

A photograph of a man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking to his left. A brown leather bag strap is draped over his right shoulder. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery and a building.

RACHAEL JOHNS

The
Single Dad's
Family Recipe

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Rachael Johns

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Аннотация

Recipe for disaster? Or second chance? Take one single dad working night and day to open his hot new restaurant. Mix in his irresistible new employee – a woman with a secret, looking for a fresh start. Simmer until a kiss leads to a clandestine affair that plunges Lachlan McKinnel and Eliza Coleman from the frying pan right into the fire!

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The Single Dad's Family Recipe

Rachael Johns

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ISBN: 978-1-474-07730-9

THE SINGLE DAD'S FAMILY RECIPE

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* 1

London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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To Ann Leslie Tuttle—for making writing
The McKinnels of Jewell Rock a joy!

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Chapter One

As Eliza Coleman stared at the door of the new restaurant at McKinnel's Distillery, she forced a smile to her lips. The action ached a little because her facial muscles were rusty from neglect.

But today she needed to put the last couple of years in a box and at least feign a little positivity. No way Lachlan McKinnel would want to employ a sad sack as head hostess for his “exciting new venture,” the phrase he’d used to describe his new restaurant in the online advertisement she’d read.

She hadn’t actually been looking for employment in Oregon but she hadn’t not been looking either. Living on her grandmother’s couch in her tiny apartment in New York wasn’t terrible—she adored Grammy Louise—but lately Grammy had been trying to coax her up off the couch and out of the house. She’d even suggested coming along to her salsa class or signing up for online dating.

Eliza shuddered at the thought of both. The last time she’d been on a date was almost six years ago and she’d married that guy. Did people even go on dates anymore? From what her girlfriends told her, hookups were the name of the game now. And she wasn’t interested in them either.

At first, getting a job had appealed only marginally more than Grammy’s other suggestions—at work, Eliza would have to interact with people—but the more she’d thought about it, the more it seemed like a not-too-bad idea. Work would at least help pass the long hours during the day and she couldn’t live on her savings forever. On a whim, she’d decided to look far and wide because the idea of getting away from everything—going someplace where no one knew her—held a certain appeal.

And that search had brought her to a little mountain town

called Jewell Rock. Her plane had touched down only hours ago in nearby Bend and she'd rented a car and driven straight here, not even pausing to find breakfast, despite the loud complaints of her stomach.

She stood in front of the door, her hand trembling as she lifted it to the handle. Her last actual job interview had been almost as long ago as her last date and the whole concept of selling herself terrified her, but then again, what did she have to lose? After everything she'd already lost, a job in a place she'd never heard of a week ago wasn't the be-all and end-all.

Trying to ignore the debate going on inside her head, she checked her smile was still in place and then pushed open the door. As she stepped inside, her jaw almost touched the polished wooden floorboards. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting but it wasn't mahogany paneling, flocked wallpaper and Gothic-type mirrors that made her feel as if she'd just stepped back in time. It felt strangely warm and welcoming, like nowhere had felt for a very long time.

Behind the brass-railed bar were floor-to-ceiling whiskey bottles as if someone had traveled the world and returned with a bottle from each city. If Eliza didn't know for a fact this building was a recent addition to the boutique distillery, she'd have been fooled into believing it was circa 1950s—like the rest of the establishment.

As the door thumped shut behind her, she stepped further into the restaurant and inhaled deeply. The scent of bourbon filled

the air but there was also a hint of something sweet that made her empty stomach rumble. Placing a hand against it, she silently willed it to settle, as the last thing she needed was loud gurgling noises emanating from her stomach while Lachlan McKinnel interviewed her.

“Hello!”

It took a second for her to realize the deep-voiced greeting was coming from off to her right. She turned to see a man with thick golden-blond hair, wearing black trousers and a chef’s white shirt, standing in the doorway to what was clearly the kitchen part of the restaurant. A very good-looking man. The thought took her by surprise and she blinked as he smiled warmly and walked forward to close the gap between them.

“Eliza?” he asked as he paused in front of her and offered his hand.

She realized she’d been standing there frozen and mute, just staring at him. There was a reason for this—he was much taller and better-looking in person than he’d appeared from the images she’d found online—but it wasn’t a good reason. She wasn’t here to gawk and drool over her potential boss, she was here to impress him. Here to nab herself a job and a new life about as far from New York City and her past life as she could get without leaving the country.

“Um, yes, hi.” She shook his hand and silently cursed herself for sounding so staccato. “You must be Lachlan.”

“I am.” His handshake was firm and she felt a surprising little

jolt inside her. Eliza put it down to the fact she hadn't so much as touched a man in almost a year. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

She nodded as he let go of her hand. Smile. Act happy. Pretend to be someone else if you have to. "You, too," she answered chirpily, hoping her tone didn't sound as awkward to his ears as it did to hers. "And this place is gorgeous. I can already imagine it full of people. Did you design it?"

His lips quirked a little at one side and she realized he was the one supposed to be asking the questions, but hey, she tended to talk when she was nervous. "The concept was mine but I had a lot of help from my brothers and my sisters. Mac, specifically, handled the construction side and Sophie and Annabel had a lot of input on the interior."

"Obviously a talented family," she said and then immediately regretted the words. He probably thought she was sucking up or, worse, flirting with him. A cold sweat washed over her at the thought.

But he chuckled. "Don't tell them that, or they'll get big heads. Now, shall we get started?"

"Yes, good idea." The sooner they got down to business, the less likely she was to say something stupid.

He led her over to one of the tables—she noticed her résumé waiting there—and held out a chair for her to sit down. As she lowered herself onto the seat, her breath caught a waft of his sweet-and-spicy scent. She couldn't tell if it was an actual aftershave or if he'd been cooking and the delicious aromas of

his creations lingered on him.

“Can I get you a drink? Coffee? Whiskey?” He winked as he said this last word, yet at the same time she didn’t think he was entirely kidding. It might not be afternoon yet, but this was a whiskey distillery.

She played it safe. “Surprise me.”

He nodded once and then retreated behind the bar. The urge to turn her head and watch him was almost unbearable but she resisted, choosing instead to take in more of her surroundings. Her eyes were drawn to an old grandfather clock that stood between the doors leading to the bathrooms. It was beautiful and fit right in with the rest of the decor. She could just imagine glancing at it to check the time when she was working.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t it?”

Eliza snapped her head to the bar at the sound of Lachlan’s voice and saw him, too, admiring the old clock.

“My grandfather bought it out from Scotland. It was his father’s, and it’s over a hundred years old. Never misses a beat.”

“It’s gorgeous,” she agreed as he turned back to what he was doing.

A few moments later, he returned to the table and set a glass mug in front of her with what looked (and smelled) like coffee in the bottom and cream on the top. “You told me to surprise you, so I thought I might as well try you out on what I hope will be our signature drink.”

She drew the mug toward her, picked it up and inhaled deeply,

the strong concoction rushing to her head and making her mouth water. “This isn’t just coffee, is it?”

Lachlan grinned, shook his head and placed a second mug down on the table. Then he discarded the tray on the table beside them, pulled out the chair opposite her and sat. “I don’t plan to offer our patrons just anything here. Go on, taste it!”

She felt his intense gaze boring into her as she took a sip and relished the quick burn of whiskey as she swallowed. It likely wasn’t a good idea to drink on an empty stomach, but she welcomed the little bit of Dutch courage right now. Something about him set her on edge—she told herself it was simply that she needed this job, so she wanted to impress him, but that wasn’t the full story.

