

Paul and Amy
By Kate Simon

Paul looked over the plans for the new tower on the beach in Miami. He and his firm had been hired to build a twenty story condo tower on one of the few available plots in Miami. Blanchard Industries had two divisions, construction and management. He had divisional vice presidents but there was no doubt who was in charge.

This was the biggest project for Blanchard construction to date. He'd been flying back and forth from Miami to Philadelphia but now he needed to go Miami full time. He would be there for at least six months. The bones of the tower were built and now they were moving on to the main phase of construction. He'd have preferred they started right away but they were set to start the next phase after the holiday. He had no choice, He had to stay in town for Christmas.

The Blanchard family did Christmas. He thought with his father retired his parents would travel. No such luck. He was committed to spending several days with his family. His sister and her husband and their kids were always fun to be around. The downside was his mother would give her usual speech about it's still not too late for him. He should meet a girl and settle down. As if three grandkids wasn't enough. They wanted more. His father gave him the 'preserving our heritage' speech. Translation, if he didn't have a son, the name John Paul Blanchard would not continue.

His family was inordinately proud of their French heritage. The first John Paul Blanchard had immigrated to this country before there was an America. Paul had lost count how many generations ago it was. They learned French as children but only spoke it with each other or when they didn't want someone to know what they were saying. They had long ago Anglicized the pronunciation of their name. The only people who called him John Paul were his parents and only when he was in trouble. To the rest of the world he was just Paul.

"Hey, got a minute?"

Paul looked at the doorway of his office and saw his sister, Alice. "Yeah, what's up?"

"I wanted to talked to you about Christmas. You're staying in town, aren't you?"

“Of course. You know I wouldn’t dare miss it.”

“What are you getting the folks for Christmas?”

“I got them a month in France.”

“A month? Damn, you really want to get them out of town,” she laughed.

“You know how much they enjoy going. A few weeks in Paris will give them time to hit all the museums and shops. Then there is a few weeks in Versailles. I’ve arranged for a genealogy specialist to help them trace the family. From what they tell me there are still some structures they can visit.”

“Wow. It’ll be hard to top that,” she smiled.

“But you did. What did you get them?”

She put a hand to her belly. “Another grandchild.”

Paul gave her a big hug. “That’s great sweetheart. Congratulations.” He grinned. “This makes four. You and Steve really need to get a hobby.”

She smiled and slapped his shoulder. “Knock it off. Look, I know the folks give you a hard time about being single. We didn’t want to blindside you at Christmas.”

“I appreciate that. Why have you never given me a hard time about it? You’re obviously pro baby.”

“The truth? Because I’ve seen the women you’ve dated. All those socialites? And wasn’t there a swimsuit model at some point? Six feet tall, skinny as a rail, IQ of a doorknob.”

“Karen.”

“Ah yes. Karen. I couldn’t see any of those women being anything more than a trophy wife and I certainly couldn’t see them being mothers. Obviously, you couldn’t either.”

Paul smiled. His sister could always tell what he was thinking.

“Look, I’d love for you to find a good woman and be happy, whether you have kids or not.” She gave him a side ways grin. “Although you are getting pretty old.”

“I’m forty five!”

“Like I said, old.”

“You’re no spring chicken.”

“I’m still ten years younger than you and I always will be.”

“You really are a pain in the ass, Alice Kay.”

“I’m the baby sister. It’s my job. And don’t call me Alice Kay.”

“For heaven’s sake, why? It’s your name.”

“My name is Alice Katherine. I’m the vice president of a fortune five hundred company. Alice Kay is perpetually six years old.”

He gave her another hug. “Okay, no calling you Alice Kay at work.”

“Thanks, Paulie,” she laughed.

Baby sisters were a pain in the ass. But he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Amy Calloway locked her purse away in the janitorial closet and pushed her cart up the hall. She was thrilled to get the job with Meadowbrook Cleaning. The job gave her a chance to spend time with her daughter, Bridget. She had started kindergarten this year. Amy got her on the bus first thing in the morning and it gave her time to do chores and groceries. If she was lucky she could catch a nap. Bridget got home early enough for Amy to spend time with her before having an early dinner. Miss Sadie from across the hall came over around five so she could watch Bridget. She was a godsend to Amy and Bridget. She treated them like family.

Amy didn't mind that she was the only cleaning person working on the Blanchard building. The rooms weren't too difficult to clean, despite the fact that there must be lots of construction workers coming through the offices during the day. Tonight was the night she cleaned the back offices. She always did them on a Friday because she figured the executives would be gone for the weekend. She finished up the head of HR's office. Amy smiled when she dusted in here. The name plate said Alice Browning, Vice President. She had pictures on her bookshelf of a her husband and three children. She liked seeing the image of a happy family but always wondered why it couldn't be her. She tried to shake it off. Amy had to remind herself that she and daughter were well and happy. They didn't need more. She opened the next door and gasped when she found the room occupied. A man was intently focused on his computer screen.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was still here." He turned and Amy's heart skipped. She'd seen pictures of Paul Blanchard but she'd never met him. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

"That's okay."

"I'll do another room."

"You can keep working. You won't bother me."

"Okay, thanks," she smiled. She tried to focus on her work but being this close to Paul Blanchard made it difficult. She dusted his furniture and emptied his trash can. There was only one family picture to dust. It looked like his parents and Mrs. Browning.

“Is Mrs. Browning your sister?”

“Yes, she is. This is a family business.”

“That’s nice. You look very close.”

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “She’s a pain in the ass baby sister, but yeah, we’re pretty close.”

She smiled at him and then realized what she was doing. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m being inappropriate.”

“No you’re not. If anything I’m being rude.” He stood and walked around his desk. “You’ve been in my office for fifteen minutes and I never introduced myself.” He extended his hand. “Paul Blanchard.”

“Amy Calloway.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Amy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Blanchard.”

“Please, call me Paul.” He smiled and she couldn’t resist smiling too.

“Very well, Paul.” She pulled her hand away and grinned. “Now I need to go clean your bathroom.” She was relieved when he laughed.

“I won’t hold you up.”

Amy went about cleaning Paul’s private bathroom. She’d always thought it was a bit much that his office bathroom was bigger than the one in her apartment. She often wished she use his large shower. Now, she thought better of the large bathroom. If he worked these kind of hours, he needed a home away from home. It also explained why his office couch was an overstuffed fabric and not a classic leather. It was more comfortable to sleep on.

“That smells good. What is it?”

She turned to see Paul standing in the doorway. “Excuse me?”

“Whatever you’re using to clean. It doesn’t smell like the stuff I use at home.”

She gave him a side glance. “The stuff you use?”

“I do manage to take care of my own home,” he smiled.

“Sorry, it’s not something I would ever picture.” She held up the spray bottle she was using. “This is an all natural cleaner. What you’re smelling is a bit of lavender.”

“It’s nice. It’s not like the stuff at home. That smells like a hospital.”

“That stuff is bad for you. All the chemicals can trigger asthma. I convinced my boss that these were better.”

“I know your boss. Todd Michaels does not easily convince.”

“I explained it was better for humans and the environment.”

“Uh huh...”

“And they’re cheaper.”

Paul smiled. “There you go. Clever girl.”

Paul had finally finished Christmas shopping for his family. He'd gotten his parent's trip arranged weeks ago. Alice and Steve weren't too difficult. He'd gotten them a weekend at a spa where they could both relax and be pampered. Now that Alice was pregnant again, she might really enjoy it. The biggest part of the gift was he would spend a weekend with the kids. He liked hanging out the kids. Michael was ten and an Eagles fanatic. They loved watching games together. Paul got Michael a new Eagles jersey and sweatpants. Getting him a new one every year was a no brainer. The kid was growing like a weed. Sam was eight and a bit more reserved. He'd expressed an interest in the family business, but that might be an admiration of his father rather than construction. He'd gotten Sam a giant Lego kit. Danielle was six and very much a girly girl. He'd never admit it but he enjoyed getting her present the most. He'd gotten her a beautiful doll with a collection of dresses and a wardrobe to put them in.

He'd done the last of his shopping in the late afternoon so he could avoid the crush of Christmas shoppers. That meant he'd have to get to some of the work he'd put off done tonight. He'd just set the boxes and bags aside when he heard Amy's cart in the hall.

