

# The Meaning of Family

By Taylor Lochland

It was almost seven in the evening when Julian parked the car in front of the split-level ranch house. “Here we are.”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath, feeling more than a little nervous. I hadn’t met any of Julian’s family, and we about to stay with his aunt for an entire week. I’d suggested getting a hotel room, but Julian, being a live-in hotel owner, wanted to stay in a house for once. When I didn’t move or say anything else, I felt him touch my knee.

“You okay, Felix?”

“I just have a few ‘meeting the family’ jitters. Sounds like this aunt of yours is practically your mother.”

“She is, but it’ll be okay. She already knows about you and is looking forward to meeting you.”

“Yeah.” I put my hand on the door latch, but didn’t open it. “Is it too late to go back? I feel guilty about not being there for Jack on Christmas.”

“It looked like he might get to spend the day with Charlie, so you probably don’t need to worry. Though, it’s sweet of you to think of him.” Julian leaned across the seat and gently kissed my cheek. “Let’s get it over with. Someone like you should be used to meeting new people.” A second after the words left his mouth, his eyes widened. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean...”

I used to be a prostitute—in fact, that was how I met him—so yes, I was used to meeting new people. “It’s okay.” However, I wasn’t used to meeting family. Julian was the first man I’d been seriously involved with for years. “This is a lot different. What’s she going to think if she finds out what I was?”

“She won’t find out unless you tell her. She knows you’re a college student.”

“What if she asks about what I did before that? Or about how we met?”

“We’ll make something up and change the subject.”

I stared at him for a moment in disbelief. “How can you be so calm? I figured you’d be the nervous one here.”

“I’m the one who knows my Aunt Grace. And even if she doesn’t accept you for some strange reason, it’s not like I’m going to dump you over it.” He reached over and brushed my cheek. “These last several months have been the happiest months I’ve ever had, and I’m not about to throw it all away. The approval of my family is important to me, sure, but not as important as you.”

I smiled, calmed by his words and his touch. “All right. Let’s go in.”

“I was starting to wonder if you boys were going to get out of that car or if you were going to turn around and leave without even saying hello.” A short woman with salt-and-pepper hair and painted lips held the door open for us as we dragged ourselves and our suitcases inside.

“Hi, Aunt Grace.” Julian kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks for having us.”

“Thanks for coming. I’m glad to get you out of that old hotel for a few days. After spending all those years there while your Uncle Frank was still alive, I know how hard it is to take a vacation.” She turned to me with a pleasant smile that reminded me of Julian’s. “You must be Felix.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I extended a hand, but she waved it off and pulled me into a hug.

“It’s good to finally meet you, and feel free to call me Aunt Grace. Or just Grace. No need to be formal.”

“Okay... Aunt Grace.”

“You can let him go now.” The amusement was obvious in Julian’s voice.

“Sorry. It’s not very often I get to hug attractive young men anymore. Well, those who aren’t related to me, that is.” She released me and took a step back, her eyes appraising my appearance. “You’re much better-looking than Julian’s previous boyfriends. I approve.”

I laughed. At least the aunt was friendly enough and clearly didn’t have a problem with our relationship. This visit might not be so bad after all.

The next several days passed without incident. Grace still had to work the few days before Christmas, so Julian and I had the house mostly to ourselves. The two of us spent most of the time relaxing and enjoying each other’s company without the responsibility of taking care of the hotel over our heads. Even though I knew Julian enjoyed his work, he was definitely more laid-back than normal without that weight on his shoulders, and seeing him like that put me at ease.

Questions about my past had only come up a couple times in conversation with Grace, but I think she could tell I was uncomfortable with the subject and tactfully changed topics when I didn’t offer any information.

Grace's two children—Sam, who was in college, and Rick, who was in the Army—were due to arrive on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and again, Grace had to work. The tree and lights still weren't up in the house, so Julian and I took it upon ourselves to take care of that. I missed out on decorating the hotel since the rest of the staff did it one day while I was in class, and being able to share the experience with Julian, and only Julian, made me feel even more like part of a couple.

We'd just finished putting the extra lights and ornaments back in the basement when the side door opened and a young man's voice called out, "Anyone home?"

