



American Romance®

A NAVY SEAL'S SURPRISE BABY

OPERATION: FAMILY

LAURA MARIE ALTOM



Laura Altom

A Navy SEAL's Surprise Baby

«HarperCollins»

Altom L. M.

A Navy SEAL's Surprise Baby / L. M. Altom — «HarperCollins»,

Fatherhood is the last thing on Navy SEAL Calder Remington's mind. On the job, he's a hardworking hero; in civilian life, he's a carefree bachelor. When he finds a baby – his baby – on his doorstep, he's got no choice but to be a dad. He needs help, and that's where super nanny Pandora Moore comes in. She's perfect in every way. Calder can't deny that he's powerfully attracted to her. But she's his employee, which puts her strictly off limits. And though Pandora may seem perfect, she becomes evasive whenever talk turns to her past. Calder can't help wondering if she's hiding something. He never imagines that the truth may tear them apart – just as they dare to imagine a future together.

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He Needs Her

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"If you're not happy with my work..." Pandora took inordinate care with drying a saucepan.

"Did I say that?" I can't even say why, but my gut tells me you're hiding something.

"You've seen my references. If I've caused you to doubt my ability to care for your son, then—"

"Dammit, Pandora." When he slapped his palm to the table, she not only jumped, but tears filled her eyes. He was instantly sorry, yet at the same time, he'd been trained to always follow his instincts. What was going on with her that he couldn't see? "What's with you? Some things don't add up. Your first day on the job, when you didn't have a cell or a way to even purchase a small amount of groceries without calling me for help. The fact that you lived in Norfolk, yet have never been to the beach. Your two mystery Saturdays. All I'm asking is for you to be straight with me. Is there something going on with you that I'm missing?"

"No." She raised her chin, and her expression lost its earlier wide-eyed fear and turned to steely determination. "But if you're unhappy with my performance, I'll turn in my resignation in the morning."

Dear Reader,

This story features a character and issue much heavier than I've ever dared deal with before. The character is Pandora from the first book in my Operation: Family series, *A SEAL's Secret Baby*. Her issue is serious alcoholism. By the end of that first book, her volunteer counselor, Ellie, feared Pandora was a lost cause.

What Ellie failed to take into account was the strength of a mother's love. It's no secret I'm a big ol' momma bear when it comes to my kids, and Pandora discovers she's no different. Alas, she also finds that just because she knows she's no longer the addict who once lost her child, that doesn't mean the rest of the world will be so accepting.

What I never expected was how personal this story became. When we took in our son, Russell, we found ourselves on the opposite end of just such a heartbreaking situation in that we were the court-appointed family who received a dear child.

I can't fathom how tough being a social worker must be. One time through this process was more than enough for me. My hearts goes out to all the men and women striving to reunite families who've lost their way.

As for Pandora and Calder, you'll have to read on to discover if their sweet, unexpected family finds their happy ending....

Happy reading!

Laura Marie

A Navy SEAL'S Surprise Baby

Laura Marie Altom



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After college (Go, Hogs!), bestselling, award-winning author Laura Marie Altom did a brief stint as an interior designer before becoming a stay-at-home mom to boy-girl twins and a bonus son.

Always an avid romance reader, she knew it was time to try her hand at writing when she found herself replotting the afternoon soaps.

When not immersed in her next story, Laura teaches art at a local middle school. In her free time she beats her kids at video games, tackles Mount Laundry and, of course, reads romance!

Laura loves hearing from readers at either P.O. Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101, or by email, BaliPalm@aol.com.

Love winning fun stuff? Check out www.lauramariealtom.com.

This story is dedicated to all of my
new Twitter friends on #YR.

From the day The Young & The Restless began, I've watched with my mother. My daughter has now joined in and even though they'd never admit it, the guys in our family occasionally follow along, too! The characters of this long-running daytime show have become like family to me, and 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon each day has become sacred! LOL!

Since discovering Twitter, I've found a great wealth of fellow Y & R viewers who are always eager to discuss Genoa City's latest gossip. As an added bonus, many have also become great friends.

Here's to you Y & R! May your rich, wonderful characters be forever young and especially restless!

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Chapter One

Pandora?

One glance at the next name on his nanny-candidate list told navy SEAL Calder Remington all he needed to know. She'd be a card-carrying unicorn lover or flake. He needed a Mary or Hazel. Someone not only dependable, but with impeccable references and the patience of Mother Teresa. The last four women had been nice enough, but they'd lacked experience. Ideally, he needed a grandmotherly type who'd successfully raised her own brood to be doctors, and now looked to pass along her vast parental knowledge to the next generation.

At twenty-eight, how much parenting knowledge could Pandora have?

Calder had pretty much resigned himself to not even let her in the house when the doorbell rang. He dropped his list and sighed. In light of the fluid situation, he adjusted his mission to ditching Pandora quickly enough to allow time for a nap before the next candidate showed.

Calder glanced at eight-month-old Quinn, who played on the floor with his favorite stuffed whale. “Might as well get this over with, huh, buddy?”

“Gah!”

Calder shook his head. “My thoughts exactly.”

He opened the door on a petite brunette whose black-rimmed glasses struck him as too big for her face. “Um, hello. I, ah, was sent by the Earth Angels agency to—”

“Appreciate your stopping by—” the August heat coming in the door already made him break out in a sweat “—but I need someone older.”

“Oh....” As if she were a leaky balloon, her shoulders deflated. “Maybe if you would just give me a chance? You know, like try my services for a week, then decide?”

Desperation fairly oozed from her pores. “Kind of you to offer, but—”

He didn’t think it possible, but when she glanced past him into the house, her complexion paled. He was shocked when she shoved him out of her way to sprint across the living room as if she’d just caught a Hail Mary pass and was intent on snagging a game-winning touchdown.

He turned to see what kind of nut-job stunt she was pulling, only to go weak at the knees. Quinn had turned blue. Pandora scooped him into her arms and turned him upside down. She delivered five raps on his back, then flipped him over to do the same in the front. No results.

Calder might be a navy SEAL and combat veteran, but he had never felt more helpless. Since May, he’d been meaning to take an infant first-aid class, but between work and single-dad duties, it was almost September and he still hadn’t found time.

She repositioned his son once more and then like magic, a grape popped from Quinn’s mouth onto the carpeted floor.

While Calder gaped, Quinn wailed.

Pandora hugged Calder’s panicked son, rocking him gently, calming him with a soft, sweet lullaby in his ear.

Once his son’s cries had been reduced to occasional shuddering huffs, she held out her hand for Calder to shake. “I’m sorry. In all the excitement, I failed to properly introduce myself. I’m Pandora Moore.”

Still shaky, Calder shook the woman’s hand. This certainly put a new spin on the situation. How did his conscience justify sending her on her way when she’d literally saved Quinn’s life? Did he repay that debt by flat out giving her the job? “Nice to meet you. Calder Remington.” Pointing to his son, he asked, “Where’d you learn that—the baby Heimlich thing?”

“Basic Infant Care 101. Choking is a leading cause of infant mortality—which is beyond tragic considering most cases are preventable.” She took the bowl of grapes from the coffee table, placing them on the mantel.

“Yeah, well, you made me feel pretty stupid.” He rammed his hands into his jeans pockets.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean to imply you’re a bad parent.”

“I get it.” Whether she’d meant it or not, her words stung because Calder knew them to be true. He may be good at a lot of things, but raising a kid wasn’t one. He tried, but even after having had Quinn for a few months, nothing about it felt natural. Bottom line, Calder had wearied of the whole nanny search. Unable to shake the guilt telling him the least he could do for this woman who’d saved his son was give her a chance, he asked, “How soon can you start?”

Her eyebrows rose. “You mean you want me for the job?”

“Sure. We’ll give it a try.” He still didn’t wholly trust a woman named Pandora, but guys on his team were always giving him crap for his name. Didn’t seem fair for him to turn around and do the same. “Can you start first thing tomorrow?”

She pushed up her glasses and shyly smiled. “Sure. The agency said it’s a live-in position, right?”

“Yeah.” He gestured down the hall. “Follow me. I’ll show you your room.”

* * *

STANDING IN THE sunshine-flooded bedroom with its own private bath and even a bay window peering out on the grassy, tree-lined backyard, Pandora fought the urge to pinch herself. A hardwood dresser, nightstand and headboard all matched and the tan carpet was clean enough for the baby in her arms to crawl wherever he wanted—assuming there weren't more grapes lying around. The queen-size mattress was bare, but new enough to still wear furniture-store stickers.

After all she'd been through, this felt surreal. As a bonus, Calder even seemed like a great guy. Though he possessed beyond steal-your-breath good looks, her gut told her he was a gentleman. As for the indefinable jolt of awareness stemming from just shaking his hand? She was determined to push that from her mind.

"Don't blame you if you hate the color," he said in regard to the mixed shades of lavender, orange and lime green polluting the walls. "The last owner went a little crazy with their sponge painting. We'll pick out something more to your liking."

"Yellow," she automatically said. "I've always wanted a room the shade of lemon sorbet."

He laughed. "You got it. As for the bedspread, towels, sheets and everything, I figured you'd be more comfortable using your own."

