CLAIRE BAXTER

THE SINGLE DAD'S PATCHWORK FAMILY

Cherish

Claire Baxter

The Single Dad's Patchwork Family

«HarperCollins»

Baxter C.

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Chase Mattner has come to tranquil, secluded Leo Bay to raise his daughter. In their house by the ocean, he plans a simple life. Regan Jantz isn't looking for distractions, either. With a tuna farm to run and two young sons to bring up alone, she's got her hands full.But as single parents, Regan and Chase form a special bond. For so long their lives have been like jigsaws without the final pieces. Could a proposal from this gorgeous single dad make them whole again?

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CLAIRE
BAXTER
&
THE SINGLE DAD'S
PATCHWORK
FAMILY
Cherish

“I don’t want to do something that will disrupt my daughter’s life. I don’t want to do anything that might get complicated.”

For a moment Regan stared. Was Chase still talking about work? Or did he mean her—them?

He caressed her cheek, smoothing his thumb lightly across the skin. A soft gasp escaped her throat when he bent his head and kissed her other cheek.

Slowly he lowered his gaze to her lips, and his warm brown eyes became intent.

Then he pulled back and stared at her. She had a moment of confused hope before reality came crashing in.

Kissing him was a bad idea. A very bad idea.

She’d been attracted to Chase since they’d met, she realized now. She’d been bewildered by the feeling.

Hadn’t accepted it. But it had been there all along.

Now it seemed that Chase might have been fighting the same feelings.

If you're looking for fresh, sparkling and warmly emotional stories, curl up and relax with a Claire Baxter book today!

Claire is a new Australian author who writes feel-good, contemporary romances. She will sweep you away to gorgeous settings where you'll meet lovable characters.

"Claire Baxter makes a noteworthy debut with Falling for the Frenchman, a sweet, sensual and sometimes funny reunion tale."

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"Claire Baxter's Best Friend…Future Wife combines a deceptively simple plot with fabulous, multi-faceted characters. It's pure magic."

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"Claire Baxter is an author who pens stories about characters that have a history, but it's a history that will leave you spellbound."

—www.CataRomance.com

Claire Baxter
The Single Dad’s Patchwork Family

Like many authors, Claire Baxter tried several careers before finding the one she really wanted. She’s worked as a PA, a translator (French), a public relations consultant and a corporate communications manager. She took a break from corporate communications to complete a degree in journalism and, more importantly, to find out whether she could write a romance novel—a childhood dream. Now she can’t stop writing romance. Nor does she plan to give up her fabulous lifestyle for anything. While Claire grew up in Warwickshire, England, she now lives in the beautiful city of Adelaide in South Australia, with her husband, two sons and two dogs. When she’s not writing, she’s either reading or swimming in her backyard pool—another childhood dream—or even reading in the pool. She hasn’t tried writing in the pool yet, but it could happen. Claire loves to hear from readers. If you’d like to contact her, please visit www.clairebaxter.com.

In memory of my dad (1924–2002)

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CHAPTER ONE

REGAN JANTZ took a flute of champagne from a circulating waiter, then made her way to an alcove from where she scanned the mix of Japanese businessmen and local industry representatives.

'You look like you don't want to be here.'

Startled, she swung towards the deep male voice. Its owner smiled down at her. Being smiled down on wasn't exactly a first but it was unusual enough to make Regan give him more than a cursory glance. She hadn't realised there was someone already occupying the vantage point she'd chosen.

She pasted a professional smile on her face and at the same time took in the expensive suit, confident stance and clean-cut lines of the man's face. 'I'm sorry?'

He leaned forward and spoke softly. 'You don't look as if you're enjoying yourself.'

'Oh.' Regan stepped back. He might be tall and good-looking and have a nice gentle voice, but she didn't know who he was.

She saw understanding in his face and, for an instant, wished she could undo the automatic reflex. He was only trying to be friendly after all.

'I've only just got here,' she said in answer to his remark. 'I was running late.'

Glancing at her watch, she said, 'I'm hoping it won't go on too long.' She had to get home before her sons went to bed. 'But I'm sure I'll enjoy it,' she finished with a smile, just in case the handsome stranger had an involvement in the event's planning.

He took a sip from his glass and surveyed the guests filing into the function room. After a brief silence, he said, 'Do you think it's a good idea—the tourist trail?'

'Oh, yes, I do.' The enthusiasm in her tone was genuine.

The purpose of the cocktail party was to launch a new initiative of the state government's tourism department—packaging South Australia's Eyre Peninsula into an activity-filled holiday experience aimed specifically at Japanese tourists and marketed to the Japanese travel industry.

'I think it's a great idea,' she said and not just because he might have been instrumental in developing the concept.

She paused, tempted to leave it at that, but something about the keen interest in his face made her go on. Most people at these events made polite small talk and avoided showing real interest in anything.

'I'm not completely convinced that I should be getting involved with it, though.'

'Why not? What's your business?'

'I run a tuna farm.' She sipped her champagne, studying his eyes as she spoke. He had kind brown ones—not as dark as her Italian ex-husband's eyes, which both her children had inherited, but a warm reddish brown. Like the rich red-gum honey that her son Cory loved on his toast fingers.

'I can see why tourists would want to visit the seahorse farm,' she went on. 'It's a real novelty. And at the oyster farm they can sample the product, which is a treat, but when they come to visit us, well, all they'll get to do is ride out to the pontoon in a boat and see the fish in captivity. And hear us talk about the process. It doesn't compare, does it?'

'I'm sure you'll make it interesting.'

She shrugged. She wasn't so sure that was possible, but she'd do her best, of course. 'So, what about you? Why are you here?'

'I'm here on behalf of friends. They run trips for tourists at Leo Bay, taking them out to swim with the sea lions.'

She nodded, smiling. 'The trail's a perfect opportunity for them. They couldn't make it tonight?'

He lowered his voice. 'I owed them a favour. They don't like functions like this.'

'And you do?'

He gave a slight grimace. ‘No. That’s why I was hoping I’d found a kindred spirit when I saw you slinking over here.’

‘Well, I admit it’s not my favourite part of the job, but it has to be done.’

He gave her a rueful smile. ‘I’m out of practice.’

‘At what?’

‘Small talk. With adults.’

The age lines around his eyes and mouth were just what his face needed to give it definition, she decided. Men had an unfair advantage when it came to such things.