She’d been around so many chefs in her life she thought herself immune to the uniform, but the way her pulse sped up around Lachlan McKinnel said otherwise. And he wasn’t even wearing the whole kit and caboodle. Not good. Her hormones needed to calm their farm because whatever ideas they might suddenly have, she wasn’t planning on acting on any attraction, but especially not with someone she worked for.

“It’s good,” she said as she set the mug down on the table again.

“Just good?” The smile he’d been wearing since she arrived drooped a little, making her feel as if she’d kicked a puppy.

“No. Of course not.” She rushed to reassure him. “It’s fantastic. The best coffee I’ve ever tasted. I could get addicted to this stuff.”

As if to prove her point, she lifted the mug again and took another sip.

He threw back his head and laughed long and loud. “It’s okay, I was just kidding. I’m not that pathetic that I need constant reassurance, but I’m glad you like it.”

Eliza hadn’t laughed in what felt like forever and appeared to have lost the ability to recognize a joke or playful banter. She summoned that smile back as she lowered the coffee to the table again, not wanting him to think her some straitlaced grump who wouldn’t be able to sweet-talk the customers.

“Anyway.” Lachlan folded his hands together on the table between them, his expression suddenly serious. “You’ve got quite an impressive résumé. The list of restaurants you’ve worked for reads like the Michelin Guide.”

“Thank you.” Her cheeks flushed a little but her stomach tightened as she anticipated his next question: Why did you leave your last job? She’d already decided only to tell him the bare basics and hope he didn’t scrounge around too much online, but miraculously he went much further back than that.

“Can you tell me how you got into the restaurant business?”

She nodded, knowing he’d eventually ask the inevitable but happy to put it off a little longer. “My father was a restaurant critic and my parents were divorced. On the weekends I spent with my dad, he often took me along when he dined for a review. I guess his passion for good food rubbed off on me. I’ve wanted to work in restaurants for as long as I can remember.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “If you loved food so much, why not become a chef?”

Although she willed them not to, she felt her cheeks turn an even brighter shade of red. She dreaded this question almost as much as the other one. A tiny voice inside her head told her to lie, but she knew from experience that doing so could get her into very hot water. Besides, with Lachlan’s big brown eyes trained so intently on her, she didn’t think she’d be able to tell even the smallest fib.

“Because I can’t cook,” she confessed.

When his expression remained blank, she went on. “I’ve tried. Lord knows, Dad paid for every cooking school he could get me into when I was a teenager, but after the fire department had to be called when I burned down the kitchen, word got around.”

A small smile broke on his face. “Seriously? You burned down a kitchen?”

She hung her head in shame and mentally kicked herself. Probably not the best way to sell yourself, Eliza. “It was not my finest moment, and after that my grandmother tried to convince me to go into medicine or journalism or law, anything that kept me away from food, but I just couldn’t give up, so I got a job as a waitress instead. Finally, I found something I was good at. Talking about food, serving food and customer service. I haven’t looked back.”

“Well, usually at this point, I’d ask what your favorite dish to cook is, but I’m predicting microwave popcorn or something, and

that's not really what I had in mind."

She grimaced. "Good. Because I burn that, as well."

"At least you're honest. Lucky I'm not interviewing for the kitchen. So tell me your favorite dish to eat instead."

Millions of foods whirled through her head—it was like asking someone to pick their favorite child, not that she would ever know how that felt. "That really depends on the situation," she said, mentally shaking her head at the dark thoughts that threatened. "If I'm dining out somewhere classy, you can't go wrong with duck confit or a good pan-seared salmon fillet, but if I want comfort food, it's mac'n'cheese every time."

Her heart squeezed a little at the thought of Grammy Louise's mac'n'cheese—the food she'd practically lived on the last couple of months.

"Then you'll be pleased to know I actually plan on having a mac'n'cheese on our menu—not just any old mac'n'cheese, of course. You haven't lived until you've tasted my whiskey-and-bacon take on the old favorite."

Her mouth watered. "That sounds amazing. What else are you planning for the menu?"

Obviously pleased by this question, Lachlan began to speak animatedly about the dishes he'd been experimenting with. "I want hearty food with a unique flair, showcasing McKinnel's whiskey as much as possible. Every table will get a complimentary basket of whiskey soda bread, and for starters, we'll offer things like smoked turkey Reuben sliders,

scotch deviled eggs and a whiskey-cheese fondue to share. The mains will be even more whiskey focused, featuring slow-cooked bourbon-glazed ribs, a blue cheese burger in which I mix whiskey into the ground beef...”

He went on and on—listing more delicious dishes, including a steak sandwich with bourbon-sauteed mushrooms and a vegetarian option of butternut squash gnocchi with whiskey cream sauce. Eliza made a conscious effort not to drool.

“I love the sound of all of that,” she said, genuine excitement pumping through her body. “You’re making me very hungry.”

“Really?” He grinned, clearly pleased by her response. “And I haven’t even started on dessert yet.”

“I can hardly wait,” she replied. Food was something she could talk about till the cows came home and talking about it with Lachlan made her realize how much she’d missed it.

“How does caramel-and-whiskey sauce with steamed sponge pudding sound?”

“Oh. My. God.” She couldn’t help moaning at the thought.

“Or are pumpkin pancakes with bourbon-vanilla maple syrup more your style? Perhaps you like the sound of blueberry-bourbon-cream-cheese pie or maple-bourbon ice cream.”

The way he spoke about the food sounded almost seductive and she felt goose bumps sprout on her arms.

“Please stop!” She begged, an alien bubble of laughter escaping her throat. “I didn’t eat breakfast and I can’t take this anymore.”

His lips twisted with amusement. “Why didn’t you say so? I just happened to have been playing with my recipe for an Irish apple crisp. How about you taste test for me while we finish the interview?”

Lachlan pushed back his chair to stand before she could reply, and as he did so, the door to the restaurant flung open and they both turned to look. A tall, skinny woman with immaculate makeup and peroxide-blond hair stood there, a girl with a sullen expression at her side.

“Linda! Hallie! What are you guys doing here?” He rushed toward them, stooping to give the girl a hug. “Why aren’t you at school? Is something wrong?”

“I need you to look after Hallie for a while,” said the woman Eliza presumed must be Linda. “I’m going to LA to look after my sick aunt. She’s got cancer.”

Eliza’s heart went out to the woman and her aunt, but when she looked to Lachlan, the smile he’d been wearing seconds earlier had vanished from his face.

“You don’t have an aunt!” he exclaimed.

Linda narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t know everything about me, Lachlan. Maybe if you’d paid more attention, our marriage wouldn’t have ended in tatters.”

“What the...?” Lachlan’s eyes bulged, but he took one look at Hallie and didn’t finish his question. When he spoke again, it was clear he was trying to control his annoyance. “Aunt or no aunt, you can’t just take Hallie to LA. And if you think you can...”

“Re-lax.” Linda’s tone was condescending. “Of course, I can’t take Hallie with me. That’s why she’s staying with you for a while.”

“What?”

Ignoring Lachlan’s one-word question, Linda bent and drew the little girl into her arms, kissing her on her golden pigtailed head. “Be good for Daddy. I’ll call you from LA.”

She straightened again and took a step toward the door as if that was that, but Lachlan’s words halted her in her tracks. “Oh, no, you don’t, Linda. We need to talk. Kitchen. Now.”

Linda glanced at her watch, let out a dramatic sigh and then flicked her long hair over her shoulder. “Fine, but I don’t have long. My plane leaves in two hours.”

Lachlan looked to his daughter and smiled warmly. “Hallie, you wait here. Mom and I will be out in a moment.” Then, dragging the woman by the arm, he led her into the kitchen and slammed the door shut, leaving Eliza alone with the little girl.

