

STILL NOT MY FAULT

FAMILY TRADITIONS
BOOK TWO



MISTY MALONE



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PROLOGUE



"ARE YOU READY TO DO THIS?" Denny asked Randi, his wife of not quite a year.

"I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be," she answered. "What do you think Mr. Clemons wants, and why was it necessary that we both be here together?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know who he is, other than the letterhead on his letter identified him as an attorney. The letter didn't give us much to go on, that's for sure. All he said is he has something he wants to discuss with us. It's vitally important, and we both need to be here. That's certainly not telling us much. But since we both took the day off to come see him, let's go get this over with. I just hope it's not bad news."

"I don't know how it could be bad news, since we don't even know who he is, but I guess we'll know soon enough." He nodded, then opened the door for her and led her inside with a hand on the small of her back.

"Good morning," the perky lady behind the desk said. "How can I help you this morning?"

"Denny and Miranda Nelson, here to see Mr. Clemons."

Her eyes seemed to light up a bit before she quickly recovered. "Ah, yes. If you'll please have a seat, I'll let Mr. Clemons know you're here. He's been eager to talk to you."

Denny and Randi exchanged glances before he led her to the empty waiting area. They'd just sat down when a man came walking down the hall toward them. "Mr. and Mrs. Nelson? Thank you so much for coming in. I'm Tom Clemons. I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to talk, so if you'll come with me, we'll go to my office and I'll explain it."

"Yes, we have certainly been wondering that," Denny said as he took his wife's hand and they followed the attorney to his office.

Once they were all seated, Mr. Clemons began, "I'm going to get right to the point. Mr. Nelson, do you know a Matthew Nelson?"

"I have a cousin named Matthew Nelson. Is that to whom you're referring?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"I don't know Matt real well, but yes, of course, I know him. He's a few years older than I am, and his father was my Uncle Herb. They live in Wyoming, about a fifteen hour drive from us here in Pennsylvania, and we didn't see them often. Why are you asking about Matt? Is everything okay with him?"

"Unfortunately, no. I'm sorry to have to inform you of this, but Matthew died almost two weeks ago of a chronic illness. I understand both of his parents have been gone for a number of years, as have yours, and there weren't any other cousins, just the two of you."

"Yes, that's correct," Denny said slowly, obviously still confused. "I'm sorry to hear about Matt, but I'm not following how that brings me here. Is there something I can

do to help somehow? And why was it necessary for Randi to be here?"

"I understand your confusion," Mr. Clemons said as he nodded, "and I apologize, I'm not handling this very well. Let me try again. Were you aware that Matt had a son and a daughter?"

"No, I wasn't," Denny said, a look of total confusion on his face. "I talked to Matt on the phone a couple years ago and he didn't mention anything about having any kids, or even being married or dating anyone. They must be young."

"Actually, they're twins, and they're almost six years old. It's truly a sad situation, but let me explain it. About seven years ago, Matt met a lady and they dated for several months. Apparently, she got drunk one night and caused an accident but left the scene. The other driver died, and she was afraid of getting caught and being charged with the fatal accident, so she simply left the area. She never talked to Matt again, and he never knew what happened or why she left. She found out she was pregnant with twins and had the babies alone."

"Why didn't she tell him?" Denny asked.

"She was afraid if she told Matt she was pregnant, he might not want them. He might put together that she was the one driving the car that killed the man and left the scene. If that happened, she would more than likely go to prison, and the kids wouldn't have anyone."

"So Matt didn't know he had a son and daughter?"

"Not until just a few weeks before he died. Ironically, the kids' mother died in an auto accident. The kids were put into foster care. When the landlord went through her things to clean out her apartment so she could rent it to someone else, she came across a diary. She read it, and the lady had written about the accident and that she was afraid she would be sent to

prison for causing it when she was drunk. She talked about Matt and the fact he was the only thing that made her think twice before leaving, but she didn't want to go to prison, so she left. The landlord gave the diary to the police. They found Matt, did a paternity test and confirmed that he was the father. Unfortunately, he was too sick at that point to take the kids."

"Did they ever meet him?"

