to help you, he might end up hurting you instead. So he brought you here, hoping that we might be able to find some answers."

Collin walked up to Brucie and reluctantly pulled him into a hug.

"Your dad's really great and he loves you a lot. As long as you got that, you should be fine." Collin said reassuringly, then stepped away.

"Are you feeling better, Brucie?" Marc asked hopefully.

"I guess. I mean, it's nice, but I still want to... you know..." Brucie admitted shyly.

"Suck cock." Jorry supplied bluntly.

"We all knew what he meant." Marc said gently to Jorry.

"Not talking about it doesn't make it go away. You need to put it out there and deal with it, or it's only going to keep happening." Jorry said as he looked Marc in the eyes.

Marc considered for a moment, then said, "Point taken. You're pretty smart, Jorry."

"I've just had years of therapy. I must have picked up one or two helpful hints along the way." Jorry said dismissively.

"Jorry, you said that Brucie can't touch me, ever. So am I supposed to hug him or not?" Nick asked cautiously.

"You can say what you need to say from right over there. Until Brucie's got a little better control of himself, I want you and your nads to stay out of his reach." Jorry said firmly.

Nicky nodded, then looked at Brucie and said, "Even though you're nuts, you're still my cousin and I love you."

Brucie seemed to be on the verge of tears again as he muttered, "Thanks, Nick."

"Okay, guys. As nice as it's been to spend this quality time together, the fact is that it's thrown me behind on Christmas dinner. Who wants to help me in the kitchen?" Marc asked hopefully as he looked around.

Brucie and Nicky immediately agreed. Jorry and Collin shared a look of indecision before giving their nods of acceptance.

* * * * *

"Why are we stopping?" Christian asked in confusion, suddenly snapped out of his jumble of thoughts.

"I promised Marc that I'd make lunch." Galen said casually as he pulled into the drive through.

After a moment to realize what was going on, Christian broke into a smile and said, "You're the coolest dad, ever."

"Not yet, but I'm working on it." Galen said playfully, then drove up to the speaker so he could order.

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"I never knew cooking was this boring. No wonder mom's such a..." Jorry barely caught himself before he said it and went back to peeling sweet potatoes.

"Cooking isn't really boring, but prepping... you know, peeling, chopping, washing... that stuff can sometimes seem to drag on forever." Marc said slowly as he made little radish rosettes.

"I think it's fun." Nick said happily.

"That's because you got the best job." Jorry scowled.

"I'm sure if you were the one snapping green beans, you'd be whining and bitching about it just as much as you are now." Collin said with a cheeky grin.

"Watch it, Collin. You don't want me telling Uncle Marc about what Christian told me about you at the Christmas party, do you?" Jorry said devilishly.

Marc looked at Jorry with wide eyes, then at Collin with question.

Collin rolled his eyes, then said, "Yeah. What me and Christian do when we're alone is a real big secret. I bet if you don't tell, no one will ever figure it out."

"I bet I can guess." Marc said as he fought down his chuckles.

"You don't need to guess. I think you pretty much saw it all when you walked in on us." Collin said as his face began to redden.

"Really? Uncle Marc walked in while you were 'doing it'?" Brucie asked in wonder as he carefully sliced a cucumber into nearly paper thin slices.

"We weren't doing 'IT', but we were kind of, you know, doing a sixty-nine thing and the bathroom door opened, and there was Marc."

"What'd he do?" Jorry asked, then looked to see if Marc were going to answer.

"Nothing. He just said he was sorry for interrupting, or something like that." Collin said frankly.

"You didn't get in trouble?" Brucie asked disbelievingly.

"Of course not. We weren't doing anything wrong. Christian's my boyfriend. We're allowed to do stuff together as long as we're responsible and safe and all that." Collin said as he finished cutting the last carrot sticks, then started cleaning up his cutting board.

"If Collin were in the bedroom with anyone besides Christian, then I would have had some harsh words for him." Marc said as he walked to the refrigerator.

As soon as Collin was completely finished with his cleanup, Marc handed him a package of celery.

"So, it's okay for them to do that because they're boyfriends?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"Collin and Christian have proved to us that they understand what it means to be in a relationship. So Galen and I think it's a good idea to support them while they're getting started and figuring things out." Marc said casually as he went back to his radish artistry.

"But they're allowed to have gay sex with each other?" Brucie asked Marc seriously.

"I'm sure that sooner or later, that will probably happen. Hopefully, when it does, they'll both be ready to take that step and it will be a wonderful experience for both of them." Marc said honestly.

"You make it sound so nice. My mom always said it was a sin and that God hates people who do that." Brucie said in confusion.

"Listen to what you just said, 'God hates...', I think that when your mom talks about God, it's probably not the same one that I'm thinking of." Collin said calmly.

"That's a good point." Marc said with a smile at Collin, then turned to Brucie and said, "At some point, you're going to have to decide what 'you' believe. You've heard what your mother believes, only you can decide how you feel about that. In this house, we believe a little differently from what you're used to."

"What do *you* believe?"

"Well, we still believe in the same commandments that you've grown up with all your life, but we look at them as guidelines to tell us how to be good people, not laws that have to be strictly enforced. We believe in a God that is love. He wants us to live well and be joyful. He wants us to care for those who are less fortunate, help the injured and to do a good hard day's work, but he also wants us to be happy. He didn't put us on this earth to growl and snipe at each other." Marc said as he finished his last little radish masterpiece.

"That sounds a whole lot different from the God that my mom talks about." Brucie said frankly.

"Yeah. Ours, too." Nick said with a look at his brother, then added, "Her God hates everyone except the people in her church. And then he makes them go to church all the time so that the preacher can scream at them about how bad they are and how they're going to hell unless they do everything he says..."

"...Including giving him lots of money." Jorry interrupted.

Nick nodded, then asked, "Yeah. If God made the world, can't he make a big pile of cash so he doesn't have to keep begging?"

"Like I said, it's up to each of us to discover what we believe. That's why it's called 'faith'. If someone else tells us what to believe, then it isn't really faith as I understand it, it's just following someone else's rules and letting them run your life." Marc said as he started cutting the skin off of a small tomato.

Brucie slowly nodded.

"It's not something that you need to decide today, Brucie. For now, why don't you stick with the golden rule. Be kind to the people who are around you and see how that goes." Marc asked as he coiled the tomato skin to make a rose.

"Any more sweet potatoes?" Jorry asked as he set the paring knife on the table.

"That's all we'll be needing peeled. The rest of them are for baking." Marc said with a smile.

"Okay. What next?" Jorry asked as he rested back in his chair.

"Why don't you take a break while the rest of the guys finish up?" Marc asked as he went back to making tomato roses.

"Do you need any help with that?" Jorry asked as he got up from his chair.

"No. This is pretty much a one man job." Marc said slowly, then quietly added, "But if you want to get the boiled eggs from the pan in the sink. They need to be peeled."

"Deviled eggs?" Jorry asked with a queasy look.

"No. These are going to be the centerpiece for the relish tray. They're mostly for show." Marc said with a grin, then continued, "If you'll also open the can of black olives, I'll show you how to make boiled egg penguins."

Jorry stared at him blankly for a moment, then broke into an adoring grin that was on the verge of laughter.

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As Galen pulled into the driveway, he looked at Christian and quietly asked, "Do you need a minute or two before we go in there?"

"I might if this food wasn't smelling so good. But we'd better get in there quick before I lose control and there's nothing left for anyone else." Christian said with a smile, seeming to be of good cheer.

"Just promise me, if you need something, let me know, okay?" Galen asked hopefully.

"Sure thing, Uncle Galen." Christian said with a warm smile that conveyed his appreciation of the offer.

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After checking the living room and finding it deserted, Galen and Christian walked into the kitchen to find everyone hard at work.

"Is anybody hungry?" Galen asked as he held up several paper bags filled with burgers.

From the reaction of the boys, anyone would have sworn that they hadn't been fed in days.

"We've got about every surface filled in here. Why don't you take that food into the living room while I wake up James?" Marc chuckled.

"You'd better not take too long, these guys seem to be mighty hungry." Galen said before turning to leave.

"Everyone, please clean up what you're doing before you go into the living room." Marc said as he looked at all his 'helpers', then hurried out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

When Marc walked into the bedroom, his heart melted at the sight of James, fast asleep.

No doubt about it, the man was cute.

Putting those thoughts out of his mind, Marc crossed to the bed and quietly said, "It's time for lunch."

When that got no reaction, Marc sat on the edge of the bed and gently shook one of James' shoulders as he said, "James. It's time for you to get up."

"What?" James asked blearily as he cracked open one eye.

"You asked me to wake you at lunch time. We're just about to sit down to eat." Marc said softly, feeling sympathy for the sleep fogged man.

"How's Brucie doing?" James asked as he sat up in bed.

"He's had a few tough revelations today. But I think that each one was a step in the right direction." Marc said thoughtfully.

"What happened?" James asked as he fought to be more awake.

"You know what he tried with you last night. He tried that with Collin today." Marc said regretfully.

"How is Brucie?" James asked cautiously.

"He's fine. I had a talk with him and the boys and we've sort of worked out a system so that they're all helping Brucie to fight his compulsion." Marc said slowly, knowing that it was hard for James to take in so much unpleasant information at once about his son.

"Thank you for helping him. I didn't know who else to ask for help." James said quietly.

"What we're doing right now is just to help get him through Christmas. Brucie's behavior really worries me. It's dangerous nearly to the point of being self-destructive. You need to get him professional help as soon as you possibly can." Marc said firmly.

"I can't help but feel that it's all my fault. I've never been an example for Brucie." James said regretfully.

"You're his father. Whether you're aware of it or not, you've always been an example. The question is, have you been a good example." Marc said frankly.

"I suppose I haven't, seeing what he's going through now." James said in an anguished tone.

"One thing doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the other. So there's no use in beating yourself up about it. Assigning blame won't help Brucie or anyone else. What you've got to do now is accept that there is a problem and commit yourself to fixing it." Marc said steadily.

"Thank you, Marc. It feels like everything in my life is falling apart. If it weren't for you..." James trailed off, then added in a lost whisper, "I don't know what to do next."

"Eat." Marc said with a sympathetic smile.

At James' bewildered look, Marc explained, "The food is waiting for us in the living room. Have something to eat and give yourself a few minutes to wake up before you start trying to sort things out."

James thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement as he swung his legs around to get out of bed.

"Do you shave your butt?" Nick asked Galen curiously.

"No. I never have. What makes you ask that?" Galen asked with a smile.

"I just wondered." Nick said with a shrug.

"James will be right in." Marc said as he walked into the living room.

"He'd better be. I don't think I can hold these guys back much longer." Galen chuckled.

"I think you can go ahead and hand out the food. We'll just be sure to set some aside for him." Marc said when he noticed all the paper bags stacked on the coffee table.

"There was no way I was going to try and keep these guys from eating once they had the food in their hands." Galen said frankly.

"Go ahead. Start handing them out." Marc smiled.

Christian walked to the table and started rummaging through several of the sacks.

"Brucie. Here you go." Christian said as he handed him two burgers and a sleeve of fries.

"Thanks!" Brucie said with surprise.

"If anyone wants something besides coke, you'd better go and get it yourself." Christian said as he handed a drink cup and a straw to Brucie.

"We have a few different types of sodas in the fridge in the garage, if anyone needs them." Marc offered helpfully.

"Jorry." Christian said as he also handed Jorry two burgers and some fries.

"Thanks!" Jorry said gratefully.

After giving Jorry a drink, Christian said, "Nick."

Nick was happy to see that Christian only gave him one burger.

James walked into the living room and looked around curiously.

"The table in the kitchen is full of preparations for dinner, so we're having lunch in here." Marc happily explained.

"Dad! Come over here and sit by me!" Brucie said excitedly.

After a look around, James walked to the couch and settled in at Brucie's side.

"Here you go, Uncle James." Christian said with a grin as he handed food to him.

James was surprised at being called 'Uncle' by the relatively unknown boy, but finally accepted it as the honor that it was intended to be and returned the smile.

"Does everyone have food?" Marc asked as he looked around.

When no one answered that they didn't, Marc said, "Then let's eat!"

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"So, Christian, is everything okay?" Marc asked curiously, hoping to get some sense of how Christian was handling seeing his father.

"As good as it's gonna get." Christian said between bites of food.

Galen nodded his agreement.

When Christian swallowed, he asked, "What about here? Did we miss anything?"

"Just Brucie being a cockhound." Jorry said frankly.

Brucie was mortified and looked at his father with fear.

"Marc told me what happened. We'll figure it out together." James assured him.

"You're not mad?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"Well, I'm not exactly happy. But, no, I'm not mad at you. It looks like you have something difficult to deal with. I'll help you with it as much as I'm able." James said honestly.

"I'm missing something. What happened?" Christian asked slowly.

"Brucie offered to blow Collin." Jorry said simply.

Christian's eyes went wide with surprise, then he looked at Collin inquiringly.

"I said 'no'." Collin said in his defense.

Christian turned to look at Brucie and found him looking anxious, huddled into his father's side.

"Not cool, Brucie. That's all I'm saying." Christian said darkly.

"I know. I shouldn't want to do that. Uncle Marc says that there's something wrong with me and I need to get it fixed." Brucie said as his eyes filled with tears.

Christian thought for a moment, then looked around the room and said, "Show of hands. Who in this room does NOT like to suck cock?"

Two hands slowly raised.

"See Brucie? You're not as weird as you thought. Your dad and Jorry are the only ones here who don't like to play the skin flute sometimes. The problem isn't wanting to suck cock, the problem is learning where, when and with who to do it. You've got to get it through your head that sex and love aren't the same thing. It looks to me like you're mistaking one for the other." Christian said seriously.

After a moment to think it over, Brucie looked at Nick and quietly asked, "Even you?"

"Yeah. But only with my boyfriend, Danny." Nick confirmed.

Brucie's gaze fell away from Nick as he slowly nodded.

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When the last of the lunch was finally consumed, Marc stood and said, "I still have about a million and one things that need to be done before I serve dinner tonight. If anyone wants to help me, come to the kitchen. Everyone else, enjoy your afternoon."

As Marc left the room, James automatically stood to follow.

Brucie looked around and considered for a moment before he, too, stood up.

"Who wants to check out what's on TV?" Galen asked as he relaxed back into his chair.

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Although Brucie actually was helping by doing various chores around the kitchen, James was sipping coffee while in deep contemplation.

Finally, James quietly said, "I'm going to move back to Pennsylvania."

Marc and Brucie both looked at him with surprise, the declaration coming without any buildup or warning.

James looked at his son and quietly said, "Brucie, I hate to do this to you, but I can't make this decision for you. I'm leaving. If you want, you can stay with your grandparents until your mother gets out of jail. That way you can continue to go to your old school and live in your old house... basically, keep just about everything that you're used to."

Brucie stared at his father, not knowing what to think, much less, say.

"Of course, if you want to go with me, I'd be happy to bring you along. Things might not be easy at first. I know that we can stay with my mom, your Grandmother Clairborne, but money could be tight for a while, and your grandmother isn't the easiest person in the world to get along with. She was a hippie before there were hippies." James said anxiously.

"If I went with you... I mean, you'd want me?" Brucie asked uncertainly.

"Of course. Please don't ever doubt that. I've always wanted you." James said imploringly.

"But you never talked to me, or did stuff..." Brucie trailed off weakly.

"I know, but that wasn't anything to do with you. Your mother had this tendency to make my life 'difficult' when I paid attention to anyone but her, that included you. I should have been stronger. I shouldn't have stood for it as long as I did." James said regretfully.

"But you want me?" Brucie asked to be sure.

"Yes. As long as you want to go with me, I want you to be with me." James said assuringly.

"Yeah. I want to go." Brucie told his father as his eyes filled with tears.

James stood and pulled his son into a firm hug.

Marc smiled at the scene, but still kept an eye on Brucie to be sure that he kept his hands above the waist.

* * * * *

"A house full of people and I have to drop what I'm doing to answer the door." Marc grumbled loudly as he walked past the living room where everyone was engrossed in a black and white movie.

When he opened the door, all thoughts of Christmas dinner and house guests immediately fled his mind.

"I'm here for the boys. Get'em so we can go." Nolan slurred.

"Nolan, you're not good to drive." Marc said slowly.

"I'll get'em myself." Nolan said as he elbowed his way past his younger brother.

Marc's mind raced, then, in a flash of inspiration, he ran to the kitchen.

"James, would you call Ruthie? Nolan's here and he's really drunk. There's no way I'm letting the boys into a car with him behind the wheel." Marc called into the kitchen before heading to the living room.

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"Go get your shtuff, boys. We gotta go." Nolan said as he swayed unsteadily.

"Dad. You're drunk. Get it through your stupid thick head. If you drive, you're going to kill someone." Jorry said firmly.

"I juss had one or two to to to take the edge off." Nolan said, then stopped to consider his words, thinking that something about them didn't sound quite right.

"I think you mean one or two cases." Jorry said defiantly.

"Don't sass me, boy! Or I'll take my belt off... Is that 'It's a Wonderful Life'? I love that movie." Nolan said as his scowl changed into a lopsided smile.

"Nolan, it's for you." James said as he rushed into the room and handed Nolan the phone.

"James? Wow! That bitch really nailed you, didn't she?" Nolan chuckled, then held the phone to his ear and said, "I'd like a large pepperoni, a medium sausage and a case of Schlitz... no, make it two. Meet me at the garage door, so my wife don't see..."

Everyone watched as Nolan's face scrunched up in confusion, then he asked, "What're you doing at the pizza place, Ruthie?"

"Uh huh."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. But I came to get the boys, like you said..."

"I'll be right there..."

"Yes, Dear." Nolan said meekly.

As soon as he hit the button to disconnect the call, he muttered, "Bitch!"

Everyone watched as Nolan turned and left the room, his footsteps loudly proclaiming his passage down the hallway and out the front door.

No one had anything to say in the wake of Nolan's dramatic exit until Marc suddenly announced, "He took the phone with him!"

* * * * *

"Don't worry about it, Jorry. I've been through it with my dad more times than I can count." Christian said sympathetically.

"It's okay. I should be used to it." Jorry said with a sigh.

"No. It's not okay. You shouldn't have to see your dad like that." Galen said regretfully.

"It is what it is." Jorry said with a shrug as he walked to Nick and pulled him into a hug.

"I'm sorry, but I still have to get back to dinner." Marc said with a concerned look at the pair of brothers.

"We'll be fine." Galen assured Marc as he walked to the boys and put his arms around both of them.

After a moment of indecision, Marc finally turned to leave the living room, followed by James and Brucie.

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"You've got a lot going on. I think that Brucie and I should get out of your hair." James said thoughtfully.

"James, please stop and think about what you're planning. You're talking about driving all the way to Pennsylvania on four hours of sleep. On top of that, it's Christmas Eve. Nothing's going to be open if you run into trouble and it's going to be a miserable drive for both of you." Marc said reasonably.

"I don't know what else to do." James said weakly.

"Stay here. The boys can stay in the living room, just like they did last night. You can have the room that you slept in this morning. Then you and Brucie can spend Christmas morning with us and start your traveling after you've had a good night of sleep and a decent breakfast." Marc said seriously.

"We can stay at a hotel. I don't want for us to be any trouble." James hurried to explain.

"The thought of you two spending Christmas at a hotel would cause us a whole lot more trouble than you being here." Marc said honestly.