Two vertical lines above the bridge of his nose told her he’d spent a lot of time frowning—or deep in thought. She could relate to that.

His hair too was a lighter, warmer brown than Giacomo’s. Its casual style didn’t go with the sharp image he presented in all other respects.

Overall, he was the most attractive man she’d seen in a long time. Suddenly, she realised he’d stopped talking and she was still staring.

Embarrassed, she glanced away. ‘Um, my main reason for coming tonight was to practise my Japanese,’ she said. ‘So I’d better go and mingle.’

‘It was good to meet you. I’m Chase, by the way.’ He held out a hand. ‘Chase Mattner.’

She shook hands with men all the time; it was a necessary part of her business, and she’d experienced all sorts of handshakes from the bone-crunching squeeze to the wet lettuce leaf effect. Sliding her hand into Chase Mattner’s, however, was…different.

For a split second she enjoyed the warm strength of his hand enfolding hers. Enjoyed the strange mixture of comfort and excitement that filled her.

But that was a ridiculous reaction. She didn’t have time to go around enjoying handshakes and, besides, someone so attractive couldn’t possibly be unattached.

Not that she wanted to know.

‘Regan Jantz,’ she said.

‘Maybe we’ll bump into each other again later.’ The gleam in his eyes told her he hoped they would.

With a nod, she walked away from him. It was only then that she registered he’d said something about a lack of adult conversation. So he had children. She’d known someone so attractive couldn’t be unattached. Not that it mattered. She recognised a local hotel owner and crossed the room to talk to her.

Chase watched Regan’s graceful progress across the room, then looked for a waiter. There was a time when he’d have been a sucker for a blue-eyed brunette, especially one as tall and striking as Regan Jantz. But that time had long gone. He’d stopped noticing women of any type once he’d married Larissa. And since then, with everything he’d been through—losing Larissa and learning through trial and error how to raise their child alone—he’d lost the urge to notice.

Regan was lovely, though. He swapped his empty glass for a fresh one and glanced across the room to where she’d settled into a discussion with one of the overseas guests. Her beauty was in her bone structure and she’d never lose it. She was one of those women who’d become even more beautiful as she aged.

As she dipped her head to hear what the man was saying, her straight dark hair hid her face but he clearly remembered the curve of her cheek, her bright, intelligent eyes. So bright and so blue he’d thought she must be wearing coloured contacts.

Women did that nowadays, he’d heard. But once he’d started talking to her, he’d decided there was nothing fake about Regan Jantz—not the hint of auburn in her dark brown hair, not the length of her eyelashes, not even the soft pink of her lips. She was as straightforward as they came and for a moment there…

No. Not attracted. He couldn't have been attracted to her. It had been a slight tug of recognition, that was all. Recognition of the fact that she was the type of woman he could have been attracted to, if things had been different. Very different. In another life.

It was too soon to even say he liked Regan but instinct told him he could like her given the chance. She reminded him of Jan in an obscure way and he valued Jan's friendship. Jan and her husband Mike were the reason he was here tonight. In a suit.

With a shrug, he shoved his free hand into the pocket of his trousers, pushing back the jacket. He wasn't just out of practice at small talk, he was out of the habit of wearing suits and didn't even know why he kept them. They'd be out of style by the time he needed them for work again. He couldn't see himself returning to working life while Phoebe was still young enough to need him and, as she was about to turn four, that day wasn't even close.

Dragging his gaze away from Regan but reluctant to join in the general chatter, he turned to the window. The function room overlooked the Port Lincoln foreshore and, as it was still early evening, he had a panoramic view of the spectacular blue waters of Boston Bay, from the tip of Port Lincoln National Park to Point Boston. The island-dotted bay was more than three times the size of Sydney Harbour but without the big city on its shores—a fact that he guessed suited the fifteen thousand inhabitants of Australia's richest town just fine.

Port Lincoln had more millionaires per capita than any other town or city in Australia. Many of the local tuna farmers had made a packet from selling sashimi to the Japanese. He wondered if Regan was one of them.

She didn't look like a millionaire, but then he, more than anyone, should know that looks could be deceptive. His own parents were rich but they spent most of their time dressed as a pair of backpackers and avoiding the luxuries they could well afford.

They'd made it clear he was welcome to their money but could expect nothing else from them, not even their time. He didn't need their money; he had enough of his own. But he could have done with their support after Larissa's death, would have been grateful for their help with Phoebe. They'd been somewhere in Africa at the time and he hadn't seen them since.

Stifling a sigh, he warned himself not to let his thoughts go there now. He drained his glass and forced himself to face the room again. He really should follow Regan's example and mingle. Having made the trip, he owed it to Jan and Mike to represent them well.

An hour or so later, Regan found herself in the same group as Chase although they were involved in separate conversations. She wondered whether he'd engineered the coincidence. When the speeches started and all heads turned towards the small stage, he moved to her side and she tried not to feel pleased, but her nerve-endings twitched and took note of his presence.

'I think I've spoken to everybody in the room,' he said in a low voice. 'What about you? Did you get plenty of practice?'

She turned to look into his face. Hunger gripped her stomach as she did so. At least, she hoped it was hunger. If not, it was a completely inappropriate reaction. 'Practice?'

She'd meant to whisper, but she hadn't meant to sound breathless. She took in a deep breath—which didn't help since all it did was fill her nose with the clean masculine scent of Chase Mattner.

There was something about this man that threw her off her game and she didn't like it. Well, maybe she did like it, but she shouldn't.

The volume of the crowd noise had dropped further and his warm breath brushed her ear as he leaned close to whisper. 'Japanese.'

'Oh, yes. I did,' she whispered back.

He nodded, then looked towards the front of the room while she continued to study his profile, his tanned cheek, the strong line of his jaw. His lips parted slightly as he gave all his attention to the speaker. And then he laughed.

Vaguely aware of the sound of general laughter around her, she was still watching as he turned to share the joke with her, his eyes sparkling, deep creases around them…

He frowned. 'Are you okay?'

His face blurred. She tried to nod but, instead of her head, it was the room that moved. It spun one way, then the other. 'I feel…a bit…dizzy.'

Within minutes she was sitting at a table in the bar sipping iced water. She'd been aware—all too aware—of his arm supporting her on the way there, but she'd been too woozy to object. Not that she'd wanted to. Which confused her.