"No. He wanted to hold them, tell them he was their father and he loved them, but he knew it would be confusing to them, why he hadn't been around before, and then hard for them to lose another parent. So he saw them but never introduced himself. This is where you and your wife come into the picture, Denny. He wanted to do something for his kids before he died. He said the best thing he could do for them was to find them a home. He talked to an attorney, explained everything to him, and asked him to find you. He knew you were either married or in a serious relationship with Miranda Thomas."

"Yes, we were dating when I talked to Matt last."

"He's hoping you and Miranda will consider adopting them and raising them as your own. He had everything he had put into a trust account for them, to help pay for college someday. But he also made three tapes before he passed away. One is speaking to the two of you, asking you to please consider raising his two children. The second one is speaking to them, explaining that when he found out he was their father, he was too sick to raise them, but he wants them to know he loves them. It says he asked you two to raise them and tells them you're good people and will make good parents for them. If you do agree, you can show them that tape right away when they come to live with you, or save it until they're older, whichever you think would be best."

"What about the third tape?" Denny asked.

"The third tape is in case you decide not to raise his kids."

In it, he speaks to them, explaining that he just found out he was their father and loves them, but was too ill to take them in. It doesn't mention you two; he simply wanted them to know their real father loved them, and why he wasn't part of their lives."

The room was completely quiet. Denny looked over at Randi, who had tears streaming down her cheeks. Not caring that they weren't alone, he took her hand and pulled her over to him and onto his lap, where he wrapped his arms around her. "Randi, what are your first thoughts?"

"This is awful. Poor Matt, and those poor kids. We have to give them a home."

"Are you sure you're willing to do this? This is a huge undertaking. We've never been parents, and these kids are already six years old."

"I know, but they need someone to love them, and they're family. "

Denny pulled Randi to his chest and they both had tears in their eyes as they held each other. Eventually, he leaned back and caught her eyes. "If you're sure you're willing to do this, I agree with you. They're family, and they need a family of their own. We may not have any experience as parents, but we have enough love to share with them."

Mr. Clemons came around his desk and leaned down, resting one hand on each of them. "Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, I believe Matt was right. He said his cousin is truly a good person, one of the best people he's met, and although he's never met the lady he was seeing, he was sure she had to be a wonderful person, as well, for him to think so much of her. He desperately wanted to find a family for his son and daughter before he died, and it sounds like he succeeded."

"He did," Denny confirmed. "We'll do our best to raise them as he would have wanted them raised. What do we have to do, or where do we go from here?"

"I can help you with everything that needs to be done. Why don't you two go home and think about this before you commit to it. Talk about it. It will be a big change in your life, so make sure you're ready for them. Take a day or two, and if you're still willing to go through with it, call me. I'll get you back in here and we'll get the ball rolling and get the kids brought here."

"Can I ask, where are they now?" Denny asked. "Are they together?"

"They were taken to a foster family. The family has had them almost two weeks now, but they don't have enough room for both of them, so they will probably be split up."

"We can't let that happen, Denny," Randi said.

"We won't," he assured her, rubbing her arm. "Or if they do, we'll bring them back together. Mr. Clemons, I agree with Randi. I believe we'll take them, but I agree it's a big decision, so we will talk about it this evening. I'll call you tomorrow to give you our final decision, but would you please ask them to do everything they can to keep them together until we can get them? They've been through enough. If they need us to go pick them up, we'll get plane tickets and leave as soon as we can."

"I'll pass that information on, and I'll wait to hear from you tomorrow. Again, I'm sorry I had to bring this news to you, but thank you for coming in. I'll get the two tapes Matt made that involve you so you can take them home and watch them."



DENNY AND RANDI talked about it extensively that evening, but their discussion was mainly centered around the changes they would have to make right away and the best way to approach certain things. There never really was any

doubt in either of their minds as to whether they would do it.

They had recently bought a house of their own, and they were glad they had. They were looking for a three bedroom, but the home they fell in love with and bought had four. Now they felt they were led toward that house for a reason. Two of the bedrooms were of similar size, with a shared bathroom between the two rooms. They felt that would be perfect for the twins. They would each have their own room, yet they would be connected by the shared bath. That would still leave them with a room they could use as both an office for Randi when she worked at home, as well as an extra bedroom.

