



not for a

Moment

cheyenne blue



Chapter 1

Uninvited Guests

“THIS IS THE MOST RELAXED I’ve been all week.” Sarah sighed in pleasure and leaned forward to clink her beer bottle with her best friend Kristin’s.

Their friend Andi raised hers in salute from across the deck where she lounged in a canvas chair.

“How much of a sad suck am I that a couple of beers on my deck followed by pizza is the highlight of my week?” Sarah chugged another mouthful.

Kristin laughed. “You can stop the ‘poor me’ act. If I suggested we swap lives, even for a week, you’d fall over your feet rushing to escape.”

Sarah waggled her eyebrows. “Try me.”

Kristin leaned forward in her chair. “Sarah Santoro. You have won the ‘Escape My Life’ competition. Your prize, should you choose to accept it, is a week living the high life of Kristin Astuti. Yes, Sarah, you will live in Kristin’s two-bedroom apartment in the lush suburb of Box Hill with a panoramic view over the four-lane Maroondah Highway, sharing with her weird housemate and his terrible taste in music. You’ll commute into Melbourne every day to slave at whatever temp job is on offer. Then you’ll return home every night to takeaway and *The Bachelor* on TV while you dream of your own prince... Sorry, princess. Although if you’re taking my life for a week, does that mean you get a prince?”

“No way. At least, not unless it’s Jake Gyllenhaal.”

Andi barked a short laugh. “And what do you get in this life swap, Kristin?”

Kristin stood and posed, one hand on her hip, the other holding the beer bottle high. “The comfortable life of Sarah Santoro! I’ll be woken every morning by the world’s cutest seven-year-old jumping on my bed demanding orange juice. I’ll prepare breakfast for Noa and myself, which I’ll eat on this very deck, listening to the birds, smelling the coffee, and watching the veggies grow. And when Noa goes off to school, I’ll drive two minutes to my steady job as admin assistant for one of Ringwood’s largest construction firms.” Kristin’s mouth turned down. “Okay, while I admit the whole two-minute commute thing is appealing, you have possibly the most unappreciative, misogynistic, asshole of a boss in Australia. But I’ll say it again: you have a two-minute commute. You don’t cram onto an overcrowded city train and spend thirty minutes jammed under someone’s stinky armpit.”

“And that closeness is why I put up with it. So I’m nearby for Noa.” Sarah sipped her beer. “Although, you’re right. I wouldn’t swap lives, even for a minute. Even though this is my only evening to myself, I still miss Noa.”

“Where is she tonight?” Andi asked.

“A birthday sleepover with a school friend.” Sarah grimaced. “I wouldn’t be that mother. She has to corral half a dozen kids, feed them something everyone will eat, soothe tears and tantrums, limit their intake of lollies, keep them from bouncing off the walls, and get them into bed before midnight.”

“You’ll be that mother soon enough.” Kristin winked. “Next month, when it’s Noa’s birthday.”

“She’s already told me she wants to go horse riding.”

“Good luck with that.” Andi stretched out her long legs. “I used to ride as a kid—it’s the most addictive thing. If you let her start, she’ll never stop.”

“Maybe Sarah will invite you along.” Kristin opened her eyes wide in an innocent look and sat once more.

“Right. And maybe you’re the next prime minister of Australia.” Andi tipped her beer to Kristin with a grin. “Me and kids aren’t a perfect match. Oh, Noa’s a great kid, but a whole bunch of them?” She shuddered.

Kristin leaned forward. “So which of us would you take in this life swap, Andi?”

Andi chugged a mouthful of beer. “Try me.”

Kristin threw out an arm. “Andi Barrons, your life is up for grabs. Whoever you choose gets to live your carefree, independent lifestyle. Your life swap will live in your cute and quirky—”

“Basic,” said Andi.

“—studio right next to your workshop and yard. As you live alone, your life swap will have total freedom to walk naked around the studio, eat out every night rather than fight for kitchen time with a housemate or cook fish fingers for a seven-year-old. Your life swap can bring home a different person every night if she wants—”

“You know I don’t do that.” Andi grinned. “I don’t have the energy working for myself.”

“—and jet off to Bali on a whim. Total freedom is the package on offer here.”

“The bank might not agree,” Andi said.

“So, who are you going to pick?” Sarah sat forward, agog with mock anticipation, although it didn’t take a telepath to know the answer.

Andi’s glance slid from Sarah to Kristin and back again. “How can I possibly choose?”

“Oh, per-lease,” Kristin scoffed. “Like we don’t already know! You’d take my life over Sarah’s comfortable one in a millisecond. We all know you’re not a kid person.”

“Your housemate plays hip hop when he gets home from night shift. That’s good reason to swap with Sarah.”

“Tariq’s got headphones now. Sometimes, he even uses them.”

“Well in that case...” Andi tapped a finger on her lower lip. “I’d choose Kristin’s life. The hip hop was the deal breaker, but if Tariq glues his headphones on, then no problem.”

Of course. Sarah squashed the sinking feeling in her stomach. Andi had never hidden her choice to remain childfree. To her, a child—even one as adorable and well-behaved as Noa—would be the ultimate nope.

And that choice worked in reverse too. A year ago, when Kristin first introduced them, Sarah had wondered if they had possibilities beyond the friend zone. After all, Andi was warm and considerate of others, relaxed company, and striking with that undercut and floppy over comb highlighting her dark eyes and sombre, angular face. But her discomfort around Noa had scuppered that faint idea before it got off the ground.

