

NY TIMES & USA TODAY bestselling author

JILL SANDERS

Christmas Joy



A Pride Oregon Novel

CHRISTMAS JOY

PRIDE, OREGON SERIES

BOOK THIRTEEN



JILL SANDERS



GRAYTON

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HAPPY HOLIDAYS



FROM
JILL SANDERS

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DIGITAL ISBN: 978-1-945100-90-1

PRINT ISBN: 979-8-868344-18-3

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Copyeditor: Erica Ellis—inkdeepediting.com

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SUMMARY

For the Crawford family, Christmas had always been a time of love and joy. But this year, Hannah couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. The reason? Wyatt was back in town, and he was engaged to someone else. As much as she tried to ignore it, the thought of Wyatt being with someone other than her left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Meanwhile, Wyatt had returned home feeling hurt and betrayed. His ex-fiancé's betrayal had left him burned. But seeing Hannah again brought up old memories and feelings he'd thought he'd buried long ago.

As Christmas drew nearer, the tension between Hannah and Wyatt grew more extreme. They both knew they couldn't act on their feelings, but the attraction between them was too strong to ignore. Would they be able to resist temptation and move on with their lives?

PROLOGUE



Thirteen-year-old Wyatt Lane Auston sat on the floor of the Jordan's house while the Christmas party raged on. The Jordan family always held a huge Christmas party each year. Most everyone in the small town of Pride, Oregon, was invited to join in the fun.

The massive white house was fully decked out in holiday cheer. There were seven Christmas trees, and that didn't include the little one in each of the kid's bedrooms upstairs. The trees were all huge, most reaching the ceilings of the rooms they were in.

The house was full of his family and friends. His parents and his sister, Avery, were somewhere in the big house, no doubt eating or talking too much. The much older Jordan boys danced around, flirting with every girl that wasn't part of their family.

Presents were being passed out, and there was more food than any teenage boy could ever possibly eat. Holiday music blasted throughout the place.

It was a week before the actual holiday, and his family was set to have out-of-town visitors starting the following day. Which meant he would have to give up his room and sleep on the sofa in his father's den. Again.

Everyone knew that the Jordan's party was the biggest and best in town. If you missed it, you'd hear about it for months after.

Wyatt didn't really care all that much this year, which is why he sat on the floor in Matthew Jordan's bedroom with two of his other friends, playing the latest version of Modark, one of his favorite video games.

The fact that Modark's creator lived in the small town of Pride played a huge part in that. Wyatt had always looked up to Luke Crawford, the game's creator, more than anyone else in his life.

When Wyatt grew up, he wanted to be just like the man. Successful. Wyatt planned to leave his dinky hometown behind and become something. Something big. Something great.

Unfortunately, he'd probably end up just like his dad. Not that that was a terrible thing. After all, his old man was the fire chief. Everyone in the small town looked up to him.

Lately, things had been changing for Wyatt. The biggest change was that he'd recently discovered his fascination with girls. All girls. Any girls.

He dreamed about them. Drooled over them. Watched them. Dreamed about them. Thought of them. Dreamed about them. Every single night he dreamed about them.

The desire to gain their attention was now starting to outweigh his love of video games and sports.

When a group of girls came into the back room, Wyatt glanced up. He'd known Hannah Crawford his entire life. He was friends with her younger brother, Reece, and played football and baseball with the guy.

Hannah had never really been anything but a friend, but lately, he'd found himself watching her, dreaming about her. Thinking about kissing her.

He avoided her gaze until she settled down next to him on the floor.

He felt her knee brush his. The contact sent sparks rushing through his entire body, which started things circulating and, well, swelling. Damn.

He tried to focus on the game and not the smell of her shampoo and the feeling of her knee brushing his again.

She was quiet for a moment, then finally said, “There’s a hidden room there.” She pointed to the screen.

He even liked the sound of her voice. Soft. Sweet. Pretty. “Where?” he asked, growing excited about the game again. After all, her dad was the one who had created Modark. Getting inside information was, well, awesome.

“Just...” She placed her fingers over his. The light contact caused another jolt through his system, and a spark passed between their hands. Like an electric shock.

“Sorry,” she said, pulling her hand back. “The carpets in here are very staticky. Here.” She shook her hand and then placed her fingers over his again.

There wasn’t a real shock this time, but feeling her soft cool skin against his was just as powerful. She nudged the joystick to the right and then smiled at him when his character walked through a solid wall into a small room stacked with hidden game items.

Her smile lit up her light blue eyes, making them almost sparkle. The urge to kiss her was so overwhelming that if his friends hadn’t been in the room, cheering and celebrating the newfound gems, he would have leaned across the space and done so.

“Wow,” he said, practically forgetting the game.

Hannah’s smile wavered as her eyes darted down towards his lips.

Did she want to kiss him? Did she know what she was doing to him?

“I’m going to go get a drink,” she said suddenly when her friends complained that she was being a nerd and playing games instead of enjoying the party.

As she stood up, Wyatt handed his friend the controller and followed her. “I could use a drink.” Hannah smiled at him over her shoulder.

As they left the room together, he reached over and took her hand in his sweaty one. He felt his insides flutter when she didn't pull away from his touch.

This was the best night of his entire life. A night that he would never forget. Ever.

After they grabbed a couple of sodas, they went out on the back porch and sat on the covered deck to watch the snow falling.

Since it was far too cold for any of the adults, they were the only ones outside. Thankfully.

With the muffled sounds of the party behind them, Wyatt grew bold and leaned over to plant his very first kiss on his very first crush's lips.

Best day ever.

CHAPTER 1



*T*welve years later...

Hannah watched Wyatt stroll into O'Neil's Grocery on the arm of his absolutely gorgeous fiancée and felt part of her heart break off and shatter on the floor. The part of it that hadn't already fallen off a few years back when he'd broken things off with her because he was going away to college in the city. She'd had another year before she graduated and had no plans on leaving their hometown. Ever.

She knew that Wyatt had always had big dreams. Dreams that didn't include living in their small hometown of Pride, Oregon.

Since that first night when they'd become an official item, he'd been up-front with her about his plans. They'd only been stupid teenagers, but he'd given her plenty of warning.

"One day I'm going to leave this small town behind me and make it big in the city. I don't know what it is that I'm going to do, but it's going to be big," he'd said that first night after their first kiss. Her first kiss.

Of course, back then, all she'd been focused on was what that kiss had done to her. She'd been dumbstruck at the feelings she'd felt, both inside and out. Her body had shaken and it had nothing to do with the fact that they'd been sitting out in the snow for an hour.

Over the years, she'd foolishly told herself that he'd grow out of the desire to move out of Pride. That somehow she would be able to persuade him to stay. If she was just enough

for him, maybe he'd decide not to leave her. He hadn't changed his mind. Nothing she'd done had convinced him.

When that day had finally come, she'd been pissed at herself for not being enough to stop him. Not being enough for him to want to stay.

She'd smiled and waved goodbye to him while hoping that he would change his mind and return.

She didn't want to make him feel guilty for leaving, so she'd been happy for him. Well, as best as she could.

There was no way she wanted him to stay out of obligation. She wanted Wyatt to be with her because he wanted to be, not because he felt trapped.

Then, several years after he'd moved away, he'd gotten engaged to Lisa Cummings. The woman had visited Pride on several occasions since they'd started dating.

Every time she visited, she seemed more annoyed at having to be there. It was obvious to everyone, other than Wyatt, that the woman couldn't stand being out of the city.

As far as looks went, the blonde bombshell was everything Hannah wasn't. Just the right amount of tall, super skinny, extremely busty, and from the looks of her clothes and makeup, wealthy enough to keep her in the latest styles.

Hannah glanced down at her tattered jeans, old school T-shirt, and worn tennis shoes and groaned. Normally, she was dressed in the latest fashions herself, but today had been a relaxed day. She hadn't planned on seeing anyone or doing anything except to head to the store and grab a carton of her favorite ice cream to enjoy while watching a movie at home.

She had the next two days off work, and work was the main reason she dressed up.

She thought about ducking behind a large display at the end of the aisle so that the couple wouldn't notice her but then thought better of it. She was not going to hide from Wyatt Auston. Ever.

Besides, even in her cruddy clothes, she looked damn good. Lifting her chin, she held her position and waited.

God, he looked better than ever, she thought as she ran her eyes over him. He'd grown so tall back in junior high and was now far past six-foot. He'd let his darker brownish-red hair grow out some since she'd seen him last year. Now his hair was long enough that those sexy curls that she loved so much were present.

Shifting her basket so that she didn't spill its contents, she waited until the couple spotted her. She held frozen in place while desperately trying to keep all of her emotions from showing on her face.

The moment Wyatt's eyes landed on her, she almost lost her breath. She'd always had a difficult time controlling her feelings around him. Her love for him had always been so overwhelming that anyone who looked at her could easily see it.

How many times had she looked into those smoldering brown eyes of his and dreamed of their future together?

Then Lisa's head jerked up, and her eyes moved towards Hannah's. The woman's eyes narrowed slightly and her entire persona changed in a blink of an eye. The woman went from pure sex appeal to a viper ready to strike out in an instant.

It seemed like Lisa had been set on earth to suck the life out of any man that she deemed worthy enough or that she could get what she wanted from. There was no question that Lisa was using Wyatt for everything she could.

It was apparent that Lisa had been raised getting everything that she'd ever wanted. It was obvious that she'd come from a wealthy family by the way she walked, talked, and spent money like it was nothing.

Hannah had been privileged enough to be raised by a well-off family as well, but her parents had gone out of their way to instill different values into her and her brother Reece.

Money wasn't what was important to them. It never had been. Her father's company had hit it big long before her

parents had ever met, so the family had never really wanted for anything. But they'd never lived extravagantly.

They had gone on a few family vacations, but most of them had been spent in a car together driving from state to state to see all the wonders of the countryside. She'd lost track of how many campgrounds they'd stayed at one summer.

Everything her family had, they'd earned. The moment she'd been old enough, she'd started earning her own money and saving every penny. Now she had a nice fat account that she knew exactly what she was going to do with.

Hannah would wager every penny that the only reason Lisa was with Wyatt was what he could give her—his rugged good looks and awesome personality, and the sex. Don't think about the sex, Hannah told herself.

Lisa was a snake.

Hannah just knew that in the end she would squeeze everything that made Wyatt so wonderful out of him and leave him broken.

The way the woman was looking at her with a new hatred in her eyes, it was obvious that Lisa now knew about her and Wyatt's history.

The last time the couple had been in town it was clear that the woman was oblivious to their past relationship. She'd actually treated Hannah with respect. Well, as much as a viper could, at any rate.

The difference in how the two of them reacted upon seeing her was humorous. Lisa's inner ice queen came out while Wyatt seemed to warm and light up when he saw her.

"Hannah," Wyatt said. He dropped Lisa's hand and shifted the basket that he held into that hand. She tried to convince herself that it he was just trying to secure his hold on the heavy basket and not dropping his fiancée's hand in front of her.

"Hi, Wyatt, Lisa." She nodded towards the woman. "I hadn't heard that you were back in town."

If she had known, she surely wouldn't have been caught wearing comfy clothing and no makeup.

“Just for the night. We're heading back to Portland in the morning,” Wyatt answered. “The family's having a very early Thanksgiving and Christmas celebration since my folks are heading out for a cruise in a few days. They're going to be enjoying the coast of Italy and Greece for the next few months.” He rolled his eyes and smiled. “They claim that since they're empty nesters now they can travel as much as they want. So we moved our schedules around so that we could make it here before they leave. Sort of a surprise for the folks.”

Hannah knew all about his parents' trip. She had talked to Avery, Wyatt's sister, earlier that morning, and Avery hadn't mentioned that her brother was going to be home for the night. Avery always told Hannah everything, which meant that she hadn't even known herself.

She and Avery had become best friends shortly after she and Wyatt had started dating. They had actually thought of themselves as sisters for most of their lives.

She knew that Avery had hoped she and Wyatt would one day marry and make their sisterhood official. Both of them had been highly disappointed when Wyatt had left instead.

“Good. How wonderful for your folks to get to spend this time with you,” she said.

It was so awkward being around someone you still had major feelings for when they had moved on. He was the only man to ever see her naked. He had done things to her that no one else had. The thought that he was doing those things to someone else hurt more than him leaving her behind.

“So, how are you?” Wyatt asked her, his eyes meeting her own. By the tone in his voice, it was very clear that he was practically flirting with her. She could see Lisa's jealousy spike to an all-time high. The woman was glaring so hard at her that Hannah felt her skin burn.

Thankfully, just then her phone chimed. She pulled her phone out from her purse and saw Avery's text.

"Use this as your excuse to get the heck out of there."

She hid her smile as she tucked her phone away again. "Well, I've got to go." She held up her basket and, without waiting for a response, she headed towards the front of the store.

She spotted Avery standing outside the store with a worried look on her face.

Wyatt was tall with dark eyes like his father, Lane. His red hair had darkened over the years to an almost brownish color. While his sister Avery had taken one hundred percent from her mother, Amber. Avery's long red hair and light blue eyes were something she'd been jealous of her entire life.

Not that Hannah didn't have nice hair of her own. It was the same length as Avery's since they'd made a pact to grow it out a few years back. Each time one of them thought of chopping it off, they'd call the other and get talked out of it.

Hannah's sandy-colored hair was probably one of her nicest features. Her light blue eyes were nice, but nothing like Avery's crystal-colored ones.

She'd been told by many that she had a nice smile and skin, but when she looked in the mirror, all she saw was a plain-looking woman staring back at her.

After quickly paying for her items—the ice cream, some chocolate sprinkles, a jar of hot fudge, and a can of whipped cream—she rushed outside to where Avery was still waiting for her.

It was obvious that her friend had just gotten off work at the bakery across Main Street.

"I'm sorry. They just showed up after the lunch rush. They came to Sara's Nook first to tell me they were in town before heading over here. When I noticed your car, I rushed over here. When I floated the idea past Wyatt a week ago, he said they couldn't make it. Obviously, something changed," Avery said quickly. "I would have called you—"

Hannah held up her hand to stop her friend. “I get it.” She smiled and hugged her. “I survived.” She glanced back at the store and noticed that Wyatt and Lisa were now standing at the checkout. While Wyatt was busy paying, Lisa’s eyes were glued on Hannah.

“If looks could kill.” Avery groaned and tugged on her arm. “Go.”

“Yeah, I’d better go before they come out.” She half walked, half ran towards her car.

By the time she was pulling out of the store’s parking area, Wyatt and Lisa were standing out front.

She would have ignored them, but then Lisa threw up her hands and turned and flat-out yelled at Wyatt.

Were they actually fighting?

It appeared that way. If so, no doubt it was about her.

She’d been so preoccupied with watching the exchange between the couple that she didn’t see the speeding car until it was too late. The black car slammed into hers, and her entire world spun out of control.

The impact sent the left side of her head banging into the driver’s side window so hard that for a split second she saw stars and her ears rang as the glass shattered around her. Little pieces of it rained everywhere inside the car, over her.

She blinked a few times, unable to get her eyes to focus. Then everything went dark.

“I’ve got you,” someone said, and she realized that Wyatt was leaning inside her car from the passenger side. He was holding her and, suddenly, everything felt right again.

“Wyatt?” Her eyes blurred again. “I had the worst nightmare,” she mumbled.

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “You’re okay now.”

“You were engaged to a viper,” she mumbled, and then she passed out again.

Hannah woke again when something pricked her arm.

“Ouch.” She tried to jerk away.

“Hold still, baby.” Wyatt’s voice was right next to her. “We’ve got you,” he said, then he added, “Dad?”

“She’s fine. We’ll take her to Edgeview for some scans. She probably just hit her head.” As the chief of the fire department in Pride, Wyatt’s father, Lane Auston, was first responder for things like wildfires, car accidents, and house fires. She frowned. Had she been in a fire?

“Mr. Auston?” Hannah blinked a few times. When her vision didn’t clear up, she squinted to get a better look around. Was she burned? Was she in danger?

Looking up at the two dark blobs hovering over her, it was hard to tell Wyatt apart from his dad.

“I’m here,” Mr. Auston said.

She’d known Wyatt’s father her entire life. He’d been the one to teach every kid in town fire safety and what to do in case of emergencies. Why was he here? Was she in a fire?

Her mind kept circling. Repeating itself. She couldn’t control it or clear her vision.

“What happened?” she finally asked, after scanning her mind and coming up blank as to why she was lying down.

“There was an accident,” Mr. Auston said calmly. “Do you remember anything?”

Hannah thought back and could only remember a few details. The phone call from her mother, asking if she’d pick up some ice cream. “I was shopping for ice cream. My mother and I were going to hang out and watch a movie.”

“Then?” Wyatt asked.

She frowned over at him. He was the blob on the right while his father was on the left. “What are you doing here?” she asked, suddenly sidetracked.

“You don’t remember talking to me in the store?” Wyatt asked again.

She moved to shake her head, only it was strapped down to something tight. So tight it was uncomfortable. Panic threatened to set in.

“Why am I in this?” she asked, trying to remove the harness that crossed over her forehead.

“There was an accident,” Mr. Auston said calmly.

An accident? She settled and forgot about the harness. New worries surfaced.

“Is my car, okay?” she asked, trying to look around.

“Afraid not,” Wyatt answered. He glanced over his shoulder. He disappeared somewhere, but then was back seconds later.

“Avery’s going to ride with you to the hospital,” Mr. Auston said. “If that’s okay with you?”

Suddenly, Hannah could hear her friend’s voice from a few feet away. Avery sounded panicked; her voice wavered as if she was crying.

Hannah wondered why.

“Sure,” she mumbled. She started to close her eyes again.

“Hannah, we need you to keep your eyes open,” Mr. Auston said. His tone sounded so urgent that she lifted her eyelids, at least for a moment. Seconds later, however, they started to slip again.

“Hannah, baby, you’ve got to stay awake.” Wyatt’s voice drifted into her sleepy mind.

“Okay,” she sighed as she drifted into the darkness again.

The next time she woke, it was to her mother’s voice.

“Hannah bear,” her mother said softly. “Open your eyes for us.”

“Mom?” she croaked. “What happened.”

“You were in an accident,” her mother answered softly.

When she opened her eyes this time, it was to a dull gray room.

Her head wasn't spinning like before, and the loud buzzing in her ears was gone.

Her mother's face appeared. For the first time in a long time, her mother looked tired. Worried.

Her long dark hair was tied up in one of those messy buns she always wore around the house. She had on a red sweatshirt Reece had given her last Christmas. She was still so beautiful.

"Am I okay?" she asked, trying to look down at herself.

"Some cuts and bruises," her father said, and she glanced over at him. Her dad was one of the strongest and smartest men she'd ever known.

Hannah was a perfect mix of her parents. Fifty-fifty is what everyone always joked. Reece, however, was so much like their father it was uncanny. With his dark hair, caramel-colored eyes, and six-three build, he was almost a perfect copy of their dad. With the exception of his smile.

They both had their mother's smile.

"You have a really nasty bump on your head," her mother added.

"You look like you went a couple rounds in the ring with me," her brother said from across the room.

"Reece? It must be bad if you're here." She laid her head back and closed her eyes.

Reece chuckled. "Yeah, you've been dark for almost three hours."

"I've been asleep for three hours?" She was now fully awake and the more she blinked her eyes, the better her vision got.

"They did an MRI, and from what they can tell, you have a serious concussion," her father explained.

"Anything broken?" She looked down at herself. She was covered with hospital blankets but she didn't notice any casts. Just a few bandages on her arms and hands.

"No, thanks to the airbags," her mother added.

“My head hit the glass,” she said, remembering suddenly. She lifted her left hand and felt the side of her head. It was covered in bandages. When she touched it, she winced.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t go poking at it,” her brother said. “You got a bunch of flowers here,” he added.

She glanced around the room slowly, since moving too quickly made her head spin, and saw more than a dozen bouquets sitting around the room.

How had people gotten them here so quickly? Three hours? Who else knew about her accident?

She knew the answer to that question seconds after thinking about it. It was Pride. She’d crashed her car in town, which meant everyone in town knew about it seconds after it had happened.

Gosh, she really was dazed.

“Can I go home?” she asked after sitting up a little more.

“Tomorrow. Tonight, they want to keep you for observation,” her mother answered. “Honey, you scared us.”

“It was Todd Jameson,” Reece told her. “He was going about fifteen over the speed limit through town. Still, you pulled out in front of him. So, you’ll probably both get ticketed.”

“I...” She frowned, then groaned. Shit. She remembered everything now. She’d been so preoccupied with watching Wyatt and Lisa argue that she hadn’t really paid attention to pulling out of the parking lot.

“That’s not important now,” her mother said. “What is most important is getting you better.”

“That and finding you a new car,” her brother added in. “Since you’re not dying and all that.” Reece walked over and laid a kiss on her forehead. “I’ve got to go.” He paused and scanned her face. “Yup, you’re going to have two black eyes and a nasty scar.”

She gasped and lifted her hands to her face.

“No, she’s not.” Her mother slapped Reece on the shoulder. “Leave your sister alone.”

Reece chuckled and shrugged. “Still ugly though.” He touched her face gently with his fingers. “Try not to scare the old folks like this again, will ya?” He turned and walked out.

“Mom?” Hannah said when her brother was gone.

“You have a bruise across your face,” her mother said, tracing her finger over the spot. Then she dug in her purse and pulled out a compact mirror. “Here.” She held it up for Hannah.

Sure enough, there was a small bruise just to the right of her nose. Her head was wrapped in thick white bandages. Her long auburn hair was like a rat’s nest and covered in something dark and dry.

“Is this blood?” she asked, using her fingernails to scrape at it.

“You can shower tomorrow,” her mother answered. “For now, I can try and get the majority of it out of your hair.” Her mother stood up and walked towards the bathroom. She returned with a wet washcloth.

While her mother was trying to clean her up, someone knocked on the door. Her father went to the door and spoke with someone. Then he stood back, and Avery walked in.

Her friend rushed to her side and hugged her.

“You’re awake,” Avery cried. “Oh god, you scared us so bad.” Her friend’s eyes were red as if she’d been crying.

“I’m sorry,” she said, holding onto her.

Her mother stopped trying to clean her hair while they hugged.

“We’ll give you two a little time together. Your mother and I are going to go down to the cafeteria and get something for dinner.” Her father took her mother’s hand and led her out of the room.

When they were alone in the room, Avery turned to her. “Wyatt was so scared,” Avery whispered. Hannah frowned down at her joined hands, unsure what to say. “You should have seen him,” she continued. “Lisa was pissed.”

“She was?” Hannah asked, her eyes darting to her friend’s.

Avery smiled and nodded. “They didn’t even stay the night at the folk’s place. After we came here, I got a text from him that they were returning to the city. He told me to text him the moment I saw you.”

“He did?” she said, feeling her stomach roll. He didn’t even stick around to see if she was okay.

“What should I say?” Avery pulled out her phone.

Hannah shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” She felt her heart break a little at the thought that he didn’t care enough about her to stick around.

She rested her head back as Avery busily started typing on her phone.

Sure, she knew she and Wyatt were no longer together, but she had hoped they’d at least remain friends.

Friends didn’t just leave friends after something like this. Did they?

If their roles had been reversed, she would have stuck around to make sure he was all right. Even if Lisa had been there. Nothing would have stopped her from making sure that Wyatt was okay.

Nothing.

CHAPTER 2



The entire trip back to Portland, Wyatt mentally kicked himself. He should have stayed with Hannah and waited until he knew for sure that she was okay.

But Lisa had pretty much given him an ultimatum to leave with her or walk back to Portland. She'd been so upset after the way he'd acted after witnessing Hannah's accident.

Hell, how could he not freak out? His heart had practically stopped when he'd seen her car spin several times in the road. His heart and head hadn't started working again until his father swore to him that she was okay and that he'd personally make sure she got to the hospital safely.

When Lisa had tugged on his arm, he'd followed her like a zombie.

After they got back on the highway heading towards Portland, everything had gone downhill.

Lisa had accused him of overreacting about the accident. Because it was Hannah.

He never should have told her that they used to be an item. Lisa had sort of forced it out of him one night, and he'd stupidly told her that they'd gone steady for five years.

"Five years? That's a lifetime," Lisa had gasped. "Do you love her still?"

He'd wanted to deny it, but the truth was, he'd never stopped loving Hannah.

That little fumble had cost him dearly. Since that night, Lisa had nagged him over the smallest things. If he didn't give her something she wanted, she'd bring up the fact that maybe he didn't love her. Maybe he was still infatuated with Hannah.

The way Lisa said Hannah's name ate at him. It was as if she was saying a dirty word, one that she hated.

The fighting started shortly after that confession. Today's fight wasn't the first one they'd had, and if things continued the way they were, it wouldn't be the last.

He was so over the bickering. Actually, Lisa's jealousy about Hannah was just one of the issues between them.

He'd confided in Lisa about his past with Hannah after she told him a few details about some of the men in her past.

Up until he'd moved to the city, she'd been the only one he'd been with. The only one who had mattered in his life. The only one he could ever imagine mattering in his future.

But then, one day after graduation, he'd felt... trapped. Not by Hannah, but by Pride and everyone in it. It seemed as if anytime he bumped into someone, all they could talk about was weddings and marriage. The fact that they said it in the same sentence as his and Hannah's names had caused panic to settle in his chest.

So he'd done the only thing he could. He'd enrolled in college classes in Portland and had rushed out of town before he could be trapped into something he wasn't prepared for. At least not at that point in his life.

The entire ride back to the city, Lisa was quiet.

Lisa was never quiet. In the time that they'd been together, she'd never gone more than ten minutes without talking about... something.

Half the time it was about some drama that her friends had gotten into. Most of the time, he only half listened.

It was funny, he didn't even know any of her friends. They had never gone out on a double date or spent time with any single person she talked about. Then again, they'd only been

going out for eight months before getting engaged a few weeks back.

He wanted to ask her what was going on in her head, but instead, he remained quiet.

In truth, something deep inside him had changed. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he didn't care what was going on in Lisa's head.

What he did care about was making sure that Hannah was alright.

He kept clinging to his cell phone, which remained quiet the entire trip back.

Could he really be married to someone who would be so selfish as to force him to leave when his friend needed him? After all, that's what Hannah was. A friend. Right?

So, as Lisa drove back to Portland in silence, worry about Hannah built up inside him. When they pulled into Lisa's apartment complex, his sister finally texted him.

"She's awake and okay. Nothing was broken. Just bruises and a bump to the head. They're keeping her overnight. I'm sticking around here to hang with her."

He read the message three times before relaxing.

"I take it by your demeanor that she's okay. I told you she would be," Lisa said, glancing at her own phone. "I think it's best we put this entire day behind us. Don't you?"

He wanted to agree, but he remained silent. He was hurt and he was rethinking things. Rethinking them.

Lisa's left eyebrow shot up slowly. "There's no need for you to walk me up." She motioned to his car, which he'd parked in the spot next to hers when they'd decided to take her car down to Pride earlier that day.

Before he could respond, she got out of the car and pulled her overnight bag from the back seat. He climbed out and took out his own car keys as she headed up the sidewalk to the stairs without looking back at him.

To be honest, he was slightly relieved. Up to that point, they'd had a few tiffs, mostly because Lisa had wanted something and he hadn't delivered. After today, though, he just couldn't shake the feeling that he'd made a huge mistake in being with her. Staying with her.

His apartment wasn't far from Lisa's. Actually, it was because of this that they initially met. One evening they had both walked down to the corner pub and, after a rainstorm started, had been stuck at the place after closing. They'd been standing outside together waiting for a ride home in the thunderstorm. In the end, after finding out that they only lived a few blocks away from each other, they'd shared a cab home.

