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*The Pumpkin Spice Café*

*The Cinnamon Bun Book Store*

*The Christmas Tree Farm*

*The Strawberry Patch Pancake House*

*The Gingerbread Bakery*

THE STRAWBERRY PATCH  
PANCAKE HOUSE

Dream Harbor Series

Book 4

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## Chapter One

Archer Baer had just become a father in the most unimaginable way possible. Not that he'd ever imagined it at all. What was a confirmed bachelor, a workaholic chef like himself going to do with a child? He didn't even have houseplants because he didn't have time to keep them alive. And he was fairly confident that children required more upkeep than a ficus.

But according to the lawyer who had called him a week ago and disrupted his entire existence, Archer had a daughter. A little girl he had never met or heard about in the five years that she had been alive. And that her mother, Cate, had been killed in a car accident and now he would never get to ask her why she hadn't told him about the kid but had listed him as the father on the birth certificate.

It was all still so insane when he thought about it. Even now as he strode down Main Street in this bizarre little town where Cate had grown up, it didn't really seem possible. Archer, a *dad*? It didn't make sense. He shook his head in

frustration, trying in vain to wake up. He needed coffee. He hadn't been awake this early in years. Working in kitchens across Paris had left him practically nocturnal. He rarely got home before 1am. How in God's name was he supposed to take care of a little girl?

The lawyer had been convinced that his daughter would be better off with him than her elderly grandmother, but Archer was not at all certain about that.

*Wouldn't she be better off with someone who knew what the hell they were doing?*

His thoughts wandered back to Cate. Despite having not spoken to her in five years, he couldn't believe she was gone and now he couldn't ask her any of his hundreds of questions.

Cate Carpenter. He'd met her while working in an upscale restaurant in Boston. She was front of house, he'd been a trainee chef. She was beautiful and funny. They'd only slept together a few times. He had been leaving anyway, heading to Europe to chase his insane dream of becoming a Michelin-star chef. Was that why she hadn't told him about the baby? Over the years she could have told him a thousand times, so why hadn't she?

And what would he have done? Given it all up? His dream. His perfect job. His quest to be the best. Would he have ended up in this little New England town sooner? Would he have married her?

Would he have resented her for derailing the plan he'd so meticulously set out for himself?

He swallowed the hot lump in his throat. None of that mattered now, because Cate was gone. Christ, Cate was *gone*, and he was here to meet his daughter. It was all so damn

tragic. And Archer couldn't deal with any of it before he had had coffee.

This was the first time since he'd arrived that he'd ventured into the town center. It was ... quaint, like something from an old postcard. Quaint, and incredibly *small*. The tree-lined street consisted of a handful of stores and ran all of about two city blocks. And that was it. The commercial area quickly became residential. It was nothing like the pulsing energy of Paris. His hopes of getting a decent cup of coffee were quickly fading.

It was cold today, especially this early in the damn morning. The chill of winter still hadn't let go, and despite the fact that it was only the first week of March, each shop door stubbornly displayed a floral wreath or faux tulips in the window. Every single one had a sign advertising an Easter egg hunt coming soon. It was all a little too ... cutesy for him. Was he really going to live *here*? Here, inside this commercial for New England charm. He wasn't sure he could stomach it. He preferred his life to be grittier than flower wreaths and egg hunts.

Store owners were beginning to open their doors, and more and more people filled the formerly quiet street. And, unless Archer was totally paranoid, he was pretty sure most of the people were looking at him.

Wonderful. Just what he needed. Nosy, small-town folks butting into his business, when all he really wanted to do was sort things out with his kid and then head back to Paris, to his kitchen, to his real life. This bizarre street, with its forced, spring décor and its curious townsfolk, was not for him. He already longed for the anonymity of a city.

He passed a pet store, ignoring the bunnies in the window, along with the shopkeeper's friendly wave. He didn't pause at

the florist's or the ice-cream parlor. There had to be a goddamn coffee shop somewhere in this place!

Ah, there! Up ahead he caught a glimpse of a sign: 'The Pumpkin Spice Café'. He frowned. They better have something other than overly saccharine seasonal drinks. He crossed the street and took note of the pub next door to the café. That could come in handy while he was here.

