



SUPER ROMANCE



The Soldier's Forever Family

GINA WILKINS

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A weekend to remember...leads to the surprise of his life. Adam Scott never thought he was missing out. Since leaving the military, he's been working at a luxurious resort: no commitments, no complications. Just the way he likes it. That is, until the morning Adam meets a young boy on the beach—a boy who looks very much like him. His son. Six years ago, Adam and Joanna Zielinski indulged in a passionate, no-strings weekend. Even now, their chemistry still burns. But Adam knows all too well that some men shouldn't be fathers. He'll protect his son the best way he knows how...even if it means saying goodbye to the family he never knew he wanted.

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"We had a lot of fun together before, didn't we?"

"We did," Joanna agreed, resting her hands on Adam's chest. She could feel his heart beating through his shirt.

His face was close enough to hers for her to feel his breath on her skin when he murmured, "I know I wasn't there for you, but I never forgot how good it was between us, even if it was only for a few days. If you— When you talk to Simon someday about how he was conceived, I don't want him to think it was just a weekend equivalent of a one-night stand."

When she talked to Simon? If she talked to Simon? His phrasing added to her unease, but he didn't give her a chance to speak before his mouth closed over hers with an intensity that implied he'd resisted the temptation as long as he could.

It happened every time Adam kissed her. Her pulse raced, her knees weakened, her skin warmed and tightened, becoming exquisitely sensitized to every point of contact between them.

It had been that way six years ago, and time had not changed a thing in that respect.

Dear Reader,

I'm so excited to present my first book for Harlequin Superromance! I've been a proud Harlequin author for more than twenty-five years and of over one hundred books, and each story is a new challenge filled with new friends I grow to love as I get to know them. I particularly enjoy exploring stories involving families—both traditional and nontraditional—and the love that binds them together.

In this book, a couple once separated and now unexpectedly reunited have to figure out how to ensure a happy future for themselves and their five-year-old son, Simon. Army veteran Adam Scott bears emotional and physical scars from an unhappy childhood and a war zone deployment. It's difficult now for him to give his trust, to make promises he's afraid he can't keep. Always responsible and cautious, psychologist Joanna Zielinski let herself be reckless and impulsive for one extraordinary weekend with Adam six years ago, and it left her with a broken heart and a baby. Since then, she has dedicated her life to protecting her child—and her heart. Can she and Adam overcome the fears and uncertainties that kept them apart to build a family based on love and trust? I had a great time accompanying them along that journey to healing, and I hope you enjoy their story.

From one Harlequin romance fan to another: here's to happy endings!

Gina Wilkins

The Soldier's Forever Family

Gina Wilkins



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 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 John and Kerry, the fiercest dad-daughter air hockey competitors ever. And for the rest of the family who have to bravely avoid flying pucks! I love my nutty family.

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

DAWN WAS ADAM SCOTT'S favorite time of day at the South Carolina coastal resort where he both worked and lived. Suspended between darkness and light, the beach was quiet but for the sound of the waves breaking on the shore and the drumming of his feet on the wet sand. He ran every morning before beginning a long day of work. He passed the occasional beachcomber or fisherman, but they rarely exchanged more than civil nods. Folks out this early weren't looking for conversation.

This was his time to clear his head, to organize his plans for the day. A chance to savor the solitude that was increasingly rare for him as his responsibilities at the resort had increased over the past three years. He didn't always go to bed alone, but he never invited anyone to join him on these morning runs. For this hour every morning, he had at least the illusion of complete freedom, no one making demands on his time or attention, no obvious reason he couldn't just keep running if the mood struck him.

A small form appeared ahead, hunched on the sand, barely visible in the pale light from the pink-streaked purple sky. Adam squinted, trying to make out the shape. Was it a dog? No. A child. A young one, at that. What was the kid doing out alone at this time of day?

Estimating the boy to be four, maybe five, Adam approached slowly. He didn't want to scare him. "Hey, buddy. Whatcha doing out here by yourself?"

Still crouched over a shallow tide pool, the boy looked up. Maybe it was a trick of shadows or the watery light of dawn, but there was something eerily familiar about this kid with his tumbled dark hair and smoky gray eyes. Perhaps Adam had seen him around the resort before? Clouds shifted overhead and the light brightened enough for him to see more clearly. No. He was sure they'd never met. But still there was something about this child...

"I'm not allowed to talk to strangers." The boy didn't look particularly concerned as he shared that rule.

"That's a good policy, but I work for the resort," Adam assured him, keeping his distance for now. "My name is Adam."

The child frowned thoughtfully. "You could still be a bad guy."

Adam was startled into a chuckle by the little guy's logic. "Well, yeah, I guess that's true. But I'm not."

Apparently satisfied, the boy extended one hand. "Do you know what kind of shell this is?"

Glancing at the cylindrical shell on the outstretched palm, Adam nodded. "It's a lettered olive. It belonged to a type of snail."

"It's cool. I want to find a starfish, too."

"You find them here occasionally. So, where are your parents? Do they know you're out by yourself?"

As if in answer, a woman's anxious voice called out. "Simon? Simon! Where are you?"

The boy winced. "That's my mom."

A woman emerged, almost running, from the canopy of tropical trees that marked the edge of the main resort grounds. She wore a tank top and plaid cotton shorts with flip-flops, and her collar-length brown hair was disheveled, as though she'd just climbed out of bed. "Simon! You know better than to wander off like this. You scared me half to death."

The voice was an echo from Adam's past. He took a step back, his startled gaze locked on the woman's anxious face. Her attention was focused on the boy, so she hadn't spared Adam more than a quick glance. Would she recognize him when she looked more closely, or had she forgotten all about the man she'd known so briefly all those years ago?

Joanna looked so much the same that it was hard to believe it had been six years since he'd last seen her. Her hair was a few inches shorter than the style she'd worn before, but was still a glossy chestnut that complemented her green eyes. Her fair skin was smooth, her cheeks flushed with heightened emotion. Seeing her now affected him as strongly as when he'd met her on this very beach. He'd wanted her from the moment their paths had first crossed. Apparently, that physical reaction hadn't changed in the ensuing years, though there was little to no chance the outcome would be the same this time.

He was aware that he'd changed a lot more than she had. When they'd met before, he'd been rail thin, brimming with impatient, brash energy. His dark hair had been cropped in a military cut. He was a healthier weight now, more muscle than sinew, tanned and generally relaxed. His last deployment had left physical traces in the carved lines around his eyes and mouth, in the scars hidden beneath his clothes, and in the strands of premature gray that peppered his hair, long enough now to brush his collar and usually mussed by the ocean breeze. He thought he looked more surfer than soldier these days. He wasn't surprised she hadn't immediately recognized him.

He couldn't believe she was really here. He'd figured she'd long since moved on with her life, finding new places to visit on vacations. Six years was a long time.

"I'm sorry I scared you, Mom. I wanted to find shells before the other people come out. You were asleep."

So she had at least one kid now. No doubt a husband waiting back in their suite. Adam told himself he was happy for her. Then wondered if he'd ever crossed her mind in the years since they'd parted.

Holding her wind-tossed hair out of her face with one hand, Joanna spoke more calmly now that her first surge of panic had subsided. "You should have woken me. Or asked last night and I'd have gotten up early with you. Don't ever come out again without telling me, understand?"

The boy sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

Joanna nodded in satisfaction, and then turned to look up at Adam. He realized he was still gaping at her. Belatedly remembering he was now an employee here, he gave her a professional nod. "Good morning."

He figured he'd leave it up to her to decide whether to acknowledge that they'd met before. Maybe she'd want to pretend that their vacation fling had never happened. Hell, maybe she didn't even remember him. For all he knew, she'd made much more of an impression on him than he had on her.

Joanna's green eyes widened, and her lips parted on a gasp of disbelief. "Adam?"

So she did remember. He cleared his throat before speaking, keeping his tone as even as possible. "Hello, Joanna. This is a surprise."

"You could say that." Her right hand fell on the boy's shoulder. Her face had paled—though he couldn't say whether it was from leftover concern for her son, shock at seeing him or a combination. "What are you doing here?"

"He works here," Simon piped up. "Does that mean it's okay to talk to him?"

Adam saw her fingers tighten on her son's shoulder before she replied. "Yes. It's okay. But you're still not allowed to come outside without my permission."

The boy pointed. "There's a tide pool on the other side of that big rock. Can I go look in it?"

Without taking her gaze from Adam, Joanna nodded. "Stay where I can see you."

It shouldn't be this hard to think of something to say to her. Though meaningless small talk would never be Adam's strong suit, he'd gotten better at it during his three years working at the resort. He made it a personal rule not to get intimately involved with guests, so he avoided that awkwardness. Still, this wasn't the first time in his life he'd unexpectedly run into a woman he'd slept with, and he was usually able to manage a few polite words. Apparently, none of those other women had affected him in quite the same way Joanna had.

He settled for the mundane. "How have you been, Joanna?"

She moistened her lips, visibly nervous. Was she still on edge because of her son's early disappearance? He couldn't imagine why running into Adam again would elicit such a dramatic response. They'd had nothing more than a few days of fun. Laughed, danced, walked, swam, enjoyed each other in bed a few times. A few damned good times. But thinking about that wasn't making this encounter any less awkward.

"I'm—um." She pushed her blowing hair out of her face, and he could see that her hand wasn't quite steady.

Seeing him again wasn't a happy surprise for her, apparently. Was she worried he would make things uncomfortable with her husband? Okay, he could understand that. How could he let her know that he was willing to pretend their fling never happened?

Giving her his most impersonal smile, he took another step back. "As your son told you, I'm on staff here, so if you or your family need anything at all during your stay, just let us know."

Her gaze darted from him to the boy and back again. She moistened her lips again. "Thank you."

She'd changed little in appearance, but something was definitely different about Joanna. The woman who'd drifted on occasion through his memories had been confident, animated, flirty. If there was, indeed, a husband waiting for her, he could understand why she wasn't flirting now, but he couldn't figure out why she seemed so stiff and nervous. The only explanation that made sense was that she was concerned he might interfere with her current relationship.

He made a sudden decision. “I’ve got a few vacation days built up.” More than a few, actually. Despite his employer’s encouragement, he hadn’t taken more than a handful of days off in the past three years. “I’m thinking about taking a week off. If I don’t run into you before I leave, it was nice seeing you again, Joanna.”

Though he’d have to scramble to make arrangements, maybe things would be easier for her. It was for a similar reason he’d slipped away after their long-ago weekend together, to save her—okay, to save them both—from awkward partings. At least this time he’d said goodbye.

He started to turn, but paused when Simon ran up to him again, another shell clutched in his hand. The boy gazed up at him eagerly, his steel-gray eyes squinting against the brightness of the rising sun. “Do you know what this one is?”

Man, there was just something about this kid’s eyes...

“That’s a banded tulip,” Adam said automatically. “Got a little chip out of it, but it’s still a nice shell for your collection.”

