

JAYLEN

by

KIMBERLY RAE
JORDAN

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*I can do all things
through Christ
who strengthens me.*

Philippians 4:13

CHAPTER ONE

It was no surprise to see his adoptive brother's car in the parking lot already when Jaylen Halverson arrived at the family clinic where they both worked. Jay let himself into the building, then made his way to the breakroom where he hung up the light jacket he'd worn to protect against the chill of the early April morning.

Gareth had already made a pot of coffee, so Jay poured the one and only cup of coffee he allowed himself each day into his mug. Though he would have liked to doctor it with a bit of cream and sugar, he didn't, mindful of the wasted calories it would add to his day. Instead, he took a sip of the bitter brew and consoled himself with the shot of caffeine he got from it.

"Good morning," Jay said as he poked his head into Gareth's office on his way to his own.

The other man lifted his head and smiled at him. "Indeed, it is."

Ever since Gareth and his girlfriend, Aria, had gotten their issues sorted out, Gareth had been happier. Not that he'd ever been a glum person, but Aria's presence in his life seemed to make him even happier.

If only Jay's relationship had brought him that much happiness. So far, his one serious long-term relationship had started out great, but had ended up only bringing him stress as they'd tried to figure out how to make it work. In the end, it hadn't. At least for him. So, it was officially over, and it would stay that way.

"Has there been any news from your contacts about a possible doctor?" Jay asked as he leaned against the doorjamb.

“Mom isn’t complaining about working in the clinic again, but I’m sure she’d rather be in Haiti with Dad.”

“You’re right about that,” Gareth said. “But so far, nothing.”

Jay sighed. “I know Serenity isn’t a desirable destination for many people, but it’s not *that* bad.”

“It’s a great place, especially for someone who wants to raise a family.”

“Maybe we should get Janessa and Aria to make up a brochure boasting of all our lovely town has to offer, and we can send it out to entice people.”

Gareth chuckled. “I suppose I could send it off to my contacts, asking them to pass on to others who might be interested but need more information. It certainly couldn’t hurt.”

“If you’re serious, let me know, and I’ll talk to them about it.”

“Let’s give it another week, then consider a different approach.”

Jaylen lifted his mug in a cheers gesture, then straightened. “I will say it’s nice to not have to worry about Nora anymore.”

Gareth nodded. “I never realized the high level of tension she created for all of us. I’m glad she’s moved on without creating any waves. At least that we know of.”

“Don’t even say that,” Jay said as he stepped back into the hallway. “I’m going to work before you say anything else that might bring it all down on us again.”

Gareth’s laughter followed Jay as he walked down the hallway to his office. The room wasn’t spacious, but it was big enough for what he needed, which was a desk, his office chair, a couple of other comfortable chairs, and some filing cabinets. His office looked out over the buildings next door, but that was true for pretty much any window in the clinic. They were located in the middle of a commercial area, with other businesses occupying the surrounding buildings.

Settling into his chair, specially ordered to fit his six-foot-three frame, Jay set his mug down and leaned forward to turn on the computer monitor. After a weekend, he usually spent the first hour organizing his work for the week. There wasn't a lot of variation in what he did, but he still liked to have it all in order.

It had been something he'd had to start doing when he needed to spend a chunk of each afternoon at the high school coaching during the basketball season. His parents were supportive of his coaching, but he knew his first responsibility was to the clinic. If his work suffered because of his time at the high school, that support might disappear.

Even though he wasn't currently coaching, his organizational habits remained the same, though he came into work an hour later.

"Good morning, darling," his mom said as she came into his office and sat down in one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. How about you?" he asked. "Missing Dad?"

She smiled at that. "Yeah. I do miss him a lot, but we're spending lots of time video chatting, so that helps to shorten the distance. Plus he'll be home soon, then hopefully we can both go when it's time to go back."

They spent a few minutes chatting about his dad, and as they did, Jay couldn't help but be grateful that when his biological mom had realized she would not be in his and Janessa's lives for as long as she'd hoped, she'd made arrangements for the Halversons to take them in.

He had no idea if there had been any sort of struggle in their minds as they'd contemplated taking a couple of Black children into their very White family. Jay had never gotten any hint that they regretted their decision. From what he'd experienced over the years since they'd joined the Halverson family, he and Janessa, and the other children they'd later adopted, were treated just the same as their biological children.

He'd now had Cathy Halverson in his life longer than he'd had his biological mom, who had passed away when he'd been nine years old, and Janessa had been seven. It had taken a while for him to be able to call Cathy mom, but once he'd started, he hadn't stopped. She was his mom in every way that mattered, even if they shared no blood. And now he wanted to make her as proud as he'd wanted to make his birth mom.

"You sure everything is okay?" his mom asked, tilting her head to the side as she regarded him. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

All the children knew that, but that didn't mean that they wanted to. He was sure he wasn't the only one concerned about letting them down. Their parents had given them all tremendous benefits in life, and it seemed wrong to do anything that might disappoint them.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Really."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, and Jay had to wonder if moms were somehow imbued with the ability to read minds.

"Okay. But if that changes..."

Jay nodded. "I'll let you know."

"Perfect." She gave him another loving smile before getting to her feet. Coming around the desk, she bent and pressed a kiss to his head. She'd done that plenty of times over the years, but these days, the only way she could reach his head was if he bent down or if he was sitting. "Love you, darling. Have a good day."

"You, too."

Once she'd left, he sat staring at the empty doorway for a long moment. Unease swirled through him, as it often did when his mom told him she loved him. Would that love change if she knew about the bad choices he'd made? His logical side said it wouldn't, but he knew without a doubt that she and his dad would be disappointed in him.

And that would be horrible because he wouldn't just be letting them down, it would be him failing to keep the promises he'd made to his mom as she lay dying.

Jay took a breath and tried to push those thoughts down deep, where he needed them to stay. He could handle most things in his life, but those thoughts and feelings hit hard at the very heart of him.

It took concerted effort, but Jay managed to focus on the work he had on his schedule for the day. It was mainly paperwork, since anything that pertained to insurance, bills, or payroll was his responsibility. Though his childhood dreams might have been to play in the NBA, as an adult, he had chosen a different path, which thankfully worked well with his business degree.

Surprisingly, he had a mind for business, and he enjoyed the work he did at the clinic. It helped that he fed his need for sports by working alongside the coach at the high school. The basketball season had just ended, however, so he didn't have to balance that responsibility with his work at the clinic for a few months.

What he really wished was on his schedule for the day was the paperwork to process the hiring of a new female doctor. The day that showed up on his desk would be a good day indeed.



Michelle Barnes let herself in the back door of the mansion, then went through the mudroom to the kitchen. Even though the house wasn't her home, she was very familiar with it. She'd been wandering its halls for years.

"Misha." Her mom greeted her with a smile as she dried her hands on a towel, then met her halfway across the large kitchen to give her a kiss. "How was your day?"

"Long." Misha gave her a weary smile, then made her way to the stationary bouncer that held an enthusiastic baby girl. She waved her arms at Misha, giving her a gummy smile. Misha lifted her from the bouncer and balanced her on her hip, nuzzling into her neck and making the little girl giggle. "Hey, Ciara. How's Mama's favorite baby?"

Ciara regarded her with big gray eyes and smacked her lips in imitation of the kiss that Misha bussed on her cheek.

A baby hadn't been in Misha's plans, but when her late brother's pregnant girlfriend had told them of her intention to abort the baby after Raden died, Misha had stepped in to take responsibility for the child. The girlfriend had complained her way through the last few months of the pregnancy and had then happily signed all the paperwork necessary for Misha to adopt Ciara once she was born.

Raising a baby as a single mom was something Misha probably wouldn't have been able to do if her mom hadn't stepped in to help her. But her mom had wanted to keep her grandchild close as much as Misha had. Though Ciara's mixed heritage had lightened her skin and hair and her eyes were gray instead of brown, Misha and her mom could still see bits of Raden in her features. It was a nice reminder that a part of him still remained in their lives.

"Is Doc Martin here?"

"Yep. He's in his office."

"He asked me to come speak with him when I got off work."

Her mom nodded, then reached to take the baby. "I'll keep her until you're finished."

"Thanks." Misha gave them each another kiss before leaving the kitchen and traversing the house to where Doctor Martin's spacious home office was located.

Once there, she knocked on his door, even though it was open. He looked up, then smiled and gestured for her to come in. The man still had a full head of hair, but it had grayed, and there were deep lines in the dark skin of his face. He'd aged noticeably since the death of his wife.

Though he was supposedly retired, the man seemed to work more hours than ever. He wasn't in the operating room as much anymore, but he consulted with people around the world. Being a world-renowned neurosurgeon, known for his invention of a tool that was now widely used in surgery on the

brain, Doctor Evan Martin's knowledge and experience was vast.

His brilliance and the support of his parents had taken him far beyond the Chicago neighborhood where he'd grown up. In turn, his commitment to using the money he'd made to help others had benefited Misha.

"How was work?" he asked as she settled into the comfortable leather armchair opposite his desk.

Misha sighed as she rubbed her forehead. "There was a bunch of graffiti threatening me again, and several appointments had been cancelled. When Shona asked the patients why they were cancelling, they said they didn't feel safe coming to the clinic."

The concern on the doctor's face was nothing new. The situation at the inner city clinic she'd been working at had gotten progressively worse over the seventeen months since her brother's death. She still wasn't sure why they hadn't just killed her too. Maybe it was because she was a woman. Maybe because she was a doctor.

Regardless, she couldn't help but feel that eventually, her time would run out.

"I may have a solution for you," the man said. "A job opportunity that would take you and your mom far from what's happening here."

Misha wanted to jump at it, especially for her mom and Ciara's sake. But at the same time, she felt like she'd been called to work with the low-income people living in that area of Atlanta, especially the women, children, and elderly people. To help those who might otherwise not try to get medical care.

But that ability was being hampered by the local gangs who threatened people who came to the clinic, simply because one of their doctors was related to the leader of a rival gang.

For not the first time, she had to fight anger that, of her two brothers, it was the one who had tried to steer clear of the gangs who'd ended up being killed by one. Since then, her other brother, Davontae Junior, had been on a rampage to

avenge his younger brother's death, and now she'd been dragged into it.

"Tell me about it," she said, though it felt like admitting defeat to consider leaving the clinic where she poured her heart out to help people in need.

"It's a family run clinic. They're in need of a female doctor."

"Where is it?" Misha asked.

"Northern Idaho."

Misha frowned at him. "Do they even let Black people into Idaho?"

Doctor Martin chuckled, catching her humor like she'd known he would. "Pretty sure they do."

"It's cold there, isn't it?" she asked. At his nod, she said, "I'm not sure I'm built for cold weather."

"You should at least go for the interview. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you find. A friend of mine in Seattle worked with the man who is heading up the clinic now and said that he's a good doctor."

Misha wanted to tell him she wasn't interested, but instead, she just sat in silence.

"I know this isn't what you envisioned for your work," Doctor Martin said, his tone gentle. "But it's not safe for you here. Not safe for your mom or Ciara, either."

Though she wanted to deny it, Misha couldn't. She didn't feel safe at the clinic, and if she didn't, then there was no way the patients did either, especially when gang members lingered nearby. It seemed that violence was inevitable if she didn't leave.

"I know that your heart was to work in your community here in Atlanta, but you're no use to anyone if you're dead." He paused, then added, "Your mom has already lost two children. Don't let her lose a third."

Technically, Davontae wasn't dead, but he might as well be. In spite of her mom's best efforts to raise her three children away from the gang culture that had killed her husband, Davontae had followed in his footsteps.

Things hadn't been too bad until Raden had been shot. Angry and grieving, Davontae had then become the most feared gang leader in their area of Atlanta, so lesser gangs had switched their sights to her and the clinic where she spent most of her days.

"Okay. I'll go to the interview." It felt like admitting failure, even though it wasn't because of her own actions that she needed to leave the clinic. "What will happen to you if Mom's not here?"

Doctor Martin gave her a small smile. "If you three leave, I'll be going as well. I've talked with the boys, and we've decided that I should join Matthew and his family in Arizona. The dry climate will be better for these old bones, I think."

The man and his late wife had been so much more than her mom's employer. They'd become family, and he'd paid her way through medical school. He'd also planned to pay for Raden's education. Doctor Martin and his wife had supported them in ways that no one ever had.

It would be hard to leave that behind, but the man was right. Leaving Atlanta was the only way to ensure their safety. They'd already moved twice in the past year. This last time, they'd even gotten an apartment away from the community, only for gang members to still find them and spray paint graffiti on her car.

Doctor Martin had wanted them to move in with him, but her mom had balked at that, and Misha had felt the same. If anything happened to Doctor Martin, it would be devastating to them. So far, the gang members seemed focused on Misha, but if she moved into Doctor Martin's home, that focus might expand.

Idaho was probably the last place anyone from the Atlanta gangs would think to look for her. It just frustrated and angered her that she had to go somewhere so much less

diverse in order to find safety. And it was all because of Davontae. He'd put a target on her. If he hadn't, they would have been able to continue to live in that neighborhood.

"Don't tell Davontae where you're going," the doctor cautioned.

"He'll come to you," Misha replied.

"But I'll be gone. When you and your mom leave, I leave."

"Do I need to call someone to make arrangements?"

"I'll have Steph make all the arrangements for you," Doctor Martin said of his daughter-in-law, who worked as his assistant.

"Thank you."

As she left the office, Misha struggled not to feel totally defeated. Right then, she had to look at the bigger picture.

The most important things in her life were her mom and Ciara. She had to get them somewhere safe. Somewhere her mom could take Ciara for walks without fearing for their safety. Somewhere her mom wasn't worried about losing her daughter the way she'd lost her youngest son.

Her mom glanced up as Misha walked into the kitchen. Her face held a mixture of hope and sadness. "What do you think?"

"I've agreed to go for the interview," Misha said. "Steph is making the arrangements, so I don't know when yet."

When her mom wrapped her in a tight hug, Misha blinked back tears.

"I'm so sorry, my love." Then, pulling back, she kept her hands wrapped around Misha's arms as she said, "But I'm trusting that God will guide you... that He'll guide us both to where He wants us to be."

Though her faith had never been as strong as her mom's, Misha nodded. Maybe this was God's way of keeping them safe, even though it wasn't how she'd wanted to help people.

As her mom always said, God worked in mysterious ways, and Misha really hoped that was true in this situation.

CHAPTER TWO

As the door to the airplane opened to the jetway, the line of people in the aisle surged forward. Misha peered out the window next to her, dawdling when normally she would have popped right up out of her seat.

Eventually, she disembarked and made her way through Spokane International Airport to find the vehicle rental company where Steph had arranged a car for her. Though she didn't travel a lot, Misha managed to do what she needed to in order to get the vehicle that would take her almost two hours north to Serenity Point.

The name had a lovely ring to it, even if it was so far north, she wondered if she'd need her passport.

Thankfully, the GPS directed her flawlessly out of the city and onto the highway that would take her to Serenity, where Steph had made reservations for her at a small B&B.

It felt weird to be there without her mom and Ciara, but her mom had stressed that Misha needed to focus on getting this job. Once she'd done that, they would all make their way to the town. It didn't seem to matter to her mom where they were headed, just so long as it would provide safety for them.

The previous night, as she'd been packing her bag for the trip, Misha had asked her mom if she planned to look for a job herself when they got settled in Serenity. Her mom had shaken her head, explaining that Doctor Martin had arranged a generous pension for her that would make it unnecessary for her to work.

Misha hoped that would be enough for her mom.

The bright afternoon sun cast its light across a lovely landscape as she drove. There were trees on either side of the road and in the distance, mountains rose in shades of purple and black. It was truly beautiful, and it soothed something inside Misha.

When Serenity came into view, Misha glanced around curiously as she followed the GPS directions to the place where she'd be staying. The large white house had a wide veranda across the front of it, and lots of windows glistened on the top and bottom floors.

After she parked at the curb, Misha retrieved her bag from the back seat and approached the house. Her knock brought an immediate response, the door opening to reveal a middle-aged woman with a warm smile.

"You must be Michelle," the woman said. "I'm Bec Nelson. Please come in."

Misha shook her hand, then stepped through the door. The foyer was large and bright, with a wide staircase and a couple of openings that led into other parts of the house.

"How was your trip?" Bec asked. "Any trouble finding us?"

"None at all," Misha assured her. "Everything went smoothly."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that." She gestured to the staircase. "Let me show you the room where you'll be staying so you can get settled. Was it a long flight?"

"It was a bit. The layovers added to it."

Bec nodded as she led her up the staircase. "I find them the worst part of any trip we've taken. Especially when the airport is basically shut down for the night and you have thirteen hours to kill."

"Thankfully, I didn't have anything quite that bad."

"Didn't stop us from traveling, though," Bec said with a laugh. "Here we go."

Misha followed her through an open doorway into an airy room. It was larger than she'd been expecting, and whoever had chosen the decorating had done a fabulous job. The primary colors were burgundy and sage green, which just happened to be two of Misha's favorite colors.

"This is lovely."

Bec beamed at her comment. “I’m so glad you like it. My daughter and I just redid all the rooms over the winter. It was a task, I’ll tell you.”

“Your efforts definitely paid off.”

Bec took a minute to show her around the space, including the attached bathroom which had a nice-looking soaker tub. “If you need anything, just let us know, and if you need info about Serenity, feel free to ask. We love our town and will happily tell you anything you need to know.”

“I’m just here for a couple of days, but perhaps I’ll be back again in the future.”

“You’re here on business?” Bec asked. “Or vacation?”

“Business. I have an interview at the Halverson Clinic.”

Bec’s eyes widened. “Oh, really? That’s great! I know they’ve been down a doctor since Nora left. Cathy Halverson has been filling in, but I know they’d like someone permanent. I hope the interview goes well.”

“You know the family?”

“I do,” Bec said. “The Halverson family has been in Serenity for a couple of generations, at least. The clinic was started by the grandparents of the current doctor. They’re a lovely family. I think you’ll like them.”

That was great, but what mattered more was that they liked her. There was no denying that she was concerned that her being Black might play a role in whether or not she got the job. It wasn’t that she saw racism around every corner, but in a predominantly white area, she and the clinic and its patients might not be a good fit.

Misha wasn’t getting her hopes up, even though she was quite sure that her mom would love the town. From what she’d seen so far, Serenity had the look of the towns in the Christmas romance movies her mom loved to watch.

“We don’t serve dinner here, but if you’re hungry, I can give you a couple of recommendations for restaurants.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

“Just ring the bell down at the desk if I’m not around,” Bec said.

Left alone in the room, Misha dropped down on the bed, appreciating its semi-firm surface. She liked her bed a little on the firm side, so hopefully that would mean she’d get a good night’s sleep later. Though she’d developed the ability to fall asleep quickly during her residency, her worry over the interview might override that ability that night.

She pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to her mom. *Arrived safe and sound. I’ll call you soon. Need to call the clinic to confirm my appointment.*

Her mom’s reply came almost immediately.

Mom: *Wonderful! Looking forward to chatting. Xoxoxo*

Leaving that screen behind, Misha pulled up the email from Steph with the number for the clinic. Though she was nervous, she didn’t let it keep her from calling it right away. Nerves were something she rarely, if ever, let hold her back. They were her fuel. Her motivation.

“Halverson Clinic,” a woman said cheerfully. “How can I help you?”

“Hello. My name is Michelle Barnes,” Misha told her. “I’m calling to confirm my appointment tomorrow at eight o’clock for an interview.”

“Oh, yes!” The woman sounded excited by what she’d said. “They’re definitely looking forward to meeting with you.”

“Perfect. Is there anything I should know about where to park?”

“We have a lot attached to the building. You can park there. Come to the back door and knock. Someone will let you in.”

“Thank you for the information.”

“You’re very welcome,” the woman said. “We’re all looking forward to meeting you.”

Misha swore she could hear the smile in the woman's voice. "Who am I speaking with?"

"Oh, I'm Aria. I work as the receptionist and back-up nurse."

"Back-up nurse?" Misha couldn't keep from asking.

"Yep. My main role is receptionist. Janessa—she's a Halverson—is the primary nurse, but I'm also a nurse, so I fill in when needed."

"That's nice you're able to fill multiple roles." Misha wondered if the clinic was just short-staffed or if it was run with a tight fist, making people work a lot of extra hours.

"I do enjoy the variety at times, but it's rare they need me for anything but manning the front desk."

"Well, I won't keep you from your work," Misha said. "Thank you for the information. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yep. We're looking forward to it."

After Doctor Martin's assurances that the clinic was a good place, she hadn't done any further research on it. Some might say that was dumb, but she wanted to have gut reactions, not go in with preconceived notions about the people she was meeting with.

She had her list of questions memorized, and if they seemed favorable towards hiring her, she planned to do more research then, before giving them an answer. To some, that might seem backwards, but it was what she felt comfortable with.

The question was if they'd done research on her, or had they taken the word of Doctor Martin through his acquaintance that she was a good doctor? She was still uncertain about what she'd say if they asked her why she was leaving Atlanta and the clinic there. She didn't want them to think she was bringing danger with her.

But what if she did?

Misha had no guarantee that the gangs wouldn't find them somehow, however Doctor Martin had assured her that he was

prepared with everything they'd need to cut ties completely with Atlanta. She had no idea what that meant, but she was going to trust him.

He had never let them down before, and she doubted he would now, either. So maybe she just needed to be honest about the situation they were trying to escape and pray that God would honor that honesty.

~*~

Jay glanced in the mirror one last time to make sure he looked okay. He'd gone for a haircut the previous day, and his barber had done his usual excellent job on the cut and fade. Though he normally went with a more casual attire at work since he was always in his office, he'd put on a button-down shirt and tie with black slacks for the interview.

That was usually Gareth's look at the clinic, but Jay wanted to make sure that he came across as professional as well. This was the one and only interview they'd been able to line up, and he wasn't going to be the one to blow it.

Gareth had called Michelle's references, and everyone had spoken in glowing terms about her abilities and how she related to patients. When pressed on why she was leaving her current job, the man had simply said that she needed to leave for personal reasons, which was a bit worrisome. However, the man had seemed very sincere when he said that her leaving would be a huge loss for their clinic.

He had to be at the clinic an hour earlier than usual, but he hadn't forgone his workout, which meant he'd probably need two cups of coffee to make it through the day.

There were a handful of cars in the parking lot already when he got there, all of which he recognized. Inside, he found his mom in the breakroom, which was doubling as a boardroom that day. Gareth was also there, along with Aria and Janessa.

He hoped they didn't overwhelm the woman, but Jay knew it was important that they all weighed in on this person who

might join their workplace. Maybe one of them would pick up on something that the others missed.

“Good morning, darling,” his mom said as she approached him.

“Morning.” Jay leaned down so she could kiss his cheek. “Ready for this?”

She rubbed her hands together, excitement sparkling in her light blue eyes. “I am!”

“Me too.” He had a feeling they were all more than ready.

Jay went to get a cup of coffee, nodding a greeting to Gareth, who stood there filling his tall, insulated mug. Aria and Janessa were there too, each with a mug of coffee already.

“Should we have rehearsed this?” Jay asked as he poured coffee into his mug once Gareth was done. “And maybe we should make more coffee. This is almost empty.”

“Let me do that,” Janessa said. “We all know that you make horrible coffee.”

“It’s not my fault that I don’t drink coffee like the rest of you. I have no need to learn how to make it since I only drink one cup a day.”

“Are you going to hold it against this woman if she loves coffee as much as Gareth and me?” Janessa asked as she deftly went about making a fresh pot.

“I don’t hold it against Aria,” Jay pointed out.

“That’s probably because I drink as little of it as you do, even though I really do love it.”

“We’re not using her food and beverage preferences to determine whether she’ll be a good fit,” his mom said with a laugh. “As far as I know, Nora had perfectly normal tastes, and we all know how she turned out.”

A rap on the back door drew their attention, all of them turning to look in that direction.

“I’ll go let her in,” Aria said as she moved toward the doorway. “Since I spoke to her yesterday.”

“I was going to suggest we pray before this interview, but we’ve run out of time now,” his mom said. “I’m just going to trust that you’ve all been praying about it as much as I have leading up to today.”

Gareth nodded. “Aria and I certainly have.”

“I have too,” Janessa added.

“Me, too,” Jay said. And it was no word of a lie. It was the one thing he’d been praying about the most of late.

They all turned toward the door as Aria walked back into the room with a Black woman who looked to be about his and Gareth’s age. Her expression appeared wary as she glanced around at them.

“This is Cathy Halverson,” Aria said, gesturing to his mom. The two women shook hands before Aria motioned to Gareth. “This is Gareth Halverson. He’s a doctor here. And this is Jay, also Halverson. He’s the man who keeps us on budget and running smoothly.”

Jay offered Michelle his hand, appreciating her firm grip. “Nice to meet you.”

Janessa moved to his side and held out her hand. “I’m Janessa Halverson.”

Michelle’s gaze moved between the two of them as she shook Janessa’s hand. Once they’d all greeted her, they settled down at the table.

“Thank you so much for coming to meet with us,” Janessa’s mom said. “We really appreciate you making the effort.”

“I appreciate you considering me for the position.” Michelle held herself stiffly, her back straight and shoulders squared. Her hands were folded on the table in front of her.

His mom took the lead in the interview, sharing about the clinic and how they served the community. As she talked, Michelle appeared to relax a bit.

“So you had another woman doctor here recently?” Michelle asked.

Jay supposed that they shouldn't have all looked at each other the way they did, but it was like they couldn't help themselves.

Gareth sighed and said, "You want to take that one, Mom?"

She laughed. "Sure. Why not?"

Jay appreciated how she managed to present the details of what had happened without including much of the drama that had swirled around it at the time. Truthfully, it still might not be over. Nora seemed to have disappeared, but he didn't think she was going to go without protest.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that with me," Michelle said.

"I'm glad to hear that." Aria grinned at her. "I've already laid claim, so we'd have to fight. And I might not look it, but I'm scrappy."

Jay laughed, as did Michelle. He'd come to really appreciate Aria and what she brought to the clinic and to their family.

"No worries," Michelle said, holding up her hands. "I won't be making a move on your guy."

"Whew." Aria slumped back in her seat. "I would have hated to actually have to back up my words."

"So, two couples here at the clinic?" Michelle asked.

"Two?" Janessa asked, her brow furrowed.

Jay picked up on what Michelle was saying before Janessa did and shook his head. "Nope. She's my sister."

"Eewwww," Janessa said, wrinkling her nose as she held up her hands. "Well, I mean that only because we're related. Otherwise, he's a great guy."

Jay leaned back in his chair, watching as Michelle laughed with the others. He could see her relaxing even more as the interview went on, and it gave him hope that perhaps they'd finally found someone who could fill the hole in the clinic.

He didn't have much to say, and neither did Aria and Janessa. His mom and Gareth carried most of the conversation, asking questions of Michelle and answering the ones she had for them.

"Would you need much time to move to Serenity?" his mom asked. "If this works out?"

"Just the time it would take to pack up our stuff," she said. "I'd be moving with my mom and my daughter."

"Oh! You have a child?" his mom asked, her smile growing. "That's wonderful!"

Michelle seemed speechless for a moment, then said, "She is pretty special."

"How old is she?" Aria asked. "And what's her name?"

"Her name is Ciara, and she's ten months old," Michelle said.

"But it will just be you and your mom moving here with her?" his mom asked, though Jay wasn't sure it was exactly a good question for an interview.

A look of pain crossed Michelle's face as she nodded. "Her father is dead."

He felt a pang of sympathy for her at that revelation. Given how young the baby was, it had to have been a fairly recent loss. He and Janessa certainly understood what it was like to lose someone important, as did Aria.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," his mom said, reaching out to lay her hand briefly on Michelle's arm. "Loss is tremendously hard."

"It is part of the reason we'd like to get out of Atlanta," Michelle said. "Start somewhere new."

"That's what I did," Aria said. "My mom had passed away, and I was left on my own. Thankfully, Janessa offered me a job here, and the rest is history."

Gareth gave a huff of laughter. "If only it had been that easy."

Aria leaned against his shoulder. “But it’s been worth it.”

“It definitely has been.”

“How soon would you need an answer from me?” Michelle asked, turning her focus to his mom.

“Well, there’s not a huge rush.”

Jay stared at his mom with a frown. There might not be a *huge* rush, but they definitely needed someone sooner rather than later.

“But I know you’re eager to get back to Haiti and Dad,” Gareth said. “So it would be preferable to not have too long of a wait.”

“Haiti?” Michelle asked.

“Our folks help run a medical clinic in Haiti,” Gareth explained. “Mom is here now to fill in while we look for a new doctor, but her heart is in Haiti—in more ways than one.”

“I’m happy to stay as long as necessary,” his mom said. “You know that your dad understands. Plus, he’ll be home soon.”

“Do you have anymore questions for us?” Gareth asked. “About the clinic or the town?”

“I don’t think so,” Michelle replied.

“Well, you can always call or email us if something comes to mind,” Aria told her.

“I’ll be sure to do that.”

The meeting wound down at that point, though his mom invited Michelle to hang out at the clinic for the morning. He wasn’t surprised when she agreed to that suggestion. If she was looking at uprooting her whole life, it only made sense that she see all aspects of the clinic. There might be something about how they did things that didn’t appeal to her.

Aria and Janessa left the room with his mom and Michelle, while Gareth got up and went to the coffeepot.

“Thoughts?” Gareth prompted as he filled his mug.

“She seems like she could be a good fit,” Jay said as he stretched out his legs. “There don’t appear to be any red flags.”

Gareth turned and leaned back against the counter. “I agree. And I think it’s a good sign that her mom would be coming with her. As a single mom, I’m sure having that support in a new town would be good.”

Jay nodded. “At least she’ll have someone to trust with the baby until she’s able to line up childcare.”

“I don’t want to get my hopes up, especially since we haven’t gotten to this point with any candidate but Nora. But it really is hard not to be hopeful.”

Jay felt the same way. “I just hope she doesn’t take too long to decide.”

“It’s a big decision to make, particularly if she’s uprooting her mom and daughter, too.” Gareth took a sip of his coffee, then straightened. “Guess I’d better go before Janessa has to come hunt me down for my first patient.”

Alone in the breakroom, Jay dragged a hand down his face. He was still tired, but he had a full day of work to put in before he could go home and crash. At least the interview seemed to have gone really well. In fact, he couldn’t see how it could have gone better.

Michelle could be a good fit in the clinic. She’d come across as very composed and calm as she’d answered the questions about her education and experience put to her by Gareth and his mom. And her questions had also seemed to be well thought out.

The way she’d relaxed once they’d touched on personal stuff showed him that she wasn’t uptight, feeling like she had to maintain a distance with everyone around her.

Nora had been uptight, in a way, but somehow, she’d also been able to relate well to the patients. That would always be a conundrum to him. But not one he’d dwell on since she was finally gone.

And now they had a potential replacement for her. Things were definitely looking up.

CHAPTER THREE

Misha followed Dr. Halverson into one of the exam rooms. She hadn't thought she'd stay at the clinic beyond the interview, but when the woman had offered her the opportunity to shadow her, Misha couldn't say no.

“Good morning, Jane,” Dr. Halverson said to the older woman sitting beside the desk. “I have Dr. Barnes working with me today. Do you mind if she sits in on your appointment?”

The patient gave Misha a curious look before shaking her head. “That's fine.”

“Wonderful!”

Misha stood against the wall, watching as Dr. Halverson spoke with the woman. She had a professional manner that was also warm and caring. And from her conversation with the patient, Misha had to assume that they knew each other outside of the clinic.

“Are you going to be working here?” the woman asked as her appointment was drawing to a close.

“I'm considering it,” Misha told her with a smile. “Just had my interview this morning.”

“This is a great clinic,” she said. “My husband sees Gareth. The other Dr. Halverson.” The woman chuckled. “We got used to having just one Dr. Halverson around, then Cathy came back to confuse everyone.”

“Well, we're working to get back to just one,” the doctor said. “In Haiti, they call me Doc Cathy. We should have adopted that here.”

The patient got to her feet and smiled at Misha. “I hope you see the appeal of the clinic and our town. You couldn't ask to work with better people.”

Dr. Halverson slid an arm around the woman's shoulders and smiled. “You're too kind, Jane.”

“It’s only the truth. I’ve never had a moment of anxiety coming to see you the way I have with other doctors.”

“I’m glad.”

Dr. Halverson guided the woman out of the exam room and walked with her to the front. Misha was going to follow them, but Janessa approached her.

“How’s it going?” she asked as she went into the room they’d just left.

“It’s going well,” Misha said, watching as Janessa deftly cleaned up and sanitized surfaces. “It seems the patients know your mom outside of the clinic, not just as their doctor.”

“Yep. We have a lot of patients who attend the same church we do. Plus, our parents were quite active in our lives while we were in school, so they know people from attending the sports we played and other school events.”

“It says a lot that people who know you personally are comfortable with you in a professional capacity as well.”

Janessa flashed her a smile. “It’s always been important to my parents that we be active in our community and not try to hold ourselves apart, just because we might treat some of them. I think knowing my parents—and now Gareth—socially has helped many feel comfortable with them professionally. Like they know they can trust them to have their best interests at heart.”

Misha liked that. She had had patients at the clinic in Atlanta that she’d known from the neighborhood, but then they’d had to move after the threats started. It had been a struggle to keep those tight-knit ties to the community the clinic served. Plus, for the safety of the patients, she’d had to keep her distance from them outside of the clinic.

Misha hadn’t come into the interview with any preconceived notions. But even if she had, she wasn’t sure that it would have matched what she was discovering. The first big surprise had been that the Halversons were a mixed-race family.

Of course, if she'd looked up any info on the clinic, she probably would have known that before the interview. But she was kind of glad that she hadn't. On top of how well the interview had gone, finding out the family was diverse and also seemed to put importance on working with people in need had helped her feel even more at ease about making the move to Serenity.

She wished her mom had come with her so that she could meet this unique family and see the importance they put on helping people. She still needed to talk to her mom about everything, but she was inclined to say that this was a better opportunity than they'd thought it would be.

When Dr. Halverson returned, Janessa disappeared to the front. "How are you finding the way we do things here?"

"I really like it," she said. "It reminds me of the clinic where I work now, although we work with a very low-income population."

The woman nodded. "We do have a segment of the population that is low income here, but it's definitely not as high as you'd find in larger cities. Our biggest effort to reach that population around here is the clinic we hold on Saturdays for people without insurance. We know there's a need and want to do what we can to help."

She led the way into what looked like a storage room, then gestured to a set of shelves. "We also have little care packages to give the people who come in on Saturday. Just the basics like toothbrushes, toothpaste, and shampoo. We also donate similar items to the local shelter."

The more she saw and heard, the more Misha felt like maybe she could play a role there.

"Do you have any questions now that you've seen a little of how we do things here?"

"I don't think so," she said. "At least not yet."

Dr. Halverson smiled. "Well, feel free to ask whenever you have any. We're happy to explain anything."

Michelle ended up staying with the woman through her morning appointments, then she joined them in the breakroom to enjoy the lunch Aria had ordered for them.

Unlike the interview earlier, the atmosphere was much more relaxed. Missing was Jay, who had been a silent figure at the interview. Janessa, on the other hand, was present and very talkative. It was clear that she and Aria were close, and from the sound of things, might be roommates.

“We have a couple of spare rooms in our home,” Janessa said as they ate. “If you and your mom would like to stay with us. At least until you’re able to find a place of your own.”

“You have the room?” Misha asked.

“My sister and I bought a former B&B, so it has a bunch of rooms. My sister and her daughter have a couple on the main floor, and Aria and I have two on the second floor. That means there are still two that are empty.”

“Your sister is okay with you offering the rooms?” Misha asked.

“Yep. We talked about it when we heard you were coming for an interview.”

“In fact, you should come by the house for dinner,” Aria said. “Or were you leaving later today?”

“No. I’m here until tomorrow afternoon.” It was longer than she’d planned to be there, but flights and driving time from Serenity to Spokane had limited her options.

Now, though, Misha was glad she had a little extra time. It meant that she was returning to Atlanta with plenty of information to share with her mom. She would feel a lot more at peace about whatever decision she made because of that.

“Well, then for sure, come for dinner tonight.”

“Thanks. I’d like that.” It would also save her the hassle of trying to find dinner for herself.

“Would you like to stay the afternoon?” Dr. Halverson asked. “You don’t have to, but if you’d like to, you’re more than welcome.”

“Honestly, I think I’d like to take a nap,” Misha said. “I didn’t sleep super well last night.”

“Oh, that’s understandable,” Aria told her. “I had a hard time sleeping before my first day here.”

The more she interacted with this family, the more she thought she was going to enjoy working with them.

And in that moment, Misha realized she’d already made her decision.

After lunch was over, she left the clinic and went back to the B&B. She chatted briefly with Bec, then went up to her room. Before she laid down, she called her mom and gave her an update, knowing she’d be wondering how everything had gone.

Plus, it had been a while since they’d been apart from each other. Definitely not since Raden had passed away. Misha was just glad that she could give her mom a good report of everything before taking her nap.

When she woke up a couple of hours later, Misha felt much more refreshed. She took her time getting ready, then headed out to her rental. Before leaving, she entered the address they’d given her into the GPS.

As she followed the directions, Misha liked that she wouldn’t have to worry about getting too lost in Serenity. That was definitely a plus. There were times she still got lost in parts of Atlanta, even with the GPS’s help.

Pulling up to the address, Misha stared at the large house. Even though Janessa had described how many bedrooms the house had, she was still a bit surprised at its size.

She got out of the car, then headed for the steps that led to the porch and the front door. It didn’t take long for the door to swing open after she pressed the doorbell, and Aria greeted her with a smile, then moved back so Misha could step inside.

“Any trouble finding the place?” Aria asked, shutting the door behind Misha.

As Misha took off her jacket, she said, “No trouble at all.”

“That’s good.” Aria took her jacket and turned to hang it in the front closet. “Not that it’s too easy to get lost in Serenity.”

“That’s what I’ve discovered,” Misha said with a laugh.

“Well, c’mon and meet Charli and Layla,” Aria said, waving toward the kitchen.

“Charlie?”

“Charlotte. Though everyone calls her Charli. Layla is her daughter.”

As they walked into the kitchen, Misha got a whiff of something that smelled Italian, and her stomach growled in anticipation of the meal to come.

Janessa was in the kitchen with a dark-haired woman. Misha could immediately see the resemblance to Gareth. There was a little girl helping Janessa at the counter, and she gazed at Misha with curiosity.

“You’re a doctor?” Layla asked after Janessa had introduced her. “Like Grandma?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Cool!” Layla beamed at her, then went back to her task of tearing up lettuce into the bowl in front of her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Michelle,” Charli said, a warm smile on her face.

“Actually, you can call me Misha. I usually only hear Michelle when my mom is lecturing me about something or when I’m in a professional setting.”

Charli nodded. “Yep. That’s when I’m most likely to hear Charlotte. Also, when one of my siblings wants to annoy me.”

Misha felt a pang of loss as she recalled the fun-loving moments she’d shared with Davontae and Raden before everything had changed.

“Do you have siblings?” Janessa asked as she cut up a tomato to add to the lettuce.

“I have two brothers.” She didn’t want to go into details about Raden’s death, so she didn’t mention that he was no longer with them. Earlier, she hadn’t mentioned him being Ciara’s dad for the same reason.

“I’m an only child,” Aria volunteered. “So wow, was it an adjustment when I landed in the middle of this family.”

Janessa laughed. “We are a lot to take in. This is true.”

“How many of there are you?” Misha asked.

“Ten of us in all,” Charli said. “Gareth is the oldest, and our youngest sister is still in high school.”

“Do you all live here?”

“Not at the moment.” Janessa put the tomatoes she’d cut into the bowl. “We have two siblings away at school. They’ll probably come back once they’re done, but then Cole and possibly Skylar, our youngest siblings, will likely be away at college.”

“Charli is a teacher at the elementary school,” Aria said.

“So you’re not all in the medical profession, following in your parents’ footsteps?”

Charli grimaced as she shook her head. “Never had any interest in that.”

“One could say that you deal with as many bodily fluids as an elementary teacher as I do as a nurse,” Janessa said with a laugh. “Maybe more, actually.”

“True, but I’m still not interested in being a nurse or doctor. Plus, I really struggled with science.”

“Only Gareth and I are currently working in the medical field,” Janessa said. “Jay has a degree in business. We have a sister in hotel management, working at the resort north of town. Another brother is a wanderer. During the winter, he works as a ski instructor. The rest of the time, he leaves Serenity behind and... wanders.”

“You have quite an assortment of careers in the family.” Misha would have thought that with a family clinic, more of

the kids would have followed in their parents' footsteps. It certainly would have meant they wouldn't have had to go outside to hire someone. It was to her benefit, though, so she was thankful they didn't have someone from their family to fill the vacancy.

The doorbell went, and Layla abandoned the salad to run out of the kitchen. Charli tapped something on her phone, then returned to the bread she'd been transferring from a tray to a basket.

A moment later, Layla reappeared, being carried by Jay. She had an arm hooked around his neck as she chatted with him. He interacted with her in a way that indicated he was used to spending time with her.

The sight warmed Misha's heart. Too often, Black men were painted as bad or absent fathers, and while she had certainly seen evidence of that, there were plenty who loved their children and were very active in their lives.

Her own dad hadn't been great, especially to her. Not that he'd hurt her physically. It was just that he'd definitely favored his sons. One indication of that was him insisting that he be the one to name the boys but leaving that to her mom when Misha had been born. He'd definitely taken more pride in his sons than he ever had in Misha.

The man had also been away in prison for extended periods of time during her life, which meant she hadn't known him very well. Davontae had known him better, but that was because their dad had spent a lot more time with him.

Of all the decisions Davontae had made, one that pained Misha and her mom a lot was his choice to not be a better dad to his three children. As a result, the mothers of those children had banned Misha and her mom from seeing the kids. Raden had been thrilled at the news that his girlfriend was pregnant, though their mom hadn't been super happy since they were young and unmarried.

Gareth showed up a few minutes later, greeting Aria with a hug and a kiss. The pair were clearly close, and Misha wondered how long they'd been dating.

“Are Mom and the teens joining us?” Gareth asked.

“No,” Charli said. “Skylar asked Mom if she could take her into Coeur d’Alene to go shopping, and Cole is hanging with his friends.”

“Kayleigh’s tied up at the hotel,” Janessa added.

“All the more for us,” Jay said as he greeted Charli with a one arm hug since he still held Layla.

He was a tall man with close-cropped hair, and he looked like he spent a lot of time in the gym. It was a physique she saw plenty of in the neighborhood where she worked, though Jay lacked the hard edge that a lot of those guys had. In that, he reminded her a bit of Raden.

Where Davontae had been aggressive from a very young age, Raden had been more laid-back. There had been plenty of talk from Davontae about toughening him up, but every time he dared voice those words, he’d received a blistering lecture from their mom.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Charli suggested. “I just have to pull the lasagna out of the oven.”

Jay set Layla down on the chair she indicated, then when Layla asked him to sit beside her, he did just that. Gareth sat at the end of the table, to Jay’s right, while Aria sat across from Jay. At Janessa’s insistence, Misha sat between her and Aria. Charli was at the end, opposite Gareth.

Misha was a bit surprised when Charli and Layla together said a prayer of thanks for the food, also praying for the safety of their father/grandfather in Haiti. The faith this family had would definitely be one more thing her mother would appreciate.

After all that had happened, her mom’s faith had only seemed to deepen. Misha, however, had struggled a bit more with everything—especially Raden’s death. Still, the fact that the Halversons appeared to also be a family of faith was just one more point in favor of her taking the job.

“Are you missing basketball season, Jay?” Aria asked.

“Definitely.”

“No surprise there,” Gareth said with a laugh. “You have lived and breathed it for most of your life. I’m not sure what you’d do if you were banned from it.”

“Coach would never ban me,” Jay said with a scoff.

“Are you going to continue to coach even though Cole’s done at the school?” Aria asked.

“I plan to.” Jay shrugged. “Though I suppose things can change at the high school. There have been rumblings about *encouraging* Coach to retire, so if they bring in someone new, they might not want me around like Coach did.”

“Do they *want* to lose?” Janessa asked. “Because that’s a given if both you *and* Cole are gone from the team. You two are the best.”

Jay gave his sister an affectionate smile. “Depends on who they bring in next, and who tries out for the team next year.”

“I would hazard a guess that if you and Coach are both gone, none of the players are going to want to be on the team,” Gareth said.

Misha appreciated the little glimpses she was getting into the personalities of the family members, especially the ones she’d be working alongside. Plus, the interaction between the siblings was fascinating. The biological Halversons interacted with their adopted siblings in a way that made Misha think they’d been together for a long time. Perhaps their whole lives.

She was definitely curious about the family, and she was sure that her mom was going to be too. Was the fact that there were people of color working at the clinic playing into her decision-making process? Yes. She could honestly say it was.

Not that she would have turned down an employment offer if that hadn’t been the case, especially if they’d still been as nice to her. However, she’d faced some racism through school and during her residency, some of which hadn’t been taken seriously when she’d reported it. So if she could have a job where that wouldn’t be an issue with her co-workers, that would be a blessing.

The presence of Janessa and Jay in the Halverson family gave her a level of comfort and security she hadn't expected. If they had lived and thrived in this small town in Northern Idaho, then maybe there was hope that she, her mom, and Ciara could, too.

Even with all that, however, she wouldn't have considered the job if she hadn't also seen a well-run clinic with patients who appeared to like the doctors, and with doctors who respected their patients.

As she prepared to leave later that evening, Janessa said, "It was great meeting you, Misha. And I sure hope we see you again."

Misha wanted to tell her it was a given, but she needed to talk to her mom first. "I'll let you all know as soon as I've made a decision. It shouldn't be too long."

"We look forward to hearing from you," Gareth said as they shook hands. "Thank you so much for coming all the way here to meet with us."

"It was a pleasure to spend time in your clinic."

After a few more minutes saying goodbye, she left the large home and made her way to the car. Back at the B&B a few minutes later, Misha spoke briefly again with the owner, then went up to her room to call her mom. This time, she also had some pictures to send to her.

The first ones were a handful that she'd taken of the rooms that Janessa had said she and her mom could use. They'd been so beautiful that Misha had wanted to capture them for her mom to see. She'd also taken pictures with the group so that her mom could have a visual of the people she'd be meeting if they moved to Serenity.

Then, before she had even left for the airport the next day, Misha had received an email from Jay Halverson with a job offer and an employment package for her to look through. The salary was generous—she'd make more there than she did at her current job. Everything was very straightforward—what

they would expect of her, and what she could expect of them —which Misha appreciated very much.

Once she was home, she'd research the clinic more, and, of course, speak to her mom before making a final decision. Her gut told her to go for it, but because this involved a major move, she wanted to make sure she had as much information as possible.

For once, it was nice to not be in a state of turmoil, even though there was still uncertainty. Hopefully, that would be gone soon too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jay had just walked in the back door of the clinic when his mom spotted him and headed his way, a big smile on her face. “Great news! Misha is accepting the job offer.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.” Jay had thought she probably would, but there was always a chance she’d say no. She might not have been interested in moving so far from where she’d been living. Not to mention moving to a place that wasn’t exactly a destination for people of color.

He wouldn’t have been surprised if that might have played a significant part in her deciding not to move to Serenity. It was something he’d struggled with. Growing up in a town where he and Janessa were definitely in the minority had been a challenge.

Out of curiosity as a teen, he’d once checked the demographic of Serenity, just to see if what he was feeling was represented in the data. It had been, but that knowledge hadn’t really changed anything about his life.

Having Misha and her mom move to Serenity would be good for the town beyond just the clinic. In her resume, he’d read about her desire to work with under-privileged families, of which there were many in and around Serenity.

“When can she start?” Jay asked as they walked into the breakroom.

“She said they could be here within two weeks, and that she could start a few days after that.”

“That’s good,” Jay said. “We’ve waited this long. What’s a few more weeks? Although I’m sure you’re eager to see Dad.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, but the separation has been for a good cause. I’m not too worried about it, though I really do miss his hugs.”

The family joked about how affectionate their parents could be, but Jay was glad that they were still so in love after

all the years they'd been together. It couldn't have been easy to balance a relationship with their careers at the clinic, as well as the many children they'd ended up parenting.

Jay would like to think that had his parents not passed away, they would have still been together. He didn't have a lot of memories of them together, unfortunately. His dad had been killed two years before his mom had passed away. So he'd been seven the last time he'd seen them together.

He assumed they had family somewhere, however, they'd never met them. For some reason, even after his dad had been killed in a car accident, his mom had continued to raise them on their own with no help from that family.

Letting thoughts of his birth parents slip away, Jay asked, "Did she have any issues with the job description?"

"Interestingly enough, she did have one change she wondered if we'd be willing to make."

Jay poured himself a cup of coffee, then moved to lean against the counter. "Which was...?"

"She asked if she could take on full responsibility for the free clinic hours," his mom said. "Plus, she wondered if we'd ever be open to having a full day of clinic hours on Saturday instead of just a half-day."

Jay considered the idea as he sipped his coffee. "Would she take another day off in lieu of her work on Saturday?"

"I would insist on it," his mom said. "I know Gareth just adds the hours to his week and rarely takes other time off, but if she's going to be working every week, I think she'd need to. Especially since she has a baby to consider. I don't want her to burn herself out. We want to keep her."

"I don't suppose it would be a big issue. Aria just wouldn't book Monday appointments for her. That way, she could have two days off in a row."

"The only issue might be that the nurses who help with the Saturday clinic might not be interested in working a full day."

“Maybe it’s time to speak to Aria again about helping out.” She’d been reluctant to take over too many free clinic shifts so far, preferring to only work them if absolutely necessary, but maybe she’d reconsider. “If we had three nurses in the rotation, it might not be so overwhelming for them.”

“Ideally, we could find someone like Betty, a retired or semi-retired nurse, who wouldn’t mind working just Saturdays.”

Jay nodded. Lots of changes to consider, and it would be something they’d have to discuss with everyone involved. It wouldn’t impact him much, if at all, but it was important that the people it impacted the most had a say in the changes. Namely, that would be Janessa, Aria, and Betty.

When Janessa and Aria walked in, his mom gave them the update on Misha. Jay left the three of them chatting and headed for his office. Gareth was already in his, and Jay poked his hand in the doorway for a wave as he walked past.

With Misha having accepted the job, he needed to spend some time working on the budget to factor that in. Though Gareth hated dealing with the clinic’s finances, Jay enjoyed that part of his job. They might clash a lot over the budget, but Jay knew that at the end of the day, Gareth trusted him with that aspect of the clinic operation.

“You ready for the new doc?” Will asked from where he sat sprawled on Jay’s couch later that day.

The man was Jay’s best friend, though they were an unlikely pair and had been for the length of their long friendship. They’d met when Jay had first moved to Serenity after his mom had passed away. His new teacher had tasked Will with showing the new kid the ropes.

Jay hadn’t known what to expect from the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy who wore glasses and was on the scrawny side. However, Will had taken his assignment seriously and hadn’t left Jay’s side that day, sticking by him through the lunch hour and both recesses. And when Jay had arrived at school the next day, Will had been waiting for him so they could walk to their classroom together.

They hadn't had a lot in common at first, and Jay had struggled with moments of intense anger and grief over the loss of his mom. Will had taken it in stride, showing a surprising empathy for what Jay was going through, even though his family was still intact.

Years later, Jay had asked Will about what he'd thought back then, when Jay would have his outbursts. Will had paused before saying that all he'd had to do was imagine losing his own mom and how that would make him feel.

Will's dad had been the pastor at the church the Halversons had attended, so when he'd arrived on Sunday, it had been to find a familiar face waiting for him. And the guy had been there for Jay ever since.

"I think we are," Jay said as he came from the kitchen. He held out a can of the soda Will preferred. He didn't drink it himself, but he kept it on hand for Will. "Cleaned out the office of all the junk Nora left behind so Misha can make it her own."

"When does she officially start?"

"I'm not sure. Hopefully soon, since they want her to overlap with my mom, and Mom is eager to join Dad in Haiti for a bit."

He sat down in his recliner, then grabbed the remote to turn on the game they were set to watch. Will had become a basketball fan once Jay started to play, and now they usually watched an NBA game or two a week when the season was ongoing.

They were just about to go into the playoff portion of the season, which Jay was really looking forward to. In another life, he might have been playing in those games.

Wings were cooking in his air fryer, and Will had brought a container of his mom's potato salad. He'd also brought another container. One that probably contained cookies or brownies. Will wasn't as focused on healthy eating and exercise as Jay was, but Jay always made an exception for Will's mom's food.

“Do you feel more confident that she’ll fit in than you did when Nora started?”

Jay laughed. “I thought Nora was going to work out just fine. She had us all blinded. I do think we’ve done a bit more due diligence this time. Gareth reached out to the doctor who recommended her, and it turns out he’s her mentor, so he knows her on both a personal and professional level. He’s also a well-known neurosurgeon, so I doubt he’d put his reputation on the line if she had the type of tendencies that Nora had.”

“That’s good. A real answer to prayer.”

“How’s Daphne doing?” Jay asked.

Will frowned with a sigh. “I guess she’s doing okay. I think she’s going to break up with me, though.”

Jay felt for his friend. His own up and down relationship with Casey had given him sympathy for what Will was going through with his girlfriend. The difference was that Will and Daphne had been together steadily for the duration of their relationship. Daphne had been a couple of years behind them in school, and when she’d come back from college to work alongside her mom as a dental hygienist, Will had asked her out.

“Why do you think that?” Jay had personally sworn off relationships for a while. He enjoyed dating and having a girlfriend, but what had happened with Casey had wrung him out emotionally.

He wasn’t heartbroken over their final breakup. He’d hurt worse over the break-up that had happened prior to that one. At the time, he’d grieved and accepted that things were finally over. Then, after three months, she’d come back, wanting yet another chance. That time, he hadn’t fully committed his heart to it because he had a feeling that another breakup was looming. And he’d been right.

“She just seems really distant,” Will said. “Like she’s pulling away, but every time I try to talk to her about it, she just brushes me off.”

“Wish I had some advice for you, bro,” Jay told him. “But we both know that I have no clue about relationships either.”

“My mom said that I should propose, but I don’t know, man. If she’s not willing to communicate with me now, I don’t think I want to get married. As much as it hurts to imagine not having her in my life, I’m not willing to use marriage as a bandage.”

Jay admired the guy for not rushing into something that might end up being an even worse situation for him and Daphne.

His thoughts went to Misha, and her revelation that her baby’s father had passed away. She hadn’t indicated if he had been her husband or her boyfriend, though he’d noticed she hadn’t been wearing a ring of any sort. Whichever it was, no doubt it had been a difficult situation for her. And perhaps moving to Serenity was a way of moving forward in her grief.

When the timer went for the wings, Jay went into the kitchen to take them out of the fryer. Will trailed after him, and they filled their plates before returning to watch the game, leaving the weighty discussion of relationships for another time.

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“Thank you so much for picking us up,” Misha said as Gareth pulled to the curb in front of the house. “We really appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Once the car was parked, he and Aria got out while Misha unhooked Ciara’s car seat. Her mom gathered up the diaper bag and their purses before climbing out of the car. By the time they were out of the SUV, Janessa had joined them.

“Mom, this is Janessa Halverson,” Misha said, then turned to Janessa. “And this is my mom, Denise.”

“It’s so wonderful to meet you, Janessa,” her mom said as she shook Janessa’s hand. “Thank you for opening your home to us.”

“The more, the merrier,” Janessa said with a friendly smile. “C’mon inside. I’ll show you to your room while Gareth gets your bags.”

Janessa took one of the smaller suitcases from Gareth, then led the way into the house. Though she’d shared the pictures with her mom, Misha could tell that she was in awe of how lovely the place was.

“I’ll leave it up to you to decide which room is whose,” Janessa said. “We have a pack ‘n play that you can set up for Ciara in whichever room you want her in.”

They’d discussed it on the plane ride and had decided that for the first couple of nights, Misha would keep her. And if she settled well and went back to sleeping through the night, she’d stay in Misha’s room. However, if she wasn’t sleeping well at night once Misha had to start work, they’d move her into her mom’s room.

“These rooms are so beautiful,” her mom told Janessa. “I just hope that a crying baby doesn’t keep you awake at night.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. This used to be a B&B, so the rooms are very well sound-proofed. Gareth and Aria like to sit on the landing to talk, and I never hear anything in my room.”

Ciara squawked then, kicking her feet as she sat in her car seat where Misha had set it on the floor.