"Yes. Thanks." Only trouble was, she didn't have her own. But she had managed to save some money. It wouldn't hurt to spend a smidge of her precious savings on the perfect floral comforter set to match her soon-to-be newly painted walls.

Quinn had fallen asleep in her arms.

The sensation of once again holding an infant struck her as sublime.

For the past year, she'd held a steady after-school child-care position until the Norfolk naval family had been transferred overseas. Pandora's charges had been two little girls aged five and seven. During that time and up to the present, she lived at a halfway house in a gloomy basement bedroom no bigger than some closets. The enormity of this job and all the secondary perks it entailed were too great to presently absorb, so she held them close as she might have a secret gift she wouldn't open until she had some privacy. No, she wouldn't even think about the full ramifications until Calder signed the agency paperwork that officially brought her dream one step closer to fruition.

"Want me to take him?" Her new boss nodded to his son before leading Pandora into the hall.

"Thanks, but I'm good." And she was. Nuzzling the infant's downy hair, she drank in his familiar baby smells of lotion and powder. If this angel were truly hers, she'd never let him go. "If it's not too personal, where's Quinn's mom?"

Calder's expression darkened as he said, "Not to be evasive, but that's a long story best told over a few beers."

"Oh." He drank? She'd hoped he didn't, but that was probably expecting too much.

"Come on. I'll show you Quinn's room and the rest of the house. We've only been here a few weeks. My schedule made it tough to nail down the closing date."

"You work a lot of overtime?"

He snorted as he led the way into a surprisingly drab nursery. "Guess you could call it that. Sorry—I'm still off my game from the whole choking thing. I'm a navy SEAL. A big part of my job is being called out with little or no notice. Like, I might tell you I'll be home for dinner, but then get assigned a mission and won't be back for six months—granted, it's usually not that long, but it can happen. Technically, for just that reason, my mom has shared custody of Quinn. But since she's in North Carolina, I need you here for any and all immediate contingencies. That's why it was important for me to hire someone through an agency. I need to know you're not only reliable and great with my kid, but have the kind of stable history and experience in caring for children that allows me to be one hundred percent certain you're doing a great job. That way, I can fully focus on what I do, which makes my life a helluva lot saner."

Pandora wished she were as confident with the trust he placed in her as Calder. Though in her head, she'd put her past firmly behind her, in her heart the fallout still remained.

Rocking Quinn, she asked, “How can you stand being away from this cutie?”

For a split second, Calder looked blank. “I, ah, guess for what I do, I don’t have a lot of options. Come on, I’ll show you the kitchen.”

Pandora followed, trailing her fingertips along white walls. Had Calder already painted the hall? Somehow she couldn’t imagine the same person who’d attacked her room with color being satisfied with a vanilla thoroughfare.

In the kitchen, Calder said, “Nothing fancy here. I don’t expect you to cook for me. Just make sure Quinn gets decent meals. I set up a household account at the bank. You can use it for groceries, diapers—whatever else we need around here or for Quinn.”

She nodded, though inside, she felt as if she may be dreaming. How many nights had she gone to bed hungry because she had no cash for food?

You sure managed to scrape up enough dough for other things, her conscience was all too happy to point out.

Fighting fire with fire, she squelched the seemingly constant voice in her head, reminding her she was destined to fail, by saying, “Thanks again for this opportunity. I’ll care for Quinn as if he were my own.”

Wrong choice of words considering what had happened to her sweet Julia. She squelched that thought, too.

“I’m pretty sure I should be thanking you.” He fished a key from a meticulously organized drawer, handing it to her. “Everyone I know with kids says the agency you work for doesn’t fool around when it comes to hiring the most qualified people.”

Pandora knew that to be true. Her best friend, Natalie, put all of her employees through extensive background checks. She feared the only reason Natalie had hired Pandora was because of the friendship they’d struck up at the restaurant where Pandora waited tables. But no matter how many times Natalie assured Pandora that wasn’t the case, or how much additional training she’d done on her own, she never quite felt part of acceptable society—or worthy of receiving good fortune.

* * *

“WELL? YOU EVER going to tell me how the interview went?”

Pandora glanced up from cramming her few books into a box to find Natalie seated on the halfway house’s twin bed. She may have offered to help, but so far had done nothing but talk. “Obviously, it was good, or Calder wouldn’t have hired me.”

“Duh. I’m the one who filled out the paperwork. I want the inside scoop. Did you find out what happened with Quinn’s mom? I kept waiting for an explanation, but he never told me.”

“I asked, but Calder said he’d talk about it later.” Pandora purposely left out the part about the beers. No need for her friend to worry about her returning to the dark side.

“Interesting.” Natalie tapped her index finger against her lips. “Wonder what happened for her to leave? The guy’s so handsome it hurts to look at him. Don’t you think?”

“No,” Pandora lied. In truth, not only was Calder easy on the eyes, but her cheeks flamed at the mere memory of the heat caused by just shaking his hand. “Even if I did, what would I do about it? Don’t you have a strict nonfraternization policy with clients?”

“True, and I appreciate you pointing that out, but you’d have to be a zombie not to have at least noticed that killer grin—and the width of his shoulders. Dear Lord...” Natalie fanned herself.

Pandora pitched a pillow at her usually more serious friend. “Knock it off. All you need to know is that Calder seems to be a great guy, and the fact that he hired me is a miracle.” She swallowed hard to keep the tears at bay.

“You deserve every ounce of good that’s been happening for you lately.” Standing, her friend ambushed Pandora with a sideways hug. “I never would’ve suggested you for this job if I didn’t think you were capable of handling it.”

"Thanks." Pandora sniffled and nodded. "But it's hard, you know? And I didn't expect that. For years, I've dreamed of living a normal life and now that I'm getting out of here and moving into this adorable home with an even cuter baby, I..." Her blessings plate felt inordinately full. The only thing missing was her daughter. But not for long, she promised herself.

* * *

PANDORA WOKE THE next morning at five. Calder said she didn't need to be at his house until seven, but excitement refused to grant another minute's sleep.

She and Natalie had packed all her belongings into five boxes—including her toiletries. Calder had offered to help her move, but she was embarrassed not only about where she lived, but how little she actually owned, so she'd declined.

She took a quick shower, dressed, brushed her teeth, blow-dried her hair and put it in a quick ponytail and carted the boxes to her car, then stripped her bed, swept the floor and wiped down all flat surfaces. Since she'd spoken with the house counselor and completed all necessary release paperwork the previous night, by six, she'd said her goodbyes to the few women who were awake, then turned in her key. Once in her car, headed toward her new home, she never looked back.

That part of her life was over and she never wanted to revisit it. Never wanted the shame of being forced by her own poor choices to live in a group home again.

She merged onto the highway and made it to Calder's Norfolk neighborhood thirty-five minutes ahead of schedule. She passed the time by driving around, admiring the tidy neighborhood and park close enough for her to take Quinn to play. She'd have so much fun caring for him and Calder's home that it hardly seemed fair for her to accept a salary.

Pulling her car into Calder's driveway filled her with a kind of quiet satisfaction she'd never known. The only thing better would be having a home of her own—which she would, but this made a great first step.

The redbrick house featured large-paned windows with white shutters. The postage-stamp-size yard was neat with box hedges lining the foundation, but the flower beds were bare save for a few hardy weeds. She wondered if Calder would mind if she and Quinn planted fall flowers. She'd always loved pansies.

"Hey, you're early."

Pandora had been deep in her daydream when her new boss stepped barefoot and bare chested onto the front porch. Wearing khaki cargo pants, he carried a sleepy Quinn still dressed in footy pajamas. If she'd thought the home a lovely sight, the man and his son were downright mesmerizing. Mouth dry, she took a moment to even form words. It sounded cliché, but she honestly hadn't known men had arms and chests so muscular outside of movies.

Quinn rubbed his eyes and whimpered.

"He's been cranky this morning." Calder took the few porch steps with ease, offering her his son. "You handle him and I'll unload your stuff."

"I—I can get it." Would he find it odd she owned so few belongings? "I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"No worries." Handing her the baby, he said, "We're in this together now." Eyeing the barely full backseat, he asked, "This it? Or do you have a friend with a truck coming later?"

"That's all." She jiggled Quinn, coaxing out a smile.

The infant grabbed her glasses, giggling while trying to shove them in his mouth.

"Whoa," she said with a laugh. "If you want breakfast, I'm going to need those."

Calder strolled past her with a box of books so heavy she'd had to take rest stops every few feet. He eyed her funnily. Longer than usual. Was everything okay? He couldn't tell from just the acrid smell lingering on her belongings where she'd been living, could he? A lot of the women had smoked heavily. Sometimes, Pandora feared she might never rid herself of the stench.

On his way into the house, Calder said, "I left a credit card for you on the kitchen table. Quinn's seriously low on baby food and formula and stuff, so you'll probably need to fix that situation and grab anything you want for yourself. I usually get fast food on the way home. If you run into trouble, just call my cell. Number's on the fridge. What's your number?"

"I, ah, don't have one." Too expensive. She'd made her Saturday calls to Julia on the pay phone outside the halfway house.

