DONNA
ALWARD

THE SOLDIER'S HOMECOMING

Cherish

DONNA ALWARD

The Soldier's Homecoming

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The Soldier's Homecoming / D. ALWARD — «HarperCollins»,

A hero for his country–home to win her heart!Jonas Kirkpatrick left town to be a soldier without ever looking back. But Shannyn saw him every day in her little girl's green eyes…. Six years later, Jonas has come home, changed utterly from the carefree boy Shannyn once knew. Hardened by war, Jonas can't allow himself to open his heart.Until he discovers what he left behind–the unbreakable bond with a child he never knew existed, and the enduring love of the only woman who can make him whole again.

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ALWARD
&
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HOMECOMING
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Donna Alward
The Soldier’s Homecoming

This book is dedicated to the men and women of our Armed Forces and their families—who put their lives on the line for our freedom every day. We can never thank you enough.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHANNYN SMITH heard the door open but didn't dare tear her eyes from the column she was adjusting. "Good morning," she said to the figure she knew was in front of the reception counter. There was a glimpse of muted green in her peripheral vision as she input the last series of numbers. "I'll be right with you."

She turned in her office chair, put a stack of patient files on the desk and clicked the mouse, minimizing the table and bringing up today's appointment schedule. Of all days for their receptionist to call in sick, forcing her to fill in. She had monthly reports due. "And you are?"

When no one answered, she lifted her eyes. And the world started to spin dangerously. Dark hair. Green eyes. The khaki color of army combats.

Jonas.

"Sgt. Kirkpatrick to see Ms. Malloy," he answered brusquely. But she knew he recognized her too when his Adam's apple bobbed up, then down as he swallowed hard.

"Jonas," she whispered. That was all. She couldn't bring herself to say more, not with him standing in front of her as if he'd materialized from a dream.

Six long years. Six years since he'd said goodbye to her. Six years since he'd been transferred to Edmonton, leaving her behind here, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and never looking back.

"Hello, Shannyn."

His words were cold and impersonal. Shannyn knew she couldn't expect anything different, nor did she want to. It had been so long since they'd seen each other. He'd moved on. Perhaps even married. Just because the shock of seeing him made her heart give a little flutter, didn't mean it did the same for him. And simply seeing him now suddenly complicated everything.

A counter separated them, which was a good thing, Shannyn realized. On the heels of her shock came an irrational spurt of pure joy in knowing he was alive. Despite how things had ended, she'd wondered at times where he was, or if he'd been killed or wounded. The elation of seeing him in the flesh shot through her veins. Yes, it was good that the reception counter was there. If not, she'd have been tempted to jump up and give him an impetuous hug of relief. That would be vastly inappropriate. They were old lovers, a flash from the past. And that was all they would remain. She'd worked too hard to build her life after he'd moved on, so she remained firmly in her seat. He certainly hadn't cared enough to keep in touch, had he? Not a single letter or phone call. Right now it shouldn't matter in the least that he was standing in front of her.

Except it did.

"You look well," she managed, trying a professional smile that fell a little flat as it encountered his stern expression.

He looked amazing, in fact. His hair was military short, but still thick and sable colored. His eyes were large, a beautiful shade of moss green with thick black lashes. When they'd met, it had been his eyes that had been the clincher. It had been his eyes that had stayed with her all this time, making it impossible for her to forget completely.

His tall, firm body was dressed in everyday combats, nothing special, even though he was neat as a pin. She noticed the three stripes on his sleeve. When he'd gone back to Edmonton, Alberta, he'd been a private with his eyes set on being an elite soldier. The best of the best. Obviously his career had progressed. Time had passed.

"Is Ms. Malloy running behind?"

Her weak smile faded and she recoiled. That was all? She hadn't expected old-home week or anything, and didn't want it, either, but pleasantries would have been appropriate under the circumstances. Some acknowledgment that he remembered her.

Clearing her throat, she looked up at the screen. “About ten minutes, that’s all. You can have a seat in the waiting room.”

He turned from the counter without a word, walked toward the blue padded chairs, and Shannyn stared, her stomach tumbling.

He was limping.

A million thoughts flooded her brain all at once. The overriding one was that he’d been injured, and momentarily all her resentment at his nonexistent reception evaporated. Somehow, somewhere he’d taken “fire and blood”, and his blood had been spilled. In that split second she imagined it leaking out of his body and soaking into the dry desert earth. Where had he been? In the Middle East, like so many of the Canadian troops? It seemed all they heard of nowadays were the small skirmishes that had devastating results.

On automatic pilot she let Geneva Molloy know that her next appointment had arrived. And what was he doing back here? The last she’d heard, he’d been stationed in Edmonton with his battalion of the Princess Pats. So why was he back at Base Gagetown, after all this time?

She stared at the back of his head, her earlier work forgotten. She could hardly go up and ask him about it, could she? He’d already been cold and dismissive. Hardly inspiring a heart-to-heart between them.

She discovered it was a conversation she didn’t want to have. After years of wondering what it would be like to see him again, to tell him the truth…it was surprising to discover it was not what she wanted. Uppermost in her mind was simply the preservation of the life she’d built for herself.

She’d done what she had for good reasons. To forget that, to be tempted to engage with him, would mean everything would change. The shock of seeing him face-to-face made that abundantly clear. Everything she’d done in the past six years—her silence, her going to night school, running this office—it had been for the best of reasons. She owed nothing to the cold stranger who had suddenly appeared today. Injured or not. He was the one who’d left her behind. He was the one who had decided his career was more important than what they had together.

“Shannyn. You okay?” Carrie Morehouse, one of the therapists, put a hand on Shannyn’s shoulder. “You’re in another world.”

“I’m so sorry.” Shannyn straightened and exhaled. “What do you need, Carrie?”

“Mrs. Gilmore’s file. Are you sure you’re okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

At that moment Geneva Malloy’s voice came through the far door. “Sgt. Kirkpatrick? I’m ready for you now.”

Jonas stood, and without a backward glance at Shannyn’s desk, went through the door with his physiotherapist.

“Hey…‘Kirkpatrick’.” Carrie paused, then pierced Shannyn with a questioning look. “Isn’t Kirkpatrick the name of—”

Shannyn confirmed it with a twitch of her eyebrow.

Carrie grabbed a nearby chair and pulled it close, plopping down. “Then it is a ghost.”

“He’s very real, I’m afraid.” Shannyn took Mrs. Gilmore’s file and handed it over, torn between wanting to talk about it and wanting to pretend he wasn’t back at all.

“Did he even recognize you?” The file went forgotten in Carrie’s hand.

Maybe it would have been easier if he hadn’t recognized her, although after all they’d shared there was little chance of it. It might have been easier to take, though, than the cold reception she’d been given.

“Oh, he knows who I am. He just doesn’t seem to care. Which is just as it should be.” She tried hard to be glad Jonas had been so cold. If he wasn’t interested in her now, it made her life a whole lot easier.

Carrie looked at her watch. “I wish we could talk. I’ve got to run or I’ll be behind. We’ll chat later, okay?” Carrie reached over and gave Shannyn’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

There was nothing for them to talk about, not really. Jonas would move along soon enough, and she'd still be left behind. After his impersonal greeting this morning, it was very clear he didn't hold any lingering feelings for her at all. That was for the best. Dreams were well and good, but reality was a whole other ball game. She'd learned that the hard way a long time ago. Everything would be much easier this way in the end.