'Feeling better?'

She rolled her eyes. 'I'm fine. I don't know what happened.'

'You're not the fainting type, then?'

'God, no!' She was as far from the fainting type as it was possible to be. 'I've never done that before.'

'Well, it was pretty warm in there. Lots of bodies.'

'Yes.' And she'd only been aware of one. The one standing next to her. She took another sip from her glass and felt the cool water slide down her throat. She was warm, but not warm enough to explain what had just happened.

'You're not…'

She looked up when he hesitated. 'Not what?'

'You're not pregnant?'

'No!'

He nodded. 'It was just a thought.' His face clouded. 'I remember my wife fainting in the first few weeks of her pregnancy.'

She breathed in and out, very slowly. She'd guessed he wasn't unattached so why did the mention of his wife slice through her? It wasn't as if she cared.

'I'm definitely not pregnant.'

'What about food? Did you eat any of the finger food in there?' He gestured towards the function room they'd left.

'No. I never do eat at these things. I'm always too worried I'll get something stuck in my teeth.'

After a brief burst of laughter he stilled, watching her face. 'You're serious, aren't you?'

She nodded. She couldn't believe she'd said it out loud. What was it about this man that made her forget who she was? First she was fainting, then she was telling him her private thoughts. She was usually much better behaved.

'When did you last eat, then?'

She frowned, thinking. 'I had breakfast.'

'Nothing since then?'

'I don't think so.'

'You don't remember?'

'It's been a busy day.' She saw him look her over. She knew she was thin, but not skinny enough to cause the frown on his face.

'I do eat. It's just that I've been busy.'

'Have dinner with me.'

It didn't sound like a question.

'I can't. I have to get home. Damn.' She stared at her watch. It was later than she'd thought. On the rare occasions she couldn't be home in time to tuck her children into bed, she always made a point of phoning them to say goodnight. But tonight she'd forgotten.

'Problem?'

'Yes. My children will be asleep by now.'

She fervently believed that all children needed to know they were loved and wanted, but when they'd already been rejected by one of the people who was supposed to love them unconditionally it was even more important to make the effort to let them know she was thinking about them. But that was the problem—she hadn't been thinking about them.

The truth made her chest heavy with guilt and she sucked in her bottom lip. She was normally so careful about things like this. She knew from experience how it felt to be forgotten by a parent. She didn't claim to be the world's best mother, but she did try to make up for being the only parent the boys had. She really tried.

'Is your husband with them?'

Her head jerked up. 'No. My mother.'

His eyebrows rose in a silent question.

'I'm divorced. My mother lives with us.' Her guilt eased a fraction. It wasn't as if they were entirely alone. Their grandmother was with them and, as Regan looked at her watch again, she knew that her boys would be fast asleep by now.

But this was the first time she'd forgotten to call them. The knot in her stomach wound tight again.

'We have something in common.' He smiled. 'We're both single parents.'

Her stomach flipped. He was unattached.

But she shouldn't care. She didn't need—or want—a man. Her jaw hurt. She'd been clenching it, she realised, and that was doing her no good at all. She sighed and lifted her eyes to meet Chase's understanding ones. 'I'm too late to say goodnight to my sons,' she said. 'It's the first time I haven't done it.'

He grimaced in sympathy. 'I'm sure they'll understand. Kids can be very forgiving. How old are they?'

'Will's seven and Cory is five.'

'And I have a daughter who's nearly four.' His face softened. 'Phoebe.'

She guessed he hadn't forgotten to phone home.

He got to his feet. 'I'd better reserve a table for us in the restaurant before they fill up.'

She opened her mouth to object, but the words wouldn't come out. Because at that moment she couldn't think of a good reason not to have dinner with him.

She nodded and watched him walk across the bar. For once she'd let someone else take the decision out of her hands, allowed someone else to take control. It felt weird, but she was a little tired of being the one who everybody came to for the answer.

Between her employees, her children and her extended family…sometimes…it was all too much.

A touch on her shoulder made her jerk, her eyes wide.

'Regan?' Chase crouched beside the chair. 'Sorry to make you jump. I couldn't get your attention. Are you sure you're feeling okay now?'

'Yes. I was just…thinking.'

He smiled and her stomach went into freefall. Oh, boy, she must be much hungrier than she'd thought.

'It's a bad habit. I'm always being told I do too much of it.' He nodded towards the restaurant. 'They have a table ready for us now.'

He rose to his feet and held out a hand. She looked at it. If she took it, would he think she was interested in him in a romantic way? Because she wasn't.

He dropped his hand and stood back, giving her space. Part of her was glad. But, as she bent to retrieve her handbag from the floor, another part wished she'd just taken his hand. Now he'd think she was an uptight, unfriendly woman who didn't know how to act around a man.

It wasn't true but, after the experience she'd had with her ex-husband, the last thing she needed was to feel attracted to this man. Or any man.

At their table, Regan accepted a menu from the waiter with a smile. She selected the King George Whiting, a local speciality popular with tourists and for good reason. Chase ordered the same, then took the menu from her and handed it to the waiter, pushing the basket of bread rolls across the table at the same time.

'Here, have some bread while we're waiting for the fish. You need to get something inside you before you keel over again.'

She groaned and took a bread roll. 'I often miss lunch but I've never felt dizzy before. I don't think that's the reason.'

'Can you think of another one?'

She shook her head.

'Maybe you should get checked over? Go to the doctor?'

'No.' She flapped a hand. 'Total overreaction. It'll probably never happen again.' As if she'd waste her precious time in a doctor's surgery when there was nothing at all wrong with her.

She brightened. 'I know what it was…I had a glass of champagne on an empty stomach and I don't often drink.'

'That would do it.' He nodded and took a bread roll himself. 'How long have you been in tuna farming?'

'My family has been in the industry for a while. My father started the business when the quotas were cut in the late eighties. His father was a tuna boat owner and Dad inherited the boat when he died but he saw that the future of the industry was in farming, not fishing.'

'A man of vision.'

She chewed a mouthful of bread slowly and swallowed it before going on. She was proud of her dad; he'd played an integral part in establishing a whole new mentality for Port Lincoln. The major industry of the town had been in trouble when it had been completely turned around by the techniques of sea culture. Her dad and people like him had been responsible for the new industry's survival and resurgence after a couple of disasters.