Several times over the past few months of being together, Lisa had hinted that they should move in together. He was thankful that he'd avoided that move. Whenever she brought it up, he claimed that his lease wouldn't be up until the end of the year. He knew there was no way she would leave her larger, more expensive building for his cramped apartment. In truth, he'd needed his space.

Then, one night, she'd started talking about marriage and, before he knew it, they were engaged. He hadn't even purchased a ring for her yet. Anytime she wanted to look at rings together, he sidetracked her with one thing or another.

In the last two months, she'd shown him more than a dozen rings, none of which had been within his budget.

Sure, the corporate job that he'd gotten right after graduating with his associate's degree easily paid his bills and afforded him the new Mustang that he drove around the city.

The last thing he wanted to do was go into debt for a wedding ring when he wasn't even sure how he'd really proposed in the first place.

In the past few months, he'd started to really miss the good days when all he had was his old truck and the old motorcycle that he and his dad had fixed up one winter.

He had left both the truck and the bike back at his parents' place and replaced it with a sleek flashy city car. That too was

a necessity he'd felt he needed when he moved away from home.

Now, he wasn't so sure he wanted any of it. The apartment. The car. The fiancée.

He let himself into his apartment and grabbed his laptop and ordered a dozen flowers from Suzie Brogan's shop, All in Bloom, in Pride.

He knew that Hannah loved yellow flowers. When he realized the shop was closed for the day already, he sent Suzie a text message.

When Suzie responded to him that she would have his flowers delivered to Hannah's hospital room first thing in the morning, he smiled.

This was another thing he missed about living in a small town where everyone knew everyone else.

"Got you covered," Suzie responded almost immediately after he'd told her thanks and sent her cash via a payment app.

That right there was what he missed. Seven years in the city and he had yet to trust anyone as much as he did every single person living in Pride.

Wyatt had known Todd Jameson, the guy who had hit Hannah's car, his entire life. He still liked the guy and trusted him. Possibly even more since Todd had jumped out and immediately helped to get Hannah's door open and check on her.

Sure, the guy had been driving a few miles over the limit, but the amount of pain and worry in his eyes assured everyone on the scene that it had been nothing but an accident.

Wyatt wanted to send a text to Hannah to tell her that he was thankful that she was okay. Instead, he showered and crawled into his bed, feeling empty and homesick.

The following morning, he showed up to Lisa's apartment with flowers, ready to apologize and finally have that talk he'd been dreading, but when he knocked on her door, a half-naked man answered instead.

“Is... Lisa here?” He frowned as he glanced at the apartment number on the door just to make sure he was at the right door.

He'd been so occupied trying not to spill the hot coffee and flowers while he climbed the stairs that he thought maybe he hadn't paid attention.

The man leaned on the door jamb and ran his eyes up and down Wyatt as if he was a problem.

“She's in the shower.” The guy eyed the flowers. “Are you the boyfriend that she keeps complaining about?”

“Fiancé,” he corrected as his eyes narrowed. “And you are?” He didn't know why he was defending his relationship with Lisa. After all, he was there to break off the engagement.

“I'm the guy that she runs to every time the two of you have a fight,” the man answered with a smile.

It was odd. When he had seen Hannah's car spinning out of control in the road, his heart had sunk in his chest. Yet finding out that his fiancée had a side toy somehow didn't hurt nearly as much. As he walked down the stairs and dumped the coffee and soft pink flowers that he'd purchased for her in the trash, he realized that he was thankful. Now he wouldn't have to jump through the break-up hoop.

When Lisa called him later that evening, he didn't answer the call. He didn't read the text messages she kept sending him either. Instead, after about the hundredth text and call, he blocked her number.

When she showed up at his door close to midnight, he kept his lights off and didn't open the door or respond. He just leaned his head against the closed door and listened to her try to explain—loud enough that the entire complex could hear her—that Travis was just a friend. When he still didn't open the door or respond, she switched tactics and yelled at him, accusing him of still having feelings for Hannah. Then she followed it up by kicking his door and screaming that Travis was a better fuck than he was before finally leaving.

She visited his apartment several times every day after that, and his neighbors started complaining about the crazy woman who kept yelling at his door.

Less than a week later, tired of fighting it all, he packed up his belongings and drove back to Pride. He was not only done with Lisa, he was also done with the city.

Since his parents were off on their exciting cruise, he expected their house to be empty.

When he pulled into the driveway shortly before ten that night, it was snowing very hard. Deciding he could bring in the rest of his things in the morning, he grabbed his overnight bag from the seat next to him and rushed through the snow to let himself into the house with his keys.

He tossed his bag down on the floor just inside the doorway and started to remove his shoes. Even though his mother wasn't home, she'd kill him if he tracked snow and muck on her floors. What he hadn't expected was to be hit over the head with something very hard.

“What the...” He jerked around and saw Hannah standing just inside the doorway.

He had only a moment to assess her as she frowned back at him.

Her hair was in two long braids lying over the shoulders of her pajama top, which read “I don't give a pluck” above an image of a huge grinning turkey.

Her face was clear of any makeup, and he spotted a dark yellow and green bruise just under her eye.

His eyes quickly ran over the rest of her, checking her exposed skin for any other bruises or cuts. Instantly, he felt bad all over again for just leaving her like he had the week before.

“Wyatt?” She practically screamed it. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

“I live here. What are you doing here?” he asked, rubbing the spot on his head where something had bounced off it.

“I’m house-sitting for your parents,” Hannah answered as she frowned at him. “They... I...” She took a deep breath. “They didn’t tell me you would be home.”

“They didn’t know.” He hadn’t sent them a text because he knew they’d be on their cruise. Besides, he hadn’t decided to return home until late the night before. Then he’d been busy packing and hauling most of his junk to a homeless shelter a few blocks away from his apartment.

His lease on his apartment would be up at the end of the month, but he’d arranged to keep paying month to month to avoid moving in with Lisa until after the New Year.

His job sucked and there was nowhere further up in the company to go, so he’d given them notice and had taken what leave he had saved up and left.

Since things with Lisa were off, he had nothing left in the city. So he’d done what he had been thinking about doing since Hannah’s accident. He’d come home. For good.

“Your parents are gone until after the New Year,” Hannah said with a frown.

“I know,” he replied, still rubbing his head. “What’d you hit me with?” He glanced around and spotted his mother’s copper vase that normally sat by the front door. He laughed. There was a huge dent in the thing now. He picked it up and weighed it. “How’d you lift this thing?” he asked, knowing full well that his father had to move the damned thing each time his mother redecorated the house.

“You’d be surprised what a person can do when they suspect someone is breaking into the house.”

“It’s my house,” he reminded her, setting the vase back down where he knew his father always put his umbrella. The fact that it was empty now was a slight shock. Most of the time there were at least six umbrellas in it.

“Where are the umbrellas?” he asked, looking around.

“I put them in bags and hung them in the closet,” she said after a moment. “When you just shove them in the pot, the water still drips everywhere.”

He walked over and sure enough, each umbrella had its own little plastic bag wrapped around it.

Deciding he was too tired to argue, he removed his jacket, hung it up, then sat on the bench just inside the doorway and removed his shoes.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

“I’m not going to track in water and muck. I learned that lesson when I was ten.” He smiled as he set his shoes down on the shoe rack he and his father had built.

“I mean, why are you here?” she asked, sounding a little annoyed.

“Because I live here.”

“No, you don’t.” She dragged out her words as if he was slow in getting what she was saying.

Deciding to change the subject, he sniffed the air. “Is that pie I smell?”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Did you just drive down from Portland?” she asked. He nodded, still sitting on the bench. “Did you have dinner?” He shook his head. Her eyes narrowed even further.

She took a deep breath and then groaned as she threw up her hands in frustration. “Fine, you can have my leftovers.” She turned to head into the house. “I went to an early Thanksgiving party and grabbed plenty of leftovers.” She motioned to the kitchen. He smiled and stood up, only to stop when she laid a hand on his chest. “But not the pie. I get the pie.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “You can have the slice of cake instead.” She turned and walked back into the kitchen.

He watched her pull a slice of pecan pie from the microwave. She put a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream on top before sitting on the sofa to watch a movie, which had been on pause, while he hunted in the fridge to find something to eat.

She had at least a dozen Tupperware dishes stuffed with the perfect Thanksgiving dinner fixings. He took his time

filling a plate with heaping helpings of mashed potatoes, stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, and turkey. Loads of turkey. He had skipped lunch and dinner and was starving.

“Are there any rolls?” he called out, his head buried in the fridge.

“I put them in the freezer,” she replied over the sound of the movie.

He opened the freezer and smiled at the huge Ziplock baggie full of rolls.

While his food heated, he watched the back of her head as she laughed at the movie.

“Who watches *Elf* a week before Thanksgiving?” he asked, knowing full well that she watched the movie every year around Thanksgiving. Always. He liked knowing some things hadn’t changed over the years that he’d been gone.

She glared at him over her shoulder, and he laughed.

When the microwave chimed, he grabbed his food and sat down on the sofa next to her and ate his meal.

“You’re not going to kick me out,” she said, between bites of her pie.

“Who said I was going to kick you out?”

“Your parents pre-paid me before they left,” she warned.

“Good,” he said, trying to act casual.

“How long are you staying?” she asked.

He glanced at her and sighed. He didn’t want to tell her the truth. For some reason, this was much more fun. “A while,” he finally answered with a grin. “Don’t worry, you can still house-sit for my folks. I’ll stay out in my dad’s workshop. Out of your way.”

Hannah frowned at him and then opened her mouth. Shut it. Opened it again. Then, instead of saying anything, she shoveled the last bite of pie into her mouth.

When she was done eating, she asked, “Lisa didn’t come with you?”

CHAPTER 3



She knew she was pushing him. After all, she doubted it was perfectly normal for him to show up at his parents' place in the middle of the night, unannounced.

"No, not this time," Wyatt answered as he continued to eat.

She wanted to tell him that even though she'd taken the guest room upstairs, there was another guest room in the house with a bed that he could use.

The Auston's house was almost the same size as her parents' place. It was a standard four-bedroom, three-bath, two-car-garage home like many that were scattered through the countryside around the small town of Pride. However, at one point, Wyatt's father had turned part of the detached garage into his workshop, complete with an old pullout sofa and space heater.

Why was Wyatt offering to stay out there in the cold space instead of in the warm house? Something told her that Lisa probably wouldn't like it if she found out that he was staying under the same roof as she was.

So, instead of saying anything, she sat back and watched her movie while he ate his meal.

When she laughed at a funny part in the movie, Wyatt was right there with her, chuckling along like he always had.

She hadn't realized that, after he was done eating, he'd pulled the blanket off the back of the sofa and covered her legs.

It was the little things like that he'd always done for her that she'd missed after he'd left. Little things that, back then, she hadn't noticed or even cared about. She'd squandered her time with him.

He probably knew that she always got cold when she was tired. Every time they'd go to the movie theater when they'd been together, she'd forget her jacket and less than half an hour into the movie, Wyatt was handing over his jacket without her asking.

It was just one more thing he always did that made her fall even more in love with him.

By the time the movie ended, she had fallen fast asleep. She woke when she heard him turn off the television. She listened quietly as he put another log on the fire and picked up his bag by the front door.

She didn't want him to know that she'd woken up, so she pretended to still be asleep.

"I know you're awake," he said softly.

She rolled her eyes behind her closed eyelids and then opened them and sat up.

"You don't have to sleep in the cold workshop," she said, tossing the blanket off her. "Sleep here." She pointed to the sofa. "Or the other guest room upstairs."

He glanced outside, and she followed his gaze. The snow was still coming down at a steady pace. If it kept up, she'd have to clear the driveway in order for Rose and Jacob to pick her up and take her to work in the morning. She worked with them as a sales associate at Hidden Cove's sales center, selling homes for the new neighborhood, so they had agreed to shuttle her back and forth each day until she could purchase a new car.

"I'll take my mother's sewing room," Wyatt said finally. He turned to go but stopped and turned back. "How'd you get here? I mean, I didn't see a car."

"Rose and Jacob drive me back and forth for now while I'm car shopping."

He nodded as she stood up and took the dishes to the sink.

“I’ll take care of those in the morning. It’s past one and you probably have work in the morning,” he said, shuffling his bag over his shoulder.

“I don’t go to work until eleven.”

He nodded, then turned to head towards the stairs.

She made sure the doors were locked, turned off all the lights, and headed up the stairs behind him.

He was already in the other room across the hallway from the guest room she was staying in. She could see the light under the door as she passed by and could hear him moving around inside.

She stepped into the guest room that she’d been staying in for the past three nights and shut the door. She felt like banging her head against it.

What in the hell was happening? What was she supposed to do with Wyatt here? Act like he wasn’t the man her heart still ached for?

He’d never answered her about how long he was going to be staying. Did that mean he was back for good? What about Lisa?

She rushed over to grab her phone, which she’d left upstairs charging earlier that evening, and sent a text to Avery. Before hitting send, however, she got a glimpse of the clock and winced. Hannah didn’t have to be at work until eleven, but that didn’t mean Avery would still be up this late.

Avery had taken a job at Sara’s Nook a few years back. So while Hannah could afford to stay up late and sleep in, Avery had early evenings and even earlier mornings.

Groaning, she tossed her phone down without hitting send and crawled into bed.

Moments before, she’d been so tired that she’d fallen asleep during her favorite holiday movie. Now, however, she was wired.

She pulled out her laptop and opened her online class, figuring that she could get an hour of studying in. She was fast asleep less than twenty minutes later.

She woke to the sounds and smells of breakfast being cooked downstairs. The house was colder than it had been the night before, so she pulled on a sweater and slipped on her fuzzy socks before paddling downstairs. She still had two hours before Jacob and Rose would be there to pick her up for work.

Wyatt was standing at the stove pushing some scrambled eggs around in a pan. He'd started a fire in the wood fireplace again and, thankfully, the room was already a lot warmer than it was upstairs.

He was wearing a pair of black sweats and a hoodie and looked refreshed and damned good in the outfit.

“Morning,” she said, holding in a yawn.

He turned and smiled at her, then held out a mug. “Fresh coffee.” He motioned to the coffee pot. “I cleared the driveway so Jacob and Rose wouldn’t have any problems getting up the drive.”

“Thanks,” she said with a frown as she poured herself a cup.

“Creamer?” He held out the jug for her.

She narrowed her eyes.

“Don’t be sour with me. Drink your coffee.” He motioned and turned back around.

“I’m not sour,” she replied, and he chuckled, which pissed her off even more.

“You’re the one who decided to stay up late,” he pointed out as he turned off the gas stove.

She wanted to tell him to shut up, but she knew that he would only laugh at her some more. Instead, she mentally stuck out her tongue at him as she sipped her coffee.

“Scrambled cheesy eggs with chunks of ham,” he said as he set the plate in front of her.

“You’re not playing fair,” she said as she eyed her favorite breakfast meal.

“Who said I was playing anything?” he asked as he set another plate down at the spot next to hers. “I was hungry and it’s one meal I know how to make. Perfectly,” he added as he sat down next to her.

They ate in silence. She tried very hard not to enjoy the breakfast too much, but Wyatt was correct. He knew just how to make the meal perfectly.

“How long are you staying?” she asked again, in between bites.

“A while,” he answered with a frown.

She glanced at him and ran her eyes over him. “Did Lisa finally dump you?”

From an outsider’s perspective, Wyatt gave no clue as to the answer to that question. Instead, he continued to eat without saying a word.

“See, playing games.” She pointed her fork at him. “I’ll just have to sick Avery on you.” She pulled out her phone and hit send on the message she’d prepared last night. “There, she’ll get answers.”

“*You* don’t play fair,” he groaned.

There was an instant reply to her text. She smiled as she glanced down at the phone. “She’s going to call you on her next break,” she warned him. She went back to eating, only now she had a huge smile on her face.

“You’re mean.” He nudged her shoulder, a move that he’d always done. A wave of nostalgia washed over her.

“And you’re ugly,” she replied, getting him to smile like he always did.

“You’re uglier.”

“You’re the ugliest.” She turned slightly towards him.

“You’re so ugly...”—he narrowed his eyes—“when you were born the doctor took one look at you and slapped your parents.”

She rolled her eyes and thought hard. “You’re so ugly, you make onions cry.”

His smile doubled. “You’re so ugly, farmers use your picture as a scarecrow.”

“What are you, two?” She rolled her eyes and made a point to slowly roll up her sweatshirt’s sleeves as if preparing for a fight. “You’re so ugly, when you throw a boomerang, it doesn’t come back.”

There was a split second before he burst out laughing and threw up his hands.

“I give up. It’s been too long since I’ve done this.” He turned back to his food. “I’m out of practice.”

She smiled and then held up her mug. “You know the rules.” She wiggled her empty mug in the air. “You have to serve me for the rest of the day.”

He rolled his eyes and stood up to get her a refill.

“The entire day?” he asked as he poured her some more coffee. When she nodded, he smiled. “Then I guess it’s a good thing you leave for work soon.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back at six. And I expect dinner and dessert.”

Wyatt rolled his eyes. “And you called me the childish one.”

“Hey, I didn’t make the rules. Remember?” She finished her food. “So, since your folks are gone, what exactly are your plans?” When he didn’t say anything, she added, “Why exactly are you home?”

“I plan on doing this and that,” he answered with a shrug.

She could tell he was avoiding answering her. She opened her mouth to ask another question, but his phone rang just then.

He glanced at it and sighed. "It's Avery. Thanks for that." He stood up to answer the call and walked out onto the back deck.

She could only hear a few of Wyatt's words but figured that she'd get the full scoop later when she called Avery herself.

She took her plate to the sink, then headed upstairs to shower and get ready for work. When she came down, Wyatt was gone. She looked out front and noticed his car was gone too.

Since she had about an hour before her ride would be there, she sat down at the kitchen table with her laptop and studied.

She only had a few more weeks of classes and one big test before she got her real estate license. Pride technically only had one real estate agent in town, and she was determined to give Ellen Rodgers a run for her money. Besides, her work was paying for half of the cost of classes, and she had a knack for the job.

"What's that?"

Hannah jumped about a foot off the chair and screamed at the same time.

"Don't do that," she said when her heart settled back down.

Wyatt stood about a foot away, looking over her shoulder.

"I practically stomped my feet all the way in here," he replied with a frown. "You were just too engrossed in..." He motioned to her computer screen, then leaned down and narrowed his eyes to read her screen. "Is that an online class?"

She shut her laptop lid and turned towards him. "It is." She narrowed her eyes and took in his disheveled look. It was obvious he'd been wearing a hat; his hair was sticking up in places. He hadn't shaved that morning, and the thick dark hair on his face made him sexier than she'd ever seen him before.

Damn. The man still surprised her.

No. She couldn't think about him in that way. He was engaged. It didn't matter if his fiancée was a viper. What mattered was that she knew that Wyatt wasn't the cheating type.

"What?" He frowned at her.

She shook her head and started gathering up her laptop.

"I know that look," Wyatt said, sitting down at the table.

"You know all my looks," she pointed out. "And I know yours." She stood up, only to stop when he grabbed her hand.

"What are you studying?" he asked, throwing her off slightly.

"Why are you here?" she countered. "An answer for an answer."

Wyatt was quiet for a moment, but the second he opened his mouth to speak, the doorbell rang.

"That'll be my ride," she said, pulling on her coat, hat, and gloves. She tossed her backpack over her shoulder and walked over to the door. She glanced over her shoulder. "I'm in the mood for Italian tonight." Before he could respond, she walked out.

"Is that Wyatt's car?" Rose asked as Hannah opened the door of the truck.

Rose was eight and a half months pregnant and ready to pop at any moment.

"Yup," she answered as she climbed in the back seat of the truck.

"What are he and Lisa doing back here?" Rose asked.

"Lisa didn't join him this trip," Hannah answered. The car was silent, then Jacob started pulling out of the driveway. "I can hear you both thinking."

"What?" Rose said, glancing back at her.

"I don't know what he's doing back. He showed up in the middle of the night and is sleeping in his mother's craft room.

I don't know how long he's here for or even why. I have my people working on getting answers though and will let you know when I do." She held up her phone when it rang and she noticed Avery's number on the screen. "Which, apparently, I will get right now." Hitting answer, she said, "Tell me everything."

CHAPTER 4



*H*auling firewood hadn't helped lighten Wyatt's mood. Lisa had called him a half dozen times in between Avery's calls. He had her number blocked, but she'd used a payphone or someone else's phone. He'd managed to dodge the first few calls but after a while, he started answering and just hanging up.

He'd tried talking to her a few times, but she'd grown hysterical and he'd hung up even more frustrated.

He answered Avery's second call after she'd texted him and threatened to call Lisa directly to see what was going on. The first time she'd called, he'd gotten away with just a few details before telling her he had to go. Now, however, he knew he couldn't put her off any longer.

"What do you want?" he asked when he'd answered his sister's call.

"I want to know what's going on," Avery replied easily.

"I'm home," he answered, tossing the axe down. He'd only left after breakfast because he'd needed to blow off steam.

How the hell was he supposed to know when he returned home that Hannah was going to be at his parents' place? Or how damned attractive she was in her silly pajama's looking tired and sexy as hell.

He'd left her upstairs showering to head out and collect wood on the back of his parents' property to blow off some of the frustration the past week had built inside him.

Not that they needed any more wood cut, but it had always helped clear his head in the past.

Now, after chopping wood for over an hour, he was hot, sweaty, tired, and still thinking about how good Hannah looked and smelled that morning.

Showering didn't help since they were obviously sharing the guest bathroom. Her shampoo and girl things were all over the place. He picked up every bottle and smelled, just to test himself. Yup, he was losing it.

It had almost undone him seeing the bruises on her face the night before and that morning. However, she'd hidden them with makeup before leaving and he had to admit, he wouldn't have noticed them if he didn't already know they were there.

"But why are you here without Lisa? You knew the folks would be gone," his sister said, breaking into his thoughts about Hannah.

The truth was, he'd been thinking a lot about Hannah lately. Seeing her dazed after the car accident covered in small cuts had been a shock to his system. The realization that he'd never stopped loving her had been a quick blow to his system.

He supposed it was inevitable that Lisa would find out one way or another.

But he hadn't expected Lisa's betrayal. It stung knowing that, the entire time they'd been together, she'd had someone else on the side.

Whatever Wyatt was, he wasn't a cheater. If he had known he still had feelings for Hannah, he would have broken things off with Lisa a long time ago. But, in a way, he had sort of loved her. He had honestly seen a future with her. Maybe not as quickly as she wanted, but it had been there. Somewhere.

"Wyatt," Avery warned.

"I'm here without her because I broke it off," he finally said.

"The wedding?" Avery asked.

“Yes.” He sighed. “Listen, I don’t want anyone to know. Not just yet. At least not until the folks get back. Okay?”

His sister was quiet.

“Are you back for good?” Avery asked.

“For now,” he answered, not really sure what his plans were. Hell, he didn’t even have a job.

“Fine,” Avery finally said. “I’m not going to be able to keep this from Hannah.”

He sighed. “I know, just... let me tell her, okay?”

“When?”

“Tonight. When she gets off work.”

Avery was quiet for a moment. “Promise?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Just... tell her you couldn’t get anything from me.”

Avery laughed. “She won’t believe that. I’ll tell her something. I’ll figure it out.” His sister was quiet for a moment. “Are you okay?”

He thought for a moment. Lisa had cut him, but thankfully, it hadn’t been deep. He knew that he was better off. Far better off. He’d been blind to the way Lisa had treated him and their relationship. Hannah was correct. Lisa was a viper.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I’m good.”

“Did she break your heart?” Avery had asked.

“A little,” he admitted. He was mostly disappointed in himself for falling for the woman’s ploys.

“Good,” Avery surprised him by saying, then she hung up on him.

He’d wanted to ask his sister why she was glad, but something told him he already knew.

When he’d left Pride, he’d left his family, left Avery, and most importantly, he’d left Hannah.

Their relationship had gone stale. Or, at least, he'd believed so. Her family and his had been pressuring them to take that next step when she graduated school herself.

He'd been young. Stupid.

So he'd done what anyone in his situation would have done. He'd run fast and far away.

He'd sowed his wild oats that first year, as his grandfather would have said.

Now, well, he didn't know what happened now. He supposed he needed someplace to live besides his mother's craft room. Which meant he needed a job.

After showering, he dug out his best clothes and drove into town.

The snow had stopped mid-morning and turned the streets of Pride into a thick mush that everyone was doing their best to avoid. In places it was brown from dirt and sticking to every car that drove through it. He was thankful he'd chosen to drive his truck that day instead of his Mustang.

He parked outside the firehouse and hadn't even made it out of his truck before his buddy Scott waved and started walking towards him.

"Back in town to cause more problems?" Scott joked, slapping him on the shoulder as he shook the man's hand.

"Problems?" Wyatt smiled. "Never."

"Seems to me last time you were here, you caused a car accident," Scott joked.

Wyatt's eyebrows shot up. "Caused?"

Scott rolled his eyes and sighed. "Never mind. What can we do you for? You know your dad isn't here. He's in Greece."

"Yeah." Wyatt ran his hands through his hair. "I was counting on him not being here. I'm looking for a job, and I'd hate to get turned down by him."

Scott laughed and then started pulling him towards the station. “You’re hired.” He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “You can sweep and cook, right?”

Wyatt rolled his eyes.

Whenever he’d helped out at the station when he was a kid, he’d been on cooking and cleaning duty. He was pretty sure his father had made plans to never allow him to really work at the station. After all, a firemen’s job was a dangerous one.

But Wyatt had no desire to be a firefighter. Not really.

“Hell, I’m hoping I can do a lot more than that,” he answered.

Scott smiled. “You can just as long as you prove you can.”

His father had always said the same thing to him.

Three hours later, Wyatt was covered in sweat and wishing he’d worn a pair of old jeans, work boots, and something non-flammable.

“Remind me why in the hell I thought you’d take it easier on me than my old man?” he asked Scott.

The man glanced over his shoulder and laughed.

“Seriously?” He groaned and tossed another log on the growing fire.

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted a job,” Scott reminded him. “Today, we practice starting fires and putting them out. Tomorrow, you can cook and do dishes if this work is too tough for you.”

He knew better than to argue or complain any more. When he’d complained as a kid, Scott or one of the many other guys working at the station would have some shit job ready for him to handle.

By the time he climbed back in his truck a few hours later, he was seriously questioning his choices in life. He was just passing the store when he remembered what Hannah had said.

He pulled into the parking lot and went inside to find something Italian to make for dinner and a dessert.

“So, boy, you’ve finally come home, have you?” Patty O’Neil asked him when he stepped into the store.

The woman had owned the local grocery mart since long before he’d been born. In the past ten years she’d gone through a double mastectomy and plenty of chemo treatments. She’d lost a lot of weight and now used an automatic wheelchair full time.

The entire town had come out to support Patty over the past few years and had helped raise money to pay for her medical bills.

Patty was a Pride staple. She kept Pride happy by keeping the little town fed and the gossip flowing freely. Her store was the only one within twenty or so miles of the town.

“I am.” He walked over and hugged her.

When Wyatt was a kid, if he wasn’t working at the firehouse, he’d been stocking shelves or working the cash register or sweeping floors at O’Neil’s.

Patty was basically his second mother. Well, grandmother at any rate.

“How are you?” he asked after she released him.

“Scooting along.” She sighed. “I see you left the viper in the city?” she said, glancing around him. Patty had made her opinion of Lisa very clear from the moment she’d met her. “Did you finally wise up?”

He nodded, surprised there wasn’t a lump in his throat. Somehow, he no longer felt any hurt when he thought about breaking things off with Lisa.

“She had a side guy the entire time she’d been with me,” he admitted.

Patty did that to him. He’d never kept anything from her. And she never gossiped about what he told her. Their relationship was too important for that.

“Oh, my boy.” She held out her arms and he hugged her again.

