

JD rolled to his right, rolled to his left, moved onto his back, then began kicking his feet.

“JD, if you don’t stop moving, I’m going to put you into a sleeper hold and force you go to go sleep,” Max said.

“I’ll be 11 in a month. I still don’t understand why I have to take a nap like I’m in kindergarten.”

“Because I’m taking a nap, and I’m almost 15. Because I can’t sleep when you’re awake. Because you were up at the crack of dawn, which means so was I. And because, as I’ve already told you a dozen times, Zoe can’t make it until late tonight. She’s trying to catch a nap, too. We don’t need you getting overtired.”

“You’re the one gets grumpy when you’re tired. I don’t get grumpy.”

“You get whiny.”

“But aren’t you excited, Max? I can’t help that I can’t sleep, you know, I’m just SO excited. Even when I close my eyes, I see all the twinkling Christmas lights flashing underneath my lids telling me to open my eyes, and not miss one second of this day.”

“This isn’t your first Christmas, kid, nor is it mine.”

“But it’s our first Christmas together, here in our home. It’s not the same as all the other Christmases. We got to cut our own tree down, Max.”

“Please don’t remind me. I said timber and you ran in the direction the tree was falling. Cracked my head good trying to save your sorry butt. Just another time I told you to stay still and you didn’t. Then you insisted on putting the star on the top of the tree by yourself after I told you no and brought the whole tree down on you, anyway.”

“Yeah, but at least it was the first time I got to do it. In the foster homes, they always had their real kids put the star or angel on top.”

“It’s just a star, JD.”

“Did you ever get to put the star on the tree at your house?”

“I never cared to. Besides, ours was fake. When I was six, they didn’t even bother with a tree anymore. Christmas mornings were spent with Dad passed out snoring, and Mom hung over. Eventually she didn’t even bother to wrap the gifts. Last Christmas, Dad got me a gun that he said I couldn’t use for hunting until I was 16, so he would use it until then. He gave Mom 20 bucks to get me something, and I wound up with \$8.53 rolled up in a receipt purchase for vodka.”

“Your Mom spent your Christmas money on alcohol?”

“It’s a disease, JD. Dad was out of work again, so she wasn’t getting much money to begin with.”

“My worst Christmas was when I was 7, before I got sent to Hearts Home, cause I woke up real early, like I always do, and ran down the stairs and checked all the presents for my name, but there wasn’t one,” James said.

“I checked twice, three times. That’s when I still believed. I remember running up to my room crying, and I completely trashed it.”

“I threw everything in the room, even cleaned out my closet and drawers, I was so mad, because I thought that even Santa didn’t love me. When they called us down for breakfast, there were no longer presents under the tree. All the foster care kids looked sad, some were crying. Only then did I realize that none of their names had been on those presents either. Those had been the family’s presents for the real children.

“At breakfast, the foster parents announced that all the foster kids would have our Christmas at noon. They brought us to this place that looked like a church, called Salvation Army. We stood in line, and like a food buffet, we were brought to three bins and told to pick what we wanted.

“I was mad, and I’m pretty stubborn, I’ve been told, so I was sitting in the back of the room, refusing to stand in line, and I heard one of the people there talking to the foster mother. ‘Usually parents come before Christmas and pick the items for the child, so that they can be wrapped and given to them for Christmas. Being Christmas, we don’t have much else left.’ And the foster mother said, ‘Oh, these aren’t mine. They’re wards that I’m fostering temporarily.’”

“That’s when I stopped believing. The worker lady was real nice though. She talked to me and told me to just look, just in case I saw something I wanted, and if I dug down deep into the bin, I might find a treasure. There wasn’t much digging to do cause the bins were nearly empty. The items left were the unwanted ones, just like me.

So just when I was digging into the last bin, which was the biggest, and I told her I didn’t see anything I wanted, she winked at me and said, ‘Try one last time. I’ll help you.’ So she put her arm down in there and came up with a five dollar bill.”

“Some of those places really treated you poorly, hah, JD? No wonder you’re so excitable today.”

“Not really poorly, now that I understand things better. Meeting you and being out here, I’ve really learned a lot about things I didn’t appreciate before. More just constantly reminding us that we weren’t really part of their family, then we filled in the blanks of not being wanted for one reason or another. Believe it or not, it was easier living with foster parents like that. The hardest were the ones that treated us like family, like we were a part of something, and didn’t separate us from their own kids.”