Their family business was nowhere near the biggest or most lucrative, but their name was well-respected and, having reverted to her maiden name since her divorce, she intended to keep it that way.

'Never having a son of his own, Dad hoped to pass the business on to his grandsons, but he died just after my second son was born.'

'Unexpectedly?'

'Very much so.' She resisted the memories that came rushing at her. 'Heart attack,' she said in a flat voice.

'I'm sorry.'

'It was a shock at the time, but I'm over it now, of course.' She cleared her throat, which was tightening despite her statement.

'And then you took over the business?'

'No. Not right away. My husband took over.' She let her gaze slide away and over the other tables without seeing the people seated at them. 'I had a baby and a toddler so I didn't take an interest in the business. I left it to him to manage.' She snorted. 'Big mistake.'

She took a deep steadying breath. Giacomo—or, as he'd preferred her to call him, Jack—with his classical good looks and charming ways had let her down all round. It had been a tough time, and she could hardly believe she was telling this stranger about him.

Was it because she'd never see him again? Was it like talking to a fellow passenger on a plane—that sense of being able to say anything because their paths would never cross again?

Or was it because, for some strange reason, she felt a connection to him? As if he was someone she could trust. As if he was a friend.

Either way, she'd probably said enough.

'What happened?'

She turned back and met his gentle, encouraging gaze. Her resistance crumbled and the words flowed out before she could stop them.

'He had no idea what he was doing. Oh, he talked as if he knew all about the industry but, when it came down to it, he had no business sense whatsoever. We nearly lost everything.'

'But you found out in time to save it?'

She winced. 'I found out when he left me. Left me, his children, the business.' She spread her hands, palms up. 'The whole lot.'

She saw a flash of anger in his eyes but it was followed by concern and he waited silently for her to go on, resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his linked hands.

'That was when I took over. I didn't have a choice. Everyone depended on me. The employees. My family. I had to support my children. And I didn't know much about the business except what I'd learned from listening to Dad.' She made a frustrated gesture.

'Rather from overhearing him talk about it. He'd never tried to teach me anything because he didn't think there was any need to.' And he probably wouldn't have thought of her as a successor. Growing up, he hadn't thought about her much at all to be honest, too consumed in making the business a success. The knowledge was like a lead weight in her stomach.

She'd told Chase she hadn't a choice, but in truth she had. No one had forced her to take over the business. She could have let it go and found herself a job. Strictly nine-to-five.

But could she have coped with the shame of allowing the family business to be destroyed? With seeing the employees—all those people—out of a job because of her husband's bad business mistakes?

Not a chance.

She'd felt a compulsion to clear up the mess that Jack had made. She couldn't possibly let all her father's work be wasted. But that wasn't all—she'd suddenly had an irrational need to show her father she could do it. He might have been dead but Regan had still been looking for his elusive approval.

And, at the same time, she'd thought it was the best way of supporting her children. It had been a lucrative business in her father's day. If she could turn around the damage, she knew it could be lucrative again. And, when the boys were old enough, she could hand it over to them to manage. It was their heritage.

Of course, she'd underestimated how difficult it would be to juggle the demands of the business and her desire to be there for her children.

But she'd coped. Just about.

'How long ago was this?' Chase jogged her from her thoughts and she refocused on his face.

'Five years. And it's taken almost all of that time to get the business back on track.'

He nodded. 'It's going well now?'

'Touch wood.' She tapped two fingers against the dark timber table. 'Yes, it's ticking over nicely. I'm about to tie up a contract with a Japanese restaurant chain and that will set us up for several years. The pressure will be off. Finally.'

The waiter brought their meals and she leaned back while he arranged a plate in front of her. No matter how encouraging Chase was, she really should stop talking now.

'Well, I'm very impressed,' he said as the waiter left.

She made a dismissive gesture.

'No, really. What you've done is amazing.'

She could have sworn her whole body blushed. She dropped her gaze to the fish and picked up her fork. 'That's enough about me. What do you do?'

CHAPTER TWO

'SO, YOU do nothing?' Regan looked down at the food on her plate and Chase thought he caught a flash of disapproval as she dropped her gaze.

He took a sip of water. Regan had declined wine, which was probably a good idea considering what had happened earlier, so he'd chosen mineral water, too. Technically, yes. In employment terms, he did nothing, but he wouldn't describe his lifestyle in Leo Bay like that.

Regan probably had him pegged as one of those characters the current affairs shows were keen on spotlighting. Bludgers who survived on taxpayers' money while they spent their days catching waves.

The idea of her thinking badly of him sat uncomfortably in his stomach and he hurried to explain. As she reached for her glass, he said, 'I've taken time out of my career to raise my daughter.'

Her face changed, brightened, and hell, she had a lovely smile.

'You have sole custody, too? When was your divorce?'

'I'm not divorced.' He frowned. 'My wife passed away three and a half years ago.'

After a moment's stunned silence, she said softly, 'I'm sorry.'

His head twitched in acknowledgement. He'd never got used to accepting sympathy.

'How did she…?' Flapping a hand, she said, 'No, of course you won't want to talk about it.'

'It's okay.' He paused while the waiter refilled their glasses.

He could talk about Larissa. Now. When he'd first moved from the city, he hadn't been able to. Hadn't been able to even think about her without breaking down. But that had changed. Living in Leo Bay had done that for him.

He still missed her; how could he not? They'd planned to spend a lifetime together. And he'd been happy married to her. He'd wanted the whole package—wife, kids and career.

Life had a way of ensuring a man didn't get too cocky.

Yet there were men like Regan's husband who had it all and threw it away. He felt a sudden surge of anger. He couldn't understand a man like that. He'd never know how a father could desert his children.

Life hadn't been easy for him after Larissa's death, but he'd never once thought of leaving Phoebe to someone else's care.

It had been one of his few strokes of genius when he'd decided to take a sabbatical and move out to the Eyre Peninsula beach shack that had been left to Larissa by her parents—along with a sizeable inheritance he would never touch. It would go to Phoebe when she became an adult.

Larissa had spent her childhood holidays at the shack and, though they'd never discussed it, he'd known instinctively that she'd been happy there.

From the moment he and Phoebe had arrived at the front door, he'd been filled with a sense of doing right. It was as if he could feel Larissa's spirit all around him. As if she'd wanted them to live there. The comfort he'd taken from that odd sensation had helped to ease the pain.