“It’s okay,” he told her, and he meant it. “I guess since my eyes are opened now, it doesn’t hurt as much.”

“Good.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “So, you’re *back* back?”

He shrugged. “I suppose.”

“You smell as if you’ve gone back to work at the station,” Patty said after a moment.

He shrugged. “It’s a job.”

She tilted her head. “Why not come back here?”

He sighed and looked around. “I’m almost twenty-five. Too old to be a grocery bagger again,” he joked. “I need a job that says I’m an adult.”

Patty frowned for a moment, then slowly smiled. “Okay, that’s doable.”

“What is?” he asked with a frown.

“You. Working here. Taking over for me,” Patty answered.

“Taking...” He shook his head.

“Sure. I’ve only got a few more years left in me. I’ll be damned if I want to spend them hiring and firing a bunch of teenagers who can’t stack cans or count change.” Patty waved her hands. “Idiots. Each and every single one of ’em.”

“Patty?” He shook his head, still not understanding.

“Listen, I never had any kids of my own, so you’ll forgive my silliness. Your dad’s father was one of my beaus. Did you know that?” Patty said, taking his hand.

“Yes, you’ve told me that at least a hundred times.” He smiled and she laughed.

“So, you’re the closest thing I have to family. It’s time I stepped aside and let someone who cares for this place take over.” She motioned to the store. “So, she’s yours. If you think you can handle her.” Patty’s eyebrows wiggled.

He frowned down at the old woman. “Are you okay?” he asked, suddenly concerned for her.

Patty laughed. “Damn it, boy, don’t make me beg.”

“You’re serious?” he asked, and when she nodded, he continued, “You want me to manage O’Neil’s?” She nodded again.

“The apartment won’t be available until after the New Year, but it’s yours then if you need it,” Patty added.

He felt his heart jump in his chest as he looked around the store.

The floors needed work. Some of the aisles needed to be shifted. The shelving repaired. The paint on all the walls was cracked and in desperate need a fresh coat. The cash registers needed to be updated. There were a dozen or more things he thought of in his head that he could easily do for cheap to make the store shine like new.

Then he thought of the past two years working as a glorified accountant. He knew how to budget and balance books for any business.

O’Neil’s was a great opportunity for anyone with a head for business.

He knew that when Patty was younger, the store had flourished. Now that she was unable to keep up, things were falling through the cracks.

Not only was Patty helping him out, but he knew full well that he could return the favor. After all, as she had just pointed out, they were practically family.

Besides, business manager had a nice ring to it. “It’s certainly a grown-up job,” he said, holding out his hand for hers.

Patty laughed and, after shaking his hand, pulled him in for another hug.

“Good, you can start tomorrow.” She slapped his back as she hugged him.

CHAPTER 5



There were days Hannah absolutely loved working at Hidden Cove and selling new homes. Today was not one of them. The snow and foul weather kept new buyers away.

Normally, that wouldn't have been an issue since she could always study for her classes.

Today, however, any time she looked at her screen, her mind returned to Wyatt.

For the first time in years, Avery had let her down getting any information from her brother. Hannah was still in the dark as to why he was home without Lisa.

"You're bored," Rose said.

"No, I'm..." She sighed when Rose gave her a look that said she knew Hannah was about to lie. "I can't stop thinking about why Wyatt is home without Lisa," she admitted.

Rose smiled. "He will tell you what's going on in his own time." She went back to her computer screen.

"You're right." She turned back to her own screen. Five minutes later she was daydreaming again.

Ten minutes later, she gave up.

"I'm going to go make sure the model home is clean and check on lot seventeen," she said with a smile.

Rose looked out the small window. "At least it stopped snowing."

“I’ll be back.” She pulled on her coat and headed outside.

The model home was only two homes away from the trailer where their offices were located. The snow had melted enough that it was sending water rushing down the street, which left everything clean.

The trailer sat at the bottom of the hills at the main entrance to the new construction neighborhood. After hiking up the street to the home, she pulled on the little booties that sat on the front porch before stepping inside.

Currently, there were more than a dozen residents already living in Hidden Cove. The model home was everything Hannah dreamed to have one day soon for herself.

She’d helped Blake Jordan decorate the place a while back and if she could, she would buy everything in it for her new home. She loved to walk through the model home and just dream. Soon.

After almost an hour in the place, which she spent switching out the toilet paper in the customer’s bathroom, straightening the flyers on the countertop, and restocking the snacks in the fridge, she headed further up the street.

Lot seventeen was currently a massive mud pit. The bones of the home sat exposed to the elements. The basement was a dark damp hole of cement that she could only look down into since there weren’t any stairs yet. All she could do was walk around it and dream.

Whenever she visited the lot, she fell more in love with the views from the top of the hill. Lot seventeen was the highest property on Seaside Hill. Once the two-story house—three if you counted the unfinished basement—was finished, it would tower over all the other homes. The views were bound to be spectacular.

Hidden Cove had four streets now—Hidden Cove, Lookout Lane, Secret Street, and Seaside Hill.

Her new home, come spring, was at the very end of Seaside Hill.

She smiled as she stood on the porch or what would soon be her porch.

From there, she could see the new clubhouse area. That building was finished already, but it hadn't opened just yet. Grand opening was set to be the week after the New Year and was going to be marked with a very special grand-opening party.

The building had an open dining area complete with a full kitchen, a small theater for residents to use, a library or reading room, and a full gym. The pool would be complete the following spring and the massive outdoor playground for children was set to go in around then as well.

All in all, Hidden Cove was going to be the perfect place to raise a family in Pride.

And she had no intention of missing out on it. Even if she hadn't gone out on a date in years. She didn't have to rely on anyone to jump-start her life. Besides, she'd gotten a really great deal on the property since she worked for the owners.

Todd and Megan Jordan were as close to royalty as you could get in the small town of Pride.

After purchasing the massive property to save it from a swindler who almost killed a few people in town, including Todd himself, they decided to turn it into what it was today—the best new residential subdivision for almost a hundred miles along the coast of Oregon. The market was booming and they'd had a slew of purchases over the past few months.

At this point, there were fewer than twenty lots left in the first phase of the neighborhood.

Which is why Hannah was studying for her real estate exams. Currently, Rose handled all the official paperwork while Hannah was a glorified salesperson who helped new buyers pick out colors and carpets and showed them around the neighborhood and homes.

Still, the pay was good enough that she'd easily been approved for the home loan. She had enough in savings to put

down on the property and would still be able to afford to purchase some things to go in it after she finally moved in.

Once she obtained her real estate license, she had been promised a huge raise as well since she would be getting more responsibility. Besides, Rose was about to go on maternity leave and soon Hannah would be very busy working by herself.

Feeling guilty for being gone longer than she should have, she headed back down the hillside. Seeing a large black truck in the parking lot outside the office, she sped up.

The sun was out now and since most of the snow had melted, she was excited to get back to work.

For the next hour, she showed an older couple from California around the neighborhood and model home. When they left, they promised to revisit the neighborhood in the future. A short while later, a young couple with three kids stopped by and made an offer on the lot down the street from hers.

God, she loved her job.

By the time Rose and Jacob dropped her off after work, she was pumped and ready to spend a night studying. Until she saw Wyatt's car in the driveway and remembered the awkwardness that she had felt just being around him again.

She should just tell him that she'd never stopped loving him and that she'd never forgiven him for leaving her. Being torn about her feelings for him was so exhausting.

The moment she stepped into the house, she smelled the red sauce and meat cooking.

Feeling her stomach growl, she sat down, removed her boots, tucked them in the closet along with her coat, and headed into the kitchen.

"Evening," she said when Wyatt glanced over his shoulder at her. He was standing at the stove in one of his mother's aprons, stirring red sauce.

“Spaghetti?” she asked, setting her computer bag down on the table where she hoped to study later.

“You know it,” Wyatt answered. “Besides being the best Italian food in the world, it’s the only one I know how to cook,” he said with a smile as his eyes ran over her. “You look happy.”

“We sold lot fourteen.” She walked over to the fridge and pulled out the bottle of wine she’d opened a few nights before. “Which means I get a glass of this.” She wiggled the bottle. “Want?”

He shook his head. “Too sophisticated for me. I’ll take one of my dad’s beers though.”

“Sure,” she said, grabbing a bottle and opening it for him before setting it on the counter next to him. “Can I help?”

“Nope, I’ve got this.” He opened the oven to check on a loaf of garlic bread inside.

“What did you do today?” she asked as she poured her glass of wine.

He glanced at her and his entire demeanor changed.

“I got a job,” he said proudly.

“What?” She practically choked on the sip of wine that she’d just taken. “Here? In Pride?”

He nodded and then slapped her on the back when she continued to choke.

When she was done, he turned back to the stove.

“You are now looking at the new business manager of O’Neil’s Grocery,” he said after a moment of silence.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Patty hired you as manager?”

“Yup.” He grinned. “I start tomorrow.”

She didn’t know what to say. So, instead, she took another sip of the wine. After a moment, she asked, “Does that mean... what happened with Lisa?” She let the question of his fiancée hang in the air.

He stopped stirring for a second. Then he turned off the stove and leaned over to pull the bread from the oven.

“She’s been cheating on me the entire time we were together,” he said softly, so low that she had to almost turn her head to hear him.

“Oh, Wyatt, I’m so sorry.” She reached out and touched his shoulder.

“It’s okay.” He straightened and then started plating the food. “I guess everyone was aware of her ways except me.” He sighed. “At least I hadn’t bought an engagement ring yet.”

“What?” Hannah frowned at him. “You didn’t give her a ring?” she asked, sitting at the table.

He set the plate down in front of her and then went back for his own food.

“No, she wanted to pick out the ring herself.” He set his plate next to hers.

She grabbed a slice of garlic bread for herself. “That’s not how it’s done. Is it?” she asked. “I mean, didn’t you present her with your grandmother’s ring when you asked her?”

He frowned and then shook his head. “No, not...” He stopped. “Besides, I didn’t really ask her. I mean, we discussed it one night and then...” He was quiet for a moment. “The next day, she told everyone we were engaged.”

She watched him as she picked up her wine glass and took a sip. Was he really that clueless?

When he didn’t say anything else, she sighed.

“Wyatt, you fell into the viper’s nest. She laid a trap for you and you willingly went.” She shook her head.

“What?” He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means, my dear ignorant man...” She smiled when she saw his temper flare. No man alive liked to be called ignorant or told what they didn’t know. “You were had. Technically, you were never really engaged to Lisa.”

When those words sank in, his temper receded.

Wyatt was different than other men. When things were laid out clearly for him where he had messed up, he didn't grow angry. Instead, he listened and became thoughtful, as if figuring out how to change the outcome or how not to mess up again in the future.

"It's funny. Since returning home, I realize that I'm not really hurt about Lisa's deception. Sure, I'm pissed. But not hurt. I suppose, in a way, I'm thankful. I hadn't intended to propose to her. Honestly, before that night, I had been thinking of breaking things off with her. She was being clingy and... well, clingy."

Hannah surprised herself and him by laughing.

"What's so funny?" he asked between bites.

"You are. You really did let the viper take what she wanted. You're lucky. She almost sucked you dry." She held up her glass. "To broken engagements."

He held up his beer and tapped her glass with his bottle as he smiled. "To my broken engagement."

CHAPTER 6



The next morning, Wyatt dressed for work. He'd promised Patty that he'd be at the store at eight sharp. He dressed in his second-best pair of pants and a button-up shirt and made himself a cup of coffee and some toast, which he ate as he watched the news with the volume all the way down.

"Why are you banging around in the kitchen this early?" Hannah groaned as she came down to the kitchen.

She ran her eyes over him and for a split second he saw them heat as she looked at him.

"Work," he answered with a smile. "You know, since I'm driving the truck, you can borrow my car if you want instead of having Jacob and Rose always drive you around."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You'd let me drive your new car?"

"Sure." He shrugged.

She smiled. "Deal. You can't take it back." She held out her hands. "Keys?"

"They're in the drawer." He motioned to the place his parents kept all the car keys.

She rushed over and dug through the other keys and other items in the drawer until she found them. She pulled them out and held them to her heart.

"Don't scratch her," He warned.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve only been in one accident in my entire life.”

“Yeah, and that one was just over a week ago,” he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t necessarily all my fault.” She motioned towards him.

He frowned at that. “Are you saying it was partially my fault?”

She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, yes. I suppose it was.”

He took a step towards her. “How?”

She moved towards him. “You and the viper were arguing.”

He frowned. “No, we weren’t.”

She took another step towards him. “Yes, you were. You’d just bumped into me in the store and she had shot daggers into my face as you tried to flirt with me. I bolted after your sister saved me with a text message. Then the viper dragged you out of the store.”

“Wait.” He held up his hands. “I wasn’t flirting with you.”

She laughed. “Yes, you were.”

He took another step towards her.

“So, how are you?” She repeated his words and his tone from that day, letting her eyes lock with his.

“Shit,” Wyatt said after a moment. Then he ran his hands through his hair. “I was just...” He threw up his hands.

“Flirting,” she finished for him. “And Lisa saw right through it all. It’s obvious that she knew about us.”

He was smart enough to remain silent. The trip to Pride before the last one, they’d run into Hannah and, a few nights later, Lisa had asked what was between them.

He’d thought he’d hidden it well enough, but he supposed he hadn’t.

“See.” Hannah motioned towards him, and suddenly he realized just how close they were standing. He could practically feel the heat radiating from her body. She was wearing flannel pajamas that oddly looked sexier than any of the skimpy things Lisa used to wear for him. “You can’t even deny it. You were flirting with me,” she said with a smile.

He didn’t know what happened. One moment he was standing about a foot away from her, and the next his arms were wrapped around her warm body as his mouth covered hers.

Heat. Sex. Desire. Home.

Tasting her brought back so many good memories that he almost melted. Almost.

Then the realization that this was Hannah, the woman he’d left behind, surfaced. He owed her more than fumbling and stealing a kiss when she hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

Besides, didn’t he have to go to work?

“Shit,” he sighed as he leaned away and dropped his arms to his side.

What he wanted to do was hold onto her for the rest of the day. Kiss her until he was out of breath. Make love to her again.

Instead, without a word, he grabbed his cell phone and coffee mug, turned, and left the house.

The entire five-minute drive into Pride, he mentally kicked himself.

“Smooth move, Wyatt,” he said as he parked in the small parking lot at the store.

He knew he could be smoother than just grabbing Hannah and kissing her out of the blue. Had she been right? Had he been flirting with her in front of Lisa?

All he could remember of that day was the fear of seeing Hannah hurt. Whatever they’d gone through over their lifetime, one thing was as certain as the rising sun. She was his

and he belonged to her. Through all things, that fact had never wavered.

Even after they'd stopped being "them," they had remained close. Did he still love her? Hell, yes, he did. He'd always loved her.

He hadn't picked up and left Pride because he didn't have feelings for her. He'd picked up and left because he'd been too young to know what those feelings were. He'd been afraid of them.

Well, he wasn't afraid now.

Walking into the store, holding his head up high, he figured the first step of fixing his past mistakes was showing everyone in town, including Hannah, just what he could do. What he could be.

Within the first three hours, he realized just how big of a job that was going to be.

Patty's office was littered with receipts and stacks of unpaid invoices. So much so that he figured it would take him days to just get through them all.

"My suppliers know I'm good for it," she'd told him before leaving for the day. Earlier, she'd handed him the keys to the place and informed the dozen employees currently working for her that he was now in charge.

"You are coming back?" he had asked her.

She'd just laughed and waved as she'd rolled out of the store.

After confirming to the employees that they should go about their day until he'd had time to assess everything, he'd locked himself in her office for the first hour.

Figuring out that he'd have to organize the paperwork later, he stuffed most of it in a briefcase he'd found in a drawer in the office to take back home with him and work on later that night.

Once the desk was clear of clutter, he knew just where he wanted to start. The first phone call he made was to Josh

Williams.

The man owned Internal Security, one of the largest internet and computer security systems in the state. The company's offices were based in Pride. Josh had been born and raised in Pride, and he'd married Carrie Brogan. Her father, Robert Brogan, had been the police chief in Pride until recently, when Aiden Brogan, his son, had taken over.

Wyatt knew Josh would be the best man to update, secure, or fix anything having to do with computers.

"Hey, Josh, it's Wyatt," he said when the guy answered the phone on the third ring.

"Wyatt, I'd heard you were back in town," Josh answered a little breathless.

"I'm back and taking over Patty's place," he answered with a chuckle. "Which is why I'm calling you. Her system is in serious need of an overhaul. Do you think you can manage to swing by the store sometime this week and take a look at it? Maybe do some upgrades to the point of sale system?"

"Sure thing. I've got time today after lunch to take a quick look," Josh answered. "I've been trying to convince Patty for a few years now to upgrade. Did she really put you in charge?"

"Sure thing. I guess she decided she'd had enough of this place. Either that or she's gone insane leaving me in charge," he joked.

Josh was quiet. "We'd heard the cancer was back."

"What?" Wyatt frowned. "Shit, why didn't she tell me that?" He glanced towards the office door.

"I guess she only likes spreading gossip about others. Not herself. I'll see you after lunch," Josh said and then hung up.

With that news fresh in his mind, he figured he had to get up and move.

He rolled up his sleeves and headed out front.

For the next couple hours, he and three of the high school kids that were currently employed as stockers or cashiers

restocked the shelves and reorganized what they could without bothering the customers too much.

The store normally closed at eleven each night and opened again at six in the morning. There were a handful of employees that Patty had kept on staff for the past two decades or so. Good employees. Three of them opened or closed the store on a regular basis.

Then there were the new ones that he understood weren't really committed to their jobs.

He immediately shifted their schedules or responsibilities around to get them more motivated.

One was now cleaning the store instead of working behind the deli counter. Another was stocking instead of working at the cash register.

Rumors were running through the employees and town that the woman had been pocketing extra change each night, a rumor that he was going to look into as soon as he could. For now, getting her away from handling money was the best that he could do.

Lunch came and went. He grabbed a sandwich from the deli and was happily surprised that Kenny, a kid who used to work stocking, was an artist with the simple meal.

“Hey, when you're as skinny as me, you learn to appreciate a good hoagie,” the kid had joked.

Too bad he only worked four days a week. Still, it was lucky that his hours worked for both the lunch and dinner rush hours.

Josh showed up shortly after he'd grabbed the sandwich, and from there on he was busy helping the guy update all the computers and cash registers to the latest and greatest POS and security system.

By the end of his first day, Wyatt was pretty sure he'd just gotten the best job in the world. Loaded down with a briefcase of receipts and invoices, he sat at the kitchen table punching away at the laptop, entering everything into the online software Patty used as an accounting system.

He planned to persuade her to change to the one his old work used, but for now, the simple system was doing the trick.

“Well?” Hannah asked when she walked in almost three hours later. “How’d it go, today?”

He shut the laptop down and smiled when he noticed she had a bag of takeout from the Golden Oar. “If there’s something in there for me, I’ll tell you all about it.”

She set the bag down on the table and smiled. “There might be a cup of soup or a single bread stick in here that I can part with.”

He groaned.

Then he smiled when she pulled out two large containers and flipped the lid to expose massive burgers and fries.

“You’re a goddess,” he said, taking the one she offered.

“Heavy on the mayo, no onions,” she said as she handed it over. “No mayo and extra cheese,” she added as she sat down across from him with her own meal. “So?” she said after they’d taken bites of their food.

While he filled her in on his day, he thought about all the changes that he still wanted to make in the store. He’d written several lists and while he went over each item with her, she added a few of her own.

“The women’s restroom is always a disaster. I’m sure the men’s is as well,” Hannah said when they were huddled around his computer after dinner.

He added the items to the list.

“The parking lot,” she said next. “I’m sure at one point there were parking blocks and painted lines, but I don’t remember them ever being there.”

He added it to the list.

“Gosh, this is so nice. It’s like making a wish list,” she joked.

“I feel the same way. How many times would you say you’ve gone into O’Neil’s? Thousands?” he asked.

“Hundreds of thousands.”

“How about a delivery service? When I lived in Portland, I paid a small monthly fee and a tip to have my groceries delivered. I had an app.” He pulled out his phone and showed it to her.

“No way.” She took his phone and looked through the app. “Can you imagine having a grocery delivery service in Pride?”

“I can. It might take a lot of work, but I think it would be worth it. Especially for customers that are older or during bad weather.” He added it to his list.

By the time he climbed the stairs, showered, and crawled into bed, he’d thought of a half dozen more items to add to the list.

The following day, he made it through almost a dozen items from the list and added two dozen more.

Since the weather was too bad for much work outside the building, he figured he’d conquer the inside first. Shortly before lunch, the slight rain that had started just after sunrise turned into snow, which turned into a blizzard right before he left work.

Since it was the day before Thanksgiving, the store closed shortly after dinner.

The drive home was a breeze in the truck. It wasn’t until he was up his parents’ driveway that he remembered Hannah had driven his Mustang. He doubted it would make it up the slight hill. There was already a foot of snow on the ground and even though it was a powerful car, the snow was too deep and heavy at this point for it to plow through an unpaved roadway.

Turning around, he headed back through town towards Hidden Cove.

Seeing his new car parked at the base of the hill next to the work trailer, he parked and headed inside.

Rose sat at a desk in a small room to the left.

“Hey,” Rose said when he stepped in. Rose Jordan had grown up in Portland but had spent most of her summers in

Pride each year with her parents. She'd married Jacob a while back and, by the looks of her, was due to give birth any minute. She stood up to greet him.

"Hey," he smiled. He rushed towards her and helped her stand. "I'm just here to offer Hannah a ride home since it's coming down pretty bad out there and I know the limits of my Mustang." He motioned towards his car out front.

"She's locking up the model home. It's the third one on the right," Rose said.

Just then Jacob walked in behind him.

"We're heading out now ourselves. Closing up early since tomorrow is Thanksgiving. We were going to offer Hannah a ride home just to be safe," Jacob said, walking over and helping Rose on with her jacket.

"I'll get her home instead." He turned to go. "When's that baby due?"

"Any day now," they both said at the same time while Rose rubbed her hands over her belly. "Night, drive safe. Happy Thanksgiving," Rose added as they locked up the trailer.

"Happy Thanksgiving," he called over his shoulder as he headed up the hillside towards the model home.

When he got to the top of the slippery slope, he realized the model home's lights were all off.

"Hannah?" he called out. He looked down and saw a set of footprints in the snow heading further up the hill, so he followed them.

He was surprised when he came to the top of the hill and saw Hannah standing on what would eventually be the front porch of a two-story home at the top.

"Hey," he called out to her, making her jump slightly. She'd been looking across at the rolling hills beyond the neighborhood.

"Hi," she said, as he stepped onto the cement porch.

“Enjoying the snow?”

She chuckled. “It’s really coming down now, isn’t it?”

“I thought you’d need a ride home since it’s too slick out for the Mustang.” He leaned on the porch post and enjoyed the view of the snow falling. From up there, he could make out the lights from town, even in the nearly white-out conditions. With a turn of his head, he enjoyed the view of the ocean far below them. “Wow,” he said softly.

“I know, right?” Hannah smiled. “You should see the view on a clear day.”

“Whoever gets this place is lucky,” he said, turning to look at her. She had snowflakes melting on her face, and her hair was damp, as if she’d walked up there without her hat on.

“I sure am.” She smiled and then laughed. “I move in sometime in January. Hopefully.”

“You... bought this place?” He turned towards the building now. It was nothing more than a jumbled mess of wood and cement, but he knew the process of building wasn’t necessarily a clean one.

“Yup,” she answered proudly.

“How?” he asked, then instantly regretted the tone of his voice.

Hannah’s eyebrows arched. “I take it you think I can’t afford a place like this?”

“Not what—” he started, but she held up her hand to stop him.

“For your information, I’ve worked part-time jobs since I was sixteen. After graduation, I started full time, saving every penny that I earned as I went, hoping someday to have something wonderful to spend it on.” She lifted her chin slightly. “My goals may have changed over the years, but one thing remained the same. I can take care of myself. I don’t need to wait for anyone else to be happy.” She started to walk past him, but he grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“I didn’t mean to imply that you couldn’t afford it,” he blurted out. “I’m just impressed.”

Her chin dipped slightly as he pulled her close to his chest.

“Honest.”

CHAPTER 7



She didn't know how Wyatt did it. How he could get her to go from boiling mad one second to simmering with heat and want for him in the next second.

"Why is it you still have the ability to piss me off?" she asked under her breath.

She felt his chuckle rumble in his chest as he held onto her.

"Because we've known each other too well for too long," he answered as she sank further into his warmth.

She'd walked up here in the snow, needing to see what it would be like during a storm. The view. The home. Everything.

The huge fat snowflakes had slowly fallen everywhere, covering the land with a thick white blanket that made it all appear dreamlike. Even the normally muddy roads of the construction site disappeared under a layer of crisp white snow.

Everything was beyond beautiful.

Then Wyatt showed up and upset her. She didn't need him. Hadn't she spent the last several years trying to convince herself of that fact?

She had a steady job. A clear career plan set in stone. And soon a home of her own.

Initially, every penny that she'd saved up had been earmarked for her dream wedding. Now, at her age, she realized that was a foolish goal.

Weddings lasted just one day. Homes were for a lifetime.

“To be honest, I’m a little jealous,” Wyatt said as they started back down the hill.

He surprised her by reaching over and taking her hand after she slipped a little on the snow.

“You are?” she asked when she was a little steadier on her feet.

“Sure. I mean, that view.” He shook his head and then smiled as he asked, “How did you luck out snagging that lot?”

She chuckled. “Seriously? Well, I happen to know someone who works here.” She nudged him.

When they reached the parking area, the Mustang was completely covered in snow.

“Need anything inside?” he asked, motioning towards the trailer that she worked in.

“Nope, I’m good,” she answered as he opened the truck door. “Will your car be okay here overnight?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not. You guys still have security up here, right?” he asked after he climbed in behind the wheel.

“Yes, ever since the whole Carl Thomas Carson debacle, Todd Jordan isn’t taking any chances.”

For the next few minutes, they remained silent while he maneuvered the truck out of the neighborhood and onto the snow-covered roads.

Already, there was more than a foot of snow on the ground and, according to the reports, it wasn’t going to let up anytime soon.

“The whole town might shut down,” he said as they drove slowly through Pride.

“I hope not. We have the Christmas tree lighting in the center this weekend.”

“Right,” he said just as the truck started sliding sideways. “Easy,” Wyatt said with a groan.

She held on while Wyatt corrected the slide.

For the next half hour, he drove five miles an hour while neither of them said a word.

When he finally parked at the base of his parents' driveway, they were both relieved.

"I'm not going to chance that," he admitted, shutting off the truck. "We can hike the rest of the way." He gathered his things.

She took her bag and followed him outside.

"I guess I hadn't heard that it was going to get this bad today." She pulled her hood up over her hair. It was too late; she was already soaked from the walk down the hill before. But it did help keep the cold wind from freezing her during the short walk up his parents' drive.

"Yeah, me either. I don't think they knew it would be this bad," he said, helping her again.

When they reached the porch, he stomped the snow off his boots and looked around. "We might be snowed in for a few days. It's a good thing my parents always have a stocked freezer."

She unlocked the door, cleared her boots of snow, and stepped inside. She immediately shivered at the cold house.

"I'll get a fire going," he said as he removed his boots and coat.

She did the same, taking the time to hang everything up where it would dry. Then she headed upstairs to get out of her wet clothes before making dinner.

The second she peeled off her wet clothes, she knew she needed a hot shower to warm up.

Stepping under the hot spray, she groaned with delight. Her skin tingled as it heated until she finally felt warm again.

"You okay in there?" Wyatt asked when she turned off the water.

"Yes, just defrosting."