But even so, hearing Andi choose Kristin's life over hers rammed home that she wasn't on Andi's radar. Not like that, anyway.

Sarah stretched her mouth into a polite smile. She totally got that not everyone liked being around kids. Andi was kind to Noa, but in a stilted way, as if Noa was an alien who spoke another language and Andi's universal translator was on the blink.

Andi's eyes glazed over whenever Sarah mentioned school lunches, the difficulties of clothes-shopping for a fussy kid, or the night-time perils of treading barefoot on Lego. No, she and Andi were poles apart in their lives, and Sarah was happy with the easy friendship they now shared.

She stretched her legs out to the low table between the chairs, enjoying how the autumn sun warmed her thighs. Not bad thighs really, too white from lack of sun and dimpled with cellulite, but she loved their curve and how she looked in shorts. She wiggled her bare toes for a moment, revelling in the last of the sunlight.

She swung her feet to the deck. "Another beer? And shall I order the pizzas?"

"Sure," Kristin said.

"I'll have one of those zero alcohol beers please," Andi said. "I'm driving."

"No worries." Sarah went inside to pull the beers from the fridge and place the call. No need to ask the others what they wanted—the three of them did this enough that she knew it by heart: two family

pizzas: one veggie supreme, one capricciosa with extra olives, hold the anchovies.

She returned to the others. “Twenty minutes for delivery.”

Kristin accepted her beer. “Thanks. I was just telling Andi that I caught next-door’s cat pissing in my tomato plants again. Do you think the tomatoes will be okay to eat?”

“Maybe.” Sarah shrugged. “You put cow poo on gardens—is cat pee any different?”

“I can build you a wire enclosure for the plants to keep the cat out,” Andi said. “Won’t take me long.”

“That would be great. It’s either that or something drastic. I got it a good squirt with the hose the other day. It yowled and ran off. Please neither of you make any wet pussy jokes.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sarah said.

Kristin pulled up her knees to sit more comfortably. “You really do have the best place here, Sarah. I wish I had a house and a yard rather than a flat and two cat-piss drenched tomato plants on a tiny patio.”

“I love it.” Sarah sipped her beer. “Maybe it makes me old and boring, but I love pottering in the garden. Veggies, flowers. My stone mandala. It’s my happy place.”

“I love it too.” Andi’s intense, dark eyes pinned Sarah over her beer bottle. “You did a great job of turning it into a beautiful space.”

“Tell that to Noa.” Sarah sighed. “She wants a swing in the corner, a sandpit, and a track to race her bicycle around. Not very compatible with a peaceful place.”

“I thought Cait was going to put up a swing,” Kristin said. Her dark hair swung forward, partially obscuring her light-brown face.

Sarah’s lips twitched. Her ex-wife had never approved of Kristin, thinking her shallow and irresponsible, and Kristin had picked up on that.

“She will,” Sarah said mildly. “But she won’t be back in Australia for almost a year. I thought I’d get Noa something from Kmart. She’ll outgrow it soon enough, so there’s no point spending much.”

Kristin’s lips pursed as if she were about to say something else.

“Was that the doorbell?” Andi cocked her head. “Pizza must be early.”

Sarah jumped to her feet, relief coursing through her at the interruption. She never liked having to defend Cait when Kristin got snippy. “I’ll get the plates,” she said to Andi. “Would you mind answering the door? The money’s on the hall table.”

“Sure.” Andi unwound her long limbs and stood, then with the easy grace of a big cat, ambled into the house and down the hall.

Sarah followed as far as the kitchen, where she pulled out plates, napkins, and hot sauce from the cupboard. Voices at the front door made her cock her head. Andi’s voice, and a woman’s. Sarah frowned. The voice sounded...familiar. Irritation seeped into her belly. She dragged a deep breath and walked into the hall.

“If you’re not going to give me your names, I can’t tell Sarah you’re here.” Andi stood with one arm across the door frame. Her lanky body seemed to have gained extra centimetres and her voice bristled with annoyance. “So, I’m going to close the door in your faces and let her know there are two people here who won’t give their names but are demanding to speak with her. Is that the correct message?”

“I could ask what you’re doing in her house.” The woman’s voice held the cut-glass edge of arrogance Sarah knew well.

She went up to Andi and touched her arm so that she lowered it. “Good evening, Rosalind and Lionel. I wasn’t expecting you.” To Andi she said, “It’s okay; they’re Cait’s parents.”

Andi’s brow furrowed. “I would have been politer if you’d introduced yourselves. I apologise.” She turned to go back to the living area.

Sarah pasted a smile over the familiar irritation at their presumptuousness in arriving unannounced. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Rosalind’s slightly hooded eyes stared at her from her thin face. Her mouth curled in its usual downturn of disapproval, but this time there was more. Rosalind’s gaze was...assessing. Behind her, Lionel shuffled his feet, looking as if he’d rather be home in their Hawthorn mansion with a large gin and tonic. Sarah’s lips twitched before she schooled her expression to one of neutrality. That was

doubtless what Lionel was thinking. And Rosalind... She was normally cordial, but now there was an edginess about her, as if she no longer had need for politeness.

On impulse, Sarah reached for Andi's hand. "Please stay," she whispered.

Andi's fingers twitched as if she was going to jerk free, and Sarah tightened her grip. The look of foreboding in Rosalind's expression set her nerves jangling.

Andi stepped closer and remained silent.