“How did she do on the flight?” Janessa asked.

“Pretty good,” Misha said. “Only fussed on takeoff and landing, but she definitely didn’t like not being able to meet everyone on the plane.”

“A real social butterfly, huh?” Janessa said with a chuckle. “I’m sure it was a long day for all of you.”

“Yeah. It was, but we’re here now, so it’s all good.”

Gareth and Aria brought in their other suitcases, setting them off to the side.

“We’ve planned for supper in about an hour,” Janessa said. “So we’ll leave you to get settled.”

“Thanks so much.”

Once the others had left the room, Misha bent to unstrap Ciara from her seat. After holding her for a minute, she set her on the carpeted floor so that she could move around a bit. Her mom pulled out some toys from the diaper bag and put them in front of the baby. Since they were her favorites, she happily focused on them.

“Which room do you want, Mom?”

Her mom frowned. “I know they said that they won’t hear Ciara cry, but I’m worried.”

Misha went to pull her mom into her arms. “You have to take them at their word, Mom. You can’t be responsible for them not being honest about things. If they say it won’t be a problem, let’s accept that until it’s proven otherwise. Besides, Ciara isn’t really a fussy baby. I think we’ll be okay.”

It wasn’t that Misha didn’t understand her mom’s worry. She herself had been in chronic worry mode ever since they’d made the decision to move.

Misha had been leaving her job and a handful of friends, but her mom was leaving the only life she’d ever known. She’d never lived anywhere but Atlanta, and once she’d started working for the Martins, she hadn’t worked anywhere else.

Misha had left Atlanta for school and her residency. She’d only been back there for a couple of years, and with everything that had happened—including having to move twice—she wasn’t as attached to Atlanta as her mom was. Still, leaving had been difficult for her, so she knew it was even more so for her mom.

Thankfully, aside from Davontae, they hadn’t left any family behind in Atlanta. Three of her four grandparents had passed away. She didn’t know if her other grandparent was alive or not. He’d left Misha’s grandmother not long after her dad had been born, apparently deciding that being in a mixed relationship had challenges he didn’t want to deal with. Which had left her grandmother to raise a young son alone.

Her mom had a younger brother, but he'd left to join the military years earlier, and was now living in South Carolina with his family. They had sporadic contact with them, usually just exchanging cards at Christmas.

"I don't regret this move," her mom said as she rested her head on Misha's shoulder. "It's just... a lot."

"I know, but I think you'll find the Halversons to be very gracious and caring. That's what I've experienced in the interactions I've had with them."

Her mom took a deep breath, then stepped back. "Well, let's get freshened up so we don't look so bedraggled at dinner."

With no significant differences between the bedrooms, her mom chose the one across the landing and wheeled her suitcase over to it. While she changed out of the clothes she'd travelled in, Misha kept an eye on Ciara as she explored a little. She quickly washed her face and added a bit of makeup, just so she didn't look so tired from the long day they'd had.

Ciara also got a change of clothes along with a quick wipe down and a fresh diaper. Misha had no idea how the time difference would factor into her schedule. While it would be nice to have the baby in bed a little earlier, Misha didn't really want her up two hours earlier. So her plan was to keep her up for as long as possible, hopefully to at least what Misha hoped her bedtime would be, even in Serenity.

Not knowing what they might have for her to eat, Misha pulled out a couple of packs of baby food that she'd put in her bag. Her mom showed up a few minutes later, and like Misha, she'd changed out of her travelling clothes.

Together, they went downstairs, following the sound of conversation and the aroma of dinner. There were a few more people there, but Misha recognized all but the middle-aged man whom she assumed was the other Dr. Halverson.

Cathy approached them with a warm smile and immediately introduced herself to Misha's mom. "I'm so glad that Misha has family who moved with her. What a blessing."

Her mom nodded. “I couldn’t let her come without me.”

“More like I couldn’t have moved without you,” Misha said with a laugh. “Ciara and I would be lost if you weren’t here.”

“Oh, she is absolutely beautiful.” Cathy reached out a finger, which Ciara promptly grabbed, giving her a big grin. “What a sweetheart.”

“The kids better watch out now,” the middle-aged man said with a laugh as he joined them. “It’s been too long since we’ve had a baby around. It’s time for some grandchildren, I think. Maybe we could be honorary grandparents to this little one, so we get some practice.”

“This is my husband, Dan,” Cathy said with a laugh.

As she shook his hand, Misha could see shades of Gareth in the man. Introductions were made all around for her mom over the next few minutes, including Jay, who arrived at the tail end of them.

Her mom eyed Janessa and Jay with curiosity. Misha had explained what she’d known about the pair, and she’d seen Janessa in the pictures Misha had taken, but Misha figured she wanted to see how they all interacted as a family. They hadn’t seen many mixed-race families in their neighborhood. At least not where the parents weren’t already a mixed-race couple.

Layla once again greeted Jay with enthusiasm, and the man responded with clear affection. Misha knew that would definitely raise Jay’s estimation in her mom’s eyes.

After they were all seated at the table—with a highchair for Ciara—the elder Dr. Halverson said a prayer of thanks for the food, which also included thanks for the safe arrival of Misha, her mom, and Ciara. Her mom squeezed her hand under the table, and Misha knew it was an encouragement for her that this was a family of faith.

Misha hoped that all of this would put her mom’s worries to rest, but she knew it might take time.

CHAPTER FIVE

The conversation at the table didn't focus just on Misha and her mom, for which Misha was very grateful. For one, she was too tired to do a lot of talking. But also, as the Halverson family talked with each other, she learned more about them and their town.

Jay was quieter than Janessa, but he still interacted with those around him. When Misha had Googled his name—just like she'd searched the others—she'd ended up with a lot of hits. More than she'd expected.

It had been surprising to read about his success in basketball at the college level. There had been plenty of speculation that he'd end up playing professionally someday, even after the injury he'd sustained early in his senior season, which they'd claimed shouldn't be career-ending.

Misha had to admit to being curious as to why he'd returned to Serenity to work in his family's clinic when he could have potentially gone on to fame and fortune with a career in professional basketball.

Jay didn't appear to be unhappy. But, of course, what did she know? She'd noticed that the man didn't show much emotion. Unlike Gareth, who smiled and laughed fairly easily.

Her curiosity, though piqued, would remain unsatisfied for now. Maybe if she had the opportunity to get to know him better, she could ask him about it. However, that definitely wasn't her focus at the moment.

Misha didn't want to be rude, but once they'd eaten their dessert, she knew they needed to excuse themselves. Her mom was fading, and Ciara was getting cranky, even though she'd done remarkably well, all things considered.

“Please feel free to help yourself to anything in the kitchen,” Charli said when Misha indicated that they needed to call it a day.

“And if you’d like to join us for church,” Cathy added. “It starts at eleven. I’m sure one of the girls could give you a ride.”

“Yep. We’ve got plenty of space,” Janessa said. “We usually leave around ten-thirty.”

“We’ll see what sort of night we have with Ciara.” Misha hadn’t been sure what they’d do about finding a church in Serenity. This was an opportunity to check one out, so if her mom felt up to going, they would.

“There’s also a nursery for Ciara,” Charli said. “Skylar, our youngest sister, often works in there.”

Misha was glad to hear that, knowing that Ciara wouldn’t sit quietly for a whole service. After thanking them for the meal, her mom took Ciara upstairs while Misha prepped her bottle. It would take a little time to get accustomed to doing stuff like that in someone else’s kitchen. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be long until they had a place of their own.

“If you need anything, just knock on my door,” Janessa said. “Or send me a text.”

“Thanks. I feel like we’re saying that a lot today.” Misha smiled. “I just hope you know that we appreciate all you’ve done to welcome us.”

“We’re very excited to have you here, and not just because we need your help in the clinic.”

“I hope you still feel that way after Ciara has a crying fit.”

“Oh, we’ve survived countless temper tantrums by Layla. I think we’ll be fine.”

It was a little consolation to think that the other child in the house wasn’t immune to emotional meltdowns. After saying goodnight to everyone, Misha went upstairs to join her mom and Ciara.

She’d only been upstairs for a couple of minutes when there was a light knock on the door. Opening it, she found Janessa and Jay standing there.

“Sorry to bother you,” Janessa said. “But we forgot to give you the playpen for Ciara.”

Janessa gestured to Jay, who lifted the item he carried. “Do you want it in this room?”

Misha nodded and stepped back so Jay could come into the room and set it down.

“Also, Charli had this from when Layla was a baby, and thought you might like to use it.”

When Janessa picked up a stationery bouncer, Misha nodded in relief. Ciara’s was coming on the moving truck, so she wouldn’t have it until they moved into their own place. Since it was helpful to be able to corral her at times, Misha was very grateful that Charli was willing to loan it to them.

“Do you know how to set this playpen up?” Janessa asked. “I’d volunteer Jay to do it, but I’m not sure he knows either.”

Jay chuckled. “This is true.”

Ciara squealed then, waving her hands at them. Janessa grinned and approached Misha’s mom. “Can I hold her? Or will she cry?”

“Sure. She’s pretty good with people she doesn’t know.”

Ciara went to Janessa easily and didn’t fuss at all, clearly happy for someone new to hold her. Jay had dropped to his knees next to the playpen, obviously determined to prove his sister wrong.

Misha wanted to offer her help since she’d set one up a few times, but instead, she just let Jay work at it. She knew it wasn’t too difficult, so he’d be able to figure it out quickly enough.

“When Doctor Martin suggested the job here to Misha, she asked him if they let Black people into Northern Idaho,” her mom said, making Misha groan. “I’m glad to see that they do, in fact.”

Janessa laughed and nodded. “Yep. Though not many choose to come. We ended up here because my mom asked the Halversons to adopt us before she passed away.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear about your mom.”

“It’s okay,” Janessa assured Misha’s mom. “She did us a big favor by arranging that for us. The Halversons have been wonderful and have never made us feel like we were anything but family to them. I was only seven—Jay was nine—when we ended up here.”

“What a blessing for you both,” her mom said. “And for the Halversons too, I’m sure.”

“I do remind them frequently that they are indeed very blessed to have me,” Janessa said with a grin.

Jay glanced up at his sister. “You’re a blessing, all right.”

Even though she wasn’t thrilled about her mom sharing her comment to Doctor Martin, Misha was glad that her mom heard for herself that Janessa and Jay were happy there.

Jay had just finished putting the playpen where Misha indicated she wanted it, when Aria appeared in the open doorway.

“Charli found some more stuff,” Aria said with a laugh. “She wants to know if you need a baby bathtub.”

“She should have just made a list of everything she has from Layla,” Janessa said as she danced with Ciara.

“That would be very useful,” Misha said. “The tub in this bathroom is bigger than the one we had in our apartment in Atlanta.”

“Perfect. I’ll go get it from her.” Aria turned, then paused. “Was there anything else you might need for Ciara? I think Charli kept a lot of baby stuff from Layla.”

“She’s a packrat,” Jay said. “But the stuff’s coming in handy today.”

“I don’t think we need anything else,” Misha told Aria.

“Well, if you do, be sure to ask her in case she’s got it stashed somewhere in the basement,” Aria said. “I’ll just go grab the bathtub.”

“Thanks for setting that up,” Misha said to Jay.

“You’re welcome. I hope she sleeps well in it for you.” He stared down at the playpen. “Has she slept in something like that before?”

“Yes. Most days, she naps in something similar. I think she’ll be fine.”

“Does she sleep good?”

Misha found Jay’s curiosity interesting. “For the most part now. She’s only been sleeping straight through for the last month or so.”

Jay frowned. “Hopefully, this move doesn’t set her back.”

“Oh well, if it does, it does. Mom is good at helping me out at night if I need to work the next day.”

Though Misha looked at Ciara as her daughter, and legally that’s what she was, she knew her mom often saw Ciara as her baby. Not in a way that would ever cause problems, just that she felt equally responsible for her. There would come a day when they’d tell Ciara exactly who her parents were, but in the meantime, Misha would be her mom.

“That’s good you have that kind of support.”

Misha nodded. “I couldn’t have done any of this without my mom, to be honest.”

When Aria appeared with the bathtub, Jay excused himself. The other woman spent a few minutes cooing over Ciara, then Janessa gave her back to Misha and the two women left.

Misha decided to go ahead and give Ciara a bath since that was part of her normal schedule at home. At their *old* home. Misha had to keep reminding herself that Serenity was home now, even if they were not in a place of their own just yet.

The large counter in the bathroom had plenty of space for the baby tub, and her mom took over giving Ciara the bath, allowing her to play for a bit while Misha dug out pajamas and the sleep sack she used for Ciara instead of a blanket. Thankfully, the playpen had come with a fitted sheet that appeared to be freshly washed.

By the time her mom came out with a towel-wrapped Ciara, everything was laid out. It didn't take long to get the little girl dressed, then her mom sat down on the loveseat to give Ciara her bottle.

While her mom did that, Misha found her own pajamas and took them into the bathroom along with the small bag that contained her skin care and other personal care items. She tried not to think about how much she missed her home and the routines she had there.

Misha knew that she would eventually have that in Serenity too, but being tired was making her emotional. Not wanting to get mired in that, she quickly went through her night-time routine.

Though she didn't usually go to bed when Ciara did, since they were sharing a room, Misha knew she had to stay quiet until the baby fell asleep. Plus, she was exhausted herself, so she'd probably read on her tablet until she fell asleep.

When she went back into the bedroom, Ciara had finished her bottle. Her mom looked up and gave Misha a weary smile.

"Do you need me to do anything else, sweetheart?" she asked.

"No. I think she's ready to go to bed, and so am I."

"Me too," her mom said. "I think I'm going to brush my teeth and fall into bed, even though I should probably take a shower."

Misha knew how she felt, but she didn't have the energy right then. "How do you feel about church?"

"I'd like to go," she said. "But we can see how things are in the morning."

Misha nodded, then got up to take Ciara from her. When her mom got to her feet, she wrapped an arm around Misha's waist and leaned against her.

"I think it's going to be good here." It was a statement of hope as much as it was one of confidence.

"I think so too."

Ciara ended up having a decent night, all things considered. She woke up once and fussed a bit, but Misha managed to get her settled back down fairly quickly.

Misha was awake before the baby the next morning, so she took a quick shower. Ciara was fussing as Misha walked out of the bathroom in her robe, but her mom was already there to lift her out of the playpen.

“So do you want to go to church, Mom?” Misha asked.

“Do you?” she asked.

Misha wasn't sure she did, just because it was a new place, and she was still feeling a bit worn out by the past couple of weeks. However, she knew attending church was important overall, but perhaps it was also important to get acquainted with a part of the community she'd be serving.

“You know it's probably not going to be like our church in Atlanta,” Misha said, referencing the enthusiastic worship style of that church.

“I know, but I don't need that in order to worship. God is here, just like He was there.”

Misha nodded, then said, “I guess I'd better get ready then.”

“Do you need me to watch Ciara before I take my shower?”

She needed her morning bottle, and Misha would get her some breakfast when they went downstairs.

“I'll be fine.” Misha moved the bouncy seat into the large bathroom, then her mom put Ciara in it. “Though could you find her an outfit to wear?”

“Yep.” While her mom headed for the suitcases, Misha pulled out her makeup.

She took the time to apply moisturizer to her face and body. As she worked, she chatted with Ciara, doing what she could to entertain the little girl while she got ready for the day.

“How’s this?” her mom asked from the doorway of the bathroom.

Misha looked at the little lavender colored dress with matching leggings and nodded. “I think that’s perfect. Are her shoes in that bag too?”

“Yep, and the socks. I’ll dress her right before we go.”

That was always the best plan, since Ciara seemed to end up covered in whatever food she ate.

Misha didn’t wear a lot of makeup, so that didn’t take too long. It was her hair that demanded most of her attention. Part of her just wanted to scrape it back into a ponytail. But in the end, she removed the silk wrap she’d put on her hair the previous night, then applied product to her curls to refresh their definition.

“I’m going to go take a shower,” her mom said. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Once Misha finished in the bathroom, she moved Ciara, then went through her suitcase, looking for something to wear that wasn’t too wrinkled. They probably had an iron she could have borrowed, but honestly, she didn’t feel much like ironing that morning.

Finally, she found a pair of black slacks that she paired with a loose, silky, light green blouse. Misha hoped that it would be suitable for that morning, since she’d worn the outfit to their church in Atlanta. She didn’t want to stand out for the wrong reasons.

Picking Ciara up, she grabbed the bag where she’d put the things she needed to feed her. The little girl didn’t really require anything special, but it was more just making sure she had what she needed and didn’t have to keep bugging her hosts.

She knocked lightly on her mom’s door, then went inside. “Oh, you look nice.”

Her mom smiled at her. “Thanks, sweetie. You look nice as well.”

“Ready to go eat some breakfast?”

If they'd been in their own space, her mom would have been the one preparing the breakfast, and as they walked into the kitchen to see Charli at work, Misha could see that her mom itched to jump in.

“Can I help you?”

Charli smiled. “Sure. Layla requested pancakes, so if you don't mind taking care of them, that would be great.”

Misha was glad that Charli had accepted her mom's offer. It was going to be hard for her mom to not have anything to do but watch Ciara, at least for the first little while.

It wasn't long before Janessa showed up, followed a short time later by Aria. An abundance of food was waiting on the smaller table in the breakfast nook, rather than in the large dining room.

“I texted Skylar,” Janessa announced as she filled her mug with coffee. “She's working in the nursery this morning and would love to have Ciara there with her, if you're comfortable leaving her.”

Misha had already accepted that she'd have to put Ciara in the church nursery if they went to the service that morning. She'd always gone to the nursery at their old church, and she'd done okay. Hopefully, it would be the same there.

“You can decide once we get there,” Charli said. “And you have a chance to see the nursery.”

Charli clearly understood the reluctance a mom might have to leave her child with strangers for the first time.

Once breakfast was over, they all pitched in to clean up, then Misha and her mom went upstairs to dress Ciara. It didn't take long, which was good because she didn't want to make any of them late for church.

“You can ride with me,” Janessa said. “Aria will ride with Charli, then Gareth will give her a ride home, I'm sure.”

Aira grinned as she picked up her purse. “Yep. You are correct.”

It didn't take long to get everyone situated, and Misha ended up in the front seat of Janessa's car while her mom sat in the back with Ciara in her car seat. Though she'd been mentally preparing herself for all the new situations she'd be facing with this move, Misha was still nervous about attending this church for the first time,

She could do this, and she knew that her mom could, too.

When they arrived at the church, Misha took Ciara from the car seat while her mom grabbed the diaper bag. Janessa led them into the building, then down a wide hallway to where the nursery was located.

"Hey, Janessa," a young woman with dark brown hair and brown eyes said when they arrived in the doorway. She then turned her gaze to Misha and Ciara, and her smile grew. "This must be Ciara."

"Yep," Janessa said. "This is Misha, Ciara's mom, and Denise, her grandma. This is my sister, Skylar."

"Nice to meet you, Skylar," Misha said.

"You too," the young girl replied. "Did you want to come in with Ciara?"

Misha nodded and followed Skylar into the large space. There were other children there, as well as a couple of adults. She was glad to see that there appeared to be a good ratio of adults to children.

Skylar walked her through setting Ciara up in the nursery, assigning her a number that would flash on the wall of the sanctuary if Ciara needed her. When she handed Ciara over to Skylar, Misha braced herself for tears, but instead, Ciara seemed to be enamored with the new person holding her.

"I'll see you after the service," Misha said as she pressed a kiss to Ciara's curls. "Thank you for keeping an eye on her, Skylar."

"You're welcome. We're going to have fun, aren't we, Ciara?"

Her mom and Janessa stood in the hallway just outside the door, and when Misha joined them, they headed through the foyer to the sanctuary. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as they passed people along the way.

“Do you want to sit with us?” Janessa asked as they entered the sanctuary. “You don’t have to, but you’re more than welcome to.”

Misha glanced at her mom then said, “Perhaps we’ll sit near the back in case I need to go out for Ciara.”

Janessa nodded. “That makes sense. We can sit there with you.”

She led them to the pew that had only a couple of people. Once they were seated, her mom on one side, Janessa on the other, Misha let her gaze wander over the people gathered there.

There seemed to be a wide range of ages, including a good chunk of young people. As she’d suspected, the racial makeup of the congregation was primarily White, but there were more people of color than just them, Jay, and Janessa. Misha wondered how many people there she might see at the clinic in the weeks to come.

Her gaze landed on Jay as he walked down the center aisle with a shorter man at his side. They stopped to talk to a woman in one of the pews, then Jay kept walking while the man sat down next to the woman. A young man with dark hair stopped Jay, then motioned to the pew he was standing next to.

“That’s my youngest brother,” Janessa said. “The one with Jay. They’re close because Cole is a basketball fanatic like Jay.”

Cole and a couple of other young men seemed to be joking around with Jay, and he cracked a smile at something Cole said. Gareth and Aria paused to talk to them for a moment, then continued hand in hand to the front row.

“Gareth plays the drums for the worship team, so he and Aria sit at the front.”

“Do you usually sit with them?”

“Sometimes,” Janessa said with a shrug. “Most often, I sit with Charli or Jay. With such a large family and friends attending here, I can always find someone to sit with.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Misha asked, realizing belatedly maybe church wasn’t the best place to be asking the question.

“Nope. It was sweet watching Aria and Gareth fall in love, but I’ve also seen Jay struggle with his former relationship. I’m not sure that I want to take the chance of a broken heart.”

Well, that answered the question she’d had about Jay’s relationship status. Not that it should matter. She didn’t need to complicate the changes in her life by even thinking about getting involved with anyone, let alone Jay. She admired some of the things she’d seen of him so far, but she wasn’t interested in becoming a rebound if he’d just gone through a breakup.

The two senior Dr. Halversons walked in with a couple who looked close to their age. The couple continued down the aisle, but the doctors came to sit in the row in front of them.

Cathy turned to face them with a smile. “Did Ciara do okay last night?”

“She did,” Misha said. “Only woke up once and went back to sleep fairly quickly.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Kids that little can sometimes struggle with changes.”

Before she could respond, a man spoke over the speaker system, drawing their attention to the front. Gareth had gone up onto the stage and was now seated at a set of drums behind a plexiglass shield.

For the next hour, Misha couldn’t help but compare this church service to the ones they’d attended in Atlanta. There were some obvious differences, but also things that were similar. Most importantly, however, her mom seemed to be enjoying it.

Maybe life would be okay for them in Serenity.

Was it too soon to have that kind of thought? Perhaps. But she needed to think positively about what lay ahead, and not focus on what they'd left behind.

CHAPTER SIX

Jay stared at the text on the screen of his phone and realized that he was going to have to block Casey's number. Even after telling her he didn't want to get back together with her, she was still contacting him, promising things would be different this time. Even going so far as to hint that maybe they could get married. At one point, that would have been enough to draw him back to her.

If there was one thing that he'd learned about himself from his eleven-year relationship with Casey it was that when he fell in love with someone, he fell deep and he fell hard. It was why he'd gone back to her over and over again, hoping desperately that each time would be different. That she'd be as completely devoted to him as he was to her.

This time, though, he refused to be drawn back in again.

This time, he would stay strong and protect his finally healing heart.

It had taken far too long to detach from his feelings for her, and he'd made a mistake in going back to her that last time, even knowing that his feelings had changed. It wasn't a mistake he was going to repeat. This had to be the end so that they could both move forward with their lives and, hopefully, other partners.

Jay drew in a deep breath. Casey was his first and only love. His high school sweetheart. It still hurt to think of not having her in his life, but it was just a dull ache now. Not the sharp jabbing pain it had been months ago. His bruised and broken heart was nearly healed.

After a moment, he tapped out the harshest message he'd ever sent her, but he needed to present a finality to their relationship. Why she couldn't seem to accept it was truly over, he had no clue. It wasn't like she seemed to actually want to be with him most of the time.

Casey, you need to stop contacting me. We agreed to end things for good, and these texts aren't helping either of us to move on. My feelings for you and our relationship have changed, so there's just no chance for us anymore. If you keep contacting me, I'm going to have to block your number. I don't want to do that, but I will, if you send me more texts like this one.

Jay turned off the sound on his phone and put it in the top drawer of his desk. He had other things he needed to focus on. Misha was coming in soon to fill out paperwork in preparation for starting work in a couple of days. He didn't want to be upset with Casey when he needed to be focused on that.

Picking up the file he'd prepared for Misha, he looked through it to make sure he'd included everything she needed to sign. It was such a relief to all of them that she was coming on board at the clinic. He knew that his parents were thrilled with her, as were Gareth, Janessa, and Aria.

He hoped that they'd made a good choice, and that she was willing to commit to being there long term.

When she showed up a couple of minutes later, Jay got to his feet and greeted her with a smile. He motioned for her to have a seat in the chair on the other side of his desk.

"How are you finding it here in Serenity?" he asked as he settled into his seat once she'd taken hers.

"Well, I haven't seen too much of it yet," she said, a smile lighting up her face. "But so far, everything has been great."

"There isn't a whole lot to see in the town, but the surrounding views are pretty incredible."

They chatted for a bit about what there was to do around the area before they shifted their focus to the paperwork she needed to complete.

"Does your mom have health insurance?" Jay asked, wanting to make sure that Misha's family was taken care of.

Misha nodded. "Her previous employer is covering it as part of her retirement package."

“Oh, that’s good. Is she hoping to work here in Serenity?”

“We’re not sure just yet. For now, she’s going to take care of Ciara.”

Jay smiled as he thought of the little girl. Layla had gone on and on about all the things the baby had done and how she’d smiled at her. He knew Layla would have loved a sibling, but Charli wasn’t on board with that at all. Having Ciara around would probably be a double-edged sword for Layla’s desire for a younger sibling.

As they worked their way through the paperwork, Jay found himself comparing this process with Misha to how things had gone with Nora. Misha was definitely much more easygoing and down to earth, and it gave Jay hope that the atmosphere in the clinic would be better with Misha than it had ever been with Nora.

“Do you plan to find an apartment or a house?” Jay asked. “Or has Janessa convinced you to stay with them?”

Misha smiled, her brown eyes softening. “She has mentioned it, but unfortunately, it’s just not possible. We need three bedrooms if we want to be able to live comfortably. Ciara needs her own room. I don’t mind sharing with her in the short-term, but long-term, it’s not really feasible.”

Jay nodded. “I get that. I’m not sure what the current rental or real estate market is like here, but we can put you in touch with someone who can help you out.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Misha said. “And I think that we’re going to go with an apartment. At least until we get used to the weather. A house would probably involve shoveling snow and other exterior work that I’m not sure either of us is ready for.”

“Yeah. It can be an adjustment if you’re not used to it.”

“I think I did more research on the weather of the area than anything else when this job was offered as a possibility.”

“It’s a great place to live, even with the winter we get.” Jay wasn’t really one to sit and chat about the weather, but he found that he wanted Misha to see the plus side of living in Serenity.

They needed Misha and her mom to be happy there so that they didn't have to go searching for another doctor. Jay was sure that he wasn't the only one who thought she'd be a great addition to the clinic, and they'd no doubt each be doing their best to help her and her mom settle in. Thankfully, they had arrived in spring, so they'd have three beautiful seasons to enjoy before winter descended on them once again.

After chatting for a few more minutes, Jay pulled out his phone. "I'm going to see if Dad has a recommendation for someone to help you find a place."

His dad sent a text back right away, and Jay passed the information on to Misha. "Give them a call and let them know that Dan Halverson referred you."

"Thanks so much for this," Misha said. "I'll feel more comfortable dealing with someone who comes with a personal recommendation."

"Definitely. That's why, if you need any help, let one of us know."

When Misha gathered up her stuff and got to her feet, Jay stood as well. He followed her out of the office, looking around for his mom.

"You're not working today, are you?" he asked.

"No. I just came in to do the paperwork. I'm going to start shadowing your mom on Wednesday."

"Sounds good." He gave her a smile. "See you then, if not before."

She returned his smile, then turned to walk down the hall toward the rear of the building. Jay really hoped that she and her mom could put down roots in their town, though he knew that the adjustments were significant since they were moving from a big, diverse city like Atlanta to a small town like Serenity.

"Everything okay?"

Jay turned to find Gareth standing in the doorway of his office. "Yep. Just hoping that Misha and her mom settle in

well here so that they'll stick around.”

“I hear you,” Gareth said with a nod. “She seems like she could be a real asset to the clinic.”

Jay wondered if the death of Ciara's father might have been part of the reason they'd come, hoping for a fresh start. There was something about the way Misha had revealed the information that made him want more details. However, he wasn't going to pry.

The professional and personal lines were easily blurred, with their family tending to treat employees at the clinic like family, but he didn't feel it was the time yet to ask more personal questions. Her prior relationships and who Ciara's father might have been had no bearing on her work at the clinic.

That didn't mean that he couldn't be curious. And he was, but for the time being, Jay wouldn't do anything about satisfying his curiosity.

Janessa came to let Gareth know he had a patient waiting for him in one of the exam rooms, so Jay headed back to his office. He needed to get Misha set up in their payroll system to make sure there was no delay in her getting paid.

Before he started on that, though, he pulled his phone back out of the drawer. He hoped that he'd have a message from Casey saying that she understood and would back off.

Casey: *Don't be like that, babe. We've always been so good together. I made a mistake in agreeing that we were breaking up for good. I still love you. Please, let's try again. I'll even move back if you'll reconsider.*

Jay frowned at her last sentence. Move back? She'd been absolutely adamant that moving away from Serenity was the only way she'd achieve the goals she had for her law career. The advancements she wanted hadn't been available to her there.

None of it changed his mind, however. A year ago, he would have jumped at the chance to rekindle things with her, but not anymore. He'd finally realized that their constant on

and off relationship wasn't healthy. How would that work if they got married? If they couldn't manage to keep a serious relationship going, a marriage between them was destined to fail.

Casey hadn't seen the same issues he had when he'd tried to bring them up, which had been the beginning of the end for his emotional involvement with her. He knew that she'd dated other guys while on a "break" from him, just like he'd dated other women, trying to move on from her, but he didn't want that anymore.

If someone needed a break from him as frequently as Casey had, they weren't right for each other. And after Will had pointed out that Casey treated him like a back-up plan, Jay had come to see the emotional manipulation that was at work.

Rather than respond to Casey, Jay did as he'd promised and went about blocking her number. He knew it wouldn't keep her from reaching out to him using a friend's phone, but he was done responding. After doing that, he went to each of the social media platforms and blocked her there, too.

Done. Done. Done.

When she was officially blocked, Jay felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He didn't have to delete any pictures of them from his social media or his phone as he'd done that after their last breakup. And there had been plenty of pictures to delete. Casey had been the queen of selfies. All of which she'd sent on to him.

Blowing out a long breath, he opened another text window and tapped out a message.

You'll be happy to know that I've officially blocked Casey and will no longer be responding to her.

Will: *About time, man! Good for you! Now we can be single together.*

Jay frowned. *Did she officially break up with you?*

Will: *No. But she hasn't replied to the last text I sent her two days ago.*

That made Jay wince. Yeah, that wasn't a good sign.

Sorry, bud.

There wasn't much more he could say after that. He really felt for his friend and wished there was something more he could do for him.

When Will didn't reply, Jay set his phone aside and got back to work.

"Want to come for dinner?" Janessa asked when she poked her head into Jay's office the next day. "Misha's mom is cooking."

"Really?"

"Yep. She offered to make dinner for us tonight."

"That was nice of her," Jay said.

"Definitely," Janessa agreed. "So will you come?"

Jay thought about his plans for the evening, which weren't of any real consequence. Just doing some housework and maybe working out for a bit.

"Will there be enough food?" Jay asked.

"She was the one to tell us to invite you," Janessa said. "So I'm sure that she must be planning enough."

"Okay. I'll be there."

"Great!" Janessa flashed him a smile before disappearing once again.

He wasn't as frequent a visitor at Janessa and Charli's place as Gareth was—even before he'd gotten involved with Aria. Part of that was because most days, he'd had enough of the siblings he worked with. He had no desire to socialize with them in the evening.

When he'd been dating Casey, she hadn't liked to hang around with his family, so he'd rarely spent much time with them. Now, he dropped by once a week, usually, but now, here he was, going for dinner again when he'd been there only three days ago.

After he finished his work for the day, Jay tugged on his jacket and grabbed his keys and phone off the desk. The others were just leaving the building, so he followed them out, locking up as he did.

“Are you coming right over?” Janessa asked.

“I might as well. There’s no need for me to change, is there?”

When she shook her head, he headed for his car. Gareth and Aria had left already, so only his car and Janessa’s remained in the lot.

He swung by the grocery store on the way to pick up a bouquet of flowers to express his thanks to Denise for inviting him for dinner. His mom would be proud of him. Both of them.

At the house, he knocked on the door, then stepped inside since they were expecting him. Conversation and the smell of food greeted him.

It was so different from when he stepped into his apartment. There was never any sort of welcoming presence there. That didn’t really bother him, but that didn’t mean he didn’t appreciate it when he encountered it at Janessa and Charli’s or his parents’ homes.

“Heya, Uncle Jay,” Layla said when she spotted him.

Gareth had been holding her, but he set her down when she wriggled in his arms. She darted over to Jay and lifted her arms. Though she was probably too old to be carried, Jay always indulged her, swinging her up so that she could hook her arm around his neck.

“Doesn’t it smell yummy?” she asked as she rubbed a hand across his hair. She’d started that as a toddler whenever he’d held her, and she was the only person he allowed to do it.

“It does smell really good.” He couldn’t quite place his finger on what the scents might mean as far as the meal being prepared, although he could pick out the aroma of freshly cooked bread. That was enough to make his mouth water in anticipation.

As he made his way into the kitchen, he realized it was more than just him and Gareth who'd been invited. Cole and Skylar were there, standing close, fighting if their expressions were anything to go by.

After handing the flowers to Denise and thanking her for the invitation, Jay set Layla down and headed for the teens. "What's going on?"

Cole scowled at him while Skylar crossed her arms and kept her irate gaze on Cole.

"I was asked out on a date," Skylar said.

"Oh?" Jay bounced his gaze between the two of them. "What's the problem, then? You know the rules Dad has for dating."

"It's Aiden," Cole muttered.

"Ah, I see," Jay said with a laugh.

"Would you be laughing if Will had asked Janessa or Charli out?" Cole demanded.

Jay considered it for a minute, then shrugged. "I wouldn't care much now if he dated one of them, but I might not have been too thrilled about it at your age."

"Exactly."

"But I wouldn't have beaten him up if he asked one of them out," Jay continued, then peered more closely at Cole. "You didn't beat Aiden up, did you?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "I just don't think they should be dating."

"It's not like we'll be going off alone together," Skylar said. "He just invited me to go out with you guys on Friday night to get ice cream."

Cole groaned. "I don't want my little sister hanging around with me and my friends."

"Afraid I'm going to tell Mom and Dad that you're doing something you shouldn't be?"

“No. It’s just... weird.”

Jay clapped Cole on the shoulder. “Such is life, little bro. Might as well get used to it. The more you fight this, the more likely you are to lose your friend.”

“Lose him to *Skylar*?” Cole rolled his eyes. “I just thought there was some sort of code between friends about dating their sisters.”

“A crush can trump all that,” Jay informed him, reluctant to peg anything as love just yet.

“Just because you’re not dating doesn’t mean that I can’t.”

“I could date if I wanted to,” Cole informed her with a glare. “I just don’t want to start something before I leave in the fall.”

“And that’s a good decision,” Jay told him. “But you’ve got to let other people live their lives, even if it does make you feel a little creeped out.”

Jay pulled them both in for a quick hug, then left them to finish their squabbling. He was kind of glad that Will had never expressed an interest in any of his sisters because if things hadn’t worked out with them, he would have hated to have had to choose between his best friend and his siblings.

“Hi,” Misha said with a smile as he approached where she stood, Ciara balanced in her arms.

“How was your day?” he asked as he held out his hand to the baby. She immediately grabbed one of his fingers and held on tight.

“It went well. We were able to look at a couple of housing possibilities this morning. Apparently, three-bedroom apartments aren’t plentiful around here, but the agent showed us a couple of townhouses where the property maintenance is included in the rent, so we wouldn’t have to deal with it during winter or summer.”

Jay had an idea of where those properties were, and those developments were in a nice part of town. “Do you have other options to see?”

“She said she might be able to find one or two more, but honestly, I really liked the one place, especially. Mom liked it too, so I have a feeling that will be the one we go with. I don’t really believe in continuing to look in case there’s something better out there when we’ve already found something we both like.”

“Yeah. You don’t want to miss out on it if it turns out there’s nothing better.”

“Yep. So once we have a chance to talk a bit more about it tonight, I’ll let the agent know so we can finalize everything.”

“Will you be able to move in right away?”

“The unit we both liked is available in two weeks, while the other one would be available sooner.”

“There’s no need to rush on Janessa and Charli’s account. I’m sure they’re fine with having you around for however long you need to be here.”

Misha nodded. “That’s what they said.”

Ciara tugged on Jay’s finger and when he looked back at her, she held her arms out to him. Jay glanced at Misha, who simply shrugged. After a brief hesitation, he took the little girl from Misha, prompting a wide, toothy grin from the baby.

“You seem quite comfortable with children,” Misha said.

Jay looked at her. “I’m not *un*comfortable with them, but I’m not as good as Gareth or my sisters. I was eleven when Cole was born and thirteen when Skylar arrived, so I have been around babies. Of course, Layla showed up more recently, so I’ve had some experience with her, too.”

“She seems to adore you,” Misha observed.

“The feeling is definitely mutual.”

Ciara patted his cheek and squealed when he turned his attention back to her. He’d hoped to one day have kids of his own with Casey, but now, he was glad they’d never gotten to that point. A dysfunctional marriage would have turned into a dysfunctional family, and he wouldn’t want that for any child.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Misha spun in a slow circle, taking in the space that had, over the course of the past couple of hours, gone from empty to home. All their furniture from Atlanta was now in place in the townhouse they'd decided on. It was larger than their apartment in Atlanta, but their furniture was still more than adequate.

She knew her mom was going to be so excited to be in their own place. After they'd gotten the keys the previous day, they'd come by to look it over and discuss furniture placement because her mom had planned to stay with Ciara at the house during the move.

"Everything look okay?" Jay asked.

Misha turned to face him with a smile. "Everything looks perfect. Thank you so much."

She'd been planning to hire some moving guys to bring their things from the garage at Charli's where they'd stored everything after it had arrived from Atlanta, since the townhouse hadn't been ready yet. However, Jay had insisted that he could find a few guys to help move everything. That morning, she'd rented a large moving van so that they wouldn't have to make a bunch of trips with a smaller truck.

"You're very welcome," Jay said, shoving his hands into the pockets of the faded jeans he wore along with a T-shirt that had a faded school logo on the front. "We're happy to help. You had less furniture than I thought you would, so it went quickly."

"And now you're all coming to Charli's for pizza, right?"

He nodded as the guys he'd brought with him joined them. "Do we need to swing by and grab the pizza?"

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"It's no problem at all." He turned to the other guys. "You guys head on over to Charli's. I'll go with Misha to pick up the

pizza.”

“What about the truck?” Will asked.

“We’ll take it back after we eat since we’re done sooner than we thought we’d be.”

“Sounds good,” Will said, holding out his fist to bump Jay’s. “Make sure you get what I like.”

Jay frowned at him. “Half a pizza.”

Will sighed. “Fine. Half a pizza.”

Once the guys had followed Will out of the house, Misha turned to Jay. “What does he like on his pizza?”

“Pineapple.”

Misha laughed. “And none of the rest of you like that?”

“Nope.” He narrowed his gaze at her. “Do you?”

“And if I said I did?”

“I might need to reconsider my opinion of you.”

“Well, I’m not sure I could ever abide someone thinking poorly of me over *pizza*.”

“Am I peer pressuring you into not liking pineapple on your pizza?” Jay asked. “If so, I think I can live with myself.”

Misha grinned in response to that, and it left her in a dazed sort of mood. This day could have been so much more stressful, but Jay had made it infinitely less so. He’d been with them the evening before when they’d walked through the townhouse, and he’d made notes on where they wanted everything placed.

That day, Jay had directed his friends on where to put the furniture and boxes, and if there was any clarification needed, he’d come to her. It had been much easier for her than if she’d had to direct everyone herself.

She wasn’t one to usually step back and let others take charge, but since these were Jay’s friends, it seemed like they might respond better to him. However, now that she’d

interacted with them, Misha thought that maybe they would have been just fine with her giving them directions.

Regardless, it was over now, and they could all relax.

After a brief discussion, Jay called in the order for the pizza, having a friendly conversation with whoever answered the phone at the restaurant. Since she'd had pizza already once at the house with the ladies, Misha knew that they were well acquainted with the workers at the pizza place.

With a last look around, Misha locked up the townhouse and followed Jay to his car. She had assumed that he'd have either a muscle car or a big truck, but the man drove a gray mid-size SUV. It was similar to the SUV that had shown up for her shortly after they'd arrived in Serenity. Yet one more gift from Doctor Martin.

Jay guided the SUV with easy movements through the streets to park in front of the pizza place. "Want to come in with me?"

With a nod, Misha undid her seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Jay held the door of the restaurant open, then followed her inside.

"Heya, Coach!" a teen behind the counter called out. "How's life?"

"Life's good. How about you?"

"Doing good."

"Glad to hear it."

"Got yourself a new girlfriend?" the guy asked as he approached the cash register, eyeing Misha.

"Nope. This is Doctor Michelle Barnes. She's going to be working with us at the clinic."

The teen's eyes widened for a moment before he said, "Sorry about that. Nice to meet you."

"No worries," Misha assured the embarrassed teen. "It's nice to meet you too."

"That's Jeff. He plays on the basketball team with Cole."

The young man nodded and smiled. “And Coach took us all the way to the state championship this year, and we won.”

“That’s great,” Misha said. “Congratulations.”

A young woman brought a couple of pizza boxes to the front counter. “You guys having a pizza party?”

“This is our payment for helping Michelle move into her new place.”

“Ahh. That makes sense.”

“You better have made one of those half pineapple or Will is going to whine at me,” Jay said.

“I did,” the girl said. “Double pineapple, in fact.”

“You don’t need to butter him up,” Jay said to her. “You’re his favorite baby cousin.”

“I’m not a baby,” she protested. “And just for that, I’m going to put pineapple all over your pizza next time, too.”

Jay pointed at her. “You’re definitely related to Will.”

Misha enjoyed watching Jay banter with the teens. It was clear they knew him and respected him, which spoke well of the man.

While they waited for the last of the pizzas, Misha paid for the order. Once they had them all ready to go, Jay called out, “Who’s your favorite Halverson?”

There was a chorus of *Doc* and *Cole*, followed by loud laughter.

“You’re all mean,” Jay said as he shouldered the door open, then held it with his foot for Misha.

“We love you, Coach!”

“Yeah. Yeah.” He let the door close on their laughter and led the way back to the SUV, a broad smile on his face.

“You’re good with kids of all ages,” Misha said as she waited for Jay to open the door of the car.

“Kids are great,” Jay replied as he bent to put the boxes he held on the back seat. Straightening, he turned to take the ones

she held. “It’s adults that really complicate life.”

Misha definitely couldn’t argue with him about that. “How do you know them all? Through your brother and sister?”

“Sort of.” Jay opened the passenger side door for her, then jogged around to slide behind the steering wheel. “I coach basketball at the high school, so I know the boys mostly from there. Skylar is on the cheerleading squad, so I know some of the girls from them having been part of that with her.”

“Is basketball a big sport around here?”

“Now it is,” Jay said as he backed out of the parking spot and headed toward the house. “When I first joined the team as a freshman in high school, it wasn’t anything to talk about. That’s changed over the years. Now the school has two strong teams—basketball and football.”

“Did basketball become more prominent because of you?” Misha asked.

Jay glanced at her before looking back at the road. “I don’t like to put it that way, but I was definitely more passionate about the game than most people. Coach tried to get me to play football like Gareth, but I had zero interest in that. Like less than zero. I cheered for the team when Gareth was on it, but once he was gone, I didn’t have anything more to do with football.”

“So you came back to town and got a job as the coach?”

“No. Coach is still there, but when I came returned from college, he asked if I’d be willing to take over coaching basketball. I didn’t even have to think twice before agreeing.”

“And Cole is also good at basketball, like you were?”

“He’s probably even better,” Jay said. “I’ve pushed him harder than Coach ever pushed me, and he’s got a good chance of going pro if he keeps his focus.”

“Did you have that chance too?”

Jay sighed. “Yeah, but I decided on a different path.”

“Do you regret it?” Misha asked.

“Not really. I like my life here.”

Misha didn't hear total conviction in his answer, which meant that he probably did hold some regret over that decision.

That topic of conversation died as Jay pulled to a stop in front of the house. They got out and grabbed the pizza, knowing that hungry people awaited them.

The front door swung open to reveal Gareth. He greeted them with a smile as they passed him. “I hear it went really well today.”

“It did,” Misha said as she followed Jay into the kitchen. She was quickly relieved of the boxes she carried. “I couldn't have imagined it going any smoother.”

“I'm glad to hear that. Sorry I wasn't there to help.”

“You had a good reason,” Misha reminded him.

“I know, but I feel guilty eating pizza when I didn't help.”

“Well, as you can see, we got plenty. Just don't eat the pineapple one.”

Gareth grimaced. “No worries about that. Will can eat every slice of that abomination.”

In the two weeks since they'd first arrived, Misha had found herself relaxing more and more around the Halversons, which surprised her a bit. However, they were very easy to be around, always making her and her mom feel welcome.

“Hey, everyone,” Charli called out. “How about we say a prayer of thanks, then we can all dig in?”

The conversations quieted, and at Charli's request, Gareth prayed, thanking God for the food and also for the smooth move. It had definitely been an answer to prayer for Misha, who'd been praying about it since they'd received their move-in date, not wanting to inconvenience the people who had offered to help them.

Once Gareth said amen, the guys hung back, allowing the women to get their food first. Even though most of them had

been lugging furniture and boxes around, they didn't seem annoyed by the wait. They stood talking and laughing with each other until the ladies all had plates of food.

Misha settled at the table with Ciara in a highchair between her and her mom. When the guys joined them, Jay sat down in the empty chair beside her. Will sat on his other side, while the rest of the men filled in the seats across the table from them.

Even though she hadn't done much of the physical work that day, Misha felt tired. She hadn't been sleeping very well for the past week or so, as she'd worried over this final step of their move. Plus, she'd begun to work at the clinic, and though it had basically gone well, she was always on edge about potential issues. Each day that she made it through with no complaints from anyone, the more she relaxed.

Now that they had their own place, Misha knew that one more stressor would be gone from her life. They just had to get the things they'd been using at the house moved over and they'd be good. It was their plan to spend the night at the townhouse that night.

Once everyone had eaten, the men who had helped them move left, after Misha had thanked them once again. Her mom stayed to help clean up while Misha went back to the townhouse with Jay to pick up the rental truck. He drove it, and she followed him in his SUV. She'd been a bit nervous about driving it, but he didn't seem worried.

"Well, that's all done," Jay said as they climbed into the SUV after returning the truck.

"Yep. Only need to move over the suitcases we have at the house with us, which should be no problem."

"I bet you're excited to get settled."

Misha nodded. "Don't get me wrong. I'm so grateful for your sisters' generosity in letting us stay with them. Both Mom and I have enjoyed staying there."

"But there's nothing like your own space."

"Yeah. We're used to living on our own, so it will be nice to get back to that."

“I hope that doesn’t mean that the only time we see you will be at the clinic.”

Misha wasn’t sure what to make of that comment. “Well, I think we’ll see you at church, too.”

“I just want you to know that we’ve come to think of you as a friend, not just as an employee.”

“Yes, I think we’ve well and truly crossed that line.”

Jay chuckled. “It happened with Aria too. Although, I would say that the friendship/employee line was crossed even before she arrived, since she and Janessa had been friends prior to her arrival here.”

Misha had heard about Aria’s arrival and how her relationship with Gareth had blossomed and then almost met its end. It was hard to believe, looking at the couple now, that they’d had such a rough patch.

“I didn’t expect such a supportive community when I was first told about the job here, to be honest,” Misha said.

Rather than question why she’d thought that, Jay nodded. “I would imagine that there might have been some apprehension about moving so far away from your friends and family. Plus, a community that you were unlikely to find here.”

“Yeah.” And they hadn’t found a community exactly like they’d had in Atlanta, but they had found something in Serenity. Not better, necessarily, but at least she didn’t feel that they were completely on their own.

Her worry was more about her mom than about herself. She’d found friendships with Charli, Janessa, and Aria. Her mom, however, had only connected with Cathy, and that wasn’t a strong connection. At least, not yet. Mainly because the woman was in and out of Serenity

When she’d mentioned it to her mom, she’d brushed Misha’s concerns away, telling her it was far too soon to be worried about her not having made a bunch of friends. Hopefully, once they were settled into their own place, her mom would have more opportunities to meet people.

Back at the house, Aria offered to watch Ciara while Misha and her mom went up to pack the last of their things.

“Are you excited, Mom?” Misha asked as she put her makeup bag into her suitcase.

“I am. How does it look?”

“Perfect.” And it really did. The biggest blessing of all, however, was that they would no longer have to look over their shoulders, scared that they were in some gang member’s crosshairs.

“Once it’s all set up, we’ll have to send pictures to Doctor Martin,” her mom said as she wheeled the suitcase with Ciara’s stuff over to the door. “I’m sure it will give him a sense of peace to know that we’ve been able to find a home here. He was worried.”

Misha nodded. As much as the doctor had encouraged them to leave, she knew he’d had concerns as well. So being able to put his mind at ease would be a good thing.

After she’d put the last of her things into the suitcase, Misha took one final look through the rooms to make sure they hadn’t left anything. Not that that was terribly concerning, since Janessa or Aria would give them anything they left behind.

“Let me just remake the beds,” her mom said. They’d stripped the sheets earlier, and her mom had washed and dried them while Misha had been helping supervise the moving of their things.

“I’ll help.”

Together, they made quick work of both the beds, and even though she hadn’t been there to see her do it, she was quite certain that her mom had vacuumed, dusted and cleaned both bathrooms. Her mom’s pride wouldn’t allow her to leave a mess behind for someone else to clean up.

They each carried one suitcase down, but were then told by Gareth and Jay that they’d get the rest. They put most of the remaining things into Jay’s SUV, with the rest going into Misha’s car.

“I feel so emotional,” Aria said as she followed them out onto the porch. “We’ve gotten so used to having you all around that it’s going to be weird without you here.”

Misha smiled at the other woman, happy that they weren’t looking forward to seeing the backs of her and her mom. They could have been saying that just to be nice, but Misha didn’t think Aria was like that.

“You know we’re always here if you need anything,” Charli said. “Babysitting or whatever.”

“I wish you could leave Ciara,” Layla said as she took the baby’s hand.

Misha had to tighten her grip on Ciara as she leaned toward Layla. The little girl had been a great help with entertaining the baby.

“You’ll still see her,” Misha promised. “We’re not going far.”

“I hope that’s true,” Janessa said. “It’s been great having you here with us.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?” Aria asked.

“I’m sure.” Misha glanced at her mom, who nodded.

“Do you want me to come with you, Jay?” Gareth asked.

Jay shook his head. “I think we’ll be fine. All the big stuff is in place, and I can manage the suitcases.”

“Okay.” Gareth slid his arm around Aria’s waist, then looked at Misha. “Please don’t hesitate to ask us for help with anything. Just because you’re not living here anymore doesn’t mean we don’t care about how you’re doing.”

“Thanks.” It was hard to agree to asking for help, particularly because she felt like they’d been helped so much already. Not just by the Halversons, but also by everything Doctor Martin had done for them. “We appreciate everything you’ve helped us with already. It’s made the transition here a lot smoother than we had expected.”

Her mom nodded and added her own thanks to Misha’s.

“I guess we’re ready to go,” Misha said, accepting hugs from the three women before heading to her car to strap Ciara into her car seat.

They waved goodbye as Misha pulled away from the curb, and even though they weren’t going very far, it very much felt like they were leaving yet another home.

Once they arrived at the townhouse, Jay and Misha unloaded the suitcases while her mom took Ciara and wandered through the space. It didn’t take long before everything they owned was in their new home.

“Thank you so much for all your help,” Misha said to Jay as she stepped out onto the small porch outside their front door. “I don’t think we could have done it without you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I could help.” He gave her a smile that made her feel warm and fuzzy. Like he really had viewed it as a pleasure rather than a chore to move their things. “And like Gareth said, if you need anything, just let us know.”

“We will.”

After a nod, Jay stepped off the porch and, with long strides, headed to his SUV. Misha watched him go, standing with her arm crossed against the slight chill that the late afternoon air held. She waved as he drove away, then waited until he’d disappeared from view before going inside.

Back in the townhouse, Misha found that her mom had put Ciara in her bouncer and was tackling the boxes with the kitchen stuff in them. “Does it still look as nice with all our stuff in it?”

“It looks even better,” her mom said, abandoning the dishes to come give her a hug. “This is wonderful.”

Her mom’s words settled something inside Misha. Personally, she’d been willing to accept whatever, just so they could be safe. But if this made her mom happy, that was truly a gift.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“How’s it been in your new place?” Jay asked Misha when he saw her at work on Monday.

“It’s great.” The beaming smile added weight to her words, and he was glad.

He hadn’t really thought much about everything they had given up to come to Serenity until he’d spent time with her during the move. He’d experienced a similar adjustment when they’d moved to Serenity from Seattle after his mom had passed away, but years had dimmed that memory. However, any major changes like that would take some adjusting, regardless of age. The only person Jay knew who seemed to thrive on frequent changes in his life was Wilder.

Janessa had voiced that she wished that Misha and her mom could have continued to stay with them, but Jay understood why they needed their own space.

“Hopefully you didn’t discover anything broken as you unpacked.”

“Everything was fine,” Misha said. “The movers in Atlanta did a great job of packing everything.”

“That’s good.”

“We also met some of the neighbors yesterday.”

“Oh? Were they nice?”

Misha shrugged. “They seemed to be. On the right, there’s a single mom with two kids. The other side is an elderly woman and her son.”

“Hopefully they’re good neighbors. If not, let me know.”

Misha laughed. “And what will you do?”

Jay cracked his knuckles. “Not sure, but I’ll think of something.”

“To be honest, having bad neighbors is something we’ve dealt with plenty. We once lived in a large apartment block

back in Atlanta, and for every good neighbor, there was a bad one. It's just the nature of living close to other people."

"I'm sure you'll be able to win them over," Jay said.

"Well, maybe not me, but my mom for sure. All she has to do is offer them cookies or her cinnamon buns, and they will fall all over her."

"Hmmm. Have I mentioned that your mom hasn't quite won me over yet?"

Thankfully, Misha got the joke and laughed again, her eyes sparkling. "I'll be sure to let her know that she needs to work on impressing you a bit more. Any specific type of cookie that you'd prefer?"

"Chocolate chip are always a winner with me." He might try to keep his diet pretty healthy, but there were a few exceptions. Baked goods were one of them. Especially chocolate chip cookies.

Misha winked. "I'll pass that on."

"Morning, Misha," Janessa called out as she came down the hall toward them. "Now that you've had two nights in the new place, how's it going?"

"It's great."

"Well, even though I loved having you live with us, I'm glad you're settling in. We do miss you, though. Especially your mom's cooking."

"Don't worry. Mom is already talking about coming over to make a meal for everyone."

"That sounds wonderful. Our kitchen is her kitchen whenever she wants. She spoiled us with her great cooking."

"Seriously though," Misha said. "I think Mom would love to be able to cook and clean regularly at your place if you'd like her to."

Janessa seemed to consider Misha's words before she said, "Let me talk to Charli and Aria and see how that might work."

“Thanks,” Misha said. “She was a housekeeper in Atlanta, and she didn’t do that just because it was the only job she could get. She loves that type of work. I think she misses it.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can come up with for her,” Janessa said with a smile.

“Mom is enjoying unpacking the house at the moment, but I know once that’s all done, she’s going to be looking for something to do. She’s never been one to sit around.”

Jay wasn’t surprised to hear that. Even from the little he’d been around Denise, he’d noticed how she always seemed to be busy doing something. It reminded him of his mom. Even after she put in a full day of work at the clinic, she’d still keep busy doing stuff around the house.

“I could probably learn something from her,” Janessa said. “After a day here, I’m more than ready to just veg out at home.”

“Yeah. That’s me too,” Misha said.

