

USA Today Bestselling Author

KIMBERLY RAE JORDAN

a Star in the Sky



CHRISTMAS
— IN —
SERENITY POINT

A Star in the Sky

Christmas in Serenity Point

Book 3

by

KIMBERLY RAE
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Cover design by Evelyne Labelle @ [Carpe Librum Book Design](#)

ISBN-13: 978-1-988409-68-9



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*When they saw the star,
they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.*

Matthew 2:10

CHAPTER ONE

Roman Wright stared at the large, burnished metal bell that hung from a similarly colored wall mount. When he'd started this journey, ringing a bell hadn't seemed important. However, each time he'd walked into the clinic, he'd seen it.

Over time, he'd heard others ring the bell, and gradually, it had become a focus for him. A light at the end of the tunnel that wasn't an oncoming train.

Now, as the bell waited for him to grasp the cord and ring it, Roman understood from personal experience what it represented. He'd gone through so much in the past year. More than he could ever have imagined when he'd first received the diagnosis.

He'd been brought low, physically and mentally, and the battle to rise again and accept that his life had changed yet again had been beyond difficult. However, he'd learned many things from this new direction, just as he had from the last time his life had been redirected.

After a hard fought battle, he was finally there and ready to proclaim victory over the disease that had threatened to rob him of life.

“Congratulations, Roman.”

He looked away from the bell to the woman at his side. She had become a familiar face throughout his treatments. Of all the medical professionals who had worked with him, she was his favorite. That was probably because her gentle, caring nature reminded him of his mom, and she'd given him a

glimpse of what his mom might have been like at that age. Had she survived.

“Thank you, Nancy.” He gave her a smile that felt weary when compared to her beaming one. But she’d been like that all through his time there. Upbeat. Encouraging. Kind.

“Ready to ring the bell?”

It was a rite of passage. One that he could now claim as his own. “Ready.”

Reaching out, he gripped the thick, rough rope attached to the clapper and gave it a firm tug. The vibration swept into his fingers even as the clang of the bell filled the space where people had gathered to celebrate this moment with him.

He let go of the rope, then turned to thank the people who had been with him through the second worst time in his life.

“I’ll be praying for you,” Nancy said with a gentle smile as she took his hand in both of hers. “Be sure to let us know how you get on.”

“I’ll send a picture once I’ve got my hair back.”

“Hair or no hair, I just hope to see a smile.”

“Thank you for everything.”

“I’d say it was just my job, but your care became more than that.” Her eyes shone with moisture. “I try not to get too close to my patients, but it was like I didn’t have a choice with you.”

“I am grateful for that, as your support helped me in more ways than you will ever know.”

Even though he’d gotten close to her, she still didn’t know everything about him. She’d probed a bit when it became clear that he was at the clinic on his own, with no family checking in on him, eventually backing off when he volunteered no information about his personal life.

With a final hug for the woman, Roman exited the clinic through large sliding glass doors. He’d be leaving the clinic the same way he’d arrived. Alone. A black car with shaded

windows waited for him, its destination being the airport where a private plane would finally take him home.

He glanced back one last time, committing to memory the place that held pain and triumph for him, and fervently hoping he never had to return.

When he'd first been diagnosed, the doctors had told him that his cancer was curable, but there had always been a sliver of doubt in his mind. And when there had been unexpected complications, he'd taken steps to get his estate in order.

But now he was returning to his property in Wyoming. Healed... in body, if not in spirit.

By the time he got to his house, Roman was exhausted. The treatment had worn him out, and he hadn't, as of yet, regained his previous level of health. The doctors had assured him that would come in time.

"Welcome home, Roman." His property manager greeted him with a friendly smile as Roman disembarked from the plane at a small private airport not far from his ranch.

"Thank you, Davis." He shook hands with the middle-aged man. "It's good to be home."

"Well, go get in the car. I'll take care of your bags. Mila is anxious to see you, and she's made you your favorite meal."

Roman wasn't terribly hungry. His appetite had definitely dwindled over the months he'd been fighting his cancer. However, for Mila, he'd eat.

Normally, he'd carry his own bags, but now he just didn't have the strength. Instead, he climbed into the SUV and waited for Davis to drive him home.

A short time later, he climbed the steps to the door of the place he'd called home for almost a decade. He'd missed a lot over the past year.

"Roman!" Mila came toward him with her arms spread wide. Like her husband, she was middle-aged, her dark hair streaked with more gray than he remembered.

He allowed himself to be wrapped up in a tight hug. “It’s good to see you again, Mila.”

She stepped back and smiled at him, though he could see that it was tremulous. He hadn’t wanted to worry this dear couple, but clearly, he had.

“I’ve researched the best food to help you regain your health,” Mila said as she took his arm and guided him over to the kitchen. “Though I’ll still make your favorites. Comfort food is good for the soul, right?”

Roman sank down into the booth of the breakfast nook, watching as Mila bustled around the large, airy kitchen. “You don’t have to do anything special.”

“Oh, yes, I do,” she said as she shot him a reproving look. “It will taste good though, don’t you worry.”

What he ate was the least of his worries, but he knew better than to get between Mila and her need to cook for people.

Tension he hadn’t even realized he was holding in his body bled out of him as he sat in the familiar environment of his kitchen. He stared out the large window beside the breakfast nook, taking in the gunmetal gray of the sky as the day moved toward twilight.

Snow was probably in the near future. That wasn’t unexpected, since it was almost the end of November. There was a chill in the air that was definitely different from the warmth he’d left behind in Texas.

Later, with his belly full, Roman sat with Davis in the office, talking about what had been going on recently at the ranch. It wasn’t a working ranch. When Roman had purchased the spread, all he’d wanted was a spacious expanse of land where he could live, far from the busy press of life.

After hiring Davis and Mila, Roman had allowed Davis to incorporate the boarding and training of horses at the property. He wasn’t overly passionate about horses himself, but Davis certainly was.

While they chatted, Mila had insisted on unpacking Roman’s things. Normally, he would have done it himself, but

his energy levels were flagging badly. Which was why he hadn't protested her doing it for him.

It was barely eight o'clock when he dragged himself off to his room, and he had no desire to do anything but fall into bed. So that was what he did.

When he woke next, it took Roman a few minutes to orientate himself. To realize that he was back home and no longer in the small, but luxurious, apartment provided for him on the grounds of the cancer clinic.

Home meant he'd survived.

Before the diagnosis, his life had already been isolated by his choice. Aside from his business partner, and Davis and Mila, he'd rarely spent time with anyone. He had plenty of interactions over the phone or via video calls, but that had all been business.

Beneath the thick blankets on his bed, Roman shifted to stare out the large window at the still dark sky. No moonlight spilled through the window, however, so perhaps the clouds from the night before lingered.

In the quiet of the night, his thoughts shifted to his family. The one he hadn't seen in almost a year.

Facing his mortality following his diagnosis had done what nothing else had been able to do. Instead of just keeping tabs on his sisters from a distance, he'd needed to see them.

He hadn't told them about his diagnosis. And as he'd undergone treatment, he'd kept in contact strictly through emails and phone calls. Though Jocelyn had tried to get him to do video chats, he'd managed to avoid them. He hadn't wanted her to see the toll the cancer treatment was taking on him, especially once he'd learned she was pregnant.

Roman reached out and snagged his phone from the wireless charger it sat on, then logged into the email address he'd had since he was a teenager. He'd stopped using it when he left Serenity Point, choosing to set up a new email for his new life, though he'd checked it periodically,

Jocelyn had continued to use it to send him regular emails over the years. Because he didn't have the account forwarded to any of his other email addresses, he never knew if an email was waiting for him. Managing it that way meant he only logged in when he felt able to handle reading a message from his sister.

Over the years, she'd written to him frequently, sharing all about her life. Much of what she shared, he already knew, because he kept track of her and Zoe. Even though he hadn't been physically present in their lives, he'd needed to keep a watchful eye on his sisters.

Even after reconnecting the previous Christmas, Jocelyn had continued to send him emails filled with lots of details. In addition to the chatty emails were a plethora of pictures. It had been a week or so since her last email, so Roman hoped there'd be at least one waiting for him.

Sure enough, there was an unread message waiting for him in his inbox.

Dearest Roman ~ I hope you're doing well. I haven't mentioned this before, but over the last few months, you've been on my mind more than ever. Mom used to say that if someone comes to mind, take a moment to pray for them, so I've been doing just that. I don't know if you've had a particular need, but just know that you're never far from my thoughts.

Roman blew out a breath, blinking back the sudden presence of moisture in his eyes.

Will you please consider coming home for Thanksgiving and Christmas? I know I ask you this every year, but this year, in particular, I feel the need to have us all together once again. I had hoped that after being together last year, you'd be more present in our lives. I understand you have a life separate from us here in Serenity, but I'd so love to see you again, and Thanksgiving seems like the perfect time for us to reconnect.

Plus, don't you want to see me pregnant? I'm HUGE. Like seriously HUGE. Pictures don't do my belly justice.

Anyway, please come for Thanksgiving. We'd so love to see you again.

Much love!

Attached to the email was a raft of photos, including a couple of Jocelyn showing off her bump with her husband, Darius, at her side, his hand covering hers on her belly.

He was glad that he'd been able to make it to her wedding. Seeing her and Zoe so happy and in love with good men had done wonders for his own heart. It had left him satisfied that if the cancer treatment didn't work, they would be well taken care of and loved by the men in their lives.

Though he enjoyed seeing pictures of his sisters and their lives, Roman always hoped to catch a glimpse of someone else in the photos.

Jocelyn had first mentioned a woman named Rebecca a year or so before she'd met Darius. She'd vented a few times about the awful relationship Rebecca was in. And when the man had abandoned her friend, she'd been relieved, though it had left the woman and her son in a challenging situation.

Roman had done a background search at that time, just wanting to make sure she wasn't someone who would take advantage of Jocelyn. She'd had an interesting background, but nothing alarming.

When he'd met Rebecca the previous Christmas, Roman had found her to be caring and friendly. His curiosity about the woman had only grown, and her son had been a joy to be around, as had Jocelyn's son, Colby. Roman hadn't really thought much about having kids himself—and that possibility was in question now following the cancer and treatments he'd undergone—but he'd enjoyed being around the boys.

Over the past year, he'd had some interactions with Rebecca—mainly regarding the gifts Roman had sent her son, Aaron—and Roman enjoyed every update Jocelyn gave about the woman and her son. The pictures of them she included with her emails were always a bright spot.

Thankfully, she did not disappoint with the pictures she'd included with her most recent email. Rebecca and Aaron featured in several, and Roman couldn't help but linger over them. He felt like he knew her well, thanks, in part, to Jocelyn sharing so much about the mother and son.

About four months ago, Jocelyn had briefly mentioned that Rebecca was having some health issues, and that she and Aaron had moved in with them. She didn't give any more details, just said she was glad that they were able to help her out. And it seemed that Rebecca was still living with them.

After what he'd just gone through, Roman's thoughts had turned more and more toward family. And the pull to see them again was stronger than it had ever been before.

He had a week to figure out if he could mentally handle a trip back to Serenity Point. And a week to regain some of his health so he didn't show up at Jocelyn's door looking like death warmed over.

As proof of his body's continuing exhaustion, the hand holding the phone lowered to the bed, and he was dragged back down into sleep.

The week passed quickly, and though Roman wasn't feeling anywhere close to normal, he still made the decision to go to Serenity.

"I hope you have a wonderful time with your family," Mila said as she gave Roman a hug. "Let us know that you've arrived safely."

"I will. I promise."

"And don't skip any meals."

Roman figured that was what she was most worried about now that she wouldn't be able to harass him to eat for a few days. "I'll do my best to eat three squares a day."

"Maybe I should talk to your sister," she murmured. "To let her know what I've been feeding you."

“Send me an email with all the info,” Roman said. “And I’ll do my best to follow it.”

Mila nodded. “I’m sorry. I just worry.”

“And I appreciate it more than you know.”

“I’m glad you’re going to your family, though.” She patted his arm. “That’s important, I think.”

“Let him go, Mila love,” Davis said. “We need to be on our way.”

After being drawn in for one more hug from Mila, Roman followed Davis out to the waiting SUV. There was a chilly bite in the air, and he was glad for the warmth of his thick jacket. It seemed like he felt the cold more now than he used to.

He sat in the front with Davis, angling the vents toward him as the man drove away from the large house. They were going to the same small airport he’d flown into six days earlier, and he’d be boarding a private flight to Coeur d’Alene, where he’d rent a car for the drive north to Serenity Point.

Whether it was wise or not, he’d decided not to let Jocelyn know he was on his way. His rationale for that decision had been that he wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t back out at the last minute. He didn’t want to get her hopes up and then disappoint her if he didn’t show up.

She’d let him know that there was a room ready for him whenever he came to Serenity, so he hoped that was true, even if he showed up out of the blue.

His stomach was a mess of nerves, and he’d barely been able to eat that morning, much to Mila’s dismay. She’d tucked an insulated mug filled with a smoothie concoction that tasted better than he would have thought it would, into his bag. Thankfully, because he was flying on a private plane, he didn’t have to worry about the restrictions commercial airlines had on liquids.

Though he knew Jocelyn would be happy to see him, Roman wasn’t looking forward to having to rehash his past year. And there was pretty much zero chance she wouldn’t question him about the drastic change in his appearance.

His hair, which he preferred to wear down to his shoulders, was long gone, only now growing past stubble. Though he he'd never been super muscled previously, he'd at least had some muscle. Unfortunately, he'd lost much of that, along with a bunch of weight during his treatment.

None of that could be easily explained away. Well, he could say he'd decided to shave his hair off—which was true since he'd done it after it had begun to fall out—but there was no acceptable excuse for his gaunt appearance.

But the cancer was behind him now—hopefully—and if he had to tell Jocelyn everything, he would. Even though it would likely mean he'd then have someone else hovering over him the way Mila did.

There were worse things in life, though. He knew that for good and sure.

CHAPTER TWO

Rebecca Clarke listened as Aaron recounted what had happened at school that day. Laughter and giggles punctuated his chatter. At one time, Aaron had been a quiet boy, keeping most of his thoughts to himself unless she pestered him to the point where he'd talk. Now, though, he was more than happy to share about everything.

It was like he'd become the boy he should have been all along, if he hadn't had an oppressive, domineering father for the first six years of his life. She carried a heavy weight of guilt for not leaving her ex sooner. But the greater guilt came from the fact that she hadn't been the one to actually end their relationship. Especially since she knew herself how horrible it was to be the child of a domineering father.

"Colby got into trouble again," Aaron said with a sigh, giggles fading away.

Aaron had gotten into trouble a bit more over the past year as he'd come out of his shell, but his best friend, Colby, definitely still got into more mischief. The first time Aaron had gotten into trouble, Rebecca had almost been proud of him because it meant he felt safe enough to act up a bit, knowing he wasn't going to be punished harshly as a result.

"What did he do?"

"He squirted his fruit pack across the table. The lunchroom person got upset with him and told his teacher, then he had to miss recess. I think it was an accident, but he still got in trouble."

"That's too bad." Luckily, Colby's mom would listen to his explanation and deal with it fairly. She knew that since Jocelyn, Colby's mom, was her best friend and her brother's wife. "Well, you guys have four days off school now."

Aaron nodded. "Are we going to cut down our trees again this year?"

“I think so,” Rebecca said as she shifted on the couch, adjusting the blanket over her legs. “But I’m not sure if Jocelyn will feel up to going.”

“Cause of the baby?”

“Yep. As it gets closer to the time for the baby to arrive, it gets more uncomfortable for her.”

“She looks like she’s got a basketball in her tummy,” Aaron said with a giggle.

Rebecca couldn’t help but smile at his comment. “Don’t tell her that.”

“Did you look like that when you were pregnant with me?”

“Yes, I did.” In fact, she’d looked even more like she’d swallowed a basketball because she’d been painfully thin. It had been a rough pregnancy, and she’d spent a good chunk of it sick.

“I wish I could have a brother or sister like Colby will get when the baby is born.”

It wasn’t the first time Aaron had voiced that sentiment since Jocelyn and Darius had announced the pregnancy. Rebecca hadn’t known what to say in response. She wasn’t looking for another relationship, even though it had been over two years since her ex had left her and Aaron behind without a second glance.

But even if she had been interested in a relationship, she wasn’t sure she was prepared to deal with another pregnancy. The memory of her first one hadn’t faded much over the years.

“We’ll just have to see.”

Where she’d once mourned Aaron not having a good male role model in his dad, she no longer did. Aaron now had three good men in his life. Darius, Ben, and Devon had all stepped in to provide guidance for the boy, just like they had done for Colby.

Rebecca was doubly grateful for her family’s support during the past year, as she’d struggled with her health. She’d never planned to move in with her brother and his wife, even if

she was Rebecca's best friend, but circumstances had changed so drastically that she'd basically had no other option.

She was just glad this hadn't happened back when she'd still been with Craig. There was no way he would have tolerated her struggles. While she would have preferred to never have had the struggles, she was relieved that she'd had Darius and Jocelyn to help her through the worst of it.

After Aaron went upstairs to say good night to everyone, Rebecca put him to bed, then went back to the couch. She didn't want to go to bed. Or rather, she really *did* want to go to bed. Fatigue still plagued her, even though she'd gotten over the worst of the pneumonia that had landed her in hospital.

But discouragement still swirled around her. She just wanted to get back to normal.

The doctors said she should be fine soon. Unfortunately, she still sometimes had trouble with her breathing and would be reduced to painful coughing. A busy day, like the one she'd just had, could leave her wiped out.

Rebecca exhaled heavily, trying to figure out if she had the energy to get herself ready for bed, even though it wasn't yet nine o'clock in the evening. The temptation to sleep on the couch was strong. It wouldn't be the first time.

She could have gone upstairs to spend time with Jocelyn, but she didn't like to encroach on her and Darius. They needed their time together once Colby went to bed, especially with the imminent arrival of the baby.

Also, Jocelyn was struggling physically herself, and though Rebecca tried her best to help her, some days it was a challenge. Sadness bubbled beneath the surface of her emotions as it often did at the end of a day when she struggled to find the energy she'd once had.

Earlier in the year, she'd been doing so well. In February, she'd gotten a new job, working as a receptionist at a dentist's office. It had meant better hours and better pay, making it easier for her to pay the rent on her house. Things had been looking up.

Then in early August, she'd caught a cold, which should have been nothing to get over. However, she'd developed a cough that just hadn't gone away, and she'd begun to feel progressively worse. Ignoring it hadn't helped, leading to the deterioration of her health, and she'd soon found herself in the hospital, sicker than she'd ever been before.

With no income for several weeks and unable to care for Aaron, Darius and Jocelyn had stepped in. When she'd come home from the hospital, she'd moved in with them, thinking she would only be there temporarily, but they'd both insisted they wanted her with them on a more permanent basis.

Jocelyn had put a rush on renovations to create two bedrooms, bathrooms, and a small kitchen in the spacious basement. No doubt investing a lot of money in the project.

So here she was, extremely grateful for all Darius and Jocelyn had done for her, and deeply indebted to them, knowing there was no way she'd ever be able to repay them for everything.

With Thanksgiving the next day, Rebecca knew she needed to get herself to bed. She wanted to be able to help as much as possible, and in order to do that, she knew she needed a good night's sleep.

Dragging herself off the couch, she turned off lights in the main area, then went to the bathroom attached to her bedroom. As she stood in front of the large mirror, she brushed her teeth and went through her limited skin care routine.

When she crawled into her bed, she let out a long breath before she prayed, asking God for a good sleep that night. She also prayed that she'd soon return to the health she'd previously taken for granted.

It took her a while to get comfortable, and as she shifted around under the blankets, her thoughts went to Roman, wondering if he'd take Jocelyn up on her invitation to join them for Thanksgiving. It had been almost a year since they'd last seen him, and Rebecca knew Jocelyn and Zoe were hoping he'd come.

With that in mind, she added a prayer that Roman would come back for Thanksgiving for his sisters' sake.

When Zoe had shown up a year earlier, she'd made it clear she wasn't going to stick around. However, she'd had a change of heart and ended up staying in Serenity. Roman's unexpected appearance at Jocelyn's wedding had given Jocelyn hope that he, too, might be back to stay.

Unfortunately, not only had he not stayed, he hadn't returned for a visit. He'd kept in contact, which Jocelyn was grateful for, but she constantly talked about how she wanted more. Especially as she neared the birth of her second child.

Rebecca also wouldn't have minded seeing him again. If only to thank him once again for his generosity throughout the year. Every month, a gift had arrived for Colby from his uncle, and Roman had also included something for Aaron each time. Not a cheaper gift than what he'd sent for Colby, but, from what Rebecca could tell, equal in value.

One time, the gift had included a Nintendo Switch for each of them, as well as an assortment of games. Two of each so they could play them together. There had also been new Lego sets, which Aaron absolutely loved. And there had even been a new tablet for him. Roman had definitely spoiled the boys.

Rebecca had called him once to protest him spending so much money on a boy who wasn't even related to him. But Roman had gently told her that he had no one else to spend his money on, and it gave him great pleasure to do it for those who were important to him.

She wasn't sure how she and Aaron had rated being important to him, but she hadn't had the energy to argue. Instead, she chose to just be grateful for the man's generosity. It had been a bright spot during some dark days.

When Rebecca woke the next morning, she heard the television through her open door. Aaron tended to come check on her most mornings but left her room without waking her on the days he didn't have school. He knew how to fix a bowl of

his favorite cereal, so he was able to feed himself without getting her up.

Moving slowly, Rebecca flung off the blanket and sat up. She had slept fairly well, for which she was grateful. At least she wasn't starting the day exhausted, even if she might end up there by the end of the day, since it would be busy with Thanksgiving dinner preparations.

"Morning, Mama," Aaron said as she shuffled out of her room. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Rebecca bent to press a kiss to his head. "Happy Thanksgiving, love."

He had a bowl of cereal in his lap as he sat cross-legged on the couch, watching a Lego movie on the large screen TV.

"Can I go up and see Colby when I'm done?" he asked as Rebecca went to the kitchen to make some coffee.

Rebecca glanced at the clock on the microwave. Just a little before nine. "Sure. If his mom's not up yet, you can both come back down here."

The coffee seemed to take a lifetime to stream into her mug. When Aaron brought his bowl and spoon over to the kitchen, he put them in the dishwasher, then ran up the stairs, opening the door at the top of them. Jocelyn had given Aaron permission to come into their part of the house anytime unless Rebecca told him he couldn't.

A couple of minutes later, she heard the thumping on the stairs as both boys came down to the basement.

"Morning, Auntie Bec," Colby said, coming over to give her a hug.

"Are your mom and dad still asleep?" Rebecca asked as she lifted her mug to take another sip.

"Mom's still in bed. Dad's up, drinking coffee and making some breakfast for Mom."

"Did you have breakfast already?"

“Yep. I made waffles in the toaster with lots of syrup. My fave.”

“Good. I’m going to talk to your dad.”

“We can play video games, Mama?” Aaron asked.

“Yep.” Since it was a day off and the adults had Thanksgiving preparations to tend to, allowing the boys to play video games was good for everyone.

Rebecca walked up the stairs to the kitchen, where she found Darius standing at the stove. He glanced up, a frown on his face as his gaze swept over her. It was the way he greeted her now, checking to see if he could tell how she was feeling.

“Morning,” she said as she sat down on a stool at the counter. She took a sip of coffee, then set her mug down, cupping her hands around it.

“Feeling okay?” he asked as he focused back on the frying pan, using a spatula to stir something.

“So far, so good,” she said.

It had taken awhile for them to get to where he didn’t bug her too much about how she felt, and she tried to be as honest as possible.

Darius nodded in response. “Jocelyn’s slow to get moving this morning,” he said as he scooped some scrambled eggs out of the pan. “Thankfully, Carla and Devon will be here in about an hour to help get things going. Zoe will be here later, after she’s helped Ben and Adela decorate the coffee shop.”

Carla had really stepped in to help when both Jocelyn and Rebecca had been struggling. She and Devon were rock stars in Rebecca’s book. Even Zoe did what she could, though she wasn’t of much use in the kitchen.

“Any news from Roman?”

“No.” Darius’s clipped tone told Rebecca her brother wasn’t happy with his brother-in-law. “Jocelyn wrote to him again this week and asked him to come, but he didn’t respond.”

“It would be nice if he came,” Rebecca said. “For Jocelyn and Zoe’s sake.”

Darius glanced at her with a lifted brow. “For Jocelyn and Zoe?”

Rebecca shrugged. “I’d also like to thank him in person for everything he’s done for Aaron.”

“He has done a lot,” Darius agreed. “But I think his presence would have pleased Jocelyn more than his presents.”

Darius put the plate with the scrambled eggs, strawberries, and toast on a tray, then poured Jocelyn’s one cup of coffee for the day from the fancy machine on the counter. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“No rush,” Rebecca said.

“Help yourself to the rest of the eggs.”

“Thanks.”

Once she was alone, Rebecca got up and went to dish herself up some food. She wasn’t really hungry, but she knew Darius would worry if he came back down, and she hadn’t eaten anything.

She hooked her phone up to the Bluetooth speakers situated around the room and pulled up the playlist that she and Jocelyn had created. It was made up mainly of worship songs, including a couple that Zoe had recorded that year in the fancy studio Roman had had built for her.

With the music playing, she sat down at the counter with her plate. As she ate, Rebecca looked over the list on her phone that she and Jocelyn had made with everything they needed to do for the dinner that day.

Since neither of them were running at full strength, lists had become very important. They had a better chance of completing everything they needed to if they had a list to help them space out the tasks.

First off, they needed to get the turkey in the oven. She assumed that Carla had taken the time into consideration when she planned to come over.

By the time Carla arrived, Rebecca had finished her breakfast and had pulled out all the dishes and silverware they'd need for the table and put everything on the buffet in the dining room.

"Hello, Becca darling," Carla said as she swept into the kitchen with Devon in her wake. She came over to where Rebecca stood to give her a hug. "How're you feeling today?"

Rebecca went with the response she'd given Darius since it was true. "So far, so good."

"Wonderful." Carla smiled at her, then clapped her hands. "So, what have we got to do?"

They tackled the list, dividing up what needed to be done. Ever mindful of how Rebecca's energy could flag, Carla assigned her the tasks that could be done sitting at the counter.

It wasn't long before Darius came back into the kitchen with the tray, now empty of food and coffee.

"Jocelyn will join us in a few," he said as he put the tray on the counter and transferred the dishes into the dishwasher.

"She moving a little slow today?" Carla asked.

"Just a bit, but she's determined to get going."

At least Jocelyn had an excuse for not having a lot of energy since she was in her third trimester, with a due date in early January.

"Well, I'm really looking forward to this day," Carla said with a beaming smile. "The only thing that would make it better was if Roman showed up."

Rebecca agreed, but Thanksgiving wasn't quite as special as a wedding, which was why Roman had come home unexpectedly the previous year. But maybe if he didn't make it home for Thanksgiving, he'd be there for Christmas.

CHAPTER THREE

Roman's original plan had been to go right to Jocelyn's after arriving in Coeur d'Alene, but he'd chickened out. Plus, his nerves about seeing Jocelyn had further exhausted him. So rather than go straight to her house, he'd booked into the nearby luxury resort where he'd stayed during part of his previous visit.

The nerves that kept flaring up annoyed him to no end. He'd never been a nervous person, but the events of the past year had produced an anxiety that he'd never experienced before.

He didn't like it.

The nerves and anxiety made him feel weak. However, he had no idea how to rid himself of the emotions because so often they crept up on him, and then he was in the throes of it before he really knew what was happening.

It was frustrating.

His exhaustion—though a little better over the past week—also frustrated him, especially since he wasn't doing enough to warrant it. He'd stayed in bed later than he usually did, then ordered a breakfast that he'd struggled to eat.

Finally, he knew he couldn't put off going to see his family any longer.

As he sat in his vehicle in front of Jocelyn and Darius's house a short time later, Roman was once again amazed at how different it looked. And once again, he was beyond grateful for that. It was no longer the house where the worst day in his life had unfolded.

Opening the door of his rental, Roman got out and took a deep inhale of the chilly air. He didn't linger by the car, eager to get out of the cold.

Still, his steps dragged as he made his way to the front door, where he rang the doorbell. As he waited for someone to

answer, he looked around the neighborhood, seeing the familiarity there that he didn't see in the house. He ran a hand over his head, the stubble there reminding him of how different he'd look to the people he hadn't seen all year.

The door opened to reveal a tall man with dark hair and tattoos. "Roman?" A frown formed as Darius's gaze swept over Roman. "What on earth happened to you?"

Roman gave him a weary smile. "I'll tell you later."

With a nod, Darius moved back, and Roman stepped past him into the foyer, grateful to be out of the cold.

"Jocelyn is going to be so happy," Darius said as he clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Actually, everyone is going to be happy you're here. Carla was just saying she hoped you'd show up."

"I wasn't sure I'd be able to, or that I wanted to, looking like this," Roman gestured to himself. "But I couldn't stay away."

"I'm glad." Darius paused, then added, "It seems like maybe this is where you need to be."

Roman couldn't argue with that. The moment he stepped into the house, knowing his family was close, something had settled inside him. Considering how anxious he'd been about seeing them, that surprised him.

"Everyone's in the kitchen."

They didn't even get that far before Jocelyn appeared.

"Roman?" Her mouth dropped open as she stared at him, tears welling up in her eyes. "Are you really here?"

"I'm here." The smile he gave her felt strained, but it was all he could muster at that point.

She headed for him, arms spread wide. Roman willingly accepted the hug she demanded. Her belly pressed against him, reminding Roman of the changes in his sister's life.

"What's wrong, Roman?" Jocelyn stepped back, her gaze moving over him as she kept hold of his arms. "What

happened to you?”

“I’ve had a bit of a rough year,” he told her.

She frowned, compassion in her gaze. “I’m so sorry to hear that.” She drew him back in for another hug. “But I’m super glad you’re here.”

“Why don’t we go to the kitchen, Joce?” Darius suggested.

“We’re going to have a conversation about why you didn’t visit us this year, but not right now.” She began walking toward the kitchen, pulling Roman along with a tight grasp on his wrist, like she was afraid he was going to run away.

His heart thumped hard, a myriad of emotion swirling through him. The one strong emotion he picked out above all the others right then was relief. He’d made the right decision to return.

“Roman!” Carla exclaimed when he followed Jocelyn into the kitchen. “Oh, my darling, I’m so glad you’re here.”

She came over to him, wrapping him in a tight hug. She was stronger than she looked. But the hug was something he needed, and he wondered if he’d made a mistake staying away all year. He just hadn’t wanted to burden them with the stress of his treatment, especially so soon after coming back into their lives.

As Carla stepped back from him, she reached up to touch his head, concern furrowing her brow. “What’s happened?”

Roman knew he was going to have to explain it at some point, but he just wanted to enjoy the day. “I’ll tell you later, but it’s all good now.”

Or at least he hoped it was. The doctors had said he was in remission. Tests had supported their pronouncement. However, he was having a hard time accepting it. The counsellor he’d met with at the clinic had told him that it might be something that took awhile to sink in.

Of course, there was always a chance the cancer would come back, so he needed to find a way to live his life without constantly worrying about what was going on in his body.

Carla narrowed her eyes at him, then nodded. “But I want to hear all about it.”

“Glad you made it,” Devon said as he held out his hand to him.

Roman gave the older man’s hand a firm shake. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been doing really well.”

It was then Roman spotted Rebecca sitting at the counter. She was watching them, but before he could say anything to her, he heard pounding up the basement steps.

A smile came more easily to his face when his nephew and his best friend appeared. Colby paused when he spotted him, but then came running over.

“Uncle Roman!” The boy skidded to a stop and peered up at Roman.

“How’s it going, Colby?”

“Good.” The boy grinned, revealing that he was missing a couple of teeth. “We’re playing video games. Want to play with us?”

“Not just yet, buddy. I’ll play with you later.”

“Okay.” Colby held his hand up for a high five, and Roman obliged him. Turning to his mom, the boy said, “We’re hungry. Can we have a snack?”

Colby was easily distracted, but Aaron stared at Roman for a long moment before he approached him. “Hi. You cut your hair.”

“Yes. I did,” Roman said, rubbing a hand over his scalp.

“I wanted to grow my hair out, but Mama said maybe when I’m older.”

“Your hair looks just fine.”

That brought a smile to Aaron’s face. “Thank you for the stuff you sent.”

“You’re very welcome.”

While they chatted about the games Roman had sent them, Jocelyn held a discussion with Colby about what he wanted to eat. It sounded like there wasn't a plan to have lunch, but soon Carla was helping Jocelyn make a couple of sandwiches for the boys.

"Would you like something to eat, Roman?" Carla asked. "Sandwich? Soup?"

Roman knew that Mila would want him to eat as healthily as possible, but the peanut butter and jam sandwiches they were making for the boys were strangely appealing. Since he hadn't eaten much breakfast that morning, he probably should eat a bit more.

"A sandwich would be nice," he said.

Carla gave him a smile. "Peanut butter and jam? Or do you want a deli meat sandwich with cheese?"

"PB&J is fine. Do you have strawberry or raspberry jam?"

"Both," Jocelyn said.

"Raspberry then, please."

"The boys are drinking milk," Jocelyn said as she poured some into two glasses. "Want that too? If I remember, you used to like milk."

"I still do," he told her. "So a glass of milk would be great."

"Why don't you sit down?" Carla suggested, pointing to the stool beside Rebecca. "Did you want multi-grain, white, or sourdough?"

He knew which one he *should* choose, but he went for the sourdough. As Carla made the sandwich, Roman moved to the stool beside Rebecca, giving her a smile as he sat down.

"Good to see you again," he said.

Her smile was small, but friendly. "Good to see you again, too."

Jocelyn had mentioned that Rebecca had gone through some health issues that led to her and Aaron moving into the

basement. She hadn't gone into any details, but Roman hoped it hadn't been anything like his own health struggles of the past year.

"How have you been doing?" Roman asked. Though it might be hypocritical, he wanted her to be more forthcoming in her answer than he'd been in his to those who had asked.

"Been doing okay."

"I hear you're living in the basement now."

"Yeah." She looked away from him to where Aaron waited for his sandwich. "Aaron's really been enjoying it."

Roman gave a huff of laughter. "I would have *loved* to live in the same house as my best friend at their age."

"I'm happy that they're so close. I'm also glad that Jocelyn and I are close, especially since she's married to my brother." Rebecca hesitated. "I've had other friends, but none as close as Jocelyn."

Roman had had plenty of friends growing up. Unfortunately, most of them hadn't known how to relate to him after his parents died. He'd been so angry and grief-stricken that he hadn't even noticed that his friends hadn't been around as much. All he'd wanted was to graduate and leave the town where he'd made the biggest mistake of his life, which had led to horrific heartache.

As an adult, he only had one really close friend besides Mila and Davis, who, though they were employees, he also counted as friends.

He knew a lot about Rebecca, Darius, and Craig, Rebecca's ex. Probably even more than Jocelyn did.

As soon as Jocelyn had started to mention Rebecca in her emails, Roman had investigated the woman. He hadn't planned to do anything with the information he discovered. He just hadn't wanted Jocelyn to be at risk of anything from new people in her life, recognizing that her money could be a draw to the wrong sort of people.

He'd done the same for Zoe. Unfortunately, he'd been distracted by the health issues leading to his diagnosis and had failed to notice what was happening with Zoe. By the time he did notice, he'd discovered she was back in Serenity and figured she would be okay without his interference.

And he was right. If he'd stepped in and enabled her to stay in Nashville, she wouldn't be with Ben now. Somehow, he thought that wouldn't make her very happy.

"Are you just here for the holiday?" Rebecca asked as Carla set a sandwich down in front of him, along with a glass of milk.

"Thank you," he said to Carla before glancing at Rebecca again. "I'm not sure how long I'm staying."

He was definitely torn. Part of him wanted to stay with his family, but part of him also wanted to retreat to his safe place. His ranch. Where he could work and recover, with Mila focused on feeding him only the healthiest of foods to help him regain the weight he'd lost.

For the time being, he'd take it a day at a time. See how things unfolded. How he was feeling. If he didn't have the strength to do anything, he might as well go home.

"Thank you again for everything you sent for Aaron. He enjoys all of it, especially the Lego sets."

Roman washed down the bite he'd just taken with a sip of milk. "I've brought another one for hm. It's a bit more difficult, so I thought I'd help him out with it if we have the time."

Another smile briefly lifted the corners of her mouth. "He'll be thrilled to hear that. I've tried to work with him on some of the sets, but he finds my skills to be seriously deficient."

Roman chuckled. "It's been a while since I last did one, so he might find my skills lacking as well."

"Ah, but he's not around you all the time, so at least you'll be more interesting."

Given the way he lived his life, he was rarely around kids. Mila and Davis had a few grandkids, but they were younger than Colby and Aaron. Since the couple lived in a log home on his property, they brought them to his place on occasion. However, he hadn't spent much time with them.

"I brought a simpler one for Colby, since I know Lego isn't really his thing. I want him to have something to do, too."

"Are you up for Christmas tree chopping tomorrow?" Jocelyn asked as Carla and Devon left the room with the plates and glasses for the boys.

"Christmas tree shopping?"

"Nope." She rubbed her hand along one side of her belly with a grimace. "Christmas tree chopping. We go to a Christmas tree farm and find the perfect tree."

"The perfect tree, huh? What makes a tree perfect?"

Jocelyn shrugged. "I have no idea. Colby and Aaron are our perfect tree finders."

"The last two years, we've gone to the farm and come home with beautiful trees," Darius said. "Who are we to argue?"

The smell of the turkey cooking was getting stronger in the air, and even though he was eating his sandwich, Roman found that he was looking forward to the meal that was to come.

Where he once might have inhaled the sandwich, Roman took small bites, letting each settle into his stomach before taking another. Too frequently over the past few months, he'd tried to force himself to eat, often with disastrous results.

Thankfully, the sandwich and milk settled well enough, and he was able to finish both.

"Are you going to help find the tree, Joce?" Roman asked.

Jocelyn looked down at her belly and sighed. "We usually make an afternoon of it. Go on a wagon ride, see Santa, have hot chocolate and mini donuts. I'm not sure that I'm up to much beyond the hot chocolate and donuts."

“That makes two of us,” Rebecca murmured.

“Ben and Zoe said they’d come this year,” Darius said. “So, if you two need to just sit at one of the tables or in the car, we can take care of the boys.”

Roman would have liked to join them, but he wasn’t sure he could handle too much walking. Perhaps he could keep Jocelyn and Rebecca company while the others enjoyed the various activities offered.

“Will you come stay here, Roman?” Jocelyn asked. “I mean, I know we don’t have quite the amenities as the hotel, but we come with the added benefit of two entertaining boys.”

Roman smiled. “Well, they’re certainly not a drawback, so I’ll think about it. You have enough room?”

“Yep. Becca and Aaron have their own place in the basement, and Zoe has her own apartment now,” Jocelyn said. “So you can have your pick of the rooms. Just not the dinosaur one. Unless you want to sleep on the lower bunk. Colby has already claimed the upper one.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be with his family. However, he wanted to be able to retreat to his room at the hotel to rest when he needed to. Maybe once he’d explained what had happened over the past year, they’d understand, and it would be easier.

“Do you know what you’re having?” Roman asked, gesturing to her belly. “You never said in any of your emails.”

Jocelyn glanced over at Darius with an exasperated sigh. “I want to know, but Darius doesn’t. He wants to be surprised.”

Darius seemed unmoved by his wife’s frustration with him. “It’s only a few months.”

“A few months!” Jocelyn threw her hands into the air. “Finding out from the ultrasound could have been a surprise, too. Or maybe doing a big gender reveal. That would have definitely been a surprise. We don’t have to wait until I’ve gone through twenty hours of labor.”

“Maybe not knowing will help you push through when the going gets rough,” Roman suggested. That earned him a fierce scowl, making Roman hold up his hands. “Or maybe not.”

Darius chuckled. “Don’t worry. She’ll forgive you for that pretty quickly since she’s happy to have you here.”

“But I’m only giving you one *get out of jail free* card,” Jocelyn said. “So don’t push your luck.”

“Oh, I won’t. Lesson learned.”

“I’m guessing that it’s a girl,” Carla said. “You’re much more feisty this time around.”

“What?” Jocelyn demanded. “I’m not feisty!”

That got a snicker out of Rebecca, which made Jocelyn grin. Roman appreciated that his sister had a sense of humor, even while struggling through the last weeks of her pregnancy.

“Does everyone have a thought on the gender of the baby?” Roman asked. “Or a preference?”

“I don’t have a personal preference,” Jocelyn said. “Though I think Colby and Aaron would like a boy.”

Darius nodded. “But I think they’d be okay with a girl, too.”

“I think it would be fun if it was a girl,” Rebecca said. “There are some really cute baby girl clothes out there.”

Roman thought about how much his mom would have loved Colby, Aaron, and the baby. She’d loved children, which was why she’d wanted more. His dad hadn’t been as keen on even the three they’d had, especially when they’d been little. But still, Roman had thought he loved them. Now he wasn’t so sure...

Thankfully, he didn’t worry about the same thing happening to Colby or this new baby. Clearly, Darius loved Colby. The man had adopted him earlier that year, and according to Jocelyn, Darius had been very emotional when the adoption had become official.

By all indications, Darius had already been a good uncle to Aaron, so it was no surprise that he was a good father to Colby.

The man who had been Aaron's father was currently far away. Roman had located him and kept track of him, wanting to make sure that if Rebecca ever needed to contact him for any reason, she'd be able to. He knew that Rebecca wasn't receiving child support from the man, but he wasn't sure that she wanted it. That might bring him back into Aaron's life.

Roman had considered asking Rebecca if she wanted Craig to relinquish his parental rights, but then she'd know that he had more information on her than she'd ever volunteered to him.

So much of what he did when it came to helping parents get what they were legally entitled to from the other parent was done in the shadows. He treaded into gray areas to get some of his information and to resolve situations, but he didn't feel guilty about it. In most cases, the ends definitely justified the means.

He tried his best to help and protect women and children. He wanted to do for them what he hadn't been able to do for his mom. Though he'd thought he could protect her, in the end, he hadn't been able to.

She'd be happy to see her children back together again. During his growing-up years, she'd told him that it was important to always stick close to his sisters. Overwhelmed with grief and guilt, he'd done the exact opposite, and he regretted that now.

But hopefully, his reconnection with his siblings was better late than never.

He liked to believe that their lives had taken the paths they were supposed to. If he'd stuck around, it was possible that Jocelyn might have made different decisions, which would have meant Colby wouldn't have been born. And as far as Roman was concerned, that would have been a terrible thing.

And without Colby, Jocelyn might not have made friends with Rebecca and fallen in love with Darius. Another thing that would have been terrible for her to have missed out on.

Personally, Roman was glad for Rebecca and Aaron's presence in Jocelyn's life because it had led to their presence in *his* life, and the pair were as much of a draw to return to Serenity as his sisters were. Which was a surprise to him, as it would likely be to them, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebecca looked over to where Roman sat at the counter beside her, peeling potatoes. She hadn't expected him to pitch in and help with the dinner, but when he'd offered, Carla hadn't hesitated to put him to work.

The man sat there, awkwardly wielding a peeler and occasionally sending bits of peel flying. It made Rebecca want to laugh. She kept her laughter under control, however, focusing on the sweet potatoes she was peeling for the casserole that Darius had requested for the meal that year.

"I think you've managed to peel away half that potato, Roman," Devon said with a chuckle as he managed his peeler with a bit more skill.

Roman frowned at the potato in his hand. "I can't tell you the last time I peeled any vegetable, let alone a potato." He looked over at Devon's pile. "How are you managing it so well?"

"Well, a couple of years ago, I was like you. Peeling potatoes was definitely not my thing," Devon said as he picked up another potato. "Carla decided she would do her best to help me improve my peeling skills. Anytime we have potatoes, she makes sure I peel at least half of them."

"And look," Carla said, gesturing to his pile of potatoes. "He's doing a pretty good job."

The older woman beamed at her husband, and Devon responded with a besotted look of his own. The two really were adorable, and Rebecca was so glad they'd reconnected and found love again.

"So you're saying I just need to keep practicing?" Roman said.

"Practice makes perfect," Devon quipped.

"How have you gone all these years without peeling a potato, Roman?" Carla asked.

“By having someone else do my cooking for me,” he stated. “Someone I pay well to peel all the vegetables.”

“Spoiled,” Carla said with a shake of her head.

Roman chuckled. “I tend to think of it as paying someone to do something I struggle with so that I can spend my time doing stuff I enjoy and do well.”

“I like the way you think, son,” Devon said.

The word hung heavy in the air, and Rebecca held her breath as she waited for Roman to react to it. She glanced at Carla to see the woman was also frozen in place, her gaze darting between her husband and her nephew.

“Mila is worth every penny I pay her. Since she enjoys doing the things I don’t, it frees me up to focus on my work and the things I like to do.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Carla admitted. “Though I enjoy cooking, so in that regard, I don’t feel like I’d rather be doing something else.”

Rebecca had to agree with that. For her, if given a choice, she’d happily cook a meal for her family rather than do other things. Which was why she was helping to make Thanksgiving dinner.

As she cut the sweet potato into chunks, Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief that Roman hadn’t reacted to Devon calling him son. She had no idea about the people who were in Roman’s life, so perhaps he had someone he viewed as a father—who had replaced his birth father—so the term *son* didn’t upset him.

Rebecca dropped the cubed sweet potatoes into the pot Carla placed on the counter in front of her. She hadn’t been sure that Carla and Jocelyn would be on board with the casserole, since it didn’t appear to be something they’d eaten for Thanksgiving before. But even if they didn’t like it, Rebecca had no doubt the boys really would, since it was so sweet.

Moving slowly, she carried the pot to the sink and set it down. After turning on the water, she watched it splash over

the sweet potatoes, slowly filling the pot. Should she try to lift it herself? It wasn't that she was weak, necessarily, but sometimes the weight of something felt doubled, just because of how tired her body could get these days.

In the end, the decision was taken from her when Devon came over to the sink. He lifted the pot out and set it on the stove for her, then turned to wash his hands. She appreciated that he didn't make a big deal out of it.

She moved to the stove and turned on the burner, then grabbed a wooden spoon to stir the potatoes before laying it across the top of the pot. With a sigh, she turned from the stove, glancing at Roman.

He was watching her and held her gaze for a moment before he turned his attention back to the potato in his hand. It gave her a chance to watch him, noting the changes in his appearance.