"We're down here, Sam," Julian answered.

"Hey!" There was what sounded like the clunk of a suitcase, and then a much younger and male version of Grace flew down the stairs and went straight for Julian. "Good to see you, you old fart."

*Old fart?* I bit my lower lip to keep myself from snickering and ended up snorting instead.

Sam looked up at me over Julian's shoulder. "You're the boyfriend?"

Before I could answer, Julian gently disentangled himself from the boy, pushed his glasses back into place, and nodded in my direction. "Sam, this is Felix. Felix, this is my cousin."

"Hi Sam."

The door opened again, and I heard a woman's exclamation of delight. "Thank you for putting up the tree, you guys!"

"You're welcome!" Julian and I answered in unison.

Sam gave me a look. "So, you're screwing my cousin, huh?"

"SAM!" Grace came down the stairs sighing and shaking her head. "I apologize for my son, Felix. I tried to give him decent manners. Obviously, I failed, since not only was he rude to you, but he's not even saying hello to his mother after not seeing her for three months."

"Sorry, Mom." Sam gave his mother a quick hug, and turned his attention back to me. "So, what do you do, Felix?"

That seemed to be what everyone wanted to know, and it was nice to be able to answer the question honestly and without shame. "I'm a college student."

"Awesome. So am I. You a grad student?"

"No. I'm just a freshman."

“No way.” Sam’s eyes widened. “I’m a freshman too. Don’t tell me Julian’s a cradle-robber.”

*Old fart and cradle-robber.* I heard Julian make an offended sound, but I couldn’t hold back the laugh this time. “He’s not. I’m younger than him, but only by six years. I’m twenty-nine.”

“Twenty-nine and you’re only a freshman?”

“Yeah. I’m one of those people who decided to... um... I had other things going on in my life before now.” Uh-oh. I sobered quickly. We were getting close to dangerous territory.

“Like what?”

“Sam, don’t be so nosy,” Grace said.

“What? I was just asking.” Sam’s previously excited and curious expression turned to one of annoyance.

Julian put a hand on my shoulder. “Another time, Sam. We still need to clean up before we go pick up Rick from the airport. You’re coming, right?”

Sam sighed. “That’s a dumb question. Of course I am. Get me when you’re ready to go.” He walked past us and headed up the stairs without looking back.

Grace rubbed at her forehead as if to fight off an impending headache.

The airport was crowded with holiday travelers and their families, but the man in fatigues by the baggage claim was easy to spot. I thought he looked vaguely familiar. Maybe I’d seen him around the hotel before Julian and I became a couple.

Sam and Grace hurried up to him and Julian followed closely behind, but I hung back, not wanting to intrude on their reunion.

There were the expected smiles and hugs between older brother and younger brother, and mother and son. However, when Julian approached, I noticed he looked a bit tentative as he extended a hand.

Rick gave the hand a couple shakes before pulling Julian into a hug as well, and Julian looked pleasantly surprised as he hugged him back. When they pulled away from each other, Julian looked back and gestured for me to join them.

He put his arm around my shoulders when I caught up. “Rick, this is my partner, Felix.”

Rick's smile faded and he looked uncomfortable as he shook my hand. I wondered why at first, thinking maybe he was homophobic. However, when he released my hand and stepped back, I realized why he looked familiar. He used to be one of my johns.

Rick was one of the many clients I saw only a few times, and it had been at least a year since our last appointment, if not longer.

Fortunately, I didn't run into former clients very often, but when I did, it usually made for an uncomfortable situation. With Rick being family of my partner—and someone in the military and subject to that whole 'don't ask, don't tell' bullshit—this had the makings of a disaster. I started thinking about pretending to be sick so Julian and I would have an excuse to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Then I remembered how much Julian wanted to spend Christmas with his family, so I decided to suck it up and hope for the best.

I didn't say anything on the drive back to Grace's house, not that it mattered. I wouldn't have been able to get a word in edgewise over Sam's chattering away about his college classes.

Neither Rick nor I said much to each other the rest of the evening, but with the immediate family busy catching up, I didn't think anyone noticed. However, when I went to bed early to reduce the risk of an incident, Julian soon joined me.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at me with a concerned expression on his face. "What's going on with you and Rick? Did he say something to you?"