Shannyn sighed. Anything with Jonas would be temporary, no matter how much she'd never been able to completely let go, no matter how tempted she was to go there again. But temporary wasn't good enough. Not anymore.

Shannyn attempted to go back to her monthly reports but her heart wasn't in her work. She kept picturing Jonas's limp and wondered what he was going through with his therapy. Wondered what had brought him to this point in his life.

Questions she had no right to ask.

After an hour had passed, Jonas reappeared at her desk. She looked up at him over the counter. Goodness, he was tall. It was one of the things she'd always really liked about him. Jonas was easily six-one, and seemed to stand even taller after his physio session.

"I need to book my next appointment."

"How frequently are you supposed to have sessions?" Shannyn tried to keep her voice professional and light.

"Once a week, for now."

She opened up the schedule. This was ridiculous. They were talking over appointments as if they were complete strangers. Yet she'd tried already to bridge the gap, make it personal, and he'd been cool and dismissive. She straightened her shoulders. "Next Thursday, two-thirty in the afternoon is all I've got."

"That's fine."

She wrote it on a card for him and started to hand it over the gray counter. But when his fingers closed on it, she knew she couldn't let him go without asking one question.

"Jonas…your leg. It's all right?"

"My leg's fine."

"How long are you on base, then?" Her heart stopped as she finished her second question, unable to help herself.

For a moment, just the space of a breath, his eyes spoke to her, delving in, acknowledging that he wasn't as cold as he seemed. But then he shuttered them. Shannyn knew she hadn't imagined the look. There was still a connection. Perhaps only the memory of what had been, but it was there, and she wished it wasn't. Her life would be much easier if she felt nothing at all.

"This is my station. I have no plans to be going elsewhere in the foreseeable future."

Here, for good? She swallowed. A short visit would have been better. Certainly less risky. But she also knew that "for good" was a relative term. No one in the military was ever in one place for long.

"All right, then," she replied dumbly.

He turned crisply and went to the door, his limp slightly less pronounced than it had been before his appointment.

He left without looking back.

He was really good at that. And she'd do well to remember it.

Shannyn left work on Friday and stopped for pizza. Every payday she stopped for a takeout meal, a biweekly extravagance. Last payday it had been chicken strips and fries. Tonight was Hawaiian pizza, with extra cheese.

She was leaning against the takeout counter when a door slammed just outside and she saw Jonas getting out of a battered four-by-four truck.

What were the chances?

Obviously pretty good. She took a deep breath and turned her attention to the teen behind the counter who was getting her change. As the glass door opened, she tucked the money in her wallet and slid to the side to wait for her order.

"Pickup for Kirkpatrick," he said to the girl in the red-and-white visor.

He dug out his wallet and turned with the box in his hands, stopping short when he saw her waiting to the side.

"Shannyn."

"Small world, huh?" She attempted a faint but cool smile.

"Bachelor's supper," he replied civilly, lifting the box a little to illustrate.

"Friday-night treat," she replied. Perhaps the initial shock of seeing each other was over, or the casual atmosphere of the pizza place helped, but he seemed slightly more approachable now than he had at his appointment. Which still didn't say very much.

"Ham and pineapple?"

"Still my favorite," she replied, feeling ridiculously flattered that he'd remembered that tidbit of information.

They stood there like statues, exchanging the most basic of pleasantries, an air of discomfort between them.

"Miss? Your order is ready."

She took the box, shifting her hands from the hot bottom to the sides. "Fresh from the oven."

And still they stood awkwardly, until Jonas chuckled.

She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until she let it out at the sound of his soft laughter.

"This is a hell of a thing, isn't it."

"It is." She started for the door and he followed her. It was easier for him to relax, she reasoned, her forehead wrinkling as she frowned. He wasn't the one carrying a secret around.

"There was a time when we weren't uncomfortable with each other at all. I don't know why we are now. That's all in the past. I didn't even know you'd still be here after all this time."

His words contradicted his cold manner of their first meeting and she wondered at it. "I stayed," she answered, hitting the door with her hip to push it open.

Jonas held the door and then followed her out, putting his white pizza box down on the hood of his truck. "I just go where they tell me."

Shannyn paused, the heat from the pizza warming her fingers. That had always been the problem. He was at the mercy of wherever his superiors sent him next. He'd done his training here, at Base Gagetown, finished when he was twenty-two. Still so young, full of energy and determination to be the best shot in the Army. Then he'd gone to Edmonton, and who knew where he'd been since then. Who knew how long he'd be stationed here? Despite his injury, it was obvious he was staying in the military, not looking to be discharged. That meant more moving around.

"And where would that be?"

He smiled but it seemed grim, a thin line. "Here and there. Doing what I do…what I did," he corrected himself. "I went where I was needed."

The very level of danger she'd worried so much about lent a sense of the mysterious to him, and Shannyn felt a glimmer of awe. He would have performed each task as it was assigned, no questions. For some strange reason, despite his aloofness, she knew what she'd always known. There was something heroic about Jonas Kirkpatrick. Something that made her feel safe. That was odd, because right now he was her biggest threat and he didn't even know it.

"What are you doing on base now? When you left you'd just finished sniper school." She looked up into his eyes. That had been a bone of contention in the end, too. An extra degree of danger that he'd relished and she'd feared. And it looked as though she'd had good reason to worry. He was only wounded. How many hadn't come back alive?

His jaw hardened, only slightly but enough that she saw it. Saw his eyes cool until they seemed to shut her out completely. In a matter of a few seconds, he had fully withdrawn into himself.

"I'm back at the school."

"More courses?" She couldn't imagine what else they would want him to do; he'd already accelerated through basic and had set his eyes on Special Forces. He'd obviously done his job and done it well.

"I'm instructing, sniping and small arms."

Her eyebrows lifted. Now he was in charge of training the next generation of sharpshooters? No more active duty? Had his injury caused that? How had it happened? She had so many questions and no right to ask. No right to pry. They were exes only, as far as he was concerned.

And truth be told, curious as she was, even though she still felt that pull to him, she knew it would be better for everyone if they kept things very impersonal. Getting involved in his life meant he'd get involved in hers, and she couldn't let that happen. For all she knew instructing was a temporary position until he could return to active duty. The last thing she needed was Jonas temporarily involved in anything and then leaving. She'd been through that enough in her lifetime.

"Do you like the new job?" She asked the question to fill up the awkward silence that had fallen.

His eyes didn't warm, just seemed to assess her distantly.

When they'd met six years ago, he'd been outgoing, fun, ebullient and full of life. It was hard to reconcile that energetic youth to the hardened man before her. The gulf between them now was wider than it had ever been.

"It has its good points."

Despite his earlier attempt at lightening the atmosphere, it was clear Jonas wasn't in a social chitchat sort of mood anymore, and it was just as well.

"Then I'm glad. I should get home."

"See you around."

She gripped the pizza box with one hand and looped her key ring around the index finger of her other. "Goodbye," she replied, surprised to feel her throat tighten.

It would have been easier if he'd just stayed away. She could have kept the memories of their idyllic months together untarnished. Now they were bookended with an image of a colder, harder man who seemed familiar yet a stranger.