His weight loss gave him an almost fragile appearance. It wasn't often—if ever, really—that she'd considered a man to be fragile. Emotionally fragile, perhaps, but certainly not physically fragile. It made her wonder what he'd been going through that had left him in such a state.

Rebecca was sure that his appearance had taken Jocelyn off-guard. When she'd met him at Jocelyn and Darius's wedding, she'd been able to see a physical strength in him. Now though? He didn't look like he had much strength at all.

"Do you want to use the masher or mixer?" Carla asked when the potatoes were soft enough to take off the burner.

"I think it will have to be the mixer," Rebecca said as Carla lifted the pot off the stove and carried it to the sink to drain.

While she did that, Rebecca removed the bowl from the stand mixer and carried it over to the sink. Carla dumped the potatoes into it, then Rebecca added the other ingredients.

"What are you making, Rebecca?" Roman asked.

She glanced at him as she scraped down the sides of the bowl. "Sweet potato casserole."

“Is that a dessert?”

Carla chuckled. “From those ingredients, you’d think that, wouldn’t you?”

“It looks like a kid’s dream vegetable dish,” he said.

“Not just kids,” Devon remarked. “I’m quite looking forward to it myself.”

When Rebecca had finished spreading the sweet potato mixture in the glass pan, she picked up the bag of marshmallows. Roman chuckled as he watched her drop them on top of the sweet potatoes.

“I’m looking forward to trying that,” he said. “Will I have to fight the boys for it?”

“It’s possible,” Carla said as she snagged a marshmallow and popped it into her mouth. “Well, Colby for sure. Aaron seems to be iffy on sweets.”

“He likes this,” Rebecca told them as she moved on to the pecans. “It’s something we had when I was a kid, and I’ve made it a time or two for Thanksgiving.”

But her ex hadn’t been a fan of it, saying it was too sweet and fattening, so she hadn’t been able to make it very frequently.

“I’m glad I get a chance to try it,” Roman said as he put his final potato into the bowl for Devon to rinse and chop up.

Carla slid the casserole into the oven while Rebecca waited for Devon to finish at the sink so she could wash the items she’d used. Once that was done, she sat back down on her stool, grateful for a break.

“My grandma always made that casserole for us,” Devon said. “Much to my mom’s dismay. She always said it was way too sweet. No one else ever agreed. Not even my dad, and he usually agreed with my mom on everything.”

Rebecca was glad to hear that someone else had enjoyed the casserole. It made her feel like it wasn’t the oddity that Craig had made her feel like it was.

“My mom would make a green bean casserole to offset the sweet potato casserole,” Devon said. “Guess which one had leftovers?”

“Well, we’re cooking what people like today,” Carla said. “This casserole is by request of Darius and Aaron.”

“Did you have a request, Devon?” Roman asked.

“I did,” the older man said. “I asked for a gingerbread cake.”

“A gingerbread cake? Never heard of that.”

“Until Devon asked for it for dinner today, I hadn’t either,” Carla said. “I hope that I didn’t mess it up.”

“It smelled good while you were baking it,” Devon said with a smile. “So I’m sure you’ve done a great job, darling.”

Carla beamed at her husband, and Rebecca wanted to just sigh at their interactions. They hadn’t had a smooth road, but since they’d made the decision to give their relationship another shot, it had been wonderful to watch them together.

“I’ll be relying on all the rest of you to give me an honest opinion of the cake,” Carla said with a laugh. “Since Dev is clearly a little biased.”

“Only in the very best way, my darling.”

They were so cute. It made Rebecca want to give love another chance. Maybe. Although honestly, probably not.

Though Jocelyn and Darius also had a great relationship, they were each other’s first really serious relationship. Neither had had their hearts broken the way she and Carla had. So Carla and Devon were the ones who gave her hope that there could be love after a broken heart.

Not that she would ever... *ever*... consider rekindling things with Craig. That ship had well and truly sailed. For both of them, if his social media was anything to go by.

In Carla’s situation, she’d had to not just decide if she wanted to take another chance on love, but if she wanted to take that chance with the man who’d broken her heart the first

time around. Rebecca thought that perhaps it was easier to try again with someone who hadn't been responsible for breaking her heart in the past.

As Rebecca sliced vegetables for the salad, she listened to Roman and Devon discuss other food traditions. She noticed that Roman didn't go back to his childhood to pull out traditions. Anything he mentioned had to do with his adult life.

That wasn't a big surprise, since Jocelyn and Zoe didn't talk a lot about the time before their parents had passed away. Jocelyn had talked a bit more about it recently, but it was still a difficult subject for her.

Rebecca herself wasn't a big one to talk about her past, either. Her distant past with her family, or her more recent past with Craig.

"How long are you hanging around?" Carla asked.

Roman rubbed his hand over his chin, then said, "Not sure just yet."

"Guess you can't be away from your job for too long, huh?" Devon said

"I can pretty much do my job from anywhere if I have all my equipment," Roman replied. "This time, I only brought my laptop with me."

"Well, you could just go home, pack up all your stuff, and come back and stay for good."

"That's not going to happen," Roman told her with a shake of his head.

"Funny. That's what Darius said," Carla mused. "And so did Zoe."

"I'm happy that's worked out for them," Roman said. "Unfortunately, it won't be possible for me."

"Well, maybe you could just spend a few weeks here," Carla suggested. "I think it would be great if you could spend the holiday season here with us. We've really missed you. I won't even bug you about moving back here."

“I’m not sure that would work.”

“At least I tried,” Carla said with a shrug.

Rebecca understood the woman’s desire to have all three of the children who’d come into her care back with her again. Jocelyn and Zoe would, no doubt, like that as well, though Zoe would probably understand more than the others why Roman might not want to uproot his life to move back to Serenity.

“You did,” Roman said with a small smile. “And I appreciate that you want me around.”

“Of *course*, we want you around. I mean, you haven’t done anything in the few hours you’ve been here that might change our minds.”

Roman chuckled. “I’ll try to keep it that way, so that when I leave, you’re not all glad to see the back of me.”

“I’ve been sent on a water and food mission, with strict instructions, AKA a threat, if I dare to return with anything that’s actually healthy.” Darius said as he came into the kitchen.

“Oh. I’ve got something she’ll like.” Carla went to the pantry and pulled out a large, flat container. “If she asks what they are, just tell her they’re chocolate chip muffins.”

Darius frowned. “What are they, actually? I don’t want to fear for my life when I hand her one.”

“Oh, they’re chocolate chip muffins, but they have vegetables in them, too. I actually made them for the boys, but they’ll be good for Jocelyn too.”

“You’d probably better give me one too, because Jocelyn will never believe that I wouldn’t want a chocolate chip muffin.”

Carla nodded. “That’s very true.”

She handed Darius a plate with two muffins on it, then set a muffin down in front of both Roman and Devon. “You want one, Becca?”

“Sure,” Rebecca told her. “Thanks.”

“This is good, darling,” Devon said after his first bite. “I wasn’t sure how they’d turn out when you were making them, but they don’t taste like vegetable cake.”

“I have to agree with Devon.” Roman broke off another piece of muffin and ate it. “Doesn’t taste anything like vegetables.”

“That’s good.” Carla put the lid back on the container and returned it to the pantry. “I knew I had to make them tasty, or Jocelyn and the boys wouldn’t touch them.”

“Aaron might be okay if they tasted like vegetables,” Devon said, making Rebecca smile. That he’d noticed that about Aaron made her feel even more a part of the family, though her connection was only through Darius and her friendship with Jocelyn. “That boy isn’t quite the sugar-addict that Colby and Darius are.”

Rebecca looked over to find Roman watching her again. She shifted a bit under his scrutiny, wondering what he saw when he looked at her. As shallow as it might be, she was glad she’d put a bit of effort into her appearance that morning.

That day, however, in deference to the holiday, Rebecca wore a long-sleeved blouse with smears of autumnal colors all over it. It ended around mid-thigh over a pair of stretchy black pants. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but she wore no makeup.

Perhaps, if she’d known Roman was going to show up, she might have made more effort. She didn’t like that she was even taking that into consideration.

It wasn’t that she wanted Roman to take a personal interest in her. Not that he would, even if she did want that. It was just that when people didn’t know her or her situation, she felt the need to present herself well. It was stupid, and she didn’t really like it, but there it was.

That way of thinking had gotten bad since Craig had left her. It was like she didn’t want people to look at her and say, *Well, no wonder he left her*. Definitely a pride thing, even

though she herself often wondered if that was why he'd found some other woman more attractive.

She'd never been one to care a lot about how she looked. Growing up, her dad had preached against focusing on the outward appearance, so she'd never worn makeup or spent lots of time doing her hair. That had carried over into adulthood. As long as her clothes were clean and in good condition, and her hair was washed and brushed, she'd been satisfied.

It wasn't until she'd started to hang out with Jocelyn that she'd tried to focus a bit more on her appearance, learning how to apply makeup and how to do her hair in a style other than a ponytail. She'd never reach the level of sophistication that Jocelyn, Carla, or Zoe had, but in certain circumstances, she at least tried.

“Is there anything else I can do?” Roman asked.

“Maybe you could help Rebecca set the table in the dining room,” Carla suggested.

Before they could get up to do anything, though, Rebecca heard the front door open, and she knew that Zoe had arrived. She wondered if anyone had alerted her to Roman's arrival.

“Roman?” Zoe shrieked when she came into the kitchen with Ben behind her. “I didn't know you were here!”

She hurried over to Roman, wrapping her arms around him when he got to his feet. After a brief hug, Zoe stepped back and stared at her brother with a frown.

“What's wrong with you?” she asked. “Are you dying?”

“Aren't we all?”

Roman's reply made Zoe's eyes go wide, and she shook her finger at him. “Nope. That's not what you're supposed to say. You're supposed to tell me that you're not dying and that you promise you're going to live until we're both really old.”

“I don't make promises I can't keep,” Roman said. “You know as well as I do that the length of our lives isn't something any of us can control.”

“Okay. You know what?” Zoe marched toward the entrance to the kitchen. “We’re doing this again. I don’t like this version. Let’s just forget this and do it over.”

Rebecca’s heart ached as she watched Zoe disappear, Ben trailing after her. She really, really, *really* hoped that Roman wasn’t back to say his goodbyes. He and his sisters had suffered so much already that it would seem so unfair if he was that sick. Unfortunately, his appearance seemed to support the possibility.

Rebecca felt a pulse of ache in her heart at the thought of Roman being terminally ill. She said a silent prayer that that wasn’t the case. He may not have been involved in their daily lives, but if something happened to him, his absence would leave a gaping hole.

Despite what Zoe hoped, there was no way that any of them were going to be able to forget what had just transpired.

Rebecca glanced at Carla, taking in the tense set of the woman’s expression as she turned to go to the oven to check the turkey. Devon’s worry for his wife was clear on his face as he watched her.

Roman sank back down on his stool, his shoulders slumped and head bent. Rebecca had a powerful urge to wrap her arms around him to comfort him. But as soon as Zoe reappeared, Roman straightened, pulling his shoulders back and lifting his head.

Zoe sighed as she walked over to him, not saying a word before she wrapped her arms around him. As she hugged him, she murmured, “I’m so glad you’re here. It’s good to see you again.”

“I’m glad to see you again too, Zoe.”

They stood like that for a minute, only separating when Jocelyn appeared, slowly walking into the kitchen with one hand on her back, the other on her belly.

“Why’s everyone so glum?” Jocelyn asked.

“I was just emotional over seeing Roman again,” Zoe said. She didn’t expound on their initial conversation, and no one

else did either, since upsetting Jocelyn wasn't something any of them wanted to do.

When Darius looked at Rebecca with a questioning look, she just gave him a quick smile of reassurance. If he cornered her later about it—and he probably would—she'd tell him what happened, knowing he wouldn't say anything to Jocelyn about it.

“Are we going to eat soon?” Colby asked from the doorway of the basement, Aaron at his side. “We're starvin'.”

“I am too,” Jocelyn said, making Rebecca grin. The three of them were like a trio of bottomless pits.

“We'll be ready to eat soon,” Carla told her. “Zoe and Ben, why don't you set the table? We'll finish getting the food ready while you do that.”

Rebecca suspected that she'd handed off the chore originally for her and Roman to Zoe and Ben to give them some space from the kitchen. Jocelyn came and settled onto the stool next to Roman.

“Did you take a nap, Becca?” she asked.

“Nope. Carla has been working me to the bone.”

Carla laughed. “I sure have. The rest of us just sat around while Rebecca did *everything*.”

“Then at least we know it's all going to taste great,” Jocelyn said.

A good chunk of the tension brought on by Zoe's reaction to Roman seemed to leave the room, thankfully. Rebecca hoped Ben could buoy Zoe up so the tension wouldn't return during the meal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Roman glanced around the table as he ate his dessert following a delicious meal. The sweet potato casserole had been a hit with more than just the boys. All of them had liked it. Now, he was eating gingerbread cake for the first time, along with a great cup of coffee.

“The cake is amazing, my darling,” Devon said. “I knew it would be.”

“And just so you know that he’s telling the truth, I agree,” Roman volunteered.

The others around the table echoed his sentiments, which made Carla beam with pleasure.

Zoe had perked up over the course of the meal, making Roman glad. He hadn’t meant to drag her down. He was still getting used to not feeling like he was living on a knife’s edge when it came to his health.

“How did the decorating go at the shop?” Jocelyn asked.

“As crazy as ever,” Ben said with a laugh. “Mom took Zoe with her last week to buy some new decorations. I thought Zoe would keep her in line, but no...”

“Going shopping with her was amazing.” Zoe grinned. “She skipped right over the elegant stuff and went right for the tacky. It seemed she was on a mission to find *the* tackiest decoration out there.”

“And did she succeed?” Carla asked.

“Well, at first, I thought the tackiest thing was going to be the set of ugly sweater decorations she picked up.”

“And that wasn’t it?”

“Nope. That would be the two tiny stuffed turkeys wearing Christmas hats.”

“Turkeys wearin’ hats?” Colby asked. “Do turkeys wear hats?”

“Here.” Zoe pulled out her phone and tapped on it, then held it out to Colby. “Turkeys in hats.”

Colby shared the picture with Aaron, and soon they were both laughing. The phone made the rounds of the table, and before long, all of them were chuckling. Well, except for Ben, but he was smiling as he shook his head.

“Don’t let the fact that Ben’s not laughing fool you,” Zoe said. “He laughed the first time he saw them.”

“And when Mom wasn’t looking, I moved them to the back side of the tree.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Zoe said as she reached over to pat his hand. “If you think your mom didn’t notice, be sure to check the tree the next time you’re in the shop.”

“You know what? I think I’m just going to ignore the tree and pretend those turkeys are hanging out in the back where they belong.”

“Is that how you’ve always dealt with your mom, Ben?” Jocelyn asked. “Just ignoring her more outlandish moments?”

“You know it. Though, honestly, she knows that my protests are usually nothing serious.”

“Adela is great,” Zoe said. “She has such a big heart.”

“Where is she now?” Carla asked. “She was welcome to join us today.”

“We told her,” Ben replied. “But she already had plans to go to the shelter to help serve dinner this afternoon. We had a great breakfast with her before we went to the shop to decorate.”

“Just know that your mom is always welcome here,” Jocelyn told him. “You’re practically family now.”

“And maybe one day you’ll actually *be* family,” Carla said with a wink. “No pressure.”

Roman figured that there was probably an engagement in their future, though how long until that happened, only Ben

knew. He was happy for them, and he hoped their road to forever was smooth.

“So, we’re all going to get trees tomorrow?” Zoe asked.

“That’s the plan,” Jocelyn said. “The weather looks great, so it should be a nice outing.”

“We’re gonna find the perfect tree again, Mom!” Colby said.

“You still need to find a tree for Aaron, too.”

“But why?” Colby glanced at his friend. “They live here now.”

“I think it would be nice if they had their own tree in their apartment, don’t you?”

“Oh... Yep! That would be awesome!”

Roman really enjoyed his nephew’s enthusiasm for everything, understanding that his sister was no doubt responsible for that. Aaron was a little more subdued, but given how the first few years of his life had unfolded, that wasn’t as surprising. But even since he’d first met Aaron, Roman could see that he’d blossomed, becoming a bit more outgoing.

“And you need to find the perfect tree for us too,” Carla said.

“Three trees? We’re going to have so much fun! Right, Aaron?”

“Yep. We are the best tree pickers. You’ll love the one we choose for you.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing it,” Devon said with a smile at the boys.

As the boys chatted excitedly about the last time they’d gone to get a tree, Roman mentally prepared himself for telling his sisters about the past year. Even if he wasn’t ready, he was pretty sure Zoe wasn’t going to let him get away with not telling them for much longer.

He knew that even though he could also tell them he was in remission, they would be worried. He knew that because *he* was still worried. But he couldn't just tell them nothing was wrong because they had eyes and could see that he'd physically changed over the past year.

"Let's clear off the table and get comfortable in the living room," Carla suggested.

Roman helped carry dishes into the kitchen, where Carla and Devon worked together to put away the food while Zoe and Rebecca loaded the dishwasher. Jocelyn carried one load into the kitchen, but then Carla told her to go sit down. Without argument, she went with Darius to the living room.

After they helped clear the table, the boys were given permission to go play video games once again.

By the time the rest of them joined the couple, Jocelyn was settled on the loveseat, and Darius had a fire blazing in the fireplace. Roman always enjoyed having a fire in his home in Wyoming, but he was most often alone when he sat in front of it. Being here with people he cared about made the experience even more enjoyable.

Roman stared into the flickering flames, thinking back over the past year. There had been moments when he wasn't sure he'd ever be in Serenity Point again. When he'd been afraid the complications of cancer and treatment wouldn't allow him to return to his life.

"Are you going to tell us now, Roman?" Zoe asked. "I need to know what's happened."

"Me, too," Jocelyn said, though her expression was one of worry.

"I would like to know as well," Carla added softly.

Roman nodded. "When I came back last year, I'd just been told I had cancer."

"What?" Jocelyn said with a gasp. "So, you came here to what? Say goodbye?"

“I didn’t know what was going to happen,” Roman told her. “I wanted to make sure I saw the two of you before I started treatment.”

“You should have *told* us,” Zoe said, anger lacing her voice. “We would have wanted to be there for you.”

“I know that, but I didn’t want you to have to deal with the stress of it when you had your own lives to live.”

“*You* are a part of our lives,” Jocelyn told him. “We would have loved to be there for you.”

Before Roman could respond, Devon asked, “How are you doing now, son?”

The first time Devon had called him son, Roman had had to fight the urge to wince. It had been an instinctive reaction. Nothing to do with the man who’d uttered the word. This time around, it didn’t take him off-guard, and he found he didn’t mind it coming from Devon.

“I’m currently in remission,” he said. “My last scans were clear, but I’ll still have to go back for regular checkups to make sure that if it comes back, I can begin treatment right away.”

“That’s why your hair is so short,” Zoe said. “And why you look like you’ve lost a lot of weight.”

Roman nodded, his gaze going to where Rebecca sat curled up in an armchair. Her expression was concerned as she stared at him. Their gazes met and held for a moment before Zoe drew his attention with another question.

“So, does remission mean you’re cured?”

“No. I need to be in remission for a certain amount of time before they’ll say I’m cured.”

“Is there a chance it will come back?” Rebecca spoke for the first time.

He gave her a rueful smile. “There’s always a chance, unfortunately.”

“My mom was diagnosed with cancer when I was in my twenties,” Devon said. “She had surgery, then went through a bunch of treatments. It took a while, but she eventually went into remission. Her cancer never came back.”

“I’m holding onto hope that’s the case for me as well.” Roman sighed. “But it’s hard not to want to brace myself for its eventual return. I don’t know how to embrace life now without wondering if it’s all going to be ripped away.”

“Take a day at a time,” Devon told him with an understanding smile. “We should all live each day as if it might be our last, because none of us is guaranteed another day. When I had my heart attack, it was very much a wake-up call for me, and I had to learn to live without fear that it might happen again.”

Roman knew that Devon had suffered a heart attack before coming to Serenity to see Carla again. He was probably the one person who could understand what Roman was struggling with.

“I want you to stay here,” Jocelyn announced. “Please.”

“Do you mean instead of the hotel?” Roman asked. “Or in Serenity?”

“Both,” she said without hesitation.

“I can give up the hotel. I’m not sure I can stay in Serenity.”

“Okay. I’ll take that. However, I don’t want you to not visit us like you did this past year. You jump in whatever fancy plane you travel in and come see us.”

“I will,” Roman promised. Now that they knew what had happened, he had nothing to hide regarding his health.

“We’ll hold you to that,” Zoe said. “I know you’ve managed to stay in our lives this past year, even though you didn’t visit, but that’s not going to work for me now.”

Roman smiled at Zoe. There were five years between them, so she’d barely been a teenager when he’d left. Getting

to know the woman she'd become had been wonderful, but they still had more of their relationship to build.

"I'll go back to the hotel tonight since I've paid for the night, but I'll be back tomorrow to go on the Christmas tree hunt."

"Good." Jocelyn rubbed her hand on her belly. "I'm glad I didn't have to threaten to have Darius beat you up."

"What?" Darius asked as he turned to stare at his wife. "I'm not beating anyone up, Jocelyn. Especially not your brother. Have you lost your mind?"

Jocelyn gave him an innocent smile with wide eyes. "Oops. Pregnancy brain."

Zoe snickered. "You better make the most out of that excuse because the countdown is on."

"I know," Jocelyn said with a sigh.

Roman had to chuckle at his sisters' interactions. When they'd been younger, Zoe had annoyed him and Jocelyn. After all, they'd been teens, and she'd been a *pre*-teen. She'd wanted to go with them whenever they went out with their friends, which wasn't something either he or Jocelyn wanted.

He was thankful that as adults, they were all getting along much better. Though they might have gotten along sooner if he'd stuck around instead of running away.

Rebecca stayed quiet, and there was worry on her face, making Roman wonder if it was about what he'd shared or if there was something else going on. Maybe with her ex.

Roman frowned. Maybe he needed to check in on Craig again to make sure that he wasn't harassing Rebecca. He checked in on him every few weeks, just to make sure he was sticking to his new life. That life was, by all accounts, a stable one.

When Craig and his new girlfriend had left Serenity, they'd moved to Arizona, and he'd gotten a job, which he was still at. In the past year, he'd married the woman he'd left Rebecca for, and everything seemed fairly stable in their lives.

Roman periodically checked on him to make sure the guy still had his job, and that they hadn't been kicked out of their house. Stability made it likely that he'd leave Rebecca alone. So even though Roman would like to see Craig crash and burn in life, he was thankful that things were going well for him. For now.

He should maybe check in on the guy anyhow, just to see if he might be doing something to cause Rebecca to worry. If need be, he'd get into Craig's email and make sure he wasn't in contact with her. He wouldn't go into Rebecca's email. He didn't do that for the innocent parties involved in these types of situations.

The more he thought about it, the more Roman's fingers itched to use his equipment. He'd continued to work as much as he could throughout his treatment. Some days, it had been impossible. But any time he'd felt halfway decent, he'd either worked on company business or on his more... secretive work.

The last month of his time at the clinic, he'd found it extremely hard to concentrate, however, so he hadn't done as much as he should have. His plan was to return home after Thanksgiving and buckle down and get a bunch of work done.

But right at that moment, he really wanted to check and make sure nothing was going on between Rebecca and Craig. Ever since he'd heard what had happened in the past, he'd felt the need to help her out. To protect her and Aaron from being targeted by her ex again.

"Are you ready for the birth, Darius?" Carla asked.

"Nope." Darius shook his head. "We went to our second birthing class the other night. It was *not* fun."

"Was it *supposed* to be fun?" Zoe asked.

"Probably not," Darius admitted. "But watching someone give birth was just a little too much for me."

"Imagine how *I* felt," Jocelyn said. "I wasn't exactly prepared for that either. And I'm the one who's going to have to experience it."

Darius shifted to face her. “But you’ve already been through it once. I assume you know what’s going to happen.”

“Well, true, but I didn’t have an actual view of what was going on when Colby was born. I mean, we kind of had the doctor’s view for that video we watched.”

Zoe laughed. “Poor Darius. I just can’t even imagine you having to sit through something like that.”

“Right?” Darius shook his head. “I just wish they’d prepared us a bit, but apparently the person teaching the class was a substitute.”

“So the sub showed a video, just like when we’d have a sub in high school?” Roman asked.

“Yep.” Jocelyn gave a huff of laughter. “I have a feeling that if the subs in high school showed videos like that, teenage pregnancies would have been non-existent.”

Carla laughed, and Roman couldn’t help but grin. Even Rebecca was smiling.

“Are you worried about the birth, Joce?” Roman asked.

“Only that Darius might faint.”

“I’m not going to faint,” Darius protested. “I’ve never fainted in my life.”

“There’s always a first time,” Rebecca said.

“Hey, sis. No ganging up on me.”

“Just saying,” Rebecca told him.

Roman was glad that they’d moved on from the subject of his health. The pending birth of his next niece or nephew was a much happier subject. At least for him. Perhaps Darius was a bit worried, but Roman was quite sure that when the time came, he’d be rock solid for Jocelyn.

But as much as he was enjoying being with his family, Roman felt himself begin to fade. If he didn’t go soon, he was going to fall asleep on either the couch or behind the wheel of his rental. Still, it was hard to work up the desire to leave when it was so warm and comfortable where he was sitting.

When the conversation next lagged, he said, “I think I’d better go.”

“Really?” Jocelyn said with a frown. “It’s not that late.”

“I know, but I’m pretty beat. I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

Jocelyn had a sympathetic look on her face. “You’ll bring your stuff with you tomorrow? So you can stay here?”

“Yep. That’s the plan.”

“Well, I hope you sleep better tonight,” Jocelyn said. “You’ll need your strength when we go to chop down trees tomorrow.”

“Is it supposed to be cold?”

Jocelyn shrugged, but Rebecca said, “They’re saying it might snow, but it’s not going to be super cold.”

“Do you have warm clothes?” Carla asked.

Roman smiled. “Oh yes. My place in Wyoming can get cold, so if I want to be outside, I need to have warm clothes. I brought some of them with me.”

As Roman pushed to his feet, Darius got up and offered his hand to Jocelyn, who allowed him to pull her up from the loveseat. Zoe and Ben also stood, and they all followed him into the foyer, where he got his jacket and boots on.

“I’m so glad you showed up,” Jocelyn said, her expression serious as she gave him a hug, her pregnant belly pressed against his waist. “And you’d better show up again tomorrow.”

“I will. I promise.” Roman turned to give Zoe a hug. “What time do I need to be here?”

“Why don’t you come for breakfast?” Jocelyn suggested.

“Like around eight?”

Everyone laughed at his question.

“No, definitely not eight,” Jocelyn said. “More like nine or ten.”

“That’s brunch,” Roman told her.

“It’s breakfast if I say it’s breakfast.”

“Okay.” Roman grinned at her. “I’ll be here at nine. If breakfast isn’t ready, I’ll just help get it ready.”

“Perfect.”

“I hope you actually know how to make breakfast,” Zoe said as she leaned into Ben’s side. “Because Jocelyn will definitely take advantage of you.”

“I feel very picked on.”

“Just calling it as I’ve experienced it.”

“But you weren’t that great at making scrambled eggs,” Jocelyn said.

“I tried to tell you that, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“It’s a good thing we had Rebecca here, who actually does know how to make scrambled eggs. Darius does now too.”

“I can make toast and coffee,” Roman said. “So factor that into any plans you have for my help.”

After saying goodnight, Roman left the house, hurrying to where he’d parked his rental earlier. The night air held a chill, but it was nothing worse than what he’d endured before. Though he had to admit that since his treatment and losing weight, the cold tended to reach his bones more quickly.

Hopefully, that wouldn’t be the case tomorrow.

CHAPTER SIX

Rebecca was in the kitchen at eight-thirty the next morning, having had a fairly decent night, which she hoped would result in her not tiring too easily that day.

“Do you think Jocelyn will be able to handle the Christmas tree farm today?” Rebecca asked as she made herself a cup of coffee.

“I think she’s determined to go, which is why I made sure not to wake her. She just needs to rest as much as possible.” Darius took a sip from his mug of coffee, which he’d prepared before she’d come up to the kitchen. “Were you this tired and sore with Aaron?”

“I was a mess during my pregnancy. Sick pretty much the whole time, so I’m a poor comparison. But even if Jocelyn wasn’t this way with Colby, a woman can have completely different pregnancies.”

“I just worry.”

“She’s still working full time, and I’m sure that has exhausted her as well, since she’s dealing with energetic kids.” Rebecca added some cream to her coffee. “I think you just need to trust her. She wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize herself or the baby.”

“I know you’re right, but I just... worry.”

Rebecca smiled at him. “You worry about those you love, and of course, this is your first baby. That can be daunting.”

“Becoming a dad to Colby was definitely easier.”

That made Rebecca laugh. “Well, yes, that’s true. And lucky you, he slept through the night from the very first day you became his dad. Won’t be the case for this little one.”

“I’m already prepared for that,” Darius said. “I just want Jocelyn to feel better.”

“That might not happen until a few weeks after the baby is born,” she warned him. “But you’re not going to be on your own. I’m here for you both.”

“Why else do you think I didn’t argue when Jocelyn wanted to build you an apartment in the basement?”

“I thought you wanted to help me with Aaron.”

“Well, that too.” Darius gave her a smile, the worry momentarily fading from his expression.

“Regardless, you know I’ll do what I can to help you both out.”

“Thanks, sis.” Darius took a sip of his coffee. “So, what do you think about Roman’s situation?”

Rebecca had been trying not to think about what Roman had revealed the night before. For a variety of reasons. First, the idea that he’d been fighting for his life was frightening. Second, that he had been doing that all alone was heartbreaking.

The man was clearly used to dealing with things by himself. He should have let Jocelyn and Zoe know what was going on. It would have been devastating to them if the first time they’d seen their brother after so many years’ absence had also been their last.

“I feel bad for him,” Rebecca said. “But were you truly surprised by what he said?”

Darius shook his head. “The hair. The weight loss. It was clear something physical had happened. I just didn’t want to think it was that bad, especially for Jocelyn and Zoe’s sake.”

She understood not wanting to be a burden to family when sick. The incident that had brought her to stay permanently with Darius and Jocelyn had forced her to rely on them when she would rather not have had to. However, having Aaron to think of had made the decision easier than if she’d just been on her own.

“Hopefully, when he goes back to his place, he’ll still come back for visits,” Rebecca said. “I mean, he needs to come see

his new niece or nephew.”

“Joce won’t let him stay away now,” Darius said. “She only accepted what he did this past year because he still talked to her and was sort of involved in our lives.”

“She really wanted to video chat with him,” Rebecca reminded him. “But I guess we now know why that never happened.”

“Again, something that will hopefully change this year.”

Rebecca nodded. Though she hadn’t spent a ton of time with Roman when he’d been there for Jocelyn’s wedding and Christmas, from what she’d seen, he seemed nice. Then, as he’d done stuff for Aaron over the past year, she realized he really was a kind person.

He was the first single man who had a significant presence in her life. For the most part, she steered clear of men. She worked with a few, but they always kept a professional distance that she appreciated.

After Craig had left her, she hadn’t wanted to let any man get close to her or Aaron. She was determined to protect Aaron in a way that she hadn’t been able to when Craig had been around.

Ben’s arrival in their lives through Zoe had been a very positive thing, especially where Colby and Aaron were concerned. He was a gentle man, but so effusive in his encouragement of the boys, whether it was their achievements at school or doing something on their video games. They both loved him, and Rebecca was confident the feeling was mutual.

The boys knew about Roman’s generosity through all the gifts he’d sent them, but Rebecca hoped that maybe they’d have a chance to actually get to know the man himself. Their plans for that day might go a long way toward helping with that.

Darius had just gotten up to refill his coffee when the doorbell rang. He set his mug down and left the kitchen. Rebecca drained the last of her coffee, then began to pull items

from the fridge to prepare the breakfast for the adults that she and Jocelyn had decided on the night before.

When Darius returned with Roman, Rebecca paused for a moment. “Good morning.”

Roman smiled at her. “Good morning.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Darius asked. “I’ve finally figured out how to make really good coffee in this monstrosity of a coffee maker.”

“Sure,” Roman said as he sat down on a stool. “That would be great.”

Rebecca cracked eggs into a bowl, then added the rest of the ingredients for the French toast. As she worked, she listened to Darius and Roman talk as Darius laid some bacon on a pan. Roman was asking all kinds of questions about Darius’s business.

She’d just put the first piece of bread in the pan when Colby and Aaron came running into the kitchen. They’d spent the night together in Colby’s room. Even though they lived in the same house, they didn’t sleep in the same room most nights. Usually, one night a week, they were allowed a sleepover in Colby’s room.

“What’s for breakfast, Auntie Becca?” Colby asked as he came to lean against her and look into the pan. “Oh... French toast?”

“Yep. And some scrambled eggs and bacon.”

“I’m starving,” Colby said.

“Me, too, Mama.” Aaron grinned at her. “I hope there’s a lot. We’re as hungry as dinosaurs.”

“Oh, there will be plenty.”

Since she figured they’d be eating in shifts that morning, Rebecca quickly whipped up a few eggs to scramble for the boys. She set out a couple of plates, then transferred a piece of French toast to each of them. They both wanted peanut butter spread on their pieces, but Aaron also wanted a banana cut up

on his. After adding some syrup, she put a scoop of scrambled eggs on each plate.

“C’mon, boys,” Darius said as he poured them each a glass of milk. “Sit up.”

They climbed up on stools beside Roman, smiling at him before turning their attention to the plates of food Rebecca set in front of them. Rebecca looked at Roman. “Do you like French toast?”

“I love French toast, but I can wait until you’ve fed Jocelyn. Coffee is a great start.”

“Okay. The next slices will be Jocelyn’s, then you’re up.”

“I look forward to it.” He gave her a smile as he lifted his mug to take a sip.

Rebecca had always enjoyed feeding people, but she was feeling a stronger than usual urge to feed Roman, given how thin he looked. “Do you follow a special diet?”

Roman hesitated just long enough that Rebecca worried that he wasn’t going to tell her, even if he did.

“I didn’t leave the clinic with a specific food list,” Roman said. “But Mila, my housekeeper and my cook, has taken it upon herself to research what they recommend to promote healthy weight gain. And, well, just healthy eating in general.”

“So maybe not what we’re having today?”

“Mila would probably say no, but she also understands that there are times to make an exception.” He hesitated, then said, “She sent a list of what I should eat.”

Rebecca flipped the French toast and stirred the scrambled eggs. “Do you have a copy of the list for us?”

Roman sighed. “She did say that I should at least give you the smoothie list, but I’m not a huge fan of smoothies.”

“I’m not either,” Colby said, wrinkling his nose. “But Aaron likes them.”

Aaron nodded as he licked his finger. “I like the banana and blueberry ones Mama makes.”

Darius pulled the bacon out of the oven and put the strips on a paper towel covered plate. "I hope Jocelyn doesn't smell the bacon. She's definitely going to want some."

"Is she not allowed to have it?" Roman asked.

"Well, it's not that she's not allowed to have it," Darius said. "It's more that her body rejects it."

"No bacon-loving baby in her tummy," Rebecca said with a laugh.

"So she gets the eggs and the French toast."

While Rebecca finished the toast and eggs, Darius prepared a tray for the two of them, since he liked to eat with her. He prepared a mug of coffee for Jocelyn, though it wasn't nearly as big as the mugs Rebecca and Darius had drunk from earlier. Her coffee was limited, much to her dismay.

Once Darius left the kitchen with the tray, Rebecca turned her attention to preparing food for Roman. The boys finished their food, then asked if they could go play.

"Do you think Jocelyn and Zoe are really upset with me?" Roman asked once the boys had gone downstairs.

Rebecca glanced at him as she transferred the French toast to a plate. "Maybe not *really* upset. However, even if they are upset, I think they'll get over it."

"I didn't want to add stress to their lives, especially with Jocelyn being pregnant."

"And I'm sure they understand that," Rebecca said. "You just have to accept that now that you're back in their lives, they won't accept you *not* being in their lives. I think that upset Jocelyn the most. Feeling like she got you back, but then didn't really have you in her life the way she wanted."

"I'll try to be better about that now," Roman said. "All the secrets about my health are out now."

Rebecca wondered if there were more secrets that weren't out, considering he'd specified that the secrets about his health were out. She could hardly ask him, however. She didn't know

him well enough to do that. Plus, the last thing she wanted was to upset him or anyone else, especially on that day.

“Here you go,” Rebecca said as she leaned over to place the plate of food in front of him. “Do you want more coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“Milk or water?”

“Water would be great.” She filled a glass, then put it down in front of him. “Thanks so much.”

“So how have you been?” Roman asked as he cut his French toast. “Jocelyn wrote that you were pretty sick a little while ago.”

Rebecca sighed. “Yeah. I’m usually pretty healthy, but somehow, one thing led to another, until I was really sick. Over the course of a month or so, I had several infections, and I ended up in the hospital with pneumonia. It was terrible. Even now, I’m still not completely back to full strength.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Roman said. “I know it’s difficult when health is compromised.”

Rebecca nodded. “I think good health is something we take for granted until we don’t have it anymore. I know I did.”

“I did too.”

Roman hadn’t been specific about the type of cancer he’d had, but Rebecca didn’t feel comfortable asking.

“Is that why you’ve moved in here?” Roman asked.

“Yes. Jocelyn and Darius brought me here when I got sick the second time,” she told him as she put the last of the French toast into the pan. “I was so worried about not being able to take care of Aaron on my own and not being able to work. Aaron and I stayed here while I was recovering, which was when Jocelyn informed me that she was having some work done in the basement. Work that would create an apartment where Aaron and I could stay. I wasn’t really given a choice.”

Roman chuckled. “She can be bossy sometimes.”

“I’ve discovered that when she gets that way, it’s usually because she cares about someone and wants to take care of them.”

“Our mom was that way,” Roman said. “She inherited our mom’s big heart. My mom worked at shelters as a way to care for people.”

“Jocelyn teaches as her way of caring. She’s so wonderful with the kids. And Zoe has begun to go to the shelters with Ben and his mom.”

Rebecca wondered if Roman had followed in his mom’s footsteps in some way. He was generous, she knew that much. But was it just with his family?

Once the last of the French toast was done, Rebecca set it aside to clean up the dishes she’d used.

“Are you not going to eat?” Roman asked as she put the dirty dishes into the dishwasher.

“I will. I just want to clean this up, or Jocelyn will start on it when she gets up.”

“Will that be before noon?”

Rebecca laughed. “Yes. She’ll be down once she and Darius finish eating.”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“Nope. It won’t take me long.” She filled the sink with warm, soapy water and began to wash the mixing bowls and frying pans she’d used.

Though Jocelyn had initially protested, Rebecca had insisted that if she was going to stay there with them, she would help with the cooking and the cleaning. As Jocelyn’s pregnancy had progressed, she’d protested less and less.

Since Jocelyn wouldn’t take any rent from Rebecca, she was glad that she could pay Jocelyn in other ways. Sometimes it took her longer than usual to get stuff done because she tired so quickly, but she tried her best. Right then, she felt okay, but she had a feeling that later that evening, she was going to be moving much more slowly.

“You won’t mind having an extra mouth to feed if I move in here for a few days?”

“If?” Rebecca asked as she dried one of the bowls. “You haven’t decided yet?”

“Okay. I guess I should have said *when*.” Roman got up and carried his plate, glass, and mug around to where the dishwasher was. “Do you mind having an extra mouth to feed *when* I move in here?”

“I don’t mind at all. The more the merrier.” She watched as he placed his dishes in the dishwasher. “Let me know if you have allergies or food dislikes that I can take into account when cooking.”

“I’m pretty easy to please,” Roman said. “Though Mila would tell you that I’m partial to most comfort style foods. I’m a pretty meat and potatoes type of guy.”

“Well, you’re in good company here then,” Rebecca told him. “Darius and Ben are both like that. Devon has a slightly more refined palate. The boys would live on pizza, burgers, and nuggets if they could.”

“What about you, Jocelyn, and Zoe?” Roman asked as he settled back on his stool.

“Zoe isn’t terribly fussy. She’ll eat whatever we’re having, though she prefers chicken over pork or beef. Jocelyn’s tastes have changed a bit with her pregnancy.”

“Has she had weird cravings?”

“Not really. Unfortunately, her body has rejected foods that normally she likes.”

“Like bacon?”

“Yep. Bacon. Oranges. Ketchup. Very strange.”

“And what about you?”

“I have a weakness for carbs. I love pasta and potatoes. And like Zoe, I prefer chicken to most types of meat. Not that I won’t eat a good steak or pork chop. I just like chicken better.”

“No fish?”

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. “Not a fan of most fish or seafood.”

“Oh. I love lobster.”

The last time Roman had been there, he’d spent most of his time with his sisters, and since it was Christmas, the focus had been on that more than anything else.

Rebecca found that she enjoyed talking with Roman. He was easy to talk to, though she couldn’t help but notice that he was more interested in getting her to talk about herself and others than revealing much about himself.

Darius appeared as she was putting the last of the dishes she’d washed away. She took the tray from him, then he made his way to the coffeemaker.

“How many cups is that so far?” she asked as she put the dishes from the tray into the dishwasher.

“Three.”

“Are you drinking Jocelyn’s share these days?”

“Don’t even hint at that,” Darius said with a scowl. “She’ll restrict me to one cup.”

“Maybe that’s only fair, considering she’s carrying *your* baby.”

“Whose side are you on?” Darius asked without looking at her.

“Honestly, in this particular situation, probably Jocelyn’s.”

Rebecca enjoyed teasing her brother, probably because she hadn’t been able to do it much when they were kids. Their father hadn’t been tolerant of that type of thing in their home. He apparently couldn’t handle seeing any of them enjoy themselves. Or at least that was how Rebecca had felt.

While Darius and Roman talked, Rebecca pulled the ingredients out of the fridge to make stew in the crock pots. They’d decided that was the easiest way to prepare for later when they got home from the Christmas tree lot. Plus, it would

be the perfect meal to eat after the chilly day they were going to endure... uh... enjoy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jocelyn arrived in the kitchen about half an hour after Darius had. Roman could see that she looked a little tired, even though she'd just gotten up. She did have some makeup on, and her hair was done, so she appeared to be ready for their day.

“Morning, everyone,” she said as she slowly walked over to sit on the empty stool between him and Darius. “Thank you for breakfast, Becca. Your French toast is always so good.”

Rebecca smiled at her. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I always do. The only thing that might have made it taste better was a *bigger* cup of coffee,” Jocelyn said as she glared at the one Darius held between his hands. “Like that one.”

Darius moved the mug a little further away from his wife. “You know it’s not my rule, babe.”

“Personally, I think the doctor should have insisted that you needed to cut back on your coffee in sympathy with me.”

“Does lack of coffee make you cranky?” Roman asked, realizing too late that perhaps that wasn’t a wise question to ask if it did.

Jocelyn’s glare swung his way. “No. Sleeping, walking, sitting... just moving... with a forty-pound bowling ball in my stomach makes me cranky.”

“Sorry, sis,” Roman said, lifting his hands in surrender. “You’re almost to the end.”

“These past few weeks have felt like they were longer than all the rest of my pregnancy combined.”

When her phone chirped, Jocelyn picked it up. “Zoe’s checking to see if we need anything for dinner.”

“She’s bringing buns, right?” Rebecca said. “Carla said she’d bring a salad and a dessert.”

Jocelyn tapped out a message, then waited before she said, “Yep. She said she went to the bakery a few minutes ago and picked up three dozen.”

“You’ll love eating the leftover buns with peanut butter and chocolate spread,” Rebecca said with a laugh.

“You know that’s a favorite around here.”

“You and Colby, both.”

“Are she and Ben coming here?” Roman asked. “Or are they just going to meet us at the lot?”

“They’ll just meet us there,” Jocelyn said. “They’re not going to get a tree. Ben prefers a fake one, and Zoe doesn’t want to have to take care of a real one.”

“Personally, I’d prefer a fake one as well,” Darius revealed. “So much easier to take care of.”

“Don’t be a Grinch,” Jocelyn said. “Or do I need to get you your own tree, like Colby has in his room?”

“He still has his dinosaur tree?” Roman asked.

“Yep.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Because I brought a few decorations for him.”

“Oh. He’ll be happy about that. The boys will decorate it tonight, then we’ll decorate the real tree tomorrow.”

Roman hadn’t decided yet how long he planned to stay in Serenity. He knew for certain that he wasn’t going to stay until Christmas, though he did plan to come back for the holiday. Not that he had a choice. Roman was sure that Jocelyn would be very upset if he wasn’t present.

If she hadn’t been pregnant, he might have suggested that they all come to his place for the holiday. Maybe in future years that would be possible.

At Jocelyn’s request, Rebecca had given them each a task. Roman was once again peeling potatoes, while Darius peeled carrots and Jocelyn was responsible for cutting them up. Roman might have preferred that job, but apparently, he

wasn't to be trusted to get them the right size. That was according to Jocelyn, not Rebecca.

"Did you bring your bags?" Jocelyn asked once they were all done, and Rebecca had added everything to the crock pots.

"I did. They're in the foyer."

"Sweetheart, can you show Roman to the room he stayed in last time?" Jocelyn asked. "My old room."

"Sure."

Roman followed Darius out to the foyer. He didn't have a lot of bags. Just a small suitcase, a duffel, and his laptop bag.

Darius grabbed the suitcase while Roman picked up the duffel and his laptop bag. They climbed the steps to the second floor, then Darius led him through a door down the hall from Colby's room.

It was the room he'd stayed in when he'd last been there, and not much had changed in the décor since then.

"Thanks," Roman said as Darius set the suitcase on the bench at the end of the bed. Roman added his duffel and laptop to it.

"You're welcome." Darius didn't leave the room right away, just stood there with his hands on his hips.

"You okay?" Roman asked.

"I guess that's the question I want to ask you," Darius said after a moment. "Are you really in remission? You're not just saying that to make Jocelyn and Zoe feel better?"

Roman could understand why he might think that. After all, he'd come there the previous year to say goodbye, just in case the doctors were wrong about his chances. Darius probably assumed he was saying he was in remission when, in fact, he wasn't, and that he was only back to say goodbye for real this time.

"I'm really in remission," Roman assured him. "Whether the cancer will return or not, I can't say for certain. Believe me, I wish I could."