“Speaking of...” Janessa said. “I’d better get up to the front and see who’s here.”

As Janessa walked away, Misha turned back to Jay. “Guess I’ll see you later.”

“You bet.” Jay headed to his office, switching gears to what he needed to take care of that day.

Unfortunately, instead of being able to keep his focus on business, his thoughts kept wandering to the time he’d spent with Misha on the weekend. He’d been more than happy to help her, especially since Gareth had been unavailable.

From his mom, Jay knew that Misha was a hard worker and was committed to her job. The plus was that she didn’t come with an unhealthy perception of her relationships with her co-workers.

Misha was going to be on her own this week after having worked alongside his mom. He couldn’t wait to hear how it went. So far, there had been no negative comments from patients, which was good. Given how hard it had been to find

someone to replace Nora, it would be a shame if Misha didn't work out.

He appreciated that things had settled down in the clinic. The overall atmosphere was definitely lighter, and no one was skulking around, trying to avoid Nora.

And it wasn't just Nora's absence that made the difference. Misha's personality was more upbeat and being around her was never a hardship.

Gareth, of course, was just happier overall because of his relationship with Aria. Jay was a little jealous, if he was honest with himself. Unlike what Jay had had with Casey, Gareth's relationship with Aria was healthy. They made each other happy in a way he and Casey had never managed to.

Jay managed to maintain good relationships with his friends and family, so he couldn't understand why he'd failed so badly with Casey. Obviously, there was something about him that had made it impossible for Casey to commit to him fully.

Yes, their relationship had been unhealthy, but it couldn't have all been Casey making it that way. He must have played a role of some sort. He just needed to figure out what that had been, so he didn't repeat it.

Pushing back from his desk, Jay left his office and went to the breakroom. He needed something to drink. Or maybe just a distraction.

Not wanting a second of coffee, he had to settle for something else. The remaining options were kind of limited, unfortunately. Water, soda, or tea. He chose tea and dug through his mom's stash of herbal and regular tea, settling on a fruity blend. He filled a mug with hot water from the dispenser, then dropped the tea bag into the mug.

While he waited for his tea to steep, Jay rubbed a hand over his head, then threaded his fingers behind his neck and stared up at the ceiling.

The relief he'd felt at finally ending things with Casey had recently given way to questions and self-recriminations. He

wanted to be able to move on from Casey and have a healthy relationship like Gareth had with Aria, but he still didn't know why he'd allowed himself to be continually drawn back into things with Casey, even when his heart wasn't fully in it.

“Everything okay?”

At the sound of Misha's voice, Jay dropped his arms and turned to face her, forcing a smile. “Yep. Just grabbing a cup of tea.”

Her gaze narrowed for a moment before she said, “Yeah. I'm here for coffee.”

Stepping to the side, Jay moved his mug down on the counter. “It's all yours.”

“You prefer tea to coffee?” she asked as she got a mug from the cupboard.

“I try not to drink more than one cup of coffee a day.”

Misha gave a nod, then poured herself a cup from the carafe. “I admire your restraint. I learned to drink far too much of it when I was doing my residency.”

“Gareth is like that, too.” Jay lifted his mug to take a sip.

“Well, I'd better get back to work.” She gave him a sparkling smile. “Just had to get a hit of caffeine.”

He watched Misha go, wondering what types of relationships she'd had. She didn't seem like the sort of person who would play with a guy's feelings. But then, he hadn't thought that about Casey either. Clearly, he wasn't a great judge of character.

They had a meeting planned for the end of the day, so once five o'clock came and went, Jay gathered up a pen and the notepad where he'd made note of a few things to discuss. There was no one else in the breakroom, so he set his things on the table and went to the fridge to get something to drink. Something that wasn't coffee.

“Making coffee?” Janessa asked as she came into the room.

“No one ticked me off enough to inflict my coffee on them,” Jay said as he held up the can of soda he’d found in the fridge. He didn’t usually have soda, but he didn’t want more tea, and he hadn’t had a soda in a while. “And who wants coffee this late in the day?”

“Probably Gareth and Misha.” Janessa quickly swapped out filters and went through the motions of preparing a new pot. “And maybe me. I’m making decaf.”

Jay took his drink over to the table and sat down, leaning back in his chair as he stretched out his legs. After a day sitting at his desk, he was ready for some sort of workout.

What he’d really like was a game of basketball. Unfortunately, now that the high school season was over, he didn’t have people to play with unless he made arrangements to use the gym at the high school. He’d done that before. There were guys from the team who’d join him for a game or two, even though they were done with their season.

But that required him to plan ahead in order to reserve the gym and let the boys know, so he’d have to make do with some time at the gym instead.

A few minutes later, Aria appeared, followed by Gareth. “Are you making coffee, Janessa?”

“I am,” she said. “Though it’s the unleaded stuff.”

“At any other time of the day, I’d complain,” Gareth said as he went to the cupboard and pulled out a couple of mugs. “But it’s probably a good idea for now.”

“No coffee for me.” Aria headed for the fridge, then returned to the table with a bottle of water in her hand.

Misha came in just as Gareth was pouring coffee into mugs.

“Would you like coffee, Misha?” Gareth asked. When she said yes, he handed her one of the mugs he’d poured, then grabbed another one.

Once they were all seated at the table with their preferred drinks, Gareth said a prayer for the meeting. This was the first

meeting that his parents weren't present at since Misha had started to work in the clinic. It felt like things were settling down, returning to normal.

"So," Gareth began. "Any concerns?"

"Is everything going okay with you, Misha?" Janessa asked. "The patients are treating you well?"

"Yep," Misha said. "Although I've never had this much curiosity about my relationship status. Even my mom hasn't been as interested as some of these patients."

"We should have warned you." Aria grimaced. "It was the same for me when I first came."

"The interest will wear off," Janessa assured her. "Helps to get a boyfriend."

"Yep," Aria agreed.

"Why don't you have one then, Janessa?" Misha asked.

"Haha." Janessa took a sip of her coffee. "I haven't found the guy that interests me enough to give up my freedom."

"Yeah. It's so hard being tied down," Aria said with a laugh. "So terrible."

Janessa rolled her eyes. "Shut up."

Jay was so glad that things had worked out for Aria to stay, not just for the clinic and Gareth, but for Janessa as well. The two had a close friendship that was important to his sister. She had other friendships, but for some reason, what she had with Aria seemed to be closer to the type of relationship she shared with Charli, the sister she was closest to.

"I'd like to have a discussion about the Saturday clinic," Gareth said. "Misha, I know you had some interest in perhaps committing more of your time to it."

It appeared that Misha had been giving it some serious thought as she laid out her ideas for what she'd like to see happen with the clinic. Given she'd only been there a few weeks, Jay was surprised that he didn't chafe more about the

changes she wanted to see, especially since they'd impact the budget, which was his focus.

"My main concern is from a personnel standpoint," Gareth said. "We have two nurses on rotation at the moment, as you know. I don't think we can afford to have Janessa out of the clinic for a full day during the week, and it's also not fair to ask her to work six days a week."

"We'd have to find someone who only wants to work one day a week," Janessa said. "I don't know whether Betsy is interested in working every Saturday or not. I suppose we could present it to her and see what she says."

"I don't mean to come in and start demanding changes," Misha said.

"You're not," Jay assured her. "The free clinic is an important part of what we do here. Mom and Dad have always done what was necessary to keep it running, and they have both said that they're pleased you'd like to devote your Saturdays to give it more time and attention."

Misha's smile at his words was small but indicated her pleasure at his comments. Jay had no idea why she was so passionate about it, but it boded well for the clinic.

Nora had questioned it at first, but since her participation in it had been written into her contract, she'd had no choice but to fulfill her responsibilities there. Once she'd accepted it, she hadn't complained much about it, which had been good.

Misha, however, wasn't just accepting her responsibility there, she was embracing it. The free clinic was clearly something she had a strong interest in, and it was good to see.

"Will it be an issue if I'm only taking appointments four days a week?" Misha asked, directing the question to Gareth.

"It shouldn't be. When Nora worked her half day in the clinic, she would take Monday morning off. We managed the appointments without too much hassle."

"I'm grateful that you're willing to consider this change," Misha said, leaning forward with an earnest expression on her face. "I'll do whatever you need to make it a success."

Gareth smiled at her. “And we’ll do what we can to make it a success as well.”

Jay admired the passion Misha displayed when it came to the free clinic. It spoke to her character even more than the work she’d done for them so far. It was a passion that his parents displayed when it came to their work as well.

At times, he struggled to not feel jealous that he didn’t feel that kind of passion for his own work at the clinic. It wasn’t that he hated what he did. In fact, he actually did enjoy it. There were definitely worse things he could be doing with his life.

The only thing he was truly passionate about was coaching basketball at the high school. Unfortunately, that wasn’t something that lasted year-round, and it couldn’t be his full-time job. Being coach at the high school would require coaching sports he wasn’t necessarily as passionate about.

“Okay. Anything else we need to talk about?” Gareth asked.

The consensus was that they’d covered everything, so they ended the meeting. Jay drained the last of his soda, then pitched the can into the recycling bin they kept in the room. Usually, he’d leave the room right away, but that day, he took his time gathering up his stuff, listening as Misha chatted with Aria and Janessa.

“Everything going okay with you?”

Jay looked up to find Gareth standing next to him, concern on his face. “Yeah. Why?”

“You just seem a bit distracted,” he said. “Usually you have more to share, especially when it concerns the budget.”

“I’m not going to argue against something that Mom and Dad have already indicated they’re on board with. This is one of those situations where I’m sure they’d be fine with seeing fewer profits in order to bring it about.”

Gareth nodded. “As long as that’s the only reason you weren’t pushing back against the idea.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Jay said. “Carrying out Misha’s plan falls more on the rest of you than on me.”

“Doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to have an opinion.”

Jay gave a huff of laughter. “That’s got to be a first. You actually *wanting* me to give my opinion.”

Gareth grinned as he shrugged. “Maybe you’ve somehow programmed me to believe that I need to have your opinion before any decision is valid.”

“If he’s managed that, I need to learn how to do it,” Janessa said as she joined them.

“Oh no,” Gareth said. “That’s not a skill he needs to share.”

As they left the room, Jay headed for his office to drop off his notepad and pen and to pick up the rest of the stuff he usually took home at night.

He was seated at his desk, shutting down his computer, when Misha appeared in the doorway.

“Do you have a moment?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She settled into the chair across from him, then said, “Are you really okay with the changes I’d like to make with the free clinic?”

“Of course,” he said. “Like I told Gareth, the only reason I’m not more vocal is because I’m the one that’s least affected by these decisions. Plus, Mom and Dad are on board with the idea. That’s really the most important thing.”

“So you’re not involved with the clinic at all?” she asked.

“Not beyond any work that has to be done from an administration standpoint. I don’t really have skills that are useful at the clinic.”

Strangely, Jay got the feeling that his comment disappointed her, and he wanted to give her a bunch of reasons as to why he didn’t have the same passion for the clinic that Gareth and Janessa did.

“Well, I’m sure the clinic couldn’t run without your skills,” she said with a smile. “I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t have concerns.”

He gave her a small smile. “As I’m sure Gareth and Janessa could tell you, if I had any serious concerns, I’d voice them.”

“So you have some not-so-serious concerns?” she asked with a small tilt of her head.

Jay wanted to say that he didn’t, but she was looking at him with such expectation that he felt like he had to be completely honest. “My only real concern is finding someone to work alongside you each Saturday. I don’t want us to settle for just anyone.”

“No. I agree, it needs to be a special person.”

“The nurse who has shared the responsibility with Janessa has been great, but I’m not sure she’ll want to do it every week.” Jay rested his hand on his mouse, though the computer was off. “You’ve fit in so well here that I’d like to see that carried through to the free clinic and whoever we hire to work there with you.”

Misha nodded. “I agree. That’s important.”

She settled back in the chair, making him wonder if she had other things she wanted to talk to him about. Which was fine with him. He had no place to be, though he would have thought that she’d be eager to get home to Ciara and her mom.

“I just want to make sure that none of you think I’m just barging in here and demanding to make changes.” Misha frowned. “I wasn’t sure about coming here, you know. From the time I decided I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to be more than just another doctor in another clinic. I wanted to be a doctor who makes a difference.”

“I think you’ll find that opportunity with the free clinic,” Jay assured her.

“I didn’t really think that there would be many lower-income people in a town like Serenity.”

Jay shrugged. “Sadly, there is poverty everywhere. It was why my parents started the clinic. They saw a need and moved to fill it.”

“Do you have a similar outlook as your parents?” Misha asked.

CHAPTER NINE

Misha wasn't sure if Jay was going to answer her, but she was super curious. Of the family members associated with the clinic, he seemed the least invested in it.

"I totally support the clinic." He didn't say it with any sort of defensiveness, so at least he hadn't taken offense to her question. "I just don't have an upfront role to play in it the way the others do."

"Do you track the expenses of the free clinic?" she asked.

A smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "I track *all* expenses. That's my job."

"I would like to be informed on what the costs for running the clinic would be." Misha didn't think finances should trump patient care, but a negative bottom line would affect all patients if the clinic had to cut services to save money.

"I can certainly go over those with you."

"But you're okay with me wanting to expand the non-money-making part of the clinic?"

Jay leaned forward, folding his arms in front of him on the desk. "The clinic isn't about making our family rich. Of course, we need it to make enough money to cover expenses and have enough to set aside for new equipment as needed."

Misha was glad to hear that. At her previous clinic, prior to her working there, the person in charge of the finances had been accused of embezzling funds. Thankfully, they'd been replaced by someone who had been very transparent, answering any questions that were put to them.

"I have a deep appreciation for clinics that are set up to help those who might not get health care otherwise," Jay said. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for a free clinic."

"What do you mean?"

Jay shifted in his seat. “My birth mom met my adopted mom at a clinic in a low income area of Seattle. My mom—Cathy—worked there for a bit, and my mom volunteered, cleaning rooms in between patients and stuff like that. Somehow, they struck up a friendship and continued to keep in contact, even after Cathy and Dan returned to Serenity. When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, Cathy was there for her.” Jaylen grimaced as he said her first name again. “Sorry, just trying to keep from getting them confused. Anyway, Cathy was instrumental in getting my mom medical help during that time.”

“I wondered how you ended up with the Halversons.”

Jay nodded. “All the legalities were done before my mom died. So I understand the importance of those types of clinics and the connections that are made there.”

“Do the same people come regularly to the one here?” Misha asked.

“That’s probably a question better asked of Aria and Janessa. But I would imagine so. Especially the ones with children.”

“And the gift packs? Have you always done those?”

“As long as I can remember. The packs have increased in contents recently, however,” Jay said. “That has been something of a project for Aria and Janessa.”

“And that’s factored into the budget?”

Jay didn’t answer right away, his brow furrowing. “Did someone tell you that I’m obsessed with the expenses of the clinic?”

“Uh... maybe?” Misha didn’t want to upset him, but she also needed to know if he was going to push back on things she might propose that would cost money.

“Of course,” he said with a nod. “They’re correct that I am focused on the expenses of the clinic. Maybe they see it as obsessed, but I view it as being diligent. I believe that it’s prudent to keep a close eye on expenses so that we’re not spending more money than we need to. Doing that means that

when we need to spend money on unexpected things, it's available."

"So it's not that you don't want to spend money," she said.

"No, it's not that. It's that I don't want to spend money frivolously. So I ask people to source out things they want to spend money on to make sure we're getting the best deal. And if someone can prove to me why they need to spend money on something beyond what we usually buy, I'm not going to shoot them down."

"I can understand that."

"All I want is for this clinic to continue to be able to offer all the services we've been able to up to this point. Financial irresponsibility is the quickest way to put the clinic in jeopardy."

As she came to understand Jay's reasoning, Misha gained more respect for the man. He might not have a medical degree, but Jay had an equally important role in the clinic. They were all necessary to keep the clinic running and offering its services in Serenity to the rich, the poor, and everyone in between.

"Are there others in the family who are hoping to join the clinic some day?" Misha asked. "Like Cole?"

Jay laughed. "No. Definitely not Cole. It would require too much studying for his liking. Skylar has mentioned maybe going into nursing like Janessa. The ones away at school now aren't planning to work in the clinic."

After realizing how family-centered the clinic was, Misha had wondered if perhaps she was just a placeholder until someone else was ready to take the position of doctor there. She was relieved to know that wasn't the case.

When she'd first arrived in Serenity, she hadn't been looking too far into the future. However, in the few weeks she'd been there, her outlook had changed. She wanted to be a part of this clinic and its work in the town. Maybe that desire would change over time, but right then, she hoped that she

could play an integral role and help in a way she hadn't been sure she'd be able to when she'd taken the job.

"Thanks for chatting with me," Misha said. "I'm still finding my footing, I think, and I appreciate you letting me ask questions."

Jay smiled at her. "I'm happy to answer them, if I can."

"I appreciate that. Communication is key."

"So I've heard."

"You don't agree?"

"Oh, I agree. However, communication can be challenging for some people, especially on difficult subjects."

Misha nodded. "Honestly, I wasn't sure I'd be able to communicate much when I came here. Especially since I was stepping into a role surrounded by people who were related to each other."

"And you feel differently now?"

"I do. Everyone here has been very good at making me feel comfortable enough to ask questions and make suggestions." Misha glanced at her phone. "I should probably get going, or Mom will start blowing up my phone to make sure I'm okay."

"That's the price we pay when we live with our parents."

"You don't, though, do you?" she asked. "I mean, they have a big enough house, I suppose."

Jay scoffed. "They do have the room, but no, I don't live with them. Haven't since I finished college. I lived with them for a bit when I first came home, but then I moved in with Will for a year. After that, I moved into the place I'm in now by myself."

"Didn't want to live with your friend anymore?"

"We're very different people and decided that it would be best for our friendship to not live together."

"One of you a slob?"

Jay laughed. “Will is a bit that way. It drove me nuts.”

“My mom would never let me be a slob, even if I’d had the tendency. I mean, everything doesn’t have to be perfect. I kind of fall in the middle. Mess doesn’t stress me out, but I also like stuff to be in its place so I can find it.”

“Mom kept after us about cleaning up after ourselves. With so many people in one house, it could very quickly get out of control if we didn’t do our part.”

“So you didn’t miss living with someone after going from a houseful to just you?” Misha knew she needed to go, but she was enjoying these quiet moments with Jay.

As much as she liked the times she’d spent with his family, there was something about the man that made her want to learn all she could about him.

“Nope. Didn’t really miss it at all. Probably because I still spend plenty of time with them.” Jay leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms up before lacing his fingers over his stomach. “Don’t get me wrong. I love them all. I just also like not having them constantly breathing down my neck.”

“Well, I’ll let you get home to your peace and quiet,” Misha said, getting to her feet. “And I’ll go get some slobbery kisses.”

Jay’s smile in response to that was filled with affection. “Layla was the queen of slobbery kisses. Once she learned to kiss, she gave them liberally.”

“Yeah. Ciara’s in that stage right now.”

“Enjoy it. They grow out of it so fast.” Jay pushed up from his chair, then grabbed his phone off the desk. “Layla has grown up in the blink of an eye.”

Misha considered for a moment what Ciara might be like at that age and realized that she wasn’t ready for that just yet. “Yeah. Time needs to slow down. But for now, I’m going to get my stuff and go enjoy my baby.”

Jay followed her out of his office, then waited for her by the back door, locking everything up before they said goodbye

and headed to their cars.

Since she was a little later than usual leaving the clinic, Misha texted her mom to let her know she was on her way home. Her mom didn't seem as worried as she'd been if Misha was late when she'd worked at the clinic in Atlanta. Though Misha missed certain things about their old life, her mom stressing wasn't one of them.

A crying baby greeted her when she walked into the townhouse, so Misha quickly dropped her stuff on the couch and moved to take Ciara from her mom.

"Thanks, love," her mom said, looking as unfrazzled as ever. "She didn't take a nap earlier, so she's cranky."

"Has she had supper?" Misha asked as she bounced Ciara gently on her hip.

"Not yet. I'm trying to get it ready, but she doesn't want to wait."

"She loves her food as much as we do," Misha said with a laugh. "Don't you, baby girl?"

Ciara wailed, arching her back. It was a move she did frequently, so Misha was ready for it.

"Here we go," her mom said a couple of minutes later. "Food!"

Misha took Ciara over to the table but kept her in her lap instead of putting her in her highchair. Once she had settled down a bit, she'd move her over.

"Have a bite." Misha held a small spoonful of mashed sweet potato to Ciara's mouth. The baby stopped crying immediately, opening up her mouth to take the food. "Yep. Always ready for the food."

"You'd think we starved her for how much she cries when we don't feed her right on time," her mom said with a laugh as she set a bowl of rice and a platter with fish and vegetables on the table.

When Ciara started reaching for the spoon to feed herself, Misha transferred her to her highchair. She used the suction

cup on the bottom of the bowl to attach it to the tray, then she handed the little girl the spoon.

Her mom said a prayer for the food, then they settled in to enjoy their meal. Misha shared about what had happened at the clinic, and her mom told her about the neighbors she'd met when she'd taken Ciara out for a walk. And apparently, Cathy had stopped by to visit with her and had joined her for the walk.

“Did you see Jay today?” her mom asked.

Misha chuckled. “Of course, I did. He works at the clinic, just like I do.”

“He's such a nice man.”

“He is,” Misha agreed. She had a feeling that they were going to have a version of this conversation frequently.

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“I don't know for sure.” Though she suspected no, since the kids at the pizza place had referred to her as the new girlfriend, which meant there had to be an old one.

“Maybe you should ask him.”

“Maybe I shouldn't,” Misha countered. “That's not what I need to be focusing on right now. No matter how nice of a man Jay is.”

“You're right. I wouldn't want you to jeopardize your job.”

It was hard to shut her mom down on this because Misha knew that her mom wanted her to find love and have a family. At one time, Misha had hoped to get married and have kids. That had all been put on the back burner while she'd gone through medical school and her residency.

One of the things she'd been looking forward to once she'd landed the job at the clinic in Atlanta was finally having normal hours, which would allow her to have a social life. A social life that she'd hoped would include dating. And it had, for a little while.

After everything had happened with her brothers, she could no longer envision bringing kids into her life. And then Ciara had arrived, and Misha had figured she'd be the only child she raised.

Now, though...

She hadn't given it a lot of thought, but there were moments when she felt a sense of hope for things she'd let go of. Her biological clock was also clicking loud enough that it was hard to ignore.

In the midst of everything, though, was a sense of guilt, however.

She'd been given a chance to leave behind the life that had taken so much from her and her mom. She knew that many in their old neighborhood didn't have that option. They had to make the best of their lives there. They had no choice.

And there were those who managed to not just survive that life but thrive in it. They raised children who didn't get caught up in the gangs the way Misha's father and brother had, and those children had gone on to live successful lives.

Things had calmed down for Misha and her family after their dad had gone to prison to serve a life sentence for his gang activities, shortly after Raden had been born. But then he'd been killed by a rival gang member in the prison.

They hadn't been able to leave the neighborhood, and despite her mom's best efforts, Davontae had been pulled into the gang life. He'd been fifteen years old when their dad had died, and anger, grief, and a desire for revenge had been a bad combination for him.

It had been Davontae's rise through the gang's ranks that had taken things from bad to horrible for the rest of them. His eventual high rank had placed a bullseye on their family, leading to Raden's death at nineteen.

Perhaps it was the trauma of it all that prevented her from looking much past a day or two into the future. They were all too aware that things could change in the blink of an eye.

But they weren't in Atlanta anymore. So maybe it was okay for her to dream and plan for a future.

"I'll try not to bug you about this," her mom said. "I understand why you didn't date any of the nice men you met in Atlanta, but that isn't an issue here. There's nothing stopping you from having a personal life now, instead of just focusing on work and Ciara."

"I know, and I'm not saying no to a relationship, but I need to focus on settling into the clinic first. Then... who knows."

Her mom smiled at her then, and Misha was so glad to see that the tension she usually carried had basically disappeared. Doctor Martin would be so pleased.

"And you know, I'm not the only single woman in this family," Misha reminded her.

That made her mom laugh. "I'm more than happy to leave the dating to you. I'm far past the dating age."

"Oh, I don't think so. There's no age restriction on dating as far as I know."

"There should be," her mom said. "Just so you don't harass me about it."

"Well, I'll make a deal with you. I won't harass you about dating if you don't harass me."

"That sounds more like a threat."

Misha shrugged. "Take it as you will."

"You're crazy."

"I had to get it from someone."

"I'll pin that one on your dad, then."

It was rare that her mom mentioned her dad, but Misha didn't latch onto it in order to get more information about him. That never turned out well, and more often than not, it left her mom upset. Maybe someday she'd talk about Davontae Barnes Senior, but Misha wasn't banking on it.

“I’m thinking about doing some baking,” her mom said. “Maybe take some stuff to the neighbors.”

“I’m sure they’d appreciate that. Jay said he likes chocolate chip cookies.”

“Really? Well, then I’ll make some and you can take them to work. I need a few more supplies, though. I haven’t really stocked up on the baking essentials yet.”

“Did you want to go tonight?”

“Are you too tired?”

“Nope. I’m fine, as long as you think Ciara will be okay.”

Her mom looked over at the little girl, who was now wearing a lot more of the mashed sweet potato than was in the bowl. “Perhaps you can give her a quick bath and get her dressed in her pajamas. Then she’ll be ready for bed when we get home.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Once they were done eating, Misha got up to lift Ciara from the highchair, keeping her facing out so that she didn’t rub her hands all over Misha’s clothes. She didn’t think they had time for both of them to get cleaned up.

Ciara liked her baths, so she was happy to go into the tub, which Misha filled with only a few inches of warm water. While the baby played with her bath toys, Misha quickly wiped her down with a washcloth. She wasn’t terribly happy when Misha washed her hair, but it was over quickly since she didn’t have a large amount of it yet.

She protested when Misha lifted her out, squealing her dislike through the whole process of getting dried off and dressed in a pair of footie pajamas. But she settled down soon enough, and by the time Misha got back downstairs with her, her mom had the kitchen all cleaned up.

“Do you have a list?” Misha asked. “We might as well get whatever you think we’ll need for the rest of the week.”

Her mom lifted her phone. “I’ve been making one.”

Though Serenity Point was on the small side, it did have a well-known nationwide chain big box store, which apparently served not just Serenity, but the other small towns in the immediate area as well.

Since they'd shopped the same chain of stores in Atlanta, they were familiar with the setup. It also meant that her mom was about to pick up the items she was used to using. It was a small thing, but the familiarity was comforting.

They picked up some diapers and formula along with their groceries, and since they were also stocking their pantry of essentials, the bill was a little higher than it normally would have been. Misha paid for Ciara's stuff, and when they got home later, she'd transfer half the cost of the groceries to her mom's account.

After helping her mom carry in the groceries, Misha settled into the rocker in the living room to give Ciara her nighttime bottle. Her mom pattered around, putting away the groceries. Misha would have offered to help except that her mom was particular in where she wanted things in her kitchen.

"I'm going to put Ciara to bed," Misha told her once the baby finished her bottle.

Upstairs in the small room that was Ciara's nursery, Misha changed her diaper one last time before she stood swaying with her for a few minutes. Ciara was pretty good about falling asleep on her own, but Misha enjoyed snuggling her a bit before putting her into the crib, whispering a prayer over the little girl.

She had more time with her now than she'd had in Atlanta. Just one more positive thing about the move. But for all the positives, there were a few negatives.

One most on her mind was the friends they'd left behind. They'd had to cut off all contact, at least temporarily. Her own friendships hadn't been very strong because she'd just started reconnecting with old friends when Raden had been killed. After that, she hadn't felt much like socializing. Her mom, on the other hand, had friendships that spanned her whole life,

who'd been there for her as she'd dealt with the death of her son.

Would her mom be able to find friendships at an age when most people were settled with their friends? Especially when it wasn't likely that she'd find many women who shared the types of experiences that she'd had.

It was the one thing Misha prayed about most regularly. That and also that Davontae wouldn't be able to find them. Now that they had a home, and she had a job, both of which offered them safety and security, Misha was loath to give them up.

CHAPTER TEN

Jay lifted his head when he heard a knock on his office door, schooling his expression so that the annoyance he was feeling over the email he'd been reading didn't show. The smile that replaced it came more easily when he spotted Misha in the doorway.

"Good morning," he said as she came into his office, a container in her hand.

"I come bearing gifts from my mom." She leaned over to place the container on his desk. "As per your request."

Jay lifted a brow at her words. "How can it be a gift if it's a request I made?"

Misha laughed as she sat down on the chair opposite him. She was wearing a pair of black slacks with a soft pink blouse that complemented her complexion beautifully.

"Well, it's a gift from Mom that takes your preference into account," she explained.

Jay pulled the container close, lifting the lid to reveal stacks of cookies. Chocolate chip cookies that looked chewy and delicious. He lifted one out, then put the lid back on.

"Don't tell my mom I'm eating a cookie so close to breakfast," he said, then took a bite of the cookie. "Oh. This is delicious. So delicious."

Misha beamed at him. "My mom makes the best chocolate chip cookies."

"That's definitely not an exaggeration." Jay quickly finished the cookie, reminding himself that he couldn't indulge in more than one. "These really are amazing."

"They're her own recipe. I mean, she took what she liked of other recipes and created her own."

"So she's a great cook and a great baker."

"Honestly, she's at her happiest in the kitchen," Misha said.

“She should open her own bakery.”

Misha laughed. “I think that would take the joy out of it for her. She likes to cook and bake for those she cares for.”

“And I’m one of those people now?”

The smile that came to Misha’s face was gentler. “Your family has been wonderful to us, and we’ve both come to value the friendships you’ve offered us over and above my employment. This is my mom’s way of showing her appreciation.”

“Does that mean I have to share?”

“Nope. Mom sent in a container with an assortment of different cookies for everyone else. She plans to give some to our neighbors, too.”

“Well, I am doubly glad to have gotten my own batch, so I won’t have to share with anyone. Except maybe Will if he comes by before I’ve had a chance to hide them.”

“I’m sure this isn’t a onetime thing,” Misha said. “So if he eats them, let me know, and I’ll tell Mom. She’ll be happy for an excuse to make more.”

“She doesn’t make them just for you?”

“Oh, she makes cookies for us, but not too often, since we don’t need the temptation.”

Jay was so glad that Misha had a good support system in her mom. He knew how important that was. His own support system had gotten him through the worst part of his life. He wasn’t as likely to lean on them now, but as a nine-year-old boy, they’d been vital in him dealing with his mom’s death.

“Well, I’d better get to my office,” she said as she stood up. “I need to check over my schedule for the day.”

Jay got to his feet as well. “Everything going okay with the patients?”

“I think so. I hope it’s not a case of people just being polite, and then booking their next appointment with Gareth instead.”

“I’m pretty sure that Aria or Janessa would have noticed that, and they would let us know.” Jay didn’t like the worry that creased Misha’s brow. “I don’t think you have anything to be concerned about.”

“And you’d tell me, right?”

“Of course. And if there are people who don’t want to be seen by you because you’re Black, then we’re better off without them coming to the clinic.”

“Are you sure?” Misha asked. “Because I don’t want to have a negative effect here.”

“The only negative effect that is your responsibility is if you’re acting in an unprofessional manner through your interactions with the patients. We obviously felt that you were the best candidate for the position here, or you wouldn’t have been hired.”

“Sorry.” Misha gave him a small smile. “I don’t mean to sound like I need my hand held or my ego stroked. I just really want to make a positive contribution here.”

“Do your best. That’s all we ask.”

Misha nodded. “I always try to do that.”

After Misha had left him alone in his office, Jay braced his hands on his desk, staring blankly at its surface. Misha’s desire to want to make sure that she wasn’t letting anyone down resonated strongly with Jay. Too strongly.

Doing his work at the clinic, making sure everything was running smoothly, kept most of his worry about honoring one of the promises he’d made to his mom at bay. But seeing the concern on Misha’s face and hearing it in her words struck deep inside him.

“Jay?”

Straightening, Jay plastered on a smile as he faced his sister. “What’s up?”

“Everything okay?” Her brow furrowed as she came into his office.

“Everything is fine.” People kept asking him that, and it was annoying. “Why?”

“You didn’t look like it was okay.”

“Sometimes you gotta get up and stretch.” He braced his hands on the desk again, and looking over at her, he said, “You should try it sometime.”

Janessa rolled her eyes. “Whatever. You should just take a chill pill every once in a while. Everything doesn’t have to be about exercise.”

“Maybe not,” he said, straightening to his full height. “But it’s a lot more fun when it is.”

“Then maybe I should just take those cookies off your hands because I don’t think cookies and exercise go together very well.”

When Janessa took a step toward his desk and the container of cookies, Jay said, “Touch them and die.”

She narrowed her gaze at him, as if trying to decide if it was worth trying to snag them. Jay crossed his arms. “If you ask nicely, I might share.”

“You’re my big brother,” Janessa said, as if he’d forgotten. “You should just *give* me a cookie or four.”

“Nope. Since when have we not fought over stuff?”

“Well, I keep hoping that you’ll grow up and stop fighting with me.”

Jay gave a huff of laughter and waved his hand at the door. “Go do your job.”

With a shake of her head and a disappointed look on her face—which Jay knew for a fact was fake—she left his office. Mindful of his open door, Jay returned to his seat and tried to focus on his work.

It wasn’t hard to do. He’d learned how to fake being fine, even when he was falling apart inside. *Everything’s fine*. Flash a smile. *How’re you doing?*

Lie and deflect.

And really, when compared with many people in the world, he was fine. He had a wonderful life. A nice apartment. A stable, well-paying job. A family that loved him.

Everything was *great!*

Well, except for the email he'd been dealing with when Misha had showed up with her mom's cookies. Even though he knew he shouldn't, Jay decided that another cookie might help him craft a polite reply to the persistent salesman who didn't seem to want to take no for an answer regarding switching back to them from their current supplier for their medical products. Maybe if they'd lower their prices further, he might consider the request.

Jay grabbed another cookie and ate half of it in one bite. The treat and the email helped pull his focus back to where it needed to be, so he was able to work steadily until lunchtime. At noon, he got up and went to the breakroom, where he pulled out the salad he'd prepared earlier that morning.

"Salad again?" Janessa said as she sat down with her lunch. "It's sickening how healthy you are sometimes."

"I like salad." Jay began to combine the ingredients, ending with the salad dressing. "And it's not like it's two pieces of lettuce and no dressing."

Misha joined them, followed by Aria and Gareth. Sometimes he left the clinic for lunch, but lately he'd been trying to eat healthier. Now that basketball season was over and he wasn't getting as much exercise, he needed to be more mindful of what he ate.

"My mom won't make me a salad for lunch," Misha said. "She insists that I need a solid lunch, so I have the energy to make it through my long and physically demanding days."

"What does she think you do here?" Janessa asked with a laugh.

"I'm not sure," Misha said. "But I don't think it would matter if I told her I sat at a desk all day. She'd still insist that I needed a solid meal."

Aria gestured to the container in front of her. “So, what did you bring?”

Misha pulled off the lid and peered inside. “This is leftover stir-fry and rice from the other night. Loved it then, and will probably love it now.”

“I think your mom should pack lunches for all of us,” Janessa said. “I’ve got a sandwich and some chips.”

“Me, too,” Aria added, then leaned against Gareth. “What do you have, love?”

“Well, I had some leftover pizza in my freezer, so I brought that.”

Jaylen shook his head. “You’re all gonna want a nap after you eat.”

“Your salad won’t make you want a nap?” Janessa asked as she opened her bag of chips.

“Nope. It’s full of protein and complex carbs.”

“One thing you’ll learn about Jay, Misha, is that he’s obsessed with healthy living,” Janessa said. “*Obsessed!*”

“I only seem like I’m obsessed because you don’t try to be healthy at all.”

“It’s hard to believe we came from the same gene pool,” Janessa said, then popped a chip into her mouth and chewed.

Jay was used to his siblings ragging on him about his focus on exercise and healthy food. He would never apologize for it because he could hardly tell the young men he coached to be healthy while he sat around eating junk food.

“So you’re a regular at the gym?” Misha asked.

“I am,” Jay agreed. “I usually go to the gym in town. When it’s basketball or volleyball season, I’ll work out with some of the players at the high school.”

“Setting a good example for the young men?”

“I try,” Jay said. “I want to teach them balance in their lives.”

“Funny that you’re more focused on health than the medical personnel,” Janessa said with a laugh.

“If I wanted to stay on the basketball team in high school and college, I needed to be on the top of my game. Exercise became a habit. One I never got out of.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t made everyone work out with you,” Misha said.

Gareth laughed. “Oh, he’s tried.”

“I got so tired of the whining that I gave up.”

“Do you exercise, Misha?” Janessa asked.

“I did in high school when I played soccer, and then for the first couple of years in college. But my schedule kind of went nuts after that with medical school and then my residency. I barely had time to sleep.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Gareth said with a nod.

“Well, if you ever want to work out, let me know,” Jay offered.

“I might take you up on that,” Misha said. “I didn’t have much interest in working out in Atlanta, but things here are... different.”

“Different bad?” Aria asked. “Or different good?”

“So far, the main downside to being here is missing the friends we had in Atlanta,” Misha said. “Pretty much everything else has been positive.”

“So, was it just a change of scenery that brought you here?” Aria asked. “That was certainly the case for me.”

Misha considered the question for so long that Jay wasn’t sure she was going to answer. Finally, she said, “That definitely played a role in our decision. I worked in a pretty rough area of Atlanta, and I was being targeted by some not so great people. Leaving was a matter of safety.”

“Will you be safe here?”

“Yes,” Misha said without any hesitation. “We were careful to limit who knew where we were going, and Doctor Martin also helped us make the move, so he made sure our destination was kept secret and that we had new phone numbers and such.”

Janessa lowered her sandwich. “That had to be difficult to deal with. I can’t even imagine.”

“It was stressful living that way, so it made the decision to move here pretty easy.”

“Well, I’m glad you, your mom, and Ciara are here,” Aria said. “I understand what it’s like to leave a place that’s not safe, whether the concern is for physical safety or emotional stability. Serenity is a great place to land, I have to say.”

“Mom and I have already discovered that,” Misha said with a smile. “And Ciara has loved all the new faces in her life.”

“She’s so cute,” Janessa said. “Kind of like her mom.”

“Actually,” Misha began, “I’m not her biological mom.”

“Oh.” Janessa frowned. “I’m sorry for making that assumption.”

Misha gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s fine. I didn’t explain the situation when I said she was my daughter. I mean, she *is* my daughter, just by way of adoption.”

“Well, she looks a lot like you,” Janessa said. “Even if she isn’t your biological daughter.”

Misha gave a little huff of laughter. “To confuse you further, there’s a reason for that. She’s my brother’s daughter. When he was killed, his girlfriend was early in her pregnancy. She wanted to terminate it but agreed to carry the baby to full term when my mom and I said we’d take the baby. Once Ciara was born, her mom signed all the papers necessary for me to adopt her.”

“Wow.” Aria sighed. “First, I’m so sorry to hear about your brother. That must have been so difficult for you and your mom. Second, how amazing that you did that for Ciara.”

Misha's revelation had answered a couple of questions for Jay, but he felt so bad for what Misha and her mom had endured. He hoped that they'd find the safety and security they desired in Serenity Point.

"Did your brother's death play a role in you coming here?" Jay asked.

Misha nodded. "Though he wasn't in a gang, he was killed by one, then I was being targeted. We needed a safe place to raise Ciara, away from the violence that took her dad."

"That's understandable," Janessa said. "I think that's what every parent wants."

"I was just fortunate to have been made aware of the opportunity here."

"We're fortunate that you chose to move here," Gareth told her. "We'd just about given up hope of finding someone. But even so, we wouldn't have hired just anyone. We saw something in you that we thought would work well for the clinic. And we were right. You've fit in so well here. Even better than we could have imagined."

"Nora did fine with the patients, but behind the scenes, she wreaked havoc," Aria said.

"You've been great with the patients, *and* you've been great with the rest of us too," Janessa said.

There was much about Misha to respect, and Jay didn't even bother to rein in that admiration. She wasn't just smart. Every day he saw her passion for her work and for people. It was something that had definitely been missing in Nora's attitude toward her work at the clinic.

She'd had a more clinical approach to her patients, where he could see that Misha was going to make connections with them the way his parents had. She'd want people to be comfortable with her, understanding that going to the doctor was stressful for some people. Feeling at ease with a doctor would come with someone like Misha.

When his parents asked how things were going—and they would—that was what he was going to tell them. That Misha

was smart and passionate. His mom had probably seen those qualities during the time Misha had shadowed her, but it wouldn't hurt to reinforce it. They needed to know that the other clinic staff continued to see that about her as she was working.

Jay left that lunch hour with a lot more insight into the newest member of their staff. Misha had revealed a lot about herself and her motivations in that time. The reasons why she'd had to leave Atlanta explained her passion for the free clinic. She'd clearly been working with a similar demographic in Atlanta, so her desire to work more with the free clinic made a lot of sense now.

All he hoped was that none of the danger that had forced them out of Atlanta followed them to Serenity Point. The doctor who had recommended her clearly knew what was going on, so Jay figured that he'd do what he could to protect them, even from a distance. Hopefully, the distance would be what would keep them safest.

It was unlikely that someone from Atlanta would think to look in Idaho for Misha and her mom. After all, it wasn't a place with a huge Black population, and if the people targeting Misha knew anything about her, they probably assumed she'd go somewhere she could continue the work she'd had in Atlanta.

As the workday drew to a close, Jay prepared to leave the clinic. He didn't have any big plans for the evening, but Will was probably going to show up at some point. The man was feeling pretty down over the state of things with Daphne.

“Hey, Jay.”

Jay looked up to see Misha standing in the doorway, her purse strap over her shoulder. “Heading home?”

“Yep. Time to go give Mom a break,” Misha said. “Ciara's been cranky today, so I have a feeling Mom's going to need some time to herself to recover.”

“Is she not feeling well?”

“Teething, I think.”

“Oh, the joys,” Jay said. “Poor baby.”

“Yeah. She’s usually pretty happy, so seeing her so cranky and miserable is hard.”

“I remember times when Shelby and Cole got like that. Thankfully, with such a big family, we could take turns entertaining them.”

“I suppose that would be good, but I’m not sure I’d want a bunch of kids just to have some help with a cranky baby.”

Jay laughed. “I hear you.”

“Anyway, I need to go, but I wanted to follow up on the workout conversation from lunch.”

“Oh? Are you interested in getting some exercise?”

“Well, not to an extreme level,” Misha said. “But I have time now, and I wouldn’t mind trying to get into better shape.”

“Are you wanting me to help you out or just tell you where to go?”

“I’d hate to take up your time.”

Jay shrugged. “I work out anyway, so it wouldn’t be taking up my time.”

“What time of day do you work out?”

“I’m usually up early, but if I don’t get a workout in then, I’ll do it in the evening. When I’m coaching the team, I’ll work out in the afternoon with them. So I’m not really tied to a certain time of day. Anytime works.”

“If you’re sure,” Misha said. “I suppose I could hire a personal trainer.”

“There are trainers at the gym, if that’s what you’d prefer,” Jay told her. “But I don’t mind helping you out.”

“Okay. I’m gonna take you up on that.”

“When would you like to go?”

“Maybe tomorrow evening?” she suggested. “I should probably stick around for Mom and Ciara this evening. How late is the gym open?”

“Members have access twenty-four/seven.”

“But I’m not a member.”

“Don’t worry,” Jay assured her. “I know the owner. He won’t have a problem with you being there with me. If you decide to make regular use of the gym, you can become a member.”

Misha lifted a brow. “Uh... Do you not think I’m going to stick with it?”

Jay chuckled. “Will you try to prove me wrong if I say yes?”

“Hmm.” Misha narrowed her gaze at him. “Does this sort of manipulation work on your sisters?”

“If it did, they’d be at the gym every day.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see if it works on me,” she said. “In the meantime, I’ll be at the gym tomorrow evening.”

“I look forward to it.” And that wasn’t a word of a lie.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Misha stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror that was attached to the back of her bedroom door. What had she been thinking when she'd picked out these workout clothes at the store earlier? She definitely should have tried them on instead of just grabbing the items in her size.

There was no way she could wear these shorts and tank top. They fit her like a second skin, and she didn't care for how tightly they clung to her curves. She'd inherited her curvy figure from her mom, and though she had no problem with that, she didn't want to put it on display.

Going to her dresser, Misha opened a drawer and pulled out her loosest T-shirt and tugged it on over the tank top. She pulled on a pair of jeans over the fitted shorts, then left her room.

She'd thought it might be too late when she'd told Jay she couldn't be at the gym until eight-thirty, but she didn't want to leave until after she put Ciara to bed. He'd said it was fine, though, so now it was time to back up her words with actions.

"Have fun," her mom said when Misha appeared in the living room. The humor sparkling in her eyes made Misha shake her head.

She wasn't sure she'd consider it *fun* per se. Probably not the way Jay might consider it fun, anyway.

"I shouldn't be out too late," she said as she slid her feet into a pair of ankle boots. She had her runners in a small duffel bag to take with her. "Call me if you need me."

"I won't."

Misha laughed as she went out the front door to where she'd parked earlier. She put the gym address into the GPS before pulling out of the parking lot. Serenity wasn't a huge town, but she still didn't know it well enough to go to a new place without the aid of directions.

The gym was in a large building not far from the store they'd shopped at a few times already, and it had its own parking lot. There were only a handful of cars there, so she was able to find a spot close to the door. Since the entire front of the building was glass, she could see a few people inside, including Jay.

Grabbing her bag, she went to the door and pulled it open. She'd never been in a gym like this before. In high school and college, she'd worked out in the schools' gyms. And there had been no working out during her residency or after her return to Atlanta. Life had been too busy for that.

Misha came to a stop inside the doors, glancing around. There was a long counter to one side, but there was no one behind it.

"Hey, Misha." Jay approached her, attired in a pair of long, loose basketball shorts and a tank top. "Glad you could make it."

"I said I'd be here."

Jay grinned. "So you did."

"I might not come back again if I can't walk tomorrow, but I'm here now."

"No worries," he said. "I'm not planning to overwork you tonight."

"That's good."

"If you need the changing room, it's right through there." Jay pointed to an arched doorway.

"Okay. I'll be right back."

The room was bright and clean, with showers and a row of lockers on opposite sides. She took off her boots, then pulled off her jeans. Since she wasn't thrilled about the tight-fitting workout clothes, she left the oversize T-shirt on. It hung to the top of her thighs, so it hid most of the tightness that made her uncomfortable.

Sitting on a bench, she put on her runners and tied them tightly. She shoved her stuff into one of the lockers, then

locked it and removed the key.

After smoothing her hair back into a scrunchie, she left the changing room. The idea of sweating wasn't exactly appealing, but she'd committed to it. At least for that night.

Jay was talking with a young woman with dark blonde hair when Misha walked out. She hesitated a moment before heading in their direction. He glanced over as she approached and gave her a smile.

"Ready to get to work?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"First time here?" the woman asked, a curious look on her face.

"Yep."

"This is Will's sister, Reese," Jay said, gesturing to the woman. "Reese, this is Misha."

"The new doctor. Nice to meet you."

"You too," Misha said as she shook the hand Reese held out.

"Will says you're nice, so you must be. He didn't care a whole lot for Nora, and it turned out that he was right about her."

"Oh." Misha glanced at Jay before looking back at Reese. "Uh... I think Will is nice too."

"Are you on the market?" Reese asked, jutting her hip out as she crossed her arms.

"On the market?" Misha wasn't entirely sure how to respond to the woman.

"Yep. Dating? Single?"

"Reese," Jay said, a tone of warning in his voice.

"What? If she's nice and she's single, maybe she and Will can date."

"Will and Daphne haven't even officially broken up, have they?"

“In my mind they have,” Reese said.

“Pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

“But you feel the same way.”

Jay sighed. “Yeah. I do. But even if he and Daphne broke up today, I wouldn’t recommend he date someone else right away.”

“Hmmm.” Reese narrowed her eyes at Jay. “Or are you staking a claim?”

“What? No.” Jay slashed his hand through the air. “I’m not staking a claim because that isn’t how I do things.”

“Well, then Will has a shot.”

“Pretty sure he won’t care about that,” Jay said. “He’s still kind of hung up on Daphne. Anyway... I’m going to help Misha with a workout.”

Reese looked back at Misha. “You’re braver than me. I think I’d die if I let Jay coach me through a workout.”

“That’s because I need you to work hard enough that you can’t talk. It’s the only way to get any peace and quiet around you.”

“I’m going to tell Will.”

Jay laughed. “Go for it.”

“Fine. I’m out of here.” Reese flashed Misha a smile. “See you around, Misha.”

“She seems... nice.”

“Oh, she is,” Jay agreed. “She’s just a bit more energetic than Will, and she doesn’t think a lot before she speaks.”

“I kind of got that feeling.”

“She means well,” Jay said. “So don’t take anything she says too seriously.”

Misha nodded, having already figured that out. “I won’t.”

“Okay. So I thought we’d start out slow tonight,” he said. “I don’t want to scare you off.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your consideration.”

“Let’s head over to the mats and do a little stretching first. It’s the best way to make sure your muscles are ready to do more.”

There were still a couple of people in the gym, one on an elliptical and the other using weights. They were focused on their own workouts, though, and didn’t even look in their direction.

“Here we go.” Jay came to a stop on a section of the floor that was covered in a bunch of blue mats.

For the next ten minutes, Misha stretched out her muscles as per Jay’s instructions. It actually felt good, and she thought that she’d be happy to just stretch for the whole time. Tension she hadn’t even been aware of in her body eased the more she stretched.

Jay was surprisingly limber for a man of his size. Even more flexible than she was. His devotion to working out was apparent before they even did anything more demanding than sitting on the floor stretching.

“Doing okay?” Jay asked.

“Yep. This has been easy-peasy.”

Jay laughed. “We’ve barely started.”

The way the man’s eyes lit up with his laughter did something to Misha. She’d already noticed that he was a handsome man, but when he smiled or laughed, it took his attractiveness to a whole new level.

“Let’s go over to the treadmills,” he said as he hopped up to his feet.

Misha glared at him when it took her a little more effort to get up from the mat. “Just so I know what’s coming... Is the treadmill the last part of this workout?”

“Nope.” Jay headed away from her, waving his hand for her to follow him.

With a sigh, Misha slowly walked across the gym to where six treadmills waited. Jay watched her, a grin on his face.

“We’ll start off slow,” Jay said as he got her set up on the treadmill.

“Is that an *actual* we?” Misha asked. “Because somehow I doubt *you’re* going to go slow.”

“I usually start off slow, but I work up to a speed you won’t be at today.”

“Thank God for small mercies,” Misha murmured.

“Ready?”

“Yep.”

The treadmill began to move at a pace that she found tolerable. She was pretty sure that she moved faster when she walked through the store or the clinic. Jay didn’t get on a treadmill yet, standing next to hers and keeping an eye on her.

After a minute, he hit something on the dash of the treadmill and the speed increased slightly. After a few more small—but noticeable—incremental increases, Jay said, “There you go. Let’s try you at that speed for fifteen minutes and see how you feel.”

Even though it was a pace faster than she usually moved, it still felt tolerable, so Misha nodded. Now that she was set up, Jay climbed onto the treadmill next to hers. His starting speed surpassed her current speed. Within a couple of minutes, Jay was jogging along at a pretty good clip. And yet, he was still able to carry on a conversation with her.

By the time fifteen minutes had passed, Misha was feeling it in her calves, and sweat had broken out on her brow and was trickling down her back. It was a clear indicator of just how out of shape she was.

“Think you can keep going for another five minutes?” Jay asked as he continued to run next to her.

Misha wasn’t sure she could, but something inside her made her nod. If she had to put a name to it, she’d have to call

it pride or ego. She didn't want to look like an out-of-shape slob in front of Jay.

"You're doing so well," Jay said with an encouraging smile. "Keep it up."

His words made her smile in return, even though she felt a bit like she was dying from over-exertion. Too bad she couldn't carry on a conversation with him the way he could with her.

As the five minutes neared its end—she was tracking it on the large clock on the wall—she prayed that Jay didn't try to get her to go for another five minutes. Her pride might just kill her by agreeing.

"Good job," Jay said as he shut off his treadmill and deftly stepped off of it.

He reached over to press something on the dashboard of hers, and Misha breathed a sigh of relief as the pace slowed, then finally stopped. She lifted the neckline of her T-shirt and dragged it down her face, wishing she'd brought another shirt to change into.

"Let's go back over to the mats and stretch again."

"And that's it?" Misha managed to ask as she waited for her heart to stop galloping in her chest.

Jay smiled as he nodded. "And that's it."

The stretching still felt good, though now her leg muscles felt more like cooked spaghetti than they had the first time around. She hoped that Jay didn't ask her if she planned to come to the gym again the next day because her body would have overridden her pride and demanded that she say no.

She knew she wouldn't reap the benefits of working out if she gave up after one session. But right then, all of her—except her pride and desire to be around Jay—wanted to say *absolutely not* to any suggestion of coming back to the gym.

"Feeling okay?" Jay asked as they finished stretching.

Misha lay flat on her back, sprawled like a starfish on a rubber mat beach. "Are my legs still attached to my body?"

Jay chuckled. “Yep. They are.”

“Then I guess I’m okay.”

Jay stayed beside her on the mat, leaning back on his hands with his long legs stretched out in front of him, as he chatted about the workouts he usually did with the guys on the football team. Misha was glad that he hadn’t abandoned her and yet also didn’t seem to expect her to hold a conversation with him.

As her heart rate returned to normal, Misha began to register how yucky she felt. Sweat seemed to have soaked into everything she wore, and it was just gross.

“You can keep laying here,” Jay said as he got to his feet. “I just need to wipe down the treadmills before someone else needs to use them.”

“Should I help you?”

“I got it.”

Misha turned her head on the mat to watch as he walked back to the treadmills and grabbed a spray bottle and a cloth from a shelf on the wall next to them. With quick movements, he sprayed the machines, then wiped them down. Once done, he put the spray bottle back on the shelf and tossed the towel into a nearby basket.

As he headed back to where she was, Misha pushed herself up into a sitting position, crossing her legs. “Do we need to wipe down the mats, too?”

“Yeah. They do have a cleaner that comes in later tonight, but just to be safe, it’s best to wipe the mats down, especially when we’ve been sweating all over them.”

They’d used the same set of mats for both times they’d stretched so they were able to wipe them down quickly. Misha did so on her hands and knees. Then, after handing back the spray bottle and towel she’d used to Jay, she sat back on her heels, trying to find the energy to get to her feet.

“Here.” Misha looked up to see Jay holding out his hand. “Let me help you up.”

After a brief hesitation, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet. The strength in his hand wasn't surprising, but Misha's reluctance to let go was. Giving his hand a squeeze, she forced herself to release her grasp on his fingers.

"Thanks." She took a couple of steps to test her legs, relieved that they didn't give out from under her. "Wow. They still work."

"You should probably stretch them out again right before you go to bed and when you wake up in the morning, just to keep your muscles limber."

"If I call in sick tomorrow, it'll be because I can't walk."

"Just make sure your doctor writes you a note."

Misha grinned. "I can do that."

She headed for the changing room where she grabbed her stuff, only taking the time to swap shoes. She had no desire to pull her jeans back on over her sticky legs, so she just shoved them into her bag. Since she was going straight home, it wasn't a big deal. Next time she came—and yeah, she probably was going to show up again—she would come better prepared.

When she exited the changing room, she spotted Jay standing next to the counter, staring down at his phone. He'd put on a different shirt, but he was still in his shorts. A duffle bag sat on the counter beside him.

He looked up when she neared him. "Glad you're still upright."

"For now," she said as they headed for the front door. "My mom is going to have a good laugh at me when I get home. The last thing she said to me before I left was to have fun."

"Are you telling me that you didn't have fun?"

Even though she was chilling in the cold evening air, Misha came to a stop in the parking lot, forcing Jay to turn to face her. "Did I look like I was having fun? Because I kind of felt like I was dying."

“You looked like you were trying to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But if you keep coming to the gym, it’ll be more fun.”

“Only time will tell.” Misha began to walk toward her car, and Jay fell into step beside her.

“Do you plan to come back again?”

“Probably,” Misha said with a sigh. “Though my legs have a different opinion at the moment.”

“It’ll get easier.”

“I probably won’t be back tomorrow night, though,” Misha said. “I’m not sure I can handle two nights in a row just yet.”