She didn't need a man. She'd proven that. But if she were to choose one, it would be someone devoted, dedicated and, above all, present. Committed.

She couldn't imagine Jonas as any of those things.

The leg press moved smoothly, up, down, up, down. Jonas grimaced at the weight on the bar. Ridiculous. It was half of what he'd been able to press only a year ago. He had enough reminders of what had happened to him without dealing with his body giving out.

He set his teeth and stubbornly added five more reps to his set, until the muscles quivered all the way up to his hip.

Tomorrow was his next physio appointment, and he was determined to have made progress. Everyone said his expertise and experience were beneficial to the training program here. But he knew the real reason he was back. He could no longer work out in the field. People called him a hero. He knew better.

He knew it was his fault.

Jonas slid off the black vinyl seat and sat on the mat, his legs spread out in a vee. Slowly he leaned forward, stretching out the muscles he'd just worked, gritting his teeth against the pain.

He hadn't expected to see Shannyn, that was for sure. Even so, he'd done nothing but think of her as the transport flight came in on final approach. He'd only been here in the Fredericton area for basic training, then sniper school. A small wedge of his life so far. But during that time…Shannyn

had been a big part of that, and he wasn't immune to remembering happier days. She'd never been far from his mind.

But that was before. Before war, before deployment, before everything. Before the pervading taste of dust and blood. He could offer her nothing now, and he didn't want to. That part of his life was over, and he was moving on in the only direction he knew how. Within the Army. His home.

He lay down on his back, crossed one ankle over his knee, and drew the knee in, stretching out his hip. They'd run into each other twice already, and he'd been back less than two weeks.

Switching legs, he sighed. Tomorrow he'd go to his appointment, and then he'd see about switching therapists, go to another office. The less they saw of each other the better. For both of them.

CHAPTER TWO

JONAS arrived for his appointment a few minutes early, providing the blond receptionist, who wasn't Shannyn, with a letter before seating himself in the waiting room.

"Shannyn?"

Shannyn, just entering reception, shook her head, diverting her gaze from the back of Jonas's head to the cheerful face of their receptionist, Melanie. "What is it?"

"It's Sgt. Kirkpatrick's letter. He wants his file sent to another clinic. He wants to switch therapists."

Shannyn took the file. "Thank you, Melanie. I'll take care of it."

Her even tone betrayed nothing of what she felt. Truthfully, she wasn't sure of it herself. Part of her was disappointed he wanted to go somewhere else, but mostly she felt relief that she wouldn't have to see him on a regular basis. The more she saw him, the more likely she was to be reminded of how she'd cared about him. Cutting down the risk of bumping into him could only be a good thing, right?

Then why did she suddenly feel so disappointed?

Shannyn unfolded the paper and stared at the writing. When she reached the end she looked over at him in the waiting area. He turned, meeting her eyes, his face unreadable. She wondered if they taught them how to perfect that look in the Army. In his letter, he hadn't offered any explanation for the switch. But then he didn't need to, did he. She got the message loud and clear. He didn't want to be anywhere near her.

The question she did have, however, was the one that she couldn't seem to get out of her mind. What had happened that made him only a whisper of the man he'd been six years ago? Where had that gung-ho, save-the-world optimist gone? Where had Jonas left him behind?

His file was already pulled for his appointment, and she went to retrieve it. It might be her only chance to discover what had really happened to him, and more than anything, before their brief contact was cut off, she wanted to know.

She opened the beige cover, staring at the documentation. So little information, just facts and figures and terminology that said very little about what had happened to the man.

He'd sustained his injury eleven months ago, but his file didn't say where or under what circumstances. The absence of data only made her more curious. He'd been stabilized, but the location had been blacked out. She'd had no idea there'd be such secrecy, and she looked up again at him sitting in the waiting room.

Where have you been, and what have you been doing that's so dangerous it has to be classified?

She continued reading. The file only stated that he'd been airlifted to Germany where he'd had surgery for a broken femur. Spent time there before being sent home to Canada for recuperation and rehab.

She read further, absorbing notations about the complicated operation to repair the bone and also about an infection that had delayed recovery.

He hadn't had an easy go of it.

It was probably enough to change a man. If combat hadn't changed him first. She couldn't shake that nagging thought from her mind.

"Sgt. Kirkpatrick?" Even now the name seemed that of a stranger. She took a deep breath. "May I see you for a moment?"

His uneven gait carried him back to the counter. "Yes?"

Shannyn forced her voice to remain professional, even as she looked up into his face. He looked the same as he had last week. That inherent neatness and military bearing, despite his disability. She had the irrational longing to reach out and lay her hands on his lapels, straightening an imaginary crease. She shook off the silly urge. It would serve no purpose. If she were sure of one thing, it was

that Jonas wouldn't stay around. She'd been burned by him before. There was no way she'd let him do it to her again.

She gripped the papers in her hand. "There are a few things I need you to authorize before I can sign off on your file and send it to the office you've specified."

She handed over the proper papers and a pen. "You should be fine there, although I think Ms. Malloy is the best physiotherapist in the city. Still, once this is taken care of, all you'll have to do is call and set up your first appointment at the new clinic."

Jonas's hand paused over the papers.

"Why you? I thought you were the receptionist."

She smiled thinly. When he'd been sent to Edmonton, she'd just enrolled in business school. "I started out that way. Now I'm the office manager. Any paperwork needs to be signed off by your therapist and by me."

"Sgt. Kirkpatrick? I'm ready for you now." Geneva Malloy called him in.

His eyes darted up to Shannyn's but she didn't let her gaze waver. She wanted him to sign the papers and be free to go on his way. On the other hand, they were running behind schedule and she didn't want to keep Geneva waiting. "I'll hold on to these," she said brusquely. "You can sign them after your session."

He handed her back the pen. She tapped the papers into an orderly stack and laid them on top of his file.

"Thank you," he replied politely. For a flash, his eyes betrayed him and she felt he wanted to say something more. Why, after all this time, did her heart still leap every time her gaze met his?

Then the look was gone and he limped his way to the facilities in the back.

She left his paperwork on the desk behind the counter and turned her attention back to her computer. This was her job, and had been for a long time. She'd done just fine, going to school, making a new life. She'd told him the truth—she'd started by answering phones and had gone on to manage the entire office. It was a good life. It was real and it was permanent and those were two things that Shannyn rated highly.

She turned her attention to her work while he was with Geneva. Checking her watch, she realized he'd been in there nearly an hour and her spreadsheet was complete. She sat back in her chair and sighed. Shortly he'd come back out, walk out the door and unless fate was unkind, she probably wouldn't meet him again. Being near him at all stirred up too many feelings she'd tried hard to bury.

Switching physiotherapists was a godsend. She could get on with her life, and he'd never know the difference. Even as she thought it, a slick line of guilt crawled through her. Most of the time she was successful in not thinking about what she'd done. But deep down she felt some remorse at keeping her secret.

The door to the back opened and she heard Jonas's voice talking to Geneva, thanking her politely. Shannyn turned her head toward the sound, only to snap it back abruptly as the front office door swung open carrying laughter with it.

"Mommy!"