It was a much more simple life he led now, away from the demands of city living and the world in general. Simple was good. It had helped him cope, helped him retain his sanity.

And then there was Phoebe. Watching his daughter grow and learn had gone a long way towards filling the hole in his battered heart.

Regan fidgeted with her napkin and he snapped back to the present. 'Cancer,' he said.

She made a sympathetic noise.

'Breast cancer. Trouble was, she found out about it the same week we learned she was pregnant and, consequently, she refused treatment and kept the bad news to herself.' He spoke matter-of-factly, but there'd been nothing straightforward about his emotions at the time he'd discovered her illness.

‘By the time I worked out there was something wrong and it wasn’t just the strain of pregnancy on her body that was making her sick, it was too late. It was a very aggressive disease.’

He stared at the tablecloth, tracing the white threads with his fingertip.

‘I can understand what she did,’ Regan said in a gentle voice.

He looked up. ‘Can you?’ He shook his head. ‘Must be a female thing. Larissa said it was her maternal instinct. I don’t believe you’d find many husbands who’d agree with that course of action.’

‘No, I don’t suppose so. A mother’s protectiveness starts early. Well before a baby’s born.’ She pulled a face. ‘A father’s protectiveness only kicks in after the baby’s born, if…if…’

‘If it kicks in at all,’ he finished for her, smiling at her horrified expression.

‘I’m so sorry. I wasn’t referring to your situation. I didn’t mean to imply you’re anything like my ex.’

‘No, I know.’ He took another drink of water while he gathered his thoughts. ‘She should have told me.’ He paused, frowning. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I worship Phoebe and I wouldn’t be without her. I wouldn’t allow anything to hurt her. Anything. But to have to watch your wife die…and all the time, to know that she’d had a choice.’

He shrugged. ‘She chose to die rather than live—’ His voice cracked and he shook his head. He’d thought he could talk about that time of his life. Seemed he was wrong. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, don’t apologise. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have asked in the first place.’ She hesitated. ‘I’m so sorry about what you went through.’

He saw the truth of her words in her clear blue eyes and it warmed him. She wasn’t the breezy businesswoman she pretended to be. He got the impression she had a sensitive soul.

He told her a little about his daughter while they ate, and she reciprocated by describing her two boys. Again, he wondered how her husband could have come to terms with leaving them, not to mention giving up someone as…unique as Regan. If Larissa had lived, he’d never have left her. He had no doubt about that.

Regan was telling him about her elder son’s obsession with all things Roman.

‘His father was from Rome originally and I suspect that Will has the wrong idea of the city—he thinks it’s still like ancient Rome, full of gladiators and people in togas. I’ve told him it’s not, but…’

‘Is that where he lives now?’

She looked up. ‘Jack? I have no idea where he is. Somewhere in Italy, I think.’

‘You don’t have any contact with him at all?’

She shook her head as she put down her cutlery. ‘When he left, he just disappeared. I tried all the places I thought he might have gone, but…’ She shrugged. ‘He didn’t want to be found, obviously. And he hasn’t been in touch since. For my part, I’m glad. In fact, I consider myself lucky that I didn’t have to go through a custody battle like my best friend Anna did. She had a terrible time, poor thing. At least I was spared that, but for the boys’ sake…’ Her face twisted.

‘I can’t say they miss him because they were too young when he left, but they talk to other children, so even in these days of unconventional families they know there’s something missing from their lives.’

After a moment, she looked at her watch and her eyebrows shot up. ‘It’s late. It’s time I headed home.’

‘You haven’t finished your meal.’

‘I’ve had enough. I still have work to do this evening. I have this contract to sort out—the one I mentioned earlier.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll call a taxi and see you home.’

‘No. No need. Stay and finish your meal. I have my car. It’s not far and…’ Her words trailed off and she looked less sure of herself.

He gave her an amused look. ‘And you don’t want me to know where you live?’

She winced. ‘It’s not you, it’s…me.’ She winced again at the cliché. ‘I don’t do this,’ she said, waving a hand at her half-empty plate.

‘Eat? I think we established that earlier.’

She made the gesture more expansive, encompassing the table and the two of them seated at it. ‘This. When I’m not working, I’m spending quality time with my children. I don’t have time for anything else.’

‘You don’t socialise with friends?’

She hesitated. ‘Well, yes, I do. But we’re not friends. We only met tonight and we’ll probably never see each other again.’

He looked away. He didn’t understand why he should be disappointed. Why, in one evening, she’d gone from a woman he’d admired on sight but had no intention of pursuing, to someone he was very keen to know better.

She was beautiful, but it wasn’t that. Or, he should say, it wasn’t only that. For some unknown reason, he felt comfortable with her. He could talk to her. He’d told her about Larissa and that placed her in a very select group of people.

But she wasn’t interested in being his friend. She didn’t even want to see him again.

Suppressing a sigh, he looked back at her, just in time to see her take a credit card from her purse.

‘No,’ he said, giving his hand a quick shake. ‘I’m staying at this hotel. I’ve already charged the meal to my room.’

She put the card away. ‘Thank you.’

She wasn’t so pale now that she had some food inside her. She’d worried him when her face had turned as white as the tablecloth.

He wouldn’t patronize her by thinking she needed—or wanted—someone to look after her. She clearly managed a successful business as well as a family all on her own, and it would be insane to imagine she was helpless, but there was something about her that made him want to help.

The slight flush in her cheeks suited her. It made her eyes sparkle more brightly, which he wouldn’t have thought possible.

‘Let me give you my number.’ He reached into his jacket as he spoke.

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘Really, there’s no point. I don’t have time to go out. This is so unusual for me.’

He separated one business card from the small pile and held it out to her, willing her to take it. ‘I don’t go out either, but I’d like you to have my mobile number, just in case.’

‘In case?’

He shrugged. ‘In case you want someone to talk to. In case you need a friend.’ He thought it sounded lame but didn’t know what else to say. It just felt wrong to let Regan disappear.

She reached for the card, frowning as she scanned it. ‘You’re a lawyer? You didn’t say so.’

‘Not practising. Ignore all the details on the card except the mobile number. It’s still the same.’

She nodded and slipped the card away. ‘Thank you.’

He knew she had no intention of calling. She couldn’t even meet his eyes. She’d probably throw the card away as soon as she got home.

It shouldn’t matter. He’d only just met her. He shouldn’t care whether she liked him or not.