"No, he didn't. Why do you ask?"

"Well, he's the one in the family who had the most trouble with my sexuality."

Interesting how so many people who have trouble with the sexuality of others are gay or bi themselves. Hell, at least half of my clients had fit into that group. "So you think he doesn't like actually seeing you with somebody?"

"He seemed okay with my last boyfriend, so I thought he'd gotten over it." Julian took off his glasses and set them on the end table. "Apparently, he hasn't. Or maybe being in the Army made him revert back to his old opinions."

I was quiet as I mentally debated whether to say anything. Julian might be creeped out to find out I'd serviced his cousin. Then again, he never seemed to have a problem with anything from my past, as long as it was in the past. I also wasn't sure if I wanted to betray Rick's secret,

but doing so would probably be better for him than letting Julian think he was a homophobe. What it came down to was the fact that I didn't want to keep any secrets from Julian. Besides, I knew Julian wouldn't out him to the rest of the family. "That's not it."

"Oh?" Julian pulled his sweater off over his head and started to unbutton his shirt. "Talk to me."

I sat up a little and helped him out of the rest of his clothes, then gently pulled on his arm to get him to lie down with me. "Promise you won't tell him I told you?"

"Tell me wha... "A look of realization dawned on his face. "You're kidding. *Rick*?"

"Not kidding." I ran my finger along the birthmark that covered most of Julian's chest. "You're not creeped out?"

He put a hand over mine and laced our fingers together. "Not really. I think I'm more surprised to hear that Rick has those tendencies."

"Well, he stopped calling me some time ago, so maybe he was just experimenting with me. A lot of guys do."

"Maybe. Though he probably stopped calling because he got deployed." Julian sighed. "It's none of my business though."

"Yeah." I squeezed his hand and pressed my lips to his, slipping my tongue into his mouth to savor his familiar taste. I broke the kiss before we ended up getting ourselves too excited. "At the very least, he won't be doing anything with me ever again."

"I hope not." Julian chuckled softly, let go of my hand, and wrapped his arms around me. "Goodnight, Felix."

"Goodnight, baby."

Just before he turned off the light, I saw his cheeks turn pink, as they always did when I called him that.

Christmas Eve dinner was going to be huge. Several more aunts, uncles, cousins, and their kids were supposed to be coming over. The thought of fitting so many people into the house boggled my mind, but Julian assured me it they'd managed it before, so they could manage it again.

When evening rolled around and everyone started to show up, I was nervous at first. There was no way I'd remember everyone's name, and there was bound to be someone who had

a problem with my relationship with Julian. However, as the faces and names trickled by, I realized there was nothing to worry about. Several people even commented on how happy they were that Julian found someone. Only a few looked like they were uncomfortable, but at least they were civil.

Rick wouldn't look at me. Sam, on the other hand, stared at me often, and I wondered if Rick had told him anything. I made it a point to give them a wide berth, and Rick was clearly doing the same to me.

While everyone was sitting at the table eating dinner, one aunt—Martha, I think—asked me why I wasn't with my own family. I explained that my family and I didn't speak to or see each other very much, and I got several looks of sympathy and knowing glances. It made me feel good that these people I'd just met seemed to care, however, stirring up the memories always brought me down. My parents made my life a living hell when I came out to them, and my friend Jack's parents were even worse. I don't know what would have happened if Jack and I hadn't had each other. *I wonder how he's spending his Christmas Eve.*

“What's the matter, Felix?” Grace asked as she piled more ham and mashed potatoes on my plate.

“I was just wondering how my friend's doing right now. He doesn't have any family to spend the day with, either.”

“You should have brought him. I hate to think of somebody spending Christmas alone.”

“We'll keep it in mind for next year.” Julian answered for me. “But he might not be alone.”

“I hope he's not.”

Later, when dinner was over and everyone was either sitting around talking in the kitchen, watching *A Christmas Story* in the living room, or playing ping-pong in the basement, I went looking for Grace to see if she wanted help cleaning up. I knew she'd probably send me away, but I thought I should at least offer. I could hear her voice coming from Sam's bedroom, so I headed in that direction. I froze when I got close enough to make out some of the conversation and heard my name.