Darius nodded. “I’m sorry you had to go through what you did, but I think you were wrong to keep it from your sisters.”

“Would you have really rather that I had dragged Jocelyn through the ups and downs of my treatment while she was pregnant?” Roman asked with a frown. “Or was it better that I waited until I could tell them I was in remission?”

Darius sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck. “As her husband, I’m glad you did it the way you did, but I know Jocelyn would vehemently disagree with me.”

“If the cancer recurs, I’ll let you know, then we can make a decision about what to tell Jocelyn and Zoe.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

And Roman appreciated that this man wanted to protect Jocelyn, much the way Roman had wanted to by not revealing what was going on with his health. He’d come to appreciate his brother-in-law over the past year.

He’d done a background check on the man, of course, just to be sure he wasn’t hiding anything in his past. Though he’d had a bit of an odd upbringing, it had been clear that Darius had left that behind.

And then there was Rebecca. Darius was devoted to his sister, and that also spoke well to Roman. The more he got to know Rebecca, the more Roman understood why Darius was as protective of his sister as he was of Jocelyn.

With that settled, the pair of them headed back down to the kitchen. Rebecca sat at the counter, finally eating her breakfast. Within minutes, the boys made a reappearance, apparently hungry again.

Darius stepped in to make snacks for the boys, who eagerly recounted the results of the Mario racing game they’d been playing. It seemed that Colby could drive faster, but he wrecked a lot, so Aaron’s more cautious approach brought about more victories for him.

Roman wondered if anyone had explained the story of the tortoise and the hare to the boy. Speed wasn’t everything if you couldn’t control it.

As the boys ate at the counter, Jocelyn phoned Carla and then Zoe, coordinating their meet up at the Christmas tree lot. Jocelyn might be pregnant, but she was still focused on organizing things.

When it was finally time to go, the boys bundled up in their winter wear and the adults pulled on warm jackets, knit caps, and gloves. Thankfully, Roman had brought what he needed to be warm while out in the cold for an extended period of time.

They loaded into Darius's SUV, with Jocelyn climbing into the front. The boys scrambled into the third row, and Rebecca made sure they were buckled into their booster seats correctly before she settled into the middle row beside Roman.

"Are you going to be able to get two trees on here, Mom?" Colby asked from the back row.

"We're going to try," Jocelyn said. "But if not, I'm sure Ben would let us put one on his car."

As they drove away from the house, Jocelyn fiddled with the radio, and Roman saw Darius give her a look. And when she settled on a Christmas music station and then turned it up, she got another look from her husband.

Jocelyn reached out to touch Darius's cheek. "You might as well just embrace it."

"But it's not even December yet," he said. "It's bad enough we're getting a tree. Do we have to have the music too?"

"For today, yes."

Darius sighed but didn't say anything more, keeping his attention on the road.

"Not a fan of Christmas, huh?" Roman said to Rebecca.

"Christmas was never really a thing when we were growing up," she said. "At least not to the extent that Jocelyn likes to celebrate. Darius will probably never be as excited about Christmas as Jocelyn, but then, not many people are."

"Remember how much Mom loved Christmas?" Jocelyn asked, turning slightly to look at them.

“Yeah. She also liked to have the tree up the day after Thanksgiving.”

“And then we started the Christmas baking. It was great.”

Roman had spent a lot of years trying *not* to remember the Christmas holidays he’d spent with his mom. The guilt over how everything had unfolded still weighed heavily on him, and all he could think about was that she should have had so many more Christmases with them. And maybe she would have if he had just kept his mouth shut.

It was one of the reasons he wasn’t sure he wanted to hang around for the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It was going to be Christmas overload with Jocelyn in charge.

Mila brought Christmas to his house, usually putting up the tree in the living room and baking plenty of goodies. She would play Christmas music while she was working, but that was the extent of it. If he wanted to get away from all the Christmas stuff, he just retreated to his office, which was where he preferred to spend time, anyway.

Unfortunately, that wouldn’t be something he could do if he stayed at Jocelyn’s. So he’d stay for a few days, then head home until closer to Christmas.

When they reached the lot, Darius parked, and they all got out of the SUV to join Zoe, Ben, Carla, and Devon. The excitement of both boys was evident as they jumped around while the adults talked. Soon, however, they were all wandering down various paths, following Colby and Aaron as they began their quest for the perfect tree.

Roman was surprised when Zoe tucked her hand around his arm. He smiled down at her, though, and said, “How’s it going?”

“It’s going great.” The smile she gave him seemed to support her words. “I want to thank you again for what you did.”

“You’ve already done that, Zoe,” Roman said. “You don’t need to keep thanking me.”

“I know, but I don’t think you realize how much it means to me,” she told him. “And to Ben, too.”

When Zoe had told him that she planned to stay in Serenity and record her own music at a studio in Coeur d’Alene, Roman had decided to have a studio built for her. It meant that she wouldn’t have to leave Serenity to work on her music. He’d also added a high-end computer setup for Ben to work on videos.

“Do you need anything more? Was everything suitable for what you needed?”

“It was more than suitable,” Zoe said. “And we’ve also been able to let others rent the space. Ben has also taken on a couple more video clients.”

“Is he still working at the coffee shop?”

“Yes, but not as much. He and his mom talked, and she insisted that he needed to do what made him happy. She’s hired someone to cover a lot of what Ben used to do.”

“I’m glad it’s worked out,” Roman said. “I’ve enjoyed the music you’ve released so far.”

It wasn’t quite his cup of tea, but objectively, he knew his sister had talent.

“I’ll be releasing some Christmas songs soon. They were so popular last year that I want to do that again this year.”

“I’m proud of you, sis,” Roman said. “For going after your dreams, even though they’ve changed a bit.”

“I never would have thought I’d find contentment doing music this way. I mean, I didn’t really even realize it was a possibility. Now that I’m here and doing this with Ben, I can’t imagine anything else. I’m so happy.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He really was, and if he had played even a small role in that by funding the studio she and Ben used now, he was happy too.

When they came to a stop near a huge tree that probably towered a good ten feet or more into the air, Roman stared, trying to picture where exactly it would fit in Jocelyn’s house.

“We’re still not cutting a hole in your floor, so the top of the tree is in your room, buddy,” Darius said as he ruffled Colby’s hair. “This will never be the perfect tree for us, I’m afraid.”

Colby stared up at his dad. “How about we put it in the basement for Aaron and Auntie Becca and cut a hole in the living room floor?”

Darius chuckled. “That’s not possible either.”

The boy’s head drooped as his shoulders slumped. “Man. Not fun.”

“C’mon,” Aaron said, tugging on the sleeve of Colby’s jacket. “There’s still lots of trees. We’ll find our perfect ones.”

“Kay.”

Colby followed his cousin, and when the adults fell into step behind him, it was Jocelyn beside Roman, while Zoe now walked with Ben, holding his hand. Jocelyn’s pace was slow, which was fine with Roman.

“How’re you feeling?” Roman asked as she grabbed his arm, much like Zoe had. He had a feeling she needed it for balance.

“I’m in pain physically, but being here with everyone makes me so happy. It helps to make my discomfort bearable.” She looked up at him. “But the bigger question is, how are you? Are you in pain?”

At one time, Roman would have said yes. However, after what he’d experienced during his treatment, he’d discovered that pain was relative.

“I have some pain in my muscles and joints, but it’s not debilitating. I don’t need medication for the pain anymore.” He didn’t mention the stomach pains he still got or the headaches that sometimes sent him to bed until they abated. Neither was as bad as they’d been during treatment, so he hoped that he’d have less of those episodes as time passed.

“I’d like to give you a lecture on not letting us know about things, but I’m going to let it go and just be thankful you’re

okay and that you're here."

"I'm glad I'm here too." Roman covered her hand with his and gave it a squeeze.

"Seems this was the year for some of us to deal with health issues," Jocelyn said.

"Yeah. You'd mentioned that Rebecca was sick, and she said she's still dealing with the effects of that."

"That was a pretty scary time for her," Jocelyn said. "And for Aaron too. It's why I insisted they move in with us. I wanted them both to have family around them, no matter what happened. She doesn't have anyone else but us."

Roman looked to where Rebecca walked with Darius, his arm around her shoulders. They were close in a way that perhaps he, Jocelyn, and Zoe might have been if he'd stuck around. He wondered if how Darius and Rebecca were raised gave them that closeness.

Would the tragedy he and his sisters had shared have drawn them close if he'd stayed around? He'd never know for sure. While they were closer now, it didn't have much to do with their past. In the years since their parents' death, they'd each dealt with what had happened in their own way.

Now, from what Jocelyn and Zoe had said, most people didn't seem to remember what had happened. Or maybe they just didn't care anymore since it hadn't been their family devastated by the actions of a selfish man.

Roman was glad when Colby and Aaron finally stopped in front of a tree, and Colby declared it perfect for their living room. Jocelyn moved to join them, probably to make sure it wasn't going to need holes cut in any roofs.

"Looks good, sweetie," Jocelyn told him. "Perfect, in fact."

Colby beamed. "Now we gotta cut it down!"

Roman wondered if they were going to actually cut it themselves, but they hadn't brought an ax or saw with them. Darius left, only to return a couple of minutes later with a

lumberjack of a man. He was dressed in jeans and a flannel jacket, with an ax over his shoulder.

“Hey! We found our tree!” Colby exclaimed when he spotted him.

The man smiled. “You seem to do that every year.”

“You remember us?” Aaron asked.

“I do,” the man said as he lowered the ax. “You’re the boys who find the perfect trees.”

“We are!” Colby agreed.

Roman smiled as the boys chatted with the man while he chopped the tree down. A younger man appeared to help him, and after getting some information from them, the pair took the tree off to the front. Before he left, Colby let him know they were still going to find another perfect tree.

As they continued on their quest, Roman found memories of the past crowding his thoughts. Back from when he was Colby and Aaron’s age. Back when he was innocent of the evils of the world. Back when Christmas was a time of happiness and excitement. Of being with family and friends. Of just enjoying all that life had to offer.

He gave himself over to the joy that he now saw on Colby and Aaron’s faces, letting go of the heavy events of so long ago, as well as the struggles of the past year. Roman knew that he couldn’t get rid of those thoughts forever, but for that day, he didn’t want to focus on them anymore.

By the time the boys had found another tree for Rebecca and one for Carla and Devon, they were ready to find some place to rest. Though it was chilly, it wasn’t unbearable to sit at a large picnic table, especially with a hot drink.

Most of the adults chose coffee, but Roman ordered a cup of hot apple cider. Rebecca had also chosen hot cider, and she had lowered her scarf to enjoy sips of the warming drink.

He’d noticed that during their time at the Christmas tree lot, she’d kept her mouth and nose covered with the scarf. Jocelyn had mentioned that the cold sometimes made her

cough, and considering how sick she'd been, it made sense that she'd try to avoid that happening again.

The boys had hot chocolate to go along with their powdered sugar covered mini donuts. They ended up getting two large orders of the donuts since the adults were as inclined to eat them as the boys.

“Can we go on the wagon to see Santa now?” Colby asked once they were full of donuts and hot chocolate.

“We'll stay here with Jocelyn,” Carla said. “So the rest of you can go.”

“Are you sure you don't want me to stay?” Darius asked his wife.

Jocelyn patted his hand. “I'm positive. I think you should be there for the boys. Take a video of it for me. I'll be fine here with Carla and Devon.”

“If you're sure...”

“I am. Have fun with the boys.”

Darius looked reluctant. But soon, they climbed up onto the large wagon, which was decorated with garlands of red and green, along with gold bells. Two large, beautiful horses pawed at the ground as they waited to pull the wagon.

Roman pulled himself up into the wagon, then turned to help Rebecca, while Darius took care of the boys. Once they were all in, Roman took a seat beside Rebecca. The boys sat across from them with Darius while Zoe and Ben were on Roman's other side.

Colby was the more outspoken of the two boys, but as the wagon bumped and jerked its way along the dirt road to its destination, Aaron was as excited and vocal as his cousin about seeing Santa. It had been years since Roman had thought much about Santa—over twenty years, actually—but he remembered how much he'd loved it when his mom had taken them to see the jolly old man.

They had gone to see Santa in the mall, however. Nothing as exciting as riding on a wagon to visit him in his... shed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rebecca took Roman's gloved hand when he offered it to her, then she climbed down from the wagon. Flashing him a quick smile, she said, "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

After releasing his hand, she turned to where the boys had gone to line up with the other kids who'd been on the wagon. There were only about ten kids, so it shouldn't take too long for them to get to see Santa.

They stood off to the side, keeping level with the boys as they waited their turn. When they finally got to the front of the line, Aaron went first, showing none of the hesitation that he'd had the first time he'd seen Santa.

Rebecca moved to where she could take some pictures of Aaron. Darius and Roman also took pictures, then they did the same when Colby took his turn.

As they waited for the rest of the children, Colby went to stand by Roman and said, "This isn't the real Santa."

Roman frowned at him. "It isn't?"

"Nope. Santa can't be everywhere, so he has guys like this one helping him. But it's okay, the helpers tell Santa what we want."

"Oh. Well, that's good."

"We were worried last year when we saw a different Santa at the community center," Colby said. "We didn't want to get Barbie dolls. Mom said not to worry, and she was right. We got the stuff we asked for."

Roman glanced over at Rebecca with wide eyes, and she chuckled. She figured this was probably the last year that the boys would really buy into Santa being real. Jocelyn's quick thinking the year before, when the boys had realized they'd seen two different Santas, had given them one more year with the mystery.

Once they were back in the wagon, Roman leaned close and said, “I thought for a moment that Colby was going to reveal that he knew the truth.”

“We all had a moment of panic last year,” Rebecca told him, keeping her voice low. Thankfully, he seemed to be able to hear her through the scarf over her mouth. “But Jocelyn is used to dealing with all kinds of questions by kids, so she could give them a plausible explanation.”

“Those boys must keep you all on your toes.”

“Oh, they do,” Rebecca agreed. “I can only imagine what the teenage years will be like.”

Roman grimaced. “Yeah. I remember those years. I think I gave my mom a few gray hairs.”

“Don’t say that.” Rebecca laughed, then coughed a couple of times before continuing. “I don’t want to think about what’s to come.”

She was glad that Aaron would have good male role models as he headed for his teen years. Darius, for sure, and hopefully Roman, Devon, and Ben too. She would like to think he’d keep his mellow personality even as a teen. However, she’d already seen him becoming more outgoing without Craig around to stifle him.

When they got off the wagon a short time later, they headed to where they’d left the others. Once there, Colby and Aaron recounted their time with Santa.

“We still need to see the other Santa, Mom,” Colby said. “So I can give him the rest of my list.”

“It’s that long, is it?” Jocelyn asked with an arched brow. “Aren’t you being a little greedy?”

“He doesn’t have to bring me *everything*,” Colby told her. “I just want him to have lots of ideas to choose from.”

Rebecca loved the little boy who had befriended Aaron, then later became his cousin... her nephew. She prayed that the boys’ friendship would grow and strengthen as they grew up.

It would be a blessing for Aaron to have that solid connection with Colby, since it was unlikely he'd ever have a sibling. And if, by some miracle, she did have another child, the age gap might be too great for them to ever be really close. At least in the way Colby and Aaron were.

“So, are we ready to get our Christmas trees and head home?” Darius asked as he rubbed his hand on Jocelyn’s back. “I think we’ve done everything here.”

“Yep,” Colby agreed. “And then me and Aaron can decorate the dinosaur tree.”

They ended up having to use Ben’s car to transport one of the trees home, since the “perfect” trees were too big to both fit on the top of Darius’s SUV. It wasn’t a big deal since Ben and Zoe had planned to go to the house, anyway. But first, Ben and Zoe went by Carla and Devon’s place to help them take their tree into the house and get it set up.

Once they reached home, Jocelyn went into the house while Rebecca helped the men. Colby and Aaron tried their best to supervise.

Eventually, the tree was out of its netting, and hopefully they’d managed to shake all the bugs out of it. If Rebecca was honest, she didn’t care all that much if her tree was real or fake. She just liked it to look pretty.

If it had just been her and Aaron, they’d probably have had a small fake tree. It was only because Jocelyn had made getting the real tree a fun experience that Rebecca embraced it.

While the guys worked at getting the tree set up in the living room, where Jocelyn was seated on the couch to guide them, Rebecca went to the kitchen to check on the stew. It was still an hour or so before they’d eat, but the tantalizing aroma of their dinner already filled the house.

She stirred both crock pots before getting out the dishes to set the table in the dining room. There was a smaller table in the breakfast nook that they sat at when it was just the five of them. But that evening, there were too many to eat there.

Rebecca turned on the Christmas playlist that Jocelyn liked, then took the dishes into the dining room. She was starting to feel tired from the day's activities and the urge to cough was stronger than usual, but she pushed through. Thankfully, she still had two days left in her weekend, which would be sufficient time for her to recover before having to go back to work.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

Rebecca looked away from the glasses she was setting on the table to see Roman standing in the doorway. “I’m finished in here, so I think I’m fine.”

She set the last glass on the table, then picked up the tray she’d used to transport the dishes to the dining room. As she walked back to the kitchen, Roman followed her, then sat down at the counter.

“Did Jocelyn fall asleep?” Rebecca asked as she set the tray down.

“Yeah. I think so. Either that or she’s good at faking it.”

“She doesn’t have to fake it these days. She can drop off to sleep in the blink of an eye.”

“I’ve had that sort of exhaustion,” Roman said. “But then there were times when I was so tired, but still couldn’t sleep.”

Rebecca nodded. “Unfortunately for Jocelyn, she’s going to be feeling this exhaustion for a few more months. Sleep won’t be any more plentiful after the baby’s born.”

The front door of the house opened, and Rebecca heard Colby greet Ben. Zoe came into the kitchen, and a few minutes later, Carla and Devon arrived.

“Here are the buns,” Zoe said as she emptied the bag onto the counter.

“And here’s the salad and dessert.” Carla placed her bag next to Zoe’s. “The stew smells delicious.”

They worked to get the meal on the table, then Zoe went to let the others know the meal was ready. As they gathered

around the table, Rebecca let out a sigh of relief to be sitting down. Darius said prayer for the food, then they began to eat.

“This is delicious, Becca,” Carla said. “Perfect meal to end this wonderful day.”

“I agree,” Devon said.

Rebecca was glad to hear they were enjoying the food. Even the boys ate the meal without complaint. “As usual, it was a joint effort.”

It was something Rebecca really enjoyed about them all getting together. Everyone pitched in, so no one carried the entire weight for their family meals.

They were starkly different to the family meals she and Darius had had with their family growing up. Those meals had always been quiet. Not much conversation around the table except as directed by their father, and there had definitely been no laughter. The meals she and Aaron had shared with Craig hadn't been much different.

Once Jocelyn had entered her life, things had changed, especially after Craig had left them. They'd eaten meals more frequently with Jocelyn, Colby, and sometimes, Carla. Gradually their family had grown, and now, with Roman there, it felt complete.

“So we're going to decorate after supper, Mom?” Colby asked.

“We'll decorate your tree after supper, but we'll do the big tree tomorrow afternoon.”

Rebecca wasn't terribly fussy about the look of her tree, but she had never wanted dinosaur decorations on it. Those decorations were fun for the boys, though, and Jocelyn would still have her beautifully decorated tree in the living room. And Rebecca would have one for herself in her basement apartment.

“I'll go get the stuff,” Darius said once they finished eating.

“I can help you,” Ben offered.

In the end, Zoe also went with them, while Rebecca, Carla, and Devon cleared off the table and put the leftovers away. Colby and Aaron had gone up to Colby's room to wait for the tree.

"I'm ready for bed," Jocelyn said with a sigh as she sat down on one of the stools. "It's so ridiculous how tired I am."

"It takes a lot of energy to grow a person," Rebecca said.

"I just want to enjoy Christmas, but everything feels like such a chore."

"Let us help you, darling," Carla told her. "I know you want to do it all, but let us help you."

"I don't think I have much of a choice."

Rebecca felt bad for her friend because she was usually upbeat and positive. This pregnancy had been hard from the start, and Rebecca hoped that the last stretch of it would go smoothly. And quickly.

"Did you want to go up and see how they're doing?" Rebecca asked.

"Yeah. Someone's got to supervise."

Carla chuckled. "You've definitely learned how to do that recently."

"Are you saying I'm bossy?"

"Supervisory," Carla said with a wink.

"Placating the pregnant woman." Jocelyn glared at her for a moment, then said, "I can deal with that."

They all migrated upstairs to where Darius and Zoe were trying to get the fake tree set up.

"I think the real trees might be easier than this," Darius muttered. "We have to separate *every* branch. It's ridiculous."

"Let me help," Jocelyn said as she headed over to the tree.

Roman sat on the lower bunk, a bag on the bed beside him. He was leaning back on his hands, watching them try to get the tree ready for the decorations.

Rebecca sat down on the floor next to the box of decorations and flipped it open.

“Here.” Roman set the bag on the floor. “Add those to the decorations for the tree.”

She peered inside the bag, then grinned at him. “I can’t believe you found more of these crazy decorations.”

“It wasn’t easy,” he said. “But honestly, money helps. I had Mila find someone who could make these decorations.”

Rebecca looked through them, smiling at the cute faces on the dinosaurs. Some wore Santa suits. Others had Christmas sweaters on. A few had Santa hats.

“These are so adorable, Roman,” Rebecca told him. “Colby’s going to love them.”

“I hope Aaron likes them too,” he said. “They’re for him as well.”

“Awww.” Rebecca lowered the decoration she held to her lap. “You’re so sweet to do that for the boys.”

Roman shrugged. “I just hoped it would be something they liked.”

“Once the perfectionists are done with the tree, the boys can have their turn.”

Soon, Devon and Carla were helping to replace some of the bulbs that had burnt out. With her exhaustion increasing, Rebecca was happy to let the others tackle the tree as she leaned back against the wall. Roman moved off the bed to sit on the floor like her, the bed at his back.

“Will you have a real tree at your house?” Rebecca asked.

She was curious about the type of life he lived. He was a wealthy man. She knew that much. Even wealthier than his sisters. However, googling Roman didn’t bring up much information beyond him being listed as the co-founder of a large security company. There weren’t even any pictures of him.

“Mila will make sure there’s a tree up,” Roman said. “And I’m pretty sure it’ll be a real one.”

“Can we put the decorations on now, Mom?” Colby asked. “Pleeeeeease?”

Jocelyn stood back and stared at the tree for a moment, her hands resting on her belly. “I suppose so.”

The boys came over to the box of decorations. When they saw the ones that Roman had brought for them, they got really excited. Roman smiled when they hurried back to the tree with the decorations, holding them out for Jocelyn to look at.

“These are amazing, Roman,” Jocelyn said as she looked over at him. “A perfect addition to the tree.”

As Christmas music played, Darius and Ben lifted the boys up so they could decorate the upper parts of the tree. Jocelyn came to sit on the bed with Carla, while Devon and Zoe handed decorations to the boys, making sure they each had hangers on them.

It had turned into as much of a production as decorating the main tree would be. Rebecca glanced over to where Jocelyn and Roman sat. Jocelyn on the bed. Roman on the floor, his legs bent with his arms resting on them. She could see the resemblance between the pair in their profiles and in their smiles.

Seeing the three siblings together made Rebecca wonder about her other brothers and sisters. She hadn’t seen them in years. There were probably nieces and nephews she’d never met, and probably never would. It made her sad that they were missing out on stuff like Colby and Aaron were enjoying.

Rebecca was happy that Jocelyn had had the reunion she’d longed for with her siblings. Aside from Darius, Rebecca wasn’t sure if she wanted to be reunited with any of hers. There were a couple that she knew she absolutely *didn’t* want to have in her life again. The others, though... maybe.

“Doesn’t the tree look great, Mama?” Aaron asked as he came over to her.

She drew him down into her lap, wrapping her arms tightly around him. Resting her chin on his shoulder, she said, “It looks fantastic.”

“Can I sleep up here with Colby again?”

Rebecca glanced over at Jocelyn, who just smiled and shrugged, letting her know that she was okay with whatever. “Sure. That’s fine.”

“I might even have some new pajamas for you boys tonight,” Jocelyn said.

“Really?” Aaron clasped his hands under his chin. “Are they dino ones?”

“Maaaaybe?”

Zoe came over and flopped on the floor next to Rebecca. “I hope any kid I have loves red and green balls. I’m not sure I could handle a dinosaur tree.”

“How about a Hot Wheels one?” Roman asked.

“Or a Barbie one?” Jocelyn suggested.

“Neither. Just a Christmas tree with plain old regular decorations.”

“You’re boring,” Jocelyn said. “I think I’ll have to talk to Ben’s mom about your Christmas tree preferences. I wonder if she’ll encourage Ben to stop dating you because you like boring decorations.”

Zoe laughed. “Adela loves me. Plus, Ben likes boring decorations too, and she’s fine with him. I like all the crazy decorations that Adela has, but I don’t want them on my tree.” Zoe leaned over and pushed Jocelyn’s foot. “Besides, it’s not like you have exciting decorations on *your* tree. Colby and Aaron are the only ones with a wild Christmas tree in this house.”

“Are you going to put a tree in the baby’s room next year?” Roman asked.

“Possibly. I haven’t thought much about it yet. I’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Once Colby and Aaron were happy with the tree, Darius and Ben took the empty boxes out of the room. Jocelyn went to the closet and pulled down a couple of pairs of pajamas, still in their plastic packaging.

Jocelyn handed one set to Rebecca, then sat back down and ripped the plastic off the other one. Sure enough, there was another set of dinosaur pajamas. The boys quickly changed into them, then they all left the room.

It wasn't quite bedtime since it wasn't a school night, so they went to the living room and played some games with the boys. Roman and Ben seemed to be the most engaged in the games the boys chose, and Rebecca was grateful that they were willing to pick up the slack when some of them were fading.

By the time the boys went to bed, Rebecca was ready for bed too. Carla, Devon, Zoe, and Ben all left, and right away, Jocelyn said goodnight and went to her room. Rebecca would have liked to hang out for a bit longer, but she just couldn't.

As she walked downstairs, Rebecca was pretty sure that Roman was headed to bed as well. The day had been busy, and he'd probably been worn out too, though he'd hidden his fatigue well.

Rebecca really wished that Roman would stay in Serenity. He looked like he needed someone to take care of him. And while he'd have his housekeeper if he went home, he'd have more people to support him if he stayed in Serenity. However, it wasn't her place to suggest that.

She closed the door behind her, thankful for the privacy she had in the little apartment in the basement. Since Aaron was already in bed, she could just focus on herself. And after a day spent walking around out in the cold, the most appealing thing was a nice hot bath.

Jocelyn had made sure a large whirlpool tub had been installed as part of the renovations, and Rebecca was extremely grateful. Her old place had had a bathtub, but it had definitely not been one she'd enjoyed soaking in. The grout

around the tub and shower had been disgusting, no matter how much she'd scrubbed it.

The spacious bathroom was a lovely sage green with burgundy accents. There was even a television on one wall. When Rebecca had laughed and asked Jocelyn why she'd done that, she'd said that it was so Rebecca could be entertained during her long soaks.

And yes, she had enjoyed watching the television. It was her favorite way to relax once Aaron went to bed.

That night, she put her favorite scented bath oil into the hot water that was filling the tub. She used her phone to pull up what she wanted to watch that night—a holiday baking competition show.

Her favorite time of year was off to a good start, and it seemed that this might be her best Christmas ever.

CHAPTER NINE

Roman relaxed back into his chair with a sigh. As he stared out the tall window beside his desk, he couldn't decide if he was more disappointed or relieved to be back home.

After helping decorate another two trees in his sister's house—one in the living room, the other in the basement—and then going to church on Sunday, he'd been ready for a break. On Monday, he'd told Jocelyn that he'd be heading home the next day. She'd been disappointed, of course, but he'd promised to be back a few days before Christmas.

The one thing he was missing the most was the conversations he'd had with Rebecca. He'd felt at ease around her because, unlike Jocelyn and Zoe, she appeared to have no expectations of him. She also hadn't hovered over him the way his sisters had. Instead, she'd offered care and conversation without the heavy worry Jocelyn and Zoe often showed.

Oh, they tried to hide it behind jokes and laughter, but he saw the concern lingering in their eyes every time they looked at him. Unfortunately, getting away from that meant giving up the happy times with Rebecca.

He picked up the insulated mug that Mila had handed him as he'd headed to his office and took a sip. It wasn't the worst tasting smoothie she'd made him, but he couldn't say he'd missed having to drink them.

After months of being surrounded by people, one would have thought he'd have been okay being around his family. However, it had felt different in Serenity. Maybe because they were not professionals, he hadn't felt comfortable retreating from them when he'd needed a break.

He also wasn't sure why he'd agreed to go to church on Sunday. Zoe had taken him aside and shared that the previous year, she'd skipped several Sundays before she ended up going for the first time. He'd appreciated that she'd understood he might be a bit reluctant to attend, but he'd gone anyway.

For some reason, he'd needed to prove that he was strong enough to weather any scrutiny that would come his way. If his sisters could face it, he should be able to as well. Still, he hadn't lingered long after the service ended.

There had been people at church who were totally unaware of who he was, but there had also been a few who knew him from back in the day. A couple of the Halverson guys had seemed happy to see him, though they'd only spoken briefly.

Gareth, who was now the doctor in Serenity, had been a friend back in high school. It was weird to realize that if he had needed medical care while in town, Gareth would have been the one to help him.

When his phone rang, he picked it up from the desk. Seeing the name of his partner on the screen, he let it ring one more time before answering.

"Hey, Marsh," he said, leaning his chair back as he swung around to face the window.

"How are you doing?" Marshall Levine asked without preamble. "Haven't heard from you this week."

"I went to see my family for Thanksgiving."

"Finally tell them what's been going on?"

Roman sighed. "Yeah."

"And let me guess. They weren't happy with you."

"You were right," Roman said. "I probably should have told them. At the very least, I should have told Darius and let him decide if Jocelyn could handle it along with her pregnancy."

"So you'll be staying in contact with them now?" Marsh asked.

"Yep. Told them I'd be back for Christmas."

"Why didn't you just stay there for the month?"

"Needed a bit of a break. I love my sisters, but once they heard about the cancer, they were hovery."

“Hovery?” Marsh asked with a laugh. “That a new word?”

“Yep. It describes someone who hovers.”

“Kind of like you are when we’re coming down to the wire on a project’s deadlines?”

“Did you phone just to harass me?”

“Maybe?” Marsh said. “Although I thought I might fly out to see you. We need to talk about some stuff for the next calendar year.”

“Just you coming?” Roman asked.

“Yeah.” Marsh sighed. “Deb has decided we’re done.”

“What?” Roman had a hard time believing that the long-time couple’s relationship was over. “What happened?”

“Our lives just seemed to be diverging,” Marsh said. “And her perspective on some things has changed recently. It kind of left us at an impasse.”

“I’m sorry.” Deborah had seemed like a nice woman any time Roman had been around them.

“Don’t be. I saw this coming for the past few months. She kept trying to talk me into changing my mind about things that we’d once agreed on.”

Roman thought about asking what those things were, but he didn’t. “Well, with or without her, you’re always welcome here.”

“Okay if I fly in on Friday and spend the weekend?”

“Sounds good. I’ll have Davis pick you up.”

“Appreciate it. And maybe Mila could make some of her cinnamon rolls?”

“I’ll ask,” Roman said. “She probably wouldn’t make them just for me since they’re not healthy.”

“You’re welcome, then.”

Roman laughed. “Yeah. Thanks. Knowing my luck, though, she’ll make just one, with your name on it.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, then ended the call. Roman was looking forward to Marshall coming for a visit, even though it would be a working visit. He liked working, and he enjoyed hanging out with Marsh, so it would be a good weekend. Mila would probably go all out with food for them, since she liked Marsh, too.

Marshall had kept things running smoothly when Roman hadn't been able to focus on work, and for that, he was very grateful. Their business wouldn't be in as good a shape as it was without Marsh's steadying influence while Roman's attention had been focused elsewhere.

Roman waited by the window in the living room, the lights of the tree glowing softly beside him. There was a fire crackling in the fireplace as well, casting a cozy warmth throughout the room.

Davis had left earlier to pick Marshall up, so they should be home soon. Mila had prepared a pot roast for their dinner, with a promise of cinnamon rolls for their breakfast the next morning. Since Mila and Davis were usually off on the weekends, she'd prepared several meals in advance for them to eat over the next few days. They'd just need to heat the food up.

When he saw the headlights of the SUV swing around the circular driveway and come to a stop in front of the door, Roman headed for the foyer.

"Good to see you again, man," Marsh said as he greeted him with a tight hug, thumping him lightly on the back.

Marsh didn't blink an eye at the physical changes in Roman. Though they hadn't seen each other in person over the course of the past year, they had video chatted at least once a week, sometimes more.

After greeting Mila, Marsh took his bag to the room he used whenever he came to visit Roman. While he waited for Marsh to return, Roman went into the kitchen.

“I know you two are probably going to end up eating in your office, so I’m just leaving all the food here.”

Roman grinned. “You know us so well.”

“You’re like teenagers, refusing to sit at the table when you’re hanging out together.”

“Did you plan pizza for us this weekend?” Roman asked.

“Yep. I had Davis pick up a couple of extra large pizzas from Tony’s when he was in town. You just need to put them in the oven. The instructions are on them.”

“I think we can manage to cook a couple of pizzas without burning the house down.”

“I should hope so.”

When Marsh appeared in the kitchen a few minutes later, he’d changed out of his suit into a pair of worn jeans and a sweatshirt, much like what Roman was wearing.

“Plenty of food for you boys,” Mila said. “So eat up.”

“Is there dessert?” Marsh asked with a grin.

“Oh course! What kind of meal would it be without a dessert?” She tapped a container on the counter. “Brownies.”

“My favorite,” Marsh said as he slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Thank you.”

Davis came into the kitchen then, Mila’s jacket in his hand. “Ready to go, doll?”

“Yes.” She turned to Roman. “Call us if you need anything.”

“I will.” He used to argue that he wouldn’t, but that only upset her. Instead, he always said he would, but then made sure he didn’t need to.

The men loaded up their plates and poured themselves drinks, then left the kitchen. However, instead of going to Roman’s office on the main floor, they made their way down to the basement. It was a large, carpeted space with a huge

television, comfortable couches, and a pool table, along with a dartboard and some arcade games.

They hadn't come to the basement to watch TV or play games, however. Their destination was another part of the basement. One only he and Marsh ever stepped into.

Roman set his plate and cup down on a small table, then took a large mirror off the wall. Behind it, he slid aside a panel and entered the security protocols that would allow him to open the door to the section of the basement that was beyond it.

He picked up his food again, and as soon as he stepped into the large room, the lights came up to reveal a bank of monitors along one wall. In front of them was a long desk with a couple of keyboards on it. This room was some place he usually only came to when no one else was around—like in the evenings after Mila and Davis had returned to their home about a mile away.

Marsh was the only person who came into the room with him. He was the one person Roman trusted above all others. They'd met in college, and Marsh knew everything about his past. Which meant he knew why Roman did his more secretive work. Together, they'd started their company with nothing more than Roman's computer skills and Marshall's business savvy. And it had grown beyond anything they'd ever imagined.

After they set their plates and glasses on the desk, they settled into the comfortable chairs.

The computers in this room were the ones he used for his anonymous activities and for communicating about the more high-level security projects they worked on. The room was extremely secure and only had internet access when he initiated it.

But before he did that, he secured the house. Maybe he was a bit paranoid, but given the nature of his company—and what he did personally—he made sure he wasn't vulnerable, especially when he was on his own.

Mila and Davis also had security at their home, and they knew not to come into the house if Roman wasn't expecting them. Marshall had a similar setup in his home in Washington State.

"I love this room," Marsh said as they began to eat.

Roman did too, and he had missed it a lot when he'd been away for treatment. But he was back now, and even though he missed Rebecca, his sisters, and the others in Serenity, he was content in that moment.

When Monday came, Roman said goodbye to Marsh, promising he'd fly to Seattle to visit the company headquarters once his hair grew back a bit more. He didn't want to show up when he still looked sick. Thankfully, he'd been an infrequent visitor to the company headquarters even before he'd gotten sick. Marsh was the face of their company.

It was quiet in the house since Mila had gone along with Davis and Marsh to do some grocery shopping, so Roman went to his office to get a bit of work done. He and Marsh had spent a lot of time working on the weekend, and they'd made considerable progress on the proposals Marsh wanted them to submit, as well as other projects to consider.

There was still work to do, however, but since it didn't require a high level of security, Roman didn't feel the need to retreat to his basement office. He sent a text to Jocelyn to see how she was doing, then turned his attention to his work.

He'd always been a bit of a workaholic, so it was no surprise that Mila had to interrupt him for both lunch and then for dinner before she left for the day. He worked late into the night before exhaustion finally forced him to head for bed.

When Roman woke later, it was still dark, and for a moment he couldn't figure out what had woken him. Turning over, he saw the screen of his phone light up.

He grabbed it off the nightstand and squinted at the display. When he saw Rebecca's name, his heart sped up.

Sitting up, he fumbled to answer the call and put it on speakerphone. “Rebecca? What’s wrong?”

“Well, possibly nothing,” Rebecca said. “But Jocelyn thinks her water broke, so Darius is taking her to the hospital in Coeur d’Alene.”

“Is she okay?” Roman dragged a hand down his face. “Is the baby okay?”

“For the moment, everyone is fine.”

“But it’s too early for the baby, isn’t it?” Roman asked.

“It is,” Rebecca said. “She’s just over thirty-four weeks, so about six weeks early.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

“It can be, but it can also mean that the baby is just on the small side and is okay otherwise.”

“Will they try to stop the labor?”

“I don’t know. I suppose they’ll assess the situation and then make a decision. Probably will also depend on how far into labor she is.”

“Sorry. I don’t know anything about labor.”

“No reason you should,” she told him.

“Thank you for letting me know.” He slumped forward, gripping his phone more tightly. “I’m going to come back.”

“I’m sure Jocelyn would tell you that’s not necessary,” Rebecca said. “But I also know she’d probably like to have you here, especially if she has the baby.”

“I’ll come.” Even though he was still exhausted—he’d only been asleep for a couple of hours—Roman flung back the blanket. “I’ll be there a little later today. Should I just go to the hospital since I’ll be flying into Coeur d’Alene?”

“Maybe phone once you land for an update.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.” Roman paused, then said, “Thanks so much for calling, Rebecca. I really appreciate you letting me know.”

“Jocelyn didn’t want to bother you, but I was sure you’d want to know.”

“You’re right. I’m glad you called. Does Zoe know yet?” Roman asked as he abandoned his warm, comfortable bed.

“I’m calling her next.”

“Keep me up to date if you hear anything more. I’ll let you know when I have an arrival time.”

After they ended the call, Roman considered going back to bed, but he knew he was unlikely to sleep with the worry for Jocelyn and her baby so strong in his mind. He was tempted to make the nine plus hour drive rather than wait for a flight.

At one time, he would have been able to do an even longer drive. However, Roman knew that he physically wasn’t up to a drive of that length just yet. An hour or so was about all he could manage before he began to tire. And it would be even worse considering he hadn’t had a full night’s sleep.

So instead, he sent off a message to Marsh’s assistant, who also did work for Roman, asking him to arrange a private plane, and have a rental vehicle waiting for him. He had no idea how long he’d be hanging around this time, but he wanted to at least stay until the baby was born, since the birth seemed imminent.

Wearily, he pulled out his suitcase and began to pack. Because this might extend into a longer visit, he packed more than he had the last time. Not that he had to take a ton of stuff, since Jocelyn had a washing machine. Still, he’d rather not have to think about laundry if things didn’t go well for Jocelyn.

No. He wasn’t even going to consider that.

Things were going to go fine, and if making sure of that meant he had to find the best doctors and pay them a fortune to fly to Jocelyn’s side, he’d do it.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he got a text from Marsh’s assistant to let him know that everything was arranged for his trip. With that, he sent a text of his own to Davis asking him to drive him to the airport.

By eight, Mila and Davis were both at the house, so he shared with them what was going on. Mila was concerned, but she also offered Roman some reassurance. She had more experience with pregnancy and delivery, so it made sense that she would know about instances where early births had occurred and everything had turned out fine.

Davis happily drove him to meet the plane, and soon Roman was once again headed northwest to be with his family. When he landed, he found a message from Jocelyn letting him know that they were just observing her and the baby for the time being.

He chose to message Darius instead of Jocelyn to see if he should go to the hospital or the house. Darius's reply was that he should just go to the house. Though he was eager to see his sister, Roman was actually glad to follow Darius's instruction. He was exhausted and wanted a nap, even though he'd have to drive for a bit before that could happen.

After texting Rebecca to let her know he was on his way, Roman began the drive. His worry over everything exhausted him further as he guided the rental along the road that led to Serenity.

He wanted to help, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn't even be at Jocelyn's side through this. That was Darius's place.

It was around two when Roman pulled to the curb in front of the house. Rebecca had let him know she wouldn't be there until five, but Zoe would be home around four with the boys.

After using the code for the front door, Roman let himself into the house. Grateful that he had a couple of hours to himself, he carried his stuff up to the room he'd previously used. Rather than unpack his things, he left his bags beside the door.

He took the time to set his alarm for five minutes before four, then Roman crawled beneath the covers. He hoped sleep wouldn't take too long coming since he needed to take the edge off his exhaustion so he could be helpful and not worn out.

CHAPTER TEN

Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief once her workday was over. She couldn't be on her phone while at the reception desk, so she'd only been able to check in periodically. That meant she'd spent a good portion of the day worried and tired after her fractured night.

She probably could've explained the situation to her boss, and she would have understood. However, it wasn't her place to share what was going on with Jocelyn.

The cold of the day bit into her cheeks and invaded her lungs, making her cough as she hurried to her car. She should have taken the time to put her scarf on properly, and normally, she'd have let her car warm up a bit before driving. However, on that day, all she wanted was to get home to her family.

Thankfully, the house was only ten minutes away, and when she pulled into the driveway, she saw that Zoe was there. There was also a black SUV parked in front of the house that Rebecca figured was Roman's rental.

Gathering up her things, she left the car and headed for the front door, eager to see the boys. That eagerness extended to Roman, though it probably shouldn't. She wished he was back under better circumstances, but regardless, it would be good to have him there.

When she opened the door and stepped into the foyer, the boys came running from the kitchen. Rebecca gathered them both into a tight hug, knowing that Colby would be worried about his mom.

"How was school today?" Rebecca asked as she took off her boots and her jacket.

"It was fine," Colby said, his normal energy muted by the worry she could see on his face.

"Yeah. It was fine," Aaron echoed.

"Well, let's go into the kitchen and see about some supper."

“Uncle Roman said he’d get us pizza,” Colby said.

“I hope that was okay.”

Rebecca looked up to see Roman standing in the arched doorway that led to the kitchen. It hadn’t even been two weeks since she’d last seen him, and yet it felt like much longer. He had on a pair of faded jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, looking nothing like she’d imagined a millionaire should.

Though he looked tired, he smiled at her, and warmth filled Rebecca, making her want to greet him with a hug. But that didn’t seem appropriate considering their level of friendship.

“Hi,” she said, then gave herself a mental shake and responded to his comment. “It’s fine. The boys love pizza.”

“Zoe said she and Ben do as well,” Roman said. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’m definitely on board with pizza.”

“Ben said he’d pick it up if we ordered it,” Zoe said as she joined them. “So we need to get an order put in.”

“The boys and I are fine with cheese or pepperoni,” Rebecca said. “I’ll let you deal with the order while I get changed. Are Carla and Devon going to be here, too?”

“They had previous plans, but said they’d drop by afterwards.”

Rebecca nodded, then headed down the stairs to the basement. She hoped that there would be some news from Jocelyn that evening. She doubted any of them would sleep well until they heard something.

After changing into a pair of sweats, a sweatshirt, and thick socks, Rebecca came out of her room to find the boys on the couch.

“Can we play video games, Mama?” Aaron asked. “We did our homework already.”

“All of it?”

“Yep,” Colby replied. “Auntie Zoe made us do it. She said we couldn’t play games until we were done.”

“Okay. You can play until Ben gets here with the pizza.”

Leaving them to their distraction, Rebecca went back upstairs to the kitchen, where she found Zoe and Roman seated at the counter.

“Is there any news on Jocelyn?” she asked.

Zoe nodded. “She called a little while ago. She said that the doctors determined that she’s leaking amniotic fluid.”

“Is she in labor?”

“No. She hasn’t had regular contractions and isn’t dilating.”

“I guess that means they’re going to keep her in?”

“Sounds like it, especially since she doesn’t live near the hospital.”

None of that surprised Rebecca. “Does she need us to pack anything for her? I know she hadn’t gotten her hospital bag ready yet.”

“Yeah. She sent me a list,” Zoe said. “I thought maybe I’d run the bag to her tomorrow. I’ll be home in time to pick the boys up in the afternoon.”

“Can I do that?” Roman asked. “Since I’m here, I’d like to help out.”

“We just have to let the school know that you’re approved to pick the boys up,” Rebecca told him. “Dropping them off isn’t an issue.”

Having help with that would be great since Rebecca had to be at work by eight-thirty. School drop-offs and pick-ups had worked out really well when they had moved in with Jocelyn and Darius. Jocelyn had taken the boys to school with her and brought them home at the end of the day. Zoe had stepped in to help on the days when Jocelyn had needed to stay later. It had been nice to not have that worry since her work hours were not as convenient to get Aaron to and from school.

“Well, since I’m here anyway, just let me know what I can do,” Roman said.

“I’d really appreciate the help with the boys,” Rebecca told him. “I can ask for some time off if I need to, though.”

“Let’s see if we can handle this without you having to do that,” Zoe said. “There are enough of us that there shouldn’t be an issue.”

As they talked, Rebecca took in Roman’s appearance. He looked exhausted, which made sense since she’d called him in the middle of the night. She’d managed to get a couple more hours of sleep after Darius had woken her up to let her know that Jocelyn thought her water had broken.

They’d probably all be calling it an early night that night.

When Ben arrived balancing several pizza boxes in his hands, Rebecca went to get the boys. They stampeded up the stairs ahead of her, greeting Ben with enthusiasm that was probably only half for him because they wanted the pizza he’d brought with him.

“Mom’s in the hospital, Uncle Ben,” Colby announced.

“I heard that, buddy.” Ben helped Zoe open the boxes while Rebecca got plates for them. “Are you worried about her?”