"Wow, okay. Well, we'll work on that. Also, while the weather's nice, use my SUV since it has Quinn's car seat and stroller. Keys are hanging on a rack by the garage door. Oh—and you might as well park your car in the garage. There should be plenty of room."

Toying with the bear on the tummy of Quinn's pj's, she asked, "How will you get to work?"

"Motorcycle. Usually only use it on the weekends, but this'll give me a great excuse to ride."

"Oh." His shoulders, chest and arms were so tanned. Did he do a lot of work outdoors? Was it wrong she had a tough time focusing on anything but his sheer, male magnificence?

* * *

"SHE HOT?" Calder's friend and fellow SEAL team member, Mason Brown—also known as "Snowman" because he grew up in Alaska and never got cold— finished his bologna sandwich and tossed the wrapper from three-point range into the trash. He missed.

"Who?" Calder asked as he opened a bag of chips. They'd been stuck in a classroom studying smart-bomb mechanisms all morning. The fresh air felt good. Plus, the day was pretty nice for a change—not too hot. They shared a picnic table with their other friends.

Across from Calder sat Heath "Hopper" Stone, nickname earned from his knack for hopping over any obstacle while at a full-on run.

Next to him, Cooper "Cowboy" Hansen. Rumor had him riding into Basic Underwater Demolition—affectionately known as BUDs—on horseback, but Calder always figured he'd just grown up on a ranch.

The group was rounded out by a bunch of boring-ass married guys who talked about nothing but their wives and kids. Deacon and Garrett used to be fun, but lately Calder had to force himself to even be normal around them. Oh, he loved Quinn because he was his son, but he also loved the life he'd made for himself.

Commitment wasn't his thing.

He sure as hell didn't want to hear about the so-called promised land of marriage. What a joke. Besides, for all practical purposes he was married—to the navy.

He loved his job. He loved how being a SEAL made the ladies go weak in the knees—not that he bragged about being a SEAL. That wouldn't be cool. But they were a different breed and women smelled them from a mile away. Adrenaline rushes and seeing the world were his life. Before Quinn, the apartment he'd shared with Mason, Heath and Cooper had only been a temporary layover between adventures.

"Duh," Heath said, "the nanny. Is she hot?"

Mason groaned. "Nannies rank right up there with kindergarten teachers on the sexy meter. I like to think there's a whole lot of naughtiness going on under all that nice."

Calder crossed his arms and glared. "Show some respect here, people. She's nice—and really knows her stuff around Quinn." And though he sure as hell wouldn't mention it to this crew, when Quinn had helped himself to Pandora's glasses, and she'd laughed, Calder had been forced to do a double take. In that moment, with the morning sun making her complexion glow, holding his giggling son, she'd been genuinely pretty. Wholesome. Exactly the look he wanted for his son. "I'm lucky to have found her and wouldn't even think of screwing up a good working relationship by making it personal."

Mason roared. "Just keep tellin' yourself that, man."

“Keep it down,” Garrett snapped from the other end of the table. He and his wife, Eve, had just had a baby boy and Garrett was obsessed with showing everyone his latest cell-phone videos. “My son’s talking...”

Calder shook his head. As the parent of his own infant, he knew kids were far from expert communicators. Guilt consumed him for not feeling more in regard to his son. What was wrong with him? When Pandora asked how Calder stood being away from Quinn, he hadn’t had a good answer. Single-handedly caring for an infant was so stressful, whenever he got the chance to bolt, he did.

So why didn’t he miss his baby and take hundreds of pictures of Quinn? Most days, Calder felt as if he lacked the most basic of dad genes. Probably had something to do with the way Quinn had abruptly entered his world.

But now that he’d finally found a nanny, he could do right by his son while at the same time getting back to what he did best. Killing terrorists with his guns, then slaying the ladies with his looks.

Chapter Two

When Calder left that morning, for Pandora the house took on the almost-reverent peace she’d only previously found in a church. Maybe it was because of the sun streaming through the many-paned windows? Or could it be as mundane a reason as her boss had painted most of the house angelic white? Regardless, she held Quinn on her hip, kicking off her sandals carefully, quietly taking it all in.

She admired the honeyed glow of maple floors in the kitchen, den and entry. In the living room, the carpet caressed her bare feet like crushed velvet. The brown leather couch and armchair still had tags hanging from them. The coffee table and a flat-panel TV sitting atop a wood stand were the room’s only other pieces. Calder mentioned he and Quinn hadn’t lived in the house long. Was he taking his time finding more stuff? Waiting till he had money in his budget? Or did he genuinely not care whether or not his house felt like a home?

She hoped he didn’t want to rush a big decision like finding just the right clock for the fireplace mantel and serene landscapes to hang on the walls. But then why would a rough, tough soldier care about any of that? He’d also admitted how much he worked. Why would a comfortable home even be high on his priority list? All he essentially needed was a place to park.

Which made her sad. Not for her, but for his son.

A survey of the kitchen showed Calder was right about her needing to go to the store. Unless she and Quinn wanted to eat baby-food peaches, carrots or protein shakes for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the day’s first priority was a trip to the store.

Noting the blender on the counter, Pandora decided no more bland, premade fare for her tiny charge. “You’re going gourmet, cutie.”

Quinn giggled when she landed a playful poke to his belly.

At the restaurant where she used to work after first getting her life back on track, she’d struck up a fast friendship with the chef. Huge, funny and French, in his laughable English he’d taught her to prepare most everything on the menu and a few items that weren’t. He’d been the only kind father figure she’d ever had, and his sudden heart attack had almost once again thrown her off course. All she remembered of her own dad was him constantly beating the crap out of her mom, occasionally taking a turn on her, then one day never coming home. Pandora would’ve thought her mom would be happy he was gone, but she’d suffered a meltdown—dying of an overdose near her forty-third birthday. Pandora, sixteen at the time, missed her, but for as long as she could remember, she’d virtually raised herself, doing her schoolwork as well as all the cooking and household chores, so the loss hadn’t come as any great shock. The distant aunt who’d taken official custody of her was all too happy for Pandora to remain self-sufficient. The ratty apartment’s rent and utilities were covered by her mom’s social security check. Pandora’s other needs were met through charity or after-school jobs.

The fact that her own mother had fallen apart should’ve served as the fire in her belly to make a better life for herself, but through counseling, Pandora now realized she’d fallen into the same abusive spiral.

Catching herself staring out the kitchen window, she said to the baby, “What do you think about from now on just focusing on our awesome future?”

He blew a raspberry in agreement.

“We have a lot to do. Not only is grocery shopping on our list, but I’ll need you to help me find a really pretty comforter and all the trimmings.”

Blue eyes wide, he hung on to her every singsong word.

“I know you’re a boy and probably don’t think a whole lot about things being pretty, but if you’d spent the past few years living where I have, you’d want to be surrounded by pretty things, too.”

Quinn babbled happily in response.

Turned out Calder’s car was as dreamy as his home. Her whole life, the closest she’d ever come to driving a new car had been when the mother of the children she used to work for had gotten a Lexus for her birthday and Pandora and the girls rode in the backseat on their way to a country-club party.

The Land Rover’s powerful engine didn’t sputter when she stopped for red lights and the tan leather upholstery smelled as good as it looked. In the rearview mirror, she regularly peeked at Quinn, all snug and smiley in his safety seat, gnawing on a rattle. Even he seemed to enjoy the ride.

The two of them made a few stops to find just the right floral bed set and fluffy yellow towels to match. Purchasing the items took nearly all her cash, but it was worth it.

With her purchases stashed in the back, she and Quinn headed to the grocery store.

Pandora had never bought so much food at once. Milk and eggs. Fruits, meats and veggies. When Calder said they were low on groceries, he hadn’t been kidding. While standing at the checkout, the total felt uncomfortably large. Her pulse raced and her palms were damp. Would the card Calder had given her even work?

The youngish female clerk asked, “May I see your ID?”

“Um, sure, but I’m a nanny and this is my boss’s card.” With Quinn fussing in his carrier, Pandora fished through her purse for her driver’s license.

“Sorry.” The woman returned Calder’s card to Pandora. “I’m not allowed to accept any credit card without matching ID.”

“Please,” Pandora begged. “It’s way past time for my baby to have his lunch, and—”

“You just said he’s not yours?”

“Well, yeah, but you know what I mean. Can we ask a manager?”

“Don’t you have an alternate form of payment?”

“No.” As this was the only open checkout lane, a line had formed behind her. With nothing else to do, people started to stare.

“Is there a problem?” the middle-aged manager asked.

Pandora explained her situation.

Quinn’s fussing morphed to crying.

“Please.” She took him from his carrier, jiggling him on her hip.

“Look, I’m sorry.” The manager voided her sale. “You seem like a nice lady, but corporate’s cracking down on checking ID for all credit-card sales. There’s a lot of fraud in this area and if your card turns out to be stolen, I’m losing my job. Can you get in touch with your boss? Have him come down here to show his ID? Then I’ll set you up an account and next time you shop, this won’t be a problem.”

Pandora eyed her cart. It’d taken over an hour to carefully make her selections. Would Calder be upset if she called his cell?

With Quinn crying harder than ever, she took a deep breath and dialed the store’s office phone.