"Looks like Santa paid a visit," she said.

"I was just finishing up my shopping. Now I have some work to finish."

"I'll let you get to it, then. I finished your office earlier." Amy went off down the hall as he sat down at his desk. He opened up his computer and pulled up a file. He was trying to focus on an electrical bid when his stomach didn't just growl, it roared. He glanced at the clock and realized it was past seven. He hadn't had anything more than a coffee and Danish in the break room this morning. He pulled a Chinese take out menu and scanned it. He stood and walked down the hall. Amy was vacuuming in Steven's office. She gasped when she saw him.

"I'm sorry, is the vacuum bothering you?"

Paul smiled. "Not at all. I was wondering if you like Chinese?"

"Excuse me? "I haven't eaten since this morning and I'm going to order. I want to know if you'd like to join me."

“Oh, I...”

He realized she might think he wanted her to pay for her meal. “Buying you dinner is the least I can do for doing such a great job.”

“That’s very nice of you. Thank you,” she smiled. “General Tso. The spicier the better.”

“Sounds good. It should be here in about thirty. I’ll meet you in the lunch room.” He walked backed to his office and placed the order. He sat back and wondered what he was doing. He tried to tell himself he didn’t like to eat alone, but that wasn’t true. The truth was he’d been thinking about Amy. He didn’t know what it was. She was a pretty woman with pale skin, long dark brown hair and pale blue eyes. But there was something else. Thirty minutes later he was setting out dinner and telling himself he wasn’t crossing a line.

“That smells good.”

Paul looked up and saw Amy standing in the doorway. “Have a seat. What would you like to drink?” He looked in the fridge. “We have ice tea and soda.”

“Ice tea, thank you.”

He grabbed some plates and silver from the cabinets and served Amy her dinner. He set out his Hunan beef and put a plate of egg rolls between them. “Help yourself. I always order too many.”

“Thank you.” She took a bite and smiled. “Oh, these are really good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“This is nice. It’s been a long time since I haven’t been cutting up my daughter’s food or telling her to wipe her face.”

“Dinner’s not over yet. I’m notoriously messy eater.”

“I doubt that,” she smiled. “Your office is very easy for me to clean.”

“How old is your daughter?”

“Six.”

“Do you have a picture?”

She gave him a side glance. “I’m a mother with a smart phone. I have hundreds.”

“Can I see?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Okay.” She pulled her phone from her pocket and pulled up a picture. She was a tiny version of Amy. “That’s my Bridget.”

“She adorable.”

Amy smiled at the image. “She’s my world.” She set down her phone. “From the look of those bags you do Christmas big.”

“They’re for Alice’s kids. I admit I spoil them.”

“That’s what Uncles are for.”

“I agree. What about you? Do you have a big family?”

“It’s just the two of us so it will be a quiet holiday. We’ll spend the day making cookies. She loves helping me in the kitchen.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Paul looked at her and smiled. He thought there was a lot more to Amy’s story than she was saying, but he had no right to ask.

Amy hadn't seen Paul in the office for several days. She hoped she wouldn't see him today. Miss Sadie had been sick all weekend with the flu and she still wasn't up to staying with Bridget. Amy had to risk bringing her to work. She set down Bridget's coloring books on the break room table.

"Sweetheart, I need you to stay in here and behave while Mommy works."

"Mommy, this is boring. I want to be with Miss Sadie."

"I've already told you. Miss Sadie is sick. She needs her rest. Now I need to get to work. I'll check in on you soon. Do not wander."

"Yes, Mommy," she said with obvious displeasure.

Amy started her work, comfortable that her daughter was safe. The building had an alarm code which she activated when she locked the door behind her. No one could get in unless they had a code. She tried hard to focus on moving quickly from room to room. Fortunately, a lot of the Blanchard employees were already gone for their Christmas vacation. She walked back to the break room and got a shock. Paul Blanchard, the owner of the biggest construction company on the east coast, was coloring with her daughter.

"Paul?"

"Hello Amy. Bridget and I were just getting acquainted over the Little Mermaid."

"He's pretty good, Mommy. He colored King Titan," she smiled and pushed his picture toward her.

"Yes, it looks very nice. Paul, I didn't realize you were here."

"I only got here a little while ago. I had some work to do but coloring is much more fun."

"Bridget, why don't you finish your picture while I talk to Mr. Blanchard." Paul stood and moved out of earshot of Bridget. "I'm so sorry. I know I should have asked but my sitter is ill and I don't have anyone else to leave her with."

“Don’t worry, Amy. It’s not a problem. She’s very sweet. This room isn’t terribly comfortable. Why doesn’t Bridget stay in my office? I can get my work done and she can watch my TV. That way you don’t have to worry about her.”

“Oh, I couldn’t...”

“Amy, I wouldn’t have offered if I minded.” Paul smiled and her heart skipped. She tried to stop her eyes from welling.

“I would really appreciate it.”

“Good, it’s settled.”

“Bridget, you’re going to stay in Mr. Blanchard’s office until I’m done.” She sat down next to her to emphasize her instructions. “You have to behave. Mr. Blanchard has work to do.”

“Yes, Mommy.” She handed Paul his picture. “Mr. Paul, you should hang your picture up. It’s really good. Mommy hangs up mine on the fridge.”

He held his picture up to her. “What do you think? Is it fridge worthy?”

“I think it’s terrific.” She thought Paul Blanchard was pretty terrific too.

Paul was looking through the report on the Miami project, but the truth was, he didn't need to. He spent way too much time in the office. It had made him very successful but it was the only thing he truly enjoyed. That and spending time with his family. His family were warm and welcoming, but he didn't have his own family. Now with the holidays approaching he felt more like the odd man out, though he'd never admit it. His mother would never let him forget it.

Bridget had stopped coloring and was curled up on his couch. He grabbed a blanket from the closet and stretched it over her. He grabbed the remote and turned on a cartoon channel. "What do you think?"

"That's good," she said quietly.

He wondered if Bridget was just tired. It was after seven. It was then he noticed she looked flushed. He touched her head and realized she was burning up. He reached for his office phone and pressed the intercom. "Amy, I need you to come to my office."

"Bridget, sweetie, can you talk to me?" he asked.

"Pretty flowers," she whispered.

"What's wrong?" asked Amy.

"She's got a fever, a high one. It came on fast."

"Oh God," she whispered as she touched her head.

"She's sounding confused. We need to get her to the ER. You get your bag and I'll carry her."

"She's prone to high fevers. I'll get her home."

"The ER is around the corner. Go get your car."

She turned on him and tears were running down her cheeks. "No car, no insurance."

"We'll talk about it later. Get your bag and meet me at the front." He wrapped the blanket tight around the child and held her in his arms. A moment later Amy met him at

the door. She tried to reach in her purse for the front door key. "Leave it." They ran to his car and he handed Bridget to Amy as he reached for his keys. He unlocked the car and opened the passenger side. He helped Amy into the front seat and ran around to driver side. He took a breath, trying to calm himself. The hospital was around the corner but it wouldn't do them any good if he crashed the car. He pulled into the ER entrance and threw his car into park. He opened the door and helped Amy and Bridget out of the car. A security guard approached him and he wasn't about to get into about parking. He tossed the man his keys. "We'll be in the ER." They ran into waiting room and a nurse rushed toward them.

"Her fever spiked really high," said Amy.

"I've got her," said the nurse. "Give your information to the desk." Amy tried to follow but Paul grabbed her shoulders.

"They need her information."

She nodded and gave the admitting clerk Bridget's information. When the woman asked for her insurance card Paul put his hand on her arm. He pulled out his wallet and handed the woman his credit card. "Put everything on that."

"Oh Paul, I can't."

"Hush." He looked at the clerk who was staring at him. "Go on."

"There's financial forms."

He pulled out his driver's license and handed it to her. "Here's my ID. Fill out what you need and I'll sign it." He pulled out his phone and pressed a contact. "Eric, it's Paul. Are you in the hospital? Great. I'm in the ER with the six year old daughter of a friend. Thanks." He looked at Amy who appeared frozen. "A friend of mine is a pediatrician. He's going to join us. Let's go find her." They pushed into the ER and looked into each open room until they found Bridget. She was covered with blankets and there was an IV in her arm. A young woman was looking into her eyes.