“A little bit,” he admitted. “But she told Auntie Zoe she’d video chat with me tonight, so I can see her before I go to sleep.”

“That’s good,” Ben said. “I’m sure she misses you.”

Rebecca glanced at Zoe to see her smiling as she watched Ben and Colby, her love for Ben plastered all over her face. She was quite sure that Zoe was hoping for a proposal soon. And when Ben looked over at Zoe, his smile deepened with his feelings for her, making Rebecca think Zoe might just get her wish.

They loaded up their plates with pizza, then went to sit at the breakfast nook to eat. The conversation was dominated by topics that the boys could take part in, but once they’d finished eating, they were given permission to go play video games again until bed.

Usually, they weren't allowed much time to play games during the week, but Rebecca figured Colby could use the distraction for this first night without his mom there. If Jocelyn ended up in the hospital for awhile, things would have to go back to normal at some point.

"Did Jocelyn say what time she'd call?" Rebecca asked as they cleared away the leftover pizza.

"Close to his bedtime."

"I think I might have him sleep in Aaron's room," Rebecca said. "In case he wakes up in the night."

"I'd offer to take care of him," Roman began, "but I think he'd feel more comforted by your presence than mine."

"Probably true," Zoe said. "There will be other times when he'll enjoy being with you. Especially if this separation drags on."

Rebecca began to prepare the boys' lunches for the next day, adding a couple of small slices of pizza for each of them. It was something they usually did when they had leftover pizza.

Carla and Devon arrived not long after they'd finished eating, and Rebecca could see the concern on the older woman's face.

She let Zoe update the couple while she finished the lunches and put them in the fridge. It was hard not to worry, and she was sure that nothing Zoe said would put Carla's mind at ease. Short of the baby arriving safe and sound, with both it and Jocelyn being fine, Rebecca doubted Carla would stop worrying.

Actually, none of them would likely stop worrying until Jocelyn and the baby were both back home.

"I'm happy you're here, Roman," Carla said as she gave her nephew a hug.

"I wanted to be here for Jocelyn, but also to help. My schedule is more flexible, so I can be wherever I'm needed."

“My schedule just got a little busier,” Devon said as he took a cup of coffee from Carla.

“You giving up your life of leisure and going back to work?” Zoe asked.

“Not exactly,” Devon said with a laugh.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ve decided to take on some pro-bono legal work. Nothing too intense, but I’d like to help people with my knowledge and experience, rather than have it all go to waste.”

“I think it’s a really great idea,” Carla said as she smiled at him. “I just don’t want you to get too stressed.”

“That’s definitely not the plan.”

Ben took over coffee making duty, handing over mugs to Roman and Carla. Rebecca turned one down, choosing instead to just drink water. She set the container of brownies she’d made on the counter for people to enjoy with their coffee.

“You doing okay?” Carla asked as she slipped an arm around Rebecca.

She gave her a quick smile. “I’m alright. Worried, of course, but I trust that the doctors will make the right decisions for her and the baby.”

“Have you spoken to Darius?”

She nodded. “Not for very long, though. He’s a bit of a mess, but he’s trying to keep it together for Jocelyn.”

“He’s a good man.” Carla smiled at her. “I wasn’t sure at first, but I’ve never been happier to be proved resoundingly wrong. I love the three of you, and I’m glad that you’re in our lives.”

“We love you and Devon too,” Rebecca said, meaning every word. They had become grandparents to Aaron, which was a blessing, since neither her nor Craig’s parents were in their lives. Or ever would be, if she had anything to say about it.

“With Roman back with us, my life is truly complete.”

Rebecca looked over at Roman to find him watching them. He smiled at her before turning his attention to his aunt.

She could say that her life was almost complete. All they needed was for the newest member of the family to make his or her appearance, and all would be good.

About twenty minutes before the boys would get ready for bed, Rebecca's phone rang with a video call. She answered it to see Jocelyn's face.

"Hey! How are you doing?"

Jocelyn gave her a weary smile. "I'm tired and worried."

"Is there a plan for the baby yet?"

"The doctors want to monitor the amniotic fluid since it's leaking. They don't want it to get too low. As long as it's safer for the baby to be inside me, they won't try to bring on labor."

"So you're in there until the baby comes?"

"It seems like it." Jocelyn let out a sigh, and for a moment, Rebecca thought she might start to cry.

"Well, try not to worry about Colby or anything here. We're all pitching in to take care of things. Hard to believe that it takes all of us to do what you do."

Jocelyn gave a huff of laughter. "I'm sure the school wishes you could cover for me there."

"Didn't they have a sub lined up for you?"

"They had someone to cover in the new year, but they're scrambling a bit right now."

"That's not your fault, though."

"I know. I just feel bad." Her frown was tinged with sadness. "And I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to the kids like I had planned."

"I'm sure you can go visit them once the baby has arrived."

"Yeah."

"Is Darius able to stay there with you?"

“For now, yeah.” Jocelyn flipped the camera around so Rebecca could see him sitting in a chair near the bed. “But he might get a hotel room so he can sleep. He’ll still need to do some work, too.”

“If you need someone to hang with you, I can come,” Zoe called out to her.

“I might take you up on that, Zo.”

“Here, chat with the others while I get Colby,” Rebecca said, then handed her phone to Roman.

It only took a minute for her to get the boys so Colby could talk to his mom. While he did that, Rebecca went upstairs to grab Colby’s pajamas and toothbrush.

Colby didn’t seem too upset when he finished talking to Jocelyn, and he was happy when told that he’d be sleeping in Aaron’s room. After they said goodnight to the adults, Rebecca took the boys downstairs to supervise them as they got ready for bed, while the others continued to talk to Jocelyn.

“I’m glad Mom’s okay,” Colby said as he settled down on the trundle they’d pulled out from under Aaron’s bed.

“I’m glad too.” Rebecca sat on the bed beside him. “Why don’t we pray for your mom and dad and the baby?”

Colby readily agreed, then both he and Aaron prayed for them. It always warmed her heart when the boys prayed, and she hoped that they’d always embrace the faith they were being raised with.

Once they were settled beneath their blankets with a promise they wouldn’t stay up talking, Rebecca went back upstairs. The others were still gathered in the kitchen, which would have made Jocelyn happy. She loved having them all there together.

“Colby settle down okay?” Carla asked.

“Yes. He prayed for Jocelyn and the baby, then seemed ready to sleep.”

“It’s good he can sleep in Aaron’s room,” Zoe said.

“Pretty sure that’s going to set a precedent Jocelyn won’t be happy about,” Rebecca said with a laugh. “But at the moment, I think it’s for the best.”

It wasn’t long before Ben and Zoe headed out, taking some of the pizza with them. Zoe offered to come back the next morning to take the boys to school, but Roman said he’d take care of getting them there. Carla and Devon stayed a bit longer, but then they also left.

“Are you okay?” Rebecca asked when she returned from seeing Carla and Devon out and spotted Roman slumped at the counter.

He glanced up at her, and she could see the exhaustion on his face. “Yeah. Just feeling a little... out of my depth, I guess.”

“Pregnancy? Labor? Family? Babies?”

Roman gave a huff of laughter. “All of it, I suppose.”

“If it makes you feel any better, this situation with Jocelyn is new for all of us.” Rebecca sat down on a stool at the counter, leaving one empty between them. “Jocelyn said she went full term with Colby, and so did I with Aaron.”

“I just feel helpless,” Roman said. “I know about a lot of things, but nothing about this. My instinct is to find the best obstetrician in the world and pay them whatever they want to come and take care of Jocelyn.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Rebecca told him gently, finding his desire to do anything he could to help his sister endearing. “The doctors at the hospital in Coeur d’Alene are capable of taking care of her and the baby.”

“What about Gareth Halverson?” Roman asked. “Is he one of those doctors?”

“No, though Jocelyn saw him at times throughout her pregnancy. He’s a family doctor, so early on, she saw him for checkups. But then, about halfway through her pregnancy, she started to see the doctor in Coeur d’Alene who would deliver the baby.”

“And they’re good?”

Rebecca nodded. “Jocelyn seemed happy with her. She and Darius did some research, plus Gareth recommended her.”

“Okay. I guess I just need to chill out.”

“It’s normal to worry,” Rebecca said. “We’re all concerned. Just don’t let it overwhelm you.” She paused. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

A weary smile crossed his face. “I was really late getting to bed, so I’d only slept for a couple of hours when you called. Unfortunately, I couldn’t really fall back to sleep afterward.”

Rebecca felt bad, seeing how tired the man looked. “Maybe I shouldn’t have called you until a more reasonable hour.”

“Nope. I’m glad you called when you did. It allowed me to get stuff organized so that I could be here earlier in the day.”

“Hopefully you’ll sleep better tonight.”

“Pretty sure I will,” he said.

“This situation might drag on a bit,” Rebecca warned him. “They’ll probably let her go as long as possible before inducing labor, providing she and the baby are okay.”

“I think I’d lose my mind if I was in Darius’s position.”

“Darius would probably like to lose his mind, but he knows that Jocelyn needs him to stay calm. I think you’d probably be the same.”

“Do you think I’m overreacting?”

Rebecca smiled at him. “It’s understandable. I think Jocelyn would hate that you’re stressing, but she’d also be glad to know you care enough to feel this way.”

“I’m making up for lost time,” he said. “Or maybe this is my punishment for staying away so long.”

“I don’t think it’s punishment. It’s just life. This would have happened whether you were around or not. You didn’t do anything to cause this.”

Roman sighed. "I need to stop making it about me. Hopefully, a good night's sleep will help me snap out of this."

"I think it will," she said. "Sleep always helps."

"To that end, I should probably call it a day."

"I'm going to as well," Rebecca said.

"What time do I need to take the boys to school?"

"They have to be at school by nine. So, if you leave here about eight-forty, you should be fine. I have to leave at eight-fifteen."

"Okay. I'll be down here by eight, just to be safe."

"Thank you for doing this. I'd request time off, but since I already had to take a lot off when I was sick, I hate to ask for more."

"There's no need," he said. "I'm here with no time constraints. Any work I have to do can be done at any point in the day."

Rebecca was grateful that Roman was so willing to help. Not everyone would have been. She just hoped that this wouldn't impact him physically while he was still recovering from cancer and the treatment he'd had to undergo.

"If you need me to do anything tomorrow when you're at work, just give me a call or text me."

"I'll call the school in the morning to let them know you have our permission to pick up the boys."

"Does Jocelyn have to let them know or just you?"

"Oh. Well, I'll see what they say when I call. They'll know Jocelyn's situation, so they'll probably accept me updating them on pickup permissions." Rebecca felt the last of her energy slipping away. "I think I'm going to lock up, then head to bed."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"No. It's pretty easy."

“I guess I’ll call it a day too.” Roman got to his feet. “And I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I hope you sleep well,” Rebecca said. “Tomorrow is another day.”

“Hopefully one with good news.”

“I’ll definitely be praying for that.”

After Roman headed upstairs, Rebecca went around the house, locking up. Darius usually took care of securing things, but earlier, he’d sent her a list of everything she needed to do. No doubt he’d expect a report once she’d completed the list, so after it was done, she took a moment to text Darius.

House is all secure!

Darius: *Glad to hear it. Miss you guys.*

Rebecca got a little choked up at his words. She knew that he cherished the home he and Jocelyn had built for their small family, which now included her and Aaron.

We miss you too. Everything is going fine here, so don’t worry about us.

Darius: *I’m thankful you’re there to help with Colby. Really puts our minds at ease.*

It’s what family does, right? You did it for me. Love you both!

Darius: *We love you too.*

Praying that you have a good night and hear good news in the morning.

They said goodnight, then she made her way through the darkened house to the stairs to the basement. As she closed the door behind her, she was thankful once again that she had this small apartment to call home for her and Aaron.

She might have initially protested Jocelyn and Darius spending the money to make the changes to the basement for them, but she was so grateful for it now. Their home within a home represented safety that they hadn’t really ever experienced before.

It was only after moving in that she'd realized that Craig wouldn't be able to just show up and surprise her with his presence because he wouldn't know where they lived anymore. Plus, now that she worked somewhere else, he couldn't find her there either. It had been two years since he'd walked out on them, and he'd given her not a single penny of support, so he didn't deserve to know anything about their lives anymore.

Rebecca was happy that only the people who truly cared for her and Aaron were in her life now.

As she headed to her room, Rebecca stopped to check on the boys. She slowly opened the door, then stood for a moment watching them sleep, praying that they'd have a good rest, and that Colby wouldn't be too worried about his mom.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Roman woke up earlier than he'd thought he would, but he was relieved to find his exhaustion had eased. When he'd gone to bed the night before, he'd expected to toss and turn, but thankfully, he'd fallen asleep almost immediately.

Since it wasn't even seven yet, he decided to take a shower. Quick showers were easier now that he didn't have to wash the length of hair he'd prior to chemo.

After he'd dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, he went downstairs, expecting to have to figure out breakfast for himself. Instead, when he stepped into the kitchen, it was a hub of activity.

Rebecca was already there with the boys, who were seated at the counter, watching as she poured waffle batter into a waffle maker. She glanced up and gave him a smile. "Good morning. Would you like some coffee and/or breakfast?"

"Both, actually, but I can get the coffee."

"I think you'll need to take a class before you can use this fancy coffee machine of Jocelyn's," Rebecca said with a laugh. "But feel free to give it a try."

Roman had a complicated coffee machine at home and after some practice, he'd worked out how to make a cup of coffee that he enjoyed. "I should probably figure out how to use it, so I don't have to rely on other people to make me a cup of coffee. Especially if I'm going to be hanging around for a bit."

"If you can't figure it out, let me know and I'll show you." She lifted the lid on the waffle maker, but then lowered it again. "There's an assortment of coffee beans and grounds in the cupboard above the machine."

Roman moved to where the machine sat and stared at it for a moment before he opened the cupboard to see what kind of coffee Jocelyn kept on hand. It was nice to see she had decent

stuff, and he wondered if that had to do with her connection to Ben, since his family owned a coffee shop.

“The instruction manual might be in this drawer here.” Rebecca reached out and tapped a drawer with the tongs she held.

“Instructions? I don’t need instructions,” Roman said. “I’m a *man*.”

Rebecca grinned. “Seems to me that’s all the more reason you should have a look at them.”

Roman chuckled as he opened the drawer and looked through the pile of instruction booklets there. Everything from the microwave to the dishwasher and... there it was. The instructions for the coffee machine.

“Can I have two waffles, Auntie Bec?” Colby asked as Roman read the instructions.

“You haven’t even eaten your first one, sweetie. Finish that, then we’ll see if you want another one.”

“But are you going to make more?”

“Oh yes,” Rebecca said. “I’m going to put them in the fridge so you can have some tomorrow.”

“That’s good. I love waffles.”

“I know you do, sweetie.”

Roman watched as Rebecca deftly removed the waffle and put half on each of the boys’ plates. She poured syrup over them, then slid the plates across to the boys. “Do you want to pray, Colby?”

The question took Roman back in time, to when he’d been their age and his mom would ask him to pray. He’d always been eager to do it. Eager to make his mom proud. And because he’d had faith in God... the faith of a child.

“Yep. I want to pray for the food and for Mom and the baby.”

“That sounds good,” Rebecca said.

Through Colby's prayer, Roman could tell that the little boy had heard plenty of praying in his life. That would have made Roman's mom so proud. As his nephew prayed, Roman felt a bit convicted that while he'd prayed plenty over the past year, he'd slacked off once he'd been declared in remission.

When Colby finished his prayer, the boys began to eat, chatting about some kids at school they played with. Rebecca continued to make waffles, even as the clock ticked by to the time when she'd need to leave.

She appeared to be ready to walk out the door. Her outfit for the day was a dark blue pantsuit with a soft pink blouse, which she'd smartly covered with an apron. Her dark hair was gathered up in a ponytail, and she wore some tiny earrings and a simple chain.

Objectively, Rebecca was a pretty woman. However, it was her caring nature that Roman found most attractive. After being the recipient of the caring nature of people over the past year, he'd come to really value that quality.

"I have to head off to work soon, boys," Rebecca said as she rinsed out the bowl that had held the batter. "Uncle Roman is going to take you to school, okay?"

"Cool," Colby said.

"Does he know where to drop us off?" Aaron asked.

Roman hadn't realized there was a special place to drop them off. When he'd gone to school, his mom had just pulled up to the curb and watched as they'd run for the front doors of the building.

"Do I need to walk the boys inside?"

"Not inside, no," Rebecca said. "Well, Jocelyn would go inside, of course. But when Zoe takes them, she just walks them to the door."

"Are there rules about where I can park?" He was starting to wonder if dropping the boys was going to cause him anxiety.

“Not really. Just pay attention to the no parking signs. That area is for the buses.”

“Okay. Well, hopefully no one yells at me.”

Rebecca laughed. “Just smile at them.”

“You think that will work?” At one point in his life, he’d had confidence in his charisma and good looks, but now, Roman wasn’t so sure about how he came across.

He didn’t like to think of himself as a vain person, but he knew he didn’t look anywhere near as attractive as he had a year ago. His hair loss and gaunt appearance made him look like a shadow of his former self.

“If you have any problems, just give me or Zoe a call,” Rebecca said as she walked to the fridge with the bag of waffles, then hesitated. “These are probably too warm still for the fridge.”

“If you want to leave them out, I’ll put them in when they’ve cooled.”

“Might be better to do that.” She took them back to the counter. “Thank you.”

As Roman focused on the coffee machine again, Rebecca encouraged the boys to finish their food. She took a couple of lunch bags from the fridge, then put them in the backpacks that were on the table in the breakfast nook.

By eight-ten, Roman had his cup of coffee, and Rebecca had the boys ready for their day.

“You don’t have coffee before you go?” Roman asked.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But most of the time, I drink the mediocre coffee at the office.”

“But... why?”

“Mainly because I don’t want to have to drink it quickly, which happens if I make a cup here at home in the morning.”

“You don’t stop somewhere on the way to work? Like Ben’s coffee shop?”

“Usually, I don’t have enough time,” she said as she slipped the boys’ empty plates into the dishwasher. “Don’t tell Ben this, but I also find it expensive to buy coffees. A bit of a waste of money.”

“Even just plain old black coffee?”

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. “I’m not a fan of plain black coffee. I usually prefer a latte or at least a healthy dose of cream and sugar.”

Roman hadn’t ever really thought about the cost of buying a cup of coffee, but it made sense that someone in Rebecca’s position would. It was a strong reminder that he lived a privileged life, not having to think about the cost of the basics or simple things in life. His interactions with people who struggled financially were usually done anonymously or at a distance.

“Okay, boys, I’m off to work.” Rebecca gave each of the boys a kiss. “Go brush your teeth and be good for Uncle Roman. I’ll see you later.”

She gave him a smile, then left the kitchen. Roman watched her go, then looked at the boys, who were staring at him with wide eyes. “Uh, your mom... aunt... said to brush your teeth, right?”

“Yep. Let’s go.” Colby ran for the stairs that led to the basement. Aaron followed more slowly, glancing back at Roman before disappearing after Colby.

Roman let out a sigh as he sat down at the breakfast nook with his mug of coffee. He took a sip, then stared out the window. It was a gray, overcast day that looked cold.

His phone’s text alert chirped, and he fished it out of his pocket.

Zoe: *You okay with the boys?*

Roman contemplated the question before answering her. *I think so. They’re off brushing their teeth, then we’re heading to the school. Any tips?*

Zoe: *Don’t make eye contact with the single soccer moms.*

What??

Zoe sent him back a laughing emoji.

Zoe: *If they get wind that you're rich and available, they'll be coming for you.*

Roman kind of doubted that, considering how sickly he still looked. *Was kinda looking for more practical tips.*

Zoe: *Don't park in the bus lane or you'll get yelled at. All the money in the world won't save you.*

He couldn't keep the smile from his face at his exchange with Zoe. He hadn't realized until recently how much of a sense of humor his sister had. She and Ben were a good pair, and he was glad that she'd found happiness in her life with him.

Thanks. I appreciate the advice.

Zoe: *You can do it, big bro!*

I'll let you know if I survive.

"We're ready, Uncle Roman," Colby said as he and Aaron came back into the kitchen.

"Okay. Let's get our jackets and books," he told them. "And don't forget your backpacks."

Roman drained the last of his coffee, then got to his feet to take the mug to the sink. It wasn't like he could put off leaving. He had a deadline to get the boys to school by, and if there was one thing he did well, it was to meet deadlines.

The boys were waiting for him near the front door, jackets and boots on. Roman pulled on his own jacket and boots, then opened the door for the boys. Once they were in the rental SUV, Roman took a minute to use the app Darius had told him to download to lock and secure the house.

It had been a long time since he'd taken the route to the elementary school, but he had no trouble finding his way.

Once there, he pulled into the first parking space he saw, even though it meant a bit longer of a walk. It was preferable to fighting for a spot closer.

“Stay with me,” Roman instructed the boys.

They nodded and walked beside him toward the school. There were lots of children moving along the sidewalk—some walking, others running. A few called out greetings to Colby and Aaron.

As they neared the building, Roman spotted a couple of adults at the front door, both of them wearing Santa hats. One of the women greeted Colby and Aaron, then looked at Roman, her eyes widening.

“Good morning, boys,” she said. “Who’s this dropping you off today?”

“This is my uncle Roman,” Colby told her. “He’s helping my mom out while she’s in the hospital.”

“Has she had the baby yet?”

Colby looked up at Roman. “Has she?”

“Not yet,” Roman said.

Though the woman had an expectant look on her face, Roman didn’t volunteer any further information. It wasn’t his place to share anything about Jocelyn’s situation.

Turning his attention to the boys, Roman said, “You guys have a good day at school, okay? I’ll be here when you’re done to pick you up.”

“Bye,” Colby said with a smile.

Aaron echoed the farewell, then followed Colby into the school. Roman took a few steps back, watching as the large doors closed behind the boys. He then shifted his gaze to the woman who had spoken to him, gave her a nod and a wave before heading back to his car.

Once he was behind the wheel, Roman pulled out his phone.

Survived the drop off. Only had to dodge one question about Jocelyn.

Zoe: *I knew you could do it! Woohoo! You da man!*

Roman gave a huff of laughter. *You're a brat.*

Zoe: *I've never heard that before...*

Are you at the coffee shop?

Zoe: *Of course not. I'm barely out of bed. Mornings are not my friend.*

Roman understood that. He didn't have a real fondness for the early daytime hours himself.

Zoe: *Why did you ask?*

I was going to swing by and grab some coffee.

Zoe: *If you want a morning meeting with me, you need to let me know the night before.*

Oh well. Next time.

Zoe: *You'll see me later. We'll be by for dinner again.*

Is there a plan for food? Or should I order something?

Zoe: *You're asking the wrong person. Check with Rebecca.*

Will do. See you later!

Roman put the SUV in drive, then headed for Main Street, where the coffee shop was located. There was a short line when he stepped into the shop, so he joined it.

As he waited for his turn, Roman glanced around the space. The Christmas tree was so laden with an eclectic assortment of decorations, garland, and lights that he could barely see the branches.

The Christmas décor wasn't limited to the tree, however. There were Christmas-themed items everywhere throughout the shop. The holiday was well and truly represented in the space.

“What can I get for you?”

He turned to face the counter and smiled at Ben's mom. After a moment's consideration, he placed his order, which included coffee and an assortment of pastries from the bakery case.

After he paid for everything, Roman stepped to the side to wait for it. The young woman who was also working there made the coffee, then took the box of pastries from Ben's mom and handed both to Roman.

Thanking her, he turned and left the shop. Back at the car, he got everything settled before heading for his next stop.

Once there, he grabbed the box of pastries and the coffee and walked across the parking lot to the door of the office building. He got it open without spilling anything, which felt like a true feat.

He looked around as he walked inside, observing the elegant space of the reception area.

“Roman?”

His gaze shifted to the front desk, where Rebecca sat with a middle-aged woman standing next to her. Both women were staring at him.

“Hello,” Roman said as he approached them and set the cup of coffee and box of pastries on the desk.

“What's this?” Rebecca asked, lifting her gaze to meet his.

“I thought you'd like a cup of coffee from the coffee shop, and while I was there, I bought some baked goods, too.”

“Oh, that's so sweet.” Rebecca smiled at him. “Am I supposed to share?”

Roman chuckled. “That's definitely up to you. Although if you share that coffee, it won't go far.”

“I think I'll keep the coffee to myself and share the pastries.”

“I'm glad to hear that,” the woman next to Rebecca said with a grin. “I might have had to fight you for them.”

“Well, I'll leave you to divvy them up how you think best,” Roman said.

“Drop off went okay?” Rebecca asked before he could turn for the door.

“It went smoothly, I think. I didn’t get yelled at, so I’ll count that a win.”

Rebecca’s brows rose. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“Let’s hope that continues for the pickup.” Roman took a step backward toward the door, then stopped. “Oh. Zoe said they’ll be at the house for supper. Did you have a plan, or should I order something from somewhere?”

“I thought I’d make spaghetti,” she said. “But if you want to order something, that would be fine, too.”

“Let’s do that for tonight, then. I’ll text you where we’re thinking of ordering from so you can let me know what the boys might like.”

“That sounds good.” She smiled at him as she lifted the cup of coffee. “And thanks so much for the coffee and treats. I’m going to be very popular here today because of them.”

“You’re welcome.”

As Roman walked back out to his rental, he couldn’t help but smile, happy that he’d brought the coffee and pastries for Rebecca. He could see that she was stepping up for Jocelyn, while still working a full-time job. If this made her day a bit brighter, then it was worth it.

Back at the house, Roman made a plan for how to fill his time. First up, he should see how Jocelyn was doing. Let her know that he’d succeeded in dropping the boys off without incident. It was hard to not have any other way to help her, but there really wasn’t anything else he could do.

Jocelyn didn’t reply right away to his text, which was a bit worrying. But rather than sit and dwell on that, he messaged Zoe.

Rebecca said we can take care of supper.

Zoe: *We? I’m pretty sure that’s supposed to be YOU.*

Ha... Fine. I’m taking care of supper. Where can we order something that everyone would like?

They went back and forth before finally deciding on Chinese food from a new restaurant that Zoe and Ben had tried and enjoyed. With that decided, he texted Rebecca to let her know their decision.

He had no idea how fussy the boys might be about food, so he hoped there was something on the menu that they'd like. His experience with kids was limited to when he'd been a kid himself and the rare interactions he'd had with Davis and Mila's grandkids.

While he waited to hear from both Jocelyn and Rebecca, Roman decided he might as well get some work done. He didn't want to sit around with his thoughts. There was a pretty good chance that if he did that, his thoughts would take him to a place he didn't want to go, especially when he was alone in the place where he'd experienced the worst day of his life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rebecca was tired when she walked into the house. It was a relief to know that she didn't have to make supper, though she absolutely would have done it if she'd had to.

"Hi, Mama!" Aaron said when she walked into the kitchen. He hurried over to give her a hug. "We're having Chinese food for supper."

"I know. It smells good." She went to hug Colby. "How was school, boys? Did Uncle Roman have any problems picking you up?"

"They didn't want to let him inside the school," Colby said.

Rebecca looked over at Roman. "Really? I phoned and told them you'd be picking the boys up. What was the problem?"

"The secretary had stepped away from her desk, and no one else knew what was going on. She straightened everything out as soon as she got back. It was all fine."

Rebecca sighed. "Sorry for the hassle."

"Hey, it was fine. The goal was to get the boys, and I was able to do that. It all worked out."

"Frankly, I think it's good they gave him a hassle," Zoe said. "And not just because he's my brother."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that," Roman muttered.

Zoe laughed. "I just meant that it's good they're not simply taking your word that you're allowed to pick up the boys."

"That's true," Roman said. "At the moment, it was a bit embarrassing because, yeah, I felt like they thought I was trying to abscond with the boys."

"We *told* them he was supposed to pick us up," Colby said. "But they wouldn't listen to us."

"It's better that they didn't listen to you, buddy," Rebecca told him. "Just to be safe."

“But he’s my *uncle*,” Colby protested.

“I wouldn’t want my dad to pick me up,” Aaron murmured.

Rebecca wrapped her arm around his shoulders. “I wouldn’t want that either.”

“So it’s good that they hassled Roman,” Zoe said.

“I think it will be okay from now on,” Roman added.

“I’m going to take my stuff downstairs,” Rebecca said. “I’ll be back up in a few minutes.”

In her room, she sat down on her bed for a moment and exhaled heavily. Worry seemed to take a toll on her because she felt really very tired. It had been busy at work, but still, she shouldn’t be that tired.

Jocelyn’s mindset weighed on Rebecca. Her friend had hoped to make this Christmas special for Colby, especially since she’d be distracted once the baby arrived. That was the main reason she’d insisted on going along to get the Christmas trees, even though she’d found it difficult to move.

Now, however, Jocelyn wouldn’t be able to go with Colby to the rehearsals of the kids’ program, and she might even miss the program. Rebecca was sure that was going to crush her friend.

They needed to get Colby up to the hospital to see Jocelyn before too many days passed. Video chat was great, but it only went so far.

Pushing to her feet, Rebecca went to her dresser and pulled out a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt to change into. After swapping her outfits, she hung up her work clothes, then went upstairs.

Back in the kitchen, all the food had been unpacked and set out on the counter. Zoe had filled a couple of glasses with milk and was carrying them to the breakfast nook.

“Can we eat, Mama?” Aaron asked. “We’re starving!”

“Yep.”

Aaron prayed this time, then Rebecca helped him fill his plate, while Zoe helped Colby with his. Roman and Ben waited until she and Zoe had food before they loaded up their own plates. Rebecca was glad that the others were there, since it meant that she didn't have to be constantly engaged in the conversation.

After a busy day at work, talking to all kinds of people, she didn't have much left in her to engage with two talkative little boys on her own. Well, one very talkative boy and one slightly less talkative boy.

Thankfully, Zoe was more than capable of picking up the slack, with Ben stepping in for any gaming related conversations. Roman spoke up occasionally between bites.

"I talked to Jocelyn earlier," Roman said once the boys had finished and left the table. "She said that they continue to just monitor the situation and that everything still looks okay with the baby."

"I wonder how long it will be before something happens," Zoe said.

"Surprisingly, Jocelyn didn't seem to be too bothered by the idea of waiting," Roman said. "Though she misses Colby."

"We need to take Colby to see her," Rebecca said.

"I think she'd like that," Roman said. "Should I take him tomorrow after school?"

"I can come hang out with Aaron until you're off work," Zoe added.

Rebecca nodded. "I think that would be a good idea. Provided that's what Jocelyn wants."

"I'll tell her about the plan, then she can let me know tomorrow afternoon if it still works."

"Don't tell Colby about the plan, just in case it doesn't work out," Rebecca cautioned. "I'd hate for him to get excited, only to be disappointed if he can't go."

"See, I would have thought that telling him would be a good idea," Roman said. "To give him something to be excited

about.”

“I did that earlier this year. Planned something, told him and Aaron about it, but then it fell through,” Zoe said with a shake of her head. “I only did it once. Lesson learned pretty quickly.”

“Just think of all the lessons you’re learning now,” Rebecca told her. “You won’t have to learn them when you have kids of your own.”

Zoe grinned. “No on-the-job-training for me. I’m going to be a pro when I become a mom.”

“Oh, somehow I doubt that’s how it works,” Roman said.

“Are you sure?” Zoe pouted. “That’s a bummer.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure any mom ever reaches pro status,” Rebecca told her. “Every kid is different, so what works with one might not work with another.”

Roman chuckled. “I’m sure Mom would have agreed that you and I were very different children.”

“Well, sure,” Zoe agreed. “I mean, you were her practice child. By the time she got to me, perfection was gained.”

Rebecca couldn’t help but laugh at that, and apparently Roman found it funny too. She was glad that Zoe and Roman could talk about their mom in lighter moments. It was something she’d noticed with Jocelyn over the past couple of years. She’d begun to talk more and more about her mom and the memories she had of her.

It wasn’t the same for her and Darius. They didn’t have a lot of fun memories with their mom, though she knew that wasn’t really their mom’s fault. Their dad had been a tyrant who apparently felt that fun was a waste of time and energy.

“I guess my mom got the perfect child on the first try, so she didn’t feel the need to continue,” Ben said.

Roman laughed at that too, while Zoe gave her boyfriend an adoring look.

“I mean, I think you’re pretty perfect, too,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

“Ah, thanks, sweetheart.” He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “I think you’re pretty perfect, too.”

There weren’t a lot of moments when Rebecca felt any sort of longing for a relationship, but they did pop up occasionally—usually quite out of the blue. She had a moment of it right then as Ben spoke so glowingly about Zoe. His feelings for her were so evident.

It wasn’t anything she’d ever experienced with Craig. And since it hadn’t been the type of stuff she’d seen between her parents either, she hadn’t realized what could be possible in a relationship.

But now she saw it with the three couples around her, and there was a part of her that longed for it. The trouble was, even if she wanted to seriously pursue a relationship, there weren’t any men who’d really caught her eye.

Well, that wasn’t *totally* true.

After meeting Roman the year before and then seeing how generous he’d been with his family and with Aaron, she’d come to really admire him. However, she knew enough to keep her interest to herself. Roman could have his pick of any woman, and men with his money usually went for the gorgeous model type.

Rebecca couldn’t be further from that type.

Having Roman around like this made her feelings for him intensify, but she would not let them distract her from what was important. Given what was going on, she couldn’t avoid Roman—nor did she really want to.

“Well, now I don’t need dessert,” Roman said.

“Because we’re just so sweet, right?” Zoe quipped.

“Something like that,” Roman muttered.

“You know, this time last year, I would have agreed with you. I mean, I had to be around Darius and Jocelyn. It was a bit too much,” she said. “But then I met Ben, and things

changed. You'll figure that out one day. You just have to meet the right person."

Roman shifted to lean back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "I think I'll just take your word for it."

"Have you ever had a serious girlfriend?" Zoe asked.

It was pretty clear from Roman's frown that it wasn't a subject he really wanted to discuss. "Depends on what you consider serious."

"Uh... Well, I would say that would be how deeply you felt for someone."

"Not length of time together?" Roman asked.

"Not really. Ben and I hadn't been dating all that long before I would have considered us serious. I just knew that I loved him more than I'd ever loved anyone."

"Well, not sure I've ever felt that way for anyone, so maybe I haven't been in a serious relationship."

Rebecca wasn't sure if she agreed with Zoe's definition of serious or not. She and Craig might not have loved each other the way Zoe loved Ben or Jocelyn loved Darius, but she considered them to have been in a serious relationship.

They might still have been in that relationship if Craig hadn't left her, which didn't make Rebecca feel good about her decisions. She'd like to think she would have realized it was better to leave him eventually, but she didn't know for sure.

"Okay, then, let me rephrase the question," Zoe said. "What's the longest you ever dated a woman?"

Roman took so long to answer that Rebecca wondered if he was even going to.

"Probably about six or seven months."

"We need to find a nice lady for you," Zoe announced.

Holding his hands up, Roman shook his head. "No, you don't."

Ignoring him, Zoe asked, "So, what's your type?"

“My type?”

“Yep. Your type of woman? What are you attracted to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Really?” Zoe looked unconvinced, but then her expression cleared. “Actually, I get that. I thought I had a type, but I didn’t realize that my type was all wrong for me. So now, my type is... Ben!”

“Basically Mr. Nice Guy?” Roman asked.

“Mr. Nice Handsome Sweet Guy,” she corrected him. “Get it right.”

Roman let out a huff of laughter. “Well, pardon me. Ben’s very much *not* my type, so I didn’t pick up on everything about him.”

“That’s okay. You just need to find Miss Nice Pretty Sweet Lady.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Roman murmured.

“Any interest in the Halverson ladies?”

“What?”

“They’re all nice. Well, Kayleigh might be a bit intense, but she’s still nice.”

“I guess you forgot that we dated for a very short time in high school,” Roman said.

Zoe’s eyes went wide. “Oh, that’s right. So that ship has sailed, huh?”

“Yep. Well and truly sailed.”

“Charli?”

“No Halversons,” Roman said. “In fact, no one.”

“Sorry. I can’t just let you languish.”

“Zoe.” Roman’s exasperation was clear. “I’m not *languishing*. Ben, help me out here.”

“Afraid I can’t,” Ben told him.

“Why not?”

“Because Zoe is unstoppable when she puts her mind to something,” Ben said.

“Are you going to force me to go on dates?” Roman asked. “Because you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes at her brother. “Maybe I’ll just introduce you to every nice woman I know, I have several single friends here. But perhaps, I’ll start with Rebecca.”

“What?” Rebecca had been enjoying the exchange between siblings until her name came up.

Roman glanced over at Rebecca and gave her a small smile. “I don’t blame you. I’m not exactly a catch.”

Rebecca stared at him, shocked that he would even consider that was her reason for alarm.

“What is that supposed to mean, Roman?” Zoe demanded.

Rebecca waited for his explanation because she couldn’t imagine what it would be.

“There are lots of things you don’t know about me,” Roman said. “I have my reasons for feeling the way I do.”

“Well, it’s going to be my new mission in life to convince you otherwise.”

Rebecca hoped that Zoe succeeded because, given what Roman had gone through over the past year, he should only be single because he wanted to be, not because he didn’t think he was worthy of a woman’s attention.

“Good luck with that,” Roman said. “You clearly need more to occupy your time.”

“Actually, I don’t. I’ve got plenty on my plate at the moment.”

“So leave me off of it.”

“I’ll... consider it.”

“You just focus on you,” Roman said. “And Ben, of course. And let me focus on me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Zoe asked. “I want to focus on *alllll* of you.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you all so much. I just want you to be happy.”

“That’s not your responsibility, sis,” Roman said. “You can’t force someone to be happy.”

“I know.” Zoe’s shoulders slumped. “But... but... Yeah. I know.”

“I appreciate that you care enough to want us all to be happy,” Roman said. “And just so you know, I’m not exactly *unhappy*. I’ve just had a rough year.”

“Okay. I’ll cut you some slack then.” Zoe got up and came around to where Roman sat to give him a hug. “I’m so glad I came back, and that you came back. Especially because I think Jocelyn needs us both right now. Well, she needs all of us, actually.”

With that last pronouncement, it appeared that Zoe’s matchmaking attempt was over. Rebecca got to her feet and began to clear off the table. While Zoe put the food away, Rebecca prepared the lunches for the next day.

“Did the boys do their homework?” Rebecca asked.

“They most certainly did,” Roman told her. “It took a little convincing—more Colby than Aaron—but they got it all done.”

“Thank you for helping them with that,” Rebecca said. “I’ll admit it’s something Jocelyn usually tackled with them. I mostly just read with Aaron. The other homework, he and Colby did together with Jocelyn.”

“I was happy to do it,” he said. “And it was nice to realize that I’m smart enough to understand what they’re learning.”

“You’re still smarter than an elementary student?” Zoe asked.

“Apparently,” Roman said with a laugh.

Once Rebecca had finished making the lunches, she put them in the fridge, spying as she did, the bag of waffles Roman had put in there that morning for her. It was nice to know that he was a man who did what he said he’d do. Craig had always been hit and miss where that was concerned.

About the only thing he ever did with any reliability was dropping Aaron off at school and picking him up at the end of the day. She’d been grateful until she’d realized why he was so dependable with that, which was because there was a woman at the school he wanted to see. Someone he’d ended up running off with, leaving behind his son and all other responsibilities.

The waffles in the fridge were such a small thing, but for some reason, it really resonated with Rebecca, striking a chord inside her.

With about half an hour until the boys’ bedtime, Jocelyn called to chat with Colby. As she listened to the mother and son talk, Rebecca silently prayed for both of them. She could hear the tears in Jocelyn’s voice, her emotions putting a strain on her words. Thankfully, Colby seemed oblivious to it, though he clearly missed his mom.

The exchange between the pair solidified the need for Colby to see his mom. Rebecca wished she could take Colby herself, but she couldn’t justify taking the time off work when there were others who could do it.

When the call ended, the boys said goodnight to everyone and went downstairs with Rebecca. She guided them through getting changed into their pajamas and brushing their teeth, then it was time for bed.

“I can sleep down here again, Auntie?” Colby asked.

“If that’s what you’d like. If you’d rather sleep in your room, you can do that too.”

Colby shook his head. “I want to sleep down here with Aaron.”

With that settled, the boys climbed into their beds. They each said a prayer, then Rebecca kissed them. “Go to sleep, okay? No talking.”

“No talking,” Aaron repeated with a nod.

“Love you both,” Rebecca told them. “See you in the morning.”

She turned off the light, leaving only the nightlight in the plug to illuminate the room. Though she heard them laughing as she walked away, Rebecca didn’t turn around to tell them to settle down. If they were hard to wake up in the morning, she’d know they stayed up too late and would need to address it the next night.

The other three were still sitting at the breakfast nook, though they now had mugs of coffee in front of them, along with a plate of cookies.

“Do you want some coffee?” Roman asked as she joined them.

Rebecca sank down into her chair. “Decaf?”

“Yeah. Since we have to go to bed at a reasonable hour,” he said as he got up from the table.

“I can make it,” she told him.

“I’m sure you can, but I don’t mind doing it. Might as well put my newly acquired knowledge to use.”

“How long did it take you to figure out how to use the machine?” Ben asked.

“Not too long. I have a fancy machine at home, so I had a general idea of how to make it work. I did end up following the instructional manual too, though.”

Rebecca watched as Roman set to work making her a cup of coffee. It wasn’t the first time someone had made her one. Ben liked to take over coffee machine duty when they all got

together. Apparently, he'd handed over the reins that night to Roman.

Once it was ready, he brought the mug over and set it down in front of her.

"Thank you," Rebecca said as she poured some cream from the container that was already on the table, then added some sugar.

"You're welcome."

Conversation turned to the plan for the next day, since Jocelyn had told them that she did want to see Colby. Roman would pick up him from school and head right into Coeur d'Alene, while Zoe would get Aaron and hang out with him until Rebecca was off work.

"She gave us a list of things to pack for her," Zoe said as they finished their coffee. "Can you help me with that, Becca?"

"Sure."

Leaving the men to chat, Rebecca went with Zoe to the master bedroom and the small nursery that they'd set up in the sitting area of the room. With Zoe's list, they filled the small suitcase they found in the closet.

"I hope that's everything she wants," Zoe said as she zipped up the suitcase.

"I suppose that if it's not, someone else will be going in to see her so we can take it to her then. I hope I can go see her on the weekend, if she's still in the hospital."

Zoe sighed. "I think she will be."

"I know it's the best place for her and the baby right now," Rebecca said. "It's just hard not having her and Darius here."

Zoe sat down on the edge of the bed, her shoulders slumped. "So everything will be fine, right? I don't think we can handle it *not* being okay."

Rebecca wished that she could offer Zoe the reassurance she wanted, but she also didn't want to give her false hope.

“I’m praying that everything will be fine.”

“Yeah. So am I,” Zoe said with a nod.

Rebecca sat down next to her and slipped her arm around her shoulders. “Why don’t we pray for her right now?”

In the time since becoming a Christian, she’d learned that when worry and helplessness took root in her heart, the best thing she could do was to stop and pray. It might not guarantee the outcome she wanted, but it was a good reminder that God was still in control, and regardless of how things turned out, He would never forsake them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Do you want another cup of coffee?” Roman asked Rebecca once Ben and Zoe had gone.

“Another one?” Rebecca gave him a curious look as she put the mugs Ben and Zoe had used into the dishwasher. “You better make sure it’s not caffeinated.”

Approaching the coffee machine, he glanced over at her with a smile. “I’d be drinking the real stuff if I planned to stay up late working. But since I have to get up at a reasonable hour, I’ll stick to decaf.”

“I’m not that much of a coffee addict that I need another cup tonight,” she said. “I’ll just stick to water.”

Roman hoped she planned to drink that water at the table with him and his coffee. He wasn’t ready to be on his own just yet, which was a bit ridiculous since he usually enjoyed his own company. The problem was that he had nothing to distract him there like he had at home.

Though he had his laptop, that was more for company work, not the work he liked to fill his late-night hours with. He could use it in a pinch, but without all his usual security measures, he wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“Do you play any games?” Roman asked as he carried his mug to the table.

Rebecca was wiping down the counter and paused at his question. “Uh, what sort of games?”

“Any type, really,” he said. “I ended up playing a lot of games when I was at the clinic for treatment.”

“Like *Uno*?”

“Among others,” Roman said with a laugh. “*Uno* was my favorite game back when I was the boys’ age.”

“Why do you think that was the first game that came to my mind?” she asked. “It’s the one we play most often.”

“Does Jocelyn have a game cupboard?”

“Yep. In the living room, under the built-in bookcase.”

“I’ll be right back,” he said, then went in search of a game, hoping that Rebecca would want to play a few rounds with him.

He had never been a huge game player, though he’d always enjoyed video games. However, he’d started to play games online on his phone or tablet with random people as a way of distracting himself and killing time. The people he played against had no idea what he was dealing with, and he found that he liked that. Most games had required just enough of his attention so that he didn’t have time to dwell on what he was going through. At least for a little while.

The games he found in the cupboard catered more to the under-ten crowd. After considering the options, he grabbed *Uno* and *Sorry*. Both were games he’d played plenty of as a kid.

When he returned to the breakfast nook, he found that Rebecca was still there, staring down at her phone. “Can I interest you in playing one of these?”

She glanced at the games he set down at the table. “Sure. What are you in the mood for?”

“Let’s try *Uno* and see if playing with Colby and Aaron has made you unbeatable.”

“Oh, I’ve never claimed to be a pro,” Rebecca said. “Colby is cut-throat at the game. He barely lets you take a breath to say *Uno* before he’s saying it.

“I’ll try not to be too much like him, but I recall doing the same thing at his age.”

Rebecca dumped the cards out of the package and shuffled them. “Colby also likes to deal himself the best cards.”

That made Roman chuckle. “If I’d been around more, I’m sure Jocelyn would blame me for his tendency to cheat.”

Rebecca deftly dealt them each the correct number of cards. It was clear he’d grown out of his need to win because

he was actually more focused on Rebecca than he was on the game.

He was really glad that Zoe's crazy comments earlier hadn't made things uncomfortable between them. Since Rebecca lived in the basement of Jocelyn's house, it could have made things awkward.

"Are you doing okay staying here?" Rebecca asked as she focused on her cards. "I know it was difficult for Zoe when she first came back."

Roman hadn't expected the question, and for a moment, he was at a loss as to how to answer her. But then the words he'd spoken to only two people before, spilled out. "I was here when it happened."