She stared at the child. Lately, she couldn’t even handle being around her best friend’s children, never mind strangers’ offspring.

“Hello,” she said after a few moments of silence. Despite her own discomfort at finding herself in the middle of a family drama, Eliza felt for the girl. Although she didn’t know the ins and outs of the situation, it was clear this child was Lachlan’s daughter, that her mother was dumping her here unexpectedly and her father didn’t seem pleased with the news.

However dire her own life was, this was a stark reminder that

she wasn't the only one with problems. And a kid as cute as this one should not have to deal with such rejection. It made her blood boil.

"Who are you?" the little girl replied.

"I'm Eliza," she said with what she hoped was a friendly smile. "Your dad is interviewing me to work in his new restaurant. Did I hear your name was Hallie?"

"Yep." The girl shuffled forward and flopped into the chair Lachlan had just vacated. The sigh that slipped from her lips sounded far too heavy for someone who could only be about eight years old, nine max.

Before either of them could say another word, raised voices sounded from the kitchen.

"Do you not want her?" Linda shouted.

"Do you want to play a game?" Eliza asked loudly. She'd borne witness to a number of screaming matches between her own parents before they divorced and she didn't believe any child should have to hear such things. Especially not their mom questioning their dad's love for them.

Hallie rolled her eyes. "It's okay. I'm used to my parents fighting and I've been waiting for this day for as long as I can remember."

"What do you mean?" Eliza found herself asking. "Has your mom's aunt been sick for a while?"

Hallie laughed. "I've never even met my mom's aunt. I meant I've been waiting for her to get rid of me like she did my

brother.” Before Eliza could ask what she meant, Hallie added, “My twin brother has got a condition called cerebral palsy that made Mommy not want him.”

The little girl’s words shocked Eliza and she found herself unsure of what to say, but Hallie continued on in a matter-of-fact way, “Oh, that’s not the story she or Daddy will tell you. They say they grew apart like grown-ups sometimes do and took a child each, but I’m not stupid. I go to Daddy’s house every second weekend but Mommy never takes Hamish. That’s my brother by the way.”

“I see.” Eliza’s heart hurt—in her research for the interview, she’d read an article on the internet saying that Lachlan had sole custody of a son with special needs, but she’d never imagined the reason why.

“And if Mommy can give up Hamish, then I always knew that one day she might also give up me.”

“But she’s not giving you up,” Eliza rushed to reassure the child. “She’s going to look after your sick relative.”

Hallie shrugged. “I’m actually glad. Daddy and Hamish live with Grandma Nora, and now I will, too. She’s the best. And I already have my own bedroom there.”

Despite the child’s attempt at bravado, Eliza saw her lower lip wobble and knew the girl was close to tears. Poor precious little thing. Eliza didn’t blame her. But she did blame her parents. Fighting within earshot of her and both carrying on as if looking after her was a hassle. Some people didn’t know how lucky they

were.

The voices in the kitchen grew louder, more irate, and no matter Hallie's declaration that she was used to this kind of thing, Eliza couldn't just stand by and do nothing. She got to her feet and held her hand out to the little girl. "Will you show me round the distillery gardens?" While we wait for your parents to finish, she added silently. "I loved what I saw when I drove in."

Hallie raised an eyebrow and took a moment to reply as if she knew this was a ploy to get her away from the firing line, but then she pushed her own seat back and stood. "Okay," she said. "If you insist. Come on."

As Eliza followed Lachlan's daughter to the door, she glanced in the direction of the kitchen... This interview was not at all going how she'd hoped.

Chapter Two

"Tell me this is some kind of sick joke, Linda!"

Holding her chin high, she folded her skinny arms over her surgery-enhanced chest and glared at him. "Joke? Looking after my ailing aunt is not a joke."

He raised an eyebrow. "Cut the crap. There is no aunt." Her father had never been on the scene, and as far as he knew, Linda's mother was an only child.

Linda let out a long, deep, clearly irritated sigh. "She's my mom's estranged sister if you must know."

"So why isn't Carol trekking across the country to look after her, then?"

“What part of the word estranged don’t you understand?” she said, speaking slowly as if he were five years old. “Besides Carol has just started a new job in Bend, she can’t just take time off when she feels like it.”

“But you can, because you have never worked a day in your life.” He was about to ask her if she had any idea what it was like to look after someone with a terminal illness—Linda had never been the nurturing type—but he figured she’d work that out pretty quickly.

“There’s no need to be such an ass about this.” She blew air between her lips, flicking her platinum blonde bangs upward as she did so. “You’d think I’d asked you to sail around the world naked, not look after your own daughter.”

“Keep your voice down,” he growled, glancing toward the shut door. He’d been in such a good mood five minutes ago—thinking that he might have finally found the perfect person to lead his waitstaff—but now he could almost feel the steam hissing from his ears. “You’ve got some nerve. You know I want her. I’ve always wanted her and our son, but your timing couldn’t be worse. I’m trying to open a new restaurant here, and you interrupted me in the middle of an interview.”

Linda smirked. “Oh, that makes sense—for a moment there, I thought you were on a date.”

He hated himself for it but he took the bait. “And why would that be so amusing? You don’t think I date?” She’d be right. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been on a date—between

having permanent custody of their son, every second weekend with both kids and work, he didn't have the time—but he wasn't about to admit that. Not to her.

“Keep your pants on,” she said, obviously highly amused. “I just meant that woman isn't your type. She's a little too... How should I put it? Rounded?”

His hackles rose even further. He didn't have a type—not anymore—but he didn't like the way Linda spoke about Eliza. She might not look anorexic like his ex-wife, but she had womanly curves in all the right places and he thought that was a hell of a lot more sexy than someone who was afraid to eat carbs.

“So how long do you think you'll be?” he asked, his voice louder than he'd meant. Already he was mentally calculating the extra things he'd have to do now that he had Hallie full-time. He loved his daughter—and his son—more than life itself, but he also understood that kids required time as well as love. Hallie had dance and singing classes and she went to school in Bend, not Jewell Rock, which would mean an hour round-trip twice a day. All this on top of Hamish's therapy appointments and his extracurricular activities. Had Linda thought any of this through?

Again, his ex-wife rolled her eyes as if she were talking with a plank of wood. “She has cancer, Lachlan, I can't give you an exact time and date when she's going to breathe her last breath.”

“Isn't there anyone else who can look after her? I'm opening the restaurant in a month!”

“You want me to dump our daughter on strangers?”

“Shh,” he hissed again. Then he firmly added, “I meant your aunt.”

She shook her head. “Can’t you show a little compassion? Besides, your mom and your family will help you look after Hallie. It’s not like one extra person in your massive family is going to make much of a difference.”

They stood there for a few moments, glaring at each other like two opponents in a boxing ring. How dare she assume his mom could help? Although he knew she would do her best, he didn’t like asking her to do any more than she already did. And with two family weddings imminent and his two future sisters-in-law pregnant, Lachlan’s mom had enough on her hands already. He wasn’t a violent man and he would never hit a woman, but the frustration coursing through his body right now made him want to pick something up and throw it against the wall.

Only the thought of his daughter and Eliza in the next room held him back.

Eliza. What must she be making of all this? Would she still be there when he went back out? It was definitely not the first impression he wanted to make on a potential new employee.

Feeling resigned and realizing they’d left their daughter with a stranger, Lachlan let out a long breath. “I take it you’ve packed Hallie’s school uniform?” Linda might have seen fit to take her out of class to bring her to him, but he didn’t want her missing any more because of this.

“Of course.”

“And can you give me a list of all her extracurricular activities?”

Linda smiled like a child who'd just been told they could stay up past their bedtime and eat junk food. “I'll text everything to you while I'm waiting to board my plane. You're a good man, Lachlan McKinnel.”

