



SUPER ROMANCE

A photograph of a family of three. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a red sleeveless top, is smiling broadly. A man with short brown hair, wearing a blue and red plaid shirt, is also smiling. They are both looking at a young child with curly brown hair, wearing a blue dress with white polka dots and a pink bow in her hair. The child is holding a blue book and looking at it with an open mouth, as if reading or speaking. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting.

**The Way to a
Soldier's Heart**

GINA WILKINS

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«HarperCollins»

WILKINS G.

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A family for her daughter? Elle O'Meara's happy being a single mom to her adopted two-year-old, Charlotte. Even so, when Shane Scanlon starts coming in to her bakeshop, he becomes a bright spot in her days. The handsome former army medic even strikes up a friendship with her daughter, making Elle wonder if there's room in her life for the excitement he could bring. Then Elle discovers why Shane's really there: he's Charlotte's biological uncle and wants her in his family. Elle prefers to believe he won't take Charlotte away but he's already lied once. Now she doesn't know if her connection with Shane was real—or just another lie.

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Shane reached out as if to take the photo, but Elle jerked back to avoid his hand.

She reached up to snap on the light, then opened the folder. Inside it, she found a second copy of the photograph and a sheet of paper with her name printed on it, her address—both home and business—her age, marital status, even her ex-husband's name. Charlotte's name appeared at the bottom of the page. Her full name. Charlotte Michelle O'Meara. Followed by her date of birth, the hospital where she'd been born and her date of adoption.

Elle lifted her gaze very slowly to Shane, struggling to understand. Her insides were knotted, her throat so tight it was all she could do to speak. "What the hell is this? Just who are you, Shane? And why have you been spying on me and my daughter?"

Dear Reader,

I come from a large, scattered Southern family: three brothers, lots of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and "greats" and a dizzying array of in-laws and longtime friends who have become close as kin over the years. Our family gatherings are filled with chatter, laughter and entirely too much good food as four generations swap stories and memories. We are a widely diverse group in just about every way, but one value connects us all: the importance of family, whether by blood, marriage, adoption or simply love.

In this, my second book of the Soldiers and Single Moms trilogy, I return once again to one of my favorite story themes: the definition of family. Divorced single mom Elle O'Meara loves her little adopted daughter, Charlotte, with all of her heart and soul. But when Charlotte's biological family shows up in the form of the child's sexy army-veteran uncle, Shane Scanlon, Elle must confront her secret fears. In doing so, she learns that family has many facets—and that love is the ultimate bond.

I hope you enjoy meeting these two families as much as I loved getting to know them myself!

Gina

The Way to a Soldier's Heart

Gina Wilkins



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Before she even learned to read, GINA WILKINS announced that she wanted to be a writer. That dream never wavered, though she worked briefly in advertising and human resources. Influenced by her mother's love of classic Harlequin romances, she knew she wanted her stories to always have happy endings. She met her husband in her first college English class and they've been married for more than thirty-five years, blessed with two daughters and a son. They also have two delightful grandchildren. After more than one hundred books with Harlequin, she will always be a fan of romance and a believer in happy endings.

For my precious little grandsons—Ephraim, who showed us how to find joy in "party dots," and Malachi, the newest member of our family. Gigi loves you both!

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

UNLIKE HER IMAGINATIVE MOTHER, Elle O'Meara had never once pretended she could predict the future. Janet O'Meara's so-called talent for occasional precognition was based more on wishful thinking than reality, but most of their friends indulged the little quirk. As for Elle, almost every day brought surprises—mostly good, some bad—and she generally preferred not to try to anticipate the next development. Still, when a dark-haired, blue-eyed man in a black leather jacket, worn jeans and a gray T-shirt sauntered into her little coffee shop on a quiet Wednesday morning in late October, she was struck by the oddest sense of heightened awareness—as if something about this customer was different from the others she'd served that day. Almost momentarily so.

Telling herself she'd been spending too much time with her lovable but deliberately eccentric mom, she smiled brightly as she set aside the cloth she'd used to wipe the counter and welcomed the newcomer. "Good morning. Welcome to The Perkery. What can I get for you?"

He was her sole customer at the moment and he swept the overhead menu board with a quick glance. Pastries and other baked goods were listed on the left, soups and sandwiches on the right, but he didn't spend much time studying either side. He glanced at the now-empty play corral behind the counter, a colorful area filled with toys and toddler books. Elle got the impression this guy didn't miss many details of his surroundings.

She couldn't help noticing how nicely his thick, dark lashes framed almost sapphire-blue eyes when he focused on her face again. Her jolt of reaction this time was entirely explainable. Hormones. She supposed it was nice to acknowledge that hers were still in working order, despite being pretty much ignored for the past two busy years.

"Coffee, please. And—" He motioned toward the almost-empty display stand on the counter beside her. "Are those filled doughnuts?"

“Yes, they are. Made fresh this morning. Your choice of raspberry, lemon or Bavarian cream filling. There could be a chocolate left—no, I’m afraid they’re all gone,” she added after a quick double check.

He ordered the raspberry. She liked his voice, she thought as she set the plated pastry on the counter in front of him, along with a big ceramic mug for him to fill at the coffee bar. Deep, rich, nicely modulated. It suited him.

The guy was definitely attractive. Early thirties, close to her own age. Slim but solid build. Square-cut face with strongly carved features. His coffee-brown hair was thick and wavy, carelessly styled in a manner that would make any warm-blooded woman want to play in it. Her fingers tingled at the thought, and she suppressed an exasperated grimace. What was up with her today?

After paying, the man thanked her and carried his plate to a tiny table by the window. He looked around with the idle curiosity of a new customer as he crossed the room in this lull between breakfast and lunch. She saw him smile faintly when he spotted a couple of whimsical plastic jack-o’-lanterns arranged on the shelves of tea-and-coffee-themed merchandise for sale. The splashes of orange and black stood out among the light woods, stainless steel fixtures and ocean-blue walls. Suited to the coastal South Carolina setting, the decor had turned out just as Elle and her business partner, Kristen Boyd, had hoped. Breezy, bright and welcoming.

Tucking her shoulder-length, honey-colored hair behind one ear, Elle reached for her cleaning cloth again. She heard Amber, her employee, clattering around in the kitchen behind her, and she assumed everything was under control in there. Appreciating the momentary quiet in the usually bustling shop, she continued tidying behind the counter, watching surreptitiously as the man filled his cup from the self-serve coffee bar. He skipped creamer and sweeteners. The no-frills type. She wasn’t surprised.

He caught her looking his way after he returned to his table. His somber eyes locked for a moment with hers, causing a tingle of awareness to course through her. She felt a silly urge to fan her cheeks with her hand, but she asked merely, “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“No, thanks. This doughnut is really good. Did you make it?”

“I did. I’m glad you like it.”

“So, you’re the shop owner?” he asked, lounging back in his seat to converse with her from across the room.

She very much enjoyed this part of her job, meeting and chatting with people from nearby and far away who wandered in for a break and a snack, learning a little about them, sharing a bit of herself. Carolina hospitality was always on the menu in The Perkery—a slogan spelled out right across the top of the menu board above her. Still, it wasn’t often she reacted quite so intensely to a visitor—even one as attractive as this man. “I’m a co-owner. Elle O’Meara.”

“Nice to meet you, Elle.” She got a thrill at the sound of her name spoken in his deep voice, proving yet again that her responses to him were out of the ordinary. “I’m Shane Scanlon.”

He looked at her intently as he said his name, as though she should know it. She searched his features, once again noting the details that made his face so innately appealing, but she was certain she’d never seen him before. She was sure she’d remember if she had. This was not a man who’d be easy to forget. “Hello, Shane.”

He seemed to find an odd sort of satisfaction—reassurance?—in the casual tone of her reply, which made her wonder again if he’d expected a different reaction. Perhaps she was simply reading too much into his expression.

“It’s my first time to visit your town. It’s an interesting area.”

She smiled. “Thanks. We locals agree.”

Dragging her gaze from Shane’s face in an attempt to regain control over those pesky hormones, Elle glanced through the big front window looking out over Salt Marsh Avenue, the main thoroughfare through the business section of Shorty’s Landing. Late October wasn’t prime tourist season. This little

town lay close enough to the larger, better known resort communities along the South Carolina coast to benefit from their summer traffic, but just far enough to slow considerably more in the off-season. Fortunately, during the three years The Perkery had been open so far, she and Kristen had built enough local patronage to carry them through those leaner months. They weren't going to become wealthy, but they were paying the bills and enjoying the work, which was what counted. At least, as far as Elle was concerned.

Before she could dwell on worrisome thoughts about her partner's recent moodiness, the door that led into the kitchen and office area of the shop burst open behind her. A little bundle of energy rushed through the swinging door, followed more sedately by a caftan-clad woman with henna-red hair and glittery-framed glasses.

"Mommy, Mommy!"

Laughing, Elle scooped up her daughter and nuzzled into her neck, making the toddler giggle. "Hi, baby. Did you have fun at the park with Gammy?"

"Fun with Gammy."

Charlotte babbled excitedly as Elle removed her windbreaker. At twenty-five months, the toddler's vocabulary was still limited to short phrases and somewhat random words, but Elle was able to follow fairly well. Charlotte had played on the swings and in the sandbox, both favorite activities during her almost-daily park outings.

Three middle-aged women, local friends who met for coffee every Wednesday, entered the shop from the front door, laughing and chattering as the bell jingled. Elle's mother stepped up to the counter to greet the trio by names and take their orders, freeing Elle to settle Charlotte into the play corral. She dropped a kiss on her daughter's fine, curly brown hair as she set her down and handed her a toy. Charlotte was an easygoing child who was almost always smiling, happy to entertain herself for the most part, though she enjoyed being in the shop with her family around her. Elle loved having a job that allowed her to bring her daughter to work with her.

Seeing Charlotte grinning at someone, Elle glanced around, expecting to find one of the women interacting with the toddler. Instead, it was the man—Shane, she reminded herself—taking advantage of the free-refill policy and topping off his cup at the coffee bar while studying the little girl in the play area behind the counter. Something about Shane's expression caught Elle's attention. For a fleeting moment, he just looked so...well, sad, she decided. How could anyone look at her daughter's adorable blue-eyed, dimple-chinned face and still feel sad?

It took Charlotte only moments to work her magic. The little girl giggled at Shane and he smiled in response. A real smile, Elle noted. It pushed sexy, shallow dimples into his lean cheeks. Wow. Once again, she felt warmth surging.

Shane glanced at Elle then, as if sensing her watching him, and she made an effort to compose her expression. "Cute kid you have there."

"Thank you."

Now that the other customers were seated at their customary table in a cozy corner, Elle's mom approached Shane with her characteristic curiosity about a new face in the shop. Especially, Elle thought wryly, a handsome male face.

"Well, hello there. I haven't seen you in here before. Is this your first time visiting us?" Elle's Southern-to-the-painted-toenails mother made a habit of greeting and chatting with the customers, finding it hard to imagine that some people simply wanted to place their orders and drink their coffee with a minimum amount of interaction.

Apparently familiar with regional idiosyncrasies, Shane nodded cordially. "Yes, it is."

"I hope it won't be your last. I'm Janet O'Meara." She held out one be-ringed and multi-braceleted hand.

Shane reached across the counter to take her hand. "Shane Scanlon. Nice to meet you."

He started to pull his hand away, but Janet held on. Elle almost groaned at the all-too-familiar look on her mother's face. Not this again!

"Oh, my goodness. You've led quite the adventurous life, haven't you, young man?"

