

*Billion-Dollar  
Attitudes*

*One*

**BIG  
SECRET**

**J.P. COMEAU**

*One Big Secret*

A CURVY NANNY ROMANCE

**J.P. COMEAU**

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## *Prologue*

### **Mitch**

I **ARRIVED** at Meagan and Chase's housewarming party, excited for an afternoon of enjoyment. My trunk was filled with steaks packed in an ice chest, ready to contribute to the festivities. Eagerly, I made my way to the patio, where my colleagues had already set up an impressive and memorable celebration. The women from Rosedale Tech had gone above and beyond, adorning the space with unique decorations that even inspired a few gift ideas. En route to the party, I picked up a welcome mat from Home Depot as a practical and easily accessible gift.

As a single guy, I was impressed by the warm atmosphere at Meagan and Chase's new home. The entire group was present, including Daniel, Ryder, Guy, Chase, Brad, and me. Although most of us had started families, Brad and I remained single.

Brad was often teased for not having a romantic partner, while I harbored feelings for Amy, a central member of our close-knit Rosedale group. However, we were just friends. I had offered her a ride to the party, but she hadn't responded. As I observed Meagan unwrapping gifts and enjoying the affection of her twins, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of envy.

Nonetheless, I was excited to contribute to the celebration. I provided the barbecue ribs while Brad prepared his secret sauce, and Courtney, Chase's assistant, took care of the side dishes.

Brad considered himself the rib expert, but his expertise was mainly in the sauce. With my extensive grilling experience, I knew these ribs were cooked to perfection. “Brad,” I said, sampling a piece, “these ribs are excellent. To elevate them even further, let’s apply your legendary BBQ sauce.” I smiled, enthusiastically coating the ribs in the delicious, sweet sauce.

“That’s enough, Mitch!” Brad scolded. “Too much sauce can kill the vibe!”

I chuckled as Brad snatched the tongs and slid the ribs onto a huge plate. He had been watching them all day, waiting for them to hit that sweet spot. These ribs were the crowning achievement of our culinary skills – the meal we had been craving all week.

I glanced at my phone, hoping for a message from Amy, but there was nada. Then, finally, Meagan noticed my distraction and asked me in a worried tone, “Hey, where’s Amy? I thought you were picking her up?”

I let out a long sigh. “Nope. Amy didn’t pick up when I called.” I leaned in closer, “Honestly, I was thinking maybe she’s coming with someone else.”

“I highly doubt Amy’s seeing anyone,” Meagan said, distracted by a baby’s cry. “She’s been focused on finishing her coursework so she can graduate with her MBA. Let me try calling her again in a bit.”

As she turned to leave, I caught her arm. “Please don’t make this about me. I’ve never officially asked her out.”

“Uh-huh,” Meagan smirked. “Not yet, you mean.”

Following the scrumptious meal, we divided into two teams for a lively cornhole game in Chase’s backyard. Ariel, exuding confidence, distributed beanbags to the women, playfully warning the men not to underestimate their abilities. Chase theatrically launched his first throw, which missed the target, eliciting cheers from the women and dramatic groans from the men. Brad playfully chided Chase for disappointing

the team. Courtney then confidently said, “Watch this!” and skillfully landed two bags in the target.

“We’re killing it!” Ariel whooped, fist-pumping.

As I tossed my next bag, I couldn’t resist glancing around to see if the car pulling up was Amy. Nope. It was the front gate guard. “Wonder what he wants?” Guy threw his bags down and sauntered over to see.

After a brief exchange, Guy approached me, holding out a big envelope. “It’s addressed to you,” he said, studying the return address. “It’s from 150 State Street, Sacramento, California.”

“It’s probably the payment on our grant that was supposed to come in last week,” Chase grumbled. “You know how it is with the government – they’re always slow.”

I stared at the envelope in disbelief. “Why is it addressed to me and not Chase? He’s the grant administrator.” I walked over to the picnic table, ready to open it up.

“Wait up! Let’s have Courtney handle it.” Guy suggested, gesturing toward the house. “Let’s grab another beer.”

As we made our way up the porch steps, Courtney let out a piercing scream. I spun around to see her collapsing on the ground, barely able to sit up. I rushed over to the picnic table and caught a glimpse of a photo of Amy – bound, gagged, wounded, and bruised.

“Amy’s been kidnapped! That psycho is back!” Courtney whispered.

As Ariel assisted Courtney in standing up, I checked the note. “I believe the ransom is... actually the remainder of the grant money!”

Meagan guided Ariel and Courtney inside as they sobbed uncontrollably while the men gathered to examine the envelope’s contents. “Stay put!” Chase shouted, swiftly texting our private security. “Don’t touch anything!”

Careful not to touch anything, I leaned in to look. “Damn it, Amy’s in... Vail.”



“What makes you so sure?” Chase asked.

“The bedspread. It’s the one from the master bedroom!” I pointed out the photo of Amy on a bedspread with a distinctive blue and yellow pattern.

Without waiting for security, Chase grabbed a pair of gloves from the shed and inspected the ransom note. “They’re demanding that Rosedale withdraw from the grant and notify the state by tomorrow morning. That means we’ll lose the rest of our funds.” He paused, his expression grim. “But Mitch, there’s another envelope with your name on it.”

I donned a glove and opened it up, revealing another photo of Amy holding a sign referencing something I thought only I knew about. Little did I realize...

**DON’T COUNT YOUR CHICKENS BEFORE THEY’RE HATCHED!!**

I whirled around, running my hand through my hair. “I have to go. I need to get to Vail to see what’s going on. It’s my property.”

Chase grabbed my arm. “No way, man. We need to call the FBI and let them handle it. By the time you get there, she’ll be rescued.”

“It’s not your fault. Don’t go. It could be a trap!” Guy warned.

“No!”

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With haste born of desperation, I bounded down the steps of my private jet and launched myself into the waiting sedan. My mind whirled with dread for Amy as I sped toward the hospital, the FBI’s report of her location ringing hollow in my ears. Despite Chase and Guy’s reassurances, guilt clawed at my heart, a merciless vise choking my conscience. I was responsible for her plight, and it gnawed at my soul.

My gut twisted as I envisioned her suffering, and a deluge of questions surged through my mind: Who was behind this? What drove them? Was it tied to the Rosedale case or some other sordid scheme? How could I safeguard her from this hell in the future? With steely resolve, I dashed through the sterile hospital corridors. My hand didn't falter as I wrenched open Amy's door, steeling myself for what lay within. I caught my breath at the sight of her bruised and battered form, her curvy silhouette a harsh juxtaposition with her wounds. Overcome with grief, I struggled for air as she lay there, asleep.

"Amy. It's me, Mitch." I murmured.

"Hey, Mitch," she whispered, her voice rough.

Tenderly, I grasped her hand, fearful of causing her more pain. "Hey, Amy," I murmured. "How are you feeling?"

She grimaced, shifting to find some semblance of comfort. "Sore," she managed, barely more than a whisper.

With a heavy heart, I nodded. "I'm so sorry, Amy. I wish I could have shielded you from this."

Her gaze locked onto mine, pain clouding her eyes. "It wasn't your fault, Mitch," she breathed. "I guess I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time...."

As much as I longed to accept her words, reason rebelled. I knew Amy planned to attend Chase and Meagan's housewarming gala. But how had she traveled from San Diego to Vail? Despite the maddening questions, I knew nothing could change the present — even if the entire situation eluded my grasp.

"Would you like something to drink," I queried, motioning to the cup on her tray. "Or would you prefer something from the vending machine down the hall?" I offered. It was the least I could provide.

Amy shook her head and took a tentative sip. "No, this is fine," she said, a feeble smile playing on her lips. She shifted in the bed, wincing in pain. "How was the party?"

A rueful smile crept onto my face as I fought to control my emotions. "It was nice," I began, my words laden with

remorse, “but it paled compared to how much everyone missed you.” I studied her, seeking a glimpse of her inner turmoil. I reached for her hand but recoiled, unwilling to inflict more pain.

“Can you tell me anything about the person who did this to you? Even the FBI is still piecing the puzzle together.”

Amy’s face darkened with terror, and she shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it, Mitch. He threatened me and said he’d come after me again if I breathed a word. And this time, it would be for good.”

Rage simmered within me, knowing someone had hurt her so deeply. But I had to stay collected. Losing my cool wouldn’t help anyone. “I understand, Amy,” I said gently. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. But I want you to know I’m here for whatever you need.”

Amy looked up at me with genuine gratitude. “I can’t thank you enough, Mitch.” Then someone entered the room, and her attention shifted. “Mum! Is that food for me?”

The woman turned to me with a beaming smile. “Are you my daughter’s doctor?”

I stepped back from Amy’s bedside, shaking my head politely. “No, ma’am.”

“No, Mum, that’s Mitch... my friend. He lives in San Diego.” Amy gestured between us. “Mitch, this is Elana. I call her Mum.”

“So, does that explain why there’s a guard at your door, Amy?” She asked, raising an eyebrow and pointing toward the closed door.

Amy’s eyes widened in surprise as she stammered hesitantly, “I... I don’t know.”

I cleared my throat, feeling both embarrassed and ashamed. “Actually, ma’am,” I began, folding my hands in front of me nervously. “Rosedale Technology is providing 24-hour protection for Amy while she recovers, and it will continue when she returns to San Diego.”

The woman frowned. “What makes you think she’s going back there...”

“Mum... stop... please! I know you’re worried about me, but I have to return to finish my classes...” Amy’s voice trailed off.

“We can make arrangements for you to finish from home, Amy. Don’t forget. Your dad has friends at the university. In fact, I think he’s reaching out to the business school dean today.”

“Mum, I’m famished. We can discuss this later. How’s Papa feeling?”

As I quietly observed the mother and daughter, who bore a striking resemblance to each other, digging into their lasagna, an eerie sense I had stepped into a surreal time warp took control of my senses. Clearly, Amy wasn’t critically injured, and Guy and Chase had been right to some degree. I felt trapped and bewildered. Pulling out my phone, I texted my Uber driver, who had dropped me off, to take me to my chalet. “Feel better soon, Amy,” I said over my shoulder and reached for the door.

As we neared my property, climbing a steep hill with a sharp bend in the road, my driver halted abruptly. The reason was immediately apparent — my chalet was encased in vivid yellow tape emblazoned with FBI CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS.

# CHAPTER

## *One*

**Amy**

### **Three Months Later**

THE BREEZE of change rustled through the air on this momentous graduation day. A blend of tranquility and anticipation swirled around me while I waited backstage at the open-air auditorium for my name to be announced. I held onto the hope that my life was about to embark on a more favorable path. Heaven knows I was in dire need of a reprieve after the last few months had tested my limits and beyond.

“Amy Elana Russo!”

With a deep, steadying breath, I stepped out onto the stage. The click-clack of my high heels on the wooden planks echoed the rhythm of my pounding heart, a mixture of pride for reaching this milestone and trepidation for the future. As the dean offered his congratulations, his handshake barely registered. Despite the ever-present anxiety hovering nearby, nothing could overshadow the magnificence of this moment!

Defying my father’s wishes, I had returned to San Diego just a month after the attack. My determination carried me through as I worked tirelessly to achieve my goals, finishing all my exams within that time.

Today, I stood tall as an MBA graduate! My professors were extraordinary, providing unwavering support and accommodating me through Zoom meetings. Their assistance was invaluable in helping me reach this incredible milestone. Thankfully, my father’s heart condition was manageable with

medication. We eventually closed our family home near Vail, not far from Mitch's chalet, and my parents rented an opulent apartment by the beach to maintain a watchful presence.

Even before graduation, I attempted to line up pre-interviews for a new job. Papa had made it clear that he expected me to repay my college loan. However, as much as I yearned to land a position that would make him proud and grant me independence, my crippling anxiety always led me to cancel my appointments. I recognized the need for another step forward but felt overwhelmed by the prospect of venturing beyond my safe haven. "Now, go out there and make your mark," Papa had urged. But how could I secure a job? The thought of returning home and joining the family's ski equipment business, which had been in our bloodline for generations, did not appeal to me.

Scanning the crowd, I beamed at Ariel and Meagan's exuberant cheers. My gaze drifted to the empty seat where Mitch should have been, right beside them. Although his absence tugged at my heartstrings, I understood his hesitance to face my parents.

Despite missing Mitch, Ariel, and Meagan had become like family, particularly in the wake of the kidnapping ordeal. Even with their busy lives—Meagan attending to her twins, Lilly and Liam, and Ariel's son Jonathan, whom I used to babysit, taking his first steps—they had shown up for me today. As much as my parents could be challenging, I deeply valued their love and devotion. However, living under the same roof for an extended period was beginning to wear on me.

Descending the steps, my breath caught as I spotted Mitch nearby, looking dashing in his suit, a warm smile lighting up his face. He shot me a reassuring wink.

Mitch had come to see me graduate!

Grinning, I knew at that moment it was the best graduation gift I could have received, especially considering my parents' feelings about him. "Congratulations, Amy! You did it!" he cheered, pumping his fist in the air.

“Thanks!” I responded to all my friends gathering around me.

As I looked upon the faces of those who had been by my side through the highs and lows, my heart overflowed with happiness and pride. However, my emotions shifted gears as my parents approached, and my pulse quickened with apprehension, fearing the tension Mitch’s presence might ignite.

My mother, tears streaming down her cheeks, enveloped me in a tight embrace, whispering, “I’m so proud of you. You’ve achieved so much, and I couldn’t be happier for you.”

My father stepped forward; his deep voice laden with emotion. “Amy,” he started gruffly before breaking into a smile. “You never cease to amaze us all—well done, my beautiful daughter!”

Over my shoulder, I caught Meagan nervously biting her lip as my parents moved to greet my friends. Ariel and Meagan had shared their worries that my parents would lump them together with Mitch, blaming them for the kidnapping due to their status as Rosedale wives. Soon enough, though, their expressions morphed from anxiety to genuine appreciation and respect when Mum and Papa introduced themselves.

“Hello, sweet girls! We’re Elana and Giuseppe Russo—you can call us Mum and Papa if that’s okay with you,” Mum exclaimed. Before Ariel and Meagan could even react to the warm welcome, they were swept into an endearing embrace by Mum, while Papa greeted them heartily, treating them as if they were already part of the family—barely acknowledging Mitch.

My stomach twisted at the blatant exclusion of my friend Mitch. It wasn’t his fault what had happened to me, and Rosedale Tech—where he was a co-owner—had been exceedingly generous by providing me with round-the-clock security. Why were they so cold toward him?

“Come, come,” Mum gestured toward the parking lot. “We have reservations at Bella Vita, just a short distance away.”

She looked at me tenderly, her eyes conveying all her love and pride for my achievement, as she and Papa turned their backs to Mitch.

Feeling a bit claustrophobic and bewildered, I fanned my face. “Mum, you and Papa are being rude. Mitch is my friend too.” Mum looked down somewhat abashed.

“He’s responsible!” Papa growled.

When I glanced back at Mitch, he offered a quick wink and strolled away.

Sensing the unease, Ariel softly squeezed my hand and whispered, “Let’s defuse the tension. We’ll have dinner with your parents. Mitch’ll be fine. He’d probably feel uncomfortable anyway. What do you say?”

I nodded, grateful for my steadfast friends who held my trust and, above all, my heart. As I turned to wave goodbye to Mitch, I found he had already disappeared from view.

“Ladies, join me. My Cadillac is parked just over there somewhere,” Papa announced, gesturing toward the cars.

As we neared the general vicinity where he claimed to have parked, it became apparent that his sense of direction was amiss. “Papa, did you put the AirTag I bought you for your birthday on your car?” I asked, struggling to hold back a smile.

“Absolutely, sweetheart! I just... uh, can’t remember how to locate it using my phone.” He scratched his head, looking more than a little sheepish.

I rolled my eyes and took his phone, opening the Find My app. “It’s right here, Papa. Just tap on the car icon.”

Mum joined in, chuckling, “He’s so hopeless with these modern gadgets. Good thing he has you, Amy, because I’m not much better.”

Papa puffed out his chest, eager to salvage his dignity. “I’m not hopeless. I simply have more important things to concentrate on. Like ensuring you lovely ladies enjoy a delightful dinner.”



Soon, my friends and I were giggling, squeezed together in the back seat. “Bella Vita is a five-star restaurant. I can’t wait to taste their dishes,” Mum informed us, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

As we drove, my thoughts drifted back to Mitch and my parents’ treatment of him. Was it wrong to stand up for him? Did they have the right to treat Mitch that way when all he ever tried to do was protect me? Ariel appeared to sense my growing anxiety and rubbed my arm. “It’ll be okay. Just relax and have fun.” I nodded, resting my head against the window as we rounded a corner. Whatever the night brought, I knew I could always rely on Ariel and Meagan to support me.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out in the front seat as Papa hesitated when pulling a cigar from the console. Mum responded with a sharp gasp and a disapproving cluck of her tongue, scolding him, “No smoking now, dear! The girls shouldn’t be subjected to your stinky cigars. Honestly, what were you thinking?”

My somber mood instantly lifted as I caught his reflection in the rearview mirror. With a dismissive wave and a slap to his forehead, he exclaimed apologetically, “Oh dear! How could I forget? You ladies must be famished. There’s no time for a smoke.”

Ariel and Meagan laughed at his contrition as we continued our journey. Papa was always entertaining and considerate—most of the time.

Soon, a half-bottle of wine had vanished in a flash, and Meagan was reaching for the bottle to pour herself another glass. “Thank goodness I can indulge in this again!” she declared, evidently feeling somewhat elated already.

Mum’s eyes widened in astonishment as she asked, “Amy mentioned you have twins?!”

“I was breastfeeding my babies, but it became too much,” Meagan remarked while taking a dainty sip of her wine. “My days revolved around eating and nursing, leaving no time for anything else. Eventually, I followed my doctor’s advice and

switched to formula. Since then, it feels like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

Mum patted Meagan’s hand, “You must make time for yourself... and your hubby, of course.”

Next thing I knew, Papa had overruled everyone’s orders and instead requested nearly every dish on the menu. As a consequence, the waiter had to set up a couple of additional serving trays to accommodate all the food. “Papa, I hope you never change. This is why I love dining out with you... and for the entertaining conversation, too,” I tactfully added.

While twirling her spaghetti around a spoon, Meagan inquired, “So, I’ve been swamped with the babies... have you secured a job yet? Last I knew, you were scheduling pre-interviews.”

I dabbed my lips with a napkin before elaborating, “It’s my nerves. You see, the sensation of confinement still triggers me, and being alone in an enclosed space with men who are strangers is not very comforting. In fact, most accounting firms I’ve come across have male interviewers.”

“Oh, my gosh. I get it. As you know, my anxiety was awful after my accident and rehab,” Meagan empathized.

“Oh, I heard about that.” Mum chimed in, frowning her brow with concern. “Amy used to keep me updated on your progress.”

Three bottles of wine were emptied in no time, and most plates were clean. My friends’ expressions signaled they were full until I pondered aloud, “Papa, do you think their tiramisu might be as delectable as Mum’s?”

Papa flashed me a broad grin as he signaled the waiter, “Time to find out!” he exclaimed excitedly.

Mum shook her head and laughed, “That’s why you’re the best Papa in the world!” Her words were met with unanimous agreement from all of us. For that moment, I felt fortunate to have such a loving family — my true friends who mattered more than anyone else ever could.

Suddenly, Meagan turned her attention to my parents and me, her face mirroring curiosity. “Amy,” she started gently, “I’ve been so consumed by my own life that I never learned why you couldn’t attend our housewarming party. I mean, I know you were kidnapped, and I’m so sorry. But can you give a brief rundown of what happened? Just the nitty-gritty.”

I glanced over to Papa, my eyes seeking his approval, and he nodded. “Go ahead,” he said reassuringly. “These women have a right to know the truth—as do the men they’re married to.”

With a deep sigh, Meagan lamented to my father, “The FBI is keeping all of us in the dark as if we’re suspects or something.”

“I completely understand. They haven’t shared much information with us either,” Papa admitted.

“Alright, it’s my turn,” I started, taking a quick sip of wine. “I fully intended to attend the party. Thankfully, I had already sent my gift, the pots and pans, with Ariel.” Ariel blew a kiss in response and continued listening. “That morning, around ten, Mum called to tell me that Papa had been hospitalized due to heart issues. At the time, we didn’t know the severity. Naturally, I booked a flight to Vail right away, planning to contact Mitch and you, Meagan, to explain the situation, but I never got the chance. Upon arriving in Vail, I requested an Uber to take me to the hospital. As I hopped in the car and we drove off, the driver diverted onto a side road. At first, I feared he was going to sexually assault me.”

“Oh, God!” Meagan gasped.

I held up my hand. “No, he didn’t. Instead, he pressed a rag over my face. It had ether or something similar on it and I passed out. The next thing I knew, I was at what I now know was Mitch’s chalet, tied up and gagged.

“He hit you too!” Mum chimed in, tossing her napkin on the table.

“Yes, he forced me to hold the sign, but I fought him. Then after taking some photos, he left in a hurry, and eventually, the

police arrived to rescue me.”

“You saw his face then. Are you sure it was a man?” Meagan asked, holding her breath.

“Yes, but I think he was wearing a disguise when he picked me up and later put on a ski mask. He threw the mask on the floor when he left. It had a toupee inside.

Suddenly, Ariel pushed back her chair and came around the table to wrap her arms around me. “Thanks for sharing that. I know it was tough, sweetie.” I nodded, taking another bite of my dessert. “I have an idea. Why don’t I ask Guy if Rosedale Tech can hire you? I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you worked remotely under the circumstances.”

“Oh, would you? That would be amazing.” We all clapped and celebrated as Papa ordered a bottle of Champagne.

“No need to worry about driving, Mr. Russo,” Ariel reassured us. “I’ll call our security detail to have them drive all of us home. You can leave your car here. Someone will gladly drive it back to the apartment for you tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER

### *Two*

#### **Mitch**

AS I BRISKLY TOWEL DRIED MY hair, drops of water splattered against my bathroom floor tiles like bullets hitting a target. The steam from the hot shower still lingered in the air, clouding the mirror like a smokescreen. I spun around to flick on the TV, hoping to catch the morning news and check the weather for the day. But my eyes widened in alarm as I glimpsed the time displayed on the screen. “Hell’s bells!” I exclaimed, realizing that today was a Monday, which meant an earlier start to our workweek.

I scrambled to throw on my clothes, my mind racing with thoughts of Amy’s parents and their treatment of me after her graduation. Being with her for the ceremony had been a blast. I could still see her sparkling eyes as she proudly accepted her diploma in her cap and gown. But that feeling was short-lived.

I chucked the remote at my bed, my frustration boiling over. The last two nights, I’d been tossing and turning, stewing over her parents’ audacity. When I’d flown to Vail through a freaking snowstorm to help out, Elana had barely given me the time of day. And to top it off, both her parents had made it crystal clear that they didn’t want me around for the post-ceremony celebrations. It was enough to make a guy see red. I mean, I was a damn part owner in a multi-million-dollar company!

“Couldn’t they see that I could help their daughter if they’d let me?” I muttered to myself, seething with anger. It was unfair, especially considering all the blood, sweat, and

tears I'd poured into getting to where I was. I was ambitious, driven, and successful, and damn it, I wanted to explore a relationship with Amy.

I yanked my wrinkled pants and shirt on, my fingers fumbling with my tie as I tried to compose myself. The guys at work would see right through me if I let my emotions get the best of me. I had a reputation for being impulsive and hot-headed, and I didn't want to give them any more ammunition. With a deep breath, I nodded to my security guard Mike and headed out – determined to keep a lid on my temper.

The morning commute was a nightmare, and I felt like I was driving through molasses. I parked my Lexus next to Chase's Escalade and bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time to burn off some energy. When I reached the second floor, I saw that the break room was deserted. Everyone was gathered in the conference room for our staff meeting. Daniel was fiddling with the sound system at the podium as I strode in. I made a beeline for the front table where my partners were seated and set up my laptop with a confident flourish. Chase shot me a concerned look, furrowing his brow. "What's eating you, man?"

"I just can't fathom it," I muttered, irritation dripping from my words. "Why do Amy's parents despise me so vehemently?" I kept my voice low, mindful of Courtney's ears lurking nearby.

Chase shook his head. "Dunno, man, but you've gotta let it go. You're well aware you weren't complicit in her misfortune."

I acquiesced with a nod, but the tightness in my gut remained. It pained me that Amy's parents couldn't perceive my innocence and the depth of my concern for her.

"If only they'd grant me an opportunity," I murmured, overcome with defeat.

Chase's hand landed on my shoulder, reassuring me. "Don't let it get to you. They'll change their tune eventually. Meanwhile, we've got more pressing matters."

“What are you talking about? What have I missed?”

He gestured toward the profit and loss statement Daniel had just projected onto the widescreen, awash with more red than green. “Seems our plate is rather full. Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

I exhaled heavily and endeavored to concentrate on our enterprise. As I kneaded the nape of my neck in a bid to dispel my worries regarding Amy’s parents, I vowed that, come what may, I’d persuade her that dating me was in her best interest. The notion of brushing against those plush, inviting lips remained an uncharted fantasy— for the time being.

The meeting plodded on, delving into accounting records and sales forecasts. I strained to focus on the figures and diagrams, yet my thoughts persistently drifted to Amy. Her laughter reverberated in my ears, and her radiant, welcoming grin seemed to materialize at each turn of my mind. Her parent’s disapproval notwithstanding, I couldn’t dismiss the sensation that we were destined for one another.

Daniel’s voice yanked me back to the present as I meandered through my daydream. “Mitch,” he cried, “Can you please inform us of any updates you’ve received from our attorney, Joe Vandenberg?”

I blinked, feeling mortified and exposed. I had been so engrossed in my thoughts that I hadn’t registered the query. “Uh,” I faltered, shaking my head to dispel the haze. “I’ve yet to hear from Joe, but I trust he’ll have something for us shortly.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed. “On Friday, you mentioned an update for today’s meeting...”

“Ah, yes. Apologies,” I admitted, chagrined anew. “I’ll touch base with him tonight and ensure we obtain an update promptly.”

Chase interceded, casting me a pointed glance. “All right, folks,” he announced briskly. “Let’s wrap this up. Lunchtime has arrived.”

The office erupted in cheers, and everyone scrambled to collect their strewn mugs and laptops, ravenous for the midday reprieve. I grabbed my computer before joining the exodus from the conference room, appreciative that Chase hadn't mentioned my blatant distraction during the meeting. However, I knew my respite wouldn't last.

In a rush to depart, I felt Chase's grip on my arm. "Hold up, I'll rendezvous with you in your office. We've got to hash this out. I'll have Courtney rustle up some burgers and fries and see if she can finagle a conference call with Vandenburg later today." Chase's eyes gave my scruffy mug and rumpled suit the once-over before smirking, "You're quite the sight, aren't you?"

"I've just got a load on my mind. Lunch should help..."

Chase bobbed his head. "Right-o, buddy. I'll find you after I sift through my emails. Ah, one more thing. The FBI just delivered a fresh report."

As the lot of us devoured our greasy lunch, Chase recited the FBI dossier from the Denver outpost. It recounted the forced entry through a rear door and Amy's assault in Mitch's mountain chalet, with a bloody bedspread but no prints. DNA had been harvested but was awaiting analysis. My frown deepened with each word. Suddenly, the meal lost its savor. Whoever had committed this atrocious act remained at large, and Amy had suffered grievously. Fear and fury seethed within me.

Brad chimed in; his brow furrowed in thought. "This intel implies the culprit knew of Amy's connection to us at Rosedale. How could they know? And the chalet location?"

"I can't say for certain," I muttered, raking my fingers through my hair. "Frankly, it's not a difficult connection. Amy's a regular at Rosedale shindigs, and the property records would divulge my chalet's address."

Chase nodded in agreement. "It's the only plausible conclusion. Someone must be spilling the beans...but who?"



Silence descended as we mulled over the newly unveiled information and tried to reconstruct the event. “It’s wearing me out, guessing who’s behind it all. For now, our priority should be safeguarding ourselves and refocusing on profits,” Chase advised, eyeing his wristwatch. “I’ll touch base with Courtney to check on her progress with Vandenburg.”

Our lunchtime chatter veered from Amy’s plight to the company’s financial prospects.

A knock on my office door preceded Courtney’s face appearing in the gap. “I bring tidings of joy,” she proclaimed, grinning. “I’ve arranged a conference call with Vandenburg for this afternoon. He mentioned an update on the patent lawsuit against Valley Technologies.”

“Nice going, Courtney,” I responded, a sense of relief washing over me. “Let’s gather in my office for the call at 3:00 pm.”

“Understood,” she affirmed, departing the room, and leaving us to finish eating.

Chase slapped me on the back. “See, Mitch? The tide is turning. We’ll unravel this lawsuit mess, and for now, you should focus on the things within your grasp. Like Rosedale, not Amy or her folks!”

Brad bobbed his head. “He’s right. Our eyes need to be on the grand scheme of things. Valley Tech moving forward with the California cybersecurity system update is a massive deal. We have to guard our intellectual property, even if it meant relinquishing the grant money to save Amy. Our private lives cannot disrupt the business.”

I exhaled, acknowledging the truth in their advice. Indeed, Rosedale demanded my unswerving commitment, particularly with our Golden Key Software patent lawsuit hanging in the balance. I pledged to do my utmost to separate my emotions for Amy and her parents’ contempt for me—until I was by myself.

That afternoon, we reconvened in my office, anticipating Vandenburg’s call. The air was thick with tension as everyone

grasped the high stakes of this legal battle. Valley Technologies had been a formidable rival for years, and we couldn't allow them to abscond with our patented innovation and grant funds, particularly given the situation.

The phone chimed, and I answered it without hesitation. "Joe, the team's all ears," I announced, activating the speakerphone.

"Greetings, everyone," Joe's voice resonated from the speaker. "I've got some crucial updates on our lawsuit against Valley Tech. As you're aware, they've continued with California's cybersecurity system overhaul despite our ongoing patent disagreement. I've been in contact with their attorneys, and they're standing their ground. Brace yourselves for a drawn-out struggle."

We hung on Vandenburg's every word as he detailed the next moves in our legal plan and underscored the need to remain watchful and unified as a company. The litigation against Valley Technologies wouldn't be a cakewalk, but we were resolute in defending our intellectual property and ensuring our labor and ingenuity wouldn't be exploited.

As the call wrapped up, a renewed sense of determination began to swell within me. Though I couldn't control Amy's family or the unknown perils lurking in the shadows, I could make a significant difference at Rosedale by guiding the company through these turbulent waters. As a devoted partner, it was my duty to uphold the company's stability amidst the chaos, offer leadership and inspiration to my team, and make tactical decisions that would secure our lasting success. Maybe, in accomplishing this, I could eventually prove to Amy and her kin that I was worthy of her faith.