“That’s fine. Just keep stretching and maybe go for a walk with Ciara tomorrow instead. You don’t have to do an aggressive workout every day.”

As they reached her car, Misha unlocked it with the key fob. “Seriously though, thank you for taking the time to help me.”

“I was happy to,” Jay said as he opened her door. “It’s something I enjoy doing, so if I can help someone become more active, it makes me happy.”

“Even if they whine their way through it?”

Jay gave a huff of laughter. “You call that whining?”

“Maybe?”

“Oh, you should have been around the first time I tried to get Janessa and Charli to work out. Now *that* was whining.”

“What about your other sisters?”

“Kayleigh works out regularly. I think it helps her deal with the stress of her job. Skylar works out because she’s a cheerleader. Aside from Cole, the rest of my siblings are rather hit or miss with their physical activity. Wilder stays pretty active, so he doesn’t tend to formally work out.”

“Well, I’m going to give this a solid try,” Misha said, making a promise to herself right then to do just that. Now that

she didn't feel half-dead, it was a little easier.

"That's great."

Though she didn't want to leave Jay just yet, Misha knew she needed to get home. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yep. Have a good rest of your day."

"I'll try," she said. "You, too."

After they said goodbye, she headed home, eager to get into the shower and wash away the sweat.

"How did it go?" her mom asked when Misha walked in. She was curled up in her favorite rocker, her tablet in her hands. Her mom was an avid reader, and Misha had no doubt that she had spent the time while Misha was gone lost in whatever book she was currently enjoying.

"My body got really angry at me about ten minutes into my time on the treadmill, but I survived."

"You look like you need a shower," her mom said, wrinkling her nose.

"I *feel* like I need a shower, so I'm going to go do that. I'll talk to you once I've washed the gym off of me."

Up in her room, Misha dropped her sweaty clothes into the hamper, then stood under the hot water, relishing the warmth on her sore muscles. After using her favorite body wash to get rid of the sweat, she turned her attention to the process of washing her hair.

She didn't like to wash it every day, so she was going to have to find a way to take care of her hair while not having to wash it too frequently, which would dry it right out. After she was done in the shower, she took the time to apply product to her hair to keep the curls defined and moisturized, then went back downstairs.

With a sigh, she sank down on the end of the couch closest to her mom, feeling oddly energized, even though she was also exhausted. "Well, I can't say I had fun, but I survived."

“I’m glad to hear that,” her mom said. “Did Jay take it easy on you?”

“It didn’t feel like it at first, but then when I saw how he pushed himself, it was clear he had. Though honestly, I don’t think he was pushing himself as hard as he usually would.”

“I think it’s good that you’re doing this for yourself.”

“I won’t go every day. Maybe just three times a week. If I stick with it for a couple of weeks, I’ll get a membership, and then I can go on my own without tying up Jay’s time.”

“I think it’s a good thing that you’re going with Jay.”

Misha sighed. “I’m sure you do.”

“You can’t blame me for trying.”

She didn’t. Misha knew that her mom looked at Jay and saw a man who was the opposite of Misha’s dad and Davontae. Jay was the type of man they’d seen Raden becoming. Only, he’d never gotten the chance to fully mature.

Misha hoped that one day the memories of how loving, caring, and funny Raden had been would fully overshadow the horror of his death.

She understood why her mom wanted her to be with Jay. But at the same time, Misha wasn’t going to force anything with the man. However, if Jay happened to ask her out on a date, she’d have a hard time saying no.

Her big concern was what would happen if they tried, and things didn’t work out. She wondered how Gareth and Aria had gotten past that. Though she’d had some doubts about the job initially, she was absolutely all in now. The idea of doing something to upset the atmosphere at the clinic to the point where she’d feel like she needed to leave was the worst possible thought.

So she would just enjoy being Jay’s friend. Unless he indicated he wanted something more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Over the next week, Jay met up with Misha at the gym two more times. He'd actually been a little surprised—pleasantly so—that Misha had shown up after that first time.

He'd started her off easy, though apparently it had still been a bit of a challenge for her. The second time they'd met, he'd kept things the same as the first workout. The third time, he'd increased her time on the treadmill, and thankfully, she hadn't died.

They were set to meet again that evening, and Jay was looking forward to it. She might have whined a bit, but she hadn't appeared to be too serious with her complaints.

He was so glad that Misha's arrival had not only filled a hole in the clinic, but also brought an air of calmness with her. She didn't leave tension in her wake the way Nora had. In fact, it seemed people sought Misha out rather than try to avoid her like they had Nora.

"How's it going, Jay?" one of the people already in the gym greeted him.

"Going good," he replied. "How about with you?"

As they chatted, Jay kept an eye on the front door, waiting for Misha to show up. The workout he did when he was there with her wasn't as intense as what he usually did, so he was still getting up early to work out before going to the clinic.

When Misha appeared a few minutes later, she waved as she went straight to the changing room. Jay ended his conversation and walked over to wait for her.

"Ready to get to work?" Jay asked when she exited the changing room a couple of minutes later.

"As much as I'll ever be." Misha smiled up at him. "Do you work out on the weekends?"

"Yep. I work out every day."

“I admire you for sticking to a schedule like that,” Misha said. “But I also think maybe you’re a little crazy.”

Jay laughed. “Well, you’re not the only one.”

“But then I must be half-crazy since I’m working out like every other day.”

“I choose to look at it as being super smart.”

They continued to joke as they stretched on the mats. These workouts were definitely more lighthearted than any other ones he did. And he wasn’t mad about it. They were a nice break from the focused, intense sessions he started his day with or that he shared with the teens during basketball season.

“So, how long am I doing on this thing today?” Misha asked as they approached the treadmills.

“Let’s go for thirty-five minutes, and I’ll up the incline a notch.”

“Is that going to make me feel like I’m climbing a mountain?” Misha asked.

“Not a mountain,” Jay said. “More like a gentle hill.”

“Gentle hill...” Misha scoffed as she got onto the treadmill. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“You can do it. I have faith in you.”

“We shall see.”

Jay gradually increased the speed and incline until she was at where he wanted her, then he got on the treadmill next to hers. He started out at a steady, fast walk, then upped his speed to a steady jog. That pace was slower than he usually went, but he was just there to keep Misha company.

She was doing better at being able to continue to talk as she walked, even though he had increased the pace. Jay didn’t know if she was aware of the improvements she was already showing in her fitness.

About twenty minutes in, her conversation dwindled as her breathing increased. They finished their time on the treadmill,

then wiped down the machines before going to finish the session off with stretching.

“I must be getting better,” Misha said as she sat on the mats once they were done.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t feel like I’m dying by the time I’m done.”

“That’s good,” Jay said, resting his arms on his bent knees. “Or maybe it’s a sign that I need to up your workouts.”

She glared at him. “Do you enjoy nearly killing people?”

“According to the guys on the basketball team, I do,” Jay told her. “Especially at the start of the season when they’re not quite in peak shape.”

“I feel a lot of sympathy for those kids.”

“They might complain while they’re working out, but like you, they stick with it.”

Misha smiled at his words. “I honestly wasn’t sure I was going to.”

“I’m glad you have,” Jay said. “I’ve enjoyed doing this with you.”

“Me, too.”

Jay wondered if she enjoyed their time together for the same reason he did. It was hard not to appreciate how easy she was to be around. Misha might have been a little reserved at first, but as she’d settled into life in Serenity and at the clinic, Jay had seen her begin to relax.

He liked how he felt when he was around her. He felt like he’d smiled and laughed more with her than with most people, aside from his family and Will. It made him want to spend even more time with her, but he wasn’t sure how to make that happen. Or if he even should.

“I still can’t believe that I’m so willing to exercise,” Misha said.

“Must be my magnetic personality that keeps you coming back.”

She chuckled. “Well, we know it’s not the treadmill.”

They bantered back and forth about it for a few minutes before Misha sighed as she got to her feet. “I should probably get home.”

“Are you enjoying the free clinic?” Jay asked as they sprayed and wiped down the mats.

“I am. And it’s so great that Betsy was willing to take on the full day shifts.”

“I was surprised she agreed to that, but it’s definitely a good thing.”

“It turned out that she’s needing some extra money, so it worked out well all around.”

Jay frowned. “Is she having financial problems?”

“I’m not sure of the details. She just said that she’d happily take on more hours to help with her monthly budget.”

“I hope her financial concerns aren’t too serious.”

“She hasn’t seemed stressed about it,” Misha said. “When she’s at work, she appears relaxed and happy.”

“Are most of the appointment slots filled?”

“All of them are,” Misha said with a smile. “The first Saturday they weren’t, but ever since, they’ve all been filled.”

“I’m glad it’s worked out so well.”

“Me too,” Misha said. “I hoped that it would be a success.”

“I wish there wasn’t a need for the free clinic, but even though this area has a lot of wealthy people, there are still plenty of low income.”

“The clinic where I worked before was also focused on low-income people, though the racial demographic was quite different to the patients at the free clinic here,” she said. “But the thing is, at the end of the day, regardless of skin color, the concerns of the patients coming to both clinics are very

similar. Parents are worried about sick kids. Older people are concerned about the changes in their bodies. Etcetera, etcetera.”

“That’s true.”

“I’m just happy to be able to help whoever shows up, whether it’s to the free clinic or during the week. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“So, did you always want to be a doctor?”

“My mom worked as a housekeeper for a doctor—a surgeon, actually—in Atlanta, and he used to talk to me about how great it was to be able to help people. When I expressed an interest in going into the medical field, he encouraged me and ended up paying for my education.”

“Is he the one who gave you a recommendation?”

“Yes. He knew we needed to get out of Atlanta. I’m not sure how he heard about the job here, but I’m glad he did.”

“Well, we’re glad he heard about it, too. We were tearing our hair out trying to find a female doctor who was willing to move here.”

“I kind of felt like I had no choice, to be honest,” Misha said with a grimace. “But it’s turned out better than I had expected. I just hope that Mom will find her place soon.”

“Is she having trouble settling in?”

“She insists she’s not, but she spends most of her time with Ciara.”

“It’s too bad that Mom and Dad had to go back to Haiti.”

“I don’t think she’s unhappy,” Misha said. “She just isn’t socializing much.”

“Did she have a lot of friends in Atlanta?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot, but she did have a small group of women that she met with once or twice a week.” Misha said. “I’m not going to get too upset about her lack of social interaction just yet, but hopefully she’ll find her own set of friends here soon.”

Jay fell into step beside Misha as they walked to the changing rooms. “If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“I will.”

While he waited for Misha, Jay looked through his messages, but his thoughts were on what Misha had revealed about her mom. He really hoped that she found a community in Serenity soon because he knew it would weigh on Misha if she didn’t.

As they walked out to their cars a short time later, Jay wanted to engage Misha in more conversation because he didn’t want their time together to end. However, he was aware that even though his week was at an end, hers still had one more day at the free clinic.

“Have a good day tomorrow,” he said.

“Thanks.” She smiled up at him. “You, too.”

He waited for her to get into her car before heading to his. Will had wanted to come over that evening, but since he’d previously agreed to meet with Misha, he’d told his friend to come over the next day. He felt a bit guilty that he’d put his friend off in order to spend time with Misha, especially since Will was going through a rough time. Daphne had officially broken up with him earlier that week.

They’d made plans for the next evening, so it worked out, but he still felt bad for what his friend was going through. It was the guy’s first official break-up, and one Will probably thought he’d never go through.

Jay felt like an old hand at break-ups. Not that it made them any easier, but he knew that it was possible to move on from a broken relationship. Even one that had seemed like it was going to go the distance.

Over the next week, Jay kept finding excuses to be around Misha, and he was sure that his family noticed. He hadn’t enjoyed being around a woman as much as he did Misha. Not even Casey.

When they'd started going out in high school, they'd had fun times, but mostly that had been while hanging out with their friends. After they'd graduated, they'd gone to separate colleges, so they'd had to try to make a long-distance relationship work.

Unfortunately, the times they had been able to be together had begun to focus more on the physical side of things. He'd known that wasn't the direction their relationship should take. But at the time, they'd both felt that physical intimacy would strengthen their relationship for the times when they were apart. But then the breakups and getting back together had started.

Even now, he hated that he hadn't been strong enough to say no when she wanted to get back together after their first breakup. Unfortunately, he hadn't known that it was going to become a pattern in their relationship. Each time they got back together, he'd hoped it would be forever.

Since he'd found a backbone and resisted Casey's attempts at getting back together this last time around, he definitely felt better about himself.

"Jaylen."

Hearing his full name in that tone from Janessa was never a good thing. Jay looked up from his work to find her in the doorway of his office with a frown on her face.

"What's up?"

"Someone at the front wants to talk to you." With that announcement, Janessa turned on her heel, then disappeared.

A knot formed in Jay's stomach as he glanced at the calendar on his desk. How had he not remembered what was coming?

He pushed back from his desk and left his office, determined to face this head on.

"Jay!" Casey swept toward him, her long, blonde hair flowing behind her, and wrapped her arms around him before he had a chance to object. The familiar scent of the perfume she always wore teased his senses, sending a barrage of

memories flooding through his mind. Memories he didn't want.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as he stepped back from her.

“Well, you can't have forgotten that I always come home for my and Mom's birthdays.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, what are you doing here at the clinic?”

“I came to see you, silly.” She giggled. “Why else would I be here?”

Not wanting to have the necessary discussion in front of the clinic staff and patients, Jay said, “Come with me.”

He thought about going to his office, but then decided to take her away from the clinic. “Let's go for a ride.”

“Sure,” she said, latching onto his arm as they walked down the hallway to the back door of the building.

Jay opened the passenger door of his SUV for her. He waited as she buckled up, then closed the door.

“Are we going to go to our spot?” she asked as he guided his car out of the parking lot.

He hated that one of the places he enjoyed most around Serenity was tainted by memories of him and Casey. Because of that, he hadn't been back there in ages. Perhaps it was time to have a new memory with her there. A memory of ending things, once and for all.

The spot was secluded and surrounded by lots of trees. At night, the view of the lights of Serenity was amazing.

“You need to leave me alone,” Jay said as soon as he'd parked.

“What?” Casey's voice was sharp, all giggling gone. “Take me back to the clinic.”

“Nope. I'm not taking you back until you understand that we are done.”

“You can’t keep me here against my will,” she said indignantly. “That’s kidnapping.”

“I’m not keeping you here against your will.” Jay unlocked the door locks. “You can leave whenever you want.”

“I’m not *walking* back to Serenity, Jaylen. You’re insane.”

“Yeah, I was because I kept going back to you over and over,” Jay agreed. “But I’ve wised up. We’re officially done. Permanently over.”

“Is it her?” Casey asked, a sneer in her voice.

“Her?”

“The new doctor.”

He couldn’t deny that Misha did play a role in his ability to stand firm this time around. However, it wasn’t entirely because of her.

“I had already told you that we were officially done before she ever came to town,” Jay said. “I’d blocked your number before I even met her. So no, it’s not her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Jay gave a huff of laughter. “I don’t really care if you believe me or not. I’m not changing my mind this time. I’ve wised up to you, and I’m not going through this anymore.”

“It’s different this time,” Casey insisted.

“No, it’s not. And even if it was, my feelings for you have died. You killed them little by little every time you broke up with me. Every time you said you needed a break. It was like you were trying out other options, and when they didn’t work out, you came back to a sure thing.”

Casey crossed her arms and stared straight out the front windshield. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jay shook his head. “I know how I feel, and that’s all that matters to me now. I would have given you everything, but it’s clear that you were only willing to give me parts of yourself. No relationship is going to succeed like that.”

“I am a catch,” Casey said. “Any man would be lucky to catch me.”

“Except you keep wanting to be released, and that’s not how a good relationship works.”

“What do you know about a good relationship?”

“I might not have ended up with one myself, but I see them around me.” Although there was one less now that Will and Daphne had broken up. “My parents have a great relationship, and so do Gareth and Aria. I know what it’s supposed to look like, and ours didn’t.”

“Take me back.”

“Don’t come around me again,” Jay said. “Accept that this is over and move on. Find another guy to sucker, because I’m not going to be that guy anymore.”

“Take me back.”

Jay knew that he had no choice but to do as she asked. He only hoped that his message had gotten across. He didn’t want to keep having to deal with her.

She was part of his past, not his future. He’d made some bad decisions during the years they’d been together, but he was ready to move past them. To focus on his future.

The trip back to town was made in tense silence, but Jay didn’t make any attempt to break it. When they got back, he pulled to the curb in front of the clinic, assuming she had parked somewhere close. He unlocked the door, then waited until she got out.

“You’re going to regret this,” she said as she opened the door.

“Don’t make me do this again, because next time, I won’t do it in private. I’m trying to spare you the embarrassment of a public rejection, but if you keep coming to me, the next rejection will take place wherever we are. No matter who is around.”

She slammed the door, then marched off down the sidewalk. Jay blew out a long breath, then drove around the

back of the clinic to park.

“Everything okay?” Gareth asked as Jay passed his office a few minutes later.

Jay stopped and leaned against the doorjamb. “Casey was back for another attempt to get back together.”

“Let me guess,” Gareth said. “It’s her birthday?”

Jay nodded. “It took me a while to pick up on the pattern, but I eventually got there.”

“Kayleigh was the one who mentioned that Casey tended to break up with you when there was a long stretch of time without an occasion for her to get a gift. And she always seemed to have broken up with you before your birthday.”

Jay winced, not realizing his family had also figured out the pattern. “You never said anything.”

“It’s hard to say something when you know it will hurt the person.”

“I guess. I really wish I understood her mindset. Like, why the constant breakups?”

“You never asked her?”

“I did, but she’d say something like it just felt like we needed a break. Only she was the one needing a break, not me.”

“So, what did you tell her this time?”

“That the next time she tries to cozy up to me, the rejection will happen right where we are, regardless of who’s around.”

“Maybe if you got a girlfriend, she’d back off.”

“Perhaps.” He’d dated during their breakups before, but he’d always ended things when she wanted them to get back together. “But I’d hate to put any woman in her cross-hairs.”

“Don’t let her rob you of the possibility of a healthy relationship.”

“I hope that this is the last time I have to talk to her about this. Surely she’s got to see that I’m not backing down, and

I'm not changing my mind."

"We'll pray that this will be the end of it," Gareth said. "In the meantime, enjoy your time with... others."

The smile Gareth gave him let Jay know exactly who he was referring to. "I already am."

"Perfect."

"Your next patient is in room three, Gareth," Janessa said as she appeared at Jay's side. "Where's Casey?"

"I let her off out front."

"You didn't get back together with her again, did you?" Janessa demanded, her brows pulled low over her dark eyes.

"No. I most certainly did not," he told her. "I just took the time to reiterate that to her."

"For such a smart woman, she's really bad at picking up on the subtleties of a conversation."

"Oh, I wasn't subtle. She's just stubborn."

They stepped aside so that Gareth could leave his office.

"Well, I, for one, am happy to have seen the last of her," Janessa said. "I think she was cheating on you, and that just isn't cool on any level."

"I'm pretty sure she dated other guys while we were broken up." He didn't necessarily hold that against her since he'd done the same thing.

"No. I mean while you were dating."

For a moment, Jay wanted details, but then he decided he didn't care. "Oh well. It doesn't matter now. That all needs to stay in the past."

Janessa smiled at him. "That's an excellent plan."

"Now, I'm getting back to work."

Jay felt lighter as he returned to his office. He might not have enjoyed seeing Casey again, but he felt like he'd finally gotten his point across. He'd shot down every attempt she'd made lately. Surely that said something to her.

He felt like his heart was well and truly ready for another relationship. The only problem he had was that underlying fear that maybe Casey was right and he really didn't know how to have a good relationship, even with the examples around him.

The last thing he wanted was to hurt someone because he didn't know what he was doing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Do you want to go for a hike on Sunday afternoon?”

Misha looked at Jay where he sat on the mat beside her, leaning back on his hands. She'd debated coming to the gym that night. Spending all this time with Jay had become a double-edged sword.

She really enjoyed being with Jay, getting to know him. But the more she got to know him, the more she felt attracted to him.

Unfortunately, earlier that day, she'd learned something new about him. Something that made her think she didn't have a chance with him, which meant her growing feelings were only going to lead to heartache.

When she'd seen the woman Jay had left the clinic with earlier that day, all Misha had been able to focus on was how she looked. Tall, slender, white. Her shiny blonde hair had been silky straight.

When she'd been younger, Misha had wanted hair like that. Shiny, straight, and silky. She'd tried to convince her mom to let her get her hair chemically relaxed, but her mom had forbidden it.

Her mom had had pride in her racial heritage, and she'd tried to help Misha accept who she was and all that meant. Which had included accepting her curls and not trying products that could be harmful to her hair in order to straighten them out.

Over time, she'd learned to straighten her hair with heat, and sometimes, she'd worn a wig. Both had disappointed her mom, but she'd backed off on her disapproval, obviously feeling like she was fighting a losing battle.

Misha had finally embraced her curls in college, and there was no way she was going to go back to trying to make her hair something it wasn't, just because she wanted to gain the attention of a man.

She'd heard Janessa and Aria talking about the woman, and that she was Jay's ex, which had been really disappointing for Misha. If that was the type of woman he was attracted to, she didn't have a hope.

Though part of her had wanted to avoid him after that revelation, Misha hadn't wanted Jay to think that a visit from his ex had meant anything to her, so she'd come, just like she had on previous Friday nights.

"You want me to go on a hike?" Misha asked. "Like climbing a mountain?"

Jay chuckled. "More like walking up a really small hill."

"I'm not sure your definition of a really small hill and mine are the same."

Her heart thumped hard when he smiled. "It really isn't a big deal. I promise. Though I would suggest a decent pair of hiking shoes."

"I wouldn't know what those actually are."

"They're shoes that have a thick sole and good ankle support."

"Can I get those around here somewhere?"

"If we were going to climb an actual mountain, I'd say no. But since we really are just going to hike an easy trail, you should be able to get them from the store here in town."

"Okay. Maybe I'll stop on the way home and see what they have."

"I can go with you," Jay offered. "Give you some insight."

"Uh... sure. That would be great."

"Well, let's go now, so you're not out too late."

They made quick work of wiping down the spaces they'd used, then Misha went to change. She took a super quick shower to wash the sweat off her body, then pulled on the jeans and sweatshirt she'd brought with her.

“Why don’t you put your stuff in your car, and we can take mine?” Jay suggested as they left the gym.

“Sure.” It only took a minute, then Jay was driving them to the nearby box store.

As they walked toward the store together a few minutes later, Misha appreciated that Jay kept his strides short so that she didn’t have to jog in order to keep up with him. The doors whooshed open as they approached them, and Jay hesitated by the carts just inside the door.

“Should we get a cart?” he asked. “Do you need anything else here?”

“No. Just the boots. Mom and I have settled into coming every Monday to do our weekly grocery shopping.”

“Do you like doing things on a schedule?” Jay asked as they walked deeper into the brightly lit store.

“I find it makes life easier if I know what’s happening when,” Misha said. “But I like to think I can roll with the punches, if necessary.”

“Coming from a large family, we had a lot of scheduling, but we also had to learn to roll with the punches.”

“So, you all ended up being able to do that?” Misha asked.

Jay laughed. “No. We’ve got a real range. Kayleigh is very much about schedules, but on the other end of the spectrum is Wilder, who thinks time is an inconvenient construct. The rest of us fall somewhere in the middle.”

Misha tried not to think of Davontae and Raden as Jay spoke of his siblings. He was fortunate that he had such a good relationship with them.

“They don’t have a huge selection,” Jay mused when they reached the shoe section. “But hopefully they’ll at least have one decent pair.”

After walking up and down a couple of aisles, they found a shelf with two different styles of hiking boots.

“Maybe try both on and see which one feels the most comfortable,” Jay suggested.

Misha found her size in each style, then took them over to the seat provided for customers to try on shoes. She’d switched her socks at the gym, so at least she wasn’t shoving her sweaty feet into the boots.

“Here, let me lace them up,” Jay said, getting down on his knees in front of her.

Misha stared at the top of his head as he deftly tightened, then tied the laces. It was hard to not like this man who seemed so willing to do things for her.

“Is that too tight?” He glanced up at her, and their gazes met and held for a moment.

She cleared her throat. “Uh... No, that feels fine.”

“Do you want both boots of the same style on at the same time?” he asked.

“I think having one of each style on at the same time is better.”

Jay nodded, and before she could say anything, he’d slid her other shoe off and quickly replaced it with the second boot. It seemed like he’d done this before, and if she had to guess where, it would be with the players he coached.

He didn’t turn it into an intimate thing, so Misha tried not to view it that way, though never in her life had a man helped her like that. The last person to help fasten her shoes had been her mom when she was little.

“Thanks,” she said as he finished tying the remaining boot.

“You’re welcome.” He straightened to his full height, then said, “Why don’t you walk around and see how they feel?”

Misha walked up and down the aisle, stopping in front of the mirror for a moment to see how they looked. “Well, one *looks* better, but the other *feels* better.”

Jay laughed. “I understand there is a draw to get the one that looks better, but I would highly recommend that you go

with the pair that feels better. Your feet will thank you.”

“I know you’re right,” Misha said with a sigh. “I’ve had to wear a lot of shoes over the years for their comfort instead of their appearance, so it’s hard to go for the practical one.”

“Go for the practical ones,” Jay urged her. “You’ll be glad you did.”

Misha stared at the boots in the mirror. “Okay. Fine. Just this once.”

She sat back down and took off the rejected boot, so she could try on both of the practical pair. While she walked around in them to make sure they both fit well, Jay returned the other pair to their box. He put that box back on the shelf, then stood with the other box in hand as she swapped the boots for her shoes.

“Sure you don’t need anything else?” Jay asked.

“Nope. I’m good. How about you?”

He thought for a moment, then said, “I could use some fruit for my smoothies.”

They walked into the grocery part of the store, and Misha took the box with the boots as Jay looked over a variety of fruits. She already knew that he focused on healthy eating, so it wasn’t a surprise that the guy didn’t even seem to be tempted to pick up any of the treats that were scattered around the food section.

She wondered if the packs of apples with caramel for dipping would be considered a fruit or a treat. Personally, she leaned toward fruit, but she had a feeling that Jay would consider them a treat.

With a smile, she snagged a pack, just to see if he’d say anything. He rarely commented on the food other people ate for lunch at the clinic, only teasing the others when they made a comment about his food.

“Did you find something you needed?”

“Needed?” Misha turned the pack of apple slices over in her hand. “Not really needed, but definitely wanted.”

Jay chuckled. “Alright. Any other wants while we’re here?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

Jay stuck close to her as they walked to the self-check-out area. Misha went to one of the tills, while Jay stepped up to the one next to hers. It didn’t take long for them to finish up and head out of the store.

They were stopped for a moment by a teen guy who recognized Jay. He asked the guy how he was doing, listening with obvious interest as the kid told him about his plans once school was out, which would be in a few weeks.

Misha continued to be impressed by Jay. He was a Christian with a strong work ethic and a willingness to give of himself to the younger generation. The man was wasted in this predominantly White community when he’d be such a good role model to Black teens in a different type of neighborhood.

But even as that crossed her mind, Misha realized it was wrong of her to think of him that way. It was true that Jay would have been a real asset in a neighborhood like the one where she’d grown up, but he wasn’t wasted in Serenity Point. He was making a difference in the lives of young people there.

She was still working to try to accept that she could play as impactful a role in Serenity as she would have in Atlanta. Knowing that they had struggled to fill the female doctor position in the clinic helped. Taking charge of the free clinic helped. They needed her there in Serenity.

It was hard to believe that God couldn’t have found a way to use her in Atlanta, but this was clearly a door that had opened for her. Just like Serenity was where God had led Jay.

She needed to accept that God had brought her to the place where He wanted her to be, even if she’d thought He could use her better in a place like Atlanta. Jay appeared to have accepted that. The attention he paid to the teens he interacted with—like the young man in front of him right then—showed that he cared for them and what was happening in their lives.

“Let me know how things go,” Jay said after a couple of minutes, then held out his hand.

The teen fist bumped him with a grin. “I will.”

After they said goodbye, they left the building, stepping out into the cool night air. Even though it was early May, the nights were still cool, and Misha was grateful for the sweatshirt she wore.

“Do you know all the teens around here?” Misha asked.

“Not all,” Jay said. “I spend more time with the teen boys than the girls, so I know most of them. They all know who I am though, so sometimes they’ll talk to me even though I haven’t interacted much with them.”

“They seem to find you approachable.”

“I’m glad. I know it’s important at that age to have someone who’s willing to listen and sometimes give advice.”

Though the age gap was much more significant, Doctor Martin and his wife had been that for her. They’d encouraged and mentored her, and she knew it was only because of their presence in her life that she’d achieved her goal of becoming a doctor. And who knew the impact that Jay’s interactions with these teens would have on their futures?

“Do you think your mom will be okay watching Ciara for a couple of hours on Sunday?” Jay asked. “Though you could bring her along if you have a carrier.”

“I used to have one when she was smaller, but I haven’t used it in a while. Her stroller gets more use these days.”

“It might be better for you to do this hike on your own, then you can bring her along another time.”

Even though she hadn’t even gone on the hike yet, Misha was already glad to hear that there might be another time. She was getting in too deep with her feelings, but it was hard not to when she thought she sensed a corresponding interest in Jay.

Or was it just her naïveté showing?

She wasn't quite as confident in her assessment of things between them as she'd been before seeing his previous girlfriend. But even so, her heart couldn't help but want him to be as interested in her as she was in him.

She'd had little time for relationships over the years. But with the few guys she'd dated, she hadn't had to guess how they felt. They'd just come right out and asked her on a date, so really, she had little experience deciphering a man's interest. Those dates hadn't led to much since she'd been dealing with her job and Ciara, along with the threats that were hanging over her head.

None of that was very conducive to building a relationship.

But things were different in Serenity, and her mom would definitely watch Ciara for a couple of hours if Misha was going to be spending that time with Jay. She had become his biggest fan.

"Guess I'll see you on Sunday," Jay said as they stood next to Misha's car a short time later.

"I'm looking forward to it." Misha unlocked her car, then opened the door. "Thanks for another workout. I appreciate you sticking it out with me."

"It's definitely not a hardship," Jay said with a smile.

"It still boggles my mind that someone feels that way, but I'm glad you do."

"Hey, given enough time, you too might come to enjoy exercise."

Misha wasn't sure she would ever reach that point. However, she *did* enjoy being around Jay. "You never know."

They then said goodnight, and Misha headed home.

"What's that?" her mom asked, eyeing the box Misha carried.

Misha sat down on the couch and lifted the lid of the box. "I bought a pair of hiking boots."

"Uh... why?"

“Jay asked me if I wanted to go for a hike on Sunday afternoon.”

Her mom’s eyes widened. “That sounds great. Finally going on a date, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s a date, Mom,” Misha said as she set the box aside and pulled her legs up onto the couch beside her.

“Why not? You’re not going to the gym. It’s just the two of you, right?”

“I don’t know, actually.” He hadn’t said anything about anyone else coming along, but that didn’t mean more wouldn’t join them. Jay did have other friends and family, after all.

“Maybe you should ask *him* out on a date,” her mom said. “Women do that nowadays, you know.”

Misha did know, and if she was one hundred percent sure that Jay had an interest in her, she’d consider asking him out. “It would be a bit awkward at work if I asked him out, and he said no.”

“Maybe that’s why he hasn’t asked you out.”

“The thing is...” Misha took a deep breath, then told her about the woman who had shown up at the clinic that day.

“So you think he’s still seeing her?” Her mom frowned. “I would hope he isn’t, considering the amount of time he’s spending with you.”

Misha hoped the same thing, though honestly, she didn’t think that was the sort of man he was. If he was going to work out with her at the gym, he’d bring his girlfriend along too.

Should she ask him about it? Because she really didn’t feel comfortable with the idea that he might have a girlfriend but was spending that much time with her.

Misha knew that she definitely wouldn’t be okay with that situation if she was his girlfriend. If it was his job, maybe... But he was spending time with her without any sort of agreement for her to pay him for his time.

“I’ll see what Sunday’s like and go from there.” Misha hesitated then said, “How did you figure out that Dad liked you?”

Several emotions crossed her mom’s face—none of them positive—and for a moment, Misha thought maybe she wouldn’t answer.

“I didn’t have to figure anything out,” she finally said. “He was very upfront about his interest in me.”

“So he asked you out on a date?”

“Something like that.” Her mom grimaced. “It wasn’t really a formal date. More like he took me to hang out with his... friends.”

Misha knew that *friends* meant fellow gang members. “Why didn’t you walk away then?”

They hadn’t spoken much about her past with Misha’s dad. But it felt safe to do it now that they were away from the gang threat.

Her mom shrugged. “He was handsome and fun to be around. Being his girlfriend gave me a status of some sort in the community. I was young, and those things kind of appealed to me.”

Misha could hardly blame her for that. Sometimes the lessons learned in life came at a high cost. Her mom had certainly paid a price for her decisions, and there was no sense dwelling on them or living her life filled with regret. Even when she’d tried to do the right thing and steer her children away from the gangs, it hadn’t worked.

“For now, I’m just going to let Jay take the lead,” Misha said after silence lapsed between them. “Nothing has to be rushed.”

As she spoke those words, she realized how true they were. For some reason, in Atlanta, she constantly felt like she had some sort of deadline hanging over her head, even though that hadn’t necessarily been the case.

It had probably felt like that because of the threat they'd lived with, and the reality that life could—and had, in Radon's case—end at a moment's notice.

But the threat was gone, and it was time to focus on their new home and the life it offered them. Misha could finally just breathe.

“I'll pray for you both,” her mom said. “I know that I talk a lot about the two of you, but I really want you to seek God's will rather than mine.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Misha said. “I don't know what I would have done without your support all these years.”

“I'm glad I've been able to be here for you. You and Ciara have given me a focus, and I'd do anything for you.”

“Even move to a completely new place?”

“I guess so.” Her mom smiled at her. “It's not so bad here.”

“Have you found anyone to hang out with yet?”

Her mom shrugged. “I've met a couple of moms who live around here with little ones.”

“Though I know you get along with everyone, I think you need women who are closer to your age.”

“I'm sure I'll find some, but I'm not going to force myself on anyone.”

Misha hated to think that her mom considered her friendship a burden on others because Misha knew that was absolutely not the case. She was a loving and caring person who gave more of herself than she ever asked of anyone else.

“Well, I'll be praying that you find some friends that are closer to your age because you need them.”

“Thanks, sweetie.”

She and her mom had been a duo for a long time, so they didn't *need* others, but it also meant that they wanted the best for each other. And the best was to have friendships that went beyond just the two of them. It was something they both

wanted and needed after they'd had to leave their friendships in Atlanta behind.

If they were able to find those types of friendships in Serenity, it certainly would feel like it really was their home.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jay was the last one to leave the Sunday school room where he'd taught the teen boys' class that day. It was something he was still getting used to, but thankfully, he'd only be doing it for a few more weeks.

When the previous teacher had to step down because of health issues, the person in charge of the Sunday school ministry had asked Jay and Will if they'd consider taking on the responsibility until the end of the Sunday school year, which coincided with the end of the school year.

Considering he already knew most of the boys, it hadn't been a hard decision for Jay. Will had been a little more reluctant because he didn't want anyone to get the idea that he was going to follow in his dad's footsteps.

To Jay, it felt a bit weird to be teaching these boys because he'd never envisioned himself as much of a spiritual leader. The coaching he did was different. That was a natural extension of something he excelled at.

He'd never really felt that he really excelled at being a Christian. Most days, he actually felt like he really only excelled at *pretending* to be the strong Christian that some of his siblings were.

Some decisions and choices he'd made in the past had left Jay with an internal struggle that often ate away at him. How was he supposed to offer advice and guidance to the next generation?

The good thing, he supposed, was that he'd sat through enough Sunday school classes and sermons that he knew what he needed to share with the teens. But there was a part of him that wanted to tell them just how much of a flawed man he was and how many mistakes he'd made.

Except he didn't want to draw attention to those mistakes because they would disappoint his parents. His birth mom had told him that he needed to grow up to be an honorable man,

and he wasn't sure that he'd managed to do that. Maybe on the surface it appeared that he was, but he knew what lay in his past.

He hadn't broken any laws, but he'd done things he knew his parents wouldn't have approved of. However, since returning to Serenity, he'd tried to make better decisions, not wanting to add to the regret he already carried.

As he made his way down the wide hallway to the foyer and then into the sanctuary, Jay nodded and smiled at the people he passed. Because Casey's family still attended the church, he was braced to see her that day. She wasn't a huge fan of church, but she usually attended when she was in Serenity. Plus, she probably figured it would mess with him to see her.

In the past, she would have been right. Seeing her while they were broken up might have filled him with dread. But that day, he just didn't care.

As he stepped into the sanctuary, he glanced around to see where Will was. He spotted Gareth and Aria standing near the front, which meant that Gareth was drumming with the worship team again. His gaze also found other members of his family scattered throughout the sanctuary.

“Good morning, Jay.”

He turned to smile at Denise. “Good morning. How are you today?”

“I'm doing well, thanks. How about you?”

“I'm doing good.” His gaze flicked past her for a moment. “Misha not with you today?”

“She's here,” Denise said. “She just took Ciara to the nursery.”

“Hello there, Jay darling.”

This time it was one of the older women in the church, who was also a regular at the clinic.

“Hello, Miss Eva. How's life treating you?”

“Very well.” The older woman smiled as she turned her attention to Denise. “Are you our new doctor’s older sister?”

Denise laughed, her eyes sparkling with humor. “I’m quite sure Michelle will treat you well even if you don’t butter me up.”

Eva grinned. “I’m Eva Price.”

Denise held out her hand. “Denise Barnes. Michelle’s mom.”

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you,” Eva said. “Say, do you do any type of crocheting, knitting, needlepoint or other type of crafting?”

Denise’s brow furrowed. “Well, I’ve done some sewing in my day, but I’ve never learned to do any of the other things you’ve mentioned. My grandma wanted to teach me to knit, but at the time, I was young and thought knitting was an old person thing.”

“If you’d like to learn, why don’t you come to our crafters group?”

“Crafters group?”

“Yep. We’re a group of women who gather once a week to work on whatever craft we bring. If you’d like to learn something, there are several of us who would love to pass on our knowledge.”

“What sort of supplies would I need?” Denise asked.

Jay hoped that because she didn’t immediately dismiss it, that she would end up going. This might be a way for her to make connections in the town.

“Don’t worry about that at first,” Eva said. “We all have plenty of supplies, so we can teach you with those. Once you find something you want to make, you can choose your own supplies.”

“When do you usually meet?”

“Tuesday mornings here at the church.”

Denise frowned. “That might not work for me.”

“Why’s that?”

“I babysit my granddaughter while Michelle works,” Denise said.

“Oh, just bring her along. We’re all mothers and grandmothers. She’ll get plenty of love.”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t want her to prevent anyone from working on their stuff,” Denise said.

“That won’t matter. We have lots of time to work on our projects when we’re at home. Loving on a little one is always a welcome distraction.”

Jay was grateful that Eva hadn’t even blinked at the information that the new doctor was a single mom. Some in the church might have questions about her situation, but Eva wasn’t one of them. Though he knew the whole story of how Misha had become Ciara’s mom, he wasn’t sure she wanted everyone else to know.

Eva had the biggest heart of anyone Jay knew, even his own parents. Never in all the years he’d known her had he ever heard her say a negative word about anyone. She offered love without bounds and always had an uplifting word for anyone she spoke to. The woman would be a great friend for Denise.

“Let me get your number,” Eva said as she fished her phone out of her pocket. Instead of doing anything with it, however, she handed it off to Jay. “Can you input it for me, Jay dear?”

He just smiled and shook his head when she told him her passcode was 1111. When Denise recited her number to him, Jay set up a contact with Denise’s name and a description of who she was just because Eva sometimes struggled with names until she’d spent time with the person.

“What was that all about?” Misha asked as she joined them, her gaze on Eva as the older woman headed down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary.

“I’m going to meet with a group of women who get together to knit, crochet, and stuff.”

Misha's eyes widened, and she glanced at Jay.

"Eva invited her."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Misha said. "But you don't know how to do any of those things."

"They said they'd teach me. The only problem is they meet on Tuesday mornings."

"But they said you could bring Ciara," Jay reminded her. "So don't let that hold you back."

"Won't she be a distraction?" Misha asked.

"Eva said they'd love to help with her," Jay said. "Plus, I wouldn't be surprised if there are a couple of homeschooling moms who bring their kids. They'd probably be happy to entertain her."

Misha reached out to touch her mom's arm. "We'll talk about it later, okay?"

The worship team was taking their places on the stage, so Jay looked around for Will again, but still didn't spot him.

"Would you like to sit with us, Jay?" Denise asked.

Jay decided he had no reason not to, so he followed them to a row near the back that had room for them. Denise went in first, followed by Misha, then Jay.

"Room for one more?"

Jay glanced up to see Will standing in the aisle beside him. Without him asking, Denise and Misha shifted down far enough to leave plenty of room for Will on the end.

"Thought you might not have hung around for the service," Jay said in a low voice as Will sat down beside him.

"That was my plan," Will muttered. "But got convicted."

"Glad you stayed."

Will made a non-committal sound. Jay knew that going to church would be difficult for Will for awhile, since Daphne also attended there. He'd seen her earlier, so he hoped that Will could just avoid her. However, it was more likely that

Daphne would avoid Will, which would probably make Will feel even worse. It was truly a double-edged sword.

The service had a familiarity to it, born from years of attending the same church. It wasn't a bad thing. Sometimes he found comfort in it. Unfortunately, sometimes it allowed his thoughts to wander.

Mindful of Misha's presence at his side, Jay tried to keep his attention on the service. Will's dad was a good preacher. Usually pretty entertaining and also thought provoking. Sometimes it amazed him that the man could find different things to preach about, even after all these years.

"So, are you up for hanging out this afternoon?" Will asked once the service was over.

"I'm going for a hike," he said, watching as Misha and her mom left to get Ciara from the nursery.

"Why would you ruin a perfectly good afternoon by going on a hike?" Will grouched.

"Why would you ruin a perfectly good afternoon by staying inside?"

"Are you going by yourself?"

"Nope. I talked Misha into going with me."

Will's brows rose slightly. "Then I suppose you don't want me tagging along, anyway."

"You're more than welcome to come," Jay said.

"And be the third wheel?" Will asked. "I think not."

"I was thinking of asking Janessa, Gareth, and Aria if they wanted to come along, too." He'd originally planned for it to just be him and Misha, but now he was thinking it might be better to make it a group thing.

"Well, if everyone else is going..." Will grimaced. "I guess I could too."

"I don't know if they are yet. I've still got to ask them."

"Well, let me know what the plan is."

“If you end up not going on the hike, you can come by later.”

“Okay.”

As Will walked away, Jay looked around for his siblings. When he spotted Janessa, Aria was standing there with her, so he headed in their direction.

He passed Casey on the way, but she didn't say anything to him, for which he was thankful. The last thing he wanted was a confrontation with her at church.

“Hey, bro,” Janessa said when Jay joined them. “How's it going?”

“Good,” he said. “Are you guys doing anything this afternoon?”

“I'm not,” Janessa said.

“Gareth might have something planned,” Aria added. “Why?”

“I'm going on a hike this afternoon and thought you guys might like to come along.”

Unsurprisingly, Janessa didn't look very excited at the idea. Aria, however, wasn't as opposed to being outdoors as Janessa was.

“Let me see if Gareth wants to go,” Aria said. “It's supposed to be a nice afternoon.”

“Yeah. That's what I thought,” Jay agreed.

“Maybe you should ask Misha,” Janessa suggested.

“I already did,” he said. “She's on board. I asked Will as well.”

Janessa laughed. “Did he say he'd go?”

“He's thinking about it.”

“His polite way of saying no way.”

“Who's saying no way to what?” Gareth asked as he joined him, his drumsticks in his hand.

“I was saying that Will said no way to going on a hike this afternoon,” Janessa said. “Jay’s trying to round up a bunch of suckers to go with him and Misha.”

“Where’s the hike to?” Gareth asked. “I’m not feeling up to a long or difficult trek.”

Jay told him where he was thinking of going. “Nothing too strenuous, especially if I’m going to convince Will to come along.”

“That sounds doable,” Gareth said, then looked at Aria. “Do you feel up to getting out?”

“Yep.”

Janessa crossed her arms and sighed. “Okay. Fine. I’ll go too.”

They made arrangements to meet at the parking lot closest to the trail Jay wanted to hike. He pulled out his phone and texted the information to Will as he walked to the foyer.

Glancing around, he spotted Misha and her mom talking to Eva again. He headed in their direction to let Misha know what time he planned to pick her up. Misha smiled at him as he joined them.

Misha had Ciara on her hip, but the little girl squealed when she spotted Jay and held out her arms. Jay took her without hesitation. It wasn’t the first time he’d held her. She was a very personable baby who didn’t seem to have a fear of strangers.

“Hey, baby C,” Jay said as he bounced her lightly in his arms. “How’s life treating you?”

She gave a squeal and bopped his cheek with a wet fist.

“Ciara,” Misha said reprovably. She reached up with her hand to wipe away the spot of slobber on his cheek. Jay froze at the feel of her fingertips on his skin. “She’s teething right now, so her hands are always slobbery.”

“A little slobber never hurt anyone,” Jay said with a laugh. “Right, C?”

Ciara laughed too, and Jay felt badly that her daddy would never see the happiness of his little girl. It was clear that she was well-loved by her mom and grandmother, regardless of the trauma that had preceded her birth.

“You’re so good with kids, Jay dear,” Eva said.

“I should be. I’ve been around enough of them.”

Eva laughed at that. “Your folks certainly helped increase the population in Serenity.”

“And they’re responsible for these three ending up here too,” Jay said.

“Yep. If it weren’t for the clinic, we wouldn’t have ended up here,” Misha agreed.

“Well, I, for one, am very glad you did,” Eva said as she touched Misha’s arm. “You’re a definite asset to the community. And I can’t wait for your mom to join our group of crafters.”

“I just hope I’m not too old to learn something new,” Denise said.

“You are *never* too old,” Eva said. “I decided to learn some needlepoint before Christmas to give as a gift to my granddaughter. She said it was beautiful, but I think it looked like a bit of a mess. Not my finest effort, but I think I will improve with practice.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Denise said. “But no promises.”

“You can come and just hang out with us if you decide that the crafting side of things isn’t for you,” Eva told her. “I need to go now, but I’ll call you tomorrow to remind you about the group.”

Jay had a feeling that Eva was going to make sure that Denise made some connections within the church. He wouldn’t be surprised if his mom had reached out to the older woman and asked her to take Denise under her wing since she’d had to return to Haiti. They wouldn’t be gone for too long though, since Cole’s graduation was coming up soon.

After Eva left them, Jay told her what time he'd pick her up for the hike. "We'll have a few people joining us. Will is going through a breakup, so he could probably use the distraction. Janessa is coming too, as are Gareth and Aria."

"A party hike," Misha said with a laugh. "Sounds like fun."

"As long as Will and Janessa don't start whining that they're tired, it will be."

"Maybe I should bring some of Mom's cookies," Misha suggested. "That should make them happy."

"I just made some fresh chocolate chip cookies yesterday," Denise said. "You're welcome to take them."

"Sold," Jay announced.

Denise smiled. "And since you're getting some exercise, you can eat them without feeling guilty."

"Okay. So I'll bring cookies to the party."

"I'll bring the water."

"Hopefully that will keep everyone happy," Misha said.

When Ciara started to wiggle, Misha took the baby back. After they'd talked for a few minutes, Ciara made it known she was ready to go, so Misha and Denise said goodbye and left the church with the fussing baby.

Will texted him back that he'd be at the parking lot, so with all the plans in place, Jay headed home. Once there, he mulled over what to eat. He didn't want anything too heavy, with a hike in his future, plus there would be cookies.

Jay finally settled on a couple of slices of avocado toast. It was a favorite to eat when he wanted something tasty and filling without being too heavy. Once he was done eating, he changed into a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt. The day was mild, which would be great if they were in the sun, but the trail went through forested areas that would make it feel cooler.

A little before two, Jay left his apartment and drove to Misha's. After she answered the door, she grabbed a small backpack and stepped out of the townhouse.

"Mom and Ciara are napping," she said as she locked the door.

"Do you usually nap on Sunday afternoons?" Jay asked, hoping he hadn't disrupted her normal plans.

"No. I usually just enjoy the peace and quiet while they're napping."

He opened the passenger door, then rounded the front of the car to get behind the wheel. "Unfortunately, you're probably not going to get much peace and quiet on this hike."

"That's fine. It will be nice to spend a little time outdoors. It wasn't something I did much of in Atlanta."

"The outdoors is a big draw in this area," Jay said. "Though lots of people come for skiing in the winter, we've also got a lot of hiking trails for the summer."

It didn't take too long to get to the parking lot where they were meeting up. Will was there already, but there was no sign of the others yet.

"Hey, Misha," Will said with a smile when they got out of the car.

"Hey."

"Glad you decided to come," Jay told him.

Will shrugged. "I didn't really have anything else to do this afternoon."

"Misha brought some of her mom's cookies for us to eat, so if you don't complain too much, you can have some."

"Well, that's a hard bargain," Will said with a frown. "You know how much I dislike hiking."

"How did you two become friends?" Misha asked. "You seem very opposite."

“We *are* very much opposites,” Will agreed. “But we’ve been friends from the first day we met in elementary school. I was the person tasked with helping the new kid. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it.”

Jay chuckled. “Yep. Will was a scrappy little kid who was determined to be the best friend I’d ever had.”

“Well, that’s sweet.”

“We kind of grew into our differences as we got older,” Will said. “By then, our friendship was solid, so those differences didn’t really impact it.”

Gareth’s vehicle pulled in next to Jay’s, drawing their attention from the conversation.

“You convinced Janessa to come?” Will asked with a laugh.

“Yep. So, the two of you can whine about the hike together.”

Soon, they were setting off. Because it was an easier trail, the path was wider meaning they could walk side by side. Gareth and Aria led the way, holding hands. Jay made Will and Janessa go next so that they wouldn’t fall behind, since they were most likely to dawdle.

Jay had transferred the container of cookies to his backpack with the bottles of water he’d brought so that Misha didn’t have to carry them. He was tempted to eat one before they began the hike, but he knew that Janessa and Will would want some too. He needed to keep them as an incentive for the pair.

“This is beautiful,” Misha said, tipping her head back to look up at the trees that rose high above the trail.

Jay kept an eye on the path, making sure that there were no bumps or roots in front of Misha, so she didn’t trip while she wasn’t paying attention to where she was going. He was glad she was enjoying the trail. It might have been more enjoyable if it had been just the two of them, but he didn’t mind sharing the time with the people cared about, even if they did whine a lot.

Things between him and Gareth had improved enough over the past few months that Jay didn't mind spending time with him socially. Jay had a feeling that they had Aria to thank for that.

It seemed that Gareth now ran a lot of his ideas by Aria first, then he only mentioned the ones that she thought were doable or necessary to Jay. It had helped to take the tension of their interactions down several levels. That was good for their relationship and definitely good for the clinic.

Though his romantic relationship might not have worked out, Jay was happy that it seemed the ones within his family were improving.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Misha was glad that Jay had talked her into getting the hiking boots. The path was definitely rougher than anything she was used to walking on. It was also more beautiful than any place she'd ever walked.

It wasn't that Atlanta didn't have nice outdoor spaces, but they definitely weren't in the areas where she had lived and worked. The best outdoor place she'd spent any amount of time in was Doctor Martin's backyard, which was basically like a park in and of itself.

"Let's stop here," Janessa said, pointing to a bench that sat along the end of a small stream.

They'd been walking about twenty minutes, but Jay didn't protest when Janessa and Will veered over in that direction. The bench wasn't big enough for all of them, but there was also a log nearby that Gareth and Aria settled on.

Jay swung his backpack off and opened it up. He pulled out the container of cookies and handed it to Misha. "I'll let you be in charge of those."

"Cookies!" Janessa exclaimed with a broad grin.

Misha took the lid off, then offered the contents to each of them.

"I'll trade you a bottle of water for a cookie," Jay said when she offered the cookies to him.

"Any other time, I'd think I was getting the raw end of that deal," Misha told him. "But today, I am *parched*, so I will take you up on that offer."

"Funny how our perspective on things changes depending on our circumstances."

"That's for sure." She took the bottle of water he held out, then sat down on the bench next to Janessa. After cracking the bottle open, she took a couple of deep swallows.

“I’m so glad you brought your mom’s cookies,” Janessa said. “They are just the most delicious thing ever.”

“Are you happy you came?” Misha asked her.

Janessa shrugged. “Eh. It’s not the worst thing ever. I’d be dying if it was hot.”

Misha watched her friend’s gaze go to where Will sat on the ground, closer to the stream, his back to them. Keeping her voice low, she asked, “Are you worried about Will?”

Janessa glanced at Misha before focusing on Will again. “Worried? I don’t know. More just concerned for him. He and Daphne were together for years, and I think Will thought they were in it for the long haul, you know.”

Jay had joined his friend, lowering himself to sit next to him. Even sitting down, their height difference was quite apparent.

“Are you really close with him, too?”

“No. I’m not as close to him as Jay is. The two of them are like this,” Janessa said, crossing two of her fingers. “But he’s been in my life as long as he’s been in Jay’s, so yeah, I think I know him pretty well.”

“Did you have someone like him when you first came to Serenity?”

“I had a couple of friends at first, but their families both ended up moving away. Charli was a grade ahead of me, so we usually spent recesses and lunches together. I became close with Aria when we were roommates at college.”

“That’s good you had Charli when you first came here.”

“Yep. Of all my sisters, she’s the one I’m closest to.”

“Is that why you live together?”

Janessa nodded. “Of course, I’m also close to Jay. That first year after our mom died, even though we did have new friends and a family, we stuck pretty close together. I really needed him close by, so they let us share a room. I’m sure that Jay was ready to have his own space a couple of months later,

but he stuck with me. He's like that. Loyal, almost to the detriment of himself."

That didn't surprise Misha at all. She'd seen those aspects of Jay's personality during the short time she'd known him. He seemed so willing to help people, to be strong when they needed that from him. Good qualities to have, that was for sure.

Jay got to his feet, rubbing the dirt from his sweats. He walked over to where she and Janessa sat, then said, "So, is this as far as we're going?"

"I'm definitely good with this being our final destination," Janessa said.

"Yeah, I probably shouldn't be asking you or Will," Jay said with a laugh.

"Maybe Misha feels the same way," Janessa told him. "What would you say then?"

"I'd encourage her to go a bit further, since I know she can go longer than this on the treadmill."

"Mishaaaa," Janessa said as she leaned into Misha's arm. "You're making me look bad."

"When it comes to exercise, it doesn't take much," Jay said with a laugh.

"I vote we keep going," Gareth said. "It's so beautiful out today."

"I'll keep going if Gareth does," Aria added.

"Of course you will," Janessa said with a sigh. "I've lost my best friend to my brother. It's so saaaaad."

"You are such a drama queen," Gareth said. "You still live with Aria."

"For *now*."

Misha wondered if an engagement was in their future. Well, she was actually pretty sure that it was in their future. How soon Gareth would propose was the question.

“So that’s three votes to keep going,” Jay said. “Misha?”

“I vote to keep going as well.”

“Will?” Jay called over his shoulder.

“I guess I can keep going if I get another cookie.”

“Well, sorry, Janessa. You are outnumbered.”

“Fine. But I want another cookie too.”

“Cookie now or later?” Misha asked as she tapped the container on the bench beside her.

“We’ll have another cookie when we reach our turnaround point,” Jay said.

Misha handed the container to him, but she held onto the water. Jay returned the stuff to his backpack, then they headed off down the trail again. They weren’t the only people out that day, and occasionally they stepped off the path to let others pass. They would exchange nods and smiles, but no one stopped them to chat.

They walked another twenty minutes, then stopped again. This time, there was no bench, but there were logs and stumps to sit on. It was a larger clearing than the previous spot, and there were other people taking advantage of it, too.

Jay sat down beside Misha on the log she’d chosen.
“Doing okay?”

“I’m doing great. This doesn’t quite work up the sweat that the treadmill does, but the view is a hundred times better.”

“What?” Jay asked. “Are you saying that all this is better looking than me?”

Misha turned to stare at him for a moment, then laughed. “I was referring to the workout equipment and the mats. Not the people. Being out in the beautiful nature with you is the best of both worlds.”

“Now I feel better.”

“Somehow, I don’t think you really felt that bad.”