“The fire is going. I found one of my mother’s pre-made meals that she cooks in a cast iron pan in the freezer. I thought we could cook that over the fire,” he said as she wrapped her thick robe around her and tied her hair up in a dry towel.

She opened the door to answer him.

“Sounds great,” she said with a smile.

Wyatt’s eyes ran over her and he smiled. “You look nice and warm.” He pulled her into his arms. “Mmm, you smell good too.”

“Wyatt,” she said, feeling her body heat even further. “I...” She didn’t trust herself. Didn’t trust that she could bounce back this time if he walked away again.

He hadn’t made any commitments to her or even about staying in Pride.

Sure, she could take this moment with him. Take what pleasures she could. Enjoy sex like she always had with him. But she knew that if she did, that last little strength she held deep inside would be taken away if he left again.

She pushed away and walked into her room, shutting the door behind her without a word. She leaned her head against the closed door, took a deep breath in, and closed her eyes.

She had to remain strong. For her future. For her sanity. For her heart.

After dressing in a pair of Christmas sweats and fuzzy holiday socks and braiding her hair, she went downstairs.

Wyatt sat by the fire on the floor. There was a huge cast iron pan sitting on a grate over the flames. The scents of meat, potatoes, and gravy filled the house.

She stood next to the fire and enjoyed the warmth for a moment. The sound of the wood crackling while the silent snow continued to fall outside was so soothing.

So many memories of childhood nights spent just like this, by a fire during a snowstorm, played in her head.

“I’m sorry,” Wyatt said, breaking the silence.

“For?” she asked, turning to sit next to him.

“For breaking your heart.” He took her hand in his. “For leaving you. For running away.”

She remained silent. What could she say to that? I forgive you?

The truth was, she’d forgiven him long ago.

It had been the right thing for him to do at the time.

It had been far better for him to bail before he had asked her to marry him than after they’d married. Oh, she knew why he’d bolted. At least now she did.

Feeling pressured to marry someone, even if you did love them, must have been scary at such a young age.

She’d never felt that pressure. Then again, she’d dreamed of the day she would become Mrs. Wyatt Auston for her entire life.

There was no doubt that he’d loved her back then, or even now for that matter. Their friendship love went far beyond any romantic love they felt for one another. That much was obvious.

“I wish I could go back in time. Tell myself not to be a fool.” He leaned back against the coffee table and rested his elbow on his knee.

She leaned back as well, still holding onto his hand.

“We all make mistakes,” she pointed out. “But you leaving town wasn’t one of them. We wouldn’t be who we are now if you had stayed.”

He glanced at her. “No, I suppose not.” He lifted his hand and hers to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. “But at least you wouldn’t hate me so much.”

She chuckled. “I don’t hate you.”

His dark eyebrows rose. “You don’t?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Loathe, maybe, but hate?” She shook her head and nudged his knees with her own and

enjoyed his smile.

She reached over and ran her hand over his thick beard. “I like this. It makes you look like a mountain man.”

He laughed and reached up to touch his face. “It’s no-shave November.”

She frowned. “What?”

“No-shave November. In support of Patty’s cancer diagnosis. Me and the guys at the station started doing it a few years back, and every November, we still do.” He smiled at her. “Besides, Scott thinks he can outgrow my beard and, well, we kind of have a wager going each year.”

She laughed. “Why is it that men can turn anything into a gambling game?”

“The proceeds will go to Patty’s cancer bills,” he replied with a grin.

“You’ve changed a few things yourself.” He touched her braid. “Highlights?”

She rolled her eyes. “Riley convinced me to try a few streaks.”

“I like it.” His eyes met hers. “I’ve missed you.”

“I don’t think my heart can take another round, Wyatt,” she warned.

He was silent for a while. “I understand.” He stood up. “I’ll grab us some plates. Dinner’s almost ready.”

She watched the logs burning and enjoyed the warmth for a moment. She probably should have gotten up and helped him get things ready for their meal, but she was oddly drained from the day.

Wyatt returned with two plates and glasses along with a bottle of wine.

While he poured them wine, he chatted about his workday. She figured he was trying to lighten the mood and went along with it. Besides, she really did want to know how things were going at the store.

When the meal was finished cooking, he scooped some of the meat pie onto a plate and handed it to her. They sat on the floor, in front of the fire, enjoying the meal and conversation.

When they moved up to the sofa, she covered herself with one of the throw blankets while he piled a few more logs on the fire.

“So, I have my exam on Saturday,” she finished telling him, holding in a yawn. “Then Sunday is Pride’s annual holiday event, followed by the lighting of the tree. I just know if I don’t pass the exam, I’m going to be bummed during the entire event.”

“You’ll pass,” he said smoothly. “You were always a straight-A student. I remember cheating off you a few times,” he joked.

She smiled. “I was a straight-A student because I studied while you kept trying to get in my pants.”

He laughed. “Hey, I didn’t hear any complaints when I finally did.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her and had her laughing.

They talked through the night as the snow continued to fall at a steady rate until they both fell asleep on the sofa.

She woke slowly in his arms and for a moment, the past few years were forgotten. Fantasies and desires of hot fast sex mixed with memories of being in love with Wyatt. Her hands slowly moved over him, enjoying and exploring while she heated, mind and body.

“Hannah,” Wyatt groaned next to her ear. The sound of his deep voice rocked her, shaking her slightly out of the daze she’d been in.

Her hands stilled as her breath hitched while the hurt flooded her mind. She couldn’t help the tears. Didn’t want them to stop. Not when her heart was breaking all over again.

Without a word, she rolled from the sofa and rushed from the room while Wyatt called her name.

She locked herself in her room. She didn't notice the chill until the tears finally stopped.

"I'm sorry," she heard Wyatt say from the other side of the door.

"Go away." She closed her eyes, wishing he hadn't come back. He should have stayed in the city and found someone else's heart to toy with.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" he asked, and she suddenly realized she'd said that last bit out loud. "Toying with your heart?" he asked softly from outside the door.

She swallowed the hurt, wanting to be anywhere but there, trapped with him just outside her door.

"Go away," she said again after a long moment of silence.

A couple of minutes later, she heard him leave. Only when his bedroom door shut did she finally relax.

She was such a fool. She'd let her guard down around him, and her stupid heart had started to fall for him once more.

Why couldn't she forget him? Why couldn't she move on or find someone else who wouldn't up and leave at the hint of a lifetime commitment with her?

She was a fool.

Well, at least she had been once. She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. That Hannah was gone. She was the new independent Hannah. The woman buying her own home. Setting her own career goals and pathways. She didn't need Wyatt or any other man. Her heart was just fine belonging to her and only her.

She took a deep breath and wiped the last of her tears away, then headed in to take a shower, dress, and prove to him that she was stronger than she'd just shown him.

CHAPTER 8



Whatever he did now, going forward, he swore as he quickly dressed that he would never hurt Hannah again. Hannah deserved more than he could offer her. Especially considering his track record.

He pulled on his coat, boots, hat, and gloves and headed outside to shovel the driveway.

He hadn't expected to see roughly two feet of snow in the low areas. The snow drifts were almost five feet deep in some places.

Still, it was the only way he could work off his anger, which was aimed directly at himself.

As he worked, more snow fell. Finally, he'd made a narrow pathway all the way down to his truck, which is where Hannah found him.

"You're fighting a losing battle." She handed him a mug. "Hot coffee."

"Thanks," he said, removing the lid and taking a sip.

While he worked, he'd grown hot and sweaty under his layers of clothes.

Still, the hot liquid felt wonderful on his empty stomach.

"You didn't have any breakfast," she pointed out. He shrugged. "You've been out here for hours. It's almost noon."

He frowned and looked at his phone. "I guess I was determined to get the pathway cleared."

“There’s no reason. I don’t have to go to work. It’s Thanksgiving Day, remember? The store won’t be open either. Actually, all of Pride is probably shut down.” She smiled as she looked around. “It’s so magical. I love snow days. Remember that one year when the entire town had a huge snowball fight?” She laughed.

“How could I forget. Everyone ganged up on the mayor.” He laughed and then took another sip of his coffee.

“I’m pretty sure Lacey Stevens orchestrated the entire thing,” Hannah said with a smile. “Nothing slips past her.”

“Right,” he said, and then his stomach let out a loud growl.

“Let’s head back into the house. I’ll make you some soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. The perfect snowed-in meal.” She turned to head back up the drive.

“Don’t you have your family’s Thanksgiving meal to go to today?”

She shook her head. “It’s called off because of the storm. My folks don’t want me trying to get to their place. Besides, we’ll make up for it at Christmas.” She smiled and started up the hill.

He followed her and by the time they reached the top, what he’d cleared earlier was already covered in a fresh layer of snow.

“When is this supposed to end?” He set down the shovel, then stomped the snow from his boots.

“Later tonight. They say this will stick around for another few days before melting off. I hope it doesn’t melt too fast. It would be nice to have a white layer on the ground for the lighting of the trees.”

“Right,” he said, sitting down and removing his boots as she removed hers.

They continued to talk about the weather as she made him soup and grilled cheese. He hadn’t remembered just how exhausting shoveling snow was. Thankfully, she’d started a fire and the house was nice and warm.

When they sat at the table, she said, “You have a job here. Does that mean you’re really going to stick around this time?”

Was he? His first inclination was to answer with a simple, “For now.” Giving her a shrug, he took a bite of his sandwich. A wave of nostalgia washed over him.

“How is it that you can still make the best grilled cheese sandwiches?” he asked, taking another bite.

“It’s the extra butter and two kinds of cheeses. Something you always forget.”

“Right,” he said, taking another bite.

It really did remind him of home. Of her. “We had some good times,” he said, thinking about all the times that she’d cooked for him.

“We did.”

He remembered her tears. Her urgent need to escape him earlier had stung. She’d never run from him before. Then again, he’d never made her cry before. Even when he’d told her that he was leaving Pride, she hadn’t shed a tear. Instead, she’d quietly told him that if it was what he wanted to do, then she understood and supported his decision.

Actually, besides her crying during a few sappy movies they’d watched in their youth, this was the only time he’d seen her cry.

Lisa had used her tears as a weapon. When they fought, she’d yell at him and if that didn’t get a rise from him, she’d start the tears and blame him for causing her to cry.

Being the cause of Hannah’s tears, however, had eaten at him and caused him to overwork himself outside.

He’d been such a fool for leaving her. Such a fool for falling for Lisa’s games. A fool for not returning home sooner. And most of all, a fool for not conveying his true feelings for Hannah long ago.

Sure, when they were together all those years ago, he’d told her that he loved her plenty of times. Actually, the words had sort of become rote, like how you greet strangers. “Hello,

how are you? Fine, how about you?" Before he'd even realized it, he was saying it all the time.

Love you he'd tell her when he saw her or when they were saying goodbye.

He'd almost become numb to the meaning behind the words.

He'd never said those words to Lisa. Maybe deep down he'd known that he'd never really loved Lisa.

Either way, the more he thought about it, the more he was positive that Hannah was the only woman that he'd ever really been in love with. He'd wasted his time with her.

He should have made each *I love you* count.

After their meal, he realized his battle with clearing the driveway was a lost cause and decided instead to pull out some of his parents' Christmas decorations and spruce up the house. If he was going to stay there with Hannah through the season, he might as well make the place look festive.

Besides, it was a family tradition to decorate for Christmas after a large Thanksgiving meal.

While Hannah studied on her laptop by the fire, he pulled the boxes of decorations out from the garage. When he realized his parents had tossed their fake Christmas tree out a few years back, he started to pull on his boots and coat.

"You aren't going back out there to shovel, are you?" Hannah asked.

"No, I was just going to go find a Christmas tree." He focused on tying the laces on his boots.

"You're going to chop down a tree?" Hannah asked, sounding a little excited.

"Sure." He glanced up as she jumped up from the sofa.

"I'm coming with you." She set her laptop down and rushed over to put on her own boots.

When they were dressed in boots, hats, gloves, and scarves, he grabbed his father's axe and headed towards the

back of his parents' property, where he knew there were several fir trees that would fit in his parents' living room.

They hiked across the snowy field and through firs and pine trees that were far too tall to chop down until they reached the small grove of perfect-sized Christmas trees.

"Wow, it's like our own private Christmas tree farm," Hannah said, a little breathless from the hike.

"My parents planted these when we were kids. This marks the end of their property. We've used a few of these for Christmas trees over the years. They're almost too tall now," he said, trying to spot one that was just right.

"How about this one?" she asked, motioning towards the largest tree.

He chuckled. "I'm hoping for something a little smaller." He motioned to the smallest tree, and Hannah frowned.

"What about..." She walked over and stood next to a medium-sized tree.

He took his time walking around it before finally nodding. "It's perfect." He smiled.

"What next?" she asked.

He held up the axe. "Now, we chop. Step back." He dug in the snow to expose the trunk of the tree and then started chopping.

It took him longer than he'd expected, since he had to keep digging the snow out around where he was chopping at the trunk.

When the tree finally landed softly in the thick snow, Hannah cheered.

He was thankful he'd grabbed a piece of rope and, after tying it to the trunk and around a few branches, they started heading back towards the house.

"I've never chopped a Christmas tree down before," Hannah said as they walked.

“Technically, you still haven’t. I was the one doing all the chopping,” he teased.

“Well, I’ll for sure help decorate it. We’ll put on some Christmas music while we make some chili then decorate the entire house,” she said, sounding a little wistful.

“Sounds great.” He couldn’t think of a better way to spend a snowed-in Thanksgiving Day. Or for that matter, a better person to spend it with.

It took some doing to clean the snow from the tree and get it in the back door. By the time it stood upright in the living room on the tree stand, they had both worked up a sweat and removed their jackets and boots.

The floor was littered with fresh fir needles. Hannah grabbed the broom. “I’ll sweep up.”

“I’ll start the chili,” he suggested.

“How many ribbons have you won for your chili?” Hannah asked as she swept.

“Last count, six,” he answered after thinking about it. “The last one was the county fair my senior year. I haven’t really made chili recently.”

“Why not?” she asked as he grabbed his mother’s large pot and started gathering the ingredients that he’d need.

“Lisa didn’t like chili,” he answered, remembering the first time he’d suggested he make his ex-fiancée his favorite meal.

“What?” Hannah stopped sweeping and looked at him. “Who doesn’t like chili?”

“Exactly. That should have been the first red flag.”

“How many red flags did she have?” Hannah asked while he turned on the burner and got to work.

He thought about it and shrugged. “Too many,” he answered under his breath.

“Are you heartbroken or just pissed that you didn’t see the signs?” she asked, suddenly by his side.

He glanced at her and shook his head. “To be honest, I’m relieved.” He smiled at her. “I’m thankful I know what to look out for next time.”

He saw her frown slightly, watched the little crease between her eyebrows form.

“What about you?” he asked, trying to turn the tables while he dumped the ingredients into the pan. “I’m sure there have been a few guys since me who have broken your heart.”

She walked to the fridge and pulled out two beers. She opened them and handed him one. He took a sip and then went back to stirring the meat while the beans and tomatoes simmered in the bigger pot.

“I haven’t dated anyone,” she admitted as she leaned against the counter and watched him.

He stopped stirring and turned fully to her. “You... anyone?” he asked, totally shocked. When she shook her head slightly, he added, “At all?” She shook her head again and he felt his heart sink.

What in the hell was he supposed to do with that news? Since he had no clue what he could possibly say, he turned back to the stove and focused on making his chili.

“That surprises you?” she asked after a moment.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“Why?” She crossed her arms over her chest and studied him.

“Because...” He shook his head, trying to not let the flood of questions he had fall out of his mouth.

Why not? What was wrong? Had he really broken her heart that badly? What in the hell was wrong with the guys in Pride? There must have been a ton of men waiting to ask her out the moment he left. Had she turned them all down?

“Why not? Why haven’t you dated?” he finished, stumbling over his words.

“Because no one would have compared.” She tilted her head. “Because I was broken. Hurt. Determined to not let anyone hurt me again in the same way.”

He turned down both burners, took her beer from her hand, and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly into her hair. “I know nothing I say or do can ever make up for leaving you.” He sighed and closed his eyes. God, it felt so good to just hold her again. This, this was as much as home as the smell of pine needles, a fire burning, and chili cooking.

“We aren’t the same people as we were,” she said against his chest.

“No,” he agreed.

As much as he knew that he’d handled his leaving badly, he also knew that if he hadn’t left, he wouldn’t be the man he was today. He would always have had a drive to go out into the world and at least try to make somewhere else home.

Fake it until you make it. He’d believed that living in the city would eventually feel as good as living in Pride. He’d been a fool.

He pulled back slightly and waited until their eyes locked before leaning down and brushing his lips across hers.

He hadn’t anticipated Hannah’s passionate response. It was as if the moment their lips touched, she came alive. Her response caused his body to do some responding of its own.

“Hannah,” he warned when she started tugging at the buttons of his flannel shirt.

“No, don’t stop now.” She reached up and bit his earlobe. “For now, let everything just be... magical.” Her mouth traced his neckline to the top of his shirt. She’d managed to unbutton his flannel shirt and pull it off his shoulders. Now, she was tugging at the white T-shirt underneath.

He took her hands and then, after making sure both burners were off, he walked her backwards towards the sofa. “Let’s take our time.” He kissed her again.

She tugged at his shirt until he finally relented and pulled it over his head.

“You have a few new muscles,” she said as she ran her fingertips over his skin.

He reached for her own shirt and smiled when he removed it to expose her bright green bra. His eyes ran over her perfect skin. “You’re just as beautiful as I remember.” He cupped her breasts as he bent down to kiss her.

“Wyatt, I don’t want to go slow,” she purred against his lips.

“No,” he said, feeling his desire for her boiling. “No,” he said, hoisting her up in his arms and walking the last few steps to the sofa, where he laid her down.

Her legs wrapped around him, holding him to her while the kiss grew hotter and they both grew more desperate.

Clothes were removed as memories of how things had been in the past mixed with small differences. One thing was certain—he’d always felt the drive to be with her. Even when he was trying to deny it when he was with someone else.

Hannah was right, no one had compared to her. They’d all fallen short of this. The moment he slid into her again was the best feeling in the world. Nothing he could have ever imagined equaled the feeling of Hannah wrapped around him again. Nothing in life would ever come close to it.

CHAPTER 9



“We aren’t going to regret this,” Hannah said when their breathing slowed and their heated bodies cooled. Wyatt was still pinning her down to the sofa and wonderfully still inside her.

“No,” he agreed without moving.

She nudged his sides. “Get off. You’re crushing me,” she added with a chuckle.

He lifted his weight off her and ran his eyes over her face.

“Was that really the first time you’ve done that since the last time we...” He dropped off.

“Don’t let it go to your head.” She nudged his shoulder. “I do have a vibrator.” She pulled her jeans back when he moved aside.

“You do?” he asked, his voice cracking slightly. “I mean, of course.” He cleared his throat.

She laughed. “Most women do.”

“You mean single women?” he asked, pulling on his own jeans.

She stopped pulling on her shirt to laugh at him. “Sure,” she added dryly with a roll of her eyes.

Wyatt frowned at her answer but instead of asking more questions, he moved back into the kitchen and returned to cooking.

Hannah walked into the kitchen once her clothes were back in place and picked up her beer. Even though it was now warm, she downed the rest of it in one gulp.

“Why are most men uncomfortable talking about a woman’s vibrator?” She saw his face flush slightly. “Is it the thought of a woman pleasing herself that embarrasses you or the word vibrator?” She chuckled when his face turned redder at the word.

“I guess I’m just not used to talking about... things.” He shrugged slightly.

“You can’t even say the word vibrator?” she joked, and he rolled his eyes. “You’ve been with others. Besides me and...”—she couldn’t say the woman’s name—“the viper.”

“You can’t even say her name?” he countered, and she stuck her tongue out at him. He chuckled and then nodded as he answered. “A few.”

“And not once did you talk about... things?” she asked as she wiggled her eyebrows.

He glanced at her and shook his head. “It never came up.”

“Well, it’s coming up now.” She smiled at his discomfort.

When he set the spoon down and walked over to circle her waist with his hands, she knew she was playing a deadly game.

“While I’m standing in my mother’s kitchen, maybe we can limit the sex talk,” he suggested.

She laughed. “After we just did that”—she motioned to the sofa—“on your father’s sofa?”

He groaned. “How many times in the past did we do that there?”

She grinned. “A lot.”

He nodded. “I don’t remember you being so... vocal.” He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers.

“I’ve had years to think about what it would be like again. I’m not going to waste time and effort. Nor am I as shy as I

used to be.” She shifted slightly as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You aren’t the only one who has changed.”

He was silent for a moment before nodding his head. “True.” He ran his eyes over her face. “I like the changes you’ve made.”

She smiled. “Good answer.” She nudged his chest. “You’re burning the chili.”

He dropped his hold on her to tend to the food.

When the chili was done, they took their bowls into the living room and ate while they unboxed the Christmas decorations. *Elf* played on the television on mute and Christmas music filled the house. The snow continued to fall outside and so they kept feeding logs to the fire while they worked to decorate the tree and the house with every last decoration they’d found.

Hannah knew that when they were younger, they had never been as open about their desires with one another. This was one of many things she was determined to correct this time around.

And she wasn’t going to let him walk away so easily this time. Whatever happened between them now, she was not going to be left hurting.

After the entire home looked like a bunch of elves had turned it into Santa’s workshop, they sat around talking in front of the fire until they grew tired.

She knew Wyatt would want to join her in her bed for the night, but in truth, she needed some time to herself.

“I think I’m going to take a hot bath,” she told him as they stood in the hallway outside their rooms. His eyebrows shot up, and he started moving towards her. She held up her hand and pushed lightly against his chest. “Alone,” she added.

He sighed and nodded. “Gotcha.” Then he leaned down and brushed his lips across hers softly. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” She waited until he disappeared into his room before closing herself in hers.

While she enjoyed the bubble bath, her mind whirled, replaying the entire day. Hell, she even thought back as far as the last time she and Wyatt had enjoyed sex together.

Then she thought of her future. Here, she hit a brick wall.

By the time she finally crawled into bed, she was pretty sure that she’d made a huge mistake earlier. Letting her guard down around Wyatt was not an option.

When she woke, the snow had stopped falling and the sun was already out. She sent a text to Rose and was surprised when her phone rang.

“Morning, Rose,” she answered cheerfully.

“Hey, it’s Jacob. I was going to call you yesterday but things got—” A loud cry broke through.

“Is that...” She gasped. “Did you have a baby?”

Jacob laughed. “Yes. Born on Thanksgiving. My uncle is here now checking up on Rose and Grace Nadine. Both seem to be doing rather well for the midnight fun we had.”

Hannah let out a little squeal of delight and started jumping up and down on her bed.

Suddenly, her bedroom door flew open, and a half-dressed Wyatt stood staring at her with a worried look.

“Rose and Jacob had baby Grace last night,” she blurted out. “You said last night, right?”

“Eleven fifty-eight. We couldn’t even get out of bed in time,” he answered with a chuckle. “My uncle tried to rush over here last night, but the roads were closed due to the storm. He says we shouldn’t even have to make the trip to the hospital,” Jacob added.

“Oh, send me pictures...” Before she could finish the request, her phone chimed.

“Already done.” Jacob chuckled. “Sorry, I sent a huge group text and now my phone’s ringing like crazy. I called you

to see if you could make it into work and hold down the fort today? There shouldn't be a lot going on in the office since it's the day after Thanksgiving, but a few workers are supposed to be there and might need something."

"Sure thing, boss." She hung up and then grabbed Wyatt's shoulders and bounced on the bed a few more times. "They had a baby!" she sang off key until Wyatt was laughing as hard as she was.

"If you're going to go into work, I guess I'd better head out and clear a path to the truck." He held in a yawn. "I'm due to head into the store today myself. I can drop you off at the site."

She jumped off the bed and did a little booty dance while she headed into shower. Wyatt disappeared into his own bedroom.

She wasn't due to be at work for another two hours, but when Wyatt was done shoveling the drive and dressing, they decided to head out early and hit the bakery on their way through town.

The rest of the roads had been cleared by the county, but they were still slick and soggy enough in places that Wyatt drove the truck at least ten miles an hour under the speed limit.

They were both surprised at the number of people crowded into Sara's Nook. Wyatt had to park his truck down the street.

The talk that morning was all about the new arrival. Dr. Aaron Stevens walked into the bakery almost fifteen minutes after Wyatt and Hannah. They had just made it up to the counter to place their orders when the entire place erupted in cheers.

Aaron laughed and held up his hands. "This is one time when I quite literally did nothing. By the time I arrived, baby Grace was happily having her first meal. Mom and dad were more shaken than anything. Both parents and Grace have been given my approval to remain at home for now."

Everyone cheered.

"Time and weight?" Someone asked.

“Eleven fifty-eight,” Hannah answered.

Aaron nodded. “Seven pounds six ounces. Twenty inches long,” he added.

“They should have called her Storm,” someone joked.

When they had their breakfast orders to go, they left the party at the bakery and headed back out.

“The snow should be melted by the time I get off work,” she said, removing her jacket as she climbed back into his truck.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “If not, just give me a call. I might work late.”

“Sure,” she said as she kept her eyes out the window.

They were avoiding talking. She should be able to tell him that the night before was a mistake, but she was too chicken to do that.

Instead, they rode all the way up to the neighborhood in silence. He parked by his car and let her out and said he hoped that she’d have a good day before driving away.

Did he know she was pulling away?

Would he understand?

So many questions ate at her during the day that by lunchtime she had a knot in her stomach. So far that morning, she’d taken more than a dozen calls as she tried to study for her exam, which she’d be taking in the morning. It was a monitored test that would take place on the library computers.

After lunch she showed two couples and one family around the model home, then helped another couple that had already signed a deal on one of the lots pick out their colors.

The place was oddly busy for the day after Thanksgiving. But she was grateful to be out and away from Wyatt for the time being.

Thankfully, all the work had cut into her time thinking about Wyatt.

By the time she locked up for the night, she'd gotten in a few good hours of studying and planned on a few more when she got back to the house.

The snow had all but melted in the warmer weather that day and her drive back through town was smooth. She slowed as she drove by the store, but since she had a track record of being distracted, she tried not to see if she could spot Wyatt inside. Seeing his truck still parked in the lot, she continued on home.

She heated up a frozen pizza and sat facing the Christmas tree that they had decorated together and studied. Her mind kept slipping to the sex they'd had on the sofa.

She didn't regret being with him. She'd kept her word about that. Regret wasn't what she was feeling. At least not when he was there.

Anger was more like it. Anger pointed at herself for jumping before thinking. Her emotions had taken over the logical part of her brain when he touched her.

When Wyatt walked in the house shortly before ten that night, she had already changed into her comfy pajamas and was watching another holiday movie in front of the fire.

"I brought some pie." He held up a bag. "And ice cream." He smiled. "I figured you'd still be studying." He glanced at the television.

"Nope, shut down about half an hour ago. Too much and my brain will seize up." She paused the movie and walked over to grab a slice of pie.

"Apple?" she asked, lifting the lid.

"Cherry." He grabbed a couple plates. "How pissed at me are you?" he asked when he put his own plate down next to her.

"I'm not mad at you," she answered easily.

His eyes narrowed. "You said you wouldn't regret yesterday but something tells me you're upset about it."

She nodded slightly. "I'm upset at myself."

“For?” he asked as she dished them up each a slice.

“Letting go,” she admitted. “Cutting loose and getting carried away.”

“Everyone needs to let loose every now and then.” He found the ice cream scoop and put a spoonful on each of their plates.

“Oh, I can cut loose.” She picked up her plate and watched him.

He chuckled. “I know you can. But something tells me you don’t do it as often as you used to.”

He was right. The last time she’d really cut loose had been... hell, she couldn’t even remember. Last summer? The one before that? Even then, what she called cutting loose was a full day of shopping and a movie in Edgeview.