Simon repeated the name under his breath as if committing it to memory, then asked, “Will you help me look for a starfish?”

“Um—”

“It’s time for breakfast, Simon. We need to go back to the suite and get dressed for the day.”

The boy heaved a huge sigh but didn’t argue. Probably didn’t want to push his luck after sneaking out earlier. “Can we come back after breakfast?”

“Yes, we will.”

Simon held out both hands toward Adam, a shell displayed on each little palm. “Banded tulip. Lettered olive,” he recited slowly, nodding to each in turn. “Right?”

“Very good.”

“I still want to find a starfish. And a Scotch bonnet. My friend Liam found a Scotch bonnet once and I want to find one, too.”

Once again, Adam was impressed by how well Simon expressed himself for being such a little guy. Was he small for his age? “How old are you, Simon?”

“Five years and three months. Have you ever found a Scotch bonnet?”

So, a little older than he’d first thought. “I have, yes. I hope you find one during your stay. There are lots of shells in the gift shop. You can buy them there or study them to learn the names.”

“Okay. But I want to find my own.”

“Of course.”

“Simon, let’s go, please.” Joanna sounded as though she was losing patience quickly.

“Okay. But...just one more second. I think I see another shell over there.” Without waiting for permission, Simon dashed a few yards away and bent down to dig in the wet sand.

Joanna made a low, strangled sound of frustration.

Cute kid, Adam thought. She must have had him soon after...oh, damn.

He’d always been good at math, but it didn’t take a CPA to figure out that adding nine months of pregnancy to five years and three months took him back exactly six years. Feeling suddenly like the world’s biggest idiot, he realized why he’d thought the kid—Simon—had looked so familiar.

It had been like looking at a childhood photo of himself.

* * *

JOANNA ZIELINSKI WAS aware of almost the exact moment when the truth hit Adam. His head snapped back, his jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed as if against a blast of overbright light. He must have felt as though he’d just been poleaxed.

She knew the feeling. Seeing Adam here on this beach talking with Simon had stunned her into near incoherence—an uncharacteristic response from a trained psychologist used to giving lectures to college students. She always prepared thoroughly for those presentations. She couldn’t have practiced

for this. She'd had no clue that the man who'd slipped out of her bed six years earlier now worked at the very resort where they'd accidentally conceived a son.

"Simon," he said, his voice a taut growl now.

It wasn't a question, but still her first impulse was to shake her head. To lie about her son's parentage. Her second, and almost overwhelming, instinct was to snatch up her child and run back to the happy home she'd created for him on her own.

Her last encounter with Adam had turned her meticulously outlined, fiercely pursued life plan upside down. Something told her this unexpected reunion would have similarly far-reaching and life-changing consequences. For her, for Adam and for Simon.

She banked down her seething emotions and squared her shoulders. She'd always taken pride in her integrity, and she wasn't going to abandon her principles now.

"Yes," she said in answer to the question he hadn't uttered. She kept her voice low so her words wouldn't carry to Simon. "I didn't know it for a couple of months afterward, but I was pregnant when I left here six years ago."

"By me."

That didn't seem to be worthy of a response, so she let it pass.

He pushed his left hand through his hair, and she thought she detected a slight unsteadiness in his fingers. This was obviously hitting him hard. Understandably.

Suddenly self-conscious, she smoothed the hem of the purple tank top she wore with purple-and-green plaid shorts. It certainly wasn't the first time Adam had seen her rumped from sleep, but that seemed like another lifetime now.

She noted Adam wasn't wearing a ring, which didn't mean he wasn't married or otherwise committed. Was he thinking of the awkward discussions he might need to have with his wife? Did Simon have siblings? If so, how would this development affect them? How was she going to explain all this to her son?

Adam moved his hand to the back of his neck. His tousled dark-coffee hair was longer now. Thick. Touchable. He'd gained a few pounds in the ensuing years, but they looked good on him. Really good.

It shook her again when their eyes met. His were the same smoke-gray as Simon's. Exactly as she'd remembered, though she'd always pictured them gleaming with a smile. He wasn't smiling now.

"Did you even try to find me?" he asked, his voice low and gruff.

Her chin rose. "You didn't leave me an address, if you'll remember." Or even a goodbye, she added silently, her chest clenching with the memory of waking up and realizing he was gone. That the fantasy was over.

She couldn't do this now. She needed time to gather her thoughts, to get her nerves under control. She took a quick step backward on the damp sand. "Simon needs his breakfast. If I don't see you again before you go on vacation..."

His eyes narrowed sharply. "I'm not going anywhere. We have to talk. You owe me that much."

Six years of emotions flooded through her—shock, stress, joy, exhaustion, wistfulness, laughter and tears. Her voice was barely audible even to her over the wind and waves and seagulls when she responded, "I don't owe you anything."

With that, she turned and hurried to her son's side, taking his hand to lead him back to their suite. Simon cooperated without protest, probably sensing this wasn't the time for rebellion.

She doubted she had completely avoided a painfully awkward conversation with Adam. She'd postponed it, at best. But at least he wasn't trying to detain her, which would give her a chance to prepare for whatever was to come.

* * *

JOANNA SETTLED SIMON at the table on their balcony where he could look over the resort while he ate the breakfast of fruit, yogurt and granola she served from the kitchenette in their

two-bedroom suite. They had a spectacular view of the beautifully maintained grounds, which were centered around a small, natural-looking lake decorated with blooming aquatic plants, fish-feeding piers and paddle boats. Masses of colorful flowers and shady trees lined winding paths. The sprawling U-shape of the resort allowed a glimpse of the ocean from their balcony through clearings in the trees.

To keep Simon occupied for a few extra minutes, Joanna set up her computer tablet in front of him with an educational video about seashells, his latest intellectual passion. Screen time during a meal was a rare treat for him, and he was obviously delighted. She left the sliding doors open when she went inside, but she moved across the room so he wouldn't hear her when she made a call.

Her sister answered on the second ring, though her groggy voice made it clear she'd been roused from sleep. "Joanna? What's wrong?"

Finally letting go of the tight rein on her emotions, Joanna blurted, "Maddie, he's here."

"What? Who's there? Are you okay?"

Hearing the sudden anxiety in her younger sister's voice, she drew a deep breath and tried to speak more calmly. "I'm okay. Mostly. I'm at the resort with Simon. And...and Adam's here."

"Adam? Wait. The Adam?"

Joanna swallowed hard and nodded, then remembered Maddie couldn't see her. "Yes."

"Oh, my gosh, what's he doing there?"

"He works here."

Maddie gave an incredulous laugh. "You're kidding."

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?"

Her sister grew abruptly serious. "No. Sorry. You must have been shocked."

"That's one way to describe it." The feelings swirling inside her were so fierce, so complicated that she hardly knew how to define them. Honestly, she'd never expected to see Adam again. It had never even occurred to her when she'd booked this trip that Adam would be here, especially not on staff.

"Did he remember you? Do you think he knew you were coming this weekend? Maybe he saw your name on the reservations list?"

Remembering the look on Adam's face when he'd said her name, Joanna replied, "Yes, he remembered me. But I think he was as stunned as I was when we ran into each other this morning. I'm pretty sure he didn't expect to see me here again."

Especially with his child in tow, she thought, biting her lower lip.

Their brief affair had been unplanned and intense. For the first time in her focused and responsible twenty-seven years, Joanna had felt completely unfettered. Passionate, desirable, spontaneous, adventurous. So unlike her usual self. They'd met on the first night of solitary long weekend vacations for both of them and had been inseparable afterward. They'd spent hours walking on the beach, talking, laughing and holding hands. Flirting. Dining. Dancing. Making love. Just having fun, with no strings or expectations on either side.

She'd thought they'd been careful despite the playfulness of their time together. She'd discovered a few weeks after returning home that they hadn't been quite careful enough.

"Does he know yet? About Simon, I mean," Maddie clarified unnecessarily.

"He sort of leaped to conclusions when he found out how old Simon is. Maybe he saw the resemblance. Simon really does look just like him, Maddie. I've always known that, but seeing them side by side...well, it's almost spooky."

"Oh, my gosh. So, what now?"

"I don't know," she admitted in little more than a whisper.

"What did he say? Was he happy? Mad? Skeptical? What?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I didn't give him much of a chance to say anything. I told him I had to make Simon's breakfast, and I bolted. He said he wants to talk later. I could tell he was shocked, of course, but the only question he asked was whether I'd tried to find him."

As the only person to whom Joanna had confided all the details of that vacation fling, Maddie was indignant. “This from the guy who ghosted you without even a ‘Hey, babe, I’ll call you sometime’?”

“Which is basically what I told him,” Joanna agreed, grateful her sister understood so well. There’d been a time when she’d never have believed she and Maddie would have this mutually supportive relationship. This closeness was one of the two good things that had come of her brief affair with Adam.

She’d always planned to tell Simon the truth about his parentage at some point. She’d even thought this trip would be a good time to tell him that she’d met his biological father here, if it seemed appropriate. She’d planned to leave it up to him to decide if, when he was older, he wanted to find his father. Not that she’d have been able to assist him much. She and Adam hadn’t exchanged many personal details during their time together.

Maybe she could have located Adam before now, had she put in more effort. She could’ve persisted in her request for resort records. As a professor, she had strong research skills. There should have been ways to track him down, though his name was common enough to have made it difficult without more information. She could have even hired a private investigator, for that matter. She’d found plenty of reasons to rationalize her choice not to pursue the search. For one, Adam had been clear from the start that he’d had no interest in commitments. He hadn’t elaborated, but she’d gotten the impression he’d had important plans for after his vacation.

Having just defended her doctoral thesis and on the verge of beginning a new phase of her chosen career, Joanna hadn’t been looking for a serious relationship, either. She’d simply asked him to assure her he wasn’t married. Though she’d been amenable to a no-strings vacation fling, sleeping with a married man would have crossed a line for her. He’d promised her he was single and unattached, and she’d believed him. Foolish, perhaps, but she’d sensed from the beginning that Adam was trustworthy.

“How did it feel? Seeing him again, I mean?”

Joanna still didn’t know how to answer that question. It wasn’t as if she’d been in love with Adam. She hadn’t known him long enough for that. Of course, she’d thought of him since; after all, she lived with a daily reminder of him. And maybe she’d wondered if the blazing sexual chemistry between them might have led to more had the timing and circumstances been different. Their situation seemed even more problematic now, considering everything that had happened in the intervening years and the big life changes looming for her and Simon.

“Do you think he’ll want to be part of Simon’s life now? Is he going to cause you problems? If so, he’d better damned well be aware that he owes six years of back child support. Is he married now? That could be awkward, huh? Will he—”

“Maddie,” Joanna broke in quietly. “I don’t know any of those answers yet.”

And it was the not knowing that had her stomach tied in tight knots.

“Mom? Is there more yogurt?”

“Yes. Just a sec,” she called back to her son. “I should go, Maddie. I just needed to hear your voice.”