"It's nice to see you both," Sarah lied, "but it's not a good time. Maybe we can arrange something tomorrow?"

"That's fine," Rosalind said. "We won't keep you. We've just come to see Noa."

Sarah frowned. "I don't remember you arranging a visit. She's not here; she's at a sleepover."

"Well, if you give us the address, we'll visit with her there," Rosalind said.

Next to her, Andi's body was rigid. Sarah glanced at her. A muscle twitched in Andi's jaw.

"No," Sarah said. "Noa's with her friends. She's been looking forward to this for days. As I've said before, you need to arrange ahead if you want to spend time with her."

Rosalind's smile was cooler than a row of supermarket freezers. "We're her grandparents. We shouldn't need to make an appointment as if we were going to the dentist."

"It makes it easier. That way you don't have a wasted trip." *Like now.*

"Cait never minded us dropping around."

"That changed when Cait and I split. I asked that you call ahead, and it's great when you do." Sarah clenched her jaw. Rosalind knew that, so why was she trying to change things? She'd always stuck to the arrangement—until now. "I'm sorry you've had a wasted journey."

“We’re trying to help, Sarah, dear.” For a moment Rosalind’s eyes softened. “It’s difficult for you by yourself caring for Noa. When Cait left you—”

“We mutually agreed to an amicable split.”

“—you agreed to share custody. With Cait now overseas, it’s just you. It must be hard. You work part-time for a low wage, and you have no one to help you—your parents are still living in Italy, are they not? We’re offering that help. Noa’s our *blood* granddaughter. You’re only her adopted parent.”

“Thank you for the thought, but Noa and I don’t need help.” Sarah’s mouth could hardly form the words. What did Rosalind mean? *Only* Noa’s adopted parent? Rosalind knew Sarah was also listed on Noa’s birth certificate. “Cait is paying child support as she always has. More than she has to. Noa has everything she needs.”

“But not everything she wants. My granddaughter should want for nothing.”

“She’s not a spoiled child. She’s being raised as Cait and I agreed: to understand the value of money, to work for what she wants. She has everything she needs, and she has a mother’s love: mine.”

“You’re doing your best, I know, but with Cait away, we think it best that we step in more to help you out. Spend more time with Noa.”

Something is wrong. Alarm bells clanged in her mind. The carefully enunciated words contained an implied threat—she was sure of it. Rosalind had never been this pushy. Indeed, her grandparent style had always been more hands-off. An unpredictable small child didn’t fit into her meticulously curated life.

Sarah’s hand shook in Andi’s grasp. A wave of nausea made her think she might throw up on Rosalind’s polished leather shoes. Their voices had brought Kristin down the hall, and she stood with her hands on Sarah’s shoulders.

The touch gave her confidence to respond. “You’re welcome to do that, of course. Maybe you’d like to come around tomorrow afternoon and stay for tea?”

“A child needs two parents.” Rosalind’s voice dropped to a soothing tone and her gaze flicked to Kristin.

“She has two parents: me and Cait.”

“It would be different if you had a partner, Sarah. But with your little job, how can you alone possibly give Noa the attention she needs? We’re just trying to help.”

“She’s at school.”

“And who collects her from school? She’s too young to be by herself. Be reasonable. We can have Noa stay over with us—maybe in the week, while you’re at work.”

“Thank you, but Noa’s school and friends are here.”

“Oh, we can accommodate that.” Rosalind waved a hand. “After all, I don’t have to work.”

Fear dripped down her spine and her flesh crawled. Rosalind wanted Noa. For reasons she didn’t understand, Rosalind was trying to gain control of her grandchild. Her neck stiffened as if made of steel, and she dragged in a breath. She would not let that happen. Whatever it took.

She took a deep breath and then another, forcing the panicked thought from her head. She was being silly. Rosalind and Lionel had always seemed happy with their fortnightly visits with Noa. They took her to the park or to an activity and usually brought her home before the time they said. Indeed, they had never asked for more time with her and sometimes skipped a visit. Why would they suddenly want the disruption of a small child in their lives?

“You’re welcome to have Noa visit more, of course,” she said. “But school days are busy times. Why don’t we talk about it tomorrow?”

Rosalind’s mouth moved into a brief smile, even though the rest of her face didn’t change. “We’re trying to help more while Cait’s away.” One bony shoulder lifted in a shrug. “Lionel and I worry about you. If you had a partner to share the load with you, that might be different.”

Andi cleared her throat loudly. “Sarah has a partner.” She lifted their linked hands. “Me.”

Sarah bit back a gasp. It lodged in her throat along with her heart, beating hard. What on earth had made Andi say that? Any second now, she would laugh, disentangle their hands, and say she was joking. The beginnings of a tension headache twinged at the base of her skull.

“You?” Rosalind lifted her chin and stared at Andi down her nose.

“Me.” Andi brought their linked hands to her lips and kissed the back of Sarah’s hand. The touch of her lips was warm. “As Sarah’s partner, I collect Noa from school and look after her until Sarah’s home.” Andi’s voice, gravelly and strong, washed over Sarah’s ears. She squeezed her hand tightly.

Behind them, Kristin gave a soft gasp and her fingers bit into Sarah’s shoulder.

There suddenly wasn’t enough air in Sarah’s lungs. What the hell had Andi done? Sarah’s breath hitched in her throat. She forced her face into what she hoped was a relaxed smile and wrapped an arm around Andi’s waist, hooking her fingers into her belt as if she did this every day. “So, Rosalind, you see there’s nothing to worry about. I have Andi as support, and Noa is cared for by two people who love her.”