The chalkboard sign in front of the coffee shop was advertising a new kale smoothie and lemon blueberry scones. The smell of fresh roasted coffee seeped from the shop and Archer could feel his body perking up. Thank God. He could not meet his daughter, his *daughter*, he still wasn't used to that word, while he was half asleep.

He reached for the door handle, not really paying attention, his thoughts snagging on that word and that responsibility, and on whether or not he wanted a scone, when the door to the cafe swung open and nearly nailed him in the face.

'What the—' His words were drowned out by the woman's shriek, as though *he* was the one charging out of the café with no regard for other people.

'Oh, no!' she yelled and then it was too late. The tray of smoothies she'd been carrying was tumbling toward him and her body was crashing into him and her wild red hair was flying around her face and Archer was steadying her with his hands on her arms.

'Oh, shit,' she groaned, staring at the place between them where smoothie was currently dripping down the front of him, with little green splatters speckling the front of her.

Archer nearly growled. God damn it! He did not have time for this. He didn't have time to go back to the absurd little house he was renting to change his clothes. He couldn't be late

to meet his ... his ... his *daughter*. He had not factored in time to be run over by a human cyclone carrying kale smoothies!

The growl must have escaped him because the woman's eyes had widened in alarm, her cheeks flushing pink.

'I'm really sorry,' she said. 'I was rushing because I'm running late and I wasn't paying attention and—'

'It's fine,' he bit out, even though it was absolutely not fine. He was going to show up to the most important meeting of his life in a smoothie-soaked shirt. A smoothie-stained father was not the kind of father that instilled confidence. And he was desperately trying to gain some of his usual confidence back.

'It's really not fine. Here let me help you.'

It was then that Archer realized he was still holding the woman's arms and standing far too close to her. He dropped his hands and took a step back, hitting the now closed door behind him.

'I don't need help,' he said, his gaze flicking to the café counter and the long line waiting there. He probably wouldn't even have time for coffee at all now. He would meet his daughter with a stained shirt and a caffeine headache. Perfect. Just perfect.

'Here, let me just dab the worst of it off you.'

The woman had grabbed a fist full of napkins from the nearest table and pressed them into his chest. 'This should help. We'll just soak up the excess and then maybe with a little soap in the bathroom or something...' She talked while she worked, a stream of chatter that he found oddly comforting. The press of her hands, roving over his chest, and the gentle curve of her lips as she spoke distracted Archer enough to dissipate his anger. In fact, he found himself wanting to lean into her touch. He wanted to keep talking to this frenetic

woman. He wanted to ask her why she'd been carrying so many drinks. Who were they for? She was dressed more for a workout than the office, her tight leggings hugging the curve of her thighs, the tiny, athletic top revealing a stripe of skin around her stomach, skin that was now speckled with smoothie. Skin that he should probably stop staring at.

God, what was wrong with him? He was supposed to be getting his head in the game for meeting his kid, not trying to pick up an, admittedly beautiful, woman at the local coffee shop.

Archer sighed, pulling his gaze away from the dangerous stripe of skin and back to the woman's concerned face. Her pretty lips were turned down in a pout.

*Damn it, Archer. No lips either.*

*Get. Your. Head. In. The. Game.*

'Don't worry about the floor!' a woman called from behind the counter, momentarily distracting him from staring and admonishing himself for staring. 'Joe is grabbing the mop!'

'Okay, thanks Jeanie,' the woman still dabbing at his chest called back. 'Sorry about this.' Her hands kept up their assault on his body. She was standing far too close. He could smell her shampoo. Strawberries? Oh God. He needed to go.

'It happens,' Jeanie said with a shrug.

An older couple walked gingerly around the puddle and Archer. 'You gotta slow down, Iris, honey.'

'I know Estelle,' the redhead—Iris, apparently—said with a sigh. She straightened, finally releasing him from her clean-up efforts. 'You're right.'

'You're a good girl,' Estelle said, giving Iris a little pat on the cheek. The gray-haired man with her gave Archer a bemused smile.

'Rough morning?' he asked.

'It's turning into one, yeah.'

The old man laughed. 'Hopefully it turns around.'