“Do you want me to come? I can be there in a few hours.”

Because she knew her sister would absolutely drop everything and rush to her side, Joanna blinked back tears. She was so very thankful they’d set aside their early differences and had become friends as adults. “I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Good luck, Jo.”

“Thanks.” She was pretty sure she’d need it.

“Mom?”

“Coming,” she said. She put down her phone and moved to get the yogurt from the kitchenette fridge. Pausing in the open doorway with the container in hand, she studied her son with an ache of

love in her heart. He looked so serious and sweet dawdling over his breakfast, a frown of concentration on his face as he memorized everything he was seeing on the tablet screen.

He was her everything.

Panic momentarily closed her throat. Her muscles quivered with a strong, if ill-advised, urge to run. She could be packed and checked out in less than twenty minutes. She could leave a note for Adam, which was more than he'd left her. Would he try to find them now that he knew about Simon? That would hardly be difficult if he worked for the resort and had access to her address. Would he disrupt the comfortable life she'd made? Or would he be relieved, instead, if she made it clear she'd ask for nothing from him?

No, she thought, moving forward to spoon a dollop of yogurt over the fruit remaining in Simon's bowl. She wouldn't run. She owed it to Simon, if not to Adam, to deal with this directly. As for her own emotions about seeing Adam again—well, she would try to sort those out later.

"You knew that man on the beach, didn't you, Mom?" Simon asked, glancing up from his bowl with a smear of yogurt at the corner of his mouth.

She smoothed a cowlick at the back of his head. "Yes, I know him."

"What's his name?"

"Adam." She saw no need just then to add the surname.

"Did you meet him last time you were here?"

She'd told Simon when she'd booked this vacation that she'd visited the resort once before, though of course she'd left out the details. What on earth had made her come here again? When she'd made the reservation just after her son's fifth birthday, she'd assured herself Simon would like what she remembered about the place—the quiet beaches, the pools, the day programs for kids. She'd told herself it was time to deal with her memories of her son's father, to see the place again through a fresh, more realistic perspective. If she'd had any idea of what—who—she would find here, she wasn't sure she'd have had the courage to follow through. "Yes, I met him then."

To her relief, Simon's attention moved on now that she'd satisfied his curiosity. "When do I leave for the aquarium?"

She smiled, pleased that he seemed eager for the arrangements she'd made for him. Through the resort reservation website, she had enrolled him in the Explorers Club, a program for kids his age. Each afternoon this week, he would join five other children and two certified teachers for field trips and activities based on introductory oceanography. She'd thought Simon would be less likely to be bored with the mother-son vacation if he interacted with other kids in an educational setting. Her bright, inquisitive child was always excited by learning new things. As an academic herself, she wanted to encourage him to continue to view learning as fun.

"You'll leave right after lunch. One o'clock. What would you like to do in the meantime? Go swimming? Walk on the beach? Build a sandcastle?"

He nodded abstractedly. "Okay, but first can we look up lettered olives on the computer?"

"Lettered olives?"

He picked up the shell he'd found on the beach that morning, a smooth, mottled cream-and-tan cylinder. "Mr. Adam said it's a lettered olive shell, and he said it's from a snail, but that's all I know. The video I just watched didn't talk about lettered olives. Can we learn more about it?"

Mr. Adam. She felt a wry smile twist her lips in response to the name. "Yes, but we're not going to spend all of this beautiful morning on the computer."

Which Simon would happily do if she let him. He loved surfing kids' sites and watching educational videos, many of them geared to children several years ahead of him in school. Though he would start kindergarten in the fall, he was already reading at a third-grade level and was several grades ahead in math.

While doing her best to promote her gifted child's intellectual development, Joanna made sure he stayed physically and socially active, which was another reason she'd signed him up for the day

camp program. She also needed some time on her own to rest and prepare for an upcoming job change that was exciting but would involve a major upheaval in their lives. She'd promised that she would take advantage of at least a few of those free hours just to pamper herself. She'd put in too many long hours during the past year, spending every spare moment with her son, and she craved the downtime she'd arranged for these precious vacation days.

She grimaced as it occurred to her that she'd rationalized her holiday fling with Adam in much the same way six years ago, considering it a reward to herself after the grueling months of preparation for her doctoral defense. She'd booked the trip a few months earlier with her then-boyfriend, Tim. They'd planned it as their first getaway together, a step forward in a relationship that had seemed promising at the time. They'd broken up a few weeks before leaving, when Tim admitted he wanted to see other women and she'd realized that didn't bother her as much as it should have. Rather than cancel her reservations, she had decided to celebrate both her degree and her newfound independence in her own way. And she'd made the most of that heady freedom with Adam.

Things were much different now, of course. She'd been young and completely independent then. Now there was Simon, and nothing was more important to her than being a good mother to him.

She just wished she knew what she was going to say to his father.

* * *

MADDIE ZIELINSKI HAD a hard time focusing on her work Monday. Her thoughts were with her sister and the trepidation she'd heard in Joanna's voice that morning. Understandable. If there was one thing Maddie could say for certain about her older sister, it was that Joanna adored her son. For that matter, so did Maddie.

As unplanned as he'd been for Joanna, as unsettling as the circumstances of his conception had been to their parents, little Simon had brought Maddie's immediate family closer than they'd ever been. And she hated the thought of some stranger—even if he was technically his father—coming from out of the blue to disrupt the comfortable rapport they'd developed.

Would Adam want to insert himself into the boy's life now that he'd learned of his existence? She conceded reluctantly that she could understand if he did, but how did they know if this would be a good thing for Simon? The child had been sheltered and cherished his whole life, given every advantage Joanna could provide for him, raised with love and encouragement and judicious guidance. They knew nothing about Adam.

Maddie had no doubt he was personable, good-looking, reasonably intelligent—how else could he have charmed her usually straight-laced sister into bed within a few hours of meeting her?—but for all they knew, he could be a real piece of work beneath a slick facade. Regrettably, Maddie had more experience with the type than Joanna. Joanna might have met a few players in academia, but as a defense attorney, Maddie encountered them every day. She'd gotten involved with some real jerks in her personal life, too. Fallen for a few before she'd decided she'd rather be single and sane than hooked up and stressed out. She might be the younger sister, but when it came to the dating game, she considered herself more worldly and realistic than her sister.

Despite Joanna's assertion that she could handle this, Maddie wondered if maybe she owed it to both her and Simon to make sure their best interests were protected. She wouldn't call herself an objective party, of course, since her full loyalty was squarely with her sister and nephew. Maybe Adam was a decent guy—maybe he'd be a great role model for young Simon—but being naturally cynical and experience-hardened, she felt compelled to find out for herself if he could be trusted.

CHAPTER TWO

“ADAM? YOU WITH ME, bro?”

Frowning, Adam realized he'd been lost in his own thoughts during his meeting with Trevor Farrell, owner of the Wind Shadow Resort. Despite his efforts to pay attention, he'd heard maybe every other sentence Trevor had spoken during the past half hour. Shaking his head in apology, he murmured, “Sorry, Trev. Got a lot on my mind today.”

It wasn't like him to be distracted, so he wasn't surprised when his employer asked, "Is everything okay?"

Adam started to brush off the question, then hesitated. Trevor would surely run into Joanna and Simon at some point during their stay. Would he remember her from that long-ago weekend? Considering Trevor's phenomenal memory, it was entirely possible.

"Do you remember when we met six years ago?"

Trevor lifted an eyebrow. "Of course."

Adam had won an all-expense-paid, long-weekend visit to the then-new resort in a raffle to benefit a veterans' charity group. Somehow Trevor had found out Adam was headed overseas for a tough deployment soon afterward, and he'd gone out of his way to greet him. He'd encouraged Adam to let him know if there was anything he could do to make the vacation more enjoyable. Having served a four-year hitch himself before opening the first in a planned chain of American beach resorts, Trevor was an enthusiastic supporter of the military. He'd encouraged Adam to look him up if he needed anything when he got out. Though Adam hadn't really expected to take advantage of that offer at the time, he'd somewhat impulsively headed this way when he'd been looking for a job after his honorable discharge. Trevor had hired him on the spot.

Adam had thought he'd stay long enough to build a little nest egg and get used to civilian life again, then move on to the next adventure. Somehow, he'd ended up as Trevor's unofficial second-in-command instead. And in the midst of that development, he and Trevor had become friends.

"Do you also remember the woman I met while I was here?"

A fleeting smile tugged at Trevor's lips. "Her name was Joanna, and she was...memorable. I could tell you were mesmerized by her, and it was no wonder."

Mesmerized. That was one way to put it, though hardly a comfortable description for Adam. Always respectful of his privacy, Trevor had never asked about Joanna during the past three years, nor had Adam mentioned her. But it seemed she'd made an impression on both of them.

He leaned forward in his chair, bracing his forearms on his thighs. "She's here. She's staying at the resort."

After a moment of silence, Trevor tapped a few keys on his computer. "Joanna Zielinski," he read from the screen. "She and a companion have a third-floor, ocean-view suite in Seafoam Lodge until the end of the week." He looked up, meeting Adam's eyes. "Awkward."

"Her companion is her son. Simon. He's five years, three months old."

Trevor could do the math just as well as Adam. His blue eyes widened, the only sign of shock he allowed himself to show. "So..."

"He looks just like me, Trev."

"That's not quite as reliable as a DNA test." His friend frowned now, obviously weighing all the potential consequences. Trevor tended to be suspicious, so Adam wasn't surprised when he asked, "Do you think she came here looking for you?"

"I'm almost certain she was as surprised to see me as I was her."

"Almost certain."

Adam nodded. Was Joanna really a good enough actress to have so convincingly pulled off that look of stunned dismay? He didn't know her well enough to be sure, but her reaction had certainly looked real enough.

"Did you ask if the boy's yours?"

Adam swallowed hard. "She said she was pregnant when she left here six years ago."

"Which doesn't mean she wasn't pregnant when she arrived," Trevor pointed out.

Was it possible she...? No. Adam pictured Simon's face again and doubted it was coincidence that the kid was his spitting image.

"She just happened to show up at the resort where you work almost exactly six years after you met here? With a child who could be your son?"

Clearing his throat, Adam nodded. "From what little I could determine in a very brief encounter, yes, that's her story."

"Should we put Walt on alert?"

Walt was another of their friends. Another veteran. And an attorney.

After a moment, Adam shook his head. While he understood and appreciated Trevor's concern, he preferred to handle his own problems as much as possible. "Not yet, thanks. I need to talk to Joanna first. Find out what's going on."

"That's fair. So...how do you feel about all this, Adam? Are you okay?"

He wasn't quite sure how to answer that one. He was still reeling, still a long way from coming to terms with the potential consequences of this morning's shock. "I guess I'm kind of numb. Not sure how I feel about it yet. Like I said, I need to talk with Joanna."

"And if the boy is your son?"