The headache ratcheted up to a dull pounding. *Oh God. What will happen now?*

Chapter 2

Howdy, Partner

“PARTNER?” IF ROSALIND’S BROW WAS in any way mobile, it would have lowered in a stormy frown. The woman must be welded together with Botox.

“Yes, partner.” Andi wrapped her arm around Sarah’s waist so they stood united and pressed a kiss to her forehead where the white streak fell in her otherwise brown hair. Sarah’s hand shook where it rested against her hip. No wonder. Rosalind would terrify anyone. Andi pressed her lips together. Except for her. It would take more than this haughty woman to bring her down. “Maybe now you’d like to introduce yourselves.”

“Rosalind and Lionel Bancroft. Of the Oxford Bancrofts.”

Did she really think that was impressive? That a person’s ancestry was more worthy than who they were now? Still, two could play at that game. “Andi Barrons. Of the Polks Hill Barrons.”

Again that attempt at a wrinkled forehead. Let Rosalind try to work out that ancestry. Andi switched her gaze to Lionel. “Pleased to meet you, Lionel. Do you talk?”

“He does,” Rosalind snapped. “Sarah, you should have informed us you had a partner.”

“I don’t see why,” Sarah said. “Rosalind, I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re interrupting our evening. Why don’t we talk tomorrow?”

Rosalind took a step backward. “You’ll be hearing from us.”

“Of course.” Andi wrapped an arm around Sarah’s shoulders and pulled her close again. She fit neatly under her arm, body warm against Andi’s side, the stiffness in her shoulders betraying her tension. “I’m sure you’ll let us know in advance when you want to spend time with Noa.”

Rosalind turned and marched down the steps from the front door. At the foot, she turned around. “Come along, Lionel.”

With a faint shrug, Lionel turned to accompany her.

They reached the gate and barged past the delivery driver, nearly knocking the pizzas from his hands.

He came up the path and handed the boxes to Andi. “Someone was in a hurry.” He jerked his head to where Rosalind and Lionel were driving off in their Mercedes.

“Yeah. Sorry they were so rude.” Kristin picked up the money from the hall table. “Thanks.” She took the pizza from Andi. “I’ll get this sorted.” She headed back to the kitchen.

Sarah stared at the closed front door. “I can’t believe what just happened.” She faced Andi. “And I can’t believe you said that.”

“No worries. It wasn’t much, but hopefully they’ll back off.”

Sarah pressed her palms to the sides of her neck, fingers massaging the base of her skull. “I thought... It seemed like they want to take Noa. Spend more time with her—at their place. But I don’t know why. They’ve only ever had her for one overnight in the past, when she was three. She was supposed to stay for three nights, but she cried so much the first night, Rosalind brought her back. Cait and I had to cancel our weekend away. Since then, they’ve only had short visits.” She pressed a shaking fist to her mouth. “Why do they suddenly want to be involved now?” She stared up at Andi, her light-brown eyes wide and damp. “They’ll take her.” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

A wave of tenderness rose in Andi’s throat, and she itched to pull Sarah into her arms. It wasn’t right she had to deal with Cait’s parents by herself. Sarah was a great parent—Noa was proof of that. “You don’t know that. Maybe they’re just trying to help more while Cait’s away.” Except that didn’t ring true. The warning signs were marching

up and down her spine, prickly like ants. But right now, Sarah needed reassurance. “Maybe we scared them off.”

Sarah huffed a laugh. “You don’t know Rosalind. What she wants she gets.” Sarah reached out and touched Andi’s forearm, where the intricate black-and-grey tattoo sleeve wound down to her wrist. “Thank you for your support. It shouldn’t make a difference really—I don’t think being a single parent goes against you anymore, but Rosalind obviously believes it does.”

“It was nothing.” Andi rested her hand over Sarah’s for a moment. “Happy to help.”

“Not everyone would have done that.” Sarah swallowed. “Thank you. I really mean it.”

“Pizza!” Kristin yelled from the kitchen.

With a final glance at Andi, Sarah led the way to the rear of the house.

Andi followed. What exactly had she done? When she’d answered the door and Rosalind had stared at her as if she were worms and demanded to see Sarah, her hackles had risen faster than a pit bull’s. Rosalind’s gaze had swept over Andi’s buzz cut, loose singlet, and tattoo sleeve, down to her worn cotton shorts and bare feet, then back to her face. Judgemental, much? Rosalind’s attitude brought back all sorts of memories—and none of them were good.

Pretending to be Sarah’s partner was no skin off her nose. Sarah obviously loved her kid, and that was reason enough to have jumped in.

It had been a small and satisfying thing to do. Hopefully, that would be the end of it.

* * *

Andi drove steadily down the Maroondah Highway toward Box Hill, Kristin in the passenger seat. It was only ten, but after Rosalind and Lionel’s unexpected appearance, Sarah had been distracted. Andi had been only too glad when Kristin suggested they head home.

“That was a good thing you did for Sarah.” Kristin propped her arm on the open window and regarded her. “Pretending to be her partner.”

Andi concentrated on the road. "It wasn't much. If it got that stuck-up bitch off her back, then it was worth it."

"Don't bet the farm on that."

Andi shot her a glance. "What do you mean?"

Kristin's dark eyes held a sombre intensity. "I'm not Cait's biggest fan. When she and Sarah got together, I didn't think it would last. Cait seemed...out of Sarah's league, I guess."