Daniel rose from his chair, stretching languidly before announcing, "I'm heading back to my lair. Got some ideas brewing on cutting our expenses." His grin held a touch of mischief as he ambled toward the door.

Guy rubbed at his weary eyes, his hand lingering on his brow. "Sounds great on paper, but let's see you put it into

action.” He huffed a tired chuckle, watching as the others filed out of my office, each lost in their private musings.

Alone in my office, I slumped into my chair and fished into my shirt pocket. Drawing out my phone, I flicked through the images until I landed on a snapshot of Amy at her graduation, grinning like a Cheshire cat as she took the stage to accept her diploma. Her joy was infectious, and for a brief moment, it lifted the oppressive weight of uncertainty that hung over me.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Who goes there?” I called.

“Courtney,” came her reply. “You still holed up in there?”

“Yup.”

“Mind if I come in, Mr. Detwiler?”

I stood and circled my desk, a pang of anxiety gnawing at my gut. Swinging the door open, I found Courtney, eyes wide with worry, her expression betraying her unease. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder and said, “There’s a deputy from the sheriff’s office in the lobby. He’s got some papers for you.”

“Papers? What kind of papers?” My pulse raced, my thoughts churning with a thousand terrifying possibilities.

“I asked, thinking it might be work-related, but he said it’s personal.”

A knot twisted in my stomach as I considered the potential contents of those documents. Was it a lawsuit, a restraining order from Amy’s parents, or some other nightmare I hadn’t even imagined?

## CHAPTER

### *Three*

#### Amy

AS THE FIRST light of Monday morning crept in, the heaviness of exhaustion draped over me like a suffocating blanket, a byproduct of yet another restless night. Drained and weary, my mind was a whirlwind, a chaotic storm of thoughts centered on making amends for my parents' deplorable treatment of Mitch at my graduation. Our friendship was a lifeline, an anchor in uncertain waters, and I longed to explore the uncharted depths of where it might lead. The heartache from his absence gnawed at me, insatiable and unrelenting, and I yearned for answers to the unspoken questions about the future of our relationship.

My reverie was shattered by the tender touch of my mother, her voice a soothing balm as she shook me awake, "Amy, it's time to get up, sweetheart. You don't want to miss your interview this morning."

Bleary-eyed and still half-asleep, I managed a groggy, "Thanks, Mum."

Her eyes, pools of love and warmth, crinkled in a smile as she said, "Your Papa and I are going for a leisurely walk on the beach this morning. The world outside is painted with such beauty today. We'll be thinking of you."

"Okay, Mum. Enjoy!"

Reluctantly abandoning the cocoon of my bed sheets, I sprang out of bed and reached for my phone, immediately drawn to a photograph of Mitch at my graduation. My heart

pounded in rhythm with the memories it evoked as I immersed myself in a realm of infinite possibilities. Mitch's smile was intoxicating, a beacon of happiness that enveloped me like his arms. I let my thoughts meander through the 'what ifs,' the tantalizing scenarios that could have been if my parents had given us a chance to explore our budding connection.

Catching sight of my reflection, I gasped at the sight of dark circles under my eyes and a disastrous tangle of hair resembling a bird's nest. I grimaced, wondering what Mitch would think of me in this disheveled state.

Time was of the essence, and I had an interview to conquer.

Rushing to my wardrobe, I snatched a sophisticated blouse and skirt, my hands quivering with a potent mix of excitement and trepidation. I grappled with buttons and zippers, my muttered curses punctuating the urgency of the morning. A quick brush through my hair and a touch of makeup later, I dashed out of my bedroom, a frenetic whirl of energy.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a couple of bagels, only to be met with a tasteless, parched texture. My trembling hand sloshed coffee onto the countertop as I attempted to fill my mug. Swiping at the spill with a curse, I tossed the bagels into the trash in frustration.

Just as I prepared to leave, my phone buzzed, and my heart raced as I read Ariel's name on the screen.

Amy, meet Courtney in the lobby at Rosedale Tech. She'll help you from there. Good luck!

I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding; my anxiety momentarily appeased. Grateful for Ariel's guidance through unfamiliar terrain, I sent off a swift reply.

Thank you :-)

I bolted out of the door, nearly tripping over my own feet in my haste. The thought of running into Mitch at Rosedale Tech made my heart race faster than a Ferrari on the Autobahn. As I pulled up in my reliable Honda SUV, I

couldn't help but wonder what he would say if we crossed paths after what had happened with my overbearing parents.

My nerves were frayed as I made my way to the lobby. Ariel's text had been vague, and I had no idea who would be conducting the interview. But I trusted my friend not to put me in a sticky situation. As I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You've got this," I told myself, sticking my tongue out at my reflection for good measure.

Inside, Courtney greeted me with a warm hug and congratulated me on my success. I was grateful for her support as we headed toward the elevators, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

And then I saw him - Daniel, the most enigmatic of the six co-owners of Rosedale Technologies. He greeted me with a warm smile and polite words, and my knees went weak.

"It's nice to see you too," I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Daniel led me through the seemingly endless corridor until we reached a massive door marked "HR." Squaring my shoulders, I braced myself for the interview that awaited me.

"Go ahead," Daniel murmured, motioning for me to enter first.

Once I took my seat in the office, my nerves began to spiral out of control. This was a golden opportunity for me, but I couldn't shake off the growing unease that threatened to consume me. All at once, it felt like someone cranked up the heat, and the room seemed to spin wildly. It was as if the walls were closing in, making it difficult to catch my breath. Despite my inner turmoil, I forced a shaky smile onto my face and mustered a meek "Thank you." All the while, I couldn't help but worry that my anxiety might sabotage everything.

Daniel, sensing my discomfort, asked gently, "Are you alright?"

"Um, I'm just a little nervous," I admitted. "Could you please open the blinds for me?"

“Of course,” he replied, walking to the window and adjusted them, allowing in more light. As sunlight flooded the room, I felt the walls recede and my breathing steady. “Is that better?” Daniel inquired.

“Yes, thank you,” I said gratefully. But before I could fully relax, Daniel broke the disheartening news that Rosedale was downsizing due to an unfortunate event. He didn’t elaborate, but I knew he must’ve been referring to my recent kidnapping and the ransom money involved.

My fleeting relief was immediately replaced by despair. Surely, Ariel must have talked to Guy about my need for a job. If there were no open positions, why did she set up this meeting?

“Oh, I-I’m so sorry,” I stammered, reaching for my bag, my voice laced with disappointment. “I won’t take up any more of your time... Really, I understand!”

“Wait, let me finish,” Daniel said gently. “We’ve had to restructure our bookkeeping role, and I believe it could be a win-win situation for both of us.”

A flicker of hope ignited within me. “That’s wonderful! Can you tell me more?” I asked, handing him my résumé. “I recently earned my MBA, so I’m prepared to tackle any role within your accounting department.”

“Fantastic!” Daniel exclaimed, grinning. “Let’s move on to your question, shall we?”

After we discussed the remaining interview topics, Daniel informed me that Rosedale had designed a new part-time remote bookkeeping position that could be mine if it aligned with my goals. While the pay wasn’t as generous as I had anticipated, I was ecstatic about the chance I was being offered!

“That’s phenomenal news! I’m elated beyond words,” I expressed, my enthusiasm unmistakable.

“I’m delighted to have you with us,” Daniel responded. “When are you available to begin?”

“Immediately,” I answered with fervor. “Do I need to arrange anything or complete any paperwork?”

“You’ll have to sign the offer letter,” Daniel clarified. “That’s the initial step. Following that, several forms must be filled out.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for that,” I stated, feeling reassured that everything was falling into place.

“I’ll be notifying Courtney right away, so she’ll handle it from here,” he assured confidently. “However, please don’t hesitate to reach out if you have any inquiries or require assistance.”

“I most certainly will, thank you,” I expressed gratefully. Then Courtney peeked around the doorframe and Daniel then left me in her adept care.

She extended her congratulations and promptly provided the necessary paperwork to finalize and sign. Courtney’s thorough examination of the documents simplified the process, and her clear explanations of the company’s policies left me genuinely grateful for her aid.

As Courtney helped me set up my new email, I wondered about the office’s morale following my abduction—the latest incident in the Rosedale mystery. Although it seemed improper to broach the topic during the onboarding process, I was aware of the possible repercussions within the company. Since it involved me, I cautiously inquired, “Courtney, I need to ask you something personal.”

She cast a worried look my way, “Oh yes...no problem.”

“It’s about my kidnapping. Would you be comfortable discussing it? I mean, I know you were the first to see that horrifying picture of me bound and...”

Courtney seized my arm and guided me to a nearby sofa. Then, nibbling on her lip, she divulged, “Honestly, Amy, I’m relieved you mentioned it. I was petrified... for you. But also for the rest of us. It appears the drama is unrelenting. And in my opinion, I believe there’s more than one individual responsible for everything.”



“Really?” I questioned, taken aback. “What makes you think that?”

“Nothing definitive. I collaborate with all the co-owners even though I’m officially Mr. Stratford’s assistant. I overhear and observe things, you know? It’s impacting all of us, despite the guys maintaining brave facades. Given the circumstances, I’m relieved you can work remotely and be near your family.”

Gratitude warmed my chest as I responded, “I appreciate that. However, I’m uncertain how long my parents will be in town. They’re eager to return to Vail and manage our family business.”

We continued our conversation for a bit, touching on the harrowing events of my abduction, and Courtney shared her own anxiety and fears during that time. It struck me how resilient the Rosedale team truly was. A comforting smile found its way to my lips, thankful for the incredible colleagues and friends surrounding me.

Courtney jumped when her phone buzzed in her back pocket. “Oh, that’s a message from Mr. Stratford. I better run! You know how to get back to the elevators, right?”

“Absolutely,” I assured her, shaking her hand. “Thank you for everything!”

Heading towards the elevator, I caught sight of a familiar face approaching from the opposite direction. It was Mitch! Surprise washed over him as he noticed me, his expression instantly brightening.

“Amy!” He enveloped me in a warm hug, then pulled away to appraise me with a careful gaze. “You look absolutely breathtaking! I’ve been dying to call you, but I wasn’t sure if you’d be up for lunch or dinner considering everything...?”

My smile broadened, my heart brimming with happiness. “It’s fine — I’m thrilled to see you too,” I replied. Before I knew it, we were stepping into the elevator together.

“I heard through the grapevine you’ll be working remotely for us.” Mitch stuffed his hands into his pockets.

Feeling slightly self-conscious, I nodded. “Yes, I’m beyond excited to join the team! It’s a fantastic opportunity.”

As the elevator doors opened, Mitch courteously touched my shoulder, gesturing for me to exit first, and murmured, “It was wonderful catching up, but there’s someone waiting for me in the lobby. Mind if I call you later?”

“Of course!” I replied, the warmth of his touch still lingering. “I’d love that.”

As I made my way to the parking lot, curiosity gnawed at me, urging me to find out who Mitch was meeting. Could it be another woman? Disquiet seized me as I stole a covert glance back at the lobby. There, a deputy sheriff’s piercing gaze focused on Mitch, his expression chillingly stern.

## CHAPTER

### *Four*

#### **Mitch**

WITH HANDS TREMBLING like an October wind, I tore into the oversized envelope the deputy handed me. His words tumbled around in my skull, seeking an exit from my predicament. “Son,” he drawled, “you’ve been summoned to a custody hearing in Eagle County, Colorado. Happens at the end of the month.”

As the words spilled from his mouth, I inhaled sharply and spat out, “Nicole?”

“Yup. One Nicole Barns, she’s the plaintiff.”

Chase’s cautionary tale about my susceptibility to the fairer sex played on repeat as I made my way home. “Watch yourself. You’re a good-looking, wealthy guy... prime target for a gold digger.” I’d brushed him off then, cocksure and dismissive, certain I had everything in hand. But when Nicole had severed ties without warning after I told her I wasn’t interested in anything long-term, a nagging suspicion she might be pregnant gnawed at me. I didn’t have the nerve to ask, though — the truth scared me too much.

Entering my beachside sanctuary, the court order sat heavy in my grip. My stride grew sluggish as I ambled to the fridge and snagged a brew. Shoes kicked off, I lumbered to the couch and collapsed with a weary groan. Glancing at the document once more, reality crept in. “I’m a father? With Nicole, who can be sure,” I muttered, disbelieving, as I shook my head. The child, previously a phantom haunting my guilt-ridden

conscience, was now a fact of life, and Colorado demanded I take responsibility. What was Nicole playing at?

I drained the remainder of my beer, changed my clothes, and gazed at the sunset and the surf's relentless assault on the shore. Fingers flew through my contacts, found Nicole's number, and dialed. To my astonishment, she answered.

"Hello, Mitch. I wondered how long it would take for you to call," Nicole's voice was ice and miles away.

"What's going on? I got a court summons today. Says I'm the father of our kid, and... you're giving up custody! Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant? I would've helped... if you'd asked."

"Mitch, I tried asking. But after a couple of unanswered voicemails, I figured you were done with me."

"Nicole, you know me better than that..." I protested, backpedaling, unwilling to confess I'd deliberately ignored those messages.

"Exactly the point," she drawled, her voice dripping with smugness. "I know you well enough, and after the whole kidnapping fiasco and that woman turning up at your cabin, I reckoned she must be your latest fling. Honestly, I was too scared to keep hunting for you. So I'm letting the state take care of things."

My breath hitched in disbelief. "How did you find out about the chalet? The media never reported anything."

She scoffed, "God, I thought you had brains to match your fortune. Guess I was wrong! Everyone knows everybody in this backwater burg except you, it seems."

"I see," I spat, the words bitter on my tongue. "So you're telling me we have a three-month-old daughter together?"

"That's right. Ava's her name."

I softened my tone. "Nicole, why are you giving her up?"

"Met someone new. She's someone who actually gives a damn. But neither of us is ready for a kid yet. Maybe someday."

“Ah, I see.”

“Yep, always been into both sides of the fence. I’m getting the hell out of this lousy town and away from all you spoiled rich snobs. Anyway, I gotta run.”

“Where’s Ava? Is she safe?”

“In foster care. And don’t you ever call me again!” she snapped before hanging up.

Moments later, an image appeared on my phone: a baby with tufts of dark hair, huge blue eyes, and a pout that unmistakably matched mine. I quickly saved the photo and dialed Daniel, seeking the name of the lawyer he’d used to confirm Harper was his child.

“Daniel, I need your attorney’s info... it’s urgent,” I blurted.

My friend hesitated before replying, “Mitch, is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, sighing. “I’ll fill you in later.”

“Alvin Lewis is the guy. I’ll text you his number.”

“Thanks, I owe you,” I murmured.

As I hung up, my mind swirled with thoughts of Ava—my daughter. The sun dipped below the horizon, and I stood on the porch, staring into the gathering darkness. The notion of this baby girl being my own flesh and blood seemed preposterous, yet here I was. I rubbed my temples, grappling with the situation. “How in the world am I going to raise a kid?” I muttered, pondering my bachelor lifestyle and the implications for my burgeoning relationship with Amy.

As my boots paced the living room, my mind reeled in a tumult of disbelief and bafflement, my pulse pounding like a demon’s drumbeat. A little kid was about to make landfall in my beachside sanctuary, shrinking the space as if by some arcane wizardry. I couldn’t shake the feeling that life would never again unfurl in quite the same way, and a chill skittered down my spine like a tiny, icy spider. Desperate to evade the inescapable truth, I sidled up to the window, my gaze locked

on the churning surf as its relentless thunder filled my ears. Was there some semblance of peace hidden within those waves?

“Maybe the kid ain’t mine,” I whispered to no one in particular.

But deep down, in the recesses of my soul, I knew that hope was a phantom, a fleeting wisp of smoke. I flicked open my phone, and there she was—the little girl who’d bewitched my thoughts. Ava. Her face, so like my own, flared in my mind, a stubborn flame that refused to be extinguished. There was no running from the truth now. Sure, the lawyer would demand a paternity test, but I had no doubts.

“Got to make this place fit for a kid,” I grumbled, surveying my bachelor pad. Was living so close to the ocean a danger? Or perhaps the neighborhood was the problem? I couldn’t recall ever spotting children roaming these streets. Mostly, the area played host to unattached souls and sun-seeking retirees who’d migrated to soak up the California golden rays. But there was more to mull over. “Need to find someone to help with the little one, too,” I conceded, feeling the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders like a suit of armor.

With a heavy heart, I sank onto my porch swing and dialed Alvin Lewis’ law office, expecting to leave a message. To my surprise, he picked up. “Lewis speaking!”

“Uh, hey, Mr. Lewis,” I began with a sigh, steeling myself to plunge into the turbulent waters of my newfound situation. “I’m calling because... Well, it seems I’m a dad now.” I inhaled deeply and added, “And I need your help.”

As I explained the case was in Colorado, he waved me off with a tired, “I’m afraid that’s not something I can help you with. You need a Colorado attorney for that.”

As we spoke, my phone hummed with an incoming call. Temporarily shunting aside my trepidation, I glanced at the screen and found Amy’s name staring back at me. A voicemail from her followed, and for the first time since we’d parted ways hours ago, a smile broke free. This serendipitous

moment demanded attention, so I dialed her back, eager to hear what she had to say.

Amy's voice sparkled with enthusiasm as she burst forth, "Mitch... My folks just hopped a flight back to Colorado to handle some stuff. I've got some thrilling news I can't wait to share with you!"

A wry chuckle escaped me at the lilting sound of her voice, and I inquired, "What news would that be?" My spirits soared effortlessly at her words.

"I'm beyond thrilled to join the Rosedale crew, and there's no one else I'd rather share my excitement with than you! You were the first person who came to mind. Can we celebrate me landing a job together tonight?"

Bewildered by the rapid twist of fate, I posed the question, "Are you hungry?"

"You know I'm always ready to eat!" Amy chortled.

"I'll arrange for takeout. Why not swing by? It's been a grueling day, and I could use a friend to confide in. I mean, I apologize. I know you mentioned celebrating, but truth be told, I'm not in the mood for much festivity tonight."

"No problem. Sounds splendid. I'm ravenous!"

As I swung the door open, an incandescent Amy greeted me, adorned in a cute yellow dress that clung to her curves and showcased more of her décolletage than usual. Her dazzling smile electrified the air as she peered up at me with rivulets of silken ebony tendrils cascading over her shoulders. The sight of Amy instantly banished my apprehensions, leaving only exhilaration in their wake.

"You're a vision, Amy," I breathed in awe, holding the door ajar for her. I strained not to let my gaze linger on her voluptuous bosom.

"Many thanks, Mitch," she beamed, her eyes gleaming with impish delight. "I thought I'd spring a little surprise on you."

Her gaze roved over my torso, pausing to appreciate the way my snug t-shirt clung to me and the low-slung fit of my surfer shorts on my hips.

“So, do tell. What’s going on with you?” Amy inquired with a furrowed brow as I motioned towards the sofa.

Dodging the question, I faltered, trying to puzzle out how to break my news. “Let’s dig in...”

“Ah, sure... sounds delicious.”

As we nestled on the couch, I unpacked the meal Uber Eats had dropped off. The enticing scent wafted through the room, causing my mouth to water. I stole a glance at Amy, who pried open a container of fried rice.

“Chinese cuisine has my heart,” she confessed, a hint of playfulness lacing her tone. “I could devour dumplings by the pound!”

As we relished the mouthwatering fare, I found myself charmed by Amy’s fervor for her newfound role at Rosedale Technologies. In the midst of hearty bites and animated conversation, I abruptly rose to steep some green tea. The unforeseen motion took Amy aback, her eyes widening in astonishment.

“Green tea, Mitch? I must say, I didn’t peg you as someone who was into green tea,” she teased with a roguish grin.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, I tenderly ferried the steaming pot and fragile teacups to the table. “Cooking is a passion of mine, which means I dabble in concocting all sorts of beverages,” I declared, filling each cup with fragrant tea.

“You’re a never-ending enigma,” Amy chortled.

Hesitation gripped me as I pondered how much less enigmatic she’d find me after hearing about Ava. The words lodged in my throat, but I managed to choke them out as we savored the warm, aromatic brew. “Amy, remember our chance encounter in the elevator?”

“You mean when the police officer awaited you in the lobby?” she asked.



“Amy, he came to serve me papers. Turns out I’ve got a kid from a past relationship.”

Her shock morphed into a tender smile as she grasped my hands, reassuringly stating, “Mitch, life’s an unpredictable dance. You never know what miracles it’ll bring, often exceeding your wildest dreams.”

I grinned, tightly clasping her warm hands. A rare sense of elation washed over me. “You’ve got a point,” I admitted, newfound confidence swelling within me.

She sipped her tea, cracked open a fortune cookie, and read it aloud, giggling, “A remarkable surprise awaits you just around the bend.”

As I recounted my fleeting tryst with Nicole, Amy’s countenance grew somber, unable to fathom a mother abandoning her child. We conversed in hushed tones until she turned serious, surveying the house. “What’s your game plan, Mitch? This place is grand, but let’s face it – it’s not fit for a little one.”

Her hand found mine, giving it a comforting squeeze. “You’re going to need assistance. Perhaps a nanny?”

A wisp of a smile crossed my face. “I’ve pondered that, but I need help finding the right one. I know zilch about babies. Fatherhood was beyond my wildest imagination up until now.”

“I’ll lend a hand, Mitch,” she vowed, determination lacing her voice. “I only work part-time and from home. I can help you with interviews and reference checks. How much time do you have?”

“I’m floundering. I’ve yet to find a lawyer. According to Daniel’s suggestion, only attorneys with Colorado licenses can take the case. I’m at a loss.”

She pondered for a moment. “Papa’s got connections...he knows everyone. He’ll know what to do.”

“Your dad?” I gaped.

“Absolutely. He’ll assist, as it’s unrelated to you and me.”

“Ah, I see. I suppose,” I nodded, processing her words.

Her smile returned. “I’ll call him in the morning. It’s perfect timing since he’s in Vail for a few days.”

“Amy, your assistance means the world to me,” I murmured, drawing her close to me. We remained entwined, nestled against the cushions of the worn couch. The moment hung in the air like a spell, our eyes locking together, and something ancient and electric zinged between us. We met each other halfway in a tender, lingering kiss until Amy reluctantly retreated.

“Looks like you’re a father now,” she teased, a playful grin playing at the corners of her mouth. “Who would’ve guessed? I should make tracks it’s getting late. Tomorrow is a big day for both of us.”

Guiding her to the door, my fingers were loath to release hers. “Goodnight, Amy. I’m grateful you stood by me.”

“Goodnight, Mitch. We’ll navigate this together,” she assured me, her smile a beacon of warmth before she disappeared into her car.

I stood on the porch, watching her leave, my heart full of gratitude and admiration for this amazing woman who had entered my life. As the night surrounded me, I looked up at the dark sky, feeling the soft touch of the wind on my face.

## CHAPTER

### *Five*

#### **Amy**

I HIT 'SEND' on the spreadsheet and took a bite of my taco while waiting for Daniel's response. Sure enough, my inbox pinged immediately with a simple thumbs-up and a smiley emoji. I chuckled, grateful for the laid-back work environment that helped relieve some of the tension I'd been feeling.

This morning, I started my day with a yoga session to clear my mind before reaching out to Papa about Mitch's custody case. When I finally had a chance to explain the situation, I could hear the disapproval in Papa's voice. "Amy, you know I don't like that Mitch guy," he grumbled. But then, after a pause, he relented, "But if there's a child involved, we can't just sit back and do nothing. I have to respect the man for stepping up."

Finally, Papa agreed to give me a referral for an attorney and scheduled an appointment for Mitch. He warned me, "This attorney doesn't come cheap, but he's worth it. Make sure Mitch knows what he's getting into. He'll be in good hands. He's an old family friend."

Then he handed the phone over to Mum, and we chatted for a while, during which she asked me if Mitch and I had gone on a date yet. I was caught off guard and stumbled over my response, but Mum admitted that she liked Mitch and that Papa's issue with him was more of a "man thing." "He just needs someone to blame for my kidnapping, and Mitch was an easy target."

While balancing my laptop on the edge of the kitchen counter, I searched online for potential nannies for Mitch. My work phone kept buzzing, but I was determined to help Mitch in any way I could. Time was running out, and he had a lot to do.

Lost in thought, I heard a soft knock on my door. “Just a second,” I called out to Greg, my security guard, and unlocked the door. To my surprise, it was Mitch, looking tired but still managing a warm smile. “Hey there, beautiful. How’s the nanny search going?”

“Wow, what a pleasant surprise,” I said, giving him a quick hug. “Come on in. Are you hungry? I’ve got some taco fixings in the fridge.”

After accepting my invitation, Mitch rummaged through the fridge, and I continued my search from the couch. He mentioned that he couldn’t sleep after I left the night before, so he went for a walk on the beach. When he came back, he started his own search for a nanny online. Rubbing my temples, I said, “Honestly, Mitch, I don’t know how people find good nannies. I’ve gone through dozens of profiles, and I still haven’t found anyone who feels right for Ava.”

He swirled his taco in the zesty sauce, a glint in his eyes as he spoke. “Amy, I can’t thank you enough for lending a hand. I know you’ve got your own fair share of troubles. Don’t worry your head too much. I’m sure someone will eventually pop up.”

I snapped my laptop shut, offering a warm smile. “Isn’t that what friends are for?”

Mitch sauntered over and sank down beside me, our shoulders gently touching. “Speaking of support, how’d your chat with your dad go? Did he agree to back me up in the custody battle?”

I hesitated, the memory of my father’s words heavy on my mind. “He did. Papa reached out to his friend and set up a Zoom call for you in a couple of days. But Mitch, he wanted me to warn you - guys like Angelo Ferrara don’t come cheap,

and they're in high demand. I'll text you the contact info and the Zoom link."

He gave my hand a comforting squeeze. "I can handle tough. Thank you, Amy, for making this happen for me."

"By the way, I noticed you left the office early. Everything okay there? I wrapped up my spreadsheets before lunch, and when I chatted with Courtney, she mentioned she was prepping for a crucial call with the company lawyer."

Mitch's arm slid over the back of the couch, his fingers resting on my shoulder, as he reiterated the disheartening news. "Times are tough for us. We've lost a revenue stream we were relying on, to be honest. If we don't land another big project soon, we won't be able to pay our team."

A worried frown creased my brow. "Is it really that bad? I knew things were rough, but I didn't think it was that dire."

He sighed, his gaze fixated on the floor. "It's pretty severe. As you know, we've been hoping to bounce back since we lost the grant money."

"I'm so sorry, Mitch. After everything we've been through, I'm just grateful Rosedale took me on. Can I do anything more to help?"

Mitch drew me into his embrace and tenderly kissed my nose. "Amy, don't blame yourself for someone using you to get to us. You're already going above and beyond. We're all in this together, doing what we can to keep each other afloat—and safe."

The soft chime of my phone broke the cozy silence, our minds adrift in thought. "Hmm, could be a reply to the job posting I put up," I mused.

"Let me get that for you!" Mitch leaped to fetch my phone from the kitchen counter.

"Ah, here's one. Ella Morris," I announced, snuggling closer to Mitch as we examined her application.

"Single, 45, and quite the impressive resume," he squinted, scrolling through my phone. "And she has a ton of references

too.”

Ella’s response to my email led to us scheduling an interview for 10:00 AM the following day at Mitch’s bungalow.

“It feels almost too perfect,” Mitch murmured as he scooped me up, spinning me around. “How about we take a walk on the beach to unwind?”

The thought of strolling hand in hand with Mitch along the ocean’s edge made my heart race. “Sounds wonderful,” I agreed. “Just give me a moment to slip out of these yoga pants. They’re hardly beach appropriate.”

“Sure, that’ll give me time to text Mike and Greg. We need them to discreetly tail us.” Mitch reached for his phone.

I dashed to my bedroom, donning a chic tank top and a breezy peasant skirt. Tying a vivid, eye-catching sarong around my waist, I admired the fashionable beach look in the mirror before announcing, “Ready for the beach!”

As we stepped out of my apartment, the sun cast a warm, golden glow on the sand and waves. The cool sand under our bare feet contrasted with the pleasant air, creating a perfect setting for our delightful walk along Coronado Beach.

Mitch’s hand found mine, and as our fingers intertwined, a rush of heat surged through me. We ambled in contented silence, the rhythmic ebb and flow of the waves calming our frazzled nerves.

Soon, Mitch started sharing his plans for rearranging his home to make room for his baby daughter. I could see the love and eagerness in his eyes as he showed me her picture for the umpteenth time. “She’s breathtaking,” I whispered, resting my head on his shoulder.

“She is,” Mitch agreed, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “But not as breathtaking as you.”

I felt a warmth spread through me, my cheeks flushing with delight. “You always know just what to say, don’t you?”

He chuckled softly. “I guess I’m just lucky that way...”

As we meandered hand in hand, life's worries seemed to melt away, replaced by a sense of peace and contentment.

Unexpectedly, Mitch stopped and turned to face me, his intense gaze searching mine. "Amy," he said, his voice low and fervent, "I know we've weathered some storms lately, but I need you to know how much I appreciate all you do for me. You're an exceptional woman, and I'm incredibly blessed to have you in my life."

Tears welled in my eyes, moved by Mitch's heartfelt words. "Thank you, Mitch. You're an amazing friend, too, and I'm grateful we're in this together... I can't wait to meet Ava."

My stomach grumbled with an undeniable fervor, betraying my hunger. "Perhaps we ought to return home and grab some dinner," I proposed, chuckling sheepishly.

Mitch's eyes sparkled as he countered, "I've got a more enticing proposition." He gestured ahead. "A little further past the next dune lies the Surfside Cafe."

My heart danced at the suggestion. The Surfside was one of those cherished spots I couldn't resist. "What a fabulous idea. I hadn't realized we'd ventured this far," I admitted, stealing a glance at the distance we had covered.

We pressed on until the quaint Surfside Cafe unveiled itself. Seated at an alfresco table with the mesmerizing ocean as our backdrop, I sensed my residual stress dissolving while sipping my Piña Colada. The exotic libation flawlessly harmonized with the serene beach ambiance.

A blissful haze enveloped me as we treated ourselves to a second round of drinks and split a seafood platter overflowing with golden fried fish and crispy fries. Time became an elusive concept, and before I was aware, Mitch gently guided me from my chair, his sturdy hands supporting me as we readied ourselves to return to my apartment.

The surf ebbed and flowed, tickling our toes and tossing our hair. We enjoyed the sparkling stars and the bright moon shining over the water. Mitch wrapped his arm around my waist, and I moaned as our lips met. Deepening our kiss, my

breasts pressed against his heaving chest. Finally, he pulled away and gasped, “Amy...”