"You really don't mind?" James asked cautiously.

"Would you get it through your thick head already? You're part of our family. When things get tough, you need to turn to your family to help you out." Marc said sternly.

"I really appreciate this, Marc. I think I can understand now why Denise worked so hard to keep me from getting to know you." James said with a weary smile.

"Why's that?" Marc asked curiously.

"Because you're a much better person than she is. After what happened with Javier, she was afraid that if I got to know you, that you might seduce me away from her." James said frankly.

"Well, just to set the record straight, I didn't seduce Javier. I didn't realize it when they were dating, but looking back, I think the only reason that he

ever went out with Denise was to try and get to me. If there was any seducing going on, it was him doing it. He was always nice to me and interested in my life. He treated me like I was special at a time in my life when no one else really did." Marc said distantly.

"Why didn't it work out?" James asked curiously.

"He was too controlling and manipulative. I was able to put up with it for a while, but I'm too independent to be happy with someone like that." Marc said honestly before opening the oven door a crack to look inside.

"Happy." James said with a weary chuckle.

"James, you're a great guy. I have no doubt that once you're past this whole ugly scene, that you'll find someone wonderful. You deserve it." Marc said as he stood again.

"Right now, I think I'll just focus on what's best for Brucie. I should have been doing that all along." James said darkly.

"Just try to keep in mind that wallowing in regret isn't going to help him one bit." Marc said before turning on the sink to run a pan of water.

The distant sound of a phone ringing caused Marc to look up.

"I can't believe that Nolan took the phone with him." Marc muttered as he turned off the water, then dashed for the door.

* * * * *

"It's for you. I think it's Ruthie." Galen said as he held out the phone to Marc.

Marc accepted the phone and cautiously said, "Hello?"

"Marc? It's Ruthie." She said uncomfortably.

"Nolan left right after he talked to you. Did you need to speak to Jorry?" Marc asked curiously, and noticed that the brothers were both looking at him with wary gazes.

"No. I just wondered... Would it inconvenience you terribly if the boys stayed with you a while longer? I thought that Nolan and I had come to some sort of understanding, but then... well, you saw him. The boys don't need to be here for this."

"I understand. And Jorry and Nick can stay for as long as it takes for you two to work things out. It's a pleasure having them here." Marc said, then smiled at the boys.

"I had my reservations about asking, but since James and Brucie are there, I guess that the boys will be alright." Ruthie explained.

Marc had to bite his lip to keep from telling her that the boys would, in fact, be much safer if Brucie weren't around, but knew that it would only complicate matters if he said anything.

"I'll be by later to pick up the boys, once things are settled here." Ruthie said firmly.

"I'll be sure to have their things ready." Marc said simply.

"I never thought that I'd ever be asking you for a favor, but even after all the bad blood between us, I'm grateful that you're willing to help me." Ruthie said quietly.

"Before anything else, we're family, Ruthie. That's more important than some harsh words or hurt feelings over the years. When it comes down to it, you can count on me." Marc said seriously.

"Thank you." Ruthie said quietly, then hung up the phone.

When Marc hung up the phone, Jorry quickly asked, "What'd she say?"

"She said that she'll be by once she and your dad have discussed a few things." Marc said carefully.

"She's gonna rip him a new asshole." Jorry chuckled.

"I think that, if you tried, you might be able to find a better way to say that." Marc said as he tried to fight down a laugh.

"I call 'em like I see 'em." Jorry said with a shrug.

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"Dad. I just thought of something and I kinda need your help." Collin whispered into his father's ear.

"What's up?" Galen responded equally quietly.

"I didn't get Christian a Christmas present. I thought we'd be going shopping again, and then stuff started going all crazy and... I thought I'd have more time." Collin said with concern.

"Let me see what I can do." Galen said as he stood, then walked to Christian and motioned for him to follow.

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Once they were out of the room, Galen quietly asked, "Were you able to get all your Christmas shopping done yesterday morning?"

"Yeah... wait, no. I didn't get anything for Collin! Oh crap! How could I forget?" Christian asked in panic.

"Think about all that's happened the last two days. It's been crazy." Galen said honestly.

"Uncle Galen, I gotta get something for Collin. I've got to!" Christian urged.

"I know. Let me talk to Marc for a minute, then I'll tell you what I've come up with." Galen said as he gave Christian a quick hug.

"I love him." Christian said as he pulled back to look Galen in the eyes.

"It shows." Galen said with a smile, then hurried to the kitchen.

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After a few minutes to present the situation to Marc, Galen stood inside the kitchen doorway and waited for his reaction.

James was sitting at the kitchen table, watching the scene, not knowing what to expect.

"ARE YOU INSANE?" Marc began.

"Probably." Galen said in a small voice.

"It's Christmas Eve and most of the stores will be closing in a few hours. And you're talking about taking five boys to the mall?" Marc asked disbelievingly.

"Yup." Galen said cautiously.

"It's going to be a madhouse!" Marc said as he tried to make Galen understand.

"I know." Galen said even more quietly.

"But you still plan on going?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Think about what Jorry and Nick are going through with their parents right now. Think about Christian and what he's going through with his dad. And then there's Brucie... The boys need a good dose of the Christmas spirit and this is the only way I can think of to give that to them. I've got to do this." Galen explained as he looked deeply into Marc's eyes.

"If you're going to do it, let me give you some money for the boys." Marc said as he walked toward the kitchen door.

"That's okay..." Galen began to say, but Marc was already gone.

"If I wouldn't be interfering, I could go with you to help out." James offered hopefully.

"Well, I'm pretty sure that, despite what Marc thinks, that I could manage on my own. But I bet that it would mean the world to Brucie if you wanted to do this with him." Galen said frankly.

"It will mean the world to me, too." James said honestly.

"This is the last of the Christmas club money. Don't worry about saving any. The money was set aside to be spent at Christmas." Marc said as he handed an envelope of cash to Galen.

"We'll be back as soon as we can." Galen said as he thumbed through the cash to get an idea of how much money he had to work with.

"You know the dinner that I've been planning for weeks and have been working on all day? It's being served at seven. That's all I'm saying." Marc said with a grin.

"I love you." Galen chuckled, then stepped in for a kiss.

James turned away and waited by the door for Galen to be finished.

"Let's go do this!" Galen said happily, then asked James as he approached, "I mean, really, how bad could it be?"

Chapter 15

When Marc heard movement in the house, he quickly pushed the oven rack back in and closed the oven door.

As he stepped into the living room, Christian immediately pulled him into an enthusiastic hug and said, "You shoulda come with us! It was awesome!"

Marc returned the hug and said, "I'm glad you had a good time."

"It was crazy and wicked and we saw these old ladies get into a fistfight and there were cops..."

"Where's Galen?" Marc interrupted.

"Outside, smoking a cigarette." James said as he dropped heavily onto the couch, looking to be completely exhausted.

"Galen doesn't smoke. He quit years ago." Marc said cautiously.

"He started again... just now." James said wearily.

"Were you guys able to get all your shopping done?" Marc asked gently.

"I hope so, because there's no force in heaven or on Earth that could make me go out there again." James said as he closed his eyes.

"You'll have to tell me all about it later. For now, I have some last minute things that I need to do for the dinner." Marc said as he pulled out of his hug with Christian.

"We gotta wrap our presents, anyway." Christian said cheerfully, then turned to the other boys and quickly said, "Come on, guys!"

Marc watched with a smile as the boys hurried out of the room.

He glanced at James and quietly asked, "Are you alright?"

"No more kids. Ever. Brucey is as much as I can handle." James said quietly.

"You can come into the kitchen with me if you feel like talking." Marc offered gently.

"Thank you, Marc. Maybe in a minute. I just need some quiet time."

"You know where to find me when you're ready."

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"Do you need any help with anything?" Collin asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Has your father come in yet?"

"Yeah. He went upstairs. He seemed kinda quiet, there at the end."

"What happened to upset him?"

"I dunno. All of it, I guess. I thought he was gonna bust a blood vessel before he even got the car parked. In fact, he dropped us off at the front door at the second mall we went to, then went to park the car. It took a really long time."

"I'm sure he'll talk to me about it when he's ready." Marc said slowly, not sounding at all certain of it.

"Yeah. We got all our presents wrapped and put under the tree and stuff. Everyone else is gonna watch TV for a little bit, but I don't feel like sitting around. I'd rather be doing something. Is there anything left to do?"

"Actually, yes. I still need to get the dining room table set. I just rinsed the Christmas dishes in the dishwasher, so they need to be dried off and put out, if you want to get started on that."

"You're the only person I know who has Christmas dishes." Collin chuckled.

"Don't forget to use the Christmas placemats and napkin rings, they match the plates. I left them on the sideboard, just inside the door."

"Right." Collin said with a tender smile before walking out of the room.

* * * * *

A knock on the front door caused Marc to look up from his dinner preparations.

He waited for a moment, and when he didn't hear anything, he let out a long sigh before moving his skillet off the burner and wiping his hands.

"A house full of people, but can anyone be bothered to answer the door? Noooo." Marc grumbled loudly as he passed the living room door.

When Marc opened the door, his frustrated mood dissipated immediately.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Yes, Merry Christmas, Allen. Please come in. Would this young man happen to be your son, Jake?" Marc asked as he led them inside.

"No. Actually, this is Davis." Allen said with a smile at the boy by his side.

"I remember you telling us about a Jake, Xain, Kenny and Kevin, but I don't recall a Davis being mentioned." Marc said as he stopped outside the living room door.

"My dad lives on the West coast and my mom's between husbands at the moment, so Allen's kinda filling in." Davis said shyly.

"Only in the sense of doing father-son things with Davis. Hildie and I don't have that kind of relationship." Allen hurried to explain.

"Don't worry, Allen. No one would ever think that you and my mom are a couple." Davis chuckled at the very thought of it.

"Except, maybe, for your mom." Allen responded immediately.

"Didn't I tell you? She's got her sights set on some guy from her plastic surgeon's office. I think they might be able to make it work. He's almost as vain as she is." Davis said with a grin.

"I can't even imagine..." Allen said with a disbelieving shake of his head.

Marc smiled at the exchange, then another knock on the front door made him look up with surprise.

* * * * *

"Maurice! I'm so glad that you made it! Please, come in." Marc said happily.

"I'm not too early, am I?" Maurice asked cautiously.

"Not at all. This is perfect timing. I'll be able to introduce everyone at once." Marc said as they walked through the entry hall.

"Officer Bridges?" Allen said in surprise.

"You two know each other?" Marc asked curiously.

"You could say that." Maurice said with a smile at Marc, then turned to Allen and asked, "Should I be setting up another adoption hearing when I get back to work?"

Allen chuckled, then said, "No. I don't think so. I've already adopted Davis in every way that matters."

"Yeah, I've had a ton of 'legal' dads. But Allen is more like a 'real' dad than any of them. I don't want to change a thing." Davis said happily.

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"Everyone. I'd like you to meet our friend, Maurice, my boss, Allen, and his almost-son, Davis." Marc said happily as he presented the new arrivals to everyone in the living room.

Marc glanced to see if Davis were disturbed by the introduction, only to find him wearing a beaming smile.

"Merry Christmas, everyone." Allen said warmly.

"Let me get Galen down here, then I'll introduce everyone." Marc said quickly, then dashed out of the room.

"Are you gonna have Christmas Dinner with us?" Nick asked curiously, directing his question mostly toward Allen and Davis.

"No. Davis and I are just out, making the rounds, wishing our friends a Merry Christmas." Allen said pleasantly as he gently placed an arm around Davis' shoulders.

"That sounds nice." Nick said with a smile.

"Although I didn't realize it at the time, I used to be fairly anti-social. So this year I'm putting forth an extra effort and making up for lost time."

There was a long moment of silence, then Marc hurried into the room, followed by Galen.

"Maurice, Allen and Davis, I'd like to introduce my husband, Galen, his son, Collin, my soon-to-be son, Christian, my brother-in-law, James, and my nephews, Brucey, Jorry, and Nick." Marc said proudly.

"It's nice to meet all of you." Allen said as he looked around the room.

"It's nice to see you again, although it seems strange to be seeing you outside of work." Galen said with a smile of delight at Allen.

"When I met you last year, I never would have imagined you ending up here." Allen said with a smile.

"You and me, both. But looking back, I wouldn't want to change a single thing." Galen said with a chuckle, then glanced warmly at Marc.

"We just came from Eric and Bobby's house. They spoke very highly of you." Allen said warmly.

"That was mostly thanks to Christian. If he hadn't spotted Joaquin on the side of the road, none of the rest would have happened." Galen said with a fond look at Christian.

"I'm just glad that you were there to help him. I don't know Joaquin that well, but Eric and Bobby think the world of him. Thanks for stopping and helping him." Allen said gratefully.

"How do you like our tree?" Nick asked Davis suddenly.

"It's nice..." Davis began to say automatically, then tilted his head slightly as he looked at the choice of ornamentation.

Allen also looked at the tree, then cautiously said, "It's very...", then seemed to falter.

"I think next year we should have one with bigger dicks." Christian said frankly.

"Size doesn't matter." Marc muttered in response, with a slight blush as he looked at his guests to see if they were offended.

"That's just something guys with little dicks say so they can maybe get laid, someday." Collin said dismissively.

"That's not something you'll ever have to worry about." Christian whispered to Collin conspiratorially, but everyone was able to hear.

"Let's not discuss this while we have company." Marc said shyly.

"Davis and I need to be going. We still have a few other stops to make." Allen said past a chuckle.

"Thanks for stopping by, guys. It was wonderful seeing you." Marc said with a grand smile.

"It was nice meeting all of you. Marc, I'll see you at work after New Years." Allen said before turning to leave.

"I'll walk you out." Marc said as he followed.

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When Marc returned, he said, "If you guys want to head into the dining room, dinner will be served in just a minute."

"Do you need any help?" Collin asked quickly.

"Sure, if you're willing, you guys could help me carry the food into the dining room." Marc said pleasantly.

"Sure Marc, we'll all be happy to help you." Christian said as he looked around the living room at the others, daring them to defy him.

All the boys got up, some more reluctantly than others, and followed Collin and Christian to the kitchen.

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"Are you okay? That looks like it's got to hurt." Maurice asked James quietly as they walked into the dining room.

"The doctors gave me some pain medication, so it doesn't hurt all that much. But I'm glad that Marc convinced me not to try and drive this evening. I didn't expect the pain pills to be quite this strong." James said honestly.

"Marc's got, like, fifty-thousand things in there. I hope you guys are really hungry." Jorry said as he walked into the room carrying a platter of ham, half of it already carved.

"I think we're going to need another table, just for all the food." Collin said as he walked in, next.

"There's some room over on the side board if you run out of space on the table." Galen said with a smile.

"Holy crap! Will someone take this thing from me? I didn't think it was going to be this heavy!" Brucie said as he walked into the room, struggling under the weight of an enormous turkey.

"That thing looks bigger than the oven. How did he even cook it?" Collin asked as he rushed to Brucie's side.

"The better question is, where are you going to put it?" Galen asked with a smile.

"Right in the middle. I don't think it'll fit anywhere else." Jorry said as he scooted a few things out of the way to make room.

"Seriously, where did he cook this thing? It's ginormous." Collin said as he helped to place the huge serving platter onto the table.

"Does anyone know where you want these things?" Christian asked as he held out a green bean casserole and a bowl of candied sweet potatoes as Jorry, Collin and Brucie passed by him, on the way out of the room.

"Try the side board, over there. It looks like the majority of the table is going to be taken up with meats." Galen said as he pointed.

As Christian was placing his burden on the sideboard, Nick walked in with an extravagantly decorated relish tray, prominently featuring three boiled egg penguins.

"Put that over here, Nicky, I think it's more of a centerpiece than it is food." Galen said quickly.

"Jeez, how many people does Uncle Marc think he's feeding?" Jorry said as he re entered the dining room with a large bowl of mashed potatoes.

"Um, let's see. How about you put that over here by me. There's a space beside the ham." Galen said as he looked around.

"Does anyone ever actually eat this cranberry stuff?" Collin asked as he looked with disgust at the wobbly bowl of chunky red jelly that he was carrying.

"Someone must, but it isn't me." Galen said with a chuckle.

"Well, it looks like we're going to have enough bread for everyone." Brucie said as he carried in a bread filled, towel lined, wicker basket that could easily double as a laundry basket.

"See if it'll fit on the china hutch. If not, put it on that extra chair in the corner" Galen said quickly.

"Seriously, there must be like a support group or an 'anonymous' meeting or something for people who cook this much." Christian said in amazement.

"What have you got there?" Galen asked as he moved slightly to get a better view.

"Prime rib, I think." Christian said disbelievingly.

"See if you can squeeze it in, down there by James." Galen said uncertainly.

"Where do you want the stuffing?" Collin asked as he walked into the room.

"I think you can squeeze it in, over here, by the turkey." Galen said quickly.

"Oyster stuffing." Nick called out as he entered.

"Oh? Um, let's see, maybe down here with the mashed potatoes." Galen said as he hurried to the other end of the table.

"I've got stuffing. Uncle Marc said that this one's cranberry." Brucie announced as he walked in.

"That settles it. We need to get online to find a local 'Cooks Anonymous' chapter." Galen said as he searched every level surface in the room to find a place to put more food.

"I thought I could leave the desserts in the kitchen until..." Marc trailed off as he noticed everyone looking at him.

"Everything looks wonderful. Please sit down and enjoy this wonderful meal that you've prepared." Galen said lovingly as he walked to Marc's side, then quietly added, "We'll talk, later."

"I forgot the salad!" Marc said suddenly and turned to leave.

"You've done enough. Just tell one of the boys where it is and take your seat." Galen said firmly as he held Marc back.

Marc turned to Christian and said, "It's in the refrigerator in the garage. And you might grab some soft drinks, while you're in there, if anyone wants some."

Christian looked at Jorry and Collin, then gestured with his head to signal, 'Come on.'

"Maybe I should have set up a card table, or something." Marc said as he looked around.

"I think the boys have had enough card tables. I wouldn't want to bring up any bad associations. This is fine." Galen said gently.

"Can we start eating? Or are we waiting for something?" Brucie asked as he looked at everyone sitting with empty plates before them.

"Go ahead, start serving yourselves. Just remember that we have more selections over on the sideboard and the china hutch." Galen said with a smile at Marc's nephew.

"Are you alright, James? You look a little woozy." Marc asked with concern.

"I'll be fine. But I might not be able to eat too much. The pain medication seems to be upsetting my stomach." James said cautiously.

"Try eating a little bread first, then give that a minute to settle. That sometimes works for me." Maurice offered kindly.

"Thank you, I'll do that." James said quietly.

"We brought some of each. Who wants what?" Collin asked as he walked into the room with an armload of sodas.

"I should have thought to make some Christmas punch to go with dinner." Marc said regretfully.

"Where would we put it?" Galen asked with a grin.

Marc looked around the table, then slightly nodded.

"Everything's great." Galen assured him.

"Where do you want this?" Christian asked as he held the bowl of salad and looked around.

"Hand it to me. I'll start it around the table. With any luck, we'll empty a few of these bowls and end up with more room than we started with." Galen said as he extended his hand.

"If we don't, then we're going to be playing musical chairs with the food dishes until the meal's over." Christian said with a grin as he gave the salad to Galen.

"What's this?" Nick asked as he held up a bowl.