"What do you mean? Sarah's very attractive, in a cute sort of way." Femme-y sort of way, but she didn't know if Kristin would get that.

"Oh, per-lease. Sarah's gorgeous. I didn't mean her looks." She shot Andi a glance from under lowered brows. "I mean Cait's a high-flyer. She rose through the medical ranks quickly, filled in as head of the emergency department at the hospital where she worked, and then they offered her the permanent position. She's career-driven and high achieving. And Sarah is not. She's happy with her life, caring for Noa, working part-time in an ordinary job, living in that old house she bought when she and Cait split. She's content with what she has. I think Cait will always be restless. And while Cait's the one who birthed Noa, Sarah was her primary carer, right from the start."

"I wonder why Cait was the one to get pregnant?"

Kristin sucked in her lower lip. "Cait collects experiences like other people collect Star Wars figurines. I think giving birth was one of those experiences. Sarah said even while Cait was in labour, she was analysing it as if she was making a documentary. Then she was happy to go back to work early, and Sarah was the one who took parental leave."

"Did Cait have much to do with Noa early on?"

"She loves her, there's no doubt about that. And she loved Sarah too. They were a great family, very tightly bonded for a while. Until they weren't." Kristin shrugged. "But they remained friends."

"Would Cait have sent her parents around?"

"I doubt it. For all that Cait's not my favourite person, I don't think she'd do that to Sarah. Cait's never been close to her parents. Maybe that's part of the problem. She's an only child, and with her overseas,

Rosalind's trying to grab onto Noa. But, we can speculate all we want, can't we?"

Andi pondered. Sarah was Kristin's best friend; there was doubtless more she wasn't saying.

She slowed for the speed limit then turned into the square, brown-brick apartment block where Kristin lived. Her ground-floor flat was in darkness. "Doesn't look like Tariq is home."

"Night shift. He's a perfect housemate that way, apart from the hip hop." She leaned across to peck Andi on the cheek. "Thanks for driving. It's my turn the next time."

"No worries. Flash the light once when you're inside."

Kristin nodded and leaped out, slamming the door of the truck.

Andi waited until the light flashed, then drove slowly back onto the highway. Her yard and shopfront were a couple of kilometres further on in a backstreet. She used the remote to enter her yard, pulling the truck into the shed at the rear and nudging the front bumper within a couple of centimetres of the stacked paint cans.

Once inside her studio apartment, she dropped her truck keys on the kitchen bench and poured a large glass of water. She drank it staring out at her yard, at the stacked timbers, trestles, and ladders along the side wall. Working for herself had many advantages, including being able to set her own hours. For a moment, she wondered how Sarah put up with constantly being at the beck and call of her arsehole boss.

Sarah. The memory of Sarah's hand sliding into hers brought a flash of longing for more of the touch. If she was reacting like that to Sarah, of all people, it must be time for her to head out to one of her favourite bars and see if she could find some company for a night. Maybe tomorrow.

Andi took a quick shower and got into bed. She stretched her naked body, revelling in the soft sheets and firm mattress, then picked up her thriller from the nightstand. Time to find out who the murderer was.

Chapter 3

Jam Drops

“GOOD MORNING, SARAH, THIS IS Rosalind. Lionel and I were wondering if it would be suitable to come and visit Noa this afternoon?”

Sarah gripped the phone, her fingers instantly clammy. Rosalind’s voice was perfectly polite, the question perfectly reasonable. But coming, as it did, after the previous evening, Sarah’s spidey-sense tingled. She looked across at Noa, who sat at the table drawing ponies with rainbow manes and tails. Her tongue wrapped over her upper lip as she concentrated. They had no plans for the afternoon; there was no reason not to agree—and she had offered.

“Of course. Noa will enjoy that.” She crossed her fingers against the embellishment. “How does three suit you?”

“We’ll be there. Maybe Noa would like to go to the park?”

“You can ask her when you arrive. Would you like to stay for tea?”

“Thank you, Sarah, but we’ll need to get home.” Rosalind paused. “We’re looking forward to seeing your partner again. Andi, wasn’t it?”

The foreboding became a red alert klaxon. *Shit*. How was she going to get out of this? “I’m not sure of her plans for this afternoon. She may have...soccer practice.” She closed her eyes.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Maybe she wouldn’t mind missing it for once?”

“I’ll check with her, but I can’t promise. I’ll see you at three.” She ended the call and sat a moment, the coil of worry pushing up into her chest.

Pasting on a smile, she went across to Noa. “These ponies are fantastic, sweetheart. Do they have names?”

Noa nodded without looking up from her drawing. “The blue one is Sky, the yellow one is Wiggle, and the black one is Neo.”

“Neo?”

“We saw *The Matrix* at Mia’s house last night. Neo’s in that.”

“*The Matrix*?” Wasn’t that rated for teenagers? “Who picked that?”

“Jasper, her big brother.” She wrinkled her nose. “It wasn’t very good.”

“Right.” Sarah stifled a laugh. Thank goodness she hadn’t said that when Rosalind was there. Her breath left her chest in a big whoosh. She should have given a definite reason why Andi wouldn’t be there. But if she’d done that, Rosalind would have certainly come around another time—maybe without notice. Maybe, if Andi was willing, they could get the meeting over with today, and Rosalind would be satisfied. She chewed her lip. It was one thing that Andi had involved herself on the spur of the moment, but this was another thing altogether. Whatever the reason Andi had said what she did, Sarah was very sure she hadn’t thought ahead. To being asked to come around and pretend to be Sarah’s partner. But it was for Noa’s sake, and what else could she possibly do? She picked up her phone again and took it out on the deck, closing the door behind her.