Shane shot a quick, questioning glance at Elle before saying cautiously, "I suppose I've had my share of adventures."

"I sense that you're a single man. A bachelor."

"Yes, I—"

"And a soldier," Janet mused, her expression dreamy and unfocused—deliberately so, Elle suspected. "Are you still in the military?"

"No, I—Wait. How did you—"

"I knew it!" she crowed, delighted with herself. "You were in the navy, weren't you? I see you on a submarine."

"I was army. A medic. But—"

"Of course. A healer. And now you're a doctor."

"No, I—"

"No, not a doctor," she said quickly. "A... Hmm, you're in business, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Of course you are."

"Um—"

Laughing musically, Janet patted their clasped right hands with her left, making more bracelets jingle. "Oh, don't mind me, dear. Sometimes these things just come to me. I'm a little psychic."

"I see." He extricated himself quickly, though politely enough.

Janet eyed him with renewed speculation. "Don't worry, Shane, I don't know your deepest secrets. Just a few tidbits that came to me when we shook hands."

Seeing a frown suddenly darken Shane's eyes, Elle decided it was time to step in. Past time, probably. "Mom, would you mind checking on the vegetarian chili? It's been simmering for almost an hour and it's time to add the corn, in case Amber has forgotten."

"Of course, darling." With one last lingering look at Shane, her mom turned and moved into the kitchen, the swinging door closing behind her.

Elle gave Shane a rueful smile. "Sorry about that. We've chosen to humor my mother's imaginings, for the most part, but she gets carried away sometimes. It's a harmless fantasy. She really is a wonderful woman."

"So, she's not really, uh, psychic?"

Laughing softly, Elle shook her head. "No more than anyone with halfway decent intuition. She read the autobiography of a famous medium a year or so ago, and she's been convinced ever since that she has the gift. Her predictions are correct about one out of nine times, but that seems to be enough to validate her. Everyone loves her, so we don't bother arguing with her."

Shane seemed to relax a bit, though he asked, "So, how did she know I was in the military?"

"Sometimes she gets lucky. Maybe it's the way you carry yourself."

Still looking slightly doubtful, he glanced at the kitchen door before his attention was reclaimed by Charlotte, who held up a stuffed dog and announced, "Puppy!"

"Yes, Charlotte. That's your puppy," Elle responded automatically.

"Charlotte." Shane repeated the name in a low voice. She looked around at him again and he cleared his throat. "That's a nice name."

"Thank you." Again, she sensed some emotion in him she didn't quite understand, but decided she was letting herself be too strongly influenced by her mother. She'd have to be careful about that.

The bell over the door chimed again, and a couple of college students with backpacks and beeping smartphones strolled in. They, too, were regular customers, drawn to the shop by flavored coffee drinks and free Wi-Fi. It was getting close to lunchtime, so they'd probably linger long enough

to order sandwiches. Elle greeted them and rang up their orders. By the time they'd settled into the deep, nautical-print armchairs at the back of the shop, Shane had slipped out.

Looking through the big street windows, Elle saw several cars, pedestrians and bikes passing by, but no sign of the man in the leather jacket. With a sigh, she wondered if she would ever see him again, or if her mom had scared him away.

Amber Carson, a college business major who, along with several other part-timers, worked at The Perkery to supplement her scholarships, stepped out of the kitchen, smoothing the sunny yellow apron around her waist. Amber's hair was dyed a dramatic black with a bright blue streak hanging over her left eye. She had several piercings, and she favored stark black clothing and nails painted black except for her thumbs, which matched the blue hair stripe. Above all, she was smart, personable and a hard worker.

"Would you keep an eye on Charlotte for a few minutes?" Elle asked her. "I'd like to check things in the kitchen."

"Of course."

Amber smiled fondly at Charlotte, who grinned back and cooed, "Bamber!"

Leaving everything in Amber's capable hands, Elle pushed through the door into the kitchen, where her mother was just sliding the first premade salads into the industrial fridge in preparation for the lunch rush. Three varieties of soup were almost ready to serve, their aromas blending into a medley that made Elle's mouth water. Sandwiches would be assembled from prepped ingredients stored in the fridge, while cookies, pastries and other treats tempted diners from the display cases out in the shop.

Goodness, she loved this place, Elle thought with a little pang. Now if only she could be confident her business partner still felt the same way...

Closing the refrigerator door, her mom turned to ask her, "Is that nice-looking fellow still hanging around?"

"If you mean that poor man you grabbed out there, then no, he's gone. I think you scared him away."

"I did not grab him," her mom retorted indignantly. "I simply shook his hand. He happened to have a very strong aura."

Elle could secretly agree—if, by aura, her mother meant a very attractive appearance. It didn't take any special talents to have noticed that.

"Well, anyway, maybe it would be best if you don't ambush our customers with psychic readings. Not everyone likes that sort of thing, you know." Remembering the way Shane had frowned in response to a vague allusion to his "deepest secrets," Elle winced before murmuring, "I doubt he'll be back."

"He'll be back." Her mom lifted the lid off the chili and stirred briskly with a wooden spoon, her bracelets jingling merrily. "I think you'll be seeing quite a bit of that nice young man. I told you big changes were coming for you."

"Oh, my gosh, Mom, give it a rest," Elle said with a groan. As much as she adored her mother, it was sometimes difficult to be patient—not her strength, anyway, she had to admit. "He was just a customer. Speaking of which, I've heard the bell ring a couple times, so the lunch crowd is starting to come in."

Crowd was perhaps a generous word for their average patronage this time of year, but still they'd be busy for the next couple of hours. Too busy to obsess about good-looking guys in black leather jackets, she thought with a sigh. Which didn't mean she wouldn't think of him a few times as the day wound down.

She almost wished her mother's prediction would be right this time. She wouldn't mind seeing Shane Scanlon in her shop again.

* * *

THE MAN IN question returned to the shop the next morning, just at the end of the breakfast rush. He wore his black leather jacket again, this time with a black shirt and gray pants. Though an early rain and a brisk breeze had left a chill in the air, most of Elle's customers had seemed comfortable enough in long sleeves or light windbreakers. Someone must have told Shane how very good the jacket looked on him, she decided as she stepped forward to greet him.

"Good morning," she said. "Welcome back. What can I get for you?"

"I thought I might score one of those chocolate-filled doughnuts today. I figured they must be good, as fast as you ran out yesterday."

She motioned toward the display case. "We just happen to have two chocolate-filled doughnuts available."

Shane glanced at the other end of the counter, where her mother was taking care of the only other customers, and then at the play corral, in which Charlotte played contentedly with her toys. Leaning an arm on the stainless steel counter, he asked, "Any chance you'd like to have that second doughnut and a cup of coffee with me? Unless you can't take the time."

The invitation surprised her a bit. If this was his way of flirting, he was rather serious about it. He'd given her a graceful out, and his expression made it clear he would take the hint. She wasn't in the habit of socializing much with customers, despite the occasional pickup attempt by randy tourists or bored businessmen looking for a night's entertainment. But this was as good a time as any for her to take a coffee break, and Shane did seem interesting, if only for a brief, likely enjoyable conversation.

"I'll skip the doughnut, but coffee sounds good."

He gave her a little smile, teasing out those oh-so-sexy dimples. "Great."

Silently clearing her throat, she motioned her intentions toward her mother, who sent her an approving, not-at-all-subtle thumbs-up.

They carried their cups to the table in the window he'd chosen yesterday. Elle took a sip of her pumpkin-spice latte while Shane bit into the flaky pastry filled with a creamy chocolate ganache. "That is good," he said after swallowing. "No wonder they go so fast. You made the filling, too?"

His compliment pleased her perhaps more than it should have. "Yes. It's a fairly simple recipe, easy to whip up and pipe into the doughnuts."

He chuckled. "You make it sound too easy. You should say you slaved over it for hours."

Amused, she lifted her cup again. "Maybe I should. I do start very early every morning."

"Do you do all the cooking yourself?"

"Not all of it. My mother and several part-time employees help. My staff and I work Wednesdays through Saturdays and my business partner and her crew take over Sunday morning through Tuesday. We switch off as needed. It's a good division of labor for all of us."

"You're only open for breakfast and lunch, right?"

"We close at four," she confirmed, though the shop's hours were posted on the sign at the door.

He nodded and glanced at the play corral. "And you bring your daughter to work with you every day?"

"Most days. Having my mom working with me here makes it easier to juggle everything."

Setting down his cup, he picked up the doughnut again. She saw his gaze sweep her left hand as it lay on the table, and she figured he noted the lack of rings—just as she was aware of his bare left hand. Not necessarily proof that he was single, of course.

"Family first," he murmured before biting into his pastry.

"Always," she agreed.

She wondered if there was something going on in this conversation she wasn't fully aware of. She was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable with this handsome stranger's focus on her and her family, though he was probably only trying to pass the time. There was enough of a drawl in his deep voice to let her know chatting with strangers was as familiar to him as to anyone south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

“Are you in Shorty’s Landing on vacation?” she asked, deciding it was time to turn the conversation to him.

He didn’t seem to mind. “Mostly business. I’m making sales pitches to some of the resorts in the area.”

This seemed an innocuous enough topic for two thirtysomething professionals. “What business are you in?”

“Risk management consulting. I’m a partner in a family-owned company, Scanlon Risk Management, Inc. We’re based out of Fayetteville, North Carolina, my hometown.”

“Which resorts have you visited so far?” she asked while she processed that unexpected response. There were several popular resorts within a twenty-mile stretch of coastline around Shorty’s Landing. Shane had a target-rich environment if he was pitching to tourist establishments.

“I arrived in the area only yesterday, so the meetings have just started,” he replied. “I have an appointment with the owner of Wind Shadow Resort this afternoon.”

“Trevor Farrell,” she said with a smile. The luxurious Wind Shadow Resort was only about twenty minutes by car from The Perkery. In addition to having visited for various social events, she served quite a few guests from there who wandered into Shorty’s Landing to explore and shop.

“I’ve known Trevor for several years. A very nice man. He’s known particularly for hiring and working with veterans,” she added, thinking of Shane’s military background.

“Yes, I’ve heard that. It’s a practice he and I have in common in our businesses.”

So, she mused, Shane Scanlon worked in his family business and believed in giving back to the military community. He sounded upstanding enough, but that was accepting him only on his own words. She’d learned the hard way not to take anyone at face value.

“From the military to a risk management career. That’s quite a leap. My mother was apparently right that you’ve led an interesting life,” she said lightly. “We won’t tell her, though. It would only reinforce her fantasy that she has a special sight.”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind. Though I’m not sure how following my family’s tradition of serving a couple of hitches in the army, then joining the business my dad and uncle started would qualify as particularly exciting.”

Judging by her own instinctive reactions to him, she suspected this man was considerably more interesting than he let on. Maybe more than even he realized. For some reason, he didn’t strike her as the risk management type. She’d have pegged him as something much more adventurous—which only proved yet again that she was no more clairvoyant than her mother. “Was it always your plan to join the family business when you got out?”

He hesitated just long enough to make her wonder if she’d accidentally touched a nerve. Perhaps their coffee break small talk had edged into more personal territory than either of them had predicted. Still, he replied matter-of-factly, “At the time I enlisted, I was considering other options for my future. My brother, Charlie, was going to take over the family business. But he died in Afghanistan two years ago, and when Dad passed away last year, I made the choice to help keep the company going. It’s been a challenge, but we’re doing well now. I made the right decision.”

It was more information than Elle had expected, perhaps more than Shane had intended to reveal. A lot to digest at once. He had suffered two major losses in a very short time. Though he’d spoken without inflection, she still sensed the deep emotion in him. Having lost her own much-loved father only four years ago, she knew how it felt and how the pain lingered.