A charged bundle in jeans and a red T-shirt barreled across the floor towards Shannyn's desk, bouncing to a halt and grinning up precociously. "Surprise! I came from kindergarten!"

Jonas released Geneva's hand as he turned, his heart stopping for a brief moment as the girl wrapped her chubby arms around Shannyn's neck.

I have a daughter. The thought struck him like the sure aim of a bullet.

As if she sensed something was off, the girl turned her head and their eyes met, green to green. Every muscle in his body tightened with the impact of the truth. This is Shannyn's daughter. She's in school. I left six years ago. She has my eyes.

Shannyn's cheeks colored; the blatant guilt on her face and the way she shifted in her chair seemed to confirm his suspicion. This was his daughter, one Shannyn had kept hidden from him all this time. A tiny poppet who looked eerily like the pictures of himself he remembered from his grandmother's photo album.

All of it left him gutted. How much more could he lose? He clenched his fingers. It wasn't enough to have the life he'd made for himself ripped away in the space of a moment. Now he had to find out he had another, separate life that he hadn't even known existed.

It took every ounce of his self-control to not go to the little girl, to kneel before her and demand to see her eyes again. Moss green eyes. His eyes in a miniature of Shannyn's delicate features. But what would that accomplish beyond frightening the child? She wouldn't understand. He didn't understand. No, it was Shannyn who owed him an explanation.

That overriding thought filled him with tense rage. And explain she would. She'd known. Known all this time and hadn't told him he had a daughter. For six years he'd been a father. She'd deliberately kept it a secret, and then when he did return to town, she'd said nothing, even though she'd had opportunity. This was the third time they'd met and still she hadn't breathed a single word of it to him.

Shannyn felt as if her head was moving in slow motion. Her daughter's happy, smiling face looked up at her. Then, turning her head a few degrees, she caught Jonas watching her with a startled expression blanking his face. Emma turned to see what she was looking at and lifted moss-green eyes to the man standing across the room.

Her heart raced even as the moment froze. He would know now for sure. There was no mistaking those eyes. Her own were aqua blue, and the only reason her lashes were dark was because she'd put on mascara that morning. Emma's eyes were his. Green with lovely thick dark lashes that curled naturally. Just like the brown curls that rested on the tips of her shoulders, the same sable color as his short spikes. She could almost see him mentally counting back six years.

Emma looked from Shannyn to Jonas and then to her baby-sitter, who stood in the doorway looking confused.

"Why's everyone standing so still?" Emma's voice piped up curiously in the silence that had fallen.

Shannyn shook herself out of her stupor. She forced a cheery smile to her face, the skin tightly stretched under the false expression. Right now she had to ignore Jonas and deal with Emma. Lord knew Jonas would have to be dealt with later.

"What brings you here in the middle of the day, pumpkin?"

"I told Melissa that I wanted to see you when she picked me up from school."

Shannyn reached down and lifted Emma up so that she was on her knee, aware of Jonas's eyes on them unwaveringly. "And how was kindergarten today? Did you have fun? Learn the secret of moonbeams? Solve the mystery of the dinosaur?"

She made jokes, but her stomach churned with anxiety. He must have put two and two together by now. If not, he would have left the office. No, he knew exactly what the deal was. That they had a child and she hadn't told him.

He would hate her. This wasn't how things were supposed to happen at all. He was supposed to be switching therapists. Out of her sphere of existence. So she and Emma could live their lives as they always had.

"Mommy, that's silly."

She forced a smile as Emma's bright voice brought her back to the present. "And so are you, girly-girl."

"Can you come home?"

Melissa, Emma's sitter, stepped forward, holding out her hand for Emma to take. "I thought you were coming to run errands with me? We need to let your mom finish work." Melissa had sized up the situation, and had ascertained something was wrong. "We'll meet her at home later."

"Give me a hug, honey," Shannyn said, squeezing the tiny waist tightly against her. She blinked back the tears that threatened, already sorry for the changes she knew were coming to Emma's life. She'd hated the upheaval she'd experienced as a child; had tried to protect Emma from going through the same thing. Now, in the space of a few minutes, all her intentions were blown to smithereens. She gave Emma a little squeeze, wanting to hold on to her and keep the inevitable from happening. "Thanks for coming to see me. I'll be home soon, okay?"

The response was a smacking kiss on the cheek. "See you later, alligator."

It was Emma's latest funny and she never seemed to grow tired of it. "In a while, crocodile," Shannyn called back, her throat tight.

When the whirlwind had departed again, Shannyn braved a look up at Jonas.

"We need to talk." She heard his voice and the tight quiver of anger it carried. Trembling, she made her gaze remain on his, no matter how his tone intimidated her. He ignored the other faces in the waiting room, his eyes piercing hers, accusing. She'd lied to him, and right now she knew that was all he could see.

"We need to talk, Shannyn, right now."

Shannyn's heart quaked. It would have been too much to ask that he not see the resemblance. She'd spent so much time telling herself that he'd never find out that she wasn't prepared for this conversation.

"I'm working. We can talk later, Jonas."

His voice was nail hard as it bit back. "We can do this here, with all these people around, or we can go somewhere more private, but Shannyn—we're talking now."

Carrie stood behind her, and Melanie picked up the phone that jangled in the stillness, shattering Shannyn's nerves. There was no way on earth she and Jonas could talk here. And by the way his lips were thinned, she knew prevaricating further would be a mistake. Plain, unvarnished truth would be the only way to explain. They had to get out of here, somewhere neutral. She looked into his face, all hard angles and unrelenting anger. He was furious, and she knew she didn't want to be completely alone for this conversation. She needed the protection of somewhere public if she were going to make him listen to her.

"I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off," she said to Carrie in an undertone. "If you need anything over the weekend, e-mail me."

"You go," Carrie murmured back. "And call if you need anything. I mean it, Shan. Anything." She looked over her glasses meaningfully at Shannyn.

Shannyn grabbed her purse and nodded at Jonas. "I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off."

He followed her out the door.

They stepped out into the June sun, and Shannyn squinted against the glare. She'd left her sunglasses on her desk, and she could really use them now, both to cover her eyes and to put some distance between her and Jonas. Hostility was fairly emanating from him, and she had no idea how to defuse the situation so they could actually have a conversation. One where he might understand why she'd done what she had.

When they reached the sidewalk, he grabbed her arm none too gently and guided her across the street, past the old barracks and down to the Green.

Shannyn shook his hand off when they reached the grassy expanse, taking a few steps away from him. He hadn't hurt her. But her hopes at an amicable conversation had evaporated when the firm grip of his fingers dug into her skin. Even though he wasn't holding her arm anymore, she felt his animosity. His jaw was clenched tightly and he walked—no, marched—across the grass, assuming she'd keep up with him.

He was angry, and had every right to be. Right now she had to pick her battles. How she dealt with him now would affect everything that happened from this moment on.

He stopped beneath an elm, shoved his hands into his pockets and stared out over the glittering water of the river. Shannyn held her breath, waiting for the explosion, not knowing what to say, wondering what his first words would be. She was grateful that they were in a public place. It would preclude a shouting match, and perhaps the presence of others would make him more willing to listen. If she were lucky.

But the words wouldn't come. When she remained silent, he spoke. Not with anger, not with a shout. With a quiet certainty.

"She's mine."