They would look into the school and after-school care right away. There were a couple weeks left in the school year, but considering all the changes the kids would be going through, they would check to see if the kids would need to start attending now. They felt it would be much easier on them if they could simply wait and take some time to adjust to their new life and start school in the fall. They would also find out where they had attended school and talk to them to see how they'd done in kindergarten and if they needed to finish the year here.

Both Randi and Denny felt they could get a little time off work when Sawyer and Cheyenne first came to live with them, to help them adjust, which they hoped would help them. In looking at the bedrooms the kids would use, they decided they both had a bed and small dresser, and they would work for now. They felt if the kids got to redo their rooms the way they wanted, pick out colors and furniture they like, it might make them feel more like they belonged, and the rooms were indeed theirs.

Mr. Clemons had given them very little information about them, but they read a report that showed the kids

hadn't had an easy life. Their single mother hadn't had a lot of money, and Children's Services had gotten involved a couple times when their teacher questioned whether they had a sufficient amount of food and clothing. Denny and Randi might not be rich, but they had enough money to be sure that never was an issue for them again. They would take them shopping soon after they arrived and help them pick out some new clothes.

The last thing they did was watch the two tapes, which about broke their hearts. Matt's love for his kids whom he'd just learned about was obvious, both by the way he begged Denny and Randi to take them in, and by the way he talked to them in the other tape. They decided to let the kids see those tapes soon after they got to their house. They hoped knowing their father loved them and wished he would have known about them sooner so he could have been there for them would help them. If they knew he arranged for them to live with Denny and Randi, it might help them adjust.

Denny called Mr. Clemons the next morning and was happy to find out he'd called and gotten things started already, anticipating they would in fact want the kids. As a result, three days later, they met Sawyer and Cheyenne Wilson at their local airport. The attorney Matt had hired accompanied them, and he had the paperwork with him that would be necessary for Denny and Randi to legally adopt them. He had done what he could, and once Denny and Randi signed the papers and gave them to Mr. Clemson, a trial date would be set roughly three months later. At that time, assuming things were going well with all of them and the judge agreed, they would legally become Sawyer and Cheyenne Nelson.

There were adjustments that needed to be made, but all in all, things went very smoothly. Luckily, both kids seemed to be smart kids and had done well in kindergarten. Their

teacher agreed that it would be better for them to not start going to a new school this late in the year and assured them they should do fine next year in first grade.

The tape Matt had made for the kids had a big impact on them and helped tremendously. They were both very touched to know they were loved by their father and that he'd made arrangements for them, knowing he wouldn't be there to raise them himself. They bonded with both Denny and Randi quickly, and by the time they met with the judge three months later, no one had any remaining doubts.

Denny and Randi might have been thrown into parenthood quickly, but they were fast learners. Friends and neighbors were very helpful, giving them advice, as well as helping out occasionally. All in all, they quickly and easily became a family.

CHAPTER 1



DENNY AND RANDI tucked Sawyer and Cheyenne into bed with hugs and kisses, then went to the living room so they could collapse on the couch. After a couple minutes of nothing but resting, Denny sat up and pulled Randi over next to him. She cuddled in against him, laying her head on his chest. "I feel a lot better after our parent-teacher conference today," she said with a contented sigh.

"Me, too. Mrs. Abbot has gone above and beyond for them, listening to their story and agreeing to take both of them in her class to keep them together this year while they adjust to a new home with new parents, a new school and classmates. It's a lot for two little kids to take on, and it was sure good to hear her say she thinks they're doing fine."

"It sure was a big relief. Mrs. Abbot has been a godsend for them and us. Hearing her say they're doing well academically was nice, but I was more concerned about how they were doing socially. We could always work with them more or hire a tutor for them if they were struggling with their school work, but how do you help if they struggle with life itself, or making friends?"

"I know," he agreed. "When she said at the beginning of the year they wanted to keep to themselves a lot, I wasn't surprised, but I was concerned. But now it's been good to hear them start talking about other kids and friends and things they did at recess, but hearing her say she feels they're adjusting well now and seem to be happy sure felt good."