She couldn’t help wondering if Shane was unconsciously defending his resulting career choice as much to himself as to her. Far be it from her to criticize anyone for sacrificing for the sake of family, but she couldn’t help thinking of her ex-husband’s long-pent-up rebellion against following a path that hadn’t felt true to him. Which didn’t mean Shane was anything like Glenn, she reminded herself rather crossly. Maybe the family business was exactly what Shane wanted.

She gave him a look of apology. "I'm sorry. I wasn't interrogating you. I tend to ask too many questions sometimes when I'm getting to know someone. A habit I picked up from my mother, I'm afraid."

He wiped a dot of chocolate from his lips with a napkin. Even as that movement drew her attention to his sexy mouth, she was gratified to see that he didn't look annoyed. "How else would you get any information?"

"Right?" She was pleased he understood, despite her gaffes. "But just so you know, I don't take offense when I'm told to back off."

"I'll keep that in mind for future conversations," he murmured, those very nice lips quirking into a half smile.

He seemed to be taking for granted that there would be future conversations. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She wasn't looking for a romantic involvement at this busy stage of her life, and certainly not a long-distance one. Still, she had to admit she was intrigued by the possibility of future interactions. As much as she'd unexpectedly learned about Shane Scanlon in the past ten minutes, she'd only scratched the surface.

A small group of employees from the pharmacy down the street entered with a burst of rather noisy laughter. Elle stood quickly. "This was nice, Shane, but I should get back to work."

Abandoning whatever he'd been about to say, Shane stood as she did. "Of course. I have to be going, anyway. Thanks for the coffee and conversation. I enjoyed it."

She smiled up at him. "Questions and all?"

"Questions and all."

Oh, those dimples were dangerous! Stifling a sigh, Elle turned to check on her daughter. Seeing that Charlotte was still playing with her toys, she glanced back to Shane. "I hope your meetings go well."

His eyes looked very blue as they locked with hers. "Thank you."

"I'll see you again?" she couldn't help asking, totally flirting.

He inclined his head just slightly. "Count on it."

Slowly rounding the counter, she watched as he left the shop and strode down the sidewalk. A little sigh escaped her.

"You see?" her mom startled her by asking from directly behind her. "I was right, wasn't I? Something exciting is about to happen for you, and I think that charming man has something to do with it."

Elle shook her head as if to physically clear it. "We have customers, Mom. And more will be in soon. Maybe you could take Charlotte for a potty break while I take orders?" Potty training was still an act-in-progress, but Charlotte was cooperating, for the most part, and Elle's mom was fully on-board with the program.

"I would be delighted." Her mom picked up the babbling toddler, but glanced meaningfully at Elle as she did so, just to make it clear she recognized the deliberate distraction.

Elle ordered herself to concentrate on her work. Her mother's prognostications notwithstanding, it remained to be seen whether Shane Scanlon was just another engaging tourist...or a man who was as interesting as he seemed.

* * *

SITTING BEHIND THE wheel of his car in a motel parking lot, Shane looked down at the printed snapshot in his hand. When he'd received the photo a week or so earlier, he'd been struck by the attractiveness of the woman in the center of the shot. Now he knew the picture didn't do full justice to the vibrant, animated woman who'd shared coffee with him that morning. Elle O'Meara.

In the photograph, she smiled brightly as she pushed a stroller through a park. The wind lifted her honey-brown hair and the sunlight glittered in her warm brown eyes as she gazed down at the laughing, pink-cheeked child. The wholesomely appealing scene could have been staged for a

magazine ad. During the past few days, Shane had studied the photo enough to memorize every detail, but still he'd been startled by how strongly seeing Charlotte—and Elle—in person had affected him.

Elle had been gracious to him during their two brief encounters. Funny, encouraging. Inquisitive in a friendly, interested manner, though she'd backed off quickly when she'd stumbled into painful memories on his part. He'd seen the compassion on her face when she'd learned of his losses, but she'd obviously understood he hadn't wanted to go into details. As it was, he'd told her more than he'd intended. Elle was certainly easy to talk to. He could easily imagine having long, wide-ranging conversations with her. The fantasy was as enticing as it was unlikely.

He stuffed the photo back into its envelope, then stashed it under the passenger seat, feeling rather foolishly furtive as he did so. It wasn't as if Elle would see into the envelope if she strolled past the car. He really wasn't cut out for this undercover stuff.

He wondered how Elle's hospitable attitude toward him would change if she found out his biological connection to her daughter. He'd debated how best to approach her since he'd learned her name a few weeks ago. He still wasn't certain that telling her everything would be the best move on his part.

Judging just by his first impressions, she seemed to be family-oriented. She'd arranged her work schedule to maximize time with Charlotte, though he wasn't sure a coffee shop was the best place for a toddler to spend her days. Elle had even hired her oddball mother to work with her. So perhaps she'd at least somewhat understand the family commitments that would compel a man to hire a private investigator, to put his own life on hold, to be prepared to bargain or bribe if necessary just to track down one small child. Or maybe she wouldn't.

Elle could send him away once she learned the truth. Could refuse to even talk with him again if she found out who he was. But for both business and personal reasons, he was going to risk hanging around a little longer. For his family's sake. For his own. And most of all, for the promise he'd made to his late brother, Charlie.

Charlotte's biological father.

CHAPTER TWO

"SO WE'RE AGREED? We'll stay with the schedule we have now at least through the end of the year?"

Kristen Boyd nodded in response to Elle's question, but her faraway expression made Elle wonder if her partner had been paying attention during their Thursday afternoon business meeting. "Kristen? You're listening, right?"

"What? Oh, right. Yes, the weekend menu is fine with me."

Elle swiveled in her seat to frown at her partner, who sat next to her at the small desk they shared in the tiny office tucked into a corner of the shop, just off the kitchen. She noted that Kristen's eyes were clouded and her right hand was tangled in her thick blond curls, a sure sign Kristen's thoughts were far away.

"We weren't talking about the menu. We were discussing the weekend work schedule. DeShawn wants to work an extra hour this Sunday to make up for the time he missed during midterms last week. That's okay with you, right?"

Kristen blinked. "Oh. Of course. I'll keep him busy prepping for Monday."

After hesitating a moment, Elle asked, "You're okay, right? Should I be worried?"

Slumping a little in her chair, her partner shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Don't blow me off, Kris. I can certainly tell by now when you aren't happy."

Elle had considered herself incredibly lucky when she and her lifelong best friend had finally been able to start this business together three years ago. With Elle's then-husband, Glenn, finally finishing law school and their finances looking promising, it had seemed an ideal time to start their family, as well. And then Glenn had blindsided her by asking for a divorce.

Other than her mother, Kristen had been Elle's biggest supporter during that rough time. Elle was trying to do the same now that her friend had gone through a painful breakup, but Kristen kept pushing her away, saying she needed time to deal on her own. Which was fine, of course. Fully understandable. And yet...

Kristen's emotional turmoil was beginning to interfere with their business. Elle wondered if she should push her partner to open up to her. If Kristen wanted out of the business, she needed to say so—though the very thought of losing the shop made Elle's heart ache.

"I'd really like to know what you're planning, Kristen," she said bluntly. "I know you're still hurting over the breakup with Casey, but is there something else, too? Are you unhappy with the work schedules? With any of the decisions we've made lately? You're okay financially?"

Though Kristen supplemented her three-day-a-week coffee shop schedule by singing in a local club on Friday nights, Elle had no other income outside The Perkery. Other than their divorce settlement, she received no support from Glenn. Elle had adopted Charlotte on her own after he backed out of the proceedings, so he didn't owe her child support. He had also openly expressed his doubts that Elle and Kristen would succeed with their fledgling business. Elle had been proud every single month the books had balanced, almost all of them now. It had been both a matter of vindication and of personal fulfillment for her.

Still, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for her to buy out Kristen's share. If Kristen had decided she wanted out, it was possible they'd have to sell the business. And while Elle told herself she would survive the disappointment and start over, the prospect hurt.

"I'm fine," Kristen repeated, her voice almost mechanical. "Like you said, I'm still stinging over Casey, but I'll get over it. As for money, I'm okay. Casey and I maybe overindulged in a few luxuries while we were together, but I'll get my part paid off. The club's been after me to perform on both Friday and Saturday nights. Not a lot of extra cash, but it's something."

She drew a deep breath before adding, "Maybe I get a little restless sometimes, but that's natural, right? I mean, especially after a bad breakup. I find myself thinking maybe a change of scenery would help. Maybe it would be good to start all over someplace new. But then I tell myself I'm just trying to run away from the pain, and it wouldn't really help."

Elle found little reassurance in those words. Certainly not in her friend's distant, unhappy expression. Telling herself not to dwell on potential problems, she focused instead on Kristen's pain, wanting to help in whatever way she could. "If you need some time off, you know you only have to say so. You don't have to wait until your scheduled vacation time. Mom and I are willing to work with you and your crew, and we can always add a couple of temp workers if necessary."

"I'll think about it, but I'll probably just tough it out. Thanks, Elle," Kristen added automatically. Her attempt at a smile was simply heartbreaking.

Frustration and genuine concern made Elle's tone more urgent than she intended. "Don't let it go too long, okay? Of course I worry about the business, but I'm even more concerned about you. If you need help getting over this from a professional counselor, or just with a nice vacation, you should acknowledge it. Deal with it."

Kristen forced a smile, though there was a spark of irritation now. "Of course. But let's just get back to our meeting, okay? So, what did we decide about next week's soup choices?"

Cautioning herself not to borrow trouble, Elle reached for her tablet computer, deciding it was best to focus on business for now. Which wouldn't stop her from worrying later.

* * *

SHANE DABBED AT his mouth with a linen napkin Friday after a second meeting with Wind Shadow Resort owner Trevor Farrell. A tall and slim man in his late thirties, with light brown hair and clear blue eyes, Trevor was already quite successful with this, his first resort, and well into plans to open a couple more. After their meeting that morning, he'd invited Shane to join him and another veteran friend for lunch in the resort's upscale restaurant, Torchlight.

“That was the best lunch I’ve had in a long time,” Shane said to his host.

“I’ll pass along your compliments.” Trevor looked pleased, though he probably heard rave reviews on a daily basis. “Our chef is one of the resort’s greatest assets.”

Walt Becker, Trevor’s friend and attorney, chuckled when he set down his water glass with his right hand. Shane had noted that Walt’s left hand was a prosthetic. Had he been injured in battle? It hadn’t been mentioned, but Shane wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case. Looking like the former marine sergeant he was, Walt was gruff, friendly and blunt-spoken. Shane liked him. Liked them both, actually.

“Trev’s threatened to lock down the resort if his chef tries to leave,” Walt commented. “He lost one of his most valued staff when his second-in-command, Adam Scott, left last month to follow his new bride and their son all the way to Seattle. Trev’s still pouting about it.”

Trevor smiled wryly. “Hardly pouting. I’m pleased for Adam and Joanna. Adam has a new management job with a luxury hotel in Seattle. He started two weeks ago. I talked with him yesterday, and he sounded happy. I’m glad about that.”

“You miss having him around,” Walt said. “So do I. But like you, I’m happy for them.”

“Yes, well, you’re practically family. After all, you are still seeing Joanna’s sister,” Trevor teased his friend with a wink. “And I’d be willing to lay money on there being another wedding in the near future.”

Walt didn’t disagree. In fact, Shane thought he looked rather smug at the prospect.