"What?" Rebecca lowered her hand and stared at him, her eyes wide. "You... I thought Jocelyn said you found them and called the cops."

"That's what everyone thinks." It's what he'd wanted everyone to think, which made him wonder why he'd now revealed the truth to Rebecca. The only other people who knew what really happened were Marsh and the therapist he'd seen over the past year.

He'd originally seen the therapist at the suggestion of the doctors at the clinic to help him deal with his cancer diagnosis and treatment. It was part of the package they offered for the exorbitant amount of money he'd paid. Over the course of the sessions with the therapist, the whole story of his past had unfolded.

"I'm so sorry you had to witness something like that." Rebecca closed her hand of cards, looking at him with compassion. "That must have been terrible."

Roman nodded. The memory of those minutes would never leave him. The fear. The helplessness. The horror. The moment his heart stopped when he realized his mom was gone. He would never be free from it, but it didn't dominate his thoughts like it once had.

The first year or so after everything had happened, he'd alternated between studying hard and drinking and partying hard to escape the memories. Marsh had pulled him out of the partying scene and taken him under his wing.

Roman wasn't sure he would have survived or been able to function normally again without Marsh's understanding, support, and help. It had forged an unbreakable bond between them that held strong, even to this day. He was the brother Roman had never had.

"Why wouldn't you have told the truth about what happened?" Rebecca asked

"It was my fault that everything happened."

"I doubt that." Rebecca frowned. "From what I understand, only one person pulled that trigger."

"Yeah, but he might not have done that if I hadn't called him out for what he was doing and then told my mom."

Her brow furrowed. "But if your dad hadn't been doing what he did, there would have been nothing to call him out on. Right? It all goes back to him."

The therapist had said something similar. "There are so many times I've regretted what I did. Thinking that if I'd just left well enough alone, my mom would still be alive."

"I hate to say this, but I'm not sure it would have made any difference in the long run. Do you think your dad would have continued to get away with what he was doing?"

Roman thought back to how he'd discovered his dad's indiscretions. "No. He was getting sloppy, and actually, after the fact, several people came forward to share what they knew."

"So it was only a matter of time before your mom would have found out, and from what Jocelyn told me, he wouldn't have been happy about a divorce, regardless."

"That's true."

"And who do you think your mom would have wanted to hear about your dad from?" Rebecca asked. "Someone who

loved her? Or someone who didn't have a vested interest in your family?"

"From me," Roman said without hesitation.

"You can't live with regret over things beyond your control." Rebecca gave him a small smile. "I've had to learn that, too."

Roman glanced at her before looking back at his cards, though the game had sort of lost its appeal. "Thank you for talking with me about this. I've had a therapist tell me the same thing you said, but it hits differently, coming from a person who heard about what happened from someone other than me."

"You should really tell Zoe and Jocelyn this," Rebecca said. "I mean, maybe not right at this moment, but eventually."

"You won't tell them?" Roman asked.

"Nope. Not my place," Rebecca said as she fanned out her cards again. "I may have an understanding of what happened because of what Jocelyn told me, but you three have an emotional connection to it because you lived it and were so deeply impacted by it."

"I appreciate that," Roman said, feeling lighter, as if a burden had eased from his shoulders.

"Blue."

Roman looked down at the wild draw 4 card she'd played and grinned. "Lovely."

"Right? So lovely."

"Seems like maybe you've learned a few tricks from my nephew."

"Well, it certainly wasn't a trick I learned in my childhood," she said. "We didn't play card games."

Jocelyn had told him about Darius and Rebecca's childhood, but she hadn't gone into specific details. However, from what she'd said, they'd had a tough childhood.

It felt a bit like everyone but him had managed to move on from what had happened to them. Not that they'd forgotten their past, but it wasn't holding them back like it was him.

With a sigh, he picked up his four cards, sliding them into place in his hand. "I feel like I'm at a disadvantage here, since it's been far too long since I've played this game against a real person."

"You could always offer to play the boys while you're here," she said. "That'll get you back up to speed really quick."

"How is Aaron as a player?"

"He's quiet, of course, but he's learned to say *Uno* at the same time as he lays his card down. Makes Colby mad sometimes, but they seem to split the wins pretty equally."

As they continued to play, Roman didn't try too hard to win. He was just enjoying the conversation and getting to know Rebecca. It was especially good to hear that she felt like she was getting closer to normal again. That her energy wasn't depleted as quickly. He was also feeling a little stronger, but he still had a ways to go before he'd consider himself normal again.

They played a couple more games before Rebecca said she had to call it a day.

"Thanks for playing *Uno* with me," Roman said. "I'm sure it wasn't what you'd planned for your evening."

"It was nice." The smile she gave him was warm and lit up her eyes. "Definitely less stressful than playing with the boys."

Roman laughed as he put the cards back in their box. "I'll have to play with them sometime, just to experience the fun."

"I think they'd really like that," Rebecca said. "And so would I."

Once the game was put away, Rebecca got up. Roman also pushed back from the table and got to his feet. "I guess Colby and I won't be here for dinner tomorrow night."

“Oh, right. I was thinking of making pasta for supper, but if it’s just the two of us, I’ll save that for another night.”

“Will you and Aaron be okay for dinner?” Roman asked, then realized that was kind of a dumb question.

Of course, they’d be okay for dinner. It wasn’t like Rebecca hadn’t been taking care of herself and Aaron for years now. She didn’t need him to take care of them, but he couldn’t deny that he wanted to. And that had nothing to do with how capable she was.

“We’ll be fine.” Her smile held a bit of humor. “I’ll probably treat him to some nuggets and fries, since that’s a favorite of his.”

“Have a feeling we’ll be eating fast food as well, which isn’t a bad thing,” Roman said as he put his mug into the dishwasher. “Don’t tell Mila, but I quite enjoy fast food.”

“Maybe you should give me her phone number, so I have a way to tattle on you. I mean, you can tell me not to tell Mila, but it’s not like I actually have a way to contact her.”

“Oh, she’d love it if I did that. The idea of getting reports on what I’m eating would thrill her.”

“It’s nice she cares so much,” Rebecca said.

“It is,” he agreed. “I was very fortunate when I hired Mila and her husband, Davis. They are totally trustworthy and have done a fantastic job taking care of me and the property. Especially this past year when I haven’t been around.”

“You weren’t living at home?”

“No. Once I was diagnosed, my doctor recommended a cancer clinic.” Roman hesitated before revealing more, knowing exactly how it painted him. A rich man, able to buy his way to excellent healthcare when millions of others couldn’t. It was why, when he made donations to cancer care, he donated to clinics in underprivileged areas, not the places that catered to rich people like him. “It was a private clinic that offered me a place to live, along with having all the medical care available that I needed.”

“What a blessing that you could have that,” she said. “I can see why you’d want the same kind of care for Jocelyn.”

“I would want the same kind of care for any of you,” he told her. “It would feel wrong to have all this money and then not use it to get the best care possible for the people who are important to me.”

Rebecca regarded him for a moment, then nodded. “I can understand that.”

“But I’m not going to insist on anything where Jocelyn is concerned.”

“Just strongly suggest options?” she asked, a small smile curving the corners of her lips.

“Maybe?” He shrugged. “Probably.”

“There are worse things that a family member could do than try to get the best possible care for their loved one.”

“This is true.”

“I know we all want her home soon, but I’m praying that the baby stays inside for at least another week or two. It’s better for the little one, which, in turn, will be better for Jocelyn and for Darius.”

“Yeah. And honestly, I’m not sure that I’d want her home as long as she’s still pregnant. I think I’d be even more worried now.”

“You and Darius, both. Well, I think all of us would be more worried,” Rebecca said. “The good thing is that we know this isn’t going to stretch out forever. Soon, the baby will arrive, and life will move into a new phase for them.”

“One filled with sleepless nights and dirty diapers.”

“Yep.” Rebecca grinned. “Be sure to give Jocelyn a hug from me tomorrow.”

“I definitely will.”

“I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

After Rebecca went around locking up, she said goodnight, then disappeared down the stairs, closing the door behind her. Left on his own in the kitchen, Roman pulled out his phone and checked through his messages.

There wasn't anything pressing beyond a reminder from Marsh that they had a meeting scheduled with some of the department heads at ten the next morning. Even before he'd gotten sick, he'd attended most meetings remotely, and plenty of times it had been without his camera on, so it hadn't raised too many questions when he'd done that over the past year.

The one time of year he usually showed up in person was to the annual Christmas event. He'd attended the previous year before coming to Serenity. He was going to miss the next one, however. His family needed him.

After sending Marsh an email to confirm he'd be present at the meeting the next day, he shut off the kitchen light and climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

Once there, Roman changed into a pair of flannel pants, then crawled into bed and turned on the television to find a news channel. He wasn't addicted to watching the news on a personal level. However, considering a large part of the company's business was cyber security, he liked to stay abreast of what was happening around the world. It also paid to keep an eye out for any of their clients appearing in the news.

Unfortunately, he didn't see as much of the news as he'd planned since he fell asleep not long after he turned it on.

When Roman woke up the next morning, the television was still blaring. With a groan, he grabbed his phone from the bed beside him to check the time. It was still early, but there wasn't much chance of him falling back asleep before his alarm was due to go off.

Previously, he'd never fallen asleep while watching television. Hopefully, he'd get back to that point once again. However, it wasn't likely to be soon.

Tossing his phone on the bed, he headed off to take a quick shower, then got dressed for the day. By the time he got downstairs, Rebecca was already there with Aaron and Colby.

Normally, Roman would have needed a couple of cups of coffee before dealing with people, but for some reason, he didn't feel that way about Rebecca and the boys. Though the pair had plenty to chat about, it wasn't a conversation he had to participate in.

"Want some scrambled eggs and toast?" Rebecca asked as he went to the coffee machine.

"You don't have to make me breakfast."

"I know, but since I'm making it anyway, it's not a problem."

"In that case, eggs and toast would be great."

As she did that, he prepared himself a large mug of coffee. He knew Mila would frown at the amount of coffee he was drinking, and she'd insist that he substitute a couple of those cups with a smoothie or two. If he was going to gain back any of the weight he'd lost, he would have more success with smoothies than with coffee. But coffee was so good.

"Thank you," Roman said when she set a plate filled with food in front of him a few minutes later. "Smells good."

"It tastes good too," Aaron told him. "Mama makes good scrambled eggs."

It wasn't long before Rebecca was getting ready to leave. "Aaron, remember that Zoe is picking you up today, and you'll hang out with her until I'm done with work."

"Yep."

She gave him a hug and a kiss, then went to Colby. "Hug your mom and the baby for me, okay?"

"I will."

After a hug and a kiss for her nephew, she turned to Roman. "Thanks for running the boys to school. I'll see you later."

Though it was only his second day doing the drop-off, Roman felt much more confident when he and the boys arrived at the school a short time later. And it made him think that he could have managed being a dad, if that had been where his journey had taken him.

However, that didn't appear to be how things would unfold for him. He would just have to enjoy these moments with Colby and Aaron and the new baby. Whenever he or she showed up.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rebecca was stirring the pasta sauce on the stove when Roman and Colby walked in the next evening. It was close to bedtime, and Aaron had been concerned that he'd have to go to bed by himself. Already the boys were used to sharing a room, and if Jocelyn was in the hospital for too much longer, they probably wouldn't want to go back to sleeping on their own.

"How was your mom, Colby?"

"She was happy to see me," Colby said with a grin.

"I'm sure she was." Rebecca bent to hug him. "We'll take you back to see her again soon."

"Dad said he was proud of me for being so good."

That made Rebecca smile. "You have been very good."

"Can I have a cookie before bed?" Colby asked.

"Sure," Rebecca said with a laugh. "And yes, Aaron, you can have one too."

The boys happily scrambled to sit at the counter while Rebecca got them each a cookie and a small glass of milk.

"Could I beg for one of those too?" Roman asked as he made himself a cup of coffee.

"No begging necessary," Rebecca told him as she left the lid off the container. "Help yourself to as many as you want."

She moved the pot of sauce off the burner to cool before she put it in the fridge for supper the next night.

"We didn't get to play any video games," Colby said with a groan.

"You can play one racing game, then brush your teeth," Rebecca said, giving in to their forlorn looks.

"Thanks, Auntie," Colby said as they slid off their stools.

Rebecca shook her head as they ran downstairs. “They’re going to be so disappointed when Jocelyn comes back, and they have to go to bed separately and can’t play games as much as they have been.”

“It’s been a good distraction for Colby,” Roman said. “She understands.”

“You told her?”

Roman chuckled. “I didn’t have to. Colby was a fount of information, telling her everything he’d been doing.”

“I guess she didn’t care?” Rebecca asked. “I didn’t get a text telling me I’d been letting Colby run amok.”

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Roman told her. “Jocelyn is just happy that you’re here to take care of Colby. She trusts you the most with him.”

“It helps that he and Aaron are such good buddies.” She stirred the pot a couple of times. “And for all his rambunctiousness, Colby’s a real sweetie, and he’s mostly obedient.”

Roman grinned. “Mostly obedient.”

“Well, he is a kid. All of them are mostly obedient, even Aaron.”

“I think my mom would have agreed that the three of us were mostly obedient at that age.”

“My dad would have said that we were *never* obedient,” Rebecca said. “Though that wasn’t true.”

“So why would he say it?”

“Because he had crazy strict rules that were very hard for children to follow. I mean, it was just ridiculous the stuff that he’d expect of us.” Rebecca stared down at the contents of the pot, wishing she hadn’t said anything because she hated thinking back to that time. But Roman had divulged things about his past, so it felt right for her to do the same. “Like our shoes had to be lined up precisely one inch from each other and one inch from the wall. They had to be tied properly, even

though it meant we had to untie them to put them on. And if they weren't clean on the bottom..."

"That's ridiculous," Roman said.

"It was, considering you're talking about kids as young as three having to do it."

"Did the older siblings help the younger ones?"

"A couple of them did," she said. "Darius always helped me out as much as he could. Unfortunately, if our dad saw him doing that, we'd both get in trouble."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Rebecca gave him a smile that she didn't really feel. "Thankfully, we escaped that life."

"But none of your other siblings did?"

"Not that I'm aware of. None of them seemed to be as focused on the world beyond our small town as Darius and I were. I haven't had any contact with them since I left. And I really have no desire to."

"Same with Darius?"

"Oh, yes. Darius has absolutely no interest in connecting with any members of our family."

"Can't say I blame him."

"He was treated worse than I was." Frowning at the memories, Rebecca stirred the sauce again, then turned as the boys came into the kitchen a short time later. "Are you ready for bed?"

"Yep," Aaron said. "We brushed our teeth."

"Okay." Grateful for the distraction from the past, she laid the spoon down across the top of the pot. "Say goodnight to Uncle Roman."

Once the boys had done that, she followed them down the stairs to the basement. It didn't take her long to get them settled, and if they stayed up a bit later that night, it wasn't a big deal.

When she got back to the kitchen, Roman was still sitting at the counter drinking his coffee. “Will they be up early tomorrow?”

“Not too early, but they know how to get themselves breakfast downstairs.”

“So they have practice tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yep. Usually Jocelyn takes them, but I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“I can do it if you want,” Roman offered.

“I don’t mind taking them, but you can come along if you’re bored.”

“When is the program?”

“Next Sunday night,” she said. “Do you think you’ll still be here?”

“Probably.” He shrugged. “Not much use going home now, only to turn right around and come back. I think I’m needed here.”

Rebecca didn’t want to feel happy at the news, but she was. She really enjoyed having him there. He was easy to be around and to talk to. Plus, the boys liked him, which was a good thing, since he was helping with them.

“So we’re having spaghetti tomorrow for dinner?” Roman asked, gesturing to the pot.

“That’s the plan. I think Ben, Zoe, Carla, and Devon will be here too.” She got a large container out of a drawer. “Did you see Darius today?”

“Yes. He was working when we first got there, but he showed up a little before supper with food for us.”

“How did he seem?”

“You do realize that your brother is hard to read, right?” Roman’s brow furrowed. “I mean, the guy’s expression reveals nothing.”

“Yeah. He’s always been good at hiding his emotions. Although he has mellowed a bit since he and Jocelyn got

together.”

“My guess is that he’s doing his best not to show his worry to her,” Roman said. “That’s what I’d do.”

“Jocelyn would know he’s doing that.”

“I think this might be a case of him knowing that she knows that he’s super worried, but they’re both pretending that it isn’t a big deal.”

“I’ll have to call him tomorrow.”

“Jocelyn was trying to convince him to come home, but he’s not interested in leaving Coeur d’Alene without her.”

Rebecca began to spoon the pasta sauce into the container. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

She hoped Darius was getting enough to eat and adequate sleep, but she wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t. Jocelyn and the baby weren’t in immediate danger, and they were in the best place possible for them, but Darius would worry and want to be close, regardless.

“So, what do you and Aaron want for Christmas?” Roman asked.

Rebecca lifted her gaze from her task and stared at the man. “You should probably ask Santa.”

“Hah,” he said with a grin. “I’m trying to *be* Santa.”

“Well, I think you have a good idea of what the boys would like for Christmas,” she told him. “Though you’ve made it difficult on yourself by buying them so much stuff throughout the past year.”

“Okay. How about what *you’d* like?”

“I don’t need anything,” Rebecca told him. That wasn’t exactly true, but she had no plan to give him a list of things she wanted.

“This isn’t about what you need,” Roman said. “This is about what you’d *like*.”

She went back to work. “I’m not going to give you a list.”

“Do I have to ask Zoe or Jocelyn what you’d like?”

“I suppose you could.” She had no idea what they’d tell him because she was as loath to give them gift ideas as she was him. Telling Jocelyn that she wanted or needed anything pretty much guaranteed she would get it. And the last thing she wanted was for her friend to ever feel like she was taking advantage of her.

Jocelyn had been so generous to her and Aaron that Rebecca hated to even hint that she wanted something. She had a feeling that would be the same with Roman, so she wasn’t even going to give him any ideas.

“Well, if you don’t give me a hint, you can’t complain if I get you something you don’t like.”

“I’d really rather you didn’t buy me anything,” Rebecca said, because if he bought her something, she’d feel like she should buy him something.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to buy him anything, but if he bought her something pricey, the pressure would be even greater. As it was, she was hoping she’d be able to find something that Aaron could give him. She didn’t bother to ask him what he wanted because he would probably give her the same answer she’d just given him.

“Maybe I should just ask Aaron,” Roman said.

That was probably a better plan than he might realize, given that Aaron was the one who was with her when she voiced her frustration with things. Whether it was her phone dying so quickly because the battery was failing or her car not starting as reliably as she would have liked.

Hopefully, if she didn’t react, he wouldn’t consider it a viable alternative. “Do you do your own shopping, or do you send off a list to an assistant?”

Roman laughed. “I would like to say I’ve never done that, but that’s not entirely true. I *have* had someone do my shopping for me in the past. I’m planning to do it myself this year, though I might need some advice. Otherwise, I’m just going to buy a bunch of random stuff.”

Rebecca found she'd be rather curious as to what that random stuff would be. Would it be like when she gave Aaron twenty bucks to buy birthday gifts at the dollar store?

Colby had been the only one who'd received stuff he actually liked and could use. Jocelyn had ended up with some smelly perfume and bright red lipstick. Darius... well, Aaron had given him some cheap paints and a paint by number set.

She thought, however, that Roman would be more likely to buy them expensive stuff that they might not necessarily want or need. Time would tell.

With the last of the sauce in the container, Rebecca took the pot to the sink to wash it. "I want to go see Jocelyn on Sunday afternoon."

"She'd like that, I think," Roman said. "The four of us could go. Jocelyn is in a room of her own, so we wouldn't be bothering anyone else."

"That sounds like a good idea. I think Zoe and Ben are going to see her tomorrow."

"I know that Jocelyn will enjoy seeing you," Roman said. "She asked me if you were doing okay and made me promise that I wasn't creating extra work for you."

Rebecca glanced up from the pot she was drying. "You're not."

"Even though I make you play *Uno* with me?"

She laughed. "Even though."

"Do you watch much TV?" he asked.

"Some. I like to watch home design shows." It was unlikely she'd ever have a home like the ones in those shows, but she liked to dream.

She'd been able to put aside more money since Jocelyn refused rent from her, but she had a feeling that she'd have to put that towards a car. Which was fine.

For the time being, she had a safe and comfortable home for her and Aaron. And as long as she was able to help Jocelyn

and Darius, she wouldn't feel too bad about continuing to live there rent free.

Jocelyn would be upset to know that Rebecca only felt comfortable staying there if she could be of help to them, but that was how it was for her. She didn't like taking handouts if she couldn't return the help offered to her in some way.

And if Jocelyn was upset, Darius would probably be angry about Rebecca thinking that way. But she and Aaron weren't his responsibility. He had a family of his own now, and he needed to worry about them. Not her.

Rebecca did wish that she had the ability to give Aaron a better life all on her own, but she barely had a high school education. And though she might have a better job now, it would never be enough to afford them a house of their own. At least not one in a neighborhood where she'd want to live.

She wished she had some sort of natural talent like Darius with his art, but she didn't. Instead, she was just average—or less-than-average—at most things. It wasn't something she dwelled on too much, but it was hard not to compare herself to those around her sometimes.

Zoe had her singing. Ben had his videos. Darius had his art. Roman had some crazy skills with computers. Even Jocelyn had a passion for her job as a teacher.

Rebecca had... nothing.

Craig had told her that often enough. It was hard to dispute that when she'd yet to prove she was capable of doing more than stocking shelves or answering the phone. Growing up, she hadn't been encouraged to dream of a career. Being a wife and mother was the ultimate goal for the women in the environment where she'd been raised.

And in a perfect world, being a stay-at-home wife and mother would have been great. However, being a single mom wasn't compatible with that.

But rather than let it get her down, she chose to live her life one day at a time, while trying to make decisions that wouldn't negatively impact her and Aaron in the future.

“What do you watch?” Rebecca asked, aware that she was in danger of getting caught up in her thoughts.

“I probably watch news the most,” Roman said.

“The *news*?”

“Yeah. I like to stay in touch with what’s happening around the world. I watch from any country that has a broadcast in English.”

“I suppose it’s smart to stay abreast of what’s going on.”

“Watching the news also helps me see if there’s a need somewhere that I can help with.”

That caught Rebecca’s attention. “Help how?”

Roman shrugged. “Depends on the situation. If it’s a natural disaster, I can arrange food and water. Sometimes we’ve sent a crew to help with clean up or building new facilities. Other times, it’s been a financial donation.”

Rebecca wasn’t sure why she was surprised at his revelation. From things Jocelyn and Zoe had shared, their mom had always encouraged them to help others where they could. He’d already shown himself to be a generous man.

“I’m sure people are very grateful that you help them out in such practical ways.”

“It would be wrong of me not to.”

Rebecca carried the container of sauce to the fridge and put it on the shelf. Supper was all planned for the next night. So even though the afternoon would be busy, she didn’t have to worry about figuring food out for after the boys were done the Christmas program rehearsal.

“I haven’t been able to do much beyond organizing stuff this past year, though.”

“So you travelled to these places, too?”

“Not all of them,” he said. “But some.”

“Mama?”

Rebecca turned to see that Aaron had come upstairs and was standing in the doorway. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Is Colby awake too?”

Aaron shook his head. “Just me.”

“Okay. I’ll be downstairs in a minute. Just wait on the couch for me.”

He nodded, then turned around and disappeared through the door.

“Guess I need to go settle a boy,” she said. “I think I’m going to call it a night since I’ll probably be up early tomorrow.”

“Okay. Have a good night.” Roman gave her a smile. “See you in the morning.”

Though Rebecca would have liked to hang around and spend more time with Roman, she was starting to feel like that would be a bad idea. The more they hung out together, the more she found to like about him. She really hadn’t thought that would happen, which was stupid of her.

Her experience with men was limited, so she was a little naïve when it came to her feelings. She’d figured that she wouldn’t be tempted to let a guy get close after her experience with Craig, but Roman was proving her wrong.

Closing the door behind her, Rebecca headed down to the basement, where Aaron waited for her. He usually slept fine, especially when he and Colby were sharing a room, but every once in a while, something kept him awake.

So she’d focus on Aaron for a bit, and not on the man upstairs who was growing on her in ways she hadn’t expected.

When Roman’s attention was focused solely on her, it made her feel special. Like she was important to him.

Realistically, she knew that wasn’t the case. Who else was he supposed to focus on when it was just the two of them? He was a nice enough guy that he wouldn’t just ignore her,

especially since his sister would probably get mad at him if she discovered he hadn't been nice to her.

So yeah, she needed to be careful about putting herself in positions with Roman where her heart would want to override her mind. Where emotions might eclipse logic.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Roman sidestepped into a row at the back of the sanctuary, then sank down onto the pew. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd come with Rebecca and the boys to the kids' Christmas program rehearsal.

Part of it was that he'd spent too much time in the quiet of the house already. He'd been okay with it for the first couple of days, but now, if he had the opportunity to leave, he was going to take it.

He watched as Rebecca headed down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary with the boys. There were a handful of adults there, as well as a bunch of kids running around.

Leaning forward, he braced his arms on the pew in front of him. It was weird to be back in this church. When he'd walked through the doors of the building a couple of weeks earlier, it had been the first time he'd been in any church in years.

As he sat there, his mind decided it would be a great time to remind him exactly when that last time had been. His mom's funeral.

Not his dad's. His funeral had taken place at a funeral home, and he and his siblings hadn't attended it. He wasn't sure if anyone had.

A huge number of people had attended his mom's funeral, however. She'd touched so many lives, and they'd all come to mourn her passing, along with her children.

Roman had walked out of the church that day, and he'd never gone back. Carla had taken Jocelyn and Zoe to church each week, but he had refused to go. The church wasn't where he wanted to be.

So each Sunday, when the three of them had left the house that Carla had rented for them, he'd stayed home. And he'd continued to stay away from church in the years since then.

But here he was, sitting on a pew he'd sat on plenty of times, preparing to watch his nephew participate in a program that he'd once been part of. It wasn't a place he'd ever thought he'd be, but his diagnosis the previous year had shifted stuff inside his mind.

His gaze tracked Rebecca as she turned away from the adults and walked back up the aisle. Her gaze was on the ground, but as she neared him, she lifted her head.

For a moment, she seemed to hesitate, then she continued on to where he sat, sidling into the row in front of him.

"You don't have to hang out here," she said as she sat down. "It won't be the most riveting way to spend the afternoon."

The sanctuary was large, and they were far enough back that, as long as they weren't talking too loudly, they wouldn't interrupt the practice.

"I'm fine. Unless they don't want us here."

Rebecca glanced at the front, then shrugged. "I don't think it matters to them."

"You're staying?"

She nodded. "Given what's going on with Jocelyn, I want to stick around in case Colby needs me."

"Then I'll stay as well."

As the person in charge organized the kids for the rehearsal, Roman's gaze wandered. The front of the sanctuary had been decorated for Christmas with three large trees draped with white twinkling lights. Red and green decorations hung from the trees' branches.

His mom had been one of the people who had helped decorate the church each year, and she'd brought him along sometimes. Their last Christmas together, he'd been there to help carry boxes and decorate the upper branches of the tree since he had no problem climbing the ladder.

The memory of his mom's joy as she'd decorated both the church and their house brought with it a mixture of happiness

and grief. And that was why, since her death, he hadn't celebrated Christmas the way she had.

He hadn't avoided Christmas altogether—Mila wouldn't have let him—but it hadn't been a holiday he'd sought out company for. Low-key celebrations had meant low-key emotions, which had suited him just fine.

Initially, Marsh had tried to get him to join his family's celebrations, but he'd eventually stopped asking, though he'd made sure that Roman knew he had a standing invitation if he changed his mind.

Though he'd been with Jocelyn and Zoe the previous year, the diagnosis had weighed too heavily for him to really get into the holidays. This year... well, it could be different. If he allowed it to be.

A light touch on his arm drew his gaze from his memories and the Christmas decorations on the stage that had prompted them. "Everything okay?"

He cleared his throat, then gave her a smile. "Yeah. Just being here reminds me of when I was a kid."

"Were you in the kids' program back then?" she asked. "Jocelyn said she was."

"Yep. All of us participated until we were too old."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"When I was the boys' age, I did. But the older I got, the less thrilled I was to be part of it. I was so glad when I aged out and didn't have to do it anymore."

"I'm sure Colby and Aaron will eventually tire of it, but so far, they're happy to be involved."

"They might enjoy it more since they're both in the program. My best friend back then didn't come to church here, so I was pretty much on my own."

Rebecca smiled at a woman who came into the sanctuary with a boy who looked younger than Colby and Aaron. She appeared to be in a hurry, but she still returned Rebecca's smile.

It didn't take her long to leave the boy at the front, then come back up the aisle. "Hi, Rebecca! Sorry, I'm in a rush. Danny's waiting for me. We're going to try to fit in a date at the grocery store, shopping while practice is going on."

The smile on Rebecca's face brightened further. "Have fun!"

"Date at the grocery store?" Roman asked, as the woman hurried out the door.

"That's what you end up having to do once you have kids. Combining errands with time together."

"Why wouldn't you just get a babysitter?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Maybe they don't have someone they feel comfortable leaving their child with, or maybe they can't afford to pay a babysitter."

"Do you babysit for Jocelyn and Darius so they can go on dates?"

"Yep."

"And do they babysit for you?"

"For dates?" she asked, her brow furrowed. He nodded. "Uh, nope. There's no need, though I'm sure they would if I wanted them to. They've babysat for other reasons though."

"You don't go on dates?"

Roman knew that it was none of his business, but he was curious. Though Jocelyn had mentioned stuff about Rebecca in passing, she'd never mentioned anything about her dating or having a boyfriend after Craig had left her.

Rebecca seemed to debate answering him because she didn't say anything right away.

"Not right now," she finally said. "I have more important things to focus on at the moment."

"Well, as you heard the other night, I'm not much into dating myself."

Rebecca turned her attention to the front again, allowing Roman to observe her. He shifted to sit back in the pew, wondering why he was so curious about her.

He liked her. There was no denying that. She was easy to be around and easy to talk to. The fact that he'd shared what had happened at the house with his parents was proof of that. She'd listened without judgement and had promised to keep his secret, which he'd appreciated.

He was coming to understand why Jocelyn counted Rebecca as her best friend. They were similar in personality. They were both very caring, helping those around them without complaint. Jocelyn was more outgoing, but Rebecca's quiet nature didn't seem to prevent her from connecting with people.

At one time, Roman had been more outgoing. According to people, he'd inherited his dad's charisma and charm. He'd been so much like him that people had called him a chip off the old block. Hence the nickname he'd ended up with. *Chip*.

That charisma and charm had stood him in good stead in high school with his teachers and his classmates. But following his dad's actions, his grief and his desire to not be anything like the man meant that he'd become more introverted. He'd withdrawn from the world around him. He'd partied hard in college, simply as a way to try and escape the memories of what had happened.

Roman shifted on the pew, not liking that his thoughts kept going to the past. It made sense why it was happening. However, he didn't like it. But what was he going to do? Leave?

Leaving was the last thing he should do, and definitely the most selfish thing he could do. He was there for Jocelyn. It would have been what his mom wanted him to do. He was the big brother. It was his job to be there for his sisters when they needed him.

He'd failed at that for many years, but he had a chance to make it up to them now. Leaving because the memories got a little hard to handle was just not something he could do.

Focusing on Rebecca was infinitely better than thinking about the past. So that's what he would do.

"How long do the practices usually last?" Roman asked.

Rebecca shifted to look at him. "About an hour and a half, then they go downstairs for a snack once it's done."

"I bet that's Colby's favorite part of the practice."

She smiled, her eyes sparkling. "It's like you know him or something."

"I know our family. We all have a tendency to like the sweet stuff."

"Aaron isn't the biggest fan of sweets, but give him the right thing, and he'll eat it like crazy. He's partial to Carla's gingerbread cookies."

"I think we're all partial to those," Roman said.

"You wouldn't be wrong."

A woman walked in, drawing Roman's attention as she hurried down the aisle with a girl about Colby and Aaron's age holding her hand. It wasn't until she was heading back up the aisle that he recognized her.

She recognized him as well, veering over to where they sat, a smile on her face. "Hi, Rebecca. Hey there, Roman. It's good to see you again."

"You too, Charli," he said.

"I heard you were back in town. How're you doing?"

"I'm fine. How're you?"

"Doing good. Have you seen Kayleigh?"

Roman frowned. "No. Why?"

"I just thought because you guys were close in high school, you might have reached out."

"We weren't that close," Roman told her. "We broke up because we didn't get along very well."

"That's what Kayleigh told you?"

“Uh... yeah? She didn’t like hanging out with my friends, and I didn’t much care to hang out with hers. And just the two of us hanging out never seemed to work out.” Roman paused. “Did Kayleigh tell you something different?”

“Just that she wished you’d been willing to put more effort into the relationship.”

Roman didn’t want to get upset about something that was so far in the past, and it wasn’t relevant anymore. They’d both been too young to make anything work.

“I don’t think any relationship I had back then would have survived... what happened.”

Charli nodded. “I can understand that. I was just curious.”

“I have no hard feelings toward Kayleigh,” Roman said. In truth, he’d hardly thought about her in the years since he’d left Serenity Point. “How’s she doing these days?”

“Good. She’s working at the resort hotel.”

Roman hadn’t seen her during his stays at the hotel, but then, he’d only been there briefly each time before Jocelyn had prevailed upon him to move to the house.

“Are you back for good?” Charli asked.

It was the question Roman hated answering because it seemed to disappoint everyone. “No. I’m just here for the holidays. I had actually left after Thanksgiving, but I came back when Jocelyn ended up in the hospital.”

“How’s she doing?” This time, she directed the question at Rebecca.

“Hanging in there,” Rebecca said. “She knows the hospital is the best place for her and the baby, though she’d prefer to still be at home.”

“I get that. Well, I’ll be praying for her and the baby. We look forward to hearing that the baby has arrived safely.”

“I’ll let her know,” Rebecca said with a smile.

“We’re really missing her at school, too, but maybe don’t tell her that. I wouldn’t want her to worry about anything at

work.”

“Right now, she doesn’t have much else to do other than worry,” Rebecca said with a grimace.

“I’m sure.” Charli glanced at her phone. “I’d better scoot. I need to run an errand, and I don’t want to be late picking up Layla like I was dropping her off.” She smiled at Roman. “Nice to see you again, Roman. Hopefully, it won’t be the last time.”

“I doubt it will be,” he said.

“Great.” With a quick wave and a smile, she left the sanctuary.

“I imagine Kayleigh was a beautiful teen,” Rebecca said. “As she’s quite beautiful now.”

“I’d be lying if I said that her looks weren’t a big draw,” Roman admitted with a shrug. “But it didn’t mean that things would automatically work out between us. Like I said, we had little in common.”

“Aside from both being attractive?” Rebecca asked.

Her comment surprised a laugh out of him. “Seriously?”

“Don’t tell me that you’re unaware of what you look like.”

“Well, I did have a mirror as a teen.” He’d been well aware of his looks back then, and plenty of girls had told him how cute he was, probably hoping he’d ask them out.

“As a teen?”

“Well, I certainly don’t have those looks at the moment.”

Roman wasn’t terribly comfortable discussing his appearance. It wasn’t that he was vain, but he didn’t like how he looked after going through treatment. He was a shadow of his former self in every way.

“Thankfully, I’m not on the lookout for a girlfriend,” Roman said. “So I don’t have to worry about how I look.”

“You don’t have to be on the lookout for a girlfriend,” Rebecca said with a laugh. “Jocelyn and Zoe will do that for

you.”

“Were you on the lookout for a girlfriend for Darius?” Roman asked.

“Not really. Jocelyn kind of set her sights on him from early on. I didn’t have to do much encouraging.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Darius wasn’t quite as sure, though, since he didn’t think he could stick around.”

“I guess Jocelyn never considered leaving.”

“I don’t think so.”

“How about you?”

“What about me?”

“Would you leave Serenity?”

“No. I think Aaron would struggle if we went somewhere else. And everyone I love is here.”

Her answer didn’t surprise Roman. Until the previous year, he hadn’t felt the urge to return to Serenity Point. But now that he’d reconnected with his family, he had to admit that there was definitely more of a draw to his hometown.

“I’m surprised that Devon decided to move here,” Roman said. “Considering he’d had an active life where he lived before.”

Rebecca nodded. “I think Carla was surprised about that, too. But love won out, and apparently, Devon was more than ready for a slower pace of life.”

He was glad that things had worked out for his sisters and his aunt. Things had worked out for him, too. He’d survived the last year, and now he had more great people in his life.

When a shout followed by laughter drew Rebecca’s attention to the practice, Roman kept his gaze on the woman. She had a delicate profile, with a gently sloping nose and cheekbones that were defined beneath her pale skin. Her lips

curved into a smile, the skin at the corners of her eyes crinkling slightly.

“Those kids are giving the person in charge a run for her money,” Rebecca said as she turned back to face him. Her brows lifted when she found him watching her.

“Jocelyn wouldn’t have the same problem?”

“Uh... No.” She looked back at the kids. “She has a real talent for working with children.”

Roman dragged his gaze from her to the front of the sanctuary, watching as his nephew did the exact opposite of what the woman in charge had asked him to do. He frowned, wondering if he should go say something, but then Rebecca got to her feet and headed toward the front.

She motioned for Colby to come to her, then waited as the boy separated himself from the other kids and approached her with his head hung. Rebecca drew him into one of the pews a few rows back from where the rest of the kids were.

Roman pulled his phone from his pocket and aimed it at the pair. He wasn’t sure if he was going to send the picture to Jocelyn, but he thought he might. His sister knew that her son wasn’t going to be a perfect angel in her absence. Maybe it would make her feel better to see that Rebecca was stepping in and loving Colby through his difficult moments.

First, she gave him a hug, then they held a brief conversation. Colby did most of the talking, gesturing as he spoke. When he finally ran out of steam, he listened as Rebecca talked to him.

When she drew Colby close again, and he leaned against her, Roman swallowed against the emotions that rose up inside him. It was so great to see that his nephew was surrounded by love during this challenging time.

It would have made his mom so happy, and she’d have loved Rebecca, just like she would have loved Ben and Darius. Seeing how their family had expanded would have thrilled her.

And he was glad he was there to see it, and that he got to have them all in his life, too. Especially this woman with a

heart big enough to care for all those around her. Including him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rebecca was glad when the dentist's office closed for lunch on Monday. It had been a busy morning, and she'd been tired to start with. Usually, she used the weekend to rest, especially if she ended the previous week tired.

Unfortunately, that weekend had been busy with the kids' practice on Saturday, then church on Sunday and spending the afternoon visiting Jocelyn in the hospital afterward. She had been happy to see her sister-in-law, but it had been hard to witness the constant concern on Darius's face.

Knowing her brother as she did, Rebecca was aware that he wouldn't be able to relax, even if the doctors told him that everything was going to be fine. He wouldn't believe them until the baby had arrived and both the baby and Jocelyn were safely home.

Rebecca loved Colby dearly, but it was a challenge having to wrangle both him and Aaron through their normal routines. Understanding that Colby was unsettled by his mom and dad not being around, she didn't lose her patience with him. However, she was exhausted.

Not having had the chance to rest and recoup meant that she'd arrived at work already tired. She hoped that she didn't get sick again. It was her greatest fear since there were moments that reminded her that even though she was definitely better than she had been, she still wasn't one hundred percent recovered. The last thing she wanted was to relapse.

After locking the clinic door for the lunch hour, Rebecca returned to the desk to hear her phone vibrating in the drawer she'd put it in earlier. She quickly pulled the drawer open, frowning when she saw the number of the school on her phone.

"Hello?"

"Rebecca?" a woman said. "This is Emily."

“Has something happened with one of the boys?” Worry spiraled through her. Both had been fine that morning, so she hoped neither of them was sick.

“No. The boys are fine.” Emily hesitated. “However, Aaron’s father came by a few minutes ago to pick Aaron up. He said there was a family emergency.”

Rebecca’s heart thudded against her ribs, panic making her want to run to the school. However, she knew she needed to keep her cool. “You didn’t let Aaron leave, right?”

“We did not,” the woman assured her. “But we wanted you to be aware of what happened.”

“Did Aaron see his dad?” Rebecca asked, worried about Aaron’s state of mind if he had.

“No. He couldn’t get into the area where the classrooms are, so he had to come to the office.”

“Thank you,” Rebecca said. “You have the list of who’s allowed to pick the boys up, right?”

“Yes. We’ll make sure that only someone on that list walks out of the school with them.”

Rebecca was thankful for that, but she was also scared. Why was Craig back? She’d hoped that she would never see him again.

Though she might not know why Craig was back in Serenity, she knew that him being denied access to Aaron would make him angry. And angry Craig was not someone she wanted to mess with.

She was very glad that she’d switched jobs, and that they no longer lived at their old address. That didn’t mean Craig couldn’t find her, but it wouldn’t be easy. It was also good that he didn’t know where Jocelyn lived now, since she’d moved to the house after he’d already left.

Craig had never liked Jocelyn, so Rebecca had rarely talked to him about what was going on in her friend’s life. She’d never mentioned to him that Jocelyn was having her old

family home renovated, so she hoped he wouldn't think to search them out there.

Though she wanted to rush to the school and grab both boys, she also didn't want to alarm Aaron. Unfortunately, taking him out of school without good reason would do that. Or Colby would get upset, thinking something had happened to his mom.

Instead, she called Roman.

"Rebecca?" he said when he answered. "Is everything okay?"

Hearing the concern in his voice choked Rebecca up, and she had to swallow before she could answer. "The school just called me to say that Craig went by there to pick Aaron up."

"Craig is your ex, right?" Roman said, his voice calm.

"Yes. I didn't know he was back in town, and I don't know why he tried to pick Aaron up."

"Okay. They didn't let him, though, right?"

"No."

"That's good. Are you leaving them until the end of the day?" he asked. "Or do you want me to go get them now?"

Rebecca sighed. "Though I want them out of there now, I don't think that's the best idea."

"Plus, if he's hanging around to see if someone picks Aaron up, he can follow us home."

Rebecca rubbed her forehead. "I didn't even think about that."

"I'll see if the office will let me take the boys out another door later, and maybe we'll go for a brief drive instead of coming straight home."

"Thank you, Roman," Rebecca said, knowing that the boys would be safe with him. "I'm not sure what to do about Craig being around."

"Has he tried to contact you?"

“No. I haven’t changed my phone number or my email address, but there’s been nothing from him.”

Rebecca didn’t think that was a good thing, and from the silence that followed from Roman, apparently, he didn’t either. If he’d just wanted to see Aaron, he would have contacted her. This smacked more of him wanting to take Aaron, and that made her super worried.

She should have pursued gaining full legal custody at some point in the past two years. But given that Craig hadn’t wanted much to do with Aaron to start with, she hadn’t thought she needed to worry about him wanting any sort of contact with Aaron. Let alone wanting to have any sort of custody.

Was she going to be able to keep Aaron safe?

The very idea of losing him made Rebecca feel like she was going to be sick. She needed to do her best to not react in panic. Panic would lead to her making mistakes, and when it came to Aaron, she couldn’t afford to do that.

Rebecca took her phone and headed for the staff room on the second floor of the building. It was a nice space, with lots of light and comfortable furniture. Even though she didn’t feel much like eating right then, she got her lunch from the fridge.

Not everyone stayed in the building over the lunch hour, so it was only her and one of the dental hygienists in the room. The young woman was more interested in her phone than in chatting, which was fine with Rebecca.

Rebecca sat at one of the other round tables and opened her lunch bag. She had a turkey deli meat and cheese sandwich, along with a small bag of chips and a gingerbread cookie.

After she set her food out on the table, she stared at it, trying to find the desire to eat something. She wanted to call Darius and tell him what had happened, but she couldn’t add to his stress.

Part of the reason she wasn’t completely freaking out was because Roman knew what was going on. She should be able to handle this on her own, but there was a relief in knowing that she wasn’t alone in making sure that Aaron was safe.

But she still had to come up with a plan. She needed to make sure that she had the legalities on her side.

Thanks to Jocelyn and Darius refusing any of her attempts to pay rent, Rebecca had been able to save up some money. She'd wanted to make sure she had a bit of a cushion in case she wasn't able to work again at some point in the future or if her car broke down. And in the back of her mind was the thought that maybe one day, she'd have enough to put a down payment on a small house for her and Aaron.

But none of that mattered if she didn't have Aaron. So she'd take that money and hope it would be enough to pay a lawyer to make sure that legally, Craig would have no claim to Aaron. She didn't know if that was possible, but she really hoped that it was.

She managed to eat about half the sandwich before she abandoned it. There was just no way she could force anything more past the tightness in her throat.

Back at her desk after the lunch hour, she tried to keep her mind on her work, but it was a challenge. As the time neared when Roman would be picking up the boys, Rebecca couldn't keep from worrying about what was to come.

Rebecca let her co-worker know she needed a quick break, then grabbed her phone. Once in the bathroom, she tapped out a message to Roman.

Can you let me know when you've picked the boys up? And when you get home?

She stayed in the bathroom, waiting for a response.

Roman: *Yep. That was my plan.*

Roman: *Try not to worry too much, Becca. Everything is going to be okay.*

Rebecca wished she had his confidence, but his words were calming. She thanked him, then left the bathroom since she couldn't hang around waiting for his next message.

When her phone vibrated in her pocket just after the pickup time, Rebecca covertly pulled it out so she could see the

message.

Roman: *Packages have been picked up.*

A smile briefly tugged at her lips as she sent him back a thumbs up. Now, she wanted the second text, then she could breathe a sigh of relief.

When that text arrived, some of the tension drained away. *Some...* Certainly not all of it. She wasn't sure when that tension would be gone. Definitely not until Craig was out of her life, and Aaron was solely hers.

Please, God, let that be the outcome.

After the workday was over, Rebecca rushed to get her things together so she could leave. Her mind knew that Aaron was safe at the house with Roman, but her heart needed her to see him... to hold him.

As she went out to her car, she glanced around, just to make sure that Craig wasn't waiting for her. He shouldn't be, because he didn't know where she worked now. However, if he'd planned this for awhile, he could have hired someone to investigate her.

That thought made her insides shake as she climbed into the car and tried to put the key into the ignition. All of a sudden, all kinds of thoughts tumbled through her mind about how he might know more about her life than she might have thought he could.

Rebecca had to keep herself from speeding as she drove home. The last thing she needed was to get a ticket, especially if she was hoping to have money for a lawyer.