His son. The very words sent a tangle of emotions through him that he couldn't begin to identify. As much as he hated to admit it, he suspected fear was among the strongest ones.

"I'll deal with it."

Somehow.

* * *

THE CHAUFFEURED VAN for the field trip was already parked beneath the spacious porte cochere of the guest relations building when Joanna and Simon made the short walk from their suite. In addition to the concierge desk, a soaring lobby and a well-stocked bar, this large, three-story structure held a coffee and pastry shop with patio seating, an arcade, a tech center, conference rooms and an extensive gift shop. The management offices were located on the top floor.

The three guest-quarters buildings were all designed in a style similar to this one, distinguished by thematic names—Seafoam Lodge, Sandy Shore Lodge and Gull's Nest Lodge. Joanna had stayed in Gull's Nest during her previous visit but had specifically requested Seafoam this time, only partially because it provided the best views.

Another boy and four girls clustered around the van, getting to know each other and the teachers who would escort them to the aquarium. Simon appeared to be the youngest of the group, or at least the smallest, but he was accustomed to that. The other boy seemed relieved not to be so outnumbered now.

Joanna spoke with both the teachers and a few other parents hanging around to make sure the van got away safely. She was pleased to see her son and the other boy talking, their heads bent over the shell in Simon's hand as Simon shared everything he'd learned about lettered olives that morning. The other boy seemed interested, and one of the girls edged closer to listen, so Joanna was reassured that Simon would make friends here.

Two men stepped out of the building, both dressed in the emerald polo shirts and lightweight khaki pants that identified them as staff of Wind Shadow Resort. One was Trevor Farrell, the owner. Though she hadn't seen him since arriving late yesterday, she recognized him from her previous stay.

Adam stood at Trevor's side. They made a striking pair, both tanned and fit, Adam dark-haired and gray-eyed, Trevor a fraction taller, his hair lighter, his eyes blue. They wore the same basic uniform as all the resort staff, but it was obvious to her, at least, that these men were in charge. She wondered what Adam's job was and when he'd started it. He certainly looked at home.

She was having a hard time drawing her eyes away from him. But then, she'd had that same issue last time, too. As it had before, his smile made her heart race. She hoped her cheeks weren't as flushed as they felt.

Ever the gracious host, Trevor stopped to greet the assemblage. "Good afternoon," he said, his smile pleasant and practiced. "Getting ready to leave for the aquarium?"

One of the teachers, whose nametag identified her as Miss Deborah, grinned and nodded, making her blond ponytail sway. “We’re just about to load the van. As you can see, the children are excited.”

“I know you’ll have a great time,” Trevor assured them, then glanced at the cluster of parents. “For those I haven’t met yet, I’m Trevor Farrell, and this is my associate, Adam Scott. If there’s anything we or any of the staff can do for you during your stay, I hope you won’t hesitate to ask.”

Joanna chewed her lower lip as Trevor and Adam moved among the group, shaking hands and making small talk. She clasped her hands in front of her, wishing there was a way to make a quick escape before they came to her.

As the other children were being strapped into the van, Simon broke away to rush back toward her, holding out the shell. “Will you keep this for me, Mom? I don’t want to lose it.”

“Of course.”

Trevor and Adam reached them then. Adam’s expression was inscrutable behind his nonrevealing, professional smile.

Trevor spoke first. “Ms. Zielinski. What a pleasure to see you again.”

“You, too, Mr. Farrell.” Did he really remember her, or had Adam alerted him?

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that Adam’s attention was focused on Simon. Her fingers tightened around the shell until the edges dug into her palm. She loosened her grip before she crushed the treasure entrusted to her care.

“I’m Simon,” her son piped up excitedly. “I’m going to the aquarium.”

Trevor glanced down automatically. Joanna saw his smile flicker slightly when he studied the boy. She figured the resemblance to Adam had to be obvious to anyone, and especially to someone who apparently now knew Adam well. “Hello, Simon. It’s very nice to meet you. I hope you have a great time.”

Simon looked eagerly at Adam. “Did you know the lettered olive shell comes from a predatory snail that eats small crust—crust—?”

“Crustaceans,” Joanna supplied quietly. He probably would have come up with the word on his own, but he was being summoned by the other ponytailed teacher, Miss Molly. Joanna gave him a gentle nudge. “They’re waiting for you, Simon. Have fun. I’ll be right here when you get back.”

“A predatory snail?” Trevor murmured, watching as Simon dashed toward the van. “And he’s only five?”

Joanna was accustomed to this question when people heard her son speak. “He’s academically advanced for his age.”

“I would say so. Cute kid.” Trevor’s expression revealed little of his thoughts.

“Thank you.”

Adam shifted a step closer to Joanna. “I’ll catch up with you later, okay, Trev?”

Trevor nodded and turned to leave without further comment. The van drove away with the eager children waving from the windows, and their parents scattered. Joanna was left alone with Adam for the first time since he’d crept out of her bed all those years ago.

He looked at her for a moment, then waved a hand toward the walkway leading to the lodges. “I’ll walk you back.”

Wanting desperately to refuse, she scrambled for a reasonable excuse. But because that made her feel spineless, she tamped down her nerves and nodded. Without another word, she turned and headed briskly toward her building, leaving him to follow if he chose.

Seafoam Lodge opened into a beautiful courtyard filled with flowers, benches and a small koi pond with a center fountain. No one else was in the courtyard at the moment. Stopping beside the koi pond, Joanna pushed her hands into the pockets of the yellow sundress she wore. She tended to dress in tailored dark garments at the medical school where she taught in the rehabilitation department.

She'd packed comfortable, breezy clothes for this vacation she'd foolishly predicted would be fun and stress-free.

Adam stood in front of her, looking strong, solid and all grown male even as the steady breeze ruffled his hair, lifting a cowlick very much like the one she'd smoothed on her son's head earlier. Unwillingly assaulted by memories of running her hands over that long, hard body—and of him doing the same to her—she bit her lower lip.

The silence between them was growing oppressive, but Joanna left it up to him to speak first. She didn't know what to say, but she also wanted to judge his state of mind. He appeared to be doing the same thing, which led to an awkward standoff. She caved first, motioning toward one of the benches nestled into the landscaping. "Maybe we should sit down."

He lifted one eyebrow. "You really want to talk about this out here?"

As if in response to his words, a silver-haired couple dressed in tennis clothes and carrying rackets appeared from the direction of the courts, greeting Adam familiarly as they strolled toward the lodge entrance.

With a sigh, she conceded the point. "Let's go up to my suite," she said, aware that it was hardly a gracious invitation. Judging by his expression as he fell into step beside her, he understood why she'd spoken so curtly.

Her hand wasn't quite steady when she swiped her key card. She led him inside, then crossed the room to open the French doors to the balcony. The living area was spacious enough, with comfortable seating, a big-screen TV and the kitchenette on the other side of an eating bar. Yet it felt vaguely claustrophobic with Adam seeming to take up so much room. "Why don't we sit outside? The balcony should be private enough."

After a momentary hesitation, he moved past her through the doors to the table where Simon had eaten his breakfast. He reached down to pick up something from one of the chairs, straightening with a slightly ragged stuffed dragon in one hand. "Almost sat on this."

Their fingers brushed when she took the toy. She felt the impact all the way to her toes. She was aware of the heat in her cheeks when she took a too-quick step backward, but she hoped Adam didn't notice. If he did, he had the tact not to mention it as he sank into his seat.

Settling into the chair across from him, she made a concerted effort to speak lightly, with an ease she was far from feeling. She was afraid if she let her composure slip now, she'd have a hard time reclaiming it. She set the stuffed dragon on the table. "This is Norbert. Simon's usually more careful with him. I guess he was excited about the field trip."

"So. Simon."

Another faint tremor went through her, but she thought she controlled it better this time. She met his gaze. "I realized I was pregnant a few weeks after I returned home six years ago. It was quite a shock. I thought we'd been so careful. And before you ask, there was no chance that I was already pregnant when I met you. You were the only man I was with when he was conceived."

A muscle twitched in his jaw, which she took as confirmation that the question had occurred to him.

She moistened her lips. "I named him Simon Eryk Zielinski. Eryk was my grandfather's name."

Adam pushed a hand through his wind-tossed dark hair, and she could see the tension that gripped him. They hadn't exchanged a lot of personal information when they'd met before, but she'd assumed he was close to her own age. She was now thirty-three, but the passing years had aged him more. Not so much in appearance. He was as fit and as attractive, if not even more so, as he'd been then. But beneath the polite smile he'd worn among the resort guests, she'd detected a solemn gravity that hadn't been present before.

She wondered again how he'd ended up working here, what else he'd done since she'd seen him last. She wondered what he was thinking. Feeling.

His stormy gray eyes met hers and she swallowed hard. For a moment, she felt a bit intimidated. Shaking off the feeling, she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders, waiting for him to speak.

“You didn’t really answer me earlier,” he said in a low voice. “Did you try to find me?”

She spread her hands. “You made it clear when you left that you weren’t interested in future contact. When I found out I was pregnant, I called the resort, but the woman in the office wouldn’t give me your information. Short of hiring a private investigator, I didn’t know what else to do.”

His eyes sparked and for a moment, she thought he was going to tell her that was exactly what she should have done.

She spoke forcefully again before he had a chance. “Do you remember what you said to me that first night, when we ended up in my bedroom after walking on the beach?”

He frowned as though he wasn’t sure where this was leading. “Not specifically.”

“You said there was no need to exchange contact information because you had plans that didn’t include a relationship. You made it clear a little vacation fun was all you wanted. As I told you then, I wasn’t looking for anything more, either. I figured the way you left proved you hadn’t changed your mind.”

He had the grace to wince at the reminder of the way he’d slipped out. “I had an early flight that day, and it seemed easier to skip goodbyes. Of course, I had no idea—”

She shook her head. “I’m not asking for an apology. You were never anything but honest with me. I was just as happy to avoid any awkwardness.”

Which was true, for the most part. Once she’d gotten past the disappointment of waking to find him gone, thinking she would never see him again, she’d decided he’d chosen exactly the right way to end things. The brief affair had been spontaneous, hot and fun, and it wouldn’t have felt right to wrap it up with a perfunctory hug or a bittersweet kiss. She’d told herself she didn’t regret a thing, that their time together would be a memory she would privately cherish for years to come.

Then she’d realized she was pregnant, and she’d known the memories wouldn’t be so easy to tuck away.

“I wasn’t apologizing,” Adam said curtly. “Did you really want me to leave with a handshake?”

She was taken aback by how closely his words echoed her own thoughts.

Their gazes held for several long moments. Was he replaying some of the same memories that had crept out of the past to haunt her now? Was he hearing sounds of quiet laughs and soft moans, of hungry kisses and exultant gasps? How many times had she woken in the middle of the night after dreams filled with the rush of the ocean and the touch of his hands?