My head spun with desire as Mitch scooped me up as if I were as light as a feather and took us to a secluded area between two dunes with a bare spot in the tall beach grass. Luckily, the guards could sense our intentions and gave us some privacy. Mitch looked at me with a tender expression and began to speak. “Amy, I’ve been fantasizing about this moment for months now.”

So, when Mitch decided I didn’t need my sarong, who was I to argue? My flesh tingled in that certain sensitive spot as I responded to his touch while watching him spread the silky fabric over the sand. My eyes, hooded with desire, gazed upon Mitch unbuttoning his shirt and watched him use it to make a pillow for my head. As I stretched out before him, Mitch stood there, staring at me — his buff torso a silhouette in the moonlight — shorts hung low on his hips.

A little breeze would be nice to cool my burning desire, and that meant that the loss of my panties wouldn’t really bother me either, so I shimmied out of them, still covered by my peasant skirt.

The cool air was present only briefly before my skirt was pushed up my thighs, and the coolness was replaced by a hot and moist sensation that ignited pleasure in the most sensitive part of my body. I tried to wiggle away or maybe even closer, but Mitch’s firm grip held me in place, and all I could manage was a surprised squeak. The bulging veins in his forearms emphasized his strength. The sudden rush of pleasure mixed with the alcohol was making me feel dizzy, and I was having trouble understanding what I was doing.

Now I was a pool of heat that begged for another form of attention, something to lessen the emptiness and speed along the process Mitch had initiated. That wasn’t to be, though, not yet. Mitch raised his head, kissing his way up my belly and chest as he fluidly lifted my comfy tank top at the same time. Then finding me braless, he used two fingers and one nipple to set the unstoppable in motion. The pulse between my legs



became a mind of its own, and I finished what Mitch had started, tossing away my shirt completely.

Nothing kept our bodies apart. Mitch slid between my knees where I lay, pressing his chest against mine and going in for a sweet kiss. My excited brown nubs caught on the grooves of Mitch's muscles, adding to the pleasure of our deep, undulating kisses.

Fingers took a handful of my hair, gently but firmly tugging my head back so soft lips could play with the sensitive skin on my neck. Glancing down, I couldn't see what Mitch was doing because his head was level with my chest. I could only feel the kisses creeping down my neck to my shoulder, then across my chest to —

I couldn't hold back a gasp when his teeth scraped across my nipple, shockingly sharp but so gentle that it was only the surprise that wrung the sound from me. Teeth vanished to be replaced by apologetic lips. I relaxed again, melting into Mitch's embrace and watching the top of his head intently, waiting for him to break away so I could feel his lips on mine again.

When I heard the sound of a siren far away, I thought — *I'm getting close*, and moaned, "Mitch, I need more!"

## CHAPTER

*Six*

### **Mitch**

**I WAS CONVINCED** Amy hadn't heard the scuffle in the beach parking lot, at least 100 yards away. Yet, nothing was stopping me now that I was reassured that we were safe as the wail of the sirens grew closer. That realization added a new element to my rapidly evolving passion.

Now on my knees, keeping my voice to a low grunt of pleasure, Amy untied my shorts and grabbed my thick cock, as I pulled a condom from my pocket. After helping me roll it on, she grabbed my shaft and pleased me, biting her lip when I added first one, then two fingers into her wetness. In return, I bit her lip in the middle of a kiss when she began moving her hand faster in long, quick strokes up and down. Finally breaking free, I pulled off my shorts.

“Beautiful, so beautiful....” I muttered, gazing down at her curves as she circled her clit with her fingers.

Finally, my eyes had enough of watching her pleasuring herself and gazing at me with wild desire. So I eased over Amy and listened to her moans as I planted kisses along her pulse point — no doubt leaving little red marks. They would quickly fade but hang around long enough so I could admire my handiwork and touch the spots, remembering our first time making love.

“Oh, this is a dream....” Amy whispered. Drawing up her knees against my chest for easier access. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, refusing to allow any space between our

bodies. But every time I came close to separating her lips, she shifted her hips, denying me entry, teasing me with the gentle back-and-forth motion of her hips against my own. “How bad do you want me?” She teased.

“Two can play this game,” I said with a throaty chuckle. Finally, I fisted her hair, pulling her head back. “Amy,” I pleaded into her lips, as I tightened my fingers around the flesh of her thigh, holding her in place until I found what I wanted and suddenly put an end to her naughty game.

“Oh, God...Oh... Mitch...” Amy lost all thoughts of playfulness and surrendered to a wave of pleasure, allowing me to pierce her swollen folds. We were letting the excitement build within us slowly, urging us into faster, breathless ecstasy. I watched her tits bounce as she rocked her hips against me, adding to the heat rising and waiting for a release.

She panted wildly, and I slowed down. Then, fully repentant for making me wait earlier, Amy groaned, “Don’t stop... oh, Mitch, please.”

“So, turnabout is not fair play, huh?” She shook her head and pressed into me. So, we continued where we had left off — fast. I forgot everything but the sensation of her warm wet walls undulating around me. I gasped for breath, using it to express to Amy how much she had affected me in every way possible.

I cupped her breasts to keep them from bouncing to the point of being uncomfortable as Amy’s breath hitched in her chest. A thin layer of sweat coated my muscles as I was turning into a writhing beast. She was so close, I could feel it, and I was too. Amy just needed that one little touch to push her over the edge...

She fastened her gaze on my face pleadingly. So, I donated a couple of my fingers to the cause and rubbed her clit furiously to match my tempo. Together, we became one soul as our shared moment turned our bodies into frozen, shining works of art in the moonlight, locked together with the force of our lovemaking. Seconds ticked by before we collapsed, transforming a climax of passion into a tender embrace.

The instant my eyelids fluttered open, I was assaulted by the vivid red and blue strobes painting the dunes in a surreal dance of shadows. Amy was still lost in the throes of bliss, utterly oblivious to the approaching storm. The sounds of Mike and Greg's voices mingled with the staccato of police radios, drifting on the wind from a distance. I threw on my clothes with practiced haste and murmured in Amy's ear, "Don't lose your head, but we're boxed in by the boys in blue."

Her eyes snapped open, and I pressed a finger to my lips while shoving her clothes into her hands with the other. "I don't think they're after us... something else has their attention... but..."

As she struggled with her tank top and skirt, her voice trembled, "I hear Mike and Greg. Are they talking to the police?"

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed impatiently in my pocket. "Quick, shake the sand off. It's Greg calling."

Greg's words were terse and urgent. "Hey, Mitch, you close?"

"Yeah, we're headed for the lot. Amy and I were on the beach... What's happening?"

"Mike and I tailed you two from the restaurant, and we picked up a shadow."

"Damn it, not again! We're on our way!"

I helped Amy to her feet, shaking out her sarong as she twisted her hair into a hasty bun. "Someone's been tailing us. The guys must've called the cops. They're waiting for us by the beach parking lot." I gestured toward the blaring sirens and the cold glow of police lights.

We hastened up the dunes, my eyes flicking over my shoulder, searching the night for any hint of our pursuer. Amy's hand quivered in mine, her fear washing over me like icy waves.

"I thought we were safe with Mike and Greg watching our backs," she whispered, voice quavering.

“We still are. They’re the best in the game,” I reassured her, my voice a solid anchor in the storm. “We just need to get to them and find out what’s going on.”

As we closed in, the frenetic red and blue lights seemed to crescendo, casting an eerie sheen across the sand. “Stick close,” I warned Amy as we neared the chaotic scene.

Out of nowhere, a shadow flitted between the parked cars, a desperate attempt at concealment. “Shit, there he is!” I barked, yanking Amy to my side protectively.

“Who is it?” she whimpered, fear making her voice tremble.

“I don’t know, but you’ve been attacked before. We can’t take any chances.”

My heart hammered a staccato rhythm against my ribcage as we sprinted toward Mike and Greg, who huddled together beside a police cruiser. “What’s the story?” I barked; my voice rough-edged as I strived to cloak my trepidation.

“Seems we picked up a shadow after you guys left the restaurant,” Mike reported, his gaze sweeping the vicinity. “At first, we figured it was just some nosy reporter. But then he started getting pushy, closing in on you two. So we rang up the cops and tailed him here.”

“Did you get a good look at him?” I inquired, praying we could pinpoint our assailant.

“Not yet. He’s been skulking in the shadows,” Greg muttered, his hand hovering near the pistol on his hip.

We braced ourselves for confrontation, adrenaline coursing through our veins, as the police closed in on our pursuer. After several agonizing moments, they emerged, escorting a handcuffed man toward one of the waiting patrol cars.

“Do you recognize him, Amy?” I asked, my tone gentle as I addressed her.

She shook her head, her eyes brimming with terror. “No... but I think the guy that kidnapped me was older... I’d have to hear him speak,” she stammered, her voice quivering.

I drew her close, relief washing over me as the immediate danger dissipated, yet the residual tension of the situation clung to us. Mike and Greg exchanged glances before addressing us. “We doubt they’ll let you near the perp now. We’ll get our report together and send it to Agent Carter!” Mike offered.

I shook my head. “Don’t bother. Call Kenneth Downing, the FBI agent from the Denver Field Office. You should already have his contacts.”

The men nodded, and Mike stepped forward. “We’ll handle it. You two wait here with Greg while I jog back to Amy’s apartment to fetch my car.”

I encircled Amy’s waist with my arm and guided her to a nearby park bench. “What did he want? Why!?” she whispered, her voice barely audible as she leaned into me.

“I don’t know,” I gritted out, my voice taut with anger and frustration. “But we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

We watched the police cruisers recede into the distance and sat in silence until Mike returned with his car. After helping us into the vehicle, he steered away from the curb and drove toward the apartment. As we traveled, I cradled Amy in my arms and she began to whimper.

“It’s ok,” I murmured, my voice tender. “We’re safe now. Besides, we have more pressing matters to consider.”

Amy’s tears ceased as if a sorcerer had waved a wand over her, and she smiled. “We have to prepare for tomorrow’s interview.”

“Exactly. Why don’t you gather some belongings, and we’ll head to my place for the night?”

Her grin broadened. “That sounds like a fantastic plan,” she agreed as we pulled up to her building.

After a brief time, we reached my humble abode, where I switched on my sound system, opting for soothing melodies to aid in our relaxation. Amy was still unsettled by the night’s events as she fidgeted with her hair and constantly looked out at the street.

“You don’t think that person can get to us here, do you? Maybe, you need to put up a fence or something, especially with you getting custody of your daughter,” Amy said, closing the blinds.

“I concur,” I exhaled. “Regrettably, merely having someone monitor the premises and relying on my security arrangement won’t be adequate.” I dragged my hand through my hair, eyeing Amy as she caught a glimpse of a passing vehicle through the blinds. “We need to unwind. Let’s take a hot shower and...”

“...grab some snacks,” she finished cheerfully.

As the hot water cascaded down our bodies, washing away the sand and salt, our cares seemed to evaporate with the steam. We took turns washing each other’s hair, our fingers massaging our scalps and sending shivers down our spines. While sharing a few passionate kisses, our bodies pressed tightly together. It was a moment of pure bliss, as I kissed each and every red spot I had left behind as a reminder of our first time making love.

Finally, we dried off and snuggled in bed, enjoying some food. I had grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry while Amy had found some Oreos in a cupboard. She dipped them in milk and licked her fingers, slowly unwinding.

It wasn’t long before Amy opened up about her kidnapping, the memories still fresh in her mind. I could see the pain in her eyes as she spoke, her voice trembling.

“I’ll never forget the sound of his voice in a thousand years,” she said, her words punctuated by a heavy sigh.

I held her close, comforting her as she spoke. It was clear that the trauma of her ordeal still weighed heavily on her, and I vowed to do everything in my power to help Amy heal. “I wish I had gotten to listen to the stalker’s voice this evening.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. You were terrified.”

“Do you think there’s a connection between the words on the sign the kidnapper forced me to hold — ‘Don’t count your

chickens before they're hatched?" she asked, snuggling up beside me.

I had been pondering the same thing ever since I got the summons. "I have a sneaking suspicion there is," I replied. "Especially now that I just discovered I'm little Ava's father. Maybe I'll get a better idea after my Zoom call with Angelo Ferrara."

"Do you think telling him about the kidnapping is a good idea? It might... you know..."

"I have to tell him the truth. But honestly, if he is a friend of your father's and lives in Vail, I'm sure he is already aware."

"First things first. Let's just get through the interview tomorrow..."

I nodded. We will," I echoed, turning off the lamp and pulling Amy closer.

As we drifted off to sleep, the music from my audio system lulling us into a peaceful slumber, I knew we had a lot of work to do. But for now, I was content just holding Amy close, grabbing a few stolen hours together — before her parents returned to San Diego!



## CHAPTER

## *Seven*

### Amy

DRESSED to the nines in his tailored suit, Mitch oozed that irresistible executive charisma as he glanced at his watch. He shot me a teasing grin and offered, “One last cup of coffee before Ms. Morris arrives? What do you say?”

“I think I’ll pass,” I said, my stiletto tapping rhythmically on the floor as I gazed at the tranquil beach scene outside. “I’m already nervous as hell.”

Mitch chuckled, “Why not try my famous green tea instead?” He twirled me around playfully, and I couldn’t help but question, “How come you’re so cool about all this? We’ve never raised a kid before.”

“Hey, at least you’ve babysat! The only sitting I’ve done involves dogs,” Mitch quipped, pulling me into the kitchen with an irresistible grin.

As we sipped our drinks, we brainstormed questions to ask Ella. “Maybe we should ask about her take on discipline?” I offered.

“Good one,” Mitch concurred. “And her educational philosophy is a must.”

Our brainstorming spiraled into the ridiculous as our nerves took hold. “Should we ask her favorite ice cream flavor?” I laughed, feeling a bit foolish.

Mitch beamed, “Absolutely! It’s a nanny’s most vital qualification, after all!”

We shared a laugh as the ticking clock on the wall taunted, reminding us that time was running short to find someone to care for Mitch's soon-to-arrive little girl.

At exactly 10:00 AM, the doorbell chimed. We exchanged jittery looks before Mitch swung the door open. Ella stood before us, her stern expression framed by dark hair pulled back into a severe bun. Her piercing gaze seemed to size us up as she stepped inside, the impeccable navy-blue suit adding to her commanding presence. Admittedly, I felt slightly intimidated as she extended a firm handshake, her grip unyielding.

Throughout the interview, I found strength in Mitch's reassuring presence beside me. We delved into Ella's background with kids, her thoughts on discipline and education, and even her preferred ice cream flavor. With each answer, my concerns dissipated until I was convinced she was the one. It seemed Mitch had discovered the ideal nanny, even though she was our sole candidate.

"So, Ella," Mitch began, his voice feigning confidence, "how do you tackle discipline in challenging situations?"

Ella's reply was unwavering yet gentle, "I believe in establishing clear boundaries and expectations from the get-go. Consistency is paramount. Kids need to understand the consequences of their actions, but they should also be rewarded for good behavior."

Her answer impressed me, and I nodded in agreement. "What about your educational philosophy? How do you think kids learn best?"

A small smile graced Ella's lips as she leaned back in her chair. "Each child is unique, and their learning style may differ. That's why I tailor my teaching methods to the individual child, ensuring they receive the support they need to flourish."

I stole a glance at Mitch, who appeared to be softening toward Ella. "Just for kicks," I piped up, "what's your go-to ice cream flavor?"

Ella's stern expression melted into a genuine grin. "Mint chocolate chip. Takes me back to my own younger days."

We shared a laugh, and Mitch and I exchanged a conspiratorial glance. Had we found the one? As the interview seemed to be wrapping up, Ella posed a question to Mitch. "Would you be so kind as to show me around your abode? I'd like to familiarize myself with the space I might be working in and gain some insight into your dynamic. It's crucial for all parties involved."

Mitch cleared his throat. "Yes, yes, absolutely. Well, um, Amy here is my assistant, lending a hand with today's interview. I co-own Rosedale Technologies."

I trailed Mitch as he filled Ella in on his circumstances, expressing his willingness to learn from the nanny should she be inclined to teach him. But when we stepped into his bedroom, I spotted a glaring issue. The bed was unmade, and it was apparent two people had slept in it — the pillows were cozy, and only one side of the covers had been thrown back. Moreover, two pairs of shoes sat nearby — one noticeably larger than the other.

"I thought you two implied you weren't an intimate couple," Ella remarked, raising an eyebrow and shooting me a glance.

Mitch and I shared a look. She had us there. "Uh, no," Mitch drawled, "it isn't what it seems. Amy and I are merely friends." He cocked his head, motioning to the disheveled bed. "I suppose we're a bit more than just friends."

I grinned, and Ella nodded pensively. After a stretch of quiet, she spoke again. "Isn't the term 'friends with benefits'? That's more accurate, no?"

"Yes. That's exactly it!" Mitch concurred.

Ella faced me, taking in my flushed cheeks. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable, but honesty is crucial. My resume and references back up my claims about myself. However, I must trust your word. It's vital to tread carefully, especially with a baby involved, as situations can spiral quickly."

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” I mumbled, feeling like I had just put my foot in my mouth. What did I just hear Mitch say? But before I could wrap my head around it, Ella turned her attention to Mitch.

“I’ve seen the headlines about Rosedale. How long do you intend to keep your company afloat? Mr. Detwiler, besides revamping your lovely home to suit a child, are you financially prepared to employ a nanny?”

Mitch stood tall, meeting her gaze head-on. “I respect your candidness, Ella. You’re right; honesty is vital. While Rosedale Technologies is my main focus, I have other ventures that guarantee my financial security. I can promise you a competitive salary and the means to modify this house to make it suitable for a child.”

Ella’s lips puckered thoughtfully, weighing his words before delving deeper. “And what of your dedication to this little one? With your business teetering, can you truly devote the time and energy required to be a committed father?”

Mitch’s jaw clenched, but his cool demeanor remained. “Ella, I appreciate your concerns. But let me be clear, my first and foremost responsibility is my daughter’s well-being. I’ll do everything in my power to create a nurturing and supportive home for her.”

Ella nodded, apparently appeased by his answer. Now on the offensive, Mitch inquired, “So tell me, Ella, why did you leave your previous nanny position?”

Pausing momentarily, she replied, “The family I worked for relocated to Europe, but I couldn’t bring myself to follow. This region holds a special place in my heart, and I wanted to remain.”

As I absorbed Mitch and Ella’s exchange, an undercurrent of discomfort became evident. Both seemed intent on proving their worth to the other. Although Ella’s questions were direct and borderline intrusive, Mitch retained his poise and sincerity in his responses.

Aiming to alleviate the tension, Mitch questioned, “What do you think of my home?”

Ella’s stern visage eased slightly as she answered, “It holds promise. But as I mentioned earlier, adjustments must be made for it to be child ready.”

“I’m willing to make those changes,” Mitch reassured her.

Their conversation continued, growing more at ease. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Ella may not be the ideal fit for Mitch and his way of life, or even for me – though my own position remained uncertain. Despite my reservations, our lack of alternatives and time constraints led me to reluctantly acquiesce to their arrangement.

“So, where does this leave us?” I interjected, seeking closure.

Mitch extended his hand, stating, “I believe it leaves us here. Welcome to the team. I’m grateful to have you as Ava’s nanny.”

Ella’s demeanor softened further as she accepted his handshake. “Thank you, Mr. Detwiler. And if you’d like assistance when collecting your baby, I’d be more than happy to accompany you to Colorado. Navigating air travel with an infant is a daunting task, even for seasoned pros.”

“Thanks, I might just take you up on that offer!” Mitch admitted, rubbing his neck.

With Ella gone, I released my pent-up frustration. “Mitch, how could you dismiss the fact that I stayed the night? We agreed we were just friends, yet you nonchalantly went along with Ella’s insinuation that we were friends with benefits?”

My outburst caught Mitch off guard. He claimed he merely aimed to diffuse Ella’s probing with his compliance. I folded my arms, narrowing my eyes at him. “Well, you should’ve come up with a better strategy. I refuse to be labeled as your friend with benefits!”

“Amy, I’m sorry,” Mitch’s voice softened, pleading. “I never meant to hurt you or make you feel uneasy. Please, don’t be upset. You’re everything I need right now.”

I shook my head, emotion welling up behind my eyes. “No, Mitch. This is all too much, too soon. After last night, I need some room to breathe and make sense of it all.”

Not waiting for his reply, I snatched my purse and stormed toward the entrance, my heels tapping rhythmically against the parquet flooring. Mitch trailed after me, seizing my arm just as I reached for the doorknob. “Please, Amy, don’t leave. I need you here, now more than ever. I can’t handle all of this on my own.”

I hesitated, my determination faltering momentarily, but I knew I had to create some distance. “I’m sorry, Mitch,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “I just need some time.”

I wriggled free from his hold and stepped out, summoning an Uber as I paced the sidewalk, struggling to sort through the emotional tornado threatening to sweep me off my feet. One side of me yearned to go back and support Mitch, but the other side insisted on putting space between us to untangle my feelings.

The Uber arrived, and I slid into the backseat, stealing one last look at Mitch’s bungalow as we pulled away. He lingered in the doorway, his expression a blend of heartache and disbelief. Guilt stabbed at me, but I shoved it aside, reminding myself that I had to prioritize my own needs.

As we approached my apartment, my phone vibrated with a new text message. Mom. She and Papa had returned to San Diego and wanted to know my whereabouts. Hesitating, I weighed my options before telling them I was headed home and would update them on recent events when I got there.

Well, maybe not *everything*. My day would only spiral further downhill if I revealed the full extent of Mitch’s and my escapades. Despite Papa’s sympathetic stance on Mitch needing a lawyer, they’d both be in a state of panic if they knew a stalker had trailed us the previous night and likely knew the location of the apartment.

When I finally reached my apartment, I felt certain I’d made the right decision. I needed to reflect on what had transpired, untangle my emotions toward Mitch, and prioritize

my well-being. It was crucial to guard my heart and look after myself before considering a future with him—and my future at Rosedale.

So why were tears streaming down my face!?

## CHAPTER

### *Eight*

#### **Mitch**

I NERVOUSLY CHECKED the time again in the quiet comfort of my home office. I counted the minutes until my two o'clock meeting with the contractor while dreading the upcoming Zoom call with my lawyer. The usually soothing blue walls felt overwhelming as if they were closing in on me with each passing minute. My nerves, tense as a piano wire, caused an involuntary eye twitch. The prospect of fatherhood, a role I had never seriously contemplated, now filled my thoughts, stirring a whirlwind of mixed emotions inside me.

On family leave from my position at Rosedale, the silence in the room was unsettling, like a foreign invader. The sounds of my typical workday was conspicuously absent, leaving me exposed and vulnerable. The enormity of my situation hadn't entirely settled into the marrow of my bones, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was out of my depth.

As the seconds stretched into eternity, my heart thundered against my ribcage, and my breaths became shallow and rapid. My thoughts ricocheted between the intimidating prospect of parenthood and the uncertain future with Amy.

The familiar jingle of the virtual call sliced through the silence, jolting me from my spiraling thoughts. I swallowed hard, attempting to collect myself as my attorney's pixelated face materialized on the screen. The weight of the world seemed to rest on the outcome of this conversation, and I summoned the courage to confront it head-on.



“Hey, Mitch, good to see you,” Angelo, my attorney, greeted me with a warm smile, but his affable demeanor failed to quell the tempest within me.

“Hi, Angelo. Nice to meet you,” I responded, my voice strained and tense. I fiddled with the corner of my notepad, avoiding his digital gaze.

Angelo cleared his throat. “So, let’s get down to brass tacks. I think it’d be best if you came out to Vail and met me face-to-face. There’s more to this than just inking some documents and taking custody of little Ava.”

My stomach roiled at the thought of the murky unknowns ahead. “What do you mean?”

“Well, for starters, you’ll need to submit a DNA sample to confirm paternity. And the judge wants to meet with both you and Ava’s mother, Nicole. He wants to make sure she hasn’t had a change of heart about relinquishing custody.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, attempting to absorb the information. My hands quivered as I pondered the implications. Was I truly equipped for this?

Angelo’s voice reeled me back to the present. “I know it’s a lot to process, Mitch. But we also need to present a plan for how you’ll care for Ava. The judge will want to hear about it.”

“I... I didn’t realize there would be so much involved,” I confessed, my voice cracking.

Angelo’s eyes softened with understanding. “Mitch, it’s a hell of a burden. We’ll tackle this together, but preparation is key.”

I managed a jerky nod, my throat tightening as I considered the enormity of raising Ava and maintaining a connection with Amy. It felt as if the weight of the world was pressing down on me, and I couldn’t shake the icy tendrils of dread coiling in my gut.

I cleared my throat, my voice a hesitant rasp. “Angelo, what sort of legal fees am I looking at?”

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “Well, Mitch, cases like this can get pricey. I charge \$400 an hour, and we could be looking at several weeks, maybe longer. I know it’s a lot, but you need to know what you’re up against.”

My stomach plummeted as I mentally tallied the potential expenses. Suppose Rosedale couldn’t recover the grant money or drum up more clients. How would I cover legal fees, renovations, and a nanny’s salary?

Amy hadn’t answered my calls for two days. What did that mean for us? My thoughts raced, a whirlwind of uncertainty as I struggled to reconcile my unexpected fatherhood with the life I’d built.

As the call with Angelo wrapped up, I faced the stark truth that my world was on the cusp of irrevocable change.

Glancing at my watch, I had under an hour to grab a bite and finish my rough designs for the bungalow addition and a security fence with cameras. In a rush, I slapped together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and snorted. I hadn’t made a PBJ in years, usually opting for peanut butter on crackers or in a smoothie. I couldn’t help but wonder how many PBJs I’d end up making for my lovely daughter.

While eating, I sketched out a quick blueprint for another bathroom near the bedroom I planned to turn into a nursery, which could later become a little girl’s room. I finished lunch and scrutinized the drawings one last time before the contractor, Billy, arrived.

It wasn’t long before a pickup truck rumbled up the driveway. “Thanks for coming at such short notice,” I told Billy, shaking his hand.

“Hey, no problem.” Billy surveyed my rough sketches, struggling to suppress a chuckle. “Mitch, I like your gusto, but let me offer some tweaks.” He proposed several ideas that immediately resonated with me, his experience evident in every suggestion.

“The open concept you’ve got here will make the space feel bigger,” Billy said, indicating my designs. “But what if we

added a pocket door between the nursery and the new bathroom? It'll offer easy access and extra privacy."

I nodded, impressed by his insight, and wondered if Amy would be as captivated by these ideas as I was and whether she would be a part of our lives in the future. The moment Billy mentioned his estimated fee, my face turned pale, and I trembled like a leaf in a storm. "Well, it's a rough estimate, but I reckon the renovations might set you back around \$75,000," he cautiously suggested.

The crushing weight of those mounting costs hit me like a sledgehammer, and I knew I had to make it work for Ava's sake and my own. I swallowed hard, striving to keep my cool. "All right, let's see what we can do to pull this off," I declared, attempting to sound self-assured while my gut stirred with trepidation.

As Billy droned on about the remodel, suggesting further modifications that could prove advantageous, my thoughts swam in a fog. "We could incorporate built-in storage in the nursery, giving the room an uncluttered feel and saving space. And energy-efficient windows and insulation would trim down heating and cooling expenses in the long run...."

Despite my anxiety, I found my enthusiasm for the project growing, imagining Ava thriving in this cozy, welcoming haven. But just as I was about to green light the endeavor, the necessity for increased security came crashing back.

"Ah, Billy, I nearly let the security system and the fencing slip my mind. How much would those add to the bill?"

Billy thoughtfully scratched his chin. "Well, considering your situation, I'd advise opting for top-of-the-line gear. You'd be staring at an extra \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the security setup and fencing."

My heart plummeted as the costs kept mounting. As desperate as I was to craft a secure and nurturing home for Ava, I couldn't ignore the ever-present specter of the Rosedale criminal case. The entire community knew about it, and I had to question if it was wise to raise a child in such an environment. Perhaps Ava would be better off elsewhere.

Sensing my turmoil, Billy clapped a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Mitch, I get that it’s a lot to process, but we’ll collaborate to find the optimal solution for your budget and your family. You don’t need to decide right this second. Give it some thought, and we’ll proceed from there.”

Despite comprehending Billy’s words, my doubts weighed on me like lead. Nevertheless, we settled on a final estimate. As he drove off, I slumped onto the front step, utterly drained, and buried my face in my hands.

Eventually, I fished out my phone and tried Amy again, yearning for her support and counsel. But once more, my call went unheeded.

With the phone still in hand, I dialed Chase, my heart heavy, praying for some good news about retrieving the grant money. As the phone rang, I steeled myself for the outcome.

“Hey, Mitch,” Chase greeted, his voice strained.

“Chase, any word on the grant funding? Any developments?”

Chase sighed. “The judge rescheduled Rosedale’s hearing with the State of California, so we haven’t made any progress yet. I’ll keep you posted as soon as I have any news,” he said. “How are things going with you and Amy? Meagan is considering having everyone over for a cookout and a raucous game of cornhole.”

“Don’t ask. Gotta go!” My frustration was palpable as I hung up the phone. To secure funds for the remodel and attorney fees, I dialed my broker, asking for a loan against my assets.

My broker hesitated, “Hell, man. Have you been watching the news?” He warned me that now wasn’t the best time to take out a loan. “Mitch, interest rates are steep and going higher!”

With no other options, I instructed him to proceed with a margin loan. It felt like the only way to ensure I had the money needed to move forward. “I’m in a personal bind. I

know this isn't the best time in the world, but my life is at a turning point. Just do it!"

"Well then, you'll have a line of credit by the end of the day!"

Despite getting a loan, I couldn't shake off the anxiety caused by the additional expenses of a nanny, furniture, clothing, and healthcare for a child. My thoughts were suffocating, and I needed a way to relieve myself from the stress.

To clear my head, I changed into my running clothes and headed for the beach. As I jogged along the shoreline, the rhythm of the crashing waves and the salty breeze did little to alleviate my distress. Then in a burst of frustration, I found myself sprinting through the sand, my thoughts racing faster than my feet.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm glow on the sand, I passed children playing in the surf, their laughter a sweet reminder of my own youth. Further down the beach, a group of teenagers bobbed on their surfboards, patiently waiting for the perfect wave. I couldn't help but wonder if someday Ava would join them, her father proudly watching from the shore. But then a nagging thought surfaced: Was raising a child without a mother really fair? How was it possible for me to be both mother and father to Ava?

Before I knew it, with my gaze transfixed on Amy's apartment building, I had run approximately eight miles... passed the Surfside Cafe'.... passed the sculpted dunes where we had made love. Finally, I stood at the boardwalk entrance and stared at her building, noticing a light in her bedroom window. My breath hitched when I saw her silhouette. Wondering if she could see me standing there, I waved.

