

Reuben stood in the center of the dining room, squirming like an awkward teenager put on display for his parents' friends.

Mama's effusive praise made him want to hitchhike to Washington State. She had been chattering nonstop about his new job in the Jubilant mayor's office since Aunt Melba arrived an hour ago. When Rachelle and Gabe walked in, she shared the details again.

Mama had insisted on the last-minute gathering after deciding that Reuben's news was worth celebrating.

"Mayor Henning met Reuben at Melba's Christmas party last December and was really impressed," Mama said. This time she was telling the story to Indigo's fiancé, Max. He had arrived separately from Indigo a few minutes earlier, after wrapping up a photo shoot at a downtown business function.

Reuben fixed his smile. Didn't Mama remember that Max had attended that party too and had witnessed the connection between the two men?

"Reuben told the mayor that he might want to move back to Jubilant, and they began talking privately about Reuben joining his team," she said. "Mayor Henning created this new position

based on Reuben's skill set. Basically, Reuben will be getting all of the city's computer systems updated, right, son?"

Mama raised a questioning eyebrow while everyone turned to listen. If he weren't so tense, Reuben would have laughed at her attempts to describe his new job in layman's terms.

"That's about right. I'll be overseeing an upgrade of the computers in City Hall and then getting the system there to 'talk' to the computer systems in other city agencies, so that there's more efficient functioning across the board. It's almost like building a new bridge but still using the old bridge until the new one is ready. For a while, you have two bridges standing side by side. When the new one is sturdy enough, you have to build an off ramp from the old one onto the new one, without people noticing much difference in their efforts to cross from one side to the other.

"After that project's finished, I'll draft a strategic plan for re-vamping internal communications for city employees and improving citizens' access to online services and products."

Aunt Melba leaned toward Reuben and hugged his neck.

"Congratulations, nephew," she said. "Sounds like an important job, but it's not quite as exciting as working for Amazon.com is it? You sure you're ready for small-town life again?"

Mama glared at her sister. "Of course he is, Melba. Besides, what's more important than being with your family?"

Mama approached Reuben and steered him to a chair on the left side of the long, cherry table. "Sit here, between your sisters."

She motioned for Indigo and Yasmin to fill the seats that flanked him. Yasmin rolled her eyes and trudged to her designated spot.

Indigo leaned against the cherrywood buffet and folded her arms. She remained expressionless, but Reuben knew an attitude when he saw one. Max pulled Indigo toward the table and led her

to the chair on Reuben's right. He sat on the other side of Indigo and continued to hold her hand under the table.

Now that Mama had everyone positioned where she wished—her three children and Max on one side of the table and her sister Melba, niece Rachelle, and Rachelle's husband Gabe on the other—she beamed.

"Wait until I tell your uncle Herbert." Mama glanced at Rachelle. "You haven't called your father, have you? I want to be the first to let my brother know that my baby's moving back home."

Reuben saw Gabe nudge Rachelle with his elbow.

"I wouldn't dare steal your thunder, Aunt Irene," Rachelle said, struggling to keep from laughing. "I know how excited you are."

"Everybody does!" Indigo said in a lighthearted tone accompanied by a wide, plastic smile.

Reuben hadn't spent much time with her during his return trips over the past four years, despite his efforts, but he knew Indigo well enough now to recognize the frustration that had reared its head earlier in the day, during lunch.

He leaned toward her, prepared to call her on it. But Aunt Melba chimed in first, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, Indigo, you're right. Your mama is excited and so is the rest of the family. We can't wait for Reuben to move back with Peyton and David."

Reuben didn't correct her. He and Peyton had called their son by both his first and middle names since Charles David was a baby, because he liked one name better and Peyton preferred the other. It had become second nature to them and to Peyton's family, who lived on the outskirts of Seattle and saw the boy often. But Reuben's relatives typically used David, despite Reuben and Peyton's repeated reminders. Reuben had finally given up,

assuming that they preferred to use “David” because that was his biological father’s name, and because Daddy (his grandfather) was also named Charles.

“We’ve missed having you around on a regular basis for a long time, Reuben, and it will be nice to have a young child to love on,” Aunt Melba said. “It’s a blessing when you can still come home and find your family intact. And it’s a blessing when that family welcomes you with open arms. That’s what we’re doing.”

Aunt Melba winked at Reuben, then extended her arms to grasp hands with Rachele right next to her and Yasmin across the table. “Want to bless the food, since your dad isn’t joining us for dinner tonight?”

Reuben held his breath when all eyes fell on him. The grace he usually said with his son—“Good food, good meat, good God, let’s eat!”—would not go over well with this group.

He noticed a hint of a smile on Indigo’s face. She wanted to see him squirm, and she was having her way.