She pressed Andi’s number. *Please, please pick up.*

“Hi, Sarah.” Andi’s low tones came over the line. “How’s things?”

“Good.” *Liar.* She hesitated. Pleasantries or get straight to the point? “Actually, not good. I was wondering if I could ask a huge favour?”

A tiny silence on the line. “You can ask. But I can’t answer until I know what it is.”

Sarah shot a look at the closed door. Through the glass, she could see Noa’s bent head as she concentrated on her drawing. “Rosalind called. She and Lionel are coming around this afternoon. To see Noa, she says, but she’s also expecting to see you.”

“Oh.”

Sarah chewed her lip as she waited for Andi's answer. "I told her you might be at soccer practice," she offered when the silence stretched too long.

"Soccer?" Andi sounded amused. "I play hockey."

"Can you come? Even for a few minutes?"

"I guess I can come for a bit. What time?"

Andi didn't sound very enthusiastic—who could blame her for that?—but she'd agreed. For a second, Sarah swayed, relief rushing through her like a waterfall. "They're coming at three. But if you could arrive earlier, we can decide what we're going to say to them. We'll need a story of how long we've been together and so on."

"Okay. How about two-thirty? Will that be long enough?"

"I hope so." Sarah sighed. "And Noa will be here of course. I haven't figured out what to tell her yet."

"Maybe you won't have to. Can we talk about that when I get there?"

"Sure. And Andi...thank you."

"No worries."

Andi ended the call, leaving Sarah staring at the phone, worry threading through her like a spider web.

* * *

Sarah looked at her phone for the hundredth time. 2:45 p.m. and no sign of Andi. Her fingers worried the phone case. Should she call? If she did, and Andi was pulling into her street at that exact moment, she'd seem like the nerviest parent. Andi wasn't that sort of person. She was blunt and direct and didn't seem to have an anxious bone in her body. She oozed confidence, from the way she strode into a room to the way she stood, hands on hips, tattoo sleeve on full display, handsome face sombre.

And Sarah still had to talk to Noa. She'd thought it might be easier with Andi there, but it seemed that wasn't going to be an option.

Noa was in the kitchen pressing her small thumb into the top of each jam drop biscuit they'd made. "Done." She beamed a gap-toothed smile. "Can I put the jam in now?"

"Sure. Remember, these are for Nana and Poppi. They'll be here soon."

"Do they like red jam?"

"I'm sure it's their favourite." Sarah took the raspberry jam from the fridge. "Don't put too much or it will burn."

"Kay." Noa carefully put a teaspoon of jam on the first biscuit. Half of it fell down the side.

Sarah bit her lip. A burned jam drop was nothing compared to the shitshow that was about to go down.

"Do I get the first biscuit?"

Sarah turned. Andi stood on the deck outside the rear door. Relief slithered down her spine and she closed her eyes briefly in thanks.

Noa turned and the next spoonful of jam fell to the countertop. "Hi, Andi. You can have the second biscuit. Mummy gets the first."

"Cool." Andi gave an awkward sort of half-wave and went across to Sarah.

"Sorry I'm late. I thought I better change to back up your story." She gestured to her clothes: a sports top and skort, thick socks, and boots. "My hockey gear, but I doubt Rosalind will know the difference."

"Thank you. I was worried. Come out back and we'll talk."

Leaving Noa to cover the counter with splatters of jam, Sarah led the way off the deck and down to the raised veggie beds at the end of the garden. "Long ears." She nodded toward Noa. "They'll be here in ten minutes, and I haven't said anything to her yet. I wasn't sure if you were still coming. It might be best if we stick to the truth as much as possible: we met through Kristin a year ago. I think that's when we did meet. We've been dating since then. And you moved in..." She stared at Andi. "When?"

"Not too long ago," Andi said. "Or Rosalind would have met me before. Six weeks ago? Will that work?"

“I think so. And as you work for yourself, you can collect Noa from school, as you told Rosalind.”

“What about Cait? Have you told her about us?”

“Um...that’s difficult. Because if this were real, I would have. But she barely has Internet or phone where she is. Hopefully, Rosalind can’t contact her any easier than I can.”

“Got it.”

Sarah looked down at the ground, then across to Andi. Her gaze ran up the hockey boots and thick socks, over suntanned, muscular legs to the hem of the brief skort. Andi had amazing legs, lean, strong, with well-defined muscles. She looked like she worked out, but more likely it was her physical job.

Job.

“I’m not entirely sure what you do,” she said. “You paint houses?”

Andi winced. “Sort of. I do...but it’s more high-end stuff. Specialty paint finishes, decorative trim work, colour consultation, and timber work. I’m more an interior designer for surfaces. Upmarket properties—probably like Rosalind’s. I haven’t slapped a coat of white satin finish on a wall for years.”

“So I better not ask you to paint my wardrobe doors?”

“As your girlfriend, you can ask. Maybe I’ll even do it.” She shot a wink, and a little frisson of feeling sparkled its way to Sarah’s fingertips. Who knew a wink could be sexy? To cover her confusion, she turned and started back to the kitchen. “I better talk with Noa.”