* * *

“SORRY...” CALDER HUSTLED toward Pandora and Quinn. With a loaded shopping cart alongside her, she’d parked herself on a bench in front of the store manager’s office. “I’m an idiot for not seeing this contingency.”

“You’re not angry?” As if she’d worried about his reaction, her shoulders sagged in relief. “Because I’m sorry I even had to call. But the baby’s hungry and I didn’t know what else to do.”

When Quinn fussed, she hugged him closer, smoothing her hand up and down his back.

“How could I be upset with you when this was my fault? Should’ve thought this through.”

After getting Pandora squared away with the manager to use his card, Calder purchased the groceries, then pushed the cart, following the nanny and his son to the car. He had a hard time not staring at her cute behind because she wore the hell out of her white shorts.

She turned around and said, “Let me get Quinn settled in his safety seat, then I’ll unload everything. You get back to work.”

“I’m not in a hurry.” He already had the back popped open and had placed the gallon of milk and two bulging sacks inside.

“Still...” Finished with Quinn, she fussed with her hands. “This is my job.”

Ah, this was some kind of boss issue. “Look, Pandora, technically I might be in charge, but realistically...?” He laughed. “You’re the one with all the answers. I might place explosives on moving subs, but navigating the baby aisle in the supermarket is way over my head. I never know what kind of milk to buy, and baby food blows my mind. That makes us a team, okay?”

Smiling, she pushed up her glasses and nodded. “At least let me help.”

When she brushed past, their forearms grazed and he caught a whiff of her floral-scented hair. Maybe it’d been too long since he’d been with a woman, or maybe he was just appreciative to finally have some help with Quinn—either way, being near her made him feel extra alert. Not so much an attraction as an appreciation. Curiosity, even, to discover more about what made her tick. None of which made sense, considering he barely knew her. But there it was all the same.

A minute later, they’d finished loading his SUV. “I’ll follow you home to carry everything in.”

“Really, I’ve got this,” she assured him.

But because he’d been raised to always carry in the groceries, he insisted.

* * *

DURING THE SHORT DRIVE to Calder’s house, relief shimmered through Pandora. Not only had he not been angered by having to interrupt his day to help her, but he’d been downright gallant. And now, offering to help her unload? Amazing. Her ex had declared anything to do with groceries women’s work.

Once parked in the garage, she took Quinn while Calder handled her purchases.

In the house, she placed the still-fussing baby in his high chair, dampened a paper towel with warm water, then washed his little hands and hers. “Hold on a minute, pumpkin, and we’ll get that hungry tummy filled.”

She rummaged in the bags Calder had already piled on the counter. Spotting the one item she needed, she removed a box of teething biscuits and handed a cookie to Quinn.

For the longest time, he stared at the biscuit, inspecting it as if he was unsure what to do. When his next logical step was to put it in his mouth, he grinned, oblivious to the drool dripping from his gummy smile.

She wiped his chin with a fresh dishrag before fishing for one of the bibs she’d bought at the store. With it securely fastened to the enthusiastic eater, she set about putting away the groceries and making lunch.

“That’s everything.” Calder set the last of the bags on the kitchen table. Sitting in the chair next to his son, he asked, “What’re you eating, bud?”

Quinn gurgled and waved his hands in the air. “Bah!”

“Really?” he teased his son. “Sounds good.”

“It’s a teething biscuit,” Pandora explained. “Soothes his gums. Plus, buys me time to fix him a proper lunch.”

“Ah....” Calder nodded. “How’d you learn about babies?”

For a moment she froze, then slipped into autoresponse mode, glad for the distraction of putting veggies in the fridge. “Mostly classes and on-the-job training. This is my first full-time position with infant care, but I’ve worked part-time for three other families. Little Jonah, an eleven-month-old, was my biggest challenge. He was a jumper. That baby was nearly the death of me. He’d try escaping his changing table, crib, playpen. Can’t imagine the trouble he’s going to cause his future teachers.”

Calder laughed.

Inside, she felt the stirrings of guilt. More and more, he seemed like a great guy. She wished she could’ve just told him about Julia, but that would only raise more questions—some of which she may not have been able to answer. As Natalie reminded her, she was entitled to her private life. Her only job requirement was giving expert care to Quinn.

“No kidding. I hope Quinn doesn’t try to pull that kind of stunt,” Calder said, still chuckling.

While putting pork chops, chicken and beef in the freezer, she said, “I’m making Quinn pureed peas for lunch. Would you like the grown-up version with a grilled chicken breast?”

His grin did funny things to her stomach. “Thanks for the offer, but I had lunch back on base. Speaking of which...” He stood, then kissed the top of Quinn’s head. “Guess I’d better head back.”

Pandora understood Calder’s work was important, but once he was gone she struggled with the oddest sensation. Something akin to clouds blocking the sun.

* * *

ALL AFTERNOON, stuck in a stuffy classroom, Calder found his mind drifting to his brief time with Pandora and Quinn. There was so much he needed to learn about his son, but considering how Calder had come to be a father, he’d had a hell of a time adjusting. Sure, he’d read a few baby books, and the first week, his mom had come from North Carolina to help him through the initial crisis, but there were still times he wondered what had happened to his life.

Opening his apartment door to find a wailing, six-month-old baby blocking the way had been a shocker, to put it mildly. Quinn had been bundled in a beaten-up carrier, talking to his pinkie finger.

Since then, everything felt upside down. Calder always seemed to be rushing to catch up. Temporary sitters and day care never seemed to work out and, until finding the agency that had provided him with Pandora, he’d feared maybe having to take an extended leave until his kid started school.

Calm, capable Pandora struck him as an oasis in his child-care desert.

Tonight, instead of rushing around trying to figure out formula ratios and how to scrub Quinn without getting soap in his eyes, Calder figured that thanks to the new nanny, he was back to business as usual.

He’d grab a beer with Mason, Heath and Cooper—maybe even chat up a hot blonde.

Four hours later, Calder shared a table at a favorite SEAL hangout, Tipsea’s, with his boys. “This is the life, huh, guys?”

Mason ate a pretzel. “I don’t know. At lunch, when Garrett was showing around all his family pics... Made me wonder if we’re missing something, but then gazing out on tonight’s sea of available beauties, I’m thinking I like my current life just fine. Can I get an amen?”

Calder and Mason clinked longneck brews.

At the opposite end of the table, Cooper raised his beer.

“You three keep living the dream...” Heath fished in a pocket of his camo fatigues. “But it’s time for me to move on. Lookie what I bought for Patricia’s birthday.” He withdrew a black velvet box, flipped open the lid to display a decent-size rock.

“Whoa—you don’t mean move on as in leaving the SEALs, do you?”

Heath almost choked on his beer. “Oh, hell, no. Just that she means the world to me and I want her to be my wife. We all saw the drama Deacon, Garrett and Tristan went through in their love lives, and I don’t need it. She’s the woman for me. Done. End of story.”

“Good for you, man.” Mason patted his back. “I felt that way once.” He shook his head and laughed. “Good thing I came to my senses.”

Calder laughed his ass off.

Heath flipped them both the bird. “Yuk it up. I’m gonna be the one sleeping on clean sheets every night that I’m home with a good meal in my belly and a nice, soft woman to hold.”

“Should we check this guy for fever?” Cooper asked.

“Oh—I’ve got one.” After pushing back his chair, Heath stood. “It’s called Patricia Fever. I’m going home to her right now. You idiots are just jealous.”

After lover boy took his leave, Calder ordered a burger. Once the waitress left, he said to his friends, “We should stage an intervention. Clearly, Hopper’s traveling down a dangerous path.”

“No kidding,” Mason said.

Calder’s dad loved the ladies, but he had this old-fashioned thing about marrying them before sleeping with them. He was now on his sixth wife, which Calder saw as ridiculous. Though his mom had long since happily remarried and Calder viewed his stepdad as a great guy, he still wanted nothing to do with the institution of marriage. To his way of thinking, marriage only kept good men down. Calder enjoyed women too much to ever settle for one. And truthfully—he winked at a saucy redhead—as much as the ladies seemed to enjoy him, it’d be a damn shame to forever take himself off the market. Vowing to remain available was his gift to womankind.

At least that’s what he told himself, and anyone else who cared to ask why he was still single. In the dark of night, Calder suspected the real reason, but no way was he ever acknowledging the fact.

He, Mason and Cooper drank in silence for a while, staring out at the crowded dance floor. It was Eighties Night and Duran Duran blared over the sound system about hungry wolves.

Mason was first to break the conversational silence. “I’ve bitched about Melissa so much, you guys could probably recite my story for me. But in all these years, you two have never told yours.”

Calder said, “That’s because I don’t have one.”

Cooper tipped his cowboy hat. “Same here.”

Mason twisted to face them. “You’re telling me neither of you have ever been serious with a member of the fairer sex?”

“Nope,” Cooper said. “Damn proud of it.”

“Amen, brother.” Calder and Cooper clinked beers.

Mason whistled. “You two are a rare, fortunate breed.”

Calder grinned. “We know.”