"My baby," Amy gasped.

“What’s her name?” asked the doctor.

Paul saw Amy was frozen in shock. “Her name is Bridget.”

“Bridget, sweetie, can you talk to me?” asked the doctor.

“Mommy,” she whispered. Her child’s voice seemed to snap Amy back.

“Bridget, baby. Mommy’s here.”

“I’m Doctor Ryan. Her temp was 104.5. I’ve given her fluids and some intravenous Tylenol to bring it down. It’s already dropped one point.”

“When she gets sick she tends to run a high fever.”

“You were right to bring her when you did. When it spikes that high, you need to get it down as soon as possible.”

“Paul?”

Paul greeted his friend. “Eric, thank you for coming. This is Bridget’s mother, Amy Calloway. Amy, this is Eric Smith.”

“Hello,” she said quietly.

“Dr. Smith?” asked the young woman.

“Friend of the family. Tell me your diagnosis.”

“Six year old female. Presented with a fever of 104.5. I established an IV and gave her intravenous Tylenol.” She ran a device over Bridget’s forehead. “Her temp has dropped to 103.”

“Very good, Doctor,” said Eric. The young woman smiled and nodded. “She tends to spike high, does she?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Eric, please. Has there been any illnesses at her school?”

“Her babysitter has been ill with the flu.”

“There you go then. She’s probably picked that up. Kids pick up everything. The fluid and the med should drop her temp pretty quickly. We’ll keep her for a few hours but you’ll be able to take her home later tonight. Then you just have to wait until the flu runs its course.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks, Eric.” Eric nodded he should join him in the hall. “Is she really okay?”

“Yes, she’ll be fine. Kids are pretty resilient. I’ll hang out for a while but Doctor Ryan’s diagnosis and treatment was accurate. Just one question. Since when did you start dating women with children?”

Paul rolled his eyes. “We’re not dating. Amy cleans my offices after hours.”

“She’s the cleaning lady.”

“Yeah, she is,” he said a bit too defensively. “Her babysitter was sick so she brought her daughter with her. Bridget was hanging out with me in my office when she got sick fast.”

“It’s a good thing she brought her with her. A fever that high can go south fast.”

“What do you mean?”

“Convulsions, brain damage, death.”

“Dear God.”

“Don’t worry. She’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Eric.” Paul stood in the doorway and watched as Amy stroked her daughter’s damp hair. Bridget’s fever had frightened him more than anything ever had. He needed to admit, at least to himself, that Amy and her adorable daughter were becoming very important in his life.

Paul walked back into the room and stood next to Amy. “She’s going to be alright.”

“I know.”

He rubbed his hand down her back. “Amy, really, everything will be fine.” Tears began to run down her cheeks. He pulled her tight against him as she began to sob. He held her close until she looked up at him. He grabbed a tissue and handed to her. “Better now?”

She nodded. “I’m so sorry, Paul. I’ve gotten you all wet.”

“I’ll dry.” He was startled when her knees buckled. “Amy!” He steered her toward the chair. “Sit.”

“I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not. You nearly passed out. You sit and I’ll call the nurse.”

“No, really, I’m okay. I haven’t eaten today.”

“What? You sit. I’ll get you something.”

Amy tried to stand. “Paul, really, I’m fine.”

“Will you stop saying that? You’re not fine.” He pointed to the chair. “Now sit.”

She gave him a small smile. “You’re really pushy.”

“Guilty. I’ll be back.” He came back a few minutes later with a bottle of cold water and a chocolate bar. “Here take this.”

“Thank you,” she said as she sipped her water.

“Eat your chocolate. You need the sugar.”

She took a bite and smiled. “Yes, doctor.” She looked over at her sleeping child and ran her hand over Bridget’s arm. “She seems better. I can’t thank you enough for helping me. I’ll pay you back.”

“No, you won’t”

“Paul, this is going to be expensive. I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Why? What do you mean why?”

“I’m your cleaning lady.”

“You’re also my friend, at least I hope so. We’ve talked a lot over the past week. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you and Bridget.”

“I have too, I just don’t understand why you’ve spent so much time with me.”

Paul sat back and smiled. “Honestly, because I like the way you talk to me.”

“Excuse me?”

“How do I say this without seeming like a total jackass?”

“Give it a shot,” she chuckled.

“Most of the people I speak to, with the exception of my family, are too deferential to me. I’m everyone’s boss. Even here at the hospital, it’s the same. I’m on the board. Being with you feels easy. Does that make any sense?”

“I guess so,” she said, sounding not all that convinced.

“Amy, I’m not expecting anything from you for helping out tonight. I can do this. Like I said, I’m on the board.” He tried to get Amy to smile. They’ll give me the friends and family discount.”

It was nearly dawn by the time Amy got home with Bridget and Paul. He'd stayed with them all night and insisted on carrying Bridget into her apartment. She found herself still wondering why someone like Paul Blanchard would be spending so much time with her and her daughter. Everything about him said he was a good guy, true to his word. She couldn't help her doubt. Nothing in her life had ever prepared her for a man like Paul.

"Where's her bedroom? I'll get her in bed."

Amy led him to Bridget's bedroom and pulled back the covers. "I'll get her changed into pajamas later."

"Mommy, my head hurts."

"I know baby. I'll get you something for that in a minute. You just cuddle up and close your eyes."

"Thank you for carrying me, Mr. Paul."

"You're very welcome, angel."

He followed Amy out to the kitchen while she poured some ginger ale. "Your girl is something else."

"I think so," she smiled.

"I'll get her coloring books and drop them off later."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I'll get them tonight."

"No, you need to stay home with Bridget. Don't worry. You'll be paid."

"Paul, I don't work for you."

"No, you work for Todd. I sign off on the charge and he pays you."

"He won't like that."

"Todd has the contract for almost all my buildings and they're all a lot bigger than my office. He'll be fine with it. Can you please trust me?"

She sighed and looked at Paul. “As you can see, I have some trust issues, but I’ll try.” She was rewarded with a smile that made her heart skip.

“Excellent. Now you try and get some rest and I’ll see you later this afternoon, okay?”

“Okay, thank you.” Amy closed the door behind him and took the ginger ale and Tylenol into Bridget. “Take this, sweetheart.”

She took the pills and took a sip of ginger ale. “Where’s Mr. Paul?”

“He went home but he said he’d bring your coloring book and crayons by later.”

Bridget snuggled back into her pillow. “Mr. Paul is nice. I like him.”

Amy kissed her forehead. “I like him too.”

Paul should have been tired but he was running on adrenaline. Last night was terrifying. Even having seen his niece and nephews sick, he'd never seen a child get so sick so fast. He was gathering up Bridget's coloring books when Alice appeared in his doorway.

"There you are."

"Here I am."

"Did you forget to lock up last night? The door was unlocked and the code wasn't set." Alice noticed the coloring books. "And when did you take up coloring?"

"We had a problem last night."

"We?"

"Amy, from Todd's company, cleans the offices after hours. Last night her sitter was sick so she brought Bridget with her."

"Uh oh."

"No uh oh. It was fine. I had Bridget in here with me while Amy worked. She's an adorable girl. Same age as Danielle. Anyway she spiked a really high fever fast. We took her to the ER."

"Is she okay?"

"She is now. I'm going to take these over to Amy's. Oh, also, I'm going to call Todd. I want Amy to take time off, I'm thinking until after New Year's. There's very few people here for the next two weeks so it shouldn't be a problem for us."

"You're going to Amy's? That presupposes you've been to her place before."

"She doesn't have a car so I took her to the ER. We only just got back. Now if this inquisition is about over I have some things to do." He tried to walk past Alice but she held on to his arm.

"Not so fast, Paulie. You're friends with our cleaning lady?"

“I’m friends with Amy Calloway and her daughter, Bridget. She happens to clean our building.”

“And how did you become friends?”

Paul sighed. He knew his sister. She wasn’t going to let this go. “I’ve been doing a lot of work at night to get ready for Miami. We’ve taken a couple of breaks together. She’s very nice. Is that enough for you?” He was suspicious of Alice’s smile. “What?”