“But we’re being rude.” Trevor turned back to Shane. “I hope you’ve been enjoying your visit, Shane. You said you’re staying in Shorty’s Landing?”

“Yes. Nice little town.”

“It is.”

Walt nodded. “Bubba’s Grill on Salt Marsh Avenue has the best burgers in the area. No offense, Trev, the burgers here are great, but Bubba’s, man.”

Trevor grinned, obviously taking no umbrage. “They are good, I’ll give you that.”

Walt looked at Shane again. “If you’re looking for breakfast, you’ll find good pastries and coffee at The Perkery on Salt Marsh Avenue. I’d say their selection is second only to the ones you’d have here.”

For some reason, Shane felt almost indignant on Elle’s behalf. He couldn’t imagine that Trevor’s pastry chef made anything better than Elle’s chocolate-filled doughnuts.

“I’ve stopped into The Perkery the past couple of days,” he said. “Everything I had was delicious.”

“So, you’d have met Elle and Janet O’Meara,” Trevor commented. He laughed softly before asking, “Did Janet read your palm?”

Remembering that odd first encounter, Shane suppressed a wry grimace. “Not exactly.”

“She’s a sweetheart. Maybe not the most reliable prognosticator, but as kind-hearted a woman as I’ve met. Elle’s great, too, as is her partner, Kristen Boyd. A real asset to their community. Elle spearheads several fund-raisers for local charities. I try to donate on behalf of the resort whenever I can.”

It was encouraging to hear that his niece’s adoptive mother was well respected in the community. Still, Shane wasn’t fully convinced that Charlotte would receive everything she needed as the daughter of a busy, part-owner of a small business that probably operated on a shoestring budget. Not to mention the woman’s self-proclaimed psychic mother. Having been raised by a single parent and a grandmother himself, he was hardly judging those aspects of Charlotte’s life—but was a plastic-fenced play area behind the counter of a coffee shop the best place for a toddler to spend her days? Did she have other children to play with—friends, cousins, neighbors? Enough variety of routine to keep her engaged and learning?

Walt laid his napkin on the table. “I had coffee and a muffin at The Perkery one morning a couple of weeks ago. That little girl of Elle’s is cute as a button. Little heartbreaker in the making, I’m thinking.”

“I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Elle’s daughter.” Trevor reached down to pick up the crutches he’d laid beside his chair when they’d been seated. He’d explained to Shane that he’d been seriously injured in a motorcycle accident in the spring and was just now getting back on his feet after a second operation to repair the damage to his right knee.

Walt rose as their host did. “Well, she’s a sweetheart.”

“What’s her name again?” Trevor asked idly. “I forget.”

“Charlotte,” Shane said before Walt could reply. “Her name is Charlotte.”

It stung that he couldn’t add that the child had been named after her war-hero father. These men would likely understand his pride, but it would require a lot of awkward explanations—ones he couldn’t give before he told Elle. It was rather a relief when the lunch conversation was over and he and Trevor could direct their attention back to a potential business collaboration.

Later that afternoon, after an extensive tour of the resort, Shane was in his car, headed back to his motel. Though he paid attention to his driving, he still contemplated the circumstances in which he’d found himself. His professional reasons for being in the area were genuine. Once he’d tracked Charlotte down, he’d immediately scheduled presentations with local resorts both to justify his stay and because the company always needed new business.

Scanlon Risk Management, Inc., the company started by his father twenty-five years ago, had fallen into a precarious state during his dad’s illness and after his eventual death. Almost before Shane had completely unpacked his duffel after leaving the military, he’d stepped in to help his uncle get the business back onto solid ground. He was gratified that his efforts were paying off, especially if he secured the Wind Shadow Resorts account—an outcome that seemed promising after hours of discussion with Trevor Farrell.

Which brought him back to the primary purpose for his stay in Shorty’s Landing...

He wished he felt better prepared for what was to come. The time had passed so quickly since he’d gotten out of the army. With so much responsibility on his shoulders, it had been difficult to find opportunity to concentrate on his search for Charlotte, though his intention to do so had never wavered.

Charlie’s on-and-off girlfriend, Brittany, had learned of her pregnancy only a few weeks after Charlie had been deployed to Afghanistan. There’d been no doubt that Charlie would have stepped up as a devoted father to his child. During their last phone conversation, Shane had promised he would take care of the child if anything should happen to Charlie. A month later, Charlie had been killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan, leaving his family devastated and his pregnant girlfriend stunned and rootless. The grieving family had rallied around Brittany, even though she’d never been particularly receptive to any of them except Shane, whom she’d seemed to like well enough.

But then Shane had been deployed overseas, only three weeks after the birth of his niece. To the distress of his father and grandmother, Brittany had disappeared with the baby only weeks after Shane left the country. A few months later, they’d gotten word that the baby had been placed for adoption and that Brittany wanted no further contact with any member of the Scanlon family.

Shane had vowed then that he would track down his niece. It was the only way he knew to fulfill his promise to Charlie. He owed it to Charlie, to Charlotte and to his dad, who, before he’d died, had asked Shane to keep an eye out for the family in the future. Those promises had weighed heavily on Shane’s shoulders, and he’d done his best to fulfill them.

Figuring it would be difficult to access adoption records, he’d decided to find Brittany and attempt to learn Charlotte’s whereabouts from her. After discovering that Brittany’s estranged family hadn’t heard from her since before Charlotte’s birth, he’d hired a private investigator.

The search had taken longer than he'd have liked. Volatile Brittany had changed her name and her appearance and lost herself in the shadowy New York nightlife, trying to escape the emotional demons that would always haunt her. Still, Shane had found her eventually. After almost a week of meetings with her, of negotiations and promises—and a generous contribution to her finances—she'd grudgingly given him the name of the woman she'd personally selected through an open adoption agency to raise her daughter. Charlie's daughter.

Shane had vacillated from the start about how to approach Elle—whether to be candid from the onset, or simply hover in the background for a few days, observing and assessing Charlotte's current circumstances. He knew there was a good chance that Elle would be angry when she learned the truth. That she'd send him on his way with firm instructions to keep his distance from both her and Charlotte. In other words, he'd been a coward—not something a thirty-one-year-old ex-soldier cared to admit.

It certainly complicated matters that his brain seemed to scramble every time Elle smiled. Even had the circumstances of their meeting been different, he would have likely tried to resist her charms. During the hectic months since he'd returned to civilian life, he'd done his best to avoid preventable complications, and a busy single mom definitely fell into that category. His increasingly urgent quest to find his niece was the exception. He'd felt pressured by his grandmother's declining health and the promises he'd made to his brother and father.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he thought back over these past difficult two years since Charlie died. He had to put his attraction to Elle out of his mind, keep his focus on his family. There was only so much a guy could juggle without taking a risk of having it all crash around his feet.

* * *

THE ANNUAL SHORTY'S LANDING Fall Festival was held that Friday evening at Paradise Park, located only a few blocks from The Perkery. Organized by the Chamber of Commerce and funded by donations from local businesses, the Halloween-themed celebration was always a big hit with both kids and adults. Elle's parents had brought her every year when she was growing up, and she wanted to do the same for her daughter.

Elle and her mom arrived with Charlotte only a half hour after the official 5:00 p.m. opening, and the event was already in full swing. The festival grounds were packed with kiddie rides, inflatables, games, food vendors and various other family-friendly attractions. Children in an amazing array of costumes sprinted from one trick-or-treat station to another for candy, stickers and other goodies.

Dressed as a kitten with pink-lined cat ears attached to a headband and a fuzzy black tail pinned to her black leotard, Charlotte was wide-eyed as she clutched her plastic pumpkin bucket and took in all the activity. A smudge of pink makeup on the tip of her little nose and eyebrow-penciled whiskers on her chubby cheeks completed the costume. Her proud grandmother privately proclaimed her the most adorable child in the park. Elle couldn't disagree, though she kept the thought discreetly to herself.

Elle and her mom had also dressed for the holiday. Elle wore a long, thin black robe over her clothes with a witch's hat headband holding back her hair. Her mom, of course, was a fortune teller in a caftan and turban. Detained frequently for chats with acquaintances, they made their way slowly from one orange-and-black festooned booth to the next. Charlotte happily crowed, "Tricker Treat!" at each stop, earning more than a few "awws" from adults enchanted by her charms.

Reveling in the fun her daughter was having, Elle couldn't stop smiling. Perhaps there was a little wistfulness when she saw doting fathers with their little ghosts and goblins, but as she listened to her mom and Charlotte giggling together, she told herself she was a very lucky woman, indeed. Whatever feelings she'd once had for her ex were gone now. The jagged cracks in her heart had healed, leaving a few scars but only memories of pain. She had a family she adored and a business she loved; what more could she ask?

One of her most faithful customers waved and called out a greeting from a few yards away, and Elle smiled and waved in return. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Charlotte slipped her hand out of Elle's loose grasp and made a dash for a colorful fishing-for-prizes booth. Elle spun to give chase. She knew she could catch up before the short-legged two-year-old reached the attraction, but she was surprised when a man stepped into Charlotte's path to block the escape. With a hitch in her step, Elle identified him immediately. Shane Scanlon—dimples, black jacket and all.

Apparently recognizing Shane, Charlotte crowed happily and dove at him, raising her arms to be picked up. He lifted her high into the air and she giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck. Shane laughed. Elle heard every female within sight sigh appreciatively at the image of the good-looking man and the sweet little girl smiling at each other. She was fully aware that her own sigh blended with the soft chorus.

Shaking her head to clear it, she moved toward them.

Shane smiled at her. "Look what I caught."

"So I see. Hello, Shane."

"Shane," Charlotte repeated, patting his cheek with a gentle hand.

Elle would have sworn he blushed a bit, and her heart melted a little in response. Careful, Elle.

"Shane." Her mom approached with a flutter of her vivid orange-and-black-printed caftan, bracelets jingling as she rested a hand familiarly on his arm. "What a nice surprise. Were you looking for us?"

"Actually, I was on my way back from a business meeting when I saw the festivities going on here. I'm staying in the motel just down the street. I didn't have anything better to do, so I thought I'd stop to check it out. That's when I caught sight of this runaway kitten." He bounced the giggling toddler in his arms as he studied Elle's outfit.

Elle smiled at him. "Nice catch."

"Nice hat."

"Thank you." She reached up automatically to straighten the plastic headband. "Still enjoying your visit to our area?"

"Very much."

Tugging at Shane's collar, Charlotte pointed to the game booth where she'd been headed when he'd scooped her up. "Fish!"

He turned his head to look. "The fishing booth? Is that where you were headed?"

She nodded emphatically. "Fish, Shane!"

"You want to catch a fish?"

She bounced again. "Fish!"

Shane looked questioningly at Elle. "Looks like I'm being invited along on your fishing excursion. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

Perhaps Shane was feeling a bit lonely in the festive crowd of strangers. He seemed pleased to find familiar faces. Still holding Charlotte, he moved into the line waiting at the game booth where preschoolers could dangle a fishing line over an ocean-painted backboard. Hidden behind the backboard, festival volunteers attached small stuffed toys to the lines with plastic clothespins for the children to "catch." Because the area was already crowded, Elle and her mother stayed back out of the way, watching from nearby. Elle had her phone in hand to snap a photo as Charlotte obtained her prize.

"Oh, my goodness, how cute is that?" Janet clutched Charlotte's plastic pumpkin bucket to her heart as she watched Shane help Charlotte grip the toy fishing rod. "Isn't he adorable?"