Only after downing his burger and taking a spin on the dance floor with not one blonde but three, Calder spotted a brunette who reminded him of the new nanny. His stomach lurched upon the realization that despite all his bragging, he’d enjoyed sharing a conversation with her in his kitchen, watching his boy chow down on his cookie, more than he had spending the past three hours in this bar.

* * *

PANDORA JUMPED WHEN the front door opened and in walked Calder. Almost nine, with Quinn long since tucked in for the night, she’d been alone for so long that the house almost felt as if it were her own.

“What’s going on?” he asked, opening the entry-hall closet to set his motorcycle helmet on the top shelf.

“Not much. You?”

He sat in the armchair adjacent to the sofa. Was it her imagination or did he smell like a bar?

Though it was none of her business where he’d been, she asked, “Tired? You worked late.” Early in her recovery, the faint trace of booze on his breath would’ve had her craving a drink. Now realizing how much those drinks had ultimately cost in regard to her daughter...? She was content to stick with sweet tea.

He shrugged. "I'm good. Workwise, it was a pretty slow day, so afterward, me and a few friends stopped off for a burger and beer. I chilled there for a while to be sure I was sober enough to drive."

She nodded.

"Quinn all right?"

"Perfect."

The house's silence that had only a few minutes earlier been comforting now served as a reminder of just how awkward her new position may be. She'd never stayed with a family before and she hadn't thought about the situation from the perspective that for all practical purposes, she now lived with this man.

Drip, drip, drip went the kitchen sink.

Outside, the neighbor's dog barked.

"Well..." Calder leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Since we're probably both thinking it, I'm going to come right out and say it—this is weird."

She exhaled with relief. "You're feeling it, too?"

"No offense, but the way you're sitting there all prim and proper like my mom, I'm afraid you're going to ground me for missing curfew."

She laughed. "Trust me, I'm the last person who'd judge." Although if she were in his position, she wouldn't waste so much as a second away from his son. She'd learned the hard way what it was like when you weren't able to see your child. The pain was indescribable.

"Now that we've got that dealt with—" he stood, tugging his T-shirt over his head "—I'm gonna grab a quick shower, then study a new manual."

"Um, sure." Her cheeks blazed. Faced yet again with his muscled-up chest, she was grateful he retreated to his room. The part of her craving adult conversation realized Calder's vanishing act was for the best.

He was her boss.

Not her friend—certainly not anyone whose bare chest she should be appraising.

Chapter Three

"Since you're still up, there's something I want to run past you."

An hour had gone by since they'd last talked, but judging by the way Pandora jumped when Calder entered the room, she'd been deeply absorbed in a parenting book.

"Scintillating?" he teased, running his hand over his bare chest.

When she glanced up at him, her cheeks reddened. "Um, not really. Just researching the proper way to introduce Quinn to more solid foods."

He nodded, fighting a flash of guilt for not having read the book he'd bought months earlier. "Last time I talked to my mom, she mentioned that."

"Oh?" Pandora's red cheeks fairly glowed. Ducking behind her book, she added, "That's nice."

What was her problem?

The air-conditioning kicked on, chilling what moisture still clung to his chest from the shower. Then it dawned on him—prim-and-proper Wonder Nanny didn't like him not wearing a shirt. She'd be the first woman in history who disapproved of his eight-pack, but as her employer, he supposed professional courtesy dictated he be fully dressed. Ducking into his room, he grabbed a clean T-shirt from an unfolded basket of laundry. After tugging it over his head, he returned to the living room. "I know I told you I didn't want to talk about Quinn's mother until I had a few beers in my system, but I guess since you're now his primary caregiver, you need to know why I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed when it comes to parenting."

"I've seen worse." She sipped from her iced tea.

"Not sure if that's good or bad."

"Good," she assured.

He struggled for the right place to start. “Until a couple months ago, I didn’t know Quinn existed. Back then, I shared an apartment with friends and one morning I opened the door to find Quinn in his carrier. A Post-it attached to the handle pretty much said his mom quit and now it was my turn to be his parent.”

Hands over her mouth, Pandora’s striking green eyes shone with unshed tears. “That’s crazy. Where is she now? What if something had happened to him while he was alone? You don’t even know anything about his medical records.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sarcastic chuckle, “tell me about it. I took him to a pediatrician and he seems healthy. Had a DNA test run and sure enough, he’s mine. Only—and I’m not proud of this—I don’t have a clue who his mom could be.”

“You haven’t heard from her? How could she just leave her child without at least reassuring herself that he’s okay? What if you hadn’t even been home, but off on one of your missions?”

“Valid questions.” Running his hand over his whisker-stubbed jaw, Calder said, “I have to assume she knew my car, and when she saw it parked out front, guessed I was home. Still, the whole thing’s thrown me off my game. I’ve been asking tons of questions from everyone I know who has a kid. Bought this house so Quinn would have a backyard. Tonight was the first time I’ve been out with my friends in what feels like forever.”

“Was it as fun as you’ve no doubt imagined?”

Leaning back in his chair, he stared at the ceiling. “It was all right.” What he wouldn’t admit was that his good time had been partially ruined by mental images of her. Of wondering what she and Quinn were doing. Was the little guy playing with his plastic boats in the bath? All of which made no sense, considering how grateful he’d been to hand over his kid to a practical stranger.

“Sorry. Hopefully, now that I’m here, you can get back to your old routine.”

“Yeah. That’d be good.” But would it? And now that Calder had Quinn, was it even possible to revert to the way his life used to be? Before having a kid, he’d had no worries beyond making it to duty on time. Now he had a constant streaming checklist of diapers and baby food and formula. Granted, all of that was now Pandora’s domain, but what kind of dad would he be to just let her take over Quinn’s parenting in full?

“You ever worry about what you’ll do if Quinn’s mother suddenly shows up, wanting to take him back?”

“Thought’s crossed my mind.” In those first rough days, he’d found himself praying for just such a scenario. But as time went on, he’d gotten angry. Calder might not be the best dad, but he sure as hell would never leave his kid on a doorstep. “At this point, I doubt any judge would grant custody to a mother who pulled this kind of stunt. I mean, what kind of woman abandons her child?”

“I don’t know....” Was it his imagination, or had she paled?

* * *

AS MUCH AS Pandora cherished Calder’s quiet home during her first day, she struggled falling asleep in the still of night. After hours of fitful tossing and turning, she was relieved to hear Quinn cry over the baby monitor.

She went to him, scooping him from his crib for a quick diaper change before making him a bottle. By this age, she was surprised he wasn’t sleeping through the night, but after what Calder told her, she suspected the little guy was waking not from hunger, but an innate need for reassurance that while he’d slept, his world hadn’t once again fallen apart.

In the kitchen, Quinn on her hip, she said to the sleepy boy, “When your dad told me your mom abandoned you, I felt sad. But then I felt guilty. By choosing to drink over raising my little girl, is that what I did to her?”

Quinn nuzzled his head against her neck. His warmth, the downy-soft feel of his hair, filled her with achy longing for her own child.

Soon, Julia. Soon.

Her next court date wasn't until spring, but that was okay. By then, she'd have saved even more money—enough to provide her daughter with the true home she'd always deserved.

Pandora turned on the overhead light, heated the formula and poured the liquid into Quinn's bottle. But as she tried to add water to the pan with one hand, it slipped, clanging Quinn into instant, startled tears.

"I'm sorry," she crooned, setting the bottle on the counter to free both her arms for soothing. "I didn't mean to scare you. It was just a loud noise. Nothing really scary." Like the nightmares she still had of the day her Julia had been taken.

"Everything all right?" Calder, wearing nothing but athletic shorts, hovered on the kitchen's threshold. As was beginning to be habit, her mouth went dry at just the sight of him and her pulse raced. At what point did her body get the memo that as her boss, not only was the man off limits, but she had no interest in romance—period? Her life's sole focus was regaining custody of her child.

"Fine," she murmured, wishing she wore more than a flimsy, too-short nightgown. "Sorry we woke you. I dropped a pan, which scared this guy."

"Glad it was nothing major." He ambled toward the fridge. "Got anything good in here?"

"There's leftover meat loaf from dinner. If you'll take Quinn, I'll make you a sandwich."

He groaned. "I know making late-night snacks for me is hardly the job description I gave to your agency, but man, does that sound like a good trade."

Laughing, she handed him the baby, trying to ignore the almost electric awareness stemming from an act as simple as brushing against his hands and forearms. Even harder to ignore, though, was the heat radiating from his magnificent chest—and his smell. Manly soap mixed with faint sweat.

Reminding herself of the task at hand, she made quick work of assembling his meal while he sat at the table with Quinn. "Ketchup or mayo?"

"Gotta go with ketchup."

"Warm or cold?"

With another happy groan, he asked, "Woman, how has some lucky guy not snatched you up?"

If he only knew.... "Stick to the question at hand, sir."

"Fair enough." He failed to look remotely chastised. "I'm used to eating pretty near anything, anywhere, but since you asked, warm sounds off-the-chart good."

She nuked the sandwich. When the microwave dinged, she set his plate in front of him. "Be careful. It could be too hot."

"Thanks. If this tastes anywhere near as good as it smells, I might steal you away from Quinn to make you my personal chef."