"It sure did. Hopefully, that means we're doing something right."

He chuckled as he wrapped his other arm around her, causing her to turn toward him and look into his eyes. "When you consider two years ago we weren't even married yet, and now here we are, parents to a couple of six-year-olds, hearing what their teacher said tells me we're doing okay. I think if we just keep showing them we love them and doing what feels right to us, we'll be okay."

"I hope so. How did your day go? Are there any new exciting cases you're working on, Detective Nelson?"

He chuckled but leaned down to place a kiss on the top of her head. "I still like the sound of that."

"I'm proud of you for making it to the detective bureau. I know you went to college hoping to be not just a police officer, but a detective, and I'm glad you made it." She giggled and added, "Plus, I love hearing about some of the cases you're working on and how you solve them. Some of them are really fascinating."

"It is interesting work that I enjoy. I don't have any new cases right now, but we're still working on the string of auto thefts we've had recently."

"I heard another one was stolen last night. No one has seen anything?"

"No. They've all been stolen at night, which is good in a way. I'd rather cars not be stolen, but at least they're stealing them when no one's around, and they're not carjackings."

"Carjackings can be more dangerous, I assume."

"Yes, they can be. If the person they're stealing the car from doesn't cooperate and hand over the keys, they often end up hurt, sometimes even dead. As long as they keep stealing them at night, at least no one's getting hurt."

"True. Losing a car is bad enough, but at least they're not physically hurt. I'm sure you'll solve it soon." She reached up to kiss his cheek. "You always do."

"Thank you for your confidence."

"You always seem to know what to do and how to solve your cases."

"I don't know about that. I always just do what feels right."

"Speaking of doing what feels right, I wanted to talk to you about something else. Christmas is coming up, and I wondered what your thoughts on that are."

"My thoughts on Christmas? I'm all for it," he said with a grin. "What in particular are you wondering about?"

"Well, this will be their first Christmas with us and I want it to be good. Do you have any idea what their holidays were like before, with their mother?"

"No, I don't, but I don't think it really matters. Their whole lives have changed, so whatever we do will be different from what they've done before. I have a feeling this Christmas will be the best Christmas they've ever had. It didn't sound like they ever had much. They may not even have gotten presents or celebrated. My biggest concern is that the holidays don't bring back memories and cause them to miss their mother."

"I've thought of that, too, although they don't really talk about her much. Maybe she wasn't much of a loving mother to them."

"Or maybe she worked a lot and didn't have much time with them."

"Possible. They haven't really expressed much sadness in not having her in their lives anymore."

"I've noticed that, too, which has been a little surprising. Whatever the situation was, she was still their mother, the only parent they knew. We have to be ready, in case the holidays should invoke some memories that make them miss her."

"Good point." After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she turned to him again. "Did your family have any Christmas traditions, something you looked forward to and did every year?"

"Well, yeah, I guess every family does, like putting a tree up and decorating it."

"How did you do that, and when? Was it a real tree? Did you have special ornaments you put on every year? Did you have any other traditions?"

He turned to face her, his eyebrows drawn together. "Where are you going with this?"

"Well, I've been thinking."

"Uh-oh."

She smacked his arm and frowned. "Seriously, Denny, this is important to me. I've always loved Christmas and I want our kids to, as well."

"As do I, and I think they will."

"But our family, like most families, had traditions, something I knew we would do every year as part of the holiday celebration. I always looked forward to them. They made the holidays more special to me because it was something not everyone did, but our family did."

"Ah," Denny said, his eyes lighting up in understanding. "Something special to our family will add a little something extra not only to the holiday, but to our family unit."

"Exactly."

"Okay, that sounds like a good idea. What did you have in mind?"

"That's why I asked what your family did. Last year, we

had just gotten married and sort of just floated through our first Christmas together. I hoped this year we could do some things your family did every year, as well as things my family did, and they would become special to us together, and eventually to our kids. Our plans kind of got rushed ahead a bit with the kids, but I'd still like to do that, find things that become part of our family Christmas celebration."

"I'm with you so far and like the idea. Let's start with the tree. Do you want a live tree or should we buy one?"