Shannyn nodded, surprised at the sting of tears that filled her eyes at the simple statement, the moment of truth. This was the father of her baby. A man she'd once loved. A man who was all but a stranger now. She tried to focus on the sailboat gliding down the river, but the image blurred.

"What's her name?"

"Emma."

She made herself turn and look at him, face this conversation head-on. The time of evading was done. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. But he wouldn't look at her. His face remained stoic, expressionless.

"Emma is my grandmother's name."

"I know."

"Why did you do that?"

Finally he turned his head from the river. His eyes glowed like polished jade in the shade of the elm.

How could she explain without it seeming more than it was? The truth was she knew how much the Army meant to him. His grandfather had fought in World War II and died. If Emma had been a boy, Shannyn had been going to name him after Jonas's grandfather Charles. Paying tribute to the wife Charles left behind seemed the next best thing. At the time, it had been the one and only way she planned on connecting her child to her father. Making sure a little bit of Jonas lived on in his daughter. Perhaps she had also done it to assuage what guilt she had at her silence.

"I know how much you love your gram." She went with the simple explanation.

"Loved. She died two years ago."

The lump in Shannyn's throat grew, making it difficult to swallow. So many changes, for everyone. Time didn't stand still. "I'm sorry."

Jonas walked away, finding a nearby bench under the elm and bracing his elbows on his knees.

She gave him a few minutes, taking the time to calm herself so she could control the conversation. If that were possible.

She'd done what she thought was best. She also knew Jonas wouldn't see it that way. She'd wanted to protect Emma. Emma deserved more than a part-time father. More than a dad who would only be around when it worked out with his schedule. She didn't need a dad out of obligation. They'd been dating when Emma was conceived. She'd known the moment he'd said he was shipping out that he wasn't interested in a lasting relationship. If he had been, he would have asked her to wait, or asked her to come with him. When she'd discovered she was pregnant, two weeks after he was gone, she knew she couldn't tell him. He'd already qualified as a sniper. He'd be in danger every day.

Jonas hadn't wanted more with her, and she hadn't wanted a man who stayed only because he'd been trapped into a role he hadn't expected. She'd been a product of that sort of relationship and had seen the devastating consequences of pretending. She'd known from experience that eventually it would have crumbled, and Emma would pay the biggest price. Shannyn had vowed then and there to never put her daughter through that sort of pain.

CHAPTER THREE

JONAS looked over at Shannyn, watching her bite her lip, worrying it. She'd changed. He hadn't realized how much when they first re-met. But she was a mother now. A mother to a child. A child he'd never known existed. His child. It was hard to reconcile the fun-loving girl he remembered with this woman who seemed so remote and unfeeling. Because her not having told him was cold, and she would never convince him otherwise.

How could she have done that to him? He wanted to reach out and shake her, demand to know what she'd been thinking. Hear her paltry justifications.

Instead he rubbed a hand over his face, struck once more by the image of a curly haired poppet with his eyes, vibrant and excited. A huge argument wouldn't accomplish anything, and he knew it. But keeping his cool outwardly didn't stop the shock or the anger pulsing through him.

He'd never wanted to be a father. But finding out he was one, knowing she'd kept it a secret, made his blood boil. What had he ever done that was so bad she thought to punish him in this way? The fact that she wouldn't have said anything if she hadn't been caught only fueled his anger.

"You shouldn't have done it," he finally ground out through his teeth. He kept his voice as level as he could; too many people were around and he didn't want to make a huge spectacle. "You had no right to deny me my own child."

Shannyn moved a step or two closer. "I can explain."

Jonas stared out over the river. How much time had he spent in this very water during his training? How many times had they gone boating or swimming, feeling the cold slickness of the water on each other's skin? How had things gotten to this point? How could it be that they were in this place again, strangers dealing with something as intimate as a shared child?

His heart pounded as memories flooded back, unfaded by time. When had Emma been conceived? On a day like today? Years ago, on an afternoon like this, he would have found a secluded spot downriver. He would have made love to her there in the heat of the afternoon. Things had burned hot between them from the very beginning. And fires that burned hot usually were extinguished just as quickly.

Only it hadn't. It had smoldered all this time in his memories of her.

He had good memories. Memories of the two of them together during a summer that had been more than a fling. Memories he'd kept tucked away, bringing them out only when the pressure got to be too much. Memories that were now suddenly tarnished by a gigantic lie.

"Nothing you can say will justify keeping this from me."

"Please Jonas, just hear me out."

"Hear you out? What can you possibly say that will make this right? I left for Edmonton six years ago. And you knew you were carrying my child and let me go anyway, none the wiser."

His hand automatically found his thigh, rubbing it absently as he'd had a way of doing since his injury.

"I didn't know I was pregnant when you left."

The defense rang false. "Don't give me that. You would have found out within a few weeks. You knew where I was stationed, knew my battalion. You could have gotten in touch if you'd wanted."

She came closer and sat on the opposite end of the bench. "You're right. It was my choice not to tell you."

"Why?" He thought briefly of how his grandmother would have loved seeing her great-granddaughter, her namesake, and the single word came out thick with emotion as anger and loss poured through him in waves. It was a struggle to keep his voice steady and low. He was glad she was sitting closer, so not every person wandering the walking path could hear the sordid details.

"There were lots of reasons. For one, you left me. You never once said you wanted me with you. I knew if I told you and you came back, it would be out of obligation and not a…deeper emotion."

"I had my reasons," he bit out. He knew she was referring to love. He hadn't said it back then, hadn't wanted to.

"I'm not saying you were wrong. I'm saying what I based my decision on. Let's face it. If you'd wanted more from me, you could have called. Or sent a letter. You left and I never heard from you again."

"You're blaming me?" He couldn't keep the incredulity out of his voice. Somehow she was making this his fault? Just because he hadn't said I love you? He'd lost his daughter for five years because she felt spurned?

"No, Jonas, of course not." Her words came faster, and he sensed her desperation. "But what I am saying is that our situation, our personal status, wasn't one that supported the idea of us and a baby. I knew you didn't want marriage and a family. And I wasn't about to put Emma through what I went through as a kid. Divorce sucks."

She sighed and softened her tone. "But that wasn't the only factor."

"Go on."

He met her eyes as she folded her hands in her lap. Good Lord, she was beautiful. Maybe even more so now than she'd been then. Her blond, streaked hair was gathered up in a clip, the ends falling in artful disarray. Her eyes were blue and clear as a morning sky over the Arabian Sea. Her skin was sun kissed and dotted with light freckles.

He'd been enchanted back then, not knowing she'd have the ability to do something like this to him. It irked him to find that he still responded to her girl-next-door sort of beauty, even when he was as angry as he'd ever been in his life.

"Oh, Jonas, look at you," she lamented, her lips downturned as she struggled to explain. "You were young, we both were. You were in the military, on the fast track to Special Forces. I knew it. You would be moving around all the time or deployed. And what would we do when you were gone for months at a time? Wait for you to come back, perhaps more of a stranger each time? A part-time father for a daughter who didn't understand why Daddy wasn't around? Or worse—what if you didn't come back at all? I didn't want to give my daughter a father only to have him ripped away from her in some foreign country."

"So you took her away from me. Denied me the chance to know my own flesh and blood."

"I protected her!"