When she finally reached the house, she sat in her car in the driveway for a couple of minutes. She looked at the lights sparkling on the Christmas tree in the living room, letting their beauty and the memory of when they'd decorated it calm her.

It was a reminder that she wasn't alone. And it wasn't just her family that was with her, so was God. So she prayed and asked Him to protect them and to blind Craig to their presence.

She didn't get out of the car until she was sure she could see Aaron without dragging him into a hug and never letting go. Making herself walk—rather than run—into the house, she headed for the door.

“Hi, Mama!” Aaron called out when he saw her.

“Hey, sweetie,” she said, walking over to where Aaron sat at the breakfast nook. She bent and pressed a kiss to his soft hair, inhaling the familiar scent of his shampoo. “How was school?”

“It was good.” As he told her about his day, her gaze met Roman's, and in his eyes, she saw concern and compassion.

Colby chimed in as they continued to build the Lego sets they each had in front of them. Though she normally went to her bedroom to change when she got home from work, she chose instead to sit down on a chair beside Roman for a little bit.

Like the boys, he was working on a Lego project, though his looked a little further along. Colby handed his instruction book to Roman, asking him for help with a part he was stuck on.

“I'll be right back,” Rebecca said, getting to her feet.

It only took her a few minutes to change into something more comfortable. More than anything, she wanted to talk to Roman to find out if anything had happened when he'd picked up the boys.

Unfortunately, that conversation wasn't going to happen until there was no risk of the boys overhearing it. Aaron would freak out if he thought his dad might be back in his life.

Back upstairs, instead of joining them at the table, Rebecca began to prepare supper. At one point, Roman came to sit on a stool at the counter.

“You doing okay?” he asked.

Rebecca glanced at the boys before she shrugged. “As well as can be expected.”

Roman looked like he was going to say something in response, but then just nodded. Gesturing at the food in front of her, he said, “So what’s for dinner?”

“Chicken casserole,” she told him. “The boys usually like it.”

“Usually?” Roman asked, his brows lifted.

“Colby will definitely eat it,” Rebecca said. “He eats pretty much everything. Aaron... not so much. He liked it the last time we had it, but that means nothing for this meal.”

She put the last of the ingredients into the large glass pan, then put it into the oven. It would take about forty-five minutes to bake, so hopefully, the boys wouldn’t whine too much about being hungry while they waited for supper.

“Did the boys have something to eat when they got home?”

Roman cleared his throat. “Well, sort of.”

She frowned at him. “Sort of?”

“Yeah. I know they’re supposed to have fruit or veggies, but they asked for chips, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Couldn’t?” she asked with a laugh.

She had thought she needed to discuss everything before she could relax, but something about Roman’s presence and having Aaron close by helped her settle. Her worry hadn’t disappeared, but it wasn’t front and center in her mind right then.

It would come back later, she was sure, but she’d take the reprieve for however long it lasted.

Roman helped the boys clean up the Lego, being careful not to wreck any of the sections they’d assembled already. By the time the casserole came out of the oven, the table was clear and set for dinner.

She was thankful that Aaron decided he liked the casserole that night. A battle over dinner wasn’t something she felt capable of having with him. She probably would have bundled him up and taken him out to get nuggets and fries.

The rest of the evening progressed as most school nights did, and Rebecca was proud of the fact that Aaron didn't suspect anything was wrong. He went to bed without argument, and once the boys had said their prayers, she went back upstairs.

They'd already cleaned up everything in the kitchen, so there were no more distractions. Roman wasn't in the kitchen, but the scent of burning wood lingered in the air, so she went to the living room to see if he was there.

Sure enough, she spotted Roman as soon as she walked into the room. He sat in the armchair closest to the fire, leaning forward with his arms braced on his thighs. His gaze was on the flickering flames, and Rebecca wondered what was going through his mind.

The Christmas tree lights were on, and the holiday playlist she'd put on the Bluetooth speakers in the kitchen was now playing in the living room. She was a bit surprised that Roman had switched it over. He was much like Darius in his approach to Christmas, although Darius had softened toward the holiday because Jocelyn and the boys loved it so much.

Rebecca also loved the holiday. Maybe not quite as enthusiastically as Jocelyn, though. However, that excitement had been dimmed by the knowledge that Craig was back in Serenity Point.

And now, with nothing to distract her, she needed to discuss the situation with someone.

When she walked into the room, Roman straightened and turned to look at her, a smile crossing his face. "Are the boys asleep?"

"Probably not," she said as she curled up in the corner of the couch opposite him. "But they'll get there, eventually."

Roman nodded. "Is there a chance they'll come upstairs?"

"I don't think so," she said. "But if they do, we'll likely hear them."

"Okay. I just figured you wouldn't want to talk about what's going on if there was any chance of them hearing the

conversation.”

“That’s true, but I think it’s okay.”

He looked back at the fire, the flickering flames casting a light that accented the still gaunt angles of his face. “Why do you think he’s trying to take him?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, the man never liked spending much time with Aaron. So why he’d want him now is anyone’s guess.”

Roman shifted, angling himself so that he could look at her. “That isn’t a great thing. If he had an obvious reason, he’d be easier to reason with.”

“Not sure it would make much difference.” Rebecca grimaced as she recalled things about Craig that she hadn’t thought about in a lot of years. “He was never someone you could reason with once he put his mind to something.”

Talking about the man she’d once loved, but who had made her life miserable, was depressing. Not even the beautiful Christmas tree or the holiday music playing softly in the room could stop her descent into the past she’d hoped was forever behind her.

“You don’t have legal custody?”

Though Roman phrased it as a question, it sounded like he already knew the answer.

“No, I don’t.” It was hard not to want to defend herself, but her reasons wouldn’t mean much to a man who had probably never had to worry about money.

Rather than ask her why, he said, “And he didn’t pay any child support?”

Again, a statement posed as a question. It was weird.

“No. And I didn’t care because I didn’t want him to have any rights to Aaron.” She sighed. “I realize that doesn’t make much sense. If I’d really wanted to protect Aaron from him, I should have followed through with gaining full legal custody.”

“Hindsight,” Roman said with a shrug. “We’ve all dealt with it.”

“Maybe, but that assumption is now coming back to bite me.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Roman told her. “I have a feeling that you having sole legal and physical custody wouldn’t have made a difference to him. If he wanted him, he’d still take him.”

Rebecca didn’t know if he said that to make her feel better about not pursuing legal custody, but if so, it didn’t really work. She appreciated him trying, though.

“I’m going to call a lawyer tomorrow to see about filing for legal custody.”

“That’s a good idea,” Roman said. “But somehow, we need to keep him away.”

“How do we do that? I mean, has he technically done anything wrong yet?”

“No, but we’ll have to make sure he’s not able to.”

“Aaron is never alone,” Rebecca said. “And there’s no chance that he’d go with Craig without a fight.”

“That’s good. And I think it’s best if Devon, Ben, or I are the ones who drop the boys off and pick them up. It’s probably better if it’s not you or Zoe. Craig strikes me as a guy who would try to intimidate a woman but would probably steer clear of a man.”

“It’s like you know him or something,” Rebecca murmured.

“I know men like him,” Roman said. “There are plenty of them in the world.”

There was a dark tone to Roman’s words that gave Rebecca pause. Then she remembered his father and what he’d done.

“I don’t want this to spoil Christmas for anyone,” Rebecca said. “So I’d rather not tell the others.”

Roman frowned. “While I do agree with that, to some degree, I also think that Aaron will be safer if everyone is aware. Well, not the boys, of course.”

“And not Jocelyn and Darius,” Rebecca said.

“Perhaps. However, I think they’d want to know.”

Roman turned his attention back to the fire, and a silence fell between them. He seemed to be a million miles away, and Rebecca wondered if there was something else going on with him. Still, she was comfortable sitting there with him.

It was nice, actually, to have someone know what was going on in her life and be there for her. Jocelyn and Darius were always there for her, but this felt different. She didn’t really know why.

She hadn’t thought she’d ever be able to trust any man but Darius. But then Devon and Ben had both proven themselves to be as trustworthy as Darius. And now there was Roman, stepping up to help her when he didn’t need to.

But she knew she could only depend on Roman in the moment, not something long term. He wasn’t going to be sticking around. This wasn’t his home, and he had no plans to make it such. No matter how much she might wish he would.

He’d left after the wedding last year and been gone until a few weeks ago. Then he’d come back, only to leave again. Getting her emotions tangled up in a man who kept leaving—even if he did come back—wasn’t a good idea.

She didn’t need that in her life right then. Apparently, she already had a man who decided he was going to pop in and out of her life, even though he was there for Aaron and not for her.

If she ever did take a chance on a man again, she needed to know that he was there for her and Aaron. One hundred percent. Not just when it was convenient for him. Or when he felt like it. He might have to go away at times, but it wouldn’t be because someone else was offering him something better than what Rebecca and Aaron could offer him.

However, Rebecca didn’t really feel like she had much to offer anyone right then, so it was best to keep herself from

becoming vulnerable to her feelings. She might need to rely on Roman for help with this, but she had to try not to lean on him emotionally.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning, Roman found Rebecca in the kitchen with the boys once again. She looked like she hadn't slept well, and her lips were pressed into a tense line as she prepared breakfast for the boys.

"Good morning," he said as he joined them.

She glanced up and gave him a tight smile before focussing back on the food she was preparing for the boys. "Morning."

Knowing Rebecca wouldn't say anything about what was going on while Aaron and Colby were around, Roman chose to converse with the boys. They were happy to chat with him about what they were looking forward to at school that day. They seemed to be oblivious to the tension and stress Rebecca was dealing with, which was a good thing.

When the boys went downstairs to brush their teeth, Roman pulled out his wallet, then slid a card from inside it. Setting the card on the counter in front of Rebecca, he waited for her to pick it up.

"What's this?" she said as she lifted the card to read it.

"Phone that number. Tell them I referred you."

"*Tina's Hope*?" She looked up from the card. "What is that?"

"It's an organization that helps women with legal fees when they're dealing with situations like yours. They have lawyers all across the country who specialize in family law."

"And they're good lawyers?" she asked.

"The best."

"I have some money saved that I was going to use."

"Give them a call first. See what they say."

"How do you know about this organization?" Rebecca asked.

“I’ve worked with them before.”

He didn’t really want to tell her that it was an organization he’d founded in honor of his mom and the work she’d done with the shelters. A few years after her death, he’d spoken with the lawyer she’d put in charge of their trust funds and discovered that his mom had done more than just volunteer her time. She’d helped with legal fees where needed. Now, the organization had grown with the help of other people who were as passionate as Roman was about helping those who couldn’t help themselves.

He’d referred a few people over the years. The woman who answered that number knew that when someone called and said they’d been referred by him, it meant that he’d be covering their costs himself, without using the organization’s funds.

Roman had a feeling that Rebecca would refuse his help directly, so this was the next best thing. The previous evening, he’d emailed the woman, telling her to be prepared for Rebecca’s call and to find the best lawyer in the area for her.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll call them.”

“I think you’ll be glad you did.”

And while she took care of getting herself some legal representation, Roman was going to be doing a little work of his own.

He might not have all his equipment handy, but he could still do some work. He wouldn’t be doing his more in-depth diving into the digital world, but he could do enough to give him an idea of where Craig might be in Serenity.

It was time for him to have a conversation with the man. But first, he wanted to see if he could discover *why* Craig might be trying to kidnap his son.

Once Rebecca had left for work, he got the boys ready, then headed to the school. As he walked with them from the car to the door of the building, Roman glanced around, trying to see if Craig was lurking. He had no idea what sort of vehicle he was driving, but he suspected it would be a rental.

He didn't see the guy, but he didn't leave the school right away. Instead, once the last of the buses had dropped off their kids and pulled away, he drove his car closer.

While he sat there, he sent a couple of emails to arrange to have some equipment sent to him at Jocelyn's. He would do what he could with his laptop, but if he wanted to do more, he had to have more tools. After about an hour, Roman decided he'd go back to the house and get on his laptop.

Roman was sitting at the breakfast nook with his laptop, eating his lunch, when he heard the front door open, and then the sound of someone crying.

Pushing back from the table, he was heading for the foyer when Rebecca and the boys appeared. Aaron was crying, and Rebecca looked like she was trying her best not to.

“What happened?”

Rebecca turned to Aaron. “Do you want to go downstairs and play video games with Colby?”

He took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. “I don't have to go back to school?”

“No.” She went down on her knees and pulled him close. “Everything's going to be okay. You're safe here.”

Aaron hugged her back, holding on for a long minute before letting go. The boys pulled off their jackets, which Rebecca took and hung up, then they disappeared downstairs.

“What happened?” Roman asked again, wishing that he could give Rebecca a hug, because she really looked like she could use one.

She walked over to the table and sank down on one of the chairs. For a moment, she stared blankly, her hands clenched on the table in front of her.

Roman sat down across from her and reached out to cover her hands with his. They were cold and trembled slightly in his grasp. The anger that had been simmering for a couple of

hours flared to life, strengthening his resolve to solve this situation with Craig no matter what it took.

“What happened?” he asked again.

Rebecca looked up, her eyes damp and filled with emotion. “Craig showed up at the school during lunch when the kids were playing out in the yard.”

His anger flared even higher, and it took everything inside him to keep it from showing. “Did he try to physically grab Aaron?”

She shook her head. “The area where they play is all fenced in. No one can get into the yard, but he came up to the fence and tried to talk to Aaron. It freaked him out.”

“I can imagine.” Now, some of that anger was directed at himself for not having stuck around longer.

“I want to keep him out of school until I get this sorted out with Craig, but I know that I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have no idea how much longer this is going to drag on,” she said. “Plus, I need to work.”

“Don’t worry about that. Between Zoe and I, we can take care of him.”

His anger just continued to build. It was Christmas. Aaron and Rebecca should be enjoying the holiday, not dealing with a deranged man from their past. One who was determined to tear them apart.

Roman wouldn’t allow that to happen.

“Did you make that phone call?”

“I did. She said a lawyer would call me in the next day or so.”

It needed to be before that. The situation had just gotten worse.

“Do you need to go back to work?”

“No.” She sighed, her shoulders hunching forward. “I told them Aaron was sick, and I needed to pick him up at school. I took Colby too because he was upset because Aaron was upset.”

“I think it’s good you did that.”

“I just hope Jocelyn won’t be mad.”

“She won’t be,” Roman assured her.

“I’ll talk to her about the situation, and then ask Aaron’s teacher if she can send his work for the rest of the week home. I’ll help him with it here at home.”

Roman didn’t want Rebecca to live in fear, but there was no way to convince her otherwise. She was already well and truly in the depths of fear. And he really couldn’t blame her.

“I need to go out for a bit,” he said. “Are you okay here with the boys?”

She nodded. “I’ll just lock the house up tight and not answer the door.”

“That’s a good plan. I shouldn’t be gone too long.”

He had a visit to make. It hadn’t taken him long to find Craig and to discover a possible motive for what he was doing. He’d phoned the hotels and motels in the area, asking to be put through to Craig’s room. It didn’t take long to strike gold at the cheapest motel, even though Craig hadn’t answered when they put him through to the room.

So he knew where to go.

And it had taken only a brief perusal of Craig and his wife’s social media account to discover his likely motivation. Thank goodness his wife was an over-sharer, posting anything and everything.

After he grabbed his jacket, Roman headed out to his rental. He drove to the motel and pulled into the parking lot. Once there, he phoned and again asked to be put through to Craig’s room. This time, he answered, his greeting brusque.

Rather than say anything, Roman hung up. Then he looked at the doors of the one-story motel, noticing that there were only two that had cars parked in front of them.

He got out of the car and went to look at the license plates of the cars. One had a license plate from British Columbia, so he started by knocking at the other door.

The door jerked open not long after he rapped on it. Craig scowled at him.

“Craig?”

The man’s expression darkened. “Who wants to know?”

“A friend.”

“You’re no friend of mine.”

“You are quite correct,” Roman said. “I am, however, a friend of Rebecca’s.”

The man’s eyes widened briefly, and he stepped back. Roman took advantage of it and followed him into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Get out of here.” Craig said, trying to step around him.

Roman was no longer the man he’d once been physically, so he really hoped that Craig didn’t take a swing at him. “You need to listen to me.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I’m prepared to offer you money.”

“Money?”

“I’ll pay you to leave Serenity Point,” Roman said.

“Why would I do that?”

“Rebecca is hiring a lawyer to make sure that you can’t legally take Aaron anywhere. And I have a feeling a judge will be quite sympathetic toward her, considering you abandoned her and Aaron and haven’t paid a single cent of child support. If you succeed in taking Aaron, the police will be after you.”

“They wouldn’t be able to find me.”

“Do you really think that?” Roman asked, then he proceeded to rattle off everything he knew about Craig and his wife. Their address. Where they both worked. “I’ve found you once. I’ll find you again.”

Craig paled.

“So, you could run,” Roman said. “Or... you could take the money I’m offering you to fund a few more rounds of IVF.”

That revelation made the man take another step back. “Who *are* you? How do you know about that?”

“Your wife likes to share on social media.” He paused. “She doesn’t know you’re here, does she?”

Craig’s throat clicked as he swallowed hard, his gaze sliding away.

“Would she really want you to do this?” Roman asked. “To take another woman’s child to give to her?”

“He’s *my* son.”

“Who you’ve had no use for. Rebecca has loved and cared for him all on her own. You’ve done nothing. You don’t deserve him. And I’m sure if your wife knew what you were doing here, she’d be horrified. I can give her a call.” He wiggled his phone at Craig, hoping that he was right in assuming that a woman who stole another woman’s man would actually draw the line at stealing that same woman’s child. “Because I also know her phone number.”

“Don’t.” Craig held up his hand. “How much?”

Roman didn’t like the idea of paying this man anything, since it felt like rewarding him for his bad behavior. However, for Rebecca’s sake, he’d do it.

He quoted him an amount that would cover ten more rounds of IVF, which wasn’t a small amount. “But don’t come back for more. That’s all you get. If your wife isn’t able to get pregnant with more treatments, I would recommend you look at other options. Ones that don’t include you kidnapping a

young boy from the only parent who has ever loved and cared for him.”

“How do I know you’ll give me the money if I leave?”

“You send me a picture of yourself in front of your house when you get home, and I’ll transfer the money into your account.” Roman pointed his phone at him. “And don’t think about sending me a fake or doctored photo. I’ve forgotten more about that kind of stuff than you’ll ever know. I’ll be able to tell.”

“Okay. Fine.”

“Now pack up.”

“What?”

“Pack up. Check out. I’m going to follow you out of Serenity. Oh, and send an email to Rebecca to let her know that you’re sorry and that you’ll cooperate with any legal proceedings that give her full legal and physical custody of Aaron.”

Craig looked like he was going to argue, but when Roman lifted his brows, the man scowled instead.

“Pack.”

“Go wait in your car.”

“No, sir. You’re not calling the shots here. I *could* call the cops and let them sort out the situation. But there’s no money if we go that route.”

“Fine.”

It only took Craig five minutes to shove his clothes into a duffle bag and check out. After a reminder of what he needed to do in order to get the money, Roman followed the man’s car through the town and about twenty minutes beyond the city limits toward Coeur d’Alene.

Even after turning back, Roman pulled over just out of town and sat for a bit, watching to see if Craig was going to circle back around. All in all, it was just shy of an hour and a

half by the time he arrived back at the house, but he felt it was an hour and a half well spent.

When he stepped into the house, the sweet aroma of baking hung in the air. It wasn't surprising, given the time of year. There had been lots of baking going on, but he doubted that Rebecca was baking because they were lacking in sweets.

After locking the door behind him, Roman hung up his jacket and took off his boots, then he went to the kitchen to see how Rebecca was doing.

She stood at the counter, using a spatula to move cookies from a pan in front of her to a wire rack. Pausing briefly, she looked up at him, then returned to her task.

Roman was tempted to tell her that Craig was gone, that he'd made sure that he wouldn't bother her again. Unfortunately, he didn't want her to know the role he'd played in everything.

Like all the work he did in situations like hers, he did it in the shadows. Anonymously. If he did have to talk to someone, he usually used a voice changer so the person couldn't tell if they were speaking to a male or female. He couldn't even do that in this situation.

"Did the lawyer call?" Roman asked, not bothering with the question of how she was doing. He could tell from her jerky movements that she hadn't calmed much, and her expression was still tense and worried.

"No," she said as she set the empty pan aside. "Not yet."

He should have called his contact with the organization while he was still out in his car. That wasn't a call he wanted to make in Rebecca's presence.

"Smells good," he said, gesturing to the cookies cooling on the rack.

She sighed. "Baking is my go-to when I get stressed about something. Without fail, anything to do with Craig sends me to the flour and sugar."

“It’s not the worst thing you could do when you’re stressed,” he said.

“Yeah. I suppose that’s true.”

“I’m sorry that you’re having to deal with this, especially around Christmas.”

“The timing isn’t great, but honestly, when it comes to Craig, no time would be good.” She scooped more cookie dough onto another empty pan. “I just wish he’d leave and never come back. Get on with his life.”

“Do you know anything about his life now?” Roman asked. “Where he is?”

“No. When he first left, there were people who would send me screenshots of his social media posts showing where he was and who he was with. It was terrible for my emotional state to have that information. I told them to stop sending me stuff.”

“Did the people send it with good intentions or bad?”

She gave a laugh, which held no humor. “That’s a good question. I’m still not sure. I just told them to put themselves in my shoes. Would they want that information?”

“Some might,” Roman said.

“Yeah. That became clear. I had to come right out and tell them not to send me anything more. One kept doing it, so I blocked her everywhere.”

“So you don’t know anything about his life now?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t want to, but now I’m wondering if I would have been smart to keep tabs on him. If that would have even been possible. Last I knew, he was in Mexico with his girlfriend, but that was right after he left Serenity, so I doubt he’s still there.”

Roman didn’t know how Rebecca would feel if she learned that he’d married that girlfriend and was now trying to have a child with her. He had no idea how she’d felt about Craig before he’d abandoned her. Was she heartbroken when he’d left? Or was she relieved?

When her phone rang, she set the scoop she was using for the cookie dough onto the counter and picked up her phone. After checking the screen, she answered it, putting it on speakerphone.

Roman pulled his phone out as he listened to the person on the other end of the call identify herself as a lawyer practicing in Coeur d'Alene. The woman sounded friendly, yet professional, as she spoke with Rebecca, asking her questions about everything that had transpired between herself and Craig.

It felt like he was listening in on a private conversation—which it actually was—but Rebecca didn't give any indication that she wanted privacy. So, he stayed. There was information he wanted in case he had to step in again.

“I don't know where he is,” Rebecca said. “Just that he's been to the school twice. Once to try to take Aaron, telling the secretary that there was a family emergency. Then he showed up today at lunch and tried to talk to Aaron while he was out in the yard. It freaked Aaron out. He's scared of him.”

Roman made himself a note to be sure to pass on all the information he had about Craig's location to his contact at the organization. He'd passed on information in that way before, keeping at least one person between him and the person who needed the info. In this case, Rebecca's new attorney.

When the conversation ended, Rebecca exhaled heavily. “I wish this could be done quickly.”

“Unfortunately, these things do take time.”

“Do you have experience with legal stuff?”

“Not really, but I'm aware that when dealing with the law, it's rarely a quick thing.”

She focused back on the cookies. “I just wish I could know for sure that he wouldn't try to take Aaron again. How are we supposed to live our lives with this hanging over our heads?”

“You've decided to keep Aaron out of school until Christmas break, right?”

She nodded. “I don’t think he’ll go back until I can give him some reassurance that Craig can’t touch him.”

Roman wished he could give her that reassurance, but he needed to make sure that Craig truly was gone. And even then, what could he say that wouldn’t reveal his manipulations behind the scenes?

In the meantime, he wanted to make things better for Rebecca and Aaron. To bring back the Christmas joy they’d had as they prepared to celebrate the holiday.

The irony of that particular situation didn’t escape him. Him, the guy who hadn’t done much to celebrate Christmas in years, wanting to help others enjoy the holiday. But he really did want to do that for these two. He just wasn’t sure how to go about it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What’s this?” Rebecca asked as she stared at the scene before her.

“We’re eating pizza,” Zoe announced. “And then we’re decorating gingerbread houses.”

Rebecca was speechless. She’d spent the past couple of days distracted by everything that had happened with Craig. Definitely not in the Christmas spirit. But now, it was like she was being pushed out of the dark place she’d been in since Craig had tried to talk to Aaron.

“Uncle Roman got all these,” Aaron said, waving his hand at the gingerbread houses that were lined up on the counter. “And lots of candy and stuff to put on them.”

Rebecca looked at Roman where he stood by the counter, a stack of pizza boxes in front of him. “You did this?”

Roman shrugged and smiled. “I thought it would be fun.”

It would be. If Jocelyn hadn’t been in the hospital and if everything hadn’t happened with Craig, they would have already done it. She should have been organizing it anyway, instead of sinking into her dark thoughts.

“Thank you.” She wanted Roman to know that she appreciated his efforts. “Let me go put my stuff away, then we can eat pizza.”

Downstairs, she changed into her favorite comfy clothes, then headed back up to the kitchen. The others had moved the gingerbread houses to the side to make room for the pizza.

Ben said a prayer for their meal, then they opened the boxes, and Rebecca helped Aaron take a couple of pieces of his favorite pizza. It wasn’t long before the six of them were seated at the breakfast nook with their food.

Colby and Aaron told her about how they’d spent their day. Building Lego. Playing games. Coloring in their favorite

coloring books. It sounded like it had been a great day, and she was glad to see a spark of joy back in Aaron's eyes.

She'd worried he wouldn't get over his encounter with Craig for a long time, but he seemed willing to accept that he was safe within the walls of their home. She just hoped that he'd feel that way outside the house soon. He couldn't stay inside forever.

Upbeat Christmas music played as they ate, and when they were done, Rebecca and Zoe put the food away, while Ben and Roman moved the gingerbread houses over to the table. They had six of them, so it looked like everyone was going to be decorating. Even Roman.

"Where did you get all this stuff?" Zoe asked as she helped to empty bags of candy and pretzels into small bowls.

"I had some help," Roman said. "It's amazing what giving someone money will do to accomplish something. Especially at this time of year."

"Well, it was money well-spent," Zoe said. "And it's amazing that you've gotten one for Ben, too."

"I'm going for the minimalistic approach," Ben told her.

Jingle Bell Rock played as they once again gathered around the table. Rebecca was quite sure that this wasn't Roman's first choice of how to spend an evening, so she was very grateful for his efforts to arrange everything. It was nearly perfect.

The only thing that would have made it better was if Jocelyn and Darius had been there with them. She'd called Jocelyn the previous night, and even though she hadn't wanted to burden her with what had been going on, she'd had to ask what she wanted to do about Colby and school.

Since it was just over a week until Christmas, Jocelyn had been agreeable to Colby staying home. Jocelyn had said she'd contact the school that day to let them know what was going on, and to arrange to have work sent home for the boys.

The boys' teacher had called after school to let Rebecca know everything would be ready for her to pick up during

lunch hour the next day. Roman had promised to help them get the work done each day, which Rebecca was thankful for. She had a feeling that the boys would work harder for him than they probably would for her.

“We should video chat with your mom,” Rebecca said. “I think she’d love to see this.”

“Yes!”

It only took a minute to get the call set up, and soon Jocelyn and Darius were watching and chatting from the screen of Roman’s laptop. It was nice that it was big enough to see them clearly, instead of on just the small screen of a phone.

“Let me see what you’re doing, Roman,” Jocelyn said. “I can’t believe you agreed to decorate one too.”

“Agreed?” Roman laughed. “I didn’t agree. I set this all up. I didn’t have to buy one for myself, but I thought maybe I’d enjoy it.”

“I’m glad,” Jocelyn told him. “And I’m glad you’ve done this for the others, too. I just wish we could be there.”

“You want to decorate one, Mom?” Colby asked.

“Sure, but more than that, I’d like to see your dad decorate one.”

“Would you have done one, Dad?” Colby asked Darius.

“I suppose I might have. Especially if Roman was decorating one.”

“It’s a lot of fun, Uncle Dare,” Aaron said. “I’m making one with lots of snow on the roof.”

“I can’t wait to see that,” Darius said.

For over an hour, Rebecca managed to push aside her concerns about Craig and just enjoy the Christmas activity. It’s how things should have been in the days leading up to Christmas.

On the weekend, they’d have a dress rehearsal and then the performance the next night. Unfortunately, Jocelyn would have to watch it on her phone.

“Look, Mama,” Aaron said, pointing to his roof. “Does it look like snow?”

“It looks like that blizzard we had after Christmas a couple of years ago.”

Aaron grinned. “It’s a big blizzard. Santa better not slip off the roof.”

“Hopefully, he lands in a snowbank so he doesn’t get hurt,” Colby said. “And he’d better not squish the presents.”

Colby wasn’t making as big a deal about presents this year, having learned in previous years that he wouldn’t find presents under the tree until Christmas morning. It was a sign that he was maturing. That both he and Aaron were maturing.

How she loved both boys. For all that she didn’t like Craig, Rebecca was grateful for the gift of her son. When he looked up at her and grinned, Rebecca knew she’d endure it all again, just so she had him in her life.

Her house’s decorations ended up being more on the sparse side, since she’d spent time helping Aaron with his. Ben’s was concisely decorated, while Zoe’s was a mishmash of colorful candies that would have made Ben’s mom proud.

Roman’s house fell somewhere between Rebecca’s and Ben’s. It had more decoration than Rebecca’s, but they were not quite as precisely placed as Ben’s. He’d used pretzels to give his a log cabin look, and his roof looked like it had gone through the same blizzard as Aaron’s.

“I’m done,” Colby announced as he stared at his house, which was covered entirely in a thick layer of icing and colorful candy. It was a good thing they wouldn’t be eating the houses.

“I’m done too, Mama,” Aaron said.

“Where are we going to put them?” Roman asked.

“How ‘bout by the candles in the window,” Colby suggested. “They’re the candles Mom put in the window so you and Auntie Zoe could find your way back home, Uncle Roman.”

“Really?” Roman looked surprised at Colby’s words.

“Yep. She told me that.” Colby grinned. “And I guess they worked because you both are here now.”

“Yep,” Zoe said with an affectionate smile for her nephew. “We are.”

The boys carefully carried their houses into the living room. They lined them all up on the window seat. The seat usually had a cushion on it, but at Christmastime, Jocelyn removed it so she could set candles and a few other decorations on it.

The boys posed next to the houses, and Roman took pictures and videos of them with his fancy phone. Rebecca knew that Jocelyn would enjoy seeing them, even though they might make her a little sad.

It had turned out to be a wonderful evening, which was just what they all needed. Aaron was smiling and happy, secure in the knowledge that he was safe with them. Rebecca didn’t want to see him fearful again, but she didn’t know how to guarantee his safety.

Once they’d cleaned up the table in the breakfast nook, the boys talked them into playing a few games of *Uno*. The boys, Roman, and Zoe each won one, then it was time for the boys to go to bed. They might not be going to school the next day, but Rebecca needed a little downtime before she went to bed herself.

The boys didn’t protest too much, and once they were tucked in, Rebecca returned to the kitchen. Ben and Zoe were still there, and Zoe smiled at her when she joined them.

“I’m sorry to hear your jerk of an ex is giving you problems,” she said.

Though Rebecca hadn’t wanted to worry anyone else with what was going on with Craig, they’d ended up telling everyone. In the end, it was just as well. More people could be on the lookout for the man. She’d found a picture and showed it to them, so they’d know what he looked like.

“I just wish he’d stayed away. He showed little interest in Aaron before. If only he’d stayed uninterested.”

“Well, I asked Mom to show the picture of him to the other workers at the shop, so if he comes in for coffee, they can let us know.”

“Thanks,” Rebecca said, appreciating how everyone had stepped up to support her and Aaron. It helped to ease some of the weight she felt from this latest twist in her life.

“Well, we’d better go,” Zoe said. “I have to spend some time at the studio in the morning as we have someone coming in to use the space.”

Rebecca followed them to the front door, watching as they pulled on their jackets and boots. Zoe gave her a hug, then Roman. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Once the couple had left, Rebecca returned to the kitchen and wiped down all the counters and the table, ready to call it a day herself.

When Roman came into the kitchen after locking up the house, she said, “Thanks so much for tonight. It really helped to take Aaron’s mind off things.”

“I thought it might,” he said. “Well, I hoped it would. The boys seemed excited when I mentioned it.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t your idea of a fun time.”

Roman laughed. “Well, that’s true. But I did actually enjoy it. Weird how it’s kind of therapeutic. If that makes sense.”

It *did* make sense. “It was relaxing.”

“I had forgotten how much I’d liked to do that when I was the boys’ age. Mom used to make them for us each year.”

“She made the houses?” Rebecca asked. “I’ve always just bought the kits.”

“I’m not sure they had kits back when I was a kid, or maybe Mom just really enjoyed making them herself.”

“I think Jocelyn tried one year, but the houses collapsed before they got a chance to decorate them.”

Roman chuckled. "I'm sure that frustrated Jocelyn. She doesn't like it when things don't go the way she wants."

"Yeah. I've noticed that," Rebecca said. "She isn't a very roll-with-the-punches sort of person."

"Must be a family trait." Roman shrugged. "I kind of feel that way myself."

"In truth, I think most people prefer things to go the way they want."

"But some people are able to pivot easier than others."

Rebecca wasn't sure she could pivot very well. It all depended on the situation. If it pertained to Aaron's safety, her brain kind of got scrambled, and there was no pivoting, only panic.

"Are you okay with watching the boys again tomorrow?"

"I have no plans, Becca," Roman said, his expression gentle. "Don't worry about me and the boys. Just do what you need to do."

"I really do appreciate you helping with them."

Roman shrugged. "It would be wrong of me to not help when I'm the one who has nothing to do."

"I'm picking up their work from the school tomorrow."

"Oh, nice. I get to be a teacher. I sure hope that I'm smart enough."

Rebecca laughed. "Somehow, I think you're probably the smartest of all of us. Well, except for maybe Ben."

"I'm smart in some things, but not everything. We'll see how things go. Maybe I should get Jocelyn to teach them from the hospital, just to give her something to do."

"She'd probably actually enjoy that."

"I'll talk to her and see what she says."

"I'm going to call it a day," Rebecca said, though she would have enjoyed hanging more with him.

Unfortunately, she was really starting to feel her exhaustion, and she wanted to make sure she got a decent rest that night in case she had to deal with Craig some more. “Thank you again for everything you did tonight.”

Roman gave her a smile, his eyes lighting up. “You’re very welcome.”

When she got down to the apartment, she didn’t have enough energy to do anything more than just going through an abbreviated nighttime routine and falling into bed.

There was no sign of Craig the next day. At least not by anyone who knew they were watching for him. Rebecca wasn’t sure if she was relieved or not. It was almost three days since he’d last shown his face, and Rebecca hated not knowing what was going on.

She’d picked up the boys’ schoolwork at lunch, though they weren’t very excited when she arrived home with it. Thankfully, they weren’t expected to do too much. With it being the final week before Christmas break, the workload was a little lighter than it might have been otherwise.

Supper that night was just soup and grilled cheese sandwiches with some raw carrots, which was the one vegetable both boys liked. It was a comfort meal that Rebecca had been craving.

One would think that going this long without a sign of Craig would make her feel better, but it didn’t. In fact, it was making her feel *worse*. Her worry wouldn’t dissipate until things were settled with him. She wasn’t even sure what that would look like, though, because the custody issue would not be resolved overnight.

She didn’t even know how to pray, beyond asking God to protect Aaron. Ideally, Craig would disappear. But before that happened, she wanted to make sure that Aaron was legally hers, so that any attempt by Craig to hassle them in the future would be useless.

“Let’s go look at some lights after dinner,” Roman suggested. “I did some research, and it looks like a display has been set up out near the resort.”

“Yep. This is the first year they’ve done it,” Rebecca said. “It’s a fundraiser. There is a fee to drive through it, and they also sell hot drinks and mini donuts.”

“Oh, I love mini donuts,” Colby said.

Rebecca chuckled. “Yes, we know.”

“So we can get some if we go?” Colby asked.

“I think we could,” Roman told him.

The boys inhaled their meal, then waited impatiently for Roman and Rebecca to finish and clear off the table. After Rebecca dressed the boys in warm clothes, they piled into Roman’s rental and headed off to the display.

“I can’t wait to see the lights,” Aaron said. “I bet they’re beautiful.”

She and Jocelyn had talked about taking the boys to see the light display. However, with Jocelyn in the hospital, Rebecca had let the idea slide. She was glad that Roman had stepped up and offered to take them.

Hopefully, the outing would perk both boys up. Aaron had calmed some, and Colby wasn’t totally down. However, he was subdued and sometimes looked pensive. That expression wasn’t one that Rebecca had seen on the boy’s face until Jocelyn had ended up in the hospital.

The drive didn’t take too long, but there was a small line-up when they arrived. When they reached the front of the queue, Roman paid the fee plus, from what he said to the girl, a donation to the fundraiser. The person working at the gate gave Roman information on what to tune the radio to if they wanted to hear Christmas music set to accompany the display, and soon, an upbeat Christmas song played in the background.

There was a stand just inside the entry that offered donuts and hot chocolate. Roman pulled up and purchased a hot chocolate for each of them and two bags of donuts.

“Thank you, Uncle Roman,” Colby said when Roman handed them their drinks. Aaron echoed his cousin’s words.

“Try not to spill them,” Rebecca cautioned.

“We’ll be careful,” Aaron said.

Rebecca took the cup that Roman held out. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” He handed her the second bag of donuts. “You okay to share those with me?”

“Of course,” Rebecca told him. “I don’t think I could eat them all without feeling sick.”

“Unfortunately, I probably could,” Roman said. “I’m counting on you to keep me in check.”

“I’ll do my best,” Rebecca said with a laugh, though honestly, she wouldn’t refuse him if he asked for the whole bag. He wouldn’t even have to beg.

“Oh, wow,” Colby said as they approached the first light display.

Rebecca had to agree. It was a stunning display of an elf working on a toy. The lights showed the movement of the elf hammering something.

“That’s amazin’,” Aaron murmured. “How did they *do* that?”

The next few displays had Rebecca wondering the same thing. There were several displays of Santa’s workshop and the hardworking elves. It was all more vivid and dynamic than Rebecca had thought it might be.

She’d assumed that it would just be a bunch of static lights showing things like a Christmas tree or a present. Instead, these scenes had movement and told a story. It really was amazing.

“They’ve definitely put some effort into this,” Roman said as they followed the slow-moving minivan in front of them.

The boys chatted excitedly in the back seat, and Rebecca couldn’t help but smile. It was another home run by Roman on picking something fun and interesting for the boys. And even

though he'd no doubt picked the activity with the boys in mind, Rebecca was enjoying it very much, too.

The worst part of it was that riding in the car with him and the boys made it far too easy to imagine what things might look like if they were a couple. It made her long for things that she really didn't have the time or the emotional energy to even contemplate.

So, instead, she tried to focus on the lights and ignore the way Roman's hand touched her arm to draw her attention to something he liked.

Rebecca had expected plenty of Santa and winter-oriented displays, but what took her by surprise was the one of the nativity. These days, not everyone wanted to be reminded of the reason many celebrated Christmas.

"That's Mary rocking baby Jesus," Colby announced.

"And the wise men with their gifts and camels," Aaron added.

Personally, Rebecca really enjoyed the way the star above the stable hung in the air, shining brightly. It was a reminder of how God had used a star to guide the wisemen to the young Savior. They hadn't known where they were going, but they had trusted the star that God had sent.

It was a bit weird to be reminded by a light display to trust God with the situation she couldn't clearly see a way through. But she'd needed the reminder as she struggled with the situation with Craig and also with the uncertainty surrounding Jocelyn and her baby.

God was her guiding star.

She touched the window with her fingertips, ignoring the cold that radiated from it as she said a silent prayer, asking God to help her keep her eyes on Him and not be distracted by other things.

"Everything okay?" Roman asked as the car inched forward, slowly leaving the nativity scene behind.

“Yes.” Rebecca hesitated, not sure for a moment if she wanted to elaborate or not. But then she figured that perhaps Roman needed the reminder as well. “I was just pleasantly surprised to see the nativity scene.”

“It was a bit unexpected,” Roman agreed.

“It reminded me that just like the wise men were guided by a star to a destination they didn’t know, I can trust God with the situations that I can’t see the resolution for at the moment.”

“Jocelyn and the baby?” Roman asked.

“Yes. And also... the other one.”

Thankfully, Roman understood and didn’t mention Craig by name. He didn’t say anything more, actually, making Rebecca wonder if he didn’t view it the same way. She didn’t know anything about his spiritual life. Jocelyn and Zoe had both talked about how strong their mom’s faith was, and how she’d tried to instill that in them, too.

It sounded like they’d all struggled with their faith after the murder of their mother. Jocelyn and Zoe had both found their way back, but Rebecca wasn’t sure where Roman stood, though he had come to church with them readily enough.

“Can we go again?” Colby asked as they headed for the exit.

“Not tonight,” Rebecca said.

“Awww.” The disappointment was clear in the boy’s voice.

“Maybe we can come again another night,” Roman said. “We’ll see how it goes.”

At Rebecca’s prompting, both boys thanked Roman.

“You’re welcome,” Roman said. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Roman may not be all that much into Christmas, but he was doing a great job of finding ways to make it special for the boys. Rebecca was kind of curious to see what he might suggest next.

The man had stepped up when he hadn’t needed to. He could have entertained the boys in other ways, but he was

going out of his way to make things special for both Colby and Aaron.

She'd already thought Roman was pretty special, but he just kept giving her more reasons to think that of him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After they returned home, Roman and the boys played a couple of games, with the boys each winning one. Though they wanted to stay up, Rebecca overruled them and herded the pair downstairs to take showers and get ready for bed.

While she was busy with that, Roman unloaded the dishwasher. He was becoming more familiar with the kitchen, so he no longer had to open and close a bunch of cupboards to find where each dish belonged.

As he worked, Roman's thoughts wandered to the Craig situation. He was beginning to wonder if Craig had sent the email, even though he'd said he had. Roman had transferred the guy the money already after he'd emailed the proof that he was back at his house. Now, however, Roman wished he'd waited until he knew for certain that Rebecca had received the agreed-upon email from Craig.

He'd been so caught up in having the boys around during the day and then doing stuff with them and Rebecca in the evening that he hadn't taken the time to check Craig's email to see if he was telling the truth. It was possible that Rebecca had received it and just not said anything, though he didn't think that was too likely.

Roman just wanted the situation resolved before Christmas so Rebecca could relax and not be constantly worried that Craig was going to pop back up and take Aaron from her. And it would mean that Aaron could stop worrying, too. No child should have to live with the worry and fear that Aaron was carrying.

Once the dishwasher was empty, he went into the living room and started a fire. If Rebecca came back upstairs, he thought she'd enjoy that. He also put on the Christmas playlist she seemed to prefer. With the lights sparkling on the Christmas tree, the room had a cozy vibe.

As he endeavored to bring Christmas to life for the boys and Rebecca, Roman found his thoughts going to his mom

over and over. He'd been fortunate to have been able to celebrate so many Christmases with her.

During their last Christmas together, he had tried to convince her that he was outgrowing all the stuff that he viewed as childish, like the matching pajamas she wanted them all to wear or decorating gingerbread houses. He wished now that he'd just gone along with what she'd wanted.

From the perspective of looking back, Roman regretted not cherishing every moment with his mom and doing everything she wanted as she tried to make the holiday fun and special for all of them. He couldn't change the past, but he could try to make this Christmas special for everyone the way his mom would have had she still been alive.

He'd even contacted Marsh's assistant to see if the guy could find someone to track down matching pajamas for everyone. Since he'd been trying to keep it a secret, he'd had to guess at some of the sizes. The boys and Rebecca had been easy since he'd looked at the sizes of their jackets hanging in the closet. He'd used his size and Rebecca's as reference for the rest of the adults. Hopefully that worked, or there might be some funny pictures on Christmas morning.

"Roman?" Rebecca came into the room, her cheeks flushed. There was a mixture of anger and confusion on her face. She walked to where he sat near the fire and shoved the tablet she held at him. "What does this mean?"

Roman took the tablet, staring at her face for a moment before dropping his gaze to the screen. On it was the email he'd just been wondering about. He skimmed it, taking in the date, then wincing as he read the message.

"What does he mean by my boyfriend throwing around his money?" Rebecca asked.

"Did you just get this?" Roman asked in lieu of an answer.

"What?" Rebecca frowned, then said, "Yes. I hadn't checked my email in a couple of days, but Jocelyn texted to let me know she'd sent me a list of links to check over. She's trying to finish her Christmas shopping." Her frown deepened,

and she waved her hand. “What does Craig mean by what he said in that email?”

Roman sighed as he sat back in his chair, holding the tablet out to her. “Why don’t you sit down so we can talk about this?”

She looked like she wanted to argue with him, but instead, she took the tablet back and plopped down into the armchair opposite him. He’d never seen her glare like she was glaring at the fire as she sat there, her hands gripping the tablet.

“I went to see Craig,” Roman began.

Her glare shifted to him. “How did you even know where he was?”

Roman debated how to answer her. He could reveal everything, but would that make her even more angry? Or would she appreciate what he’d done for her once she understood why he’d done it?

“I phoned the cheap motels and hotels in the area and asked to be connected to his room. Eventually, I found the one where he was registered.”

“Wait,” she said, holding up her hand. “How did you know his name?”

Roman knew he was at a crossroads. He’d already told her some things he hadn’t told anyone else but Marsh and his therapist. Now he had to tell her more. For some reason, he needed her to know.

“I know everything about him.”

“What?” Rebecca’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“I have kept tabs on Jocelyn and Zoe over the years. When new people came into their lives, I did extensive research on them.”

“You... you researched *me*?” She pressed a hand to her chest. “You know... everything?”

Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and Roman felt a little sick at the look of devastation on her face.

“I’m sorry,” Roman told her. “I just needed to make sure that the people around my sisters weren’t out to hurt them.”

“So what happened with Zoe, then?” Rebecca asked. “She had some pretty lousy people around her, especially right before she came back last year.”

Roman couldn’t deny that, so he nodded. “You’re right. The only reason I didn’t catch that sooner was that I was dealing with the start of my health issues. I allowed that to distract me, thinking that because Jocelyn and Zoe had been okay up until that point, I didn’t have to worry about them.”

“I’m sorry.” Rebecca sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re right though. I should have caught what was going on with Zoe,” Roman said. “But I think it worked out like it was supposed to. Zoe came home and met Ben.”