“You’ve just told me more about a woman than you have in years. You like her.”

“I just said we’re friends.”

“Yeah, right,” she grinned. “Go on now.”

Paul got in his car trying not to think about his sister being right. It only took him a few minutes to get to Meadowbrook Cleaning. He’d decided his request would be better made in person.

“Paul Blanchard for Todd Michaels,” he said to the receptionist. She picked up the phone and a moment later Todd came into the lobby.

“Paul, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Can I have a moment.”

“Of course.” Todd led them to his office. “Can I get you something?”

“No, I’m good. I want to talk to you about someone, Amy Calloway.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No not at all. She does an excellent job.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Last night she had to bring her daughter with her because her sitter was sick.”

“She did what!?”

“Calm down. I told her it was fine. Bridget was watching TV in my office when she got a very high fever. We took her to the ER. She’s better now, but Amy should be able to stay home with her while she’s recovering.”

“Ah, of course. I’ll send someone over to your office tonight.”

“No, that’s not what I want. Almost no one beside Alice and I are in the office until after the New Year. I would like Amy to be continue to be paid.”

Todd looked at his computer and pulled up Amy’s file “She only started a little while ago. She hasn’t got any vacation time yet.”

“I understand. I want you to bill me for the time.”

“Excuse me?”

“Keep charging me and paying her. That way she can have some time with her daughter.”

“Oh, sure, okay,” he said in a tone Paul didn’t like.

“No, you don’t understand. There is nothing inappropriate going on. Amy is a very nice, hard working woman. I’d just like to see her catch a break.”

“Of course. I’ll see to it.”

“Thanks, Todd. I appreciate it. If you don’t mind I’m going to get going. It’s been a long night.”

“Paul, before you go, you may need to know something. You know before we let any employee have access to a client’s building we do a deep dive on their backgrounds. We wouldn’t let anyone have access if there was a problem.”

“Amy cleared.”

“Yes, but she does have a history you may need to know about. It was awful enough that I remember it. I’m assuming you don’t know about her ex-husband.”

“I know she’s divorced. She didn’t say much more.”

“He’s in San Quentin doing twenty five to life.”

“For what?”

“Attempted murder.”

“Who’d he try to kill?” he asked, afraid he knew the answer.

“Amy.”

“She never said.”

“From the police report, she’s lucky she survived.”

“What happened?”

“He didn’t like she’d filed for divorce so he shot her.”

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

Todd looked at his screen. “The report said that he shot her then tried to go after their daughter. Despite being shot twice she protected her daughter by barricading them both in the bathroom until the police arrived.”

He felt himself shaking with anger. How could anyone try to hurt them? “I had no idea.”

“Paul, I know you. You say nothing is going on and that’s the truth. But I’ve known you for years. You’re interested in her. You should know she’s carrying a lot of baggage.”

“Thanks, Todd.”

Paul sat in his car and tried to control the flood of emotions. He knew he was blind angry that someone would hurt Amy and Bridget. He also knew he was more tied up with the Calloway girls than he could have ever imagined.

Paul managed to get a few hours sleep before he headed back to Amy's. He was surprised he'd gotten any sleep at all. He grabbed the packages from the back seat and took the elevator to Amy's floor. He knocked quietly, hoping he wouldn't wake Bridget.

"Hi, Paul. Come in."

"How's the patient?"

"Much better. Her fever is down."

"I brought some ginger ale and her coloring books."

"Thank you," she smiled as she took the grocery bag. "What's that?"

He pulled a blue box out of the other shopping bag. "I picked this up for Bridget."

"That's so nice. She's awake if you'd like to give it to her." He followed Amy to Bridget's bedroom. "Bridget, Mr. Paul has come to visit."

Bridget sat up and smiled. She was still a bit flushed but she looked much better than she had last night. "Mr. Paul!"

"Hello, Bridget. How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Mommy says I have to stay in bed."

"Mommy's right. I brought you someone to keep you company." He handed her the house shaped box. Bridget opened the box and squealed. She pulled out the large teddy bear and gave it a tight hug.

"Look Mommy! She has a princess shirt. Look it's Ariel!"

"I see, honey. She's very pretty."

Bridget stood up on her bed and threw her arms around Paul's waist. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Paul."

He put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "You're very welcome, angel."

“Sweetheart, I want you to lay down for now. I’ll bring you some dinner in a little bit.”

“Mr. Paul, will you still be here?”

He smiled and looked at Amy. “I don’t have any plans.”

“Good.” Bridget sat back and started talking to her bear.

Paul and Amy closed her bedroom door and walked out into the living room. “I didn’t mean to invite myself to dinner.”

“No, my daughter invited you. She has a mind of her own.”

“I can call for takeout.”

“No need. I made ziti. There’s plenty.” She opened the fridge. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Ice tea would be great. Thanks.”

“It was very nice of you to bring her the bear.” They sat down at the kitchen table.

“She’s such a sweetheart and she was pretty brave last night. So was her mother.”

“Who are we kidding? I was a mess.”

“You held it together for your daughter.”

“Barely.”

“Did you get some rest?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know how. As soon as she was settled I was out cold.”

“I talked to Todd. He’s fine with you taking some time.”

“I have to admit, working today would have been tough.”

“You’re off until after the New Year.”

“What? That’s ten days. That’s crazy.”

“No, it’s not. There are very few people in the office during the holiday.”

“You’re a big company. There are going to be people in and out. I need to do my job.”

“First, yes Blanchard is a big company. The executives rotate being on call if there is a problem.”

“How can you do that?”

He shrugged and smiled. “We figured out a long time ago that if employees don’t have to choose between their families and their jobs neither suffers. It creates a satisfied work force. We have a very low turn over rate.”

“That’s great but I don’t work for you.”

“Todd’s company cleans all the buildings I own. Most are a lot bigger than my office. They have teams of cleaning people. He was fine with my request.”

“He must think...oh God.”

He reached for her hand. “Amy, he doesn’t think anything bad of either of us. But I need to tell you something. Todd told me about what you went through with your ex-husband.”

“What?! Why would he do that? He had no right.”

“He didn’t tell me anything that wasn’t public record. I’m sorry you and Bridget had to go through that.”

Amy bolted to her feet. “I don’t need your pity! I don’t need anyone’s pity.”

He stood and took her by the shoulders. “Amy, I don’t pity you. Not at all. Do you know what I really think of you? I think you’re remarkable. You came from LA to start a new life for you and your daughter. You’re raising a lovely child. What Todd told me didn’t change my opinion of you. You are extraordinary.” He was relieved when he saw a smile.

“I still don’t understand why he told you at all.”

“Tom has known me for years. He could see, even if I didn’t, that I care about you.”

“What?” she gasped. “You can’t.”

Paul chuckled. “Why?”

“You’re the boss. I’m the cleaning lady.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, and? You’re an important man in this town. You said so yourself last night. You’re everyone’s boss. I clean toilets.”

“I didn’t say I was important. I said everyone knows me. And you work hard to take care of yourself and your child. Are you ashamed of what you do?”

“Of course not.”

“Neither am I.” He moved his hand up and down her arm. “Amy, I’m not going to push anything you don’t want. For now, I think you and I are becoming great friends. That seems like a very good start.”

Amy smiled. “I guess so.”

He let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Good. What do you think about maybe the two of us going out for dinner?”

“As friends?” she grinned.

“Sure,” he smiled.

“Maybe we can do that. In the meantime you can help me get dinner on the table.”

Paul thought about where he would take Amy for dinner as he set out the dishes. She pulled a large baking dish out of the oven and set it on the stove. “That looks delicious.”

“Mommy, I’m hungry.” Bridget was standing in the kitchen doorway, holding her new bear.

“That’s a good sign,” said Paul.

“Yes, it is,” she smiled as she touched Bridget’s head. “Your fever is about gone. I’ll make you some soup.”

“Mommy, I like ziti.”

“There will be plenty left. Tonight you get soup.”

“Mr. Paul, do you like ziti?”

“Who doesn’t?” He smiled. Paul found himself listening to Amy and Bridget talking about everything from their trip to the ER, to her new bear, and when she could have some of Mommy’s ziti.

“Paul? You’re staring. Is your dinner okay?”

“It’s excellent. Everything is excellent.”