"I love live trees because the pine fragrance smells like Christmas, but since we found out both kids have some seasonal allergies, maybe we should buy an artificial one, just to be sure they're not sneezing and suffering with watering eyes and runny noses all holiday season."

"I agree. We'll take them shopping and let them help us pick out one we all like. What about ornaments?"

"Well, I have a couple ideas. First, I saw kits to buy that might be fun to do some evening or weekend. They're precut strips of red and green paper with sticky stuff on the ends so you can make red and green paper chains. Since you don't have to cut them or glue them, they should be pretty easy to make, even for little hands, and when they're done, we can put them on the tree."

"And they can proudly tell people they made them," Denny said, smiling. "I like that idea. What's your other one?"

"You know our family's tradition for ornaments, and I would love to do the same thing for our kids. From the time I was little, I remember going shopping every year for our ornament. We each got to pick out one that we liked and wanted on our tree. When we got home, we would put that ornament on the tree first. Then Mom got out the box of ornaments from past years, and we got to put all of ours on the tree. When we took the tree down every year, we would

take our individual ornaments off and put them in the box with our name on it, to save for next year."

I remember you told me about that. I like the idea."

"Those ornaments were ours to put on every year, then when we got married or moved out of the house, the box of special ornaments went with us so we could put them on our own tree. Taking them with us when we were grown didn't mean a lot to me as I was growing up, but when I moved out, I loved that I had them. Every year when I put my own tree up, I enjoy putting each one of my ornaments on the tree. I remember back to when I picked that one out and why. Years later, they bring back lots of good memories."

"I love that idea as well. We'll tell them what we plan to do, and when we buy the tree, we'll let them each pick out their first ornament as well. They'll be the first ones on our tree. Then you can put yours on."

"Or I can see if they want to help me put them on. If they ask about them, I'll tell them why I picked each one."

"Hearing those stories might be something they'll enjoy and remember and make them like picking out their own too. In fact, maybe we should get out your box of ornaments and look at them, and maybe you can tell a little story about a couple of them before we go shopping for theirs."

"Ooh, good idea. Thank you."

"Okay, I think we have the tree and ornaments covered."

"Yep. What did your family do at Christmas? Anything that was special to you?"

"Now that you mentioned it, yes, there was one thing I always looked forward to. Every year, Mom and Dad took us shopping to pick out a toy to donate. We'd pick out something we'd like, then after we bought it, we got to go someplace that was collecting toys to pass out to kids who didn't have much, and we got to drop it in the box. I always enjoyed

that. Dropping that toy in the box for someone else made me feel good."

"I love it. What a good way to teach kids it feels good to give to others. Can we do that?"

"Absolutely. Anything else you want to do?"

"Yes. Cookies were always big at our house."

"I remember that. Anytime someone came to visit you, your mother brought out a big plate of cookies. I was glad our families were friends because I used to love going to your house to visit at Christmastime. I know you love baking the cookies, which is convenient because I love eating them."

"I noticed that," she said with a laugh, before getting serious again. "Do you think Sawyer and Cheyenne would like to make cookies?"

"They might, though they're awfully young yet. One thing they might like doing is decorating some cutout cookies. Didn't you say your family always took a Saturday and spent the day baking, icing and decorating them?"

"We did. Mom mixed them up the night before and put them in the refrigerator so we could start rolling them out the next morning. Then once the first batch was baked, Dad helped us decorate them while Mom kept rolling the dough, cutting the cookies out and baking them. We had a blast. The kitchen was a mess by the time we were done and we had colored frosting and sprinkles on our clothes and usually some in our hair and on our faces, but we had fun. We made lots and lots of cutout cookies that day. Mom always put a few of them on every plate of cookies she offered to our guests, and we proudly told everyone we decorated them."

"We can ask if they want to spend a day doing that. I'll bet they'll have fun." He chuckled as he added, "In fact, I'll bet we'll all have fun."

"I hope so. I'm looking forward to Christmas this year."

"You always look forward to Christmas," he said as he leaned down to plant a soft kiss on her head.

"I know, and last year I was looking forward to our first Christmas together. Now here we are, planning things to do with our son and daughter. It still hardly seems real."