Pandora held out her arms for the baby, steeling herself to disregard any physical pleasure stemming from the exchange. "Judging by what you've told me about your eating habits, sounds like he needs me more than you."

"Probably true."

When Calder took his first bite, Pandora realized she'd been holding her breath in anticipation of his verdict. It shouldn't matter whether or not he liked her silly sandwich, but it did.

Only when he smiled did she exhale. "All I can say is wow. If the mashed-up food you feed Quinn is half as good as this, he is one lucky kid."

Fairly glowing from Calder's compliment, Pandora had the feeling she was the lucky one.

After his latest bite, Calder glanced at her, then cocked his head. "You look different."

"I'm, um, not wearing my glasses. They're mainly for reading and driving. Long-distance stuff."

He nodded. "You look good—not that I mind glasses, just that..." He reddened. "I'm gonna finish my sandwich."

Mortification didn't come close to describing the emotion surging through Pandora. She looked good? What did that even mean? In manspeak, was that a step above ugly, yet beneath homely? Moreover, why did she care?

* * *

“SO IT’S THE MIDDLE of the night,” Calder said to his friends during a break in day two of smart-bomb training. “I hear Quinn screaming, only once I find him in the kitchen with the new nanny, he’s already settled down. And damn if she doesn’t look pretty good in this skimpy naughty-nightie number. Her hair was all down and a little crazy and she’d even lost her glasses. Anyway, so next thing I know—”

Mason whistled. “You two put the baby to bed, then got busy?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” Calder smacked the back of Mason’s head with one of the wiring manuals they were supposed to be studying. “From there, she makes me a meat-loaf sandwich I swear was better than sex.”

“Sounds to me like you’re not doing it right.” Heath high-fived Mason.

Calder shot them both dirty looks.

Cooper never stopped reading.

“All I’m saying is I think I found a keeper.”

“Don’t you mean Quinn found a keeper?” Deacon asked.

“Who asked you, married man?”

Finishing the last swig of his bottled water, Deacon shrugged. “Just pointing out that for a guy who hates female attachments, and considering this nanny’s only been on the job twenty-four hours, you’re sounding awfully content.”

“What’s wrong with that? As long as I keep things professional with Pandora, I can see this working out for a nice long time. I do what I want. Quinn’s getting great care. It’s a win-win for all involved.”

Heath snorted. “What’s the nanny getting out of it?”

Calder winked. “The pleasure of seeing me.”

* * *

“IT’S A LITTLE BARE, but it has good bone structure.” Natalie, in her official capacity as the owner of Earth Angels, the child-care agency Pandora worked for, finished her walk-through of Calder’s home and set her clipboard on the kitchen counter. “I know it’s only been one night, but how was it?”

“Good.” Pandora held Quinn, waging a playful battle over who had control of her glasses. So far, the baby was winning.

“Care to elaborate?”

“It was very good. Awkward at first, but I guess that’s to be expected. Did you know Quinn was literally left on Calder’s doorstep? Calder’s only had him a few months.”

“Whoa.” Natalie sat at the table. “Sure your new boss wasn’t pulling your leg? He certainly didn’t divulge any of that while filling out his paperwork. Sounds crazy.”

“Tell me about it. Remember how when I first asked about Quinn’s mother, he put me off? I assumed they must’ve had a nasty divorce, but I never expected anything like this.”

Quinn squirmed to be let down, so Pandora set him on the wood floor she’d cleaned earlier that morning.

“Luckily, Quinn doesn’t show signs of abandonment issues.”

“He did wake up around two last night. Seemed more interested in having a nice cuddle than a bottle.”

“Poor thing....” Natalie shook her head, then sighed. “Well, I’ve got two more stops, then a mountain of paperwork back at the office, so I’d better go.”

When she stood, Pandora gave her friend a hug. “Even though your stay was official, it was nice seeing you. We should do lunch.”

“For sure. And didn’t you have a visit with Julia last Saturday? How’d it go?”

“I wish. Her foster family rented a beach house, so we needed to postpone until this week.”

Just thinking about seeing her daughter filled Pandora with anticipation, but also resentment. To her way of thinking, Julia should've been returned at least a year ago.

"I know that look," Natalie said with another quick hug. "Be patient. Before you know it, you'll be spending every night going over homework and driving to soccer practice."

Pandora crossed her arms. "From your lips to God's ears...."

* * *

"YOU'RE HOME EARLY."

In the entry hall, Calder shrugged. "A few guys were setting up a volleyball game down at the beach, but I wasn't feeling it. You two, on the other hand, look like you're having fun." Pandora sat on the floor with Quinn, building a block tower. When she placed the last block on top, he knocked the whole thing down, shrieking and laughing with delight. In the short time he'd had his son, Calder had never seen him this happy, which produced a mixed bag of emotions. Part of him was thrilled with Quinn's smile, but another side of him regretted not having been able to produce the same results.

Pandora grinned up at him. "It's looking more and more like your son is destined to become Master of the Universe."

"Sounds like a noble calling." That was it. The last of anything witty he had to say. Pandora and Quinn were back to their two-person game and Calder stood there like an oaf, not sure what to do with his hands.

Why hadn't he gone to the beach with his friends?

He knew why. Guilt had damn near eaten him alive. The whole point of hiring a nanny—aside from caring for Quinn—was so Calder could get back some semblance of his former life. So why did he feel like a louse each time he tried to do just that?

She glanced his way. "Want to take over for me? I should probably start dinner."

"Sure." Inspiration struck. "But would you rather pack up the kiddo and head down to the beach to hang with my team? They're cooking out."

"Will there be a lot of drinking?" Of all the questions she might have asked, that wasn't one he'd expected.

"Maybe beer. But it's a school night, so if you're worried about Quinn being around a bunch of drunk guys, I doubt anyone's going to get hammered."

She fiddled with her messy ponytail. "I don't even own a bathing suit."

"You don't have to go in the water. Come on, it'll be fun." And it sure as hell beat sitting around here, trying to drum up something clever to say.

"I don't know...." The way she worried her lower lip, drawing it into her mouth so a sliver of her teeth showed, struck him as sexy.

"Come on. Think of it as an official duty. I'm making you go, since I'd like to be with Quinn and my friends. More important, if you're not there, who'll hold the baby while I play?"

She sighed, but pushed to her feet. "Give me a sec to change into shorts and get gear and a bottle for Quinn."

* * *

"WHOA, THIS A MIRAGE?"

"Lay off, Hopper," Calder said to one of the guys they'd just approached. Feeling awkward around more of the hulking SEALs who were similar in stature to her boss, Pandora welcomed the distraction of Quinn making his usual play for her glasses.

Calder made introductions and everyone seemed nice, but once the volleyball game started and she and Quinn were relegated to the sidelines to sit with a girlfriend of one of the SEALs, Pandora felt like the proverbial third wheel.

Which shouldn't have mattered.

It wasn't as if she and Calder were even friends, so why had a twinge of disappointment lodged in her belly over the fact that for all practical purposes, she might as well be invisible? It was ridiculous.

Though she'd worked for her last family over a year, she could count on one hand the number of times she'd spoken to the girls' father. What was it about this position that should be any different?

Calder's team scored and he high-fived the other guys.

As was starting to be an alarming trend, he'd taken off his shirt. His friends had also lost theirs. The level of male perfection, highlighted in the sun's early-evening glow was undeniably heady. Yet, at the same time, it left Pandora feeling all the more lonely. It was obvious these men were a tight family unit.

The woman beside Pandora constantly cheered on her man.

Even Quinn unearthed something more interesting than her. His expression turned intense while studying driftwood he'd found in the sand.

Pandora may have grown a lot over the years, but sadly, without Julia, she was still on her own, yet craving more. Once and for all, she wanted to be part of a real family. But she knew better than to think she'd find that in a man like Calder. Even if they'd met under different circumstances, what would he want with her? They came from opposite worlds. He was college educated, as she'd seen from the framed diploma he'd stacked along with other yet-to-be-hung pictures in the linen closet.

Had he known Quinn's mom carried his child, would he have married her? What qualities would he find attractive enough in a woman to make him want to stick around?

Chapter Four

"I can't get used to the idea of Calder being a dad."

Pandora glanced up from feeding Quinn his bottle to find a pretty redhead sitting beside her. They'd finished grilling hot dogs and the guys had returned to their game.

"I'm Patricia, by the way."

"Pandora. Nice to meet you." She shook her new friend's hand.

The baby grunted at the interruption in his bottle, but soon enough was back to contentedly downing his meal.

The team playing opposite Calder's spiked a ball deep into their territory, and the men erupted into a slew of good-natured name-calling—further startling the baby.

"Rowdy bunch, huh?" Patricia ran her hand along Quinn's downy hair while Pandora comforted him.

"I've seen worse." No way was Pandora prepared to share the number of drug-induced bar fights she'd witnessed. During her blackest moments, when alcohol had no longer been enough, she'd done and seen things that to this day made her deeply ashamed. She may have technically paid for her crimes, but that didn't mean her soul had been cleared from all wrongdoing.

"My guy's Heath—that big lug to Calder's right. If you're like me, it'll take forever to get everyone's names straight."