“Mummy, jam’s done. Can we put them in the oven now?” Noa jumped down from the stool and tugged at Sarah’s hand the minute she came through the door.

The counter was covered in raspberry jam and the empty jar was on its side.

“Sure. I’ll put them in, you look at the time and add ten minutes. That’s when they’ll be ready.”

“It’s five minutes to three so they’ll be ready at...” Noa pursed her lips. “Five minutes after three.”

“That’s it.” Sarah put the biscuits in the oven, then faced her daughter. “Noa, you know Andi’s my friend, don’t you?”

“Course,” Noa said. “Andi paints things, jus’ like I do.”

“Andi’s my—”

The doorbell rang. *Shit. Of course they would be early.* Sarah stared at Andi. “I’m not ready.”

Andi picked up the bag she’d dropped when she came in. She pulled out a flannel shirt and draped it over the back of a chair, then a builder’s tape measure and a pair of work gloves, which she dropped onto the counter, avoiding the jam splatters. “Props.” She shucked her hockey boots and left them at the back door.

Sarah stared open-mouthed for a second. She hadn’t even thought of that. She went to the front door, closing her bedroom door on the way. No need for Rosalind to see it was obviously only occupied by one person.

She threw the door open. “Rosalind, Lionel. Please come in.” She stood aside to let them pass.

“Thank you, Sarah. It was kind of you to invite us over.”

Sarah let that pass without comment. Rosalind had never been the type to offer a kiss on the cheek or even the pretence of an air kiss, and she walked past with a nod. Lionel offered a slight smile.

“Noa, darling. We haven’t seen you for a long time.” Rosalind swooped toward Noa with her arms wide open.

Noa shot Rosalind a panicked look and retreated to the other side of the kitchen counter next to Andi.

“We’re teaching Noa bodily autonomy,” Andi said. “Please don’t be offended, but she’s exercising it often just because she can.” She rested a hand on Noa’s shoulder.

Oh! Sarah glanced at Noa. She seemed comfortable next to Andi.

“Hello, Nana. Hello, Poppi,” Noa said.

“Shall I put the kettle on?” Sarah offered. “Noa’s made jam drops for you. They’re in the oven.”

“They’re nearly ready,” Noa said.

“I’ll make the tea,” Andi said. “How do you like it?”

“Sarah keeps an orange pekoe for us,” Rosalind said. “We have that weak and black.”

Andi filled the kettle. “Why don’t you sit on the deck?” She gave the counter a quick wipe, then took out mugs and set them next to the tape measure and gloves.

“You can show Nana and Poppi your flower patch,” Sarah said to Noa.

“Who’ll take my biscuits out of the oven?” Noa stuck out her lower lip.

“I will,” Andi said.

“Kay.” Noa ran out the back door. “C’mon, Nana and Poppi. I grew flowers you can *eat*. You can eat one if you want.”

Sarah flicked a quick smile at Andi as she followed Rosalind and Lionel into the garden. “Okay?” she mouthed.

Andi nodded.

Noa picked an orange flower and held it out to Rosalind. “These are nass...nuss...”

“Nasturtiums,” Sarah supplied.

Rosalind took the flower and held it awkwardly.

Noa picked more and handed one to Lionel. “It’s good, Nana.” She ate one herself.

“I’m sure it is.” Rosalind balled up the flower and dropped it into the grass.

Sarah glanced back into the kitchen. Andi was opening every cupboard in turn, obviously looking for the teabags. Hoping Rosalind didn’t glance that way, she encouraged Noa to give her grandparents a tour of the veggie patch to give Andi time to find what she needed.

“This is lettuce and those are carrots and that’s spinach.” Noa wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like that, but Mummy does. And these will be cauliflowers soon.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah saw Andi put mugs down on the outside table, then return with a plate of biscuits. When Noa had finished her tour, Sarah suggested they sit in the shade.

Andi pushed mugs of tea, the teabags still inside, across to Rosalind and Lionel.

“Oh dear.” Rosalind’s mouth turned down. “This is far too strong. You only need waft the teabag across the surface. And I do prefer a cup and saucer to a mug. It really does make the tea taste better.”

Andi pushed across the sugar bowl, a plate, and teaspoons. “Take the teabag out now.”

Rosalind did, with a moue of distaste. “Can I trouble you for some fresh boiling water?”

Andi took Rosalind’s mug back into the kitchen and returned with a weaker brew.

Where would she sit? The back of Sarah’s neck was damp with sweat. If Andi was a real partner, what would she do? She moved into the corner of the two-seater. “There’s room for you here, babe.”

Andi came over and sat, picking up Sarah’s hand and resting it on her own thigh then covering it with her own. A frisson of heat rippled through Sarah’s hand. Andi’s bare thigh was warm, surprisingly soft over firm muscle. *Nice*. How long since she’d touched a woman’s leg? She couldn’t remember. For a moment, she fought to regain her composure, curling her fingers around the inner surface of Andi’s thigh.

They hadn’t discussed this, whether they would touch when Cait’s parents were here. But then, there had been no time to discuss much of anything. They were winging it more than a flock of lorikeets.

“So, Noa, do you like living here with Sarah and Andi?” Rosalind stirred her tea and fixed Noa with what she probably thought was a kind smile. It reminded Sarah of a shark.

“Yeah.” Noa wrapped both hands around her glass of water. “Can I have a jam drop?”

“Offer one to Nana and Poppi first,” Sarah said.