"I know what you mean. There have been so many changes for us in the last six months, but as worried as I was about it all, I think we're doing okay. You're a terrific mother."

"Do you think, really?" He looked down at her and could tell that was a question she wanted an answer to. She'd been worried, and he didn't blame her.

He squeezed her shoulders a bit and pulled her in closer to him as he leaned down to give her a kiss before answering. "Randi, I think you've done a marvelous job. They both adore you, and I'm sure they have better lives now than they did. I'm proud of how much love you've shown them."

"I do love them."

"I know; it shows. This is another example of that. You've obviously been thinking about the holiday season and how you can make it special for them, and I appreciate that. With these ideas, I feel sure this will be a Christmas they'll remember for a long time if not always. Just don't try to do too much for them and wear yourself down. The kids and I need you healthy over the holidays."

"I won't do too much. Now that we've talked about it, I know what to plan. I'll go ahead and get a couple of those kits to make the paper chains, and we'll check our schedules and plan a day to bake and decorate cookies. We'll also pick a day to go shopping for our tree and let them each pick out an ornament. It'll all be fun. Thanks for discussing this with me so I know what we're doing and that we're in agreement on it."

"Thank you for bringing it up. I agree, it's good to talk in

advance to be sure we agree on what we're doing. Now, I'd be very interested in going to bed early tonight." He waggled his eyebrows before adding, "Maybe we can find something to do that will help us sleep well. What do you think?"

She laughed but nodded her head. "I think I have just the thing. It always seems to wear us out, then we sleep like babies."

"Perfect. And since we've now talked about this plan to wear ourselves down and we seem to agree on what we're doing, I say let's get started." She laughed as he stood and she took the hand he extended to her. He surprised her when he leaned down and scooped her up into his arms and carried her into their bedroom.



OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, Randi spent some time going through her recipes for Christmas cookies. Denny was right, she did love baking them for the holiday season and always having a good supply at the ready for anyone who stopped in to visit. This year, she would see if Sawyer or Cheyenne wanted to help make them, but she had no intention of forcing them to help. If they didn't want to, she would make them herself, perhaps after they were in bed. Knowing time would be an issue this year, she pulled out the recipes that were quicker and easier.

She hadn't seen the kits to make the paper chains before this year but knew they should be easy and fun for the kids to do. She was afraid they might sell out fast, and not willing to risk that possibility, she stopped at the store between visits to clients the first chance she got and bought some.

As she picked them up, the packages beside them got her attention. It was a kit to make strings of popcorn and cranberries. She had considered doing that with them, but she

was afraid they would get hurt with the needle, especially sticking it through the cranberries. This kit was the perfect solution for that. The popcorn and cranberries looked very real, but were actually plastic, with precut holes, making the stringing easy. The needle had a very blunt end, which would be safe. Smiling, she picked up a couple packages of them as well.

She tucked them away in her closet for when they had their tree. On second thought, she wondered if maybe they should make them before they went to buy their tree. That would give them something fun to do one evening in anticipation of getting their tree, and when they did get it, they would have the pretty chains ready to drape onto it. As she gave it more thought, she remembered Denny's suggestion to tell the kids about her box of ornaments and how she and her sister got to pick out one ornament they wanted every year. She liked that idea.

Anticipation always helped make things even more special, so she wondered if maybe they could talk about that one evening and tell them they would all go shopping and pick out a tree that weekend. At the same time, they could each pick out their first ornament. Maybe the next evening, they could make the paper chains and popcorn strings so they would be ready for the tree when they got it in a couple days. If they did that, she was sure they would be excited by the time they went shopping that weekend. It would also make it exciting to put the tree up and start decorating it. Then she could tell them little stories about each of her ornaments as she pulled one out of her box and let them hang it on the tree. Thinking about that plan was getting her excited.

She was smiling again as she thought about it that evening when Denny got home from work, with Cheyenne and Sawyer in tow. All three of them greeted her with a hug, which brought out an even bigger smile. He leaned close to

her ear and whispered, "Remember what you were thinking about just now. Later tonight, I'm going to ask you what that big smile on your face was for."