She moved forward as if to throw her arms around him but he held up a hand, warning her off. If she thought him so good, why had she looked elsewhere for excitement when they were married? Maybe he wasn't good, maybe he was just a pushover. A pushover who had been blinded by Linda's looks and the fun they'd had together when they'd first met but had been paying the price ever since.

“Go say goodbye to Hallie,” he said instead and then turned and opened the door for her to go through.

“She's not here!” Linda exclaimed, then turned to him in horror. “Who was that woman? What has she done with our daughter?”

“Will you stop being so dramatic?” Lachlan snapped. “They're probably just outside.” Although inside, his heart clenched as if someone had wrapped string around it and was tightening quickly. Where were Hallie and Eliza?

He strode quickly to the door and breathed a sigh of relief when he opened it and spotted Hallie and Eliza a few yards away, seemingly deep in conversation in the garden. Eliza glanced up as if sensing his presence and the look she gave him told him

exactly why they'd moved outside.

Shame washed over him and he felt heat creeping into his cheeks that a stranger had thought it best to intervene so his daughter didn't hear the raised and bickering voices of her parents. At the same time, he was thankful that she had. However many times he told himself not to let Linda rile him up, he always failed miserably in this resolve.

"She's out here," he told his ex-wife.

The possible-kidnapping drama forgotten, Linda rushed over to Hallie and made an elaborate show of bidding her farewell. "I'll miss you, my darling. Be good for Daddy and Grandma Nora. I'll call you every night." She clung to her a few more moments, then kissed her on both cheeks and stepped back.

"Au revoir, folks," she said with an irritating wave of her fingers, before turning and tottering away in her ridiculously high heels to her car. She seemed more like someone off on a beachside vacation than someone off to play nurse.

As Linda sped off down the long drive, Lachlan turned to Eliza. This is awkward, he thought, wondering what she must make of arriving in the middle of his family drama. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "That was my ex-wife."

"I guessed." She nodded and her shoulder-length, chocolate-brown hair bobbed a little.

"I had no idea she was going to come over like that or I wouldn't have scheduled the interview."

"I guessed that, too," Eliza replied, but her lips didn't even

offer a hint of a smile.

“Daddy.” He felt Hallie tugging at the side of his shirt. “Daddy. I’m hungry.”

“Wait a moment. Can’t you see I’m talking?” The moment his words were out, he realized how snappy they sounded.

“Sorry, Daddy,” she said, a quiver in her voice and her eyes glistening.

He swallowed the frustration at his daughter—none of this was her fault—and took her small hand in hers. He squeezed it gently three times, which was their secret, silent way of saying I love you. “It’s okay, glitter-pie. Everything’s going to be okay. Can you just give me a moment and then we’ll go get some lunch?”

She nodded solemnly and squeezed his hand three times in reply. His heart flooded with warmth. No matter how angry he was at her mother and however untimely this new arrangement was, he never wanted to make Hallie feel like she were a burden.

He looked back to Eliza and offered her a conciliatory smile. He could tell she wasn’t impressed with his and Linda’s behavior. Although it really wasn’t any of her business, he wanted to stick up for himself, wanted to give her a little history of the last tumultuous decade with his ex-wife. But he would never speak badly of Linda in front of Hallie. And besides, there were still so many questions he wanted to ask Eliza about herself and her own professional experience.

Sadly, conducting an interview with his eight-year-old daughter in tow was also not ideal. He was about to ask her if

she'd mind if they rescheduled the interview for later in the day or even tomorrow but decided he didn't really have the time. Opening night was four weeks away and so far he'd interviewed ten people for the job and none of them had been suitable.

Yet from the moment Eliza had walked in the door, he'd thought she was the one. There was just something about her that made her look like she belonged in the restaurant—he could already imagine her weaving between the tables on a busy night, chatting to the customers, directing the waitstaff, helping make McKinnel's the place where people wanted to be.

His older brother, Callum, would probably berate him for hiring someone without calling their references or finishing a proper interview but this was Lachlan's restaurant and sometimes you had to go with your gut. He ignored the voice in his head that told him how wrong his gut had been about Linda—there'd been adolescent hormones involved there, so it didn't count.

As far as he could see, the only thing against Eliza was that she couldn't cook—but considering he wasn't hiring her for the kitchen, that didn't actually matter. It was her personal skills that counted and the way she'd taken Hallie away from the drama impressed him. Not that Hallie was difficult but he believed Eliza would be able to handle difficult customers, leaving him to focus on the restaurant, which was his area of expertise.

“When can you start?” he asked her.

“What?” She blinked. “You're offering me the job? Don't you want to ask me more questions? Check my references?”

“I’ll call your references later but they won’t change my mind, will they?”

“They better not,” she said. “Wow. Okay.”

“Is that a yes?”

She deliberated so long, he thought she was about to reject his offer, but finally she said, “Will Monday be okay? I have a few things I need to organize first.”

As today was Friday, that seemed reasonable. “That would be fine, but if you need a little longer, that’s okay, too. And let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. Now, my daughter here is hungry and I think I recall you saying you were, as well. Would you like to have an early lunch with us?”

Again she deliberated, but not quite so long this time. “If it’s not an imposition?”

“Not at all. It will give us a chance to talk a little more and you can start to try some of the dishes I’ll be putting on the menu. Come on, let’s head back inside.”

“Can we have mac’n’cheese, Dad?” Hallie asked as they started toward the restaurant.

“Of course,” he replied.

“That’s my favorite food, too,” Eliza said, smiling down at his little girl and Lachlan felt the tension that had built inside him with Linda’s arrival start to dissolve again.

They went inside and Hallie and Eliza sat at one of the tables while Lachlan went back into the kitchen to make lunch.

He made two separate dishes—one for his daughter sans the

whiskey and one for his newest employee with all the trimmings. As he worked, he kept one ear to the door, smiling as he heard Hallie chattering away to Eliza, telling her about school, the distillery and the fact her two new aunties were both having babies very soon. It didn't sound like she was too affected by her mother's sudden departure and for that he was grateful. Although Eliza didn't say much, her replies were soft and encouraging and the belief he'd made the right decision in hiring her solidified inside him.

"This smells delicious," she said a few minutes later when he emerged from the kitchen, carrying three bowls of steaming pasta.

"Thanks, Daddy," Hallie said before picking up her fork and diving in as if this were the first meal she'd had in months. He had to wonder if Linda had given her breakfast but again he bit his tongue.

"Let's hope it tastes as good as it looks." Lachlan sat down beside the girls and waited in anticipation as Eliza tasted her first mouthful. He was a good chef but he knew from her résumé that she'd worked in restaurants with some of the best chefs in America and he found he really wanted to impress her.

"Wow," came her one-word reply after a few moments. It wasn't the word but the way she said it and her almost-black eyes that lit up as she did so that made his heart soar.

"It's okay?"

She smiled. "Okay is an understatement."

He let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding and picked up his own fork. But before he'd even loaded it with macaroni, the door of the restaurant burst open again and in came half his siblings.

"What's for lunch?" Mac said, before he, Blair and Sophie—his youngest sister by two and a half minutes—halted in their tracks.

"Sorry," Blair said.

"We didn't know you had company," Sophie added.

Lachlan stood and gestured to Eliza. "This is Eliza. I've just offered her the position of head hostess. Eliza, these are three of my siblings, Sophie, Mac and Blair." He pointed to each of them as he spoke.

"Wow. Cool. Hi. Nice to meet you." Sophie rushed forward, offered her hand to shake Eliza's and then pulled out a seat at the table.