Jay grinned down at her as he lightly bumped his arm against hers. “I happen to agree with you. Being out here is definitely a step up from the gym.”

“Do you hike often?”

“Not so much in winter,” Jay said. “A lot of my time is tied up with basketball practices and games. Spring and fall are the times I like to hike the most since the days aren’t too warm. I do hike in summer, but not quite as much.”

“I’ve been introduced to so many things I didn’t know I’d enjoy until I came here,” Misha said. “Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. I’m all about helping people experience new things. Sometimes I have more success than others. I mean, it’s clear that I didn’t succeed with Janessa or Will.”

“Hey, they’re here, aren’t they?”

“I think that has more to do with your mom’s cookies than with them wanting to spend time outdoors.”

“Or maybe it’s both the cookies and spending time with people they like.”

Jay smiled. “Yeah. Maybe that.”

Though Misha had hoped that perhaps it would be just the two of them, she was enjoying this too. The more she saw Jay interact with others, the more it reinforced how she herself saw him. He must have some flaws, but she had yet to find any glaring ones.

She was quite sure that Janessa and Will would say that his focus on exercise and healthy eating was a flaw. She might have agreed if he tried to force everyone to be the same way, but he didn’t.

“Thanks for coming along today,” Jay said.

“I’m just glad you weren’t tired of spending time with me at work and at the gym.”

“That will never be the case,” Jay told her, his expression softening. “I enjoy the time we spend together. You’re very easy to be around.”

No one had ever told her that before, but then, she'd been a ball of tension and worry while living in Atlanta. Her friends had repeatedly told her she needed to chill out, and when she hadn't, they'd gradually stopped inviting her to spend time with them.

“So are you.”

Was it coming across that she was flirting with him? She kind of hoped it was, because that's definitely what she wanted to do.

When she glanced around at the others, she found them all watching her and Jay. Janessa and Aria smiled at her, while Will and Gareth looked to be more curious.

Misha uncapped her water and took a sip, a little unnerved to be the attention of Jay's closest friends and family while she was attempting to flirt with him a little bit.

“More cookies?” she asked, holding out the container.

Janessa laughed as she got to her feet and came over to take it from Misha. “I'll never say no to cookies.”

Janessa went around, offering them to the others. When she got to Will, she said, “Why don't you take two? I know this was as much of a trial for you as it was for me, and I plan to eat two.”

“Thanks, Nessa,” Will said. “You're a sweetie. Unlike your brother.”

“I bet Misha thinks he's a sweetie,” Gareth said.

Misha choked on the swallow of water she'd just taken.

“I'm sure she does,” Aria said. “I also think he's a sweetie. Just not as much of a sweetie as you, darling.”

She leaned her head against Gareth's shoulder and looked up at him, fluttering her lashes.

Gareth laughed as he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “Nice save.”

Misha liked seeing the pair together. From what she could see, it was a fun, loving relationship, which would be what

she'd want in any relationship she had. Was that what Jay would want?

Since she hadn't seen him interact with his previous girlfriend, Misha had no idea what they'd been like together. Maybe she should ask Janessa. It was already clear that Janessa thought there was something between them, so she might understand Misha's curiosity.

But that would definitely be a conversation for another day. Right then, she was just going to enjoy the moment.

She'd been unable to do that for much of her life because she'd always worried about what might be right around the corner. It had always robbed the joy from the moment.

Serenity was definitely living up to its name. The peace she'd found there had calmed her so that she could focus on the things that brought joy to her and those around her.

After she finished her cookie, Misha took another sip of her water, then they got ready to retrace their steps. The walk back to the cars seemed to fly by, and soon they were saying goodbye to the others.

Misha didn't want the time with Jay to end, so she was glad when he didn't immediately pull out of the parking lot once they'd gotten into his car.

"I really enjoyed that," Misha said. "But I have to say, my feet will be *sooo* glad to be out of these boots."

Jay turned to look at her, resting his arm on the steering wheel. His brow was furrowed with concern. "I hope that you didn't get any blisters. I should have been more mindful of that."

"I don't think I have blisters," she assured him. "But my feet aren't used to these types of shoes."

"Well, if you do have blisters, you can use me as an excuse to call in sick."

"I won't need to call in sick," Misha said with a laugh as she relaxed back in her seat. "It's definitely not that bad. Plus, I still have tomorrow off to recover."

Having Mondays off would normally have meant not seeing Jay, but since she'd fallen into the routine of working out with him on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings, she still got to see him.

"Think you might like to go on another hike sometime?"

"I would. This was great."

"Maybe next time we'll leave the whiners at home," Jay said.

"So just go with Gareth and Aria?"

"Yeah." Jay's gaze moved to the front windshield. "Or maybe just the two of us."

"I'd like that."

"Would you be interested in... going out for dinner or maybe to a movie sometime?"

Misha's heart sped up as the meaning of his words sank in. "Just the two of us?"

"Yes." He looked back at her. "Unless you'd prefer to go on a double date with Gareth and Aria."

Misha grinned. "Nope. Nope. Just the two of us is fine."

Jay smiled back, relief on his face, like he'd thought she might shoot down his invitation. That was never going to happen. She wanted a chance to spend more time with him in a setting where they could just focus on each other. On the two of them.

After agreeing to discuss their plans further during the week, Jay turned on the car and left the parking lot. Misha was disappointed that their time together was ending, but she also didn't want to leave her mom alone with Ciara much longer. However, she knew her mom was going to be thrilled that she and Jay were finally going on a date.

This seemed like a natural progression in her life now that she was free from the stress of the past several years. She could only hope that her brother stayed far from their life there in Serenity.

It wasn't that she never wanted to see him again. He'd always been good to her and her mom, taking care of them in a way that made sense to him. Unfortunately, they'd wanted him to care about them enough to quit the gang, but that was never going to be an option for him.

Misha didn't know how they'd ever reconcile their new life with the one that Davontae led in Atlanta. They didn't consider him dead to them, but it was hard to see how he might ever be part of their lives again, especially since they'd cut off contact with him.

Misha didn't linger in the car too long once they got back to her place, not feeling that she needed to drag out their time together, now that she knew that they'd be going out again soon. Just the two of them.

Inside the townhouse, she found her mom giving Ciara a snack.

"How did it go, sweetie?" her mom asked. "You look like you had a good time."

"I did."

Misha took off her boots and set them on the rack by the door. She curled and relaxed her toes a couple of times. Her feet were definitely not happy with her. Ciara had crawled over to her, so Misha scooped her up and nuzzled her neck, making the baby squeal.

"Well, tell me how it went," her mom said as Misha settled on the floor with Ciara in her lap.

"Gareth, Aria, and Janessa were there, and so was Will." Misha smiled. "They loved your cookies. As usual."

"I'm glad. I notice you don't have the container."

"I think most of the cookies were gone, but I forgot to get it back from Jay."

"So was it nice?"

"It was. We walked through a forest, and it was so beautiful." Misha cleaned a bit of mushed biscuit off Ciara's

cheek as she told her mom about the hike. “And then, after the others had left, Jay asked me on a date.”

“What?” Her mom clasped her hands together. “Really? You’re not just joking with me, right?”

“I’m not.”

“When? Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “We’re going to talk about it this week.”

“You shoulda pinned him down.”

Misha laughed. “I don’t think he’s going to try to get out of it.”

At least, she hoped he wouldn’t.

“I *knew* he was interested in you, and I was right.”

She’d been more confident about that than Misha had been, but then she’d also had nothing to lose.

“Not to bring things down,” her mom said, suddenly looking nervous.

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Davontae’s been looking for us.”

“How do you know that?” Misha asked. “We aren’t supposed to be in contact with anyone in Atlanta for now.”

“I know.” Her mom sighed and looked down at her hands. “But it’s hard cutting people out of my life who have been my support for so long. I made a new email address and only gave it to Marion. She promised she wouldn’t share it with anyone.”

At least there was that. Marion was as good as her word. Not all of her mom’s friends would have kept their secret.

“So Von went to visit her?”

“Yeah. He stopped by yesterday.”

“What did she say to him?”

“She gave him a letter I left with her in case he went to see her.”

“A letter? Mom...”

“I didn’t give him any details about where we went,” she said. “I just needed him to know that I love him and that I wished we could have been safe there. I know he hasn’t made the best decisions, and probably will continue on that path, but he’s still my son.”

“I get it, Mom,” Misha said. “I love him too. It’s just hard to love the person he’s become because of what he’s allowed to happen to our family.”

Her mom nodded. “I made a copy of the letter if you want to see what I told him.”

“Did you leave any other letters with people?”

“Nope. I only trusted Marion. Plus, I figured he wouldn’t hurt her.”

All of that was true. Misha just hoped that it wouldn’t change. Davontae had never been known for having the most thought-out actions to begin with. Unfortunately, he’d become very reactive since Raden’s death, which had only worsened things for them.

“She said she let him check her phone to see that we hadn’t been in contact.”

“Except you email each other.”

“She made a new email too, and she only has it on her laptop. Her other email address is on her phone, and that’s the one he saw.”

Davontae had never really understood computers and the internet. Unlike Radon, who had lived for that stuff. He probably wouldn’t think about people setting up new emails and not using their phone to check them. At least, Misha hoped he wouldn’t.

“Have you been phoning Marion, too?”

Her mom nodded, though clearly reluctant to share that. “But Marion bought a cheap throwaway phone. A burnt one.”

“What?”

“No. Wait.” Her mom’s brow furrowed. “A *burner* phone. You know Marion loves those detective shows. When I told her what was going on, she decided that getting us each one of those phones would make it possible to keep in contact.”

It was rather humorous to think that a fifty-something-year-old woman had the leg up on a thirty-five-year-old man when it came to electronics and clandestine communication. That definitely worked in their favor, and hopefully, it stayed that way.

Misha gave her mom a small smile. “It’ll be okay, Mom. Just let me know right away if anything changes or something comes up that I need to know about. Don’t take a chance that something seemingly insignificant won’t amount to anything.”

“I’ll be careful, sweetie,” she said. “I promise.”

Though her joy over the upcoming date with Jay had dimmed slightly, she knew she couldn’t let the past continue to rob them of their joy in the present. So, until something resulted from Davontae’s interaction with Marion, she wouldn’t waste time worrying about it.

There were too many positive things she wanted to focus on instead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jay got out of his car, then ran his hands down his torso to smooth out any wrinkles in his clothes. It had taken him longer than usual to pick out his outfit for the evening. His first date with Misha.

He'd gotten a bit frustrated with himself over his delay. After all, Misha had seen him in everything from his workout clothes to business casual at the clinic and had still agreed to go on a date with him. She probably wouldn't judge him harshly on what he wore.

In the end, it was their destination for the evening that had dictated what he chose. Kayleigh had heard him talking about not knowing where to go for their date, and she'd offered to make a reservation for them at one of the restaurants at the resort.

He'd jumped at the offer, and they'd decided they wanted to go to the steakhouse. He was prepared for this meal to put a dent in his wallet, but it was definitely worth it. Plus, it had been a good while since he'd last spent money on a date. He could afford it.

After much debate, he'd ended up choosing a pair of black slacks and a light green button-down shirt. He'd even taken the time to polish his dress shoes until they shone. Sometimes he liked to wear a chain, but since his favorite one had been a gift from Casey, he no longer had it, and he hadn't bothered to buy one to replace it.

He'd gone to the barber earlier that day and made sure that his fade and trim were both fresh and looked fine. More than anything, he wanted Misha to see that she was worth him putting the effort into looking his best.

Satisfied that everything was okay, Jay grabbed the things he'd brought with him and made his way to the door of the townhouse. Denise answered when he rang the doorbell and beamed at him as she moved back, gesturing for him to step inside.

“Oh, flowers,” Denise said, her eyes twinkling. “Lovely.”

Jay held them out. “Actually, they’re for you.”

Her eyes widened as she reached out to take the bouquet. “They are beautiful, Jay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He offered her the small gift bag he held. “I also brought something for Ciara.”

“You are too generous.”

“Well, it’s a thank you for letting me take Misha away for a few hours.”

“We wouldn’t have dreamed of keeping her here. She needs this,” Denise said. “It’s been far too long since she’s done something for herself, which is why I’m happy she’s been working out and that she agreed to go out with you.”

Before Jay could respond, Misha came down the stairs. She wore a long, flowy white floral skirt with a light purple blouse that matched the flowers on the skirt. The color looked lovely against her skin. The jewelry she wore consisted of a dainty silver chain and silver hoops in her ears.

“You look beautiful,” he said as she neared him.

She smiled, then said, “You look very handsome yourself.”

“Let me take a picture,” Denise said as she put the flowers and gift bag down on a nearby end table, then pulled out her phone.

“Mom...” Misha sighed. “We’re not going to the prom.”

“I know, but this is a special occasion, too.”

Jay happened to agree, so he willingly slipped his arm around Misha and bent down a little to bring their heads closer together. Even though she wore heels, he still had a few inches on her.

After Denise was satisfied with the picture, she gave them each a hug. “You two enjoy yourselves.”

Misha went over to where Ciara was sitting in a round yellow bouncer and bent to press a kiss to her head. “Be good

for Nana, baby.”

“Jay brought me flowers and a gift for Ciara too,” Denise said as she picked up the things he’d brought.

“Really?” Misha looked at the flowers and gift bag, then looked at Jay. “That was so sweet of you.”

“Maybe you should open Ciara’s before we leave.”

Misha took the bag from her mom and peered inside. “Oh. That is adorable.”

She pulled out the doll that Jay had found on Amazon and managed to get in time thanks to two-day shipping. It was a doll with a soft purple body and a plastic head with a skin tone a shade or two darker than Ciara’s.

“Look, baby,” Misha said as she went back to the little girl. “Look what Jay brought you.”

Ciara’s eyes went round as she lifted her hands toward the doll. When Misha handed it to her, she immediately hugged it.

“She loves dolls,” Denise said. “But she looks especially happy with this one.”

Misha nodded. “I’m sure she’s going to want to sleep with it.”

“I’m glad she likes it.”

Jay had wondered if he should buy the little girl a doll, but he’d been at a loss as to what else she might like. To see it was so well received was a relief.

“Well, you two need to go.” Denise made shooing motions with her hands.

“Okay. Okay. We’re going.”

They were both laughing as the door closed behind them after they stepped out of the townhouse. Jay offered Misha his arm, then they made their way down the walk to where he’d parked.

“Do you go to this restaurant often?” Misha asked as he turned out of the parking lot.

No. I can't remember the last time I was there," Jay said. "It's not a huge restaurant, and most of the time, you need a reservation to get in."

"Is it super expensive?" Misha asked, worry in her voice. "We didn't have to go somewhere so exclusive."

"Kayleigh hooked us up, so it's not a problem." He had no idea if she'd arranged for a discount for them, but regardless, like Denise had said, it was a special evening. "Just prepare yourself for some really good food."

"Okay. I can do that."

The resort was made up of the hotel, a large lodge, and an assortment of cabins. It was most popular during the winter months when people came to enjoy the snow, but it wasn't exactly empty during the remainder of the year. According to Kayleigh, the place was getting busier, even during the off-seasons.

It took about twenty minutes to reach the hotel, then they were walking to the restaurant that, even though it was attached to the hotel, had an outdoor entrance as well.

The hostess greeted them with a smile that grew warmer when Jay gave his name.

"Miss Halverson's brother, right?" she asked.

"That's me."

"Wonderful. If you'll follow me."

Jay laid his hand lightly on Misha's upper back to guide her ahead of him, then fell into step behind her. The restaurant was dimly lit, and the aromas in the air made Jay's mouth water in anticipation of the meal to come.

The woman led them to a two-person high-backed booth tucked into the back corner of the restaurant. Jay waited for Misha to take her seat before settling into his. Given his height, seats that he couldn't control weren't always comfortable, but that definitely wasn't the case there.

The hostess handed them each a menu, then left them with a promise that their server would be with them shortly.

There was a stained-glass hanging lamp above their table, casting just enough light for them to see each other and their menus. It took a minute for him to realize that there were no prices on the menu. Misha must have realized it about the same time as he did.

“Jay, why are there no prices on this menu?” she asked.

“Mine doesn’t have any either,” he told her. “I guess we’re just supposed to order what we want and not worry about the price.”

“Hmmm. I guess.”

She didn’t sound convinced, but short of demanding another menu—one with prices—or leaving the restaurant, they didn’t have much choice. He suspected that Kayleigh might end up paying their bill. If so, he’d settle things up with her later.

Their server greeted them with a smile, then told them about the day’s specials before taking their drink orders. Alone again, they talked about the different menu options, and by the time the server returned with their drinks, they were ready to order.

“This is really lovely,” Misha said when they were left alone again.

Jay had to agree. The low murmur of voices and softly playing music didn’t overwhelm their conversation, unlike some steakhouses he’d been to. He definitely owed Kayleigh for arranging this for them. It was the perfect place for a first date.

“They have two other restaurants here,” Jay said. “But this one is my favorite.”

“What are the others?”

“There’s a vegan one. The other one is French or Italian, I think.”

“So you weren’t interested in the vegan restaurant?”

“Not really. I’m sure they have great food, or they wouldn’t be here, but if it’s a toss-up between a steak and

anything else, the steak is gonna win.”

Misha nodded. “I’m not a die-hard steak fan, but I do like meat, so I’d have a hard time giving it up.”

“Maybe another time, we can try one of the other restaurants.”

“That would be nice.”

Jay was glad that she was open to another date. Not that he’d thought she wouldn’t be, but hearing her voice it was a relief. Although the evening was still young. It was possible that she might change her mind by the end of the evening.

Once their food arrived, the sizzle of the steak had Jay ready to dig in. Misha seemed as pleased with her choice as well, even though she’d opted for chicken instead of steak.

“This is delicious,” Misha said after her first bite. “So delicious.”

They ate in silence for a minute, enjoying the food. Jay was glad he hadn’t had steak in a while because it just added to his appreciation of it.

Soon, their conversation picked up again, and Misha asked about his experiences playing basketball, both in high school and college. Basketball was always a topic he enjoyed talking about. His experiences in college, less so.

When she asked about his injury, he wished he could avoid the subject, but she had a right to know. Casey had been furious with his decision to let his injury sideline his career, and it had led to their longest breakup and a time when he’d made a few more bad decisions.

“The doctors said I should be fine to play after adequate treatment and therapy,” he said, cutting his remaining pieces of steak into smaller bites, just to have something to do.

“But you chose not to play again?”

“Not professionally, anyway.”

“Most people would kill for the opportunity to play professionally,” she said, stating something he knew was very

true. “But you didn’t want that?”

“My mom—my birth mom—used to tell me that it was more important to stick with the family than to pursue money. By the time she got sick, I was already obsessed with basketball and telling everyone that would listen that I was going to play in the NBA. I think all she saw was the potential for problems, and she was afraid she wouldn’t be around to guide me.”

“She didn’t trust the Halversons to guide you like she would have?”

“Or maybe she didn’t want them to have to face that hassle. She wanted me to contribute to the family who had so generously taken us in.” Jay stared down at his food. So much of this he’d never told anyone, and it wasn’t even the whole story. “She made me promise a lot of stuff before she died, and it was hard to move past it, you know, even when I was old enough to know that I could.”

“My mom’s experiences and fears have definitely molded a lot of what she’s passed on to us kids,” Misha said. “My dad was a gang member and ended up in prison for life, where he was killed by a rival gang member. Mom was adamant about us steering clear of the gangs.”

“But that’s at least rational,” Jay said. “I got the lectures about the gangs, too. That promise was easy to keep around here. No gangs, per se.”

“It didn’t matter how much my mom lectured us, though,” Misha said. “My oldest brother ended up in one, which led to my younger brother’s death.”

“Oh. Wow.”

So Misha’s older brother had been the opposite of Jay. The guy had seen the proof of what his mom had warned him about and did it anyway. Though Jay was now aware of situations that had ended badly for some professional sports players who got caught up by the fame and didn’t manage their money well, it didn’t happen to the majority of athletes

playing at that level. Still, he'd let his mom's fears hold him back.

"Do you regret not going pro?" Misha asked.

Ah... wasn't that the question of the hour. He'd been asked it over and over. "I can't answer that yes or no. I enjoy my life here. I get a lot of satisfaction helping the boys' basketball team. Helping them grow and learn how to play the sport and go on to become good teammates. I love all of that. There are days when I wonder what life might have been like had I made a different decision. But I don't dwell on that, and it's all in the past."

Misha had finished her meal, so Jay took the last bites of his meal, then pushed his plate to the side. He wondered if Misha was wondering if she'd made a mistake in agreeing to go out with him. It was possible she'd see his issues as a bit more than she'd want to deal with.

It was probably better to find that out early on, though he didn't relish someone knowing stuff he'd never shared with anyone but Will. He'd just have to hope she'd hold his confidence if this turned out to be their first and last date.

"Would you like dessert?" their server asked as he scooped up their empty plates. "And maybe some coffee?"

"Could we see a dessert menu?" Jay asked, not wanting their evening to end yet, even though it had had some difficult moments. Maybe he could still redeem it.

"Sure. I'll grab that for you."

"Do you want something?" he asked as he waited for the man to return with the menu.

She smiled at him. "I could probably manage a small dessert."

"Maybe we could share something?"

"That would be great because I'm not sure I could eat a whole dessert myself. Their servings here are very generous."

"I think they must cater to the crowd coming in off the ski slopes."

“Now I feel guilty for eating everything when I didn’t spend any time skiing.”

“But you were on your feet all day,” Jay told her.

“True.”

“How was the free clinic today?”

“It went well,” Misha said. “No major issues to deal with, which was nice. It always knots my stomach a little when someone has been suffering and waited for the free clinic to get help rather than coming during the week.”

“If someone called in during the week, I know we’d see them or get them the help they need.”

“I know, but they seem reluctant to do that, for some reason.”

“I’m glad that it seems to be going so smoothly on Saturdays for you.”

“Pretty sure it won’t always be that way, but I’ll be thankful for as long as it continues.”

The server left them with the dessert menu, and Jay laid it on the table between them. They leaned over it together, then ultimately decided on a lava cake. Misha went for a cup of decaf, but Jay just asked for more water.

The dessert didn’t take too long to appear, as well as the coffee for Misha. The server set it in the middle of the table, along with two forks.

“This looks delicious,” Misha said as she cut into the cake. The gooey interior oozed out in a way that made Misha cheer softly, then she hummed in delight after her first bite.

She seemed to be enjoying the dessert so much that Jay didn’t want to take a bite for himself. Since he wasn’t a big sweets eater, he’d happily let her eat it all.

“Aren’t you going to have some?” she asked after a couple of small bites.

“Honestly, I’m just enjoying seeing how much you’re loving it.”

Misha grinned. “I think you’d enjoy it more if you tried it for yourself. We’re supposed to share.”

Jay picked up his fork and cut off a small piece of the cake, making sure to get part of the gooey inside as well. He quickly found out why Misha had been enjoying it so much. The flavor of rich, dark chocolate exploded in his mouth, and he was surprised that it wasn’t super sweet. Which worked for him.

“Isn’t it amazing?” she said. “They have some great chefs in this place.”

“I would imagine they pay for the best,” Jay agreed as he helped himself to another bite. “I’ll have to let Kayleigh know that we really enjoyed the food.”

“They need to hire a new printer, though,” she said. “Because someone really screwed up when they forgot the prices.”

Jay started to explain why that was when he caught the twinkle of laughter in Misha’s eyes. He chuckled. “I’ll be sure to mention that to her as well.”

Misha laughed, and Jay loved the sound of it. Her laughter made his heart light, and he hoped that she only ever found reason to be happy when around him.

He needed to put his past bad choices behind him and make sure that he made better ones from here on out.

Though they lingered over their dessert, eventually, they finished and left the restaurant. The night air had turned cool, and Jay turned the heat on in his car once they reached it.

After buckling her seatbelt, Misha rubbed her hands together. “I don’t think it was ever this cold in May in Atlanta.”

“Yeah. It is a bit chilly tonight. Do you have warm enough clothes for winter?”

“I doubt it. To be honest, I don’t think I truly comprehended how cold it really gets here.”

“Well, there are plenty of places around here with good clothes, though they won’t have much winter stuff in stock at the moment.”

“Mom told me yesterday that she decided that her first project in the crafting group is going to be learning to knit mittens for the three of us.”

Jay chuckled. “Well, you will definitely be able to make use of those.”

“That’s what she thought.”

He took his time driving back to the townhouse, in absolutely no rush to arrive and end their evening. But short of driving aimlessly around Serenity or parking somewhere, it did have to end.

Finally, he pulled into a spot in the parking lot of the townhouse complex. When Misha didn’t immediately undo her seatbelt and open the door, Jay switched off the headlights but didn’t turn off the engine so the heat would continue to flow from the vents.

“I really enjoyed this evening,” Misha said. “Thank you so much for arranging it.”

Jay shifted so he could face Misha more fully. “You’re welcome. I enjoyed it too. We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

She smiled at him, at first, but then it faded a bit, and her gaze dropped to her lap. Jay’s stomach knotted. Had he misread her reactions to them being together? Had his revelations earlier turned her off dating him?

“I really would like to do it again,” she murmured. “But I feel like I need a little clarification first.”

Jay was confused. “Clarification?”

“I’m not interested in being one of a few girlfriends you have,” she said. “I need to know exactly where I stand.”

“There are no other girlfriends,” Jay told her. “I haven’t been on a date in ages.”

“So that woman at the clinic last week? She wasn’t a girlfriend?”

Well, that didn’t make the knot in his stomach go away. If anything, it got tighter. This was another subject he really didn’t want to talk about. “Casey? You saw her?”

“I did,” Misha said. “And Janessa said she is your sometimes girlfriend.”

Jay would like to have a few words with his sister. But first, he had to have this conversation with Misha.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Having spent a lovely evening with Jay, Misha knew she wanted to do it again. She just needed to make sure that she was the only woman spending time with him.

Misha had known she'd need to address this subject with Jay, though she really hadn't wanted to bring it up. However, if he was in the habit of dating more than one woman at a time, she needed to know that before their relationship went any further.

Plus, she wanted to know if he truly dated all types of women, or if the blonde-haired woman was more of his usual type. People could be drawn to a physical type—she understood that—but if he was usually attracted to women who were Misha's opposite, she wasn't sure she wanted to risk her heart. She wasn't interested in being an anomaly.

“Casey is my *ex*-girlfriend,” Jay said. “We broke up several months ago.”

“So why did Janessa call her your *sometimes* girlfriend?”

Jay hesitated before answering, which didn't fill Misha with much confidence. “Unfortunately, we have a history of breaking up and getting back together again.”

That statement made Misha feel a little sick. “How long were you together?”

That second hesitation was longer than the first. “We started dating when we were juniors.”

“In college?”

“High school.”

High school sweethearts? That really didn't bode well for Misha. “And you broke up and got back together with her more than once?”

“She broke up with me,” Jay said, then frowned.

“But you always got back together?”

“Until this last breakup. I told her I wasn’t interested anymore.”

“Was that why she was at the clinic to see you last week?”

He nodded. “But I told her no.”

“Why didn’t you want to get back together this time?” Misha really hoped he didn’t say it was because of her. She worried that if that was the case, the first time they had a rough patch, he might go back to the other woman.

“I was tired of the breakups. Of feeling like I was her yo-yo. She’d send me out of her life, then jerk me back into it again. I finally woke up to the pattern... the manipulation... and I hated it. And that hate killed any feelings I still had for her.”

Misha wished she could have all the details, but she knew that she wasn’t entitled to them. “Have you dated other women besides her?”

“Yes. If our breakup lasted longer than a couple of weeks, I’d figure it was over, and I’d start to date again, hoping to get over her.”

“Were they all like her?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tall. Blonde. White.”

“Oh.” Jay frowned. “Well, they’ve all been White.”

“Is there a reason for that?” she asked. “It that the type of woman you’re attracted to?”

Frustration crossed Jay’s face, evident in the interior of the car thanks to the streetlamps throughout the parking lot. Misha wondered if she’d misjudged Jay.

His frustration faded as he sighed. “I’m actually attracted to intelligent, confident women.”

Misha wasn’t sure how to interpret that. She wanted to take the comment at face value, but there was no denying that, in addition to being intelligent and confident, Casey was also beautiful.

“And there were no intelligent, confident women of color around for you to date along with the White ones?”

“Not sure if you’ve noticed, but there aren’t a huge number of non-Caucasian people around here. Back in high school, Janessa and I were the only ones in our classes. So, if I wanted to date, it was going to be a White girl.”

Misha could see how that might have been the case for the high school years. But did that apply to college too?

“Casey was athletic as well as smart, so we got along well when we first started dating. But then, after graduation, I went to Boise State while Casey went to Seattle for law. We were over thirteen hours apart, and it was a struggle to keep things going long distance. That’s when we broke up for the first time.”

“But it didn’t last?”

“Nope. We’d only been broken up a week when Casey said we should get back together again. It started a pattern. A couple of times, we ended up breaking up for almost two months, and that’s when I dated other women. And yes, they were White because that’s what the majority of the women around me were.”

Misha didn’t feel any more at ease than when they’d started their conversation. A part of her regretted having started it, but she knew she needed this information in order to make a decision on whether she dared risk a relationship with Jay.

The knowledge she’d gained of him during their friendship told her she could trust him, but these new revelations worried her.

“Here’s the thing,” Jay said. “I don’t date based on skin color. Like I said, I like smart and confident women. I’m not going to date a woman just because she’s White if she doesn’t have those qualities. And vice versa.”

“I’m sorry.” Misha sighed. “I didn’t mean to insinuate anything by my questions.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Jay told her. “I understand how my dating only white women might look to some people, but I hope what I’ve shared with you has helped to clarify things.”

“It has,” she said. “It was just hard to understand why you’d be attracted to me when you’ve only dated White women. I needed to know why I was the exception to that.”

“I can understand that,” Jay said with a nod. “I’m attracted to you because you’re smart and confident, and a big plus is that you’ve got a great sense of humor. You make me laugh and smile more than any other woman has. Do I think you’re beautiful? Yes. But that’s just icing on the cake for me.”

Misha stared at him. “How do I know that you won’t change your mind and go back to Casey again?”

“We broke up months ago,” he said. “She’s already tried to get back together a few times, and I’ve told her no. She kept bugging me, so I blocked her. Thankfully, she doesn’t live in Serenity, so she can’t bug me in person.”

“But she still showed up at the clinic.”

“Yep. Her family still lives here, so she does come back. I forgot that it was her and her mom’s birthday last week, and she always comes home to celebrate with her mom. She showed up to try to convince me to get back together again, and I said no. Again. Honestly, I should never have gotten back together with her that last time because my feelings for her had changed. But, at that point, it was just habit.”

“Your sister doesn’t like Casey.”

“No, she most certainly does not,” Jay said with a laugh. “None of my siblings do, to be honest. They are all very happy that I didn’t get back together with her after this last breakup.”

Misha wanted to be sorry that she brought up the subject, but now that they’d gotten to this point, she wasn’t. “Thank you for telling me all of this. For answering my questions.”

A smile briefly flitted across Jay’s face. “I hate talking about the stuff with Casey because it makes me look like a fool, but you have a right to know. Unfortunately, she’s

already aware that we're spending time together, so it's entirely possible she might approach you at some point in the future."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. She still has friends in town, along with her family, who have probably been telling her stuff. Just know that my feelings for her are dead, and they're going to stay that way. There's zero percent chance of that ever changing."

"I'm glad to hear that." Glad and relieved.

"Also, I have only ever dated one woman at a time," Jay added. "Any woman I dated other than Casey was while we were broken up."

"You never had feelings for any of those other women?"

Jay shrugged. "There was never the chance to develop anything with them before she'd show back up to get us back together again. So I went with what I knew... who I knew."

"I'm not meaning to lock you into anything so early on," Misha said. "I just need to know I'm not wasting my time."

"I'd like to think you aren't," he replied. "I have no intention of dating other women while we're seeing where this leads. These past few weeks, as I've gotten to know you, I've found myself looking for excuses to spend even more time with you. If that's what you want as well."

Misha reached out and laid her hand on his where it rested on the gear stick. "It's what I want too. I just needed a bit of reassurance that we were on the same page."

Jay turned his hand over and threaded their fingers together. "Same book. Same page. Hopefully, even the same line." He lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of hers. Butterflies erupted in her stomach at the warmth of his lips on her skin. "So you're up to planning another date?"

Misha smiled at him, unable to keep her joy from spilling out. The dip that their evening had taken was behind them now, and maybe Casey would pop up in their future, but at

least she felt able to handle the woman. She knew about her. She knew about the relationship she'd had with Jay. She wouldn't be taken off-guard.

The only thing she had to take Jay's word for was that he was truly attracted to a woman of color when his history didn't bear that out. However, she liked him enough, and enjoyed the time they spent together enough, that she was willing to take the risk.

When Jay got out of the car and walked her to the door of the townhouse, Misha wasn't sure if he planned to kiss her, but she was kind of glad when he didn't. There was no need to rush the physical affection, and it would make her feel better if they didn't.

"Hopefully, I'll see you at church tomorrow," Jay said, giving her fingers a squeeze.

"Yep. We'll be there."

It was hard for Misha to say goodnight, but she did. Jay slowly backed away, only letting go of her hand when he had to. Despite the cold, Misha lingered on the porch until he pulled out of the parking lot, then turned and went into the house.

Since it was fairly late, the house was quiet, her mom having already gone to bed. Misha would tell her mom about the date at some point, but right then, she was kind of glad to just be able to cherish the memory alone for a little while longer.

~*~

Though Jay would have liked to spend more time with Misha the next day, the weather wasn't conducive to another hike, plus Will had wanted to hang out with him. When he'd told her, Misha had understood.

They had spent some time together, though. He'd sat with her and Denise during the worship service, then Denise had invited him to join them for lunch. He'd endured a grilling

from Denise, but he had expected that, and he'd known it came from a place of love and concern for her daughter.

Jay thought he'd passed the test if Denise's hug when he'd left had been any indication. He looked forward to getting to know her better as he and Misha continued to date.

He'd enjoyed seeing how they'd made the townhouse their own. The last time he'd seen it, there had still been unpacked boxes everywhere. Now, it definitely looked more like a home, and that made him happy. If Misha and Denise were making a home for themselves in Serenity, then he didn't have to worry about them leaving.

"So, how did your date go?" Will asked from where he stood on the opposite side of the counter, building his burger. "I'm assuming it went well, judging from the grin on your face."

That comment only made him smile more. "It went really well."

He put one of the burgers he'd made onto a bun, then added some lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and condiments to it. "That steakhouse at the hotel is amazing. Kayleigh really came through for us."

"I've only been there once," Will said. "It's a bit out of my price range."

"Mine too. They didn't give us a bill. Just told me that Kayleigh had taken care of it, so I either owe her big-time or need to settle up."

"It's never a good idea to owe a sibling," Will warned. "You'd better settle up."

"This is true." Jay added some of the fries he'd made in the air fryer to his plate, then picked up his drink. "I'll talk to her about it the next time I see her."

"So, when is your next date?" Will asked. "Or has she not agreed to another date yet?"

Jay hadn't been sure they'd have a second date when the conversation had veered into his relationship with Casey and

the other women he'd dated. Though he hadn't wanted to share about it, Jay had known that he had to be honest because if he didn't and stuff came out later, it wouldn't have a positive impact on their relationship.

"I had to tell her about Casey," he said as he carried his food into the living room and set everything down on one of the TV trays Will had set up there earlier. "And then she wanted to know if I only dated Caucasian women."

"Oh, wow." Will put his plate and drink down on his tray. "Talk about a minefield conversation. And you survived... apparently. Did you tell her the truth?"

"Of course, I told her the truth," Jay replied indignantly. "Starting off a relationship with a bunch of lies would hardly have been smart. So yeah, I told her the truth."

Mostly. She didn't really need to know all the intimate details of the relationships he'd had. That was all in the past and needed to stay there.

"I guess she must have been okay with your answers if she agreed to go on another date with you."

As they ate, Jay gave him a more detailed account of their evening. Since he always told Will everything, he had no problem sharing that with him.

"Do you think Casey's going to give her hassles?" Will asked.

"It would be a little difficult since she's living in Denver at the moment," Jay said. "However, I don't know what her family might do."

"They haven't messed with you, have they?"

"Nah. But Casey has her parents wrapped around her finger, so who knows what they might do for her. Honestly, though, I think Casey's going to move on. It would be beneath her to have to beg for me to come back."

"That would be a first for her, huh? Usually, you're more than happy to get back with her."

“Yep. I don’t think she’ll be interested if she has to be the one to keep begging for us to get back together.” Jay grimaced. “Usually that was me.”

“I hope that you really are over her,” Will said. “Misha seems nice, and she’d be hurt if you ended things in order to get back together with Casey.”

“Will, c’mon, bro.”

“It’s happened before,” Will said with a shrug.

Well, that’s not going to happen this time. Even before I was interested in Misha, I’d told you things were definitely over with Casey.”

“True. I’ve honestly been a bit surprised that you’ve managed to hold out.”

“It took me far too long to wise up, but now there’s no way I’d ever go back to her. I’ve had the chance to feel what it’s like to be with someone who makes me feel happy, and I don’t want to lose that.”

Will sighed, his expression turning morose. “I thought I had that.”

“I’m sorry to be talking about me and Misha when you’re feeling like this.”

“Nope.” Will held up his hand. “You listened to me talk about Daph and me even when you were upset about your breakups with Casey. We’re best friends, man. We talk about all this stuff.”

“I really am sorry that things ended with you and Daphne,” Jay said. “Is there any chance you might get back together?”

“Nope.” Will gave a vicious shake of his head. “If I learned one thing being your friend, it’s that getting back together after a breakup is a bad precedent to set.”

“Depends on the reason for the breakup.”

Will gave him an incredulous look. “Seriously? Even after everything, you would still give someone another chance?”

Jay liked things to be black and white, but he wasn't sure that was always possible. "I'm not going to say for sure one way or the other."

He hoped that he never had to find out because he didn't want to have to endure a breakup with Misha.

"Maybe if me and Daph had had a spectacular fight that led to us breaking up, I might give her another chance," Will said. "But I'd tried to get her to talk to me for a few weeks before she broke up with me. If she wanted to work things out, she had plenty of opportunities. So yeah, I'm done."

"I get that," Jay said.

The game started before they'd finished eating, so they turned their attention to the television and put talk of relationships to the side for the time being. As he watched the game, Jay wondered if Misha liked basketball. She'd seemed knowledgeable about the sport, but they hadn't discussed it at length.

He'd never invited Casey to these times with Will, and Will had never included Daphne. However, the idea of hanging out with both Misha and Will seemed like it might be fun. The bonus was that Will actually seemed to like Misha, which hadn't been the case with Casey.

After the game finished, Will left. Jay glanced at the clock on the wall, wondering if it would be too late to call Misha. She didn't have work the next day, but she probably didn't stay up too late since she had a baby.

Hey! Up for a quick call?

Misha: *Sure.*

Jay wasted no time in calling her, then put his AirPods in so he could clean up in the kitchen while they talked.

"Did your team win?" Misha asked when she answered.

"My number one team wasn't playing in this game," Jay said. "But the team I liked best of the ones playing won, so I'm happy."

"Do you go to live games very often?"

“No. It’s a bit of a drive to get to anywhere a team plays. I have other things I’d rather spend my time and money on.”

“That surprises me,” Misha said.

Jay emptied the remnants of the fries from the air fryer into the garbage, then began to wash it. “Why’s that?”

“I thought you lived and breathed basketball. I figured that would mean you’d spend money on it.”

“Oh, I do live and breathe basketball, but my interest is more in the high school level game than the professional one. I watch the NBA games for entertainment, but I’m more invested in the local team and coaching and playing with them.”

“You play with the high schoolers?”

“Sure do.” Jay returned the cleaned air fryer basket to the machine, then put the box away in the large pantry.

“Do they fight over having you on their team?”

“Sometimes. But I come with a handicap.”

“What sort of handicap?”

“I can’t shoot.”

“So, what can you do?”

“Basically, I can pass the ball. If I’m fouled, one of the other players takes the shot.”

“From that, I must assume that normally you score a lot of baskets?”

“I can. All depends on the day and the people I’m playing with. However, my height is a bit of an unfair advantage against teenage boys.”

“Teen boys can be tall, though,” Misha pointed out.

“Yep. But I’ve been playing at this height for a lot longer than they have. Getting used to a new height after a growth spurt can take a little time.”

“Oh. Yeah. That makes sense.”

“How was your day?”

Jay enjoyed having her to talk to as he tidied up and got himself ready for the week ahead. He wouldn't see Misha at work the next day, but before the call ended, they made plans to meet at the gym again the next evening.

Once they'd said goodnight, Jay turned off the lights in the kitchen, then walked over to the large sliding glass doors that led out to his balcony. He was far enough up that he could look out over the town. It was one of the things he appreciated about his apartment.

As Jay mulled over the past few days, he hoped everything he'd learned from his relationship with Casey would help him succeed with Misha. One thing he refused to do was be a doormat the way he'd been with Casey. She'd definitely been in charge of their relationship, and that hadn't worked for him in the long run.

And it wasn't because he needed to be the one in charge. No. He wanted a partnership with Misha. He wanted the best for Misha, and he hoped that she'd want the same for him. He wanted a relationship like his parents had, with a strong enough foundation that it could weather the storms of life and go the distance.

Hopefully, they'd have the chance to build that foundation before facing any sort of storm.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Misha guided her car along the driveway that led to the Halversons' family home. Though she hadn't expected it, they'd received an invitation to Cole's graduation party.

She hadn't spent much time with the teen. Had only been around him a handful of times, though it was clear that Jay was close with his brother. Most recently, she'd seen Cole when Jay had invited her to watch him play basketball in the high school gym with some of the teens he coached.

Misha hadn't been the only spectator. Skylar had been there too since the guy she was dating also played basketball and was one of Cole's best friends. There were other teens there, but no other adults.

Misha hadn't minded, though. She'd climbed to the top of the bleachers and leaned against the wall, watching as Jay handled the dual roles of player and coach.

Though he hadn't been there in a coaching capacity, he hadn't let that stop him from offering guidance as he'd played, first on one team and then on the other. The boys' respect for Jay was clear as they adapted to his suggestions and high-fived him when he cheered on their accomplishments, even if they were on the opposite team.

"Are you sure we should have come?" her mom asked as Misha pulled her car to a stop next to the others that were already parked there. "We don't really know Cole."

"They invited us," Misha reminded her. "So, they must have wanted us here."

"Or maybe they felt like they had to invite us."

"I didn't get that feeling, Mom." Misha tried to give her a reassuring smile. "We don't have to stay super long. Just try to enjoy our time here."

Her mom blew out a breath. "I'll try."

It was taking some time for her mom to find her place in Serenity. The group that Eva had invited her to had become the first real connection that her mom had made. She'd gone the first time, uncertain about committing to it, but then she'd gone to every meeting since. Misha was so thankful that Eva had reached out and taken her mom under her wing.

They couldn't just hang out in the car, so Misha opened her car door and got out, knowing her mom would follow. She unbuckled Ciara and got her out of her car seat, while her mom retrieved the diaper bag.

They hadn't even reached the steps leading to the porch when the front door opened and Jay stepped out, his gaze finding hers without hesitation. The smile that came to his face made Misha's heart skip a beat, and she walked more quickly toward him.

"Hello, beautiful," he said as she reached him. He wrapped his arms around both her and Ciara, then took the baby from her. "Hey there, cutie."

Ciara had developed her own feelings for Jay, and happily spent as much time as possible with him. The feeling seemed to be mutual, as Jay never failed to take Ciara whenever they arrived where he was.

"How are you, Denise?" he asked, giving her a one-armed hug. "You look very nice."

Her mom glanced down at herself. "Thank you, dear."

It had taken them both more time than it should have to decide on what to wear to the graduation party. Misha had finally texted Janessa to ask for some advice. Thankfully, since they'd communicated via text, she had no idea if the woman had laughed at her request. She hadn't tacked an LOL on her suggestion that jeans and a nice shirt were fine, so Misha hoped she'd understood that this outing was a little nerve-racking for them.

"Let's head on in," Jay said. "We're actually eating out back."

"I'm glad it turned out to be such a nice day."

“Mom’s been praying for good weather all week,” Jay said as he led them into the house.

It was the first time they’d been to this house. Most of the time when they hung out with the Halversons, it was at Charli and Janessa’s place.

“This is very beautiful,” her mom said.

Misha had to agree. It wasn’t a super modern home, but it was clear that it belonged to a loving family. Pictures covered every surface and many of the walls. Misha would have loved to spend time perusing them in search of glimpses of a younger Jay.

“Denise!” Cathy came hurrying over to them. “Welcome! I’m so you glad you three could make it.”

“Thank you for inviting us.”

“Of course, we wanted you here. It’s a celebration!”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“I don’t like to put guests to work, but since you offered...”

“Put me to work,” her mom insisted.

Misha smiled as she watched the two women head into the large, bright kitchen. Now that she had something to do, her mom would relax.

“Let’s head out back,” Jay said. “I think we’ll just end up in the way if we stay in here.”

There were already a bunch of people gathered on the large deck at the back of the house. The whole area was set up for entertaining, with a wide covered porch that ran the length of the house, and beyond that, a large, tiered deck.

Janessa came over and tried to take Ciara from Jay, but the little girl grabbed hold of Jay’s shirt and wouldn’t let go.

“Seriously? You don’t like me anymore, Baby C?”

Jay chuckled. “I’m her favorite.”

“Well, I guess like mother like daughter, huh?” Janessa said with a laugh.

“You know it.” Misha grinned. “She really has attached herself to Jay recently.”

The only person who was able to take Ciara’s attention from Jay was Layla when she ran over to them. Jay sat down at one of the picnic tables scattered across the deck, putting him at a level that enabled Layla and Ciara to interact.

“He’s very good with kids,” Janessa said. “From babies all the way up to teens.”

“It’s a good attribute to have,” Misha mused. “In this day and age, kids of all ages are in need of people who love and support them.”

Now that they were officially dating, she couldn’t help but wonder if they might have a future that would include children one day. She didn’t want to jump the gun, but her heart already belonged to him, and each day she prayed that their relationship would last.

More people began to show up, but thankfully, Jay stuck close to her, so she didn’t feel like she was out of place, even though she was a stranger in a crowd where everyone else seemed to know each other.

Jay introduced her to people who approached them, but he seemed content to just hang out with her.

“Well, that’s a surprise,” Jay said, a grin spreading across his face as he stared at two new arrivals. “I didn’t know they were coming.”

After greeting Cole, the pair headed over to where they stood, and Jay gave each of the men a hug. “Guys, I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Misha. Misha, these are two more of my brothers. Zane and Lee.”

Misha had known that there were two other adopted children in the family but hadn’t heard a lot of details about them.

“And who is this little lady?” Lee asked, holding out his hand to Ciara.

She stared at him for a moment before grasping his finger.

“This is Ciara. She’s Misha’s daughter.”

Lee and Zane both stood taller than Misha, but they were three or four inches shorter than Jay. They also had lankier builds when compared to his more muscular one.

Kayleigh arrived while they were talking and hurried over to give the men hugs. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“We thought we’d surprise everyone.”

“Even Mom and Dad?” Jay asked.

“Yep.”

“Well, I think it’s great you made it. Are you missing school?”

“We managed to work it out,” Zane said. “I haven’t missed many classes, so they were okay with me missing tomorrow.”

“So you’re just here for the night?” Kayleigh asked, a frown on her face.

“Yep,” Lee said.

“Are you coming home for the summer?”

“I’m not.” Lee took a can of soda that Cole offered him. “My job has offered me full-time hours for the summer, so I’m going to stick around.”

“I’m not coming home either,” Zane said. “I’ve got stuff going on.”

“Stuff?” Jay asked. “What kind of stuff?”

Zane crossed his arms. “I don’t have to tell you, dude. I’m an adult now.”

Jay chuckled. “I remember those days.”

“Well, look who else has shown up,” Kayleigh said, then marched toward the back door.

She came to a stop in front of a man with dark curls who towered over her. Not that that made the man overly tall, because everyone seemed to tower over the petite Kayleigh.

“The gang’s all here,” Jay murmured. “That’s Wilder.”

After talking with him for a minute, Kayleigh grabbed Wilder’s arm and dragged him over to where they stood. The siblings exchanged hugs before Jay introduced Misha to the newest arrival.

She was kind of glad that she had met the family in small numbers, so she had a chance of remembering all their names.

“Nice to meet you,” Wilder said, a broad grin on his face. “It’s about time the clinic got a good doctor, bonus that it’s meant Jay also got a nice girlfriend.”

“Amen!” Kayleigh said, then lifted her hand in Wilder’s direction. The guy gave her a high five.

“I would get ticked at you, except that you’re right on both counts,” Jay said, slipping his arm around Misha’s waist.

“Does she know about Casey?” Wilder asked.

“Casey?” Misha looked up at Jay. “Who’s Casey?”

Jay’s eyes went wide, then she saw him struggle to keep a straight face. “Uh... she’s my ex. You don’t have to worry about her.”

“You had a girlfriend before me?”

“Yeah... She was my high school sweetheart.”

“Yikes, Jay,” Wilder muttered.

“Harsh,” Lee agreed.

“Are you wanting to keep Misha as your girlfriend?” Zane asked. “Because you’re getting ready to crash and burn, bro.”

“I was going to tell her,” Jay said as he glared at his brothers. “Wilder is the one who brought Casey up.”

Kayleigh stood with her arms crossed and a smirk on her face, clearly waiting for her brothers to wise up.

“I know I’ll be looking to Gareth for relationship advice after this,” Lee said. “You need some help, Jay.”

Jay laughed. “Do you honestly think I wouldn’t tell Misha about Casey?”

“You three are so gullible,” Kayleigh added.

“Wait.” Lee turned to Misha. “You started this by pretending you didn’t know about Casey.”

“Oh, good one,” Wilder said with a laugh. “You’ll fit right in.”

Misha grinned as she leaned into Jay’s side. “I figured you could take the joke.”

Wilder watched as Jay laughed and held her and Ciara close. The man then stepped close and wrapped his arms around all three of them, clearly not having much of an issue with personal space. “This is amazing.”

“I don’t think I ever saw Jay this happy while he was dating... her,” Lee said.

Kayleigh smiled at Misha. “It’s been nice to see.”

Misha felt a rush of warmth at the acceptance of Jay’s siblings. It helped ease a bit of the ache from missing her own.

After the food was ready, Misha helped carry it out while Jay kept hold of Ciara. Dan called for everyone’s attention, then he said a prayer for the food. Her mom had set aside a small dish of food for Ciara, so Misha took it to where Jay sat and settled down next to him.

“I’ll take her so you can go get yourself some food,” Misha said.

“How about *you* get yourself some food first?” Jay suggested.

“I’m fine to wait.”

“Okay. How about I get for us both? Do you want a hamburger, hot dog or both?”

“Both?” She gave him an incredulous look. “I think not. Just a hamburger with lettuce and tomatoes.”

“Sounds good.” Jay handed Ciara to Misha, though the baby wasn’t thrilled to be left behind.

“He’ll be back, baby,” Misha reassured her as she took a bib from the diaper bag and put it on her. “Have a bit of carrot.”

Her mom had cooked up some carrots and sweet potatoes to bring with them. They were soft enough that Ciara could eat them without choking.

Though Misha was happy that they were celebrating Cole’s accomplishment, she couldn’t help but think of the kids in her Atlanta community. Some never had the chance to graduate because their attention was pulled in different directions, whether it was their home environment or obligations to their family. Others had to struggle to reach that milestone.

Davontae hadn’t graduated from high school, rebelling against the constraints of being in an educational environment. Determined to make a different life for herself, Misha had worked hard and even managed to graduate early. Raden had also graduated, with plans to get a degree in engineering so that he could provide a better life for his child.

“Here you go,” Jay said as he set one of the plates he carried in front of her. In addition to the burger, there was a big scoop of potato salad and a bag of chips. “I’ll grab us some drinks.”

Misha smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He rested his hand on her back for a moment. “I’ll be right back.”

When Jay returned, he had her mom with him. A couple of other people who knew Jay and Janessa joined them, giving Misha and her mom friendly smiles when they were introduced.

“Do you want me to take her?” her mom asked as Ciara squealed and wriggled in Misha’s lap.

“You go ahead and eat,” Misha told her. “Once you’re done, we can switch off.”

“Okay.”

As she helped Ciara eat, Misha had a moment of wondering if she was dreaming. Everything surrounding them felt so surreal, something she never would have imagined being part of. It was like a scene out of a family-oriented movie or television show. So foreign to her.

“You okay?” Jay asked, making Misha realize she’d spaced out.

She gave him a reassuring smile. “Yep. It’s all good.”

He didn’t look totally convinced, but he let it go.

“Is Will coming today?”

“I thought he was,” Jay said. “But maybe not.”

She knew that Jay was worried about his friend who was going through his first serious breakup. She hadn’t known Will and Daphne as a couple, so she had no idea how things had deteriorated between them over time. All she knew was that it was hard to see the sadness on Will’s face.

“Want me to text him?” Janessa asked.

Jay arched a brow at her. “You think he’ll answer you?”

“People aren’t usually able to ignore me for long.”

“This is true,” Jay agreed. “You’re like that annoying itch in the center of your back that you just can’t reach to get rid of it.”

“I’m an *itch*?” Janessa rolled her eyes, making their friends at the table laugh. They were clearly used to the bickering siblings.

“I’m done,” her mom said a few minutes later. “Hand her over.”

Ciara’s hands were a mess, but her mom managed to maneuver the baby around without getting orange mush

smear on her. Pro-mom move, for sure. One that Misha hadn't perfected just yet.

Ciara seemed to be happy across the table from them because she could still see her and Jay. Misha was glad that she wasn't fussy. She'd had a good nap before coming, so that helped.

Dessert turned out to be an ice cream bar, which was a little hard for Misha to get into because the evening air held a bit of a chill. At least in her estimation. Still, it was a fun dessert that the rest of the guests seemed to really enjoy.

"Do you want more ice cream?" Jay asked.

"No, thank you," she told him. "It's a little chilly for me to be eating as much ice cream as I usually would."

Jay looked at her with concern. "Do you want to go inside? I forget that you three aren't acclimatized yet."

"I wonder how long that'll take," Misha mused, appreciating it when Jay put his arm around her.

Thankfully, they'd anticipated it being cool and had worn jackets, and Ciara was outfitted in a pair of thick tights, jeans, and a long sleeve shirt under a thick sweater that had a hood on it.

She didn't think they'd be staying too much longer, anyway, as Ciara's bedtime wasn't too far off. Plus, it was only going to get colder for them, no matter how warmly they'd dressed.

Ciara went to Janessa when she held her hands out to her, and she was making the rounds of the guests with her. Once she didn't have Ciara, her mom had gone to help clean up. Misha planned to join her, but for just a moment, she wanted to enjoy the warmth of Jay's embrace.

"Thanks for including us in this," Misha said when it was just the two of them at the table.

"Thank you for coming. I'm always glad for an excuse for us to spend time together."

"Me too."

A fire had been lit in a fire pit out in the yard, and the young people all seemed to gravitate to it. The older guests remained around the tables, cups of coffee in their hands.

“Do you want to go to a movie or something this week?”

“Is there a theater here?”

“Not one that shows new releases,” Jay said. “There is a restored theater that shows classic and seasonal movies.”

“Really? Would you want to see a classic movie?”

“Depends on the movie. Honestly, I don’t watch a lot of movies.”

“Me either,” Misha said. “Movies just weren’t part of my entertainment in Atlanta.”

“What did you used to do for entertainment?”

“I’m kind of boring,” Misha said with a laugh. “If I was going to go out, it was usually just for a meal or coffee with friends. Being responsible for a baby cut back a lot on my ability to socialize.”

“Denise didn’t help you in the evenings?”

“Oh, she would, but she had Ciara with her during the days at her job, so I didn’t feel right asking her to take care of her in the evening too. I appreciated Mom taking care of her while I was at work, so I wanted her to have a chance to unwind, too. Plus, it was the only time I got to spend with Ciara during the week.”

“Ciara’s fortunate to have the two of you.”

Misha smiled as she leaned into Jay’s side. “We’re fortunate to have her. She was a ray of sunshine in a time of darkness.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Me too. But we’ve got happier days ahead of us now,” Misha said, smiling up at him.

“Indeed,” Jay agreed. “For all of us.”