"Ranch roasted carrots." Marc said automatically.

"Pass." Nick said immediately.

"Go on, give it a try. You might like it." Marc said with a smile.

"I don't like carrots." Nick said simply.

"It's true. He'll throw up." Jorry said frankly.

"Yeah. Um, give those here." Collin said and snatched the bowl of carrots from Nick's hand.

"I'm sorry about the chaos, Maurice. I've never really hosted a holiday meal before, even though I've always wanted to. I guess I kind of overdid it." Marc said quietly.

"There's no need to be sorry. It's a pleasure for me to sit down with a group of happy people and not have to worry about my work for a while." Maurice said honestly, then added with a grin, "And there's no chance of us running short on food."

Marc shyly smiled, then turned when he noticed a bowl of food being handed to him.

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"Christian, before I forget, I wanted to let you know that an acquaintance of mine has volunteered to represent you in court." Maurice said casually as he added more food to his plate.

"You didn't need to do that. We can afford to hire an attorney." Marc hurried to say.

"Trust me, no matter how things end up turning out, it's better this way. Basically, the way it works, is that since Josh isn't being paid by you, he has no obligation to represent your interests at all. His only obligation will be to represent the best interest of his client, who is Christian." Maurice said carefully.

"So, who's paying him?" Galen asked cautiously.

"There's an organization that I'm familiar with that helps protect abused and abandoned children. Providing legal representation for Christian alone will allow the court to give more weight to his argument. If the lawyer were being paid by you, then there could be a presumption that his job is to get you custody of Christian, regardless of what's in his best interest." Maurice said seriously.

"Do you think we should hire a lawyer?" Marc asked cautiously.

"That's up to you. Since you have an interest in the outcome, I could see an argument for having a lawyer present to represent you. But since the case before the court will be to decide what's best for Christian, I can't say that there's really a need for it." Maurice said consideringly.

"Has the court date been set?" Marc asked curiously.

"Yes, it's on the docket for 9am on Monday." Maurice said simply.

"That's quick! Do we have enough time to prepare for that?" Marc asked as he looked at Galen with concern.

"I think so. I'll need to make a call after dinner." Galen said seriously.

"I'm sure that Josh is going to call to talk to Christian a time or two before Monday, but other than that, all you should have to do to prepare is show up." Maurice said frankly.

"Can I have some more of that stuffing?" Nick asked Marc hopefully.

"Sure, which one? Cornbread, oyster, cranberry or traditional?" Marc asked with a smile at his nephew.

"The one that tastes like 'Stove Top'." Nick said hopefully.

"Traditional." Marc said decisively, then passed a bowl of stuffing down the table toward Nick.

"Can I have some more turkey?" Brucie asked next.

"Pass me your plate. White or dark?" Marc asked casually.

"White, please." Brucie responded happily as he handed his plate to his father.

"Marc, everything is exceptionally good. Thank you for inviting us." James said as he passed the plate to Collin.

"Yeah. My mom's cooking sucks! This is great!" Brucie interjected.

"Brucie, that's not a nice thing to say." James gently scolded.

"But it's true!" Brucie defended.

"Yes, it is. But that doesn't mean that you're free to say it. If people notice you saying negative things, they'll think you're a negative, dark person who'll say those types of things about them behind their backs. It's much better to try and be positive about things." James said instructively.

Brucie thought about his father's words for a moment, then, when his plate of turkey arrived before him, he looked down the table at Marc and said, "Thank you, Uncle Marc, your food is wonderful."

"You're very welcome, Brucie. It's a pleasure to have you here this evening." Marc responded warmly.

James gave his son a smile of approval before turning his attention back to his food.

* * * * *

A knock on the door caused Marc to look up suddenly.

Jorry and Nick looked at each other with concern.

"I'll get it." Marc said as he got up from the table.

Galen watched him leave, then quietly asked, "How is everyone doing?"

"I can't believe I've eaten this much, but I can't seem to stop. Everything's so good." James said in wonder.

"So, I guess your upset stomach is better?" Maurice asked with a smile.

"Yes. You were right about the bread. Just a few minutes later, I was feeling much better." James said gratefully.

"Jorry and Nick are right in here." Marc said as he led Ruthie into the dining room.

"Are you boys about ready to go?" Ruthie asked gruffly.

"We're eating Christmas dinner, Mom. Can you wait until we're finished?" Jorry asked hopefully.

"Please, Ruthie, why don't you sit down and have some dinner with us? As you can see, we've got plenty." Marc asked in an urging tone.

After a moment of looking at her sons' begging expressions, Ruthie finally relented and said, "I suppose."

"Have a seat, Ruthie. I'll get you a plate." James said as he began to stand.

"I'll get it, Dad. I'll be right back, Aunt Ruthie." Brucie said quickly.

"You know all the other guests, but I'd like to introduce a family friend, Officer Maurice Bridges." Marc said formally as he pulled a chair to the table from the far side of the room.

"Nice to meet you." Ruth said quietly as she looked at the man.

"Maurice, this is my sister-in-law, Ruthie Stone. She's Jorry and Nick's mother." Marc finished with a smile and a glance in the boys' direction.

"You have some wonderful children. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Stone." Maurice said cordially.

"Here you go." Brucie said as he raced into the room and placed a plate and silverware in front of his aunt.

"Thank you." Ruthie said with surprise.

"The stuffing is really great. You've got to try some, Mom." Nick told his mother happily.

"Actually, I overdid the cooking a little bit, so I ended up with four different types of stuffing. The traditional is the one that Nicky seems to like best." Marc said shyly as he handed her the bowl.

Ruthie reluctantly accepted the bowl, then served herself a modest portion.

"If you like tri tip, you should have some of that. Marc really outdid himself." Galen said frankly.

"Thank you." Ruthie whispered as she took a small portion of the tri tip steak that was in front of her.

"There's plenty of everything, so please help yourself to as much as you like." Marc said pleasantly.

After taking a bite of food, Ruthie quietly said, "I can't stay too long. But this is very good."

In an effort to change the subject, Marc turned to Maurice and asked, "Is there anything else we need to know before the hearing?"

"No. Actually, as long as you know where and when it is, that should be all." Maurice said consideringly.

At Ruthie's curious look, Marc said, "The court is going to decide Christian's custody."

"Yeah. I hope he'll let me stay here with Marc. It's really great here." Christian said honestly.

Ruthie looked around, then quietly said, "It seems they'll keep you well fed."

Christian laughed at the response, then smiled warmly at Marc.

As Marc was passed two bowls at once, from opposite directions, Ruthie said, "I haven't had oyster stuffing like this in years. It's just like my mother's!"

"I remember having your mother's oyster stuffing a few times. When I tried making my own, that was what I was trying to make it taste like. Hers was the best oyster stuffing I ever tasted." Marc said honestly.

"Is there any way you could copy down the recipe for me? I never got it from her, and I've missed it so much. For the first time in years, it actually feels like a holiday to me." Ruthie said as tears filled her eyes.

"Of course I will. And if you like, you can take what's left with you. We obviously have more than enough." Marc said warmly.

"Thank you, Marc. I'm sorry for..." Ruthie began to say, but trailed off.

"It's okay, Ruthie. Just have a happy Christmas." Marc said gently.

* * * * *

"I don't think I could eat another bite." Galen said as he pushed away from the table.

"Everything was wonderful, Marc. But I think I'm gonna explode." Christian said as he rested back in his chair.

"How did you make this turkey gravy? I'm going to have to make Christmas dinner tomorrow and the kind I have isn't anywhere near as good as this." Ruthie asked as she helped herself to another portion of food.

"I'll copy down the recipe for you when I get you the recipe for the oyster stuffing. The secret is in the seasoning." Marc said with a smile at his sister-in-law.

All the boys seemed to be on the verge of turkey induced comas as they were picking at the last few bites of food on their plates.

"James, Nora called me and told me a little about what happened with Denise. Is everything going to be alright?" Ruthie asked hesitantly.

"How did Nora find out?" James asked cautiously.

"Denise called her from jail." Ruthie answered quietly.

James slightly nodded, then quietly said, "I'm leaving, Ruthie. I'm sure Denise has told you about what happened to my family when I was growing up. When she hit me, she crossed that line."

"The doctor said that Mom nearly killed him." Brucie added earnestly.

"I know what you went through, and I'm sorry about that. But I think that Denise just has a problem. If she agrees to get help with it, maybe you..."

"I hope she gets that help. Really, I do. In fact, when you see her, you can tell her that if there's anything that I can do, I'll support her however I can in that. But what we had is over. There's no undoing what's been done. Brucie and I will be leaving after the Christmas holiday." James said carefully.

"We're going to stay with Grandma Clairborne." Brucie added helpfully.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind? It's Christmas." Ruthie said quietly.

"I know, Ruthie. And for Christmas this year, I'm going to give Brucie a safe place to live where he doesn't have to endure screaming tirades and the threat of physical violence." James said seriously.

"I wish more parents would give that gift to their children." Maurice said honestly.

When Ruthie turned to look at him with question, he elaborated, "I'm an officer in the local courthouse. Every day I see people, many of them good, decent people, stand before the judge and make decisions that put themselves and their children in harm's way. Some do it out of fear, but many others do it out of some misguided notion of love that somehow includes putting up with some of the most heinous and unforgivable acts of cruelty... forgive me. I've just seen too much. Suffice it to say, I think James has made a wise decision."

"Ruthie, it's my hope that Denise can get the help she needs and find someone who will share in her life and bring her joy and happiness. If you look back on our marriage, you'll see that I was never able to do that. My wishes for her are love and happiness... with someone else." James said sincerely.

Ruthie slowly nodded, then quietly said, "I doubt that she'll be ready to hear that for a while, but I promise that, when she is, I'll pass that message along to her."

"You were always her best friend. Right now, I think she's going to need you more than ever." James said honestly.

"I don't know how much help I'll be. Nolan and I..." Ruthie trailed off as she looked at Jorry and Nick.

"Ruthie, just so you know, if there's anything we can do, we'll be happy to help." Marc offered gently.

"Thank you, Marc. You've already been a tremendous help, taking care of the boys while we had our talk." Ruthie said quietly.

"The offer stands. If you need our help, please let us know." Galen said clearly, wanting to let it be known that it wasn't just Marc making the offer.

Ruthie nodded that she had heard.

"Everyone, why don't you go into the living room and relax for a while? That is, unless you're ready for dessert." Marc said with a smile.

There was a chorus of groans at the suggestion, then one by one, people slowly made their way to standing and sluggishly left the dining room.

"Boys, we need to be leaving." Ruthie said from the living room doorway.

"But, they haven't opened their presents, yet." Collin said plaintively.

"Come on, Mom." Nick begged.

"It will just take a minute, Ruthie." Marc said quietly.

"Okay. Go ahead." Ruthie reluctantly agreed.

"I got you this one." Brucie said immediately as he handed a small, wrapped present to Nick.

Jorry watched carefully, to make sure that Brucie didn't get too close to his younger brother.

"Thanks, Brucie." Nick said happily as he started to tear off the wrapping paper.

Everyone watched as Nick revealed a handheld video game.

"Wow! I wanted one of these!" Nick said happily.

"I know. I saw you looking at it while we were shopping, so I bought it after you went to look at something else." Brucie said happily.

"Thanks, Brucie! This is great!" Nick said and rushed to Brucie to give him a hug, but stopped short and looked at Jorry inquiringly.

Jorry thought about it for a second, then gave a single nod.

"Thanks, Brucie." Nick said as he gave his cousin a quick, firm hug.

"Next is from me and Christian." Collin said as he held out another gift.

"You didn't have to get me nothin." Nick said as he backed away from Brucie and accepted the gift.

"Just open it." Christian said with a smile.

Nick made short work of the wrapping, then looked strangely at the Power Ranger action figure.

"I didn't know if you were into Power Rangers, but it comes with a DVD that looks like it might be fun." Collin quickly explained.

"Yeah. I mean, I watch Power Rangers sometimes. But I never got any of their stuff, before. Thanks, Collin." Nick finished enthusiastically and rushed over to give first Collin, then Christian, quick hugs.

"This one's for you, Jorry." Brucie said quietly as he held out a large, flat, wrapped gift.

"Thanks." Jorry said cautiously as he accepted the gift.

Feeling the stares of everyone present on him, he carefully unwrapped the gift to reveal a dark red plaid button up shirt and inside it was a packaged black tee shirt.

"I thought it'd look good on you." Brucie said timidly.

Jorry was stunned into silence for a moment, but finally was able to say, "I think it will, too. Thank you, Brucie."

A luminous smile was Brucie's only response.

"We got you this." Christian said as he thrust a box in Jorry's direction.

Jorry looked at Christian uncertainly as he accepted the box. He could tell that Christian was worried that he wouldn't like what they had chosen.

He carefully unwrapped the present and revealed a remote control car.

"I know it's kinda kiddie, but we thought it might be good for... I don't know... it's stupid..." Christian finished in a defeated mumble.

Jorry smiled at the reaction and moved to Christian to give him a firm hug. "It's great, Christian. I promise."

"Is that everything?" Ruthie asked quietly.

"I wanna see everyone open the presents we got them." Nick said urgently to his mother.

Marc had just walked into the room as Nick was saying that and quietly said, "Everyone else will open their gifts in the morning. Next time you see them, they'll be able to thank you and tell you all about it."

Ruthie looked at Marc gratefully for supporting her.

"And these are for you. They're the recipes that I promised you." Marc said as he handed her some folded papers.

"Marc, I'm so sorry for everything. I don't know how everything got so far out of hand." Ruthie said repentantly.

"I don't know either, Ruthie. How about we not worry about it? Just know that if you and Nolan need us for anything, we're here for you." Marc said gently.

"I'll keep that in mind." Ruthie responded quietly.

"Boys, get your coats on. It's time to go." Marc said to Jorry and Nick.

"Can't we stay long enough to have dessert? I wanted some of your chocolate cake. It smelled really, really good." Nick begged.

"I'm sure your mother has lots of things that she needs to get done, tonight. So you guys need to be on your way. But I tell you what, why don't I pack up a little something for you to take with you? I'll be sure to give you an extra large piece of that chocolate cake." Marc said and dashed out of the room before anyone could respond.

"Thanks again for the game, Brucie. This is the one that I really wanted." Nick said as he pulled on his coat.

"I'm glad you like it." Brucie said timidly.

"You guys remember that we're over here. If you get bored or anything you can come over and visit again." Christian said seriously, then glanced at Ruthie to see her reaction.

"Maybe, after things settle down at home, the boys could invite you over to visit us." Ruthie said tentatively.

"Yeah. Let's do that." Collin answered immediately, apparently completely missing the tension underlying the suggestion.

Christian smiled fondly at Collin's obliviousness.

"Oh, and Ruthie..." Galen said, drawing her attention. "If you happen to come across a telephone handset, would you set it aside for us? Nolan seems to have forgotten that he was carrying it when he left last time."

"Yes. I'll keep an eye out for it." Ruthie said slowly.

"Here you go. I've got a plate of desserts for each of the boys, and a little bit of the leftovers from dinner, in case the boys get hungry again, later." Marc said as he handed her two plastic shopping bags.

"Thank you again, Marc. I hope that you and your family have a very Merry Christmas." Ruthie said in a voice that was more sincere than he would have expected.

"You, too, Ruthie." Marc said gently, then watched as Ruthie led the boys out of the room.

* * * * *

"Pardon me for saying so, but that woman sure does cast a gloom when she walks into a room." Maurice said honestly.

"She has her own little raincloud that follows her around." Christian said with a grin.

"Is anyone in the mood for some coffee and dessert?" Marc asked curiously.

The boys all perked up at the suggestion. The adults were considerably less enthusiastic.

"The coffee sounds good." Galen said frankly, then quietly added, "You might ask me about the desserts again, say, after New Year's."

James and Maurice gave nods of agreement.

Marc chuckled, then rushed out of the room.

"Is he always so upbeat and enthusiastic?" Maurice asked Galen curiously.

"Mostly, but I think it's amplified by Christmas. He's the type of person who enjoys doing things for others. So this gives him an opportunity to do what he loves doing most." Galen said thoughtfully.

"What do you do for him?" Christian asked Galen curiously.

After a moment to consider, Galen quietly admitted, "I don't know. I guess I accept the things he does for me and I let him know that I'm grateful for them. Sometimes, I'll come up with something I can do for him, and I can tell that it means the world to him when I do that. It sounds kind of one sided when I talk about it, but it doesn't really feel like it is. We're two pieces of a puzzle that fit together to make 'us'."

Christian glanced at Collin, who seemed to be fascinated by the little train running around under the Christmas tree, then broke into a smile.

* * * * *

When Marc walked back into the living room, he quietly said, "Sorry that took so long. In all the chaos of the cooking, I sort of lost the coffee maker."

"As long as you find it by morning..." Galen began to say.

"No. I found it. The coffee will be ready in just a minute." Marc hurried to explain.

"Marc, I was wondering about something." Collin said as he finally dragged his attention away from the train.

"What was that, Collin?" Marc asked pleasantly.

"That turkey you fixed for dinner. I don't think I've ever seen one that big. How did you cook it?" Collin asked curiously.

"Do you want me to write the recipe down for you?" Marc asked uncertainly.

"No. I mean, that thing was bigger than the oven. How did you cook it?" Collin asked seriously.

"Oh. I bought a roaster." Marc said, then noticed Collin's vacant expression. "It's something like a gigantic crock pot. It's out on the back porch if you want to see it."

"No. That's okay. I just couldn't figure out how you cooked that ginormous thing along with all the other stuff that you had to bake." Collin said frankly.

"He's a kitchen wizard. He has mystical, super-human cooking abilities." Christian said with a grin.

"After tasting that meal, I'd have to agree with you." Maurice chuckled.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." Marc beamed, then quickly asked, "Does anyone need anything? The coffee should be just about ready."

"Didn't you say something about dessert?" Christian asked hopefully.

"You can't be serious." Galen groaned.

Christian looked at him with the most innocent expression that screamed out, 'I don't know what you mean'.

Marc laughed at the exchange, then said, "You boys follow me into the kitchen and you can help yourselves to dessert."

Collin, Christian and Brucie immediately hopped up and happily followed Marc out of the room.

* * * * *

"How is Christian doing?" Maurice asked Galen quietly.

"I took him to see his father in the hospital this afternoon. That was kind of hard on him, but I think he's doing alright." Galen said honestly.

"How is his father?" Maurice asked with concern.

"From what Marc has told me, the doctors haven't seemed too optimistic for his long term prognosis." Galen said seriously.

Maurice slowly nodded.

James was looking back and forth between them, but didn't want to intrude on their conversation.

When Maurice noticed him, he said, "I heard what you said at dinner about your home situation. I just wanted to say again, I think you're making the right decision both for you and for your son."

"Thanks. It's good to hear that. I'm sure that by the time Denise is done telling her side of the story, everyone's going to think that I abandoned her and kidnapped Brucie." James said anxiously.

"I'm sure that anyone who knows Denise will take anything she says with a grain of salt." Galen said frankly.

"Salt substitute." James corrected automatically, then broke into a smile when he realized what he had said.

Galen broke into laughter at the comment, as Maurice looked on curiously.

"James and Brucie haven't had any salt, sugar, real eggs or dairy products in a very long time. It seems that Denise got the idea that she should believe every health food fad that comes along and banish actual food completely from their diets." Galen explained.