Paul let himself into his parent's home. He walked into the kitchen and the hubbub of a family dinner. "Hi Mom."

"Paul, I didn't know you were coming. Grab a plate," said his mother.

He kissed her cheek. "I didn't come for dinner. I just came to say hello."

"Uncle Paul!" Danielle came running toward him. He picked her up and gave her a kiss.

"Hello, sweetheart."

Alice and Steve walked in behind her. Alice looked him up and down. "Somebody's got a date." Leave it to Alice to cut straight to the chase.

"Yes, nosey, I have a date."

"A date? With who?" asked his father as he and his nephews piled into the kitchen.

"You have date?" asked Matthew.

"It is with that pretty weather lady from Channel six?" asked Sam.

"Alright you lot," said Steven, "Out. Matthew, Sam, take your sister into the den. Your uncle will say hi before he leaves."

Danielle held tight around his neck. "I want Uncle Paul to stay!"

"I'll see you again soon, Dani. Go on, now."

The children left the room as his mother turned off the stove. "Who is she?"

"Is it Amy?" asked Alice.

"Yes, it's Amy."

His sister smiled and nodded. "Nice."

"Who is she and how did you meet?" asked his mother.

"Her name is Amy Calloway and I met her at work."

"What does she do?" asked Mom.

He took a breath. He'd always dated executives or business women or weather girls. "She cleans the offices after hours. I met her while I was working late on the Miami project. She's thirty two and has a six year old daughter named Bridget." He looked back and forth between his parents.

"Alice, have you met her?" asked his father.

"Briefly."

"Oh, I know her," said Steve. "Fair, dark hair, blue eyes. I've run into her a few times after hours. Nice lady."

"Is that all?" asked Dad.

"The office is always spotless."

"Tell us about her, Paul," said Dad.

"She's a lovely, hard working, extraordinary woman. She's been through an awful in her life but she's come through it and is raising an adorable little girl. I think Bridget and Danielle would be great friends."

"And you like her," said his mother.

"Yes I do. Very much. Which leads me to why I'm here. Amy doesn't have any family. I'd like to invite her and her daughter to Christmas dinner with us." He caught a look between his parents.

"Of course, dear," said his mother. "Steve, dinner is almost ready. Will you get the children?"

"Sure thing, Poppy."

Paul smiled. His brother in law was the only one who called his mother by her given name. He glanced at his father who was carving the roast and his sister, who was dishing out potatoes. "Is that all?" he asked, nervous for the response.

"No. Dinner is at four. That way the children can get to bed at a reasonable hour," said Mom.

“And...that’s all?”

Mom set down the spoon she was using to make the gravy. “John Paul, did you think we wouldn’t want your friend here because she cleans for a living?”

“Well...”

“Shame on you,” said Mom.

“You should know us better than that,” said Dad.

Paul smiled even though he felt a bit ashamed of himself. His parents were extraordinary people. He patted his father’s back as he stole a bit of roast. “Thanks Dad.” He kissed his mother’s cheek. “I love you, Mom.”

“Of course you do,” she smiled. “I’m adorable.”

He gave her a hug. “Yes, you are.”

Amy got dressed for her first date in years. She couldn't believe he was taking her to Lucca's. She'd never been heard of it before so she googled it. It was a four star restaurant in the center of town. She saw the pictures and this was as far from Mickey D's as you could get. She didn't have a need for fancy clothes but she did have a long sleeved black dress that fit well. She'd bought it years ago but it was a classic look. Since she'd only worn it a handful of times it was still in good shape. She'd twisted her hair up into a loose bun. She was clipped on a long, plain gold necklace and small gold hoops. She smoothed the skirt down around her hips and took a last look. "This is crazy," she said to her reflection.

"Mommy, Miss Sadie is here."

Miss Sadie was the grandmother everyone wanted. She was a sweet woman who's children had moved out of town. Amy thought she enjoyed spending time with them and fussing over them. It certainly wasn't for the money she paid her. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Oh, look at you! You look wonderful."

"You look pretty, Mommy."

"Thank you, both."

"What's his name?"

"Mr. Paul," said Bridget. "He brought me this bear when I got sick." She held up her new bear for inspection.

"Isn't that nice. What's her name?"

"She hasn't told me yet."

Miss Sadie smiled at Amy. "Not very talkative, is she?"

"No, she talks but she hasn't decided yet. A name is an important thing. You have to make the right choice."

Amy and Miss Sadie tried to hold in their chuckles. "A name is a very important thing," said Amy. "Sweetheart, come sit with me for a minute." They sat down on the

couch and Amy brushed her hand over Bridget's forehead, reassuring herself the fever was gone. "Sweetheart, you know I'm going out to dinner with Mr. Paul."

"Yeah. I like him. He's nice."

"I like him too. Are you okay with that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes men and women like spending time together."

Bridget looked at her bear and thought for a moment. "You mean like he'd be your boyfriend?"

"Something like that. How do you feel about that?"

"I guess it's okay. He's not like the bad man. Mr. Paul is always nice to us."

"Yes, he is," Amy wondered if her ex-husband knew that his child only referred to him as the bad man. Or, if he'd even cared. The knock at the door caused her heart to race. She opened the door and gasped. Paul was wearing a dark blue suit and light blue shirt that set off his bright blue eyes. He was holding a single rose. His smile went straight to her heart.

He kissed her cheek and whispered, "Tu es si belle. Je suis un homme chanceux."

"Merci, Monsieur," she smiled as she accepted the rose.

"Do you speak French?"

"Just enough high school French to know what you said was very nice." She accepted the rose and smiled. "This is Miss Sadie. Miss Sadie, this is Paul Blanchard."

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Sadie. I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh, really?" she grinned. "I haven't heard nearly enough about you."

"Hi Mr. Paul," said Bridget.

"Hello, angel. How are you feeling?"

"I'm all better."

“That’s very good.”

“We should get doing,” said Amy. She handed her rose to Miss Sadie. “Will you find a vase for this.”

“Of course, dear. Go have a good time.”

Lucca’s was even more elegant than Amy had seen in the pictures. Paul helped her with her coat as they were greeted by the maître d.

“Mr. Blanchard, it’s good to see you again.”

“Hello, James. This is Ms. Calloway.”

“Ma’am,” he nodded. “I’ll see you to your table.”

They were taken to a prime location near, but not too close to a roaring fireplace. They had a view of the Christmas lights reflected on the river outside. “Oh, Paul. This is wonderful.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased.” Paul nodded at James and she was sure he’d given strict instructions as to their table. James returned quickly with a bottle of wine and two glasses. He poured a small amount in a glass and handed it to Paul. He sipped and nodded. James poured the wine in both glasses and quickly left. “This is a nice Malbec. I hope you like it.”

Amy took a sip and smiled. “It’s delicious. You know your wine.”

“We’re French. It’s mandatory training.”

“And you speak it. Was that part of the training?”

“Yes. We don’t get to use it much unless we’re travelling.”

“Or if you don’t want anyone to know what you’re saying,” she smiled.

“Hah! Exactly. My family, my father in particular, is very proud of our heritage. We’ve been regaled with stories of the first Blanchards coming to America in the 1600’s

since we were kids. Farmers, business men, politicians. You peak under any historical rock and one of us was there.”

“That’s really nice.” Amy looked at her menu and had no idea what to order. The server came to their table and she decided to take a chance.

“Good evening. I’m Elaine. I’ll be serving you tonight. Have you made your choices?”

“What do you recommend?” she asked.

“The chef’s specialty is a slow roasted salmon that is amazing.”

“That sounds delicious,” she smiled and closed her menu.

“Yes, it does. Make it two,” said Paul. He smiled at Amy and took another sip. “You haven’t said much about your family.”

“There’s not much to tell. I’m an only child. My father died when I was six. My mother died eight years ago. I don’t really have any other family.”

“What was your mother like?”

Amy smiled. “She was wonderful. Warm and funny and smart.”

“Like mother, like daughter.”

She chuckled. “Thank you. She was a great cook and baker. At Christmas I try to do some baking. It’s my way of keeping some family tradition alive.”

“That sounds wonderful. Would that include chocolate chip cookies?” he grinned.

“It might. If you’re a good boy maybe Santa will bring you some.”