Sitting in Jay's embrace, Misha could finally accept that it was possible, and she was grateful that God had brought them to that point.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When the phone on Jay's desk rang, he barely glanced at it as he picked the receiver up, preparing himself for a conversation with a supplier. "Jay Halverson."

"Jay, there's a woman here at the front asking to speak with you," Aria said.

"Did she give her name or what company she's from?" Jay didn't think it would be Casey again. It didn't seem like Aria was annoyed by this woman the way she would have been if it were Casey.

"Just a minute." He heard muffled conversation, then Aria said, "Her name is Amberlyn Scott."

The name was a flash out of the past, and Jay froze, his stomach clenching with dread. He had no idea why she was in Serenity, but it couldn't be for any good reason.

The last time he'd seen her, they'd fought because he'd told her that he didn't want to go out with her anymore. The truth was that Casey had contacted him to get back together again, and since he still wasn't over Casey and hadn't yet developed strong feelings for Amberlyn, he'd had no trouble walking away from her.

That breakup had been the worst one between him and Casey. It had followed his decision to not even talk to the scout who had approached him about playing professionally. She'd been livid, and when she'd ended things, Jay had been certain it was for good.

Feeling battered from that fight with Casey, he'd turned to Amberlyn for solace. Getting involved with her when he'd still had feelings for Casey had been a bad decision, and then he'd made it worse by ending things with her the way he had. She'd deserved better than how he'd treated her.

He got up from his desk and walked to the front, prepared to face his past once again.

“Amberlyn,” he said when he spotted her standing near the desk. “What brings you to Serenity?”

“Can we talk?”

“Sure. Come back to my office,” Jay said, then turned and led her through the halls to where his office was located. Once there, he waited for her to step into the office before he closed the door behind her. “Have a seat.”

As she sank down on the chair he indicated, Jay went around to his own seat. “This is a bit of a surprise.”

“I know,” she said as she gripped her purse tightly. “But I needed to talk to you.”

“It’s been a few years since I last saw you. What could you possibly need to talk to me about?”

“Your son.”

“My... what?” Jay’s stomach lurched, making him feel a little sick as his heart pounded in his chest. “I don’t understand.”

“I got pregnant after we slept together,” she said. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you before you ended things with me. Then I heard from one of the guys on the team that you were back with your ex.”

Shame and dread gripped Jay as he felt himself losing his grasp on the life he’d built over the past several years. He was at a loss as to what to say. Did he apologize? Deny that the boy was his? Demand that she prove her accusation?

“I know you probably won’t believe he’s yours, but we can do a paternity test to prove it. I am one hundred percent confident it will come back saying you’re his father.”

“What do you want from me?” Jay asked. “Money?”

If it was just money, he would happily agree to give her child support.

“No. I want you to take him.”

“What?” Jay stared at her in shock and horror. She wanted him to take the boy?

What kind of woman was she? Good mothers didn't just give their children away. Not unless they were in a situation like his mom had been, with no other options.

"It no longer works to have him in my life," Amberlyn said, her expression tight.

"I don't understand how you can say that about a boy you've raised for the past... what... six years?"

Amberlyn's chin lifted. "I'm doing what's best for him."

"For him? It sounds like you're doing what's best for you."

"Listen, you don't know me or my situation. The man I love wants to marry me, but he doesn't want Peyton."

"He's your son," Jay said. "You're a package deal."

"Only if I want to be."

"What kind of man doesn't want a little boy?"

"It's not that he doesn't want a little boy, he doesn't want one that is so obviously not his."

Her words chilled Jay. "He's a racist."

"No," Amberlyn insisted. "He just wants to have a son who looks like he belongs to us."

"And you really love a man like that? A man who would reject a little boy over something he can't control?" Jay tried to keep his anger from spilling over. "You're the one who made the decision to be with me, a Black man, and now you're abandoning your child because someone has made you regret that decision?"

"I don't expect you to understand," Amberlyn said, her gaze hardening.

"I think I *need* to understand, Amberlyn. You're asking me to take on a child who doesn't know me at all."

"If you care so much about him, then you should be willing to step up and take him. You're his father."

"And you're his mother. Are you planning to just leave his life completely? What are you proposing here?"

“I’m giving you legal and physical custody, but no child support. I didn’t go after that from you, so I don’t owe you anything.”

“And if I say no?” Jay asked, even though he knew he wouldn’t be able to abandon a child of his.

“You’d rather him be part of a family where he’s not wanted?”

“And how do you know he’d be wanted in my family?”

“You don’t have a family,” she said. “No wife. No kids. And from the look of your immediate family, they wouldn’t have a problem with him.”

No, they wouldn’t have a problem with Peyton. They’d have a problem with him and the decisions he’d made. The disappointment he’d always feared bringing to his family was now staring him down, and he wasn’t going to be able to avoid it.

Jay was torn. He wished there was a way to help the boy without having to reveal his past actions. But hiding what had happened wasn’t possible if he was going to step up and do the right thing.

It didn’t matter if he understood why Amberlyn was doing this. It didn’t matter what the fallout would be for him. All that mattered was that there was a little boy who needed a welcoming home.

The sick feeling in his stomach only increased as he wondered what impact this might have on his relationship with Misha. He had portrayed himself as a certain type of man, and this revelation was going to prove to everyone that he wasn’t who they thought he was.

Even though they didn’t care for Casey, they might have been more understanding of a child resulting from their relationship. Only Will had ever known about the women he’d dated when he and Casey weren’t together. Dated... and slept with.

But before he disappointed everyone around him, he needed to know for sure.

“I want the paternity test,” he said.

“Of course. I figured you would. I’ll leave you with information on how we can get a test done that will legally allow us to add you to his birth certificate, and it will work for the change of custody, too.”

The more she spoke, the more Jay realized this wasn’t a snap decision for Amberlyn. She’d clearly thought it through and had planned for what was necessary to make this happen.

By requesting a paternity test, he’d bought himself some breathing room. Or maybe he’d just delayed the inevitable. Nothing she’d said or how she’d acted had shown anything but total confidence in her belief that he was the father of her son.

Amberlyn got to her feet, then pulled something out of her purse and laid it on his desk. “I think I can find my way out.”

Jay didn’t bother getting to his feet as Amberlyn opened the door. With one last look over her shoulder at him, she stepped into the hall, pulling the door closed behind her.

Bending his head forward, Jay closed his eyes. Regret filled him. Not just the familiar regret of the decisions he’d made, but also the regret of not having lived a more honest life. He’d compartmentalized so much, trying to uphold an image that would make his adoptive parents proud, while also appearing to not break the promises he’d made to his birth mom.

The thing he’d come to realize far too late was that regardless of whether they knew or not, he’d already disappointed them with his behavior and decisions. He knew from sermons and Sunday school lessons that what was done in the dark or behind closed doors rarely stayed there.

And even if no one else knew, God did. That was a fact he’d tried to ignore. He hadn’t wanted to acknowledge that he’d failed to please God as well.

He may have wanted to hide what he’d done, but it hadn’t guaranteed it would never come to light. He’d been naïve to think that. And now he had to deal with the ramifications.

Pushing back from his desk, Jay grabbed his phone and keys, then after a brief hesitation, he snatched up the packet of information Amberlyn had left on his desk. Jerking open his door, he strode down the hall toward the back door, pausing only long enough to tell Janessa he was gone for the day. She gave him a concerned look, but since she was with a patient, all she did was nod.

Once outside the building, he dragged in a deep breath, trying to loosen the tight band around his chest. When that didn't help, he jogged to his car. He didn't know where he was going. He just knew he couldn't stay there as he tried to process everything he'd just learned.

All the walls he'd erected in his life to keep the parts separate were crumbling, and he needed to shore them back up while he dealt with this situation. Until he knew for sure that his life was really going to change, he couldn't let the cracks show.

He drove aimlessly along the roads outside Serenity, ignoring his phone when it rang, Janessa's name popping up on the display on the dash. Talking to anyone was the last thing he wanted to do right then.

His heart hurt with the thought of what was to come, but Jay knew he had no one but himself to blame.

Reaching a hiking trail he'd used in the past, Jay pulled into the small lot that marked the start of it. He didn't have any hiking gear with him, but he didn't care. Getting out of the car, he left his phone behind but brought the thick envelope.

Thankfully, the trail was dry, so the shoes he'd worn to work didn't sink into mud. He followed the trail for close to half an hour until he reached a stopping point. Thankfully, the clearing was empty, so he could sit alone with his thoughts. Mid-afternoon on a Monday meant that there weren't many people around.

He stared down at the package in his hand, wondering what all it contained. It was possible it might just be paperwork, but part of him wondered if Amberlyn had given him pictures of his son.

With shaking hands, Jay broke the seal on the envelope and pulled out the contents. The first thing he saw was the picture of a young boy smiling at the camera. He had light gray eyes, a mop of loose dark brown curls, and he was missing his two front teeth.

A sob escaped Jay's aching chest as the boy's image went blurry. Blinking, Jay gently wiped away a droplet of moisture that fell on the picture.

Even without a test, he knew this boy was his. There were obvious differences between them, but he could see the similarities, too. They had the same smile, and the shape of their eyes was similar.

More hurt layered over what was already present in his heart. He should have been there for his son from the start. Now this boy would be uprooted, abandoned by his mother, just like Jay had been. Oh, of course his mom's abandonment had been beyond her control, but she'd still left him behind. And Peyton was going to feel the pain of that, just like Jay had.

Tipping his head back, Jay let out a pained yell. The papers in his hands crinkled as his grip on them tightened.

He wanted to rage and throw things. He needed an outlet for his pain and anger. But he knew it wouldn't change anything.

And who was he going to rage at? God?

He, and he alone, was responsible for all of this. The disappointment of the people who cared for him. The pain of a little boy.

Jay wanted to call out to God for help, but he didn't. All of this was the consequence of his selfish decisions, and God wasn't going to save him from it.

Looking down at the papers again, Jay drew a shaky breath as he looked through the other pictures Amberlyn had included. Pictures starting from the day Peyton had been born. She'd documented so much of his life. Clearly, she cared about him. How could she just give him up?

When he reached the last picture, Jay put everything back in the envelope and set it on the bench beside him.

For what felt like an eternity, he stared unseeing at the scene in front of him, trying to calm his mind as he struggled to handle the emotions that had shattered him.

He knew he needed to get back to Serenity, but he couldn't do that until he had pulled himself back together. The temptation was high to just get into his car and drive. Leave everything behind and find a way to live his life somewhere else.

But Jay knew it was a selfish desire and that it would solve nothing, because what he couldn't leave behind was the ache in his heart and the knowledge of what he'd done. He'd never be able to outrun those thoughts when he carried them within him.

As the sky darkened with twilight's approach, Jay picked up the envelope and got to his feet. Without his phone, he couldn't risk getting stuck out on the trail in the dark.

Whether he was ready or not, he needed to go back.

The sun had set by the time he reached his car. Getting behind the wheel, he put the envelope on the passenger seat beside his phone. He stared at it, almost afraid of what it would reveal if he picked it up. Would there be countless missed calls? Or just the one from Janessa?

Ignoring it for the time being, Jay turned the car on and began the drive back to Serenity. He'd only been driving for about five minutes when his phone rang.

Gareth.

Well, if Gareth was calling him, he'd left his family in a panic. Tapping a button on the dash, he answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Jay? Where are you?"

"I'm just coming back to Serenity. Why?"

There was a beat of silence before Gareth said, “Where have you been?”

Jay bristled at the question, but he reined in his annoyance. Getting defensive would only alert his family that something was wrong. “I had to run an errand out of town.”

“You usually let us know in advance if you have to leave early. And why haven’t you been answering your phone?” Gareth asked. “We’ve been worried.”

“Sorry. I forgot it in the car.” That was a stupid answer, but it was the best one he could give his brother right then.

Gareth sighed. “What’s going on, Jay? It’s not like you to leave in the middle of the afternoon.”

“I told Janessa that I was gone for the rest of the day. I didn’t realize I had to account for my whereabouts like I’m Cole or Skylar.”

Okay, he couldn’t keep from getting a little defensive with Gareth. But as a bonus, it helped to distract him from the pain in his heart.

“You don’t. It was just... That woman showed up and then you left. Janessa and Aria were worried.”

“I didn’t mean to worry them,” Jay said, which was the truth. “I just needed to take care of a few things.”

“I won’t pry further, but I make no guarantees about Janessa or Charli. Nessa alerted everyone when she couldn’t get hold of you. We’ve all been trying to call.”

Jay gripped the steering wheel tightly, knowing he had the opportunity to tell Gareth what had happened. But he couldn’t. Gareth had been the perfect son. He wouldn’t understand how hard it was to live up to the standard he’d set.

“Well, you can let them know I’m fine. I don’t feel like calling them all back tonight.”

Gareth hesitated again before he said, “You should probably know that Janessa also called Misha to see if you’d been in contact with her.”

“Okay. I’ll call her and let her know everything is fine.” A lie... a whopper of a lie... but he needed to keep the truth to himself for a bit longer.

“Sorry for panicking, bro,” Gareth said. “We were just concerned.”

“I appreciate your concern, though I’m sorry for causing it.”

He still wasn’t sure why everyone’s reaction had been so extreme. There was no way his leaving the office in the middle of the afternoon should have warranted that. Not answering the phone hadn’t been a wise move, but still. He was an adult. He didn’t have to if he didn’t want to.

“Have a good evening, Jay,” Gareth said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After ending the call, Jay blew out a frustrated breath, though honestly, he was glad for something else to focus on. Dealing with Gareth had helped him push the other feelings back. If he was going to be able to deal with everyone, he needed to get himself together.

Lucky for him, Jay had a lot of experience showing one face to the world while he was falling apart inside. There had been times that it seemed like Casey waited until he had a big game before breaking up with him. Like she didn’t want to just affect their relationship, she wanted to make it hard for him to focus on his game.

The first time it had happened, he’d played so horribly during the first half that his coach had benched him for the rest of the game. His first-string status had been in jeopardy after that catastrophe.

He’d had no choice but to learn how to stuff the hurt and anger aside so that he could function without falling apart. Given how often he and Casey had broken up, it was a skill he’d perfected. He hadn’t had to do it recently, so hopefully he wasn’t out of practice.

By the time he reached his apartment, he’d rehearsed what he needed to say to Misha. He had an hour before they were

supposed to meet at the gym, but he needed to talk to her first.

“Jay?” Misha said when she answered the phone. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” He sighed. “Not sure what got everyone so fired up. I just had some stuff to take care of and left my phone in the car.”

Technically, all true.

For a moment, Misha didn’t say anything, and Jay wondered if she didn’t believe him.

“Does this sort of thing happen much?” she finally asked.

“Which part? Me leaving a bit early to run errands? Or my siblings freaking out for no apparent reason?”

“Both?”

“Well, running errands is part of life,” Jay said. “And my siblings? Sometimes it happens. They allow their imaginations to run wild. Especially Janessa.”

“Oh. Well, yeah. She had me convinced something bad had happened to you. I was worried.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Jay said, running his hand over his hair. Of all of this, he was the most sorry about worrying Misha. “She needs to just chill a bit.”

“Are you still up for going to the gym?” she asked.

“Yep. As long as you are.”

“I am.”

“Great. Do you want me to pick you up or just meet you there?”

“We can just meet there.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

He hoped her wanting to drive there on her own didn’t mean anything. Most nights they went to the gym, it was a fifty-fifty thing if he picked her up or she drove herself.

Rather than dwell on that, he forced himself to eat something, then changed into the clothes he usually wore for his time at the gym. If he could just make it through the evening, he would be okay.

Well, okay to the world.

Inside his mind... that would take awhile.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Misha watched as Jay opened his container of food, which appeared to be his usual. He kept his attention on it as he combined the different parts of the salad, adding the dressing last.

None of that was out of the ordinary. The difference was in his attitude.

Whenever they were all together in the lunchroom, Jay usually interacted with her and his siblings while preparing and eating his meal. The others were chatting, but Jay remained quiet. Focused on his food.

He'd said he was fine, and the previous evening at the gym, he'd seemed his usual self, if a little distracted at times. However, he'd also smiled and laughed, and he'd ended their time together by giving her a tight hug, holding her like he didn't want to let go.

The whole situation was just... weird, and Misha wasn't sure what to make of it.

When Janessa had called her to ask if she'd heard from Jay, Misha hadn't been alarmed. They weren't in contact all the time, so not hearing from him hadn't concerned her at first.

But then Janessa had called back and asked if Misha would try calling Jay to see if he would answer. When she'd done that and he hadn't, she'd begun to wonder if perhaps there was a reason for Janessa's worry.

When she'd finally heard from Jay, it had been a relief, especially when everything seemed to be *fine*. She was starting to hate that word.

On the surface, Janessa's reaction to Jay leaving early and not answering his phone for a few hours seemed excessive. Prior to the events of the previous day, there hadn't been anything to even hint that something like that would set off such a crazy reaction from his siblings.

It was almost like they'd thought he was a danger to himself or something. She'd never gotten that feeling from him, though, so she didn't know what to think.

"Right, Jay?" Janessa said.

He looked up from his salad. "What?"

"I said," she began slowly, glancing at Gareth. "That it would probably be okay if Aria and I did a major shop for the free clinic bags this week."

"Yep. That would be fine," Jay said. "Just come by my office and grab the business credit card."

Even though Jay's response came easily, there was a tension between the siblings that Misha didn't know how to handle. She wanted to confront them about it in hopes of diffusing the situation, but she didn't know how to do that.

Jay was distracted. Janessa was worried. Even Gareth and Aria seemed concerned.

Misha was too new to the dynamic to know how to deal with it, but since she and Jay were dating, it seemed like she was owed some sort of explanation. She just wasn't sure from whom.

Something told her that everyone would say everything was *fine*, and she'd still be stuck in the dark. Maybe she needed to bide her time and see what happened. Surely the tense situation wouldn't drag on indefinitely.

After another two weeks had passed without things going back to normal, Misha was starting to think that perhaps they *couldn't*. Jay had been gone from the clinic two more times without any detailed explanation. One day, it had been almost eleven before he'd shown up, and another time, he'd left the office before lunch and hadn't come back at all that day.

He was still spending time with her, and at times—usually doing their workouts—everything seemed normal. But then there would be moments when he seemed distant, like his thoughts were a million miles away. Even Ciara didn't elicit the smiles she usually did from Jay.

Misha was ready to tear her hair out, and she didn't know who to talk to about what was going on. She didn't want to put Janessa or Gareth in the position of having to talk about their sibling when they might not want to.

But when Jay cancelled their date on short notice that Saturday night, Misha knew she had to make a decision. Either she had the right as his girlfriend to know what was going on, or he didn't consider their relationship as serious as she did.

She didn't want to force him to confide in her, but she was getting the feeling that his heart was no longer in them being together. Something had happened to change how he felt about their relationship. She had no clue what it might be, but she knew that for her own sake, she had to step back.

He clearly needed to focus on whatever was bothering him, and maybe without having to deal with their relationship, he'd be able to do that.

Just imagining not being with him like usual hurt Misha deeply. But what also hurt was feeling like he didn't want to confide in her about the issues that were causing him to withdraw.

She wasn't proud of the fact that she'd wondered if Casey was back in his life. And the possibility of that, more than anything else, made her realize that she couldn't live with the uncertainty any longer.

The next evening after Ciara had gone to sleep and her mom was settled in the living room reading, Misha retreated to her own room, phone clutched in her hand.

She prayed she was making the right decision and that God would give her the right words to say. It wasn't that she wanted to end their relationship permanently. She just wanted to give him space to deal with whatever was going on, and then, hopefully, they could get back together again.

"Misha?" Jay asked when he answered the phone after five rings. "Everything okay?"

"No. I don't think it is."

"What's wrong?"

“Why don’t you tell me?” she said. “I feel like things have changed, and I don’t know why.”

Jay was silent for what felt like an eternity, then he said, “I’m just dealing with some stuff.”

“I’ve gathered that much. But why won’t you talk to me about it? I can see that your siblings are worried, but all you say is that everything is fine, when clearly, it’s not.”

He didn’t say anything in response to that, making Misha feel sick. She wasn’t sure exactly when it had happened, but she’d come to love this man. Unfortunately, it seemed pretty evident that he didn’t feel the same way.

“Jay, I think maybe we should take a break.” As soon as she said the words, she winced, remembering what he’d said about his previous relationship. “Not forever. Just until you’ve dealt with whatever’s going on.”

“If that’s what you want.” Jay’s voice was tense and held a coldness she’d never heard from him before.

“It’s not what I want, but I think it’s what you need.”

“I have never needed breaks from the women I’ve loved, but it’s apparent that you’ve all needed breaks from me.”

“Jay...”

The line went dead, and a sob escaped Misha as she pressed a trembling hand to her lips. He *loved* her?

Had she made a mistake?

The more the tears fell, the more convinced she was that she had.

“Misha, darling.” Suddenly, her mom’s arms were around her. “What’s happened?”

Misha wasn’t able to speak for several minutes as she cried out her heartache. Her mom sat beside her on the bed, murmuring a prayer as she held Misha.

When the first wave of emotion had passed, Misha spilled everything. She’d tried not to worry her mom with what had

been going on, but she'd still picked up on the tension, so she didn't appear to be shocked by Misha's revelations.

"I don't know what to do, Mom," she said, exhausted by the toll her crying had taken on her. "I think I really hurt him, and that wasn't what I meant to do. I just felt that if he didn't want to confide in me, it would be better if he could just focus on whatever was happening instead of trying to balance it with our relationship."

Her mom smoothed a hand over Misha's curls. "It will be okay, darling."

"I don't know if it will be," Misha whispered, her shoulder slumping. "What have I done?"

"This doesn't have to be the end. You can still talk to him again. Once he's had a chance to calm down. Or maybe you can show him in other ways that you still support and care for him."

"I *love* him, Mom. I don't want to end things with him, but I think that's how he took it."

"How about you take him some cookies tomorrow? You don't have to talk. Just show him that you're not leaving him, but rather just giving him some space."

Misha nodded as she stared down at her phone and the picture that had been on her lock screen for the past month. It was a picture of her, Jay, and Ciara, all smiling at Janessa, who had taken it. At the time, it had felt like a glimpse into what their future would look like.

Now she needed to cling to her earlier feelings and pray that there was a future that God still wanted for them.

"Don't give up hope, darling," her mom murmured. "God is still in control of everything. He knows what's going on with Jay, so even if we don't, we can trust God to work things out."

Misha knew that was true, but fear had her heart in its grip.

She hardly slept that night, tossing and turning as she imagined all the different ways she could and should have

handled things with Jay. When morning came, she was moving slowly, her heart still heavy and hurting.

“Here you go, darling,” her mom said as she set a container on the counter. “Take Jay his favorite cookies.”

Misha wasn't sure that baked goods were going to fix anything, but they certainly couldn't hurt. More than anything, she just wanted a chance to look into his eyes and let him know that she wasn't going anywhere.

It was around eleven when she finally stepped through the back door of the clinic. She'd noticed that Jay's car wasn't in the parking lot, but she hoped that he'd just gone out for a bit. When she reached the door of his office, however, her heavy heart sank even further.

The room was dark, and there was no sign that he'd even been there yet that morning. Was he coming in late again?

“Misha?”

Turning, Misha saw Janessa hurrying down the hall to where she stood. “Isn't he in today?”

Janessa bit her lip, and her gaze dropped for a moment. “He called Gareth last night to let him know he needed to be out of the office for the next couple of weeks. He said he'd be working remotely. He didn't tell you?”

“I talked to him last night.” Trying to keep from crying again, Misha took a deep breath. “I think this might be my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told him that I thought maybe we should take a break so that he could focus on whatever he was dealing with.” When Janessa winced, Misha nodded. “Yeah. I realized too late what that would mean to him. I didn't mean I wanted a permanent end to our relationship.”

“It's understandable,” Janessa said. “He's been very distracted, and he doesn't seem to be talking to anyone about what's caused the sudden change in his behavior.”

“Not even Will?”

“I’m not sure. Gareth called Will last night after talking to Jay, but Will didn’t give any indication he knew what was happening.”

“I don’t want to lose... us,” Misha said. “I had hoped that I could talk to him this morning and explain what I meant. I even brought his favorite cookies.”

Janessa wrapped her arms around Misha. “I don’t know what’s going on with him. He’s never been like this before. Just don’t give up on him.”

“I won’t. I love him, Janessa.” It felt wrong to tell Janessa that before she’d told Jay, but she needed her to know.

Janessa’s arms tightened around her for a moment before she stepped back. “I have been so happy to see the two of you together. Jay deserves someone who makes him happy the way you do.”

“He makes me happy, too.”

“Then don’t give up on him.”

“Should I go to his place to talk to him there?”

Janessa frowned and shook her head. “I think he’s left town. Or at least that was the impression he gave Gareth, and when Gareth went by his place before work, Jay didn’t answer when he buzzed his apartment.”

Misha’s heart sank. He was gone? Even hearing he wouldn’t be in the office for a couple of weeks, she’d not considered that he would leave Serenity completely.

“He’ll come back,” Janessa assured her. “And when he does, I think he’ll tell us the whole story. He has a tendency to keep things to himself and not share anything with us until he’s worked it out for himself.”

“If we’re going to be together, he needs to learn to share the burdens.”

“I know, but he hasn’t had a relationship like that before. Casey was the burden in his life. Just have some patience as he learns how to be in a healthy relationship for once.”

Misha would be as patient as needed, including waiting for him to return.

That evening, she went to the gym, just like she would have on any other Monday evening. Jay had gotten Misha her own membership, so she didn't need him in order to get in. But it felt wrong walking into the gym without him there. She also didn't need him there to guide her through the workout they did together, but that, too, felt wrong.

She felt close to tears as she stretched on the mats, and she had to fight the urge to get up and leave. He would want her to keep working out. She knew that, and so she would.

All afternoon, she'd wondered if she should text him or try to call him again. Fear had kept her from reaching out, but as she walked on the treadmill—her pace much slower than normal—she couldn't help but take a picture of the empty machine beside her.

Opening her text messages, Misha pulled up her conversation with Jay. After attaching the picture, she typed out *Missing you. Hope you're doing okay.* She added a heart, then hit send.

It wasn't the way she wanted to converse with him. However, she'd tried to call him after work, to no avail, so it was the only way she could think of to reach him right then. Even if he didn't respond, she'd continue to send the messages unless he told her to stop. Nothing excessive. Just one or two a day when the pain of missing him became unbearable.

She closed out her messages and got off the treadmill, even though she hadn't spent even ten minutes on it. Her body just didn't have the strength to push on. She'd come back on Wednesday and try again.

After doing an abbreviated stretch to go with her abbreviated time on the treadmill, Misha cleaned up and left the gym. As she drove home, she went past Jay's building. She'd only been there once, when he'd invited her to join him and Will to watch a basketball game.

Looking up, she counted the floors to the one his apartment was on, then looked across to the windows she knew belonged to him. All of them were dark. It was possible he had curtains covering them, but in her heart, Misha was sure that Janessa was right, and he'd left town.

There was no reply to her message by the time she got home, and there was no reply to her message when she crawled into bed.

Tears soaked her pillow that night, and she had a fractured night of sleep once again, but Misha resolutely got out of bed the next morning. She had responsibilities she had to fulfill, and she needed to be focused on her patients for the duration of her workday.

She had smiles for the patients, but they took more effort than usual. Unfortunately, there were no smiles when she and the others gathered in the breakroom for lunch. Clearly, she wasn't the only one struggling with what had happened with Jay.

"Will texted me this morning," Gareth said as they sat around the table. "He said he'd heard from Jay, and he's okay."

Relief filled Misha, and the tension that had been present in her body since realizing that Jay was gone, eased a little bit. Not completely. That wouldn't happen until she could see him again. Until she could hug him and feel his arms around her. Until she knew that things between them were going to be okay.

"Where is he?" Janessa asked.

"Will didn't say."

"So he doesn't know?"

Gareth shrugged. "I think he probably does, but Will will always protect Jay if he thinks he needs to."

Janessa grumbled something about siblings being closer than best friends, her expression dark.

"Just be glad he's in contact with someone, Nessa," Gareth said.

“I *am* glad,” Janessa said. “I’m also still mad because all he needed to do was talk to us. He’s never acted like this before.”

“Jay is a grown man, so unfortunately for us, he can do what he wants. All we can do is pray that he realizes we’re here for him.”

Misha knew Gareth was right, but she shared Janessa’s desire to know more about what was going on.

“Do Mom and Dad know what’s happened?” Janessa asked. “I haven’t mentioned anything to them.”

Gareth nodded. “I talked to them yesterday afternoon. They’re concerned, of course, and one or both of them will come home if we feel they should be here.”

“Well, there’s not much sense in them coming home when Jay isn’t even here,” Janessa said. “But maybe once he’s back... depending on his state of mind.”

Misha hoped that the next two weeks flew by, especially if Jay didn’t respond to any of her messages. She just needed to see him again and know that he was okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jay stared across the shiny surface of the large boardroom table to where Amberlyn sat with her lawyer. This was it. The final meeting between them before Peyton was legally his.

The past two weeks had been... intense, and it had just been the beginning. Jay had no delusions that it would be smooth sailing from that point on.

“Jaylen has one more request to make,” his lawyer said.

“I’m not paying child support,” Amberlyn snapped.

“That’s not what I want.”

During their meetings, he’d watched Amberlyn closely. It gave him a sense of gratification to see the toll that the process was taking on her. He still couldn’t begin to understand how she could possibly give up her son, but he was glad to see it wasn’t easy for her. No matter how she projected the image that it was.

“Then what do you want?”

“I want you to stay in contact with Peyton.”

“What?”

“Once a week, I want you to video chat with him.”

“I don’t think that’s a wise idea,” she said. “If my fiancé ever found out, there’d be problems. He thinks it’s better to just cut off contact completely.”

“Explain it to me. I need to understand.” When Amberlyn looked at the lawyers seated at the table with them, Jay addressed the lawyers, “Do you mind giving us the room for a minute?”

The lawyers were slow to move, but eventually it was just him and Amberlyn in the fancy boardroom.

“Okay. Talk to me. I’m taking him regardless, but I need to know what’s going on. You’ve made me a part of wrecking a

young boy's life, and I don't like that I don't even understand *why*."

She frowned as she stared down at her hands. "I'm pregnant."

"You're pregnant? But how does that make any difference?"

"My fiancé told me that he'll support me and the baby, but not Peyton. I can't support two kids on my own."

"So go after him for child support," Jay said. "And I'll happily pay support for Peyton."

"I can't. He said if I do that, he'll just file for custody and take the baby."

"So, you're choosing this baby over Peyton."

"No. I'm doing my best to take care of both my babies. I can't take a chance on him taking this baby."

"So you're willing to give up one child to keep the other," Jay said. "You *are* choosing this baby over Peyton. Jim isn't a good man for making you do that. And he'll be a bad father if he raises that child to hate Peyton, all because he doesn't fit into the whitewashed picture Jim wants of his life."

"Jim isn't a bad man. He just wants a family that reflects us both, and Peyton isn't that. He wants this baby. He'll be a good dad. Just not for Peyton." Amberlyn's expression fell for a moment, then it hardened as she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. "By choosing this option, both of my children will have good lives."

"I'm pretty sure that Peyton isn't going to feel like his life with me is a good life for a very long time. Not if you're completely out of the picture," Jay said. "I think you should keep in contact with Peyton, even if you don't see him in person. Your circumstances might change at some point."

"I can't, Jay. Please. I just can't."

Jay still thought she was making a terrible decision, but it was becoming very clear that Amberlyn wasn't going to change her mind. Peyton was his now, and she was prepared to

walk away without a backward glance. The best thing he could do was help Peyton make the best of a terrible situation and give him a stable and loving home.

“If you ever marry someone who wants to adopt Peyton, I’ll relinquish my rights.”

Misha’s smiling face came to mind, and he was struck by the differences in how she and Amberlyn dealt with the children in their lives. While Amberlyn wasn’t willing to fight for her son, Misha had stepped up and taken in her brother’s child. It was just one of many things he admired about her.

Knowing there was nothing more to say to her, Jay got to his feet and went to call the lawyers back. Within the hour, he was on his way to the rental where Will and Peyton waited.

Peyton had been staying with him and Will in a small short-term rental for the past week. When he’d left Serenity for Idaho Falls, he hadn’t anticipated that Will would follow him. But thankfully, the guy was off work now that school was out, so he’d insisted on coming with him. He’d been a huge help, taking care of Peyton while Jay attended countless meetings.

There was no joy in Jay’s heart, even though Peyton was now legally his. He was grateful for the opportunity to get to know his son, but he didn’t like the circumstances. And he still wasn’t sure how to deal with the tsunami that was going to hit his life when he got back to Serenity with Peyton.

He’d relied on Will to let his family know he was okay because he didn’t want to talk with anyone. They’d all have endless questions that he wasn’t ready to answer just yet.

He’d held out hope that maybe Amberlyn would change her mind at the last minute and not want her son out of her life. The hit to his life, in that case, would have been mainly financial, and Peyton wouldn’t be facing the trauma that lay ahead once it sank in that his mom was out of his life.

But with Amberlyn digging in her heels, Jay had resigned himself to what was to come with his family. His main goal in that regard had been to have everything settled with Peyton

before he got back. It was why he'd left Serenity the way he had. He knew he couldn't keep juggling everything there while trying to work.

And while he hated to admit that Misha was right to call for a break between them, she had been. It hadn't been fair to her for him to be so distracted without explaining why.

He'd tried not to think too much about her because every time he did, his heart just ached. He had a feeling that the temporary break she'd requested was going to end up being a permanent one. Something told him that he was going to have a hard time juggling a new relationship with trying to help Peyton adjust to his life in Serenity Point.

Each day he'd been gone, Misha had sent him a text with a picture and a brief message to let him know that she missed him. She hadn't been in any of the pictures, but Ciara had been. The one that morning had been a picture of the baby with food smeared all over her face and in her hair with the caption *Bananas and oatmeal are the best!*

He missed them all immensely, but he knew the Serenity he'd left behind would change once he returned home.

Peyton greeted him with an earnest expression when Jay walked through the door. "Can we have pizza for supper?"

"Did Will put you up to that?"

Peyton looked at Will, who then looked at Jay and shrugged, an innocent expression on his face.

"Fine. But did you know that Will likes pineapple on his pizza?"

"Pineapple on pizza?" Peyton wrinkled his nose. "I don't know about that."

"It's gross," Jay told him. "Really, really gross."

"So why do people like it?"

"Because they're crazy," Jay said.

"We're not *crazy*," Will protested. "We just have refined taste."

“Can I try a piece?” Peyton asked. “Maybe I have ‘fined taste too.”

“Sure. We’ll get a whole pizza with pineapple on it, and you can try some.”

“I’ll place the order,” Will offered.

“Can I trust you to get me just a plain pepperoni? No pineapple?”

“Maybe?”

Jay shook his head. “I’m going to get changed.”

He went to the room he’d been staying in and changed into a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt. Once he’d hung up the slacks and button-down shirt he’d worn for the meeting, Jay sat on his bed and took a minute to just breathe.

His life had changed irrevocably, and he was struggling to keep up with it. He’d always relied on his ability to compartmentalize things in order to keep pushing ahead. Unfortunately, it was nearly impossible this time around. It was only because he’d cut off all contact with his family and Misha that he’d been able to do it at all.

But that was only temporary.

Even though he was focused on Peyton and the legal stuff, Misha was often on his mind. Her beautiful smile. The way her eyes lit up when she laughed. How her hand felt in his. How she felt in his arms. He missed it all so much.

But he didn’t hold out much hope that any of that would ever be his again.

In a few days, everything would be out in the open. All the walls between the different parts of his life would be down. His secrets out in the open.

The one thing through all of this that he was thankful for was that Casey hadn’t been the one to get pregnant. He might struggle to understand Amberlyn’s reasoning, but at least she was trying to do what she thought was right for her son. He didn’t think Casey would ever put a child’s needs before her own.

“Jay?” Will’s voice was followed by a knock on his door.

“Yep.”

The door cracked open, and Will poked his head in.
“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just needed to have a moment to myself.”

Rather than retreat, Will pushed the door open further, then leaned against the doorjamb with his arms crossed. “Did you get everything done today?”

“Yep. It’s all official and legal now.”

“When are we heading back to Serenity?”

“Peyton has one more session with the therapist tomorrow morning, then we can leave.” It was going to be an eight plus hour drive back to Serenity from Idaho Falls, which was where Amberlyn lived. He just hoped that Peyton would be okay to make the trip.

During the day, the boy seemed to be okay, viewing his time with Jay and Will like it was some sort of adventure. However, nighttime was something different, and that was looming once again. Jay never really felt like he knew what he was doing as a parent to Peyton, but that was never more evident than when bedtime came.

“Pizza will be here in a few minutes,” Will said. “Peyton’s watching TV while he waits.”

“Thanks for helping me out these past couple of weeks,” Jay said as he got to his feet. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Oh, but you could have.” Will gave him a frown. “All you needed to do was... Tell. Your. Family.”

Jay sighed as he followed Will back to the open living room/kitchen area. Peyton was sitting on the overstuffed couch with his legs drawn up, watching some animated kids’ show.

Jay went to join him, feeling the need to be available to the boy after being gone for most of the afternoon. Peyton glanced at him, then looked back at the television.

When the doorbell rang, Peyton turned on the couch to kneel and hook his arms over the back of it, watching as Will answered the door. After tipping the delivery person, he carried the two large boxes over to the coffee table.

Jay went to the kitchen to grab them some drinks and plates. He'd discovered that Peyton loved apple juice, so he'd bought some little drink boxes for him, along with soda for Will. He grabbed one of each for them, then a bottle of water for himself.

His eating hadn't been great during his time there, and he'd had little time to exercise. He'd never realized how much he relied on his workouts to help with his mental state until he didn't have the opportunity to do them.

"That's the one with the pineapple?" Peyton asked, pointing to the box that now sat open in front of Will.

"Yep. Have you ever had pineapple before?"

"I don't think so."

"Here, try this." Will plucked a piece off the pizza and held it out to him.

Peyton hadn't proven to be a super fussy eater, but cooked pineapple was an acquired taste. He took the pineapple from Will and gave it a sniff before popping it into his mouth.

His brow furrowed as he chewed, then he said, "It's sweet."

"Yes, it is," Will said. "Sweet and yummy."

Peyton looked unconvinced as Jay set their drinks and the plates down on the coffee table. Before they started to eat, Will prayed for the food.

The first time they'd prayed before they ate, Peyton had been confused. Jay was sure he still didn't completely understand why they did it, but he seemed to expect it now, folding his hands and bowing his head without being asked to.

Though he hadn't appeared to be turned off by the pineapple, he refused a slice when Jay offered it and chose the

pepperoni instead. After putting a slice on Peyton's plate, Jay put one on his own plate.

"By the way, Janessa texted earlier to say your parents are back home."

Jay frowned at his friend. "They weren't supposed to be home until next month."

"I can't begin to imagine why they might have come home early," Will said wryly.

Jay felt a strange mix of anxiety and relief. His anxiety was for himself, and the relief was for Peyton. Regardless of how they felt about Jay's past actions, his folks would embrace Peyton.

Though his appetite had vanished with the news of his parents' early return, Jay forced himself to eat two pieces before calling it done. Leaning back in his seat, he cracked open the water bottle and gulped down half of it in one go.

When Peyton finished his piece, he picked up his juice box and brought it to Jay. "Can you put the straw in for me? I always squeeze it too much."

"Sure, buddy," Jay said, swallowing down the rush of emotion that resulted from Peyton coming to him for help. It might have been a small thing, but it meant a lot to Jay.

After pushing the straw into the little circle on the top of the box, he held it while Peyton took a couple of deep swallows. When he was sure that it wouldn't spill out, even if the little boy squeezed it too hard, he let him have it back.

"Do you want another piece of pizza, Peyton?" Jay asked.

"No, thanks. Will said maybe I could have Oreos for dessert if I ate my supper."

"Did he now?" Jay said with an arched brow at his friend. "Will loves cookies and sweets."

"Is that why you like pineapple on your pizza?" Peyton asked Will.

"Never really thought about that, but it's possible."

Will had eaten three pieces of pizza and still had room for a few Oreos. Jay let Peyton have two, and he ate one himself because he didn't want to have to explain to his son why he didn't want any sweets. He'd probably think he was crazy.

"Are we leaving tomorrow?" Peyton asked as he broke one of his Oreos apart, then licked the frosting.

"Yes."

Peyton glanced at him before focusing on his cookie once again. "Will they like me?"

"My family?" Peyton nodded. "Yep. They're going to love you."

He was glad he could say that with one hundred percent certainty. Over the past week, he'd told Peyton about his family, showing him pictures of each of them. The only people he hadn't shown him pictures of were Misha, Denise, and Ciara, because he wasn't sure exactly what role they would play in his life in the future. "And Layla will be excited to meet you."

"She'll be my friend?"

"I'm sure she will be." He hoped that Charli would be willing to help him out and watch Peyton while he was at work since it was summer vacation. If she couldn't, maybe Denise would do it if he and Misha were able to work things out.

"Everyone is really nice," Will said. "You'll like them."

Once they were finished eating, Jay cleaned up the kitchen while Peyton watched some more television with Will. Jay's phone beeped as he was wiping down the counter, and his heart skipped a beat. The only person who texted him anymore was Misha.

Janessa had tried contacting him for the first few days. But when he hadn't replied, she'd given up on him in favor of, apparently, Will.

He didn't pick up his phone until he'd cleaned up the entire kitchen in preparation for them leaving the next day.

Though he still had plenty to do that night, Jay took a minute to read the message Misha had sent him.

Misha: *Your two favorite girls hanging out together and missing you.*

Attached to it was a picture of Ciara and Layla. Both of their faces were lit up with wide smiles, and Jay felt his heart clench. Though he loved the picture, a photo of his favorite girls would only be complete with Misha in it.

It had been several years since he'd gone this long without seeing his family, and he missed them. He would be facing deep disappointment and anger from them on his return, but he just hoped that it didn't take too long to get past all of that.

Putting his phone in his pocket, he left the kitchen. "I'm going to go pack up, so we don't have a lot to do tomorrow."

Peyton had several large suitcases and boxes that Amberlyn had packed for him. It appeared that she hadn't held anything back, for which Jay was grateful. He had nothing for a little boy in his apartment, and he knew it would be better for Peyton to be surrounded by familiar things.

Thankfully, Will had his car there too, so they'd have enough room for all Peyton's stuff without having to rent a trailer.

In his room, Jay packed away everything but what he planned to wear the next day. He'd only brought one suitcase, so it didn't take too long.

When he went to Peyton's room, the little boy appeared in the doorway.

"Do you want to pick out some clothes to wear tomorrow?" Jay asked.

Jay sat down on the bed, watching as Peyton looked through his clothes. Peyton brought over a pair of jean joggers and a T-shirt with what Jay had discovered was his favorite cartoon character on the front.

"Can I wear these?"

"Yep. Those are perfect. Which shoes do you want?"

After a few more minutes, Peyton had picked out a complete outfit. Jay set them aside, along with a pair of pajamas and underwear, then began to pack away the rest of his things.

“Why don’t you take a shower?” Jay suggested.

Showering wasn’t Peyton’s favorite thing. He much preferred a bath, since he didn’t have to wash his hair.

“Bath, please?”

Jay regarded him for a moment, then decided that he didn’t really want to have to deal with washing his hair that night either. He was going to need to ask Janessa, or maybe Misha, about how to deal with the little boy’s hair.

For as long as he could remember, Jay had kept his hair short. As an athlete, it had just been easier, and now it was his preference. Part of him wanted to cut Peyton’s short as well, but he wouldn’t do that unless the boy asked him to. And if that didn’t happen, he’d learn how to take care of it, because he was his dad now.

“Yes. You can have a bath.”

“Yay!” Peyton punched the air, then hurried to the bathroom.

Jay followed him and turned on the tap in the tub, adding a little bubble bath liquid to the warm water. After helping Peyton into the tub, Jay left the bathroom door open while he finished packing up the boy’s stuff. He could hear him chatting as he played with the handful of toys that had come in the suitcase that Amberlyn had said would be enough for him until he reached Jay’s place.

The more Jay packed away, the more the nerves for the next day built.

He hadn’t felt nerves like that in ages. It had probably last been back in college when he’d played for a championship title.

However, so much more was at stake now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It had been nearly two weeks after Jay's departure, and Misha was a bundle of nerves as she let herself into the clinic. She was the first one there for a change, but she'd been awake early, and there had been no chance of her falling back to sleep.

Janessa had called the night before to let Misha know that she'd heard from Will and apparently Jay would be returning the next day from wherever he'd been. She hadn't had any more details, but just knowing that had been enough to fill Misha with an anxiousness that hadn't been conducive to sleep.

She put her stuff in her office, then headed to the breakroom. Knowing she'd need coffee to make up for her sleepless night, Misha went ahead and made a pot. She stared at the dark liquid streaming into the carafe, trying to numb herself to what might lie ahead.

Jay hadn't replied to any of her texts, which might have made her feel completely hopeless except that he hadn't replied to anyone else's either. Janessa had been very vocal in her displeasure about that. Gareth hadn't been happy either, but he hadn't voiced his unhappiness like Janessa had.

Whatever Jay was going through, he'd made it much harder on himself by not keeping in contact with his siblings. They were all worried about him, and for some—namely Janessa and Cole—that worry was manifesting as anger. His parents had even come home early from Haiti.

There had been a lot of speculation about what might have happened to drive Jay away from Serenity. However, it had only been a couple of days since Misha had heard for the first time about the woman who had appeared at the clinic just before everything had changed with Jay.

No one knew who she was, just that her name was Amberlyn. Misha had wanted to be relieved that the woman wasn't Casey, but all she'd felt was sick. She'd braced herself

for the fact that she might have lost Jay. Now, with his return, she'd find out for sure.

There hadn't been a day since their last conversation that she hadn't cried. But the night after hearing about that other woman, her tears had fallen harder and longer.

It had been hard to continue to send texts to him after that. But on the off-chance they were wrong about the significance of the woman, Misha didn't want to have stopped reaching out. Her goal had been to show him that she was there for him.

And she would be until he told her he didn't want that from her anymore.

If that happened, then she'd have to figure out how to go to work every day and see him without falling apart. They'd found a home in Serenity, and she was loath to give it up.

She was strong. She had to keep reminding herself about that.

She'd gone through all that was required to reach her goal of becoming a doctor. She'd endured the loss of her brother. She'd taken on the responsibility of a baby. She'd uprooted her family and made a new life for them in a new town with a new job.

She didn't want to have to survive the heartbreak that might be coming her way, but if she had to, she would.

However, Misha knew that it wouldn't be her own strength that would get her through what was to come. It would be the strength God gave her. Just like He'd given her and her mom the strength to deal with everything that had happened in Atlanta.

She firmly believed that—heartbreak or not—God wanted them there in Serenity. She just prayed that it would be with Jay by her side.

“Morning,” Aria said as she joined her in the breakroom. She gave Misha a hug before grabbing a mug from the cupboard. “Didn't sleep well last night?”

“Not really. No.” Misha finished pouring her mug of coffee, then filled Aria’s.

“Janessa didn’t either,” Aria said. “She and Gareth are talking in the parking lot at the moment.”

Misha took a sip of her coffee, then stared down at the dark liquid. “I think I might have made a mistake in telling Jay we needed a break.”

Aria moved closer to her and rested her hand on Misha’s arm. “You did what you thought was right. And it’s possible that Jay did need to be able to focus on whatever caused such a major disruption in his life.”

“But what if it’s another woman?”

“I don’t think it is,” Aria said. “I’ve gotten to know Jay, and he’s an honorable man. If he wanted to be with another woman, he would have ended things with you first.”

Part of Misha felt that way too, but her mind was doing a great job of creating all kinds of scenarios. None of which were in her favor.

“When I ran away, it was because mistakes I’d made were brought to light, and I was ashamed and scared. It took me a little while to get up the courage to come back and try to fix things. Jay and Janessa stood up for me then, so yeah, I’m going to stand up for him now. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m quite sure he’ll try to make things right with everyone, including you.”

Aria’s gentle words made Misha feel a little better, but nothing could seem to banish the fear that lingered in her heart.

Her mom had encouraged her to trust God to work things out, whatever the situation might be. However, Misha was scared that how she wanted it to work out and how God wanted it to work out might not be the same.

Her heart still clung to what Jay had said right before he’d hung up about not needing a break from the women he loved. She was sure he’d loved Casey, but did his words mean he also

loved her? Her heart wanted that more than anything, but only time would reveal what he'd truly meant.

Gareth came into the breakroom, followed by Janessa, whose expression resembled a storm cloud. Over the past two weeks, her mood had vacillated between sadness and anger. Misha had also experienced the same mood swings, though her anger hadn't been directed at Jay. It had been directed at herself.

"He better clear *all* this up," Janessa muttered as she stomped over to the coffee machine. "He better tell us everything and then buy me a bunch of chocolate to make up for having stressed me out like this."

"Jay's not going to buy you chocolate," Gareth said with a laugh. "Unless it's that super dark stuff that's supposed to actually be good for you."

"No. I don't want that," Janessa said as she poured coffee into her mug. "Normally I'm happy with chocolate from the grocery store, but now I want the fancy, expensive stuff."

As much as Misha had been hurt by Jay's sudden disappearance and silence, Janessa had been even more so. It had been pretty clear that she felt abandoned by her big brother.

"Did Will say what time Jay was due back?" Aria asked.

Janessa shook her head. "When I asked him that, he just said that Jay would make contact with someone once he was back."

"I know you've wanted him to be in contact with you, Nessa," Gareth said, "But we need to be thankful that at least he was talking to Will."

Janessa didn't reply, just dumped a bunch of sugar and cream into her coffee. More than she usually did. Misha was kind of glad to have company in her agitation about the situation. Gareth and Aria were much calmer. Misha didn't know how the rest of the family was handling the situation, since she hadn't been around them much.

But Janessa's hope was her hope. That Jay would clear everything up so that they could all begin to move past whatever had happened to send him down the path that had taken him away from them.

~*~

“Are you sure that you're okay to hang out here for a bit?” Jay asked Will.

“I'm positive. Pey and I will start to unpack his stuff.”

In anticipation of bringing Peyton back with him, before he'd left, Jay had cleared all his stuff out of the second bedroom in his apartment, leaving only the double bed. Jay had the bed in case one of his brothers or Will wanted to stay the night. The room had been a place where he'd stored some of his sports equipment and clothes he didn't use frequently.

Before leaving, he'd moved everything to his room, then had vacuumed and changed the sheets on the bed. It wasn't much of a room for a little boy, but it was all he had at the moment.

“Do you care where we put stuff?” Will asked.

“Nope. As long as it's put away neatly.”

“Well, we shall certainly try to put everything neatly, but we both know that my definition of neat and yours are two different things.”

“Just try your best,” Jay said. “That's all I ask.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad.”

“I don't think I'll be too late.”

“No rush,” Will assured him. “We'll be fine.”

Jay's initial instinct had been to contact Misha when he arrived back, but since his parents had made the trip home from Haiti specifically out of concern for him, he needed to talk with them first. His stomach was in knots as he imagined the conversation to come.

“Peyton,” Jay said as he stepped into the doorway of the bedroom. The little boy had gone there in search of his favorite stuffed animal. “I’m going to leave for a little while, but Will’s going to hang out here, and you guys can unpack your stuff.”

“All of it?” Peyton asked, clutching a large bear in his arms.

“Yep. All of it.” Jay knew his apartment wasn’t an ideal place for a child, but he wasn’t going to rush into buying a house just yet. “If you need places to put stuff, we’ll go out tomorrow and buy it.”

“Okay.”

Jay went to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, reaching out to pull Peyton closer to him. “I know all of this is new and you might be scared, but it’s going to be okay. You just need to tell me how you’re feeling and if you need anything. I’ve never had a little boy around before, so I might not know what you need. But if you tell me, I’ll try to get it for you. Okay?”

Peyton nodded. “I miss Mommy.”

“I know you do, buddy.”

The boy had become quieter and quieter the further they’d driven away from Idaho Falls. Jay had tried to get him to talk about what he was feeling, but the boy had been resistant to conversation.

Since arriving in Serenity, his smiles had been a rarity, and the previous night had been the worst so far, with lots of tears and a flash of anger that Jay hadn’t seen from him before.

Jay tugged the boy and his bear into his arms for a hug. Peyton held himself stiffly and didn’t return the hug, so Jay didn’t continue to hold him.

As he left the apartment a short time later, Jay realized he’d been much like Peyton when he’d first arrived in the Halversons’ home. He hadn’t wanted their love and affection. Hadn’t wanted to feel their arms around him. The only

person's hugs he'd wanted had been his mom's, but she hadn't been there.

He'd been angry too. However, he'd been a few years older than Peyton, so he'd been able to hide his feelings better. Plus, he'd had Janessa to take care of. It had been one of the last requests his mom had made of him.

The Halversons had been lavish with their love, giving him and Janessa constant hugs and kisses. All of that had, over time, helped him feel like he was truly welcome there, rather than just tolerated. That he had a forever home with them.

That's what he hoped to convey to Peyton. He might not have been there for the first several years of his life, but the boy wasn't unwelcome. Their new relationship would take some time to strengthen, and Jay knew that the heartache Peyton was experiencing was new and confusing for him. Hopefully, time and love would help bring the little boy a feeling of security and acceptance the way it had for him.

As he drove to his family home, Jay found himself on a route that would take him past the gym. It was a little earlier than he usually met Misha there, but he couldn't keep from turning into the parking lot. When he saw her car, he pulled into a spot and stared through the glass windows, trying to see her.

He spotted her on the treadmill, and all he wanted to do was to go inside and see her. The heaviness of his heart lifted just a little to see her there, continuing something they'd started together.

Though he knew that she was right to have requested the break, he regretted how he'd handled things with her. She deserved better than him. Deserved better than how badly he'd dealt with everything.

He'd lost his chance with her—through his own words and the situation he knew had in her life with Peyton—but he prayed that since he couldn't have anything else, he'd still have her friendship. Not that he deserved even that much.

Though he wanted to continue to watch Misha, Jay couldn't keep his parents waiting. When he'd texted his dad earlier, he'd responded that they'd love to see him whenever he wanted.

He was going to see them with mixed emotions. He knew how he hoped they'd respond, but he also felt that he didn't deserve that reaction.

Warm light spilled from the living room window of his parents' home when he pulled up to it. Though it wasn't winter, his dad would probably have a fire going, since it was something his mom loved.

It was now or never.

Jay sat for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts and shore up his defenses. Then he grabbed the packet of pictures Amberlyn had given him and got out of the car.

When the front door swung open, his parents stood there together with nothing but love and concern on their faces. As he stepped into the foyer, both of them wrapped their arms around him and held him tight.

"Why don't we go into the living room?" his dad suggested when their embrace ended.

Jay nodded, his vocal cords tight with emotion. His dad settled into his favorite chair while his mom drew Jay to the love seat near the fireplace, keeping hold of his hand as she sat down beside him.

"What's been going on, son?" his dad asked.

Jay's gaze went to the flames flickering in the fireplace as he tried to figure out where to begin. He supposed the best starting point was where this whole thing had kicked off for him. Amberlyn's visit.

Rather than look at either of his parents, Jay focused on the envelope he held as he slowly recounted the news Amberlyn had delivered to him, though not telling them yet about her decision to give him to Jay.

"You have a son?" his mom asked, her voice hushed.

“Yes.” He held out the envelope. “His name is Peyton.”

She didn’t hesitate to take it, and from the corner of his eye, Jay could see her open it and quickly flip through the pictures.

“Oh, Jay, darling, he’s beautiful. And he looks like you.” She got up and went to where her husband sat, perching on the arm of his chair. “Dan, look at him.”

Jay watched as his parents oo’d and ah’d over the pictures, grateful that he hadn’t misjudged how they’d react to Peyton’s arrival in their lives.

“Where does he live?” his dad asked. “Will you be able to see him often? When can we meet him?”

“He’s going to be living with me.”

Both his parents looked up from the pictures, shock on their faces.

His mom was the first one to speak. “What do you mean?”

Again, he took a moment before he began to explain what Amberlyn had wanted and what he’d been doing over the past few weeks.

His mom left the pictures with his dad as she came back to where Jay sat on the loveseat. “Why didn’t you tell us what was going on?”

They might be the first to ask that question, but Jay was confident they weren’t going to be the last.

“I knew you’d be disappointed in me.” His thoughts were a struggle to put into words. “I guess I wanted to have it all sorted out, so you didn’t have to deal with the mess I’d made because of some bad decisions.”