Mac and Blair also followed with handshakes and Lachlan couldn't help noticing the way his younger brothers looked appreciatively over his new employee. Mac's appreciation wasn't surprising—he might not date much since splitting with his longtime girlfriend a year ago, but he wasn't dead. And Lachlan had to concede you'd have to be dead not to notice how easy on the eye Eliza was.

But Blair's interest surprised him—granted, he was divorced but most of the time he and his ex-wife, Claire, acted like newlyweds. It was very confusing for everyone.

Whatever, he made a mental note to warn them both off Eliza later—he didn't want any flings with his brothers getting in the way of her doing her job.

“Hi, Auntie Sophie, Uncle Mac and Uncle Blair,” Hallie said through a mouthful of macaroni.

“Hey, short stuff.” Sophie ruffled Hallie's hair. “What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in school?”

Sophie half looked at Lachlan as she said this and he mouthed back, Linda.

Sophie nodded—he'd fill her in later—then she leaned in and sniffed Hallie's lunch. “Mmm, that smell's to die for.”

“Okay, okay.” Lachlan shook his head as his brothers also pulled up seats. “I'll go get you all a serving.” He knew he wouldn't get rid of them until he did so.

“So where are you from?” Sophie asked when they all had steaming bowls of the best mac'n'cheese in Oregon in front of them.

“New York,” Eliza replied.

“Long way from home,” Blair commented.

Eliza shrugged. “I'm looking for a change of scenery and a new adventure.”

Mac nodded. “I can relate. So where are you living?”

“Um...I actually came straight here from the airport,” she admitted, glancing over and meeting Lachlan's gaze. “That's one of those few things I need to organize.”

“Hey, why don't you check out the apartment next door to us?”

Sophie suggested. “The old tenants moved out last month, and the landlord is still looking for a new one. It’s nothing flashy, but it’s cozy and not far from here.”

“Us?” Eliza asked.

Sophie grinned. “Me and my twin sister, Annabel. She’s a firefighter, but I’m sure you’ll meet her soon enough. If you’re interested, I could call the landlord and see if she can show you round this afternoon.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you. And then I’ll need to deliver my rental car back to the airport and work out more permanent transport.”

“We can probably help you with that, as well,” Blair said.

“I can draw some pictures to go on your new walls,” Hallie—never one to be left out—offered.

Everyone laughed.

“Thank you,” Eliza said, “that will be wonderful.” Then she looked to Mac. “So are you the genius behind this building?”

“Sure am.” As Mac’s face glowed with pride, Lachlan felt a pinch of something like jealousy inside him. It might have been Mac’s handiwork but much of the concept was Lachlan’s and he’d got his hands dirty a few times during the construction. But he bit down on the impulse to state these facts as he knew how uncharitable it would sound—besides, even when they egged him on, he’d never been the type to compete with his brothers, so the feeling was weird. Perhaps he was still unsettled after Linda’s dramatic arrival and departure.

Lachlan refilled his brother's bowls and poured Hallie a glass of milk while conversation continued around him. Eliza got along well with his siblings, she showed lots of interest and asked lots of questions about the history of the distillery and the café that had been open until recently.

“We closed it a month ago—in April—so we could finish the construction and decorate the restaurant,” Lachlan explained. “It’s ideal to have somewhere to eat on the premises as customers tend to buy more whiskey when they can linger for a snack, hence why I want to open up as soon as possible.”

“Fantastic,” Eliza said, wiping a tiny smudge of cheese-and-whiskey sauce off her bottom lip. “I’m excited to be here at the ground level.”

Mac chuckled. “I hope you’re prepared to work hard because I can attest to the fact that Lachlan here is a slave driver. I’ve barely slept in a month.”

Lachlan glared at him but Eliza didn’t seem perturbed.

“Bring it on,” she said as she met his gaze. “Workaholic is my middle name.”

And something inside him fizzed at this declaration. Someone who wasn’t afraid of a little hard work was exactly who he needed in this position. Eliza’s good looks had absolutely no bearing on his decision whatsoever.

[Chapter Three](#)

Everything was happening so fast, Eliza thought as she flopped back onto her bed in a cute little boutique hotel in Jewell

Rock. Unlike the neighboring town of Bend, whose popularity was rising by the second, Jewell Rock was still a national secret and therefore there wasn't an abundance of places to choose from to stay. The few options were all high-quality, rustic, mountain-lodge-type places. Lachlan's sister Sophie was so very friendly that she'd offered Eliza the couch in her and Annabel's apartment for the night, but Eliza had politely declined the generous invitation.

Once upon a time, she'd have accepted such an offer from near strangers—thought of it as an adventure—but things had changed and now she preferred to keep to herself and take new friendships slowly.

Her cell phone beeped and despite the fact that her limbs felt heavy from exhaustion, she rolled over and reached to grab it from the bedside table. Speaking of friends...a message from Lilly, her best one, popped up on the screen.

Just checking in. How was your day? Any news on the job yet? xx

While part of her felt too tired for a conversation, calling was easier than typing out what would inevitably be a long message. She pressed Dial and less than two seconds later, Lilly picked up.

“Tell me the interview was a disaster and you're not moving halfway across the world.”

Eliza almost smiled as she snuggled back into the pillows. That was classic Lilly—no time for greetings and a tendency for theatrics. “Oregon is not halfway across the world.”

Lilly groaned. “Oh, no. You got the job, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I start on Monday.”

“Monday?” Lilly exclaimed. “How on earth are you going to come home and pack all your things and get back there in that time? Where are you going to live?”

“I’m not coming back to New York.” She couldn’t bring herself to call it home—without Jack and Tyler, nothing felt like home anymore. “Not yet anyway. The restaurant is opening in a month, so there isn’t really time. I don’t need much. I’ll have a uniform for work and I’ll buy whatever else I need locally. And I’ve already found a place to live. It’s an apartment, only a five-minute drive from the restaurant—I might not even need a car. I’m thinking of buying a bicycle and getting fit.”

Lord knew after all the comfort eating she’d done over the last eighteen months, it wouldn’t be a bad thing if she lost a few pounds.

“Getting fit?” Lilly sounded horrified. She was married to a chef, wrote food reviews for a popular mommy blog and believed life was too short to waste time exercising.

“It’s an idea,” Eliza said.

“A crazy one if you ask me,” Lilly replied, “but moving on. Where are you living? What was Lachlan McKinnel like? Will you get free whiskey as part of the package because...in your situation, I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

Lilly always asked more than one question at once.

“Don’t worry—I’m not going to become an alcoholic,” Eliza

promised. “This fresh start will be good for me, I can feel it in my bones. In answer to your other questions, I’m moving into an apartment next door to Lachlan’s twin sisters. I met one of them this afternoon and she just happened to mention the place next door was vacant. She set me up with the landlord and I checked it out this afternoon. It’s perfect, so tomorrow I’m going to buy a bed, a fridge and maybe a couch, a microwave and a TV. That should do me for starters. And as for Lachlan, I’m not sure what to think of him.”

“Whoa. There’s a lot to unpack here. What do you mean, you’re not sure about him? Didn’t you like him?”

Eliza pondered her response a few moments before she told her friend about Lachlan’s ex. “They’re a close-knit family,” she added. “Anyway, my opinion of him personally doesn’t matter—he’s definitely a good chef and he’s serious about making the restaurant a success. Since he’s going to be my boss and not my friend, I guess that’s the main thing.”

“Yes, I suppose that true. But are his sisters at least nice?” Lilly asked. “Perhaps you’ll become friends with them. I don’t like to think of you all alone across the other side of the country.”

“They seem nice. A bit younger than us, though—different zone. Sophie asked me if I wanted to join Tinder. Apparently they’ve both signed up.”