"It's been going on for so long, I didn't realize what I'd been missing. The food that Brucie and I have had since we've been here has been incredible." James said honestly.

"Well, thank you, James." Marc said happily as he walked into the room carrying a tray that was fashioned to look like drifting snow and a coffee service that was comprised of a variety of Christmas characters.

Galen stared at the coffee service for a moment, then turned away to hide his smile.

"You certainly do seem to enjoy the holidays." Maurice said as he tried to fight down his own grin.

"Not all the holidays. Mostly just Christmas. I hardly decorate at all for Martin Luther King day." Marc said as he carefully set the coffee service on the coffee table.

Looks passed amongst Maurice, James and Galen, none of them quite sure if Marc were joking or not.

"Anyone ready for dessert, yet?" Marc asked as he looked around.

"Maybe after some coffee." Galen said slowly.

"I've got to get back to the boys. Will you serve?" Marc asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I've got it." Galen assured him with a smile.

A moment after Marc left the room, Maurice looked at Galen with question.

"No clue." Galen said honestly, then asked, "What do you take in your coffee?"

* * * * *

"Would you guys like to help me with something, tonight?" Marc asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Sure. What can we do?" Collin answered immediately.

"Well, I know that we probably have enough desserts already, but I was really wanting to make some fresh gingerbread cookies." Marc said with a smile.

"Gingerbread men?" Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah. We can do that." Marc said with a nod.

"Can we make them anatomically correct?" Christian asked with a teasing grin.

After a moment to consider, Marc finally said, "Yeah. Sure. Why not?"

"Seriously?" Christian asked happily.

"Yeah. There aren't any little kids here. Let me go ahead and get the gingerbread started." Marc said as he pulled a mixing bowl from one of the lower cabinets.

"Thanks, Marc." Collin said quickly, then turned to Brucie and Christian and said, "This is gonna be great!"

* * * * *

"How's everyone doing in here?" Marc asked happily as he walked into the living room.

"I think we're good." Galen said contentedly.

"Can I tempt anyone with dessert?" Marc asked with a smile.

"If you keep this up, I'm not going to be able to fit into my uniform when I go back to work on Monday." Maurice said hesitantly.

"Indulge yourself today and let your belt loose a notch on Monday. It's Christmas, you've got permission." Marc said happily.

"Okay. Yes." Maurice said in a resigned tone.

"I've got triple chocolate cake with hot fudge topping, rainbow jello cake with coconut frosting or toffee crusted cheesecake with caramel sauce." Marc said with a smile.

"I think my blood sugar went up about fifty points just hearing that." Maurice said cautiously.

"Well, I also have pies, cookies and cupcakes in the kitchen, if you'd rather have something like that. I just wanted to present you with the more adult selections." Marc said frankly.

"I know I'm going to regret this, but that toffee cheesecake sounds wonderful." Maurice said reluctantly.

"Coming right up!" Marc said happily, then turned and asked James, "What sounds good to you?"

"When I was in the kitchen earlier, I thought I saw an apple pie..." James said cautiously.

"I have three of them, actually. Would you like cinnamon apple, blueberry apple or extra tart apple pucker pie?" Marc asked with an evil grin.

"Pucker pie?" Galen laughed.

"You have to have it with ice cream to offset the tartness. It's sort of like a roller coaster ride of sweet and sour."

"I think I'd like some blueberry apple pie, and some vanilla ice cream, if I could." James asked hopefully.

"Vanilla? I'll have to check, but if not, I'm sure I'll find something close." Marc said thoughtfully, then looked at Galen with question.

"Give me a pucker." Galen said with a grin.

Marc smiled, then made a show of puckering up and giving him a smacking kiss, before hurrying out of the room.

This time, James didn't look away at the display of affection. He simply watched with a neutral expression.

"I'd have to spend half of every day in the gym if I lived here. I don't know how you do it." Maurice said with a smile.

"Trust me, this is just a holiday thing. We can go weeks at a time without having any sweets in the house." Galen said frankly.

"When you invited me over, I didn't have any idea that I'd be treated to such a feast." Maurice said with a smile.

"We're glad that you were able to join us. But I know that it's even more important for Marc. Since he's been existing, as he puts it, 'on the fringe of the family'. Doing something like this has a lot more meaning for him than it would for a lot of people. He hasn't spoken much about it, but I get the feeling that he's spent quite a few Christmases alone in the past few years. That's why he's done a little bit of overcompensating." Galen quietly explained.

"A little bit." Maurice agreed with a smile.

"I'm just glad that Marc invited us. As caught up as I've been with my problems with Denise, I don't know how much of a Christmas I could have given Brucie if we hadn't come here." James said frankly.

"We're glad that you're here, James. I hope that being here with Collin and Christian will help Brucie to be comfortable and able to enjoy his holiday." Galen said sincerely.

* * * * *

"Sorry that took so long. I wanted to make some fresh caramel for your cheesecake, Maurice." Marc said as he rushed into the room.

"Fresh? You made fresh, homemade caramel, just now?" Maurice asked cautiously as he accepted his cheesecake from Marc.

"Yeah. I just made some yesterday, so I had everything close at hand." Marc said with a smile at Maurice's wonder, then handed first Galen, then James, their plates.

"Is there anything I need to know about this before I start?" Galen asked as he looked down at his apple pie and ice cream.

"Fasten your seatbelt." Marc said, then dashed out of the room again.

* * * * *

"How's this?" Brucie asked as he leaned back to examine his handiwork.

Christian looked over at Brucie's gingerbread creation and froze in astonishment.

"Does it not look right?" Brucie asked anxiously.

"It looks great! Wow!" Christian said in wonder, then looked at Collin to see if he were paying attention.

"It's perfect." Collin said in amazement.

"Really?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Totally. I've just got a blobby little gingerbread guy with a head, arms, legs and a dick. You've got... man, he's got abs, pecs, a belly button..." Christian said slowly.

"Nipples." Collin added.

"And that cock, it's... Brucie, this thing is amazing." Christian finally said as he looked up.

"How are you guys coming along?" Marc asked as he hurried back into the kitchen.

"Look at what Brucie did." Collin said quickly.

Marc walked over to the table and froze at the sight.

"Isn't that something?" Collin asked as Marc continued to examine the gingerbread masterpiece.

"Do you like it, Uncle Marc?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"It's fantastic, Brucie. I didn't realize you had so much talent." Marc said honestly.

"Can you do it again? I mean, can you make another one?" Collin asked curiously.

"Yeah. I could make these all day." Brucie said with a smile.

"Okay. Then we have a change of plan. You make the gingerbread cookies and we'll get the dough ready and help you however we can." Collin said seriously.

"I haven't told the other adults what you guys are doing in here. I want it to be a surprise." Marc told the boys quietly.

Christian looked down at the amazingly accurate gingerbread sculpture, then up at Marc and said, "I'm pretty sure it will be."

* * * * *

"Does he ever slow down?" James asked as he looked toward the door.

"Sure. For about three or four hours every night, while he sleeps." Galen said casually.

At Maurice's wide eyed look of surprise, he laughed and said, "Not really. Marc's just excited about the holiday and having guests. Usually he's fairly laid back... in a fussy kind of a way."

Maurice nodded, then took his first bite of the cheesecake.

He slowly chewed, just a little, then stopped to savor the incredible flavor.

Galen smiled at Maurice's reaction, then took a large bite of his apple pie.

Tart didn't begin to describe the sensation.

He could have sworn that his mouth was going to turn inside out.

A full body cringe assaulted him as he tried to swallow the insanely sour piece of pastry in his mouth.

"A little sour?" James asked past a chuckle.

When Galen was finally able to force himself to swallow, he said, "That's not a pie, it's a culinary weapon!"

"The look on your face was priceless! I wish I'd had a camera!" James laughed.

Galen hurried to take a bite of his ice cream, trying to dilute the intense sourness with something sweet.

"I think I sprained a tastebud." Galen finally said.

James was holding his sides and nearly fell out of his chair, he was laughing so hard.

Maurice smiled at their reactions, then slowly and reverently took another bite of his incredibly good cheesecake.

* * * * *

"Okay, guys. I've done a little Internet research on the subject and I think I know how to keep your gingerbread men from turning into grotesque monsters when they're baked." Marc said seriously.

"You can really do that?" Collin asked with surprise.

"I think so. We're going to have to be really careful and cook them extremely slowly. And even then, Brucie's going to have to do some touch-up work afterward. But if I understood it right, we should be able to make it work." Marc said confidently.

"Dad's gonna freak when he sees these." Collin said happily.

Marc finally looked at the table to find that Brucie had made another gingerbread masterpiece.

"Who's she?" Marc asked curiously.

"No one, really. I just thought I'd do a girl, too." Brucie said frankly.

"She's really beautiful, Brucie. You've got an amazing talent." Marc said quietly.

"Let's make another. We've got to make one for everyone." Collin said urgently.

"I'm going to give her to my dad." Brucie said seriously.

"Yeah! And make another girl, so you can give her to Maurice." Christian said happily.

"When I suggested that we make gingerbread cookies, I never imagined that it would turn out like this." Marc said with a smile.

"Big boobs, Brucie. I bet that Maurice likes 'em big." Christian said seriously.

Marc shook his head as he left the room.

* * * * *

"So, how did everybody like the desserts?" Marc asked with a knowing smile at Galen.

"You're evil." Galen said with a grin in return.

"I warned you."

"Marc, this is without a doubt, the best cheesecake that I've ever tasted." Maurice said honestly.

"I'm glad it turned out. When I decided to make cheesecake, I thought I'd just find a recipe and make it, but I ended up having to go to the library to do research and I really had to hunt to find an authentic 'classic' cheesecake recipe." Marc said seriously.

"I don't think they made classic cheesecake with toffee and caramel." Galen said frankly.

"Well, no. What I did was take the classic recipe to make the cheesecake, itself. Then I went through a few of the modern twists that people have done and added them to that recipe." Marc admitted shyly.

"If you ever decide to enter a baking competition, I'm certain that you could win with that cheesecake." Maurice said frankly.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it... but I just came in to tell you to save room for a special surprise that the boys are making in the kitchen." Marc finished with a smile.

"It's getting late, I should probably be going." Maurice said quietly as he looked at the clock on the entertainment center.

"Please stay, at least until the boys are done. I overheard them talking and they're making something special for each person that's here." Marc asked hopefully.

"What are they making?" Galen asked curiously.

"I don't want to spoil their surprise. But I promise, it's going to be worth the wait." Marc said seriously.

"Okay. If it's for the boys, I'll stay." Maurice said as he relaxed back into the couch.

* * * * *

"Do you guys mind if I turn the TV down? The boys are about ready to make their presentation." Marc asked as he hurried into the living room.

"Sure. I don't think any of us were really watching it." Galen said honestly.

Marc smiled as he walked to the television and turned down the sound, then turned to look at the door with anticipation.

Brucie walked in first, proudly carrying a plate.

"Dad, I made this especially for you." Brucie said as he placed the plate on the coffee table in front of his father.

"Thank you... Oh my God!" James gasped as his face blushed scarlet.

"Don't you like it?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"Go get the next one and you can ask him when everyone's got theirs." Marc said urgently.

Brucie looked at his father with concern, but finally did as Marc had said.

"What in the world would possess him to do something like this?" James asked in horror.

"James, take a good look at what you're seeing. Don't look at it as a father, look at it for what it really is. Brucie has an amazing talent." Marc implored him to understand.

"But, how could he? We've been so careful. How could he do something so... degrading?" James asked helplessly.

Marc stared at him for a moment, then got a sense of what James was seeing.

"He made this for you, James. He wanted to create something that he thought you would find pleasing to look at." Marc said carefully.

"I would never want to objectify women like this." James said as he finally looked away from the cookie and up at Marc.

"Try thinking about it this way. The great master sculptors in the ancient times created incredible masterpieces to capture and preserve the beauty in the world that they witnessed. If you take a good look at what Brucie has created here, he's done that." Marc said gently.

"Uncle Galen, we made this for you." Christian said proudly as he presented a cookie that somewhat resembled Marc, at least in general appearance.

Brucie was standing in the doorway, watching carefully for Galen's reaction.

"It's beautiful. Thank you." Galen said with a smile.

Collin and Christian had beaming smiles as they ran for the door.

"I think that when you get to Pennsylvania, you should seriously look into getting Brucie into some kind of art program so he can develop his gift. It would be a crime to let him continue on without professional training." Marc said quietly.

James looked down at the cookie again, then over at Galen's before saying, "He does have talent, doesn't he?"

"Yes. And I think that you'll have to tread very delicately to keep from discouraging him from developing it." Marc said honestly.

"But, at the same time, I think it might also be a good idea if you found a way to express your feelings about how he represents people. If you've never talked to him about your feelings on the matter, he may not understand the difference between an artistic nude and a pornographic naked lady... or man." Maurice said carefully.

"Yes. That's a good idea..." Marc began to say when the three boys appeared and placed a naked female gingerbread cookie in front of Maurice.

"Well, um... She certainly looks... healthy." Maurice stammered.

"Christian thought you'd like the big boobs." Brucie quickly explained.

"Thank you. I can honestly say that I'm at a loss for words." Maurice said as he stared at the cookie before him.

All the boys filed out of the room again, rushing back to the kitchen.

"This has turned out to be the most unique Christmas gathering that I've ever attended." Maurice nervously chuckled.

"Every day has been a new adventure with the boys around." Marc smiled.

* * * * *

"Well, aren't you going to eat them?" Christian asked when the last of the cookie masterpieces had been revealed.

Predictably, Marc's had looked much like Galen, Christian's like Collin, and Collin's looked remarkably... eerily like Christian. Brucie's own cookie had a rather average looking physique and didn't look like anyone any of the others had met.

"I hate to destroy all your hard work." Maurice quietly explained.

"They're cookies. I can make you another one whenever you want." Brucie said simply.

Maurice paused for a moment, then cautiously picked up the cookie and took a bite.

"Mmmm... that's good." Galen said after his first bite.

"Marc made the cookie dough, I just shaped them." Brucie said timidly.

"Well, my compliments to the chefs." Maurice said cordially.

"On behalf of my assistant chefs, I thank you." Marc said happily.

"But I really do need to be going, now. I'd like to thank all of you for including me in your holiday celebration." Maurice said as he stood.

"We'll see you on Monday." Christian said happily.

"Yes. I'll see you then. All of you, have a very Merry Christmas." Maurice said as he started walking to the door.

"Hold on, I'll pack up some leftovers for you to take with you." Marc said quickly, as he followed.

* * * * *

"Did you have anything else planned for tonight?" Galen asked as Marc walked back into the living room.

"I still have a little more cleanup to do in the kitchen. But I didn't have anything else planned to do." Marc said as he looked around.

"Do you need some help?" Collin asked pleasantly.

"No, thank you, Collin. All I have to do is empty the dishwasher and load it again. I've already washed all the big stuff, so that should finish it off." Marc said warmly.

"Would you boys mind sleeping out here again, tonight?" Galen asked curiously.

"No problem. Do you mind if we watch TV?" Christian asked hopefully.

"Just don't turn it up too loud." Galen said with a smile.

"We won't." Christian quickly agreed.

* * * * *

"How was it?" Marc asked in a sleepy whisper.

"Everything was perfect." Galen said warmly.

"I made too much food." Marc said regretfully.

"Everyone ate their fill and enjoyed every bite. I don't know what more you could ask for." Galen said gently.

"Do you think the boys had a good time?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure they did."

"They're really special."

"So are you."

"Goodnight."

"G'nite."

Chapter 16

Marc woke with a mix of tiredness and enthusiasm.

There was a part of him that would very much like to stay in bed and drift in the nebulous area between sleep and wakefulness. But he already knew within himself that trying to do so would be an exercise in futility. The longer he lounged, soaking in the warmth and comfort, the more his anxiety would build about the list of chores that needed to be done to prepare for Christmas Day.

Marc got out of bed, careful not to disturb Galen's sleep. He took a moment to appreciate the beauty of his lover, his soulmate. There was no doubt that Galen was an attractive man, but what made Marc's heart melt was the pure goodness that he knew was in Galen's heart. Despite years of living an unfulfilled life, dedicated only to keeping the promises that he had made, somehow Galen came through the experience without bitterness. Instead, those dark years only seemed to provide a contrast for the awe and joy that he now felt every day.

Finally, Marc broke himself out of his thoughts and forced himself to get to work. After a few minutes to get cleaned up, he went downstairs to do a quick once-over cleaning of the unoccupied rooms before starting on his breakfast preparations.

* * * * *

"Do you smell that?" Collin asked into the mostly silent room.

"What? Did somebody fart or something?" Christian asked in a low, rough voice.

Collin smiled at the question, then responded, "No. I think Marc's making breakfast. It smells like sausage cooking."

"Living here's like living in a restaurant. Back with my parents, both of them, most of the time you'd just dig around in the fridge and hoped that you'd find something that you could choke down. It's funny, I don't remember either of them ever really cooking much of anything, but we always seemed to have nothing but leftovers... I wonder how that worked." Christian trailed off thoughtfully.

"I'm used to having cereal or pop tarts or something like that for breakfast. You know, just kind of jam it in your face and go. I guess if Marc did that, I wouldn't think that there was anything wrong with it, but him doing all the

cooking and stuff, it's like him saying that he cares about us and he wants to make us happy and stuff like that." Collin said as he rolled onto his side, so that he could look at Christian.

"Yeah. I still don't get Marc, where he's coming from. It's like he sees the world in a different way than we do. Sometimes I think he's not being for real, and just acting like things are alright when he knows that they're not. But then he'll say or do something and I'll realize, all over again, that he really believes it. I'd really like to see what he sees."

"I think the difference is that he chooses to see the best in people. He expects them to do the right things and to be kind and caring. Because of that, the people who care about him try not to disappoint him and end up acting better than if he wasn't around." Collin said speculatively.

"Yeah. Maybe." Christian said as he turned to face Collin.

"How's your weasel bite?" Collin asked with a lazy smile.

"It doesn't hurt at all, right now." Christian said honestly.

"Good." Collin whispered, then moved in to give Christian a 'good morning' kiss.

From a few feet away, Brucie watched them kiss for a moment, then reached under his blanket to adjust himself.

The sound of the movement caused both Collin and Christian to look up.

"Seriously? You're jerking off to us kissing?" Christian asked with a sour look.

"I was just... it was twisted. I wasn't..." Brucie stammered.

"Whatever. At least you didn't try to crawl under the blankets and suck us off in our sleep." Christian said frankly.

"I thought you'd be mad at me if I did that." Brucie quietly admitted.

"Yeah. You were right." Christian confirmed.

"I need to... but I've got a..." Brucie began to say as tears of fear and frustration welled in his eyes.

"What?" Collin asked in confusion.

"I think he needs to go to the bathroom but he's ashamed to stand up because he's got a boner." Christian translated.

"Just go. We're not going to rape you or... whatever it is that you're scared of." Collin said frankly.

"You're not going to make fun of me?" Brucie asked cautiously.

"Not this time. You get a free pass." Christian answered, then continued, "But that doesn't mean that if you go swinging your boner around some other time that we won't rag on you about it."

Brucie sat, frozen in place, for a moment, then quietly said, "I really gotta go."

"Then go." Christian said impatiently.

"Will you not look?" Brucie asked hopefully.

Christian rolled his eyes, then said, "Yeah. I think that Collin and I can find something to do to distract us while you're gone."