I waited, praying she would appear on the boardwalk, searching for me. But the light in her window went out, and there was no sign of Amy. Then, like a cold wave, my hope was swept away.

So, with a heavy heart and sore feet, I trudged back home, my thoughts consumed by the growing uncertainty of my

future, and a silly thought struck me.

What the Hell does a guy like me wear when meeting his baby daughter for the first time?

## CHAPTER

### *Nine*

#### Amy

“MUM, IS THE TIRAMISU READY?” I inquired from my room as I applied my Crimson Kiss lipstick—a memento of the unforgettable evening spent with Mitch.

“Just another minute, darling!”

When Meagan called me last night to invite us to a Rosedale cookout this afternoon, I was hesitant to accept, knowing it involved my parents and me. However, once she mentioned Mitch wouldn’t be there, I felt relieved and agreed to join, offering to bring Mum’s famous tiramisu for dessert. My parents were thrilled to meet Harper, Jonathan, and the twins, Lily and Liam, while I was eager to catch up with my closest friends.

Papa insisted on driving his Cadillac and carefully placed Mum’s dessert basket in the trunk before we headed toward Guy’s estate. En route, I filled them in on Meagan and Chase’s home within Casa Palacious and how Guy initially rented the massive estate for its top-notch security before falling for Ariel and tying the knot. “And Papa, rumor has it that an Arab prince was the first owner of this huge estate, complete with a vineyard, and bought it to escape his family.”

“You sure he wasn’t Sicilian?” Papa’s comment about our family history made Mum and I giggle. Though never discussed publicly, the Russo family’s colorful connections were hardly a secret.

Papa pulled up, careful not to block the road to the vineyard, and parked. As we arrived, laughter and chatter filled the air. Meagan was bustling in the kitchen, whipping up an extravagant meal for everyone. The twins were busy with their toys, and I noticed Mum quickly joined them, even helping to feed the little ones. Watching her effortlessly care for the children warmed my heart. My mother had always longed for more kids, but it just never happened.

Papa, on the other hand, wasted no time joining the men on the back porch, grilling steaks and enjoying a cold beer. Their boisterous laughter echoed around, and it was evident that my father was in his element. Despite having a fabulous time with my friends, I couldn't shake the guilt of Mitch's absence. It nagged at me, making me wonder if his decision not to come was because my parents and I were attending. Had I inadvertently caused him to miss the Rosedale gathering?

Before long, I found myself on the floor, playing with Jonathan and his vibrant building blocks, marveling at how much he had grown. "I can't believe he has all his teeth already," I shared with Ariel, my voice laced with wonder.

She chuckled, "I know, right? It feels like he was just a tiny baby yesterday. Time sure flies." Eventually, Meagan managed to escape her cooking duties and joined our chit-chat, agreeing with my sentiment as she sat down beside me. Not long after, Ariel excused herself to mix up more mimosas for us gals.

A pang of guilt hit me when Meagan mentioned Mitch and inquired about the latest updates. "Well, while my parents were away, we started seeing each other—you know, as more than friends. Mitch opened up about his shock at discovering he was a father and how anxious he was about my reaction. Naturally, I was taken aback, but I didn't hold it against him. So, he asked me to help find a nanny for little Ava. And—drumroll—he was incredible." I giggled, a blush creeping up my cheeks.

With a sly grin, Meagan arched a brow, teasing, "Go on, spill the tea!"



But my smile faded as I finished the story, “Well, the cops showed up. That’s when the stalker made an appearance. We managed to dodge that bullet, but honestly, I was scared out of my mind!”

“I don’t blame you...”

“Then, the next day, during an interview for a nanny, Mitch casually labeled us as ‘friends with benefits,’ making me disappointed...” As I poured my heart out, Meagan’s expression softened, and she gently touched my shoulder.

“Amy, I hear you,” she confided. “Think back to the rocky start Chase and I had. It’s tough, but sometimes we need a jolt to see what our hearts truly desire.”

“I know you’re right, but it’s just so difficult,” I sighed, handing Jonathan a red block.

“I feel you, girl. But don’t let past pain cloud your judgment. You deserve happiness, and if Mitch is the key, then you owe it to yourself to give him a shot,” Meagan declared, the conviction in her voice.

“But there’s more. My parents aren’t exactly on the Mitch bandwagon, and he’s about to be a single dad. Maybe it’s just not in the cards.”

“Amy, taking a leap of faith can be scary, but sometimes it’s necessary. If I had let fear rule me, Chase and I would never have had the joy these twins bring us,” Meagan said, her gaze filled with love as she looked at her kids playing on the blanket.

“Anyway, about the stalker. Did you catch a glimpse? Was it a guy or a girl? Could you ID them? Do you think it’s the same creep who snatched you?” Meagan asked.

“I never saw the kidnapper’s face, but it could have been the same guy. What intrigued me was the voice—so eerie, I’ll never forget it. But the other night, the cops didn’t give me a chance to see the beach lurker or hear him speak before they whisked him away,” I recounted.

“Yeah, and the FBI told the guys he’s already out on bail since nothing really went down.”

“It’s all so bizarre, honestly.” I shook my head, wanting to forget the whole mess and just enjoy the festivities. As we shifted to lighter topics like my new gig at Rosedale, I spotted movement outside the window. Mitch! Anxiety tightened my chest, wondering how he’d react to Papa. “Oh, no! Mitch is here. I thought you said he wasn’t coming.”

“That’s what he told Chase. Guess he had a change of heart.” Megan smiled encouragingly.

A flutter of anxiety tickled my insides as I fretted over my father possibly uttering a negative comment to Mitch. Hastily, I excused myself and slipped out to the back porch, only to find them engrossed in a discussion about sports. Inhaling deeply, I made my way toward them, my nerves dancing beneath my skin. “Hey, Mitch,” my voice quivered ever so slightly.

His lips curved into a warm smile, “Hey there, Amy.”

Heat suffused my cheeks as I fumbled with the right words. “Um, I...I needed to discuss something with you,” I stuttered.

“Absolutely, let’s talk,” Mitch agreed, nodding respectfully at my father before accompanying me away from the rest.

Gathering courage, I spoke up. “I didn’t appreciate you labeling our relationship as ‘friends with benefits.’ It makes me feel undervalued,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “And I get why Ella posed those personal questions, but she came off as rather harsh.”

Mitch’s hand encircled mine, his gaze blazing with an intensity that sent shivers coursing through me. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I want to carve out time for you, Amy,” he murmured, his voice sultry and low. “I want to be your rock in the sunshine and the storms. I want to unravel this mysterious connection we share.”

His heartfelt, poetic words sent my heart into a wild frenzy, and I felt myself falling deeper for him. “I want that too, Mitch,” my voice barely a whisper. “I want to explore where this leads.”

He inched closer, his eyes never leaving mine. “Then let’s make it happen,” he whispered, his breath warming my cheek.

A sudden cough from behind caught us off guard, and we sprang apart, flushed with embarrassment. “Dinner’s ready, lovebirds,” Chase teased, smirking at the scene he’d stumbled upon.

Hand in hand, Mitch and I made our way back inside, joining everyone at the table. My heart swelled with joy seeing Mitch seated between my father and me. As we began eating, Mitch and Papa exchanged hushed words regarding Mitch’s custody battle.

“It’s true. Nicole wants to relinquish custody of Ava, but nothing’s set in stone. I still need to prove I can offer her a stable home and be a responsible parent,” Mitch admitted, a hint of worry lacing his voice.

Papa nodded thoughtfully, “Being a single parent isn’t a cakewalk, but it’s worth the effort. I may not have been a single dad, but I’ve learned that firsthand raising my amazing daughter, Amy.”

A warm smile bloomed on my face as I glanced at my father, and I caught Mum beaming from ear to ear across the table. Despite his initial hesitation, I could see that Papa was beginning to empathize with Mitch’s difficult situation.

As the meal concluded, the ladies commenced tidying up the dining area and washing the dishes. Simultaneously, the guys withdrew to Chase’s state-of-the-art home cinema to indulge in some football. Mitch beckoned me while I was drying the dishes, a sheepish grin on his face.

“Hey, Amy, I was wondering if you could lend me a hand,” he said hesitantly. “I need to find something to wear after the court hearing in Vail... when I meet Ava for the first time. I thought about wearing a suit, but that doesn’t feel quite right.”

Raising a quizzical brow, I replied, “You want fashion advice from me? The woman who works from home in yoga pants and an oversized shirt?” I couldn’t help but chuckle.

A nervous laugh escaped Mitch as he scratched the back of his head. “Yeah, I trust your judgment. I’m way out of my element, you know.”

Not long after, we were hand-in-hand, navigating the bustling mall. Mitch’s exuberant expression and his bulging bicep pressed against my shoulder stirred wicked thoughts I had to tuck away for another time. As we strolled by the baby section, Mitch revealed the nursery furniture he had picked out for Ava. Then, wandering to the men’s section, we selected an ensemble that was both comfortable and fashionable for the occasion. “Do you think little Ava will approve?” Mitch inquired excitedly.

Suppressing a giggle, I broke the news. “Mitch, she’s an infant. I’m not sure she’ll have much of a reaction, but maybe...” I continued, “I hope everything goes well with Ava... and Nicole.”

“Thanks, Amy I guess you’re right. You’re the best,” he replied, planting a tender kiss on my lips.

My heart twinged with jealousy at the thought of Mitch and Nicole together, creating a child. Yet, I quickly tucked it away. Now wasn’t a time for that discussion.

That night, as we headed home, I felt a wave of sadness wash over me. Mitch was leaving for Vail the next morning, and I wouldn’t be accompanying him.

“Will you be bringing Ava back alone?” I asked, attempting to mask my sullen mood.

Mitch shook his head, “No, Ella’s all set to go at a moment’s notice. I’ll probably be in Vail for a few days before we’re ready to return to San Diego.” Pausing, he cleared his throat and peered into my eyes. “Amy, would you like to join me? You can work from the chalet while I’m occupied,” he suggested, his hands resting gently on my shoulders.

Memories of the chalet resurfaced, causing me to shudder as the walls seemed to close in on me. My heart raced, and I struggled to regain my composure. “Mitch, I... I don’t know,” I stammered, swallowing hard. “I wish I could be there for

you, but the chalet carries painful memories. I'm not sure I'm prepared to face them just yet."

Mitch's eyes widened as he grasped the implications of his proposal. He quickly removed his hands from my shoulders and stepped back. "Oh, Amy, I'm so sorry. I didn't consider how that might affect you. I feel awful for even suggesting it," he apologized, his voice laden with genuine remorse.

"No, Mitch, don't blame yourself," I reassured him, managing a weak smile. "It's just... it's something... I don't think I'll ever be ready to go back there."

"I can't believe... I'm so sorry...." Mitch raked his fingers through his hair, looking away in self-disgust.

"No worries, and thank you for inviting me, Mitch. That means a lot. Let's focus on the future, shall we?" I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Mitch exhaled and slowly nodded. "Yes, let's do that." He reached out for my hand and squeezed it gently, taking a moment to anchor himself in the present. I smiled in return, appreciative of his understanding as I helped him with his purchases, and we made our way back to his Lexus.

When we arrived at the apartment, Papa's car occupied the designated parking space. "I see your parents got home safely."

"Knowing them, they'll stay up all night to hear what you picked out." I chuckled.

We shared a laugh, our spirits buoyed despite the emotional rollercoaster we had just endured. I opened the door and stepped out, the cool evening breeze caressing my face. We wrapped our arms around each other, cocooned in a warm embrace, reluctant to let the day come to an end.

As we finally pulled away, Mitch gazed down at me, a radiant smile illuminating his face. "You know," he began, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, "I jogged all the way from home last night, hoping I might bump into you on the beach. I saw you standing at your window and thought you saw me too."

My eyes widened in surprise. “I did see you,” I admitted softly.

His brow furrowed with heightened curiosity. “Why didn’t you come down to the boardwalk then?”

A touch of sadness tinged my voice as I confessed, “I did, but by the time I got there, you had already disappeared.”

Our eyes locked, the unspoken acknowledgment of our near encounter hanging in the air. But instead of dwelling on the missed opportunity, I hugged him one last time before he left. “Stay in touch. I can’t wait to see more pictures of your beautiful daughter.”

## CHAPTER

## *Ten*

### **Mitch**

THE MOMENT I crossed the threshold into the lobby of the law offices of Waltz, Schneider, and Cosby, Vail's crisp mountain air was exchanged for the rich aroma of wood polish and paper. My footsteps were hushed by the luxurious carpet, but the oppressive presence of law books lining the walls was impossible to ignore. My purpose was clear. I settled into a plush chair and clutched my tablet that held the nursery furniture photos for Ava, the sketches for the imminent remodel, and the personal files Angelo would need.

As I glanced around the room, my eyes fell upon a shadow box mounted on the wall. It showcased an array of military ribbons and medals, along with a photograph of a younger Colonel, Angelo Ferrara. A swell of respect surged within me, knowing Ferrara had served his country before pursuing law. That sort of grit and determination was precisely what I needed in my corner.

My heart raced and sweat slicked my palms as anxiety clawed at me. Yet, the resolve to create a welcoming home for my daughter never wavered. Soon enough, Angelo emerged from his office, his smile warm and inviting. I rose, inhaled a steadying breath, and strode in after collecting my thoughts. "Have a seat, Mitch," Angelo gestured to a leather armchair opposite his polished mahogany desk. Diplomas and certificates framed the cozy yet professional space.

Angelo leaned in, his blue eyes sharp on mine as I crossed one leg over the other. "Mitch, I've gone over your case, and I

want you to know I'll fight tooth and nail to help you win custody of Ava. But let me remind you, it's unusual for the judge to award full custody to one parent. They typically favor joint custody, ensuring the child has access to both parents, even when living apart. This holds true even when Nicole requests full relinquishment of her parental rights."

I frowned, replying, "From what I've heard, Nicole's found someone else and wants to shed the burden of raising a child. But knowing her, she's apt to change her mind on a dime."

Angelo's expression turned solemn. "Yes, I'm aware. Additionally, she's let go of her legal counsel. It seems she only needed them for the court filings."

"That sounds about right. Secrets seem to be her specialty." I nodded carefully, keeping my own deep mystery—Rosedale's unsolved riddle—hidden, worried that it might jeopardize my chance at fatherhood. After all, if Angelo hadn't mentioned it, why should I?

"Now, as we touched on during our video call, the court will want to make sure you can offer Ava a stable, loving home. They'll examine your financial footing, living conditions, and capacity to care for your little girl."

I powered up my tablet and brought up the files—my contract with Ella, the remodeling agreement, and even some pics of the nursery furniture. I presented Angelo with the loan documents and various HR files Chase had forwarded to me, confirming my insurance coverage and W-2s from the past three years.

"Outstanding, Mitch," Angelo praised, obviously impressed. "Now, a crucial part of your case is proving your dedication to being a presence in Ava's life, and you've got a solid start here." He leaned across the desk and handed me a sheet of paper. "Here's the location for your DNA test. Simple stuff. They'll just swab the inside of your cheek, but I'd recommend getting it done right away."

"Right, I looked it up. But it seems the results can take up to five business days. Do I really have to wait that long to



meet Ava?”

“Actually, no. I’ve been in touch with the Department of Human Services. They’re aware you’re heading into town and plan to meet you at your chalet tomorrow for the introduction. Any further meetings will be on hold until the test results come back. Judge’s orders!”

“Should I stock up on diapers or anything else for the baby at the chalet, given there’s no gear for her there right now?” I asked, running a hand through my hair.

“Don’t sweat it. Margaret, the caseworker, will bring everything you need. But she’ll be observing how you interact with the baby, gauging whether you’re forming a connection with the little one.”

I could feel the anticipation humming through me. “Looking forward to that,” I mumbled.

As we dove further into the labyrinthine details of my case, my phone buzzed in my pocket like an insistent insect. It was a text from Ella. My breath hitched when I read:

Ella: Terribly sorry, but I’ve caught something awful. Fever’s got me good.

Me: That’s rough. At the attorneys. Meeting Ava tomorrow. Could really use you.

Ella: I’d be there if I could...

Me: Appreciate the heads-up.

I slipped my phone back into my jacket, doing my best to keep any signs of unease off my face. There’s a saying about being honest with your lawyer, but I wasn’t quite ready to admit that the new nanny had hung me out to dry.

“Everything copacetic?” Angelo asked, his eyes narrowing just a touch.

“Forgive me,” I said, “just a little business matter to attend to. I’ll be right back.”

“By all means, Mitch,” Angelo said, glancing at his watch. “We can pick up where we left off when you return.”

I stepped outside into the afternoon breeze, a welcome respite. After taking a deep breath, I dialed Amy. She answered on the first ring. “Hey there, was just about to give you a call! How’s everything going?”

“Bit of a mixed bag,” I said, my voice tight as I filled her in. “Amy, I need your help. Ella can’t make it, and I need someone I trust with Ava. Can you fill in for her?”

Amy hesitated, her voice laced with concern. “I don’t know, Mitch. I’ve only taken care of Jonathan at that age, and just briefly. And... where are you meeting, at the foster parent’s place?”

“No, at the chalet.”

“Oh, I just... I’m not certain...”

“Amy, please! You don’t have to stay the night or anything. I’ll book a hotel room. It’s just for a few hours... You don’t have to visit any place that brings back....”

“Alright. That helps. I just can’t go into the bedroom. Don’t remember much else about the place, though.”

“You won’t regret it... I promise,” I said, relief lifting my voice.

“When do you need me?” she asked.

“Not sure yet. Just catch the first flight out tonight or in the morning. Then, I’ll meet you at the Vail airport.” Gratitude washed over me, and I couldn’t help but smile at her selfless response. I thanked her profusely before hanging up and heading back to Angelo’s office. As we waded deeper into the murky waters of the legal process, my emotions swirled with equal parts confusion and excitement.

“All right, first things first, you’ll need to head for this lab and get that paternity test squared away. Once that’s done, I’ll give you a ring after I’ve had a chat with the caseworker to nail down the perfect moment for you to come face-to-face with your stunning little girl.”

As I turned to go, Angelo thrust a folder into my hands, a sly grin on his face. “Oh, and before you go, take a look at these fresh snapshots of your baby. Trust me, you’ll get a kick out of them — she’s the spitting image of her old man!”

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The morning came, and I was all pumped up and ready to get things done. I had one goal in mind—make the chalet super cozy for Amy and impress the case worker by getting rid of any party vibes. So, I spent a bunch of hours moving stuff around, swapping out a tacky Bud Light fridge magnet for one of Ava’s cute pictures.

I texted Amy on and off all morning till it was time for her to leave San Diego, and I found a more chill bedspread in an old trunk to replace the blue and yellow one. At the same time, I booked us a room at the Vail Hilton for another night together. Amy was supposed to show up around noon, just in time for Margaret to come by at two o’clock after Ava had her nap.

Dressed in my new pants and shirt, I was on my way to the airport, getting super excited about seeing Amy. When she finally walked out of the gate, she was dressed like the perfect nanny with a bright blouse and comfortable pants. We exchanged some nervous but excited looks before I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and told her she looked perfect for the part.

Amy blushed and smiled shyly. “Thanks, Mitch. Did you hear from Ella?”

I shook my head, feeling a little worried. “No, but I can’t help but feel that something’s off.”

“I don’t think it’s a big deal that she canceled today,” Amy said seriously. “You wouldn’t want her here if she’s sick. Plus, it sounds like there’ll be plenty of time to sort things out with Ella before Ava heads to California.”

When we got to the chalet, Amy seemed to relax after seeing some new pics of little Ava. She started fixing up the

place, moving pillows on the couch, and checking the bathroom for clean towels. “Got any air freshener? It’s kinda stuffy in here like it’s been closed up for a while.”

I was bouncing between the window and the door like a little kid, and finally, the big moment came. “Come on in,” I said, with Amy trying to peek around me. Margaret walked in, carrying a sleeping Ava in her baby carrier. I couldn’t help but touch her face and whisper, “God, she’s so tiny.”

After a quiet moment, I grabbed the carrier and sat Ava next to me on the couch.

Amy said hello to Margaret, who plopped down in a nearby armchair. They both laughed together. “Oops, my bad for not introducing Amy earlier,” I said, grinning but still staring at my baby girl.

Margaret showed us how to get Ava out of her seat, and when I held her for the first time, I was filled with love and a need to protect her. She was so tiny, her little fingers wrapping around my thumb. When Ava’s eyes opened and met mine, I was amazed at her grip and felt a deep connection to this little, precious being.

“She’s beautiful, Mitch,” Amy whispered, her eyes shining with warmth.

“I know,” I replied, my voice shaky with emotion. “I can’t believe she’s real. If only Nicole had told me she was pregnant. I would’ve wanted to be there for her... even though we wouldn’t have been together forever.”

Margaret shook her head, clearly not impressed. “We’ve tried getting in touch with Nicole for days, but she never calls back. Her parents, who live here in town, think she’s in Europe, but they haven’t heard from her either.”

I looked away from Ava, feeling an even stronger bond as I heard about Nicole’s absence. “So, she’s just left her kid behind?”

“It seems that way, but only time will tell. One thing’s for sure, though. The court won’t be too happy about her lack of interest,” Margaret said.

Then, Amy jumped in, “Can I hold the baby too? I wanna bond with her as well...”

“Sure, that’s a good idea,” Margaret agreed, and I gently handed her over.

“Be careful with her head,” Amy said, slowly taking Ava into her arms.

Margaret watched us with Ava, a smile on her face. “It’s almost time to feed her. Want me to show you, Mitch?”

“Absolutely,” I replied, excited to learn.

Margaret showed Amy and me how to make Ava’s formula. “Ava’s got a small milk allergy, so the pediatrician prescribed Nutramigen, which she’s been okay with. Stick to this formula unless her new doctor says otherwise.”

“Oh, I should write that down,” Amy said, putting the info in her phone and taking a picture of the container.

After following Margaret’s instructions, she showed us the right way to feed her, making me feel more confident as a new dad.

During the visit, Margaret checked out how well we were doing at making our home all about family. She mentioned that a home inspection in San Diego would be needed before any final decisions could be made. Margaret also noticed how great Amy was as a nanny. Finally, she watched our interactions with Ava, especially how connected we were to her.

“Mitch, you’ve done an amazing job getting ready for Ava, and I can tell Amy’s gonna be a loving and skilled nanny. I have no doubts you’ll give your daughter a great and supportive home,” Margaret said, her voice full of warmth and approval.

With Margaret’s thumbs-up, I breathed a sigh of relief. Over the next few hours, we got to know Ava and learned her cues, likes, and dislikes. Amy and I took turns holding, feeding, and changing her diapers. With each moment, I felt more at ease and confident as a dad. Amy did great as a loving nanny—it came naturally to her.

Finally, Margaret left with Ava, and it felt like a piece of me went with them. “You’re going to be a great dad, Mitch,” Amy told me. “I can’t wait till you have her full time... I’ll be Ava’s, Auntie Amy.”

“Auntie Amy?” I laughed. “Let’s get out of here. I’m ready to celebrate with a cozy dinner in the room I booked at the Vail Hilton.”

“Sounds awesome. I’m starving... and I’ve *really* missed you!”

# CHAPTER

## *Eleven*

**Amy**

**Three Months Later**

ROSEDALE'S HEADQUARTERS teemed with life on Kid's Day, the air pulsating with the vibrant energy of youth. Rainbow-hued balloons and streamers danced overhead as laughter and playful banter filled the room. Games and activities designed for various age brackets ensured everyone was having a blast.

In one corner, a magician enraptured Harper and Jenny, her guest, pulling off mind-bending coin tricks and mesmerizing scarf illusions. Daniel and Sicily, Harper's proud parents, watched with delight from a safe distance.

Ryder and Amber efficiently juggled their duties, keeping the snack tables laden and orchestrating the music for an enthusiastic round of musical chairs that even lured a few adults to participate.

My heart swelled as I observed Mitch's daughter, Ava, exploring her surroundings with wide-eyed wonder. Just two months ago, the court had granted Mitch full custody of the six-month-old darling. It was no surprise the DNA test confirmed Ava was indeed, Mitch's daughter, and witnessing their bond warmed my soul. Mitch's face transformed into a beacon of pure joy whenever Ava babbled or made her endearing attempts to crawl. I was genuinely ecstatic for him; he had braved the storms of single fatherhood and earned his happiness.

As I soaked in the festive ambiance, I couldn't help but marvel at the beautiful sense of camaraderie that enveloped the children who belonged to the Rosedale tribe. Before long, Courtney and I found ourselves watching over Ava, with Mitch having given Ella the day off. We were the odd ones out—childless and without borrowed kin.

Amidst the cheerful chaos, a bothersome thought weighed on my mind. With my parents relocating to Vail, I needed another job, or at least a full-time position, to cover the rent for my beachside flat. Plopping down beside Courtney, who was engrossed in a game of peekaboo with Ava, I couldn't help but voice my concerns.

“Ugh, Courtney, I have to find a better job or something to supplement my income,” I sighed, observing her elicit a giggle from Ava.

Courtney's attention shifted to me, worry etched on her face. “What's happening? Are you having money troubles?”

“Well, ever since my parents moved back to Vail, I've been struggling to make ends meet,” I confessed, shaking my head. “I've even resorted to counting the change in my console before treating myself to Starbucks.”

“Oh, sweetie, that's tough,” Courtney empathized, cradling Ava in her lap. “Have you talked to Mitch about it?”

“Yeah, he's said he'll pitch in when possible, but the guy's got a full plate. He's already footing the bill for Ella and his own place,” I admitted, offering her a feeble grin.

We carried on with our conversation, taking turns keeping Ava entertained. Courtney dished out some tantalizing details about her and Brad in between making goofy noises and engaging in patty cake play.

“So, Brad and I have hit the beach a couple of times after work,” she revealed, a wicked smile playing on her lips.

“Ooh, Courtney, that's amazing!” I squealed, clapping my hands in excitement.

“Shhh, it's our little secret, okay? Brad would have my head if he knew I spilled the beans.”



So, I was just talking to Courtney, right? And I told her I was worried about how much Ella was around and how she'd been getting in the way of Mitch and me. Like, she was always there, and it was hard to get closer to him with her around all the time. I just wanted us to get past this and be able to get closer without her butting in.

Courtney was all serious and was like, "I feel you. Nannies can be awesome, but it's hard to find the right balance. Just don't let jealousy mess with your head. Ella's more like a sweet grandma than anything else." She thought about it for a sec and then said, "Maybe you could just talk to Ella about how you feel? If you're honest with her, it might help clear things up, and you might figure out how to have her in your lives without her getting in the way of you and Mitch." Then she laughed and said, "I don't know where all that advice came from, 'cause I've got no clue about babies or nannies!"

I chuckled and then groaned, acknowledging the truth in Courtney's advice. "You're spot on, girl I've got to work on being a better communicator. I can't let jealousy consume me. It's crucial to share my feelings with both Mitch and Ella, so we can find a harmony that suits all of us."

Ava's wails sliced through the air, marking the end of our heart-to-heart. "Ah, nanny mode activated," I declared with a smile, already shifting gears to cater to the little one's needs. "I'll change her and get her bottle warmed up."

"Looks like it's time for our meeting. We'll catch up later," Courtney declared, trailing the others into a hush-hush staff meeting to deliberate on the proposed budget. I'd caught a glimpse of those numbers, and boy, were they ghastly. Yet, in spite of the pressing choices, our corner maintained a spirited vibe. Ariel, Amber, Sicily, and Meagan joined me, and we all gathered, feasting on slices of pizza.

At first, we took pleasure in observing the children laugh and eat, their giggles a melody to our ears. "Just look at them," Meagan mused, "so untroubled and pure. Even the twins seem captivated, watching the festivities from their swings."

Amber joined in, lost in nostalgia, “I wish we could all return to those simpler days.”

It was no secret that Rosedale’s co-owners battled a severe dip in revenue, forcing them to ponder wage cuts and possible layoffs. As the afternoon progressed, the stark reality weighed upon us. We knew hard choices were made behind those doors, casting a gloomy shadow on our once jubilant spirits. Ariel whispered her apprehension, “I hope they find a solution that won’t hurt the kids or the staff too badly.”

We nodded in unison, faces somber. Sicily sighed, “Yeah, let’s just keep our fingers crossed. We’re all family here. That’s why they organized a lively Kid’s Day before diving into that serious meeting.” We carried on nibbling our pizza, but now with a more muted air, the uncertainty loomed over our gathering. Time inched by, the meeting endured, and to make matters worse, Ava’s crankiness intensified.

“I can’t seem to soothe her,” I confided, tenderly rocking Ava in my arms, seeking wisdom from the seasoned moms surrounding me. “Do you think she could be getting sick?”

“Perhaps, she’s beginning to teethe,” Ariel answered, feeling Ava’s forehead. “Doesn’t seem like she has a fever.”

“I’ve got some Tylenol in my bag,” Sicily chimed in.

Just as Sicily offered assistance, the staff emerged from the meeting room. Their expressions were drawn and grave. The ambiance plummeted further, but Chase, ever the optimist, endeavored to brighten the mood. He proclaimed with a teasing smirk, “Well, folks, the good news is Rosedale isn’t bankrupt... yet!” The tense atmosphere softened as a smattering of nervous laughter broke free.

Mitch spotted Ava’s restlessness and hurried over. “Hey, maybe we should head home,” he proposed, concern evident in his voice.

With a nod of agreement, we bid farewell to everyone and made our way out. Strolling along, Mitch exhaled, “So much for our night together, just the two of us. Should I call Ella and ask for her advice?”

I shook my head, resolute. “No, we need to work this out ourselves. Ariel might be right; it could just be teething. She’s at the right age, after all.”

But as we continued toward the bungalow, Ava’s wails grew louder and more urgent, casting a shadow of worry and uncertainty over us both. Mitch tried different types of music to calm her, alternating between classical compositions and gentle lullabies, but her cries only escalated. I could see the concern etched on Mitch’s face as his gaze darted toward Ava in the rearview mirror. Together, we searched our minds for any potential source of her anguish, but we were too inexperienced to come up with a conclusion.

Arriving at the house, it felt like an eternity before the recently installed security gate finally creaked open. Mitch hurried inside as I lifted Ava from her car seat. He promptly found the list of emergency contacts on the fridge, including Ava’s pediatrician. Just as he was about to dial, I spotted something odd on the countertop.

“Mitch, hold on!” I cried, pointing at the canister of infant formula. “This isn’t Nutramigen. It’s another brand called ‘GentleCare.’ Could that be what’s bothering her?”

Mitch’s brow furrowed as he scrutinized the container. “You may be onto something. I didn’t even notice. Maybe Ella grabbed it by mistake, or the store was out of Nutramigen.”

Setting his phone aside, he approached Ava and tenderly stroked her back. “Let’s whip up a fresh bottle using the Nutramigen we have left and see if that does the trick.”