He coughed.

Max leaned past Indigo and grinned at him. “Mind if I say grace in your honor tonight, man?”

Reuben could have kissed the brother. “Go for it.”

Everyone clasped hands and bowed their heads. Indigo held his hand loosely and Reuben’s heart constricted. He got the message: she might be forced to be in his presence, but she was going to use every chance she got to let him know she wasn’t enjoying it.

When dinner was served, his sister kept her eyes on the roast, garlic mashed potatoes, corn, and greens that Mama had whipped up in just hours. He usually wolfed down the traditional southern fare, but tonight, not even the hot buttered rolls could take his mind off of his nagging fears.

He wanted to pick a fight, to get whatever was bothering Indigo

out in the open. But they weren't kids anymore; there was no guarantee that pushing her buttons would yield the results he longed for—reconciliation, love, and friendship.

He'd been trying to figure out for months how to crumble her wall of resentment. Nothing had worked, and Mama's excessive joy tonight was only making things worse.

Reuben decided to change the subject, hoping that for once, it might penetrate her shell. "How are the wedding plans coming?" he asked.

Indigo shrugged and took another bite of food. Reuben took the cue and decided to leave her alone. He turned toward his baby sister.

"What's new with you, Miss Yasmin?"

The teenager mimicked her sister's nonchalance. "The same ol' same ol'."

He must have lived in Seattle too long—this chick was talking in code. "Excuse me?"

Yasmin sighed. "I keep forgetting you're *thirty-one*. Let me translate: The same old, same old stuff. Nothing's going on since Mama and Daddy decided that they still want me to be their baby and stay under their thumbs. I'll start my senior year of high school in three weeks, but in the meantime, I'm just watching summer wind down. I helped Aunt Melba at the hair salon today and came home to hear your *wonderful* news."

Reuben sat back and folded his arms.

"Yasmin, that was out of line." Cousin Rachelle laid down her fork and frowned in surprise.

Yasmin smirked, seemingly at no one in particular, and took a long sip of sweet tea before responding to Rachelle. "The truth will set you free."

Reuben peeked at Mama and awaited her response. Neither

Mama nor Daddy tolerated disrespect. He remembered receiving threats of a spanking at seventeen.

But Daddy was in bed this evening, resting and trying to get his blood pressure down. And Mama was intent on doting on her son/grandson, oblivious to the blanket of tension her praise was knitting. She took a bite of her potatoes and kept her head lowered.

Rachelle's eyes blazed. Gabe elbowed her in the side again. He looked at Reuben and reassured him with a smile.

"Man, now that you're leaving Amazon, does this mean no more free shipping? No more free gifts? Think about your cousins! You sure you want to give up that great job to move to Jubilent?"

This time Rachelle elbowed him.

"*You* moved here from Houston to practice small-town medicine, doc," Reuben said. "What's the problem?"

Both men laughed. Reuben was grateful for the camaraderie.

"It'll be good for Charles David to have family close by," Reuben said. "He's at the age where he's asking more questions about where I grew up and what you guys are like. Plus, if we're going to leave a place as familiar to Peyton as Seattle, she could use some extra help every so often."

Rachelle nodded, and Reuben remembered her offer to ask her daughter Taryn, who at a year older than Yasmin was already in college, if she'd be interested in a part-time babysitting job when Peyton and Charles David arrived.

"Taryn loves kids. I think I told you that she volunteers in the nursery at church. She said she can help you guys out some once you get settled, and there's no need to pay her. She's only taking fifteen hours in the fall, because she'll be a cheerleader this year."

Reuben grinned. "Your baby is an Everson College Egyptian? My, my, my. I remember when I used to go to games just

to watch the halftime performances with the dancers and cheerleaders . . .”

“My goodness,” Indigo said sweetly. “As long as you’ve been gone, it’s funny that you remember anything about this place.”

Reuben turned toward her. “Indie, let’s talk—”

Mama jumped to her feet. “Let’s have dessert. I made a German chocolate cake and a peach cobbler. Indigo, can you get them for me, from the kitchen?”

Reuben sucked his teeth.

The pinched smile plastered on Mama’s face couldn’t mask the fear in her eyes. She saw this family feud brewing, and she was doing her best to halt it. But sooner or later he and his sister were going to have it out.

Just because he’d been gone for a while, living life on his terms, didn’t mean he couldn’t ever come home. He had a right to be a part of this family as much as she did. If his presence was bugging her, she’d better grow up and get over it.

In thirty days he was returning with his wife and son, ready to join the mayor’s staff and become part of the fabric of Jubilant. Indigo wasn’t going to make him regret this move. Too much was at stake.