He reached for her hand. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

She sighed and took another sip of wine. He needed to know. She might as well get it out of the way. “I met Mark right after my mother died. I think now I was just so lonely. It was okay for a while but after I had Bridget it got bad. I filed for divorce but he wasn’t having it. I got a restraining order but he ignored it. One night he came to my

apartment with a gun. He said he was going to take us all out. He shot me but I got Bridget and locked us in the bathroom. Fortunately my neighbor heard the shots and called police. It took me about a year to recover. After that I wanted to get as far away from everything as I could.” She waited for Paul to express shock or disgust. He took her hand and pressed it to his lips.

Dinner was delicious. The wine helped her relax and enjoy a wonderful evening with her handsome date. She laughed at the stories he told her about growing up the older brother. He talked with love about his nephews and his niece. “You really love kids, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do. They’re just fascinating little beings. Watching them learn new things. You can rediscover things yourself through them.”

“Why didn’t you ever have kids?”

He sipped his wine and smiled. “I never met their mother.”

Amy was taken aback by his honesty. “There must have been someone.”

“No, not really. There were a couple of women I dated for a while but it never felt serious. We wanted different things.”

“Like what?”

“They liked being seen with me but they had different priorities. Money and careers mostly. Don’t get me wrong, they were perfectly nice but it just never felt right. Honestly, I wanted what my parents have. They’ve been together for fifty years. They adore each other. They love their kids and grandkids. Being in their home always feels...better. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.”

“I spend more time at their house than I do my own.”

“It sounds like you have a wonderful family.”

“I do. That brings me to something I wanted to ask you. I’d like to invite you and Bridget to Christmas dinner at my parents.”

“What?”

“They are looking forward to meeting you.”

“You’ve already asked them?”

“Of course. Alice and Steve will be there with the kids. I’m sure Bridget and Danielle would get great.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Understand what?”

“I don’t understand how someone like you would want to take me to Christmas dinner with your family. Why you would be so kind to me. Why someone like you would want someone like me in your life.”

“Amy, you really don’t know how extraordinary you are. I think you’re wonderful and strong,” he gave her a sly grin, “and very beautiful. I know we’ve known each other at this but I hope you’ll give us a chance.”

“Paul, I’m not used to someone like you.” She smiled. “I don’t think there is anyone like you.”

Paul took her hand in his. “Sweetheart, the only thing you need to remember is, I’m not him.”

Amy walked hand in hand with Paul to her apartment door. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"I had a great time too. I hope we can do this again soon." He leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss. "Very soon."

"I'd like that."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay," she smiled. She opened the door to her apartment and closed it behind her.

"Did you have a nice time, dear?"

"The best."

"Bridget is sound asleep."

"That's good," she said only half listening. The only thing she could hear was "I'm not him."

"Dear, are you okay?"

"Yes, can you stay?"

Miss Sadie grinned. "Go on, dear."

Amy smiled and ran out and down the hall. She smiled when she reached Paul in the parking lot.

"Amy? What is it?"

"You're not him." She pulled him into a deep kiss. He held her tight against him, rubbing his hands down her back. "Miss Sadie is going to stay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am." Paul smiled and opened the passenger

Paul opened the door to his house and hoped he'd straightened up. He helped her with her coat and hung it up in the hall. He was surprised at his nerves. "Can I get you something?"

Amy smiled. "Yes." She ran her arms up his chest. "You."

He smiled and kissed her before taking her hand. He led her to his bedroom and pulled her close. "Amy, sweetheart." He began to unzip her dress when she stopped him.

"You're going to want the lights out."

"You're a beautiful woman. I want to see you."

She spread her hand over her stomach. "It's not like you see on TV. I'm a mess of scars."

He put his hand to her cheek. "Sweetheart, do you trust me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then trust me with this." He unzipped her dress and carefully slipped it off her shoulders. It fell to the ground and she tried to cover herself with her hands. "Amy, please." He pulled her hands away and became blind angry. There were two round scars but there was also a long scar the length of her abdomen. "Dear God," he whispered.

"I told you."

He felt a drop of water hit his hand. He looked up to see she was crying. "Amy," he whispered.

"I told you. I look like Frankenstein." She tried to turn but he stopped her. He wiped the tears from her cheeks. Then he kissed her.

"You know what I thought? I want to find your ex and kill him. How could he do this to you? To Bridget."

"I look horrible."

"No, you look like a warrior. I've never met anyone as brave as you." He pulled into a deep kiss. "Amy, angel, I need you." He led her to the bed and she sat while he stripped

off his suit. He smiled at her wide grin when he pulled off his boxers. She pushed back against the pillow. He carefully slid the rest of the lingerie from her body and put kisses in their place. He caressed her cheek and gave her another soft kiss. "Let me give you what you need."

Amy tried to focus on getting Bridget dressed for Christmas dinner with Paul's family. The past weeks had been the happiest of her life. Paul had spent as almost every night with them. He never seemed to tire of entertaining Bridget while Amy made dinner. They'd also made good use of Bridget's time at kindergarten. She never thought she'd be able to forget about her scars but Paul made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

"Bridget get your shoes on. Mr. Paul will be here soon."

"I'm ready, Mommy." She had on the new Christmas outfit she'd gotten her. Having time off had given her a chance to do a little shopping. Bridget's new sweater was bright red with a picture of Santa. She had a matching pair of red pants and green socks with little reindeer. The reason she could see the reindeer was Bridget had forgotten her shoes.

"Bridget, go get your shoes and bring them to me." She was fastening the straps when there was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Paul, Mr. Paul!" Bridget shouted as she ran to the door.

"Hold on." Amy looked out the peephole and smiled. "Hello there," she smiled as he gave her a quick kiss.

"Merry Christmas," he smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Paul. I have reindeer on my socks."

"That's excellent." He lifted the hem of his slacks. "I have candy canes on mine."

"Look, Mommy! Mr. Paul has funny socks too!"

"I see that," she smiled. "We should get going." She grabbed a large shopping bag.

"What's all that?"

"Mommy made cookies!"

"Are there chocolate chips in there?" he asked as he peaked inside the bag.

“Later, nose. You’ll spoil your dinner.”

“Mommy wouldn’t let me have any either.”

Paul laughed and grabbed the bag and Amy locked the door behind them.

She was surprised when they pulled up to Paul’s parent’s home. It was a nice suburban home but it wasn’t nearly as grand as she expected. “This is where you grew up?”

“Yes. My father did well enough with our company that he wanted to move but my mother wouldn’t hear of it,” he said as he unbuckled Bridget from her car seat. Amy was surprised when he had it installed in his car. She took a deep breath as he knocked on the door.

“Mom, Dad, we’re here.”

She tried to calm herself as they joined Paul’s parents in the den. The room had a warm, lived in feel with the biggest Christmas tree she’d seen in years. Paul’s father looked like an older version of him. He was tall and handsome with bright blue eyes. His mother was a petite woman with her white hair pulled into a tight ponytail.

Paul kissed his mother and hugged his father. “Mom, Dad, this is Amy Calloway and Bridget Calloway.”

“Welcome. It’s very nice to meet you,” said his father as he shook her hand. Let’s have a seat.

“Thank you for having us, Mr. and Mrs. Blanchard.”

“We’re very happy you can join us,” said his mother.

Amy realized Bridget was hugging her bear very tightly and staring at Paul’s mom. “Bridget, these are Mr. Paul’s parents. Say hello.”

“Hello,” she said quietly. “You’re really pretty.”

“Why, thank you, dear,” she smiled.

“What’s your name?”

“Bridget, this is Mrs. Blanchard,” said Amy.

“No, her real name,” said Bridget.

“My name is Poppy,” she touched her husband’s arm. “And this is John,” she smiled.

Bridget held her bear to her ear. “She likes that. Her name is Poppy too.”

Amy smiled. “Paul gave her the bear when she was sick but apparently the bear couldn’t decide on a name until now.”

“I’m honored, Bridget,” she smiled.

“Where is everyone?” Alice called as she walked into the den. Alice was followed by her husband, Steve, carrying two large bags. Amy had met him a few times at the office. With them were two young boys and a girl Bridget’s age.