Lilly snorted. “Tinder! Jeez, I’m so glad I met Matthew before the dating scene changed so dramatically.”

“Mom-my!”

Before Eliza could say anything to that, Lilly's two-year-old daughter, Britt, hollered in the background.

"Mom-my, I did poos in the potty."

Eliza felt torn between laughing and crying at the excited little voice. Jack and Britt had been born only three months apart and every milestone Britt crossed felt like a knife twisting in Eliza's gut. She wanted to be happy for her friend but all she could think about was the fact Jack would never do any of the things Britt was doing.

"I'll let you go," she said, choking up. "Tell Britt I said well done, and I'll send you some photos of my new place tomorrow night when I've furnished it a little."

"All right, my love," Lilly replied. "Chat soon."

Eliza had barely disconnected from her friend when the phone started ringing again.

"Grammy," she said as she answered.

"Hello, my darling," came her grandmother's singsongy voice down the line. "I've just got in from salsa and I'm dead on my feet, but I couldn't go to bed without checking in on my favorite granddaughter."

"I'm your only granddaughter."

"Even if I had a hundred grandchildren, you'd be my favorite," Grammy said. "Now, tell me, did you get the job?"

"Yes." Eliza filled her grandmother in on her day.

"Wow—that's quite a jam-packed day. But tell me, is Lachlan McKinnel as good-looking in person as he is in his photos?"

Eliza frowned. “How do you know what he looks like?” Although he’d appeared on a local TV show cooking segment, until she’d seen the advertisement for the job and searched online, she’d never heard of him and she was pretty sure her grandmother hadn’t either.

“You don’t think I’d let my favorite granddaughter fly all the way to Tombouctou without doing a little research.” As far as Grammy was concerned, anywhere outside of Manhattan was the end of the earth. “Well, is he good-looking?”

Something quivered low in Eliza’s belly—indicating that she wasn’t as numb as she’d thought. It was quickly followed by guilt that she could be feeling anything so frivolous. “It doesn’t matter what he looks like. What matters is that he’s passionate about food and has offered me the fresh start I need.”

“So he is good-looking.” Grammy sounded victorious. “I might have to jump on a plane and come and check him out myself if there’s potential for a romance.”

“I think he’s about forty years too young for you.”

Grammy laughed. “I meant for you, my dear.”

That’s what Eliza had been afraid of.

“I’m not looking for love,” she said, trying to put her grandmother straight. Her heart had been so full of love once and she’d lost it all in the most tragic of circumstances. Even thinking about loving another left her feeling chilled.

“Did I say anything about love?” Grammy tsked. “Not all relationships have to be serious you know? Fun and mutual

pleasure are just as important. I should know.”

Eliza blushed. She should be used to her grandma’s frankness about sex by now, but it still made her want to cover her ears.

“Even if that’s true,” she said, “getting involved with my boss would be asking for all sorts of trouble. Been there, done that before, and you know how it ended.”

“What happened with Jack was not because Tyler was your boss,” Grammy said almost tersely.

But as much as she loved her grandmother, Eliza really didn’t want to get into all that—again—right now. “It’s a moot point anyway,” she said, equally as terse. “I’m not ready for another man in my life yet.”

Deep down, she didn’t think she’d ever be ready but if Grammy thought there was a slight chance, maybe she’d stop pushing.

“Okay,” Grammy relented. “Tell me about Jewell Rock instead, then.”

And despite the tiredness she felt from getting up at the crack of dawn, flying across America, getting a job and house hunting all in one day, this was something she could give her grandmother.

“It’s beautiful. The complete opposite of New York, but I think you’d love it. There’s a big gorgeous lake near where I’m going to live and I’ll wake up every day to a view of the mountains. I’m going shopping tomorrow to buy stuff for my apartment, but over the weekend, I hope to have some time to

play tourist. I'll email you some photos.”

“I'd rather you send me a bottle of McKinnel's whiskey!”

Eliza puffed out a breath of amusement. “I think that can probably be arranged. Now, as much as I love talking to you, I'm exhausted and I've got a big few days ahead so I need to try to get some sleep.”

Try being the operative word—sleep hadn't been something she'd easily achieved for a long while.

“It's not even midnight here,” Grammy proclaimed. “You young things these days have no stamina. But you're probably right. I need my beauty sleep.” Then her tone turned serious. “I love you, cherub. Look after yourself and remember I'm always here—any time of the day or night—to talk if you need it. I might not have suffered a loss like yours, but I'm an old woman and I've experienced enough in my long life to know that when you're hurting you shouldn't bottle it all up inside. Promise me you'll call when you're feeling low.”

Eliza tried to swallow the lump that rose in her throat and blink away the tears that came at her grandmother's loving concern. “I promise,” she whispered and then quickly disconnected the call before she lost it.

No matter how far she ran from the scene of her heartbreak, she knew she'd never escape the pain but, somehow, she had to learn to live with it. And maybe McKinnel's Restaurant was exactly what she needed to help her do so!

[Chapter Four](#)

Lachlan hated to be late on Eliza's first day but getting two kids ready and off to school in the morning took three times longer than one kid. And Hallie's hair was responsible for almost half an hour of that time. Thankfully, his mom had offered to take Hamish, so he could drive Hallie into Bend and talk to her teacher to make sure everyone knew that he was the first point of contact for the foreseeable future. Hallie seemed to be taking the change in stride but he'd wanted to spend a little one-on-one time with her just to be sure.

When he finally arrived back at the distillery, his new head hostess was sitting on the restaurant's front step, her elbows resting on her knees, waiting for him. A bicycle was off to one side, leaning against the building. Even though he'd told her she could wear casual clothes until they'd sorted out the uniforms—one of the many jobs on his to-do list for the next few days—Eliza looked professional in smart black trousers, a short-sleeved pink blouse and her hair held back off her face with some kind of pink clip. Pink looked good on her, he thought as he approached—a color he'd never seen the benefits of before now.

“Good morning,” he said as she stood to greet him. “Sorry I'm late.”

“Isn't that usually the employee's line?”

He grinned, feeling some of the tension dispersing that had built up inside him since Hamish woke at 6:00 a.m. “Perhaps, but I don't like being tardy and I am genuinely sorry you had to wait. Can I get you a coffee to make up for it?”

“Sounds good. Thank you.” She hitched her purse against her shoulder as they headed toward the door.

He slipped the key into the lock, pushed the door open and then held it as Eliza went through. The scent of caramel wafted by as she passed him and he wondered if it was perfume or if she’d had something sweet for breakfast. He’d never smelled such a scent on a woman before—his mom, sisters and ex-wife all preferred floral aromas—and he liked it. A lot.

“How was your weekend?” he asked, pushing the thought of caramel to the back of his mind as he flicked the switch so light flooded the restaurant. “Sophie told me you took the apartment. Are you all settled in?”

“Yes,” she said, putting her purse down on one of the tables. “Everything seems to have fallen into place. Your sisters are wonderful.”

“They have their moments,” he said, secretly in complete agreement. His younger sisters were pretty fantastic and the best aunts he could want for his kids, always helping out whenever they could. They’d both make great moms one day, but so far, neither of them had been lucky in the love department.

“What about you?” she asked. “How was your weekend?”

“Busy,” he replied as he went behind the bar and turned on the coffee machine. “I played cabdriver to Hallie and my son, Hamish—they have better social lives than me—and then in the evenings I came in here and experimented with a few more dishes.”

He yawned at the thought, his body in dire need of a caffeine injection. He'd already had one cup of coffee this morning but it wasn't enough, not at the moment when he was burning the candle at both ends.

"Anyway, how do you like your coffee? Cream? Half-and-half? Sugar?"