"I can see why." Quinn had finished his bottle, so Pandora tucked it into his diaper bag, trading it for a burping cloth she positioned over her left shoulder. She eased the fussy baby upright for burping and soon enough, despite the noise, he struggled to keep his eyes open.

"I can't wait to have kids." Patricia gazed longingly toward Quinn. "My birthday's Sunday and rumor has it, Heath's finally popping the question. We plan to get started on our family right away."

"Want to hold him?" Pandora offered her the baby.

"Yes, please." The switch was awkward and filled with laughing.

"Mmm..." Cradling Quinn, Patricia closed her eyes and smiled. "He's amazing. When Heath told me the story of how this cutie was abandoned, it still makes me mad. Like, seriously? Who does such a thing? That woman was the world's worst mother. Probably strung out on booze or worse."

"No doubt." A knot formed at the back of Pandora's throat. No matter how hard she swallowed, it refused to budge. Would it always be this tough? Remembering the woman she used to be? She had no right judging Quinn's mom, as she'd once been every bit as bad.

“Quinn smells so good. I come from a large family, but since I was the baby, I never got to play with a real live one till my nieces and nephews started coming.”

“Must’ve been amazing,” Pandora said, “growing up in a big, loving family.”

“Mostly it was.” She laughed. “Although, I still cringe when I think of sharing a bathroom with so many people.”

Patricia’s statement had been innocent enough, but brought still more bad memories of the halfway house where Pandora had spent the past couple years. It had sure beaten living on the streets, but in some ways it had been harder. So many people and rules. So many reminders of how close she’d come to losing it all.

Reminding herself those days were finally behind her, Pandora forced a smile. “How long have you and Heath been together?”

“Two excruciatingly long years.” Cradling Quinn, her smile turned wistful. “It’s hard enough being with a SEAL—you never know when they’re coming or going. Only the wives have any glimmer of real knowledge as to what’s going on. We lowly girlfriends never know anything.”

“Oh—I’m not Calder’s girlfriend,” Pandora said quickly. “Just Quinn’s nanny.”

“Sorry. I forgot. We don’t see many of those. How long have you been with him?”

Pandora laughed. “Actually, this is only my second night. So far, so good.”

Quinn started to fuss.

“Spoke too soon?” Pandora didn’t mind when Patricia returned Quinn to her waiting arms. She’d only been with the infant a short while, but she’d already learned to decipher his basic cries. Hunger. Dirty diaper. Sleepy. Babies were relatively simple to figure out.

Quinn’s father, on the other hand...

In the setting sun’s orange glow, Pandora made the mistake of looking up to find Calder in all his bare-chested glory rising up to spike the ball. He struck her as powerful and in control—not at all the same man she’d encountered when Quinn had been choking. Assuming Calder worked with the same efficiency in his capacity as a SEAL as he did on the volleyball court, what did that say about his parenting skills? The fact that the only time he appeared truly happy and at peace was when he wasn’t caring for his son.

Not that Pandora was judging. Just curious to discover more about him.

Calder’s team won, but by the time they’d defended their victory by besting their challengers in a two-out-of-three series, the sunset’s glow had long since faded to dark.

Quinn slept soundly against her, and since Patricia and her soon-to-be fiancé had skipped out a while back, Pandora had spent the past hour staring out at the dark surf. She grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in small-town Virginia, so her only memories of visiting the beach were imagined. Fourth of Julys she’d dreamed of watching fireworks. Running barefoot in the sand with a whole pack of sparklers all for herself. Birthdays she’d envisioned with friends splashing with her in the surf and building sand castles. In her rich fantasy life, she’d even had mermaid-themed cupcakes and balloons.

Back to reality, it was hard to believe she’d finally met her lifelong dream of seeing the Atlantic. The faint, briny-scented breeze and the rhythmic crashing of the waves proved hypnotic, making her think of a life that might’ve been. Regret upon regret for not at least giving her own daughter the happiness she deserved.

“Ready?” Calder asked beside her, jolting her to the present.

“Ah, sure.” It took her a few seconds to regain her composure. But then her boss took Quinn, inadvertently brushing her breasts in the trade-off. Only, the invasion of her personal space didn’t feel like an invasion at all. More like the kind of natural thing that happens between a man and woman sharing a relationship and raising a child.

But they didn’t share any of that. For all practical purposes, they were strangers.

“Sorry.” He held out his hand to help her to her feet.

“It’s okay.” She accepted his help, but soon regretted the decision. When their fingers touched, the usual sparks were there tenfold, making her unsure about her next move. Had he felt it, too?

If so, he showed no indication. All polite business, he fastened Quinn into his carrier, then hefted the baby and diaper bag. “That everything?”

“Uh-huh.” Except for the irrational part of her wondering what it would be like to have a real connection with a man as decent as Calder.

* * *

“THIS WAS GOOD.” Over the years, Calder had had many women in his passenger seat, but none who set him on edge quite like Pandora. Why, he didn’t know, but he took her prim posture and pressed-lip silence to mean he’d done something wrong. Knowing full well he hadn’t and was just being paranoid, he decided to make a game out of coaxing the woman to speak. “You and Quinn have fun?”

“We did. The beach is always a treat.”

“Yeah?” He glanced her way to find her fogging her glasses, then wiping them on a tissue she’d drawn from her purse. “What was your favorite thing about spending time at the shore?”

She slowly exhaled. “I liked the smell. The waves sounded just like I’ve always imagined.”

“Wait.” Stopped at a red light, he turned to her. “You mean to tell me tonight was your first trek to the beach?”

“Embarrassing, right?”

After checking the rearview mirror to ensure there were no other cars around, Calder made a U-turn.

“What’re you doing?”

“Well, hell, woman.” He shot her a sideways grin. “You’re a bona fide Atlantic virgin—an elusive and mystical creature, to be sure.”

“Sure you weren’t spiking your cola?”

“Nope.” He made a left, aiming the SUV back to where they’d just come from. “We’re on a mission.”

“To do what?”

“Something we would’ve done earlier if I’d known what a momentous occasion this was. We need to get those toes of yours in the water.”

“Calder, you’re being silly.” She glanced to the backseat. “It’s already late and Quinn’s covered in sand. He’ll need a quick bath before bed and I’ll need to clean his carrier.”

“So? It’s not like you have to be at a desk bright and early.”

“But you no doubt do.”

“Haven’t you learned it’s impolite to argue with your boss?”

He took her shy smile to mean he’d broken at least a small part of her reserve. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but are you mentally stable enough to protect our country?”

For a split second, he thought she was serious, but then he caught her wink and burst out laughing. “You almost had me.”

“You’ve got to admit this whole notion of sticking my toes in the water sounds a bit off the deep end.”

Now he winked. “I’m not suggesting you go deep, Ms. Moore. Merely dip your toes in the shallow end. It’s a serious rite of passage.”

“It’s a rite of passage that can wait. Quinn’s comfort and needs come first.”

“In case you haven’t noticed—” he veered into the parking spot they’d vacated only ten minutes earlier “—Quinn is out. I don’t think he’ll mind the slight detour.”

After having a look for herself, she said, “You’ve got me there.” In the glow of the dash lights, her expression morphed from doubt to wary acceptance to anticipation. “But is this really prudent?”

He laughed. "Does it matter? Come on." He almost held out his hand to her, but then thought better of it. He wanted to have a little fun, but not present the image of being interested in that way. "Last one in is a rotten egg!"

"Who's getting Quinn?"

"Me, so you'd better hustle."

Pandora kicked off her sandals and ran and ran, laughing until she reached the shore. The water was cold but refreshing and unexpected and hit her as an affirmation her life was finally on the right track. Granted, her current actions may not be dignified, but for at least a few minutes that was okay. She could let her guard down a smidge—just not too much.

Had she denied herself the beach's simple pleasures for so long because she hadn't felt good enough? Like only clean, wholesome people visit such enchanted places?

"How is it?" Calder asked from behind her. Quinn slept cradled against him.

"Wonderful," she admitted. And honestly, if she hadn't had to work so hard to earn her way to this spot, this very moment in time, she might not have appreciated it for the miracle it truly was. As soon as she regained custody of Julia, a trip to the beach was in order.

"If you don't mind my asking," he said above the surf that pounded louder than it had earlier, "how's it even possible you've lived around here yet have never been to the shore?"

"Just one of those things." Though her gut told her she could probably trust him with the truth, her head warned the less he knew about her past, the better off they'd both be.

The nighttime breeze had considerably cooled the air.

Pandora said, "We should get back to the car."

"What's your hurry?"

"I-it's cold." At first, she'd been exhilarated by their fun, but now she was somewhat ashamed. Almost as if being in such a clean, family-friendly place might mark her a fraud. But was she? She'd worked hard to get to the healthy emotional zone in which she now resided. Didn't that count for something?

She wiped tears from her cheeks, glad for the darkness so Calder wouldn't see.

"You okay?"

"Sure." She hoped her exaggerated nod read as convincing.

"It's all right, you know."

"Wh-what?"

"If the sight of moonlight on the ocean moves you." He reached his hand toward her, brushing first one tear-stained cheek, then the other with the pad of his thumb.