Adorable might not have been the word Elle would have chosen to describe Shane—but she couldn't take issue with it, either. He was cute as he made an exaggerated show of helping Charlotte

cast her line over the backboard, drawing a peal of giggles from the child. The man was definitely good with kids.

“You should ask him to dinner while he’s in town. I’d be happy to babysit, of course. Maybe you could take him to Bruno’s tomorrow night.”

Elle resisted the impulse to roll her eyes. “Mom, I’m not going to ask him out.”

“Why not? It’s okay for women to do that, you know.”

“Yes, I know it’s okay, but Shane is only in town for a few days on business. He lives in North Carolina and apparently travels quite a bit. For all I know, he could be leaving town tonight.”

Her mom gave her a look. “Wouldn’t hurt to ask. I have a feeling you and Shane could be just right for each other. I could tell the first time I touched him that he’s a fine, upstanding young man.”

Elle didn’t bother to point out that her mother had thought the same about Glenn. They’d both been fooled by Glenn’s practiced smiles and deliberately chosen words. Needless to say, Elle wasn’t placing a lot of faith in her mom’s newest “prediction.”

Shane toted Charlotte over to them then. Charlotte gleefully gripped a small, stuffed black cat in one hand. “Mommy, look! Kitty!”

Had it been merely coincidence that the child’s prize matched her costume? Or had the volunteer peeked around the backboard before attaching the toy to the clip on the end of the fishing line? Elle suspected the latter.

She slipped her phone in her pocket and reached for her daughter. “That’s a beautiful kitty, Charlotte. Say ‘thank you’ to Shane for helping you at the fishing booth.”

“T’ank you, Shane,” the child parroted obediently.

“You’re very welcome, Charlotte.”

“Are you getting hungry, Charlotte?” her grandmother asked, motioning toward the other end of the park where picnic tables were surrounded by food vendors. Tempting scents from grills and fry buckets wafted from that direction. There weren’t many healthy offerings, but plenty of celebrated festival foods were among the selections. “We can have hot dogs or fried chicken. You like both of those.”

“Chicken,” Charlotte announced immediately, squirming for Elle to put her down. “Want chicken.”

Janet took the child’s hand, then smiled coyly at Shane. “We’d love to have you join us for a bite, Shane. Do you like fair food?”

“Who doesn’t like fair food? Okay with you, Elle?”

He turned to face her, and she noted that his hair showed even more tendency to curl now that he was wind-blown and slightly disheveled. Feeling her fingers twitch in response, she pushed her hands into her pockets and spoke cheerily. “Of course it’s okay.”

A few minutes later they settled at a picnic table with their guilty-pleasure Southern dinners. Charlotte and her grandmother were sharing fried chicken and waffles. Elle and Shane indulged in bowls of buttery, cheesy shrimp, and grits with andouille sausage and a dash of cayenne pepper. Elle was fully aware their group was getting some curious glances from people who knew her. Being so busy with work and family, she hadn’t dated much—at all, really—since her divorce, so speculation was sure to be aroused by seeing her sharing a meal with a good-looking man.

Between the food, the cacophony of sounds surrounding them, frequent greetings from passing acquaintances and Charlotte’s excitement-fueled chattering, there was little chance for real conversation among the adults at the table. Which didn’t stop Elle’s mom from trying to find out all she could about Shane. Elle winced a couple of times, hoping she’d been a little subtler than her mom at interrogating the interesting visitor. As he had with her, Shane answered the questions with patient tolerance, though Elle learned little about him that she hadn’t already known.

Charlotte held up a gnawed chicken drumstick. “Bite, Shane?”

Such a flirt, Elle thought with an amused shake of her head even as Shane answered, “No, thank you, Charlotte. I still have some of my own dinner left.”

While Elle tried to wipe her squirming child’s food-smearred face with a paper napkin, her mom spoke to Shane. “You’re very good with children.”

“I like kids,” he replied lightly.

“None of your own, though?”

Elle cleared her throat pointedly as a warning to her mother not to get too nosy, but Shane answered with a smile. “No, none of my own. I’ve never been married.”

“Elle told me you’re from Fayetteville. Do your parents still live there?”

Remembering that he’d recently lost his father, Elle winced and started to intervene, but again Shane responded evenly. “My mother died when I was only three. My dad died last year. But my grandmother, my uncle and my cousin and her family all still live in Fayetteville, so there’s no shortage of family there.”

Even Elle’s sometimes-oblivious mother could see it was time to back away. She focused on wiping Charlotte’s mouth while Elle changed the subject to something less precarious. She knew she would reflect later about this other great loss in Shane’s life.

“Have your business meetings gone well, Shane? Wasn’t I right about Trevor Farrell being a nice guy?”

“He is.”

“And his resort is beautiful.”

“Very.”

“Do you think you got the account?” her mother asked, unable to resist chiming in again.

It was obvious that Shane didn’t want to speculate about his ongoing discussions, but he said guardedly, “Our talks have been going well.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you, if you like. I can tell Trevor that I predict a very successful collaboration if he signs with you.”

Shane shot a slightly alarmed look at Elle. Sighing at her mother’s propensity for overstepping boundaries—even with the best of intentions—Elle interceded smoothly. “I’m sure Shane prefers to conduct his own business negotiations, Mom. You shouldn’t interfere.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate the offer, Mrs. O’Meara,” Shane said.

“Janet,” she reminded him. “And I won’t say anything, if you prefer. But the offer stands.”

“Candy, Mommy?” Charlotte asked, pointing hopefully toward her pumpkin bucket.

Judging that her daughter had eaten enough chicken, Elle handed her a piece of candy from the bucket. “Just one for now.”

A rumble of activity from behind them drew Elle’s attention to the amphitheater that anchored the south end of the park. “Oh, they’re setting up for the concert. It’s supposed to start at eight.”

She checked her watch, surprised to note that it was already almost seven. “We’ll have to leave before the concert begins. Charlotte’s already drooping and she still needs her bath before bedtime.”

Her mom clapped her hands together, causing her bracelets to jingle. “I have an idea, Elle. Why don’t I take Charlotte home? You and Shane can stay and enjoy the concert. I’m sure you’d like it, Shane. One of the local singers performing tonight was on a national TV talent show last year! He made it all the way to the top five before he was eliminated. I just know you and Elle will have a fun evening.”

Elle wondered if her “psychic” mother was aware that her daughter would like very much to pinch her. Could she be any more obvious in her matchmaking?

“It does sound like fun,” Shane said before Elle could speak. He looked at her in question. His expression let her know he understood the position her mom had just placed her in, and he generously provided her with a plausible excuse. “But I’d understand if you have other things you need to do tonight.”

“No,” she said on an impulse. “I mean, yes. I’d love to stay for the music.”

She still doubted this would lead anywhere, but why not enjoy a rare evening with an attractive man? It was nice to get away from chores and worries for a few hours, and a public concert was a safe, pressure-free place to spend time with him, even if gossip was sure to ensue.

“Great.” His dimples flashed briefly, and she couldn’t resist smiling back.

He seemed genuinely nice. Maybe he was. She needed to learn to trust again.

Tonight could be just what she needed to get back out again as a single woman who could appreciate the company of a charming, handsome man, if only for a few pleasant hours. Shane Scanlon fit that description very nicely.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLE SENT HER costume home with her mom and daughter, which left her dressed in the fall tunic, slim jeans and leather boots she’d worn beneath the robe. This was an outfit more suited to a date night. Not that this was a date, exactly, she cautioned herself. Just an evening with a new friend.

She and Shane wandered through the park while waiting for the concert to start, browsing the crafts booths and watching costumed kids playing the games and collecting enough candy to support all the town’s dentists for the next twelve months. With all the bustle around them, they had to keep their heads close together to talk, but Elle didn’t exactly find that a hardship.

Elle’s phone chimed with a text and she drew it from her pocket. “I always check my phone when I’m out,” she explained, not wanting to appear rude. “I have to make sure everything’s okay at home.”

“Of course.”

Glancing at the screen, she said, “Mom’s just letting me know that Charlotte is all tucked in and sound asleep.”

She didn’t add that her mom had urged her to stay out as long as she wanted. And had ended the text with a “wink” emoji.

“Does your mother live with you?” Shane asked as Elle texted a quick reply.

She slipped the phone back into her pocket. “Yes. Mom was so lonely after my dad died and I needed help with Charlotte, so she moved in. It’s worked out very well for both of us.”

After Elle’s divorce two years after her father’s death, her mother sold her own home and had been sharing mortgage and household expenses with Elle since. The house had a finished basement that they’d transformed into a cozy efficiency-style apartment into which Janet had happily settled, though she spent most of her waking hours with Elle and Charlotte.

“Your mom hardly looks old enough to be a grandmother.”

Elle smiled. “If you’d said that in front of her, she’d probably have tackle-hugged you.”

“She was widowed young.”

“Yes.” Elle sighed regretfully. “She was. Certainly young enough to remarry, even now. She’s only fifty-eight, but she hasn’t been interested in dating. She was totally devoted to my father. They started going out in junior high and she never had another boyfriend.”

“Yet she seems happy. I don’t think I’ve seen her once without a smile.”

“That’s my mom. She misses my dad deeply, but for the most part she is very happy. She loves making other people laugh. And most of all, she loves being a grandmother to Charlotte. Who utterly adores her in return, obviously.”

“Yes, that is obvious.”

There it was again. That fleeting sadness she’d seen in his eyes before.

“I think I’m going to indulge in dessert,” he said, shaking off whatever dark thoughts had plagued him before she had time to analyze his reaction. “All these good smells are making me hungry again. What do you recommend?”

Dragging her attention from this intriguing man, she glanced at the booths around them, seeing caramel apples, funnel cakes, cotton candy, kettle popcorn and fried pies among the dessert offerings. “I don’t know about you, but I’m having one of those fried pies. Apple is my favorite.”

“Sounds good.” He motioned with one hand for her to lead the way.

A short while later, having enjoyed flaky, crisp pastries oozing with fruit filling, they settled on a concrete riser in the amphitheater with cups of hot cider. The benches were beginning to fill, and the crowd was noisy and animated as they waited for the music to start. It was fully dark now. The artificial lights cast moving shadows around them suitable to the Halloween decorations and costumes. With no responsibilities pressing on her for the moment, Elle was having a very good time.

Shane seemed to share that sentiment. Lounging on the hard, cold bench with the disposable cup cradled between his hands, he smiled at her. “Thanks for staying with me, Elle. This is so much nicer than spending another solitary evening in that motel room.”

“Do you have more business meetings this weekend?” she asked, wondering how long he planned to be in the area.

“I have a couple more items to check off my list before I leave town.”

It wasn’t exactly what she’d asked, but maybe his answer had been unintentionally evasive. Before he could say anything else, if he’d planned to, they were interrupted by a group of Elle’s friends who swarmed around them, settling into the rapidly filling riser seating with noisy greetings and laughter. Elle introduced Shane, then rattled off names to him she doubted he would even begin to remember. The concert began a few minutes later and any further conversation was forestalled by the volume of the music from the stage.

What the performances lacked in polish, they more than made up for in enthusiasm. Elle and her friends filled the breaks between sets with light prattle about kids, sports, festival food and the acts they’d seen. Shane fit in well with the loose-knit group, chatting easily with the other guys, deftly deflecting questions that crept toward the overly personal.

Elle had almost forgotten what it was like to spend an evening with adults, to laugh and flirt and feel young and attractive. As much as she adored being a mother, this impromptu concert was still a pleasant break. Maybe it was time to date again, at least occasionally, now that Charlotte was a little older and Elle’s mom was so happily available to babysit. She wasn’t ready for anything serious—but it wouldn’t hurt to have a little grown-up fun every once in a while.