Brucie watched as Christian moved in to give Collin a firm kiss.

When it was obvious that the two younger teens had their attention only on each other, Brucie extricated himself from his blankets and hurried out of the room, with his hands covering his tented sweatpants as he ran.

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"I guess we need to get these blankets picked up and get dressed so we're ready for breakfast." Collin said as he reluctantly stood.

Christian lazily smiled up at the sight.

"No. Not when Brucie's in the house." Collin said firmly.

"You're no fun." Christian said with a pout, then climbed out of the blankets to begin his day.

* * * * *

A knock on the door drew everyone's attention.

"I've got it!" Collin called out as he hurried out of the living room.

"How are you doing, Brucie?" Christian asked casually.

"I'm worried." Brucie said honestly.

"Yeah. Me, too. I think all of us are, about different stuff. Maybe knowing that you're not the only one will make it easier for you." Christian said frankly.

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"Joaquin, you remember Christian, and this is our cousin Brucie." Collin said as he led Joaquin into the living room.

"Hey. Thanks for what you did the other night. I owe you one." Joaquin said timidly to Christian.

"I'm just glad that you're alright. Come on in and sit down. It smells like breakfast should be ready any minute." Christian said casually.

Joaquin walked into the room and took a seat on the couch, the other side from Brucie.

"How are you feeling?" Christian asked curiously.

"I was feeling sore all over, yesterday. But I'm a lot better today." Joaquin said honestly.

"Marc says that breakfast is just about ready. You guys should probably head into the dining room." Galen said from the living room doorway.

"What about the presents? It's Christmas morning." Collin asked hopefully.

Galen smiled, then patiently said, "You're not four years old, anymore. I think you'll be able to wait until we've had breakfast."

"I guess so." Collin grudgingly agreed.

"Good! I'm starving!" Christian said as he stood.

"Go on, then. I'll join you in the dining room in just a minute." Galen said with a chuckle at the hijinks of the boys.

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"James. It's time to wake up." Galen said gently from just inside the bedroom door.

"Huh?" James asked in confusion.

"It's Christmas morning and breakfast is ready. It's time for you to get up." Galen said with a smile at the sleep rumpled man.

"Oh. I can't believe I slept through the whole night. Thank you." James said as he fought to get himself to a sitting position.

"Come to the dining room whenever you're ready. Marc is going to start setting the food out, soon." Galen said with a smile before quietly withdrawing from the room.

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"How is everybody doing this morning?" Marc asked as he hurried into the dining room with a platter stacked high with pancakes.

"A lot better now that the food's here." Collin said as his eyes tracked with the movement of the platter.

"Before you dig into this, you should know that I also have blueberry pancakes with blueberry syrup on the way." Marc said before zipping out of the dining room.

"I don't know how he does it." Galen chuckled.

"I know! It's all I can do to make a bowl of cereal without setting the house on fire." Christian said frankly.

"I thought it was just me." Joaquin said with a grin at him.

"Good morning." James said as he walked into the dining room, still looking more asleep than awake.

"James, I'd like for you to meet Joaquin, he's a friend of ours. Joaquin, this is James, he's Brucie's father." Galen said pleasantly.

"It's nice to meet you." Joaquin said cautiously, noticing the butterfly bandages on James' forehead. He briefly wondered if James, too, had been forced to jump out of a moving car.

"Here we go. I'll be right back in with eggs and hashed browns." Marc said as he stopped at the table just barely long enough to drop off another platter of pancakes and one of sausage links before rushing back out of the room.

"I feel like we should be helping or something." James said as he watched Marc go.

"We'd only be in his way." Galen said frankly.

"Yeah. If there's something one of us can do to help, Marc will let us know." Christian agreed.

"But if he *does* ask you to do something, just remember how hard he works and how much he does all by himself. He's not asking because he's being lazy or mean, it's because he really needs your help." Collin interjected.

"I think that's everything. Does anyone need a refill on their coffee or juice before I sit down?" Marc asked as he rushed into the room and quickly placed the last plates of food on the table.

"No. Everything's fine. Please just sit down and eat." Galen implored him.

"Everything looks wonderful. I don't know how you do it." James said as he began to serve himself.

"To be honest, I'm not in the habit of making big meals. I've been doing my best to make something nice, but what I envision isn't exactly what I end up with. I just can't seem to get the amounts right. I end up cooking way too much." Marc said frankly.

"That's better than too little." Galen said simply.

"I'm glad you think so, because from the look of it, we're going to be having leftovers well into the new year." Marc said regretfully.

"If it tastes as good as this, I don't have a problem with that." Christian said honestly.

"Let's see if you're still saying that when January rolls around." Marc said quietly.

"I've never cooked for anyone else. And what I cook for myself is usually just something from a box. This is really nice for a change." Joaquin said timidly.

"Considering what Brucie and I usually eat, I don't know if our bodies will know what to do with 'actual' food. If I never have to taste anything 'artificial' or 'substitute' again it'll be too soon." James said honestly.

"Yeah. I forgot what 'real' food tasted like. This is really good." Brucie interjected.

When the phone started ringing, Marc immediately began to stand.

"Marc, you've done enough. I'll get it." Galen said firmly.

Although it was apparent that Marc would rather take care of it himself, he acceded to Galen's wishes.

As Marc took his seat again, he noticed the anxious expression that Christian was wearing.

"What's wrong?" Marc asked cautiously.

"I wonder if that's the hospital, calling about my dad." Christian said quietly.

"I seriously doubt it. I called and checked on him this morning and they said that while his condition hasn't improved, the pain management seems to be working and he's been able to rest comfortably." Marc said honestly.

"It's probably just one of those robocalls wanting Marc to refinance his mortgage." Collin said to Christian with an encouraging smile.

"Anyone who calls us, trying to sell us something on Christmas morning had better not get their hopes up." Marc said frankly.

"Mom gets really upset by those calls. I don't think her preacher would want to hear some of what she says when she gets one." Brucie said honestly.

"I'm sure her preacher probably says the same or worse, under the same circumstances." Marc said with a smile at Brucie, then looked at the door with concern, wondering what was taking Galen so long.

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"Marc, it's Maurice. I think you'd better talk to him." Galen said seriously as he walked into the dining room, carrying the handset to the cordless phone.

"Is it about my court hearing?" Christian asked anxiously.

"No, Christian. This is something completely unrelated." Galen said as he handed the phone to Marc.

"Good morning, Maurice. Merry Christmas. Is there something wrong?" Marc asked cautiously.

Everyone in attendance stopped their eating and couldn't help but notice Marc's deepening expression of concern as they listened to hear his side of the conversation.

After a pause, Marc finally said, "That's terrible. Of course we'll want to help however we can."

When Marc looked at him, Galen nodded his approval of what he suspected Marc was thinking.

"Is it going to be safe?" Marc asked cautiously.

After a moment to receive the assurance that it was, Marc firmly said, "We'll be down there as soon as we've gotten everything together. Thank you for calling us, Maurice."

After another moment, Marc took the phone away from his ear and disconnected the call.

"What do you want to do?" Galen asked quietly.

Marc looked around the dining room, then carefully said, "Maurice received word that someone broke into a local food kitchen last night and ransacked the place. All the food was either stolen or intentionally contaminated in some way to make it inedible. There's nothing left to serve the people who are coming to them for help. Maurice says that there are volunteers working to repair the damage and get things back into working order, and that they'll be able to replace the food from the local charity food pantry, but it will take time for that to be delivered and prepared. He wanted to know if we'd be willing to donate our time and our leftovers to help feed the people who have come to the food kitchen, in hopes of a warm meal."

"What are we sitting around here for? Let's go!" Collin said as he stood.

Marc smiled at him and said, "I told him that we'd help. But we need to think this through. Everyone who's helping needs to get ready to go out, then help me get the food ready for travel."

"Just tell me what I need to do." Collin said seriously.

Christian smiled at Collin's willingness to jump in, feet first.

"Joaquin, I know what you've been through the past few days. So we'll understand it if you don't feel like going with us." Marc said honestly.

"If there's anything I can do to help, I want to." Joaquin said sincerely.

"James, I know that you were planning to leave for Pennsylvania today. If that's still your plan, this would probably be the best time to go." Marc said frankly.

"Brucie and I will go with you. If it turns out that our help isn't needed, then we'll begin our journey from there." James said decisively.

"Will there be room in your car to carry some of the food?" Marc asked to be sure.

"Yes. All our belongings will fit in the trunk. There should be plenty of room in the back seat."

"Then it sounds like we've got a plan. Remember to leave enough room for everyone who's going to ride along." Marc reminded everyone around the table.

"Let's do this." Galen said as he stood.

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"I don't know how much good this is going to do. I mean, I cooked a lot of food, but not nearly enough to feed all these people." Marc told Maurice in the parking lot.

"There are people bringing prepared food from all over the area. If you'll just start bringing things in, the volunteers will help you get things heated and ready for service." Maurice said seriously.

The building was cold.

It seemed as though every piece of glass in the place, windows and otherwise, had been shattered.

Some of the most vile racist and homophobic slurs were spraypainted on nearly every surface in the building.

"No time for sightseeing. Bring that food in here." A stout young woman said sternly.

There were a few uniformed police officers talking to people off to one side of the room while other people were working feverishly to salvage what equipment they could.

Christian carried the foil covered platter around a steam table and into an industrial kitchen. In one corner there was a pile of utensils that had all been mangled in various ways. Next to it were garbage cans filled to overflowing with cans that had been beaten and torn open, obviously for the sole purpose of depriving hungry people of the food that they had contained.

"What have you got?" A young man asked as he rushed up to Christian.

"Ham." Christian said simply, unable to focus on anything but the atrocity surrounding him.

"Here, slide it into this cooking pan and I'll pop it in the oven to warm it up. Then you need to take your platter back to your car or you're probably not going to get it back." The man said as he picked up a steam table pan of a suitable size.

Christian did as he was told.

As he turned, he was surprised to see a familiar face.

"Allen, right?" Christian asked with a smile.

"It's nice to see you again, Christian. Although, I wish that it could be under better circumstances." Allen said as he walked up to the table and sat down a large granite roaster.

"What have you got, there?" The young man who had helped Christian asked curiously.

"Christmas turkey. It still needs to cook for another hour or two. Can you use it?" Allen asked expectantly.

"I'm sure that by the time it's ready, we'll be more than able to use it. Let me just get a baking pan and get it going." The man said before dashing away.

"Where do you want this?" A slightly older teenage boy asked as he approached.

"Just put it here on the table, for now." Allen said to the boy, then turned to Christian and said, "This is my son, Jake."

"Nice to meet you." Christian said honestly, then regretfully added, "I need to get out to the car and get another load."

"We're planning to be here all morning, so I'm sure that we'll all have time to talk, later." Allen said with a smile, then turned his attention to the young man who had returned with a pan for the turkey.

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Once all the food had been brought in, Marc and Allen started helping to organize the people they had brought to help out.

Reuben, Kenny and Kevin were all assigned 'clean up' duty in the dining room, with James overseeing the effort. Along with clearing tables, they also generally helped the people in the dining room and did more than a little visiting with them, along the way.

More than once during the morning, James remembered the time of his life when he and his mother and sisters had been living in a similar place.

Joaquin, Christian, Brucie and Lawrence all helped to serve food as the endless supply of hungry people paraded past them. The boys stayed on task most of the morning, but there were occasionally times when they would be able to chat and get to know a little bit about each other.

Deacon, Collin and Xain had the unenviable task of washing the never ending supply of dishes. However, during the course of the morning, none of them uttered a single complaint.

Jake had the singular honor of watching Ricardo and Edovina, which left Juana free to help Marc, Galen, Billy and Allen in the kitchen, heating and preparing food for the hungry masses. Maurice, much to his credit, was able to solicit food donations from an incredible number of people. Even though most of them weren't able or willing to donate their time, the amount of food that they provided was astounding and much appreciated.

Galen, Billy and Allen were mostly fetching and carrying. When one of them would notice that a pan of food on the steam table was nearly empty, they would hurry to bring another to replace it.

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Just before noon, a truck from the local charity food pantry arrived. Once that was unloaded and the regular volunteers were able to get everything organized to their liking, they were finally able to take over the day-to-day operations.

"How are you doing, Christian?" Marc asked quietly, as he drove.

"I never did anything like that before. There were so many people... and they were all so different." Christian said in amazement.

"How do you mean?" Marc asked curiously.,

"Well, when you think of someone who goes to a place like that for free food, you think of... at least I think of a homeless old man, usually white, looking all dirty and... homeless. You know, like the guys with the cardboard signs at the stoplights." Christian explained with difficulty.

"I know what you mean." Marc assured him.

"But there were little kids and families and... there's a bunch of them that I'd never guess that they needed to get free food from a soup kitchen." Christian said frankly.

"I'm sure that they do their best not to 'look' homeless or in desperate need. Unfortunately, when someone is seen as being in that situation, they automatically have another strike against them. Employers are less likely to hire someone who looks like they really need the job." Marc said regretfully.

"I wish there was more that I could do to help." Christian said honestly.

"I tell you what, work hard on your schoolwork and get a good job. Then, when you're in a position to really be able to help, I'll remind you about today." Marc said seriously.

"It doesn't seem like enough." Christian said quietly.

"Until then, we'll help in other ways. And, of course, when something like today happens, we'll step up and do whatever we can to help them." Marc said assuringly.

"We need to make sure that they know to call us if they need something." Christian said firmly.

"Remind me after Christmas and I'll contact them." Marc said with a proud smile.

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"Are James and Brucie still going to leave today?" Collin asked his father curiously.

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure that they know that they're welcome to stay, if they want to." Galen said frankly.

"I don't know. James doesn't seem to notice the stuff that's right in front of him, sometimes. You'd probably better tell him, just to be sure that he's got it." Collin said thoughtfully.

Galen smiled at his son, then said, "Yes. You're probably right."

"How are you doing, Joaquin? You're awfully quiet." Collin asked as he turned in the seat.

"Being there today, helping those people. It's making me think." Joaquin said quietly.

"You helped a lot of people today. That's nothing to be upset about." Collin said seriously.

Joaquin smiled at him, then said, "I've just been thinking that all this time, the whole time I've been in Orlando, I've only been thinking about myself. I've never done one single thing to help someone else."

"From what I saw at the hair salon, you do a lot to help." Galen said honestly.

"They pay me. It's not the same." Joaquin said shortly.

"I can understand if you feel like you're not doing enough, but you have to look at your situation realistically. The first thing you have to do is get yourself secure before you can do much to help anyone else. All the good intentions in the world don't mean a thing if you can't pay the rent and put food on the table. That's not being selfish, that's life." Galen said frankly.

Joaquin slowly nodded as he thought about Galen's words.

"Do you think the cops will get whoever trashed that place, last night?" Collin asked curiously.

"No." Galen said simply.

After a moment, hoping for more of an answer, Collin finally asked, "Why not?"

"I suppose it could just be me being cynical, but from the way I see it, the police have their hands full just trying to keep order. I don't really think property crimes against a charity organization or the homeless are a high priority for them. I'm sure that someone will write a report about it, and maybe... just maybe... a news crew might be dispatched to cover it. And in the end, that's probably all that will be done." Galen said honestly.

"That sucks!" Collin exclaimed vehemently.

"Some things do, but you still have to accept them." Galen said simply.

"No. I don't." Collin said firmly.

Galen considered for a moment, then said, "No, I suppose not. But just realize that if you choose to fight this battle, you're likely to run into a wall of bureaucracy and apathy. It's not fair. It's not right. But that's the way it is. At some point, you have to choose your battles. And in this case, I don't think it's a battle that you can possibly win."

"So the people who trashed the food kitchen and wrecked their food are just going to get away with it?" Collin asked in a disillusioned tone.

"Probably." Galen said frankly.

"And no one's going to do anything about it?" Collin asked to verify.

"Most likely, no." Galen said simply.

"If you want, maybe we can do some checking online and come up with something that we can do to help." Joaquin offered cautiously.

"Yeah! That'd be great. I bet Christian will want to help, too." Collin said with a smile toward the back seat.

"You guys can use the computer in my study, if that will help." Galen said as he fought to restrain the smile of pride that he felt for his son.

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"We should be leaving. I had hoped that we'd be on the road by now." James said when they arrived back at Marc and Galen's house.

"You can stay another day, if you like. It's no inconvenience at all and we love having you." Marc said immediately.

"Yeah. We like you being here." Collin interjected.

James smiled at the words, and quietly said, "Thank you, Collin. You don't know how much that means to me. But we really *do* have to be going. If we travel today and tomorrow, then I'll be ready to start putting things in order to rebuild my life, first thing Monday morning."

"What about your Christmas gifts? You gotta get those before you leave." Collin said seriously.

Brucie looked at his father imploringly.

James smiled at his son, then said, "I suppose. But we'll have to leave right after."

Brucie broke into a smile at the declaration.

"C'mon in, guys." Marc chuckled.

* * * * *

"Everyone take a seat and I'll hand them out." Marc said as they walked into the living room.

"We can do that, if you want." Collin quickly volunteered.

"Thank you, Collin, but I'll get it." Marc said with a smile at him, then walked to the tree.

"Galen! It looks like you're first, since I'm going to have to move yours to get to most of the rest." Marc said as he scooted the large wrapped gift across the floor to him.

"Really?! I thought the big one would be for one of the boys." Galen said with a trace of boyish delight in his eyes, then he thought to ask, "Should I wait until everyone has their presents?"

"No. Go ahead and open it. Otherwise James and Brucie will be waiting on us all day." Marc said as he went back to the tree.

"It says, 'Merry Christmas, Dad - From Collin and Christian'." Galen said as he read the card, then started tearing into the wrapping.

Both boys looked on with anticipation, waiting for his reaction.

"A chamois?" Galen asked in surprise as he took the plastic package out of the big box.

"For the man who has everything." Marc chuckled at Galen's confused expression.

"Chrome polish?" Galen said dubiously.

"Just read the card inside, that'll explain everything." Christian said past his chuckles.

"Oh!" Galen said as he took out the card and began reading it.

When he looked up at everyone's expectant gazes, he paraphrased, "It says that the boys are going to help me scrub, wax and polish my car."

"I'll set mine over here." Marc said as he moved a box to the side.

"No. Go ahead and open it." Christian said firmly.

"Yeah. Don't make us wait." Collin said seriously.

"Okay, guys." Marc chuckled, then very carefully and precisely peeled back the tape to unwrap his gift.

"Seriously?" Collin said in astonishment.

"It's part of being fussy." Christian said with a loving smile at Marc.

"Oh! Screw it!" Marc said with a grin, then began ripping the paper off the box.

Once the paper was off, Marc stared at the box in puzzlement.

"We thought that it was something that you and Dad could do together." Collin explained, not sure if Marc liked the present or not.

"What is it?" Brucie asked curiously.

"It's a video game system." Marc said absently, then looked to Collin and Christian and said, "Thanks, guys. This is incredible."

"We got you some games, too. They're in there. The clerk at the store said that they're the kind that old... people like you and Dad usually enjoy." Collin stammered.

"Thank you, boys. I love it." Marc said sincerely, then reached for the next present under the tree.

"This one's for Galen." Marc said as he handed over the present.

"Marc? What did you do?" Galen asked as he glanced at the tag before tearing into the gift wrapping.