While I prepared the bottle, Mitch cradled Ava, murmuring soothing words to her. She continued to cry, but her sobs seemed to abate somewhat as if picking up on her father’s unease and wanting to make him happy.

Mitch fed Ava the freshly made bottle, and we observed her carefully for any changes. As she finished the formula, her sobbing gradually ceased, and she appeared more comfortable. We were grateful to have potentially discovered the root of her fussiness.

“Maybe we should call Ella and fill her in on the mix-up,” I suggested while Mitch held a now tranquil Ava.

“Yeah,” he concurred, his voice laced with relief. “I’ll give her a ring, and we’ll be sure to stick with Nutramigen from here on out. The poor little one just needed her regular formula.”

Cradling a now-drowsy Ava, I gently rocked her as Mitch retreated to the next room to phone Ella. Although I couldn’t hear her side of the conversation, I managed to glean enough from Mitch’s replies to piece it all together.

“Hey, Ella,” he started, his tone amiable yet inquisitive. “I just wanted to ask you about the formula you bought for Ava. I noticed it wasn’t Nutramigen, but rather GentleCare. Was there a reason for the change?”

The silence hung heavy as Mitch strained to catch Ella’s reply, his entire demeanor morphing with the progression of their conversation. It was clear that frustration was building inside him.

“Ella, I’ve told you a thousand times Ava’s pediatrician specifically prescribed Nutramigen for her. You had no right to switch the formula without running it by me first,” he declared, the strain in his voice evident.

As he paused, I could almost hear Ella attempting to justify her decision by mentioning her nanny experience and how GentleCare was supposedly the best formula available.

Mitch’s tone intensified, seething with anger, “That’s not the point, Ella! You blatantly disregarded the doctor’s instructions and didn’t even have the courtesy to discuss it with me. Ava’s been crying non-stop, and it’s all because of the formula switch. I trusted you to follow the doctor’s advice and keep me in the loop about any changes.”

I found myself holding my breath, waiting for his next words. My heart soared when I finally heard him say, “I’m sorry, Ella, but this is where it ends. You’re fired.”

As Mitch hung up and reentered the room, a smile tugged at my lips, knowing that Ella’s meddling would no longer

come between us. We could now concentrate on nurturing our bond and taking care of Ava without interference.

Mitch's gaze flickered toward me, a storm of emotions brewing in his eyes. I reached out to gently touch his arm. "We'll get through this, Mitch. Together, we can look after Ava and find a new nanny who'll respect your wishes and keep you informed."

He nodded, taking a deep breath as he glanced at Ava, peacefully asleep in my arms. "You're right, Amy. We'll work through this together—for Ava and for us."

Mitch ended the call and drew a chair closer to the rocker, my smile widening with the knowledge that Ella's influence was finally gone. A sudden thought occurred to me, and I seized the moment.

"You know, Mitch, ever since my parents moved back to Vail, I've been struggling to make ends meet. What if I became Ava's nanny? It would benefit both of us. Besides, Rosedale only created my position because of the kidnapping, and other staff members can handle my responsibilities."

A mixture of surprise and relief morphed over Mitch's face, his smile growing. "Amy, I've wanted to suggest that for some time, but I wasn't sure if it was the right moment or if you'd even be open to it. It seems fate has finally given us the perfect opportunity."

Settling back onto the couch, Ava snuggled contentedly in my arms, the ordeal with Ella behind us. The tension of the day dissipated, leaving a sense of tranquility in its wake. Mitch looked at me tenderly, a blush creeping across my cheeks.

"We make a good team, don't we?" he murmured.

I smiled, my heart full. "Yes, we do."

## CHAPTER

### *Twelve*

#### **Mitch**

WITH AN EASYGOING VIBE, Amy and I slipped off the couch and gently placed Ava in her crib.

“Should we change her first?” Amy wondered.

“Nah, that’ll just wake her up. And then it’ll be forever before she sleeps again.”

“You mentioned she’s not quite sleeping through the night yet...”

“She’s getting there... usually wakes up around two. But all I do is change her diaper and make sure she has her binky. Then she’s good till six when I get up.”

“Cool, good to know,” Amy chuckled, enjoying her new role.

We adjusted the mobile to play Ava’s favorite lullaby and tiptoed out of the nursery.

“I’m craving some pasta. How about you?” I suggested.

“Yeah, sounds good. I’ll whip up a salad.”

We headed into the kitchen and started getting dinner ready when Ava’s muffled cries caught our attention. I smiled and started for the nursery, but Amy grabbed my arm. “I got this. You work on the food!”

I could tell Amy found Ava’s binky when the cries stopped, and I heard the nursery door close.

“Mission accomplished,” Amy snickered as I began boiling water for the pasta while she rummaged through the fridge for sauce ingredients. “Can we use this leftover chicken?” She asked, holding up the container.

“Sure, let me see what else we have,” I replied, keeping my voice low as I searched the cabinets. “Ah, here we go. How about a creamy tomato sauce with some heavy cream, canned tomatoes, and a bit of parmesan?”

Amy’s eyes lit up, “Yum! Let’s do it!”

As we cooked, Amy started a conversation. “So, we’re making Italian food, and it reminds me of my parents. How should I tell them about us living together and me being Ava’s full-time nanny?”

I glanced at her, “How do you think they’ll react? You know, since your dad’s changed his opinion of me.”

“I’m not sure. They might be hesitant at first, but I think they’ll come around eventually,” Amy replied, biting her lip.

“I hope so. But we can take it slow and talk to them when you’re ready,” I reassured her. I smiled at Amy, glad I could make her feel better.

She seemed nervous about talking to her parents, but I knew it was important to her to be honest with them. If not, things would be tough for her, me, and ultimately, Ava, if Elana and Giuseppe didn’t support what we were doing.

“Look, the first of the month will be here before I know it, and I’m worrying about paying the rent. With the lease in Papa’s name, it’s up to him to navigate a solution with the landlord.”

“We need to sort this out and fast,” I muttered, furrowing my brow.

A thought crossed my mind, and I grinned. “What if I paid you for the entire month upfront?” I asked, twirling a forkful of pasta.

Amy’s eyes widened. “Well, Ella’s gone now... but how much could you manage without putting yourself in a bind?”

I whipped out my phone and tapped away at the calculator app. “This should work,” I said, showing her the number. “It’s just a start, but we can find more ways to make ends meet. I’ve put my chalet on the market, so hopefully it will sell soon. I could use the extra income just in case...”

Her face lit up as she hugged me. “How did I get so lucky?” she murmured into my shoulder. “That’s twice what I made at Rosedale.”

I feigned shock. “Should I take it back?”

“No way! But listen, if you can advance me that amount, I can use it to pay next month’s rent, so Papa won’t breach his lease. He can tell the landlord he’s not renewing, penalty-free. Then you can pay me the same as Rosedale did. I’ll be living here, so I won’t need much more... Plus, aren’t you saving on security now?”

“Ah, right,” Mitch said. “No more 24/7 guards, thanks to the new fence and gate.”

“See? We’re already on the upswing,” Amy said, and we exchanged a high-five.

As we dug into our meal, the aroma of sauce filled the bungalow. Amy’s face grew thoughtful. “Hey Mitch, how’d that meeting with Rosedale go this morning? The one about budget cuts? I know it’s touchy, but I’m worried about how it’ll affect you... and me and Ava, eventually.”

Mitch sighed. “It went as expected. We’re slashing budgets left and right, and sadly, that means some folks are losing their jobs. The co-owners are safe, but it’s tough for everyone else.”

She nodded, frowning. “Tough times, indeed. What about the patent on the Golden Key Project?”

“Still tangled up in the court stuff. But, hey,” I said, “there’s more. And since you’ll be living here, you should know.” I paused for a sec, then went on. “Brad came up with this cool app idea that helps power companies avoid brownouts and power outages when things get crazy busy. But we gotta keep it on the down-low. Rosedale’s got a leak problem. So, we’ve been working from home a lot. I’d say



don't even bring it up with Meagan and Ariel, at least not yet. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"Wow, that's big," Amy said, her brows scrunching up. "How can I help?"

"By taking care of my little girl, duh," I chuckled, giving her a friendly nudge. "Your support means everything to me. Knowing Ava's in good hands will help me focus on the project."

Amy's face lit up at my words, her cheeks turning pink. "You got it, Mitch. I promise I'll take great care of her."

We finished our pasta dinner, the lingering scent of the creamy tomato sauce tantalizing our senses. While we were cleaning up the kitchen, I felt an overwhelming sense of satisfaction and something else. So, while Amy was drying the dishes, I approached her from behind and wrapped my arms around her waist. I watched her thick hips sway, pressing against my zipper. Brushing her hair back over her shoulder, I breathed in her tantalizing scent, inviting me to pepper kisses over the tender flesh and along her pulse point.

She giggled, and the sound made my cock stiffen. Then, I had to swallow a growl as she threw down the dish towel and turned in my arms.

"What you got on your mind there, boss. You know you're my boss now!" The heat of her breath broke the last bond of my restraint. I couldn't contain myself a second longer. I slid my arms back around her waist, holding her close against me as I buried my face into the crook of her neck. The moan that escaped her lips stiffened me even more.

My lips puckered against her skin. And when she softly sighed, I sucked a patch of skin between my teeth before picking her up off her feet.

"Should we be doing this?" she asked breathlessly. "What about little Ava?"

"What about her? She's asleep... and she's just a baby."

I kissed her neck again. "I... oh, I just. It doesn't matter..." She muttered.

“Good!” I uttered as Amy ran her fingers through my hair.

I lifted her hips and sat her on the counter, allowing my hands to massage her thighs. Then I pulled back, taking in the valley of her breasts as she wrapped her arms around my neck. And when my eyes lifted to hers, my hand flew into her hair, fisting it before I pulled her lips down against mine.

The sensation washed over me like the waves on the beach. I felt dragged beneath the surface in her undertow as it tugged me into the writhing surf of desire. Her arms tightened around my neck. My head tilted off to the side, deepening the kiss as my tongue ravished the roof of her mouth. She locked her legs around me, rolling that heated flesh against my stomach. And all I could think about was how deeply I wanted to bury myself between her legs.

“Come here,” I commanded against her lips.

Amy lowered herself against me. Locking her legs around my hips as I carried her effortlessly to the bed. Then laying her gently on the mattress, I climbed up. I crawled over her, wrapping my hand behind her back before I effortlessly eased her farther up. Squealing with delight, she clung tightly to me as the scent of her womanhood wafted up my nostrils. I growled as I kissed her clothed tits. Finally, I settled her head against the pillows and picked up my remote control. Instantly, soft music drifted from the hidden speakers behind the bed.

Amy giggled. “Do this often?”

I reached for the other pillow and eased it beneath her head. “No.”

She cocked her head. “So you just use this system when you’re alone.”

I tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. “Yep, I just had it installed during the remodel.”

“Anticipating?”

I pressed her legs open with my knee. “Yep. Anticipating this moment.”

I wasn't sure what caused her gaze to immediately darken with desire, but I didn't care. All I cared about was invading Amy's body until we both cried out for mercy, unable to continue another moment without making love.

So, I crashed my lips down against hers and felt her buck against me. Her body was mine to infiltrate.

Amy's kisses snatched my breath, and everything else fell to the wayside. I blanketed her body with my own as her tongue slid across mine. I was doing the unthinkable on Amy's first day at the job as Ava's new nanny! But I couldn't deny the warmth spreading throughout my veins with every brush of our tongues exploring, prying, and wanting more.

As she rolled her hips against me, I felt my thick cock pressing against the denim trapped inside my pants, and she did, too, as she eagerly touched me with her hands. Her legs spread farther, giving her damp folds room to breathe before my knee edged against her wet panties. She bucked into me, wanting friction more than ever before, causing her to groan out my name. "Oh. Mitch. You're so... please more."

I growled. "That's it, Amy. Let it out."

She shivered, and her nipples puckered under her bra as my hand grabbed her wrists, pinning them above me. She was vulnerable and beautiful at the same time. I felt as if I were on top of the world while I was above her, so I flipped her skirt over her hips.

"Hell, you're so beautiful, Amy."

I relinquished her wrists, and she watched as I pulled out my cock, and pleased myself. In contrast, she watched every stroke, licking her lips, wanting what was leaking from my tip.

Amy grinned at me as my hand disappeared between her legs, and I pulled her panties off to the side. Then, in one fell swoop, I plunged into her depths. The pleasure washed over me as I felt catapulted into the clouds. And I bottomed out against her as I massaged her swollen clit.

"Take all of me, Mitch. Do it. Do it now!" She commanded.

So I started pounding away.

“Oh, shit,” she whispered.

I growled. “So tight for me. God, Amy, you’re so tight tonight.”

Her back arched. “Oh, yessss, Mitch. I love it just like that. Don’t stop. It’s so — that’s it —”

I captured her lips. “Come for me, Amy. Do it.”

She bucked ravenously against me, meeting me thrust for thrust as her words disappeared down my throat. “Yes. Yes. Oh, Yes. Mitch! Please, Mitch!”

I moaned, “That’s it, beautiful. Get it, girl!”

Amy fell over the edge, and I thought her arching spine might shatter into pieces. Instead, her eyes rolled back, and I knew I was close, as her walls gripped me so tightly she almost pushed me out.

“I’m coming with you. Oh, yeah, Ugh, shit!”

When we collapsed against each other, we held ourselves there, enjoying our moment of rapture. I wrapped my arms around her back, rubbing my hands up and down her spine as she panted against my chest.

Our intermingled fluids dripped from between her thighs, and my cock slowly dwindled until it slid from her warmth. And when I kissed the shell of her ear, I let myself revel in the scent of the two of us intertwined.

Finally, I rolled over next to Amy — both of us still half clothed — and reached for her hand.

“Amy?”

“Huh?”

“How about a hot shower!”

But before we could move, a whimper from the other room morphed into a squall. I sat up with a start and looked at the clock. “Can you believe it? It’s two o’clock already!”

## CHAPTER

### *Thirteen*

#### Amy

THE MORNING SUN streamed through the curtains as my first day as Ava's nanny began, excitement and nerves buzzing through my veins. Mitch was still sound asleep, his gentle snores a lullaby to my overactive thoughts as I tiptoed toward his closet. Rummaging through his clothes, I found a cozy sweatshirt and soft gray sweatpants, all the while wondering when I'd have a chance to retrieve my own belongings.

As I slipped into the borrowed clothes, Mitch stirred, his eyes fluttering open. "Huh? Did I oversleep?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

I quickly shook my head. "No, I'm sorry. It's just that... I just realized I don't have any clothes here. I hope you don't mind..."

Mitch swung his legs over the side of the bed, donning his robe with a chuckle. "You look better in them than I do. We'll pick up some of your things when I get home tonight. Can you make do until then?"

"Of course. Is that your little one, I hear?" I asked as sleepy cries echoed from the nursery.

"If you don't mind getting her. I'll take a quick shower."

As Mitch disappeared into the bathroom, I entered Ava's room and gently lifted her from her crib, soothing her with hushed whispers. Once she was content in my arms, I made

my way to the kitchen to prepare her bottle. With precision, I measured the formula and water, ensuring the perfect temperature, while Ava's wide-eyed curiosity followed my every move.

Settling into a kitchen chair, I cradled Ava on my lap and swayed gently as she eagerly drank from her bottle. "You were a hungry girl, weren't you? I think you've been starving on that nasty old formula, right?" I playfully teased, planting a kiss on her forehead before positioning her in the highchair.

Instantly, Ava grasped her baby spoon and banged it against the tray, her laughter like music in the air. "You're a little musician, aren't you?" I cooed, tickling her rosy cheeks.

As Ava continued her impromptu concert, I brewed a fresh pot of coffee for Mitch. The rich scent mingled with the melodious sounds of Ava's laughter and her spoon against the tray. The anticipation of the day ahead settled in my chest, a blend of responsibility and anxiety, as I realized I'd soon have Ava all to myself.

The shower's hum died down, indicating Mitch was nearly ready. With a warm smile, I poured him a steaming cup of coffee and placed it on the counter, eagerly awaiting the day's adventures.

As Ava frolicked joyously, Mitch materialized from the bathroom, pristine and invigorated, a towel secured around his waist. He sipped my freshly brewed coffee with gratitude and flashed a roguish grin, "I'm already being pampered. You're my savior," he declared, ruffling his damp locks.

"No problem," I responded, a blend of pride and embarrassment warming my cheeks.

With Ava preoccupied, I assembled our morning meal—golden-toasted bagels and fluffy scrambled eggs. Apprehensively, I stole glances at Mitch, now clothed, as he scrolled through his phone, then seized a bagel and made for the exit.

"Oh, I nearly overlooked this. Here's a house key and the remote for the gate. Remember to close it if you step out,"

Mitch instructed, depositing them on the table.

“And the security? Anything I need to do to shield us from the Rosedale curse?”

“It’s certainly morphed into a hex. Anyway, there’s nothing you have to manage. The security firm remotely handles everything. I’ll provide them your phone number once I reach work.”

After Mitch pressed a tender kiss to Ava’s forehead and grazed my cheek, he departed. It was time to serve Ava her cereal, and I encountered my initial hurdle. Ava adamantly clamped her mouth shut, recoiling from the proffered spoon. My gentle, coaxing, and whimsical faces proved futile. Somewhat dispirited, I turned to Google for counsel but unearthed no novel tactics I hadn’t already employed. I tried reaching Mitch for assistance, but his phone rang briefly before cutting to voicemail. Noting the hour, I realized he was immersed in a meeting and didn’t wish to intrude. Sighing, I conceded that I had to tackle this challenge solo.

Inhaling deeply, I opted for a novel strategy. I blended some mashed banana into the cereal, hoping the sweetness would captivate Ava. To my delight, her eyes sparkled at the sight of her beloved fruit, and she ultimately welcomed a spoonful. Relief washed over me as she gleefully devoured the remainder of her breakfast.

Craving fresh air and a change of scenery, I decided to take Ava for a seaside stroll. After tidying her up and adorning her in a sunhat and breezy attire, I secured her into her stroller and embarked on our adventure.

The sun beamed down with fervor as we sauntered along the sidewalk adjacent to the coastline. The ocean’s breath playfully ruffled my hair, while the rhythmic melody of waves crashing against the shore created a soothing ambiance. Ava cooed and chattered energetically, her bright eyes absorbing the vivid surroundings.

As we ambled on, I felt the tug to grab my phone and dial my mother for advice and solace. But each time, trepidation and uncertainty held me back. I wasn’t ready to unveil my new

life to my family just yet. So, I decided to focus on the allure of the present moment. Nevertheless, my gaze was soon hijacked by a pack of cyclists advancing on a nearby bike trail, visible from my peripheral vision.

As they closed in, one rider, a man sporting a baseball cap instead of a helmet, veered off from the group and made a beeline for Ava and me. My heart pounded, and I froze as I took in his ominous, twisted smile. He halted right before Ava's stroller and drawled, "Looks like those chickens hatched after all."

Fear cascaded through me, and I let out a scream. Ava, jarred by the uproar, started to wail. "Get away from us!" I hollered, lunging to scoop Ava up, frantic to protect her from this possible menace. But the man merely cycled away, his laughter taunting us like a sinister lullaby.

My hands quivered as I fumbled for my phone, urgently dialing Mitch's number to alert him that the kidnapper had resurfaced.

The phone rang once, twice, then thrice before Mitch finally answered. "Hey, Amy, what's up?" he inquired, his tone easygoing and oblivious.

"Mitch," I stammered, my voice trembling, "he's back. The kidnapper just materialized out of nowhere and... and he saw Ava."

Mitch's demeanor shifted instantly, concern seeping through. "What? Where are you right now? Are you safe?"

I scanned my surroundings, my heart drumming in my chest. "I think so. We're by the gazebo on the beach, a few blocks from home. He didn't try to snatch her or anything. He just... said, 'looks like those chickens hatched after all,' and then pedaled away."

A brief silence ensued on the other end before Mitch inhaled deeply. "Okay, listen closely. Stay put. Head to the gazebo and stick around people. I'll contact the police and be there as quickly as I can. Don't engage with anyone and keep a watchful eye on Ava."



I nodded, despite him being unable to see me. “Okay, okay. Please hurry!”

“I will. Just remain composed and hold Ava tight. I’ll be there soon.” The call concluded, leaving me with my pulse racing and my eyes darting around the park, hunting for any indication of peril.

As I cradled Ava against me, the intensity of our situation settled heavily upon me. It felt as though history had resurfaced in a cruel twist of fate—the Rosedale curse now entangled with the life of an innocent baby. Abandoning the stroller on the sidewalk, I shifted Ava onto my hip, making my way to the beachside gazebo. Each second that passed seemed to stretch into eternity as we waited for Mitch and the police to arrive.

My hands trembled relentlessly while I held Ava close, murmuring soothing words to calm her nerves, even as my own were frayed by the confrontation. Finally, the wail of a siren pierced the air, but it was Mitch’s Lexus that appeared first. He raced toward us, concern etched deeply in his eyes.

“Are you both okay?” He questioned urgently, hands gripping my shoulders before he scooped Ava into his arms.

I nodded, tears cascading down my cheeks. “Yeah, we’re okay. He didn’t touch her. But Mitch, what are we going to do?”

Before Mitch could formulate a response, the sirens crescendoed, and police cars accompanied by a sleek, unmarked black SUV screeched to a halt nearby. A cadre of officers and two suit-clad men emerged, striding purposefully toward us. The suited men closed the distance, flashing their badges as they introduced themselves as FBI agents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Detwiler, I’m Agent Johnson, and this is Agent Thompson,” the taller agent gestured to his partner. “We’ve been assigned to your case after receiving the call from the local police and Agent Downing out of the Denver Field Office.”

“We have to talk,” Agent Thompson said, his voice laced with gravity. “Your family could be in immediate peril. We think relocating you to a secure location, for now, is the best course of action until we catch the person behind this.”

I shared an uneasy and bewildered look with Mitch before directing my gaze back at the agents. “A secure location?” I inquired, my voice barely audible.

“Let’s clear something up first. I’m Mitch Detwiler. This is Amy Russo, my other half and the caretaker for my daughter, Ava.”

Agent Thompson nodded in understanding, “Ah, got it. So, the Denver report makes sense now. You, ma’am, were the victim of a kidnapping in Vail?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” I stammered, feeling shaky.

“I agree that Amy and Ava should go to the secure location, but I can’t accompany them. My current work project is critical, and it could be connected to this larger scheme,” Mitch chimed in.

“So, what exactly is a secure location, and how long do we need to stay there?”

Agent Johnson offered me a compassionate glance. “We can’t be certain. It might be a few days or more, depending on how fast we neutralize the threat. But you have to come with us immediately!”

Mitch enveloped me in his arms, drawing Ava and me nearer. “Amy, you need to go. I’ll do everything within my power to protect our family,” he declared, his voice resolute.

His eyes bore into mine, and my heart plummeted as the gravity of our predicament settled in. I struggled to speak, my throat tight. “Alright,” I whispered, trembling as I clutched Ava close.

The agents ushered us to the sleek black SUV, helping us into the backseat. Ava began to sob, clinging to me for dear life, her tiny hands grasping at my shirt. Her frantic heartbeat resonated against me. I tried to soothe her, caressing her head and murmuring comforting words.

The SUV roared to life, and I stared out the window at Mitch, who stood on the sidewalk, a blend of fear and powerlessness on his face. My heart ached, feeling as if I'd left a piece of myself behind. Tears pooled in my eyes, and I lifted a trembling hand to wave goodbye, watching him recede into the distance.

I turned to Ava, now nestled in the car seat the agents had provided and held her hand. The tears I'd been trying to suppress finally broke free, coursing down my cheeks as I longed for the familiarity of my daily life.

My mind swirled with questions and dread, attempting to grasp the situation. Who was after us? Why target Rosedale Tech? What if we never saw Mitch again? Overwhelmed with uncertainty and terror, the sedan sped toward our mysterious destination.

“The baby needs changing!” I declared, leaning forward in my seat. “And shouldn't we stop for supplies?”

Agent Johnson's kind eyes met mine. “We have a small bag of baby supplies right here,” he said, handing me a plastic bag that clearly came from a convenience store. He continued, “Our fellow agents are handling everything else you'll need at the secure location. Our top priority is ensuring your quick and safe arrival!”

## CHAPTER

### *Fourteen*

#### Amy

“WHAT'S OUR DESTINATION?” I inquired, my voice quivering slightly as I glanced at darling Ava, snugly secured in her car seat. The FBI agents had whisked us away without warning from the charming oceanfront avenue in San Diego, leaving Mitch nowhere in sight and my heart burdened with anxiety.

Catching my eye in the rearview mirror, Agent Thompson responded, “We’re escorting you to a safe house in Pine Valley. It’s in your best interest that you, Mitch, and the little one stay out of the limelight for a bit.” He continued to concentrate on the road ahead. “The safe house is tucked away in a serene mountain village, a couple of hours northeast of San Diego. It’s a tranquil and unobtrusive spot that’ll provide some respite from the mounting tension you’ve been enduring.”

Agent Johnson swiveled toward me, offering reassurance. “Rest assured, we’ll do everything within our power to shield you and Ava,” he affirmed. “And we’re collaborating with Mitch. He’s in capable hands.”

I attempted to take comfort in his words, but my hold on the door handle only grew more rigid, my knuckles paling. I tried to console Ava as she wriggled, eager to escape the confines of her carrier, even as my own apprehensions loomed over me. “Everything’s alright, sweetheart,” I murmured, my voice wavering, unsure if I was trying to reassure Ava or myself. “We’ll be just fine.”

At last, Ava dozed off as the sedan cruised along the freeway, leaving the comforting familiarity of San Diego in its wake. The urban scenery gradually transitioned into undulating hills, the rising sun casting its warm glow upon the landscape.

We veered onto a twisting, gravelly path that delved deep into the forest. The thick underbrush and towering trees seemed to envelop us, further severing our connection to the world beyond. Soon, we reached a secluded cabin, where a female FBI agent stood waiting.

“Ms. Russo?” she queried, glancing down at her clipboard.

I nodded, cradling Ava as I exited the car. “That’s me. Were you waiting for someone else?”

A hint of a smirk played at the corners of Agent Ramirez’s lips, her gaze unimpressed as she introduced herself and motioned for us to follow her into the cabin. Crossing the threshold, an icy shiver raced down my spine, as though I’d left something vital behind. Panic surged through me when it dawned on me that I’d lost my connection to the outside world. Anxiety prickled my skin as my thoughts spiraled out of control, the burden of Ava’s needs and our financial future bearing down on me like a crushing weight.

Before I could voice my fears, Agent Ramirez offered a comforting smile. “Relax, Amy. We have everything you and your baby need here. We’ll take care of both of you.”

Gently patting Ava’s back, concern threaded through my words. “Could I check the formula you have? Ava can only have Nutramigen. Nothing else agrees with her.”

A warm smile softened Agent Ramirez’s eyes. She gestured towards the fully stocked pantry. “Mr. Detwiler briefed me on your needs, including Ava’s Nutramigen.”

A sigh of relief escaped my lips. “Oh, thank you. That’s perfect.”

As we settled into the snug cabin, curiosity gnawed at me, prompting me to voice the question that had been nagging me

since our arrival. “Why isn’t Mitch with us? Why the separation?”

Agent Ramirez hesitated for a moment, her gaze briefly flitting away before returning to meet mine. “The Rosedale case is complex and widespread, as you’re aware. Kidnappings, murders, and extortion are all entwined in it, just like the ransom they paid for your safe return.”

I nodded, the chilling memory of being held captive and forced to film a ransom video while holding that repulsive sign still fresh in my mind. But how did that relate to Mitch and me being apart?

“Right now, Mitch and his team are serving as bait to catch those behind the Rosedale case,” Agent Ramirez explained further. “We need to guarantee your and Ava’s safety in case the criminals seek revenge or try to use you as leverage.”

A pang of fear squeezed my heart at the thought of Mitch facing danger, but I was painfully aware that there was nothing I could do to change the circumstances. My only option was to keep myself and Ava safe while having faith that Mitch was making the right moves.

Agent Ramirez flashed a reassuring smile and gestured toward a hallway branching off from the main room. “Don’t worry, you won’t be alone here. I’ll be staying with you both. I’ll do my best to stay out of your way. My room is just down that hall.”

With a heavy sigh, I slumped onto the couch and placed Ava beside me. Although having Agent Ramirez nearby wasn’t ideal, I had to believe she was here to ensure our safety. Out of nowhere, a loud growl from my stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Just as I was about to head to the kitchen, Ava’s cries filled the air. I quickly prepared a bottle and nestled into the rocking chair to feed her.

I discovered a portable crib in the bedroom next to the master suite, and my eyes welled up as I laid Ava down. The crib lacked soft blankets, a mobile to play gentle lullabies, or Mitch to tenderly kiss her goodnight.

As I wandered into the kitchen, I settled on a large bowl of mac and cheese. It might not be gourmet, but it was comfort food, and that was all I had the energy for right now.

While eating, I attempted to lose myself in a TV show, but my mind couldn't escape the lingering shadows of the Rosedale case and the unseen threats still hovering around us.

Finally, exhaustion caught up with me, and I crawled into the huge king-sized bed, praying for sleep to take over. Instead, I tossed and turned as an owl hooted outside my window. Unable to take it any longer, I got up to check on Ava, gently scooping her up and bringing her into my bedroom. Carefully arranging the covers and making sure her binky was within reach, I snuggled next to her, comforted by the presence of a piece of Mitch beside me. Gradually, the hooting retreated into the night, and sleep embraced me at last.

### **Mitch**

As I stood there, watching Amy and Ava being driven away in the FBI sedan, I felt like everything was going wrong. I couldn't forget the tears in Amy's eyes or the scared look on Ava's face. I knew I had to do something to protect my family and figure out what was going on with this crazy situation. The cops seemed like they wanted to help, but nothing was really getting fixed. I was getting more and more stuck in this mess Amy called the Rosedale curse.

Suddenly, I heard sirens in the distance, and they snapped me out of my thoughts. They got louder, and I realized the cop cars were coming to my house, just a block or two away. My heart started racing, and I was totally confused and worried. "What's going on?" I asked the cop, who was still writing down what happened with Amy and the cyclist.

"Looks like your home security company called about someone trespassing on your property," the officer said, glancing at his watch. "It happened just a few minutes after this whole thing went down!"

I hopped in my car and rushed to my house, only to find the security gate wide open and a bunch of cops all over the

place. I couldn't believe it – how could things get even worse so fast?

“Agent Carter!” I shouted, surprised to see him. “You must've been nearby to get here so quickly!”

“Actually, I was talking to a witness for another case just a mile or two from here. When I heard your name and address on the radio, I hurried over to see what was happening.”