Those rare but vivid dreams had taken her by surprise each time. She’d have sworn she’d long since put the weekend behind her. But then again, she lived with a daily reminder of her days and nights with Adam, so it was only natural she’d have thoughts of him from time to time. Right?

Swallowing hard, she rose to her feet. She craved a few moments to herself, just a chance to clear her thoughts, to lock away the memories again. “I need a glass of water. Can I get you anything?”

He looked as though he were going to decline, but then seemed to change his mind. “Yeah, water sounds good. Thanks.”

She doubted he was any thirstier than she was, but maybe he, too, thought it a good idea to change the tone of this conversation. To focus on what needed to be their priority.

Their son.

* * *

TOO RESTLESS TO SIT, Adam stood when Joanna did, then turned to lean against the railing and gaze moodily out at the view. The suites were arranged to maximize privacy with palmettos and flowering trees between the balconies. Vacationers milled on the beach in the distance. A young couple strolled hand in hand through the courtyard below, seemingly oblivious to anyone around them.

He vaguely remembered what that felt like.

Absorbed in their own pursuits, no one looked his way. And even if they did glance up, they couldn't know that his entire life had changed since he'd set out for a jog that morning.

He had a son.

Despite Trevor's warnings, Adam had little doubt the boy was his. He suspected DNA tests would merely confirm his gut instinct, though he wouldn't object to the formality. He still found it hard to believe Joanna had deliberately sought him out now for any of the reasons Trevor had implied—for any reason, actually. In fact, she seemed poised to run, taking her—taking their—son without a goodbye. He could hardly blame her for that impulse, considering.

She'd claimed to be unable to locate him. Obviously she hadn't tried very hard. He wouldn't make the same mistake if she were the one to vanish now. They had some things to settle before going their separate ways again. He just wished he knew what the hell he was supposed to do next.

A sound from behind him made him turn to find her approaching with a glass of ice water in each hand. She set the glasses on the table, then wiped her palms on her dress, drawing his gaze. She had great legs, long and shapely. He remembered with unexpected clarity exactly how they'd felt wrapped around him. He cleared his throat and shifted his weight, giving her a curt nod. "Thanks."

Any nervousness that might have been present in her expression earlier was hidden now behind a look of determination. Obviously she'd used the brief time inside to reinforce her defenses. It bothered him that she'd felt it necessary to do so.

"You're angry with me," she said.

"No." His response was automatic.

She held her ground. "Yes."

He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. "Okay, yeah. Maybe a bit."

"You think I could have tried harder to find you."

He met her eyes. "Yes."

Her mouth tightened, but she continued. "Even considering the way you left? No phone number. Not even a note."

Despite the truth of her words, he refused to be placed on the defensive. "I've already told you my reason for that." Part of the reason, anyway. "But you had to have known everything changed with the pregnancy."

"Everything certainly changed for me," she said in a strained whisper, looking away. Her right hand went to her stomach, as if in subconscious memory, and he found his mind filled with images of her swollen with pregnancy. His throat tightened painfully.

"I was six weeks along before I realized I was pregnant, or at least before I admitted it to myself," she said, her hand falling to her side. "You'd made no effort to contact me, so I assumed you'd moved on with your plans, whatever they were. As I said, I did try to reach you through the resort, but I couldn't get anywhere. Adam Scott is not an uncommon name. I didn't even know what state you lived in."

He grimaced. "I was in Afghanistan."

Her eyes widened. "Afghanistan? You were in the military?"

"Army."

She moistened her lips, drawing his attention to her soft mouth. "I wondered at the time if you'd served a tour. There was something about your haircut and the way you carried yourself. But you didn't seem to want to talk about it, so I didn't push. I had no idea you were on your way overseas."

He shrugged. "It was my second deployment. And you're right, I didn't want to discuss it. The whole point of taking that vacation was to get away from military talk for a few days."

He'd relished the few days of luxury and relaxation, but he hadn't been overly concerned about his upcoming assignment. He'd been aware of the dangers he would face, of course, and had considered himself rather noble for leaving no one to worry about his safety. Still, he'd fully expected

to return as relatively unscathed as he had from his first, far-less-traumatic mission. Remembering that almost cocky naïveté now made him grimace, though fortunately Joanna didn't seem to notice.

"How long were you deployed?"

"Ten months." He didn't add that it had been a twelve-month tour cut short by an explosive device.

"Which would have made it even harder for me to contact you," she pointed out.

"It would have been possible," he muttered. He'd had the right to know about his child, even though he had no clue how he'd have reacted. "Five years, Joanna. Five years I've had a son I didn't know about."

Her eyes glittered, and the sight of her tears punched him in the gut. His throat ached with the emotions he was choking down. Pain and regret hovered between them as they stood there, gazes locked, both struggling for words.

His phone beeped with a text, shattering the tense moment. The sudden sound startled them both. Unsure whether he was more annoyed or grateful for the interruption, he glanced down at the screen and cursed softly. "There's something I have to deal with now. Work."

"Of course," she said, a bit too readily. "We can talk later."

He looked up from the phone with a frown. "We will talk later. We still have a lot to discuss."

She gave a resigned nod. "I'd rather not tell Simon anything about this until after you and I have had that discussion."

He knew exactly what he felt this time. Relief. He wasn't at all ready for the boy to know who he was. "Agreed."

Pushing the phone back into his pocket, he started to turn, then paused, looking over his shoulder. "You're not going to run, are you?"

She held his gaze when she answered lightly, "Not yet."

He wished he could take more reassurance in that reply.

* * *

SIMON RETURNED FROM the field trip chattering a mile a minute about everything he'd seen and learned. He hopped out of the van clutching a reusable water bottle imprinted with the aquarium logo in one hand, and a slightly crumpled craft project in the other. Joanna dutifully admired the blue cardboard ocean covered with stickers of all the specimens he'd seen that day. She smiled when she saw that he'd drawn shells on the glitter-embellished "sand" at the bottom of his ocean, including a fairly credible lettered olive.

"This is great, Simon. I'm glad you had a good time."

"We had a wonderful time," Miss Molly volunteered, overhearing the comment as she mingled among the reunited kids and parents. "You have a very bright and well-behaved son. He asked such smart questions that I can tell Deborah and I will have to stay well prepared for each day's lessons."

Joanna was pleased that Molly seemed more impressed than impatient with Simon's endless questions. That wasn't always the case.

"See you tomorrow, Simon, when we'll go to the maritime museum."

"Bye, Miss Molly." Falling into step beside Joanna, Simon continued to recap his field trip, barely pausing to take a breath as he leaped nimbly from one sandy stepping stone to the next.

She tried to interject the occasional response or question, just to let him know she was paying attention. It was difficult to focus on anything other than her dilemma with Adam. "What was your favorite exhibit?"

He puckered his lips in thought for a moment, then said, "The archer fish! They shoot water out of their mouths at insects sitting on branches above them. The bugs fall in the lake and then the fish eat them. We saw them when the aquarium people put bugs in the tank."

"That's a very clever fish."

Simon grinned up at her. "Bet the bugs wish they were dumber."

She chuckled. "I'm sure you're right."

She loved teasing with her bright little boy, making each other laugh with silly jokes. His laughter could make her smile even after the hardest day. Just standing beside his bed and watching him sleep brought her a deep sense of joy she could never have imagined before she'd had him. They'd been happy in their tidy house in a suburb of Atlanta, their own small refuge.

The idea of sharing him with someone else made her stomach tighten in rejection. Because she recognized the selfishness of that reaction, she shoved it away, assuring herself she wanted only what was best for Simon, whatever that might mean for his future. Of course, she would protect him fiercely from being hurt if she suspected that might happen, but there was no need to borrow trouble. For all she knew, Adam had no interest in fatherhood, no desire to have his bachelor life complicated by a five-year-old.

She wouldn't be surprised if he offered financial assistance, regardless of how involved he wanted to be in Simon's life. Granted, she didn't know Adam well, but she'd pegged him as a man of honor. She wouldn't accept a dime for herself, of course, but she supposed it would be only fair to allow Adam to open a trust account or make some other financial arrangements for the boy. She couldn't let her own pride interfere with her son's best interest, as grating as it would be to surrender even that modicum of parental control. As for any other interaction...she swallowed hard, telling herself again to take it one step at a time.

"I'm sure you're a little tired after your busy afternoon," she told Simon. "Would you like to rest awhile before dinner?"

As she expected, Simon shook his head. "I'm not tired. But maybe we could go to the beach and I could build a sand castle?"

"We could absolutely do that."

Fifteen minutes later, she reclined on a low beach chair with her bare legs stretched in front of her, reading a book on her tablet, and with an insulated tumbler of ice-cold water beside her. Above her, a blue umbrella fluttered in the steady breeze, shading her from the late afternoon sun. Only a few people milled on the beach and in the waves. Others were out on the fishing pier many yards to the south.

With the beach relatively empty, Simon had plenty of room to play. He sat cross-legged on the damp sand near Joanna's chair, his sunscreen-shiny face creased in concentration. He'd dumped a bag of brightly colored beach toys around him—shovels and pails, sand molds, a plastic bulldozer and a construction vehicle with a scoop bucket on a bendable arm. Imitating the beeps and other mechanical noises he'd heard on his favorite construction-themed videos, he focused on building a road to the sand mound he'd already prepared for his planned castle.

Joanna divided her attention between her busy son, the gripping novel and the natural beauty surrounding her. She thought wistfully that this was exactly what she'd envisioned when she'd booked this vacation. She'd known there would be bittersweet moments, of course, but she'd been prepared to deal with them. This was all she'd wanted—quiet time together outdoors in the sun and surf.

Another young boy ran up to watch what Simon was doing. The child immediately grabbed one of Simon's plastic shovels and plopped down to dig with it.

"Cody!" a male voice called out. "That doesn't belong to you."

Noting that the boy, who looked to be close to Simon's own age, had Down syndrome, Joanna prepared to caution her son to be patient, but she should have known it wouldn't be necessary.

"It's okay," Simon told the boy's father, who was hurrying over. "He can play with me."

The dad looked at Joanna, the expression on his broad, ruddy face questioning. She smiled and nodded. "Let him play for a few minutes if he wants to."

Accepting that his son had settled in, the man chuckled wryly. "Thanks. To be honest, I wouldn't mind sitting a bit to catch my breath. Cody insisted I carry him on my shoulders all the way down the beach and back while my wife takes a nap. I'm Ken McGee, by the way, and this is my son, Cody."

"I'm Joanna Zielinski, and this is Simon." Setting her tablet aside, Joanna motioned for Ken to sit on a towel she'd spread nearby for Simon.

He accepted the invitation, settling on the towel with his legs folded beneath him. "You can play just for a few minutes, Cody, but then we have to go join Mommy for dinner, okay?"

Engrossed in a lesson from Simon on how to pack damp sand into a mold, Cody gave no sign that he'd heard his father, though Joanna believed he had. She and Ken exchanged a few remarks about the beautiful weather and the resort facilities. Standard stranger small talk.