“Hello dear,” said his mother. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas said the boys as the ran toward the tree. Can we open presents now?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “The pushy one is our son, Michael. His shadow is Sam.” She brushed her hand over the little girl’s blonde hair. “And this is Danielle.”

Amy smiled. “This is Bridget.”

Bridget held up her bear. “This is Poppy.”

“That’s Nana’s name.”

“It’s her name too.”

“Why don’t you show Bridget your toy box,” said Steve.

“Okay, Daddy.” Danielle led Bridget to a large box in the corner of the den.

Steve smiled. “It was easier than toting toys back and forth.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Browning.”

“Steve, please.”

“Mom, come on. It’s time for presents,” said Michael.

“We might as well,” said Paul. Amy sat down on the couch next to Paul.

“I’ve brought a little something,” she said. She pulled out a tin and handed it to his mother.

“Cookies?” asked Poppy.

“Fruitcake. It’s my mother’s recipe.” She saw the family looking at each other and smiling. Paul started chuckling. “What?” she asked

“You told her,” said Alice.

“I never said a word.”

“Told me what?”

“We all like fruitcake but Dad is a fruitcake-aholic.”

“Fruitcake?” asked John. “There’s fruitcake?” He took the tin from his wife and opened the lid. “Ohhhh, Merry Christmas.”

“John, no. You’ll spoil your dinner,” she said as he left the room in search of a fork.

“Don’t bother, Mom. You’ll never win,” said Paul.

“Save some for us, Dad,” called Alice.

Amy smiled and took a second tin from the bag. “I made one for your family.”

Alice smiled. “Oh wow, my own fruitcake.”

“Our cake, dear,” Steve smiled. He reached for the tin and Alice smacked his hand.

Paul leaned in. “Sweetheart, I believe Santa promised me something.”

She grinned and handed him a tin. “You have been a good boy.” Paul popped the tin and stuffed a cookie in his mouth.

“Paul, you’re just like your father,” said his mother. Paul grinned as he stuffed another cookie in his mouth.

“Thank you,” he mumbled through cookie crumbs.

“Michael, why don’t you hand out the rest of the gifts,” said Poppy. Michael pushed a large box toward Sam and another large box to Danielle. He looked at a box and read the tag.

“This one is for Bridget.” He pushed the box to her and he saw her confusion. “It’s from Uncle Paul. He gives the best presents.” She smiled and sat down next to Danielle.

“Paul?” she whispered. “Santa visited her this morning.”

He looked at her and winked. “He made a second stop.” He pointed at his nephew. “There are a few more gifts under there.” Michael found two leather portfolios. He handed one to his parents and one to his grandparents. He grabbed a small box and handed it to Amy. Amy smiled and pulled one more gift out of her bag. She handed it to Paul.

“Santa made an extra stop for you too.”

The boys tore into their presents. Michael put on his new jersey. Sam asked Steve to help him open his box of Legos. Bridget looked toward Amy for direction. She wasn’t used to a Christmas like this. Neither of them were. Amy nodded. “Go ahead, baby. Open your present.” Bridget sat her Poppy bear next to her as she looked where to tear open the box.

“Like this, Bridget,” said Danielle as she opened her gift. Bridget followed her example. She opened the box and found a beautiful doll with long brown hair wearing a Christmas dress. With the doll was a carry case that held different outfits on tiny hangers. She looked over at Danielle, who’d received the same doll with blonde hair. Amy fought back tears. She’d never been able to give her daughter such an extravagant gift. Bridget picked up the doll and brought it to Amy.

“Look Mommy. She’s so pretty.”

“I see, baby. She’s beautiful.”

“She looks like you,” said Paul. He fought back his own tears when Bridget launched herself at him.

“Thank you, Mr. Paul.”

He hugged her tight and kissed the top of her head. “You’re welcome, angel.” Bridget sat back down next to Danielle.

“John, give the children their gifts from us.” John pulled small packages out from under the tree and handed each child a package, including Bridget. Amy watched as Bridget unwrapped several storybooks. “The children have plenty of toys so we give them books.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” said Amy, a bit overwhelmed herself. Bridget brought them over to Amy.

“Look, Mommy. Read me a story.”

“Not just now. These are from Mr. Paul’s Mommy and Daddy.” Bridget went to Poppy and John and gave each of them a hug.

“Thank you for my storybooks.”

“You’re very welcome, dear,” said John. The children took their cue from Bridget and thanked their uncle and their grandparents for their gifts.

“While the children are occupied it’s a good time to open your gifts,” said Paul.

“We said the gifts were for the children,” said Poppy.

“You say it every year, Mom, and every year we ignore you,” said Paul. “Now open your present.”

Poppy unfastened the portfolio and gasped. “Oh my. John look.”

“There’s time in Paris and then you’ll meet a genealogist who’s going to take you around where our ancestors lived.”

John stood and hugged his son. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Dad.”

Poppy gave Paul a kiss. “Thank you, dear.”

Paul looked at his sister and nodded. “Open yours.”

Alice opened the portfolio and squealed. “This is great! Steve, look. A long weekend at that spa in Derry. Massages, pedicures, manicures...this is great.”

“Yes, my nails have been looking a little shabby,” Steve smiled.

“And the best part of all, babysitting by my big brother while we’re gone.” Alice stood and gave Paul a hug. “Thank you. This is great.”

“You’re very welcome. Okay, you’re turn.”

Alice smiled and handed her parents a small box. Her parents opened the box and held up a small Eagles jersey that said Browning and had the number four on the back. Poppy looked at the jersey then at her daughter. “Are you...?” Alice nodded and Poppy squealed. Steve and Alice accepted hugs and congratulations from their family.

Amy stood and extended her hand to Alice “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

She tried to separate herself from the family to give them a moment. She sat back down on the couch and Paul joined her.

“Alice let me go first because she knows my parents will be preoccupied with the new grandchild.” He pointed to the small box in her lap. “Your turn.”

She smiled and tore open the box. She pulled open the lid and her heart skipped. “Oh my,” she gasped. It was a gold heart shaped locket. “Paul, it’s beautiful.”

“I thought you could put a picture of Bridget in it.”

She looked at him and smiled. “Or a picture of a handsome fella I know.”

“Or that,” he grinned.

“Would you put it on me?” She held up her hair as he hooked it around her neck. “It’s beautiful, Paul. Thank you.” He smiled and gave her a quick kiss.

“Now it’s my turn,” he grinned.

Amy suddenly felt in over her head. She and Bridget had been given wonderful and costly gifts. Her gift to Paul was nothing like that.

He sat down and tore the paper off the box. He lifted the lid and smiled. “This is great,” he grinned.

“It’s just a little something. Bridget thought you would like it.”

“Bridget, did you help Mommy pick this out?”

“Do you like it?”

“I love it, thank you.” He gave her a quick hug. He looked at Amy and smiled. “Thank you.” He gave her another kiss.

“What is it?” asked Poppy.

He held it up and showed it off. “It a year calendar. It’s an adult coloring book with lots of colored pencils. Bridget and I like to color.”

“He’s really good. He stays in the lines,” Bridget smiled.

Amy looked around at the family, happy and smiling. It reminded her of movies she’d seen, but never had in her real life. The big family, lots of kids, two loving parents. Paul smiled at her and took her hand. He had done everything to make her and Bridget be apart of his life and his family. She realized why she’d been so nervous all day. She was in love. She’d survived so much in her life but she didn’t know how she could ever survive losing Paul.

Paul couldn't remember a better Christmas. His family had welcomed Amy and Bridget. He'd never invited anyone to Christmas dinner and now he knew why. Being with Amy and Bridget felt even better than being with his family. Amy was the one. The only one. He wouldn't push, she'd been through too much.

"Mom, can I be done now?" asked Sam. "I want to pay with my Legos."

"Yes," said Alice. "Thank Nana for dinner."

Sam kissed Poppy's cheek. "Thanks, Nana." Michael followed suit and gave his Nana a kiss.

"Come on, Bridget. We can play with our dolls," said Danielle. She kissed her Nana and waited for her new friend.

Amy nodded. "Go on, sweetheart."

Bridget smiled and jumped up. She reached for Poppy and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Nana." Everyone smiled but Amy looked shocked.

"I'm sorry. She didn't mean to be forward. She was just following the others."

