

## ONE



ROB MITCHELL NEVER COULD STAND to see his mother cry. Especially when he was the one who had caused the tears.

“Mom, please don’t cry.” He tilted the screen on his Apple laptop to reduce the glare streaming through his kitchen window in Brandon Beach, Delaware. He loved his twice-weekly FaceTime visits with his mother, but this one had somehow taken a seriously wrong turn.

“I’m not crying.” She dabbed a tear from her cheek, the huge diamond on her left hand reflecting the 9 am California sun.

“Yes, you are. I can see you.”

“I have a cold.”

“If you say so.” He sighed and tugged on the sleeves of his sweater. It was a size too small, but she had sent it to him, and he wanted her to see him in it. If he hadn’t been home in over four years, he couldn’t very well expect her to know he’d bulked up a bit. “You know why I can’t come back there. Not to stay.”

“I know.” She relaxed a bit. “What about for Christmas? Won’t you think about it? For me?”

“Sure, Mom. I’ll think about it. For you.”

“I don’t want to lose you. I’ve already lost Jeff and Andy. Of course, I lost Andy a long time ago, but I had hoped to hold on to Jeff a little while longer.”

“What makes you think you’ve lost him, too?”

“Well, he’s a lawyer, isn’t he?”

Rob laughed. “Not all lawyers are bad.”

“I know what the lawyers in your father’s companies do. Plunder and pillage and steal...”

Tilting back in his chair, he chuckled. “That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?” *Coming from you, at least.*

“I’m not as blind to his machinations as he’d like me to think. I know what he does in his office all day, and I’m well aware of how he made his money.” She adjusted the collar of her designer jacket.

“Mom, let’s talk about something else.”

“All right.” Tucking her blond hair behind her ear, she studied him with a sad smile. “You know you’re the only one who calls me ‘Mom’?”

He leaned forward on the table. “Oh? I didn’t realize.”

“Your brothers call me ‘Mother.’ So formal. I hate it. Your father’s doing. Just like he now has them going by Jefferson and Anderson. If you were home, you’d be Robinson.” She huffed. “Occasionally Andy slips and calls me Mom, but he corrects himself, especially if your father is in the room.”

He needed to change the subject, fast. “Hey, why don’t you come out here and visit me? Take a break for a while. I’d love to see you, in person, instead of on a computer screen. Spend some time with you. And I’d love for you to meet Hope and Ian.”

She fingered the string of pearls around her slender neck.

“That’s a thought. Certainly no one would miss me around here.”

“Come on, Mom. This isn’t like you. Why so morbid all of a sudden?”

“I’m not morbid, dear. And it’s not sudden.” She brightened.

“Oh, you remember Catherine Whittaker? Word is that she came home early from Yale Law, because ...”

And she was back. Back to her old self, passing on the gossip of the rich and powerful of Orange County, Southern California. She didn't have much else, really. And she was never malicious, always pleasant. The social circles in which she lived, in which he had grown up, were almost by definition devious, scheming and unscrupulous, but somehow, she had managed to remain graciously kind.

Rob rose and grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator as she meandered through the latest news.

“... and then Kitty Pembroke offered to fund the entire thing. Wasn't that sweet?”

“Yes, it was.”

“It's so like her.” She paused, examining her nails, flawlessly polished in a soft pink. “You really want me to come out there?”

Why would she question him? “Of course. Did you think I was just saying that?”

“I'm never sure anymore.”

His breath caught in his throat. “About what I say?” Surely, she didn't mean that.

“No, honey. I know I can trust you. It's everyone else. I'm a little frazzled at the moment. Let me think about it, check my calendar and get back to you, OK?”

“Mom, what is going on?”

She waved a hand. “Nothing is going on, dear. That's your suspicious nature. You got that from your father. Now I have a brunch to attend, and if I don't get going, I'll be late. I'll talk to you later. Bye now!”

The screen went black.

It was not ‘just his suspicious nature.’ Something was definitely off.

JULIANA HELLISCH LEANED AGAINST THE sun-bleached wood railing on the balcony outside her bedroom in Brandon Beach. How lucky could she be? Until today, she'd never even seen the beach, let alone dream she would ever be able to live on one. Growing up on a working dairy farm in Wisconsin didn't offer much chance for travel.

Waves crashing on the shore a block away offered a soothing rhythm, a stark contrast to the hurried bustle below. Four men carried boxes full of clothes, linens and personal items from their home in Annapolis. A stack of folded cardboard waited outside the front door, ready to be taken away.

Juli breathed in the crisp, salt air once more. Her room cleaned, her clothes put away, it was time to get to work. She descended one flight of stairs to the main floor. Where had that little munchkin disappeared to?

She peeked into the kitchen, counters covered with dishes, pots and pans. "Amelia?"