A cool night breeze swirled through the amphitheater, ruffling her hair and slipping down the loose opening of her tunic. She shivered, thinking she should have worn a light cardigan.

Shane started to shrug out of his leather jacket. “Are you cold? You want to wear this?”

“No, that’s okay, I—”

But he’d already draped the jacket over her shoulders. “Sounds like the next act is starting.”

Aware of a couple of her friends watching, she smiled and kept the jacket wrapped around her rather than arguing. It did feel good. And it held just a hint of spicy scent. Aftershave? Nice.

She looked up at him, finding him gazing back at her as she unconsciously stroked the soft leather with her free hand. Turning toward the stage, she pretended to focus on the band wailing into their microphones.

Maybe if Shane asked her out on a real date, she’d say yes. He’d probably be in town occasionally if he got the Wind Shadow account. She wasn’t expecting anything serious to develop, but she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t strongly attracted to him. She sensed the attraction wasn’t one-sided. So...why not?

The concert ended at ten with the mayor thanking everyone for their attendance and wishing them all a happy and safe Halloween.

“And starting November 1, all the jack-o’-lanterns and orange-and-black bunting here in the park will be replaced by snowflakes and candy canes and red-and-green ribbons.”

Lori Malloy, owner of a gift and souvenir shop located a few doors down from The Perkery, laughed lightly as she made the prediction to Elle and their other friends. “Actually, my staff and I started putting out some of our new holiday merchandise two weeks ago.”

Pragmatic accountant Bob Hodgkin groaned. “It’s too soon to be talking about Christmas! We’re still over three weeks away from Thanksgiving.”

“It’s never too soon for Christmas,” his wife piped in. “I love every minute of it.”

While the others fell into a spirited discussion about the proper date to put up Christmas decorations, Elle glanced up at Shane with a smile. “I’ve had a nice time,” she said quietly, “but I really should be getting home now. I have to get a very early start in the morning.”

“Of course.”

“You need a lift home, Elle?”

“Thank you, Lori, but Shane has already offered me a ride.” It wasn’t all that far to her house, but would have required crossing a couple of busy streets on foot in the dark and in post-festival traffic, so she would take him up on that offer.

Six pairs of eyes turned immediately to the outsider in their midst. Though he’d been graciously welcomed, it was obvious he was still being assessed. Elle bit back a smile at the clear warning being implicitly sent: We watch out for our own.

Judging by the way Shane blinked, he got the message.

He walked with her to his car, which he’d parked close to the north entrance of the park. She handed him his jacket before climbing in, then buckled her seat belt as Shane slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “Turn left out of the parking lot, then right at the next intersection.”

He put the car into gear. “Got it.”

What should have been a ten-minute drive came to an abrupt stop on Salt Marsh Avenue, where both lanes of post-festival traffic were brought to a complete stop by a three-car wreck not far ahead. Craning her neck to peer around the vehicles in front of them, Elle could see flashing lights just arriving to the scene. “This could take a while,” she said with a groan.

“I hope no one’s hurt.”

She could see shadowy figures climbing out of all three crumpled cars, illuminated by streetlamps and headlights from the cars idling around them. “From what I can tell, it looks like everyone’s okay. I think a couple of those cars are going to have to be towed out of the way, though. Unfortunately, there’s no alternate route from where we’re sitting. If we’d turned right out of the park instead of left...”

Shane shrugged. “So we’ll wait. Maybe they’ll get a lane cleared quickly.”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Traffic jams aren’t exactly common in our sleepy little town. Even during peak season. I could walk from here if you—”

“No reason for that. Obviously, I’m not going anywhere soon. This gives us a chance to talk a bit more, anyway. What did you think of the concert?”

“It was fun. Not my type of music for everyday listening, but I enjoyed it tonight.”

They chatted about music for a few minutes, finding common ground in a fondness for smooth jazz combined with good wine. Elle spent a pleasant moment privately fantasizing about sitting by an outdoor fire pit with Shane, wineglasses in hand, softly wailing sax playing from hidden speakers—the type of daydream she hadn’t allowed herself to indulge in for a while.

Headed toward the blocked intersection, a police car equipped with strobing lights and a whooping siren threaded carefully through the line of unmoving vehicles, giving Elle hope that an officer would soon be directing the flow of traffic. Shane waited until the noise had died down before speaking again. “You said your mom moved in with you after your divorce. Do you mind my asking how long that’s been?”

“I’ve been divorced a little more than two years.”

“Does your ex-husband see Charlotte often?”

It made sense, of course, that Shane would assume her ex was Charlotte's father. And though she owed no explanations, Shane had been candid with her when she'd asked about his family. Besides, she had never planned to hide how Charlotte had come into her life.

"Glenn wasn't Charlotte's father," she said a bit more bluntly than she'd intended. "I adopted her on my own shortly after the divorce. He's never seen her."

After a moment, Shane commented, "Definitely his loss."

She nodded. "Very much so."

"He wasn't interested in fatherhood, I take it."

She shrugged. "I thought he was. We talked about it a lot during our marriage, while he attended law school. He was even involved in the initial steps toward finding a reputable adoption agency and beginning the registration process. But then he suddenly announced that he wasn't daddy material. And, by the way, he no longer wanted to be a husband, either. He left the law firm he worked for here and moved to California to live a single attorney's life on the west coast. Maybe he watched a few too many Baywatch reruns."

She'd spoken lightly to gloss over the emotional turmoil Glenn had put her through, but Shane didn't smile. "Sounds like sort of a jerk."

Her smile felt decidedly rueful. "Turned out he sort of was. He was just very good at hiding it for a while."

"I don't know much about adoption, but I've heard that's easier to adopt as a single parent than it was in the past."

"Fortunately, the agency I used was open to single-parent adoption, as was Charlotte's birth mother. Charlotte was five months old when she came to me, and she had a few special issues, so my application to adopt her was pushed through as soon as my background checks cleared."

"Um—special issues?"

She saw his hands flex on the steering wheel and figured he was getting restless with the extended delay. Perhaps he kept the conversation going to pass the time—or maybe he was genuinely interested. Regardless, she was always open to chatting about her wonderful daughter, who had already faced so many challenges in her short life and still woke each morning with an eager smile.

"She had surgery for infantile esotropia—basically, crossed eyes—three months after I brought her home. It was nerve-racking and, frankly, expensive, but she came through like a trooper and has done remarkably well since the surgery. Most people would probably never know she'd had an issue with her eyes just by looking at her now, though it was pronounced in the few early photos that were provided to me."

"I certainly haven't noticed anything. Was this something she was born with?"

Elle was a little surprised by the gravity of his tone. "Yes. But because newborns don't focus well, anyway, it probably wasn't clearly noticeable until she was several weeks old. The surgery isn't medically necessary, but many studies have shown that the earlier it takes place, the better the outcome in most cases. Believe me, I read all the literature and consulted with several pediatric ophthalmologists before I consented."

"Will she need follow-up surgeries? Is her vision impaired?"

"In most cases, no follow-up surgery is required, though occasionally some adjustment is needed later. In Charlotte's case, the procedure seems to have corrected the condition. She's had age-appropriate vision and depth perception tests during the past year and a half and it looks good so far. Maybe she'll need corrective lenses at some point, but that's not such a big problem."

Shane kept his gaze on the cars ahead, but his attention was obviously still focused on her daughter. "Did you ever meet Charlotte's birth mother?"

It occurred to her that the conversation was getting personal again, as she and Shane seemed prone to do. She could rationalize her own curiosity with the excuse that a single mom should know

as much as she could about the men she brought into her life—if that was even a possibility in this budding friendship.

As for Shane—well, maybe it was understandable that he had questions about the adoption process. She didn't mind answering a few more. Being Charlotte's mom was the most important part of her identity. Any man, whether friend or potentially more, who came into her life should be made aware of that.

"No. Though we used an open adoption agency, she didn't want to meet. I was just grateful she chose me to raise her child after studying the application, personal statement, references and videos I submitted."

"Did you ever worry that she might—uh..."

Maybe he realized he was being too intrusive. He stopped himself before finishing the question, but she guessed what he'd started to ask. "That she might change her mind? I suppose every adoptive parent has that concern. I can't imagine how devastating it would be."

She swallowed hard, then shrugged and deliberately lightened her tone. "Anyway, I've gotten beyond that. I'm Charlotte's mother and nothing can change that now."

She was prepared for Charlotte to ask questions someday, of course, and she would answer them as truthfully as she could. She would even help if Charlotte wanted to try to track down her biological relatives after she turned eighteen. But she had to admit she was in no hurry for that day to arrive.

A tow truck with an amber light bar flashing on top made its way past them toward the crumpled cars blocking the intersection.

Shane spoke again as he watched the wrecker go by. "Was it difficult? Bonding with a baby already five months old, I mean. Did she—"

Again, she filled in the rest of the question. "Did Charlotte miss her birth mother?"

He shot her a quick glance. "Yeah, I guess that was what I was asking."

"I was told her birth mother had some personal issues, so Charlotte had a few different caregivers before me. Whether because she missed her mother or because her life had been so unsettled to that point, Charlotte was fussy and seemed anxious the first few days she was with me. I was just yet another adult in her life at that point."

Having adored Charlotte from the moment she'd first seen her, Elle had worried about that at first—along with all the other anxieties involved in becoming a new single mother. "Fortunately, within a couple of weeks, she seemed to understand that I wasn't going anywhere. That I would be the one who answered every time she cried. I was with her every minute during her surgery prep and recuperation. Mine was one of the first faces she saw when she woke up afterward. I think she understands by now in her innocent way that I would give my life for her."

Clearing her throat, she told herself to ease up on the drama, genuine as her sentiment had been. She spoke more casually when she said, "Charlotte and my mom hit it off immediately. They've become almost inseparable since. Charlotte adores her Gammy and vice versa. Now it's as if we've all been together since the day Charlotte was born. She's ours."

"She is definitely yours." Shane looked out the windshield as he spoke.

The car ahead of them moved forward and he followed at a cautious distance. "Looks like they've cleared one lane," he said, his tone brisk now. "Should have you home in a few minutes."

His attention was claimed then by the signals of the police officer directing traffic. They didn't speak for the rest of the ride except for Elle telling him where to turn. She laced her fingers in her lap, mentally replaying their conversation and wondering if Shane had satisfied his curiosity—or if he'd been trying to learn more about her as someone he might want to get to know better in the future. Now that she thought back over the exchange, it felt almost like an interview.

That absurd thought showed she must be more tired than she'd realized after a busy week, and she still had to be up early in the morning to crank out doughnuts.

"Nice place," Shane said when he parked in her driveway.

The yellow frame house was trimmed in white with hunter green shutters and a tidy small yard. Elle had always loved it. Especially now that it was where she was raising her daughter.

“Thank you. And thanks for the ride.”

Shane half turned in his seat to look at her. He drew a deep breath, and she had the feeling he was bolstering his courage. The possibility that he was getting up the nerve to ask her out flitted through her mind, but why would he need to brace himself for that, even with the possibility that she would turn him down? Not that she would, but she supposed he couldn't be sure of that.

“Elle, there's something—” He broke off with a sigh when her phone beeped with another incoming text. “I know you need to check that.”

With an apologetic half smile, she drew out the phone and read the screen. “Mom says she's sorry to interrupt, but she can't find the antacids. I knew she'd regret that second piece of fried chicken.”

He unbuckled his seat belt. “You should go in to her. I'll walk you to the door.”