"From me! From her father!"

"Not from who you were. From what you were."

Heads turned in their direction as their voices rose. She took a deep breath, spoke more calmly and tried a different tack. "Did you want to be a father then? Be honest."

He paused, clamping his lips together. Of course he hadn't. He'd been twenty-two, at a brand-new posting with a new stripe on his sleeve. He'd been well on his way to becoming the best shot in the regiment. He'd had his eye set on deployment and making his mark. And as much as he'd cared for Shannyn, the last thing he'd wanted was to be tied to a wife. A family. He'd had things to accomplish first. A wife and children had no place in that world.

"That doesn't mean I didn't have a right to know."

She turned away so she was staring at the lighthouse in the distance. "I did what I thought was best for my daughter."

"Our daughter."

Even saying it felt foreign on his tongue.

How had his life come to this? Back where he started? He stretched out his leg, trying to relieve the ache that settled in his quadricep. Why couldn't things have just stayed the same? Being with the battalion. Doing what he did best. Being the best.

He stared ahead. He could see Chris's face before him still, wide and smiling after cracking some joke. The two of them running laps around the compound before the desert got too hot to breathe. The quiet, reassuring sound of his voice while Jonas stared through the scope.

Their last mission:

The taste of dust was everywhere.

Parker's voice was low beside him telling him to hold his shot. The midday sun beat down harshly, and Jonas wondered if it was possible to bake in one's own skin. He held his position; sweat trickled down his neck, sticking to his skin, but he didn't move a single muscle. Hadn't moved for the past three hours, twenty-seven minutes and fifteen seconds. "We've got someone at the door, Park."

"It's not him. Not yet."

Godforsaken desert, Jonas thought, biding his time. He'd been in the desert long enough that he was sick and tired of it. There were nights when he lay awake for hours, thinking of home. Of cold beer in a sports bar and a bacon cheeseburger, instead of army chow and warm water from his canteen. Instead of dusty roads and the same unending landscape as he traveled from assignment to assignment. At least he had Chris Parker to keep him from going crazy.

"Jonas? Jonas, are you okay?"

Shannyn's voice broke through, and he turned his head slowly, surprised to see her sitting there beside him. She reached out to touch his arm, and he flinched. She drew her hand back automatically, her blue eyes suddenly troubled.

"I'm fine," he answered roughly. The flashes of memory were happening more and more frequently, and always at the strangest times. He couldn't seem to control them. They were always, always of that one day. Bits and pieces here and there that hit without warning, leaving him feeling raw and exposed. It always took him some time to reestablish himself with his surroundings.

"You don't look fine." Her voice was low with concern. He hated that tone. Hated it every time someone looked at him the way Shannyn was looking at him now. As if he didn't quite make sense.

"I said I'm fine," he snapped, rising to his feet and taking a half-dozen steps to get away from her. Faces turned again in his direction, and he took deep breaths to try to get his heart rate to return to normal. He wished the memories would all go away so he could get on with what was left of his life. Only, now that too was thrown into chaos by learning he was somebody's father.

Shannyn stared after him, warning bells pealing madly in her head. What was going on?

They'd been talking and then suddenly he'd gone. His eyes had blanked and every muscle in his body had stilled. It had been eerie, watching him disassociate, until she realized his breathing was accelerating.

She'd tried to call him back, and the empty stare she'd seen before he came to frightened her more than anything else.

What in the world had happened to him?

She was getting in far deeper than she cared to. Now that he knew Emma was his, naturally he'd assert his rights and demand to see her. She couldn't deny him that. And seeing him this way, knowing something was horribly wrong, she could already feel herself being drawn in. Wanting to help him almost as much as she wanted him gone.

What if he shouted this way at Emma?

When he turned back, she fortified herself with all the courage she could muster. "This is a perfect example of why I didn't tell you. Emma is five years old, Jonas. She's not going to understand if you blank out and then shout at her. She's not equipped for that."

She wanted to say that, even as an adult, she didn't understand him either, but right now the focus had to be off her own feelings and on keeping Emma safe and happy.

"I have a right to see her. She has a right to know me."

"Why is this so important to you? Why can't you just let it go?"

"Because she's my daughter. My responsibility." His former control reasserted itself. "I'm not the kind of man who shirks responsibility. I thought you understood that much about me."

"That's what I'm saying." Shannyn implored him with her hands. She did understand. As much as she was hurt that he'd left her, she'd admired him for his dedication to what he considered his duty. And he would have been dutiful to Emma too and it would have broken her heart little by little to know that he was staying for that reason and not of his own free will. Would have destroyed her to come home one day to a man who wanted out. Who wanted a life away from her and Emma. She never wanted Emma to feel abandoned and unloved the way she had felt growing up.

"You would have stayed involved out of responsibility, not out of any lasting affection."

Jonas looked around them. Now that the shouting was over, no one seemed particularly interested in their exchange, no one noticed anything out of the ordinary. People simply walked along the path, enjoying the early-summer day, the mellow heat, the fresh green of the grass and leaves. Everything seemed to spin in a slow circle. The desert, Germany, the base, all spiraling outside of here. A perfect world around him while he felt trapped in chaos. His whole world was changing. It didn't seem real.

He clung to the one thing he hoped she might understand, searching for common ground that would anchor him to this unreal situation. "Shannyn, you've brought her up alone. I could have helped."

"With child support." Her lips thinned to a straight line.

"Well, yes."

Her short laugh surprised him. "And your money would have made it all right."

"It might have lessened your financial strain. It couldn't have been easy."

"We've done just fine, thank you."

Jonas stared hard at her—dismissive. Her tone, her body language…it was all dismissive. He wasn't wanted or required here. God, he wasn't really wanted or required anywhere anymore. In a world of doers, he was now redundant. What had once been his purpose was gone. And he'd never thought about what he'd do when it was over. He'd always thought he'd keep doing what he was doing until he died on some battlefield. He certainly hadn't expected to come home with a gimp leg, leaving him good for next to nothing.

He saw the talent in the next wave of elite soldiers and hated that he wasn't one of them anymore. Put out to pasture at the ripe old age of twenty-eight. It didn't seem fair. He'd lost his career, and now he discovered he'd lost a family he hadn't even known he had.

"I want to see her."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

His eyes blazed. "Shannyn, you can't keep me from my own daughter."

"I'll do what I have to, to keep her safe and happy."

"And you think I'd threaten that?"

"She doesn't need a temporary dad who'll leave once he satisfies his curiosity."

That was what she thought of him, then. It showed how little she knew. How far apart they were.

"Look at me," he whispered stridently. "Does it look like I'm going anywhere? You've seen my file, right? Active duty is a long shot at best, out of my realm of possibility, more likely, according to the doctors."

He stepped closer, close enough that she had to tilt her neck sharply to look into his eyes. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, so close he could almost feel it against his. His gaze fell to her lips, and they opened slightly. How he could despise her so much right now and still want to kiss her was beyond him.

"I'm obviously not in danger anymore. So tell me, Shannyn. What is it you're really afraid of?"

CHAPTER FOUR

SHANNYN took a step back. “You’re invading my personal space.”

Jonas laughed, a brittle sound as he stared at her with accusation in his eyes. “I beg your pardon.” He affected a small bow, mocking her, and put more distance between them.