'Come on, Henry,' Estelle said, taking the man's arm. She sipped the smoothie in her hand. 'Looks like I'm going to beat Iris to class today. Good thing I bought my own drink.' She laughed as they walked out.

Iris laughed in return, until her gaze landed back on Archer's face and she quickly sobered. 'Well, I don't think I can fix it.' They both looked down at the bright green stain on his white button-down shirt.

'Of course you can't.' He sighed. None of this was helping. His head was a complete mess before this meeting and the last thing he needed was to be lusting after the town's yoga instructor, or whatever she was.

Iris winced. 'I'm really sorry. How about I buy your drink? What are you having?'

Archer glanced at the line again and every single person was pretending not to be staring at him with a million questions on their faces and doing a terrible job of it. So much for getting in and out of this town without attracting too much attention. He turned his gaze back to Iris and her crinkled brow and downturned mouth. The zip-up hoodie she was wearing over her workout clothes had slipped down one shoulder revealing more skin he shouldn't be staring at.

He had to go.

There was no way he was answering anyone's questions today. Or staying any longer in the presence of this woman who'd already thrown his day for a loop.

'I don't have time,' he said gruffly, and turned away from Iris and her shocked expression and the judgemental line of

coffee drinkers. He wasn't here to make friends. He was here to do right by his daughter. Whether he was convinced that *he* was the right thing for her was inconsequential.

'Monster!' The little girl took one look at the green splotch on the front of his shirt, shrieked in horror and ran behind the couch. So, the first meeting with his kid was going about as well as he thought it would.

'He's not a monster, love. That's your dad,' Paula, Cate's mom said, smiling fondly at where the girl had disappeared behind the furniture. Archer had never met Paula, just further evidence that what he'd had with Cate had been casual and fleeting.

Paula was breathing with the help of an oxygen tank, the tube in her nose making it perfectly clear that she needed help with this child. With *his* child. His child who he'd only gotten a brief glimpse of before she'd disappeared.

'Then why does he have green gunk spilling out of him?' the little girl asked, still not emerging from her hiding place.

Archer glanced down at his shirt. She wasn't wrong. The smoothie stain did look suspiciously like monster gunk. 'It's uh ... it's just smoothie,' he said, and Paula nodded.

'Did you hear that, Olive? Just a little smoothie spill, that's all.'

'I'm not coming out,' Olive, *his daughter, Olive*, said.

'Okay, dear. You can stay there for now.' Paula smiled at Archer. 'Please, sit. Olive can be shy at first.'

'I'm not shy,' came the little voice. 'I just don't like monsters.'

Archer winced. 'I'm really sorry,' he explained to Paula. 'There was a kale-smoothie related accident this morning and I didn't have time to change.'

'Of course, don't worry,' she said even as her own smiling face had taken on a worried expression. 'I'm sure it's all going to work out.' He could see it then. This *had* to work out. This woman had lost her own daughter and now wasn't well enough to take care of her granddaughter.

This wasn't just about him and his own life, his own selfish needs.

Shit.

He cleared his throat. 'Right. Of course it will. I'm sure Olive and I will get used to each other in no time.'

By the look on Paula's face, she wasn't exactly impressed that Archer had big plans to 'get used to' her granddaughter but frankly it was the best he could promise at the moment. Just saying her name, Olive, was a first. He'd avoided it until now as if not saying it somehow kept all this from being real.

But it was real. She was real. And she was terrified of him.

That damn woman at the coffee shop. If she hadn't poured green goo down the front of him then none of this would be happening. And then she'd had her hands all over him, as though those flimsy paper napkins were doing anything. Not that he was still thinking about Iris's hands on his chest (but he might think about them later). At the moment, he had bigger problems.

And he had no idea what to do about them.

The main one being how to get his daughter out from behind the couch.

She was still hiding over a half hour later while he and her

grandmother made painful small talk and the lawyer went over the paperwork.

'So, Paris,' Paula said, 'Did you like living there?'

'I *do* like living there,' he said, emphasizing the present tense. He was *not* moving here permanently. 'I love it.' Even as he claimed to love it, his words rang false. How could you love a place you'd barely experienced? Archer's life consisted of the kitchen at Beau Rêve where he was the head chef, a few bars he and the staff frequented after work, and his apartment. Did he love Paris, or did he love the idea of being the best there, a place revered for its cuisine? It didn't matter. Paris was part of the plan. Dream Harbor absolutely was *not*.