She rested a hand lightly on his arm. “Don't bother getting out. I'm sure Mom's fine, but I'll go in and check on her. I have to be at the shop early tomorrow, anyway. I have chocolate-filled doughnuts to make,” she added with a wink.

He nodded, his answering smile looking a little strained as he covered her hand with his. “Do me a favor, okay? Put one of those aside for me. I'm having a breakfast meeting with a potential client in the morning, so it could be midafternoon before I get a chance to come in.”

The warmth from their linked hands flooded pleasantly through her. She'd thought the two glasses of wine she'd imbibed earlier had mostly worn off, but maybe not entirely. “I'll save you one, all wrapped up so it will stay fresh until you get there.”

He chuckled. “I appreciate that.”

“So...I'll see you tomorrow?”

“You'll see me tomorrow.”

They sat there for another long moment, hands joined, gazes locked. His eyes glittered in the shadowed car, and she was sure he was thinking about kissing her. Or was she projecting her own curiosity?

Because she wasn't the kind of woman who coyly waited for a man to make the first move, she leaned forward and took hold of the soft leather lapel of his jacket. She wasn't even going to blame it on the wine. “Let's chalk this up to curiosity,” she murmured, then pressed her lips to his.

His startled chuckle was smothered by the kiss that he returned with satisfying enthusiasm after only a heartbeat's hesitation.

She'd intended the kiss to be brief. Lightly teasing. As she'd said, it had been motivated as much by curiosity as by the attraction she'd felt for him from the start. But what had started as a friendly gesture quickly flared into more. Her fingers tightened on his jacket when his left arm went around her to hold her closer.

Their lips softened, parted, molded together. She felt the slight roughness of evening beard, the heat radiating off him, the strength of the arm holding her. And she was so very tempted to allow the kiss to deepen, to dive in for an even more thorough taste of him. She was only human, and it had been much too long since she'd felt like this...

Shane came to his senses before she did. Drawing back into his seat, he disentangled her hand gently from his coat. “Good night, Elle. We'll talk tomorrow.”

She blinked a couple of times, bringing his face into focus. He wore a faint smile, but his eyes were too shadowed for her to see if the smile spread that far. She honestly had no idea how he felt about her kissing him.

“Good night, Shane.” Rather shaken by the unexpected intensity of what she'd started, she climbed out of the car and walked briskly toward her door, digging in her bag for her keys. She knew she'd recall the taste and feel of him long into the night ahead.

Shane didn't back out of the driveway until she had her front door open. He lifted a hand in a wave as he drove away. She stood in the open doorway until his red taillights had faded out of sight. Only then did she close the door with a sigh that sounded wistful even to her own ears.

* * *

"WHEN ARE YOU coming home, Shane? You don't have any more meetings lined up for this weekend, do you?"

"No, there's nothing scheduled," Shane told his uncle during a Saturday afternoon phone conversation. Shane sat in his car outside The Perkery, having parked just as his phone rang. He'd already given his uncle a report on the seemingly successful sales pitch that morning, and he was getting impatient to head inside for coffee and the promised chocolate doughnut. "I'd just like to spend a little more time here. I'll call you when I get back in town. I'll probably stop by your place on my way home to see Dottie. And I'll be at the office all day Monday."

"Guess I can't blame you for wanting a little time to yourself," Raymond Scanlon conceded. "You haven't had more than a handful of days off since you got out of the army, have you?"

Shane wasn't sure he'd had even that many, not if he counted all the days he'd felt compelled to handle family issues in addition to his work obligations. Which was most days. "Everything's okay there, right?"

"Oh, sure. We'll get by until you're back."

Shane wished his uncle could sound more confident. "How's Dottie?" he asked, using the nickname everyone, even her grandchildren, called his grandmother, Dorothy Scanlon.

"She's feeling better today, I think. She's been barking orders all morning. You know. The usual."

"And Parker?"

His uncle's sigh sounded clearly enough through their connection. "She's still fretting about anything and everything, but I keep telling her it will all be okay. Still, she'll feel more relaxed when you're back. You've always had a knack for reassuring her."

Raymond's daughter, Parker, worked for the family business and was a part-time dance instructor with plans to open her own studio eventually. She and her musician husband, Adrian Mendel, were the parents of a six-month-old boy, Aubrey. They'd recently moved into their first house, which was in need of a few repairs. Shane acknowledged ruefully that he and his younger cousin shared the bad habit of taking on too much and then worrying about how to get it done.

Shane hadn't yet told his family that he'd located Charlie's daughter. When he got home, he'd have to figure out a way to let them know that the child was healthy and seemed happy, though he doubted it would be easy to convince them they had no place in the life she had now. Parker and Adrian were still openly disappointed that Brittany hadn't given them the chance to raise Charlotte as their own. Had that happened, they'd lamented, she'd have grown up knowing her great-grandmother, her uncles, her biological family history.

As loving as Elle and Janet were toward the child, as much as she belonged with them now, the fact was that Charlotte had been born a Scanlon. That meant something to Shane's family. And, he had to admit, to him. He accepted that Elle was Charlotte's mother, but he couldn't help thinking occasionally of what might have been, had Charlie lived or Brittany made different choices.

Putting those thoughts out of his mind for the moment, he said, "You know you can reach me at any time if you need me for anything."

"Enjoy the break, Shane. Get some rest, walk on the beach, whatever you need to do to recharge. You deserve it after getting Wind Shadow Resorts for us."

"Trevor hasn't signed anything yet," Shane cautioned his uncle. "But it does look promising."

"I'm sure you got it. I have full faith in you. We all do."

"Thanks, Raymond."

It had been a compliment, Shane thought as he slid his phone back into his pocket. A sincere one. So why had it left him feeling more stressed than ever? He could only imagine how much more pressure the family would put on him if they knew he was in contact with the child they'd all grieved since Brittany had disappeared with her.

He couldn't help wondering if it was really the family piling on that pressure—or if he was doing it to himself. The weight of the promises he'd made to his brother and father sometimes pressed more heavily on his shoulders than he suspected either of them would have intended. Which didn't mean he wouldn't do everything within his power to honor those assurances.

He reached for the door handle and slid out of the car. It was a warmish day for the last week of October, so he left his leather jacket in the back seat. He was comfortable enough in his pullover and jeans as he walked into The Perkery.

He was probably playing with fire by showing up here again, but he kept being drawn back. And while he tried to convince himself he wanted to spend as much time as possible with his niece, he suspected he was equally unable to resist spending more time with Elle.

This would all be much easier if he wasn't so damned attracted to her. Despite the complicating circumstances, he'd had a hard time keeping his eyes off her last night—not to mention his hands. Spending the evening at the park with her and her friends had been the most fun and relaxing couple of hours he'd managed during the past few months. There'd been a moment of connection when he'd parked in front of her house that had made his body tense with awareness of her, but he'd warned himself to remember why he couldn't act on the attraction.

And then she'd kissed him.

He'd lain awake half aroused for quite a while last night, staring at the motel room ceiling and mentally listing all the reasons that kiss had been a big mistake. As much as he'd enjoyed it, as secretly pleased as he was that she'd wanted to kiss him, he shouldn't have let it happen while she was still unaware of his connection to her daughter. Of his reason for spending time with her—or at least, the reason he'd initially looked her up.

Maybe it had been too long since he'd been involved with anyone. The only semi-serious relationship he'd had since getting out of the service had ended when the woman said he spent too much time working and taking care of his family, leaving no time for her. Fair accusation, he supposed. As he'd reminded himself before, he had more than enough on his plate for now; he certainly didn't need to take on a single mom with her own business and an emotionally dependent widowed mother.

Not that there'd have been much chance of that, anyway. Not once Elle found out that he'd deceived her, if only by omission, from the first time they'd met. She'd made it clear last night that she'd always dreaded the possibility of one of Charlotte's biological relatives making contact. He had no plans to interfere with the perfectly legal adoption, but she couldn't be sure of that. She would have to wonder why he'd been hanging around.

At this point, he wasn't sure he could answer her. He was beginning to question it himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHANE FOUND THE shop more crowded than he'd seen it before. Customers chatted around the little tables and stood in line at the counter where Elle, Janet and Amber bustled to take orders and serve everyone. At first he figured he must have misjudged the peak of Saturday rush hour. After a second glance, he realized that many of the customers wore matching bright pink shirts promoting a charity marathon that had apparently taken place that morning. Must be time for post-run carbs-and-caffeine, he decided.

He thought about turning around and heading back out to return later, but Elle spotted him then with a smile and a little wave of greeting. Giving in, he threaded through milling pink shirts toward the counter. Elle had a coffee mug and a plated chocolate-filled doughnut waiting for him by the time he got there.

“You didn’t change your mind about wanting one of these, did you?” she asked, looking remarkably at ease despite the chaos. In fact, she seemed to thrive on it.

“I’ve been looking forward to that doughnut since I woke up this morning.”

She laughed and nudged the plate closer. “Then I’m happy to be of service. Enjoy.”

Damn. Something about the sound of Elle’s laughter erased every cautious, coherent thought from his head. When he looked at her bright smile, he found himself hungrier for a taste of her lips than for chocolate and pastry. She glanced at his mouth, and he had no doubt that she, too, was thinking of the kiss they’d shared.

Maybe he really did need a vacation. But he had to keep in mind that this wasn’t one. His reasons for being in Shorty’s Landing were serious and pressing.

Looking up from her toys in the play corral, Charlotte spotted him. She tossed a toy truck aside and sprang to her feet, clutching the plastic railing for balance with one hand while reaching out to him with the other. “Shane! Shane!”

He smiled at her from across the counter, his chest tightening. Her eyes were so much like Charlie’s. Very much like little Aubrey’s. Charlotte and Aubrey could have passed for siblings. “Hi there, Charlotte.”

Bouncing on her feet, she opened and closed her outstretched hand in appeal. “Shane! Want Shane!”

So she did get tired of being in that plastic fence-thing. He looked inquiringly at Elle. “I think she’d like to come out and sit with me for a while. Do you mind?”

Her hesitation was only natural, he supposed. After all, they still hardly knew each other. Truth was, he wouldn’t want her handing off the child to just any friendly stranger who wandered in. But maybe watching him with Charlotte at the festival, in addition to their very public surroundings, gave her some reassurance. “Of course not, if it wouldn’t interfere with your snack.”

“I’ll enjoy the company.”

He claimed a two-seat table just being vacated, set down his coffee and doughnut and then returned for Charlotte. Elle passed her over. The child gripped a picture book in one hand, refusing to leave it behind. “Just bring her back when you’re ready for a break. She’s perfectly happy with her toys most of the time.”

Elle turned then to take an order from another customer. Hoisting his niece onto his hip, Shane carried her to his table and sat with her on his knee. Still clutching her book, she watched him with big blue eyes as he took a bite of his doughnut.

With a grin, he broke off a small piece and offered it to her. She accepted it with a sweet, “Thank you, Shane,” then crammed it into her mouth, leaving a smear of chocolate on her soft cheek.

“Good?” he asked.

“Good,” she agreed with a fervent nod.

They shared the doughnut as they leafed slowly through Charlotte’s picture book. She pointed out the drawings on each page, naming every item with a familiarity that proved she knew this book very well. He watched her closely as she scanned the pages. Her eyes seemed to be tracking fine as far as he could tell, though granted he was no expert.

“Horsey,” Charlotte pronounced, poking a finger at the book.

“Yes. That’s a horse. A big brown horse,” he said, reading the caption.

He’d noticed Charlotte rarely used complete sentences, but he was confident it wouldn’t be long before she was chattering a mile a minute. Her dad had been quite the conversationalist, always the life of a party, rarely at a loss for amusing banter or a quick quip.

