

Boys' Night Out: Room at the Inn

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Rating: K+

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Author's Notes: Set in the Shadows-verse, sometime in their future. Written for the 2009 12_days_of_Clois Holiday challenge, prompt #44 Wrapping.

"Dad!" Jason Samuel Kent whined. "We can't go home yet. I haven't found a present for Mom." He and his father had spent the past three hours going through crowded pre-Christmas stores. Twice in that time Jason had been deposited on a building roof so his father could attend to an emergency as Superman. A sudden cold snap had taken the city by surprise. It was promising to be a white Christmas this year but the roads were icy and even the city transit was having trouble in the weather.

Luckily Superman didn't have problems like that - being able to fly had some big advantages. Jason was used to his father leaving to tend to problems. He always carried a book with him and a cell phone to call his mother in case the emergency was going to take more than a few minutes. It was routine.

But finding the perfect present was anything but routine.

"How about a book?" his father suggested.

Jason shook his head. They had a houseful of books. Even *he* had books he hadn't read yet.

"Earrings?"

Jason shook his head again. Earrings were what Daddy Richard had given Mom. She had a jewelry box full of earrings she hardly ever wore. "What did you get Grandma?" Jason asked, hoping to get an idea.

His dad chuckled. "I got her a new drill and bits. Her old one was worn out."

"I don't think Mom would like a drill for Christmas."

"I don't think she would either," his dad agreed as they wove their way hand-in-hand through the crowds.

Sacred Heart Church was ahead. Jason's dad was friends of the rector, Father Daniel Leone. Jason thought Father Daniel looked scary but he was also really nice. Father Daniel didn't talk to the little kids like they were stupid.

"Clark," Father Daniel called, hurrying over to them as soon as they were inside the church.

"Go wait over there," Clark told Jason. "This won't take too long."

Jason went and sat in one of the pews. In front of the sanctuary a group of children about Jason's age and dressed in simple tunics were rehearsing a play.

"We have no room," one of the bigger boys told a girl dressed up to look pregnant and the

boy with her. "But you can stay in the stable."

This was the part of the Christmas story Jason didn't like. He couldn't get his head around the idea that people could be so mean to a woman having a baby. *The stable?* He knew how drafty and cold his grandma's barn was in winter. Jason shivered in sympathy.

His mom told him it hadn't really been as bad as all that. The climate was warmer in Bethlehem than in Metropolis or Smallville. The little town would have been so crowded that people would have been sleeping in courtyards and alleys and anyway Jesus was probably born in April, not in December. And then she would go on about how no man in his right mind would force a nine-month pregnant woman on a four day hike plus the Romans liked orderliness and having the population of Judea all in a uproar for a census that would have involved only Roman male citizens made no sense.

When Mom got into one of her tirades Dad would nod understandingly and give her a bemused smile. "You left out the fact that the tree and the presents are all from pagan sources the Church adopted to keep the common folk happy," he would say. That's what Daddy Richard used to say, too.

"That's what I'm talking about," Mom would say. "It's all hype and marketing and greed and has been for God knows how long."

"Do you want me to take down the tree and get rid of all the gifts?" Dad asked.

"Hell no," Mom said. "But, I just wish for once we could..."

"Could what?" Dad asked.

"I wish we could do without the hypocrisy, greed and conspicuous consumption without looking like radical nutcases," Mom said.

Jason wasn't sure what she meant. But after she was done she got out the little nativity scene she'd had since she was a little girl and put it on the table. Jason felt sorry for the little ceramic baby Jesus because he had no blankets or crib or toys. And despite what Mom said, the stable still looked like a not very nice place to stay.

There was a cold draft as the church doors opened and closed. Jason looked back to see several people bundled up in dirty coats slide into the back pew - two grownups with two kids. Jason watched Father Stephan, one of Father Daniel's assistants, stride down the aisle toward them.

"Stephan," Father Daniel called, shaking his head at him. Father Stephan looked like he wanted to argue but turned away from the newcomers anyway. Curious, Jason watched his dad talking to Father Daniel. They didn't seem to be paying any attention to the family other than to acknowledge that they were there.