"Something a little bit out of character for me, I'll admit. I usually don't buy into the hype and get the latest gadgets. But I made an exception this time. I saw it and thought that you'd like it." Marc explained with an unrepentant smile.

"What is it?" Collin asked his father curiously.

"A RoboSapien." Galen said with almost boyish wonder.

"What's that?" Christian asked cautiously.

"I'm sure you'll get to know *all* about it in the next few days." Marc said with a chuckle.

"How about I set this aside for right now and we continue on?" Galen asked as he reluctantly set the box on the floor by his chair.

"Brucie, this one's for you." Marc said as he walked it across the room.

"Really?!" Brucie said joyfully.

"What'd you get?" Collin asked curiously.

Brucie made short work of the gift wrapping and finally said, "Wow! It's an iPod! I've always wanted one of these!"

"Galen suggested it. There's also a gift card in there so you can buy the music that you like for it." James quietly added and appeared to be getting choked up.

"It looks like this one is for me, from Galen... Can I open it in front of everyone?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Yes. Go ahead." Galen chuckled.

Marc didn't even bother with trying to unwrap the gift gently. He tore off the paper and opened the thin cardboard box to discover what was inside.

"He got you a dress?" Collin asked as he looked from his father to Marc uncertainly.

"It's a robe! A nice soft one. I thought Marc might like it." Galen immediately responded.

"It looks like I'm going to have to take back what I've said about you having no taste, because this is absolutely perfect, I love it." Marc said lovingly.

Galen smiled with pride at his accomplishment.

"Christian." Marc said as he handed a large and unusually light package to him.

"It's from Collin." Christian said as he read the tag before ripping off the paper.

When he opened the box, he seemed to be frozen in wonder at the sight of the wooden stand.

"I thought you could use it to show off your sword." Collin explained quietly.

"Yeah! I'll go get it now! It's gonna look great!" Christian said happily as he bounded out of the room.

"Joaquin." Marc said with a smile.

"You got something for me?" Joaquin asked with surprise.

"Of course. We knew you'd be coming over." Galen said frankly.

Joaquin opened the small package and paused when he saw the box. He opened the box to verify its contents before saying, "Thank you. This is wonderful."

"What is it?" Collin asked curiously.

"It's a prepaid phone. And there are cards in here with extra minutes for it." Joaquin said happily.

"Since we knew that you'd had your phone stolen, we thought this might be of use to you." Galen explained quietly.

"It's great! Thank you! I didn't know how I was going to start getting things put back together. But now... I guess I don't have to start. I just have to keep going." Joaquin said happily.

"James." Marc said as he handed a crudely wrapped, flexible package to him.

After looking at the label, James quietly said, "Thank you, Brucie."

"Open it! I hope you like it." Brucie urged his father.

James tore open the gift wrapping to reveal a hunter green fleece jacket.

"I thought that since we're going to be moving to Pennsylvania that you'll need something warm to wear." Brucie explained.

"Thank you, Brucie. I think I'll probably be able to use it every single day." James said as he lost the battle to keep his tears at bay.

"Uncle Galen gave me the money to buy it." Brucie quickly added.

Galen was in nearly the same emotional state as James when Brucie called him 'Uncle'. That one little unconscious slip by Brucie gave evidence that he actually *had* been accepted as part of Marc's family.

"Set it up." Christian said as he hurried into the living room, carrying his sword.

Collin set up the stand and held it in place as Christian reverently placed the sword, hilt up, onto its display stand.

"It looks like it was made for it." Marc said with approval.

"Who's next?" Christian asked as he looked to Marc expectantly.

Marc took the next present from under the tree and said, "Me!"

"Go ahead." Christian encouraged.

Marc quickly unwrapped the large flexible present and ended up with a beautiful quilt in his lap.

"It's handmade. I thought that you'd appreciate something 'real'." Galen quietly explained.

"It's beautiful. Thank you." Marc said sincerely, then continued, "There are just a few small ones left."

"Collin." Marc said and handed him a small package.

The smile on Collin's face was more affection than amusement, but either way, he turned and gave Christian a firm hug as he held the toy 'Hummer' in his hand.

"Christian." Marc said, then handed a present to him that was somewhat small, but not nearly as small as Collin's.

"Wow! Christian said as he opened the box to find that it held a portable DVD player and six DVDs. As he investigated, he also found two sets of headphones and a splitter. After discovering all the treasures that the box held, Christian quickly searched for the label to find who had given it to him.

"Thank you! It's the best present I ever got." Christian said sincerely as he looked back and forth between Marc and Galen.

"Last one." Marc said, then held out the package as he said, "Collin."

Possibly learning from Christian's mistake, Collin looked at the label before opening the gift.

He broke into a smile when he saw the new iPod, packaged with several gift cards for new music.

"Thanks." Collin said timidly.

"James, before you leave, would you like to have lunch with us?" Marc asked hopefully.

"As much as I would love to, Brucie and I need to get on the road." James said regretfully.

"I understand. But please remember to call us if you need any kind of help at all." Marc said sincerely.

"And just call to let us know how you two are doing, too." Christian added quickly.

"We'll do that. Thank you." James said warmly.

"Do you need to pack anything?" Marc asked cautiously.

"No. I packed everything into the car before we left for the food kitchen, just in case they didn't need our help." James said honestly then guided Brucie to get up so that they could leave.

"Thanks for all you did, today. You watching after the kids in the dining room made it so that the rest of us could focus on our work." Marc said honestly as he walked them to the door. The rest of the family automatically followed so that they could see James and Brucie off.

"If I was any help at all, I'm glad. But being there today helped me to remember who I am and where I came from. I'd lost sight of that over the years and I'm grateful to have been reminded." James said quietly as he stopped outside his car.

"Stay in touch." Marc said as he stepped forward and pulled James into an unexpected hug.

"Brucie, if you ever need something or need to talk, you can call us." Collin said seriously.

"Really?" Brucie asked with surprise.

Christian smiled at the reaction, then quietly confirmed, "Yeah, really."

"Merry Christmas." Marc said as he took a step back.

"Yes. It really is. Merry Christmas to all of you." James said, then indicated for Brucie to get into the car.

"Drive safely!" Marc said as James was closing the door.

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A somber mood seemed to have fallen over the group as they returned to the living room.

Finally, Marc broke the silence by saying, "We're glad that you were able to spend Christmas with us today, Joaquin. I'm sorry that we haven't been able to spend more time visiting with you."

"Actually, it's been perfect. It's been quite a while since I've felt like I was part of a family. Just being here, being included, has meant a lot to me." Joaquin said sincerely.

"How are you doing, now?" Marc asked with concern.

"Honestly, I feel afraid most of the time, since it happened. I know it doesn't make any sense, but that's how I feel." Joaquin said frankly.

"With what you went through, it's perfectly understandable." Marc assured him, then continued, "But you can't let that keep you from living your life."

"Yeah. I've just got to learn to be more careful." Joaquin said with resignation.

"True. But you also need to keep in mind that you can call or come over and visit us anytime you want. We'll always be happy to see you." Marc said seriously.

"I wouldn't want to bother you." Joaquin said reluctantly.

"You know that you're safe here with us, right?" Marc asked firmly.

"Yeah."

"So, if you find yourself feeling afraid and need to feel safe, just come by here and we'll always be happy to see you. Anytime, day or night." Marc said as he held Joaquin's gaze.

It took a moment, but Joaquin finally said, "Yeah. Okay."

"Good." Marc said with a smile, then continued, "I'm going to put something together for lunch. You guys can watch some TV or check out your gifts."

* * * * *

"Dad, do you want to wash your car? We could do it right now." Collin asked hopefully.

"As much as I'd like to, it looks like it's about to rain. We'd better save it for some other day." Galen said regretfully.

Collin glanced at the window and reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"We'll do it tomorrow, weather permitting." Galen said seriously, warmed to the depths of his soul to know how much his son was looking forward to them washing the car together.

* * * * *

As the group was watching the infomercial about the battery operated carpet sweeper, the phone ringing interrupted them.

"Someone else can get it. I missed the ending, yesterday." Christian said firmly.

Galen smiled at the comment, then stretched to be able to grab the cordless phone from its charging cradle.

"Hello?"

"Oh! Hi, Maurice. No, it's Galen. Has there been more trouble? What can I do for you?" Galen asked quickly.

Collin and Joaquin listened to Galen's side of the conversation with interest as Christian tried to maintain his focus on the infomercial.

"Oh, good. I'm glad." Galen said with a relieved smile.

Both Collin and Joaquin relaxed a little at his reaction.

Galen laughed, then smiled as he said, "No. I don't think that would be any problem at all."

A moment later, he continued, "Anytime would be fine. As far as I know, we don't have anything planned for the rest of the day."

"No. I promise that it's not a problem. No one's going to be upset and call you the bailiff that ruined Christmas." Galen said warmly.

"You, too, Maurice. Merry Christmas." Galen said before disconnecting the call.

"What's going on?" Collin asked curiously.

"Christian's going to have some company, later." Galen said simply.

"Who?" Christian asked as he turned to look at Galen.

"Finish watching your show, then I'll tell you about it." Galen said seriously.

Christian seemed to be about to object, but instead turned his attention back to the infomercial.

* * * * *

At the sound of a knock on the door, Galen hurried to answer it.

"Hello. I'm Josh Pendragon, I'm here to meet with Christian Stone." The young man said uncertainly, on the doorstep.

"Yes. Please come in, Josh. We've been expecting you. My name is Galen Anderson, Christian is in the living room, right this way." Galen said pleasantly.

"You *do* understand why I'm here, don't you?" Josh asked cautiously as he stopped, just inside the front door.

"Yes. You're going to be Christian's legal representation at the court hearing on Monday." Galen said seriously.

"Good. I just wanted to be clear on that, upfront. There have been prospective parents that thought that I was there to represent them or that I was somehow automatically on their side." Josh said frankly.

"Well, I hope that you'll decide that we're a good fit for Christian, but I understand that it's not part of your job to convince the judge of that." Galen said frankly.

"Yes. Thank you. Do you think there would be any way that Christian and I would be able to speak privately for a little while?" Josh asked hopefully.

"Of course. You can use the dining room if you like." Galen said as he prompted Josh to walk with him toward the living room.

"Yes. Thank you, again."

* * * * *

"How is everyone doing in here? Who was that at the door?" Marc asked as he walked into the living room, drying his hands on a dishtowel.

"You're not cooking another huge meal, are you?" Galen asked cautiously.

"No. Just some soup and sandwiches. It'll be ready in a few minutes. I've just been cleaning up the dishes we brought back from the food kitchen, this morning." Marc said honestly.

"You should have told us, we would have helped you." Galen said seriously.

"It's fine. I was in there cooking anyway." Marc said with a shrug, then looked around before cautiously asking, "Where's Christian?"

"He's in the dining room with his lawyer." Galen answered simply.

"A lawyer... who makes house calls... on Christmas day?" Marc asked dubiously, then added, "I didn't think such a thing existed."

"He's a children's advocate. I think he probably plays by a different set of rules." Galen said frankly.

"I have to get back to watch the soup. Make sure you invite the lawyer to stay for lunch." Marc said before hurrying out of the room.

Galen smiled at Marc's retreating form, then noticed Collin's worried gaze fixed on the living room door.

"Josh is here to help Christian get placed where he belongs." Galen said seriously.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Joaquin asked cautiously.

"Not that I can think of. Right now, I think that everything is completely out of our hands. We just have to hope that we've done enough for Judge Robison to decide that our house is the best place for Christian to live." Galen said frankly.

* * * * *

"Any idea how long Christian's going to be in there? Should I take a tray of food into them?" Marc asked as everyone settled in around the kitchen table.

"I think it's probably best if we leave them to their work. If they get too hungry, Christian knows where the kitchen is." Galen said frankly.

"I feel like I should at least offer the lawyer some coffee or something." Marc said honestly.

"A soda, maybe. He doesn't look old enough to drink coffee." Galen said with a grin.

"That's a bad sign. When the doctors and lawyers start looking too young to do their jobs, that means that *someone's* getting old." Marc said warmly.

"That's possible, but just wait until you've seen him to judge me too harshly. He's *really* young." Galen said in his defense.

"Well, if that's true, maybe it's good that he's a children's advocate. That way he's more likely to be able to empathize with his clients and they might be more willing to trust him." Marc said speculatively.

* * * * *

"Does anyone mind if I turn on the football?" Galen asked as he led the way into the living room.

"Go ahead. I just want to check out my new iPod." Collin said as he sat down in front of the tree.

"Is that okay with you, Joaquin?" Galen asked carefully.

"Yeah. I want to read the instructions and figure out the phone you bought me." Joaquin said honestly.

Seeing that no one had an objection, Galen turned on the football game with the volume set to a reasonable level, then discretely took the instruction manual out of the RoboSapien box and started leafing through it.

* * * * *

"I'm done in the kitchen. Does anyone need anything, right now?" Marc asked as he walked into the living room.

"Yes. I need something very much." Galen said immediately.

"What's that?" Marc asked with a smile.

"For you to let me take care of things for the rest of the day. You've done an amazing job cooking and taking care of everything and everyone. Now, I think it's time for you to sit down and enjoy it. Let us take care of you for a while." Galen finished with a smile as he set his reading aside.

After a moment to consider, Marc quietly said, "Thanks, guys. I loved planning everything and making the meals, but some rest would be nice."

"Just kick back and relax, then. Is football okay with you?" Galen asked curiously.

"That's fine." Marc answered, then quietly asked, "Do you think Christian is alright?"

"I hope so. They've been in there an awfully long time." Galen said with a concerned look at the doorway.

* * * * *

"Collin, have you thought about calling your mother and your grandparents and wishing them a Merry Christmas?" Galen asked his son gently.

"No." Collin answered honestly.

"I'm sure they'd love to hear from you." Marc interjected.

"Yeah." Collin agreed.

"Collin, call your mother." Galen said with a laugh.

"Oh. Okay." Collin said simply, then went to pick up the phone.

"You see what I have to put up with?" Marc asked Joaquin with a smile.

"I can think of worse things." Joaquin said honestly.

* * * * *

"Before you hang up, I need to speak with your mother." Galen said when it sounded like Collin's call was winding down.

"Yeah. Sure." Collin said with distraction, then went back to his conversation.

* * * * *

When Collin handed him the phone, Galen walked out of the living room so he could speak to his ex wife privately.

A moment later, Christian walked into the living room, followed by Josh.

"How did everything go?" Marc asked curiously.

"That's Marc. I told you about him." Christian told his companion quietly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Stone. I'm Joshua Pendragon, you can call me Josh. Christian has had nothing but nice things to say about you." The young man said pleasantly.

"It's nice to meet you Josh. Could I interest you in some lunch?" Marc asked with a smile.

"No. Thank you. My gran's expecting me at Christmas dinner. In fact, I'm a little bit late. I need to be going. I'll see you on Monday, Christian." Josh finished quickly, then turned to leave.

"I'll walk you out." Marc said as he stood.

* * * * *

"He's barely more than a toddler." Marc said absently as he walked into the living room.

Joaquin laughed at the statement.

"Christian, are you hungry?" Marc asked with concern.

"Yeah. I guess." Christian said unenthusiastically.

"I'll get it, Marc. Remember what Dad said." Collin said as he got up from in front of the tree, then turned to Christian and continued, "Come on."

* * * * *

Marc and Joaquin sat for a few minutes, letting the sound of the football game and commercials mask the silence between them. Finally, Marc quietly asked, "How are you doing, Joaquin? Things haven't gone exactly like I'd planned today. I hope you aren't too bored."

"Ever since I came out, my family won't have anything to do with me. I don't know if I can honestly say that I miss *them* as much as I miss being included as part of a family. So, no, I'm not bored. I've had a happier Christmas than I ever thought that I could." Joaquin said frankly.

"I'm glad that you're here. I was a little bit afraid that the boys were going to end up spending the entire holiday with only me and Galen for company. I guess I shouldn't have worried about that. We've been around more people this week than I usually meet in a month." Marc finished with a chuckle.

"Well, if something happens like it did with the food kitchen, this morning, remember to call me. I think it was great being able to help out like that." Joaquin said honestly.

"We'll make sure to keep in touch so we can call you if there's a problem... or a celebration... or just a gathering." Marc said warmly.

"Like a family." Joaquin said quietly, finishing the thought for him.

* * * * *

"Why not?" Collin asked firmly as he led the way back into the living room.

"Because he's my lawyer. There's, like, a law or something that says I can't repeat what we said in private." Christian said firmly.

Collin turned to Marc and asked, "Is that right?"

"I think what Christian is talking about is called 'attorney client privilege', and as far as I understand it, it's just the attorney who can't discuss what was said." Marc said carefully, then continued, "But Christian doesn't have to talk about anything he doesn't feel like sharing."

"It's all just a bunch of 'what-ifs' and 'maybes', anyway. Josh didn't really tell me anything except that there's a lot of things that can happen and he's going to try to be prepared for all of them." Christian said frankly.

"So, it's not a slam dunk?" Collin asked quietly.

"No. It doesn't sound like it." Christian said anxiously.

A knock at the front door drew all their attention.

"I've got it." Collin said before Marc, or anyone else, could react.

"Just tell us if there's anything you need, okay?" Marc asked Christian quietly.

"Can we just not talk about it, right now?" Christian asked hopefully.

"You got it." Marc said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Joaquin's in here." Collin said as he led the way into the living room.

"I didn't expect you back this early!" Joaquin said with surprise.

"Things didn't go exactly as we expected this year." Bobby said quietly.

"The almighty, Agnes, himself, decided to invite one more dinner guest at the last minute... a 'date' for Bobby." Eric seethed.

"Ouch! So how did *that* go?" Marc asked, then smiled at Galen as he walked into the living room, still carrying the handset to the phone.

"Vile food. Horrid company. Agnes' little rat-dog yipping and snapping at me through the whole meal... everything was pretty much what I was expecting except for Bobby's blind date." Eric said frankly.

"I hope the 'date' wasn't too humiliated when she realized what was going on." Marc said cautiously.

"Megan was really sweet..." Bobby began to say, but was silenced by a venomous quelling glance from Eric.

"After the horror of the gathering finally began to subside and we were about to leave, *Megan* tells us on the way to the car that she's a lesbian and has been in a committed relationship for years. She only showed up today as a favor to her mother, who's friends with Agnes." Eric finished with a roll of his eyes.

"Well, I guess it's good that she didn't get her heart broken when Bobby left with you instead of her." Marc said as he tried to fight down his chuckles.

"It might have been kind of romantic if you two had fought over me." Bobby said with a demure giggle.

"Tragic, more likely. Megan had forearms like Popeye the Sailor. I'm pretty sure she could have beaten me into a bloody pulp, spinach or no." Eric said frankly.

"She was a sweet girl." Bobby quickly countered, then quietly added, "But she *did* have some manly forearms."

"Are you ready to go, Joaquin?" Eric asked suddenly, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"Yeah. I just need a second to get my things together." Joaquin said quickly.

"I hope that your Christmas went well." Bobby said as he looked at the others in the room.

"It's been eventful, but I'm willing to call it a success." Marc said, then turned to smile at Galen.

"Look what they got me for Christmas. It's a prepaid phone, so I won't have to worry about it if I'm away from the shop or at home alone. I can always call for help if I need it." Joaquin said happily.

"Or you can call us. If you're feeling afraid... or even if you're just bored, we'll always be happy to either come and get you, or talk with you on the phone to let you know that you aren't alone." Marc assured him.