As she stood, he pushed his chair back and got to his feet. He couldn’t help it; he did care.

‘Don’t bother seeing me out.’ She flapped a hand at him. ‘I hope you enjoy what’s left of your meal. And…it was nice meeting you.’

Her voice had dropped to a murmur on the last words, but he heard her well enough to believe she meant it. Hope leapt into his chest.

‘It was great to meet you, Regan.’ He held out his hand and, after a slight hesitation, she shook it. ‘Remember, call me if you need anything,’ he said, holding on to her soft hand a second longer than strictly necessary.

She looked into his face, her eyes shining. But she didn’t speak or even nod. She simply pulled her hand from his and walked away.

A week after the launch of the tourist trail, Regan rubbed her forehead and let her eyes drift away from the computer screen. She glanced across at her two sons, who were quietly colouring pictures, but she’d promised they wouldn’t have to sit there for too long. They were boys; they had energy to burn.

She worked at home as much as possible in order to spend time with Will and Cory. They had an arrangement that if the boys sat quietly and let her concentrate while working at her computer, she’d reciprocate by playing a noisy game with them when she’d finished.

Regan normally had her mother around for back-up when she needed to go into the office, but her grandfather’s health had taken a turn for the worse and her mother had decided to move in with him for a little while, to look after him. He’d been relatively self-sufficient till now, at least in a physical sense. Financially, he was one more person who relied on Regan. Not that she begrudged him the money. Of course she didn’t.

She did wish, though, that Pop would move closer to them. He lived alone in a small town further up the coast. If he lived nearby, they’d be able to make sure he was taking care of himself. As it was, her mother would travel up to see him as often as possible and stay with him when she thought he needed some help. And Regan worried that it was too much for her mother.

With her mother at Pop’s for the next week or so, she had a child-care problem. Her other back-up, her best friend Anna, was currently overseas on a long-anticipated trip to discover her roots in northern England. She missed Anna. The boys missed Anna’s children, too. They were all good friends and until now she’d always been able to rely on Anna to pitch in and help when necessary.

She let out a deep sigh.

‘Are you finished, Mum?’

‘No, Will. A little longer.’

The boys exchanged a glance and she felt a pang. They’d sat still long enough and she wasn’t achieving much anyway; she was too distracted. Closing her eyes, she wondered if any of her other friends would be able to babysit for a few hours during the next week. Unlikely. They were all busy with their own lives and, besides, she hadn’t been in touch with them recently. A couple of them—girls she’d known since her schooldays—would always be friends no matter what. When they met it would be the same as always. But they lived in the city now and had their own commitments.

Other friends were married couples she’d known while with Jack. Her divorce had shifted the emphasis of those friendships and she’d felt strange with them for a while—especially when she was the odd one out in a room full of couples. In a sense, she’d been glad of the lack-of-time excuse to stay away, but she’d like to catch up with all of them again. Now, though, when she needed a favour, was not the right time.

In case you need a friend…

The memory of Chase Mattner’s voice made her eyes snap open. She looked straight at the business card he’d given her. She’d intended to throw it away as soon as she’d got home from dinner that night, but something had stopped her. Instead, she’d carried it to work in her briefcase, then brought it home again and tucked it into the corner of the desk blotter in her study where it had stayed all week. And she’d thought about ringing him at least once a day.

Could she ring him?

Just to talk.

She'd been shocked at how easy it was to talk to him, to open up to him. She'd almost forgotten they'd only just met. Almost. But it wasn't every day a man like him walked into her life.

She reached for the business card with the name of a high-profile city law firm printed in a no-nonsense typeface across the top and, for the first time, read Chase's details.

Partner?

He'd been a partner? How had he managed the transition from a prestigious job like that to full-time father? And in such a place, too. She hadn't been to Leo Bay for years but, from what she remembered, there was hardly anything to the settlement—a few beach shacks, not much more. It couldn't even be called a small town.

Presumably, he didn't need to work, but didn't he want to?

Her hand shot out and pushed the card back into the spot it had occupied for a week.

What was she thinking?

She chewed on her lip. The truth was, she was thinking it would be good to talk to him again. It would be good to see him again. It would be good to have Chase Mattner as a friend.

It had been difficult to walk away from him, but she'd reminded herself that she wasn't a great judge of men, wasn't any sort of a judge at all. Since that night, though, she'd remembered the break in his voice when he'd spoken about his wife, and the change in his eyes when he'd talked of his daughter, and she'd wished she hadn't been so emphatic about not calling.

But she'd told him she wouldn't. What would he think of her if she changed her mind now?

A little voice told her he would think nothing bad.

Her hand crept out again and she pulled the card across the blotter towards her. She could ring to thank him for dinner. She'd thanked him briefly, but it would be polite to do it again. Properly.

And what about rescuing her when she nearly fainted? If it hadn't been for him, she could have found herself sprawled across the floor of the function room and just the thought of that made her hot with embarrassment. She hadn't thanked him for saving her from the mortification of it.

She picked up the card and dug one corner into her chin while her stomach flip-flopped with indecision.

She'd do it.

As soon as she'd made the decision, her stomach cramped into a tight ball. She'd never been so worked up about a simple phone call.

Picking up the handset, she glanced across at the boys again. She couldn't talk to Chase in front of them, even if they'd have no idea who she was speaking to or what she was talking about.

'Boys, I'm just going into the next room for a minute. Don't touch anything, okay?'

She waited till they both nodded before slipping through the door into the empty dining room and dialling the mobile number on the card.

'Chase Mattner.'

Her eyes closed. Until a few moments ago, she hadn't seriously thought she'd hear his voice again and now it sent a shock right through her. It took her back to the moment he'd first spoken and her first sight of his sun-bronzed face with the kind, understanding eyes.

'Hello?' he said, his voice curious at the silence.

'It's Regan Jantz,' she said in a rush before she could change her mind and hit the disconnect button.

'Regan?'

He hadn't expected her to call. She could hear the surprise in his voice. She shouldn't have—

'Wow. I'm so glad you called.'

A shudder turned into a wave of warmth. 'You are?'

'Yes, of course. But I didn't think you would.'

'No, me neither.' Her voice sounded odd and she cleared her throat. 'Actually, I was ringing to thank you.'

'Oh?'

'For dinner.'

'You're welcome, Regan. It was my pleasure.'