Ken glanced toward the boys. "Your son is good with Cody."

Watching as Simon helped the other child dump the mold and tap out the sand, Joanna smiled. "One of Simon's friends at our church back in Georgia is a little girl with Down syndrome. He's very fond of Michaela. She's a sweetheart."

Cody scooped a shovelful of sand and tossed it in the air, giggling when the sand rained down on him. Leaning back to avoid having a face full of grit, Simon looked wryly at his mother. "I think Cody likes demolition better than construction."

Ken's laugh sounded a bit weary. "You can say that again."

As if he realized how his words could be interpreted, he added quickly, "Cody's a great kid. I—my wife and I don't mind the challenges. Wouldn't trade him for the world."

"Of course not," Joanna replied gently, trying to avoid the psychologist's penchant of reading more into statements and expressions than the speaker had intended. "It's obvious he's a precious little boy."

"He is," Ken agreed with a more natural smile, though she still thought she detected signs of stress in his eyes. "And he's been making great strides lately developmentally. I—we're doing great."

She merely smiled, pretending not to notice either the slip of words or the too-hearty tone. Nor his repetition of the word great.

Ken stood then. "C'mon, buddy, let's go find Mommy. She'll want to clean you up before dinner."

"See you around, Cody," Simon called after them, earning a wave of a chubby hand in return.

"You were very sweet with Cody, Simon," Joanna commented, proud of her son.

He was already making repairs to his road and castle. "He's like Michaela, isn't he?"

"Yes, he has Down syndrome, which means he doesn't learn things as easily as you do. But he still likes to play with toys and other children, so it's nice of you to share and to be patient helping him."

"Yes, it is." Adam stepped into view from behind her, his gaze on Simon. "Cody's become a favorite around here in the past couple of days."

Joanna's pulse rate sped up, and she realized ruefully that for all the time that had passed, she still turned into a smitten schoolgirl whenever Adam strolled into view.

CHAPTER THREE

"HI, MR. ADAM. I'm building a road and a castle."

Joanna looked through her lashes at Adam, wondering how he felt about having his son call him "mister." Whatever the emotions, he had them well hidden. "It's looking great, Simon. Nice digger you've got there."

"It's an excavator. The boom is hydraulic," Simon replied off-handedly before going back to playing, making impressively realistic sound effects.

Adam looked at Joanna with a raised eyebrow. She smiled faintly as she rose to greet him. "He likes to watch educational videos about construction equipment."

"Yeah? You like heavy equipment work, Simon?"

"I like seeing how things are made," Simon replied, dumping a load of sand from the bucket.

Adam glanced at Joanna, and for a moment she thought she detected a hint of emotion in his eyes. Wistfulness, perhaps? Regret that there were so many things he didn't know about his son? Or was she projecting how she might feel in his position?

Before she could decide, he schooled his expression and spoke evenly. "So, Trevor and I are having dinner at Torchlight tonight. He wanted me to invite you and Simon to join us."

Her first reaction was to be alarmed by the seemingly innocuous invitation. She wasn't ready for a "family" meal with Adam and Simon. Not nearly ready. She looked quickly at Simon, all too aware that he was listening even though he hadn't paused in his play. How could she refuse without arousing his curiosity about why?

"Trevor makes a practice of dining with guests most evenings," Adam added smoothly. "We ate with Cody and his family yesterday."

It seemed to be an attempt to reassure her there was no need to worry about Simon learning anything she wasn't ready to tell him. Still, the whole situation seemed fraught with potential complications. "I don't—"

"Can we, Mom?" Simon piped up, proving he was paying attention. "I want to tell them about the aquarium."

Feeling cornered, she moistened her lips, tasting the hint of ocean salt in the air. Simon would probably enjoy being the center of attention at dinner, as she had no doubt he would be. Other than her father, who believed that children should generally sit quietly unless spoken to, Simon didn't spend a lot of time with men. She'd always been very careful not to let him get too close to the few men she'd dated to protect him when the relationships ended—as they always had after a fairly short time. She simply hadn't met anyone who'd felt like a good fit. And now that Adam was here, she found herself instinctively wanting to protect her son again. Not to mention her own heart, which she feared was unexpectedly vulnerable.

"Mom?"

Trapped, she somehow managed a smile. "Thank you, Adam. Tell Mr. Farrell we'd be happy to join you. What time?"

"Does seven work for you?"

It was a little later than Simon usually had his dinner, but he'd had a snack before they'd come out to the beach, so she figured he'd last until then. And it would give her time to get them both cleaned up. "Yes, seven is fine."

He lingered a few moments longer, watching Simon play, and then he met Joanna's eyes again. "See you later, JoJo."

The offhand nickname shook her to the core, making her bare toes curl into the sand. She flashed to the memory of his voice in a darkened bedroom, husky in her ear as he'd laughed softly and murmured, "Just let yourself go, JoJo. You know you want to."

She had let herself go with him, in a way she'd never done before or since with anyone else. Just remembering their lovemaking made her weak in the knees.

Adam was studying her too closely. His stormy gray eyes darkened and narrowed, as though he could somehow see the steamy images in her mind. They stood staring at each other for what seemed like minutes, though it was probably only a moment or two. They were jarred into motion when Simon made a sudden explosion sound, sweeping a hand to crash down one wall of his castle.

Adam didn't jump, but he sounded a bit startled when he asked, "What was that?"

Simon grinned up at them from amidst the scattered remains of his construction. "Earthquake."

Chuckling, Adam took a step back. "I'll get out of the danger zone, then. I have a few more things to do this afternoon, so I'll see the two of you at dinner."

With one last glance, he turned and strode away. She couldn't resist watching him. She'd almost forgotten his distinctive walk, a rolling, ground-eating gait that was as efficient as it was sexy. Pulling her attention away from the all-too-intriguing sight of his backside, she shook her head and began to

gather her belongings, telling Simon to put his toys in the carry bag. They had to get ready for dinner. This was no time to dwell on how attractive Adam Scott still was to her.

* * *

ADAM AND TREVOR were waiting when Joanna led Simon into Torchlight just before seven. The resort included two dining options that were more casual than this upscale restaurant, so this was a special treat for her son. As they entered the restaurant, she reminded Simon to use his best manners and his indoor voice—something he sometimes forgot when excited.

Both men rose when she and Simon were escorted to their table. Joanna didn't quite meet Adam's eyes as she greeted them. After being seated, she was given a menu, but neither Adam nor Trevor requested one. Hardly a surprise. She was sure they had the menu memorized. She was offered a children's menu, which she handed over to Simon, to the apparent surprise of both Trevor and Adam.

"You can read the menu, Simon?" Adam asked.

Studying the menu gravely, Simon nodded. "Most of it. What's gira—giran—"

Joanna looked over his shoulder to read the word he pointed to. "Girandole. It's a type of pasta, shaped like little spirals. It says it's topped with a light creamy sauce with peas and chicken or shrimp. This is a very nice children's menu," she added to Trevor after glancing at some of the other choices.

He smiled, looking pleased by the compliment. "Our chef has four kids. He says it drives him crazy to take them out to eat and have them offered only burgers or chicken nuggets or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Kids can have all of that here, of course, but we make sure there are always other options for our more adventurous young diners."

"I can recommend the girandole," Adam said with a nod to Simon. "That cream sauce will make you want to lick your plate—though I doubt your mom would approve."

"You doubt correctly."

Simon giggled. Adam smiled at Joanna. His gray eyes gleamed like polished steel in the flickering candlelight. She swallowed hard and dragged her gaze away.

"I want the girandole," Simon announced, mangling the pronunciation only slightly. "With shrimp."

"Excellent choice, sir," Trevor affirmed, making the boy giggle again.

Brought back to the present, Joanna placed her own order for a scallops and risotto dish she hoped she'd be able to swallow, considering how tight her throat felt. She then made an effort to mask her discomfort during this deceptively innocuous dinner with their host. She doubted very much she was the only person at the table aware of the undercurrents swirling beneath their lighthearted small talk.

At least she didn't have to figure out how to make conversation. Trevor took care of that by asking Simon to tell them about the aquarium visit. Simon happily launched into a detailed play-by-play recount to which, to give them credit, both men listened graciously, inserting appropriate comments and questions. Joanna was content to sit quietly and let her son be the center of attention. She supposed this was a good way for Adam to get to know Simon a bit, in a public setting with no pressure or expectations on either side. To Simon, Adam was just one of two nice men with whom he was having a special dinner.

She glanced at Adam's face to see if she could judge how he felt about that, only to find him looking back at her. He appeared to be dividing his focus equally between her and Simon. Was he still annoyed with her, despite the dinner invitation? Still suspicious of her? Did he doubt that Simon was his son? Could he really look at this boy and not see himself sitting there?

He talked easily with Simon, and not in an overly patronizing tone her bright son found annoying. A pang went through her as she watched Simon respond eagerly to the male attention.

Simon would have enjoyed dinner with just her at the buffet, too, she assured herself. She and Simon never had trouble having fun together or making lively conversation. But maybe she should

have made more of an effort to find more male role models for him. She'd planned to sign him up for some sort of team sports when he got older, but five seemed so young.

Perhaps she really had been selfish. Her mouth suddenly dry, she reached for her water glass, looking at Adam over the rim as she took a drink. How much would she have to share her son with this man she barely even knew?

* * *

SIMON WAS AN amazing kid. Well-behaved. Funny. Smart. Almost scary smart for his young age. Adam figured the boy would probably be designated as gifted. From what he'd read, kids like that could be challenging to parent, trying to keep them both intellectually stimulated and socially engaged. Joanna appeared to be handling the balance well, judging by what he'd seen so far. Simon was obviously eager to learn, and he'd seemed to mix well with the other kids on the outing earlier. Adam had been impressed with how well he'd interacted with Cody, a child with far different needs.

He was frankly fascinated by Simon, finding himself searching the boy's face for familiar features, wondering what Simon had been like as a baby, as a toddler, what he would look like as an adult. Fatherhood was one of the things Adam had written off, something he'd taken care to avoid. Or at least, he'd believed he had. He thought he knew himself too well to trust he'd settle in easily to routine domestic life. Despite the three years he'd worked relatively happily here at Wind Shadow, he didn't consider himself the type to stay in one place for long, or to live up to the lofty expectations of others. With little particularly positive experience with family in his past, he'd never regarded himself as daddy material.

He was the type who slipped out in the night rather than face hard goodbyes.

He looked at Joanna, who picked delicately at her scallops while listening to her son's cheery babbling. He'd reluctantly agreed with Trevor's suggestion that a casual meal in a public setting would be a safe way to get acquainted with the boy and learn a bit more about Joanna's agenda, if she had one. Still, this meal had to be as uncomfortable for her as it was for him, though she was doing a good job of hiding her emotions behind a fixed smile. He couldn't help comparing it to the genuine, happy smiles he remembered from before—smiles that lit her eyes and crinkled her nose, pushed shallow dimples into her cheeks and were often accompanied by infectious laughter.