“If you know everything, do you know why Craig was here? Why he wanted Aaron?”

Roman didn’t want to hurt Rebecca, but hopefully hearing that Craig was moving on with his life might put her at ease.

“His wife had recently found out that the fertility treatments they’d been undergoing hadn’t worked.”

Rebecca stared at him, her expression going blank. “He married her?”

Roman nodded.

“And since she couldn’t have a child of her own, she wanted my son?”

“Honestly, I don’t think she knew anything about his plan,” Roman told her. “They didn’t have any more money for treatments, so I guess Craig decided that he’d take Aaron. I gave him money so they could continue with their treatments, after making sure he knew what would happen if he approached you or Aaron again. He’ll agree to whatever you pursue when it comes to custody.”

“I just...” Rebecca crossed her arms, hugging her tablet against her chest. “I don’t know what to think.”

“About what, exactly?”

“All of it,” she said. “I don’t want Craig back, but... he married her? After telling me he didn’t want to ever get married? Also, I feel bad for any child he has, unless he plans to be a completely different father than he was to Aaron.”

Roman rubbed his palms against his jeans. “I think he might be. He seems to be determined to give his wife what she wants, and if a baby is that important to her, she’ll demand that he step up.”

“How much money did you give him?” she asked.

“Enough for a few more rounds of treatment.”

“Which is how much?”

Roman shook his head. He didn’t want her to know that. “Listen. I have made it my business to help people—especially women—who are struggling to get out of situations that they can’t afford to escape on their own. I track down exes who aren’t paying alimony or child support and help the women get what is rightfully theirs. Helping women and children in need was something that was important to my mom, so it’s important to me.”

“Is what you do legal?”

That made him hesitate for a moment. He didn’t want her to think less of him than she already did. “Some.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this,” she said, tapping the tablet she held. “I don’t like that he’s profited off his attempt to kidnap Aaron. I don’t like that you know all about my life when I didn’t tell you about it. I don’t like feeling like I owe you.” She hesitated. “But I do like that Aaron is safe. At least for now.”

“I’ll make sure that nothing ever happens to him, Becca,” Roman said, needing her to know that he would always do what he could to stand between her and Craig. “I’m keeping an eye on him, making sure he’s going to his job and staying where he lives.”

“Does he live close?”

Roman shook his head. “They live in Arizona.”

“Will you be able to give me an address so the lawyer can serve him with papers?”

“Yes. And if he doesn’t cooperate, I can take away the money as easily as I gave it to him.”

“What if he moves it?”

Roman gave a humorless huff of laughter. “He’s not smart enough to hide it where I can’t find it. I’m good at finding money people are trying to hide so they don’t have to meet their financial responsibilities.”

“How did you learn about all of this?” Rebecca asked.

“I’ve always enjoyed working on computers, and I studied a variety of different aspects of programming throughout high school and college. I built a legitimate business helping companies with cyber security. Knowing how to protect against hackers means learning how they work.”

“So you can hack as well as protect from hackers?”

“Basically.”

Rebecca’s gaze went to the fire, and as she stared at it, Roman wondered what was going through her mind. He felt like he’d disappointed her when all he’d wanted to do was protect her and Aaron.

It was much easier to help people at a distance—not just physically, but also emotionally. He was too caught up in his feelings for Rebecca and Aaron to be remote in his interactions with them. But he wouldn’t have it any other way because he wouldn’t want to give up their presence in his life.

She might be mad at him, but hopefully, because of his actions, she and Aaron would be safe.

He’d definitely blundered his way through this whole situation. His mistake was in not making sure that Craig didn’t mention anything about Roman’s involvement in his decision to walk away. Because he hadn’t done that, Roman had also had to answer questions about Craig’s life, and he knew that on some level, that had hurt Rebecca.

“I’m going to call it a day,” Rebecca said as she got to her feet, then headed for the entrance of the living room.

“Becca,” Roman said, waiting for her to turn around before he continued. It felt like an eternity before she looked at him. “All I wanted was to protect you and Aaron. I would have done the same for anyone I cared about. And I care about the two of you an awful lot.”

Her eyes widened a bit, but she didn’t show any other emotion. Finally, she gave a nod, then turned and left.

Roman sighed, wishing for a moment that he had a rewind button. No, actually, he didn’t. Except for warning Craig not to mention him, he wouldn’t change anything about his interaction with the man.

He had a feeling that if Rebecca told Jocelyn about what he’d done, his sister was going to yell at him for upsetting her friend. But after that, she’d probably thank him for doing what he could to keep Rebecca and Aaron safe. In fact, she probably would have done the same thing if she hadn’t been in the hospital.

Left alone with the flickering flames, twinkling lights, and someone crooning about Christmas and love from the speakers, Roman leaned back in the chair and stared at the fire. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped to accomplish that evening, aside from wanting to just talk with Rebecca and spend time with her.

Now, he was afraid that things were going to be awkward between them.

Everything had spun out of control, and Roman wanted to rail at someone. Preferably Craig. He’d felt that way a few times as he’d thought of what the man had done to Rebecca and Aaron.

But really, he had no one to blame but himself for how he’d handled things. Clearly, he functioned better operating behind a computer screen than dealing in person with these situations.

He wished he had someone to talk to, but Darius—the one person who would most likely understand why he'd done what he had—wasn't in a good place for Roman to unburden himself. And perhaps they weren't close enough for him to do that just yet.

So instead, he'd just berate himself for what had happened.

The next day was as awkward as Roman had figured it would be. Rebecca was polite enough, but the smiles she usually gave him were absent. Even when she'd been stressed about the situation with Craig, she'd still had smiles for the boys. But that morning, as she made them breakfast, there were none.

“Are we doing anything tonight, Uncle Roman?” Colby asked. “Can we go see the light display again?”

Roman had made a plan for the evening, but he wasn't sure if it was going to work out, given how things currently stood between him and Rebecca. “I'm not sure. We'll see.”

“I hope we can do something, even if we can't see the lights.”

“It might be nice to have a few days between when we see the lights,” Roman said. “If we see them two nights in a row, it might not seem as nice the second time round.”

Aaron nodded, but Colby didn't look sold on that idea.

“I'm going to work,” Rebecca said once the boys were done with their breakfast. “Be good for Roman.”

“We will,” Aaron told her.

Roman wanted to say something... anything... before she left, but he had no idea what, so he remained silent. Once she'd left, he went to make himself a really strong cup of coffee. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Thoughts of what had happened with Rebecca wouldn't leave Roman alone as he hung out with the boys. He managed to focus enough to get them going on their schoolwork. It was a bit of a challenge because Colby just wanted to talk and play

around, and Aaron went along with him. Thankfully, there wasn't a ton of work for them to do.

Would Rebecca send them back to school now that the threat of Craig was gone?

“What’s the next word, Uncle Roman?” Colby asked.

Roman blinked at the paper of spelling words he held. “Butter.”

“Like peanut butter!”

“I like peanut butter,” Aaron murmured as he wrote the word on his paper. “But it sticks to my teeth.”

The pair were certainly a hoot, and Roman couldn't help but smile, even though he was feeling kind of down and distracted.

Once they were done with the spelling test, Roman tucked their papers back into the folder, then pulled out some math worksheets. Colby wasn't thrilled about that, but that was no surprise.

Roman had discovered that his nephew wasn't thrilled about any of the schoolwork. Interestingly enough, Colby had as much of a knack for the work as Aaron did, he just didn't like to actually do it.

“I think I'd rather do my schoolwork at home from now on,” Aaron said once they were done for the day.

“Why's that?” Roman asked.

He thought the boy might say that it was because he didn't want to risk running into his dad. Instead, Aaron said, “When we do it at school, it takes all day. When we do it at home, it doesn't take as long.”

“Oh. But wouldn't you miss having fun with your friends?”

Aaron shrugged. “Maybe. But we could have play dates. Plus, I live with my best friend, so I could play with him.”

“Unfortunately, your mom can't stay home and teach you,” Roman told him.

“But you can, right?”

“I don’t live here, buddy.”

Aaron’s expression fell and his head drooped. “But couldn’t you move here? Uncle Darius did.”

Roman didn’t know how to explain his situation to the boy. It wasn’t something that a child of his age would really be able to understand.

“My home isn’t here,” Roman said. “And my work isn’t here either.”

“I thought maybe that you could be like Uncle Darius.”

“And move here?”

“Yeah, but also, he was my uncle, but now he’s Colby’s dad.”

It took a moment for Roman to get the drift of what Aaron was saying. If Aaron’s uncle became Colby’s dad, then that meant Aaron was hoping that Colby’s uncle would become his dad. That *Roman* would become his dad.

The idea left him speechless. It wasn’t that the idea didn’t appeal to him. He just didn’t see how it could work. Never mind that it was unlikely that Rebecca would ever be interested in him, given what he’d done.

He struggled for the words to say to the boy that would let him down easily, without making him feel like Roman wouldn’t want to be his father given the right circumstances.

“I think you should move here, Uncle Roman,” Colby said. “And Mom wants that too. She said she hopes you wise up and come home.”

His nephew’s words made Roman chuckle. He could almost hear Jocelyn saying them. “I have a house in Wyoming. I don’t think Darius had a house somewhere else, did he?”

“Don’t know.” Colby shrugged. “But he said he loved Mom enough that he wanted to stay here.”

Roman had seen proof of that, and he was grateful that things had worked out for his sister and Darius. He just didn’t

see it unfolding the same way for him. It was hard to imagine putting down roots once again in Serenity.

He was aware that the only reason he had for not returning to Serenity permanently was his reluctance to be back where he'd witnessed the horrible tragedy that had left him without parents. Zoe had had more than just the tragedy keeping her away from Serenity. She'd been hoping to build a music career that, at the time, she'd assumed she needed to be in Nashville in order to do.

Love had given her a reason to stay. To redirect her life.

Would love be enough to bring him home?

Regardless of his answer, it was irrelevant. He'd messed up with Rebecca. But even if he hadn't, he had nothing to offer her because he knew that his money held no appeal to her.

All he had to offer anyone was an uncertain future. He didn't know if his cancer would return, and he didn't know if he'd ever be able to father children.

He could hack his way into an ultra-secure computer system but couldn't figure out how to navigate this situation with Rebecca. He'd messed it up royally, but the feelings he had for Rebecca still made him want the best for her and Aaron.

Whatever that might be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Rebecca tried to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach that had been present ever since she'd opened her email the previous day. She wasn't sure how she felt about the revelations in Craig's email and what Roman had told her about her ex's current life.

What she hated the most about the whole situation was how weak it made her feel. She'd thought that she was being strong and taking charge by contacting a lawyer. And though she'd worried about coming face to face with Craig, she'd wanted to have the opportunity to show him that she wasn't the same person he'd left, and that she wouldn't let him walk over her.

But apparently, Roman had felt she needed him to step in and fix things. It hurt to think that he hadn't felt confident in her ability to handle the situation. And now she wondered if the lawyer he'd referred her to was on his payroll, too.

She was so tired of people feeling like they needed to help her. Or maybe they felt obliged to help her. It was marginally understandable coming from Darius since he was her big brother, and he'd been helping her since she'd been little.

But Roman? She didn't want him to consider her helpless. It shouldn't matter what he thought about her, but it did. A whole lot. She knew it was an issue with her pride, but it was hard past that.

She'd hardly been able to look Roman in the eye since realizing what he'd done. And on top of that, Craig had assumed that the man was her boyfriend. That had been mortifying as well.

If she'd taken more time to think about it, she wouldn't have shown Roman the email. At least she would have spared herself *that* embarrassment.

It seemed that she just couldn't get away from the Wright siblings feeling like they needed to take care of her. Rebecca

knew she should be grateful for their help, but she really just wanted to prove that she could stand on her own two feet.

For once, she wasn't excited about heading home because she just didn't know how to act. However, she couldn't hang out at the office since it was closing. Plus, she was worn out from a busy day and the emotional toll of the day.

She took her time pulling on her coat and scarf, making sure to wrap it securely around her neck and mouth. The temperature had dipped throughout the day, and though she wasn't in a rush to get home, she didn't dawdle as she left the building for her car.

After her car warmed up a bit, she left the parking lot and headed home. As she drove, she rehearsed a few conversations she might end up having with Roman. Hopefully, the boys would be around to provide some distraction.

When she pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, Rebecca spotted Ben's car and breathed a sigh of relief. It would be great if he and Zoe would hang around for dinner and the evening. It beat having to depend on a pair of young boys to run interference in an awkward situation.

As she walked into the house, the aroma of food greeted her, which meant she didn't have to worry about cooking dinner. She would have been happy to do it, but it was nice to have a break.

"Hi, Momma," Aaron called out as he ran to her. She bent to give him a hug, which made him shiver and say, "You're cold!"

"It's freezing outside."

"We played outside for a bit, but Uncle Roman made us come inside because it got too cold."

Without waiting for a reply, Aaron ran back to the kitchen. Rebecca took her time hanging up her jacket, then put her boots in the closet.

"Hey there, Becca," Zoe said with a smile when Rebecca walked into the kitchen. "Hope you don't mind us popping by for dinner."

“Of course not,” Rebecca told her. “Especially when it seems like maybe you brought dinner with you.”

“We did.” Zoe gestured to the breakfast nook. “Hope you’re okay with Chinese again. We were in the mood, so we decided to take care of supper for everyone since we were coming over anyway.”

“Well, I’m just going to go downstairs and change.”

“Don’t go too casual,” Zoe said. “We’re going out after we eat.”

“We are?” Rebecca glanced at Roman, wondering if he’d organized something or if Zoe had come up with a plan. “Jeans okay?”

“Yep,” Roman said, revealing it was his plan for the evening once again.

Curious about what was on the schedule for the evening, Rebecca changed into a pair of jeans and a warm sweater. If ever there was a night to stay in and curl up in front of a fire, it was that night. However, if Roman had made plans, she wouldn’t throw a spanner in the works.

He’d done so much to plan fun evenings for the boys, and she wouldn’t spoil that. It was one of the things she really loved... liked about him. The man didn’t have to stick around to help with the boys, but he’d stepped up more than she’d ever expected him to.

As they began to eat a few minutes later, the boys and Zoe tried to guess what they were going to do. Roman refused to divulge any details, no matter what Zoe promised him.

“Really not fair when I can’t offer you anything you can’t buy yourself,” Zoe said with a groan.

“Maybe if you could bake cookies or something, you’d have some bargaining leverage.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty restricted in what I can cook or bake.” Zoe wrinkled her nose. “Those tubes of cookie dough from the store are about the limit of my baking.”

“Don’t know that I’ve ever had those.”

“I can believe that,” Zoe scoffed. “Mr. I-Have-A-Chef.”

“True. But I also have a Carla, Jocelyn, and Rebecca, who are great at baking.”

Rebecca felt heat in her cheeks at his compliment. She could admit that part of the reason she’d baked as much as she had recently was because she knew that he enjoyed it.

However, given how much he’d done for her, some baking hardly seemed to rate. But what else could she give him?

“Can we go now?” Colby asked once he and Aaron were done eating.

“We need to clean up first,” Roman told him. “But we can’t take too long. We need to be there by six-thirty.”

“We’ll help clean.” Aaron slid off his chair and picked up his plate and glass. Colby did the same, then followed Aaron to the kitchen to put their dishes on the counter.

Rebecca didn’t linger over her meal, and none of the others did either. Soon, they were all pitching in to put away the leftovers and load the dishwasher.

“So, where are we going?” Zoe asked as they walked out of the house, all bundled up.

“Ben knows,” Roman said. “We’ll meet you there.”

The boys scrambled into their seats in the SUV, throwing out guesses for where they were going. Rebecca didn’t have any idea, but she didn’t pester Roman for the answer.

It wasn’t until he pulled into a parking spot at the far end of Main Street that Rebecca finally had a clue. After getting out of the car, the boys stood on the sidewalk looking around.

When Zoe joined them, she was laughing. “Really, Roman?”

He shrugged. “It’s for the boys.”

“It sure is.”

“I think you’ll enjoy it too,” Roman told her. “If you keep an open mind.”

Rebecca actually thought it was a good idea. While not something the boys might have chosen to do on their own, she thought they'd enjoy it because it was Christmas related.

"We're seeing a Winnie the Pooh movie?" Aaron asked as they walked to the small theater.

"A *Christmas Winnie the Pooh* movie," Roman said.

Serenity Point's movie theater didn't show the latest releases. Mostly it showed classic or seasonal movies, which *A Very Merry Pooh Year* definitely fit into.

As they stepped into the warmth of the theater, they were greeted by the sound of kids talking and laughing. Aaron and Colby spotted a couple of friends from school and ran over to talk to them.

"I'm surprised Ben agreed to come," Zoe said as they followed the boys.

"Are you really?" Ben asked.

She grinned at him. "No, actually, I'm not. You'd do anything for those boys."

"Yep. Pretty much. Watching a kids' Christmas movie isn't too much of a hardship."

For a few minutes, Rebecca spoke to the moms of the kids the boys were talking to. As she did, she glanced around, quickly noticing that Roman and Ben were among only a handful of guys present. This movie was definitely not a big draw for adult men.

It made Rebecca appreciate Roman and Ben even more.

When they had settled into their seats in the theater, Rebecca had Roman on one side and Aaron on the other. Colby sat beside Aaron, and Zoe was on his other side with Ben.

Rebecca was glad that she hadn't seen the movie before because it held her attention. For the most part. It was impossible to completely ignore Roman's presence at her side, as much as she wished she could. But at least their current situation wasn't conducive to conversation.

The boys probably wouldn't have chosen this movie to watch, but they seemed to enjoy it. It wasn't a long show, so less than an hour and a half later, they were leaving the theater.

From the marquee, it appeared they were showing a Christmas movie for teens and adults at eight-thirty, so they didn't linger in the lobby of the theater.

"Thanks for the movie," Zoe said as she gave Roman a hug. "I actually enjoyed it."

"I'm glad."

Zoe came over to Rebecca and gave her a hug as well. "I'm going to call you later."

"Okay." Rebecca figured she wanted to talk about her time with Jocelyn that day.

Zoe and Ben headed off to Ben's car, while she and Roman wandered back to Roman's car with Aaron and Colby. Once the boys were buckled into their seats, Roman started up the car.

"Do you want to drive around a bit to look at the Christmas lights?" Roman asked.

Before Rebecca could respond, the boys expressed with great enthusiasm that they'd love to do that. "Sure. Let's look at some lights."

With Christmas music playing and the boys talking loudly, Rebecca didn't feel the need to hold a conversation with Roman. That was the only reason she was able to relax and enjoy the sights.

After driving up and down a bunch of streets, some of which had featured many beautifully decorated houses, Roman drove them home. They'd just pulled into the driveway when Rebecca's phone rang.

"Hi, Zoe," she said when she answered. "We just got home. Can I call you back when the boys are in bed?"

"Yep."

Rebecca ended the call, then climbed out of the SUV. They went into the house, and after getting the boys a snack, Rebecca took them downstairs.

She had Aaron take a shower in her bathroom, and Colby took one in Aaron's. It was almost nine-thirty when they were done. She went upstairs with them to say goodnight to Roman, finding him sitting in the living room enjoying a fire in the fireplace with his laptop balanced on his knees.

"Goodnight, Uncle Roman," Colby said.

Aaron also said goodnight, then the boys each gave Roman a hug, thanking him for the movie.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" Colby asked.

"You'll just have to wait and see," Roman told him with a smile.

"You have the dress rehearsal tomorrow," Rebecca reminded the boys.

"Oh! Do we have our costumes?"

"Yes. Your mom and I have them figured out."

The boys continued to chat about it as they went back down to the basement. Once she had them settled in bed, Rebecca went out to the couch to call Zoe back.

"What took you so long to get home?" Zoe asked when she answered the phone.

"Roman offered to drive us around to look at lights, and the boys were on board with that."

"What's going on with you two?"

Rebecca frowned. "What?"

"The tension was pretty thick between the two of you earlier," Zoe said. "What's happened?"

For a moment, Rebecca wanted to deny anything had happened. However, she needed to talk it out, and she knew that while Zoe loved her brother, she also cared for Rebecca. She wouldn't automatically take one side or another.

“Ah, Roman,” Zoe said with a sigh after Rebecca had explained everything. “I think he’s trying to make up for lost time, so any chance he gets to step in and help us out, he’s going to take it.”

“But he’s not making up for lost time with me,” Rebecca said. “I’m not a family member.”

“Perhaps not in the strictest sense of the word,” Zoe agreed. “But you’re someone he cares about. Anyone can see that.”

Rebecca wasn’t sure how to take Zoe’s words. “I just hate that he sees me as weak. Like I can’t take care of myself.”

“Why does that matter?”

“What?”

“Why does it matter how he sees you?” Zoe asked. “Why do you care what he thinks about you?”

Nope. She wasn’t going to fall for that line of questioning. “I think it’s natural to care what people think of me. Especially since he knows pretty much everything about me.”

“You’re not the only one he has full information on,” Zoe said. “He knows about Ben too.”

“He told you that?”

“Not in so many words,” Zoe said. “But just knowing what his job is and how protective he is, it wasn’t hard to figure out that he’s been keeping track of all of us. And that would include anyone that’s in our lives.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“It probably would have when I was living in Nashville.”

“Why there and not here?”

“Okay. Fine.” Zoe sighed heavily. “It would have bothered me that he was aware of the bad decisions I was making, financially and with the people I allowed into my life.”

“So you get it?”

“Yeah,” Zoe said. “But knowing Roman as I do now, I also know that he isn’t judging you for your past. And more than anything, he just wants us to be safe. All of us. Including you and Aaron. Maybe *especially* you and Aaron. He cares about you.”

Rebecca didn’t want to talk about Roman anymore. Zoe’s words sparked a hope inside her that had no business being there. Once Christmas was over, Roman would leave, and his visits would be sporadic. She didn’t need to have her feelings tangled up in a man who was hardly ever around.

“How was Jocelyn when you saw her today?”

Zoe hesitated before answering. “Emotional. She’s really sad that she’s missing the program this weekend.”

“We’re going to video chat so she can see it, though, right?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. “But you know that’s not the same.”

Rebecca did know. “Hopefully, a visit from Colby in the morning will make her feel better.”

“She’s definitely looking forward to that.”

“Are you and Ben going to come along?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve had a few visits with her this week. You guys can spend some time with her and Darius.”

Rebecca was glad for the opportunity to see her friend, and she knew Jocelyn would be thrilled to spend time with Colby. They wouldn’t be able to stay too long, however, since they had to be back in time for the dress rehearsal.

“Let me know how it goes tomorrow,” Zoe said. “On all fronts.”

Rebecca promised she would, then hung up. After a debate with herself, Rebecca decided that she needed to not be cowardly and go talk to Roman instead of texting him about their plans for the next day.

With a sigh, she got up and climbed the stairs to the main floor. When she noticed it was dark, she felt immediate relief,

but that quickly shifted to disappointment. Obviously Roman had assumed she'd just stay downstairs with the boys, and she couldn't blame him for thinking that since she'd been avoiding being alone with him.

Back in the basement, she sat down on the couch again and tapped out a message.

Did you want to go with me and the boys to see Jocelyn tomorrow morning?

Though they'd discussed it briefly at dinner, he hadn't committed one way or another to the plan.

Roman: *Sure. What time do you plan to leave?*

Probably nine so that we could be there by ten and stay for a couple of hours. We need to be back by two for the dress rehearsal.

Roman: *Sounds good.*

Thank you for the movie and light tour tonight. I appreciate how you're making this Christmas memorable for the boys.

Roman: *It's the least I can do.*

I think the boys really needed it.

Roman: *To be honest, I think I needed it too. This has helped me remember what Christmas used to be like. How wonderful it could be.*

Roman: *My mom would have loved to do all of these things.*

Rebecca was glad that Roman had those memories of his childhood. Their lives were the opposite in that regard. Her childhood hadn't left her with great memories. The best part of her life had been the last two years. For Roman, however, it seemed the best part of his life had been the years before his mom's death.

And she completely understood that. From everything she'd heard, Christina Wright had been a lovely person. So generous and caring. Rebecca wished she'd had the

opportunity to meet her, but she was also thankful she could see so much of that generosity and caring nature in her children.

I wouldn't have even thought of doing some of these things with the boys.

Roman: *Well, I haven't had much to do besides hang with them. Googling what to do for Christmas in Serenity brought up a lot of suggestions. Too bad we missed the Christmas Market.*

The boys and I went because they wanted to see Santa again. Zoe was helping Ben and Adela at the coffee shop's booth.

Roman: *Guess that was when I was back home.*

Yep. Jocelyn wanted to go, but she just didn't feel up to walking around. I took the boys and let Darius and Jocelyn have some time, just the two of them.

Roman: *Is it normal for a pregnant woman to have that much trouble walking?*

Rebecca sank back into the couch, drawing her legs up under her as she considered her response to Roman. Their text conversation was a little less awkward than talking face to face, and she hoped that perhaps it would help them get past what had happened with Craig.

Jocelyn has something called pelvic girdle pain. It's gotten worse as her pregnancy has progressed.

Roman: *Is that causing her problems now?*

I don't think so. The pain has more to do with her ligaments and such, not the uterus.

They continued to text for a little while, and with each text they exchanged, Rebecca felt like they were returning to the way things had been between them before the Craig mess. They'd been forging a friendship, and she wanted that still.

Well, she wanted more, but she'd settle for friendship.

She just needed to put aside her issues with how Roman might see her and focus on the boys and Christmas. Roman had done her a favor by getting rid of Craig, and she just needed to accept that it was unlikely she'd ever be able to repay him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Roman helped Rebecca clean up the remnants of their breakfast while the boys went to wash up and change out of their pajamas. Things had been markedly less awkward that morning compared to the previous few days.

He was relieved because he'd hated the tension that had developed as a result of his handling of the Craig situation. Still, if given the chance to do things differently, he wouldn't. Except maybe he'd have told Craig to keep his role in things under wraps.

The problem was that he had a perspective on situations like Rebecca and Craig's that Rebecca didn't. Through his work helping people who were dealing with custody issues and deadbeat parents, Roman had seen the worst of the worst. And he didn't think that Craig would have treated Aaron any better this time than he had before he'd abandoned them two years ago.

The bottom line was that he hadn't been willing to risk Aaron's safety. Even though he would have been able to tell the police where to find Craig if he'd succeeded in grabbing Aaron, Roman couldn't have let that happen. Aaron would have suffered emotionally had he been separated from his mom, like Craig had planned.

He was certain that if Rebecca was presented with the option of Craig taking Aaron, even if she got him back, or Roman paying the guy off, she'd let Roman use his money to secure Aaron's safety. Even so, Roman understood why it might be difficult for Rebecca to accept help from him.

But what Rebecca didn't realize was that Roman would do anything for her and Aaron. There was no limit to the amount of money he would pay for their safety.

"Jocelyn asked me to grab a couple of things for her," Rebecca said as she hung up the dish towel. "I'm just going to go get them."

“Do you want me to get the boys into their jackets?”

“Sure. That would be great. Thanks.”

While he waited for the boys to reappear, Roman made himself another cup of coffee and poured it into an insulated mug. The boys ran into the kitchen, then, at Roman’s direction, they hurried to put their jackets and boots on.

When Rebecca joined them, they left the house and piled into Roman’s rental SUV. The longer he stayed, the more he considered buying himself a vehicle to leave at Jocelyn’s, so he had wheels of his own when he came to visit.

“I can’t wait to see my mom,” Colby said as Roman drove out of Serenity. “I colored a picture for her.”

Roman glanced into the rearview mirror to smile at his nephew. “I’m sure she’ll love that.”

“I wish the baby was born already,” Colby mused. “Then Mom could come home.”

Roman looked over at Rebecca to see a frown on her face.

“It’s important that she stays where the doctors can take care of them,” Rebecca said. “But it won’t be much longer. The baby can’t stay inside your mom forever.”

It was rare to see Colby so subdued, and Roman knew it would upset Jocelyn to see her son that way.

“What would you like to name the baby?” Roman asked.

“I dunno,” Colby replied. “We don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“Well, I have the perfect name for a little boy,” Roman told him.

“You do?” Colby sounded curious. “What is it?”

“Shrek!”

There was a moment of silence before the boys started to laugh.

“You don’t like that name?” Roman asked.

“I love it,” Colby said. “But Mom will hate it.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Mario!”

“Or Luigi,” Aaron added.

They spent the next little while taking turns suggesting ideas for baby names. It was a great way to pass the time, and even Rebecca got involved. Colby decided that he wanted to share a few of the names they’d come up with when he saw his mom.

When Colby told Jocelyn he had baby name ideas for her, she looked a little skeptical, but encouraged him to tell her what they were.

“Shrek? Are you kidding me?” she said at his first suggestion. “I’m not giving birth to an ogre.”

Colby laughed. “How about Buzz or Woody?”

She narrowed her eyes at her son, which sent Colby into fits of laughter. Roman was glad that Colby’s somber mood had lifted.

“But what if it’s a girl?”

“Bo Peep!”

“Have you guys been watching *Toy Story*?” Jocelyn asked.

“Just once,” Aaron said.

“You’re coming up with some crazy names,” Jocelyn said.

Jocelyn’s room was large, bright, and private, which meant they didn’t have to worry about noise they created bothering roommates. He was happy to see that Jocelyn didn’t look as worried as she had in the beginning, and even Darius appeared to be a bit more relaxed. If he had to guess, Roman thought that perhaps the closer they got to the due date, the less worried they were.

“Why don’t we grab some lunch?” Darius suggested about an hour and a half into their visit. “Do you want to come with me, Becca?”

“Sure.” Rebecca got up from her seat by the window.

“Can I come, Mama?” Aaron asked.

“Yep.”

“Can I go with them?” Colby asked.

Maybe because she’d had some good quality time with him already, Jocelyn nodded. “Bring me back some nuggets and fries.”

“I will,” Colby promised, then put his jacket on.

When it was just Roman and Jocelyn, his sister said, “So. It seems like maybe you and Rebecca have worked things out.”

Roman hadn’t mentioned anything to Jocelyn about what had happened, so he could only assume that Zoe had told her. Or perhaps Rebecca, though he kind of doubted that.

“I hope so.”

“The two of you are quite the pair.”

Roman frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Do you like Becca?”

Rather than answer her direct question, he said, “Wouldn’t matter if I did. My life’s not here.”

“But why couldn’t it be?” she asked. “You said you work from home, which means you could work from anywhere. Including Serenity.”

“I have a home that I love in Wyoming.”

“You don’t have to get rid of it. You could use it as a vacation home.”

“That’s just one issue,” Roman said.

“What are the others?”

“My future is uncertain.” He shifted to stare out the window. “That’s not fair to inflict on someone.”

“But maybe that should be her decision.”

Roman turned to stare at Jocelyn. “What are you even saying? Have you had a discussion with Rebecca about this?”

“No, but Zoe suggested that Rebecca reacted the way she did to you paying Craig off because she doesn’t want you to see her as weak or needy.”

Roman digested that tidbit of information. He hadn’t really considered that she’d care about that. He’d thought her reaction had more to do with her not liking that he’d delved into her life.

“Doesn’t mean she’s interested in me,” he said. “Pride is a thing. Plus, she wouldn’t want to deal with my medical stuff.”

“What medical stuff? I thought you were in remission.”

“There are still physical ramifications from the cancer and the treatments.”

Jocelyn frowned. “Like what?”

Roman didn’t get upset at her lack of understanding. When he had no experience with the journey, he, too, might have assumed that once the cancer was gone, you were good to go.

If only.

“There’s a possibility I won’t be able to have kids.”

That revelation didn’t ease the frown on his sister’s face. “Really? You don’t know for sure?”

“Not yet, but they mentioned it was a possibility, given my treatment.”

“I don’t want to be dismissive of that, but I honestly don’t think that would be something that would hold her back.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if Darius had told me that he might not be able to have kids, I would have still chosen to be with him,” she said, her expression serious. “I realize that you might think it’s easy for me to say, given my pregnancy, but it’s true. Just like none of us are guaranteed tomorrow, none of us are guaranteed children, even when we’re healthy.”

Roman didn’t know what to think about Jocelyn’s words. The truth was, he hadn’t been sure he’d wanted to have kids, even before the cancer diagnosis and treatment. So it wasn’t

that he necessarily felt robbed of something he'd desired. But he didn't want to rob someone else of their dream.

"There are too many strikes against a relationship," he said. "Not just a relationship with Rebecca, but with any woman."

Jocelyn shook her head. "I'd tell you that you're foolish for thinking that way, but it's your life. Perhaps there is someone better out there for Rebecca."

Roman gave a short laugh. "Reverse psychology isn't going to work on me."

Except that maybe it did.

The logical side of his brain said that it was quite possible that there *was* someone better out there for Rebecca. But then there was the emotional side that protested that no one could ever love and care for Rebecca and Aaron better than he could.

Was that his pride speaking? Or was it his heart?

A short time later, the door opened, and he looked over to see Rebecca coming into the room with Darius, Colby, and Aaron. When their gazes met and held for a moment, Roman knew it was his heart, and maybe... just maybe... it was her heart, too.

"We got nuggets, Mom," Colby said, proudly holding up the bag in his hand.

"And fries," Aaron added.

"Yum."

Darius and Rebecca unpacked the bags, sorting out what food was whose. When Rebecca handed Roman the burger and fries he'd asked for, he thanked her with a smile.

"You're welcome." She returned his smile, then turned her attention back to the food.

As they ate, Roman didn't contribute much to the conversation. It was important that Colby have the chance to chat with his mom before they had to leave. Plus, Roman had plenty of things on his mind.

Though Roman could see the emotion in Jocelyn's eyes, she kept her words and tone upbeat as they prepared to leave. She was pretty determined to not drag Colby down with her sadness at him leaving.

Roman struggled with his own emotions as he watched his sister embrace her son, knowing how hard it was for her to let him go. The rest of them hugged Jocelyn and Darius, then left the hospital. Colby's mood was once again somber on the ride back to Serenity, so it was clear that he felt a sadness of his own at leaving his mom.

He prayed that God would comfort the little boy. With regards to Jocelyn's situation, he didn't really know *what* to pray. He wanted Jocelyn to be home with Colby, but that would mean the baby needed to come soon. However, the best thing for the baby was to stay inside the womb for as long as possible. In the end, he just prayed that God would comfort all of them and keep them healthy and safe.

When Colby asked about seeing the light display again later, Roman couldn't find it in his heart to deny him.

He ended up not going to the dress rehearsal with the boys and Rebecca, choosing to do a bit of work while the house was quiet. Marsh had sent him a couple of proposals to review, so he needed to look those over and also check the reports on their current projects.

It wasn't unusual for him to get lost in his work, and that day was no exception. It seemed like he'd barely started to work when Rebecca arrived back home with the boys.

After a dinner of chili with all the fixings, they set out for the light display again. It was as much fun for the boys the second time around as it had been the first time.

When they got home, Roman wondered if Rebecca would come back upstairs to talk once she put the boys to bed. Hoping that she might, he started a fire and settled into the armchair with his laptop once again.

Instead of focusing on it, though, he found himself staring at the Christmas tree, wondering what he should say to

Rebecca if she did join him.

He'd thought he'd struggle more over his feelings for her, but the conversation with Jocelyn had really helped.

The bottom line was that if he loved Rebecca enough to want to be with her, he should be willing to do whatever it took to make that happen. Even if it meant returning to live in Serenity.

It would have made his mom so happy. Him opening himself up to love and returning to the town she'd loved so much. Even if things didn't work out with Rebecca, the draw to return was growing.

He didn't want to completely leave his home in Wyoming, however. Maybe the others would be willing to spend summers there. Davis would love to show the boys all about his horses.

The lights of the Christmas tree blurred as moisture suddenly formed in his eyes. In that moment, he realized that since his diagnosis, he hadn't allowed himself to think too far into the future. To make any plans.

However, after his conversation with Jocelyn, considering the future was all he wanted to do. Ideally, it would be with Rebecca and Aaron. But even if it wasn't, he wanted to make plans. Not for the business, but for himself personally.

Movement in the corner of his eye had Roman blinking as he turned to see Rebecca hovering in the entrance of the living room. He smiled at her, hoping to encourage her to join him in front of the fire. "Boys settled down?"

"Yep." She walked a little further into the room. "Are you working?"

"Not really." He set the laptop on the end table beside him. "I got some work done earlier."

After a bit of hesitation, she sat down in the armchair opposite him and pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. She stared at the fire for a moment, then said, "I want to apologize."

“There’s no need,” Roman assured her.

Her gaze flicked to him, then back to the fire. “There is. I know you had the best of intentions in dealing with Craig the way you did.”

Roman debated whether to tell her about what he did. Maybe it would help her understand a bit more, and he really wanted her to know.

“It has been important to me to find a way to carry on my mom’s legacy. I donate to shelters and organizations that help the women my mom tried to help. But I wanted to do more, especially since I ended up with a skill set that allows me to track people and money. Most of the time, I’m tracking down deadbeat dads who legally owe child support. Sometimes I’ve been alerted to situations that need to be monitored.”

Rebecca’s brows drew together. “How do you find out about those situations?”

“Over time, I’ve built up a network of people who know how to alert me to situations that could benefit from my skills. I work anonymously, so these people vet the people involved, then contact me.”

“Were you monitoring me?”

“No, not you. I was monitoring Craig,” Roman said. “Jocelyn wrote about what was going on with you and Craig in one of her emails. I took it upon myself to keep an eye on him. Unfortunately, since I was here, and we were distracted with Jocelyn, I didn’t realize what he was doing in time to stop it.”

“And the card you gave me with the number to call? Are you connected to that?”

Roman sighed, wishing he didn’t have to spill everything, but he knew he needed to be honest with her. “That’s an organization I started to help women in situations like yours who can’t afford to pay for good legal representation.”

“*Tina’s Hope*,” Rebecca murmured. “Christina was your mom.”

“Yes. I created it in her honor.”

“Do Jocelyn and Zoe know?”

Roman shook his head. “I’ve tried to keep that side of my life under wraps. If what I do becomes common knowledge, it could jeopardize my ability to continue to do it.”

Rebecca leaned back in her chair, hugging herself. “Do you usually pay people off, like you did Craig?”

“No. I don’t make a practice of that.”

“Then why did you do it with him? He didn’t deserve your money.”

“No, you’re right. He didn’t.” Roman hesitated, then said, “But you and Aaron did. You deserve to live in peace, without worrying that he’ll keep popping up in your lives.”

“What will keep him from coming back?”

“I didn’t tell his wife what he intended to do with Aaron, and as long as he steers clear and cooperates with you legally, I won’t.”

“I don’t want child support from him,” Rebecca said. “I just want him out of our lives.”

“Then tell the lawyer you want to terminate his parental rights. I have a feeling that if he has the choice between doing that or paying child support, he’ll do that. He didn’t want Aaron because he hoped for a relationship with him.”

Rebecca frowned as she nodded. “If I could get him out of our lives permanently, that would be the best Christmas present ever.”

“Just so you know,” Roman said. “If I could go back...”

“You’d do things differently?” she asked when his words trailed off.

“No. I’d do the same thing over again. For guys like Craig, reasoning doesn’t work. Money is the only thing that would get through to him. If he’d been a reasonable man, he would have approached you about custody.”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t have agreed to anything. I don’t trust him with Aaron. I trust you with Aaron more than I

ever would trust Craig.”

Roman liked that she felt that way. “I’d never do anything to hurt him or Colby. Those boys mean the world to me.”

Rebecca stared at him for a long moment. “The boys think you’re great, too.”

He wanted to say more, to tell her that *she* meant the world to him. “I’m so glad that I’ve had a chance to get to know Colby and Aaron the way I have. I’m not happy about the circumstances that led to it, but I’m so glad I’ve been able to be here with you and the boys.”

She smiled at him then, her expression easing away the tension that had been on her face when she’d first come into the room. “I couldn’t have done this without you. And I don’t think I would have wanted to.”

Her words made Roman’s heart skip a beat. “We’ve done pretty good, haven’t we?”

“Yes, we have. I’m not sure what Aaron and I would have done if you hadn’t come back.”

“I’m sure that you could have managed without me, but I’m glad you didn’t have to.”

“We’ll miss you when you go back to Wyoming.”

Here was his chance. “I’m not going back. At least not permanently.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened as she shifted forward. “You’re not?”

“Being here with all of you has shown me how isolated I’ve become over the years. Once I left college, I was able to work remotely. I stayed in my apartment most of the time, rarely socializing, which allowed me to retreat into a virtual world. I retreated even more once I began to make a lot of money and bought my property in Wyoming, basically leaving the world behind.”

“Didn’t you have to go into an office?”

“Not physically. Marshall, my business partner and best friend, takes care of the business side of our company. I focus more on managing the projects we take on. We have talented teams in place, so I don’t have as much of a hands-on job anymore, which was a blessing over the past year.”

“Have you told Jocelyn about your plan to move back here?”

“Not just yet.”

Rebecca beamed at him. “I don’t think there’s a single person here who will be disappointed by this news.”

“Even you?” he asked, feeling hopeful as he relaxed back into the chair.

He felt a stronger connection to Rebecca than he had to any of the handful of other women he’d ever spent time with in the past. All of whom he’d dated for varying lengths of time.

The situation with Jocelyn had forced him and Rebecca to spend time together, working to care for the boys, and he’d liked that. It had given them the opportunity to get to know each other in different scenarios. Enough for him to see things about her that really appealed to him.

Roman hoped that he wasn’t misunderstanding her seeking him out and spending time with him. He thought he sensed a responding interest from Rebecca. But was it just wishful thinking?

He was very much out of practice when it came to deciphering the signs of romantic interest. Or maybe he was just used to women who expressed themselves much more obviously.

If he did reveal how he felt about her, only for her to tell him she wasn’t interested in him that way, it could make things awkward. He somehow had to figure out how she might feel before taking that risk.

Before he had a chance to do that, however, Rebecca’s phone rang. She looked down at the screen, her brow furrowing as she tapped it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Rebecca's stomach clenched when she saw her brother's name. She hoped nothing was wrong. "Darius?"

"Hey, Becca." Darius's voice sounded weary as it came through the speaker of her phone.

"Is everything okay?"

"Jocelyn's gone into labor, and they're not going to do anything to stop it."

Rebecca did some quick mental math. "She's almost thirty-seven weeks. The baby should be fine."

"Yeah. That's what they're saying."

"How is Jocelyn feeling?"

"She says she's good."

"I *am* good." Jocelyn's voice was distant but clear.

Rebecca smiled. "She's the best judge of how she's doing."

"Unless she's saying that to make me feel better."

"I'm not. I really am good."

They only talked for another minute before Jocelyn had another contraction, and Darius hurriedly ended the call.

"Wow. The end is in sight."

"Yep." Rebecca smiled at Roman. "And the doctors must be confident the baby will be okay if they're not trying to stop labor."

"How long will it take?" Roman asked. "When will the baby get here?"

Rebecca shrugged, wishing she had answers for Roman. "The length of labor isn't something that can be easily determined."

"I never realized how many uncertainties there are in having a kid."

“Honestly, raising a child is just one uncertainty after another,” Rebecca said, then added, “That’s kind of true for life in general, too.”

“Do you ever think of having more kids?”

Roman’s question took her by surprise, even though it probably shouldn’t have since so much lately had centered on the two kids already in their lives and the one on its way.

She was happy that they’d managed to get past the awkwardness of the past couple of days. It was weird, but she felt like they were even closer for having gone through that.

“I hadn’t really thought much about it until recently,” she said. “And that’s only because Aaron has mentioned that he wants a baby brother or sister like Colby’s getting.”

“And you don’t feel the same.”

“The problem is that I had a horrible—absolutely wretched—pregnancy and delivery with Aaron. I know they say you forget it all after the baby’s born, but that wasn’t the case for me.”

Roman frowned. “I suppose an experience like that would make someone reluctant to go through it again.”

“Yep.” Rebecca bit her lip for a moment. “The thing is, I have mixed feelings about having more kids.”

“Why’s that?”

She wasn’t sure if she wanted to talk over her conflicted thoughts on kids. Would he view her differently if she revealed how she felt? She hadn’t even discussed it with Darius or Jocelyn.

“Pregnancy issues aside, I never planned to have a lot of kids. My family was big, and I always felt like none of us got much personal attention.” Not that that had necessarily been a bad thing in her family, but she had assumed that any large family—good or bad—would have the same issue. “Craig felt the same way, so we’d both agreed that we’d only have one or two kids. After my horrible pregnancy, we decided to stick to one.”

After her rough pregnancy with Aaron, she'd been thankful that Craig hadn't wanted as many kids as physically possible. And when she realized how bad of a father Craig was, she was even more relieved.

"With working full time and being a single mom, I'm glad I don't have to split my attention further. I like being able to have my attention just on Aaron. And Colby when necessary."

"So even if you were in another relationship, you wouldn't want more kids?"

Rebecca wasn't sure why he was so focused on the subject. Maybe the prospect of his sister having another baby was bringing on all these questions.

"Not sure I'd want another pregnancy, but there are other ways to become a parent," she said. "It would also depend a lot on the guy."

If she was married to someone like Roman, she'd happily add another child to her family, especially through adoption. She might even consider another pregnancy because she had a feeling he'd be supportive of her, even if she was sick for nine months straight. And she wouldn't have to worry about juggling a full-time job while feeling so awful like she'd had to do during Aaron's pregnancy.

Thinking about being married to Roman did funny things to her stomach. Her heart was already convinced she loved him. He'd proven to be a great man who'd stepped up to help her, even though he didn't have to. He treated her and Aaron so well, just like he treated the members of his own family.

And now, it looked like he was going to be around permanently. His change of heart felt like a minor miracle. Not just for her, but for Jocelyn and Zoe as well. And more importantly, for the boys. It was clear they both adored Roman.

"Do you want kids?" she asked, figuring her question was only fair.

"I didn't think I did." His gaze shifted to the fire. "But hanging around Aaron and Colby has given me a new

perspective. They're great kids."

"They are," Rebecca agreed. "And I'm only a little bit biased."

Roman laughed as he looked back at her. "I wonder what the new baby will be like. Outgoing like Colby or more reserved like Aaron."

"Or maybe somewhere in the middle."

"I'm also curious to see how the boys interact with a baby."

"Colby will probably get bored with the baby when he realizes it can't do anything with him," Rebecca said. "Or he'll love spending time with the baby because he can talk all he wants, and the baby won't interrupt him."