“I want to know why you're being a jerk to Felix.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you avoid him, and I’m not the only one. Your cousin Tracy and your Uncle Bob noticed it too. Felix has been in my house since Saturday, and I can tell you he’s a nice young man.”

“I’m not saying he’s not nice, Mom.” Rick sighed. “He just makes me uncomfortable.”

“*You’re* probably making *him* uncomfortable by acting like he has the plague. You get along fine with Julian now, so I thought you were over that ‘gay people have cooties’ stuff. I *hoped* you were over it.”

“Shit, Mom, that’s not it either.” It was Sam’s voice.

“Watch your language!”

There was an exasperated sound. “You really want to know what the problem is?” A brief pause. “The problem is... Felix is a hooker!”

That answered my question about whether Rick had said anything to Sam. The bedroom got quiet, the heads within earshot turned in my direction, and the sounds of murmurs filled the area and started to spread through the house. *Fuck*. I put a hand over my face and wished for a hole to open up beneath me. Or at least for some of the kids to trample me to death. It seemed like the world had stopped, and the silence in the bedroom was about to smother me. Finally, Grace spoke.

“What did I tell you about telling lies about other people?”

Suddenly, Julian was beside me wrapping his arm protectively around my waist. Apparently, the whispers had reached him.

I leaned against him, hating that my secret was out but gaining strength from his closeness.

“It’s not a lie!” It was Sam again. “He might be giving Julian diseases.”

Julian pulled away from me, clenched his fists, and marched into the room, looking as angry as I’d ever seen him. I followed him.

Grace stared at Sam with narrowed eyes. “I want to know how you know he’s a hooker. For all I know, you’re making this up.”

“Rick told me he... “ Sam’s voice trailed off. “I mean... uh... “

“Felix doesn’t have any diseases,” Julian said, but nobody seemed to hear him. Rick and Grace were both glaring at Sam, who seemed especially interested in the floor.

I couldn't stand it. It was Christmas Eve, and this family was fighting because of me. Even worse, somebody who wasn't ready to be outed was about to be outed, and again, because of me. I took a breath. "*Former* hooker. I don't do it anymore." My heart pounded, but it calmed down when Julian's hand squeezed my shoulder.

Rick looked at Julian. "Did you know about him?"

"I did. It's okay. It's in his past."

Grace was silent for a long moment and appeared to process what she'd heard. Finally, she smiled. "You're right, Julian. It's in his past. We all have things about our pasts we aren't proud of." She turned her attention to me. "You seem to be doing a good job of putting it behind you, dear. That's the important thing." Then she looked at Rick and Sam out of the corner of her eye. "I still want to know how my sons knew about it. I seriously doubt they heard it from either of you."

"Well, Mom..." Rick started.

I cut him off. "It was embarrassing, really. It happened about two years ago, I think. I was supposed to meet a client in the bar across the street from Julian's hotel. Rick came in and he fit the description, so I walked up to him and started flirting and touching... all without making sure I had the right guy! I don't know what the hell I was thinking." I paused and took a breath. "Anyway, I saw he was uncomfortable, and I assumed it was because he didn't want to be in a public place with me. Just when I was about to suggest going somewhere private, the actual client came in, recognized me from my photo, and pulled me away. I guess Rick was too nice to tell me to get lost."

"And you two recognized each other after all that time?" Grace shook her head.

I shrugged. "You can't forget the face when something like that happens."

Julian and I retreated to the guest room. Neither one of us felt like dealing with the stares and questions that would be sure to come if we rejoined the party. Grace was supportive and said she'd make sure nobody bothered us.

I turned the lock on the door, stripped down to my boxers, and plopped down on the bed. "Whew."

“That was a nice thing you did.” Julian joined me on the bed and leaned against the headboard. “Though, I’m not sure if I like the thought of you lying to my aunt,” he added with a chuckle.

I scooted over and rested my head in his lap. “It’s not really a lie. That’s actually how I met Rick. I just left out the fact that after I left, he gave his phone number to the bartender and told him to give it to me.”

Julian raised an eyebrow. “Clever.”