Noa slid from her chair, took the plate in both hands, and walked around to Sarah. “You get the first one, an’ Andi gets the second one.” Then she carefully took the plate to Lionel and Rosalind. “I made them. It’s raspberry jam.”

“I don’t eat sugar, darling,” Rosalind said. “And you shouldn’t either.”

“I’ll have one,” Lionel said. “Thank you, Noa.” He took two, ignoring Rosalind’s glare.

“Do you have lots of friends at school?” Rosalind asked. “What are their names?”

Sarah bit her lip. Most grandparents would already know the answer to that.

“Seb an’ Opal an’ Billie an’ Lahn an’ Mia an’ Jamal.” Noa finished her biscuit. “Can I have one more, Mummy?”

“Yes,” said Sarah at the same time as Rosalind said, “No.”

“It’s not good for her to eat so much sugar.”

“She’s fine.” Sarah crossed her legs, forcing herself to appear relaxed. “She has a healthy diet.”

Lionel reached for another biscuit, earning himself a glare from Rosalind.

“We have a proposition for you,” Rosalind said. “While Cait’s away, we suggest that Noa attends St Philomena’s. It’s a private girls’ school in Hawthorn. It has extremely high standards and the girls receive a well-rounded education. If she likes it, Noa could remain there until Year 12, after which she’d go to university.”

“Noa’s happy at her state school,” Sarah said evenly. “Besides, I can’t afford the fees.” She dug her fingers into Andi’s thigh.

“We’re offering to pay the first year’s fees.” Rosalind smoothed down her pencil skirt over her bony knees.

“It’s a kind offer, but it’s not necessary. Cait and I are extremely happy with how Noa’s schooling is going. Her friends are here. If she had to travel to Hawthorn, she’d be disconnected from her social group.”

“She’d soon make new friends. *Suitable* friends.”

“Still. Thank you for the offer, but the answer is no. It would be too hard for me—us—to take her there.”

Sarah glanced at Noa. She was staring at Rosalind with a stormy expression. “I don’t want to go to a new school. I won’t.”

“You don’t have to, sweetheart. I promise.” Sarah forced a smile through stiff lips.

“You should reconsider,” Rosalind said. “We thought this was something we could do to help while Cait’s away. Noa could come and live with us in the school term. She—”

“No.” Sarah fought to keep her voice calm. “Rosalind, the answer is no. I also would appreciate if you didn’t upset my daughter by discussing things like this in front of her.”

“We hardly see Noa at the moment, and we’d love to see more of her. We’re in a position to do so much for her, and we’d really like to. Not only education, but she could have—”

“Enough, Rosalind.” Sarah’s pulse pounded like a jackhammer. “You’ve been able to see Noa as often as you want—you chose the fortnightly visits, not me. Now, please drop the subject.”

Rosalind’s face smoothed like a bedsheet. “Of course. Noa, would you like to go to the shopping centre? We can see what you’d like as a present?”

Noa hesitated. “Only if Mummy comes too.”

“I’m sure Mummy and Andi have things they want to do,” Rosalind said. “What do you call Andi, Noa?”

“Andi.” Noa looked confused.

“I think it’s better if we go to the park, sweetheart,” Sarah said. “Maybe we can get an ice cream on the way home.”

“Mummy, can you come to the park too?”

“Of course, sweetie.” Sarah’s smile felt more like a grimace. There was no way she was leaving Rosalind and Lionel alone with her daughter now.

Noa nodded. She sat down again and swung her legs.

“Will you come with us also?” Rosalind directed her words to Andi.

Andi’s brows lowered momentarily. “I’ll stay here. I need a shower after...soccer...practice. I cut it short to be back for your visit.”

“You don’t appear very dirty,” Lionel said. “When I used to play rugby, I’d return home covered in dirt and sweat. Maybe ladies play more gently.”

“We don’t. It’s as tough as it gets,” Andi said. “But I spent a lot of time on the sidelines today. I hurt...my knee a couple of weeks ago.”

Sarah blew out a careful breath. There were so many traps for the unwary in this, from non-stinky soccer kit that was actually for a different sport, to showers. Was Andi actually going to take a shower and change, or was she just going to disappear while they were at the park?

“Then we’ll see you when we return.” Rosalind inclined her head. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

Sarah widened her eyes and stared at Andi. “Will you be here? Didn’t you say you had to go to the yard to get ready for work tomorrow?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Andi’s thigh pressed against hers and Sarah removed her hand.

“Don’t let us hold you up, babe. I’m sure Rosalind and Lionel will understand.”

Rosalind’s lips pressed into a thin line, but she made no comment.

“Thanks, doll.” Andi stood. “I’ll get in the shower now.”

Doll. Really? Sarah snorted quietly.

Andi turned to the others. “I’ll probably be gone before you’re back from the park. It was good of you to drop around.” Picking up the sports bag, she marched inside, down the hall, and into Sarah’s bedroom.

What now? Did she actually have a change of clothes and a towel in her bag? Was she just going to hide until they went to the park? Sarah bit her lip. Maybe Andi had presumed there was an ensuite. How long would she wait in the bedroom before Rosalind became suspicious? She jumped to her feet. “Let’s go to the park.”

“Yeah!” Noa jumped up and came around to tug at Sarah’s hand. “Let’s go!”

“What’s the rush?” Rosalind picked up the disdained mug of tea and took a cautious sip. “I haven’t finished my tea yet.”

Sarah sat back down and willed Rosalind to finish quickly.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

NOT FOR A MOMENT

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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