He didn't really know how everything would work now that Olive was in the mix, but he would figure it out. His life may have been temporarily derailed by this situation, but it would not be permanent. If everyone involved decided that Olive should stay with him, and that still felt like a big IF, then she would come with him.

He refused to think about the fact that he couldn't even get her to come out from behind the couch, let alone move her to France. One problem at a time.

'Okay, Mr. Baer.' The custody lawyer, Ms. Kaori Kim, turned her attention away from the paperwork and back to him. 'I see you've rented a house in town.'

'Yes. And Olive will have her own bedroom.' He'd rented a cottage on a quiet street. He'd moved in and unpacked and set up a bedroom for a little girl, which he was not at all qualified to do so he'd just bought every pink thing he could find. A shitty approximation of home, but he was hoping it would make Olive feel comfortable.

'And what about employment?' the lawyer asked.

Employment. Archer's stomach dropped. Of course. He needed a job while he was here. And he'd looked. He'd spent his first few days in town scouring the nearby areas for an open chef position and he'd come up empty. His search area was too narrow, but he didn't know what he was going to do with Olive while he worked. He couldn't add a long commute or late hours into the mix. And they had to stay in town for now. They'd all agreed that the transition would be easier for Olive if she could stay near her grandmother and her friends and her school. It made sense but it had left Archer stuck and with no good options for work.

'I have the perfect place!' Paula piped in. 'Gladys is looking for a new cook.' She beamed at him.

'A new cook?' he repeated faintly.

'Yes, at her diner!' Paula's face was lit up like this was a great idea.

'A diner?'

She nodded.

'Wonderful,' Ms. Kim said, slamming her binder shut. 'So, we are all set for a temporary custody arrangement. Mr. Baer, you will be Olive's primary caretaker for the next six months, with Paula Carpenter retaining visitation rights. After the probationary period is up, we will reconvene and make a decision based on the best interest of the child.'

Archer just nodded, unable to do much else. His whole face felt numb. A *diner cook*? That was his life now? A suburban dad, diner cook. He felt sick. How the hell would he ever get his Michelin star working at a diner?

Kaori peeked over the edge of the sofa. 'Is that okay with you, Miss Olive? You're going to live with your dad for a little while and he's going to take good care of you. We're all going

to make sure of it.' With that ominous line, Kaori sent Archer a stern glare that pretty clearly said the entire town would be watching him. As if he hadn't already gotten that message this morning at The Pumpkin Spice Café.

He couldn't make out Olive's answer, but he was sure it wasn't good because Kaori's face slipped from all business lawyer to concerned friend.

'I know, sweetie,' she whispered, leaning over the couch cushions. 'But sometimes we have to be brave.'

Kaori and Paula both had tears in their eyes and once again Archer felt like shit for worrying about his own life when they'd just lost someone dear to them. It had only been a couple of months since Olive had lost her mom. And now she was stuck with him.

He got up from his seat and kneeled on the couch beside Kaori. He peeked over the edge and found Olive staring up at him with large, brown eyes. Same as Cate's. His heart clenched.

'Hey, Olive.'

She kept staring but at least she didn't run away, so that was progress.

Archer cleared his throat. 'So, I know this is kinda strange, and I know we just met, but let's just give this a try, okay?'

Her forehead crinkled.

'I think your mom would have liked for us to be ... friends,' he tried.

'She would have,' Kaori added. 'I knew your mommy, and she would have loved for you to spend some time with your dad.'

*Would she?* Archer wanted to say. If that were the case, then why hadn't she told him about Olive? But now wasn't the time

to ask. Not with Olive looking at him like that, like she was lost and scared, and he had no idea how to help her.

But Archer did not quit. And he didn't fail.

If he could survive apprenticing in some of the most intense kitchens in the world, then he could surely manage one little girl. Right?

He reached his hand out and for several, tense heartbeats, Olive just looked at it. And then, finally, she placed her tiny hand in his.

It was a start.