Even with the more forced expression, she looked beautiful this evening, her features illuminated by the candles on the table. She'd brushed her hair to a glossy chestnut curtain and accented her striking green eyes with what looked to be minimal makeup. Her sleeveless peach-colored blouse was cut just low enough to give a tasteful glimpse of creamy skin. He shifted in his chair and stabbed his fork into his steak.

"So, anyway, the aquarium wasn't as big as the one back home, but it was still really fun," Simon concluded when he'd shared all he could think of to report about his outing.

"There aren't any aquariums in this country as big as the one in Atlanta," Trevor replied with a chuckle. "I haven't had the pleasure of touring that one, but I've read about it."

Adam glanced again at Joanna to see if she reacted to hearing Trevor mention her home city. Obviously, as owner of the resort, he had access to his guests' records. Did she wonder if Adam had snooped into her personal information? Because she would be wrong. This was the first he'd heard that she and Simon lived in Georgia.

"Atlanta, huh?" Adam said, dragging his gaze from Joanna back to the boy. "That's where you live?"

Simon chased a pasta spiral with his fork. "We live in Alpharetta. But we go to the aquarium in Atlanta sometimes. And to the zoo. And the children's museum, and the science center with the planetarium. That's my favorite."

"It sounds as though you stay busy."

"We do things on weekends, because Mom doesn't usually work then. And sometimes my school takes field trips. When I don't have school and Mom's working, my nanny, Rose, takes me

places. Mostly the park. I like to feed the ducks there. Mom says there will be a lot of parks when we move, too. And a lot of boats and museums and...”

Joanna cleared her throat. “How’s your dinner, Simon?”

He scooped another forkful of pasta and shrimp into his mouth and said around it, “It’s good.”

She smiled and handed him his napkin. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it. But don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Where do you work, Joanna?” Trevor asked conversationally, earning a quick look from Adam. They’d agreed before Joanna and Simon arrived that this meal would be pleasant and friendly, no interrogations. Yet he suspected Trevor had proposed this casual gathering as a way to scope out Joanna’s motives, which his suspicious friend still questioned. Still, Adam supposed this was an innocent enough topic.

Her reply was indirect—not where she worked, but what she did. “I’m an assistant professor of psychology.”

Adam felt his fingers tighten around his fork in response. It probably shouldn’t surprise him that she was an academic, but he was still a bit taken aback.

“So it’s Dr. Zielinski?” Trevor asked.

She smiled faintly. “Just call me Joanna.”

Adam reached for his wineglass.

Trevor seemed intrigued. “Psychology, huh? Have you worked in a clinical setting, or solely in academics?”

She toyed with the scallops remaining on her plate. “I’ve had a few private clients, but teaching has been my main focus until now.”

“Considering a change?”

“Yes.” She sounded as though that was all she wanted to say about it. Thinking of the way she’d interrupted Simon when he’d mentioned an upcoming move, Adam frowned.

But Trevor wasn’t quite finished. “Are you from the Atlanta area originally?”

“I am, yes.”

“Gram and Grampa live in Buckhead,” Simon inserted, making an effort to stay involved in the conversation. “My mom grew up there, didn’t you, Mom?”

Joanna nodded. “I did.”

“Grampa’s a surgeon. He cuts people open and fixes their hearts,” Simon added artlessly. “He says I can be a surgeon, too, but I want to be a marine biologist. Or an architect. Grampa says architect is just a fancy name for a carpenter who can draw, but that’s not right because they use computers and math and physics and design stuff. I saw a video about them. I think I’d like being an architect, but marine biology sounds fun, too. Mom said when we move, I’ll get to—”

The pasta Simon had balanced on his fork while he’d chattered fell with a plop onto his lap. He winced and looked quickly at his mother. “Sorry. It fell on the napkin, though.”

She was already helping him clean up the small mess. “Just be more careful, okay? Don’t try to talk and eat at the same time.”

She didn’t seem annoyed by the accident, Adam noted, drawing his fascinated gaze away from the precocious kindergartner. Was she actually a bit relieved that Simon had been interrupted again when he’d started to mention a move?

She didn’t seem to want to discuss her plans, whatever they were. Was she reluctant to talk about them because she didn’t want him to know where she and Simon would be living? She wouldn’t go to that extent to keep him away from his son, would she? That hardly seemed to fit with Trevor’s concern that she’d had ulterior motives for showing up here this week. So far, she seemed to be doing everything she could to hold Adam at arm’s length. Frankly, it was beginning to annoy him.

“What would you like for dessert, Simon?” Trevor asked. “Cheesecake? Pie? Or we have an excellent chocolate lava cake that you can order à la mode, if you like.”

“That means with ice cream! I like à la mode.”

Adam had to give Trevor credit. In his easy manner, he'd drawn out quite a bit about Joanna during this deceptively simple meal. They'd learned that she was a professor. The daughter of a surgeon. Adam was no expert on Atlanta, but even he recognized the expensive neighborhood Simon had mentioned so casually.

No wonder Simon was such a genius. He might've gotten Adam's gray eyes and cowlick, but the rest had come straight from his mother. Adam wasn't looking forward to the prospect of telling Joanna or Simon about his own dysfunctional family background.

Was there anything this kid needed that he didn't already have? Especially anything Adam might have to offer?

* * *

TIRED FROM HIS busy day, Simon was already drooping by the time he'd finished his dessert. Still, after politely thanking their hosts for dinner, he wanted to linger at the small amphitheater near the lakeside bar to hear the calypso band. Relieved that the meal had gone relatively well, Joanna had kept her goodbyes polite but brief. It had been left unspoken but taken for granted that she and Adam would be seeing each other again soon. Adam had looked as though he wanted to say something more before they parted, but after a glance at Simon, he'd merely wished them good-night.

A handful of people danced around the tiny stage, their rhythm enhanced by a few too many tropical drinks. Simon was fascinated by the movement and the bright colors and the steel drum. Joanna sat next to him on a low bench and he snuggled against her to watch the festivities. Before the end of the second number, he'd fallen asleep.

Enjoying the party herself, she waited a few minutes before trying to rouse him for the walk back to their cabin. She was tempted to order a piña colada to sip while Simon dozed in her lap, but she knew she should get him ready for bed. He would need his energy for tomorrow.

“Looks like your date conked out on you.”

Moistening her lips, she glanced up to find Adam standing nearby, watching her and Simon without smiling despite his light words. He stood mostly in shadow, one side of his face illuminated by a tiki torch. The flame flickered in his dark eyes, seeming to mirror the inner turmoil he'd probably experienced that day. She knew her own emotions were pretty well shredded after the past fifteen hours.

“He's had a full day.”

“Starting very early.”

She remembered the jolt of panic she'd felt when she'd woken at dawn and seen Simon's bed empty. The relief when she'd found him. The shock when she'd identified his companion. “Very early. He wanted to listen to the music for a while before turning in, but he didn't last long.”

“So he inherited your appreciation for music?”

Her thoughts drifted in response to the question, back to moonlit hours spent snuggled on a bench much like this one—if not this very one—listening to other bands. Getting up occasionally to dance in the sand, their fingers laced, bodies pressed together, mouths close enough for the occasional kiss. Until the tension had built too high, and they'd slipped away to find privacy. And a bed.

That all felt like another lifetime now.

She swallowed hard. “Yes, he loves music.”

Adam studied her face. Was he thinking back to the same things she was? Had he remembered their previous encounter as fondly as she had, or had she been nothing more to him than a pleasant diversion he'd forgotten about since? Still, he'd immediately recognized her face and knew her name on the beach this morning. She supposed there was some gratification in that.

But it was getting late. Looking down at Simon, she jostled him gently. “Come on, honey, let's go back to the cabin. You need to get to bed so you can rest for tomorrow.”

"I don't want to go yet. I want to hear the music," Simon roused enough to respond, a hint of whine in his protest. As well-behaved as he generally was, he could be a pill when he was tired, which he certainly was now. She hoped he wasn't about to show one of his rare flashes of five-year-old temper here in front of...well, in front of everyone.

Adam motioned toward the lodges. "As it happens, I'm headed that way myself. How about a lift, buddy? You can ride on my shoulders if you like."

Distracted and intrigued, Simon lifted his head to peer at Adam. "I'd be really high up, wouldn't I?"

Adam smiled faintly. "Yes, you would. You'd be able to see a long way."

Simon promptly climbed onto the bench and held up his arms. Joanna felt a ripple of dismay at the sight of her son reaching out to the man he didn't know was his father. And something else...maybe a little possessiveness? Or was it fear of something she couldn't quite define?

Adam crouched in front of the bench while Simon climbed on, then straightened with the boy high on his shoulders.

Giving her a slightly crooked smile, Adam asked, "Ready, JoJo?"

From his lofty perch, Simon giggled drowsily. "That's a funny name for her. Aunt Maddie usually calls my mom Jo, but sometimes she calls her Joey."

Joanna fell into step beside them. "Not if she wants me to respond."

"Maybe I should call you Dr. JoJo."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Not if you want me to respond."

"Oh, I absolutely want you to respond," he said lightly.

Something about his tone made her miss a step on the pebbled pathway. She pulled herself together sharply with an admonition that she had to keep her wits about her this week. She couldn't think clearly if she allowed herself to be dazzled again by infatuation—or whatever it was she had once felt for Adam, if only for a weekend.

It didn't help to see him with her—their—son on his shoulders, both laughing when Adam bobbed and weaved to give Simon a more entertaining ride. Her fingernails dug painfully into her palms. As appealing a picture as they made, what would be the consequences of bringing this man—this virtual stranger, really—into their lives?

Adam glanced down at her, and whatever he saw in her expression made him stop smiling. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just tired." More tired than she'd realized, apparently, she decided, considering the dramatic turn her thoughts had taken. She'd be able to think straight tomorrow, after she'd had a chance to rest and process this change in their circumstances a bit more.

They'd arrived at their building, so she reached up to help Simon down, too vividly aware of each time she brushed against Adam in doing so. "Good night, Adam. Thank you again for inviting us to dinner."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Adam?" Simon asked hopefully.

Adam ruffled his hair. "Sure, buddy. See you tomorrow."

He turned his head to look at Joanna then. "I'll see you tomorrow, too."

She nodded in resignation, knowing they still had a lot to talk about. "Simon leaves for his field trip at one."

"Right. I'll find you."

Was that a promise...or a warning? She was too exhausted to decide.

* * *

MADDIE WAS GRATIFIED to see her sister's number on her caller ID Tuesday morning. She'd been on pins and needles wondering how everything was going between Joanna and Adam. It had been all she could do not to hop on a plane yesterday after Joanna's frantic call, but she'd forced herself to take some time to make responsible arrangements for her work obligations. Still,

family came first. As she'd learned during the past six years, a family didn't have to be perfect, just mutually supportive.

"Jo? Is everything okay?"

"It's...nerve-wracking," Joanna answered. "But it's okay, I guess."