“You can’t keep me from my daughter anymore,” he argued firmly. “And you know it.”

Shannyn’s heart sank. He was right. Now that he knew about Emma, she had no right to keep him from her. Legally she had no reason to deny him visitation. All she had were her own reservations, which would matter very little in the overall scheme of things if he pressed his case. She decided to appeal to whatever sense of fatherly concern he might possess.

“I don’t want her upset.”

He put his hand into his trousers pocket and tilted his head, watching her closely. “Neither do I. I’m willing to let you name the terms of how we do this. Within reason.”

“You are?” It was the last thing she’d expected from him and she couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice.

“You can tell her about me by yourself, if you wish. And we’ll meet wherever you think she’ll be most comfortable.” He balanced his weight on one leg and smiled thinly, a smile that seemed forced and manufactured for the moment.

“Thank you,” Shannyn breathed with relief.

“I don’t have any desire to traumatize her, Shannyn.” His jaw softened slightly. “I’m not in the habit of terrorizing children.”

“Of course not.” She dropped her eyes. After the initial blowout, he was suddenly being remarkably reasonable. Appealing to him from Emma’s point of view had been the right course. He was exerting his rights, but at least he wasn’t blind to how this would affect Emma.

“You have the weekend.” He straightened, putting his weight equally on his feet once more. “I’ll be in touch Monday, and we’ll talk then about how to move forward.”

She met his gaze again and clenched her fingers. He was making it sound like a business transaction, or an assignment.

“For someone who says I can handle this how I want, you’re being awfully dictatorial. It’s not some battle plan you’ve concocted.”

“I just want to make sure you don’t drag this out. It’s been six years. I think I have a right to have doubts about your…expediency.”

Shannyn felt as if they were right back to the beginning of the argument again, and she didn’t want to rehash everything that had been said—and unsaid.

“Fine. But just so you know,” she lifted her chin, “bossing me around really isn’t going to help your case any.”

Jonas stared down into her eyes, and she struggled not to feel intimidated. In front of her now was a man accustomed to getting what he wanted. One who gave orders and had them followed. One way or another. But she was going to do this on her terms. It didn’t matter what it took, she’d go toe-to-toe with him, for Emma’s sake. Protecting herself right now came second to making sure Emma remained unhurt through everything.

She got the feeling the battle was going to be draining. In more ways than one.

“The weekend, Shannyn.” The words were softly spoken, but she was left in no doubt of the ultimatum they contained. “I’ll be in touch on Monday.”

He spun on his heel and walked away, his gait lopsided from his injury.

Shannyn went back to the bench and sat down heavily. How on earth was she going to find the words to tell her baby that she had a daddy after all?

She chose the backyard because that was the place Emma was most comfortable and happy. They didn't have a huge yard, but what they did have was lush with green grass and a perfect place to play. A white fence separated them from the neighbours, and in one corner Shannyn had put a small flower bed and herb garden, as well as Emma's outdoor toys.

Today Shannyn felt the need to be outside in the fresh air, not cooped up in a room where she found it hard to breathe. Every time she thought of what she'd say to Emma, her heart faltered. In her mind she'd gone over and over the questions Emma might have, and how she'd answer them so a five-year-old would understand. She'd thought about it so much that here it was Sunday afternoon and still she hadn't done it.

But Jonas would call tomorrow. She was sure of it. And if she hadn't told Emma by the time he did, she knew Jonas would make things very difficult.

"Honey, you want a Popsicle?" Shannyn called out to Emma who was pumping her legs and swinging on the secondhand swing set Shannyn had bought at a yard sale last spring.

"Okay." The legs stopped pumping, and the swing slowed until Emma popped off and landed on the grass.

It felt more like August than June today. Mellow warmth soaked through Shannyn's T-shirt and heated her legs. It was the kind of day that made her wish she were out boating on the river, or lying on the beach at the lake. For a minute she got caught in memories of Jonas, a Jonas who was less jaded and more carefree, squidging his toes in the sand at the beach as she lay in his arms.

But reality was that she was supposed to be having a life-altering discussion with her baby, who wasn't so much of a baby anymore.

She handed over the Popsicle and patted the seat of the picnic table.

Emma hopped up and Shannyn smiled down on her dark head as she licked the Popsicle. Everything she'd done in these past years had been for Emma. To give her the kind of life every child deserved. One filled with love and fun and, most of all, stability. Different from the one she'd had. Her number-one priority had been to protect Emma. To do what she thought was best. Now she had to undo everything with a simple conversation. Turn her little girl's life upside down.

How did she even begin?

She hadn't said anything at all until Emma started preschool and began noticing her friends had mommies and daddies. Or that they lived with their mommy and saw their daddies on weekends. When the question arose, she had given Emma the short version. That her daddy didn't know that she was born and that Shannyn didn't know where he was right now. And then she'd reinforced how happy and good their life was. It had never been her intention that Emma would find her life lacking in any way. And Emma had accepted her answers like any young child would. With trust.

How could she now explain that her father was here and wanted to see her? In her heart, Shannyn knew he would leave again. Maybe not next week or next month, but eventually he would leave and Emma would be fatherless again. How was that fair? She put her hand on Emma's curls, feeling the warmth radiating from her scalp. Every single decision she had made had been to protect Emma from upheaval.

"Mama? Can I play on the slide now?"

Shannyn looked into her daughter's eyes. They were so like Jonas's and since she'd seen him again they seemed even more so. Being with him, even through their arguments, only served to remind her how much she'd invested in him so long ago. And how much she'd invested in their daughter in the years since.

In the end she couldn't give the words voice. "Yes, you go play, honey." She took the empty Popsicle stick from Emma's sticky hands and kissed her cheek. Emma went back to playing, and Shannyn watched from the table. And for the first time since she'd found out she was pregnant, she really had no idea what she was going to do.

"What time's your lunch?"

Shannyn knew the voice even though the words were clipped and economical. He didn't waste any time. Nine-fifteen and he was calling already.

"I get a break from twelve until one."

"Meet me at the lighthouse at noon."

"But, Jonas, I…"

She heard loud noises slamming in the background as he cut her off. "I've got to go now, but twelve o'clock at the lighthouse." Shannyn heard a voice shout in the background before the line went dead.

Her hands trembled, not with fear but with anger. He said he was going to let her handle this, but all he did was make demands left and right. When to tell Emma. When to meet. She should ignore his latest order and stay right where she was. But that meant he might come to the office and confront her there, and a public scene was unacceptable for their clients. Damn him for putting her in such a position.

He was expecting her to tell him that Emma knew about him and plan the next step. It would have been easier to tell him over the phone rather than face-to-face. There was no way she could explain it so that he would understand, but she was going to have to try.

She was waiting outside the white-and-red structure, looking over the water when he stepped up behind her.

"We're in for some showers."

She turned and caught her breath.

He was wearing his trousers but his shirt was missing and he stood before her in an Army-issue T-shirt. And, oh, he filled out every cotton inch. Flat where everything should be flat, a wide chest and broad shoulders that led to arms with muscles that dipped and curved. His boots gave his six-foot-plus frame even more height. His size made him more attractive to her, not less. She wished she didn't find him attractive at all. All that lean fitness, paired with his handsome, if uncompromising, face, was a tempting combination. Not tempting enough to make her forget how he'd hurt her, though. Thankfully his interest at the moment was focused on Emma and not her. One complication was enough.