A woman not much older than she was turned around, a stack of plates in hand. "Everything in this kitchen is dusty. It's been so long since ..." She shook her head, her mane of dark red curls bouncing. A deep sadness settled over her face.

Juli side-stepped around boxes. "Would you like me to wash the dishes?"

Another woman, features nearly identical to Amelia's but hair a glossy black, stepped between them. "I'll do it. You go play with Colby."

"Thank you, Amanda." Amelia moved around her sister. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

"Where is he?" Juli asked.

"He's in the backyard." She handed the stack of plates to

Amanda and steered Juli to the backdoor. “Did you find your room suitable?”

“It’s wonderful, thank you. There’s even a balcony. This house is amazing.” She glanced back at Amanda. “Why does she dislike me so?”

“It’s not you, as much as the whole situation. She’d rather I was able to stay in Annapolis near her, but as you know ... though I’m much luckier than most in my position. I have the house, and my job, which means I can keep you.... Anyway, you’re unpacked and sorted?”

“I am. Colby’s room isn’t ready yet.”

“I’ll take care of his. Why don’t you take him for a walk before his nap?”

“Of course.”

Juli descended the two steps from the kitchen into the backyard. A wooden fence surrounded the lawn, while a picnic table and grill occupied a bricked area to the right.

“Juli! Juli!” A three-year-old boy kicked a soccer ball away and ran to meet her.

She crouched and gathered him in her arms. If nothing else, her job as nanny boosted her self-esteem on a daily basis. Though she’d only worked for Amelia for six months, she’d become deeply attached to the affectionate child.

“Your mom says we should go exploring. What do you think of that idea, Colby?”

A wide grin brightened his face as he wriggled to the ground. “I like ‘splo-wing.’”

“All right, then. Let’s go out the back way.” She unlocked the gate and they ambled east down the gravel alleyway.

The house really was quite perfect. One block from the beach, it was far enough away to keep Colby from trying to escape and make it on his own, which she wouldn’t put past him, but not so far as to tire out his little legs if they walked there. Three stories high

meant they could also see the water over the smaller oceanside houses.

They soon reached the boardwalk. Most of the shops were closed this time of the year, but Colby's eagle eyes spotted one down the row still open for business. He bolted ahead.

Juli took off after him. Her long legs allowed her to catch him quickly and scoop him up like a seagull on a sand crab. "Colby, you know you can't run ahead like that!"

He giggled. "But they have toys!"

"You still can't leave me behind." She set him down and grabbed his hand, leading him into the shop. Stuffed octopi, t-shirts with clown fish emblazoned on them, wind-up dolphins and sandpipers on driftwood filled the shelves. Bins full of colorful rocks and shells were an irresistible joy to a three-year-old who loved anything to do with nature.

Colby shoved his chubby hands deep into a bin full of magnetic rocks, chuckling uncontrollably. "Look, Juli! They stick together!"

He pulled up handfuls of the shiny gray pebbles, letting them clunk down and grabbing them again.

"Colby, come see the sea stars." Something, anything less noisy. She beckoned him closer, holding up the dried, pink, star-shaped animal.

"Ooooh!" He trotted over.

"Gently. Hand out flat." She placed it in his outstretched hand, and with one finger of his other hand gently stroked it.

His eyes widened. "Fish?"

"It was. Not anymore."

"Where its eyes?"

She turned it over. "Good question. Maybe we can find out somewhere."

"Can I have it?"

Juli glanced at the bin. Ninety-nine cents. "Sure." She had an

allowance to spend on him, which she rarely used. “Come on.” She jerked her head toward the front.

At the register, she pulled out the debit card Amelia had set up for her, and a peppermint candy. “Is there a nature center or library or something here?” She unwrapped the candy and popped it in her mouth.

“Both.” The lady scanned their purchase. “Library is down Main Street. Nature Center is farther down, right before Brandon Beach turns into Millersville. It’s open every day, but they have special activities for kids every Wednesday and Saturday morning. He’d love them, I think.” She grinned.

“Thank you, very much.”

On their way out a brightly colored flyer taped to the door caught her eye.

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service  
Brandon Beach Community Church  
7:30 and 11:30

Warm memories of the midnight service at Maplevue Church flooded her. How many more days until she would be home? Today was the 1st; her flight to Wisconsin was scheduled for the 20<sup>th</sup>. Not quite three more weeks. Time could not fly fast enough until she was home again with family. Only a mother’s love could soothe the wounds the last year had burned deep into her soul. Deception, betrayal, loss, debt—how she longed for the embrace of her mother and brothers.

Only nineteen more days.

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ROB GLANCED AT THE CLOCK over the kitchen sink. Almost one o’clock. Barely enough time to make his shift at Surf Foods. He pulled

off the sweater, closed his laptop, tossed his can in the recycling bin and headed out the door. He climbed into his blue Chevy Blazer, drove down Second, turned left onto New York and then onto Main.