"Amy, dear, not to worry. Bridget is a lovely child."

"Thank you," she whispered. Paul reached under the table and held her hand.

"Does her father mind her spending Christmas with us?" asked John. Paul shot him a glare. "What?"

"It's alright, Paul. They need to know. Better sooner than later. My ex-husband is in prison for attempted murder."

"Oh," gasped Poppy.

"He was very angry when I filed for divorce. He tried to kill us."

Paul put his arm around her shoulder. "He very nearly succeeded."

"What happened?" asked Alice.

“He said he was going to kill us then himself. I managed to keep Bridget and myself locked in the bathroom until the police came.”

“My God, how terrifying,” said Poppy.

“Once he was convicted I was able to get my divorce. I got him to surrender his parental rights to Bridget on the promise I wouldn’t go after any of his assets. I changed our names back my maiden name.”

“How old was Bridget?”

“Three.”

“How could anyone want to hurt that precious girl? Is she okay about?” asked John.

“I don’t think she remembers a lot of it. She refers to him only as the bad man. I don’t think she realizes he was her father. She did panic when I cut myself paring.”

“Why?” asked Steve.

Amy glanced at Paul and he knew to finish the story for her. “What Amy didn’t say was the bastard shot her twice before she got Bridget locked in the bathroom.” His mother covered her gasp with her hand.

“Are you alright, dear?” she asked.

“I’m fine, Poppy, thank you.”

“It took her a year to recover,” said Paul. “She saved Bridget despite being so badly injured. She’s a hero.” He saw his mother wipe a tear from her cheek. She stood and walked over to Amy.

“Come here, you dear girl.” Amy stood and pulled her into a tight hug. She pulled back and smiled. “You’re right, Paul. She’s extraordinary.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Alice stood and placed her hand on Amy’s back. “Would you like to help me with the coffee?”

Amy sighed, looking relieved to be out of this emotional situation. “Yes, of course.

“Alright, Mom, Dad, you go to the den with the kids. We’ll take care of the dishes and the coffee.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” said John as he left the room.

Steve and Alice put the food away while Paul and Amy did the dishes. It all felt so normal. They’d brewed a pot of decaf and were dishing out some of Amy’s fruitcake. “Are you ready for Miami?” asked Steve.

“The schedules are done. I don’t think there’ll be a problem.”

“Have you finally decided how you’ll be gone? If it’s longer than six months we’ll have to work something out for the projects coming up in the spring.”

Amy’s face drained of color. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to check on Bridget.”

Alice slapped Steve’s shoulder. “Brilliant!”

“What’d I do?”

Alice pointed at Paul. “Go fix it!”

He found her in the den, sitting with Bridget. “Excuse me, Bridget. I need to borrow Mommy for a minute.” He took her hand. “Come with me, please.” He led her down the hall to his father’s office.

“Paul, please, it’s fine. No promises were made.”

“Okay, stop.” He took her hands and made her sit next to him on the couch. “When we met, I was working late to get ready for the Miami project. It’s a twenty story tower. I’m to oversee the final stages of construction. I’ve been flying back and forth to Miami once a month for a week at a time. Everything had been on hold for the holidays. After the holidays I had planned on moving down there until the project was finished.”

“It’s okay,” she said quietly.

“No, it’s not. I met you and everything changed. I still have to oversee the project but I’ll continue to do it from here. I’ll go down for a week here and there when I have to, but I’m not moving.”

“But this is a big project. It’s important to you.”

“It is, but you and Bridget are more important to me. I’ll figure out how to make this work, but I’m not moving. I can’t imagine, don’t want to image a day when I don’t see the two of you.”

“Paul, how can you do this? Your job, your company. I don’t understand.”

He smiled and placed his hand on her cheek. “Then allow me to explain. Amy Calloway, I’m in love with you.” He gave her a soft kiss. She smiled and he brushed a tear from her cheek.

“I’m in love with you too.”

He grinned and pulled her into a passionate kiss.

“Wow, this is for real. You and me. We’re an actual couple.” she said.

“Of course we’re for real.” he smiled. “What’s say we get back to the folks before my father eats all your fruitcake.”

They joined the family in the den. He could relax now. He sat down next to Amy on the couch and put his arm around her. Everything felt right. It was Christmas and his family was together. All his family. Bridget ran up to them with one of her new books.

“Mommy, read to me.” She climbed up into Amy’s lap. Amy smiled and showed the book to Paul. *Cinderella*.

One year later...

Christmas with his family was always Paul's favorite day. Waking up this Christmas morning with his wife in his arms made this the best Christmas he'd ever had. They'd been up late wrapping presents. Amy told him it was too much but he told her the best part of Christmas was spoiling children. He gave her a kiss.

"Merry Christmas"

"It's too early. Sleeping."

"Bridget will be up any minute and I want to give you your present."

She propped herself up on her arm. "Ohhh...that sounds promising." She gave him a deep kiss.

"Very nice, but that's not the gift I meant." He reached into his nightstand and pulled out a small jewelry box. She opened the box and gasped at the sight of half carat diamond stud earrings.

"Oh, Paul. They're gorgeous." She gave him another kiss. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The bedroom door flew open and a hyper Bridget ran into their bedroom. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, angel," he said as she climbed up between them.

"Mommy, can I give Mr. Paul his present now?"

"We should have breakfast first."

"Mommy!"

"Fine, go on then."

Bridget ran out of the room and came back with a gift bag. She jumped back on the bed and came back with a bright red bag. He opened the handmade card and smiled. He and Bridget loved coloring together. He started reading out loud.

“Dear Mr. Paul, You are a nice man. You color with me and read to me. You’re nice to Mommy.”

He stopped reading and wiped his eyes.

“Will you be my Daddy? Love, Bridget” He looked at Amy “What?”

Amy reached into the bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers with a blue cover. “I got the paperwork started.”

Bridget’s voice cracked. “Mr. Paul? Do you want to be my Daddy?”

Paul grinned from ear to ear and pulled Bridget to him. “Of course I want to be your Daddy! Being your Daddy is the best thing ever.” He covered his daughter’s face with kisses and she dissolved in giggles. He looked up at Amy and smiled. He gave Amy a kiss. “I love our family.”

Christmas at his parents was just as loud as always. Bridget and Danielle had become best friends now that they went to the same school. Michael and Sam made a beeline for the tree. Alice handed baby Caroline to Steve as they sat down on the couch. The children opened their presents and the room quickly became a sea of wrapping paper.

“Bridget, will you get me the box for Nana and Pop?” She grabbed a box from under the tree and handed it to him.

“Here, Daddy.”

Everyone looked at him. She’d always called him Mr. Paul. “Bridget has asked me to adopt her.” Squeals and hugs were all around.

“What’s going on?” asked Danielle as she looked up from her toys

“Mr. Paul is going to be my Daddy.”

“Isn’t he already?”

Bridget looked at him and smiled. “Yeah, he is.”

Paul could barely contain his grin. "Here Mom, Dad. You need to open this one." He sat back as they opened the gift. It was a small Eagles jersey with JP Blanchard and a number twelve.

"What?" his father gasped and pulled him into a tight hug.

His mother started to cry. "Oh, Paul, Amy, I'm so happy for you."

"There'll be another John Paul Blanchard after all. The twelfth one," he smiled.

"Amy, dear, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Poppy. Your son is fussing over me like mad."

"As you should,"

"Yes, Mom."

Alice looked at him and smiled. "A twofer. I'll never top that."

"You could go for twins next time."

"God no! This factory is closed. After eighteen hours labor? Have you seen the size of her head?"

Paul laughed and gave his sister a hug. It had been the most amazing year of his life. He'd gain a wife and a daughter and his son was on the way. They'd managed to balance work and home, most of the time. It helped that he'd convinced Amy to come work for the family. She'd taken over for Alice when she went on maternity leave and showed a real knack for working with people. He waited for things to settle down a bit until he pulled Amy into his father's office.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Blanchard.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Blanchard." She put her arms around his neck as he held her close. "Do you realize that this room, right now, is as quiet as our life will be for the foreseeable future. A seven year old, a baby, the family, it's going to be crazy."

"Yeah, it will," he smiled. "Isn't it great?"