She swallowed, chilled by the sudden puff of cool air preceding the dark cloud coming down the river. Goose bumps shivered up her arms and she folded them around herself as thunder rumbled low, still miles away. Even though the sky directly above was blue, the water seemed discolored and white caps dotted the surface.

"Yes, it looks that way," she managed to reply.

He held out a brown paper bag. "I know I hijacked your lunch break, so I grabbed something on the way."

Shannyn stared at the bag, recognizing the familiar logo. "You didn't."

A smile crept up his face and she realized it was the first time he'd really smiled at her, a smile that connected. It moved from his lips and thawed the ice in his eyes as he admitted, "Of course I did. You can't get a hamburger like this overseas, heck, not even in Edmonton. And I brought lots of napkins." He held out his other hand, revealing the white stack.

He led her up the steps to one of the benches that lined the perimeter of the lighthouse, then reached into the bag and handed her the foil-wrapped sandwich. "I got extra cheese on yours."

Shannyn smiled back, secretly pleased that he remembered another one of her favorites. She hadn't had one in ages. Sliding the foil pocket back slightly, she took her first bite and sighed in appreciation at the juicy beef and tang of the condiments.

"Mmm." She let the sound vibrate through her lips as she swallowed and put the sandwich down on her lap. "I haven't had one of these in a long time."

"We used to eat a lot of them, way back when."

She used her napkin to dab at her lips; it was a tasty but messy business. She wrinkled her eyebrows. She was surprised he'd made such a casual reference to their past after the resentful tone of their last meeting. For a brief moment as their eyes caught and held, she got that tumbling in her stomach, a lifting and turning that she'd almost forgotten. Perhaps it was brought on by nostalgia of what had been, but not completely. Part of it was a pull to the man beside her now. Tall and strong and more than a little enigmatic. A man who made her wonder what was simmering underneath.

"Yes, we did," she responded, the words coming out slightly breathy.

"It was a good summer."

That summer had changed her life. And not just because she'd gotten pregnant. But because it was the first—and only—time she'd been in love.

They'd met through mutual friends at an outdoor concert in Officers' Square. Right away she'd been attracted to the lean, dark-haired boy who seemed to have so much energy.

They'd started dating, and things had progressed rapidly. It had been a whirlwind, magical.

But the young man who had captivated her heart and enjoyed life to the full and made her laugh, was gone. She supposed they'd both grown up. But his smile and the brief memory took her back. Made her wonder what it would take to bring that smile back again.

She watched him as they ate for a few minutes in silence. He was more relaxed right now. Perhaps it would be a good time to get some answers to her questions. And not just for Emma. For herself. She wanted to know what had happened in the years since that summer. What made him tick. When her curiosity got the better of her, she asked the question that had been plaguing her.

"What have you been doing the past six years?"

His chewing slowed. He looked away as he admitted, "I made Special Forces. I was there until nearly a year ago."

"Where were you stationed?"

"I moved around a lot. Wherever I was needed."

"You won't tell me."

He looked back at her then, and she realized the soldier was once again in control. "I can't tell you. Sometimes I was sent with a regular Recce platoon."

He saw her confusion and elaborated. "Reconnaissance. We'd offer support to operations, that sort of thing. Other times…" He paused, his gaze slipping from hers again. "It doesn't matter now, anyway. Those days are gone."

Shannyn folded her hands and watched his head turn away from her. She got the feeling it mattered a great deal. "It changed you, Jonas."

"Being in combat changes everyone." He still refused to look at her, instead appeared to be people watching.

She didn't know why he felt the need to generalize everything so much. "I'm sure it does. But I'm interested in how it changed you."

"Why?"

Ah, a question with several answers, some she'd acknowledge, some she wouldn't. She picked the only one that was relevant. "Because you are Emma's father."

Whatever was left of his lunch he wrapped up and put back in the bag.

"Whatever it was I thought I knew that summer, I was wrong."

"Wrong how?"

He balled up the bag and got up, taking a small hop on his good leg to right himself before depositing everything in the trash can. "I was full of myself and what I was going to do. I was indestructible. I thought I knew everything." He sighed heavily. "And I really had no idea."

"You hardened." Shannyn held her breath waiting for his response. She could sense his stubborn withdrawal and couldn't help but see the resemblance between him and Emma, especially now when he seemed so unhappy. His lips seemed fuller; the bow shape of his mouth so much like her daughter

when she'd had a rough day at school or got overtired. He'd passed on his fair share of traits whether he knew it or not, and it drew her to him. How could she hate the man who had given her such a precious gift?

When his answer came it was not what she expected.

"I know I've probably seemed hard and demanding. I'm sorry. I've lived in a world where you give and receive orders."

The small confession touched her. "You don't smile anymore. Or at least not like you used to."

His eyes pierced her and she wondered if he was trying to see her thoughts.

"You've changed, too. You're cautious. Reserved. And for what it's worth, you don't smile much, either."

"Maybe we just don't smile at each other." It was out before she could think about what she was saying, and she bit her lip.

"Perhaps we should try." He sat down again at the table. "I'm trying to look past my resentment of you for lying to me. For Emma's sake. What did she say when you told her?"

Another gust of cold air hit them, and Shannyn brushed a piece of her hair away from her face, lowering her eyes. The thunder that had been creeping up the river rumbled closer, and the first lightning pierced the gray sky.

"I didn't tell her."

"You what?"

His earlier geniality evaporated. The hard edge of his voice was matched only by the thunder that boomed. The first cold droplets hit her skin, and Shannyn looked at the path of the storm. She could only see perhaps half a kilometer away; farther than that was a gray curtain of rain.

"We've got to get inside," she exclaimed, thankful for the temporary diversion.

"Are you kidding?" Everyone who'd been outdoors was suddenly scrambling for shelter. The lighthouse, really a museum, was already filling up with tourists. "My truck's parked on the street. We can make it if we run."

Heavy drops of rain marked the path as they jogged toward his pickup. Jonas reached the vehicle first and unlocked her door before running around the hood to the driver's side and clambering in just as the skies opened up.

For a few seconds the only sound was the drumming of rain on the roof of the truck and their heavy breathing.

Jonas rested his hands on the wheel, picking up the conversation where it had left off, much to her dismay.

"You didn't tell her. We agreed."

"No, you demanded. You said I could do this my way and then you ordered me about like one of your privates. Which I am not."

His only response was the use of a very indelicate word.

Shannyn straightened her back and half turned on the seat. "I'm the mother of your child and perhaps you should remember that."

"You're right. How could I possibly forget something that has happened so recently."

Embarrassment bloomed in her cheeks at the acid in his tone. He was never going to forgive her. "Look. I tried, I really did. But I just didn't know how to tell her. How to answer the questions she's sure to have. Can't you understand that?"

"You had no trouble with the decision not to tell me. What have you told her about her father, anyway?"

Shannyn looked at the windshield, but saw nothing but water streaming down the glass. "I told her you didn't know that she was born and that I didn't know where you were."

She felt his eyes on her, condemning.

“Now that was a bit of a lie, wasn’t it. Because you could have found me quite easily if you’d tried.”

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