I didn't bother shaking his hand. Agent Carter, also known as Carter Brown, was the detective from the San Diego Police Department who had been working on the Rosedale case from the start. He'd even been attacked himself, but he wasn't really the best detective. So, instead of chatting with him, I went to the officer who was taking pictures of a footprint under Ava's nursery window.

“Hey, officer, can you tell me what happened here?” I asked, trying not to freak out.

“Alright, so it looks like some dude wearing a ball cap just walked into your yard through the open front gate. Your security cameras caught him trying to get into your house.

Lucky for you, he took off on a bike when he heard the sirens coming.”

My heart dropped, and my stomach was all twisted up. Great, now my family was on the radar of the Rosedale psycho who tried breaking into our home. I turned back to Carter, getting all worked up.

“Agent Carter, what's up with my security gate being wide open? And why would someone try to break in while everything's going nuts?”

Carter hesitated, “Well, Mitch, the guy probably saw a chance with all the crazy stuff happening. As for the open gate, it could be a glitch, or someone messed up. We gotta look into it more.”

I clenched my fists, super angry. “This is so unacceptable, Carter. These weird things are tearing my family apart, and now my home's a target. What's your department doing to stop this madness?”



Carter sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Mitch, I get you’re mad, but we’re doing all we can to figure it out. We’re checking the security footage, talking to witnesses, and looking at any evidence we find. I promise you, we’re not gonna stop until we solve this.”

I shook my head. “Ugh, every time you talk, it’s the same stuff... I promise you, blah, blah, blah...”

While I was giving Carter a piece of my mind, another officer came up with a tablet. “Mr. Detwiler, we got a picture from the security footage of the guy. You should check this out.”

I took the tablet, and my eyes went wide. “Carter, get over here. You need to see this.”

He hesitated, then came closer. On the screen was a fuzzy pic of a guy in a ball cap, his face hidden by the brim. “Could this be the same dude who messed with Amy at the gazebo?”

Carter looked at me and frowned. “Could be!”

I threw my hands up like I was asking for some kind of help from above. “So, why’s everyone just hanging around instead of searching for this dude? C’mon, he’s on a bike!”

Carter caught on and started giving orders to the cops. “You heard him! Let’s get moving and find this intruder! Check the security videos to see how he got away and start looking around the neighborhood. We need to catch this guy before he causes more trouble.”

The officers rushed away, leaving my place to track down the mysterious trespasser. Agent Carter gave me a quick nod before following his team.

As soon as everyone was gone, I hit the remote to close the gate, making sure my home was safe again. I couldn’t help but feel something was off, and I knew I had to do some snooping on my own. I hurried inside, locked everything up, and went straight to the basement.

In the basement, stashed in an old desk, was my laptop. I’d been using it to help Brad with research on the new app. I hadn’t shown him what I’d found yet. But now, with

everything that happened today, I felt like it was time to figure out who was behind this whole Rosedale curse thing Amy mentioned.

I opened the desk drawer, and there it was, just like I had left it. I quickly turned on the laptop, checked the main directory, and made sure no one else had used it. Once I was sure no one had messed with it, I put the laptop back and saw that I'd missed a text from Courtney. I took a quick breath.

Courtney: Mr. Detwiler. Amy's dad, Giuseppe Russo, has been calling her all day with no luck. He's really worried and wants you to call him as soon as you can!

Me: Thanks, Courtney. I'll give him a call.

Feeling defeated, I sat down on the lowest step of the basement stairs, held my head in my hands, and mumbled, "Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse."

## CHAPTER

### *Fifteen*

#### **Mitch**

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I woke with a start when I heard my phone chime. I grabbed it quickly, hoping it was Amy. Instead, it was Courtney calling to remind me that Amy's father had called again, demanding to know where his daughter was. According to Courtney, Mr. Russo had warned her that I would be to blame if he had a heart attack. However, Courtney's voice turned into a whisper before I could respond, and she exclaimed, "Oh, my God! Three black sedans just pulled up out in front of our building. What's going on?!"

Simultaneously there were three hard knocks at my front door! "FBI, open up!"

"Courtney! It's the FBI. They're here too!"

The pounding on my front door echoed through the empty house, and my heart raced as I realized that the FBI was also at the Rosedale Tech office. My mind was racing with questions, but I realized above all else, I needed to stay calm and face the situation head-on.

As I opened the door, Agent Downing stood before me, his face stern and serious. "Mr. Detwiler," he said, "we've decided that it's necessary to take some of your staff and all family members into protective custody until the perpetrator has been caught and processed."

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine, knowing the threat was more extensive in light of the Rosedale case history. But

at the same time, I felt a sense of relief that the FBI was taking action to protect everyone involved.

“We’ll be driving you and the Rosedale co-owners to Guy’s estate, Casa Palaciosa,” Agent Downing continued. “It’s easier to lock down and secure, which should provide a more effective barrier against any potential threats, and I understand you have an important project you’re working on. That way, you can continue your work. Your friend, Carter Brown from the local PD, insisted on it.”

Trying to process the information, I asked, “And the other family members, are they at Casa Palaciosa too?”

Agent Downing shook his head. “No, they’ve all been moved to safe houses not far from where Amy and your daughter are staying. It’s for their safety, you understand. We’ll reunite you with them as soon as possible.”

“Let me grab some things.”

As soon as I was out of the agent’s sight, I called Courtney to confirm what I had just been told. When she answered, she was breathless. “Mr. Detwiler, Brad and I got away!”

“What do you mean, got away?”

Courtney explained, “We managed to hide in a storage closet together until the agents left the office. They didn’t see us, and I don’t think they knew how many of us there were. So, we slipped out the back door. We couldn’t risk being taken into protective custody, too, not with everything going on.”

I could hear the determination in her voice, and I couldn’t help but feel a surge of admiration for her courage. But I also worried for their safety, knowing they chose to go off alone. “Are the other co-owners aware?”

“Yes. Brad has his laptop. He plans to work on the new app while we’re hiding.”

“Get a burner phone. I’ll do the same and forward you the number as soon as possible. The rest of us are supposed to go to Casa Palaciosa. FBI’s orders!”

“So, what’s your plan now?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

Courtney hesitated for a moment before answering. “Brad and I are on our way to grab his camping equipment. We’re heading for a campground near Palm Springs. It’s secluded, and we should be able to lay low there for a while. We can’t risk being caught since the news got out somehow that we are working on the app.”

“Yeah, someone told Carter. He knows.”

“Well, I suspect he still has access to our servers... due to the ongoing investigations.”

We ended our conversation as I grabbed some essentials and prepared to leave with the FBI. I was pissed, saddened, and even grateful to a point that the nightmare plaguing Rosedale might be coming to an end. On the one hand, I was glad that Courtney and Brad had managed to evade protective custody, allowing them to continue working on the project so we could market it. But on the other hand, I feared for their safety, knowing that they were putting themselves at risk by going off the grid.

Before I locked my house and pulled my Lexus inside the tiny garage, I grabbed a picture of Amy, Ava, and me that Margaret took on the day she delivered Ava here and slipped it in my pocket.

The ride to Casa Palacious was a blur, my mind bouncing between worry for Courtney and Brad and the gnawing ache to be with Amy and Ava. As the black sedan pulled up to the estate, the imposing iron gates swung open, revealing the winding driveway that led to Guy’s sprawling mansion. Of course, I’d been here many times for work and pleasure, but today it felt like a different world, a fortress designed to keep the dark forces at bay.

I was met at the entrance by Guy whose face was ashen. Daniel and Ryder were already rummaging through the wine cooler, and Chase was staring out the window, all sporting their unique blend of fear, frustration, and suspicion. They had been abruptly yanked from their normal lives too, and their

families whisked away to safe houses. Now we were here, trapped in Guy's gilded cage, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"How are you holding up, Mitch?" Guy wondered, his eyes blazing with a mix of sorrow and fear. "Do you know where Amy is? I'm thinking everyone else must be near her location... at least, that's what Agent Downing told me."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I don't know, Guy. But we're here now, and we have to deal with it. The FBI is taking this seriously, finally!"

Guy glanced over his shoulder at the agent standing on the back porch. "Hey, listen up! Let's meet in my office. It's soundproof."

I nodded. "And turn off your phones!"

As we gathered in the opulent office to discuss our next move, reaching for a ray of hope, I jammed my hand into my pocket to touch the photo of Amy, Ava, and me. Just as we settled into our seats, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Despite the FBI's assurances, it felt like we were sitting ducks, vulnerable to an unseen enemy. I took a deep breath and looked around at my partners, trying to find solace in our collective strength.

"Alright, first things first," Guy began, his voice laced with determination. "Mitch, you mentioned burner phones. We need to find a way to get them without tipping off the FBI. Any ideas?"

I thought for a moment and then replied, "We could ask one of our employees or friends who aren't in protective custody to pick them up for us. They can leave them somewhere discreet for us to collect."

Guy smirked. "You've got to be kidding me. They are all either in safe houses or are scared out of their minds."

Ryder chimed in, "Yeah, and you know the FBI will be monitoring everything we do. They would find out and probably fine us or something. Sometimes I wonder whose side they are really on."

Daniel added, “Speaking of trust, how do we know that Courtney and Brad are safe? They’re out there on their own, and we can’t protect them.”

I cleared my throat and motioned for everyone to come closer so they could hear my idea. “Chase, I noticed a while back at your last party that an unpaved road next to your house looked like it when into Guy’s vineyard.”

“Yes, it’s new. It’s for my farming equipment. It leads out to a side road. Guy rubbed his hands together with a sly grin, his voice low and conspiratorial. “I don’t think even our regular security detail has figured out the trail leads off the property. They believe it stops at the shed where I store the equipment.”

I listened, considering. “You’ve got a solid reason for taking off on your ATV. Do you think the FBI is aware that Chase’s house is on your estate?”

Chase snorted, nodding. “Oh, they know, alright. But who cares? Guy can tell them he’s gotta inspect the vineyard’s irrigation. I’ll toss him the keys to my Escalade. It has 4-wheel drive and can handle the sand path with no problem.”

Ryder scratched his chin, impressed. “Clever plan. But when do we make a move?”

“Tonight,” I declared, my voice resolute. Their gazes snapped at me in surprise, but I just shrugged.

The others exchanged glances, sensing the pressing need for haste. “Let’s do it,” Guy agreed. He smirked, glancing at his watch. “How about... seven o’clock? Night’ll have fallen by then, and besides, the sooner we can connect with Brad and Courtney, the better.” Guy ran his hand down his face. “On second thought, I think it’s best if Mitch tags along. Just in case we hit a snag.”

A few glasses of wine and some reheated leftovers from Guy’s freezer later, the two of us were off. The thrill of our escapade hung thick in the air as we navigated the four-wheeler toward Chase’s abode. Our minds buzzed with

anticipation, already plotting our covert trip to Walmart to snag a phone for each of us.

Climbing back on the four-wheeler, we made our way back to the main house, eager to share our successful escapade with the rest of the group. Yet, when we when inside, we were met with long faces. Agent Downing was sitting on the couch with his feet propped up on Guy's antique coffee table. I sucked in a quick breath waiting for his interrogation to start about our little journey into town, but instead, he opened his briefcase and handed each of us a digital tablet to connect with our family members.

I nodded, feeling nervous yet excited to see Amy and baby Ava after only one day. Despite only seeing them virtually, it still would bring me joy. I grabbed the tablet and opened the Zoom app, seeing the preloaded meeting invitation. Downing gave me a reassuring nod. He followed me into the other room and I clicked the button to join the call.

The screen flickered for a moment, and then there they were – Amy, her soft ebony hair cascading around her shoulders, and little Ava, chubby-cheeked and gurgling happily in Amy's arms. My heart swelled with love and longing as I waved to them, trying to maintain a smile despite my bittersweet ache.

“Hi, Amy. Hey there, Ava!” I said, my voice wavering just a bit.

Amy's eyes lit up as she saw me and gave me a warm, gentle smile. “Mitch, it's so good to see you! Ava, look, it's Daddy!” She turned Ava towards the screen so she could see me better.

The baby's eyes widened, her tiny hands reaching out toward the screen as if trying to touch me. I couldn't help but chuckle, my eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“We miss you so much, Mitch,” Amy said softly, her own eyes shining with emotion. “But we're so thankful you're okay and that we can still see you. Thank God for digital technology.”



I swallowed the lump in my throat, finding it difficult to speak. “I miss you both more than I can say. But I’m grateful too. Grateful that we’re all still safe and able to be together like this, even if it’s just through a screen.”

“Oh, Mitch. I’ve been thinking. I’m pretty sure I forgot to close the gate when Ava and I headed out to the beach. I’m so, sorry—“

“Amy, save your breath. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t been so worried about money, I would have never let my security detail go, thinking home security would be enough. Now all the wives and kids have been placed in protective custody like you.”

“Oh, God, Mitch....”

“And your father has been calling the office, worried sick about you. I don’t know what to tell him.”

“Let me talk to Agent Ramirez and see if she’ll let me get in touch with him. Papa might be able to help. He has *contacts* you know!”

Our conversation continued, filled with updates about Amy’s living arrangements and how she and Ava were coping. It was a bittersweet exchange, a lifeline that connected us across the distance and danger that separated us.

As my allotted time drew to a close, I reluctantly prepared to say goodbye. Downing stood nearby, his expression a mix of sympathy and firm resolve.

“I love you both so much,” I told them, my voice thick with emotion. “Stay strong, and know that I’m doing everything I can to be with you again.”

Amy nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. “We love you too, Mitch. More than anything.”

With a final wave to baby Ava, I ended the call, and the screen went dark. At that moment, the emptiness of the room felt almost unbearable. But as I looked over at Downing, I saw a glimmer of something in his eyes when he asked, “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but is Amy’s father, Giuseppe Russo?”

“Yes, and I’m sure he’s been burning up my phone.”

“While you were out, I collected everyone’s phones and put them in my car safe, so I wouldn’t know. But if that’s Giuseppe Russo, I think he’s...” Downing shook his head.

“Who is he?”

“The Russo family has deep ties to organized crime. They operate in Colorado and Nevada, and I’m pretty sure they have connections around here, too — the horse tracks. I believe Antonio Russo is the kingpin of the operation. He’s in Vegas.”

“I don’t think it’s the same family. Amy’s family owns a boutique that sells skiing equipment in Vail,” I shook my head. “And anyway, if you know all this stuff, why are they still operating?”

Downing smirked as he walked away, “You fellas got a lot to learn!”

## CHAPTER

## *Sixteen*

### Amy

WITH AVA NESTLED SECURELY in the baby carrier backpack, I adjusted the straps and gripped my walking stick, ready to embark on this little adventure. The sun cast its warm golden rays through the trees, dappling the forest floor with spots of light. The gentle rustling of leaves above and the sweet scent of nature filled the air, setting the scene for a perfect day for a picnic.

Last night's whispered conversation with Mitch over the FBI's trusty iPad had left me with a thrilling revelation that the Rosedale girls were nearby, tucked away in their own secluded cottages. It was an unexpected but welcome surprise, given the isolation the FBI had imposed upon us. Agent Ramirez reluctantly gave her approval for me to meet them, understanding my need to reconnect with familiar faces in these challenging times.

The trail opened up to a lovely clearing, where the sunlight sparkled on the placid surface of Lake Susan like a thousand tiny diamonds. The breathtaking view stopped me in my tracks, and I paused for a moment to savor the beauty before me. Lush greenery framed the lake, creating a scene that seemed ripped straight from the pages of a romance novel—or a creepy thriller. I wasn't sure which.

As I neared the lake, I spotted my friends gathered around a picnic table. Instead of their usual laughter, I was met by a few hushed sounds of children playing hide-and-go-seek around the shelter and between the picnic tables. On a ridge

not far away, I spotted a black sedan. A male agent was outside leaning against the hood, binoculars in hand, keeping watch over us.

“Look, here comes Amy!” Ariel called out, her smile as infectious as ever.

“Amy! I bet you never dreamed in a thousand years we would be meeting like this!” Meagan said, hugging me.

“You were brave to hike out in the woods by yourself. We had a ride.” Sicily rolled her eyes and shot a thumb over her shoulder toward the car on the ridge.

“Got snacks!” Amber announced, opening her pack and pointing to the ice chest on the picnic table filled with drinks and fixings for a picnic. “Government issue. Not bad, considering.”

“I’ll get a bottle of water... Oh, by the way, where’s Courtney? Or wasn’t she a part of this?” I asked.

“Shhh,” Ariel held her finger to her lips. “Okay, here’s the scoop!” We huddled closer and listened as Ariel faced the lake, away from the agent with the binoculars. “Remember, loose lips sink ships. Sound familiar, Meagan?”

Meagan groaned, facing away, “Don’t remind me!”

“Well, I think that’s part of the point. But first things first. Guy quickly texted me before the dragnet caught up with Jonathan and me, and they took our phones away,” Ariel explained. “They didn’t include Mom. She was allowed to stay at the guest house. She’s got to be a nervous wreck.”

“But where’s Courtney?” Sicily whispered.

“Courtney and Brad got away. Guy figures the FBI really didn’t know who all was involved, so Courtney and Brad hid until everyone else was evacuated from the Rosedale office.”

“Where do you think they went?” Amber asked.

Ariel shrugged, “Who knows, honestly. I just hope they’re okay. But hey, we’ve got a lot of stuff to talk about, and we don’t have a lot of time. I don’t even know when we need to get back to our cabins. Your cabin, Amy, must be pretty far

away, while the rest of us are right next to each other. It looks like we're in some kind of national forest or something. Anyway, I digress. Here's what I'm thinking. We should all write down everything we remember about our own experiences. I mean, we all agree that this whole crazy case has gone on way too long, right? Even with the FBI involved in your kidnapping, Amy, nobody's been caught yet."

"Yes, and the person that was following Mitch and me on the beach was out of jail in one day," I added.

"So, we don't have anything to write on," Meagan remarked.

"Thankfully, I grabbed a writing tablet from my desk before I left, so I brought it with me and some pens." Ariel dug into her backpack and distributed a pen and some paper to each of us.

"Well, you'll know my story. It's the newest. If someone watches Ava for me, I'll get a fire going in the grill. I hope we have some matches or something."

"Great. I think everything you'll need to get started is over there in that bag." Sicily explained.

As they settled in to jot down their stories, I fixed the hot dogs for the kids, who were growing hungrier by the minute.

"Hey, kids!" I called out, "Hot dogs will be ready soon. Who's hungry?"

With the children happily eating, I joined the gals at the table and started recording my own story on paper. The atmosphere was a mix of urgency and camaraderie, as we all understood the importance of what we were doing. In the midst of the chaos and uncertainty surrounding us, it was comforting to be in the company of friends, sharing a meal and working together to unravel the tangled web of events that had brought us here.

Finally, Sicily raised her hand like a kid in school and waved her paper in the air. "I'm done." We all paused as she reiterated how she moved to San Diego and started working for Daniel. Soon a body of a staff person was found murdered

beside the copier, and how, later, someone had tried to kidnap Harper, her daughter, in plain daylight. The attempt had failed, and the kidnapper got away. Also, at some point, Daniel received a weird recording from someone who intended to break them up. And it seemed like things revolved around the date of January 6th. “Oh, and Agent Carter Brown was assigned to the case after the first schmuck came up with nothing!”

“Since I wasn’t around then, what’s the significance of January 6th, Sicily?” I asked.

“I think that’s still a mystery,” Sicily replied and continued. “Well... here’s some more history. The six guys were friends and frat brothers in college, but at first, they included Clint Tyree as a founding partner who helped set up the company. He was always good with paperwork and very smart. But some years later, Clint rebranded the old company to Rosedale Technologies and transferred to Seattle, his hometown. Most recently, he came back to help write the grant for the Golden Key Project.”

“Yea, and he suddenly took off and left us holding the bag!” Meagan added. “But, hey, that project helped solidify my relationship with Chase. So, I’m not complaining.”

“I’m next!” Amber called out. “Do you remember the hog’s head that was left for Ryder at Daniel’s bachelor’s party?”

“That was so gross!” Sicily added.

“Long story short, a note was left for Ryder in a dead hog’s head, hinting that Ryder’s family was somehow responsible for the murder at the office. His family owned a butcher shop at some point and the hog head looked suspicious. Also, Carter was found tied up and left in his garage during that time. Thankfully, he was rescued, and of course, my mother and father-in-law are innocent.”

“Well, maybe Meagan and I should tell our story together since it is intertwined,” Ariel snickered.

“No, you tell it for both of us. Some of what happened is still foggy or I’ve completely forgotten it,” Meagan admitted, sighing.

I was aware of some of the story because I used to babysit for Ariel and was Meagan’s driver while she was recovering from her own close call with the killer. But I listened closely as Ariel filled us in on her story since Ariel, Meagan, and I were the only ones to have personal contact with the killer/kidnapper.

Ariel explained how she had escaped to England to avert harm after Chelsea - an acquaintance of Meagan - had discovered where she lived. Soon after, Meagan was kidnapped and left for dead. Taking almost a year to recover from her head injury.

“Yea, and some of us believe that Chelsea person was coming after Ariel, and when she wasn’t home, went after Meagan instead. It’s just a theory I’ve heard the guys kicking around.” Amber added.

“Good job, everyone!” Ariel cajoled, holding out her hand. “I’ll get these stories typed up as soon as I can. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll collect them for safekeeping.”

We promptly concluded our activities as we observed another black sedan arriving on the ridge. Now there were two agents present, and I was relieved to find that one of them was Agent Ramirez. As the sun descended behind the hills, the air grew colder, encapsulating the perfect conclusion to a day filled with mixed emotions.

As I eased a sleeping Ava into her car seat and sat beside her, Ramirez glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Amy, I set up a Zoom call with your father as you requested. He’s eager to hear from you. I’ll take the baby if you like so you can have some private time to speak with him.”

“Awesome!” I replied, grateful for the opportunity to reconnect with my dad. After not hearing from me for two days, I knew he would be worried sick.

As soon as we arrived at my safe house, I gently freed Ava from her car seat and handed her over to Ramirez. I headed inside, my heart thumping in my chest at what my father would say when he found out what was happening. With a deep breath, I clicked on the Zoom link and waited for the call to connect.

Papa's weathered face filled the screen, his eyes reflected a mixture of relief and concern. "Amy, my dear, I've been trying to get in touch with you for two days! Are you alright? I understand you're in a safe house. Agent Ramirez reached out to me," he said, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Papa, I'm so sorry for making you worry," I said, tears welling up in my eyes. "I'm okay, really. A lot has happened, and I have so much to tell you."

His eyes searched mine for a moment before he sighed heavily. "Alright, tell me everything. I'm here for you."

I recounted the events of the past few days, explaining how I had become little Ava's nanny and the circumstances that led to it. My father listened intently; his brow furrowed in concern. When I finished, he shook his head and said, "Amy, I had no idea all this was happening. I'm glad you're safe, but I want you to know that I'm going to do everything I can to help you."

"Oh, Papa, I appreciate that, but it's complicated," I replied, feeling overwhelmed.

"I understand, sweetheart," my father said, his voice softening. "But I can't just sit back and do nothing while you're in this situation. I'm going to reach out to some of our relations before I try to contact Mitch and see if we can work together to find a solution. We need to reunite the two of you and figure out a way to take care of Ava without putting you in danger. And, of course, the rest of the Rosedale crew. Mum and I have grown fond of them."

I hesitated, knowing what family relations he was referring to. But I didn't care. I loved Mitch and Ava, and Papa always put family first. His determination and love would be a driving force in finding a way to make it happen. "Thank you, Papa. I



don't know what I would do without you," I whispered, my voice cracking with emotion.

"Everything will work out alright, Amy. I promise," my father said, his eyes filled with determination. "Just take care of yourself and Ava. I'll handle the rest."

"Can I have a word with Mum? She's been on my mind non-stop these past few days. Honestly, I wasn't prepared for taking care of a baby day and night. All I've ever done is babysit." I tried to hold back the tears threatening to spill.

"Amy, sweetheart, I wish I could make that happen. But the FBI only gave the green light for me to contact you. No one else from our family is allowed, and that includes your mother. You can only imagine how heartbroken she is. She sends you all her love, though. And as you can see from my surroundings, I'm not at home either."

"Where are you then?"

"I'm afraid that's a secret, my darling!"

"I love you, Papa!"

As the screen faded to black, a soft whimper echoed from the other room. "Seems like someone's craving a bottle."

With a playful grin, Ramirez passed Ava into my arms and said, "Fear not, little one! Mama's here to save the day!"

## CHAPTER

### *Seventeen*

#### **Mitch**

I **STOOD** in Guy's kitchen, flipping pancakes and sizzling bacon on the griddle while the guys sat around the kitchen island like a pack of hungry wolves. Daniel, Ryder, Chase, and Guy all chimed in with their breakfast orders, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes at their enthusiasm. However, it was a nice break from the long faces we often wore around here.

"Hey, Mitch," Daniel teased, "have you ever considered applying to the local Waffle House as a short-order cook? You've got the skills."

Ryder snickered, and Chase joined in. "Yeah, man, you'd be a natural."

I shot them a mock glare, flipping another pancake with exaggerated flair. "Laugh it up, boys," I retorted. "But if we don't get Shock and Awe off the ground, we might all be looking for new jobs."

Late last night, after our Zoom visits with our families, we proceeded to get drunk while playing poker and discussing the new app that we hoped to market to electric utilities. The name Shock and Awe started as a joke, but it stuck for our new app. It was a make-or-break kind of deal for us. But before I could slide into a full-blown rant about the importance of our project, I caught sight of Agent Downing, who was as hungover as the rest of us and looked like he could also use some breakfast. He'd played poker with us and probably lost more money than he'd care to admit.

Just as I was about to fix him a plate, the intercom buzzed with a message from the front gate of Casa Palacious. I pushed the button, and the guard's voice crackled through. "Hey, there's a US Marshal here with some sort of orders. They're demanding to speak with Agent Downing since he's in charge of your protective custody detail. What should I do?"

We exchanged glances with Downing, who immediately straightened in his seat. Something about this felt off, and we knew it, and so did he. But there was no sense in keeping the Marshal waiting. "Send them through," Guy yelled from across the room.

I handed Agent Downing a plate of breakfast, watching as he took a deep breath and braced himself for whatever was coming our way. "Guess the fun's over, boys," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "Downing, do you have any idea what this is about?"

"Nope, not a clue!" Downing hissed, shoveling in a few more quick bites of his scrambled eggs.

As the guys exchanged uneasy glances, we all knew that the arrival of a US Marshal could only mean one thing—trouble. And for Rosedale Tech, trouble had a nasty habit of following us around.

We all crowded around the window, watching a beige Cadillac pull up with Giuseppe Russo at the wheel, flanked by one man seated beside him and one in the back. As the doors to the car opened, I recognized one of them as my attorney, Angelo Ferrara. But when Downing caught sight of the third man, his eyes widened in recognition.

"That's Antonio Russo!" Downing whispered, glancing at me.

"Who's Antonio Russo?" Chase inquired.

"He's only the kingpin of the Russo crime family."

"What the fuck!" Daniel whispered.

My breath caught in my throat when Giuseppe Russo, Amy's father, stepped out of the car. He wore a well-fitted suit, which differed from his usual casual Tommy Bahama

beachwear. He and his brother Antonio could have passed for twins if it weren't for Antonio's balding head. Giuseppe glanced at all of us and then gave me a crisp nod and a tight smile.

My heart pounded in my chest while I stood in the doorway as the men made their way toward the front porch. Antonio Russo's presence was a clear sign that some power move was about to go down. Downing's face had gone pale, and the rest of the Rosedale Tech crew shifted uncomfortably, casting anxious glances at each other.

When the trio finally entered Casa Palaciosa, they couldn't help but look around in admiration. "Well, I must say, this is quite the place you've got here, Guy," Giuseppe remarked, his eyes sweeping the opulent room with a mixture of envy and appreciation.

In that instant, I realized Angelo was the man sporting the US Marshall's badge, and my mind raced with confused thoughts stoked by fear. Then as the tension in the room thickened, Giuseppe's gaze landed on Agent Downing, the one person that wasn't a part of the Rosedale crew. "Ah, you must be the infamous Agent Downing," he said with a smirk. "I've heard all about you."

Downing's jaw clenched tightly, but he remained silent, staring back at Giuseppe.

Then without further ado, my attorney performed his duties as a US Marshall. "Agent Kenneth Downing, I'm here to serve you with a Court order."

Angelo handed over a thick envelope, his face betraying no emotion. Downing hesitantly took it, scanning its contents. His eyes widened as he read.

"These papers order the FBI to release the Rosedale families from protective custody and vacate the premises immediately," Downing said, his voice taut with disbelief. "But there's more. We're also required to return the phones we have put away for safekeeping and provide all the evidence we've gathered in the Rosedale case to Mr. Angelo Ferrara."

I was dumbfounded. What could have possibly transpired to trigger such an abrupt and stunning reversal of our circumstances?

Antonio regarded Downing with a chilly smile. “You heard the man. It’s time for you and your men to leave. And don’t forget our evidence.”

The room was awash with shock and fear as Downing and the other agents gathered their belongings.

Suddenly, Antonio reached into his jacket pocket and produced an envelope filled to the brim with cash, which he handed to Downing as he stepped closer. “This is to ensure that my niece Amy and the other women and children make it safely back to their San Diego homes by midnight tonight.”

Eyeing the envelope with suspicion, it was clear Downing knew better than to argue. “Understood,” he said through gritted teeth, snatching the envelope from Antonio’s outstretched hand.

Antonio leaned in closer, his voice low and menacing. “And if this Court order is not carried out, you’ll answer to me personally.”

Downing met his gaze head-on. “Nothing will happen to them, Mr. Russo. I give you my word.”

Antonio’s eyes narrowed. “Your word doesn’t mean much to me, Agent. But we’ll see.”

The two men locked eyes for a tense moment before Antonio abruptly cut off their conversation. “Give me your business card!”

Downing fished in his pocket and pulled out a card, which he handed over to Antonio. The mob boss carefully examined it, his expression inscrutable. “Very well,” he said, slipping the card into his pocket. “We’ll be in touch shortly with a secure digital drop box where you are to send the evidence. I expect your final file transfer,” Antonio glanced at his watch and continued, “to be finished before six o’clock this evening local time.”

“Consider it done, sir!”

As Downing and his fellow operatives withdrew from the stately residence, Antonio motioned for the men to accompany him into Guy's study. Amy's father secured the door in their wake, and the group settled into seats encircling Guy's desk, which now doubled as an impromptu conference table.

Positioned behind the desk, Antonio reclined in the chair, his fingers interlaced in a contemplative fashion. My counsel, who had maintained silence since executing his duties as a US Marshal, was seated beside me. His focus was unyielding on Antonio.