To avoid him, she walked back to the sofa and sat down. He followed her into the living room and sat beside her.

“Hannah, I don’t regret yesterday either,” he said between bites. “I had hoped—”

“Don’t.” She groaned. “I know what you hoped.” She looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

He shifted slightly and then sighed loudly. “Too much to ask for?”

“You think?” She leaned back. “How about we watch a movie and eat our dessert. Then head up to our own beds.”

He nodded. “Sure.”

She wanted more than anything to snuggle up against him after she finished her dessert. But instead, she wrapped the blanket around her and watched the entire movie without so much as glancing his way again.

CHAPTER 10



Wyatt tossed and turned that entire night, thinking about what Hannah had confided in him. The fact that she thought of being with him as cutting loose ate at him for some reason.

Sex wasn't supposed to be used as a tool to cut loose. He hadn't slept with her because he'd needed to have fun or relax.

The reason he had slept with her was what kept him up all night. The guilt of leaving her weighed him down more and more the longer he was around her.

It was funny, the entire time he'd been in the city, he hadn't thought of it or the pain that she was going through. Not once. He'd been selfish. Now, however, seeing her reaction to him being back, how she was acting around him, it was so obvious.

He was so tired the next morning that by the time he woke up, Hannah had already left for her test.

Seeing the gray day outside, he figured that he'd head into work early and get some of the items on his growing to-do list accomplished. The day before, they had moved all of the extra-large displays, which blocked the aisles, into the back and had rearranged the stockroom. Today, he planned to finish organizing the space, figure out what to do about the displays, and finish decluttering his office.

Already the store was looking a million times cleaner and more organized. Everyone who came in made a point to compliment him on how nice it looked. They told him how

much easier it was to find items, even though he knew that most people in town knew the store by heart. So far no one had complained about any of his changes.

The employees were much happier with their new schedules and in their new work positions too.

Earlier he had believed that he'd have to fire Lucy for stealing, but after having a long discussion with her, he realized how far off he'd been. The woman just straight up couldn't count change, and with the old POS system she had to do the math manually every time someone handed her money. She was much happier making sure the aisles were clean and straightening up after messy customers.

He rushed through the light rain into the store, and his happiness tripled the second he stepped foot inside. It was as if every worry he'd had in the past few years slipped away. He belonged here. He felt as if he could make his mark right here. This was the proof he could show everyone that he was... something.

Rolling up his sleeves, he got to work.

Almost an hour later, Patty rolled in with a huge smile on her lips.

"So, you rose to the occasion, I see." She slapped him on the elbow.

"I did." He laughed. "How do you like the changes so far?"

"So far?" She arched her brow.

"I have a few more that will have to wait until the weather cooperates."

She nodded. "No complaints from me or the customers, I hear. She's looking better than when I took over from my parents."

He felt his chest tighten with pride.

"I left her in capable hands. I'm so very proud." Patty took his hand. "Now help me gather some groceries while you tell

me all about the other changes you're going to make around here.”

He laughed, and for the next half hour he walked down each aisle with her strolling in her wheelchair beside him as he filled her in on his plans.

A few minutes after Patty left, Hannah came in looking slightly shocked.

“How'd the test go?” he asked, growing worried.

“I... passed. One hundred percent. I didn't even get one answer wrong.” Her face looked a little pale.

“That's... great.” He rushed towards her and wrapped her in his arms. “Right?” he asked when she remained stiff.

“Right. I... just... I... I passed,” she said as if it had just sunk in. Then she was laughing. “I have my real estate license.” She started bouncing in his arms.

A few customers that had overheard Hannah's cheers congratulated her.

Suddenly, the two of them realized they weren't alone and broke apart.

“Thanks,” Hannah said with a huge grin. “I'd better head up to work. Jacob and Rose are still out until Monday, and I have to unlock the gate for the crews.”

“Jacob was in earlier to get groceries,” he supplied. “The new family plans on making it to the tree lighting ceremony tomorrow evening.”

“Good. Everyone is dying to meet Grace. I'm going to grab a few things and take off. See you later tonight.” Hannah headed back towards the bakery while he turned back to his work.

Even though he tried to focus on his work, his mind was solely on Hannah until he saw her leave the parking lot in his car.

“You're a fool,” Reece said from beside him.

Wyatt had been too busy watching Hannah to realize her brother had walked into the store.

“Hm?” he asked, tossing a box into the cart he was using to move things around.

Reece Crawford was about three inches taller than Wyatt. Hannah’s younger brother by a year and a half had outgrown him sometime in high school. While Wyatt had played football, basketball, and baseball, Reece had focused solely on boxing. Rumors were that he was the best in the state now.

Wyatt had been too busy in the city to follow the guy’s career, but by the looks of him, he could tell why he was the best. Reece had packed on a few pounds of solid muscle since the last time he’d seen him.

“Don’t play games with my sister,” Reece warned as he shifted his basket to his other arm, his eyes squarely on Wyatt’s. Where Hannah’s soft blue eyes always looked at him with appreciation and desire, Reece’s caramel-colored eyes were shooting daggers at him at the moment.

“I’m not playing games,” he said, turning back to his task.

“No?” Reece leaned against the shelves. “From where I was standing, that sure looked like a game. Or the two of you are back together and you’ve decided to stick around town.”

“I’m sticking,” he admitted quickly. Reece’s dark eyebrows shot up.

“Are you going to make the forever commitment then?” Reece asked.

“Forever...” Wyatt sighed. “Listen, I don’t know if your sister would appreciate you butting into her life. I seem to remember she always hated that when you were a kid.”

Reece’s eyes narrowed. “Does it look like I’m a kid?”

Wyatt ran his eyes over the man and then smiled. “Nope. But then again, your size never mattered to Hannah. I’d wager you’d still let her whoop your butt.”

Reece’s grin was fast. “Hell yeah.” He slapped him on his shoulder. Hard. It almost sent Wyatt into a display of canned

yams.

“Either stay out of my sister’s life or learn to make a damned commitment.” He turned to walk away.

“That was fun,” Wyatt said to himself as he went back to work.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Hannah’s father strolled into the store, and Wyatt held in a groan.

No wonder Patty was the biggest gossip in town. Not a day went by when he didn’t see almost everyone in town. Plus, it was obvious that news of his and Hannah’s little celebratory display earlier had spread through town like wildfire.

Even though Wyatt had idolized Luke Crawford his entire life, seeing the man walking towards him almost scared him enough that he thought about making a run for his office. Instead, he turned and greeted the man while pasting on his best don’t-kill-me smile.

“I’d heard you’d taken over managing this place,” Luke said as he ran his eyes over him and held out his hand.

Reece was a spitting image of his father. Size and all.

“I sure did,” Wyatt said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Where are you staying?” Luke asked.

Suddenly, Wyatt’s head began to buzz. Shit.

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “Since I know Hannah’s still house-sitting for your folks...” He let the rest of the statement drop off.

“I’m staying in my dad’s workshop,” he lied quickly.

It wasn’t as if her parents didn’t know they’d been sleeping together back during their dating days. But for some reason, Wyatt believed this answer would soothe her parents’ minds better than hearing he was across the hallway from their daughter.

He doubted the rest of the conversation would go smoothly.

Luke's eyebrows shot up, much like Reece's had done a while back. "Why? It's got to be freezing out there. Doesn't your mother have a sewing room," he asked.

Wyatt almost chuckled. "Yes, sir."

Reece slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't be a fool." He walked away, shaking his head.

What in the hell? Wyatt didn't want to push his luck any further and chance running into Hannah's mother, so for the rest of his workday he stayed in his office or the storage area.

Since he was feeling guilty, he sent a text to Hannah telling her that he'd grab them dinner that evening. After leaving the store later that evening, he stopped off at the Golden Oar to grab some to-go meals.

That was another mistake, as the entire place was filled with the Jordan clan. Every single member of the large family was there, as well as half of Pride.

Before he had a chance to order food, someone shouted, "Wyatt," and suddenly he was pulled into the fray.

He was there all of five minutes before finding out that it was an impromptu celebration for Grace's birth. The happy new family was tucked in the back corner.

He sent a text to Hannah to get down there quickly if she wanted to see Grace, then he walked over and offered his congratulations to the happy family.

"We hadn't planned on being out this soon," Rose said as she bit her bottom lip.

"We just came down here for some burgers." Jacob laughed. "We should have known better."

"I don't even have my phone." Rose sighed. "My post-birth brain is mush." She smiled down at Grace, who was wrapped in bright pink and sitting in her carrier. The little girl looked so petite. Her dark hair had slight curls to it and even though her eyes were closed, he was pretty sure she'd end up with the Jordan's silver eyes.

“One minute we were having a private family meal and, the next, my entire family showed up.” Jacob laughed.

“That’s the Jordans for you,” Wyatt said as he took the table across from them just as Hannah sent him a text. “Hannah is on her way down here,” he told them.

“Oh, good.” Rose shook her head. “Since we’re stuck here celebrating with your family, it will be nice to have friends here too.”

While they waited for Hannah to arrive, he ordered a beer and chatted with Jacob. The moment Hannah stepped into the restaurant, cheers from the Jordan clan erupted, and she was pulled over to his table.

“Wow,” Hannah said, standing over the sleeping baby. “When she’s awake, I want to hold her,” she told Rose.

“Of course.” Rose smiled and nudged the blanket away from her daughter’s face.

“She looks like Jacob,” Hannah said with a chuckle.

“Thanks,” Jacob replied. “But I see her mother every time she cries.”

Rose nudged Jacob’s side as she chuckled.

For the next two hours, they sat in the restaurant, even long after the new family had left to go home.

Hannah had gotten to hold Grace for all of five minutes before the little girl started crying and the family decided to leave.

They ate, drank, and hung out with friends just like the old days. It felt so right that he no longer questioned if he was going to stick around town. This was where he belonged. He knew it deep down in his heart.

“So, tomorrow,” he said as he drove them back in his truck. Since she’d had three glasses of wine, they’d decided to leave his car at the restaurant and pick it up the next day after the tree lighting ceremony.

“Yes?” she said, resting her head back against the headrest.

“Tell me you and my sister aren’t going to dress like you normally do during this event?” he asked with a half groan.

She laughed so hard he heard a soft snort.

“Why? Are you embarrassed of us?” she asked when she had settled.

He shrugged as he pulled into the driveway and parked, then shut off the truck before responding.

“It’s just, don’t you think you’re a little old to be dressing as elves still?”

“You’re never too old. Besides, Avery and I have graduated to senior elves. We now work directly with the big man himself,” she said, tapping her nose.

“Gosh, you mean, Santa?” he asked in a wishful childish voice. She laughed again.

“What about you?” she asked as they sat there watching snowflakes drift slowly from the dark sky and land on the hood of his warm truck, where they instantly melted away.

“Me?”

“You used to dress up too. Tell me you’re not just going to wear jeans and a sweater tomorrow. Think of the children,” she exclaimed in a tone that reminded him of his mother somehow.

He shrugged again. “I was asked earlier by the mayor to fill a specific role.” He held in a groan. “I hadn’t made up my mind.” He turned towards her with a grin. “Until now.”

“Oh?” She leaned closer. “Going to be a reindeer handler?”

He reached over and took her hand.

“Nope. Tomorrow, it looks like I’m going to be your boss.”

She frowned. “You mean?”

His smile grew. “I’m going to be the big man himself.”

CHAPTER 11



*W*hy hadn't Hannah bought herself a new elf outfit last year? She'd far outgrown the silly costume long ago. Now the darn candy-cane striped tights were giving her a wedgie and her curly toed elf shoes felt a full size too small.

At least the long green skirt and coat hung low enough that no one would be the wiser as to her predicament, and the hat and gloves fit still.

Avery had arrived early so they could go through their standard ritual of doing each other's hair and makeup, and stuffing themselves in their elf outfits before heading downtown. It was a good thing too because she'd needed the ride since they'd left the Mustang at the restaurant the night before.

Wyatt had gone into work early that morning after she'd arranged to ride with Avery to the main event.

It had continued to snow throughout the night, and now there was a light covering of the white stuff on the ground. In some places there was at least three inches of powder. Now, however, the light cloud cover overhead allowed for some of the sun's warm rays to peek through. Not too much, thankfully, which meant that the snow would stick around for the evening's tree lighting.

Most of the day's fun started at noon and would continue until just around seven that evening, when it would grow too cold to stick around outside.

There would be bands playing Christmas songs in the pavilion at the center of town all day. The local ballet school that had opened the year before had a short performance just before the lighting of the tree. Booths from every local business circled the town square, selling items or offering gift wrapping or food services.

This year, there were three more food carts brought in from Edgeview, a barbeque truck and a taco truck.

Those, along with the Golden Oar, Baked, and Sara's Nook booths or trucks, gave the visitors and townspeople plenty of choices for the duration of the event.

They were due to arrive at the Santa booth shortly before noon, where they would spend the entire afternoon visiting with kids, taking pictures, and passing out candy canes. After finding a parking spot at the edge of town, they rode in the horse-drawn buggy that acted as a shuttle through town and circled the square.

When they arrived, Hannah wasn't surprised to see almost a hundred kids and their family members standing in line to see Santa already.

"Looks like we have our work cut out for us again this year," Avery said cheerfully.

"First, coffee." She motioned to the food truck. "Please."

Avery nodded. "For sure." She took her arm and tugged towards the truck. They were the third people in line, and when they reached the window they ordered their favorite coffees.

While they waited for their drinks, the guy behind the counter flirted with Avery, who willingly flirted back.

Hannah glanced around for Wyatt. Even though she knew he was supposed to be dressed in the red suit, she still hunted the growing crowd just in case he was there early.

"Did you get his name?" she asked Avery as they made their way towards the center stage area where Santa's workshop was set up.

“Lucas,” she answered in a dreamy tone. “He says he’s cousins with Robin and Kara.”

“I didn’t know their cousin moved into Pride,” Hannah said as they walked past all the waiting families.

“He lives in Edgeview. I think.” Avery glanced back at the food truck.

They were stopped a few times by friends or people asking when Santa would arrive. By the time they made it up to the front, it was exactly noon.

Everyone stood back as the two reindeer arrived pulling the sleigh that was delivering Santa with style. Kids and adults cheered as Wyatt stood in the back of the sleigh waving and giving his best Santa impression.

In the past years, Santa had been portrayed by many of the townsmen. For several years, Lacey and Aaron Stevens had played Mr. & Mrs. Claus themselves. But Lacey’s duties as mayor caused her to break character too often.

Lacey had probably asked Wyatt to play the big man this year as a ploy to keep him in town longer. It was not only a great honor to portray the big man but supposedly very good luck.

She met Wyatt’s eyes as he passed her and took his spot in the massive red chair.

For the next few hours, she helped kids sit on Wyatt’s lap or she took pictures. She only took a couple of short breaks to rush to the bathroom or to shovel some pizza in her mouth. Wyatt took two fifteen-minute breaks himself but did not once break character.

Just watching Wyatt with the kids had her heart melting. He was good. Really good.

She knew it wasn’t just the Santa act. Wyatt loved kids.

She enjoyed seeing every one of the Jordans go through the line, three generations of them.

Her brother stopped by the booth along with her parents, and she took one of her breaks to snap a family photo with

Santa. Then she headed out to grab another coffee with her mother.

“I just want you to know that I couldn’t stop your brother or father from heading to the store and having a talk with Wyatt yesterday,” her mother had said as they waited in line together.

She groaned loudly and glanced back at Wyatt.

“Both of them have assured me they didn’t embarrass you, but...” She dropped off.

“Right.” Hannah sighed and rolled her shoulders.

Was that why Wyatt had acted a little off during dinner the night before? He had been a little quieter than normal.

He’d still flirted with her, but she could tell there was something bothering him.

“Are you two...” Her mother dropped off, arching her eyebrows.

“No,” she automatically answered, but then she remembered the other night and rolled her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Her mother reached over and touched her arm. “Honey, you don’t need me to tell you to be careful.”

“I know.” She touched her mother’s hand.

Amber Crawford hadn’t been raised in Pride. The day her mother had moved into town was the day she’d met Luke Crawford. According to her father, that was the day he’d fallen madly in love with her. According to her mother, she’d really fallen for him on Christmas day.

“I know,” she said again. “But he’s the only man I’ve ever loved,” she said softly.

“I know.” Her mother smiled. “From the looks of it, he’s over Lisa.”

“He never loved her,” she blurted out, then felt her face heat. “I mean, she was a viper.”

“No, I get it.” Her mother chuckled. “Men can be stupid and blind sometimes. I doubt that boy ever stopped loving you.” Her mother glanced over to where her father stood talking to Reece. “It took far longer than it should have for your father to admit his feelings.”

Hannah smiled. “He has no problem showing them now.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Her mother smiled and then laughed when Luke Crawford glanced in their direction and stuck his tongue out before blowing them both a kiss.

“He’s still stupid,” Hannah said, turning around to place her order.

When it was finally time to light the massive tree in the center of the square, everyone made their way over to where the mayor stood on a small stage. She, Avery, and Wyatt stepped up to the stage and, after a short speech from Lacey, Wyatt hit the big red button and gave his best “ho ho ho” as the massive pine tree lit up the entire center of town.

Shortly after the lights were turned on and the entire town sang a few Christmas carols together, Wyatt slipped into the tent behind Santa’s workshop and came out dressed in a black sweater and jeans.

By then, she was starving again.

“Hungry?” she asked him as she pulled her coat on over her outfit.

“Didn’t you bring a change of clothes?” he asked, motioning to her legs “You’ve got to be freezing in that.”

“Now that I’ve stopped moving, I am,” she admitted.

He took her hand and waved to Avery. “I’ll get her home,” he called out to his sister.

Avery waved back and then disappeared into the crowd of townspeople, all flooding towards their own cars.

“How about we grab some barbeque and then head home?” he suggested, motioning towards the food truck.

“Sounds wonderful.”

“Here, go sit in the truck, get warm. I’ll order us food.” He held out his keys for her. “My truck is in front of the store.”

She turned and could see his truck from there. “Okay, I want a turkey thigh,” she said as she started walking. “Beans and coleslaw.”

He nodded and turned to step in line while she raced through the cold to jump in his truck.

She was slightly surprised to see someone leaning against the truck when she got there.

Her blood iced over when she noticed it was Lisa. The woman was wrapped in a designer snow outfit, as if she was about to hit the ski slopes.

Lisa was looking down at her phone, and she jumped when Hannah hit the unlock button on the key and the horn honked.

“What are you doing here?” Hannah asked, wanting more than anything to just climb into the truck and heat herself up. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and waited as Lisa’s eyes narrowed.

“Of course, you’re here.” Lisa sighed and then sneered at Hannah’s elf outfit. “Where’s Wyatt?”

“Why are you here?” Hannah asked again instead of answering the woman. “I thought you and... whatever the other man’s name is were happily living your best life in the city.”

Lisa’s eyes narrowed. “I’m here to talk to Wyatt,” Lisa said calmly. “My fiancé.”

“Ex,” Hannah supplied. “Why?”

Lisa took a step closer and suddenly Hannah realized that the woman was easily a foot taller than her in the heeled boots she was wearing. Still, Hannah worked out often enough that she knew she could hold her own.

“You’re in my way,” Lisa said in a low tone.

Hannah smiled. “Funny, from where I’m looking, you’re in my way, since I’m the one holding the keys.” She motioned

towards the truck behind her.

“Lisa? What are you doing here?” Wyatt asked from behind her.

Lisa’s entire demeanor changed, hiding the viper that Hannah knew all too well.

“There you are.” Lisa smiled and rushed past Hannah to try and hug Wyatt, who held up the to-go containers to block her move.

“What are you doing here?” Wyatt asked again, this time a little firmer.

“I’m here to see you, silly.” Lisa chuckled and tapped his shoulder.

“Go home.” Wyatt sidestepped Lisa as Hannah opened the truck door for him. “There’s nothing we have to say to one another.”

Wyatt helped Hannah up into the passenger seat and then handed her their food.

“I’m pregnant,” Lisa blurted out loudly enough that Hannah heard several people around them gasp.

Wyatt looked into Hannah’s eyes briefly before turning around slowly.

“Congratulations,” he said without turning around.

“It’s yours,” Lisa said firmly.

“Like hell,” Wyatt said, still looking at Hannah.

“I swear it,” Lisa replied, and Hannah saw the lie and fear in the woman’s eyes.

“Tell me another story,” Wyatt said with a sigh. “Go home. I’m sure Travis will take good care of you both.”

“He left,” Lisa said with a half sob.

“Then you know how it feels,” Wyatt said as he shut Hannah’s door. Without another word, he walked around and climbed in the driver’s side of the truck while Lisa continued to beg him to talk to her.

As Wyatt drove away, Hannah could see the weariness in his face.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“It’s not mine,” he said, glancing at her.

“Of course not,” she agreed. Still, she bit her bottom lip and worried.

“Hannah, how long have we known one another?” he asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Our entire lives.”

He nodded and then stopped at a stop sign. Everyone in Pride was heading home at the same time and traffic was blocked.

Wyatt turned to her. “First off, the last time I was with Lisa physically was the night we got engaged, which was about three months ago. Second, I always used protection. With everyone that I’ve been with.”

“Three months? Prior to...” She couldn’t ask. Couldn’t even mention that they’d been together a few nights ago.

He nodded. “We’d been having issues. I pulled back since I felt pushed into something I hadn’t really agreed to. I made excuses not to be with her.” He moved a few feet with the traffic. “Work. Being too tired. It’s the main reason I didn’t move in with her. I needed distance from her.” He sighed and rested his head back as traffic stopped. “Honestly, I was trying to figure out how to get out of the relationship when we were here last. Then your car accident happened, and I knew...”

“You knew?” she asked.

“Screw this.” Wyatt pulled quickly into a store’s back parking lot. He put the truck in park and turned towards her. He set the food on the dash and pulled her into his arms. “I never stopped loving you. Even when I was with her. Never,” he said into her hair. “I was such a fool for leaving you all those years ago.”

Her entire body went lax. For the first time in years, since he’d left, everything was right.

“Me too,” she said softly. “I’ve always loved you. I never stopped.”

He leaned in and kissed her softly, and she melted against him. Then he hugged her again, holding her tightly in his arms as if he never wanted to let go.

“I’m not going to take those little words for granted this time. When I tell you that I love you, I’m giving you my whole heart.” His eyes locked with hers.

Her smile doubled as she buried her face into his chest. “I’ll take it. All of it.”

She felt him take a huge breath. “Let’s go home.” He brushed his lips across hers.

She nodded and then sat back as he returned to the traffic.

When they pulled into the driveway, they both groaned when they saw Lisa’s car parked there.

“She’s persistent.” Hannah sighed. “And apparently a fast driver.”

When they parked, Lisa got out of her car and stood, waiting for them.

“What are you doing here?” Lisa asked when Hannah stepped out of the truck beside her.

“None of your business,” Hannah answered and before she could brace herself, Lisa threw her entire body at her.

Her elf slippers had zero traction on them, and she lost her footing on the icy driveway. Hannah’s back hit the side of the truck, and the side of her head hit the running board just above her ear. Then her elbow hit the ground and went instantly numb.

She felt Lisa’s weight slam into her for less than a second before it was removed.

Her vision grayed out as her head spun just before everything went black.

CHAPTER 12



When Wyatt saw Lisa attack Hannah, he reacted quickly to pull the woman off the now-unconscious Hannah.

“She attacked me,” Lisa screamed.

Since Wyatt had been getting out of the driver side of the truck, he hadn’t seen what had happened. He’d only seen Lisa jump on top of Hannah when he rounded the front of the truck.

After pulling Lisa away, he rushed to help Hannah.

He hadn’t braced for an attack from Lisa, and when her snow boot kicked him in his ribs, he stumbled and hit the ground next to Hannah.

“Son of a...” He groaned and then blocked Lisa’s next kick.

“You bastard,” Lisa screamed over and over as she kicked out towards him. “I’m pregnant. This is your baby. You can’t leave me. What am I going to do now?”

“Lisa, stop!” he screamed and finally got her attention.

“What am I going to do now?” she cried and crumpled to the ground.

He pulled out his phone and shot a text message to Aiden. “911 at my parents’ house. Send ambulance.” He tucked his phone in his pocket and scooted towards Hannah.

With shaky hands, he pulled her up off the cold icy ground and held onto her until Aiden arrived.

He kept trying to wake her, and the longer her eyes remained closed, the more he worried. He thought about moving her into the house, but then he remembered everything his father had taught him about trauma and instead wrapped his coat around her and held her as still as he could.

Lisa was still crying into her hands, repeating the same phrases over and over as the first patrol car drove up the driveway.

“What happened?” Nick Farrow, one of Pride’s newest police officers, asked as he rushed over to them.

Suddenly, Lisa stopped crying into her hands and shouted, “She attacked me.” Lisa pointed to the still unconscious Hannah.

“She attacked us,” Wyatt answered firmly. “Knocked Hannah out and kicked me when I tried to help her.”

Nick went from concerned to focused as he walked towards Lisa and gave the woman orders.

Wyatt didn’t even watch as his ex-fiancée was handcuffed, read her rights, and shoved in the back of the patrol car.

Another patrol car arrived as that was happening, and this time Aiden rushed out.

While Nick filled Aiden in quickly, Hannah’s eyes fluttered open finally.

“Wyatt?” she asked with a groan. “My head hurts.”

“I know, baby,” he said softly. “Hang on. The ambulance should be here soon.”

“What happened?” Hannah asked. “The car accident?”

“No,” he answered with a frown.

She tried to shift in his arms, but he held her still.

“It’s cold.” Her teeth started chattering.

“Here’s a blanket.” Aiden knelt beside them and wrapped Hannah in a thermal blanket.

“I want to move her,” he told Aiden.

“Better not. The ambulance will be here shortly,” Aiden replied. “How are you feeling?” he asked Hannah.

“Cold,” Hannah replied.

“We’ve got you.” Aiden shifted the blanket a little. “While we wait, refresh my memory. What’s your name?”

Hannah replied in a soft voice between chattering teeth, “H-Hannah R-Renee Crawfford.”

“What’s today’s date?” he asked.

“N-november t-t-tenth.” She closed her eyes. “C-cold.”

Wyatt frowned up at Aiden, who touched his shoulder. “Bumping your head can mess up your mind,” he said softly. Just then, the ambulance pulled into the driveway.

He stood back and watched them load Hannah into the back of the ambulance and then climbed in beside her.

Her eyes remained closed for the entire ride into Edgeview, and his worry tripled.

“The light hurts my eyes,” she told the EMT once.

His worry for her health outweighed all the other worry flooding his mind. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he worried what this meant for them.

Did she really think it was almost a full month ago? What did that mean? Would it mean that she wouldn’t remember everything he’d confided in her over the past few weeks?

Had she forgotten the other night? The things he’d told her?

Whatever it took, he’d prove to her all over again that she was the only one he’d ever loved.

His stomach ached thinking that this time she wouldn’t be so forgiving.

After they reached the hospital, he stood by while they rolled her inside just as the snow turned into sleet. The trip to Edgeview had been slow going due to the weather.

He followed them into a small room and they sat in silence as they waited to see a doctor or for them to roll her back for scans.

“It’s not November tenth, is it?” she asked with her eyes still closed. The nurses had turned the lights down lower, but Hannah complained that they still hurt her head.

“No,” he answered softly.

“I’m trying really hard to remember things, but the last thing I remember is being in the hospital surrounded by flowers.”

“Your car accident,” he supplied.

“Did your parents go on their vacation?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How long ago?”

He thought about it and answered, “Three weeks back. It’s the twenty-sixth.”

“I missed the festival?” she exclaimed half opening her eyes.

“Nope,” he answered, and she glanced down at her outfit and groaned when she noticed that she was dressed in the elf outfit.