Hearing some odd beeping noises in the background, Maddie asked, "What's going on? What are those sounds?"

"Simon wanted to come into the arcade after breakfast. I figured you'd be impatient for a report, so I'm taking the opportunity to talk while he's engrossed in a pinball machine."

"Pinball, huh? That kid's probably already figured out the geometric trajectories of the balls to get the best scores," Maddie said with an indulgent laugh.

Joanna's answering chuckle sounded strained. "He's working on it."

Maddie really did adore her funny nephew. The way her own love life had fizzled lately with one disappointing date after another, Simon could be the closest she would ever come to having a kid, something she hadn't realized she wanted before spending so much time with Joanna and Simon. She just didn't want to make babies with any of the guys she'd been out with lately.

"So? Have you talked to Adam again?" She'd waited as long as she could to ask.

"We had dinner last night," Joanna said, then added quickly, "Not alone. We ate with Simon and Trevor Farrell, the owner of the resort. So we didn't talk about anything important, just small talk."

Even mentioning the man's name added another layer of tension to Joanna's voice, something Maddie noted with a deepening frown. "So how's Adam acting? Is it weird with the two of you? Is he trying to get to know Simon? He totally believes Simon is his kid, right?"

"Yes, it's weird. And yes, he believes me. Or he says he does. He seems sort of fascinated by Simon. Maybe even intimidated by him. Like he's not quite sure how to behave."

Maddie supposed that all made sense. Had to have been a shock for the guy to find out suddenly that he had a kindergarten-age son. She cleared her throat before asking the next question. "I don't suppose you've told Mom and Dad that Adam is—"

"No!" Joanna interrupted quickly. "And don't you dare say anything until I've had a chance to talk to them."

"You know I won't. Trust me, I want nothing to do with that conversation."

Henry and Gail Zielinski still hadn't recovered from the shock of having their most responsible and previously compliant daughter return from vacation pregnant and unmarried. They'd wrung their hands and asked—within Maddie's hearing, of course—what they'd done wrong to be the parents of not just one but two rebellious daughters.

Maddie shook her head at the memory of that conversation. To give them credit, their parents had supported Joanna's decision to raise the child, and they'd welcomed Simon with as much warmth as their reserved personalities allowed. Still, Joanna had seemed to feel even more pressure to excel in her career and lead an exemplary life to make up for her "lapse in judgment."

Joanna had never quite mastered Maddie's ability to shrug off their parents' disapproval and live the way she wanted, though Jo said she was working on that. The cross-country move ahead should help. Still, Maddie hated thinking about how much she would miss her sister and nephew.

She brought the conversation back to the present. "When are you going to talk to Adam again?"

She could almost hear her sister's swallow. "This afternoon, I think. While Simon's on an outing with Explorers Club."

"What are you going to say?"

"I don't have the foggiest."

It wasn't like Joanna to sound so lost. She was always so efficient and prepared. Maddie felt her own hackles rising in perhaps unjustified annoyance with the man who'd caused this distress. "And if he wants to be a part of Simon's life in the future?"

"I'll deal with it. Somehow. I have to go, Maddie. I'll call you later, okay?"

“You’d better.”

After disconnecting, Maddie set down her phone. Then turned to her computer to find the first available flight to South Carolina.

* * *

JOANNA MADE IT to midafternoon before she saw Adam. While she’d appreciated having the time to prepare, she’d grown more tense as the minutes ticked past, probably because she knew it was coming and didn’t know exactly when.

Maddie had often accused her—sometimes teasingly, others more irritably—of being a control freak, and Joanna supposed that was fair. She liked her schedules, her routines, her notes and outlines and calendars. True spontaneity was a rare indulgence, especially during the past six years, when she’d lived every day with the consequences of letting her hair down once. She wouldn’t trade a moment of the challenges for the joy she’d found in her son, but for Simon’s sake, she’d been careful not to take any more risks. Sexy, enigmatic Adam Scott was an emotional hazard if she’d ever seen one.

The hour she’d just spent in the spa should have left her relaxed and loose. Though she’d enjoyed the pampering and had appreciated having some of the tension eased by the skilled masseuse, she was still on edge. The reason for her discomfort fell into step beside her only a short distance from the spa.

“Having a nice day?” Adam asked in a casual tone he might have used with any guest.

She shot him a look. “Working on it.”

When he merely gave her a bland half smile in return, she pushed her hands into the pockets of her shorts. “How’s your day going?” she asked, knowing it was an inane question, but it was also the best she could come up with.

He replied cordially enough. “Good. Busy. It’s peak time for us here. Almost every unit is occupied, and we have a few big events coming up next weekend. Two family reunions and a wedding.”

Hearing him speak so easily and familiarly about resort business made her pause and tilt her head in his direction. “How long have you worked here? You never mentioned you were even thinking about it when we met before.”

“I wasn’t considering it then. Trevor told me before I left that he makes a point of helping out vets looking for work. He encouraged me to look him up if I ever found myself in that situation. When I got out of the hosp—out of the military, I remembered what he’d said, and I thought I might as well stop by. His previous assistant manager had to move away for family reasons, so he needed someone to step in. That was a little over three years ago.”

He’d covered his verbal stumble smoothly, but she caught it. “You were in the hospital? Were you injured in Afghanistan?”

“Yeah. Obviously, I recovered.”

It was clearly not a topic he wanted to discuss, but she couldn’t resist asking, “How long were you in the hospital?”

He didn’t answer right away, and she wasn’t sure he would. But then he muttered, “Six months, counting inpatient rehab. Like I said, I got over it.”

Six months. She bit her lip as those words sank in. He hadn’t just been banged up; he’d been seriously injured. She couldn’t help wondering exactly what those injuries had been, and whether he still suffered from them.

He changed the subject with abrupt finality. “Want to get a coffee? Or maybe walk on the beach for a while? We’ve got a couple hours before Simon gets back, and I don’t have anything pressing to do in the meantime. Nothing that won’t wait until later, anyway. And you and I need to talk.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, wishing again that she were anywhere but here, facing a conversation that was going to be difficult at best, but then she nodded. “Let’s walk.”

Staying in the open should hold back that claustrophobic feeling she'd had when Adam was in her suite yesterday. She was as aware of him now as she had been then, but at least there would be more space around them—and no flashback-inducing beds within sight.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADAM EXTENDED A HAND, palm-up, toward the path to the beach, signaling for Joanna to lead the way. He strolled beside her, keeping a careful distance between them on the wide walkway. He didn't try to start a serious conversation, and she was too tense to make small talk, so they trekked in silence. They had to move to one side to make way for a couple holding hands and snuggling together, seemingly oblivious to anyone and anything around them. The young woman giggled at something her companion whispered as they disappeared toward the guest quarters, and it wasn't hard for Joanna to guess what they had in mind.

Remembering similar whispers between herself and Adam on this same path six years ago, she cleared her throat, suddenly needing a distraction. "The grounds are beautiful. I've noticed quite a few things that are new since my last visit."

Adam nodded, and she thought he looked pleased by the praise. "Trevor's about run out of room for expansion here. He's opening a second resort on the Texas Gulf Coast next year and has plans in the works for a third in Florida."

She would've liked to know the whole story of the evolution of Adam's job here, but she supposed if he wanted to tell her more, he would. Instead, she kept the focus on his employer, which seemed safe enough. "Trevor's young to have accomplished so much. I got the impression that he's single?"

"He's widowed."

Startled, she slowed her steps. "Widowed? That's tragic."

"Yeah."

"No children?"

"No."

"Did you ever meet his wife?"

"No. It was before we met him."

So, more than six years and Trevor hadn't remarried, though he was probably only in his late thirties. She doubted it was from lack of opportunity. Trevor was handsome, personable, respectable and successful, the type of man most women looked for. Was he still grieving his late wife? The thought saddened her.

She was tempted to ask if Adam had ever been married. She'd have liked to know if there was a woman in his life now, though she'd seen no signs of it. Yet another great-looking guy, good job, sexy as all get-out. The only reason a man like that would be single was that he wanted to be, which must have made his instant fatherhood even more of a jolt.

She clenched her hands and moistened her lips as they stepped out of the tree-lined walkway and onto beach sand. "Will your responsibilities here increase as Trevor becomes busier with his new projects? He seems to have a great deal of faith in you. Would you want to be the senior manager at one of the resorts?"

His face expressionless, Adam shrugged. "I haven't committed to anything at the moment."

Before she could respond, he changed the subject again. So far, they'd been carefully civil, but still the air between them seemed charged with tension. The guarded conversation was beginning to remind her of the pinball games Simon had played that morning. Every time they encountered a topic that made Adam uncomfortable, he bounced to a new one. "You implied to Trevor that you're making a career change, too. Are you looking for something different in Georgia or moving to a new state?"

She tasted a fresh coating of salt when she moistened her lips. "Actually...I've accepted an offer in Seattle. Of course, it means a big change for Simon, so I had to consider it very carefully, but I decided I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

Adam didn't quite stumble, but his steps faltered. His eyebrows drew together when he repeated, "Seattle?"

Was he thinking of how far Washington was from South Carolina? Was he wondering how he could get to know his son at all if they lived three thousand miles apart? Because she certainly was.

She nodded. "I'll be working with patients and their families dealing with long-term disabilities as the result of stroke, traumatic head injuries and other catastrophic health issues. It's always been a particular field of interest for me. I've been to Seattle a couple of times to observe their program, and I think it will be a good fit for me."

His face was hard to read when he asked, "What does your family think?"

"My family has always encouraged me to pursue my career goals." More than encouraged, actually. Her parents had been almost obsessively single-minded about making sure she and Maddie were studious and career-focused from an early age. Their mission had been easier with her than with her obstinate younger sister.

"And they aren't opposed to you moving so far away?"

"My parents aren't exactly the clingy type. They'll expect regular visits home, of course, but they won't try to stop us from going. My sister...well, my sister will miss me," she said with a faint sigh, thinking of how much she'd miss Maddie in return.

She found it rather ironic that it was because of Adam, in a way, that she and Maddie had bonded so tightly during the past years. Maddie had stood by her during her pregnancy, helping her with doctor appointments and nursery preparation, serving as her birthing coach, spending a lot of time with her during those first few weeks of adjustment and sleep deprivation. Their mother was useless at that sort of thing, having mostly turned her own daughters over to the care of nannies during those early months of feedings and changes and colic.

"You never mentioned if you have siblings," she said, looking up at him. Did Adam have anyone who would be excited to know about the newly discovered nephew, or parents who would be anxious to meet their five-year-old grandson?

"No. I was an only child."

"Are your parents still living?" If so, how would he tell them about Simon?

But he shook his head again without looking at her. "They're both gone."

So her sense of him being alone in the world was proving correct. She wondered how long ago his parents had died, but something about his posture let her know he didn't want to get into it at the moment. She didn't press, though if Adam became a part of Simon's life, he would have to tell her more about himself.

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