'And for your help earlier that evening, for getting me out of that room without anyone noticing. I dread to think what would have happened if you hadn't been there.'

'Well, don't think about it. It didn't happen; your dignity is intact. None of your potential clients have any idea what went on.'

'Thank you.'

'No problem. I'm glad I could help.'

'I'm grateful and…' She hesitated long enough for her stomach to lurch. 'If there's anything I can do for you in return…'

There was a brief silence.

'I mean, if I can help you—'

'Well, as it happens…do you bake?'

'Bake?'

'As in cakes.'

'I used to. It's been, uh, ages. Why?'

'It's Phoebe's birthday today and she asked me to make her a pink cake for tea. Don't know why. She's never had one before so I don't know where she got the idea. But that's what she wants and I thought it would be easy.'

'You've tried to make one?'

'Uh-huh. I'm hoping you can tell me where I've gone wrong. I'm running out of time.'

An image bloomed in her mind. Chase in a kitchen. In an apron. Surrounded by baking debris. Before she knew it, a burst of laughter bubbled in her throat and she couldn't hold it back.

'I'll ignore the fact that you just laughed at me,' he said and she could hear suppressed laughter in his own voice. 'I'm desperate. This so-called cake is so bad it's not funny.'

'Right. Sorry.' She banished the picture of Chase and cleared her throat. 'What's wrong with it?'

'It's thin and crispy. Like a pizza base.'

She hissed in a breath through her teeth. 'Did you follow a recipe?'

'Yep. I borrowed a book from my friend, Jan. She's taken Phoebe for the afternoon to give me the time and space to make it. I should have asked Jan to make the cake instead.'

'But Phoebe asked you to make it.'

She couldn't remember the last time she'd actually made a birthday cake for either Will or Cory. No, that wasn't true; she could remember. It had been Will's first birthday. The only birthday Jack had been there for. Before her life had been turned upside-down. Since then, she'd resorted to shop-bought cakes. Biting her lip, she hoped the boys hadn't been disappointed. Then she rolled her eyes. They wouldn't even know the difference—but she'd make up for it. She'd make cakes for both birthdays this year. She'd surprise them with something special.

'So you see my problem.'

'Did you use all the ingredients exactly as listed?'

'Yes. It's a very old book, though. I had to convert ounces to grams.'

There was always a chance he'd made a mistake there. 'Did you open the oven door while it was cooking?'

'Ye-es. You're not supposed to?'

'It doesn't help, but look, there are lots of things that can go wrong.'

He made an exasperated sound. 'I don't suppose…you'd come and help me?'

She felt a mixture of sympathy and fear. Calling him was one thing. Going to his house was quite another. But then she thought of Phoebe coming home, expecting her pink cake. And she remembered all the cakes she'd hoped for but hadn't had during her childhood.

Her throat closed. She was close to agreeing. But could she trust herself to bake a cake after all this time? What if she messed it up?

'I don't know,' she said at last.

'It's okay, Regan. I understand. It was too much to ask.' He sighed. 'So, what do you reckon I should do?'

She was silent for a long moment. Then she heard herself suggest a solution and could hardly believe it had come from her own mouth. 'I could buy a plain cake and bring it over there and we could decorate it for Phoebe. It's a compromise but I don't think she'll care.'

'Brilliant. She won't care, but are you sure you don't mind?'

The sound of laughter reached her through the half-open door. 'Oh, there's a problem, Chase. I'll have to bring my sons with me.'

'You call that a problem? You should see my cake. No, really, it's fine. Your sons will be welcome.'

She took a deep breath. She was really going to do this. She was really going to decorate a birthday cake for a little girl she'd never met, with a man she hardly knew.

Shaking her head, she said, 'Do you have candles?'

'I…um…well, she didn't ask for them so I didn't think they were necessary.'

She smiled. 'But you have to take a photo of her blowing out the candles. She'll love it. Believe me.'

Regan wondered what had made her say that. What did she know about little girls? Except that she used to be one a long, long time ago. It felt like a long time. She was nearly thirty.

'Don't worry, I'll bring some. We'll be there as soon as possible.'

'Drive carefully.'

Once he'd given her directions, she hung up, then pulled the door wide. 'Boys, we're going out,' she said as she walked into the study.

A synchronized groan met her words.

'It'll be fun.' She placed a hand on Will's shoulder and ruffled Cory's dark hair. 'We're going to a place called Leo Bay. You'll like it.'

'What's there?' Will asked.

'Um, not much.'

'So why will we like it?'

'Because…' She paused. Why was she so sure they would like it? 'Because we're going to have a good time. Once I've done what I have to do, we'll go to the beach.'

Will squinted at her for a moment. 'Can we go bodyboarding?'

'Sure.'

'Cool,' he said as he slid off the chair. 'Come on, Cory. Let's get the boards.'

As she ushered them both to their bedroom to change into clothes more appropriate to the beach, she spotted her mother packing a suitcase.

Regan stepped into the doorway of her mother's room. 'Nearly ready to leave?'

Her mother sighed. 'Yes. I'll be gone for a bit longer this time. I'm going to try to talk him into seeing a doctor as well.'

Regan nodded. 'Poor Pop. He thinks that seeing a doctor is the beginning of the end.'

'I know, but we have to find out what's going on. There might be a simple treatment that will prevent him getting worse.'

Her mother tucked a nightdress into the edge of the suitcase and flipped the lid closed. While she fiddled with the zip, Regan rubbed her forehead. She had to remember to take some headache tablets before leaving.

'Give him my love, won't you? And take care of yourself, too.'

Her mother nodded.

Regan went to pack a bag of her own, stuffing it with towels, sunscreen and extra clothes for Will and Cory. She would miss her mum while she was away, but Regan knew that their relationship was not a close one and never had been. She knew her mother loved her, and she adored the boys, but Regan had always been aware, growing up, that her parents were busy making the business a success. She appreciated all their hard work now, but it left her feeling a little sad at times, as if she'd missed out on something special.

Still, she was grateful for what they did have and she knew that many people had a lot less. Her mind drifted to little Phoebe, whose mother had died to give her life…

She changed into a loose dress and, after loading the boys into her car along with all the things they wanted to take, she drove to the office.

Sue, Regan's secretary, smiled at Will and Cory as she took a pile of paperwork from Regan.

'I'll be in the office next week, Sue. And I'll call you before then to make sure there are no problems.'