God, he missed his brother.

He swallowed painfully, then forced a smile when Charlotte pointed to a big-eyed cow and said, “Cow. Moo.”

“Yes, Charlotte, a cow says moo.”

She pointed again. “Big.”

“Pig,” he corrected her with a smile. “That’s a pig.”

“Big.”

“Pig. Puh-pig.”

“Puh-pig,” she repeated carefully. “Oink.”

He chuckled, then made piggy sounds that elicited giggles from her.

“Silly Shane,” she said with a shake of her head, making him laugh again.

Charlie would have adored this cute little girl. And Shane had no doubt the feeling would have been mutual. Everyone had loved Charlie.

Brittany had claimed to love Charlie, too—and Shane tended to believe her. Yet she’d given away his child without even offering to let Charlie’s close-knit family raise her, as she must have known they would have been happy to do. The sting of that rejection had hurt them all, especially after they’d gone to such great lengths to assure her of their willingness to help, to provide whatever she needed, to take her in as part of the family even after Charlie died.

Shane didn’t blame Brittany for giving up her parental rights; if anything, he admired her for making the best choice for the child’s welfare. He had no issues with adoption, considered it as valid a route to parenthood as biological pregnancy. But for Brittany to give her child to a stranger without even considering her family had been unjustified, in his opinion. Her choice, which he still didn’t entirely understand, had hurt them badly at a time when they were still grieving Charlie’s loss. It had been especially painful for Charlie’s father and grandmother, who’d have given anything for more time with his child.

“You two seem to be having fun,” Elle said from behind him.

Shane looked up in response to her voice. “We are. Charlotte’s been reading her book to me.”

“Puh-pig, Mommy.”

Elle reached down to smooth Charlotte’s tumbled curls. “Yes, sweetie. That’s a pig. What does a pig say?”

“Oink, oink.”

“Very good. Do you want your snack now? Gammy has bananas and yogurt for you in the kitchen.”

Shane checked his watch, surprised to see that it was almost two thirty. He glanced around the shop as Elle took Charlotte from him. Most of the pink shirts had disappeared while he’d been occupied with his niece. Only a few quiet customers were still settled in with their coffees and pastries.

He waited until Elle stepped back out of the kitchen with a tray of cookies for the display case before he moved to stand on the other side of the counter. He watched as she unloaded the tray into a waiting basket. “Those look good.”

“White chocolate and cranberry. Want to try one?”

“Sounds delicious, but since I just ate a chocolate doughnut, I should probably hold off on sweets until after I’ve had some real food.”

Elle slanted a smile up at him. “From the amount of chocolate on Charlotte’s face, I’m not sure you had much of that doughnut.”

“She might’ve had a bite or two,” he said, relieved that she didn’t seem perturbed. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, it’s fine. She had a good serving of vegetable soup for lunch and she’s having a healthy afternoon snack, so it’s okay if she had a little treat.” Elle closed the display case and straightened, setting the empty tray aside. “You’re very good with Charlotte. You really like kids, huh?”

It occurred to him that maybe she was a little wary of his interest in Charlotte. Understandable.

He drew a deep breath, thinking it was past time for him to level with her. “Elle, there’s something I should probably—”

He almost groaned when Janet burst through the kitchen door. This was the second time he'd been interrupted before he could come clean. "Elle, we need you back here now!"

Shane tensed, his flash of frustration dissolving into concern at Janet's expression. Was something wrong with Charlotte?

The same question must have crossed Elle's mind. She moved quickly toward her mother. "What's wrong?"

Janet had spotted Shane. "You said you were a medic, didn't you? You should come, too. We need you."

Shane didn't hesitate before rounding the end of the counter toward the kitchen, a vivid image of Charlotte's sweetly trusting face in his mind.

* * *

HER HEART POUNDING in her throat, Elle surged into the kitchen with Shane close behind her. The urgency of her mother's summons had scared her. Of course her first thought had been of Charlotte.

One quick visual sweep of the industrial kitchen let her know what had happened. Amber stood at the sink, a dishtowel wrapped around her right hand, blood soaking through the fabric. Staring at Amber with huge, worried eyes, Charlotte sat in a booster seat on a chair at the small table positioned at one end of the room, her snack forgotten in front of her. Her lower lip quivered.

While her mother moved to reassure Charlotte, Elle rushed to Amber's side. "How bad is it?"

Looking pale but calm, Amber shook her head. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I was prepping vegetables for tomorrow's soups and I cut my hand. I just need to stick a bandage on it and cover that with a glove while I'm working in the kitchen."

"I just knew something bad was going to happen today."

Elle shot her fretting mother a look. "Don't start, Mom. How deep is the cut, Amber?"

"I'm not sure. It's probably fine."

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Shane asked, stepping closer. "I've had some first-aid training."

Elle figured that as an army medic in a war zone, Shane had more than "some" training, but it seemed characteristic of him to downplay his proficiency. She watched while he unwrapped the towel from Amber's hand, and then she winced when she saw the gash he'd revealed. Blood still flowed freely from the wound in the heel of Amber's right hand. With the mandolin slicer and raw vegetables still scattered on the counter, it didn't take much imagination to mentally recreate the accident.

"Yeah, this is probably going to need a couple of stitches." Shane looked at Amber with almost apologetic sympathy. "A bandage isn't going to be enough."

Amber winced. "Are you sure?"

He was already pressing the towel against the bleeding cut again. "Pretty sure. Hold this tight until we can get you to an urgent care center. I can drive you."

"No." Giving Charlotte a reassuring pat, Elle's mom stepped forward. "It would be easier if I drive her since I know the way. And the shop will be responsible for the cost, right, Elle?"

"Yes, of course."

"We can't leave Elle here to run the shop by herself," Amber protested, her face pale but calm.

Elle was already untying Amber's apron. "I can handle it. Now that the post-marathon rush is over, it will probably be slow here for the rest of the day. We'll only be open for another hour and a half. I can call Kristen or DeShawn if I need more help. I'm sure one of them would come."

"I can help here until closing," Shane suggested. "I take orders pretty well," he added with a smile for Elle.

It seemed ungracious to decline his offer, though it was becoming increasingly difficult to think of Shane as merely a nice customer just passing through town. In the few days she'd known him, he'd made an impact on her, her mother, even her daughter. And that was starting to make her nervous.

Just why was he hanging around them so much? Was he really that attracted to her, that lonely in an unfamiliar town? He seemed harmless enough—other than to her long-denied hormones—but should she be more concerned? Or was the stress of Amber's injury simply making her paranoid again?

Maybe his notable attention had to do with his business? It occurred to her that perhaps he wanted her to put in a good word with some of the more prominent area business owners. She hoped that wasn't his intention.

"I have to get back out to the counter," she said as her mother bustled Amber through the back exit. She quickly wiped Charlotte's face then helped her down from the booster seat to take her out to the play corral in the shop.

Shane looked around the kitchen. "Is there something I can be doing in here to help?"

She motioned toward the counter where Amber had been working. "If you really want to help, you could clean that area."

"I'm on it," he said cheerfully, turning on the hot water and reaching for a clean kitchen towel and the bottle of disinfectant by the sink.

She turned toward the swinging door into the shop, then paused with the door half open, looking back at him. "You were starting to say something when we were interrupted?"

He was already scrubbing at scattered spots of blood. "Later. You'd better tend to your customers now."

She carried Charlotte out of the kitchen, letting the door swing shut behind them.

Fortunately for Elle's composure, if not for her profits, business was slow for the next hour, easy enough for her to handle on her own, especially with Shane's surprisingly efficient assistance. She didn't bother calling Kristen, figuring her partner would prefer not to work on her day off.

Two young couples entered together with a jingle of the door bells shortly before closing time. They dawdled awhile over their menu choices while Elle waited patiently with her hand hovering over the register. She heard Charlotte laughing and glanced toward the play corral. Shane was making silly faces at the child while he refilled clearly marked coffee station carafes with cream and skim milk from the kitchen. Charlotte followed his every move with obvious fascination. It was clear she'd fallen hard for her new friend Shane, which made Elle bite her lip for a moment before forcing a smile as her customers finally decided what they wanted.

Maybe Charlotte was too young to have her heart broken by a charming stranger who'd disappear from her life as quickly and unexpectedly as he'd appeared, but Elle wasn't quite as resilient. She rather envied her daughter's open, trusting nature, and the two-year-old's ability to savor the moment and Shane's attention, unencumbered by worry about the future. It bothered Elle to think that she couldn't at least enjoy an attractive man's company, even if only temporary, without questioning his every action.

The group of four didn't linger over their drinks and snacks. Tidily bussing their own table, they left with smiles and waves. Elle wiped down the table, taking the opportunity to relax and just breathe for a few blessed minutes, then turned to move behind the counter again.

Shane stood in the kitchen doorway, his shoulder braced against the jamb as he watched her stow away the cleaning cloth. "Eventful day, huh?"

"A long one so far," she agreed with a tired smile. "I hate that Amber cut herself. She downplayed it, but I know it must have hurt like crazy."

"I'm sure it did. But it should heal quickly now that she's having it tended to."

Elle reached into the play corral to pick up Charlotte and give her a little snuggle, making the child giggle. Holding her daughter on one hip, she tilted her head toward Shane then. "You seemed very comfortable handling all that blood and panic. You calmed everyone down and assessed the wound very quickly. I was impressed. Did you ever consider going into a medical career after your military service?"

He looked down to adjust the rolled-up sleeve of the pale blue shirt he wore with dark jeans. She wondered if he was avoiding her eyes when he replied lightly. “Yeah, that was one of the options I considered when I went in, but after Dad died, my uncle really needed my help to keep the family business going. I don’t regret my choice,” he concluded as he’d assured her once before.

Didn’t he? As she had the last time, she couldn’t help wondering if this had been the career he’d wanted. She’d bet he’d have made a wonderful doctor. He was certainly still young enough to attend medical school. Had he put aside a lifelong dream because of his family obligations? “How many employees does your company have?”

“Six, not counting my uncle and me. Two have been there since Dad and Uncle Raymond started the company almost twenty-five years ago.”

She suspected from his tone that he felt almost as strong an obligation to those employees as to his family. She hoped they all appreciated Shane’s efforts on their behalf.

“My cousin, Parker, works with us, too,” he added. “She handles social media and most of our correspondence. She’s really good at that. She also teaches dance—tap, ballet, jazz, that sort of thing—to kids, though she’s been on maternity leave for the past few months.”

“She’s a dancer? Is she good?”

He nodded. “She could have danced professionally, but she chose to teach, instead. She wants to open her own studio eventually.”

“Quite an ambition. You said she’s been on maternity leave?”

“Yeah, though she’s about ready to get back to it. Their little boy, Aubrey, is six months old. Everyone says he looks just like me at that age. Not to brag, but he’s cute as a floppy-eared puppy.”

She laughed softly. “You sound more like a proud uncle than a cousin.”

“I, uh—yeah.” Shane pushed a hand through his hair, his expression suddenly hard to read. “Parker and I were raised almost like siblings, so I feel that way about her. What do you need me to do now?”

“You can keep an eye on the counter while I finish up in the kitchen, if you like. Just let me know if someone comes in and I’ll come back out.”

“You got it, boss.”

Grinning at his teasing, she pushed through the kitchen door.

Her mother called shortly afterward to let her know that following a long wait to be seen by a doctor, Amber had been stitched up and cleared for duty. Elle told her mom there was no need for either of them to come back in today. She advised her mother to take Amber home, saying she could easily close up on her own.

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