"Except to cry," Roman said.

"Yep. Except for crying."

"I wonder how long until we hear something."

Rebecca's phone rang, and she smiled when she saw Zoe's name on the screen. The woman squealed when Rebecca answered, and they had a quick conversation. Before their call was over, Carla called Rebecca as well. She ended the call with Zoe, then talked to Carla for a few minutes.

"If the baby comes before morning, are we going to go see them?" Roman asked once she and Carla had hung up.

"We'll see how Jocelyn is feeling and how the baby is doing. If it's in the NICU, we won't be able to see it."

"And we need to be here for the program tomorrow night, right?"

Rebecca nodded. "We can't take off with two of the three wise men."

"No understudies, huh?"

"Nope," Rebecca said with a laugh. "It's not quite that type of production."

Silence lapsed between them, but it didn't feel awkward. Roman seemed lost in his thoughts as he stared at the fire, and she didn't distract him.

With the fire, the tree lights, and the Christmas music, several of her favorite things were all in one place. With Roman's presence, everything combined to create a scenario that made her feel cozy and content.

She didn't want to leave him yet. If she had her way, she'd just hang out with him in front of the fire until they received news of the baby's birth.

However, Rebecca knew she needed to go downstairs and go to bed. Even without the possible arrival of the baby, the next day had promised to be busy with church and then the Christmas program in the evening. Now it wouldn't just be busy, but also emotional as they waited for news of the baby.

Still, she didn't want to leave Roman. Now that things had settled between them, she wanted to spend more time with the man. That probably wasn't the wisest move on her part. But even though she had romantic feelings for him, she also considered him a friend. A good friend.

Though she hadn't thought at length about what any man she dated had to be like, Rebecca had always known that an important quality would be that he treated Aaron well. Roman did that for sure, and as a bonus, he also treated her very well.

On top of that, he had proven himself to be a protector. Though Rebecca wanted to prove that she was strong and able to take care of herself and Aaron, she appreciated knowing that if need be, Roman would step in and help her.

“Would you ever be interested in another relationship?”

Roman's question shocked Rebecca speechless for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes when people get out of a difficult relationship, they're not interested in trying again.”

That had definitely been the case for awhile following Craig's abandonment of her and Aaron. Especially after she'd

discovered he'd run off with another woman. The idea of trusting another man had seemed unfathomable.

Darius, Devon, and Ben had helped restore her faith in men. Helped her realize that not every man was like Craig or her father. And then Roman had arrived, showing her that he, too, was a good man. That he'd chosen to be different from the type of man his father had been.

However, the reality was that even having these good men in her life, Rebecca would never be ready to just start dating a man without knowing them really well first. Even though Craig had never been a stellar man, he'd appeared to be different from her father and his. And while he had been in some ways, in other ways, he'd been quite similar.

Unfortunately, she'd discovered that too late. Even though she'd known him for most of their school years, once they'd left their hometown, he'd grown into a man that had caused Rebecca great concern.

"I'm not as opposed to the idea of a relationship as I once was," she told him, curious where these questions were coming from. "It's been a couple of years. Distance has helped."

"So if some guy asked you out on a date, you'd say yes?"

"No. Not for just some random guy," Rebecca said. "I'd have to know him pretty well before I'd say yes."

Roman regarded her for a moment. "Isn't that the purpose of dating, though? To get to know each other?"

"Maybe. But after my experience, I'm not going to date a guy I haven't already spent time with." She considered that for a moment before adding, "I want to know that I like a guy well enough that dating wouldn't be a waste of time. Actually, I'd prefer us to be friends first."

"That makes sense," Roman said with a nod. "It's not how I've done things with the women I've dated, but maybe if I had, things would have turned out differently."

Rebecca didn't like to think about him dating, though she was curious to know what type of woman he'd found

attractive enough to date. From the sound of things, if he dated without getting to know a woman first, it was likely that her appearance had attracted him to her.

“What’s with all these questions about dating?” Rebecca asked. “Feels a bit like we’re in high school and you’re getting ready to ask me if I like your friend.”

Roman laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “No. Definitely not asking for a friend.”

Who are you asking for then?

It was a question that she didn’t have the guts to ask.

“I’m... uh...” His expression sobered a bit, and he looked away for a second before meeting her gaze again. She wasn’t sure what to think when he moved from his seat to kneel in front of her, his hand reaching to grip the arm of her chair. “I’m actually asking for myself.”

Rebecca froze for a moment, then her heart began to pound at a furious rate. Had she missed the signs of his interest? Or had she been blinded to it by telling herself he’d never be interested in her?

She glanced at the fire, then the tree, wondering if the whole scenario was actually a dream. It was too perfect.

“Becca?”

At the sound of her name, she looked back at him. Her gaze travelled over his face, taking in his serious expression. When she met his gaze, a small smile eased some of the seriousness on his face.

“You want to go on a date with me?” Rebecca asked. “Seriously?”

“I’m not really wanting to go on a date with you,” Roman said.

Rebecca felt her cheeks heat. Well, that was a little embarrassing. No, a *lot* embarrassing. And more than a little confusing, given his position kneeling in front of her.

“What I want is to go on as many dates as it takes for you to see if you’d be as interested in a relationship with me as I am to have one with you.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks heated even more, though now for a completely different reason. “Well, that won’t take more than one date.”

Roman frowned. “I’m not sure if that’s a good or bad thing.”

Now it was Rebecca’s turn to laugh. She couldn’t help it because there was a giddiness inside her that just had to spill out.

“I don’t need a bunch of dates to know that,” she told him, reaching out to rest her hand over his where it rested on the armchair. “I’m just so surprised that you feel the same way.”

Roman stared at their hands for a moment before looking back at Rebecca. “Why would you be surprised? You’re amazing.”

That made Rebecca narrow her eyes at Roman. Even the men who were supposed to love her—aside from Darius—had never told her she was amazing. Not her other brothers. Not her father. And certainly not Craig.

But here was Roman, a man who could have any woman, and somehow, he thought she was amazing. It was hard to wrap her mind around.

When she said as much to Roman, he shook his head. “I suppose some might think that, but I have never found a woman I admire as much as I do you. Other women I’ve dated were happy to hang around as long as we were having fun, but they didn’t want to deal with the tough stuff.”

“I’ve dealt with a fair amount of tough stuff,” Rebecca said. “I didn’t have much of a choice.”

Roman nodded, then sandwiched her hand between his. “But despite what you’ve gone through, you haven’t become bitter and angry. It’s truly remarkable.”

“Jocelyn and Zoe didn’t put you up to this, did they?” Rebecca knew it was a stupid question, but she still couldn’t believe Roman actually wanted to date her. That he was holding her hand in his.

His brows lifted. “While both of my sisters have sung your praises, I wouldn’t choose to date you if my emotions weren’t already involved.”

“I guess spending these past few weeks together has helped with that,” Rebecca said. “We couldn’t help but get to know each other.”

“It started before that,” Roman revealed, shifting to sit on the floor, though he kept her hand in his.

His hand was warm and strong, and Rebecca hoped he didn’t let go of her. “What?”

“I’ve appreciated the interactions we’ve had over the past year. They were little blips of light in the darkness of my treatment. Likes stars in the night sky.” Roman smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “Plus, Jocelyn shared bits about you in her emails as well. She’s done that ever since you came into her life. I felt like I knew the type of woman you were, and since spending time with you, I’ve realized that I was right.”

Rebecca could say the same thing. Jocelyn had spoken a lot about her brother, though many of her memories were of him as a teen.

“You’re not going to leave again, are you?” Rebecca asked. “I’m not sure I could deal with that if we were involved.”

“I don’t plan to go anywhere, I promise.” His expression seemed sincere, and Rebecca wanted to believe him. “I might have to leave for business reasons or to check on my place in Wyoming, but I’ll always come back.”

Rebecca tightened her fingers around his. “I’m sorry if I sound demanding, making sure you’re going to stay here.”

Roman smiled at her again, understanding in his gaze. “It’s not demanding. I get why that might concern you. I have a bit

of a track record for leaving, plus you've had someone leave you."

Though she might have liked to deny that any of it was tied to her feelings of abandonment because of how Craig had left, Rebecca didn't. She couldn't deny what was true.

"But there is something else we need to talk about before we get more involved," Roman said with a sigh.

Sensing that this was something important to him, Rebecca slid off the chair to sit cross-legged in front of him, her knees bumping against his. With the fire flickering beside them, she took his hands in hers and looked at him expectantly.

His gaze drifted for a moment, but then he looked back at her. "You already know that I'm in remission, but I need to know that you understand that there is no guarantee that the cancer won't come back."

Though Rebecca hated the idea of his cancer returning, if it did, she would stand beside him. That would be tough for him to go through, but he wouldn't do it alone.

"I do understand that," Rebecca said. "I know it's a part of who you are, but it doesn't scare me."

"There's part of me having undergone treatment that I haven't spoken about," he said. "Well, except with Jocelyn."

Rebecca frowned, wondering what else there could be. She understood that while his treatment had worked on the cancer, it had also left him gaunt and worn out. He didn't need to tell her about that.

"What is it?" Rebecca asked, hoping it wasn't anything too serious but also certain it wouldn't be anything she couldn't handle. That told her more than anything how deep her feelings were for him already.

"I know we're at the start of dating, but it's important you know this before things get more serious." Roman blew out a breath. "My cancer and the treatment have the possibility of leaving me sterile. There is a chance that I'll never be able to have kids."

Relief that it wasn't something more serious swirled through Rebecca. "I'm not going to say it's not a big deal because it obviously concerns you. But given our conversation earlier, you know that I don't have my heart set on more biological children. I'm happy with Aaron, and I'll never say that my life is lacking if he's the only child I ever have."

It felt weird to be talking about having children before they'd even gone on their first date, but Rebecca appreciated that Roman wanted her to have all the information.

Roman lifted his hand to run the back of his fingers along the back of Rebecca's cheek. His expression was gentle, and the feelings in her heart wanted to spill out.

She'd never experienced affectionate and gentle touches, and she reached up to grip Roman's hand, pressing the back of it against her cheek. The simple touch had a deep impact on her heart, and she hoped that it was just the first of many.

Her time with Craig might have originally left her wary, but her experience with Roman was quickly overshadowing that. And not just because of what had developed that night. From almost the moment they'd first met, he'd proven to be a different type of man. A better type of man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Shouldn’t we have heard something by now?” Roman asked as they sat at the table in the breakfast nook.

They’d finished eating lunch a short time ago, and the boys were watching a movie in the basement.

“Labor can take ages,” Zoe said. “Or at least that’s what the site I checked last night said.”

“It is possible for it to take quite a while,” Rebecca agreed. “But I would imagine we’ll hear something soon.”

Roman hoped so. He was worried about his sister and the baby. Thankfully, Rebecca was calm about it, which had helped him to stay calm as well. It had worked for a couple of hours, but now he was worried again.

They’d been to church that morning, and Roman had hoped that when the service was over, they’d have had a call from Darius. The man had texted sporadically, but they’d heard nothing for the last three hours.

Roman hoped that didn’t mean that something had happened. Something bad. He’d been praying often since waking up that morning, wishing there was something more he could do.

“The good thing is that since the baby is being born now, they might be home before Christmas,” Zoe said. “Which would be wonderful.”

“Even the baby?” Roman asked.

“There’s a good chance,” Rebecca said. “But we’ll have to wait until it’s born before we know for sure.”

After they had cleared the table, they went downstairs to join the boys. They had a few hours to wait before they needed to be back at the church for the kids’ program. If Jocelyn hadn’t had the baby yet, she wouldn’t be able to watch the program. If that was the case, Roman planned to video it for her.

As they settled into the overstuffed couches in the basement, Roman made sure he was seated beside Rebecca. He enjoyed being close to her, and from the smile she gave him as she relaxed into the couch, her arm pressed against his, she felt the same way.

He glanced at Zoe to find her watching them with lifted brows. She grinned before turning her attention to Ben, who sat next to her. When she whispered something to him, Ben looked from the television to Roman and Rebecca. A smile tugged up one corner of his mouth.

It wasn't a surprise that they'd picked up on the shift in the relationship between him and Rebecca. They weren't trying to hide things. Or at least Roman wasn't. He hadn't really discussed it with Rebecca. But he assumed that if she wanted to keep it from their siblings, she would have said something.

The movie on the television didn't hold Roman's attention, especially since his thoughts were fractured between worry for Jocelyn and the baby and what was happening between him and Rebecca.

Instead of watching the movie, he glanced around the space. It was the first time he'd been down there since the place had been renovated. The area they were sitting in didn't look too different from the previous year.

But now there was a small kitchen tucked into one corner and a couple of doors on the other side of the room likely led to bedrooms. It was a cozy apartment that seemed perfect for Rebecca and Aaron, and Roman was glad that Jocelyn and Darius had set it up for them.

The movie was just ending when suddenly, all their phones went off. Everyone scrambled to check them, and Roman felt a rush of relief when he spotted a message from Darius.

Darius: *Christina Noelle Clarke arrived at 1:30 pm weighing six pounds, seven ounces. She and Jocelyn are both doing well.*

Another message arrived with several pictures attached. The first was a closeup of a tired Jocelyn, smiling as she

cradled the baby close to her.

Emotion choked Roman as he stared at the baby, who now bore his mom's name. She would have been so pleased to have a granddaughter. Roman couldn't wait to hold the baby and to spoil her the way he enjoyed spoiling Colby and Aaron.

It was wonderful to see beautiful things happening in their family, especially after all the ugliness that had marred it.

"Colby, come here," Rebecca said. "Your mom had the baby."

"What?" Colby jumped to his feet and came running to where Roman and Rebecca sat.

Aaron followed behind him, and while Colby went to look at Rebecca's phone, Aaron came to Roman.

"It's a baby girl," Rebecca told Colby. "You have a little sister."

"She's all red and wrinkly," Colby said. "Why's she look like that?"

"All babies look like that when they're first born," Rebecca replied with a laugh. "She'll look a little different in a day or two."

"What's her name?"

As Rebecca gave Colby the details, Roman scrolled through the pictures for Aaron.

"Can we go see her?" Colby asked.

"I'm not sure. We'll have to wait and see what your mom and dad say. We can't go anywhere today because you need to go to your program tonight, remember?"

"Oh, right. Will Mom be there?"

"No," Zoe answered. "But we'll video it, so she can watch."

Apparently, that was good enough for Colby because the boy slid off the couch and returned to his beanbag on the floor. Aaron joined him, their attention once again on the movie.

Rebecca turned to smile at Roman. “Feel better now?”

“I do,” he replied, reaching out to squeeze her hand gently. “Thanks for keeping me sane.”

“You’re very welcome. Though, for the record, I was a bit worried too. I’m just glad that everything has worked out so beautifully.”

Roman appreciated Rebecca’s ability to keep calm, which in turn kept him calm. It wasn’t that he was an easily agitated person. However, when it came to his family or things he didn’t understand, he worried. That had definitely been the case with Jocelyn’s situation.

That was why, whenever Rebecca said she had nothing to offer him, Roman disagreed.

They spent the rest of the afternoon watching movies and just chilling with the boys. After a few messages from Darius, Jocelyn finally called.

“How are you feeling?” Zoe raised her voice as she directed her question to Rebecca’s phone.

“I’m exhausted, but very happy. She’s here, and she’s healthy. And she’s absolutely beautiful.”

“But she’s red and wrinkly, Mom,” Colby said as he got up and went to where Rebecca sat. “How’s that beautiful?”

“You were just like her when you were born, and I thought you were beautiful, too.”

“I’m not beautiful,” Colby protested. “I’m a boy.”

“All babies are beautiful. I can’t wait for you to meet her.”

“When can I see her?”

“If everything goes well tonight, we’ll probably be home around supper time tomorrow.”

“Yay!”

All of them laughed when Darius said, “My sentiments exactly.”

“I need to get some sleep,” Jocelyn said. “But I just wanted to thank you for all you’ve done for us and for praying for us. I’m so thankful for each of you.”

“We both are,” Darius added.

“We’ll be so happy to have you back home again,” Rebecca said. “We want to meet the newest member of the family.”

After promising to keep them up to date on their plans the next day, Jocelyn said goodnight, taking a minute to talk to Colby before ending the call.

With the time to leave for the church drawing closer, they went back upstairs. They all pitched in to make a quick supper of sandwiches and potato chips, then they headed to the church.

The sanctuary filled quickly as people arrived for the program. Thankfully, they’d gotten there early enough to get good seats. Roman needed to video the program, so he was glad he had a seat near the front.

He’d taken the seat along the center aisle with Rebecca seated beside him. Knowing it would be difficult to hold his phone steady for the entire program, he’d found a tripod to use.

Not knowing the exact format for the program, Roman decided to just record everything. Jocelyn and Darius could fast forward through any parts that they didn’t want to watch.

Since he didn’t need to hold the phone, once he got it all set up, he sat back to enjoy the program. He glanced at Rebecca, and even though the main lights of the sanctuary had been dimmed slightly, he could see the beaming smile that lit up her face.

As if sensing his attention, Rebecca turned her head toward him. Her smile softened, though it didn’t lose any of its glow. When he held out his hand, she didn’t hesitate to take it, threading her fingers through his.

The enthusiastic singing of the kids brought back memories, and Roman couldn't help but smile at them. For once, the memories didn't weigh him down.

As he sat there, hope filled Roman. A year ago, he never would have imagined getting to that point again. He'd lost all hope following his mom's death, but the past few weeks had helped him find it again. Hope in God. Hope in life. Hope in love.

At one point in the program, Colby, Aaron, and another boy stepped up to a microphone and began to sing together.

*We three kings of orient are,
Bearing gifts, we traverse afar.
Field and fountain,
Moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.*

The rest of the children joined them as they moved on to the chorus, singing boisterously.

*O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

The way the kids drew out the O at the start of the chorus had Roman chuckling. And when Colby lifted his arms, mimicking the way the woman was directing them, laughter swept through the congregation. Rebecca leaned against his arm, and Roman heard her laughing too.

Roman could already picture the exasperated look on his sister's face, even as she tried not to laugh. Being able to make people laugh was a good quality to have. At least as far as Roman was concerned. Jocelyn might have a different opinion, since it was her son providing the levity in the program.

The three boys then said, "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

Roman was reminded of Rebecca's comments the night they'd gone to see the light display. Over the years, he hadn't felt much like looking for a star that would lead him back to God. But whether he'd been looking or not, God had provided situations that had drawn Roman back.

It was hard to imagine returning to how his life had once been, and even if he could, he had no desire to go there. He wanted the people who were important to him to be in his life, though not in the way they'd been over the past year. He wanted to be with them on a daily basis.

Once their part was over, Colby, Aaron, and the other boy went back to where the rest of the kids stood. They had done well, and Roman knew that Jocelyn would be proud of Colby.

When the program finished, the people followed the kids out of the sanctuary down to the basement, where a large assortment of Christmas goodies had been set out on long tables. They quickly found Colby and Aaron, then supervised them getting their treats.

Roman stuck close to Rebecca and the boys, while Zoe and Ben and Carla and Devon wandered off to talk to others. Gareth Halverson came by and talked to him for a bit with a couple of his friends.

Now that he was going to be making his home in Serenity Point once again, it would be good to have friendships there. Not everyone he'd been friends with in high school was still in the area, but some, like Gareth, were.

As the basement emptied, Roman pitched in to help clean up the basement. Several people were helping, so it didn't take very long, and soon they were headed home.

"I can't wait for this next week," Roman said as they drove to the house. "Jocelyn and Darius coming home, meeting a new baby, and Christmas. It's going to be great."

Rebecca's hand settled on his where it rested on the console. "It is going to be amazing."

When he came to a stop at a red light, Roman lifted their hands and pressed a kiss to the back of hers. "Best Christmas

ever, I think.”

He hadn't thought he'd ever say that about a Christmas that didn't include his mom. However, he'd also never truly appreciated all that Christmas meant in his younger years. Now that he was older, being with family and having a true understanding of why they celebrated the holiday made it that much more special.

Roman was up before anyone else on Christmas morning. The previous night, they'd gone to church and then come back to the house for food. Carla and Devon had spent the night at the house, but Zoe and Ben had gone to sleep at Adela's. They planned to be back at the house later that day for Christmas dinner.

As he waited for the rest of the house to wake up, Roman made himself a large cup of coffee using the fancy machine. Knowing that others would want coffee as well, he decided to also make a pot using the smaller, less complicated, coffee maker.

Watching as coffee streamed into the glass carafe, Roman took small sips from his mug. Wanting to help set the mood for the day, he used his phone to connect to the Bluetooth speakers that were spread around the main floor, then started the playlist that Jocelyn and Rebecca favored.

He'd just finished his coffee when he heard movement and noticed Darius walking into the room.

“Want coffee from the pot?” Roman asked. “Or I could make you a cup if you'd prefer that?”

Darius gave him a tired smile as he slumped down on a stool at the counter. “If you don't mind making me one, I'd really appreciate that.”

“Strong enough to stand a spoon up in it?”

Darius gave a huff of laughter. “Yes. The stronger, the better.”

Over the next half hour, the others showed up. First Carla and Devon, then Rebecca and the boys. Jocelyn was the last to

make an appearance, baby Chrissy propped on her shoulder.

“I forgot that sleeping with a baby is really no fun,” she said as she handed the baby to Darius. “I’m going to take a shower and see if that will wake me up.”

“Breakfast will be ready when you’re done,” Carla said.

Darius seemed much more at ease with the tiny baby than Roman had thought he’d be. Even though Darius and Jocelyn appeared to be exhausted most days, they were also clearly very happy.

“Can we open our presents soon?” Colby asked.

“Not yet,” Darius replied. “But you can go get your stockings and bring them here to open.”

The boys didn’t need to be told twice. They darted from the kitchen and returned in short order with their stockings clutched in their hands.

And that was the start of a busy day.

After a ton of presents had been opened, they gathered to eat a big dinner together. Roman enjoyed it, and knowing he had a lifetime of family dinners to come made him very happy.

Once the dinner was finished and cleaned up, they all vegged out in the living room. Soon, the day wound down. Ben and Zoe left first, followed a short time later by Carla and Devon.

“Colby can stay with Aaron again tonight, Jocelyn,” Rebecca said. “I’ll put them both to bed in a bit.”

“Thank you.” Jocelyn gave Rebecca a weary smile. “I’m not sure we would have been able to do this without your help.”

“You would have been just fine,” Rebecca assured her. “But I’m glad I can be here for you both.”

Jocelyn glanced between Rebecca and Roman. “And I can’t tell you how happy it makes me that you two are together. I never would have imagined it happening when you first came home last year, Roman, but now it feels perfect.”

Roman happened to think it felt perfect, too. They'd gone on a few dates over the past week, with Jocelyn and Darius stepping up to babysit Aaron.

Though they'd spent plenty of time together prior to that past week, the dates had been different. It had just been the two of them, and they'd had the chance to focus on each other, which Roman had really enjoyed.

Where previous dates he'd been on had been more focused on entertainment, his time with Rebecca hadn't been that way. They'd been content to go for dinner and just talk. They hadn't wanted to go to a movie or anything else that would take their attention off of each other.

Roman knew, even after such a short time, that he wanted a future with Rebecca. And he felt fairly confident that she felt the same way.

"I'll be back up once I settle the boys," Rebecca said after Jocelyn and Darius had gone to their room with the baby.

The boys weren't happy to have to go to bed, even though it was already past their normal bedtime. As ever, Rebecca calmly took the boys' protests in stride, gently urging them to say goodnight to Roman and head downstairs.

While Rebecca was in the basement, Roman added another log to the fire. He turned off two of the lamps, leaving only one lamp plus the fire and the Christmas tree lights to illuminate the room.

He'd come to learn that Rebecca loved a cozy atmosphere, so he would create that whenever he could for her. She was already bemoaning the end of Christmas, since they were planning to take the tree down the next day.

Though the armchairs were closer to the fire, Roman had chosen to sit on the couch, hoping Rebecca would sit beside him. When she reappeared a short time later, Rebecca didn't hesitate to join him on the couch.

"Are the boys settled?"

When Roman slipped his arm around her, Rebecca leaned into his side. "Yes, though they're still awake. They'll fall

asleep soon, I think.”

“Did you enjoy the day?”

Rebecca looked up at him with a smile. “Yes. It’s the best Christmas I’ve ever had, and Aaron feels the same way.”

“I have another present for you,” Roman said.

“You gave me something already.” Rebecca frowned at him. “Something far too expensive.”

“It was a practical gift,” Roman told her. “Aaron told me that your cell phone battery wasn’t any good. That your phone was always dying.”

Rebecca sighed. “I should have known better than to complain about that around Aaron. Little traitor.”

That made Roman chuckle. “He loves you and wanted you to have something that you needed. So technically, you could say the phone is from him.”

“Nice try.”

“You got me a couple of gifts, so it’s only fair I get you a couple as well.”

“They weren’t that expensive,” Rebecca said, referring to the leather wallet engraved with his initials and the soft knit sweater she and Aaron had given him.

“That doesn’t mean I won’t value them. Just because they didn’t cost a lot of money doesn’t mean they aren’t valuable.”

“I am thankful for the phone,” she said. “I just feel like it’s too much.”

“Nothing will ever be too much for you and Aaron.”

“Don’t start buying us expensive stuff,” Rebecca warned.

Roman didn’t want to agree to that because his instinct was to buy them anything they could possibly want. But he also wanted her to be comfortable, and if him showering her with gifts would interfere with that, he’d restrain himself.

“Well, I do have one more gift for you,” Roman said. “So you’ll just have to accept it.”

Rebecca laughed. “Okay. Fine.”

Roman picked up the flat square box he’d set on the end table earlier. Holding it out to her, he said, “Merry Christmas.”

After a moment of hesitation, Rebecca took the box from him. “Thank you.”

This was definitely a more personal gift, and he hoped she liked it. He’d picked it out himself, having to pay a small fortune to have it rushed to him in Serenity Point.

Rebecca carefully removed the wrapping paper, glancing up at him when the velvet box appeared. She rested her hand on the box for a moment before lifting the lid.

“Oh, Roman,” Rebecca said as she ran her fingertips over the necklace. “This is beautiful.”

“That’s Aaron’s birthstone,” Roman told her as he pointed to the stone that was in the center of the heart pendant. He didn’t tell her that it was a genuine ruby in the twenty-four-carat gold necklace, though he was sure she’d assume it was.

“It really is lovely.” She looked up at him and smiled. “Thank you so much.”

Roman knew that Aaron was Rebecca’s world, so he’d wanted to give her a gift that acknowledged the boy’s importance to the woman he loved. And honestly, the boy was important to him, too.

“Can you put it on me?”

With a nod, he took the box and freed the necklace from it. Rebecca shifted so her back was to him and lifted her hair out of the way. Roman carefully looped the necklace around her neck, fumbling a bit with the clasp.

“There you go,” he told her when the necklace was secure.

She turned back around, her fingers gently holding the heart pendant. “I can’t believe you got this for me. I love it.”

“Maybe someday you’ll want to add to it,” Roman said.

Her expression softened as she smiled at him. “I think that’s very likely.”

Roman took her hand in his. “When I first met you a year ago, I never would have imagined how things would unfold. But over the past year, your texts and the pictures you sent were like bright stars in the night sky.”

“I wanted you to know how much we appreciated what you sent Aaron. I couldn’t believe how generous you were with him when he was nothing to you.”

“But he was someone to Colby, and in time, he became something to me, too. Just like you did. One thing I was looking forward to when I made the decision to come back was seeing the two of you again.”

“Really?”

Roman nodded. “You’d seemed like a kind and caring woman when I first met you, and you’ve proven that over and over in the time since. But it’s more than that. You make me laugh, and when you smile, it makes me smile too.”

And just like that, a smile appeared on Rebecca’s face.

“You have helped me believe that I can have a good relationship in my life with a wonderful man. I wasn’t actually looking for a relationship, but you won me over.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Roman lifted his hand to cup Rebecca’s cheek. “I know some might think it’s too soon to say it, but I love you, Becca.” When her eyes widened, Roman said, “I need you to know that I’m taking this seriously. I need you to understand how important you are to me. This isn’t just some passing fancy. I want to build something with you.”

Tears cast a sheen over Rebecca’s eyes. “I love you, Roman, and I want to build something with you, too. You’ve shown me how willing you are to step up and help me. I’ve never had that in a relationship before. Someone who would be at my side through life’s ups and downs.”

“I will always be there for you.”

“And I’ll be there for you, too.”

“Us against whatever the world throws at us?” Roman asked.

“Absolutely.”

Roman leaned closer and brushed his lips across hers, then wrapped his arms around her. Rebecca returned the hug, holding him close.

“I already thought this was the best Christmas ever,” she said as she sat back enough so that Roman could see her eyes. “But now, it’s even better. I’ll never forget this day.”

Roman wouldn’t either.

EPILOGUE

“Oh, Becca,” Jocelyn said, her voice thick with emotion. “You look so beautiful.”

Rebecca smiled at her friend’s reflection in the large mirror they both stood in front of. “So do you.”

“Well, as the bride, you’re definitely outshining us all today.”

The satin dress she wore fit her perfectly, thanks to several fitting appointments to get it exactly right. It was covered in a delicate floral lace and featured long sleeves of chiffon with floral motifs that matched the lace of the dress. The fitted bodice gave way to a full skirt with layers of lace, organza, and tulle.

Framed in the sweetheart neckline was the necklace with the heart pendant that Roman had given her the previous Christmas. It now included one more stone. A diamond to represent Roman’s birth month of April. She also wore a pair of dangling diamond earrings that Roman had given her. They’d probably cost a fortune, but she hadn’t protested when he’d presented them to her the night before.

Over the past year, they’d reached an agreement with regards to money and gifts. Roman had wanted to give her and Aaron everything. A new car. A new house. Every gaming console available and all the games to go with them.

Rebecca appreciated the generosity of the man, but it overwhelmed her at times, and it had only gotten worse after he’d proposed in April. Roman had said that her yes to his proposal was the best birthday gift she could have ever given him.

Finally, she’d extracted a promise from him that for anything that cost over a hundred dollars, he’d talk to her before he bought it for her or Aaron. He’d agreed with the caveat that that didn’t include birthday and Christmas gifts. He’d made good use of that loophole and had gone all out on

her and Aaron's birthdays—which was when she'd received her new car.

That was why it had been important to her to pay for her own dress and other wedding costs. The dress wasn't a super expensive gown, but she loved it.

Roman had essentially given her a blank check to pay for the wedding, but she'd still done her best to keep costs down and to contribute her own money to help with the expenses. It had frustrated Roman, but he hadn't forced her to do things differently.

In the end, he'd said that all he wanted was for her to have the wedding of her dreams. If she could achieve that on the budget she'd set, then he was fine with that.

As far as Rebecca was concerned, she was getting the wedding of her dreams because she was marrying the man she loved. All the other details of the wedding were nice, but they were unimportant compared to the ceremony where they'd pledge themselves to each other.

As Rebecca took in her reflection in the mirror, she knew that the Rebecca of three years ago would have never imagined she'd one day marry a man who loved and treasured her the way Roman did. After what had happened with Craig, she'd had no desire to get married, and honestly, she hadn't been sure that any man would ever want to marry her.

In a way, she was glad she'd had that mindset at first. After Craig had left, she'd just focused on Aaron and their life together. She hadn't tried to date anyone else. That meant that when Roman appeared in her life, she was available, and she'd healed enough to be able to consider a relationship with him.

"This dress is so perfect," Zoe said as she joined Rebecca and Jocelyn at the mirror.

Both of them, along with Carla, were standing up with Rebecca that day. All of them wore floor-length satin dresses with long sleeves, courtesy of Carla. As matron of honor, Jocelyn's dress was a deep burgundy. Carla's was navy blue, and Zoe's was green.

The men would all be wearing dark gray suits with ties that matched the women's gowns. Marsh was Roman's best man, while Ben, Darius, and Devon were his other groomsmen. It meant they had an uneven number of attendants, but they hadn't cared because it had been imperative that the people who were important in their lives stood up with them.

"Is it time yet?" Rebecca asked, eager to get the ceremony underway.

"Just waiting for Darius," Jocelyn told her. She turned away from the mirror to scoop up the little girl, who wore a white dress of lace and tulle.

Chrissy had learned to walk at ten months, so she was a pro now, and would walk down the aisle with Colby and Aaron, who would be dressed similarly to the men in the wedding party.

"Why don't we wait outside?" Carla suggested when Darius arrived.

When it was just the two of them in the room, Darius approached her, a rare show of emotion on his face. "You look so beautiful, Becca."

The emotion that choked those words brought tears to her eyes. "Thank you for walking me down the aisle."

"It is my absolute privilege." He smiled at her. "I love you so much, and I'm so grateful that God has blessed you with a good man. I have no hesitation in giving you away today because I know that Roman will care for you and Aaron the way you deserve. It's been a journey, but I'm glad we're here, together, with an amazing family."

Darius had never been one for sappy displays of emotion growing up. However, in the same way that Jocelyn had softened him, being a dad to Colby and Chrissy had softened him further. He was freer with his words of love and encouragement than he'd ever been before.

It was a change that thrilled Rebecca because she knew that he was truly happy, and it was what she'd wanted for him.

It was what she'd wanted for them both, and now here they were, preparing to add even more happiness to her life.

"Let's go get you married," Darius said, some of the emotion easing as he smiled. "Roman is extremely eager to get this show on the road."

Several minutes later, Rebecca stepped into the wide doorway leading into the sanctuary. She held tightly to Darius's arm, clutching her bouquet of red roses and greenery in her other hand. Since it was just two weeks until Christmas, the sanctuary was already decorated for the holiday, though they'd added to the decor for the wedding.

But she saw none of it, her gaze focused solely on the man who waited at the end of the aisle for her. The smile on his face when their gazes met made her heart ache in the very best way with the love she had for him. And as *Ode to Joy* played, Rebecca forced herself to take slow, measured steps to where Roman waited.

"I love you," he murmured as he took her hand and led her up the stairs to where the pastor stood. "And you're so beautiful."

Handing off her bouquet to Jocelyn, Rebecca grasped Roman's hands in hers and smiled up at him. "I love you too."

The service seemed to pass in a blur, with only the moments where they spoke their vows coming into sharp focus for Rebecca. They'd decided to each share something personal before reciting their vows. However, with emotions so high, it was hard to get the words out.

Because of that, she cut short what she had planned to say, but she wasn't too worried because she knew that Roman understood what was in her heart. Plus, he'd struggled to get through his own brief speech.

After exchanging rings, the pastor pronounced them husband and wife, to the cheers of all the people who'd come to the ceremony. Rebecca wrapped her arms around Roman's neck as he took her in his arms. They shared a lingering kiss as

people clapped and whistled, making Rebecca smile against Roman's lips.

The joy she felt when they turned to face the congregation filled her heart right to the brim. From the smile on Roman's face, she knew he felt the same way.

And it wasn't just her and Roman who were happy about what had just transpired. The beaming smiles of their friends and family—especially Aaron—warmed her heart. Among the people gathered to celebrate with them were Mila and Davis, along with Nancy, the nurse who had cared for Roman during his time at the cancer center.

They were definitely blessed, and she was so excited to begin the next chapter of her life with Roman.

~*~

Roman stared out at the stormy late afternoon sky, hoping the snow would hold off until everyone had arrived. They already had plenty of snow. They didn't need anymore.

“No sign of them yet?” Rebecca asked as she joined him in front of the window.

He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her in close. She hugged him around the waist, and when she tilted her head back, he bent to kiss her.

The past week and a half had been wonderful. After the wedding, they'd left Serenity Point for his place in Wyoming. They'd enjoyed their time together as a newly married couple, but they'd also missed Aaron, especially Rebecca.

Every day, they'd called Aaron to talk to him, and he had been fine with them being away while he'd stayed with Jocelyn, Darius, and, of course, most importantly, Colby. But they were ready to have him back with them, along with the others.

The past year had seen Craig relinquish his parental rights, and Roman had already talked to Rebecca about formally adopting Aaron once they were married. He and the boy had formed a tight bond, and Aaron had been so excited when he'd learned that Rebecca and Roman were going to be married.

Having Aaron as his legally-adopted son would truly complete their little family.

“They should be here any minute.”

“I can’t wait to see them all,” Rebecca said, squeezing Roman in her excitement.

“Mila is so excited to have even more people to feed,” Roman told her with a laugh.

“She told me that she made a bunch of cookies and some gingerbread houses for the boys and whoever else wants to decorate.”

“Are you upset that you missed the Christmas program?” Roman asked.

“Not really. Since Aaron asked not to have a special role in the program this year, I don’t think it really mattered to him that we weren’t there. Plus, we’ll watch the video together when they come.”

The only people not coming that day were Ben and Zoe. The couple planned to arrive the day after Christmas, since they hadn’t wanted Adela to be alone on the holiday. The house was going to be filled to the brim with family, and Roman couldn’t wait.

Roman still had moments where he couldn’t believe how things had turned out. Almost immediately after Christmas the previous year, he’d begun to prepare for his move to Serenity. That had included finding a piece of land to buy and meeting with an architect to design the home he needed.

Rebecca hadn’t been sure about giving input on the home design. But even though they hadn’t been engaged yet, he’d convinced her that someday she and Aaron would live in it with him.

He’d been thinking of building something similar to the size of his Wyoming home, but Rebecca had told him it was unnecessary. She’d manage to talk him down... literally. In the end, they’d decided on a four-bedroom house, and after the plans were made, the building had begun.

Once the house was done, leaving only the basement unfinished, he'd brought in different people—ones who did stuff under an NDA—to finish it up. He'd ended up with a secure room for his work, just like he had in the Wyoming house, which he was happy about.

They'd be moving into the new home once they returned to Serenity Point in January. Though it was fully furnished, Roman had chosen to continue to live with Jocelyn and Darius, so the three of them could move in together. The only people not super excited about the move were Aaron and Colby, who would be living apart for the first time in over a year.

“Oh, look!” Rebecca said, lifting her hand to point out the window at the large SUV that pulled up to the house. “They're here!”

She grinned up at Roman as she let go of him, then grabbed his hand. Roman followed her, just as eager to greet the family.

Soon, the family was all gathered in the foyer, exchanging hugs. As they peeled out of their coats, Rebecca hung them up in the front closet.

Once she was free of her winter wear, Roman scooped Chrissy up and nuzzled her neck, which sent the toddler into gales of laughter. Chrissy had proven to be a handful for her parents. She was a daredevil who had mastered climbing on most of the low-level furniture, like the couches and coffee tables. She'd given them all heart attacks at one time or another with her antics.

Roman took the kids to the living room while Rebecca took the adults upstairs to show them the rooms where they'd be staying.

“This is an amazing house,” Jocelyn said when they returned to the living room. “I can see why you bought it.”

The house itself was less of the reason than its remote location. “Thankfully, it's got more than enough rooms for all of you.”

“We’ve missed you two,” she said as she flopped down on the couch. “It was a taste of what it will be like when you move out, and I’m not sure I like it.”

“Sorry about that,” Roman replied. “But I’ve dumped a lot of money into that house, so we’re absolutely going to live in it.”

“Plus, we spent tons of time designing it to suit our needs,” Rebecca added. “I can’t live in your basement forever. No matter how much I’ve appreciated being able to.”

“I know you need to move on with your lives, but we really will miss you.”

“It’s not like we’ll never see each other,” Rebecca said. “I have a feeling we’ll be together frequently. Colby and Aaron will make sure of that.”

“Are you going to come work with me at the center?”

Roman and Rebecca had spent some time over the past week discussing what she wanted to do work wise once they were married. He’d offered to pay for her to go back to school if she’d wanted to, but she’d decided against that. Jocelyn had been after her to come work at the center she’d set up for moms and their children.

Though Jocelyn hadn’t wanted to go back to teaching full time after Chrissy was born, she’d still wanted to help kids. With Roman’s financial help, she’d opened up a center that would focus on moms and kids. It offered space for everything from mommy-and-me exercise sessions to crafting classes with babysitting available.

There had also been practical classes on budgeting and nutrition offered to young moms. Jocelyn usually spent her hours at the center tutoring kids and just being available to chat with other moms. It also gave her the flexibility to bring Chrissy and the boys with her. The center satisfied both her need to help others and to still be able to take care of her kids.

She wanted Rebecca to work at the center too, mainly to be there for drop-in hours to talk with the moms or help with the

children, giving the moms a bit of a break while they socialized with other moms.

Roman would support whatever Rebecca wanted to do, as long as it made her happy. For too much of her life, she'd done stuff because she *had* to. Now, Roman wanted her to do something because she *wanted* to.

If she said she wanted to continue to work as a receptionist at the dental office, he'd support her in that. But if she wanted to do something else, he'd support her in that too.

He enjoyed the work he did, so he wanted the same for Rebecca.

"I haven't decided yet," Rebecca said.

Jocelyn nodded. "Just remember that you're welcome at the center. I'd love to work with you."

Mila appeared a short time later, letting them know that dinner was ready. Rebecca had tried to help Mila earlier but had been shooed out of the kitchen.

"It smells delicious," Carla said as they followed Mila into the dining room.

The roast beef dinner was all set out on the table, and they didn't waste any time finding seats. Roman had told Mila that she and Davis were welcome to join them, but she'd refused, saying Roman and Rebecca needed time with their family. The compromise that Roman was willing to make was that she and Davis go ahead and leave for the day so they could enjoy their own dinner at a decent hour.

After dinner, they'd cleaned everything up—which Roman knew was going to make Mila mad—then ended up back in the living room. The boys sat on one of the love seats, each of them on their Nintendo Switches, while the adults filled the rest of the seats. Chrissy didn't need a seat, because she went from one person to the next over and over again, demanding hugs and kisses.

Rebecca was curled up against him, and even though the snow had begun to fall outside, they were cozy inside with a blazing fire and the Christmas tree glowing brightly.

It had been nice to have time alone with Rebecca, but having family there was nice as well. They were missing Zoe and Ben, but Roman understood why they couldn't be there. Ben's mom was as important to them as Zoe's family was. Though Adela had been invited to join them in Wyoming, she hadn't wanted to leave her responsibilities in Serenity, which included volunteering at the local shelter.

The couple had been married in September after getting engaged the previous Christmas, so they were spending their first Christmas as a married couple as well. The holiday had come to hold a lot of significance for their family, and Roman didn't think that would ever change.

Contentment was a relatively new feeling for Roman, but he embraced it wholeheartedly. He knew that the contentment was thanks to the changes he'd made in life, most notably, reconnecting with God and his family, which had also led him to Rebecca and a future that filled him with hope.

As Chrissy started to get cranky, Jocelyn and Darius left the room. Soon, the rest of them headed upstairs as well, ready to call it a day. Though their room was on the main floor, Rebecca and Roman went up with the others.

Though Aaron didn't need the help he once had to get ready for bed, Rebecca had missed her son, so she wanted to spend a little more time with him. After he and Colby crawled into their beds, Roman and Rebecca listened as the boys said their prayers.

After saying goodnight to the others, Roman and Rebecca returned to the main floor. While Rebecca went around turning off lights, Roman armed the security system for the house.

Once in their room, Rebecca went through her nighttime routine, then she curled up with Roman in the overstuffed armchair in front of the bay window that looked out over the trees behind the house. Roman tugged a quilt over both of them as they sat there.

There was only one lamp on, but Rebecca had set up a Christmas tree in their bedroom, and its lights cast a soft glow

in the space. They also had a fireplace there, but since they were later than usual coming to their room, he hadn't lit a fire.

"I'm so glad everyone is here," Rebecca said as she curled a strand of his hair around her finger. It had grown out over the past year, though it still wasn't as long as it had been prior to chemo. "We just need Ben and Zoe."

"They'll be here soon," Roman reminded her. "And we'll all be together to ring in the new year."

"Our first as a married couple." Rebecca smiled. "So much has happened this year that I'm excited to see what the new year holds."

"This past year was definitely better than the previous one," Roman said.

He'd been to the cancer clinic twice for follow-up testing, which, thankfully, had all been clear. His body had slowly regained its strength and the muscles he'd lost during treatment, and he felt like his normal self once again. Rebecca's health had also improved, and by February, she'd told him that she felt like she was back to how she'd been prior to her health troubles of the previous year.

Rebecca pressed her cheek to his as she looped her arm around his neck. "I'm so glad for that."

"Me too," he said. "I have so much to live for now."

"Yes, you do."

There were still moments when Roman feared the cancer returning, and Rebecca having to deal with that. She was always quick to assure him that whatever came, they were in it together.

She'd already proven her willingness to be at his side during the rough times, like when he'd revealed to his sisters and Carla the role he'd played in what had happened to their parents. Though they'd been shocked at the secrets he'd kept, and maybe a little angry, they managed to work through it together. Roman felt their relationships were stronger now for having done that.

“I wish it wasn’t snowing,” Roman said as he stared out the window. “I can’t see the sky.”

“But the stars are still there, even though we can’t see them,” Rebecca reminded him, well aware of why he liked to be able to see the sky.

It was one of the things he liked about the rural property. The lack of light pollution gave them a glorious view of the night sky and the stars that twinkled like diamonds spilled across black velvet.

“You’re my star in the sky,” Roman murmured, as he often did. “And I love you so very much.”

“I love you too.”

They shared a gentle kiss, then cuddled for a while longer as they talked. These quiet moments talking at the end of their day were among Roman’s favorite.

They’d started the habit while at Jocelyn and Darius’s—though not while dressed in their pajamas or sitting so intimately. They’d also taken the time to pray together. Those moments together had helped their relationship become everything Roman could have wanted, and more.

“I have a feeling that this is going to be the best Christmas ever,” Rebecca said.

Roman chuckled. “Do you plan to say that every year?”

“Probably. As long as we’re together, Christmas will always be amazing.”

“Together forever,” Roman said, then pressed a kiss to her lips. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

“I love you, Roman.” Rebecca hugged him tightly. “Merry Christmas.”

As long as he drew breath and there were stars in the sky, he would love the woman in his arms. And he looked forward to celebrating a lifetime of Christmases with her.

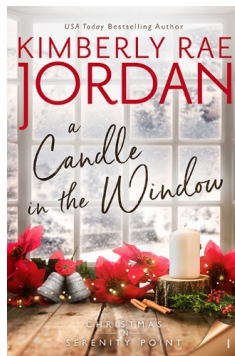
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The McKinleys

(3 books)

Home to Collingsworth

(7 books)

Those Karlsson Boys

(3 books)

Marrying Kate

(Single title)

Faith, Hope & Love
(*Single title*)

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