“We’re not disappointed in *you*. We’d never be disappointed in you, Jaylen,” his dad said, using his full name as evidence of how serious he was. “We can be disappointed by the choices you made without being disappointed in you.”

Jay didn’t understand what the difference was. His choices were his. He’d made the decision to do what he’d done,

knowing full well how his parents—including his birth mom—would have felt about it.

“I didn’t want you to regret, you know...”

“Regret adopting you?” his dad asked.

Jay stared at his feet as he nodded. “My mom told me to always make you proud. To not do anything that would make you regret taking me and Janessa into your home.”

His mom’s hand gripped his arm. “Has this been hanging over your head all these years?”

Jay shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Well, let me say that nothing you’ve ever done has made us regret offering to take you into our family,” his dad said. “And that includes this situation.”

“You offered to take us?” Jay asked. “I thought my mom asked you.”

“No,” his mom said. “When your mom was diagnosed with cancer, Dad and I talked and decided we’d offer to take you if it appeared she wasn’t going to recover. I knew from conversations we’d had how important it was to her that you and Janessa not go to her or your dad’s families. She and your dad had worked so hard to build a life for you in a safe neighborhood. Even after your dad’s death, she did what she could to keep you from the neighborhood where they’d grown up.”

Jay drew up memories of where they’d once lived. It had been a wonderfully diverse neighborhood that, while low-income, hadn’t been riddled with gangs. There had been lots of families of varying sizes and races. He hadn’t realized the effort it might have cost his mom to be able to make a home for them there.

“We were happy to have you as part of our family,” his dad said. “And that hasn’t changed.”

“I’m sorry if we ever made you feel like your place in this family wasn’t secure,” his mom said, her voice wobbling a bit.

“If we ever made you feel like you had to worry that you might lose our love.”

Tears stung Jay’s eyes, and he gripped his hands together to stop them trembling. “You never made me feel that way. I was so young when I made those promises to my mom, and I felt like I could never free myself from those expectations. And the harder I tried, the harder it became. In those moments when it felt hopeless for me to uphold those promises and expectations, I just ditched it all.”

His mom leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. “From the moment you arrived, you’ve always set a high standard for yourself.”

“Except for when you didn’t pursue a pro career in basketball,” his dad said. “Why was that?”

Oh, he was going to have to bare everything. That hadn’t been his plan when he’d come there that night, but maybe in order for them to understand, he had to.

“It wouldn’t have been what my mom wanted.”

“But what about what you wanted, son?”

“I don’t want to look back,” Jay said, deciding that maybe he didn’t want to delve into all that right then. “My decisions—all of them—have brought me to this point, and I need to just focus on Peyton now and what he needs from me.”

“I agree that your attention needs to be on Peyton,” his mom said. “However, it seems that things in the past have prevented you from understanding your worth and value to us and our family. You’ve already felt like you had to deal with this whole situation on your own, and if you continue to think that way, you won’t ask for help with him in the future.”

Jay ran a hand over his head. She wasn’t wrong. It was hard not to feel like he needed to figure out everything with regards to Peyton on his own. The boy was his responsibility, and this situation was the consequence of the bad decisions he’d made in the past.

It didn’t feel right to prevail upon his family for too much help when they didn’t approve of his choices.

“We’re here for you, son,” his dad said. “For Peyton’s sake and for your own, lean on your family. Don’t shut us out.”

Jay hadn’t planned to ask for help from his parents. He’d just known there was no way to keep this latest turn of events in his life a secret anymore. Though he could hide a lot of things, a son wasn’t one of them. Well, he could have hidden him if Amberlyn had simply wanted child support.

He didn’t know if he would have actually hidden Peyton’s relationship to him if all Amberlyn had wanted was child support. It would have been a huge temptation to keep his past from encroaching on his present and the future he wanted for himself.

All he had to do was think of the warm light of affection in Misha’s eyes. The many times Denise had called him a good man. The admiration in the gazes of the boys he coached. The promises he’d made to his mom. Everything the Halversons had done for him.

Yeah. All of that would have weighed heavily in favor of keeping the information about Peyton to himself. Which just proved what a selfish person he really was.

But that wasn’t how things had turned out, and though he could have chosen not to take Peyton, the moment he realized what sort of environment his son could end up in, he’d stepped up.

Did that decision erase what he would have done otherwise?

Jay wasn’t so sure it did.

“When can we meet Peyton?” his mom asked.

Jay dragged a hand down his face. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“Are you telling the others?” His mom hesitated. “Are you telling Misha?”

“I can’t very well hide his presence in my life,” Jay pointed out by way of an answer.

“Why don’t you tell your siblings tomorrow morning?” his mom suggested. “Then we can have dinner here tomorrow

night so they can meet him.”

Jay didn't want to overwhelm Peyton, but he also didn't want to drag out the family introductions with meeting after meeting. Maybe this would be like pulling the bandage off in one quick jerk.

After Jay agreed, his mom said, “But come out a little early so we have a chance to meet him before the gang arrives.”

When he got up to leave, his parents gathered him into their arms, and his dad took a few minutes to pray for Jay and Peyton. Jay struggled to accept the requests made on his behalf in his dad's prayer, feeling like he really didn't deserve them.

Jay had mixed feelings as he left his parents' home, but that seemed to have been his default state since Amberlyn had dropped her bombshell. It would be great if he'd be able to get past the emotional quagmire he was in soon, but somehow, he doubted that was going to happen.

Even if he managed to sort out his feelings about the situation with Peyton, there was still Misha. He felt a little sick every time he thought about what he had to lose, but it wasn't fair to ask her to continue a relationship with him when he needed to be so focused on Peyton. And it definitely wouldn't be fair of him to ask her to wait, especially when he had no idea how long it would take for his life to settle into its new normal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Misha had hoped that at some point on Saturday, she'd hear from Jay. Though busy at the clinic all day, she'd checked her phone regularly. Unfortunately, there'd been no message from him, or from anyone else, for that matter.

She'd thought that Janessa would contact her once she'd talked to Jay, and Misha had a hard time believing that Janessa hadn't tracked her brother down for a conversation as soon as he got back into town.

It left Misha feeling off-balance and like she had no right to an explanation, even though whatever had been going on with Jay had deeply impacted their budding relationship.

Perhaps it had been stupid of her, but she'd really thought that she and Jay would talk as soon as he got back to Serenity. That she was important enough to him that he'd get in contact with her right away.

But perhaps he was still angry with her for telling him they needed a break.

As she prepared to leave the clinic at the end of the day, Misha struggled with a feeling of despair. She regretted what she'd done, but she had no idea how to fix it. Janessa had told her to be patient, and she could do that. But how long did she need to wait?

The only thing that gave her a small spark of hope was Jay saying that he didn't need a break from the women he loved. Her heart longed to be included in that, even if the words had been said in anger.

Knowing her mom would ask her if she'd heard from Jay, Misha was in no rush to get home that day. But still, she didn't dawdle. She was exhausted and despite having to disappoint her mom, home was actually where she wanted to be.

"How was work?" her mom asked after she'd gone upstairs to change into something comfy.

Misha sank down onto the floor where Ciara was playing and held out her hands to the baby. Ciara grasped Misha's fingers, pulling herself up with a grin and taking a couple of steps toward Misha. It was her latest trick, and Misha figured it was just a matter of time before she tried walking on her own.

"It was fine," she said. "Had a couple of no-shows."

"That's unfortunate." Her mom walked to the table and began to set it for their dinner.

"It happens. Thankfully, not too frequently. Most of the time, if people can't make it, they phone." Because it was just her and Betsy at the clinic on Saturdays, they didn't take calls or make appointments, but there was a number that people could call to leave a message, which was then forwarded to Misha's phone.

Her mom finished setting the table, then returned to the kitchen to dish up their dinner. Misha got to her feet and picked Ciara up. She took her to the table and put her into her highchair, buckling her in since she liked to stand up in the chair now.

When Misha saw the food her mom placed on the table, she realized she hadn't expected her to come home with good news. She'd made some of Misha's favorite foods. In this case, it was her mom's fried pork chops and homemade mac and cheese. She didn't like either dish made by anyone else but her mom.

Misha tried to ignore the ache in her chest as she poured water into their glasses, then sat down at the table with her mom. It wasn't until after her mom had said a prayer for the meal that she said anything.

"Guess you didn't hear from him, huh?" her mom said as she slid the bowl of mac and cheese closer to Misha.

"Nope." She plopped a spoonful of the macaroni on her plate, then put some in Ciara's small bowl. After mashing it up a bit, she set it in front of her. "I didn't hear from anyone, actually."

“Not even Janessa?” Her mom frowned. “That seems odd.”

Misha hadn't kept anything from her mom. She trusted her more than anyone else in this situation. Including Janessa, since, at the end of the day she was Jay's sister. She might be upset with him, but that was more on her own behalf than Misha's. It was entirely possible that she'd talked with Jay that day and didn't feel it was necessary to talk to Misha.

The ache in Misha's chest increased as a longing grew for a friend who would be there for her in situations like this. Janessa, Aria, and Charli had been friendly to her, but they already had solid friendships in their lives. There was no one who was solidly in her corner except for her mom.

Misha was deeply grateful that she hadn't had to make this move on her own. Facing this situation alone might have broken her more than it already had.

But she couldn't dwell on that. She still needed to work with each of these people. It was time to put her professional face on and get on with the job.

She could do it. While dealing with patients in Atlanta, she'd had to put what was happening outside the clinic to the side. It wasn't easy, but she'd managed to do it.

And she'd do it again in Serenity Point if it meant she would keep her job and not allow the situation to become too tense at the clinic.

“I'm so sorry, darling,” her mom said. “I never would have thought he'd be like this.”

Misha shrugged. “We didn't know him well.”

“True, but from what we did know of him and his family, I would have expected him to behave differently.”

Misha agreed, but it did little good now. There hadn't been red flags, unless she counted his on again, off again relationship with his ex as one.

“What are you going to do?”

Misha glanced up from the pork chop she was cutting. “Nothing. I'm going to go to work and do the job I was hired

to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very. This is our home now. I don’t want to leave, so that means I need to just suck it up and be professional.”

“We could maybe visit other churches, so you don’t have to see him on the weekends. That would mean you’d only have to deal with him four days of the week.”

“We’ll see,” Misha said. “There’s no need to make a decision on that just yet.”

Misha gave her mom a reassuring smile. Or at least she hoped it was reassuring. She knew that part of the reason her mom was struggling so much with what Jay had done was that she’d been so hopeful that things would work out for them. It was something that had made her happy to be in Serenity, thinking that there was an opportunity for Misha to have a relationship with such a wonderful man.

It was hard to see her mom’s disappointment and hurt, especially when Misha was dealing with her own heartache.

Once the dinner was over, Misha helped clear the table and put away the food. She then took Ciara upstairs for her bath, sitting next to the tub while the baby splashed in a few inches of water. Crossing her arms on the edge of the tub, Misha rested her chin on them as she watched Ciara play.

She was realizing much too late that getting involved with someone she also worked with had been foolish. But she’d had so much hope and confidence in what she’d felt for Jay and how she thought he’d felt for her that she’d ignored the concerns that lingered in the back of her mind.

And there was also the fact that she had really, really wanted something just for herself. For so long, she’d had to be strong, shouldering the safety of their family when Davontae had put them at risk. And when her mom had fallen apart after Raden’s death, Misha had tried her best to support her while also dealing with her own grief.

Jay’s strength had been a big draw for her. Not just his physical strength, but the steadying presence and quiet

strength he'd shown her. Those moments when he'd held her and she'd leaned into him, trusting him with herself, had been precious. Moments when she'd been able to just... be, knowing he'd protect her from the world around them.

But there had been no one there to protect her from him and the hurt he'd inflicted on her.

But she couldn't blame him entirely for their current situation. If she'd just kept her mouth shut and not told him they needed a break, she might be in a position where she could demand answers. Instead, she was on the outside, waiting for someone to throw her a scrap of information.

Misha let Ciara play a little longer than usual, then took her out of the tub and wrapped her in a towel. The little girl protested, but Misha nuzzled her neck, making her giggle and distracting her enough to get her dried off and dressed.

Once she had her in her pajamas, she took her back downstairs, where her mom had a bottle prepared for her. Having these normal things to do helped Misha set aside her feelings for the time being. Ciara deserved her attention, so Misha gave it to her.

Later, after Ciara was asleep, she and her mom said goodnight to each other, even though it wasn't that late. Since coming to Serenity, her mom had developed a routine of taking a long, pampering bath on Saturday nights, so Misha turned off all the lights on the main floor, then went up to her room.

She was curled up on her bed, reading, when her phone rang. Setting her tablet aside, Misha picked up her phone, hoping that it would be someone calling her to let her know what they'd learned from Jay.

Assuming it was probably Janessa, her heart skipped a beat when she saw Jay's name on the screen. Anticipation and fear warred inside her, so she forced herself to take a calming breath as she tapped the screen to answer it.

"Hello?" Her heart pounded as she waited for him to respond.

“Hi, Misha. It’s me. Jay.”

In those five words, Misha thought she heard a weariness—maybe even a wariness—in his voice. It tugged at her, but she had to stay strong. To protect her heart from what might be coming.

She didn’t know how to respond, and the silence stretched out between them.

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?” Jay asked, his voice subdued.

“Yes,” she said, finding her voice. “Sure.”

“First, I want to apologize for how I reacted to your suggestion that we should take a break. You were right, and I shouldn’t have reacted so negatively.”

She was *right*? Her heart sank. Had he decided that this wasn’t going to be the temporary break she’d envisioned?

“I was dealing with some stuff, and you were right. If I wasn’t going to share that with you, then I needed to just focus on the situation.”

Misha was at a loss for words. Did she tell him it was okay? Tell him she wished she’d never asked for the break.

Jay sighed. “I need to tell you what’s been going on before you hear it from anyone else.”

That sounded horribly ominous to her, and Misha swallowed hard before she said, “Okay?”

“I think I told you that I occasionally dated other women when Casey and I were broken up.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I don’t even know where to start to explain everything,” Jay said, frustration bleeding into his words.

“Just tell me the most important parts and then fill in the blanks. If I have questions, I’ll ask.”

“Okay. The most important part is that I have a son.”

Of all the things Misha had braced herself for, that had never crossed her mind, and the revelation was like a kick to her stomach. “A son?”

“Yeah.”

“With Casey?”

“No. No. Definitely not. I didn’t know about him until his mother showed up a month ago to tell me about him.”

The blonde woman who had shown up in the office, that had roused Janessa and Aria’s suspicions. “Amberlyn.”

There was a beat of silence before Jay said, “How do you know her name? Did Janessa call you today?”

“No. But she and Aria were talking about the woman who’d come in to talk to you right before you... changed. They thought maybe...”

“That I was seeing her?” Jay asked with a humorless laugh. “Nice that my family thinks so highly of me to believe something like that.”

“They didn’t know what was going on,” Misha reminded him. “You wouldn’t talk to anyone, so they were left to try to piece things together. It’s not necessarily their fault that they put the pieces together wrong.”

“And what did you think?”

“I didn’t know anything about her until about a week ago. Janessa and Aria let their suspicions slip.”

“Did you believe them?”

“I didn’t want to. You’d promised me that you wouldn’t date someone else while we were together, but by then, we’d broken up. I didn’t know what to think.”

Jay didn’t respond right away, and when he did, it wasn’t to address what she’d said. “I didn’t know anything about Peyton until Amberlyn showed up to tell me about him. But she hadn’t just come to tell me about him. She wanted me to take him.”

“What? She didn’t want him?”

“She’s in a situation where she can no longer safely raise him.”

Misha didn’t like the sound of that. “Do you know for sure he’s yours?”

“Yes. The week after her visit, I gave a DNA sample. Once the results showed I was his father, we began to hash out the legalities of me taking custody of him. I’ve spent the past two weeks in Idaho Falls, spending time with him and going to therapy with him to help him make this transition. It’s been a long month.”

That explained the weariness she’d heard, but perhaps it had been a long month made longer by his unwillingness to share what was going on. To let others walk alongside him.

“How old is he?” Misha asked, trying to figure out the timeline in her head.

“He’s six. She got pregnant with him during my senior year.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone what was going on? Your family was so worried.” *I was so worried* she wanted to say, but she kept those words to herself.

More silence. When it didn’t end, Misha looked at the phone to make sure the call hadn’t dropped.

“I was ashamed.”

“Of your son?” That didn’t sound like the Jay she’d come to know... and love. But maybe she’d really misjudged the type of man he was.

“No. I was ashamed of my actions that led to his mom getting pregnant in the first place.” Jay exhaled heavily. “I allowed myself to become physically intimate with Casey, even though I’d been taught that sex should be reserved for marriage. We’d been together a couple of years before it got to that point for us. However, once I’d already been intimate with one woman, it was easier to become intimate with others. Which I did.”

“So having a child revealed what you’d done,” Misha guessed.

She’d been raised with similar values, and she’d stuck to them. But she hadn’t always given her faith importance in her life, so she wasn’t sure how much had been conviction and how much had been a lack of opportunity. She hadn’t dated anyone long enough to want to be physically intimate with them.

“Yes. I had managed to hide my actions from everyone,” Jay said. “But after breaking up with Casey that last time, I resolved to do better. To be better. To not have to hide my actions because there would be nothing to hide.”

She thought of what he’d shared about his promises to his mom, and it started to make a lot more sense. His mom had wanted him to be an honorable man, and yet he’d faltered and, in his mind, failed her. It was only natural for a person to want to hide that failure.

“I don’t think your family would have rejected you over this,” Misha said. Her experiences with them had shown that they were gracious and loving. Surely that grace and love would have extended to their son and brother.

“Probably not,” Jay agreed. “But this situation was the consequence of my bad decisions. I couldn’t ask anyone else to deal with it.”

“Except Will.” Misha felt a stirring of jealousy. Would he have ever turned to her the way he’d been so willing to turn to his best friend?

“Will already knew about my physical relationships with women,” Jay said. “There are no secrets between us, so I didn’t feel like I was letting him down.”

“Would you have ever shared this particular secret with anyone else had you not needed to take Peyton?” Maybe she should have asked her real question. Would he have shared that secret with *her*?

His silence hurt more than it should have.

“I don’t know.” At least he was being honest. “I wanted everyone to think well of me. My parents raised me to be a certain way, and I wanted them to be proud of me. The boys I coach look up to me. Even your mom has told me what a good man I am. I didn’t want to lose any of that. And now I’ve got to deal with everyone realizing that I’m nothing but a fraud.”

Misha noticed he didn’t say anything about how she had viewed him. Maybe he didn’t realize just how much of her heart was already tied up in him. Though she was hurt by his actions, she could understand why he’d acted—and reacted—the way he had. But she had a feeling that nothing she felt was going to matter in the long run.

“I doubt anyone thinks you’re a fraud,” Misha assured him.

“I pretended to be something I’m not. An honorable man? Would an honorable man have treated women the way I did? I knew better and did it anyway, figuring it wouldn’t matter since I was far enough away from home that no one would ever know.”

Misha realized then that there was nothing she could say to make him feel any differently. These weren’t judgments that anyone else had passed on him. They were judgments he was passing on himself.

Was it likely that there were people who *would* judge him? Sure. Just like there had been people who had judged her mom to be a bad parent when Davontae had gotten caught up in the gang. And there had been more who had judged her when word had spread that Raden had gotten his girlfriend pregnant.

Misha knew it was difficult to face that judgment whether a person had done anything to warrant it or not. But if Jay had been truly trying to change, it was possible he could use this to help others—particularly the boys he coached—to make different decisions.

She didn’t say that to him right then, however, because she wasn’t sure it would be well-received.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time,” Jay said. “I just wanted you to hear about all of this from me.”

“I appreciate that,” Misha said, understanding now that Janessa had likely not called her because Jay had asked her not to.

“I... I think it might be best if we... I mean, I’m going to be pretty focused on helping Peyton with this change in his life. He’s... struggling.”

Misha knew what Jay was trying to say, and her already broken heart shattered into a few more pieces. It took an effort, but she managed to not start crying. It would be selfish of her to demand that Jay divide his attention between her and Peyton when there was a little boy who was suffering through the loss of his mom.

“I understand. You need to do what’s best for your son.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If I’d known what was going to happen, there is no way I would have started up anything between us. It’s not fair to you.”

Misha was well acquainted with how unfair life could be, but she couldn’t find it within herself to hold Jay one hundred percent responsible for how everything had unfolded. He’d had no way of knowing what was coming when he’d asked her out on a date. Even if he’d been totally upfront about his previous relationships, this particular turn of events would still have taken them off-guard.

She just wished he wanted her by his side through all of this, the way she wanted to be.

“It’s fine.” It was anything *but* fine for Misha, but she wasn’t going to add to Jay’s stress.

“It’s not fine.”

“Let’s not dwell on what might have been and move forward. We were friends before anything else.”

Once again, a weighty silence came from Jay’s side of the call. “Yeah. Thanks for listening.” He cleared his throat. “And again, I’m sorry.”

Before Misha could say anything more, he said goodnight and ended the call. She stared at the screen of her phone as it

went dark. The tears she'd been trying to hold back slid down her cheeks, dripping onto her phone.

The break she'd thought would only be temporary was now permanent, and she didn't know how to deal with the gaping hole that had been left in her heart.

Why had God allowed this to happen? Why had He brought them all the way, to this new place, only for her to experience even more heartache? She'd had such hope for their new life in Serenity, and now all she wanted to do was leave. To hide somewhere and wait for her broken heart to heal.

But that wasn't possible. She had a responsibility here, and after having to abandon her responsibilities in Atlanta, she wasn't ready to do that again.

You brought us here, Heavenly Father, so I trust that You will walk with me through this heartbreak, and that You'll give me the strength I need to face Jay every day.

Letting out a deep breath, Misha curled up under her comforter, and in the darkness of her room, she looked through all the pictures she had of Jay on her phone, allowing herself to grieve the loss of her dream of a future with him. Then, one by one, she moved the pictures to a hidden folder so they would no longer show up in her photos whenever she opened the app.

She didn't want to delete them yet. Her heart couldn't handle that right then, so having them out of sight was the next best thing.

Then, through tear-filled eyes, she changed her lock screen, swapping out the photo of her, Jay, and Ciara for one of her and Ciara with her mom. Her wallpaper was even harder to change since it was the photo her mom had taken before they'd left for their first date. Rather than replace it with another photo, she just chose a generic background.

Misha wished it was as easy to purge his presence from her heart as it was from her phone, but she knew that only time would mend her broken heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

If Jay had thought he'd disappointed and let people down before, it was nothing compared to what he was doing after returning to Serenity. He felt like he couldn't do anything right for anyone.

Peyton was a bundle of negative emotions, with anger directed at Jay being at the forefront. Janessa was mad at him. Gareth was frustrated with him, as were most of his other siblings. His parents... well, he was pretty sure they were frustrated and disappointed too.

And Misha... she was hurt. He'd hurt her when all he'd wanted was to love and cherish her. Build a future with her.

Recently, it seemed that doing the right thing brought a lot of pain with it.

Taking custody of Peyton had been the right thing, but it had hurt the little boy tremendously. Breaking things off with Misha had been the right thing, but it had left him with an ache so intense it took his breath away if he let himself think too long on that loss.

He sat in his car in the lot behind the clinic, putting off going in, though no one else was there yet. All he wanted was a few minutes of calm. Right then, the locked car felt like an island of peace in the midst of the storm his life had become.

Getting Peyton to eat breakfast had been a battle. Asking him to get dressed had continued the battle. The only good part of the morning so far had been dropping him off at Charli's. Not because that gave them a break from each other, but because hanging out with Charli and Layla seemed to be the only time Peyton was happy anymore.

Jay had tried to call Amberlyn the night before to insist that she talk to Peyton, but she hadn't answered. Not that that was a surprise. She'd made it clear that she wanted a clean break.

Normally, Jay would have agreed with her, but seeing Peyton's pain compelled him to try to do the one thing he knew would make his son feel better. At least in the short term.

The night before, they'd had a video chat with the therapist they'd been seeing in Idaho Falls, but it hadn't gone well. Jay knew he needed to find someone closer so that they could have face-to-face meetings.

Putting his arms on the steering wheel, Jay leaned forward to rest his forehead on them. He was so tired. The emotional toll all of this was taking on him had worn him out more than the most intensive workout ever had.

The only problem was, there seemed to be no end in sight. With a workout, he knew when it would be over, or he could call it quits when his body had nothing left to give.

He had to keep going, despite his exhaustion, because giving up wasn't an option. Peyton needed him to push on, no matter how much he might want to throw in the towel.

One day at a time.

The view he'd once had for his future had narrowed down to just getting through the next twenty-four hours. He hoped that one day, they'd be past this rough patch. Right then, however, that hope felt a little futile.

With a sigh, he straightened and blew out a long breath. He needed to switch gears for the moment and focus on his job. It was about the only thing he was doing well at the moment. Keeping that up felt especially important right then.

He was just getting out of the car when Gareth's vehicle pulled up next to his. Opening the back door of the SUV, Jay grabbed his work bag and the one with his lunch in it. These days, he was bringing sandwiches instead of salads because he had no time to prepare the salad in the mornings.

"Doing okay?" Gareth asked when he joined him near the back door of the office.

Jay gave him a look that made Gareth wince.

The man lifted a hand. “Sorry about that.”

If there was one thing he’d stopped doing, it was telling everyone he was fine or that things were okay. Didn’t do him much good since it was pretty clear that *nothing* about his life was okay, and he was *anything* but fine.

“How is Peyton doing?”

“Still angry with me, though thankfully he’s okay with Charli and seems to really like Layla.”

“I’m sure he’s a confused little boy.”

There was no doubt of that in Jay’s mind. Unfortunately, he didn’t know how to make it less confusing for him. Though he didn’t wish Amberlyn dead, it would have made it easier if Peyton didn’t know that his mom had chosen to give him away, but rather that she had left him through no fault of her own.

Jay had a feeling that Peyton was going to deal with the emotional ramifications of that for a very long time.

“As long as he thinks I took him from his mom, he’s going to hate me,” Jay said as he unlocked the back door.

“I reached out to a doctor in Coeur d’Alene to see if he had a recommendation for a child psychologist.”

“Really?”

“I thought perhaps you could use a referral or two for someone to help Peyton.”

Jay wanted to argue that he could deal with it himself, but that was as much a lie as him saying he was fine. “Let me know what he says.”

“Will do.”

Jay dropped his things in his office, then went to the breakroom to get a cup of coffee. He now drank at least two cups of the brew each day since he was sleeping lousy most nights. And without regular workouts, he had no way to completely exhaust himself anymore.

Gareth was already there, prepping the machine, which meant that they had to wait a few minutes before the coffee would be ready for them. The knot in Jay's stomach tightened the longer he had to hang around the breakroom, knowing that Misha would be there soon.

If at all possible, Jay stayed out of her way so that she could do her job without having to deal with him. He cherished every glimpse he got of her, but since he doubted the feeling was mutual, he tried to keep out of her sight.

"You can have the first cup," Gareth told him, gesturing to the carafe.

Jay assumed that Gareth knew he preferred to be in his office before Misha arrived. After grabbing his mug, he pulled the carafe out, which paused the stream of coffee, filled his mug, then put it back.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll see you later."

When he made it to his office before Misha arrived, Jay breathed a sigh of relief. They'd survived their first week in the office since he'd talked to her the previous weekend. He couldn't say it had been easy, but he'd tried his best to make it less stressful for Misha. Or at least as less stressful as was possible in their current situation.

A short time later, he heard the sound of female voices and looked out his open door to the hallway. There was pretty much no chance that she'd come to his office.

It was moments like these that his regret over how he'd handled everything was the greatest.

When lunch rolled around, he wasn't hungry. However, he was desperate for some exercise and knew he was going to have to fit it in wherever he could, even if it meant it wouldn't be the length or intensity of his usual workouts.

He grabbed his phone and the bag he kept in his office with some workout clothes, then left the building. It was apparent when he got to the gym that he wasn't the only one fitting a workout in over lunch.

Thankfully, there was a treadmill available, so after he changed, he put his air pods in and found his running playlist. Though he'd told Misha to always stretch, he didn't have the time or inclination to stretch himself that day. Instead, he set a punishing pace and tried to run from his problems.

He was a few minutes late getting back to work since he had to take a shower because of the considerable sweat he'd worked up during his run, but he didn't berate himself like he might have another time. The workout had been necessary for his mental health. The physical exertion had left him feeling pleasantly exhausted. It was a feeling he'd missed in the past several weeks.

Now that he'd done it once, Jay decided that it might be worth coming in a bit early—if Charli didn't mind having Peyton there a bit early too—so he could go for a workout at lunch. Getting back even that small part of his life might help him in other areas, and he needed to get back to eating healthy, too.

Once step at a time. One day at a time.

He'd focus on the workouts first and see how he felt. It wouldn't take much time away from Peyton—fifteen minutes at most—and it would get him out of the office for a bit during the day, too. Hopefully, it would be a win-win situation.

As the end of the day neared, Jay felt his tension level rise. Every time he went to pick Peyton up, it was a trial. The boy never wanted to leave with Jay, sometimes throwing a tantrum. Each time it happened, Jay felt like he'd never be a good father.

A knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts. Glancing up, his eyes widened when he spotted Misha standing in the doorway.

He got to his feet, uncertain what she might want, but oh so glad to see her there. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Her tension was clear in her crossed arms. “How is Peyton doing?”

Jay shrugged. “Not very good, to be honest. Pretty sure he hates me for taking him away from his mom.”

“But you didn’t take him away, right?”

“Technically, no. She insisted I take him. But I don’t want to tell a six-year-old boy that his mom doesn’t want him anymore. Better he think I wanted him to live with me than that.”

Misha frowned. “I’m sorry it’s going badly.”

“It really couldn’t be going much worse,” Jay admitted, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

“Was he like this before you came back?”

“Not really. I think he was a bit confused about what was going on. I guess reality sank in when we got back to Serenity because he’s been so angry since then.”

“I really am sorry to hear that. Do you have a therapist for him?”

“I had him see someone during the time we were in Idaho Falls, and it seemed to be going well. But now we’re having to do video chat with her, and that hasn’t worked at all.”

“Is there no one here in Serenity that could help him?”

“No one that specializes in kids. Gareth has put feelers out in Coeur d’Alene, so I hope that results in finding someone. I think Peyton needs the face-to-face meetings.”

“Yes. I could see how that would work better for a child.”

“It’s really hard to see a child with so much anger and not know how to help him.” Jay sighed. “Speaking of which, I need to go get him from Charli’s.”

Misha nodded. “Hope you have a good evening.”

“Yeah. I’d really like that, but I’m not holding my breath.”

Janessa appeared beside Misha, surprising Jay because she hadn’t wanted much to do with him since he’d come home.

“Am I interrupting?”

“Nope,” Jay said. “I’m just getting ready to go pick Peyton up.”

“I’ll see you guys later,” Misha said. “Have a good weekend.”

After she left, Janessa ventured a little further into the office, glancing back over her shoulder at the hallway. “That was... surprising.”

“A little yeah,” he agreed. “But we have to get past the awkwardness eventually. There’s no way we can both work here if it’s going to be super tense for everyone.”

“True. I just thought it would take longer than this.”

Jay had too, but he was glad it hadn’t.

“Do you think this means things will work out between you two?”

“I’m not even thinking about that right now,” he told her. “It doesn’t seem likely because my life really is a bit of a mess at the moment.”

Janessa narrowed her gaze at him as she crossed her arms. “You really only have yourself to blame for that.”

“I am aware,” he told her, his voice tight as he turned to shove his things into his bag.

“So, what are you going to do to fix it?”

Jay straightened and met her angry glare with one of his own. “You think I’m not trying to fix this? You honestly think that if I saw a way to make this better for everyone, I wouldn’t take it?”

Without answering, Janessa turned and left his office.

Anger and frustration were still rolling through him when he left the clinic and drove the short distance to Charli’s, hoping and praying that Peyton would be more amenable to coming with him than he usually was. After he parked at the curb in front of the house, he sent a quick text to Will.

Still coming over? Mind picking up some pizza if you are?

He sat for a minute to see if Will replied, really wanting to be able to tell Peyton that Will was coming over. He'd probably still order pizza even if Will wasn't coming, because that would at least make it more likely that Peyton would eat supper without complaint.

Will: *Sure. I can do that. I have no plans.*

Jay could almost hear the sarcasm in Will's words. He was still struggling to get over Daphne, and he was spending far too much time on his own. Will wasn't exactly the most outgoing guy, and it had gotten even worse now that he was going through a breakup.

He hated not being able to be there for Will like he would have been had he not needed to focus so much of his time and energies on Peyton. It felt like he was failing his best friend, even while Will had been there so often for him.

Charli greeted him as he walked into the kitchen, waving her phone at him. "Do you have plans for supper?"

"Will's picking up some pizza for us," Jay said, glancing around for Peyton.

"Would he pick up an order for us too?" she asked. "Then maybe you guys could join us here for supper."

Jay couldn't deny the appeal of that idea, but he didn't want to overwhelm his sister. "Are you sure?"

"Completely sure," Charli assured. "I think Layla would like it if Peyton hung around a bit longer."

Jay wasn't going to turn down an opportunity to put off making Peyton unhappy for a few more hours. If hanging out there would make him happy, then they'd hang out there.

"Place your order," he said. "And I'll call Will to let him know that he needs to pick up your pizzas, too."

Charli smiled at him. "Perfect!"

"What's perfect?" Janessa asked as she joined them in the kitchen.

"Will is picking up the pizza for supper," Charli said.

Janessa frowned. “He’s coming here for supper? Or is he just dropping the pizza off?”

“He’s staying for supper with us,” Charli told her. “Along with Jay and Peyton.”

Jay watched his sister for a minute, trying to figure out her reaction. He understood her not wanting to be around him. But Will? That didn’t make sense. Puzzled by her attitude, he tapped out a quick message to let his friend know about the change in plans.

“What’s going on, Nessa?” Jay asked as he slid his phone into his pocket.

Janessa turned her frown on Jay. “What do you mean?”

“You seem unhappy that Will is coming here for supper.”

She shrugged. “I just didn’t know that we were having guests.”

“Is that a problem?” Jay asked. “We can go eat at my place like we’d planned.”

Charli laid a hand on his arm. “It’s fine.”

Jay wasn’t sure that it was. He wasn’t ignorant of the fact that he’d done damage to his relationships with his siblings over the past few weeks. However, Janessa seemed to be the one struggling the most to get over her anger toward him. With Cole a close second.

Gareth and Aria arrived and apparently, they picked up on the tension right away.

“What’s going on?” Gareth asked, stepping into his role as the oldest brother.

Jay kept his mouth shut, knowing that anything he said was likely to make Janessa defensive and angry. Gareth’s gaze moved to each of them, clearly waiting for *someone* to explain what had happened.

“C’mon, Nessa,” Aria said, going to her friend and putting her arm around her. “Let’s go upstairs for a few minutes.”

Janessa allowed herself to be led away without looking back. Jay watched her go, her anger at him feeling like a stab in his heart. For their whole lives, he'd been there to protect her and stand beside her.

And now she probably felt like he'd abandoned her or didn't trust her because he didn't share what he'd been dealing with.

"Anyone going to give me a clue here?" Gareth asked.

Charli sighed as she shook her head. "Do you really need a clue?"

Gareth dragged his hand down his face. "I understand that she's still upset about Jay leaving town without a word, but there are bigger issues to deal with at the moment."

"I get why she's upset with me," Jay said. "But she seems to be mad at Will, too."

"He wouldn't give her the information she wanted," Charli said. "That made her angry."

Gareth put his hands on his hips. "I think she's more hurt than angry."

"Yeah. Janessa's hurt often manifests as anger," Charli agreed. "She won't stay angry for long. It always blows over."

Jay hoped that was the case, but this was the longest she'd ever been angry with him. He'd apologized to her for what he'd done, but that apparently hadn't been enough. He wasn't sure what else to do to make things right with her.

Though Jay wanted to talk about it more, he also wanted to check on Peyton. "Can we talk about this later? I'd like to see Peyton before we eat."

"He's in the basement with Layla. I left them doing some painting, so hopefully there isn't paint all over the place."

"You like to live dangerously," Jay said as he headed for the stairs that led to the basement.

"That's me alright," Charli called after him. "Living on the edge Charli."

Jay jogged down the stairs to the basement. Before he even got down there, he could hear the kids talking with the television playing in the background.

“Hey guys,” Jay said as he stepped into the basement.

“Uncle Jay!” Layla put her paintbrush in the cup of water on the table, then hurried over to him.

He swung her up into his arms and gave her a hug before walking over to the small table where the two had been painting. Peyton watched them approach, his expression blank.

Jay didn't like that he'd figured out how to hide his emotions from Jay. The only emotion he saw from the boy most days was anger.

He set Layla back down next to her chair, then he went down on a knee beside the table. “Hey, Peyton.”

“Hi.” Peyton focused on his paper, dipping his paint brush into one of the color pots on the table between them.

Jay figured he wasn't going to get more than that from him without effort. “Tell me what you're painting.”

Layla quickly dove into an explanation of what she'd painted so far, though it didn't look anything like what she was describing.

“How about you, Peyton?” Jay asked, shifting a little closer to the boy.

“It's a puppy,” he said. “Mommy said she was going to get me one, but she never did.”

Oh, well... How was he supposed to respond to that?

“I should have drawn a puppy, too. I keep asking Mom to get one, but she always says no.”

Jay had to bite his tongue not to offer to get Peyton a puppy. Unfortunately, their current living situation didn't allow for that.

“Are we leaving?” Peyton asked.

“Nope. We’re going to stay here and have pizza for supper.”

“Yay!” Layla cheered. “Are Misha and Ciara coming too?”

“Who’re they?” Peyton asked.

“Misha is Uncle Jay’s girlfriend and Ciara is her baby. She’s sooooo cute!”

Layla’s words were like a punch to Jay’s gut. He hadn’t realized that she’d picked up on the change in their relationship. Of course, she’d always been an observant kid.

“You have a girlfriend?” Peyton asked, his brow furrowed as he looked at Jay.

“Not at the moment.”

“What?” Layla exclaimed, a frown forming on her face. “Misha’s not your girlfriend anymore?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“Why not? She is so pretty and so nice. I love her.”

That made two of them. “It just didn’t work out.”

Layla’s shoulders slumped. “That’s too bad. So I guess they’re not coming tonight, huh?”

“No. Not tonight.”

“Are you mad at her?” Layla asked.

“Not at all.”

“That’s good. It wouldn’t be good if you were mad at her.”

“I’m not mad at anyone, sweetie,” Jay said, as much to her as to Peyton. “Anyway, why don’t we get all this stuff cleaned up? Will’s going to be here soon with the pizza.”

“Oh, no... Pineapple on the pizza.” Layla made a gagging sound.

Jay chuckled as he got to his feet. “Only on his pizza. Peyton and I are getting pepperoni.”

“I hope I get plain cheese.”

Jay helped them clean up the mess, his thoughts on what the evening might have been like if Misha and Ciara were there with them. He hadn't had the opportunity to introduce Peyton to Misha yet, since he hadn't taken the boy to church the previous week. He was hoping to take him that next Sunday, so maybe he'd have the opportunity then.

It took them awhile to get everything cleaned up, and Charli came down to check on them just as they were finishing up.

“Good job, you two,” she said, giving them both a smile. “Now let's go eat pizza.”

Jay followed them up the stairs, trying not to let the feeling that someone—two someones, actually—were missing, eat at him. He wondered how long it would take before he didn't feel their absence so keenly.

Part of him hoped that he never lost that feeling because that would mean his love for Misha had faded. Right then, though he knew it would be easier, he didn't want that.

There was a teeny, tiny part of him that was holding onto the hope that she might be willing to try again once things settled down for him and Peyton. He couldn't let it be more than that small part of him, however, just in case it took longer than he'd hoped, and she moved on.

The thought made him feel sick, but he had no right to demand that she wait for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Misha hadn't been sure about going to church that Sunday. She and her mom had talked about trying one of the other churches in town, but neither of them really wanted that. So far, they'd enjoyed the services at the Halversons' church, and the idea of going to a church where they didn't know anyone held no appeal.

She'd gone to see Jay on Friday, just to test the waters between them. Though she hadn't been actively avoiding Jay, their paths hadn't crossed much. Given the size of the clinic, that likely meant that Jay had been staying out of her way.

That realization should have hurt, but she had a feeling that he was doing it as much for her as for himself.

Jay had looked so tired on Friday, and Misha wished it was her right to offer him comfort and support. She missed him terribly, but she knew there was no place for her in Jay's life.

Since they'd been able to hold a civil conversation, Misha thought maybe it would be fine to continue to attend the same church as him. For her, the worst part of going was the memory of the services they'd attended together.

But she'd survived going to the gym, where they'd made a *lot* of memories, both as friends and after they were in a relationship. It had been hard, but she was determined to continue her efforts to get into better shape. Jay had put a lot of time and effort into helping her, and she didn't want him to have wasted that time by giving up on what he'd taught her.

So if she could handle seeing Jay at work and going to the place they'd spent a lot of time together, she could handle attending the same church as him.

"Ready to go, Mom?" Misha asked as she walked downstairs with Ciara.

"Yep." Her mom peered at her with a frown. "You're sure about this?"

“I am. It’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I just want you to be happy.”

Misha tried to give her a reassuring smile, but it felt weak. “I’m okay. Probably not happy just at the moment, but I’ll get there.”

She and her mom had had plenty of conversations about the situation with Jay over the past week. But all the talking in the world wouldn’t change her current situation.

“Let’s go,” she said, grabbing the keys from the hook near the door.

Her mom picked up the diaper bag and followed her out of the townhouse, locking the door behind them. It was a beautiful day. Perfect weather for a hike.

But she wouldn’t be taking advantage of it. Hiking was something she hadn’t done since the one time she’d gone with Jay and the others. The closest thing she’d done to hiking had been walking around the neighborhood with her mom and Ciara. She hadn’t even considered going hiking on her own, since she didn’t feel completely safe wandering the trails alone, even in a place like Serenity.

When they reached the church, Eva waylaid her mom, so Misha continued on to the nursery with Ciara.

“Hi, Misha.” Skylar greeted her with a smile and a quick hug. “Hi, Ciara.”

Ciara didn’t hesitate to go to the teen. The baby had no idea what was going on in her mom’s life, and she clearly still loved all the Halversons. Not that Misha didn’t love them too, but she held more of herself back than Ciara did. She appreciated that Skylar didn’t ask how she was doing.

After signing Ciara in, Misha left the nursery and headed for the sanctuary, hoping she could make it to a seat without running into Jay. They might have talked at the clinic, but she wasn’t really keen to have a conversation with him out in public.

As she walked into the sanctuary, it was like her gaze was metal and Jay was a magnet, because without hesitation, she found him standing off to the side with Will, a couple of his siblings, and a young boy. He glanced over as she stood there, and their gazes met and held.

The ache from missing him intensified, and she wished that it was still her right to walk over to him. To have him put his arm around her and to lean into his side. To be surrounded by the light scent of the cologne he wore.

He gave her a small smile before his attention dropped to the boy at his side. Peyton. The boy looked so small standing next to Jay and maybe a little lost judging by the way he was looking around with wide eyes.

Layla skipped up to him and gave him a hug, making Misha smile. That girl had so much energy, and it was clear that she liked Peyton. For a little kid moving to a new place, finding a friend like Layla was a good thing.

Dragging her gaze from the group she'd once been a part of, Misha tried to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach as she looked for her mom. Thankfully, she'd chosen a seat on the opposite side of the sanctuary from where the group stood.

"Doing okay?" her mom asked when she joined her, glancing in Jay's direction.

She covered her mom's hand with hers and gave it a squeeze. "I won't lie and say I'm fine, but I will be."

Her mom frowned. "Promise?"

"I promise."

She knew why her mom worried about her, but there wasn't much that would help but time. And a week wasn't quite enough time to be over the heartache. Although, considering they hadn't dated for very long, the separation shouldn't have hurt as much as it did.

However, she'd been drawn to Jay almost from the first moment they'd met. So even before they'd started to date, she'd already developed feelings for him. She wasn't just

mourning the loss of their relationship, but also the future she'd dreamed of having with Jay.

As the service began, Misha resisted the urge to look around to see where Jay had ended up sitting. She did notice that Janessa was seated at the front with Gareth and Aria, which surprised Misha. For some reason, she'd assumed that Janessa would sit with Jay and Peyton.

However, Janessa had been so angry with Jay over what had happened, it was possible that the pair still hadn't repaired their broken relationship. Misha hadn't talked with Janessa about Jay since they'd broken up. It didn't feel right to do so.

The service was hard to focus on, though Misha tried her best. She couldn't deny that she was relieved when it was over.

She and her mom didn't linger long in the sanctuary before going to get Ciara. There were other people picking up their kids, so they had to wait a few minutes.

"How was she?" Misha asked Skylar.

"Oh, she was great. A bundle of joy, as usual."

Ciara clapped her hands, then reached out for Misha. As she took her from Skylar, she said, "I think she enjoys being around other little ones."

Once they had the diaper bag, they said goodbye to Skylar and headed for the foyer.

"Misha!" Layla skipped up to them, reaching up to take Ciara's hand. "Hi, Baby C."

When Ciara leaned down toward Layla, Misha shifted the baby to hold her face out so the two could interact.

"How are you doing, Layla?" Misha asked. "Enjoying your summer break?"

"Yep! I have a new friend, and he's my cousin, too."

"Is that Peyton?"

Layla nodded. "He's nice. Mom is babysitting him while Uncle Jay is at work, so we can play together every day."

“That’s good. Have you done anything special?”

Misha wasn’t keen to chat for too long, but she also didn’t want to brush Layla aside. She’d gotten to know her while living at their house and very much enjoyed being around her. It gave Misha a glimpse of what Ciara might be like one day.

“Mom lets us color and paint.” Layla looked over her shoulder. “Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

She darted away from them, only to return with Peyton in tow. Ciara began kicking her legs when she saw them approaching, so Misha put her down, holding onto her hands. The little girl began to walk toward the two children, which prompted Layla to drop to her knees with a squeal.

“Hey, Baby C! Walk to me!”

Misha took a chance of letting go of Ciara’s hands, planning to scoop her up if she looked like she planned to start crawling instead. Layla clapped her hands, then held them out to Ciara.

Ciara wobbled a bit, then she took a tentative step forward, hesitated, then took another one. Misha grinned as she watched her little girl take her first steps toward Layla.

“Yay, Baby C!” Layla moved closer as Ciara plopped down on her butt. “She’s walking now!”

Misha bent to set Ciara back onto her feet, so she didn’t put her hands on the dirty carpet. But Ciara wasn’t having that, wanting to get back down onto the floor.

“Did you see Ciara walk, Uncle Jay?”

Misha picked Ciara up and straightened. Seeing Jay there, a smile on his face made her want to smile too, but at the same time, tears hovered near the surface.

“I saw that,” Jay said, his gaze moving from Ciara to Misha. His smile gentled a little. “Good job, Ciara.”

Ciara lunged toward Jay, clearly remembering who he was and wanting him to hold her like he always used to. After the briefest of hesitations, Jay reached out and took her from Misha.

Ciara placed her hands on Jay's face and gave him an open-mouthed kiss on his chin. He laughed, then nuzzled her neck, which made her squeal.

Misha's heart ached with the grief of not just her loss, and but Ciara's as well.

Her gaze dropped to the boy who stood next to Layla, his eyes wide as he watched Jay and Ciara. She wondered how things were going with them.

Jay lowered himself to a knee, then looked at Peyton. "This is Ciara."

"This is Peyton," Layla said as she put her arm around the boy. "He's my new friend and my cousin."

Misha smiled at the way Layla spoke to Ciara, as if the baby would understand even half of what she was saying.

Ciara was clearly fascinated by the new face in the crowd and waved her hands at Peyton. The little boy glanced at Jay, then Layla, before looking back at Ciara.

"You can hold her hand," Layla said. "She likes us."

Peyton slowly held out his hand and touched Ciara's. She grasped one of his fingers and grinned at him.

Emotion tightened a vice around her chest, and Misha found it hard to breathe. She felt a hand gently stroking her back and glanced over to see her mom beside her. The smile she gave Misha was gentle with understanding.

Misha wanted to snatch her baby and run from the church. Run from the hurt that being this close to Jay brought to the surface. Run from the memories of a time when hope was blossoming.

Instead, she stayed frozen in place, waiting for Jay to give Ciara back so she could walk away with her pride intact. Her pride, but not her heart.

Jay straightened, then turned to Misha. "I can't believe she's walking already."

Misha swallowed against the emotion choking her in hopes her voice would be steady. “She just started standing and cruising along the furniture this past week.”

“Do you think she’ll be walking before she turns one?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Misha said, wishing she could just end this interaction.

Jay placed his hand on Peyton’s shoulder. “By the way, this is my son Peyton.”

Misha smiled at the little boy. “Hi, Peyton.”

His presence might have led to the end of her relationship with Jay, but it wasn’t his fault. She couldn’t imagine what he must be going through.

“Hi.”

“And this is Misha’s mom, Denise,” Jay said as he nodded at Misha’s mom.

Peyton waved at her, but there was no smile for either of them. It was hard to see a young child filled with such unhappiness, and it left her with so many questions about the boy’s mother. She’d like to have a conversation with the woman, both as a medical professional and a mom.

“We should probably go,” her mom said. “I have lunch in the slow cooker.”

Jay kissed Ciara’s head, then handed her back to Misha. Ciara didn’t care for the location change, but Misha kept a tight grasp on her so she couldn’t fling herself out of her arms.

“It was good seeing you again,” Jay said, his gaze holding Misha’s for a moment.

“It was good to see you again too, Jay,” her mom said. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Her mom laid a hand on Misha’s back and guided her away from Jay and out the front doors of the church. They walked in silence to the car and didn’t talk until they got home.

What was there to say? If they wanted to keep their new life, Misha had to learn to co-exist with Jay, which meant there

would be more moments like the one they'd just had.

“Why don't you two go and get changed?” her mom suggested. “I'll get lunch on the table.”

Misha didn't feel much like eating, but she did what her mom told her. She changed Ciara out of her cute church outfit and into a pair of leggings and a T-shirt, clothes she could nap in after she ate lunch. Once she was in something comfortable as well, Misha went back down to join her mom at the table.

Life was supposed to have settled down by uprooting their lives and coming to Serenity. Instead, it had gotten infinitely more complicated, and this time, there was no escape.

They wouldn't be able to leave to get out of this situation. She'd just have to stick it out. Ride the rough waters until things smoothed out again.

She just hoped it didn't take too long.

~*~

Jay tried to mask the heaviness of his heart as he left the church with Peyton. They were headed to his folks' place for lunch with some of his other siblings. He would have rather been going to eat with Misha and Denise. Unfortunately, that was not his place anymore.

He hadn't thought he'd be a part of Ciara's future milestones, so seeing her take hesitant steps toward Layla had been incredible. Though he'd witnessed some of those milestones in Layla's life, it hadn't struck him exactly what he'd missed with Peyton until he'd seen Ciara take those first steps.

A new regret had been added to the ones already present within him when it came to Peyton. He couldn't help but wonder if there would be a moment of great regret for Amberlyn when she realized what she was going to miss of her son's life.

“Do you love her?” Peyton asked from the back seat.

Jay looked into the rearview mirror and saw Peyton staring out the window. “Love who?”

Even as he asked the question, Jay knew the answer would be the same whether Peyton was talking about Misha or Ciara. However, he needed to know what was going through the boy’s head.

Peyton’s gaze met his for a moment before he looked back out the window. “That baby.”

“Yes. I do love her. Just like I love Layla. Just like I love you.”

“And her mom?” he asked. “Do you love her too?”

Jay sighed. “I do.”

“So why isn’t she your girlfriend anymore?”

“Sometimes it just doesn’t work out.”

“Do you wish the baby was your daughter?”

Where were these questions coming from? Was he just trying to understand the dynamics and relationships in this new world of his? Or was there something more to it?

He didn’t want to lie to Peyton, but since he didn’t understand the motivation behind the questions, he had to be more careful with his answers.

“We really hadn’t been going out long enough for me to think too much about that.”

Peyton fell silent and didn’t say anything more for the remainder of the drive to the family home. Jay had no idea where his answers fell into the little boy’s perception of his life. Would they make things worse?

Jay knew things could be worse, but he didn’t want them to move in that direction. Not just for his own sake, but for Peyton’s. He was already so angry and sad that if things got worse, there wouldn’t be any happiness left in him. From Charli’s account of Peyton’s times with Layla, at least he seemed happy there. Jay didn’t want him to lose that.

“Hello, Peyton, darling,” his mom said when they arrived at the house.

Peyton let her give him a hug, though he held himself as stiffly as when Jay hugged him. The only person whose hugs he returned were Layla’s.

“Did you enjoy children’s church?” his mom asked as she guided him toward the kitchen.

“I guess.”

Jay hadn’t been sure about sending him downstairs with the rest of the kids, but Charli had said she’d go with him and Layla to make sure he was okay. He knew that should have been his responsibility as his dad, but since Peyton behaved better for Charli at the moment, they agreed she should go with him.

“Did Layla introduce you to any of her friends?”

“Yeah.”

He rattled off a couple of names, but Jay didn’t recognize them. He hadn’t had a reason to know kids Layla’s age beyond a couple who belonged to people he already knew. That would probably change now, especially once school started.

“I saw a baby too,” he said. “And she walked.”

His mom’s gaze held a question when she looked at Jay. “A baby?”

“Ciara.”

“Oh, nice. And she walked?” A smile grew on his mom’s face. “Is she walking already?”

“Took a couple of steps at church today. She saw Layla and walked toward her.”

“Oh boy,” his mom said with a laugh. “Misha better watch out. That little girl is going to skip right over walking and start running.”

Jay wanted to laugh, but all he could muster up was a smile. “I’m sure Layla will tell you all about it.”

Within a few minutes, the rest of his siblings began to arrive. Sure enough, Layla gave her grandma a much more detailed account of Ciara's tottering first steps. Peyton stood next to her but didn't add anything to the story.

They all pitched in to get the table set and then carried dishes of food from the kitchen to the dining room.

"Anyone heard from Wilder recently?" Gareth asked as they passed food around the table after his dad had said a prayer for it.

"Last I heard, he was headed to Singapore with a couple of friends," his dad said. "And I think he mentioned something about maybe going to Japan after that."

Jay had never understood how his parents weren't worried to death about Wilder and his gallivanting around the world.

"I hope he sends some pictures," Cole said. "I bet he's seeing some cool places."

Jay gave his younger brother a sharp look. He'd better not be thinking about following in Wilder's footsteps. Jay could barely handle the idea of Wilder travelling around the world. He didn't want to have to worry about Cole, too.

Peyton tugged on his sleeve. "Can I have another bread?"

"Sure." Jay reached for the basket of rolls and let him pick one. "Do you want me to butter it for you?"

Peyton nodded and held the roll out to him. Happy to have something to do for his son, Jay quickly broke the roll open and slathered some butter on it. He'd already discovered that Peyton loved bread. Whether it was a roll or pizza, he loved any type of bread product.

Jay didn't eat a lot of bread himself, but he was buying plenty of it for Peyton. It was just one of the many changes to the contents of his pantry.

"Are you going to rent the gym again soon, Jay?" Cole asked, surprising Jay by initiating a conversation with him. Just like with Janessa, relations with Cole had been tense after

his sudden disappearance and silence. “Some of the guys want to play.”

“Not sure when that will work out.”

“Bring Peyton along,” Cole told him. “I’m sure Will would come and keep him company.” Cole smiled at Peyton. “Would you like to watch me and your dad play basketball?”

Peyton shrugged. “Sure.”

“See,” Cole said. “There you go.”

Jay couldn’t deny that he was tempted. It had been far too long since he’d last played. As he thought about it, he realized that the last time he’d played, Misha had been there to watch him.

If only she could be there again to see him play. He’d loved being able to look up into the stands and see her clapping and cheering for him.

“I’ll call the school tomorrow and see if I can reserve a time.”

Cole grinned. “Great. I can’t wait to tell the others, though I think we should just limit it to us guys.”

“Give it a rest, Cole,” Skylar said, with a glare in his direction. “You’re just trying to keep me from coming to watch my boyfriend play.”

“You’re a distraction,” Cole said. “If you show up, I’m not playing on the same team as Aiden because we’ll lose.”