“Why are you here? Where’s Lisa?” she asked, dragging out Lisa’s name as if she was having a difficult time saying her S’s.

He almost lost it. The tone of his voice changed as his shoulders sagged.

“Hopefully, rotting in a jail cell by now,” he answered.

“What?” Hannah frowned at him.

He swallowed the bile that threatened to surface from his gut. “She’s the one that did this to you.”

“Oh.” Hannah sighed and closed her eyes. “Are we...?” She let the question hang in the air.

He moved closer to her and took her hand. “Whatever we are, we can figure that out later. Now, just... rest.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her bruised knuckles.

As he did so, her parents and brother rushed into the area.

“We heard what happened,” her father said.

“Are you okay?” they all asked Hannah at once.

“Tired and my vision is wonky. The light hurts.” Again she slurred some of her words and dragged every one of her *S*'s out like a hissing sound.

While she talked to her family, he slipped out of the room. He made it halfway down the hallway when Reece caught up with him.

“Sneaking away?” Reece asked.

“More like getting out of the way,” he admitted with a wince.

“Nick told us what happened,” Reece said.

Wyatt took a deep breath. “Tell me she’s locked up.”

Reece nodded. “For now, she’s in holding. She told Aiden that she’s pregnant with your baby.”

Wyatt winced. “It’s not mine.”

Reece’s eyes narrowed as he looked squarely in Wyatt’s eyes. After a moment, he nodded as if signaling that he believed him.

“It’s why I came back to Pride. When I found out... about the other guy.” Wyatt ran his hands through his hair. “Hannah knows everything.” He glanced behind them. “She did. Now...” He shrugged. “I don’t know what she remembers. From the sound of it, she thinks it’s November tenth.”

Reece was quiet. “Don’t give up on her,” he said in a low tone. Then he held out his hand. “I hated that you left her, but something tells me that you’re done running.”

“I am.” He took Reece’s offered hand. “If she’ll have me. Again.”

Reece sighed and glanced behind them as Luke stepped out into the hallway. Seeing them, he made his way towards them.

“She’s asking for you,” he said to Reece.

Hannah’s brother nodded and then disappeared down the hallway.

“I’m sure you just told my son everything, but why don’t you and I grab a cup of coffee and you can give me a play-by-play of just what in the hell happened.”

Wyatt nodded his head and then followed the man down to the lobby coffee shop. While they sat in the small cafeteria, he told Hannah’s father everything, from how Lisa had basically strongarmed him into the proposal to the present day.

“Sounds like the woman is a little unhinged,” Luke said once Wyatt was done talking.

“I never thought so when I was dating her,” Wyatt admitted. “Hannah has called her a viper.”

Luke smiled. “She would have hated anyone you were seeing.”

Wyatt laid his head into his hands. “I really fucked that up. I should have never left town.”

“We can’t move backwards in time,” Luke said. “Our past is what makes us who we are today and in the future. From the sounds of it, you’ve done some real good at the grocery store.”

He nodded, unwilling to lift his head. “I never thought that one day I’d be running the place. For some reason, being there just... clicks.” He lifted his eyes, needing to convince someone other than himself that it was where he belonged.

Luke smiled at him. “You’re sticking this time?”

Wyatt nodded. “I can’t imagine being anywhere else. Doing anything else.” His eyes locked with Luke’s. “Being with anyone else.”

Luke’s smile grew. Then he slapped him on the shoulder, hard. “I knew you’d come around. Sooner or later.” He

motioned towards the door. “Why don’t we head up and see how our girl’s doing?”

When they walked into the room, the lights were down even lower and there was an empty spot where the bed had been. Where Hannah had been.

Reece and their mother sat in chairs, waiting.

“She’s in having an MRI,” Reece supplied. “They want us to stay here until they have her in a room.”

They waited almost half an hour before a nurse walked in and told them Hannah had been moved up to a private room. The four of them headed upstairs to room two-twenty-four.

Hannah was already in bed, looking comfortable as she sipped from a large hospital mug.

“They don’t want me to eat, but I’m starving,” Hannah said softly, her words slurring slightly.

“Our dinner is lying in my parents’ driveway.” He felt his own gut twist. Not from hunger but from anger.

Hannah’s gaze landed on him, and he could see her thinking. “You’re back?”

He nodded and moved closer to her. “I took over managing O’Neil’s. I’ve been back for almost two weeks now.” Then he remembered something. “You passed your exams.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I did?”

He smiled. “Yesterday.”

She blinked a few times and then glanced at her family. Her mother nodded and smiled.

“Wow, cool.”

“How about we head downstairs and grab some dinner and bring you back something?” Luke suggested and then glanced at him. “We can grab you something too. By the time we return, I bet they’ll let you eat something. Hopefully they’ll have your MRI results by then too.”

Hannah nodded slowly at her family, then watched them all leave after her mother planted a kiss on Hannah's forehead.

"My mother says that it was Lisa who attacked me," Hannah said when they were alone.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't listen to you long ago about her." He sat down and then pulled the chair closer to the side of her bed.

"I don't remember ever telling you to not date her," Hannah said quietly. He figured her head was hurting since she was talking quietly and the lights were still low.

"How's the head?" he asked, wanting to change the subject from his crazy ex.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly as she leaned her head back against the pillow. "Honestly, it's probably the worst pain I've felt in my life. Did she hit me over the head with something?"

He shook his head, growing even more worried than before. "No, from what I saw, she threw herself at you and you fell backwards and hit your head against the side of my truck."

Hannah frowned. "She must have hit me pretty hard then."

Just then, Dr. Aaron Stevens walked into the room.

"Hannah, Wyatt," Dr. Stevens said. He shook his hand. "I rushed here the moment I found out you'd been hurt. Hannah, I expected your folks to be around."

"They went down to the cafeteria to grab some dinner," Hannah answered.

Dr. Stevens glanced at him. Wyatt and Hannah had known the man their entire lives. He worked part time up at the hospital in Edgeview but also had regular hours in Pride at his clinic.

Normally, he only came up to the hospital when visiting his patients. Such as Hannah.

"I've looked over your scans. I don't like what I'm seeing," he said, sitting next to Hannah. "Here, try and follow

my pen just with your eyes.” He held up a pen, then moved it from side to side.

Hannah had a difficult time following the pen.

Dr. Stevens set the pen down and sighed. “Who looked at you after your car accident?”

She frowned and then shrugged. “I...”

“She doesn’t remember,” Wyatt jumped in. “She thinks that today is the day of her accident.”

Dr. Stevens’s frown grew. “When are your parents coming back?”

“What is it?” Wyatt asked.

“There’s a lot of built-up pressure here.” He pointed to the spot on his head just above his left ear. “Too much pressure. Several of your blood vessels are clogged as well as some internal bleeding.”

Wyatt knew that he was dumbing it down for them.

“Like a hematoma?” Hannah asked.

Dr. Stevens smiled and nodded. “Blood clots can easily be cleared, with surgery.”

“Do it,” Wyatt broke in. He didn’t know much about medical treatments, but he knew that blood clots in or near the brain could be fatal if not taken care of quickly.

Both Hannah and Dr. Stevens looked at him.

“We’re talking blood clots in the brain. That’s dangerous stuff. If you don’t do surgery, what happens?” he asked.

Dr. Stevens frowned again.

“Hannah.” Wyatt turned to her, tears burning his eyes. “I... I know you can’t remember the last few weeks but remember the past twenty-four years. I’m here, one hundred percent.” He took her hand. “I’m not going anywhere. Ever again. Not without you.” He lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a soft kiss across her knuckles. “I can’t lose you.”

“It’s not an option to not do surgery at this point,” Dr. Stevens broke in. “I just wanted to prepare—”

“I’ll call her parents back.” Wyatt stepped into the hallway and punched Luke’s number as the first tear slipped down his cheek. Damn it, get yourself under control, he told himself as he relayed to Luke that Dr. Stevens wanted to talk to them.

“We’re heading back upstairs now,” Luke replied, and he could hear the man running.

By the time Wyatt got himself under control, her parents and Reece were stepping out of the elevator and heading towards him.

“What’s up?” Luke asked, running his eyes over his face.

“Dr. Stevens... brain surgery,” he managed to get out before both of her parents engulfed him in a hug.

CHAPTER 13



*H*annah woke up and saw a bright ceiling above her and wondered where she was. Nothing hurt much. She was practically floating.

This was nice.

Then memories flooded her mind, and her eyes jerked open quickly.

She remembered the helicopter ride to the Portland hospital. Being prepped for brain surgery. Meeting the specialist that would perform her surgery. She'd hoped Dr. Stevens would be the one doing the procedure, but he assured her that he would be assisting in the surgery and promised that he wouldn't leave the room once.

She remembered saying goodbye to her parents. Her parents!

"Mom? Dad?" she croaked softly.

"Right here." Both of them appeared above her. They looked tired. Tired and happy.

"Did... it work?" she asked, trying to look around.

"Yes." They smiled at her. "Dr. Stevens said they cleared the blockage."

"How much of my hair did they have to shave?" she asked, trying to reach up to touch her head.

Someone chuckled and then suddenly her brother's face appeared above her.

“All of it,” he replied. “You’re as bald as the day you were born.”

He was shoved aside by their mother. “Dr. Stevens assured us that it’s only a two-inch square just above your left ear,” her mother replied.

She relaxed and glared over at her brother, who was smiling stupidly at her. “But it worked, right? Did they managed to clear the hematoma?”

“You tell us?” Dr. Stevens appeared above her. “For now, I’m going to keep you harnessed down. We don’t want you moving around too much. How do you feel?”

“Good,” she said after a moment. “The pain is gone. The pressure in my head that I was feeling earlier is completely gone. Now it’s just a dull ache.”

Dr. Stevens smiled. “And how about the memories of the past few weeks?”

She thought about it and then smiled when she remembered the winter festival. “Wyatt was Santa Claus.”

Dr. Stevens’s smile grew. “Good girl.” He touched her shoulder. “For now, you’re staying put for a while. I’ll be back to check up on you later.”

Dr. Stevens disappeared and her family reappeared.

“Where’s Wyatt?” she asked.

“He’s in the waiting room with some of the rest of your friends.” Her father smiled. “Aaron let us three back here to see you first.” He glanced behind him then turned back to her. “Reece is heading out so that Wyatt can come back.”

“Thanks,” she called out to her brother.

“Anytime, sis,” Reece said as he left.

“How long did the surgery last?” Hannah asked.

“A few hours,” her father answered. “It’s around three o’clock in the afternoon now. You were in recovery for an hour or so. Now you have a private room. They’re going to

kick us all out at eight tonight. We've got a hotel room in town, so we'll be close."

Suddenly, everyone turned away as someone else came into the room. Her mother turned back to her. "We'll leave you two to chat for a few minutes." Her mother leaned down and kissed her before leaving.

She waited but when Wyatt's face didn't appear over her, she held out her free hand.

"I'm not supposed to move my head. So get your butt over here," she said, waiting.

When Wyatt's face finally appeared above hers, she could tell that he'd been crying and worrying.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Sure, brain surgery was a breeze. You look like shit though." She smiled.

Instead of chuckling, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Hey." She reached up and touched his face. He still hadn't shaved or trimmed his beard. She liked the thing and hoped he would keep it. "I'm all good now."

"I could have lost you." He leaned down and placed his face on her chest. "God, I don't know what I would have done..." The rest of what he said was muffled against her chest.

She ran her fingers through his thick hair and just held onto him.

Before her surgery earlier that morning, she'd gone through a bundle of emotions herself. Having to tell her family goodbye, just in case, was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. As hard as watching Wyatt leave town all those years ago.

When he stilled and glanced up at her, she touched his cheek.

"I remember everything," she said. "When I get out of here, I want to go home with you."

“I’d like that.” His eyes raced over her face. Then he reached up and touched her face. “You look like a mummy.”

She smiled. “A sexy mummy?”

He smiled for the first time. “From here on out, anything you want, I’ll move heaven and earth to get it for you.”

“Good, because what I want now is you by my side.”

“Done.” He placed his lips gently over hers. “I love you.”

Her heart skipped a few beats with the sheer joy of hearing those words from him again. She said them back to him.

Just then, the door swung open and she heard a few more people step into the room.

“Sorry to interrupt, but you have a few more visitors that would like to say hi,” someone said, and then suddenly Avery’s face appeared above her.

“Hey, stupid,” her friend said with a smile as her eyes ran over her.

She smiled. “Hi, ugly.”

Avery’s smile doubled. “Looks like she’s okay.”

For the next hour or so, so many people shuffled in and out of her room, she lost count. Faces floated over hers, and the smell of flowers filled her room. Wyatt stayed by her side, holding her hand.

At one point she drifted off to sleep and when she woke, Wyatt was still there, in the darkness. She could tell there was a television on without the sound.

“Hey.” Wyatt appeared above her. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry.”

“Good. I just heard them in the hallway delivering other people their dinners. Yours should be here soon.” He hovered over her.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I had a burger while you slept. Your parents took care of me. They persuaded Dr. Stevens to let me stay with you

tonight.”

“Good.” She sighed and stretched her legs and arms. “How long do I have to stay immobile?”

“Dr. Stevens says he’ll let you sit up to eat dinner.”

“Good.” She rolled her ankles. “I feel bruised.”

“You are in places,” he said softly.

“When can we go home?”

“You can ask Dr. Stevens when he comes in. He’s sticking around Portland just to watch out for you.”

She wanted to sit up soon. Her back and butt were numb, and she wanted to not feel strapped down.

Dr. Stevens walked in a few moments later, just as her food was brought in.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he ran his eyes over her face.

“Great. Starving.”

“Good. Before I sit you up, I need to check a few things. Then you can enjoy your dinner.”

For the next few minutes, she answered his questions while he checked her vitals.

“Did I pass?” she asked after a moment.

“With flying colors.” He sat the bed up. “I’m going to keep you locked in the neck brace for another day to keep you from getting whiplash.” He winked at her. “For now, at least you can sit up and enjoy your dinner.”

“Thanks,” she said again. “When can I go home?”

“Two to three days, if all goes well. Rest up. I’m going to head out for the night. I’ll be back in the morning to check on you. The nurses will call me if they have concerns. For now, you’re doing fantastic.” He patted her hand. “I’m so glad of it too.”

“Thank you, Dr. Stevens.” Hannah felt her love for the man swell. She’d known him her entire life, and he’d just

saved her life.

“Anytime.” He nodded to Wyatt, who shook his hand a few times.

She was hoping for a burger or at least a chicken salad. Instead, she got a bowl of orange Jell-O, some tapioca pudding, a small cup of chicken broth, and some hot tea.

“It’s all so…”

“Bland?” he suggested.

“Watery,” she supplied.

“Liquid diet.”

“I think Dr. Stevens got out of here before I opened the lid so he wouldn’t hear my complaints,” she said, and Wyatt chuckled.

“We’ll start with the pudding, since I know you like it best.” He started spooning the food into her mouth slowly.

She ate every single bite and, oddly, it all tasted wonderful. By the time she was done eating everything, she was tired again.

“Sleep, I’ll be right here,” Wyatt said as he moved her tray aside.

“You can’t sleep in a chair,” she complained.

“I won’t. Dr. Steven showed me how this chair turns into a bed. I even have a pillow and blanket. I wanted to crawl in bed with you, but he doesn’t want me to jostle you. Besides, the nurses will be coming in often to check up on you, and I’d just get in the way.”

“You should be home,” she said with a yawn. “But I’m thankful you’re here.”

“Sleep,” he said again as he brushed his lips across hers.

It was four days before she left the hospital, thanks to a mild fever that delayed her discharge. Most of her time in the hospital was spent watching television or sleeping between visitors. She was pretty sure she had seen every person who

lived in town at least once. Some more than a handful of times.

She couldn't remember ever getting this much attention in her entire life.

Her parents, of course, wanted her to go back home with them, but she wanted to return to Wyatt's parents' place. After all, it was where Wyatt was and she had already been paid to house-sit. She'd been absent from that job for a full week.

Thankfully, Avery had suggested that she take over watching her parents' place during the time that Wyatt and Hannah were stuck in the hospital.

Avery had rented a small place in town a while back. Since she worked a couple jobs in town, she'd easily saved up to rent a one-bedroom cottage from Brook Masters, now Brook Ryder. Brook didn't need the small beach cottage any longer since she and her husband, James, had moved into the massive mansion on the hill they had finished remodeling after their wedding. Brook's parents owned Sara's Nook, where Avery worked.

Hannah had wanted to move in with Avery, but the place was just too small for the both of them. Besides, she wanted to save her money for her dream home she was building.

During the drive back from Portland, she kept thinking about her new home. When would it be finished? When could she move in? Would Wyatt move in with her? Would he want to?

"Can we drive by my lot?" she asked as Wyatt drove them into town.

"Sure," he said. When he reached the turn, he pulled into the neighborhood. "Jacob says it's moving along quickly. He's put the crew on working on it first." He turned to head up the hill. "I guess it pays to have brain surgery," he joked as he drove up the hill.

She gasped when she noticed the building. It was a building now and not just wood sticking out of the ground at all different angles.

“It’s starting to look like a home finally,” she said as her eyes teared up.

“He thinks you could be in it just after the New Year. When my parents are supposed to be home.”

“That would be wonderful.” She sighed and rested her head back. “I’d love to walk through it, but I’m too hungry and tired.”

“How about we stop off at Baked. I’ll run in and grab us a pie, then we can head home?” he suggested.

“Sounds great.”

While Wyatt rushed through the light rain, she laid her head back on the seat and glanced around her small town.

Why would anyone ever want to leave here?

All the Christmas lights made the town look like a beacon in the night. Every streetlamp in town had lighted decorations. The massive Christmas tree that Wyatt had lit days before had the entire square shining.

Every shop along the main street had their own decorations and flashing lights in their display windows.

Pride was the epitome of the perfect Christmas town. She felt her own pride of being part of the festive town swell as she thought back to how many parades she’d been in. How many times she’d helped decorate a float or a storefront.

Then she glanced through the windows of Baked and wondered if Wyatt would ever feel the urge to leave town again. Her heart sank at that thought.

Had he told her he was here to stay because of what happened to her?

She didn’t want to be an anchor, holding him to a place he had no desire to be.

There was no doubt in her mind that he loved her. There never had been. Even if that love was due to the fact that they’d known each other their entire lives.

There were more than a hundred people who lived here that she could say the same about. Several of them she considered family, even though they weren't blood relatives.

When Wyatt came rushing back with two large pizza boxes and a bag, she saw several people standing in the windows and waving at her.

"Everyone wanted us to come in, but I told them you were too tired." He climbed into the truck. "Your folks were in there too." He motioned to the windows.

Sure enough, her entire family stood inside, waving at her.

She waved back. "Thanks." She was too tired to deal with so many people. Even though a lot of the pain had disappeared after surgery, she still had a dull ache on the side of her head. The stitches were itching, and she ached for a shower and her own clothes.

She wanted to sit in front of a fire, eat pizza, watch a movie, and snuggle up with Wyatt for the rest of her life. But the worry that one day he'd get the itch to leave Pride and her again caused her head and her heart to ache.

CHAPTER 14



After getting Hannah settled on the sofa in front of the fire that he'd started, he set the pizza on the coffee table, got napkins and two cans of root beer, and handed her the remote for the television.

"Comfy?" he asked her.

"Yes. Thanks for grabbing me my pajamas and slippers." She wiggled her feet with the bear claw slippers on them.

She was now dressed in the brightest red-and-green flannel pajamas that he'd ever seen.

When she pulled the quilt from the back of the sofa, he helped her arrange it over her lap as she flipped through channels until she found a Christmas movie.

"I'm going to head up and change." He looked down at the clothes that his sister had brought to the hospital a few days before. He'd only showered twice while Hannah had been sleeping and had worn the same clothes the entire time.

"Mkay," she said through a bite of pizza, her eyes glued to the set.

He showered quickly, then pulled on a pair of his own flannel pajamas and thick socks. The house was cold so he turned up the thermostat a little. He knew the fire would heat the place up the rest of the way.

It hadn't snowed the entire time Hannah had been in the hospital. Still, the temperatures were cold enough that he figured they'd get more snow before the end of the week.

During the entire time Hannah had been in the hospital, they'd talked a lot. Not once, however, about their future. Only about her wanting to return here with him instead of going to her parents' place.

Still, when she'd requested to stop off and see the house she was building, he'd wondered.

Would she want him to move in with her?

Should he ask her?

What sort of commitment was he willing to give her?

The thought of marriage had sent him running years ago.

He'd run from her but hadn't from Lisa. Why? What had been different?

With Lisa, he hadn't really felt like his heart was on the line. She'd been the safe choice. Looking back at it now he knew that was totally ironic.

He couldn't remember a single day of his life that he hadn't felt too much for Hannah. She was his everything. Even when he'd left Pride, she had filled his dreams.

When he'd tried to convince her that he'd return someday to be with her again, she'd acted like she'd wait. Not once had he ever believed that.

Now, he knew it was the truth. Somehow, it made him feel like a bigger fool.

As he glanced down over the stair railing to her snuggled below on the sofa eating pizza, dressed in her pajamas and laughing at a movie, he felt his heart swell. The love he'd always felt for her had grown so much, it was a wonder it didn't burst out of his chest.

Nothing and no one could ever make him leave her again.

Now, as he thought about marrying Hannah, there were no panicked thoughts. No fear or urge to flee. No thoughts of being trapped or tricked like he had with Lisa. Only joy and excitement.

Hannah spotted him out of the corner of her eye and waved him down.

“Come on, pizza’s getting cold.” She held open the blanket for him to sit next to her.

Smiling, he went downstairs and took the spot next to her, then sat back and enjoyed the pizza, the movie, and being home with her.

They fell asleep in each other’s arms and, for the first time in years, he was right where he wanted to be for the rest of his life.

Hannah returned to work three days after she was released from the hospital. He wished she’d taken more time off, but since Dr. Stevens assured them both that she was on the mend, she insisted she head in and help. Rose was still off work with the new baby, and Jacob was having to handle everything himself.

He’d gone back to work himself the day after she’d gotten home. There was still so much for him to do around the store that he ended up working late a few nights.

His sister stepped up and stayed with Hannah during the times when he couldn’t be there. Avery even helped Hannah clean up the shaved spot above her left ear. They came up with a crazy idea to shave a thin strip above each of her ears so they would match. He liked the look, even though she still had a bandage over the stitches.

Her long hair easily fell over the shorter spots so that they weren’t really noticeable. At least to anyone except her.

When anyone visited, she wore hats or a beanie to hide the stitches and scar.

Her family visited often and, to his surprise, when he came home one night from work, they all enjoyed a wonderful dinner that her mother had cooked.

Somehow, Christmas presents appeared under their tree, and he realized that he had yet to go shopping for anything.

The first week Hannah was back at work, he stopped off at Classy and Sassy after work to get a few items.

“So, what else are you going to get Hannah?” Riley asked as she and Lilly worked on wrapping what he’d purchased for Hannah, Avery, and a few other people. He wanted to get something small for each of his employees and settled on coffee thermos mugs with different funny sayings for each employee.

More? He thought about what else he wanted to give Hannah and instantly thought of his dad’s grandmother’s ring, which sat in the family safe. His father had given his mother that ring when they’d first married. On their tenth anniversary, he’d purchased her a new ring and had put the heirloom in the safe for him to give his future bride one day.

Deep down, he’d always believed that Hannah would one day wear it. He smiled and asked, “Do you happen to have a ring box?”

Riley and Lilly both cheered at the same time.

“It’s about damn time you asked Hannah.” Riley slugged him on the shoulder.

“Don’t tell,” he warned the cousins.

“Never.” They both made motions of locking their lips together and tossing the imaginary key over their shoulders at the same time.

“How old are you two?” he joked.

“So, have you asked her yet?” Lilly asked.

“Nope.” He frowned. “I... I’m not sure how to go about it.”

“Well, you can’t just leave this under the tree.” Lilly held up an antique-looking blue ring box from one of their display cases. “I resurfaced this last year.”

It was perfect. Taking it from her, he could just imagine his great-grandmother’s beautiful silver ring with its simple cut diamond in the middle sitting in it.

“It’s perfect,” he said as his heart jumped in his chest. This was real. He was going to ask Hannah to marry him. For the first time in his life, he was going to propose to someone.

Loaded down with all the wrapped boxes, and the blue ring box in his coat pocket, he hauled everything inside in two trips.

By the time Hannah arrived home, he had put his great-grandmother’s ring in the box and shoved it in the back of his sock drawer. All the other presents were situated under the tree. He noted that there more than a dozen gifts under the tree with his name on them. Some were from Avery or Hannah’s family and others from Hannah herself.

Thankfully, Riley had suggested he get her family a few things since they had all planned on spending Christmas day together over at their house. His sister was going to join in because their parents were on their cruise.

“Wow,” Hannah said, walking into the house and seeing the new gifts under the tree. “You went shopping.”

After setting up the gifts, he’d lit a fire and had made them grilled chicken, mashed potatoes, and honey carrots for dinner.

When he’d heard her pull up, he’d opened a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass.

“I did.” He held up the wine glass for her. “How was your day?” he asked after giving her a kiss.

“Great. I sold lot twenty-three.” She smiled and took a sip of the wine. “How was yours?”

“Great. I moved the end caps back today and came up with a new easy way of taking special orders. Well, actually, Josh did that, since he created the app, but I started putting everything in it. By the start of the year, everyone in Pride will be able to order their groceries on an app and schedule grocery deliveries.”

“That’s impressive. And from the smell of it, you cooked dinner.” She tapped her glass to his.

“I did.” He smiled.

“Did you ever think you’d enjoy running the store that you worked at all throughout high school?” she asked.

“Never,” he answered as he held her chair out for her.

Once she was sitting at the table enjoying her wine, he rushed around and put the food on the table.

“Wow, this all looks amazing,” she said as he sat down beside her. “What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion.” He took a sip of his wine. “Just... happy you’re home.” He held up his wine glass.

While they ate dinner, they talked about their work. She filled him in on her new responsibilities since she had gotten her real estate license. He filled her in on his future plans for the store.

Each of them hung on to the other’s words as they talked.

It wasn’t until after they had finished doing their dishes that he realized just how different his and Lisa’s relationship had been from his and Hannah’s. He really had been a fool.

Since his return home, his return to Hannah, they had only been together physically that one night. Even though they’d promised not to regret it, he was pretty sure she had for a while.

Then she’d been hurt, and her health had been the only thing that had mattered. Even now, if he thought for an instant that he’d hurt her in any way, he’d walk away forever.

But when they moved to the sofa, she started rubbing herself up against him and, well, he stopped thinking.

“Hannah,” he groaned as she pressed her lips against his.

“Wyatt,” she replied in the same tone. Then she pulled back and smiled down at him. “Don’t make me hurt you.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his hands moving over her hips.

She nodded quickly. “You’ve been avoiding me since we got back.”

“You had brain surgery,” he pointed out.

“Only a minor one.” She smiled. “Six stitches. I seem to remember you getting more in your leg one summer when you thought it was a good idea to jump the gorge on your dirt bike.”

He smiled. “That was a good summer.”

“Only because you broke your leg and had to spend every day inside with me.”

“Well, yeah.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I think that’s the first time I got to second base.”

She laughed. “I remember me getting there before you.” She pointed a finger into his chest. “Just like now.” She reached down and gripped him through his pants and almost had his eyes crossing as she started stroking him through the material.

“Hannah,” he warned again.

“Wyatt,” she said again, only this time it was a moan as his hands moved to her butt and pulled her next to him.

“Take me upstairs,” she said against his lips.

He jerked them off the sofa and rushed up the stairs with her in his arms. He didn’t care that they’d left the television on or that he hadn’t even locked up. What mattered most was pleasing her. Whatever she wanted, he wanted to give to her.