She smiled at him as she gave both kids a hug. "How was school today?" They spent the next ten minutes listening to all the funny and important things that took place in their first grade classroom.

Sawyer told them about the new and exciting game they got to play in Phys-ed class, but Cheyenne turned quiet and Randi could tell there was something on her mind. After they talked a bit about the new game with Sawyer, Randi turned to Cheyenne. "Is something wrong, sweetheart? Didn't you like playing the new game in gym class today?"

"No, the game was fun," she assured them, "but Mrs. Abbot said tomorrow we're going to go around the room and everybody gets to say one thing we'd like to get for Christmas this year."

Randi met Denny's eyes, and they looked just as confused as she felt. "You don't want to do that?" Randi asked, taking her daughter's hand.

"I don't know what to say. I already got what I really wanted, but I can't say that anyway. The other kids would laugh at me or make fun of me if I did."

Denny was concerned now and stooped down in front of her so he was looking at her eye to eye. "What was it you really wanted, and why would the kids make fun of you if you told them what it was?"

"What I really wanted—what we both really wanted," she said, looking over to her brother, "was a mama and a daddy who wanted both of us so we could live together again. We got that, and you're the best mama and daddy ever. But the other kids have always had that, and they'd laugh at me again if I said that."

After another quick meeting of Denny and Randi's eyes, he asked, "What do you mean they'd laugh at you again?"

"One day last week before Thanksgiving, we had to say something we were thankful for. Sawyer said for the best mama and daddy ever, and I said that my brother and I get to live together." Denny had to blink a few times, and glancing up, he saw Randi losing her battle as a couple tears escaped her eyes. He turned back to Cheyenne and focused on her again. "And some of the kids laughed at you?"

"Yeah, at recess. They..." She stopped short, and Sawyer nudged her a bit at the same time. Denny wasn't sure what, but he could tell something had happened that the kids had chosen not to share with their parents.

Making a quick decision and hoping it was the right one, he pulled Randi down with him and both kids into his arms. "Time for a family hug," he said, pulling all four of them close. Randi did the same. He was happy to see both kids smiling as he pulled back. "Now, thank you for saying you have the best daddy and mama ever. We feel we have the two best kids ever. But would you please finish your story? What happened at recess?"

She got a sad look on her face but looked at her brother, then slowly shook her head and looked down. "I can't."

Denny watched as Sawyer's little hand snaked over to grab hers, and he knew whatever it was, it involved both of them. He knew they were extremely close and was glad, but he also knew something was up, and it had obviously upset his daughter and possibly his son as well. He wanted to help, but he couldn't if he didn't know what the problem was. "Cheyenne, you can tell me if you want to, and I wish you would. I'm asking you to, but it looks like you're choosing not to. I'm not sure why, but I don't like thinking you're hiding something from Mama and me."

Sawyer quickly looked up at Denny. "Daddy, don't get upset with her, please. It's my fault."

"What's your fault?"

"She's trying to protect me, but I won't let her get in trouble for it."

"But you protected me," she said, causing both Randi and Denny to look from one of them to the other.

"Okay, why don't you two tell us what you're talking about, and we'll see if we can sort it out?" Denny said. "Cheyenne, how did Sawyer protect you?"

She looked over at her brother, a sad look on her face. Sawyer spoke up before she had a chance. "Let me answer so she doesn't have to tattle on me. After we said what we were thankful for, I felt like she did about being thankful that we can live together again. But some of the kids didn't understand, and they were laughing at her and teasing her. Two of them even called her a ninny, saying, of course, she lives with her brother. A couple of them said they wish they didn't have to live with their sister or brother. One of the boys called her stupid, and I pushed him. The teacher outside saw it and I got in trouble for pushing him. That's why she didn't want to tell you, so I wouldn't get in trouble. But don't be mad at her, please. I'm sorry I pushed him and got in trouble but didn't tell you."

He was looking down, and Denny noticed both of them had tears in their eyes. He sighed, and looking over at Randi, he could tell she was having mixed feelings too. Again, hoping he was doing the right thing, he did what his heart was telling him to do. "Okay, let's talk about this for a minute. First of all, we're not angry, and you're not going to get in trouble this time."