Eliza came across to join him, pulling out a stool on the other side of the bar. "Half-and-half and no sugar, please."

"Sweet enough already, hey?" It was supposed to be a joke, but she looked horrified and he mentally kicked himself in the shins. He didn't want her to think he was flirting with her, because he hadn't meant it that way and he got the impression she already didn't have the highest opinion of him. He blamed Linda for that. Eliza had seen him at his worst before she had the chance to find out that he was really a pretty nice, fair and levelheaded guy.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," he said. "It was just a stupid joke."

"It's okay."

Awkward silence lingered while he finished making the coffee and by the time he placed the mug on the bar in front of her, he decided he needed to clear the air before they got down to business.

"Look, I wanted to apologize properly for the way your interview unfolded the other day. I'm not proud of what you witnessed between me and my ex-wife," he said. "And I want to thank you for taking Hallie outside so she didn't hear our

discussion.”

Eliza’s lip quirked upward at one edge. “Is that what you’d call it?”

“Okay. A heated discussion. What you heard may not have given you the best impression of me and that’s probably because Linda tends to bring out the worst in me. To be honest, I can barely stand to look at her and if it wasn’t for Hallie, I wouldn’t have anything to do with her.”

“Your personal business isn’t any concern of mine.” She wrapped her fingers round her mug and drew it up to her lips.

“Still, I’d like to explain. Linda and I got married fairly young—we thought attraction was enough to build a marriage on, and I won’t lie, things were good for a while. But then we had twins and everything changed. Our son was born with cerebral palsy and she couldn’t handle it. She gave all her attention to Hallie and refused to even hold Hamish. It broke my heart but I hoped in time, she would learn to love him.”

He paused a moment, emotion swamping him.

“Hamish is the most lovable kid on the planet, but Linda never came to feel this way. Instead she drew away from me, too—she came to resent the love and attention I gave Hamish—and so she had an affair. I wanted custody of both the kids but she fought in court to keep Hallie and has never so much as acknowledged Hamish again since. So when she came barging in here the other day and said she was off to take care of some sick relative I’ve never even heard of, the anger I usually manage to

contain exploded. How can she give herself to look after a near stranger when she's never given any of herself to her son?"

"I don't know." Eliza twirled a few strands of her hair between her fingers. "But that's really sad. How do you explain that to Hamish?"

Lachlan let out a heavy breath. "So far I've just skirted around the issue. He gets lots of love and attention from me and my family and I hope that we give him everything he lacks not having a mother. I guess because it's always been this way, he's never questioned it. Hamish isn't a dumb kid but his condition has left him with a moderate intellectual disability—he amazes me. He can play things like chess almost as well as an adult, but he takes longer to catch on with things like schoolwork than most kids, and perhaps this has been an advantage when it comes to the absence of his mother."

Eliza smiled sadly. "He sounds like a great kid. I can't imagine how any mother could just abandon their child."

"He is." Lachlan nodded. "And I'll never understand Linda either. Hallie's always been great with Hamish, though, and it may not have sounded like it the other day, but I'm glad to have her with me, too. I'd have appreciated Linda giving me a little more notice, though, so I could organize everything better."

"That's understandable." Eliza took another sip of her coffee and he found himself wondering and wanting to ask about her background. He knew from her résumé when she'd graduated college, which put her in her early thirties, about the same as him

—she couldn't have got to that age without some kind of serious relationship. Did she have a crazy ex in her past, as well? Was that why she'd chosen to leave a perfectly good job in a fancy restaurant in New York to come here? She'd told his siblings she was looking for a change of scenery and a new adventure, but people didn't usually look for such things unless something or other had gone wrong.

These were questions he might have been able to ask at the interview, but he felt like the chance had passed him by and that if he asked them now, it might sound like he was prying. Lachlan told himself that Eliza's personal life wasn't any of his business anyway, that as long as she worked hard and did the job he needed her to do, then he didn't care, but he couldn't help being curious.

Pushing that thought aside, he also took a sip of his coffee. Man, that tasted good. Just what he needed, and hopefully with caffeine in his system, he would focus on what mattered—getting the restaurant ready for the grand opening.

He put down his mug. “I thought I could give you the grand tour of the distillery first and introduce you to everyone who works here and then we can come back and go through the list of everything we need to achieve over the next few weeks.”

“Sounds good.” She downed her last bit of coffee and stood.

Although he still had almost a full mug to drink, Lachlan decided it would be better to get the tour started. Things felt weird between them and he wanted to get back to the easy

conversation they'd been having before Linda rudely interrupted the interview.

"I grew up here," he said as they started out of the restaurant, "and, like my brothers and sisters, I'm very passionate about the whiskey and the distillery, even though until now I haven't worked here. What I'm trying to say is all of us can tend to go on a bit about the history of the place, and so if we start boring you to tears, let us know."

Eliza let out a sound that was almost a laugh, but not quite. "I'm sure I'll be fascinated."

Was she nervous? What would it take to get this woman to relax? He hoped to God he hadn't made a bad decision in hiring her. He wanted a head hostess who was chatty and friendly, happy to flirt a little if necessary and laugh with the clientele. For a moment, he wondered if he—like Mac and Blair—had been bamboozled by her looks.

"The gardens are beautiful," she said, jolting his thoughts.

And he grabbed hold of the topic, happy that she'd initiated something. "Thanks. My mother is the family green thumb and she does a lot of the work herself, although she does have help these days. We've got a full-time gardener on staff."

"I read that your mom lives here at the distillery, and that your father died recently. I'm sorry," she offered.

"Thank you." It was good to see she'd done her research. "Yes, we lost Dad to a heart attack just over a year ago and a lot has changed around here since then. My older brother has taken over

as head of the distillery and where Dad was all about tradition, Callum wants to take the distillery to the next level. In addition to opening the restaurant, he's branching out in the types of whiskey we make. We're now selling McKinnel's touristy merchandise as well, and he's hoping to buy some land next door and actually start growing our own grains."

"Sounds like a lot going on."

"There is, but you don't need to worry about any of that. Our prime concern is the restaurant." He gestured to the building they were approaching. "We'll start in here. You met Blair the other day—he's our head distiller. If you've got any questions about the making of whiskey, he's the one to ask."

Both Blair and Lachlan's other brother Quinn were in the distillery and they stopped talking to welcome Eliza to the distillery family.

"Quinn's in charge of our warehouse," Lachlan explained. "And he recently got engaged."

"Congratulations," Eliza said.

"Thanks heaps." Quinn smiled broadly and the goofy expression that crossed his face whenever he spoke about his fiancée, Bailey, appeared. "We're also expecting twins."

"Quinn and Bailey are going to get married at the distillery and we'll do the catering in the restaurant. Bailey's an event coordinator and we're hoping that with her on board, we'll get to host a lot more weddings here. The first one is actually going to be our oldest brother, Callum, and his fiancée, Chelsea, in two

months' time.”

“I hope you like weddings,” Blair said with a chuckle.

“Who doesn't like weddings?” Eliza asked, but again she didn't smile.

Lachlan let Blair show her round the actual distillery, which—whether she liked it or not—included a brief lesson in whiskey making and then Quinn took them into the warehouse for a quick look. From there, Lachlan took Eliza to the shop and office building. Sophie was busy with customers doing a tasting, so although she offered them a quick wave, they headed down the corridor to Callum's office to find him and Chelsea locked in a passionate embrace.

Lachlan cleared his throat and rolled his eyes at Eliza as he rapped on the open door. “You two should get a room!”