"Gentlemen, let me lay it out for you. Just a few days ago, I couldn't give a flying fuck about your troubles or what you had coming. But when family calls, like my brother here, I answer." Antonio clapped Giuseppe on the back. "He tells me that you guys are like family, and that makes you like family to me. So, it's on me now to help you mop up this mess. I'll use what I've got—connections, calling in favors, and, if need be, getting my hands dirty. And you should know, I don't take losing lightly."

Giuseppe cleared his throat, and continued his brother's monologue, "Now that the Rosedale families have been liberated from protective custody, it's time we unravel the truth behind the years of murder, abduction, intimidation, and extortion plaguing the Rosedale family and now my only child."

"What precisely do you propose?" I inquired cautiously as the others either nodded or signaled their agreement with a thumbs up.

A smile graced Antonio's lips, his eyes gleaming with intrigue. "My plan entails a measure of risk on your part. However, I suspect you always knew it would come to that, didn't you?"

Guy rose to his feet and paced the floor. "Mr. Russo, one doesn't ascend to your stature without developing survival instincts. I guarantee my friends and me," Guy gestured to encompass our group, "have long sensed something was amiss

with the case. We are ready to defend ourselves but were at a loss of how to do it!”

“Indeed, that’s the truth,” Daniel declared, rising and leaning across the desk toward the mob boss.

“Let’s cut to the chase, then. What, sir, do you propose?” Chase inquired as a smattering of chuckles broke out.

“Did I miss something?” Antonio growled, irritated.

Giuseppe reclined in his chair. “Perhaps you gentlemen should introduce yourselves before my brother outlines the plan we’ve devised for you.”

Following the introductions, Antonio chuckled, “So, yes, allow me to cut to the chase, Chase.”

As Antonio continued with the plan, his eyes suddenly caught sight of something outside the window. The lush green of Guy’s vineyard spread out before him, a picturesque scene that demanded his attention. He stopped mid-sentence, admiration overtaking his previously stern expression.

“That’s a beautiful vineyard out there,” he said, pointing out the window. “Is it yours, Guy?”

Guy, noticing the change in Antonio’s demeanor, smiled and nodded. “Yes, it is. I took it over a few years ago. It’s been quite a project, but it’s starting to bear fruit, quite literally.” He quickly walked over to the wine cooler beside his desk, opened it, and pulled out a bottle of wine. “This is one of the first vintages from the vineyard. Would you like to try some?”

Antonio nodded, intrigued. Guy uncorked the bottle and poured a glass for Antonio, who accepted it with a smile. He took a sip, savoring the flavors before continuing his previous train of thought.

“Now, where was I? Ah, yes. Rosedale needs to fire the private security detail they’ve been using. They’re nothing but a bunch of schmucks.” Antonio took another sip of the wine, clearly enjoying it as he explained his thoughts on the matter. “Their incompetence is causing more problems than it’s solving, and I have a better solution in mind....”

The room fell silent as everyone listened intently to Antonio's proposal. Guy, for his part, beamed with pride as he watched the mob boss enjoy the fruits of his vineyard.

Antonio swirled the wine in his glass, seemingly deep in thought. "I have a hand-picked crew, guys." His eyes seemed lost in contemplation. "I have personally assembled a team of experts, gentlemen, who typically work for the high-stakes clientele at Del Mar during racing season. They are, undoubtedly, among the finest in the field. With the racing season at a standstill, they are available to assist Rosedale," he explained, his tone steady and self-assured.

Daniel's eyebrow arched, his curiosity piqued by Antonio's proposition. "These men, are they trustworthy with children? After all, we're family men."

A sly smile played across Antonio's lips, his gaze meeting Daniel's. "Indeed. To my knowledge, the majority have families of their own. I assure you they're discreet and trustworthy professionals."

I edged nearer to Angelo, my legal counsel, to voice a question gnawing at the recesses of my mind. "Could this arrangement create complications with the state, given I'm expecting a visit from the Department of Human Services to check on Ava?"

"As long as Antonio Russo is involved," Angelo quipped, a smirk tugging at his lips. "No!"

Ryder interjected, "We are profoundly indebted to you, sir. How could we possibly repay you?"

Amy's father rose to his feet, his brow furrowing. "Please, refrain from insulting my brother! He is extending a helping hand because he values family above all else. We want you, your wives, and your children to put this legal debacle behind you and resume normal lives."

"Oh, no!" Ryder stammered. "I apologize. I never intended to be disrespectful. Please understand."

Antonio nodded, swallowing another taste of his wine. "I take no offense. However, I do acknowledge my brother's



concern.”

We exchanged apprehensive glances before I finally suggested, “Please introduce us to your crew. We are immensely grateful for your aid. When can we expect their arrival?”

“They should be here soon” Antonio stood, emptying the final droplet of wine. “Now, Guy, would you be so kind as to show me around your estate? I’d like to survey your vineyard. We’re in search of a fresh wine supplier for my casino establishments.”

We heard a distant commotion as we returned to the main house after we toured the vineyard. The sound grew louder and more distinct. Then, turning the corner, we were met with a heartwarming scene: the wives and children had arrived. Laughter and squeals of delight filled the air, and the atmosphere was charged with joy and relief. There were embraces, tears streaming down our faces as some held each other tightly, the weight of our past struggles seemingly melting away in the warmth of our reunion.

I located Amy as she ran toward me, holding little Ava. “Can we really go home?” Amy asked breathlessly.

“Yes, thanks to your father... and your uncle.”

“Now, if you wait right here, I have a question to ask your father.”

“What question?” Amy asked, grabbing my arm.

“His permission to marry his daughter! If that’s alright with you,” I asked, locking a loose tendril behind her ear.

“Oh, God, yes, yes, Mitch!” Amy hopped up and down and motioned for her family, calling, “Papa, Uncle Antonio... come here!”

## CHAPTER

### *Eighteen*

**Amy**

**A Week Later**

EXCITEMENT BUBBLED INSIDE me as I hastily gathered my damp hair into a messy bun while sitting at my new vanity. Today would be a day to remember as my parents had planned an engagement party for Mitch and me at the charming Bella Vita. The venue held a special place in our family's history since my mom had discovered that the restaurant's owners were her distant cousins while planning my graduation celebration there.

With her signature charm and persistence, my mother managed to convince them to close the restaurant to the public for the day, ensuring our celebration would be a private affair, free from any unexpected surprises. The anticipation of our engagement party at the intimate Bella Vita, surrounded by the warmth and love of family and friends, filled my heart with joy as I dabbed moisturizer onto my face, preparing for the unforgettable moments that lay ahead.

Glancing at the baby monitor, I noticed Ava was still taking her morning nap and went off in search of Mitch. I descended the bungalow's creaky wooden steps into the dimly lit basement, drawn by the faint shuffling sound. The air was musty, and I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering slightly. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I spotted Mitch standing by an old, worn dresser. He was bent over, peering into one of the open drawers with a furrowed brow.

I crept closer, curious about what had captured his attention. My foot caught on a loose floorboard as I approached, and the resulting creak echoed through the basement. Mitch jumped, startled by the noise, and in his haste to turn around, he dropped something on the floor.

I watched as he quickly scooped up the object, but not before I caught a glimpse of the shimmering diamond ring that had clattered to the floor. My heart skipped a beat, and I blurted out, “What are you doing, Mitch?”

He appeared embarrassed and flushed, looking at me sheepishly. “I didn’t intend for you to discover it like this,” he confessed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I just got this ring back from the jewelers. You weren’t supposed to see it yet. I was planning to propose to you for real at the party in front of our friends and your family.” He gestured towards the ring, a nervous smile playing on his lips. “It’s an heirloom diamond that’s been passed down for years on my mother’s side of the family. My great-grandmother was Sicilian.”

As he spoke, I couldn’t help but feel a warm glow spread through me. The thought of Mitch going to such lengths to surprise me was incredibly touching. Still, I couldn’t resist teasing him a little. “So, you planned to surprise me at the party this afternoon with this very special ring?”

“I knew you’d be expecting the wedding set we looked out the other day.”

“Well, I guess the surprise is on you this time,” I said, giggling, reaching out to take his hand. As we stood there, surrounded by the dusty relics of the past, we shared a quiet moment of connection that bridged generations, bound by the love that had brought us together.

Mitch paused and locked eyes with me, seemingly trying to read my expression. Then, after a moment, he confidently stepped back and knelt down, holding the diamond ring up in front of me. The sunlight streaming through the basement window illuminated every angle of the gem, causing it to shimmer like a sky full of stars.

“Amy,” he began, his voice filled with emotion. “You are the love of my life, and I can’t imagine spending another day without you by my side. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and Ava’s mother?”

Tears filled my eyes as I looked at the man I love kneeling before me with vulnerability and devotion. My heart felt overwhelmed with joy, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Mitch, I love you so much! Yes, I will marry you as I promised before, and I will stand by your side as we raise our daughter.”

As he slid the ring onto my finger, I marveled at how the diamond seemed to come alive. The stone’s fire and brilliance seemed to mirror the happiness that radiated through me, filling every corner of my being. Our love was like that diamond, forged through time and pressure and as unique and precious as the gem now adorning my hand.

We stood there, basking in our happiness until Ava’s cries from upstairs suddenly pulled us back to reality. Exchanging a glance, we knew we had to hurry. Our daughter needed us, and our new life together was beginning.

Hand in hand, we raced up the basement stairs, eager to attend to Ava and start our day as an engaged couple. Despite the unexpected nature of the proposal, I couldn’t imagine a more fitting moment, a perfect reflection of what we’d been going through.

Not long after, Ava was sitting on our bed wearing her ruffled pink dress with a matching bow in her hair, playing with her teddy bear. Mitch had just finished tying his tie. As I slipped into my tea-length dress, I giggled and asked, “Can you zip me up?”

“My pleasure.” Mitch’s hand brushed over my thick curves and lingered a bit at the small of my back when he pulled me in for a kiss. “You look beautiful, Amy!”

There was a knock at our door. “It’s Bob, my new bodyguard. The limo must have arrived.”

The moment we walked into Bella Vita Italian Restaurant, I was swept away by an intoxicating blend of flickering

candlelight and the heady aroma of roses. Something was magical in the air that late afternoon, an energy that made my pulse race. The Rosedale crew had come together, dressed to the nines, their laughter and excited chatter filling the room to celebrate our engagement. Papa, the ever-exuberant host, greeted Mitch and me with a dazzling grin, his theatrical gestures making it clear we were the stars of the show.

“Let’s welcome our guests of honor!” Papa bellowed, initiating applause from everyone.

Ava jumped and started to squall. “You scared the baby, Papa.”

“Giuseppe, Giuseppe...” Mum clicked her tongue and lifted Ava from her baby seat, rushing to comfort her.

“The place looks amazing, Mum!” I whispered, glancing around.

Outside, beyond the restaurant, the enchanting garden played host to a talented ensemble, their sweet melodies wrapping around us like a lover’s embrace. Mum had outdone herself. Sparing no expense, the decor was a breathtaking sight, each detail meticulously chosen by skilled decorators who had spun a gossamer tapestry of elegance with their cascading fabrics, shimmering fairy lights, and intricate flower arrangements.

As Mitch and I mingled with our dearest friends, Courtney, who had arrived home with Brad, was the first to catch a glint of my engagement ring. Her eyes lit up with a mischievous gleam as she grabbed my hand. “Oh, Amy, it is so unique. Is this what you and Mitch picked out? It looks like an antique.”

By now, all the gals were standing around, and as Mum pushed to the front of the crowd, I explained how I had happened upon Mitch in the basement and spoiled his surprise. “It was Mitch’s great-grandmothers. And Mum, she was Sicilian.”

Suddenly she yelled, “Giuseppe, come here! Mitch might be one of our distant relatives!” Mum grabbed my hand with

her free one to inspect the ring while balancing Ava with the other. “What a way to find out!”

Martha, Ariel’s mother who lived in Guy’s guest house, came out from a private room and congratulated me. She also offered to take Ava to join the other kids, being entertained with games, prizes, and a ventriloquist. I thanked Martha for her kindness and for looking after the kids so that we could celebrate. Martha collected Ava and her diaper bag and said, “I’m so happy for you, Amy!”

We all laughed, then clinked our glasses of Champagne in cheer. However, the evening was far from over, as the dining room soon filled with an array of steaming Italian delicacies. After we enjoyed our food, Papa stood up and made a toast to our future in grand form before Mitch, and I were the first to dance to the sound of “We Found Love.”

After a few hours of raucous celebration and several bottles of Champagne, as usual, the women ended up on one side of the room telling Mum about our safe house adventures. My mother was the best gasper I had ever encountered. She gasped and shivered time after time as each one of us told our story. Then we *all* gasped when Courtney told us about how she and Brad encountered a bear while hiking near their campground. “We dropped our backpacks and barely escaped with our lives while the bear feasted on the snacks inside!”

However, when we heard Agent Downing’s name mentioned from the men’s side of the room, we joined them and listened for any snippets of information that Papa was revealing about the Rosedale saga. With cigar smoke swirling around his head Papa explained with expansive gestures how he and Mum were getting out of the lease on the apartment by purchasing the penthouse instead and that he was planning to sell the family business in Vail.

“Now that Amy and Mitch are settling down, Elana and I want to be a part of their lives and can’t wait to spoil our one and only grandchild, little Ava.”

“What about your brother, Antonio? Is he still around?” Chase asked as he pulled up a chair for Meagan to join in.

“No. Antonio flew back to Vegas the same day. But that doesn’t mean he has abandoned us.”

“How, so?” Guy asked, leaning closer and lighting a cigar of his own.

“Here’s the update,” Papa said. “Agent Downing sent several videotapes from various places and a pile of photos of evidence. We don’t have access to the real evidence.... yet!” He grinned mischievously. “I suspect there will be an extra, fee.... if we want any of that.”

“Why would we want the original stuff, like the clothes Meagan was wearing when she was rescued after her kidnapping.... or the sign Amy held up during her ordeal?” Mitch asked.

“Oh, there are a hundred reasons! But, most importantly, to have a private lab do forensic testing. Or perhaps, we don’t want that evidence around. Something that might implicate one of you!”

“What do you mean...” Daniel asked, alarmed. “You don’t think any of us are behind this, do you Mr. Russo?”

Papa held up his hand in rebuttal. “No, I don’t, but you never know. Let’s say, for example, the perp is caught, and the case goes to trial. A good defense attorney can perform miracles. So, sometimes it’s best if anything incriminating is lost. You know, disappeared, or too destroyed to be of any use to the defense. Of course, there will be an extra fee for those services, too! Antonio will have to send someone from Vegas to handle matters of that sort.”

This issue made me nervous, and I could tell the other gals felt the same, so I asked a new question. “Papa, where is Mitch’s attorney, Mr. Ferrara? Is he going to be involved in this? Mitch told me he had no idea he was a US Marshall.”

Papa took a long draw from his cigar and blew a few smoke rings, thinking before he answered. “Ferrara and I go way back. Of course, that’s the reason I trusted him with Mitch’s custody case. He is a retired colonel. His expertise is in law enforcement, and he has a lot of experience in covert

intelligence gathering. Ferrara has connections that Antonio doesn't have access to, which makes him a valuable asset... or, in layman's terms. He's a good friend to have on our side."

Daniel scooted back in his chair. "I just want you to know how much Rosedale appreciates your assistance in this case."

Papa chuckled. "All I've done so far is arrange a seasoned security team for you."

"Hey, anything is an improvement, as far as I'm concerned," Ryder added.

"I'll have more for you in the next few days when Antonio's men have a chance to review what we've got. Figuring this out should be a piece of cake for them. They're used to dealing with all sorts of crime. My brother's biggest liabilities are the staff members at the casinos. There's always a few that think they are wise guys."

Soon we were all saying our goodbyes and gathering our sleepy kids. When we stepped outside, a line of limos driven by our security guards were waiting to whisk us away to our homes. Mitch and I slid in the back with Ava's car carrier between us. I was admiring my ring as the light from the streetlamp set the diamonds ablaze when we stopped at a red light not far from the bungalow.

When I glanced up at our surroundings, I did a double take. "Mitch! See that yellow bike over there in the bike rack outside the Stop-and-Go?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I think that's the bike the guy was riding." As the light turned green and we moved on, I rolled down the tinted window to get a clearer look. "Now, I'm sure of it. That's the same yellow bike, alright. It has a dented back fender!"

"Bob! Did you hear that!" Mitch asked, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir. You two stay in the car and let me handle this," Bob told us as he pulled up and parked between the building and the bike rack to provide privacy. We both watched in awe as he opened the glove compartment and took something out,



something small. In a few swift moves, he eased out of the driver's seat, took a few steps to the bike, and pressed what he was carrying under the bike's back fender. Then, chuckling, he got in and eased the vehicle out of the parking lot, grabbing his phone.

“Is that what I think it is?” Mitch asked.

“If you are thinking of an AirTag, you are correct,” Bob said, pulling up an app on his phone. “But it's no ordinary AirTag. Antonio specially ordered these. They can be detected within a 5-mile radius. They don't work off Bluetooth like the regular ones. I'll get an alert when the bike moves.”

I clapped Bob on the back, “Now, we're finally getting somewhere!”

## CHAPTER

### *Nineteen*

#### **Mitch**

ON THAT SUNNY MONDAY MORNING, I ducked into the black SUV and closed the door, feeling the leather seats creak as Bob started the engine and drove us toward Rosedale Tech's headquarters. It had been months since our successful grand opening, where we had rubbed shoulders with local celebrities and prominent figures from Silicon Valley. The press portrayed me as a successful bachelor on the rise, and it felt great.

But things had changed since then, and not for the better. My colleagues and I had hit a rough patch in our careers through no fault of our own, leaving the future of Rosedale Tech uncertain. Nevertheless, I felt grateful for the stroke of luck that fate had given me in my personal life.

Just moments ago, I'd kissed my baby daughter and fiancé goodbye. Then Amy snagged my arm before I could grab my 'secure' laptop and reminded me, "Don't forget, I'm going shopping today with Mum and some of the gals for my wedding dress and their bridesmaid dresses."

"Have fun. I can't wait to see my blushing bride..." I said, grateful Giuseppe and Elana would be footing the bill. "Oh, and your security is already here. You're in good hands."

While relaxing in the luxurious SUV, I thought about how different my work life was from my personal one. Although the successful grand opening event felt like it happened ages ago, I was still uncertain about what was in store for me and

my coworkers. Nonetheless, I was presently reenergized by the advice given to us by the Russo family, despite their questionable affiliations and shady habits.

Today, I had promised myself I would focus on finishing the Shock and Awe app design and would encourage others to do the same. We were ecstatic we had a buyer who wanted to be installed in the next month. Yet, that promise to myself was short-lived when Bob pulled up to the stop light near the Stop-and-Go, and we noticed the yellow bike was still in the same spot.

I leaned forward and tapped Bob on the shoulder, “Hey, are you sure your tracking device is working?”

He pressed a button on his phone, and we heard a ping sound, confirming that, indeed, the device was active. “I have to tell ya, Antonio’s equipment is known to rarely fail, and in the rare event that it does, it can lead to dire results for the vendor or the operator responsible.”

“So, what do you make of it? I wonder how long that bike has been parked there in the rack?”

“That’s on my to-do list today. I plan to interview the store manager to see what I can learn. Now that everything has been set up to keep you safe, we’ll start piecing together the picture the evidence shows us.”

I breathed in deeply, and my shoulders relaxed as Bob pulled up to the office and I got out. “I’ll text you when I’m ready to leave.”

“Don’t forget, Giuseppe is planning to stop by around one to catch you up on a few things.”

“Got it! Thanks.”

As I walked toward the building, I couldn’t shake off the feeling of unease that had crept up on me. The bike had seemed insignificant at first, but now it felt like a puzzle piece that didn’t fit. I wondered what other clues I might have missed and what they could mean for our company’s future and our safety. The uncertainty of it all made me feel powerless, and I had to find a way to regain control. As I

entered the lobby, I made a mental note to focus on what I *could* control and trust my instincts. After all, sometimes, the best way to move forward was to step back and reassess the situation with a clear head.

As I made my way to the breakroom following my departure from the elevator, I was excited for the usual Monday morning assortment of pastries and drinks that Courtney reliably set up for us. Typically, the basket next to the Keurig machine would be brimming with all of our preferred coffee and tea options. However, as I strode along the hallway, I detected no aroma of fresh coffee and encountered a group of individuals with somber expressions when I rounded the corner.

As Brad sat at the table with his head in his hands, Chase and Guy ignored me when I entered. Chase was seated next to Brad, gazing at the floor, and Guy was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, looking out the window. Sensing the gloomy atmosphere, I asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Courtney has tendered her resignation. She left a letter on my desk,” Chase said.

“What? What happened?” I asked, stunned.

Brad shook his head and sighed, “Her father insisted she come home to Wyoming. He’s afraid for her safety, and he’s up in years.” Brad raised his head to look at me. “I think she was secretly feeling guilty that his worry over her would cause health issues.”

“I’m sorry, bud!” I whispered and placed my hand on his shoulder.

Brad shrugged. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out I’m next, and since she and I have been dating, that probably means the psycho will come after her too!”

“Did you know she was leaving?” Chase asked Brad.

“Yes, and no. When she called her father to check on him using the flip phone and had to explain why she was afraid to use her own phone, I figured it was only a matter of time.”

As a new dad, I suddenly thought of Ava and had a newfound understanding of why Courtney's father had wanted her to come home so he could protect her. Clearly, we had not been offering the required level of protection our staff needed. All the extra counseling, extra paid days off, and paid security was only a band-aide of sorts.

"We've been very selfish," Guy muttered. "Has anyone else resigned that you know of, Chase?"

"No, but the day is young...."

"Well!" Brad stood. "Sitting around here moping isn't going to change anything. It's true we've been dealt a shitty hand, but we also have been doing our best. Courtney and I worked our asses off while we were holed-up inside the tent witnessing the first rain Palm Springs had in months and losing two backpacks full of food to a hungry bear."

We chuckled and nodded, heartened by Brad's dry humor.

"What's the name of that place that Courtney usually gets our Monday morning pastries from?" Chase asked. I pointed at the sticker on the fridge. "The Donut Hole? How original." Chase called the number and barked. "This is Chase Stratford from Rosedale Technologies. Send us our usual Monday morning order and put it on our tab. And give yourselves a fifty-dollar tip."

Chase's quick flip from being a jerk to a generous guy acted as shock therapy to our brains for some reason. Soon, we had our coffees going, and not long after, the delivery guy brought the goodies. Today, though, instead of going to our individual offices, we huddled around Brad's computer while he showed us the progress he and Courtney had made on the new app's design.

Everyone seemed excited about the possibilities as we looked over the new app. Chase leaned forward and pointed at the screen, "I really like the new user interface. It looks sleek and modern. But what about the backend? How is the data going to be managed?"

Brad furrowed his brows, “That’s a good question. We could use a cloud-based solution to store the data. It would be scalable, and we could easily manage it.”

Guy nodded in agreement, “That’s a good idea. We could use Amazon Web Services. They have a good reputation, and they’re reliable.”

Chase leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, “But what about the security of the data? We’ve been dealing with security issues, and we can’t afford to have another breach.”

Brad looked up from his computer, “I was thinking about that. We could use encryption to secure the data. And we could implement two-factor authentication for the users. That should make it more secure.”

Before we realized it, all the food was gone, and the Keurig had been refilled with water numerous times. The crushed water bottles beside it were evidence. “Jeez, it’s almost one o’clock. Giuseppe should be here any minute with an update on his team’s progress,” I remarked.

“Let’s get this place cleaned up,” Guy suggested, grabbing some paper towels and disinfectant spray to wipe down the table and counters.

“I got the trash,” I said. Then turning to Brad, I continued, “Why don’t you head for your office to put away your computer, then meet us in the conference room for our meeting with Russo.”

“Nope, I’m not letting this baby out of my sight. It seems these walls have eyes, you know.”

I simply shook my head and chuckled. “Yep, good idea.”

At straight up one o’clock, Giuseppe strode into the conference room with Bob right behind him. We all exchanged pleasantries and then got right down to business. The Russo’s had made some progress in the last few days, and Giuseppe was excited to share. Opening his laptop, he asked, “How do I hook this up to your overhead projector?”

“We’ve got you covered,” I reassured him as Chase set things up, and soon we could see several file folders on his

desktop.

Giuseppe proceeded to show us how he had arranged the evidence gathered from Agent Downing for easy identification. Each incident had a separate file with its own password and authentication process. As he clicked through each file folder, he explained the significance of each piece of evidence and how it fit into the bigger picture from the first murder and finally to the picture of Amy holding the sign.

“Now, what our team has noticed so far, is that the perp or perps love to taunt you with riddles and stupid shit,” Giuseppe explained, and continued, “It seems there have been only three actions of extreme violence against anyone associated with Rosedale. First, the murder of the maintenance person - that was to get your attention. To shock you. Then you had one failed kidnapping attempt, like the one against that precious child... her name is Harper, right Daniel?”

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.”

“Then we have the cop, Carter Brown, being tied up and left to die. That was ridiculous—an amateur job, for sure. Ryder, your family was called into question regarding the murder of the maintenance person working at the original Rosedale office, but that ultimately went nowhere... more taunting.”

“More like harassment!” Ryder added.

“Now, things take a stranger turn. Guy, your driver is mysteriously killed in the restroom of a popular restaurant. This leads to an acquaintance of your sister, Chelsea, pranking your then-girlfriend, Ariel. Things spiral out of control here... and Meagan is kidnapped and left for dead in the ditch allegedly by Chelsea.”

“What do you mean, things take a stranger turn?” Chase asked.

“Well, for one thing, this Chelsea person turns up dead in Canada, and the perp makes sure Chase knows about it. So there’s your third murder. And there is some question about an individual named Alex... another dead end. But again,

Chelsea's death doesn't trace back to anyone from Rosedale, thankfully."

"What about Amy's kidnapping? How does it fit in?" I asked.

"That's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. We can't figure it out, possibly because we still don't have anyone in custody to question. That lies squarely on the local legal system and probably, to some extent, lazy law enforcement. The most obvious is that you'd lose funding from a grant you were banking on for financial success. But why the kidnapper picked Amy is unclear." Giuseppe explained.

"Other than someone knowing Mitch was interested in her, despite the involvement with the mother of his child..." Guy pointed out.

I cringed but held my head up high when I expressed a notion that had been buzzing in my head since I found out I was Ava's father. "Giuseppe, do you think there's a connection between Nicole, Ava's birth mother, and Amy being targeted?"

"Let me tell you this. As you know, Vail is a small town, and Nicole's family owns a ski resort, Mitch. So it isn't a stretch that Nicole and her family influenced the killer in some weird way. But honestly, I doubt it. I know that Nicole's parents aren't exactly proud of how their daughter leads her life. And they had to know getting involved with my Amy wouldn't bode well for them."

Guy scooted back in his chair and added, "Here are my two cents. Amy wasn't a stranger to the Rosedale crew, so it is possible they planned to target her one way or another and simply followed Amy to Colorado. It might be interesting to have a look at a list of the passengers on the flight Amy took from San Diego to Vail."

"Excellent idea," Giuseppe said, scratching down a note. Then suddenly, he closed his laptop and crossed his hands over his chest. "Here's the problem we're against. The local cops aren't killing themselves to solve this! You have to ask why? And the FBI has bigger fish to fry. Amy was kidnapped in Colorado; of course, I became aware. Ferrara got involved



immediately, and the feds were brought in because my brother threatened them. But what have they done? Where are their reports? There aren't any! They were just going through the motions to keep the Russo family happy.”

“So, we have incompetent law enforcement and an FBI that's just twiddling their thumbs, right?” Daniel asked.

“Botta Bing, Botta Boom!”

“So where does that leave us?” I wondered out loud.

“You're looking at it!” Giuseppe swept his arms open dramatically.

I was struggling to digest everything when I heard someone snapping their fingers in the back of the room and turned to see who it was. Bob was getting Giuseppe's attention. “Hey boss, we gotta go. The yellow bike is on the move!”

## CHAPTER

### *Twenty*

#### Amy

AS THE LIMOUSINE glided to a stop at the Blushing Bridal Boutique and Spa, Ariel exclaimed, “Elana, you’ve outdone yourself with this gem of an idea!” Meagan and I tittered in eagerness. Our hearts were aflutter with visions of the romantic escapade I often conjured up in my daydreams.

“How fortunate we are that Martha offered to mind the little ones. She’s quite the quintessential grandma,” I remarked.

“You know my mother,” Ariel said, “her life revolves around the kids. And she loves Ava, Lily, and Liam as much as her own grandson, Jonathan.”

“She’s a sweetheart, for sure,” Meagan added, stepping onto the sidewalk. “Since you have visited this spa before, Elana, could you recommend a great facial treatment?” Meagan asked.

“Oh, choosing a favorite is quite impossible. Each of them is so thoroughly divine and soothing,” Mum chortled. “Let’s not hurry. The fashion show commences only after our leisurely luncheon.”

The moment we entered the spa, the air was laden with the scents of a dream brought to life: lavender, chamomile, eucalyptus, and peppermint intertwined in a delicate dance, casting a spell of relaxation upon us.

Soon, Milly, the bubbly proprietor, greeted us with her radiant smile and started explaining their services. “We have an array of treatments tailored to the unique needs of different skin types,” she began, detailing a range of facials such as the indulgent gold leaf treatment, the collagen-boosting vampire facial, and the gentle rose quartz facial. “Our body treatments, including wraps, scrubs, and massages, are designed to rejuvenate and luxuriate.”

Having made our selections, we were led to the changing room, complete with well-appointed vanity stations and secure lockers. We donned the provided chenille robes that swathed us in supreme comfort while the dulcet tones of the waterfall and the soothing melodies wafting throughout the spa worked their magic easing our stress levels.

Mum and Ariel were the first to be spirited away to indulge in their chosen treatments: a regenerative caviar body wrap for Mum and an invigorating aromatherapy massage for Ariel. Meagan and I savored ginger and lemon-infused water in the tranquil relaxation area, enveloped in verdant foliage and the soft glow of ambient lighting while waiting our turn.

Soon, our skilled aestheticians beckoned us to our private treatment sanctuaries. We delighted in our personalized facials: a nourishing stem cell facial for Meagan and a calming crystal-infused facial for me.

Once our pampering sessions concluded, we reconvened in the spa’s lavish lounge, where an exquisite lite lunch awaited us. As we enjoyed our delicate hors d’oeuvres, we shared stories about how we had been changed for the better. Looking at each other, we noticed a new radiance in our faces and a calm energy that hadn’t been there before. After a while, the conversation began to flow effortlessly, reflecting the relaxed atmosphere of the spa.

Mum, her eyes sparkling, said, “Wow, that seaweed wrap was amazing. I feel so refreshed and my skin feels incredibly soft!”