His old college roommate—now his partner in the store—stood stocking potato chips when Rob strolled in. “How’s your mom?”

Rob shook his head. “I had the weirdest conversation with her, dude.”

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know, just ... weird. She said stuff about my dad and my brothers, like she thought everyone was against her. Said she didn’t trust anyone.”

“That is weird.” Ian leaned against the counter. “Doesn’t sound like her.”

“She was pushing hard for me to move back there.”

“That’s not unusual, is it? I mean, lately?” asked Ian.

“No. Then she wanted me to come home for Christmas.” He shuddered exaggeratedly.

Ian laughed. “Be nice.”

“That is nice.” He pointed to the office. “Let me get a new drawer and you can go.” He hurried to the office in the back of the store, climbed the stairs and unlocked the door. After retrieving a new cash drawer, he returned to the front.

Ian eyed his attire, grinning. “Still in sandals, I see.”

“What’s the point of living on the beach if you’re in shoes all the time? I need to feel the sand on my feet.”

“You’re such a rebel.”

“So they keep telling me.”

“Well, if you weren’t, I wouldn’t have this store. So I’m thankful, my friend.”

“At least someone is.” He shoved the new drawer in place and slammed the register shut.

Ian laughed. “Hope, and me, and the baby. That’s three. And



I'm quite sure your mom is thankful, too, no matter what you think. That's four. Four someones." He wiggled his fingers as he walked backward to their office with his cash drawer.

Four was nice. But it would be nicer if he had a Hope of his own.

Later that afternoon, Rob brought more bread out from the storeroom. Arranging the new product on the shelves near the front windows, he noticed a young mother exiting the library across the street. Although there could be as many as 15,000 people in the one-mile-square town in the summer months, there were only about one thousand year-round residents.

She wasn't one of them.

Maybe she was visiting relatives, bringing the boy to see his grandparents. A great percentage of Brandon Beach's permanent townsfolk were over fifty years old. With a boy that age, they were probably headed to the Candy Shoppe.

He went to the back for more baked goods.

When he returned, he was surprised to find her in the parking lot outside his store. Brown, wavy hair fell below her shoulders. She wore a denim jacket over a bright, flower print dress and Converse sneakers. On a gray day like today, she was the brightest thing in sight.

She pointed to the yellow, striped awning over the only grocery store within five miles.

The child faced her, his little arms crossed over his chest. He shook his head and dropped to the ground.

She knelt to his level to face him and spoke.

Rob laughed as the boy's little head bobbed up and down like a sandpiper's.

She spoke again, amazingly patient.

Still nodding, the child grinned. He clambered to his feet and they headed toward the double glass doors.

He sprinted to the register. Had she spotted him watching them?

“Colby, the pineapple is over here.” She held up a tub of the cut fruit.

Squealing, he bolted toward her. “Pineapple in my mouth!”

She giggled and picked up three containers of the yellow treasure, then she handed Colby two. “Here you go. Don’t drop it. What else do we need, luv? Just for today and tomorrow?”

“Cocoa Balls!” He jumped up and down, the tubs of pineapple bouncing in his arms.

“Why don’t you let me take that?” She reached for the round plastic. “You can go get one of those little red baskets by the door.”

“No!” He screamed, twisting away, his little cheeks pinking.

“OK. Then I guess we can’t have any pineapple, because I can’t carry it all.” She started to put her container back.

“I go get it.” He let her take one tub of the fruit.

“I’m going to get the cereal and milk, and some peanut butter, and jelly. Do you want grape or strawberry?”

“Gwape.”

“When I come back, I want you to be calm, and then we can pay for the food and go home, OK?”

He nodded.

“No running.” She pointed her finger at him and stepped away to pick up the other items, eyeing him over her shoulder.

Rob stepped out from behind the register in time for the boy to slam into him. Apparently “no running” hadn’t sunk in. He looked down at the tiny creature wrapped around his leg. “Well, hello there. And who might you be?”

The child inched back, but said nothing, clasping the pineapple to his chest as if fearing Rob might steal it from him.

Rob dropped to one knee. “I’m Rob. What’s your name?”

He shrugged.

“You don’t know your name?”

“Colby.”

“Colby. That’s a fantastic name. How old are you?”

He held up his three outside fingers.

“Three. I see. And where is your mom? Or did you drive here by yourself?” He cocked his head. “I bet you could do that. You look pretty smart.”

The boy grinned and bobbed his head.

Rob laughed. “You did? Is your car outside?”

“Colby? Where are you? I told you to come right back ...”

“He’s right here, ma’am.” Rob rose to greet the voice drifting over the shelves.

“Oh, thank you, God.” Footsteps quickened, and she rounded the end of the nearest shelf, juggling jars of peanut butter and jelly, the pineapple, a quart of chocolate milk and a box of cereal. He stood to greet her. The groceries bobbed one last time, and the milk toppled from her arms and crashed to the floor.