Jason slipped out of the pew and went over to them. "Hi. My name is Jason. What's your name?" Jason said, addressing the closer and larger of the two children.

"Johnny," the other said, bringing his head up out of his over-sized coat so Jason could see his face. The boy's nose was red and sore and he looked like he'd been crying. The boy indicated the other child. "This is my sister Krista and my mom and dad."

The adults nodded. Jason fought to keep from wrinkling his nose. His sense of smell had always been better than most people. These people smelled of stale sweat and fear.

"I know where there are some cookies," Jason offered. The boy glanced at his parents who nodded permission then he grabbed his sister's hand and followed Jason to the table with the cookies and juice for the kids in the play.

Jason poured juice for the two and they gulped it down greedily. Jason had a sudden suspicion that they hadn't had very much to eat that day. He could hear their stomachs

grumbling. He didn't say anything when they grabbed handfuls of cookies and stuffed them into their pockets.

The girl started sniffing.

"Why are you crying?" Jason asked.

Krista's lower lip trembled. "Mom and Dad said Santa wasn't coming this year."

Jason wanted to tell him it wasn't true but he remembered what his mom and dad said about interviewing people - never correct them, just keep them talking. "Why?" Jason asked.

"Because he won't be able to find us," Johnny said. "We don't know where we're going to be. There was no room at the family shelter so we have to keep moving. We saw the church was open..."

"You can spend the night here," Father Daniel said, coming over to them. "Tonight, at least, there's room at the inn."

Jason beckoned to the priest who crouched down to Jason's level. "I think they're hungry, too."

Father Daniel nodded and ruffled Jason's hair. "Your dad and I have it handled," the priest said.

Jason looked around for his father and spotted him talking with Johnny's parents. No doubt his dad would find some way to help Johnny's parents. Dad was an important journalist, not just Superman.

But that still left the problem of Santa Claus finding Johnny and Krista, not to mention a present for Mom.

"Jason, what are you doing?" Mom asked as Jason brought toys and books down from his room and dropped them on the living room table.

"I'm helping Santa Claus," Jason announced. He had found the Christmas wrap and was struggling to figure out how to put wrapping paper on a teddy bear. It was one that Grandma Ellen had given him and had simply sat on a shelf getting dusty. He figured Krista would like a teddy bear. For Johnny he'd chosen a toy truck. Dad didn't approve of guns and military toys even though Grandpa Sam always gave Jason toys like that. Jason didn't want to run the risk that Johnny's parents might not approve either.

After a few minutes Mom came over with boxes for the bear and the truck and helped him wrap them in silver paper. Dad helped with the red ribbon.

"You want to explain how you're helping Santa Claus?" Mom asked as they wrapped the books.

"Johnny and Krista don't have a place to live so Santa can't find them," Jason explained patiently. "But Superman knows where they are, and so do I."

"And whose idea was it to give away Jason's toys?" Mom asked. She sounded curious, not angry.

"Jason's," Dad said. "After all, Santa can't do everything, even with Superman's help. Sacred Heart has opened their community hall as a family shelter for the holidays," Dad went on. "With the bad weather all the others are full up. The father was an accountant for one of the firms that didn't survive the market melt-down. Couldn't find a job in his field, unemployment ran out, little girl got sick. Hospital wrote off the surgery but the family still had to pay for the outpatient visits. Things went from bad to worse - they lost everything and it's hard to go on a job interview when everything you own is in a grocery cart."

"Why do I have the feeling there's going to be an exposé in tomorrow's paper on the

failure of the city and state's social services 'safety net' that allowed these people to slip through and end up on the street?" Mom asked.

"And a human interest story about some of the families who have not been adequately served," Dad said. "Daniel is checking around the parish for someone who might need an accountant or has a place they can stay until they're back on their feet. And Superman is putting out a personal plea to the city to open their hearts and wallets to help out those who are less fortunate."

That's when Jason realized what the perfect present for his mom would be. Not earrings or books or even anything from a store. He would have to hurry to finish it in time for Christmas. He was going to build an inn for the little nativity family to stay in. And *his* inn would have room.