When he laid her down on the bed, she reached for him, but he stood back and kicked off his jeans and pulled his shirt over his head. He made a point to grab the condom from his back pocket.

Hannah had risen up to rest on her elbows, watching him.

“Do you really think that Lisa believes her baby is yours?” she asked.

He frowned down at the condom. “No, I think that if she really is pregnant, that she knows it’s not mine. She used to complain about these.” He set the packet down next to her and

then shifted to sit beside her, dressed only in his boxers. “Do you believe me?”

She reached over and took his hand in hers. “I lost count of how many times we were together over the years, but what I never lost track of was that each time, you were safe.” She motioned to the condom. “You never forgot protection. Never.” She cupped his face and turned it until he was facing her. “I believe you. She is, after all, a viper.”

He chuckled and then leaned in and kissed her. “I should have never left you,” he said between kisses. She lifted up and straddled his hips, still fully dressed in her work slacks and blouse.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” she purred, and then she leaned back as he unbuttoned her shirt slowly.

When he placed his lips on her skin, she arched and moaned for him. The sounds were so familiar, so rewarding, that he figured he could spend a lifetime listening to them.

Then she moved over him, and his inner narrative stopped as his inner beast took over.

He clawed at her clothes until she was naked, lying under him, gasping for air, and begging him to never stop.

When he covered her pussy with his mouth, she cried out his name, burying her fingers into his hair while he lapped at her, demanding everything she was. Everything she had.

He wanted—no, he needed—more.

“Everything,” he growled against her soft skin. “I need everything.”

“Wyatt,” she cried out again moments later as he slid a finger deep into her heat.

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you,” he said as he shifted up, slid on the condom, and plunged into her. “I mean it,” he added as her legs wrapped around his hips.

“Don’t ever leave me again,” she said. Her fingers twisted in his hair as her eyes met his.

“Never,” he promised. He kissed her. “Never again.”

CHAPTER 15



Waking up in Wyatt's arms again was like returning to your favorite spot in the world. This, right here, was her home. Feeling his heated skin against hers, hearing his shallow breathing, his heart beating against her ear, was the best feeling in the world.

She knew that she should probably go slow with him. After all, he'd broken her trust once. But this was Wyatt. The only man she'd ever been with and the only one she ever wanted to be with.

She was smiling when she heard her phone ring somewhere downstairs.

Wyatt groaned and shifted as if to get up.

"No, don't. Whoever it is will leave a message." She held him in place. "Besides, it's cold in the house." She shivered as she held onto his warmth.

His arms wrapped around her again and he sighed.

"This is nice," he said into her hair. "Home." He sighed, causing her smile to double.

"Do you work today?" she asked.

"Yup." He glanced at her clock and groaned. "In an hour."

"I'm heading to Edgeview with your sister to do some more shopping."

"More? There are at least three dozen presents under the tree already."

“I have a few more to get still. Plus, I need to help your sister flirt with a guy.”

“Who?” he asked with a frown.

Hannah chuckled. “Nope, I’m sworn to secrecy. We all know what happens when Avery likes a boy and you get involved.”

“I only punched Rodrick because he punched me first,” Wyatt pointed out.

“Rodrick was a dick; I was talking about Carson.”

“Who?” Wyatt asked, shifting slightly until they were face to face. The smile on his lips told her that he knew exactly who she was talking about.

“Believe it or not, your sister has done just fine picking men on her own since you’ve been gone,” she said.

He frowned. “And you?”

“Me?” She tilted her head slightly, then sat up.

“Did you go on any dates? I mean, I know you said you hadn’t...” He motioned with his hand, sort of like shooing a fly away. “But you must have gone out with someone occasionally.”

She didn’t want to give him the names of their friends who had asked her out. Nor give him the details of those one-time dates, which ended in serious disappointment. Besides, it wasn’t as if he’d told her about every girl he’d gone out with or slept with since breaking things off with her.

She had a right to some secrets. Right?

She shrugged and started to get out of the bed, but he held her there. “Hannah?” he said, almost begging.

“I went out on a few dates,” she admitted, growing a little agitated that he’d be so concerned. “It’s not like I meant to wait for you to come back, it’s just...” She sighed and rolled her shoulders, growing more frustrated. “As expected, none of them compared. Okay?” She threw up her hands in frustration.

His smile grew. “Who?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I know better than to give you names of guys I went out on dates with.” She rolled out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom before he could say anything else. She heard his alarm on his phone ring from somewhere in the house as she went.

It was childish of her, but she hid in the bathroom until she heard him climb into the shower in his parents’ bathroom.

By the time she was dressed for her day with Avery, Wyatt had already downed a cup of coffee.

“You can’t hide from me forever.” He set his mug down and walked over to pull her into his arms.

“Just until you learn that who I spent my time with while you were gone isn’t up for discussion.”

He was silent for a moment before nodding. “You’re right. I’m sorry. No more prying. I promise.”

“Good.” She lifted on her toes and brushed her lips across his. “Have a good day at work.”

He smiled. “Have a fun day shopping.”

“I always do with Avery.”

He kissed her once more until she felt her legs turn to jelly, then left.

She sat down and replayed the previous night in her head until she heard Avery’s car arrive outside.

Avery was the only person Hannah had ever felt like she could be one hundred percent herself around. Even if that meant she was complaining about her brother. And during the first few months after Wyatt had left Pride, she had done that a lot.

Most of Hannah and Avery’s school friends had either left Pride after school or had gotten married right away and were busy with their families. Which is probably why the two friends had grown even closer in the past few years.

During the drive to Edgeview, they chatted about basically everything.

Besides working at the bakery part time, Avery filled in for the dispatchers at the police and fire stations on occasion since her dad was the fire chief.

This was always an advantage since Avery heard things before the gossip mill could pick them up.

“I heard something the other day that I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you,” Avery said when they were halfway to the other town.

“What?” she asked, curious what her friend would feel strange talking to her about.

“Well, it’s about... Lisa.” She turned to look at her briefly.

“What about her?” Hannah glanced out the window. It was one of those gray days in Oregon where you wished it would rain or snow so there was an excuse for the dreariness.

“She was released on bond the day you got out of the hospital.”

“Right.” Hannah had heard that much. She wasn’t too worried about the woman coming back, not after Hannah’s newly hired lawyer, George Stevens, Dr. Stevens’s son, had officially pressed charges against Lisa and filed for a restraining order for both her and Wyatt.

“Well, there’s a rumor going around that she checked into a mental health clinic.”

“Good, she could use some help,” Hannah countered.

“Well, that’s what I thought, but then George stopped by and was talking about how Lisa’s lawyer was claiming that she had a mental break due to the stress that Wyatt had caused her by breaking off their engagement.”

“Okay,” Hannah said slowly.

“Lisa is suing Wyatt for breaching an agreement,” Avery said, biting her bottom lip. “I know it’s totally not going to amount to anything, but I called our folks and they think—”

Hannah held up her hand to stop Avery. “Wait. The viper is suing Wyatt for breaking off their engagement, which she

strongarmed him into in the first place and then cheated on him the entire time?”

Avery shrugged. “Sounds like it.”

Hannah surprised her friend by laughing. “Let her try. No judge in his right mind would prosecute him.”

“That’s what I thought. Until I found out that Lisa’s father and two of her uncles are judges in Portland. If the case is seen in Portland, then there’s three chances the judge will be related to her,” Avery pointed out.

So, Hannah had been right after all. Lisa did come from a wealthy family. Judges. Yeah, that seemed about right. After all, the woman acted like she had never been punished in her entire life. Her daddy could just bail her out.

“They’d have to recuse themselves from the case,” Hannah pointed out. “I’m not worried. Let her sue.”

“I wish I’d talked to you sooner. I’ve been so worried all week about it.” Avery pulled into the mall’s parking lot. “Do you think he’s working?”

“Who? Lucas?” Hannah sang his name and started teasing Avery like they were in middle school.

Avery laughed and then pinched Hannah’s arm.

“Grow up.”

“Make me.” Hannah stuck out her tongue.

The pair of them were laughing as they walked into the mall arm and arm.

Their first stop was to the coffee shop, where they each grabbed a peppermint mocha and pretzel bites to snack on while they plotted the best route through the mall. Each of them knew this place like the back of their hand. It was probably their ten-thousandth trip there together.

All the stores were decked out in holiday cheer. In the center of the mall stood a three-story Christmas tree, which Santa and Mrs. Claus sat underneath. The line to see the jolly man was wrapped around the center space three times.

“Why did we think it was a good idea to do shopping the week before Christmas?” Avery complained when they had to push their way through a group of people who had stopped mid-stride in the middle of the hallway.

“Because when else can you experience this in a mall nowadays?” Hannah joked as she motioned around the crowded space.

“True.” Avery wrapped her arm through Avery’s as they weaved through the crowd.

Several very long hours later, they found their way back to Avery’s car and loaded up all the wrapped gifts they’d purchased. Avery’s items went in the trunk, and Hannah shoved her gifts in the back seat.

“I’m done,” she groaned as they drove away. “I spent far too much this year. It’s going to take me until next Christmas to pay off my credit cards.”

Avery laughed. “I’m cutting up all my cards when I get home.”

“Why do we do this every year?” she asked, leaning back. “Oh!” She sat up and pointed to her favorite drive-through. “Milkshakes.”

Avery laughed and pulled off the road and into the drive-through.

As they waited in the car lane to order, Avery turned slightly towards her.

“So, are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?” When Hannah just raised her eyebrows and shrugged, Avery sighed. “My brother. You. Your future together.”

Hannah sighed. “He hasn’t technically said that he is sticking around, not really. He told me that he would give me anything I wanted and when I asked him to stay, he agreed.”

“That’s something.” Avery smiled. “He seems happy with his job at the store.”

“He does. Really. I mean, I don’t remember him being this excited to work anywhere else.”

“Remember when he worked a summer at the station with our dad?” Avery said and they both laughed. “Maybe someday we’ll finally be sisters.”

“No matter what happens, you are my sister.” She slugged Avery playfully on the shoulder.

“Ditto,” Avery replied and then turned to order their shakes.

When they pulled into the driveway of Avery and Wyatt’s parents’ house, Wyatt stepped out on the porch.

“Good. He can help you carry your stuff inside. It’s too cold out there.” Avery nudged her. “Thanks for going with me today.”

“Sure thing. I’m sorry your guy wasn’t working.” Hannah leaned over and hugged her.

“It’s okay. Maybe next time he will be. If not...” She shrugged.

“Hey.” Wyatt opened her door for her. “Hey, sis.” He leaned down and smiled at Avery.

“Hey, you get to help her carry in all that.” Avery motioned to the back seat.

“Wow,” Wyatt said, then quickly got to work hauling everything in.

It took them two trips to get everything in and under the tree.

“If you buy anything else, we’ll have to go chop down a second tree,” Wyatt joked as they sat by the fire sipping hot chocolate.

“Your sister told me about what Lisa is trying to pull on you. How she’s trying to sue you.” She saw his frustration surface. “I’m sorry you have to go through this.”

“You’re sorry?” He frowned and then shook his head. “She almost killed you.” He reached over and took her free hand. “You have nothing to be sorry about. Whatever Lisa throws at me, I can handle, except for her hurting you.”

Hannah's heart did a little flip. Then, when Wyatt leaned forward and brushed his lips gently across hers, it did a full-on cliff dive.

She'd been fooling herself that their nights together were just a moment of weakness. She kept telling herself to back off, not trust, delay the heartbreak. But in truth, not being with Wyatt would cause her heart to break even more.

When he leaned back, breaking the light contact, she set her mug down, then slid over him to straddle his hips.

"Wyatt," she said, sinking her fingers into his hair. "I don't want to keep fighting what I feel for you."

His eyes were glued to hers, and she could see relief in them as his hands moved to her hips and gripped her tightly.

"You hurt me by leaving. It broke my heart being abandoned. I felt as if I wasn't good enough to keep you here," she admitted.

"No." He frowned and shook his head. "That's not—"

She stopped him by placing her lips over his.

"Whatever it was, it doesn't matter now. For now, I can't keep denying what I feel. I don't want to any longer. For now, let's just... enjoy." She leaned in and poured everything she felt for Wyatt into the kiss.

She felt him vibrate under her, and he gave up trying to talk to her. His fingers dug into her hips as she took the kiss deeper than any other before.

He was hers. Even if it was just for now.

CHAPTER 16



*H*ow in the hell had he never thought that his leaving town would have that effect on Hannah? He wanted to stop her and explain that he was the one who hadn't been enough for her.

His only reason for leaving was that he'd felt unworthy to spend a lifetime with her. His stupid young mind had thought he needed to go off to the city to make something of himself. Something that would be worthy of her.

But what she was doing to him currently had his mind sliding to other places. Her demands were so powerful, he lost track of his thoughts, until only one thing mattered.

Hannah.

When she shifted over him and reached down to grip him, he groaned and made the decision to show her just what she meant to him.

He swooped her up in one quick motion and carried her up the stairs and into the bedroom without breaking the kiss.

He had to prove to her that he wanted to spend a lifetime with her. He planned on telling her the moment that he could come up with the right words, but for tonight, he could at least show her.

When he slipped off her pajamas, it was as if he was unwrapping the best gift he'd ever received. He took extra time, appreciating each inch of soft, perfect skin that he exposed.

Her soft sounds each time he lapped at her or ran a fingertip softly over a spot she enjoyed pushed him almost to his breaking point.

When she was finally lying on the bed completely naked, he leaned up and slowly ran his eyes over her. Mine, he thought. I will make her understand everything. Soon.

“Wyatt.” She reached her arms up for him. “Please.”

Unable to deny her anything, he covered her body with his own. “Later, I’ll prove to you, everything,” he said next to her ear.

When he slid slowly into her, he lost any hold he had on his own self and gave everything to the only woman he had ever loved.

“It’s snowing still,” Hannah said when they woke.

“It’s December in Oregon.” He sighed and pulled her warm body closer to his. “Tell me you don’t have to work today,” he groaned.

“It’s Sunday, so no. You?” she asked after he started trailing his mouth over her neck.

“Nope. I have plans to spend the entire day right here.” Then he thought of his empty stomach, and added, “Well, maybe I’ll spend a little time to grab some food at one point.”

She chuckled and then spun around in his arms to look at him.

“One week until Christmas.” She ran her eyes over him. “Do you like it here?”

He made a point to glance around the room, which caused her to smile. “Here?” He pulled her closer. “Yes, very much so. You?”

She mimicked his move and glanced around the room. “My new home should be done by the time your folks get back.”

His heart skipped a beat. “Will you be ready to move in?”

She shrugged. "I have some furniture." Then she frowned. "What happened to all your stuff in Portland?"

"I put some of it in storage. The rest I didn't want, so I donated it as I left town." He brushed a strand of her hair out of her eyes.

"Once I'm in the house, I plan on hiring Blake Jordan to fill it with nice things." Hannah sighed. "She has done amazing things for the model homes and a few other clients' homes."

"It sounds like you have it all planned out already." He brushed his lips across hers.

"I hadn't planned for this." She sighed. "Falling for you again."

He smiled and felt his insides warm.

"Neither did I. To be honest, I just knew I couldn't stand the way I left things when you got into your accident. Lisa was so jealous, and I get it. She saw what I was too dumb to realize."

"What's that?" Hannah asked.

His eyes locked with hers. "That I never stopped loving you."

He watched her reaction.

"You're really going to stay?" she asked.

He nodded. "As long as you'll put up with me."

She smiled. "I'd put up with you more if you kissed me right now."

Making love to the woman he loved, had loved his entire life, while the snow slowly fell outside was one of the best feelings in the world. They had the entire day to spend together, to re-explore one another, so they moved slowly.

After a lazy hot shower, they headed downstairs and made apple-walnut-cinnamon pancakes with caramel syrup and whipped cream. They enjoyed watching the snow continue to fall while they ate and sipped hot apple cider.

Around noon, she got a call from Dr. Stevens that he wanted to come check on her and possibly remove her stitches.

When Aaron and Lacey Stevens arrived, they each had arms full of pre-made dishes that she had made for Hannah for the week.

“I figured you might enjoy some home-cooked meals without all the work.” Lacey set down the containers and then hugged Hannah before giving him a hug. “You’re looking rested,” she told them both.

“It’s nice having the day off to spend together,” Hannah said as she smiled over at him.

“Come sit over here and let me have a look at your head,” Dr. Stevens told Hannah.

Hannah sat on a barstool, and Dr. Stevens gently removed the bandages while Wyatt helped Lacy put the meals into the fridge and freezer.

Lacey asked him questions about his work, and he lost himself in talking to her about the plans he had for the store. How he and Josh Williams had come up with the grocery order app and planned to implement it in the New Year.

“All done,” Dr. Stevens said.

He looked over at Hannah. It was the first time he’d seen the scar above her ear. His knees turned to jelly, and he had to grip the countertop.

She only had a half dozen or so stitches, but the scar was red, puckered, and bigger than he’d expected.

“Don’t worry, her hair will cover it soon enough,” Lacey said, touching his arm.

“I’m not worried about how it looks. I... should have been faster or done something to stop it from happening in the first place.”

“There was nothing you could have done,” Hannah said, glancing towards him. “I had just gotten out of the car, and Lisa was on me so fast. I didn’t even have a chance to put up a fight. And we all know that I can. Besides, my elf shoes had

zero traction, which played a huge part in causing me to slip and fall,” she added with a grin.

She was right, but he still felt hollow in the pit of his stomach.

“Here,” Lacey said, handing him the last container. “I had my brother make you some pecan pie. Mine is better, but Iian does a solid job,” she added with a wink. “That should do it. I think the two of you should be set for meals until your folks return.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, jumping off the stool and hugging them both. “For the food and for saving my life,” she told Dr. Stevens.

“Everyone in town was so worried about you,” Lacey said. “We’ve never had any townspeople have brain surgery before.”

“There’s a first for everything.” Hannah walked over to wrap her arms around Wyatt. “Can I go without a bandage on now?” She motioned to the side of her head.

“Yes, but if it starts bleeding or...” Dr. Stevens started but Hannah nodded and interrupted.

“If my brain starts leaking from the scar, I’ll call you,” she joked.

“What about the woman that did this?” Lacey asked.

“We have restraining orders in place,” Wyatt answered.

“I heard she’s trying to sue you?” Dr. Stevens asked.

“Trying.” He smiled. “Your son is taking care of it.”

Both Lacey’s and Aaron’s smiles grew.

“It’s a good thing George is back in Pride,” Hannah said.

“It is,” Lacey agreed. “It’s a good thing you’re back in town too.” She touched Wyatt’s arm.

Just then, Aaron’s phone rang, and he stepped into the hallway to answer the call.

“Well, if you need—” Lacey started, but Aaron rushed back into the room.

“Sorry, we have an emergency,” Aaron said as he gathered up everything from his medical bag. “It’s Patty,” he told Lacey.

“O’Neil?” Wyatt asked, feeling his heart jump in his chest.

“Yes,” Aaron confirmed.

“Is she okay?” Wyatt asked, worried.

The look the doctor gave him made his worry double. “Is there anything we can do?”

Lacey touched his arm again. “Honey, just pray she passes peacefully.”

“What? Surely, it’s not that bad. She was just in the store a few days ago.”

“She’s on borrowed time,” Dr. Stevens said as they rushed out of the house.

“Keep me posted,” Wyatt called after them as they raced through the snow to their truck.

Hannah walked up and wrapped her arms around him. “Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Growing up, Patty was like a really cool aunt to me,” he admitted as his eyes stung. “She was always there for me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Hannah said softly.

He shut the door and wrapped his arms around her. “There’s nothing we can do but wait.” He closed his eyes as memories of Patty ran through his mind.

“How about we cut into that pie? Getting my stitches removed has made me hungry.” She pulled him back towards the kitchen.

While they waited for word on Patty, they turned on a movie to keep occupied.

Almost an hour later, his phone rang.

“It’s Dr. Stevens,” he told Hannah before answering. “Hello?”

“Hi, Wyatt, it’s Lacey. We thought you would want to know that Patty passed away half an hour ago. She went peacefully and her last words were that she was happy her store was in good hands.”

His heart sank and his eyes filled with tears. “Thank you for letting me know,” he heard himself say in a strange voice. He hung up the phone as Hannah’s arms wrapped around him, and he cried for the loss of the woman who meant more to him than he’d allowed himself to show.

Five days later he sat in George Stevens’s legal office along with a group of other townspeople to hear the reading of Patty’s will.

Everyone in town had attended her funeral a few days prior. The whole of Pride had shut down for the event. Then, everyone met up at the Golden Oar for the best reception the town had seen in years.

Now, George’s office was packed with a handful of familiar faces, not one of them dry eyed as George read Patty’s last words to her friends and family.

“My dear friends, I hope there isn’t a dry eye in the room or a frown on any of your faces. I lived my life strong and happy, as I know many of you do. Each and every person in this room I loved just the same way. The people in this town are the reason I woke up each day and smiled. I loved serving Pride for over sixty years. Not a day went by that I didn’t find happiness here. I hope some in the room will take note of the fact that this small town holds more than any big city ever could.”

At this point, several eyes turned towards him, and he frowned.

“Yes, boy, everyone is probably looking at you, Wyatt. Since I feel like I’ve helped bring you up to be the man you are today, I want you to know that hiring you to manage O’Neil’s was a huge mistake.”

Several people gasped, and his heart sank while George continued to read.

“I should have signed over the store to you the day you walked in wearing that stupid suit to take over doing my job.” George chuckled and continued reading. *“So, now that I’m gone, I’ve made sure to fix that mistake.”* George slid a piece of paper across the desk towards him. *“Don’t squander your life. Enjoy every moment of it and, for god’s sake, marry the girl. She’s been waiting a lifetime for you. If you were smart, you wouldn’t let the sun set today without asking her. And I know you’re not stupid, boy. I know O’Neil’s will be in good hands. I’m so very proud of you. But just remember, I’ll be watching over you from heaven, and if you don’t do exactly what I’ve asked, I’ll kick your ass when you finally get up here, which I expect will be a very, very long time from now.”*

Several people chuckled as Wyatt took the piece of paper and looked down at it. It was a copy of Patty’s deed to the entire property—the apartment above the store, the land that it sat on, and the store itself.

“Now, to my other friends...” George continued reading. Wyatt’s eyes blurred from tears while he stared down at the bittersweet gift he’d just been given.

CHAPTER 17



*H*annah was bored. She was too worried about Wyatt to really focus on her work. She had several sales calls that she needed to make before the end of the day, her last day of work until after Christmas, but she was waiting until she heard back from Wyatt.

When the door to the work trailer opened, she glanced up thinking it was Jacob. Instead, Wyatt walked in with a funny look on his face. Immediately, she jumped up from her chair and rushed towards him.

“How did it go?” she asked, wrapping her arms around him.

“Fine.” He sighed and held onto her.

“Are you okay?” she asked, worried that he wasn’t acting normally.

“I... am. Patty was, well, amazing. We all knew that.”

She leaned back to look up at him. “I can’t imagine the town without her.”

“No one can,” he agreed. “I talked to Jacob before coming in here. He told me to break you out of here since it appears no one is going to want to buy a home the Friday before Christmas,” he said with a smile.

“Really?” She thought about the handful of things she should do, but then told herself she could put them off until after the holiday. “Okay.” She rushed around to close down and lock up.

Since it had been snowing again, he'd dropped her off at work in the truck so they didn't have to leave his car there again.

After he helped her into the truck, he pulled out of the small parking area. Instead of heading down the hill towards town, he turned to go up to the top of the hill where her house sat.

So much had been done on the place in the past few weeks. Carpet and flooring were currently being installed, and the cabinets were getting their finishing touches as well.

With just a handful of small items to be finished, there wasn't any doubt that they'd be able to move in after the New Year. All that was left was to ask Wyatt if he'd move in with her, which she had planned on doing Christmas morning.

She'd purchased a special gift that would help her with the task and couldn't wait for him to open it. Since she was worried the small gift would be lost among all the bigger boxes under the tree, she carried it in her purse.

"Wow," Wyatt said, stopping in front of the place. "It looks like a home."

"It is. Want to go in?"

He shook his head. "No, let's not bother the workers. I have some place else for us to be." He pulled around the cul-de-sac and headed down the hill.

They drove into town and parked in the store parking lot, facing the windows. Looking out at the building, Wyatt was silent for a moment.

"What will happen to this place now?" she asked when he finally turned off the truck.

He sat there, looking at the store for another moment in silence as the snow continued to fall.

"This really is the most perfect place in the world," he said softly.

She smiled. "It sure is."

“I had big plans, you know,” he said, suddenly turning towards her. “I was going to be someone this town could be proud of. Show everyone I could go out on my own and make something of myself.”

She nodded slowly, swallowing the fear that leapt out as she remembered all the times that he’d talked like this in the past. Remembering when he’d finally left to do just that.

Then he reached over and took her hand in his. “I was a fool. I didn’t have to travel to the city to do any of that. It was all right here, waiting for me.” He motioned towards her and then the store. “Patty left it to me.”

She blinked a few times. “Left you...”

“O’Neil’s. The grocery store.” He smiled. “It’s mine. The building, the store, the apartment above. Everything. I am now the owner of a very successful, established business.”

“Oh my...” She leaned across the seat and hugged him. “Congratulations,” she said as he hugged her back.

“I was going to do this differently. I had plans,” he said into her hair. “But after today, well, I sort of made a promise to a dear friend. And I certainly don’t want her to kick my ass in the afterlife.” He leaned back and pulled a small blue ring box from his pocket. “Patty told me not to let the sun set tonight without asking you to marry me. So my plans got moved up a few days.” He shifted until he was facing her fully. “Hannah Renee Crawford, will you put me out of my stupidity and marry me?”

She chuckled, then yelled, “Yes!” She hugged and kissed him.

When they separated, he motioned towards the store and honked the horn once. To her surprise, a huge handwritten banner appeared in the windows.

“She said yes!” was written in black lettering.

Laughing, she asked, “What would it have said if I’d said no?”

He chuckled and lifted up the ring box. “I know you’ve been dying to get your hands on my great-grandmother’s ring your entire life.”

Hannah smiled. “Your sister can’t keep a secret.”

“Don’t blame her. After all, you told me as much the first moment you saw it.”

“True.” She held out her finger. “Put it on my finger, and I promise never to take it off again.”

He smiled as he slid the ring onto her finger, then he leaned in and kissed her.

“Since I got a gift early...”—she pulled out the small box she’d been carrying around in her purse—“it’s only fair you get one early too.” She held it out.

Wyatt was smiling when he opened the box and pulled out a set of keys. He held them up.

“These are just the construction set. When the real locks are put on the doors, we’ll get copies. Wyatt Lane Auston, will you move in with me?”

He chuckled and hugged her. “Yes.”

“I wish I had a banner that said “He said yes” on it,” she said when he pulled back.

“Come on inside. I directed everyone to cut open a cake and pop a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne after dropping the banner.” He helped her out of the truck.

They walked into the store hand in hand and were greeted by many cheers.

For the next hour, they nibbled on cake, sipped the bubbly stuff, and talked to everyone who walked into the store about the banner.

Hannah was pretty sure people stopped by the store just to see what it meant. It was a genius marketing ploy since almost everyone purchased something before walking out of the store.

“Do you know what I was thinking?” Wyatt said when they drove home.

“What?” she asked.

“I was thinking of turning the apartment upstairs into an office,” he surprised her by saying.

“For you?”

He shook his head. “No, for you. Since you’ve passed your real estate test, I figured that someday you would like to actually sell real estate. Once you’re done working up at Hidden Cove, that is.”

She hadn’t thought that far ahead. She just knew that she would no longer have to rely on Ellen Rodgers for all the contracts needed for Hidden Cove.