“Why are you so surprised?”

“I’m not.” He ran his fingers through my hair, sending tingles through my scalp. “More like amused.”

“That’s better.”

He reached over to the nightstand, opened a drawer, and I heard him fishing something out. “I think I’d like to give you your Christmas present now, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind.”

He placed an envelope in my hand. “Merry Christmas. I’m afraid it’s not very romantic.”

I ripped open the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. It was a receipt showing my tuition had been paid in full for the winter semester. “Julian... you didn’t have to do this.”

“I didn’t want you to have to drain your savings or go into debt to pay for your classes.”

“Thank you, Julian. You’re right, it’s not very romantic, but it’s valuable. Very much so.” I sat up, straddled his lap, and kissed him hard. “I’ll make sure to get straight A’s. Just for you.”

“Do it for yourself, too.”

“I know, I know. Your turn now.” I climbed down off the bed, opened my suitcase, and pulled out two wrapped packages. I handed him the small one first.

He opened it, pulled out the figurines and smiled. “Apollo and Hyacinth.” Julian was a Greek mythology nut and the way he decorated the hotel showed it. “I’d have gotten you big statues of them if you didn’t already have them. Took me forever to find the portable versions though.”

“Thank you, Felix. I love them.”

I handed him the other package. “I admit, I feel a little weird about this one.”

He opened it, looked inside the box, and laughed. “That’s what happened to it! I almost went crazy looking for it not too long ago.” When we first got together, Julian wanted to draw

me, and I let him. I knew how much he loved the drawing, so I snuck it out of his drawer one day and had it matted and framed.

“I felt like Narcissus doing that.”

“Don’t feel that way. It’s perfect.” Julian reached for my hand and pulled me back into his lap.

“Just don’t hang it up in any public areas. I don’t want all the hotel guests to see that much of me. My parts are for your eyes only now.”

“I’m glad.” He wrapped his arms around me and held me close, and the rest of the world fell away for the night.

What was left of the visit went smoothly. We spent Christmas day relaxing—watching old movies, playing board games, drinking coffee, and eating cookies. Both Rick and Sam seemed more comfortable around me, and Rick even shot me looks of gratitude when nobody was watching. Without the worry about anybody finding out about my past, I was more comfortable too. It was my first time spending Christmas with a family in over ten years, and it was nice, even though I felt a twinge of guilt whenever I thought about previous Christmases with Jack. I hoped he wasn’t alone.

We had to get back to the hotel the next day, and even though I was finally feeling like part of the family, I was anxious to go home. As we packed our suitcases, Julian touched my hand.

“I’m glad you came. I told you Aunt Grace would like you, no matter what.”

I looked up at him with a smile. “She’s a pretty awesome lady. You’re lucky to have her.”

“You have her now, too, you know.”

I felt my smile broaden. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

We loaded up the car and went back inside to say our goodbyes. Sam and Rick both shook my hand and told me they hoped to see me again, and Grace gave me huge hug and kissed my cheek.

“Take a look at the photo wall on your way out,” she whispered as she pulled away.

I did, and laughed when I saw my own face next to Julian's amongst the framed family pictures. It was a goofy picture she'd taken the night we arrived—Julian and I were looking at each other and laughing about something, I don't remember what. "I forgot you took that."

"I'd like a professional picture of you two soon, but that one will do for now."

"Now we know what to get you for Christmas next year," Julian said, grinning and almost looking like he was about to cry from joy. He could be a sap sometimes.

"Make it for Mother's Day. I don't want to wait a whole year." Grace put an arm around my shoulder. "You're part of the family now, Felix. Whether or not you like it."

"I like it." I liked it a lot.

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Thank you for reading *The Meaning of Family*. I hope you enjoyed it. If this is the first time you've met Felix and Julian, you can read about how they met in *The Meaning of Perfection*, which is part of the anthology, *Sindustry*, vol. 2. They also appear as side characters in the novella, *Better Than Money*, which tells the story of their friend Jack's holiday. Both books are published by Dreamspinner Press. If you've already read them, thank you!

You can find out more about those stories (and my other published works), at my website:

<http://taylorlochland.com>

Have a great 2010!

-Taylor