His touch affected her far more deeply than it should have. Embarrassed, she looked away. "I'm fine—the wind blew sand in my eyes."

"Locational hazard...." His soft tone told her he knew she was lying. The fact both mortified her and filled her with hope he'd never guess just how much their shared moment had truly meant. Whatever their future, she'd always associate him with the moment she realized her efforts really were finally making a difference. Soon, she'd not only have her daughter returned, but her dignity.

* * *

MIDWAY THROUGH CHANGING Quinn's diaper at five-thirty the next morning, Calder was startled by Pandora's appearance at his side. Apparently she'd felt as awkward about her choice of late-night attire at their last meeting as he had. Not that he hadn't been appreciative of her miles of creamy skin, but her current chaste, white cotton pj's were infinitely less seductive.

"What're you doing up?" he asked. "We were trying to be extra quiet to let you sleep."

"That's nice of you," she said as she passed the wipes, "but my job description is to care for Quinn in order to allow you more rest."

"I had to be up anyway. Got a text we're doing early drills." After wiping down his son, Calder tossed the soiled diaper in the trash, then reached for a fresh one.

“Put cream on his bottom.”

“What cream?”

She handed him a tube. “Last time I changed him, I noticed he looked a little chafed. No biggie. Just something to keep an eye on.”

“Sure.” Calder flipped open the lid. “How much?”

“A dime.”

“Did you grab this stuff at the store?”

“Uh-huh.” She stood near enough for him to feel her heat. Not a good thing, considering he hadn’t been as smart as her and still slept in just boxers. “Want me to finish up with him so you can grab a shower?”

“Trying to get rid of me?” He was only half teasing. Ever since the beach, she’d been quiet. He’d meant for their outing to be fun, but he couldn’t help but wonder what’d brought on her tears. He’d wanted to ask her on the drive home, and again while they’d bathed Quinn, but the timing hadn’t seemed right. Besides, were her tears even his business?

“No.” Her smile seemed genuine. “Just trying to be helpful.”

“Thanks.” The more time he shared with Pandora, the more confused he grew. When it came to the fairer sex, he excelled at the short game. One or two nights—tops. Mornings could be tricky, so he avoided them like brussels sprouts. So here he was on his second morning with the nanny and despite the fact they’d barely even spoken, let alone had sex, he honestly wasn’t sure how many more he could take. Something about her had him all riled up and flustered—in his line of work, never a good thing.

With Quinn tucked back into his snap-bottom T-shirt, Pandora scooped him up and cradled him against her.

His son looked happy, and that fact calmed Calder’s choppy nerves. Truly, he needed to chill. Pandora was the nanny. Nothing more. No need to rely on his usual shtick, or worry about spending too much time with one woman, because she wasn’t his woman. If anything, he should treat her like one of the guys. “Got anything going on this weekend? Thought we might get back to the beach, only this time do it up proper. More volleyball. Soggy sandwiches. It’ll be great.”

“Um...” She looked to the baby, out the window, to the changing table—anywhere but him. “That sounds amazing, but I have plans.”

“Oh?” He’d placed her firmly in the friend zone, so why did he feel shot down? It didn’t happen often, which left him needing answers. Only because he was her employer, no matter how much he wanted to drill her about what she was doing that could be more important than chilling with him and his son—he knew damn well he couldn’t. Shouldn’t. It would be a seriously needy move, and Calder never lacked for female attention.

“Rain check? I’ve never been on a picnic, so...” As her words trailed off, so did her eye contact. Interesting. What would the nanny be doing on Saturday? Or should that what be replaced by a who?

Chapter Five

Wednesday afternoon, the computers Calder’s team had been using to study the latest Afghanistan satellite-photo-intelligence models were down. Cooper and Heath used the opportunity to nap. Calder and Mason had just finished a five-mile run and sat on a bench, soaking in rays.

“Damn nice day,” Mason said. “Reminds me why I left Alaska.”

Calder had tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He opened them to glance sideways at his friend. “Thought you bolted because of Melissa.”

“Well, that, too. But mainly because of the weather.”

“Uh-huh. You’ve given me so much crap over the nanny, I’m shoveling it back your way.”

Resting his arms behind his head, Mason said, “Whatever. Speaking of which, haven’t heard much about her today. Everything all right?”

Calder sighed. “I guess it’s going good. Both Quinn and the house are freakishly clean, and she’s a great cook.” That said, the beach rejection stung his manly pride. His rational side knew giving the

matter a second thought was ridiculous. The part of him used to women falling for his SEAL charm still didn't get it. What had he done wrong? "Look, I shouldn't even mention this to you, but after the volleyball game, I found out Pandora had never been to the beach."

"What?" Mason scratched his head.

"I know, right? Anyway, I've been meaning to spend more time with the little guy, so I figured we'd do the whole day-at-the-shore thing with him on Saturday, only—"

Mason laughed. "She turned you down, didn't she?"

Lips pressed tight, Calder had never wished more he'd kept his big mouth shut.

Still laughing, Mason said, "Mr. Professional Working Relationship who yelled at us for asking if Pandora was a sex-kitten nanny broke his own rule, huh?"

"Forget it. Sorry I brought it up." Calder had honestly thought it would be a good idea to spend time with Quinn. The beach was always fun. The whole thing shouldn't have been a big deal.

Standing, Calder headed back to the building housing their classroom.

"Aw, come on..." Mason trailed after him. "Don't go getting your panties in a wad. I'm sure the nanny has a perfectly good reason for turning down your date."

"It wasn't a date," Calder snapped. "I don't like her that way. Wouldn't be right."

"Might not be right, but if she's hot and you two share tight quarters, what's your plan to keep things platonic?"

Calder tugged open the metal door, welcoming the rush of cool air. "Drop it, okay? I don't need a plan, because nothing's going to happen."

"Then why are you so pissy over her wanting an afternoon for herself?" Mason stopped off at a vending machine.

Though his friend asked a valid question, Calder didn't have an answer. If pressed, he suspected his true problem stemmed from the simple fact he was scared to death of once again being alone with his son.

* * *

CALDER RODE STRAIGHT home from the base only to find Quinn and Pandora heading down the block. He parked his bike in the garage, then hollered in their direction, "Wait up!"

After closing the door, he pocketed the opener, jogging to meet them.

"Hey." She veered the stroller against the sidewalk's edge to make room for him. "How was your day?"

He shrugged. Now that he'd caught up with the duo, he wasn't sure why he'd even tried. All smiles, Quinn kicked and made baby noises. Pandora had been smiling. However, since his arrival, she'd pressed her lips into a telling line of tension. "You two headed for the park?"

She nodded. "They have great baby swings—you know? The one's that are safety seats?"

"Guess I've never much noticed."

"Quinn loves them."

Another dig at Calder's parenting? Or lack thereof?

They walked the last two blocks in silence. The temperature was already cooling off with a hint of approaching autumn in the air. Even from their distance, the sounds of kids playing—laughing—rang clearly through the air. He couldn't remember ever having been that kid—fully carefree. Sure, after his mom had remarried, things settled down, but he'd been past the playground age.

Upon reaching the park, it struck Calder as surprisingly full. "There always this many people here?"

"It's a park. Most times, there's even more." Her sideways look, not to mention her pinched expression, didn't sit well with him. Yet again, he felt inept. He'd lived a few blocks from what was apparently a family mecca, yet it'd never even occurred to him it was anywhere he and Quinn might want to be.

"Sorry. I didn't know."

“It’s not a big deal, Calder.” She parked the stroller in front of the lone empty bench in a row of five. “Now that you’re here, want to put Quinn in a swing?”

Visions of Quinn screaming whenever Calder tried cramming him into his car seat ran through his head. “No, thanks.”

Pandora effortlessly plucked Quinn from his stroller to plop him into the rubber swing seat and strapped him in. As if the kid knew what came next, he giggled and kicked. The size of his drool-filled grin tugged at Calder’s heart.

From Pandora’s first small push, Quinn howled with laughter. He clapped his little hands and bounced and kicked. His eyes shone with what Calder could only describe as pure glee. Burning heat forced his eyes to close for a moment while at the same time he swallowed the knot at the back of his throat.

He’d never seen Quinn like this—truly happy. But now that he had, something in him clicked. Was this at least partially what parenting was about? Not just keeping your child fed and clean, but figuring out what produced adorable grins? Then earning them over and over again?

“You want to push?” Pandora stepped aside, urging Calder to give it a try.

“What if I push him too high? Is he going to fall out?”

Hands on her hips, she cocked her head. “Really?”

“Well...” He forced a deep breath. “Stranger things could happen.”

Approaching the swing, Calder couldn’t have said why, but his pulse raced and his palms began to sweat. He crouched to reach the little guy, then pushed just enough for Quinn to shriek all over again. “He’s doing it!”

“You thought he wouldn’t?” Pandora asked. “See? You’re doing great. Now whenever I’m not around, you can bring him here on your own. Once he starts walking, he’s going to love the rope bridge and slide.”

Calder took one glance at the wood-planked bridge hanging between two roofed forts. “No way. Too dangerous.”

Now Pandora was the one laughing. “If you think that’s scary, wait till he gets his first bike.”

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