"Yeah. I'll remember." Joaquin said quietly and seemed to be getting choked up.

"We'd better go now. I think what little of Agnes' food I was able to choke down isn't sitting well." Eric said frankly.

"Thank you again, everyone. I had a great time." Joaquin said as he followed Eric and Bobby out of the room.

"Once we've gotten through the holidays, expect to hear from us. I plan on inviting all three of you over for a nice meal... and no blind dates, I promise." Marc said as he followed them to the door.

* * * * *

Christian was quieter than usual the rest of the night.

Although Collin tried his best to get Christian to talk about it, it ended up that the only thing that seemed to bring either of them any peace was when he held Christian close and expressed his feelings through touch.

True to his word, Galen prepared a simple dinner for them that was some sort of a goulash. The food was reasonably good and Marc appreciated the effort.

As they sat and watched television, later that night, none of them were especially engaged by the program, but none of them wanted the 'together' time to end.

Finally, it was Marc who suggested that the gathering break up and everyone go to bed.

Although no one was enthusiastic about the idea, neither did anyone protest the announcement.

* * * * *

Collin and Christian prepared for bed in near silence.

Both of them went through the paces and finally they climbed into bed together.

They automatically snuggled as they settled in to sleep.

Just as they were drifting off, Collin whispered, "I *do* love you."

There was a momentary pause, then Christian responded, "Yeah. Me, too."

* * * * *

The next morning, when Collin noticed that Christian seemed to be awake, he quietly asked, "How are you doing?"

"I'm better. I just had to get some stuff sorted out in my head. You were right, what you said the other day. Even if Judge Robison says that I can't live here, we won't give up." Christian responded in a low voice.

"Why would he say no?" Collin asked with concern.

"Because he might not have a choice. No matter what we want, or what *he* wants, he still has to follow the law." Christian said frankly.

"Is that what your lawyer said?" Collin asked as he turned more on his side, to face Christian beside him.

"That's some of it. Josh just wanted for me to be prepared if things don't go the way that we want. The good thing is that he's on my side, so even if things *do* go wrong, he's going to keep on trying to help me. He said that his job doesn't end when the judge slams his gavel. He said that he won't consider his work done until I end up in a good place... whether it's here, with you, or not." Christian finished regretfully.

"Is there anything I can do?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Just, don't give up, okay?" Christian asked hopefully.

As an answer, Collin moved in to give Christian a firm kiss.

* * * * *

"Where's Dad?" Collin asked as he walked into the kitchen, with Christian following a step behind.

"He's up in his study, playing with his new toy." Marc said with a smile.

Both Collin and Christian took turns giving Marc hugs, before Christian carefully asked, "Didn't he get one of those things where you just pop in the batteries and it works?"

"For someone other than Galen, yes. But the reason that I bought Galen a robot is because of his tendency to look at a new gadget and rather than see what it is, he sees what it can become. He devises all sorts of improvements and fantastic modifications to expand it far beyond the original concept." Marc said warmly.

"So, he's up there right now, tearing apart the new little toy robot that you got him?" Christian asked to confirm.

"Yes. But that's why I bought it for him. If he left it in its original state, the novelty would wear off in a day or two, then it would sit around, collecting dust. But, depending on what kind of ideas he comes up with, he might be entertained for months making tweaks and modifications to the thing." Marc said happily.

"I thought it was cool that you got him a robot, but knowing *why* you got it for him is even cooler, especially, since you were right and he's up there, geeking out on it, right now." Collin said with a smile.

"As much as I want for him to enjoy his new toy, he still needs to eat. Would you go up and tell your father that breakfast is almost ready?" Marc asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Collin said before racing out of the room.

"Are we having breakfast in here, today?" Christian asked curiously.

"Yes. I think we're probably done eating in the dining room for a while." Marc said as he turned his attention back to his cooking.

Christian automatically went to the cupboards and started taking down what he would need to set the table.

"Thank you, Christian." Marc said appreciatively.

* * * * *

When Galen finally walked into the kitchen, Christian asked, "So how is your new robot working?"

"I'm still testing all the preprogrammed functions, but so far it's performing just the way it's supposed to. I've already got some ideas of modifications that I can make." Galen said happily.

"Do you think that the weather's good enough for us to wash your car today?" Collin asked hopefully.

"I don't know. I didn't think to look at the weather report this morning." Galen said honestly.

"It may be a little bit chilly. They're predicting that the temperature *might* reach the mid sixties, but today there's only a slight chance of rain." Marc provided casually as he ferried ham and eggs to the table.

"Is that warm enough?" Collin asked in anticipation.

Galen could see how much his son was looking forward to the project and said, "I think we can make it work."

"It will probably be best to do it earlier, rather than later, since the driveway catches the morning sun." Marc said as he took his seat.

"Sounds good." Galen said with a smile at the boys, then thought to ask, "What else do we have planned for today?"

"Not a thing, as far as I'm concerned. With all the excitement of the past week, I think we're due for a nice, quiet day." Marc said honestly.

"What do you *do* on a nice, quiet day, Marc? I really can't see you enjoying sitting around, vegging in front of the TV." Christian asked curiously.

"No. Not the TV, more likely I'll fix myself some tea and settle in on the couch and read for a while. It's very relaxing and I haven't been able to do that very much, recently." Marc said with a smile.

"I don't know if I could do that. I mean, it sounds kind of boring, to me." Christian said honestly.

"That really depends on the book that you choose. If you find the right book, it's easy to become lost in it." Marc said honestly.

"I must have always been finding the wrong books then, because reading's usually boring for me." Christian said frankly.

"Be thinking about what kind of movies and television shows catch your interest and I'll see if I can find some books with the same sort of subject matter. I bet that we'll be able to find something that you enjoy." Marc said confidently.

"Yeah... we'll do that." Christian said darkly as he internally included, 'If I'm still here after tomorrow.'

* * * * *

Even though the sun was shining, it was still early in the day and the temperature hadn't edged it's way out of the fifties, yet.

By the time Galen and the boys were done with their work, all of them were chilled to the core.

Even so, the sight of the Fairlane, sparkling in the sunlight, made the hours of effort that they had put in completely worth it.

"If you guys want to go and take hot showers and change into something comfy, I'll have chili and cornbread waiting on you when you're done." Marc said as he intercepted the trio just as they entered the house from the garage.

"If I didn't already love you, that would have won me over." Galen said gratefully.

Marc hurried to him and gave him a quick kiss, and was careful not to get his clothes wet, since Galen was damp from head to toe.

* * * * *

The chili lunch was well received. There wasn't much in the way of conversation, but Marc was willing to accept their enthusiastic eating as a compliment.

Finally, when lunch was finished, all four of them retired to the living room.

"Is there any football on, yet?" Marc asked curiously.

"I don't know, but if you wouldn't mind, I was thinking that I could get back to my project, upstairs." Galen said cautiously.

Marc chuckled with delight, then said, "As far as I'm concerned, today is for doing whatever you enjoy. If you want to work on your robot, that's perfectly fine with me."

"Do you feel like doing anything, Collin?" Christian asked curiously.

"Not really. After being cold, out there, I think it'd be kinda nice to sit in here, with you and snuggle while we watch a movie or something." Collin said honestly.

"Hey! We can try out my Christmas present together. I've got the player, the DVDs and the thing so that we can both listen to it at the same time." Christian said happily.

"Yeah. That sounds great!"

Marc smiled at the interaction, then went upstairs to his room to get the book that he had been reading.

* * * * *

Collin and Christian ended up sitting on the floor, leaned with their backs against the couch, snuggled together under Marc's new quilt, watching a disaster movie that started well, but seemed to get progressively worse as it went on. Nonetheless, both boys were relaxed into the experience of holding and being held.

The phone ringing jolted Marc out of his reading.

"Hello?"

"Of course not. It's always wonderful to hear from you. What can I do for you?"

"Sure. Just a second." Marc said, then put his hand over the mouthpiece before saying, "Collin, it's for you."

"Me?" Collin asked with surprise, not knowing who could *possibly* be calling for him.

"It's Joaquin. He wanted to talk to you about something that you had discussed yesterday." Marc said as he handed Collin the handset of the phone.

"Hi, Joaquin." Collin answered quickly.

"Yeah, I still want to. What have you found out?" Collin asked quickly as Christian looked at him curiously.

"Do you think I should get the parents to do it, since they're, you know, parents?"

"Yeah. That's true."

"No. But I think that if I talk to Marc and my dad about it, they'll get me one."

Marc looked up curiously at the statement.

Collin was, of course, oblivious to what anyone else was doing as he continued his conversation.

"Yeah. That sounds good to me. Be sure to call if you think of anything else. Christian and I will want to help any way that we can."

"Goodbye." Collin finished with a smile, then turned off the phone.

As Marc accepted the phone back from Collin, he quietly asked, "What is it that Galen and I are going to be getting you?"

"A computer." Collin said frankly.

Marc put the phone handset back on its base station, then thoughtfully said, "Probably a laptop, so you can take it with you when you travel."

"Yeah. Joaquin was just saying that there's these sites that you can visit and leave messages for a bunch of people to see, and maybe *that* will help us get people to care about what's going on at the food kitchen." Collin said frankly.

"Oh! So that's what you were talking about." Marc said with a smile.

"Yeah. For now, Joaquin said that it'd be a really good idea if we could get everyone who we know that was there yesterday to write letters to the editor of the big newspaper... I don't know what it is here, but if we get everyone to write in, not just the adults, but the kids, too, then maybe the newspaper will decide to do a story about it." Collin said seriously.

"I tell you what, I'm going to go upstairs and get my laptop for you. It should have everything that you'll need already set up. You guys can go

ahead and compose your letter to the editor and we can email it or print it off and send it whenever you're ready." Marc said seriously as he stood.

"Thanks, Marc. From the way Dad was talking, no one's probably going to do anything about whoever tore up the food kitchen. But I can't just not do anything." Collin explained seriously.

"I'm proud of you, Collin. I don't know if anything will be done or not, but by you doing this, you're improving the chances that someone in charge will take notice and take action." Marc said before leaving the room.

* * * * *

In the end, Collin and Christian each composed their own letters. Marc felt another swell of pride as he read through them.

Although the letters might have been grammatically dubious, at best, that only seemed to lend to the sincerity and passion in the boys' pleas for people to protect the services that provide for the most vulnerable members of their local community.

Marc felt that he wasn't in the proper state of mind to compose a letter of his own, just yet. But as soon as the chaos of Christian's hearing was over, he committed himself to contacting everyone else who had volunteered, to get them to write letters, too.

The boys had settled in to watch another movie which, fortunately, was much better than the previous one. As Marc was losing himself in the pages of his book, he was startled by a knock at the door.

* * * * *

"Mom?" Marc asked with surprise.

"Hi, Honey. We were just in the neighborhood and thought that we'd stop by to see how you're doing." Nora said cheerfully.

"What would you be doing in *this* neighborhood except coming to visit me?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Don't be difficult." Nora said as she walked past him, into the house.

"Is everything going alright?" Gene, Marc's father, asked as he also passed by.

"Fine." Marc said cautiously as he closed the door.

"Were your ears burning on the ride home last night?" Gene asked his son with a grin.

"No. Should they have been?" Marc asked cautiously.

After a stern look from Nora, Gene smiled at his son and said, "Never mind."

* * * * *

"Look who's here!" Marc said cheerfully as he led his parents into the living room.

Collin and Christian looked up in unison, with surprise.

"Isn't it lovely? Marc, you've really outdone yourself this year." Nora enthused as she looked around at all the Christmas decorations.

"I had help." Marc said shyly.

"It's absolutely perfect." Nora said happily, then her attention seemed to be drawn by the sword in it's stand, prominently displayed beside the Christmas tree.

Collin noticed and said, "I wanted for Christian to have a way to show it off."

"I can't imagine a better way of displaying it." Nora said as she turned toward the boys, then curiously asked, "What *is* that you boys have got, there?"

"It's a portable DVD player. Christian got it for Christmas." Collin answered before Christian had the chance.

"Couldn't you just watch your movies on the television, so everyone could enjoy them with you?" Nora asked curiously as she took a seat on the couch, next to where the boys were nested.

"No. Just like, right now, Marc's reading a book. If we had the TV on, he'd probably have to go into another room so he could pay attention to what he's reading." Collin offered helpfully.

"And it's nice to know that no matter where I end up staying, that I'll have something to do that I can take with me." Christian added quietly.

"Yes. Are you nervous about your hearing tomorrow?" Nora asked curiously.

"How do you know about that?" Christian asked cautiously.

"Families talk." Nora said simply, then continued, "So, Christian, where were you born, anyway?"

"Detroit." Christian answered cautiously.

"Oh? And Marc said that you were fourteen, is that right?" Nora asked curiously.

"Almost. Thirteen and a half." Christian responded, even more slowly.

"Oh, really? When is your birthday?" Nora asked pleasantly.

"June twenty-second... why do you want to know?" Christian asked warily.

"Oh, that's just six days before my brother's birthday. Isn't that something?" Nora asked delightedly.

"Not really." Christian said hesitantly.

"What's with the interrogation, Mom?" Marc asked curiously.

"I'm just wanting to get to know my new grandson, there's nothing wrong with that, is there?" Nora asked jokingly, then before he could answer, she continued, "So, Christian, are you aware of any aunts or uncles on your father's side of the family?"

"Whenever my dad talked about his family, it was mostly just a long string of cussing. But, I don't think he ever talked about anyone but his parents, I guess they'd be my grandpa and grandma Stone, even though I never met them." Christian said honestly.

"You have grandparents now, don't you even worry about that." Nora said simply.

"It's just about dinner time, would you like to stay and have dinner with us? I was just planning on doing a light pasta dish." Marc asked his parents hopefully.

"That sounds lovely, but I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble." Nora demurred.

"I haven't started it yet, so it's no extra work at all. Will you stay?" Marc asked with a smile.

"We'd love to." Nora answered for both of them, then added, "I'll go with you to keep you company while you're cooking."

* * * * *

As Collin, Christian and Grandpa Gene sat in the living room, in silence, it suddenly occurred to Christian what he could do.

He picked up the remote control from the coffee table and turned on the television. It took him a moment, but before too long, he located a channel showing something that he presumed was football.

Without a word, he climbed out from under the quilt and stretched to place the remote control next to the chair where Grandpa Gene was sitting.

The smile and look of gratitude that he received from Gene spoke louder than words.

So, Grandpa Gene relaxed back into the armchair, watching sports, while Collin and Christian returned to watching their movie.

* * * * *

As soon as they were safely ensconced in the kitchen, Marc turned on his mother and asked, "What's going on?"

"What I want to know is what happened with Denise and James? Ruthie told me that James and Brucie spent the night here last night." Nora asked in return.

"I heard that Denise called you, so you probably know more about it than I do." Marc countered.

"Well, yes. But according to Denise, she just lost her cool a little bit when she found out about being excluded from the inheritance, then James called the police and had her arrested." Nora said simply.

"That's not quite the same story that I heard." Marc said as he busied himself with getting the pans that he would need set up on the stove. "It wasn't James who called the police, it was Brucie. And that was because James had been knocked unconscious by Denise. Brucie called the police

because he thought that James was dead. He thought that Denise had killed him."

Nora looked at him with surprise at the announcement.

"According to James, the doctor at the hospital said that she very nearly *did* kill him." Marc said as he turned to face his mother, then added, "From the look of his injuries, I believe it."

"I suppose *that* would explain why we couldn't get them to release her, yesterday. They said that we'd have to wait for the judge to set bail, tomorrow." Nora said thoughtfully.

"James and Brucie have already left and are on their way to Pennsylvania, to live with James' family. He's said that he's going to divorce her." Marc said seriously.

"He can't let one little fight, in the heat of the moment, destroy their entire marriage." Nora said grimly.

"It wasn't one little fight. You said it yourself, Denise heard about the inheritance, I assume from Ruthie, and then Denise took her anger and hatred out on James. That's not a fight, that's abuse. James has chosen to cut all ties with his abuser and has taken his son to live in a safe environment. I think he's making the right decision and I completely support him in what he's doing." Marc said honestly.

"The vow is for better or worse..." Nora began to say.

"Mom. She nearly *killed* him. I don't care who it is, man or woman, adult or child, when someone attacks you physically, intending to do harm, it's time to leave... and not come back. I have a lot of respect for James for choosing to stand up for himself and for Brucie. I sincerely wish that more people in abusive relationships would do the same." Marc said firmly.

"Is that why James chose to spend the night here? Because he knew that you would support his decision?" Nora asked carefully.

"No. That actually had nothing to do with it. James had a problem and needed my advice. When I heard about his situation, I offered him a place to stay." Marc said simply, then went back to working on dinner.

There was a long moment of silence, before Marc quietly asked, "While you're sitting there, would you mind helping me out by grating some parmesan cheese? I'm going to need about a cup."

"Yes. Of course." Nora said with a smile at her youngest son, then thought to ask, "I don't suppose you know about what's going on with Ruthie and Nolan, do you?"

"Not really. After the boys slept over, Nolan stopped by to pick them up, but he was so drunk that I wouldn't let the boys leave with him. Later, Ruthie stopped by to get the boys and said that she and Nolan had talked. I really don't know what, if anything, they had decided." Marc said as he placed a cheese grater, cheese and a bowl on the table before his mother.

"From what Ruthie's told me, they're going to try couples counseling. I hope it helps, but I can't say that I'm optimistic." Nora said frankly.

"Honestly, I really don't care if Nolan and Ruth can work it out or not. But unless one of them opens their eyes and starts paying attention to what's going on with their children, I'm afraid that those kids are going to be permanently damaged from living with two such horrible, bitter, toxic people." Marc said imploringly.

"I think your father and I can make an extra effort to see that the children aren't being overlooked." Nora said as she continued turning the little crank on the cheese grater.

"Remember to call me if you need any help, even if it's just to give them a break from the tension. Jorry and Nick will always be welcome here." Marc said honestly.

"What about the baby?" Nora asked cautiously.

"Galen and I don't have any baby experience. And from what little I've seen of Nolan and Ruthie's daughter, I don't think she's a good 'starter' baby. She probably needs someone with years of experience to take care of her." Marc said frankly.

"Let's see how things play out over the next week or so before we commit ourselves to any course of action." Nora said thoughtfully.

"What do you have planned?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Me? Not a thing." Nora said quickly, apparently offended by the very suggestion.

"Right." Marc said with a knowing grin.

"Oh! It seems that I've shredded too much." Nora said suddenly as she put down the cheese grater.

"So, we'll just have some extra to sprinkle on top." Marc said with a smile as he collected the bowl of cheese from his mother.

* * * * *

Nora chuckled with delight when she walked into the dining room and saw all the colorful Christmas decorations.

"Visiting you at Christmas is like going to a Christmas festival." Nora said as she moved to take a seat.

"You always made Christmas so special for us, you taught me to love it as much as you do." Marc said honestly before hurrying out of the room.

"There's only about a minute of the football game left, then Grandpa Gene will be in." Christian said as he and Collin walked into the dining room.

"How are you liking it here, Christian?" Nora asked seriously.

"It's great. I hope I can stay." Christian said honestly.

"But, if that happens, are you going to miss your family?" Nora asked with concern.

"No." Christian said simply, then explained, "I used to think that my parents didn't like me. But since I've been here, I've realized that they also don't like each other. They don't like themselves. And they don't like anybody else, either. Until I got here, I didn't know that I didn't have to live like that."