Both kids looked up at him with hopeful eyes. "We're not?" Sawyer asked.

"No, not this time. We understand exactly what you

meant when you said you were thankful for being able to live with your brother, honey," Denny said, looking at Cheyenne. "The other kids have never had to worry about that, so they don't understand. They don't know what happened to you, or that you were separated for a short time before they found us and you came to live with us."

"And we're very glad you agreed to come live with us," Randi added, looking at both kids.

"You're not real mad at me?" Sawyer asked.

"No, we're not," they answered together.

"I'm not happy that you pushed a boy, but I understand why you did," Denny said. "There are better ways of dealing with someone who upsets you, and we'll talk about those ways in a minute. First, though, I want to tell both of you that we're proud of the way you look out for each other. Sawyer, I know you don't normally push or hit other kids, and the only reason you did in this case is because you were looking out for your sister. I'm proud of you for that." He turned to Cheyenne next. "And now I understand why you didn't want to tell me what had you upset; you were looking out for your brother. Again, I'm proud of you for that."

"We both are," Randi added.

"Although I understand why you didn't tell us when this happened and you got in trouble, Sawyer, I don't want that to happen again. If anything happens to either of you, I want you to tell us about it, even if you got in trouble for it. If it was something you shouldn't do, we'll talk about it. If you deserve to be punished, you will be, after we talk about it. I want to make sure you know why what you did was wrong, so it doesn't happen again. But just because you got in trouble for it at school doesn't mean we'll be upset."

"I thought you would be," Sawyer said. "I didn't want to tell you because I thought you would be mad and disappointed."

"We're not saying it's okay to push someone, but in this case, we understand why you did. Let's talk now about what you could have done instead of pushing him, okay?"

Both kids nodded, looking up at them. "There was a teacher outside who saw you push the boy," Denny said. "You could have taken your sister with you and gone over closer to her to play. If they were teasing her, they probably wouldn't have followed you. If they did, the teacher would have heard them."

"And they would have gotten in trouble instead of me," Sawyer said.

"Right," Denny said. "Sometimes if you just leave, walk away from them and ignore them, they stop. If not, you can always tell the teacher what they're doing."

"But isn't that tattling?" Cheyenne asked. "I thought you weren't supposed to tattle."

"This might be hard for you to understand, but there's a time that it's okay to tattle. If you're having a problem with someone, you should do what you can to avoid it. Ignore them if you can or walk away. But if you walk away from someone to try to avoid a problem and they follow you and keep teasing you, then you should tell your teacher. It's not okay for them to do that to you, and the teacher would want to know so she can stop it and have a talk with them."

"Okay," Sawyer said with a nod of understanding.

"But we want to know about anything like that," Denny continued. "Maybe we can give you an idea to try if it happens again. But if the same kid or kids keep teasing you, your mama and I might want to talk to your teacher about it. She can watch them a little closer and if they tease you again, she might catch them doing it and will stop it and talk to them."

"Then they'd get in trouble without us tattling," Cheyenne said, a proud look on her face.

"That's why it's important that you tell us about anything like this," Randi said.

"We will from now on," she said.

"We promise," Sawyer added.

"I'm glad to hear that," Denny said as he and Randi opened their arms to the two smaller members of their family.

After another good family hug, the kids were smiling, as were the new parents, until Cheyenne frowned again.

"What's wrong now, sweetheart?" Randi asked her.

"I still don't know what to say I want for Christmas."

Denny and Randi exchanged glances, both trying to hide a smile, when Sawyer surprised them. "It doesn't matter what you say, so just say a doll. Every girl wants a doll."

She looked at her brother with a serious expression. "It doesn't matter what I say?"

"No," he assured her. "It's not like it's a right or wrong answer. Kids like to say what they want, so Mrs. Abbot is letting each of us say one thing. Besides, she just said to tell us something you want. She didn't say you had to say the one thing you want most."

"You're right," she said after thinking about it a moment. "Okay, I'll say a doll. Thank you." She gave her brother a hug, which he returned. Afterward, they walked off, putting their backpacks on the hooks for them inside the door before running into their bedrooms.