'Sure. So where are you all off to?' she asked. 'Looks like you're dressed for the beach.'

Cory nodded. 'Where did you say it was, Mum?'

'We're going to Leo Bay,' Regan mumbled. 'Have a good weekend, Sue.'

'You, too.'

Regan was fond of Sue but she didn't want to tell her about Chase. Sue had stuck by Regan and the business through the difficult time after Jack had left. She'd earned the right to be a little nosy and was more a friend than an employee, but Regan knew that if she even hinted that there was a new man in her life, the news that she was dating would spread through the business faster than fire through the bush.

After leaving the office, Regan went to the shops to find a plain sponge cake, bought candles, icing sugar and food colouring and then they were ready to leave.

CHAPTER THREE

REGAN only had a vague memory of a day trip to Leo Bay as a child. Her father had never taken time off work for holidays and her mother would go nowhere without him so a very limited number of day trips was all they'd managed.

The boys chattered in the back of the car and she somehow managed to answer their questions, whilst her concentration was divided between following the unfamiliar road and thinking about Chase.

This was so out of character for her, she had to wonder whether she was losing her mind. She didn't date.

But she wasn't dating, she reminded herself. She glanced at the cake resting safely on the passenger seat. She was saving a little girl from disappointment and doing a favour for a friend. That wasn't unusual, so what was the problem?

Besides, the boys would be sad if they turned back now. They didn't have many days out, either. Not as many as she'd like. She did her best but she had a busy schedule. She really must put aside some time for a proper holiday this year. They all deserved it.

Anyway, if she felt uncomfortable with Chase at the end of the day, she could simply walk away and never see him again. What did she have to lose?

She slowed the car as they approached a few scattered houses.

'Are we there, Mum?'

'Nearly.'

They reached the end of the road and the bay opened out before them. She braked, awed for a moment by the crescent-shaped sweep of white sand edging turquoise water. Low dunes stretched to the left and right and curved into sandy headlands at each end of the bay, enclosing and framing the perfect picture.

Recalling Chase's directions, Regan turned the car to the right and headed along the dusty road behind the dunes. Houses were built on the inland side of the road only. Chase's was the fourth and last house and had been constructed on timber posts which, Regan guessed, gave it a great view across the dunes to the ocean.

She pulled the car on to the sparse gravel frontage and stepped out of it, her eyes on the sky-blue weatherboard building. It was a beach shack, exactly as he'd said. She'd had a random thought that he might have downplayed its description and she'd find a sprawling, contemporary holiday home. But no, it was a shack, complete with paint that was peeling in places from the salt air, fishing rods on the front veranda and drifts of sand at the end of each step.

She was acutely aware that butterflies had taken up residence in her stomach, yet she did much scarier things than this all the time. This was nothing compared with her first meeting with angry, disappointed customers when she'd taken over the business. And that was only one example of what she'd learned to deal with on a daily basis. Not that she allowed customers to be let down now that she had the business under control, but still, there was always some demand on her courage.

This, though, had taken on a significance out of all proportion to what it was—a simple visit.

The boys were scrambling to get out of the car and she tore her gaze away from the house to organise them, giving Will the bag to carry and Cory the bodyboards, before reaching into the front seat for the cake. As she closed the car door, the house door opened and Chase strolled out on to the porch.

But this was a very different Chase from the one she'd encountered at the cocktail party. For an instant, she wondered if she'd have given him a second glance if he'd been in board shorts and T-shirt with bare feet when she'd met him.

But then he smiled at her and something deep inside her twisted. Was seeing a friend supposed to feel like this?

His clothes were irrelevant. It was something about him that made her straighten her spine and take notice, that made her nerve-endings tingle and her muscles contract.

She hadn't given a man so much as a glance since her divorce but this man had her looking.

But look was all she would do. And talk. He'd been so easy to talk to at dinner she'd found herself sharing information about herself she wouldn't normally give away to anybody.

Since Jack's desertion, she'd been absolutely certain that she'd never be able to trust a man again. If the one who'd loved her as deeply as she'd believed Jack had loved her could walk out of her life without a backward glance, how could she trust anybody else?

She and Jack had fallen in love the day they'd met, had been married within months, and he'd promised to love her for ever. When she'd had two babies in quick succession, she'd thought they were living the dream, that their life was picture-postcard perfect.

But while she had still been reeling from the death of her father, he'd abandoned the three of them. And not only that, but he'd left her to sort out the mess he'd created. In her book, you didn't do that to someone you loved.

It had taken her five years to dig her way out of the disaster, to get their lives back on a secure footing. Five years that had killed any love she'd ever felt for Jack, but she still thought about him. Despite their divorce, she didn't feel she'd achieved closure.

She would never again give a man the power to hurt her as Jack had done. Which meant keeping her heart under wraps and her feelings firmly under control.

Chase jogged down the steps from the veranda and crossed to where she was still standing. 'Regan, it's fantastic to see you again.' He bent to kiss her cheek.

Shock stole her voice. He'd kissed her. She wanted to lift her fingers to her cheek, to touch the blazing spot he'd brushed with his lips, but luckily she remembered she was holding the cake in time to stop her making a total fool of herself.

It was a peck, that was all. Other friends greeted her with a kiss. It was nothing out of the ordinary. She just hadn't been expecting it from him.

'Is that the cake?' He gestured at the white box in her hands.

'Oh, yes.'

'Brilliant. Thanks for doing this. Shall I take it?'

'Um…could you help Cory instead?' She tipped her head towards her youngest son, who was struggling to hold two bodyboards that were bigger than him. 'I promised I'd take the boys down to the beach afterwards.'

Chase's smile broadened to a grin and he dropped to crouch beside Cory. 'G'day, mate. I'm Chase. Can I give you a hand?'

Cory nodded.

'I've got one of these, too.'

Cory looked up at him as he straightened and tucked the boards under his arm.

'The waves here are perfect for bodyboarding.'

'Are they?'

'Yeah, not too big.'

'Cory doesn't know how to do it yet,' Will chimed in. 'Mum's tried to teach him but he keeps falling off the board.'

'Well, that's no problem. We can fix that. Shall I take the bag, Will?'

Will looked surprised that this stranger knew his name and he glanced at Regan as he handed over the bag. She gave him an encouraging smile. Will wasn't shy but he did take a while to warm up to new people.

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