"I'm glad that you've been able to find a place where you can be accepted." Nora said seriously.

"They don't just accept me, here. They believe in me. And I know that no matter what I told them that I wanted to do, that they'd do whatever they could to help me." Christian said confidently.

"Within reason." Marc said as he walked into the dining room, carrying a covered serving dish. As he placed the dish on the table, he continued, "We also love you enough to tell you if we think that whatever you're planning is probably a bad idea."

"You say that, but I haven't seen you do it, yet." Christian said playfully.

"Tell him, Collin." Marc said with a grin.

"Tell him what?" Collin asked cautiously.

"Go go power rangers." Marc said with a barely restrained chuckle.

"Oh, yeah. Um, he's right. If he thinks you're doing something stupid, he'll call you on it." Collin said with a grimace at the memory.

"Collin, did you tell your father that dinner is ready?" Marc asked as he started walking toward the door.

"Yeah. But he was up to his elbows in his little robot thing." Collin said frankly.

Marc nodded, then left the room.

* * * * *

"This is wonderful! What do you call this, Marc?" Gene asked happily.

"Fettuccine alfredo." Marc said honestly.

"Really? I don't remember it ever tasting like this." Gene said with surprise.

"Oh? Maybe it's because I made the sauce from scratch." Marc said casually.

"Marc, you're going to spoil him." Nora said gravely.

"Ask the guys, that's what I do." Marc chuckled.

"He's serious. He spoils us like crazy." Collin said frankly.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I was involved in something." Galen said as he rushed into the room.

"That's fine. We just started. We're having grilled chicken, fettuccine alfredo, garlic bread, and a green salad." Marc said with a smile.

"It smells incredible." Galen said as he started filling his plate.

"So, I remember you saying that Christian's hearing is tomorrow. At what time was that, again?" Nora asked curiously.

"Nine o'clock. Why? Do you plan on going?" Marc asked curiously.

"I can't say for sure. But don't be too surprised if we turn up." Nora said cheerfully.

* * * * *

After dinner, Gene and Nora said their goodbyes and received warm hugs from every member of the family.

Once Marc had finished attending to the dinner dishes, he went to the living room to find the boys sitting together, watching television. Marc suspected that they were 'seeing without seeing' as they sat there, holding each other.

"Boys, before it gets too late, I'd like to go through what you'll be wearing to court tomorrow." Marc said gently.

Although it was obvious that neither boy wanted to, they didn't make a complaint as they followed him into the spare bedroom.

Both boys were surprised at the amount of clothing that Marc had purchased for them without their knowing.

In the end, Marc made sure that they both had everything that they would need, laid out and ready to go.

* * * * *

"You know, this could be the last time that we're going to get the chance to sleep together for a long time." Christian said honestly.

"Yeah. I've been trying not to think about that." Collin admitted.

"What do you want to do tonight?" Christian asked hopefully.

"You mean *besides* sleep?" Collin asked cautiously as he began to get some idea of what Christian was really asking.

"Yeah." Christian confirmed, then added, "If we don't see each other again for a really long time, what would you regret not doing?"

"What I want to do... I don't even know if you'd want to." Collin stammered.

"Collin, you really suck at hiding your feelings. I have a pretty good idea of what you want to do." Christian said seriously, then continued, "And it's the same thing that I want you to do."

"Yeah, I know what I want to do. But I don't know how. I wouldn't want to do it wrong and hurt you." Collin quietly admitted.

"I've done a lot of research on the Internet. I think that between us, we can figure it out." Christian said assuringly.

"Okay. Yeah. How do we start?" Collin asked anxiously.

Christian laughed, then said, "How about we go take our showers, then come back in here and crawl into bed and see what happens next?"

"It's important to be clean." Collin said as he gazed deeply into Christian's eyes.

"Dirty can be good, too." Christian countered automatically.

* * * * *

The next morning, despite Marc's effort to raise everyone's spirits with a breakfast of sausage gravy and biscuits, they all felt heaviness in their hearts.

Although everyone was ready to leave in plenty of time for court, all of them felt as though they were moving in slow motion, dreading what was to come.

For his part, Collin couldn't bear to let Christian out of his sight for more than a moment. He wasn't sure if he had developed an irrational fear that if he lost sight of him, he might not ever see him again, or if he were just desperate to stockpile the memories of their time together and had only just realized that each passing moment was that much more precious and rare.

The drive to the courthouse was made in silence.

* * * * *

"All rise!"

Judge Robison walked into the courtroom and went directly to his bench.

"Court is in session..." Maurice called out, identifying the court and case as everyone stood. After a brief pause, he continued, "For the sake of brevity, would those arguing the case please step forward and introduce themselves to the court."

"You may be seated." Judge Robison said as he sorted through the documents before him.

"Before we begin, I simply want to clarify that the pending cases regarding the alleged neglect and abuse of Christian Stone have been transferred to this court and consolidated so that we may have a hope of seeing an end to these matters before young Mr. Stone becomes an adult. That being said, the primary matter before us is the custody of the juvenile, Christian Nathaniel Stone. Are the parties prepared?"

"Joshua Pendragon, for Christian Stone, who is present, your Honor."

"Lemual Peabody, for Marc Stone and Galen Anderson, both of whom are present, your Honor."

"Hezekiah Hince, for Child Protective Services and the State, your Honor. We are ready to proceed."

"The first matter that I would like to dispose of today is the termination of the parental rights as regards Nathaniel Stone. I have read the motions submitted to the court. Do I have any further preliminary motions before we proceed?" Judge Robison asked as he looked at the attorneys.

"Due to the nature of the incapacitation of Nathaniel Stone, I would move for a continuation of these proceedings until such a time when Mr. Stone can be present, or at least secure legal counsel to be present to represent his interests." Mr. Hince said quickly.

"Based on the State's own evidence of ongoing abuse, by Nathaniel Stone, the prospect of Mr. Stone's recovery, and the probable affect that his further custody would have on the child, the motion is denied." Judge Robison said professionally.

"Your Honor, Mrs. Stone is not present. I move for a continuation until such a time that Mrs. Stone, or her attorney can be present, to represent her interests in this matter." Mr. Hince said respectfully.

"Your Honor." Josh quickly responded, "Mrs. Stone was contacted directly by this court regarding these proceedings and has expressed no interest in pursuing custody. I would object to any continuance on those grounds."

Judge Robison looked at some papers on his desk, before he addressed the attorneys, "Yes. I have a sworn statement here, to that effect. Motion for continuance denied. Are there any further motions, before I rule on the matter of parental rights?"

A dead silence greeted the Judge's question. "Alright then. Based upon the State's evidence of abuse by Nathaniel Stone, the Father of Christian Stone; the State's evidence of criminal neglect by Mrs. Helen Stone, the Mother of the child; the fact that both parents are being charged in District court for these criminal acts, this court has no hesitation in terminating all parental rights of Mr. and Mrs. Stone. It is so ordered."

Judge Robison signed some papers which he placed in a folder, and handed to Maurice, the bailiff. "Since the rights of both parents have been terminated, I see no purpose in pursuing the multiple counts of abuse and neglect, that the State will pursue in District Court. I therefore order that all outstanding actions regarding same be placed on the District Court's calendar."

"So, the remaining matter would be regarding Christian Stone's custody. It has been proposed that Mr. Marc Stone be given that honor." Judge Robison said as he looked over the people in his courtroom.

"Child Protective Services opposes that action." Mr. Hince said immediately.

"On what grounds?" Judge Robison asked, obviously not at all surprised by Mr. Hince's objection.

"Although they share a common name, according to our records, Mr. Stone is not related to the child. Therefore, by the dictates of the state codes, the child should be taken into Child Protective Services custody for evaluation and eventual placement."

"Yes. The codes would indicate that course of action." Judge Robison reluctantly agreed.

"Furthermore, it has come to our attention that the child has temporarily been in Mr. Stone's care over the recent holiday which might have unduly influenced him. For that reason, we recommend that the child's wishes not be taken into account in the court's decision." Mr. Hince continued.

"The court will take your recommendation under advisement and give it due consideration." Judge Robison said seriously.

Christian looked at Josh anxiously at the announcement.

"However, due to the history of treatment Christian Stone has received in the bureaucracy of the Child Protective Service agencies, both here and in Michigan, I could not, in good conscience, remand him to their custody. Therefore, it is the judgement of this court that the juvenile, Christian Nathaniel Stone be remanded to the custody of Camp Little..." Judge Robison was saying when he stopped at the sight of a man rushing into his courtroom.

To Marc and Galen's surprise, Marc's father, Gene, hurried past them and handed a slip of paper to Maurice. They looked back to find Nora, Ginny and Grandma Ellen also entering the gallery.

Maurice glanced at the paper, then took two steps and placed it on the desk in front of Judge Robison.

After a moment of reading, Judge Robison asked, "Mr. Hince, am I correct in understanding that your only objection to Mr. Marc Stone having custody is that he is not a blood relation?"

"I'm simply stating the department's stand on the matter, using the guidelines that we are required to follow. I do not object to Mr. Stone, per se. Only to a child being given into an unrelated person's custody without the proper investigation and certification process."

After a moment to consider the words, Judge Robison turned to his trusted bailiff and gave a single nod. Maurice then called out to the courtroom, "The court calls Mrs. Ellen Stone to come forward and give testimony."

Ginny slowly made her way to the front of the courtroom, pushing Grandma Ellen forward to sit before the judge.

"Am I to understand that you have some information that is relevant to these proceedings?"

"Yes, your honor. Christian is my great-great-nephew and Marc's second cousin. After meeting him at a family gathering and hearing of his lineage, I had a private investigator friend of mine do some investigation on my behalf. Just this morning I met with the investigator and have been given certified copies of all the paperwork that proves their relationship by blood, beyond any shadow of a doubt."

Maurice accepted the folder that Grandma Ellen was holding and handed it to Judge Robison.

After a moment to skim through the documents, Judge Robison stood and said, "This court will stand in recess for thirty minutes while I review these documents. Will the attorneys for the interested parties join me in my chambers?"

"All rise!" Maurice called out to the courtroom.

* * * * *

"I know that you said that you might be coming, but I didn't really think you would." Marc said as he stepped forward to hug his parents.

"We didn't want to get your hopes up in case the investigator didn't come through for us. But now you know why your mother was asking all those pushy questions last night. We needed to verify that the information that we'd obtained was really for the right person." Gene said frankly.

"Thank you for doing this, Grandma Ellen. It never even occurred to me to investigate Christian's genealogy." Marc said to her warmly.

"With age comes a certain wisdom. Every now and then, it comes in handy." Grandma Ellen said with a tender smile at Marc.

After releasing his father, Marc bent down to give his Grandma Ellen a very gentle hug.

* * * * *

"Dad, Mom's here." Collin said, drawing his father and Christian away from Marc and his family.

"Where?" Galen asked as he looked around.

"Back there, by the door. See?" Christian asked as he pointed.

"When I talked to her on Saturday, I told her about what's been going on, but I certainly didn't expect for her to hop on the next available flight." Galen said honestly.

"Do you think she's here to take me away from you?" Collin asked anxiously.

"No. You know your mother isn't like that. I'm sure she's here because she's concerned about you and wants to be here to comfort you if things don't turn out well." Galen quietly assured his son.

"I don't know what I'm going to say to her." Collin said nervously.

"Tell her that you love her. Remember that I've already told her everything about you and Christian. You don't have to worry about saying the wrong thing or trying to hide anything from her. Just be honest." Galen said assuringly.

"I guess so. I'm just nervous." Collin said in a small voice.

"You're nervous?" Christian asked incredulously.

Collin looked at Christian sympathetically and quietly said, "You win."

Christian gave him a pained smile in return.

"They're starting back up again." Galen said urgently as he saw Maurice walking back into the room.

Judge Robison returned to the bench and as soon as Maurice had called the court to order, he began to speak.

"After a careful review of the documents presented to me, I find them to be relevant to the matter at hand and, therefore, admissible in this case. Thanks to the work of Mrs. Ellen Stone and her private investigator, this court has been provided with a series of notarized documents that prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Christian Stone is, indeed, a distant cousin of Marc Stone and is therefore a blood relative." Judge Robison said carefully.

"Since it has been stated in the record that the only objection that CPS had to the placement of Christian Stone into the custody of Marc Stone was their lack of a familial relationship, and since that matter has been resolved to the court's satisfaction, it is the order of this court that Marc Stone be named as permanent guardian of the juvenile, Christian Stone. After thirty days, the court will be willing to entertain a petition for adoption if all parties are amenable."

Judge Robison paused for a moment, then calmly continued, "If there are no other matters relating to this case to be presented, this court is adjourned."

After a tap of the gavel, Maurice stood forward and said, "All rise."

* * * * *

"Congratulations. I'm very happy for all of you." Mr. Hince said as he approached the table where Christian was openly crying as Marc held him.

"Thank you. That's very gracious of you to say." Galen said as he watched Marc and Christian out of the corner of his eye.

"Actually, my only concern was that the boy was going to be sent away to live with a stranger. Since it's been proven to the judge's satisfaction that they are related, I'm perfectly happy with the outcome." Mr. Hince said frankly.

"What've you got against strangers?" Collin asked curiously.

"Nothing. If they've been investigated and certified so that we can be reasonably certain that they will be good parents, then I'll be first in line to recommend them." Mr. Hince said seriously.

"But Christian's dad hurt him really bad, and they're related by blood." Collin said cautiously.

"I know, and if there were any way of preventing that from happening to him and others, I'd do anything in my power to make it so. Unfortunately, the best answer society seems to have come up with so far is the child welfare laws. I realize that they don't always work the way they were intended, but at least it's something to do to try and help." Mr. Hince said earnestly.

"I think I understand." Collin said slowly.

Mr. Hince smiled, then said, "I'm glad. Now, it appears that someone else would like to talk with you, so I'll be leaving."

Collin followed his gaze and smiled when he saw that his mother was waiting a few steps away for him to be available to talk to her.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr. Hince. Thank you for taking the time to explain things to me." Collin said sincerely, then offered his hand.

Mr. Hince shook his hand and smiled, then walked away.

* * * * *

"Christian, although I'm pretty sure I know the answer, I still have to ask. Are you happy with the way *everything* turned out?" Josh asked carefully.

Christian pulled away from Marc's chest for a moment and really thought about the question before quietly saying, "Yeah. I really am."

"Good. I hope that everything works out the way you want. But just remember that if you find yourself in a legal situation where the authorities are talking *about* you and not *to* you, that I'll be willing to help, if I can." Josh said seriously.

"Thank you, Josh." Christian said sincerely.

"Yes. Thank you for what you did for Christian and for the job that you do." Marc said with true admiration.

"I try to do my part." Josh said timidly, then started clearing paperwork off the table where he had been working.

* * * * *

"Mom, I didn't know you were coming." Collin said honestly.

"I know. I wasn't sure if I should, and even at the airport, I still wasn't one hundred percent sure I was going to go through with it."

"I'm glad you're here." Collin said as he pulled her into a hug, with Christian standing right by his side.

* * * * *

Marc and Galen watched silently as Galen's ex wife talked to the boys. When their private conversation was concluded, she guided the boys to walk with her to include Galen and Marc.

"Hi, Galen. Hi, Marc. How have you been?" She asked as she approached.

"We're good. I'm surprised to see you here, Kat." Galen said frankly.

"I'm kind of surprised to see me here, too." Kathryn said with a grin, then added, "But after you told me about everything going on with Collin and Christian, and since my office is closed until after New Year's Day, it seemed like this was the place to be."

"Well, not that it isn't wonderful to see you..." Galen began to say.

"...thank you for saying so, and even with a straight face." Kat interrupted with a chuckle.

"Why are you here?" Galen finally asked.

"I just wanted to see for myself if you were being melodramatic and over-dramatizing what was going on between the boys." Kat said honestly.

"And?" Galen asked cautiously.

"You were right." Kat said with a shrug.

"Marc, do you have your calendar with you?" Galen asked playfully.

"I'll remember to write it down when we get home." Marc said with a smile.

"I think you're right. They're in love. Not a crush, not puppy love but real honest to God, love." Kat said seriously.

"So, what are we going to do about it?" Galen asked cautiously.

"We have to keep them together, agreed?" Kat asked to confirm.

"Agreed." Galen immediately responded.

"We could keep the custody agreement and Christian could just tag along when Collin comes home." Kat offered hopefully.

"How would you feel, being a tag along?" Marc interjected.

"Okay. Good point." Kathryn conceded.

"I guess we could swap and the boys could visit *you* on the holidays." Galen said thoughtfully.

"That doesn't sound much better." Kat said honestly.

"Boys? What do you think?" Marc asked cautiously.

Collin and Christian whispered together for a moment and finally seemed to reach a decision.

"Christian needs to be here with Marc. Maybe someday the whole travelling thing might be fun, but not right now." Collin said frankly.

"So what do you want to do, baby?" Kathryn asked her son gently.

"Could we just live here? And, you know, have a home?" Collin asked hopefully, then quickly added, "I love you, Mom. But the bad thing about shared custody is that I don't want to be 'shared', I just want to be loved."

"I think we can do that." Kat told her son with a tender smile.

"And I can still come for visits, just not every time the post office closes for a three day weekend." Collin quickly added.

"And I can visit you down here, too." Kathryn said seriously.

"Yeah! That sounds great! By the way, how long can you stay?" Collin asked with excitement.

"I have a flight out, day after tomorrow. Plenty of time for me to take my son and my son-in-law to-be out for dinner and maybe do some sightseeing." Kathryn said warmly.

"So, you'll do it? You'll let Collin stay here?" Galen asked hopefully.

"Yes." Kathryn said with surprise at the question, then added, "Of course, this means that you get to be the evil, everyday parent that has to say 'no' sometimes and I get to be the angelic parent who swoops in occasionally and showers the boys with gifts and attention."

"I can see you in that role." Marc said with a smile at her.

"Especially the swooping part." Galen said playfully.

"If you guys will point me at a decent restaurant around here, I really need to get something to eat. They served me something vaguely food-like on the plane that seemed to have derived all it's flavor from the plastic packaging." Kathryn said frankly.

"There's a nice place a few blocks from here. I think all of us would enjoy an early lunch after the morning that we've had." Marc said quickly, then added, "No one seemed to have much of an appetite, this morning."

"Hi Maurice! How are you today?" Collin asked, unable to restrain the swell of happiness he was feeling.

"I'm fine. Judge Robison is going to be tied up in chambers for a while, going over an out of court settlement with some attorneys, so I was just going to take an early lunch. By the way, congratulations Christian." Maurice said warmly to him. At that moment, his first glimpse of Christian popped into his head; the thin frightened boy who was being attacked by his father in the airport.

"Thanks. Hey, we're just going to lunch too. Would you like to come with us?" Christian asked hopefully.

"Come on, Maurice. You celebrated Christmas with us. You're like family!" Marc encouraged.

"If you're sure it wouldn't be an imposition." Maurice said cautiously.

"Imposition? If these guys start getting all googly eyed at each other, I'm going to need someone to talk with." Kathryn said with an inviting smile.

"Then I would be honored to accept your gracious invitation." Maurice said formally, directing his reply mostly to her.

Kathryn took hold of Maurice's arm, basically 'claiming' him, as Marc and Galen led the way out of the courthouse.

The End