Skylar dating Cole’s best friend continued to be a point of contention for the pair. Jay had given up trying to mediate between them. Neither of them was going to give in on their position, so it was just a waste of his time and breath to try. He had bigger issues to deal with than their petty squabble.

Like healing broken hearts—his and Peyton’s.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After closing her office door, Misha slumped behind her desk, glad the day was over. It hadn't been a great day. Actually, it had been a pretty terrible one.

Picking up her phone, she texted her mom a quick message. *I've been held up at the clinic for a bit, so I'll be late getting home.*

Mom: *That's fine, darling. See you when you get here.*

Glad to have a few minutes to just breathe and process the day, Misha set her phone aside, then put her head on her arms on the desk.

She had always wanted to be a doctor to help people. But sometimes help came in the form of having to deliver bad news. Or, as in this case, she'd received a copy of test results from a referral she'd ordered for a young patient from the free clinic. It had taken some doing to arrange the referral since the patient didn't have insurance. However, Jay had been a big help.

But had it been too late?

She hadn't had to give the child's mother the results of the tests that had been done, but that didn't make reading the results hurt any less. That mother was now dealing with the most horrific news a parent could ever receive, and Misha couldn't help but put herself in that woman's shoes.

Now that she was a mother herself, it was harder to distance herself from the parents and children she saw. But usually, bad news didn't overwhelm her the way those test results had. But as she'd read the report, her already aching heart had broken further.

If she went home now, feeling the way she did, she'd upset her mom, and that was the last thing she wanted to do. So, she sat at her desk, trying to keep from crying, and prayed.

She prayed for comfort for the woman and her son and wisdom for the doctors who would plan the course of treatment for the little boy. Prayer didn't feel like enough—not when she had a professional understanding of what the child faced—but God could still heal the boy, whether through medical treatments or a miracle.

A knock drew her attention, and Misha lifted her head in time to see the door crack open and Jay poke his head into the room.

“Misha?” He stepped further into the room, his brow furrowed with concern.

She lifted her hands to brush the moisture from her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” He came around the desk and crouched down beside her chair. “Has something happened to Ciara or your mom?”

Misha wanted to throw herself into his arms and cry out her sadness, but that wasn't their relationship anymore. “No. They're fine. I just got a bad report on a patient. The one you helped me get the referral for.”

Jay's expression filled with sadness. “How bad?”

Misha took a shaky breath and brushed away more tears that spilled over. “It's going to be a rough road with no guarantees.”

Jay rested his hand on hers. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I don't know.” She swallowed hard. “It just doesn't seem fair.”

“Come here.” Jay stood up and pulled her up into his arms.

A war erupted inside Misha as Jay's arms wrapped around her. She held herself stiffly, knowing she shouldn't rely on his strength or the security and solace he offered her. But, oh, how she wanted to. She wanted to lean into his strength. To let him hold her as she cried.

But she needed to protect her vulnerable and hurting heart from even more pain.

“I’m here for you,” Jay whispered.

He held her gently, and Misha knew she could step back from him, and he’d let her go. It was what she *should* do. But instead, she sagged against him, giving in to her need to lean on him.

Jay didn’t even flinch as her weight settled against him. Misha clutched a handful of his shirt, hanging on as all the grief and sadness she’d been carrying overwhelmed her.

She was no stranger to tears. Over the past month, she’d cried plenty of times. Nighttime was the worst, as everything seemed much more futile, and her heart ached so much more as she lay in the dark, praying for the oblivion of sleep.

She’d begun going to the gym every night after Ciara was asleep, working out at a pace well beyond what she’d done with Jay. It was the only way to exhaust herself so she wouldn’t toss and turn when she got into bed.

But having Jay there, offering her something she wanted so badly, her emotions bubbled to the surface, and she just didn’t have the strength—or desire—to hold them back.

When her tears were finally spent, Misha became aware of the thump of Jay’s heart beneath where her head rested on his chest. Focusing on that, she took steady breaths, loosening her grip on his shirt as her emotions subsided.

She’d never known the strength of a man like Jay, and it was hard to move away from it and all that his embrace offered her. Though there was nothing to fear right then, his arms around her had always felt like a promise of safety, of support, that would be there for her in that moment and in the future.

Except that his strength and everything else about Jay weren’t hers. He had other commitments that superseded their budding relationship, and none of that had changed.

She needed to remember that, so that her resolve to keep going in their new life in Serenity wouldn’t weaken. Doctor Martin had invested a lot to get them to a place of safety, and she couldn’t mess that up.

Taking a deep breath, Misha stepped back from Jay. His arms slipped away, dropping to his sides. One step wasn't far enough, but she couldn't seem to move further away from him.

Jay gazed down at her, and Misha's breath caught in her lungs for a moment. The warmth and affection in Jay's eyes hadn't seemed to dim in the weeks since they'd gone their separate ways.

He lifted his arms, his hands gently cupping her face. "I've missed you, Misha. So much."

She knew that to respond the way she wanted to would just make things more difficult for them. But his words... they touched her heart, soothing the hurt that had been lingering ever since the day she'd told him they needed to take a break.

"I've missed you too." Though her words came out as a whisper, he heard her.

But even as she said them, the futility of their situation sank in again, and tears spilled over once more.

Jay's thumbs brushed across her cheeks, sweeping the tears away. Misha lifted her hands and gripped his wrists, hanging on and never wanting to let go.

"Don't cry, baby," Jay said as her tears flowed once again. "Please don't cry."

"I can't stop. I don't know how to stop." And she realized that was true. Her physical tears might not flow constantly, but she felt like she'd been crying on the inside for weeks.

Her overwhelming sadness made no sense, really. Things between them hadn't even progressed as far as their first real kiss. He'd kissed her forehead, her cheeks, but not on the lips. At the time, she hadn't felt any sort of rush to push for more, and after he'd revealed things about his past, she'd come to understand why he hadn't pursued that side of their relationship.

So why did it hurt so much?

Was it because Jay was the first man she'd truly loved? Did it hurt so much because this was her first real heartbreak?

But it felt like more. Like the short time they'd had to explore their feelings had forged a deeper relationship than they'd first realized, building on the friendship they'd developed in the weeks following their first meeting.

"Nothing has changed, Jay," she said, her throat tight as she tried to blink back the tears that kept forming in her eyes. "You can't focus on a relationship right now. Peyton needs you."

"He does," Jay agreed. "But *I* need *you*. I need the joy you bring. The smiles and laughter. And not just me. I think Peyton could use that in his life, too. I feel like I've got a big hole in my heart, and it hurts every day."

Misha swallowed hard. "Me too."

"I want to try again," Jay said. "I want to make this work between us."

"But what if it doesn't? I'm not sure that I'll be able to stay here if we try again and it doesn't work."

Jay's brows drew together. "I will give my whole heart to this, Misha. I promise you." He lowered his hands, taking hold of hers. "I love you, Misha. I know I didn't tell you that before, but it's true. My heart simply... longs for you. I've never felt like this before."

"Never?" Misha asked, wondering about what he'd had with Casey.

"Never. The relationship I had with Casey was never like this. Even when it wasn't bad between us, we were too young to know how to make our relationship strengthen and grow. I loved her as a teenage boy. I love you as a man."

She tightened her hold on his hands, wanting to hope. Wanting to believe.

Could they really build a relationship while he was trying to build one with his son? She would never stand in the way of

Jay and Peyton's relationship. But would her presence in Jay's life be good or bad in Peyton's eyes?

"If you don't want to..."

"It's not that," she hurried to assure him. "I... love you too."

A smile lit Jay's face, but then faded. "So what is it then?"

"I worry about Peyton," she said. "He's had a lot of changes in his life lately. Does he need me to be a part of all that?"

"The fact that you're thinking of him above your own good just reinforces for me that you'd be a good person in his life." Jay sighed. "I've been slow in coming to understand that I can't help Peyton on my own. He needs to know that he's part of a bigger family. One that loves and cares for him. That doesn't just include my parents and my siblings. It includes Will, and it can include you, Ciara, and your mom. I think the three of you could be an important part of his life."

"We can be part of his life without you and I being in a relationship."

"I know," Jay said. "But I want a relationship. I'm not saying it's going to be smooth sailing, but I think the rough patches will be easier if we walk them together."

Misha felt hope growing within her, desperately wanting what Jay was laying out. But were they being selfish? Wanting to build a relationship while so much else was going on?

Jay let go of her hands and slumped down in one of the chairs next to her desk. "The thing is that I'm struggling to cope with all the changes in my life since getting Peyton. Just like he is. I've had to put aside so much of what I enjoy in life to be a father to Peyton, including you. It's been... hard."

Misha placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tension there. "Most parents have nine months to prepare their lives for a child."

Jay nodded, his head still bent. "I don't want to resent him for forcing all these changes on me. And yes, logically I know

that he's not responsible for the changes. That's me and his mom. But do I have to give up everything good in my life because of my past decisions? Is being without you meant to be my punishment?"

His questions hit at Misha's heart, and she wasn't sure how to respond. It would be hard to not view things like that, even for her. But if the demise of the relationship was a punishment, what had she done wrong to warrant that happening to her?

Misha tugged a chair over next to his, then sat down. She rested her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers, saying the only thing she could think of. "I'm sorry you've been struggling."

"I made a huge mistake in making our break permanent," he said.

"I shouldn't have suggested the break in the first place."

Jay turned his head and pressed a kiss to her hair. "And if I'd been communicating better, you wouldn't have felt like you needed to do that."

They sat together in silence for a moment, and Misha mulled over what Jay wanted for them. The truth was, had they been dating longer, or had they been married, they certainly wouldn't have called off their relationship because of Peyton's arrival in Jay's life.

Maybe they'd both jumped the gun in assuming they weren't far enough into their relationship for it to survive Peyton needing Jay's attention. And maybe they'd underestimated how quickly they'd developed feelings for each other, and how deeply those feelings went.

"If we do this," Misha began, "you have to talk to me. Communication will be even more important now that it's not just you and me building a relationship. I don't want to have to guess at what you're thinking."

"I don't want that either," Jay said. "I'm still trying to learn how to communicate better, but I'll try my best not to keep things in my head when I should be sharing them. I've learned

my lesson. I think Janessa is still angry at me over what happened.”

“Are you really sure about this, Jay?” Misha asked.

“I am.”

“I’m not going to try to be Peyton’s mom,” she told him. “I’m not going to take any sort of parental role with him. I’ll treat him the way I treat Layla.”

Jay nodded. “That’s probably for the best. He still misses Amberlyn a lot, so I think he’d balk at someone trying to step into her role.”

“And I wouldn’t want to do that.”

“I’ve been praying for wisdom in dealing with him and everything else in my life,” Jay said. “Just the thought of having you in my life again fills me with peace, and I feel like I can breathe.”

Though Misha could see possible pitfalls in getting back together, she also couldn’t deny that something settled inside her with the decision made. She really had believed that God had brought Jay into her life, so losing him had felt like she’d let something precious slip through her fingers.

“Can we pray about this right now?” Misha asked, needing Jay to know that she wasn’t just relying on the two of them to make this work.

“Yes,” Jay agreed readily. “And let’s pray for your patient and his mom as well.”

Misha appreciated that he remembered what had brought them together earlier and that he understood how important the situation was to her. Prayer was all that was left to her now that oversight for the little boy’s care had been handed off to a specialist.

But God was the one who could heal when all else had failed. So, as they bowed their heads in prayer, Misha prayed for emotional and physical strength for the mom even as she walked a very difficult path with her son. Jay then prayed for God to bless their relationship and to give them wisdom and

understanding as they dealt with each other, as well as the different situations they faced.

He was just ending his prayer when his phone rang. Pulling it from his pocket, he tapped the screen.

“Hey, Charli,” he said. “I’m on my way. I was held up at work for a few minutes.”

Misha didn’t move from his side, though she knew that she should be getting home too. At least she’d already warned her mom that she’d be late.

“There’s no problem.” His gaze met Misha’s. “I just needed to talk to Misha for a bit.”

Misha smiled at him, knowing that Charli was probably bombarding him with questions.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he told her before saying goodbye and hanging up.

“Charli worried?”

“Not worried, per se. It was just that Janessa had already been home for a little while, and I’m not usually very far behind her.”

“I texted Mom to let her know I was going to be late when I saw the email with the test results. I needed a few minutes before facing her because she knows when I’m upset.”

“Do you tell her about stuff like that?” Jay asked.

“I don’t give specifics, of course, but yeah, I usually tell her if something upsetting happened. She’ll pray for people even without knowing anything specific about them. As she always reminds me, God knows the details.”

As they both stood up, Jay said, “Can I call you later?”

Misha smiled at him, her heart feeling so much lighter than it had in recent weeks. “I’d like that.”

“It’ll probably be after nine.”

“That’s fine. I’ll still be up.”

“I’m going to grab my stuff,” Jay said. “I’ll meet you by the back door.”

Misha squeezed his hand, then let him go so she could get her own things together. Though her heart didn’t ache like it had earlier, it still held concern for the young patient and his mom. She suspected that would be the case for a while.

After they exited the clinic, Jay locked it up, then walked Misha to her car. When she’d put her bags on the back seat, she turned to face him.

Jay drew her into a hug, and Misha willingly returned the embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist. She’d missed him so much, and she hoped that this wasn’t a dream her mind had come up with in order to appease her hurting heart.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Jay said when they finally stepped apart.

“Are we telling people?”

“Yes. I’m not hiding this to see if it works, plus I want people to pray for us. They can’t do that if they don’t know what’s going on.”

“I’d like to tell Mom,” she said. “She’ll be so happy.”

“She doesn’t hate me?”

“No. She was upset that things didn’t work out for us, of course, but there was no hate.”

“I’m glad.” Jay bent to brush a lingering kiss to her cheek. “Drive safe.”

“You too.”

Misha couldn’t stop smiling as she drove home, and she couldn’t wait to tell her mom about the conversation she’d had with Jay. She appreciated Jay’s commitment to making things work this time, and she really, really hoped that it would be enough.

“Is everything okay?” her mom asked as soon as Misha walked in the door. “You’re not usually this late.”

Misha gave her a tight hug before picking Ciara up and kissing the top of her curls. “Yes, and no. I was upset by the test results one of my patients had received.”

“Oh, no.” Her mom came over and gave her another hug. “I know how hard that is for you.”

Misha shared a bit about the situation and wasn’t surprised at all when her mom said she’d be praying for them.

“So everything else is okay with you, then?”

“Everything is more than okay,” she said, smiling at her mom as she did a little dance with Ciara. “Jay came to check on me when he realized I was still there, and we had a chance to talk.”

“I’m guessing it was a good talk?”

“It was. We’ve decided that we love each other enough to try again.”

Her mom’s eyes widened. “Really? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. We talked about everything, and we know it’s not going to be easy.” Misha hesitated, then said, “Mom, I’d rather be with him during the rough times than not be with him at all.”

“He’s not going to break up with you again if things aren’t going the way he wants, is he?”

Misha shook her head. She understood why her mom was concerned. Jay’s family would probably be concerned too, but none of them had been there when they’d talked. They wouldn’t know how committed they both were to making things work until they saw it for themselves.

“Just pray for us, Mom. All of us. That’s what we’ll need more than anything.”

“Except maybe a babysitter, so you two can have some time together.”

“Yes, maybe that,” Misha agreed with a laugh. “Thankfully, I think there are plenty of people who will help us out there.”

“You can definitely count on me,” her mom said. “I want things to work out for you two, so I’ll help wherever I can.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Misha had no idea how Peyton would receive the news that they were dating, but she was braced for a negative reaction. The one thing she’d never do was get angry or frustrated with a little boy over his emotions, especially given what he was dealing with.

She would just approach him with patience and love, and hope that in time, he’d see the love that surrounded him and that they weren’t going to abandon him like his mom had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Where are we going?” Peyton asked.

Jay looked up from the bag he was packing with food items. “We’re going to the park for lunch.”

“Just us?”

“Nope. Layla will be there too,” he said. “And Misha, Ciara, and her mom. Will, too.”

“So, Misha’s your girlfriend again?”

“Yes, she is,” Jay said, returning to the task of putting the rest of the food he was taking into the bag.

“Are you going to marry her?”

Though he’d talked a bit to Peyton to let him know that he and Misha were dating again, the boy hadn’t asked many questions. However, they’d all sat together at church that morning, which had apparently triggered these questions.

“We haven’t talked about that yet.” Though Jay definitely hoped that was in their future. He was done dating just for the sake of dating.

“If you do marry her, will she be my mom?”

Jay said a quick prayer for wisdom as he turned his attention fully on his son. “She’d be your stepmom. Just like I’d be Ciara’s stepdad.”

“Is Ciara’s dad around here?”

“No. Her dad died before she was born.” He wasn’t going to try to explain all the details about that to someone so young.

“So she never knew him?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“She likes you,” Peyton said.

“She likes you too.” Jay wasn’t entirely sure which *she* Peyton was referring to, but his answer applied to both Misha

and Ciara.

“She likes Layla better, I think.”

For that observation, he was going to reply with Ciara in mind. “That’s only because Layla has known her longer than you have. Misha and her mom lived with Charli and Janessa when they first moved here. So that meant that Ciara and Layla lived in the same house.”

“Are they going to live with us?”

“Nope. The only time we’ll live together is if Misha and I get married,” Jay said. “But like I said, we haven’t talked about that yet.”

When Peyton fell silent, Jay picked up the bag from the counter. “Are you ready to go?”

“Can I bring a ball to play with?” Peyton asked.

“Definitely. Do you have any other outdoor toys?”

“I’ll check.”

Peyton headed off to his bedroom, while Jay set the bag of food by the door. When he and the others had talked about the food, he’d offered to bring veggies and dip, as well as the apple juice boxes Peyton loved.

When he’d asked Charli if she and Layla wanted to join them—and Misha, Ciara, and Denise—at a park for a picnic, she’d jumped on board, and soon most of the family that was currently in town planned to join them. Cole and Skylar—and Aiden, of course—had volunteered to snag a spot at the park after church while the rest went to get the food.

“Ready to go, buddy?” Jay called out.

Peyton appeared with a few things in his arms.

“What you got there?”

“A ball, a Frisbee, and a kite.”

“Sounds good.” Jay got a plastic bag and held it for Peyton to put his things into.

They left the apartment and took the elevator down to the ground floor. As they stepped out of the building, gloriously warm air greeted them. It was sunny, with hardly any clouds in the sky. A perfect day, and he was going to enjoy it with his favorite people. All of them.

To be back together with Misha felt like a miracle. He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd told him to leave her alone. It was nothing less than he deserved, given how he'd treated her and considering everything else going on in his life.

But when she'd let him comfort her, Jay knew he had to try again. He'd missed her so much, and his life had felt empty without her and Ciara in it. Yes, he'd seen her at work and at church, but it wasn't the same.

The moments he'd missed the most were the times at the gym, eating dinner together, and even hanging out at the townhouse with Misha, Ciara, and Denise.

But he'd also missed hearing her talk with the others in the breakroom at lunch. It was during those conversations that her intelligence shone as she talked about medical stuff with Gareth, Janessa, and Aria. He might not have understood a lot of what they discussed, but Misha's passion for her work and her care for her patients was very evident.

All of that was so attractive to him. It was no surprise that he'd fallen hard for her.

His life was better with Misha in it, and he was sure that he wasn't the only one who felt that way. It was his hope that, one day in the future, Peyton would also feel that way about her.

It didn't take too long to get to the park where they were meeting. He slowed his speed as he drove, looking for the spot where Cole had said they were waiting. The park was quite large, with lots of beautiful green spaces, flower gardens, playgrounds, plenty of walking paths, and a huge man-made lake at the center of it.

Once he reached the area where Cole had said they were, he pulled in behind his brother's car. After they got out of the car, Jay retrieved both bags, then handed Peyton his. When Jay

held his free hand to Peyton, the boy hesitated for a moment before taking it.

Jay gave him a smile. They crossed the road and headed for the picnic shelter where Cole and the others waited.

Cole jogged toward them and greeted them with a grin. Well, the grin was directed more at Peyton than Jay. Cole held out his hand to Peyton, who let go of Jay's in order to fist bump Cole's.

"What've you got there, bud?" Cole said, gesturing to the bag Peyton held.

"It's a ball, Frisbee, and a kite."

"Cool!"

It had taken a bit for Cole to warm up to Peyton, and like Janessa, he'd been angry at Jay. The teen had given him the silent treatment for awhile. That had been hard for Jay because it told him that he'd lost the respect of his little brother.

When he'd finally started talking to Jay again, Cole had had a lot of questions for him, challenging Jay on the things he'd lectured the guys on the team about over the years. Especially where they pertained to respecting girls and not rushing into sex.

There was nothing Jay could say to defend himself, so he'd taken the verbal punches Cole had sent his way. Things were still a little tense between them, but at least Cole wasn't carrying his anger into his interactions with Peyton. Jay was thankful for that.

Jay had had to accept that he'd fallen off the pedestal Cole had put him on. But he hoped that maybe seeing what had happened to him might still work as a cautionary tale for any decisions the teens might make in the future.

When they reached the shelter, Jay spotted Aiden and Skylar sitting close together on one of the picnic benches facing the lake. Cole no doubt felt like a third wheel with the pair these days.

"Let's throw the Frisbee, Pey," Cole said.

Peyton set his bag down and fished out the Frisbee, then glanced over at Jay.

“Have fun,” Jay told him.

The smile Peyton gave Jay was small and fleeting, but at least it was something.

Jay stood with his arms crossed, watching as Cole tossed the Frisbee gently to Peyton, clearly curbing his natural athletic abilities and competitive tendencies. A few minutes later, he spotted Charli’s car pulling in behind his.

“Cole, I’m going to see if Charli needs help,” Jay called out. “Please keep an eye on Peyton for me.”

“Will do,” Cole yelled back.

As Jay jogged toward the road, he noticed Misha’s car pull up as well. Smiling, he waited for a couple of cars to clear the road before heading across it to open Misha’s door. She smiled up at him as she undid her seatbelt.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said.

“Hey, handsome.”

As she got out of the car, Jay leaned forward to give her a hug and brush a kiss on her cheek. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“It’s far too nice a day to stay inside,” Misha said, clinging to him for a moment before stepping back. The feel of her in his arms never failed to fill him with warmth.

He knew there would be moments of temptation with Misha, given his history of seeking physical intimacy with the women he’d been with previously. But it was his hope that his desire to live a God-honoring life would override his desire to feel a physical closeness with Misha that went beyond hugging and kissing.

It was a conversation they needed to have so that he could reinforce with her his commitment to strengthening their relationship by focusing on the emotion and spiritual bonds they shared and not the physical. That physical bond had seemed so important in his relationship with Casey, and now

he realized that it was because the emotional bond they shared wasn't strong enough to sustain a relationship without something else to draw them together.

Plus, it had been easier to just fall back on the physical aspect of their relationship without working to build stronger emotional and spiritual bonds. If this relationship was going to go the distance, it needed to be different from how he'd done things in the past.

And Jay definitely wanted it to go the distance, so he wasn't going to make that same mistake with Misha.

"Yep. Outdoors is the place to be today. To go for a hike or hang out at the park." He went to the back of the car with her, then lifted out the stroller for Misha. "Do you want Ciara in it?"

"Actually, maybe we can carry her and put our cooler in the stroller instead."

"Sounds good."

He waited as Misha put what she wanted in it, then went to check if Charli wanted to add anything. Soon, they were making their way across the green space to the shelter. Layla ran on ahead, while Charli and Janessa followed behind them with Denise and Ciara. Misha was pushing the stroller as Jay carried Charli's cooler since it was too big to fit in the stroller.

Janessa's anger seemed to have eased a bit since she'd found out that he and Misha were back together, but their relationship still hadn't healed completely. But at least it didn't feel like she was glaring daggers into his back as he walked in front of her.

"Is Kayleigh coming?" Skylar asked when they reached the shelter.

"She went home," Charli said. "She's had a bit of a week. I think she's going to spend the afternoon holed up with a good book or maybe just napping."

Skylar frowned. "Bummer."

Jay wasn't surprised by his sister's decision. Kayleigh could be fairly high-strung, especially where her work was concerned. So if her week had been more stressful than usual, it wasn't surprising that she would try to recoup before the next week.

"Mom and Dad are here," Janessa said a few minutes after Gareth and Aria had arrived, walking hand in hand across the grass.

Jay turned to look at the road. "I'll go see if they need help." He gave Misha a smile, then jogged back to the road again.

When he reached them, his mom gave him a hug, then his dad handed over another cooler. Jay had no doubt they were all going to eat well, even if it was a picnic.

Will still hadn't appeared by the time all the food was laid out, and Jay was beginning to think he might not show at all. Though Will had previously shown up to any Halverson gathering that he was invited to, that wasn't the case any longer. Since his breakup, his attendance at their family gatherings was more sporadic.

When his dad called for them to gather around for prayer before they ate, Jay took Misha's hand and rested his other hand on Peyton's shoulder. Standing between the son he loved and the woman who held his heart, Jay bowed his head, listening as his dad said a prayer for the food and for the members of the family not present.

Jay was grateful that even though he'd messed up terribly—both in the past and more recently—his family hadn't forsaken him. The experiences had definitely proved to him that his parents and siblings would stick by him through the ups and downs in his life. And he'd do the same for any of them.

He hoped that his birth mom would have still been proud of him, despite the mistakes he'd made. Having only a nine-year-old's memory and perception of his mom and the promises he'd made to her, it was difficult to accept that she would have been. However, as a man, he was trying to believe

that her love for him would have meant she would have reacted the way the Halversons had.

Once the prayer was over, Jay helped Peyton fill a plate with food. There was a ton of choice. A variety of chips. Everything to make a sandwich. Potato salad. Veggies and dip. Pickles. Deviled eggs. His family always had lots of food, and now, with Denise around, there was even more.

The next few minutes were filled with people getting their food, then finding seats at the picnic tables scattered around the shelter. Misha settled herself and Ciara at the table where Peyton and Layla were sitting.

Jay joined her there a couple of minutes later. “Did you want a drink?”

“Oh, that would be great.”

After she told him what she wanted, he went to grab drinks for both of them. He paused when he spotted Will making his way to the shelter. He detoured and walked to meet the man.

“Hey,” he said as he approached Will, holding out his hand for a fist bump. “Glad you could make it.”

“I brought brownies.”

“Janessa will love you.”

Will gave a humorless laugh. “I doubt that.”

“Yeah. You and I are still in the doghouse.”

“Your sister holds a grudge like nobody’s business,” Will told him.

“Honestly, I had no idea she had the capability of holding onto her anger for this long. I’m starting to get a little annoyed with her, to be honest.”

“I would say she can’t stay mad forever, but I’m not so sure about that anymore.”

“Yeah, me either,” Jay said. “I’m just glad you decided to brave her anger and spend the afternoon with us.”

People greeted Will as they walked into the shelter, and while his friend went to get food, Jay went to the drink cooler and grabbed a couple of cans for him and Misha. Back at the table, he found Misha feeding Ciara, who was now buckled into her stroller.

Jay swung his leg over the bench and sat down beside Misha, setting her drink next to her plate. “Everything okay, Peyton?”

Peyton looked up from his sandwich and nodded. “I like the bread.”

“It’s good, huh? Grandma made it.”

“It’s very good.”

Thankfully, Peyton also liked cheese, so he wasn’t just eating plain bread.

Charli and Will joined them at the table a few minutes later, while Janessa chose to sit with Gareth, Aria, Denise, and their parents.

“Hi, Will,” Peyton said when the man sat down across from him.

“Hi, Will,” Layla chimed in. “You’re late.”

“I am,” he agreed. “But thankfully, I made it in time for the food.”

“What did you bring?”

“Brownies.”

“Oooh. I’m glad you came.”

“Layla,” Charli admonished her daughter with a laugh. “We’d be happy that Will was here, even if he hadn’t brought brownies.”

“But he *did* bring them, so that’s even better.”

Jay leaned close to Misha. “You should take notes on how Charli parents Layla. I have a feeling you’ll need them.”

Misha laughed as she bumped her shoulder against his arm. “Are you saying that Ciara’s going to have a similar

personality to Layla's or that she's going to be an influence on her?"

"I think it's probably going to be both," Charli informed her. "I'd try to restrict their contact, but I think it's too late at this point."

"Oh, I would never want that," Misha said. "I think Layla is delightful."

"I do too," Charli agreed. "Most of the time. The other times, I just have to shake my head at what comes out of her mouth."

Lunch passed with more delightful comments from Layla and even some from Peyton. Will laughed a few times, which Jay counted as a win because he hadn't heard much laughter from Will since Daphne had broken up with him.

"Why don't you two go for a walk?" Charli suggested. "We'll keep an eye on Peyton and Ciara."

Jay looked at Misha. "Want to go for a walk?"

"Are you sure you don't mind watching Ciara?" Misha asked Charli.

"I don't mind at all," Charli assured her.

"Are you okay if I go for a walk with Misha, Peyton?"

Peyton glanced at Misha, then nodded. "Can Will help me fly my kite?"

"That's up to Will," Jay said, looking at his friend, who nodded. "Then let's go."

"Save me a brownie," Misha told Will.

"Save me one of Denise's cookies," Jay said.

Misha laughed as she got up from the table. "You should know by now that Mom always has a separate stash for you."

Jay got up as well, and as they walked away from the shelter, Misha slid her hand into his. He loved that she initiated contact between them. It made him feel like she

wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her. It hadn't always felt like that was the case with Casey.

“Are we going somewhere specific?” Misha asked. “Or are we just going to walk all around the park?”

“I have a destination in mind,” Jay said. “You’ll just have to wait and see it when we get there.”

Thankfully, it wasn't too far away. He led her onto a path that took them past more picnic areas, some playground equipment, and a couple of volleyball nets. All of them were filled with people out enjoying all that the park had to offer.

“Thanks for arranging this picnic,” Misha said. “I love hanging out with your family.”

“More than me?” Jay asked.

“Never more than you,” she told him, letting go of his hand so she could put her arm around his waist.

Jay looped his arm around her shoulders, holding her close as they continued to wander along the path, following behind people pushing strollers or just sauntering along like they were.

“I thought it would be good for Peyton to get used to being around you when there are people he already likes present too.”

“It's good that they're people I also like.”

“He's asking questions already,” Jay told her. “But he doesn't seem upset at the idea of us dating.”

“I'm glad. I don't want to add to the turmoil in his life.”

As they neared their destination, Jay stepped to the side of the path, keeping himself between Misha and a pair of skateboarders who came whizzing by.

“Thank you,” Misha said.

“For what?” Jay asked as he guided her back onto the path that took them to a small set of stairs.

“For thinking about me.”

“You’re never far from my thoughts, beautiful,” Jay confessed as they walked down the stairs into the garden of beautifully blooming flowers that he’d wanted to show her. He guided her to another path to the right, where there was a little bit more privacy from the main path through the garden.

“That’s the same for me with you.” Misha lifted her hand to where his rested on her shoulder and intertwined her fingers with his. “But what I meant in this particular case was how you shorten your stride, so I don’t have to run to keep up with you. Or how you made sure that if those kids had run into us, they would have hit you first.”

As he turned to face her, Jay was grateful that there weren’t any people in the small section of the garden where they were. “I will always protect you. I know my actions haven’t exactly shown that because I did hurt you. But from this point on, I will always do my best to protect you. And as far as shortening my stride, well, it would be inconsiderate of me not to do that for you.”

“Not every guy would think about that,” Misha pointed out.

Jay shrugged. “Maybe. But that’s not who I am.”

“And I’m glad,” Misha said. “I know that you’ve struggled with how people have perceived you since Peyton’s appearance in your life, but I look at you and see the same man I fell in love with. A gentle man who cares deeply about the people around him. Whether that’s the teens you coach or your family, I see how much they all mean to you.”

Emotion clogged Jay’s throat as he listened to her words. They were a balm to the ache that still existed in his heart, an ache that hurt a little more whenever he saw the anger Janessa held toward him or the disappointment in Cole’s gaze.

Misha lifted her hand and rested it on his cheek. “You might not feel like it right now, but you are a man to be admired. Yes, you might have made mistakes in your past, but you stepped up to take care of a son you knew nothing about, even realizing the upheaval that action would create in your

life. A less honorable man would have told Amberlyn to leave.”

Jay laid his hand on her hers, then turned his head to press a kiss to her palm before taking her hands in his. “I always want to be a man that you’re proud to be with. But all of this—along with some conversations with my parents—has helped me to see that I shouldn’t be striving to please them or even you. That the person I should strive to honor and glorify with my life is God. And in doing that, I’ll always make them proud, and hopefully you too.”

“I think, ultimately, how you’re handling things now is pleasing God.”

Jay hoped so. It had, in some respects, been freeing to realize that he didn’t need to focus on pleasing the people around him. If he sought to honor God with his actions, what people thought wasn’t important. There were moments when he wondered if he’d be able to do that—he was just a simple man trying to honor and please a magnificent God—but his parents had reminded him that God would help him.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

That was a verse from Philippians that he’d memorized as a kid, but it had taken on new meaning in the light of recent events. With Christ’s strength, he could do everything... including living his life in a way that was honoring to God.

“There’s no way I’m going to be able to help Peyton without God’s help, and the help of my family.”

“And me,” Misha said. “I’ll be there for you and Peyton however you need me.”

“Thank you.” Jay still wasn’t sure he deserved the second chance Misha had given him, but he was so glad that God had worked it out for them. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” The soft smile she gave him filled Jay’s heart.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. When she moved back a little and lifted her head to look at him, Jay saw the love he felt for her reflected in her gaze.

Because he wanted to be more respectful of Misha in their relationship than he'd been of the women in his past, Jay whispered, "May I kiss you?"

Misha's smile came quickly as she said, "Yes. Always yes."

When their lips touched for the first time, Jay vowed once again to cherish Misha and the love God had given them for each other. As they leaned into their first kiss, Jay held her with gentle hands, wanting her to know all the love he felt for her. All the joy he felt in her presence.

Mindful of the public place that they were in, Jay didn't allow their kiss to linger too long. However, he didn't feel disappointed that this first kiss hadn't lasted longer.

When he lifted his head and saw the love in her gaze, Jay couldn't help but tighten his arms around Misha, then he lifted her and swung her around in a gentle circle. Her laughter wrapped around him as she gripped his arms.

This was just the start of things for them. The first of many kisses to come. The first of many joyous moments shared, just the two of them.

So rather than disappointment, all he felt was excitement for what lay ahead.

EPILOGUE

Misha looked at the women gathered in the room with her, each dressed beautifully in preparation for the wedding that day. She'd been surprised, but also felt honored, when Aria had asked her to be one of her bridesmaids. Janessa, of course, was Aria's maid of honor, and Charli was also a bridesmaid.

Gareth had had a more difficult time deciding on who to choose as his best man since he had two best friends. Jackson had suggested they flip a coin for the job. That idea had backfired on the man, however, when Wade won the toss. Jay was the third groomsman and Misha's partner.

All the bridesmaids were wearing long dresses in lavender. Though Misha wasn't likely to wear the dress again, she loved how it looked on her. The dresses were all the same color, but they'd each chosen a different style. Misha's was a sheath style with a square neckline and filmy sleeves of lavender tulle that reached her elbows.

The men would be wearing light grey suits with ties that matched the bridesmaids' dresses, and Misha couldn't wait to see Jay in his outfit. She had no doubt that he was going to be the most handsome of all the men—even the groom. Of course, she didn't give voice to her thoughts, knowing that at least one woman would argue with her about that.

The wedding photographer circled around them, snapping pictures as they sorted through the flowers that had just arrived. They were currently gathered in a Sunday school room at the church, waiting for word that the ceremony was ready to start.

"Are you going to cry your way down the aisle, Aria?" Janessa asked her best friend.

"I don't think so," Aria said. "This is the happiest day of my life."

"Gareth's too," Janessa told her.

Aria gazed into the mirror that leaned against one of the walls. “I’ve already cried my tears over my mom not being here. She wouldn’t want me crying today.”

Misha didn’t know how she would have dealt with not having her mom around for her wedding, and she hoped she never had to find out.

“I love my dress, Auntie Aria,” Layla said as she spun in a circle, her skirt flaring out. Her and Ciara’s flower girl dresses were a sage green color with sashes that matched the lavender of the bridesmaids’ dresses.

Misha hadn’t expected Aria to want to have Ciara in the wedding party, and Misha hadn’t been sure *she* wanted Ciara in the wedding party. At almost two, Ciara was a great walker, but she was an absolute *pro* at running. Hopefully, having Layla and Peyton with her would keep Ciara from running off.

Her mom had taken Ciara out into the hall for a few minutes, so she didn’t keep pulling on the women’s dresses. Aria’s beautiful white dress fascinated her, and she kept wanting to touch it.

“I’m glad Micah was okay with not walking you down the aisle,” Janessa said.

“He understood,” Aria told her.

“And you weren’t tempted to change your mind in the last week?”

“No.”

Aria’s half-brother and his mom had arrived that week for the wedding, and it had been interesting meeting them. When Misha had heard about Aria’s past, she’d been amazed at the woman’s willingness to invite them into such an important event in her life.

Janessa put her arm around Aria’s shoulders. “I’m glad you’re marrying Gareth. We’re going to officially be sisters now.”

Misha had grown close with all three women, but Janessa and Aria were still closest to each other. Over the past year,

Misha had grown closer to Charli, mainly because of her help with Peyton. Jay and Misha had spent a lot of time with her and Layla over the past year. As a single parent herself, Charli had really stepped up to help her brother when he became one.

There was a knock on the door, then Dan and Cathy came in. Cathy's dress was sage green, but it was a shade or two darker than the flower girl's dresses. Dan wore a light gray suit similar to the ones the men in the wedding party were wearing, though his tie and pocket square matched Cathy's dress.

"Everyone is here, so we're ready to get this show on the road," Dan announced. "I'm hoping that one of you single ladies will catch the bouquet so we can get going on the next wedding."

"Dad," Charli said with a laugh. "Let's get through this one first."

"Just wanted to put it out there," he told her. "Didn't want anyone to think that just because we're through planning this wedding, that we wouldn't be ready to plan another."

"We'll discuss this later, darling," Cathy said. "Let's get Aria and Gareth married first."

Soon they were all in the foyer, waiting for Kayleigh's cue to line up. She was in charge of keeping them all on schedule, and she was doing a great job of that. The rehearsal the previous night had run smoothly, and it had taken less time than Misha had thought it would.

As the ladies waited, Jay, Jackson, and Peyton joined them.

"Oh, don't you gentlemen look handsome?" Cathy said.

"And you look beautiful," Jay said. "Aria did a great job of choosing these outfits for us."

"You look very handsome too, Pey," Misha said as the little boy stopped beside Jay. "Are you ready to help guide Ciara down the aisle?"

Peyton nodded. "Yep. Me and Layla are going to do a great job."

“If she runs away, just let her go, though,” Misha reminded him. “Don’t chase her or everything will go crazy.”

Peyton chuckled at her words, and Misha was thankful he’d gotten to the point where he could laugh and have fun. That certainly hadn’t happened overnight. It had been a rough year of firsts without his mom around, and the school year had had some rough patches. But things seemed to be getting a bit easier for him. He definitely had more good days than bad now.

“Okay, everyone, let’s get into line.”

Misha was relying on her mom to stay with Ciara until it was the kids’ turn to walk down the aisle, then to come get her once she made it to the front. She was glad for her mom’s help that day, as she was every day.

The past year had included a few ups and downs for her mom. Even though she’d made a few friends there in Serenity, she’d continued to miss her life and friends in Atlanta. The one highlight had been when they’d decided that it was safe for her to contact Devontae.

They’d taken precautions, and though she’d listened to the conversation, Misha hadn’t spoken with him herself. She’d had nothing to say to him, and she’d told her mom that she didn’t want her to tell him anything about what was going on with her. Especially not about her relationship with Jay.

Misha didn’t want Devontae to have any insight into her new life, because she’d already lost so much because of him. And she had so much more to lose now if she had to leave Serenity because of Devontae, starting with the man at her side.

She and Jay were the first to walk down the aisle, so Misha slipped her hand into the crook of Jay’s arm, and if she held on a little tighter than she needed to, Jay didn’t mention it or seem to mind.

“Ever think about doing this someday?” Jay asked as Kayleigh motioned for the doors to open.

“What?” Misha looked up at Jay as they stepped forward.

He just grinned and kept his gaze on the front of the sanctuary. Misha gave a huff of laughter as they started down the aisle. She'd definitely thought of marrying Jay. And after Peyton had seemed to be settling in better, they'd talked a time or two about what their future might look like, including marriage.

Maybe this was Jay's way of saying he wanted them to have a more serious conversation about it. She was definitely on board with that.

When they reached the front of the sanctuary, Jay leaned a little closer and said, "I love you."

She squeezed his arm and smiled up at him. "I love you too."

Misha happily walked to her spot, while Jay went to his. Gareth and Wade were already standing at the front, waiting for everyone to join them. Jackson and Charli came next, Jackson grinning widely, while Charli tried to keep him on the beat of the music. Janessa was also smiling happily when it was her turn to walk down the aisle.

As the three little ones walked down the aisle after Janessa, Misha held her breath. Layla was gently tossing rose petals, while Peyton carried a little box with the rings. Ciara also had a basket with rose petals, and as she walked, she took fistfuls and flung them up into the air, which resulted in a few landing in her hair.

About halfway down the aisle, Ciara dropped her basket and ran toward the stage. People likely assumed that she'd head for her mom, but nope. The little girl climbed the stairs, then veered over to where Jay stood. He bent and swept her up into his arms.

Misha was grateful that Peyton and Layla hadn't run after her, as they arrived at the front at a more sedate pace. They'd had a brief discussion about what to do if Ciara didn't behave. They'd decided that if she ended up with Jay, Skylar would take her from him since she'd be on that side of the sanctuary. Ciara liked the teen, so they were all hoping she didn't throw a fit if Skylar took her.

But next, it was Aria's turn. There were no tears as she beamed with joy when it was her turn to walk down the aisle beside Dan, her gaze on Gareth. He met her at the front, then they both hugged Dan and Cathy before heading up the stairs onto the stage.

During that interchange, Skylar stepped up and took Ciara from Jay. Thankfully, the toddler didn't protest the move, and Skylar carried her to where Misha's mom waited to take her into the small room at the back of the sanctuary, normally used by moms with young babies. It had a one-way mirrored glass window and a speaker, so her mom could still witness the wedding without Ciara interrupting anything.

With Ciara taken care of, Misha could relax and enjoy the wedding.

As the couple said their vows, Misha couldn't help but wonder how long it might be until she and Jay would be ready to take that step themselves. Just because they'd had a brief discussion about marriage didn't mean an engagement was imminent, however.

But as she listened to Aria and Gareth pledge their love and lives to each other, she knew it was something she wanted to do with Jay. Her love for him had only grown over the past year.

He'd had an endless amount of patience with Peyton, loving him through the rough moments when the boy hadn't wanted anything to do with his dad. Jay had also always made time for the two of them, arranging dates and babysitting, so they could be together without the kids.

Their communication had struggled a bit at first, but they'd worked hard to get better at it. She'd known that they'd made big strides forward when Jay had told her about an interaction he'd had with Casey. Apparently, the woman had been back in town and cornered him again, deriding Misha and giving a bunch of reasons why she and Jay were the better couple.

Jay had told Misha all about the conversation, and though she'd been furious at the woman, she'd appreciated Jay's honesty. Now that she'd been with Jay for a while, Misha

understood a bit more why Casey might want him back. He might not be perfect, but Jay was a loving man who tried his best to care for those around him.

Casey shouldn't have let him go, so it was definitely her loss and Misha's gain. Misha had no intention of letting him go.

Though she was sure Jay wanted them to get married, Misha just didn't know if they were on the same timeline. Unlike Jay, she only had Ciara to consider.

Peyton, however, was old enough to know what them getting married meant. He'd made great strides in the past year, but it was possible that Jay didn't think Peyton was in the best place yet for them to take that step.

That was why Misha hoped his question earlier meant they were getting ready to have a conversation about it all. It would be another step in the direction they'd been moving since deciding to date again.

As Misha took Jay's arm to follow the rest of the wedding party out of the sanctuary, she thanked God that they'd tried again, and that they had been able to stand firm in the commitment they'd made to each other on that day when they'd stayed late in the clinic.

~*~

Jay slipped his arm around Misha's waist as they stood off to the side, watching as Gareth, Aria, and his parents stood in a receiving line in the church foyer. He was really enjoying the day. More than he might have thought he'd enjoy any day that involved him wearing a suit and tie for hours on end.

At least the suit made him look pretty good. Not as stunning as Misha, though. The lavender complemented her complexion, and the style was very flattering on her.

They'd had several pictures taken together that day, both alone and with the two kids, and Jay hoped to get copies of all of them.

“So, are you next, Jay?” Eva asked as she joined them. She didn’t bother with shaking their hands, choosing instead to give them each a hug. “You’ve clearly already got yourself a wonderful woman. You just need to put a ring on her finger.”

Jay winked at the older woman. “We’ll just have to see who catches that bouquet.”

“Well, Misha, darling,” Eva began, “you better put in the effort to grab that bouquet. Don’t be afraid to use your elbows.”

Misha chuckled. “I will try my best, but I doubt I’m the only single woman here that would like to get their hands on that bouquet.”

“Get Jay to give you some hints,” Eva said. “He knows how to keep a person away from the goal.”

Misha glanced up at him, her eyes sparkling with laughter. “I will certainly do that.”

“I can’t wait to see how you snatch that bouquet from the other women. If I were a betting sort of person, I’d definitely put my money on you, Misha dear.”

“So would I,” Jay agreed.

As the woman moved on, Misha began to laugh. “I am going to feel so bad for letting Eva down if I don’t catch that bouquet.”

“I think she’ll get over it,” Jay said. “But I look forward to seeing you go for it.”

“So you have some tips for me?”

Before he could answer her, someone else approached them and engaged them in conversation.

Once the receiving line was over, the wedding party was driven to the spot where Gareth and Aria had planned for them to have their pictures taken.

It was a beautiful early summer day, though Jay’s suit made him feel a little hot standing out in the sun. Misha didn’t appear to be bothered by the heat, however.

At one point, the photographer had him, Misha, Peyton, and Ciara pose together, and Jay was glad that Aria and Gareth had included that pose. It was his hope that while it wasn't technically a family photo yet, it would be in the not-too-distant future.

Once their pictures were taken, Peyton ran off with Layla, while Ciara tried to catch them. The older kids were good about not running too far away from the much younger toddler.

As his gaze tracked his son's movements, Jay was so glad for the progress Peyton had made that year. Amberlyn had stuck to her guns and hadn't contacted Peyton at all. In fact, she appeared to have disappeared completely.

Jay had tried to contact her a couple of months after he and Misha had gotten back together, but her number was disconnected. And when he'd contacted the lawyer he'd used for the change of custody to ask him to check on Amberlyn, he hadn't been able to find her anywhere in Idaho Falls.

Now that they were this far out from that initial difficult period, Jay was kind of glad that Amberlyn wasn't in their lives. Peyton was doing much better, and the relationship father and son shared now was stronger than Jay had ever imagined it would be.

Peyton had even started calling him Dad, after basically calling him nothing at all for the first six months they were together. It hadn't been something that Jay had stressed over, but now, he was glad that Peyton had come to accept Jay's role in his life.

Jay stood off to the side, watching as the bridesmaids lined up with Aria for some shots, loving how Misha laughed and smiled with the other woman. He loved how confident she was in herself and her beauty. It made her so easy to be around.

"You're looking a little besotted there, bro," Jackson said as he joined Jay.

"Besotted? Do you even know what that means?"

"Are you calling me dumb?" Jackson demanded.

“Am I?” Jay asked, giving him a wide-eyed look.

Jackson rolled his eyes. “I’ll have you know that I *do* know what besotted means. And that look on your face as you watch Misha is it.”

Jay shrugged. “You’re not wrong. I am absolutely besotted with her.”

Jackson sighed. “Lucky you.”

“Not lucky,” Jay told him. “Luck has had nothing to do with it. It’s taken some hard work to get to this point. Maybe you need to prove that you’re a bit more serious if you want someone to take you seriously.”

“My sense of humor is my biggest draw,” Jackson said.

“It might be, but being serious sometimes isn’t a negative thing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be with a woman who doesn’t know how to have a good time.”

“If you’ve exhausted the possibilities around Serenity, you might have to go further afield.”

Jackson groaned. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Not sure what your options might be, then.” Having found Misha, he understood why Jackson might want a relationship, too. But he also knew that having a relationship with the wrong person, just so he had someone, wasn’t a good option to being single.

Once all the pictures were done, they headed for the hotel where they’d be having the reception. Kayleigh had gotten Gareth and Aria a good deal at the hotel, and Jay was prepared for a wonderful meal.

He was thankful that he and Misha didn’t have to sit at the head table. Instead, it was just Gareth, Aria, Wade, Janessa, and his parents. He and Misha were at a table with Jackson, Charli, the kids, and Denise. So far, the kids were all doing pretty good, even Ciara, which he knew was a relief to Misha.

Misha let out a sigh as she leaned against him once they'd found their table and sat down. "This has been incredible, but I'm getting a little tired."

"Me, too. Hopefully, some good food perks us up."

"It should be great, if the food we had at the steakhouse is any indication."

"Gareth raved about it after Kayleigh arranged a tasting menu for him and Aria."

"This wedding has been amazing," Misha said.

"Amazing, but also... a lot of work and expense."

"Yep," Misha agreed readily. "But if it's what they wanted, then more power to them."

Jay had no idea what Misha would want for a wedding, but he was going to find out soon. Hopefully.

After a delicious meal, there was a brief program with speeches from Janessa and Wade, as well as his parents. Then it was time for all the fun stuff. Jay got up with Misha when it was time for the bouquet toss, planning to cheer her on from the sidelines.

Aria met his gaze and gave him a wink before glancing over at where the single ladies were all gathered. There was a plan for this, but he didn't know if it would go like they wanted. If this part didn't, it wasn't a big deal. What he needed to go perfectly would come a little while later.

"Okay, all you single ladies," Jackson said, somehow having been granted access to the mic. "Let's get lined up and see who's about to get hitched next. And if you're looking for a handsome man with a great sense of humor, I am available."

Laughter filled the room as the women lined up, jokingly jostling with each other.

"Everyone ready?" Aria called out.

As the women cheered, she took one more look over her shoulder, then whipped the bouquet over her head. It flew with

an amazing accuracy right to Misha. She didn't even have to fight for it.

When the bouquet landed in her hands, Misha stared down at it for a long moment before she looked over at Jay. He grinned at her, then joined in with the clapping and whistling.

"Just a reminder that I'm still available," Jackson said. "Since Misha already has a man of her own."

"That was unexpected," Misha said when she joined Jay again, the flowers clutched in her hand. "Now I have two bouquets from this lovely day."

They went back to the table, where Denise sat next to a stroller that held a sleeping Ciara. She smiled when she spotted the bouquet in her daughter's hands. Denise was aware of the plan for the evening, and she'd been excited from the moment Jay had first spoken to her about it.

Peyton came up to Jay, his eyes wide. "Can I get a cupcake? They just cut the cake and said we could get cupcakes now."

"How about you get one for Misha first?" Jay suggested.

"Okay!" Before he could say anything more, Peyton dashed off. Kayleigh was there and bent to talk to him before nodding. When Peyton returned, Kayleigh trailed him with a couple of plates.

"Here you guys go," Kayleigh said, setting the two plates in front of Jay.

"Here's your cupcake," Peyton said, handing Misha the plate he held.

She smiled at him, then bent to give him a kiss on the forehead. He'd only been receptive to her affection in the last three months, and in the past month, he'd initiated it with her.

Peyton moved to stand beside Jay, watching Misha as she pulled the wrapper from the cupcake, then used her fork to take a bite. Charli was talking to her as she took a couple more bites, then Misha set her fork down and pulled out a foil wrapped disk from inside the cupcake.

Misha frowned as she looked at it. “What is this?”

“Maybe Dad should check it out for you,” Peyton suggested as he leaned against Jay.

“Weird,” Misha said as she handed it to Jay.

Peyton shared a conspiratorial grin with Jay as he unwrapped the foil that he’d wrapped the day before. He’d handed it off to Kayleigh, who had taken care of getting it to the right person. They’d slid it into a cupcake for him, then kept that one separate so Kayleigh could give it to Peyton.

Jay had been a little leery about handing over a diamond ring to a stranger, but Kayleigh had insisted everything would be fine, and she had come through.

“What is it?” Misha asked, leaning forward as Jay removed the wrapping completely. Her eyes widened when she spotted the ring. “Is that...?”

Going down on one knee on the carpet, Jay held the ring out to her. “Misha, I have spent the past year falling more and more in love with you. You’re an amazing woman, and I love who I am when I’m with you. I also love how you’ve opened your heart, not just to me, but to Peyton too. We both love you, and we want to know if you and Ciara would like to become part of our family. Misha, will you marry me?”

Her mouth hung open as she stared at him, her hand pressed to her heart. “You want to marry me?”

“I do,” Jay assured her. “I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone but you.”

“I love you, Jay,” she said, her eyes growing damp. “Both you and Peyton.”

“Is that a yes, Misha?” Charli asked. “I think Jay needs a yes.”

Misha laughed, her joy spilling over. “Oh, it’s definitely a yes.”

Jay got to his feet, pulling Misha to hers as well. He slid the ring onto her finger, then captured her face in his hands

and kissed her. There were cheers all around them, and when Misha turned to look, Jay wrapped his arms around her.

“Did you all know about this?” Misha asked the family members who were gathered around them.

Their moms stood together, arms around each other as they beamed with joy, and it touched Jay’s heart to know that they approved and shared in their happiness.

When Aria and Gareth hugged them, Misha said, “I’m sorry if this intruded on your day.”

“It absolutely didn’t,” Aria told her. “Jay asked Gareth about it, then he talked to me. Jay made it clear that he would be fine if we didn’t want this to take place, but we did. It’s such a wonderful day already, and now this has made it even more wonderful.”

After they’d hugged their family, Jay drew Misha into his arms again. “I hope you didn’t feel pressured to say yes because I asked you in front of everyone.”

She smoothed her hand over his tie as she smiled. “No pressure at all. After your question earlier, I figured we were going to have a talk about marriage. I didn’t think you were getting ready to propose. I just hoped it wouldn’t be too long from conversation to engagement.”

“Would you have rather had a conversation first? We can also have a long engagement if you’d prefer that.”

“No, I don’t prefer that at all,” she said with a shake of her head. “I’m ready for this next chapter of our lives together. When we moved here, finding love was very low on my list of expectations. I just wanted a safe place where I could practice as a doctor. And then, there you were.”

Jay chuckled. “I guess love caught both of us unexpectedly. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to trust a woman enough to love her after what had happened previously in my life, but you made it so easy to love you. I can’t wait to build a family with you, starting with Peyton and Ciara.”

“I want that too,” Misha assured him, her eyes shining with a love that reflected what he felt for her.

Jay had despaired of finding a love like his parents had, and he'd felt like he didn't deserve it. But God had given it to him anyway, and he knew he'd cherish Misha, Peyton, Ciara, and any other children they might have for the rest of his life.

~*~ **THE END** ~*~

Dear readers ~ First, let me say thank you for taking the time to read Jaylen. I hope you enjoyed the story of Jay and Misha's relationship. I loved getting to know this couple and was so happy to give them their happily ever after. It was also fun to write Aria and Gareth's wedding as part of this story.

Second, thank you for being understanding about the unexpected delay in the publishing of this book. It was supposed to have been released two months ago, but life... Best laid plans, and all of that!

I have a quote on my Instagram by Samuel Johnson that says A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it. After all the books I've written, I've come to realize how true that is. Just as an author brings their experiences, feelings, and outlook to the stories they write, so, too, does the reader.

As I wrote Jay's story, I was reminded yet again that my goal should be to honor God with my writing, first and foremost. A desire to please everyone can be paralyzing, given that I can't control the experiences people bring to my books.

While I write each of my stories, I pray that, in addition to honoring God, my books will bring joy and encouragement to those who read them. I hope that was the case for you with Jay and Misha's story. That you were uplifted, even as you were entertained.

Thank you again for spending time with the Halverson family. Be sure to pre-order the next book in the series, which will be Janessa's story.

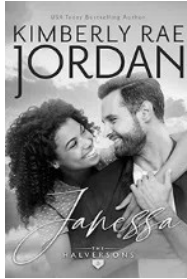
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