Ariel chimed in with a grin, “I must agree, the aromatherapy massage was a game-changer. I feel like a

weight has been lifted from my shoulders – quite literally!”

Meagan, beaming with satisfaction, said, “Elana, you were right about this place. That stem cell facial was exceptional. My skin feels so supple and radiant now.”

I smiled, pleased that everyone was enjoying the day as much as I was. “Thanks, Mum, for this much-needed treat. My crystal-infused facial was equally amazing. I feel so relaxed and pampered.”

We enjoyed our delectable lunch, chatted about upcoming wedding preparations, and shared amusing anecdotes. Mum recalled a funny story about my childhood, leaving us all laughing heartily. “And then,” she continued, “Amy came running into the kitchen, covered head to toe in mud, clutching a bunch of what she thought were wildflowers – but were actually weeds!”

We laughed together, and Ariel shared her own humorous tale. “Oh, that reminds me of when my brother decided to give our dog a ‘haircut.’ The poor thing looked like it had been attacked by a lawnmower!”

Meagan joined in, her eyes twinkling. “You all have such entertaining stories. My cousin once decided to create a mural on her bedroom wall with her art supplies. It took my aunt days to clean that up!”

“Oh, gosh!” Ariel laughed, “I caught Jonathan about to do the same thing just yesterday!”

As our laughter subsided and we wiped tears of mirth from our eyes, Milly reappeared and showed us to the other side of the building. The boutique was a vision of elegance with its lace curtains, chandeliers, and creamy white walls. An attendant, impeccably groomed and wearing sky-high heels, greeted us, “Hello, I’m Melody. Please have a look at our wine menu. I’ll give you a few minutes before I send over my assistant. Then when you’re comfortable, the fashion show will get started.”

Our anticipation for the upcoming showing grew as we perused the wine menu. We chose a crisp Sauvignon Blanc,

perfect for sipping while admiring the breathtaking bridal gowns. The attendant smiled warmly as she expertly poured our wine into elegant glasses for each of us.

The lights dimmed, and soft, enchanting music filled the room, setting the stage for the parade of exquisite bridal creations. The first model appeared, gliding gracefully down the runway in an Inbal Dror ball gown made of ivory tulle, adorned with delicate silver beads that sparkled like starlight.

Mum gasped, her hand flying to her chest. “That gown is simply divine! It’s like something out of a fairy tale.”

Ariel nodded in agreement. “You’re right. It’s stunning.”

As we continued to watch the show, we couldn’t help but be drawn into a world of elegance and enchantment. Each gown seemed to tell its own unique story, reflecting the personality and style of the woman who might wear it on my special day.

Next, a model wearing a mermaid-style gown by Galia Lahav captured our attention. The gown’s form-fitting silhouette accentuated the model’s curves, while the intricate lace detailing and shimmering sequins added an air of sophistication and glamour.

Meagan leaned in and whispered, “That dress would look fabulous on you, Ariel. It’s so elegant and sexy.”

Ariel blushed, “Oh, thank you, Meagan. I adore the details on this gown.”

Finally, a model appeared in an elegant Ver Wang A-lined gown. Its clean lines and understated design proved the power of simplicity. The flowing silk moved gracefully with each step, epitomizing effortless chic.

Mum sighed dreamily, “There’s something so timeless about a Vera Wang gown, don’t you think?”

I smiled and replied, “Absolutely, Mum. It’s understated elegance at its finest. I love it!”

As the fashion show continued, we were treated to an array of enchanting gowns and attire for the entire wedding party.

“Each dress is more beautiful than the one before,” Meagan remarked, her eyes wide with amazement.

I nodded, my heart full of inspiration and my mind swirling with ideas. “This day has been truly unforgettable, thanks to all of you.”

After the fashion show, we excitedly made our way to the fitting area, eager to try on the gowns that had captured our hearts. Seamstresses bustled about, ready to assist and take measurements as we stepped into the luxurious dresses.

Ariel slipped into the Galia Lahav mermaid gown, its elegant curves and intricate lace detailing fitting her like a dream. On the other hand, Meagan chose an enchanting gown adorned with delicate lace that hugged her figure in all the right places, accentuating her natural beauty. Mum opted for a sophisticated, floor-length gown with a flattering neckline and subtle embellishments, perfect for the bride’s mother.

As I stepped into the Vera Wang gown, I couldn’t help but feel a wave of emotion. It was the dress I had always imagined myself wearing, and seeing it come to life was nothing short of magical. The gown’s elegance, clean lines, and soft silk fabric made me feel like a true princess, albeit a bit too tight.

The seamstress approached, her tape measure draped around her neck and a reassuring smile on her face. As she took my measurements, I couldn’t help but express my concerns.

“It’s always my hips that give me trouble,” I sighed, worrying that the dress might not fit perfectly.

The seamstress chuckled softly and patted my arm. “Don’t you worry, dear! I can work wonders when it comes to alterations. We’ll make sure this gown fits you like a glove.”

Her kind words and expertise put me at ease, and I felt confident she would work her magic on my dress. Meanwhile, Ariel, Meagan, and Mum also received expert attention from their respective seamstresses. The boutique’s atmosphere buzzed with excitement as we were transformed into the vision we had dreamed about at some time in our lives.

As we each stepped out of the fitting rooms, we admired one another in our chosen gowns. The boutique's mirrors reflected our beaming faces, and it was evident that we had each found the perfect dress for our roles in my upcoming wedding. Then, we took turns twirling, laughing, and capturing the moment with our cameras, creating memories we would cherish forever.

“Strike a pose, Amy!” Meagan called out, holding her phone up to snap a photo.

“Make sure you get my good side,” I teased, tossing my hair and winking at the camera.

Mum stood next to me, beaming with pride. “Amy, you look absolutely stunning. I can't wait to see you walk down the aisle.”

As we continued to laugh and snap pictures, the joy in the room was palpable. With each click of the camera, we were capturing not just images but moments that maybe someday would be shared with our children.

With a final glance in the mirror, I knew I had made the right choice. The Vera Wang gown was everything I had ever dreamed of. As I was admiring the delicate lines of the dress, Melody approached with an exquisite lace-edged veil. With a flutter of excitement in my chest, I accepted it, knowing it would be the perfect complement to my gown. As I placed it on my head, the delicate lace cascading down my back, I felt my bridal look was complete. I couldn't wait to wear it on my special day.

Finally, it was time for our amazing day of pampering to end. I'll admit I felt a bit like Cinderella one minute after midnight. We reluctantly changed back into our street clothes, thanking Melody and the seamstresses for their incredible assistance. Then, we sauntered to the boutique's entrance, where the waiting limo greeted us.

As we settled into the luxurious seats of the limo, we each pulled out our phones, only to realize the men we loved had tried to call us while we were busy selecting the perfect gowns for my wedding.

“How odd,” I mused aloud, “It seems they all called around the same time. I guess they must have missed us.”



## CHAPTER

### *Twenty-One*

#### **Mitch**

AS WE HURRIED up the steps of San Diego County jail, Amy held my hand tightly while Meagan and Chase followed closely behind. I could feel the tension radiating from both women, their emotions a turbulent mix of fear and determination. Lazarus Blackwood had been caught with the yellow bike in his truck the previous day. Although he denied any wrongdoing, he admitted to being drunk and riding his bike alongside a group of cyclists on the day when Amy was accosted on the beach. However, one question persisted - why did he mention the cryptic message “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” that day? This was not something people typically say to each other in passing.

Amy and Meagan sat closely on uncomfortable chairs inside the cold, sterile room, their hands interlocked for support. Their faces were pale, and I could see that the gravity of the situation weighed heavily on them. As Chase and I stood beside our gals, we listened intently to their conversation, trying to understand the complex emotions they were experiencing.

“We’ve been waiting for this day,” said Amy, her voice trembling slightly. “But it doesn’t feel like what I had imagined.” I could sense her fear, and I knew she was worried about how this situation might affect her mental well-being, especially with our wedding day fast approaching and her new role as a mother to Ava.

Meagan swallowed hard, her eyes darting nervously around the room. “Yes, I agree. I feel creeped out. I don’t have time to return to therapy. The twins need a full-time mom. Not one crippled by her past,” she added, her voice barely above a whisper. The prospect of facing her attacker was clearly bringing back painful memories and nightmares she had tried to suppress without the help of her therapist. I could see the fear in her eyes and the way she squeezed Amy’s hand for reassurance.

Chase and I exchanged glances, helpless and concerned for the two women we loved. We wanted to protect them and remove their fear but knew we couldn’t. It was their battle to fight, their memories to confront. We could only stand by their side and offer our support.

After a few moments, the door opened. Agent Carter, the investigator on Rosedale’s ongoing case for a long time, entered the room. He motioned for us to follow him into his office. His demeanor was serious, and his face showed signs of exhaustion.

“Thank you for coming in today,” Carter said once we were seated in his cluttered office. “I know this is difficult for all of you.” He looked at Amy and Meagan with empathy. “We’re here to conduct a lineup to see if you can identify the man who accosted you. Giuseppe Russo insisted we do this today, so we’re moving forward without having interviewed Blackwood yet.”

Meagan’s eyes widened in surprise. “You haven’t interviewed him yet?” she asked, her voice barely concealing her disappointment.

Carter shook his head. “I’m afraid not. But we need to know if you can identify him as your attacker. If not, we’ll no longer have reason to hold him.”

He then went on to explain the double-blind lineup procedure. “This is a double-blind lineup, which means that neither the officer administering the lineup, nor the witnesses know the suspect’s identity. This helps to prevent any unconscious bias or influence on your identification.”

Amy and Meagan exchanged anxious glances as Carter continued. “There will be six individuals in the lineup, including the suspect. They’ll be presented to you one at a time, and you’ll be asked to state whether or not each person is the one who accosted you. Take your time and make sure you’re certain before giving your answer. Remember, it’s just as important to clear an innocent person as it is to identify the guilty party.”

As he finished his explanation, I could see the growing anxiety in both women. The responsibility of potentially deciding someone’s fate weighed heavily on them, and their hands visibly trembled.

Meagan’s breathing became more rapid, and she fumbled through her purse, pulling out a small pill box. She quickly swallowed a pill with a sip of water, trying to steady herself. Chase and I exchanged worried looks, our concern for her mounting with each passing moment.

“Are you okay?” Amy asked Meagan, her own voice trembling.

“Yeah,” Meagan replied, her voice strained. “This is the first time in a long time I’ve had to take my anxiety medication. Thank God I still have a few pills in my purse.”

Carter nodded in understanding. “I know this is a lot to handle, but we’ll be right here to support you throughout the process. So, take as much time as you need. Just be honest about what you remember.”

Unable to contain our frustration any longer, Chase and I confronted Carter about his lack of action on his investigation. “Why haven’t you interviewed Blackwood yet? This is the first break we’ve had in the Rosedale Tech case,” I demanded, trying to keep my voice in check.

“Yeah,” Chase chimed in, his tone equally as tense. “Giuseppe’s men had to track this dude down and then called the police to insist someone come and make the arrest. So, you should be on top of this!”

Carter sighed, rubbing his temples as he tried to explain. “I understand your frustration, but we’ve been swamped with cases. The sheriff’s office is understaffed, and I’ve been stretched thin trying to manage everything.”

His words did little to quell our anger, but Chase and I had to keep things civil for Amy and Meagan’s sake. They were already upset enough, and arguing would only make things worse.

“Fine,” I said, clenching my jaw. “We just want to make sure justice is served. As you know, we are more than ready to put this nightmare behind us.”

Carter nodded, his eyes solemn. “I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to ensure it is. To avoid any bias, Amy and Meagan will view the lineup separately.”

Amy went first, with me accompanying her into the observation room. In total, there were six men in the lineup, each of varying heights, builds, and hair colors, dressed in similar plain clothing. They stood facing forward, waiting for instructions.

Amy studied each individual carefully, her eyes narrowing as she tried to recall the harrowing encounter on the beach. Finally, when Carter had them repeat a phrase twice, she stepped away and grabbed my hand, “It’s #4. I can tell by his voice!”

Carter had the women exchange places but I was allowed to stand at the door while Meagan repeated the same process as Amy.

When person #4 recited the phrase, Meagan stepped forward and touched the glass as if receiving a vibe. Then, after a pause, she stepped back, covered her mouth with her hand, and whispered, “That’s Alex. He’s gained weight and has had his nose fixed, but that’s definitely Alex!”

Chase pulled her close and indicated for Carter to close the curtain. “That’s enough. We’ve done what we came to do.”

Agent Carter’s response to their identification was somewhat unexpected. Instead of displaying relief or

satisfaction, his expression seemed to flicker with a hint of unease. “Alright,” he said, his voice conveying a subtle tension. “I’ll note your identification, but we still have a lot of work to do in this case.”

Chase and I exchanged concerned glances, trying to decipher Carter’s reaction. It felt as if something was amiss, but we couldn’t put our finger on it. Yet, despite our suspicions, we knew it was essential to focus on supporting Amy and Meagan through this ordeal.

As we left the observation room, Meagan suddenly broke down, sobbing into Chase’s shoulder. “I never thought I’d have to face him again,” she cried. “I just want to move on and forget what happened. But remember how, after my therapy session to help my memory, I recognized the voice I had heard inside the car while locked inside the trunk...”

“Didn’t you think it was the guy named Alex you dated a few times a long time ago?”

“Yes, but none of the guys looked like Alex at first, but when he said, ‘slow down, you’re driving too fast,’ it was the exact same voice I heard while locked in the trunk.” Chase comforted Meagan by stroking her hair while Amy and I stood nearby to support her. Even though today progress was made, Meagan and Amy had a long way to go in their emotional healing journey. The traumatic events of their abductions had inflicted profound wounds that would take time to heal completely.

“So, since we both recognized him, that means there is a good chance the guy that kidnapped me in Vail was Alex!” Amy whispered as the realization of what they had discovered was sinking in.

“Yes, I guess so. But why?” Meagan sniffed.

As we prepared to leave the police station, Agent Carter joined us in the hallway. “I want you all to know that we’re doing everything we can to bring this case to a close,” he said, his eyes betraying a hint of the turmoil he seemed to be working to control. “But there’s still a long road ahead. You’ve

shown tremendous courage today, and you'll need that strength as we continue to pursue justice."

"We understand that," I said. "We've been living in this horror story for how long now?"

"I've lost count of the fucking years and months," Chase hissed.

As Chase drove us away from the police station, the atmosphere in the car was a mixture of relief, exhaustion, and lingering anxiety. Meagan's breakdown reminded us of the trauma she and Amy had endured, and realizing there was still a long way to go before they could truly move on was sobering.

Suddenly my phone buzzed with a text from Guy. "Guy's asking if we're on our way home yet!" I said, texting him back that we were. "He's excited. He says Ariel and Elana are fixing a massive Italian dinner that will be ready when we get to Casa Palacious."

"I love this family," Amy said. "Looks like Mum and Papa do too. I hope Mum has made some tiramisu."

Chase pulled the Escalade into the driveway of Casa Palacious, the warm glow of the lights from inside the house radiating a welcoming atmosphere. The delicious aroma of Italian food greeted us as we entered the front door. We could hear laughter and conversation coming from the kitchen.

Martha came out to greet us, her face lighting up with relief at the sight of us. "Oh, thank goodness you're back," she said, hugging each of us. "The twins have been asking for you non-stop, but they're finally asleep and so is Ava."

"We really appreciate you watching them, Martha," Meagan replied, her voice filled with gratitude.

"Yes, we do. It's been a long day," Amy added.

Elana and Ariel emerged from the kitchen, their arms laden with steaming pasta dishes, garlic bread, and fresh salads. They set the table with a flourish, inviting us to sit and dig in.

As we gathered around the table, the tension and anxiety of the day seemed to dissipate, replaced by a sense of comfort and camaraderie. Knowing that Alex was behind bars and Giuseppe had assured us the FBI would handle the investigation instead of Carter, it felt like a weight had been lifted.

Amy's eyes lit up when she saw a large dish of tiramisu, Martha's specialty, placed on the table. "Mum, you made tiramisu! You know it's Meagan's favorite," she exclaimed, hugging her mother tightly.

Martha chuckled. "I thought we could all use a little something sweet after such a trying day," she said, her eyes twinkling.

Guy uncorked a bottle of wine, filling our glasses as we began enjoying the feast. The mood around the table was light and jovial, a stark contrast to the emotional turmoil we had faced earlier in the day as Giuseppe raised his glass in a toast. "To the investigation! The FBI has been notified. This Carter person will not be involved in questioning Alexander Steele!"

"Alexander Steele?" Meagan asked.

"Agent Downing just texted me. He is already working on the case! Alexander Steele is Alex's real name."

With the wine flowing and the laughter reaching a crescendo, we took the chance to fully enjoy the moment and acknowledge a minor triumph that brought new energy and renewed hope to the Rosedale crew.

## CHAPTER

### *Twenty-Two*

**Amy**

**Three Months Later**

THE SKY WAS A BRILLIANT BLUE, speckled with cotton candy clouds as the sun cast a golden glow over the beach just outside my mother's penthouse apartment. The ocean waves gently lapped at the shore, creating a soothing melody and setting the tone for my perfect day. The boardwalk, adorned with twinkling fairy lights, was covered with a silken runner that awaited my procession toward the love of my life.

Inside Mum's penthouse, the air buzzed with excitement and anticipation. I stood in front of the mirror, taking in my reflection as my beautiful Vera Wang gown shimmered in the soft light. I felt like a princess, ready to marry her prince. Ariel and Meagan, both dressed in their lilac bridesmaid gowns, flanked me on either side, their eyes filled with love and support.

"Can you believe the day is finally here?" Meagan asked, her voice filled with a mixture of awe and excitement.

"I know, it's surreal," I replied, my heart pounding in my chest.

Ariel chimed in, grinning from ear to ear. "You look absolutely stunning, Amy. Mitch won't be able to take his eyes off you."



I felt my cheeks flush as I smiled at my dear friends. “Thank you, besties. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

With a final touch to my veil, we were ready. The soft music began to drift up from below, signaling that it was time for the procession to begin. Ariel and Meagan each gave me a quick hug before gracefully stepping out of the apartment and into the private glass elevator that would take them down to the boardwalk, and I would soon be close behind them.

My father, Giuseppe, came up behind me and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “You look absolutely beautiful, my dear,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Papa. I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart,” he replied, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

As a groomsman, Chase, escorted Mum to her seat, then the elevator doors opened, signaling that it was time for me to make my entrance. My heart raced with anticipation, knowing that in just a few moments, I would be walking down that silken runner, hand in hand with my father, towards my future with Mitch.

With one last deep breath, I stepped out of the elevator, the doors closing behind me. Then, rearranging my train, I prepared for the most magical moment of my life.

The boardwalk held a special place in my heart, as it was the very spot where Mitch and I, albeit separately, had truly begun to fall in love. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of nostalgia as I stepped onto the wooden planks, the familiar sound of seagulls and the laughter of people in the distance transporting me back to those early days of our blossoming relationship.

With each step, I felt the warmth of the sun on my face and the gentle ocean breeze in my hair, and I knew without a doubt that this was where we were meant to be. As my father and I walked arm-in-arm toward Mitch, the love and joy in the air were palpable. I couldn’t wait to join my life with him in this

magical place that had played such a significant role in our love story.

As we reached the end of the boardwalk, the beautiful ceremony area came into view. White chairs adorned with lush green ivy and fragrant white roses that matched my bouquet lined either side of the aisle. At the same time, the soft sounds of the ensemble that had played at our engagement party filled the air. Family and friends beamed with happiness, their eyes shining with tears of joy.

Mitch stood at the altar, looking incredibly handsome in his tuxedo. His eyes locked onto mine, and I could see the love and adoration written all over his face. As my father and I made our way down the aisle, time seemed to slow down, allowing me to take in every detail of this unforgettable moment.

When we finally reached Mitch, my father gently lifted my veil and kissed me tenderly on the cheek before placing my hand in Mitch's. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I felt a sense of peace and certainty envelop me. This was where I was meant to be and the man I was meant to spend the rest of my life with.

Angelo Ferrara, Mitch's attorney and a friend of the Russo family, officiated the ceremony. His voice carried across the beach as he spoke of love, commitment, and the beautiful journey Mitch and I were about to embark on together.

Mitch and I exchanged heartfelt vows. Each word was spoken with unwavering conviction and love. I gazed into his eyes, feeling the depth of our connection and the strength of our bond. As we prepared to slip our wedding bands onto each other's fingers, Mitch fumbled with the ring, nearly dropping it into the sand.

There was a collective gasp from our guests, followed by laughter, as Mitch skillfully caught the ring just in time. "Phew, that was a close one," he joked, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. We all laughed, and the atmosphere instantly took a lighter tone.

“With the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Angelo announced. “You may kiss the bride.”

As Mitch leaned in to kiss me, the cheers and applause of our loved ones enveloped us. The salty ocean breeze mingled with the sweet scent of roses as our lips met, sealing our commitment to one another in a tender, loving embrace.

With the ceremony complete, it was time to celebrate the beginning of our new life together. As we walked hand in hand, greeting our guests, the sun dipped toward the horizon, casting a warm golden glow on the sand and the crashing waves.

The reception was magical, set up on the beach as the sun set. Tables draped in lilac linens and adorned with white roses and green ivy created an enchanting atmosphere. The soft melodies of the ensemble filled the air while laughter and conversation buzzed around us.

Our loved ones gathered around, their smiles infectious as they shared stories and caught up with one another. The surprise appearance of Courtney, who had flown in especially for the wedding, brought an additional burst of joy to the celebration. Her presence lifted everyone’s spirits, especially Brad’s, who was clearly elated to see her again.

As we all kicked off our shoes and let the warm sand embrace our toes, the reception took on a relaxed, carefree vibe. The delicious food catered by Bella Vita Restaurant left our taste buds dancing with delight.

The time came for the bouquet toss, and Courtney, with her impeccable timing, effortlessly caught it, much to everyone’s amusement. “Looks like you’re next, Court!” I teased as she flashed a cheeky grin and winked at Brad.

Later, as I sat down with my piece of wedding cake, Meagan leaned in and whispered, “I bet you’re happy that Vera Wang gown has a little extra room for dessert, huh?” We both giggled, and I nodded in agreement, “Absolutely!”

The evening continued with heartfelt speeches and toasts, each warming our hearts and filling our eyes with tears of joy. Finally, we danced under the stars, the ocean waves providing the perfect backdrop for celebrating love and new beginnings.

As the reception drew to a close and the sky turned a deep shade of twilight, Papa stood up to make his second toast to us. Holding his glass high, he looked at Mitch and me with pride and love in his eyes. “To the beautiful bride and groom, may your love continue to grow stronger with each passing day. May your life be filled with happiness, laughter, and endless adventures together.”

The clink of glasses and cheers from our friends and family filled the air while Mitch and I embraced, feeling the love and support that surrounded us.

Our honeymoon to Hawaii beckoned, and for the first time in what felt like forever, we could travel without the need for security. Yet, we couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness as we kissed our sweet Ava on the cheek, leaving her in the capable hands of her grandparents, Pop and Momo.

With their warm smiles and reassuring nods, they promised to take good care of her while we embarked on our well-deserved honeymoon. As we waved our goodbyes and stepped into the waiting limo, we looked back at the beautiful beachside wedding and reception, knowing that this was just the beginning of our incredible journey together as husband and wife.

“I love you Mitch!”

“Back at ya. Now let's get on to the fun stuff!”

## *Epilogue*

### **Brad**

AS I WAS ABOUT to leave for the wedding, I took a moment to double-check my appearance in the mirror and fix my tie. Not long after, Courtney called me to let me know she had arrived and would be waiting for me at baggage claim. I was thrilled to reunite with her and eagerly anticipated picking her up.

Last week, Courtney informed me over the phone that she intended to make a surprise appearance at Mitch and Amy's wedding. During our hour-long talk, I suggested we go camping together after the wedding. We agreed upon Yosemite, and Courtney and I have been in touch every day this week to settle our arrangements.

At the beach wedding venue, I couldn't stop admiring Courtney. She looked gorgeous in her pink gown that highlighted her curves and perfectly complimented her tanned skin. She had tied her blonde hair in a sophisticated updo that showed off her graceful neck and paired it with dainty silver earrings. Her radiant eyes and friendly smile reminded me of how much I had missed her, and looking at her took my breath away.

As we rounded the corner, we caught sight of the boardwalk where Amy was standing in her gorgeous wedding dress. Seeing my dear friends' happy moments unfold filled me with joy. The sun was setting, creating long shadows on the boardwalk. Courtney quietly remarked, "She looks

absolutely stunning, right?” I nodded in agreement, completely captivated by her breathtaking beauty.

While inhaling her sensual scent, I whispered to Courtney, “I agree with you, and I must add that you are even more stunning.”

Walking to our seats, I noticed our friends’ reactions upon seeing Courtney with me. They seemed pleasantly surprised to see her as if they didn’t anticipate her being here today. However, their warm welcome for Courtney felt genuine, and their heartfelt smiles conveyed that they were just as delighted to see her as I was. Although I still had some negative thoughts about the Rosedale case, I set them aside for Mitch and Amy’s wedding day. Today should be about love, coming together, and positivity.

During the ceremony, I experienced a sense of relief and happiness that Alex was finally arrested. Today’s ambiance was filled with joy as we commemorated our friends’ union. We were all prepared to relish the feeling of liberation from the fear that had been haunting us for quite a while.

Courtney noticed my contented expression and touching my arm, she said, “Brad, you look happy. Are you enjoying yourself?”

I smiled genuinely and replied, “Yeah, I am. It’s amazing to see everyone so carefree, don’t you think?”

She nodded, her eyes shining. “Absolutely. Especially after everything we’ve been through.”

As I sat beside my friend, witnessing the exchange of vows between Amy and Mitch, I felt hopeful about our future. Despite our obstacles, we remained united as a family through thick and thin.

Courtney and I enjoyed the food, laughter, and celebrated with our friends during the reception. While chatting with the guests, Courtney ran into Chase, who used to be her boss, and joked by asking him with a playful smile, “Have you started missing me yet, Mr. Stratford?”

Chase feigned surprise and said, “Oh, you left?” He laughed and added, “Of course, we miss you, Courtney. In fact, I’d be willing to offer you a raise if you come back to work with us.”

Courtney grinned and teasingly replied, “Well, Mr. Stratford, that’s quite the tempting offer.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “You know, calling me Mr. Stratford makes me feel old. Let’s start over. You call me Chase when you come back to work?”

Courtney laughed, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Oh, wow, that really sweetens the pot. But... I’m so excited to be starting my first semester at the community college back home.”

“That sounds awesome,” Chase replied. “I remember continuing your education has always been your dream.”

Courtney grinned. “If it doesn’t work out. My friends at Rosedale will be the first to know!”

“We may need you, at least, to work remotely if you can. The lawsuit on the Golden Key Project is set for another hearing before the judge in the next months. Since you were a part of the research for the grant application, your help would be much appreciated,” Chase explained.

“You know I will help anyway I can!”

As Courtney talked to Chase, I saw Agent Downing drinking alone at the bar. I approached him, hoping to chat and learn about the investigation.

“Agent Downing, how’s it going?” I asked, extending a hand to shake his.

“Brad,” he said warmly, clasping my hand firmly. “It’s good to see you. Congratulations to the bride and groom.”

“It’s definitely an unforgettable day.”

After some small talk, I couldn’t help but bring up the case. “So, any updates on the investigation? I know today is a happy occasion, but I’m just curious.”

Downing glanced around, making sure no one was in earshot and then leaned in. “To be honest, I didn’t want to bring it up and spoil the wedding for Amy and Mitch, but we’ve found a significant lead. Alex’s DNA matches the sample found in Mitch’s Vail chalet. It was also left inside Chelsea’s car – the person who kidnapped Meagan. So, he is definitely our guy. We just need to tie up some loose ends.”

“Wow, that makes me feel better since we let our security details go.”

While Agent Downing and I conversed, I noticed Courtney was enjoying socializing with the wedding guests, mainly her friends and those she used to work with. Afterward, we sat with Daniel, Sicily, and Ryder at a table, sharing humorous stories and discussing our experiences. We felt grateful for the love and encouragement that surrounded us, although I still harbored some uncertainties. Despite that, we reveled in the festivities of this momentous day.

“So, Courtney,” Ryder said with a grin, “I heard you’re back in town. What brings you here?”

Courtney smiled. “I couldn’t miss Amy and Mitch’s wedding and wanted to surprise everyone. Brad and I were also thinking of taking a little trip to Yosemite to camp for a few days before starting my college classes.”

Sicily’s eyes lit up. “That sounds lovely! It’s been ages since Daniel and I went camping. You two will have a great time.”

After Sicily mentioned the camping trip, she leaned closer to Courtney and shared a fond memory. “You know, I used to camp in Yosemite with my parents as a kid. It’s beautiful, and you can do many things there.”

“Really?” Courtney asked, genuinely interested. “What do you suggest we shouldn’t miss while we’re there?”

Sicily thought for a moment before answering. “Well, if you’re up for a bit of a hike, you should definitely check out the Mist Trail. It takes you past Vernal and Nevada Falls. The views are breathtaking, especially in the early morning.”



Courtney's eyes sparkled with excitement. "That sounds amazing! I've always wanted to see those waterfalls."

I chimed in, "Wow, Sicily, you're making me even more excited for this trip. I can't wait to explore Yosemite with Courtney."

Courtney smiled at me, her eyes shining with anticipation. "It's going to be an adventure, that's for sure."

Daniel nodded. "Just be careful out there. You never know what you might run into."

Courtney laughed. "I think we'll manage. After all, Brad here has already faced down a wild bear."

Ryder chuckled. "That's a story I'd love to hear sometime."

After Amy and Mitch were whisked away for their honeymoon, Courtney and I were eager to leave for our own trip. We quickly said goodbye to our friends and promised to catch up with them after our adventure. "I'll see you in a week!" I shouted as Courtney and I rushed away.

Then turning to Courtney, I grinned, "I can't wait for our Yosemite trip. Just imagine it – us, surrounded by nature, with no interruptions — this time. We'll finally have quality time together."

Courtney's eyes lit up, and responded playfully, "Oh, definitely! And you know what, Brad? I'm really looking forward to seeing you try to put up a tent again. The last time it was in the rain!"

Chuckling, I rolled my eyes. "Not the image I was hoping for. But, hey, just for the record, I'll probably need your help to start a proper campfire. I don't think Uber Eats delivers to Vernal Falls."

She giggled, teasing, "Deal! But only if you promise to make the best s'mores I've ever had."

Raising an eyebrow, I replied, "Challenge accepted. Just wait and see. You'll be asking for my secret s'mores recipe."

Courtney leaned in, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “It’s a date, then. Can’t wait to make some unforgettable memories with you, Brad.”

“Unforgettable, indeed!”

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