Chelsea sprang out of Callum's arms and her cheeks turned pink as her gaze fell on Lachlan and Eliza. Callum seemed less embarrassed—in fact, his smug, satisfied smile as his gaze met with Lachlan's made Lachlan try to recall the last time he'd kissed a woman.

He pushed that thought aside. “This is Eliza,” he said. “And these two are my brother Callum and his fiancée, Chelsea.”

“It's so great to meet you,” Chelsea gushed as she rushed around Callum's desk and offered her hand.

“And you, too,” Eliza replied with a smile.

Callum also shook her hand. “Welcome to McKinnel's—Lachlan showed me your impressive résumé. Sounds like we're

very lucky to have you here.”

“Thanks. I’m excited to be here.”

“If you ever need anything or have any questions, my door is always open.”

“Maybe you should shut it more often,” Lachlan quipped.

Callum gave him the finger and Chelsea reprimanded him. “Don’t mind these two,” she said. “They’re very professional most of the time.”

The four of them chatted for a few more moments until Chelsea excused herself. “I’m really sorry,” she said, placing her hand on her small bump. “I have to get to a prenatal appointment.”

“It’s fine.” Lachlan smiled at his future sister-in-law. “We should be getting back to the restaurant anyway.”

“It was lovely to meet you both,” Eliza said.

Callum nodded as he wrapped an arm around Chelsea and pulled her close. “You, too, we’ll see you around.”

Leaving his brother and Chelsea to no doubt partake in a passionate goodbye, Lachlan led Eliza back down the corridor.

“Oh, do you mind if I buy a bottle of whiskey for my grandma?” she asked, glancing across to where Sophie was just wrapping up a sale.

“Of course.” He took her over to the polished wood tasting bar, but neither he nor Sophie would hear of Eliza paying for her bottle.

“Call it a welcome-to-the-team gift,” Sophie said as she placed

the bottle in a special case for mailing.

“You’re close to your grandmother, then?” Lachlan asked as he and Eliza finally headed back to the restaurant.

“Yes. I’ve been living with her the past few months and she was kind of like a surrogate mom for me in my teens.”

“Oh?” Lachlan didn’t know if he sounded nosy but he couldn’t help asking, “Was your own mom not around?” He remembered her saying her parents were divorced.

“She died when I was thirteen, in a helicopter crash.”

It was his turn to say, “I’m sorry,” but he couldn’t help being happy that she’d shared a little of herself.

“Thank you.” Her reply was almost a whisper. “Until then she had full-time custody and I stayed with Dad every second weekend, but after her death I went to live with him and Grammy moved in until I was old enough to take care of myself. We became very close.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. And sometimes I’m not sure if that’s a blessing or a curse. Did you like growing up in a big family?”

He chuckled. “Sometimes I loved it and sometimes I hated it. My siblings can be my worst enemies or my best friends. Speaking of family...” He slowed his steps. “I just remembered, I’d better take you to the house to meet Mom before we head back, or my life won’t be worth living. Although she’s not involved in the day-to-day running of the distillery anymore, she likes to be kept in the loop.”

“Hallie told me you lived with your mom,” she said.

“Yes, when Linda and I split up, I moved in with my parents, so Mom could help me with Hamish. It was only supposed to be temporary,” he admitted, “but nine years later and we’re still there. Sounds pretty pathetic, doesn’t it? A thirty-three-year-old man still living with his mom.”

There was a hint of a smile on her lips as she met his gaze. “Hallie also told me how much she adores your mom. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Come on, then. And let me hold that.” He took the box with the whiskey from her grasp before she could refuse and gestured for her to follow him toward the main house, pointing out the smaller cottage on the property as they passed it. “Callum and Chelsea live there—it used to be our grandparents’ place. It was the original house they built when they moved over from Scotland in the 1950s.”

“It’s quaint.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is,” Lachlan said as they continued. “Blair also lives at the main house with Hamish, Mom and I.”

“He’s not married?” she asked.

Lachlan tried to detect if there was interest in her question or if she was simply making conversation. “He’s divorced, too. But more recently. And it’s kinda complicated.”

“What divorce isn’t?”

He chanced a glance at her as they walked but couldn’t read anything from her expression. “You sound like you speak from

experience.”

Her forehead crinkled and then she nodded. “I’m smack-bang in the middle of one myself.”

“I’m sorry.” Suddenly her move across the country made complete sense.

“Thanks. Don’t really want to talk about it, though.”

“Fair enough.” His divorce was ancient history now and still not his favorite topic of conversation, but he couldn’t help wondering about hers. Who was the party at fault? Had Eliza and her husband simply drifted apart? Had he been abusive? Was that why she was trying to get as far away as possible from him? Or was she still in love with him?

Lachlan pondered these questions as they walked in silence the rest of the way to his mom’s place. The list of things he’d like to know about Eliza was growing longer by the second.

Chapter Five

After meeting Nora McKinnel, who was as friendly and welcoming as the rest of her family, Eliza sat down with Lachlan and started going through his to-do list. As he shared his dream and ideas for the restaurant, she listened intently and couldn’t help catching some of his enthusiasm. He asked her questions, valued her experience and was eager to listen to her opinions and suggestions for going forward. It felt good to have a project—something to focus on other than her own woes—and once again, she found herself relaxing in his company. The uncomfortable awareness of earlier in the day had made her tongue tie every

time she tried to speak.

As he talked her through the menu, business matters and his vision, she decided her initial opinion of Lachlan as a good guy was more accurate than the one she'd started to form when his ex was there.

Besides, really, who was at their best when interacting with their ex-partners anyway?

She'd surprised herself by telling Lachlan about Tyler—well, not exactly Tyler, she hadn't mentioned any names or details—but, after he'd been so open and honest about his family situation, it hadn't seemed such a big deal to share that tiny bit of herself. She was glad he hadn't pried and for a moment, she'd wondered if she shouldn't tell him the whole sorry story but she'd bitten her tongue, reminding herself why a move across the country had been so appealing.

In Jewell Rock, she wasn't met with sympathetic looks and awkward conversation because people didn't know what the right thing to say to her was. Over the past couple of days, she'd met the whole McKinnel clan, her landlord and a number of other people as she purchased things for and set up her apartment. None of them had treated her like a leper as many of her friends in New York seemed to now.

“Are you all right?” Lachlan's concerned question drew her out of her musing. “Shall we take a break? I feel like I've been overloading you with information.”

She blinked and shook her head. “No. I'm fine. Was just

thinking how exciting all this is. I might have worked in lots of restaurants, but I've never been part of the grand opening of any of them."

A smile crept onto his lips. "Me either. Sometimes I have to pinch myself that this is actually happening. And other times, I wonder if I'm crazy, trying to do all this while looking after two kids."

"I don't mean to pry, but how exactly do you plan on running a restaurant while being a full-time single dad?"

"I'm not under the illusion it's going to be easy," he said, "but in some ways, being my own boss will mean I can be more flexible with my working hours. I've hired another very experienced chef to work with me. The dishes will all be mine to start with, but I'll take the lunch roster most days and he'll take the nights. That way, I can be around for my children in the afternoons, put them to bed and then come across here to help close."

"I see." It sounded like a lot to take on but it wasn't her place to question her boss. And plenty of women managed to work full-time while also being single moms. Why shouldn't a guy be able to do the same? "Did you want me to start making phone calls to set up interviews?"

They'd just finished going through the pile of résumés from people applying for waitstaff jobs. Lachlan had explained they had a few people staying on from the café but as that had only been open a few hours during the day for the lunch period and

given the restaurant's expanded hours of operation, they needed to employ quite a few new people. He'd already hired a team of kitchen staff who were due to start soon, but as the waitstaff would be under Eliza's supervision and management, he wanted her to be involved in choosing them ASAP.

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