She hadn’t actually made the switch yet since Rose was still officially on maternity leave until after the New Year and she didn’t want to take on the extra work after her surgery.

“You... what about...” She was stumped. “You’d do that for me?”

He chuckled and nodded. “If we’re going to be together, we’re together in everything.” He reached over and took her hand in his. “Always.” He lifted it to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

“Always,” she repeated.

That holiday weekend, Wyatt had to go into work each day, which left her home alone, since the construction sales office was closed until after Christmas. She spent her time visiting her family or hanging out with Avery.

When she went into town, all of the businesses in Pride seemed to be in overdrive. Last-minute gifts were being purchased or wrapped, and all of the restaurants were flooded with townspeople before everything would be shut down for a few days.

She ran to the bakery that morning to visit Avery at work and ended up sitting at a booth for a few hours just talking to her friends and showing off her ring and her surgical scar to everyone who came in.

After the bakery, she walked around town and bought a few last-minute gifts before settling in a booth at the Brew-Ha-Ha and reading a book while enjoying a cup of coffee. Well, two cups. The Brew-Ha-Ha sat across the town square from O'Neil's, and she kept glancing out the window towards the store in anticipation of Wyatt getting off work.

Their engagement had spread quickly throughout the town and now it seemed as if it was old news. More people were excited about Wyatt taking over O'Neil's and asking her if he had plans to change the name now that there wasn't an O'Neil running the place.

She kept telling everyone that she had no idea and they would have to ask Wyatt, but she knew perfectly well that he planned to keep the name in honor of Patty.

George and Robin came in almost an hour after she arrived and sat with her and chatted about their new life together. Just before they left, George brought up the fact that he hadn't heard from Lisa's attorney again after he filed his counterclaim against her.

"The fact that she physically harmed you to the point of needing brain surgery is our ticket to freedom. Besides, really, no judge would side with her about breach of a relationship," George added. "It's frivolous and a waste of the court's time. Trust me, you two don't have anything to worry about. The restraining order should keep her away, plus I know that Aiden and the rest of the crew are keeping an eye out for her."

"Thanks," she said, feeling totally confident in the town's ability to look out for them. Besides, today was Wyatt's last day of working until after Christmas. The store was set to close in less than an hour and wouldn't be open again until the day after Christmas.

Which was why she was wasting so much time in town. She wanted to be there when he got off work. Maybe they could head to lunch at the Golden Oar.

The meals that the Stevens had dropped by were great, but she had been craving a huge steak and a potato.

She sent a text to Wyatt and told him to pick her up at the bookstore when he got off work so they could grab some food.

It took him a few minutes to respond with a simple “see you soon.”

Figuring he was busy, she went back to reading the book she’d just purchased and lost track of time until her stomach growled loudly.

It was a quarter past noon, and when she glanced over, the store was now closed.

She pulled out her phone and called Wyatt. The call went to his voicemail, and she instantly began to worry.

She was just heading out to cross the square and find Wyatt when Aiden and Suzie walked in with their son Justin in a stroller.

“Have you seen Wyatt?” she asked Aiden.

“No.” Aiden frowned and glanced towards the store. “Is everything okay?”

“I... think...” She looked down at her phone, wishing that Wyatt would respond to her text messages or call.

“How about I walk you across the way, and we check on him together?” Aiden said and then turned to Suzie. “I’ll be right back.”

Hannah practically sprinted across the snow-covered grass to the store. She didn’t even register the pretty Christmas lights or decorations that surrounded her. All that mattered to her was getting to the store and finding Wyatt.

“It’s locked up,” Aiden said, banging on the door a few times.

“Wyatt?” Hannah called out as she banged on the door too.

“His truck is still here,” Aiden said, nodding to the parking lot.

“Hey,” someone called out to them.

Hannah turned to see Nick walking towards them. “What’s up, boss?” he asked Aiden.

“Have you seen Wyatt?” Aiden asked Nick.

“Not in about twenty minutes. I stopped off just as Carol was locking up,” Nick answered. “I was heading home when I saw the two of you rush across the way.”

“Go check the back delivery entrance,” Aiden said. He pulled out his phone and called someone as he looked around. “Whose car is that?” he asked, motioning towards a black sedan sitting a few spots from Wyatt’s truck.

Hannah shrugged. “Not sure. People use the parking lot sometimes for other things.”

Aiden walked over to the car and jotted down the license number while he talked to someone. All the while, Hannah kept banging on the glass doors.

Why hadn’t she asked for a set of keys to the place? Tears burned her eyes as Aiden and Nick searched the outside of the building.

She leaned her forehead up against the doors, her fists raw from banging on the glass.

“Wyatt,” she said softly, scanning the inside of the store. Then she saw movement near the back wall and cried out.

“Wyatt?” She banged on the glass again and then cupped her eyes to look inside the dark store again.

“What?” Aiden was back.

“There, I saw... something.” She pointed to the end of the aisle.

“You’re sure?” he asked. When she nodded, he called Nick back. “Give me your baton,” Aiden said.

“Are you sure, boss?” Nick asked.

“Yeah.” He turned to Hannah. “If I’m wrong, I’ll pay for the repairs myself. If not, well, either way. Cover your eyes.” He nodded to Nick who took Hannah by the shoulders and moved back several large steps.

It took Aiden three tries before the front door's glass finally shattered.

"Gun?" Aiden said, holding out his hand to Nick.

"It's my weapon," Nick said. "And I'm in uniform." He stepped through the shattered door.

"Police!" Nick called out.

"Wyatt?" Hannah cried out. She tried to rush forward but was held back by Aiden.

"Stay put," he said as Nick disappeared inside the dark building. "I'm going in too. Promise me you'll stay put."

She nodded as Aiden disappeared into the darkness, holding the baton as a weapon.

She held her breath and hugged herself as she waited. She didn't hear the people come up behind her and wait with her. Arms wrapped around her as worry for Wyatt consumed her every thought.

Her eyes and her mind were so focused that when the dark figure rushed toward the door, she had to blink a few times to realize what was happening. It didn't even dawn on her to get out of the way. Instead, she squared her shoulders and braced for the impact. Braced to take the viper down herself.

This time, Lisa was not going to catch her off guard.

CHAPTER 18



Wyatt was a fool. How had he locked himself in the freezer without his cell phone? He'd been in the thing a hundred times since taking over the store.

He'd only gone in there to grab a pre-made pie so that he could take it to Hannah's family's annual holiday blowout the following night. He'd had Avery bake it specially for him at the bakery and drop it off at the store a few hours before.

Now, pie in hand, he stood at the freezer door and banged on the thing until his knuckles bled.

He was sure his keys, wallet, and phone were still sitting on his desk where he'd left them moments before.

Had Carol already locked up and left for the night?

Okay, don't panic, he told himself. Hannah was waiting for him. They were going to go eat at the Golden Oar. She was sitting across the park in the coffee shop. When he didn't show up, she'd walk over, find his keys and phone on the desk, and hopefully hear him banging on the freezer door.

A few minutes after he got locked in, he was so cold that he almost gave up on everything.

He was just raising his hand to hit the metal door again when it flew open, and he almost lost his balance and fell flat on his face.

"Thanks," he said, trying to stop his teeth from chattering. Then he glanced up and realized who was standing in front of him. Lisa.

“What in the hell?” he asked, bracing himself to push past her and call the police. Only he realized she was holding a gun aimed directly at his chest.

“There, now we’re all alone,” Lisa said with a smile.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, trying to think of a way out.

“I shut you in here until everyone left so that we could talk, privately.” She drew out her words as if she was talking to a child. “I needed you alone so that I could finally explain everything to you.”

“You locked me in here?” he asked, shocked.

“Yes.” She smiled as if proud of herself. “I broke the lock and hid in the bathroom until everyone was gone. After all, you had plenty of signs saying the store was going to be closing at noon today.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“You have to listen to me,” she said firmly, her attitude changing slightly.

“Okay,” he said again.

He figured the only way through this was to listen and bide his time. Time. Damn. What would happen if Hannah showed up? There was no way in hell he was going to let Lisa hurt her again. He’d die first.

“Travis was only a friend. When he opened the door that day, he lied.” Her voice started to rise. “There’s only been you,” she said after taking a deep breath. “I never cheated on you.”

“Okay,” he said again.

Lisa’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t believe me.”

“No, I don’t. You said differently when you knocked on my door the next morning,” he pointed out.

Lisa’s eyes narrowed. “I only said those things because I was angry at you for not answering the door.”

“That doesn’t mean every word you said wasn’t true.”

“You jackass,” Lisa screamed, and her hold on the gun wavered. Her face turned bright red. “You cheated on me with that girl. The one you’re infatuated with,” she yelled.

“No, I didn’t,” he said calmly.

“You’re sleeping with her now. I heard you’re engaged. You lied to me during our entire relationship. Besides...” She glanced around as if trying to come up with something else. “You... you probably stole this store from the owner after you killed her,” Lisa added.

Wyatt almost laughed. “You’re reaching. And what I do with my life now is none of your business. You are no longer in it,” he said, still trying to remain calm.

Each minute that passed by, the fear of Hannah showing up and Lisa hurting her tripled.

“Go home,” he said, taking a step slowly back.

“No!” Lisa screamed, then she shifted and took a deep breath. “Here’s what is going to happen. You’re going to come with me back to Portland. We’ll sell this tacky little store and buy ourselves a big house in the suburbs.” She smiled and her eyes went a little unfocused.

“What about Travis?” he asked.

“What about him?” Lisa said, sounding a little offended.

“Isn’t he the father of your child?” He motioned towards her stomach.

Suddenly, she placed her free hand over her flat belly as if only now remembering that she was pregnant.

“I... the baby.” She lifted her chin. “No, you’re the father. I told you”—she lowered her voice—“you’re the only one I’ve been with. Travis lied.”

“You lied. You’re not really pregnant, are you?”

Her eyes narrowed, and Wyatt saw the truth. The woman wasn’t all there. It was as if she couldn’t even get the stories straight in her head.

How had he not seen this before?

“We’re going to go now.” She motioned with the gun. “We’ll leave this town behind us. I forgive you,” she said with a full-faced smile. “For leaving us.” She ran her hand over her stomach a few times. “This will all be in the past. We’ll have such a happy life together.”

Just then there was banging and yelling at the store’s front doors. Lisa jerked her head to the side and, without thinking, he rushed towards her. Unfortunately, his body was still frozen from being locked in the freezer. His legs felt as if they were stiff and made out of iron. His hands and arms refused to work to grip the gun.

Lisa easily pushed him aside, and he fell back into the freezer, hitting the back of his head on the floor. Just as he recovered and managed to stand up again, the freezer door shut again.

“Hannah!” he screamed as he banged on the locked door over and over again.

He lost track of how much time it took for the doors to open again. When they did, Nick was standing on the other side of the door with his gun drawn.

“It was Lisa,” he said quickly. “She’s here. She has a gun.” He tried to rush past Nick.

“Easy,” Nick said, holding him upright. “Aiden?” Nick called out.

Just then they heard a scuffle and screams.

“Over here!” Aiden called out.

Nick dropped his hold, and Wyatt and both men rushed through the store to the front door.

“I must have missed have passed by her or missed her when I came in. She probably snuck past us.” Nick said as they rushed towards the front of the store.

They both stopped at the broken front door and looked out to where Hannah was sitting on Lisa’s back, holding the woman to the ground like one would a spoiled five-year-old.

Lisa was screaming and thrashing about, but Hannah held her arms behind her. She kept her feet on the back of Lisa's head, which was face down in the snow.

"Wyatt?" Hannah cried out when she saw him.

He rushed to her side as Nick ran to control Lisa.

"You're okay." Hannah jumped up and hugged him. "My god, you're freezing," she said when she touched him. She wrapped him in her coat.

"Inside," he said between clenched teeth. "My coat is in my office."

She rushed past him and returned with his coat, keys, and cell phone.

"What happened?" she asked as they both watched Nick place handcuffs on Lisa as she tried to fight him. Watching Nick expertly handle the woman caused his blood to heat a few degrees.

"She locked me in the freezer," he explained as he pulled on his coat and hugged Hannah again.

"Don't ever do that to me again," she sighed against his chest.

"No," he sighed. "Never."

"I want a set of these." She held up his keys, then smacked him in the chest. "Don't do that again. I can't lose you." She hugged him again, crying.

"If she hurt you..." He dropped off as Aiden stepped through the door and saw them.

"She's in custody now," Aiden told him. "I'll buy you a new door." He motioned to the glass with a smile. "I was right," he told Hannah who rushed across the space and hugged him.

"You were." She laughed.

"How did you know?" he asked, feeling his fingers warm up finally. Pain shot through them as the skin warmed too quickly.

“The sedan was a rental.” He motioned to where his truck and a dark sedan sat in the parking lot. “I followed my gut, and seeing Hannah so worried, I knew something was up. Besides, everyone in town knows there’s no way you’d leave her again.” He slapped Wyatt on the shoulder.

Wyatt hissed with pain as the playful slap bounced off his frozen skin.

“Sorry.” Aiden chuckled. “Why don’t you two head on out. I’ll get some help sealing the door until Carl can get a new piece of glass in it for you.”

Wyatt wanted to agree, but he also worried for the store.

“Here.” Hannah took the store’s key off his ring and held it out to Aiden. “I can get this from you later.” Then she took his hand and pulled him out of the store. “I’m driving,” she said, opening the truck’s passenger door and waiting until he stepped up to her. He laid a gentle kiss on her lips and climbed in.

The entire way to his parents’ house, he had the heater vents facing him.

“I can’t seem to get warm,” he groaned when he stepped into the cold house.

“I’ll start a fire.” She walked him to the sofa and threw the blanket over his shoulders. “Then I’ll make you some hot cocoa and soup.”

She lit the fire and by the time the hot drink was ready, he finally felt as if his bones weren’t made of glass.

“How long were you in the freezer?” she asked, handing him the hot mug.

“I don’t know. I’d just gotten your text about meeting you over at the Brew-Ha-Ha.”

“Thirty minutes?” she gasped. “No wonder you’re freezing. Lacey gave us a canister of homemade turkey soup. I’m going to heat that up,” she said as he sipped the hot chocolate.

“Right now, I’d eat anything that is hot.” His body was working overtime to heat itself. By the time she brought the soup over, he was half asleep.

“Wyatt? How are you feeling?” she asked, feeling his forehead.

“Hot. Tired. Alive.”

She frowned at him. “I’m going to call Dr. Stevens,” she said after he took a couple sips of the soup and then set it down.

“No, don’t. I’m just... my body is fighting to get warm. Lay down with me. Let’s watch a movie and get warm together,” he said with a yawn.

“Okay,” she said slowly, and then she snuggled up against him.

He fell asleep before the movie even started.

When he woke, Hannah was sitting next to him as Dr. Stevens took his temperature.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“You’ve been out for hours,” Hannah said with a cry. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay. I was just cold,” he said, feeling slightly light-headed.

“Well, your body did what it was supposed to. It shut down until it could regulate its internal temperature,” Dr. Stevens said with a grin. “The soup probably helped.” He glanced up at Hannah. “He’s not running a fever and, from the looks of it, he’s feeling much better.” Dr. Stevens stood up.

“Yeah, just a little groggy,” he admitted.

“Thank you.” Hannah hugged Aaron and then quickly sat next to Wyatt. “Are you okay?”

“Sure.” He yawned. “How long was I out?”

“Twelve hours.”

“What?” He frowned and looked around.

“I’ll just let myself out,” Dr. Stevens said. “Let me know if there are any changes.” He nodded. “Merry Christmas.”

“Shit, it’s Christmas.” Wyatt glanced at his watch. “We’re supposed to be at your parents’ place in...”—he frowned—“an hour.”

“Which is why I called Dr. Stevens. I wanted you to rest, but then you didn’t wake up.” Hannah hugged him. “You scared me.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, instantly wishing for a long hot shower. “If you give me time, I’ll shower and we can—”

She shook her head. “No, you’re staying put.” She frowned at him as her eyes ran over his face. “We’re staying put.”

“You can’t cancel Christmas because I slept in,” he said with a grin.

He’d hoped to get a smile from her, but she just glanced at her watch and sighed.

“My family will just have to come here.” She nodded once and then pulled out her phone. After she had started typing, she glanced up at him. “They’ll probably be here shortly.” She ran her eyes over him. “Wear the red sweater. The one that I like. I’ll be up to change shortly.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. “Merry Christmas.”

Her smile brightened. “Merry Christmas.”

CHAPTER 19



Seeing her entire family gathered around the Christmas tree that Wyatt had chopped down and they had decorated together warmed her heart. As did watching Wyatt's color come back into his cheeks as he sat next to her while they ate the dinner that her parents and brother had hauled into the house.

Everyone had jumped into action to quickly get the house ready for the big meal.

Wyatt's parents' good dishes were pulled out from the cupboards, rinsed, and dried, then set out on the formal dining room table. A huge red three-wick candle sat in the middle of a festive centerpiece of fresh holly and pine cones.

Christmas music and the smells of a festive meal filled the house, and the fire in the fireplace kept everyone warm.

She couldn't have asked for a better Christmas day.

Her brother and Wyatt acted like old friends, and she and Avery acted like the sisters they had always believed themselves to be.

Both Reece and Avery had brought dates. Reece's date's name was Courtney, and she lived in Edgeview and worked at the hospital. Just how he'd met her, Hannah wasn't quite sure.

Avery's date, however, Hannah knew all too well. Nick Farrow had grown up in Pride and had been working as a cop in town for the past few years. He'd left town shortly after school and had joined the military. He was a good guy, and a great cop.

Apparently, he and Avery were good friends. Only friends, they both had said many times.

Avery had extended the invitation to Nick out of friendship. Which was just fine with her, seeing as he'd helped her and Wyatt out on so many occasions in the past few weeks.

It was nice learning all about Nick had spent his time in the military while they all ate dinner. He talked about his time overseas jumping from country to country. He talked about how it was nice to be home with his family for the holidays again and talked about spending Christmas in barracks eating army food.

Hannah couldn't imagine spending every day of her life for years like that.

After hearing all about his life over the past few years, she realized there were probably a lot of military families spending the holidays away from their homes.

Glancing around the table, she tried to hold back the tears as she thought about not being able to be right here with everyone she loved.

In the past month, she'd come so close to losing everything. What would have happened if she hadn't gotten in her accident, which had caused Wyatt to return home? Would he had really gone through with marrying crazy Lisa?

She just knew that he would have been miserable. No doubt, at one point in the future, he would have seen through her act and left her.

When the topic switched to what had happened the day before, Nick updated them on what had happened to Lisa after she was handcuffed.

"You broke her nose," Nick said to her. "Did you know that?"

"No." She smiled. "Good."

Wyatt reached under the table and took her hand in his. "Paybacks."

“Yeah, right. She broke your brain and you broke her nose,” Avery joked, and everyone laughed.

“Tell me this time she won’t be released,” Hannah asked Nick.

“That’s not really up to the police. We only catch and book, not prosecute them. But something tells me the judge won’t let her go so easily after this time.”

“Of course after yesterday, her lawsuit will be dropped. Right?” her mother asked.

“I would assume so,” her dad added. “I’m sure George will work hard first thing Tuesday morning when the courts are open again to get her lawsuit against you dismissed.” Her dad winked at her. “Nothing to worry about, at least not today.”

In the previous few hours, she hadn’t even worried about Lisa’s lawsuit against Wyatt. Honestly, she hadn’t really spared the woman a second thought up until a moment ago. Now, however, as they finished their dinner, it was all she could think about.

Even when everyone was done eating and moved into crowd around the Christmas tree to start opening presents, her mind kept returning to the woman who had attacked them, sitting in a jail cell during Christmas.

“Hey.” Wyatt nudged her knee. “What’s got you so quiet?”

She tried to shake off the thoughts of Lisa alone in a cell without a warm meal, presents, or family, but she just couldn’t.

She bit her lip. “Do you think... we could take some of the leftovers down to the station after we’re done here?”

Wyatt’s eyebrows shot up. “For?” She frowned and tilted her head and his eyes grew wide. “Really?”

She nodded. “I just can’t shake the thoughts of her alone in a cell. Even if she is crazy.”

“The woman that attacked you and almost killed you?” Wyatt asked, blinking a few times.

She nodded. “I know, it’s...”

“Kind of you.” He cupped her face and kissed her softly. “If it’s what you want, I’ll arrange it with Nick. He says that she won’t be transferred to the county prison until Tuesday.”

“Thanks.” She kissed him back.

“Hey,” her father broke in loudly, “none of that until after the big day. Which is when again?”

Wyatt laughed and shrugged as he looked at her. “It’s up to Hannah.”

She thought about it and then smiled. “I’ve always wanted a wedding on Valentine’s Day.”

Someone in the room groaned as everyone else cheered.

Four hours later, shortly before nine that evening, she and Nick and Wyatt walked into the station carrying a few covered plates filled with leftovers from their holiday meal.

Alice glanced up from her spot behind the dispatcher’s desk and smiled. The older woman was dressed in a fuzzy red candy-striped outfit and had a massive Santa hat on her head.

“What’s all this?” she asked Nick.

“Just spreading a little holiday cheer.” He held out a plate for her. “I gave you two pieces of pie. One pecan and the other pumpkin.” He winked at her.

“I’ve had three other meals dropped by already, but it won’t stop me from enjoying the pie. You are a joy,” Alice said, taking the plate from him. “I’ll buzz you back. Merry Christmas,” she said to the three of them and then busied herself unwrapping the plate and digging in.

“Come on back.” Nick motioned to them. They followed him through the nearly empty station and headed down a long hallway that Hannah had never been down before.

“Gosh, this brings back memories,” Wyatt said, surprising her.

“You’ve been back here before?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Remember that summer your brother and I started to work at O’Neil’s?”

She nodded and narrowed her eyes.

“It was because we’d got caught breaking in the back door of the store to...”—he cleared his throat—“liberate some ice cream.”

“You broke in and stole from Patty?” she asked, totally shocked now.

Wyatt’s smile grew. “Yup. Caught in the act, cuffed, booked, and spent an hour in the cell until Patty cut a deal with Robert Brogan.”

“And Patty still left you her store?” Nick shook his head as he unlocked the last iron door. “She’s just inside. I can’t leave you alone with her but at least you can see her,” he said as they stepped through the door together.

There were two jail cells facing the door. The moment they stepped through, she could see Lisa watching a television set on the same wall as the door they had just entered.

“Thank god. Can you please change the channel,” Lisa complained with a whine. “I refuse to watch this stupid movie.” She motioned to the screen, where Hannah’s favorite holiday movie, *Elf*, was playing.

Glancing at Wyatt she whispered, “And you were going to marry her?”

Wyatt sighed and shook his head, then handed her the plate of food she’d packed for Lisa.

“You give it to her. This was all your idea,” he said with a smile.

“What are you doing here?” Lisa asked as Hannah stepped forward with the meal.

Hannah noticed then that there were two huge bruises under Lisa’s eyes and her nose sat at an odd angle. White cotton rolls stuck out of each nostril.

She really had broken the woman’s nose. Hiding her smile, she held out the plate.

“We brought you some holiday cheer,” she said, taking another step forward.

“I’m not a charity case,” Lisa sneered. “I’ve eaten dinner.”

“Of course.” Hannah pulled the plate closer to her own chest as if ready to take it away.

“Is there pie?” Lisa asked.

“Pecan.” Hannah held out the plate again.

Lisa sighed heavily. “Why?”

“Why?” Hannah asked.

“Why are you being nice to me?” Lisa said as if her patience was gone.

“Because it’s Christmas and everyone deserves a little joy today,” Hannah answered, still holding out the plate.

“Even after I...”—her eyes flickered towards Wyatt—“after everything I did to you?”

Hannah nodded and smiled, waiting for Lisa to make the next move.

The woman sat on the bed for a moment before getting up and crossing the small cell to take the plate from her.

“Did you really have to have brain surgery?” Lisa asked her, running her eyes over Hannah.

Smiling, Hannah removed her Santa hat and pulled up the long hair covering the scar over her left ear.

Lisa winced and visibly shivered.

“I didn’t hit you that hard,” Lisa said, moving to sit on the bed again and picking the tinfoil off the plate.

“The doctors think that the blood clot started with my car accident. They didn’t catch it then and wouldn’t have found it in time if you hadn’t attacked me and caused me to hit my head. So, in one sense, you saved my life when you attacked me,” she said with a smile.

“Really?” Lisa frowned. “Like, your head would have just...” She made a motion with her hands as if her head was

exploding.

Hannah chuckled. “Not exploded, no, but one day I would have just...” She snapped and then sighed as Wyatt stepped up behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders.

Lisa’s eyes moved to Wyatt, and Hannah saw a little of the crazy slip behind her eyes.

“What happens to me now?” Lisa asked, covering the plate and setting it aside as she gripped her hands together.

“Now,” Wyatt said, “you drop the lawsuit against me and get the help you need.”

They remained silent as Lisa glanced between the two of them.

“Did you ever love me?” she asked Wyatt.

He was quiet for a moment. “I never stopped loving Hannah but, for a while, I did love you.”

Lisa lifted her eyes to the ceiling and closed them for a moment.

“I was never pregnant,” she said when she turned her face back towards them.

Wyatt nodded. “We heard. They did a test the first time you were booked here.” He motioned towards Nick. “It’s a small town, and we tend to look out for our own.”

Lisa nodded once. “For what it’s worth”—her eyes moved to Hannah—“I’m glad you’re okay.”

Hannah smiled. “Me too.” She motioned to the plate. “Enjoy the meal. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Lisa said softly as they turned and walked out.

“You are a far better person than I would have been,” Nick said once they were in the long hallway again.

“Not really.” Hannah smiled. “I’m extremely happy that we didn’t change the channel, so now while she eats her cold Christmas dinner, she’ll be watching *Elf*.”

Both Nick and Wyatt laughed.

EPILOGUE



Standing on the hillside overlooking the beach and the small town, their small town, Hannah held onto Wyatt and felt her heart settle into place.

“Happy?” he asked into her hair.

“More now than ever before.”

“Two weeks,” he said, and she felt his chest rise and fall as the cool wind floated over them. “Then we can move in.”

She glanced behind them and smiled at the home. “Soon enough. Before then, we have a lot of shopping to do.”

He chuckled. “And a wedding to plan.”

“Right.” Her smile grew.

“Hannah?” Wyatt said softly.

“Hmm?” She turned in his arms and looked at him, her eyes searching his. She tried to memorize every speck, every color hidden there as the sun sank lower in the sky.

“I love you,” he said, resting his forehead against hers.

“I love you.” She kissed him.

“You are the best Christmas gift I could have ever hoped for,” he said against her lips. “You are my hope. My past. My future. My life. My one and only love,” he said between kisses. “My joy.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jill Sanders is a New York Times, USA Today, and international bestselling author of Sweet Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, Western Romance, and Paranormal Romance novels. With over 90 books in eleven series, translations into several different languages, and audiobooks there's plenty to choose from. Look for Jill's bestselling stories wherever romance books are sold or visit her at jillsanders.com

Jill comes from a large family with six siblings, including an identical twin. She was raised in the Pacific Northwest and later relocated to Colorado for college and a successful IT career before discovering her talent for writing sweet and sexy page-turners. After Colorado, she decided to move south, living in Texas and now making her home along the Emerald Coast of Florida. You will find that the settings of several of her series are inspired by her time spent living in these areas. She has two sons and off-set the testosterone in her house by adopting three furry little ladies that provide her company while she's locked in her writing cave. She enjoys heading to the beach, hiking, swimming, wine-tasting, and pickleball with her husband, and of course writing. If you have read any of her books, you may also notice that there is a love of food, especially sweets! She has been blamed for a few added pounds by her assistant, editor, and fans... donuts or pie anyone?