“Those hurt the most. Eventually we’d have to leave. We’d cry or feel like crying, and sometimes, the foster parents would cry, too. I think they had about as much choice as we did, but I can’t really say for sure. I used to think it was their fault, or my fault, but now I don’t. What’s the best Christmas you’ve ever had, Max?” JD turned to him.

Max hesitated for a while and JD thought he might be sleeping.

Then he said, “When I was 3 or 4 years old, my Dad dressed like Santa, and he came into my room and woke me up. It was magical at the time, because I didn’t know it was my Dad. I felt pretty special that Santa would let me see him, and he told me I was a special boy,” Max smiled.

“A special boy that got to open his presents early. It was still dark outside, I remember that, which made the Christmas lights and the tree just stand out so much more, like a dream. Mom was so beautiful, all dressed up, laughing. Dad had come into a bunch of money at that time, so it changed everything in the household. The tree was filled with presents a mountain-high, it seemed.”

“I just stood there, not breathing, my mouth wide open, thinking, ‘Is this for me? All for me?’ Santa said, ‘Merry Christmas, Max.’ I was so busy looking at all the presents, I didn’t notice him leave. Then suddenly, the door bursts open and it’s my Dad, ‘What’d I miss? Is it Christmas time?’

I ran to him and told him all about the presents sky-high and how I saw Santa and he said, ‘Santa was in this house? In here, with your mother? You didn’t see her kiss him, did you, Max?’ All the while Mom was laughing. He put his arm around her, and everything seemed right, everything seemed good, everything seemed happy, like it should be, and could never be another way.”

There was silence a long time as they both felt happy about those things. “What about you, JD? What’s your favorite Christmas?”

“This one. Even if you’re being grumpy. We may not have a lot, Max, no mountain of presents, no parents to make it magical, but we have each other. We take care of each other. We . . . love each other? Not in a sissy way, but in a, you know, like a big brother, little brother way . . . right?” JD suddenly felt uncertain.

Max ruffled his hair. “Yeah, buddy, I love you like a little annoying brother.”

“And I love you like a big moody older brother,” JD jumped on him. “And I love Zoe like a bossy sister, even though she acts more like a mother, and you love Zoe like a -” Max gave him the don’t-you-dare look “-really good friend you care about,” he giggled. “And Diane’s - ?” “Intolerable, bossy, selfish, annoying,” Max interrupted.

“Someone you love to hate, but hate how much you love, does that make sense, Max?”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “She’s as much a part of this home as the rest of us. It wouldn’t be the same without her. I just hate those meetings.”

JD jumped up and stood in front of the chalkboard, one hand on his hip, and strutted like Diane. The chalk squeaked over the board as he wrote the word ‘Updates’. Then ‘Max, Zoe, JD, and Diane’. He flipped his hair. Max was cracking up.

“Max!” JD said sharply in a high-pitched voice, and underlined his name in a harsh squeak.

“What have you done since our last meeting, what else needs to be done, and what supplies are you needing?”

Max played along. “I’ve –.”

“Well speak up, Max. Have you done so little that you’ve nothing to report?” JD tapped his foot impatiently.

“I potty-trained JD to use the outhouse,” Max said.

“Hey!” JD cried in his normal voice. “Humph, so you’re saying that while I’ve been going to school,” he returned to his high-pitched voice, then wrote school scratchily under Diane’s name, “planning my wedding,” he harshly wrote wedding, “and trying to find ways to support you,” and with that he wrote 3 dollar symbols and circled them with a cloud, “All you’ve done is force JD to use the outhouse? I don’t even know why I bother?”

Another flip of the hair. “Do you know that to get here, I had to walk in four inches of snow? Four inches! These are two hundred dollar boots that I got on sale for a hundred fifty. They’re not meant for the snow. With everything I’m doing for you, I expect that path to be shoveled and free of debris.”

“Zoe, can we impeach her now?” Max said.

JD quickly took Zoe’s seat, crossed his legs, and placed his hand under his chin. “On what grounds?” he said in a bored, tired voice.

“I don’t have a shovel. She wants me to perform duties that I’m not equipped for.”

“Diane?” JD looked toward the board, then returned to being Diane, stomping his feet.

“Well, can’t he just make one?”

JD and Max laughed and laughed and laughed. “Neither one of us is getting a nap, are we.” Max said.

“Not today.”