

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER SNOW

An Alaskan  
Christmas  
Homecoming



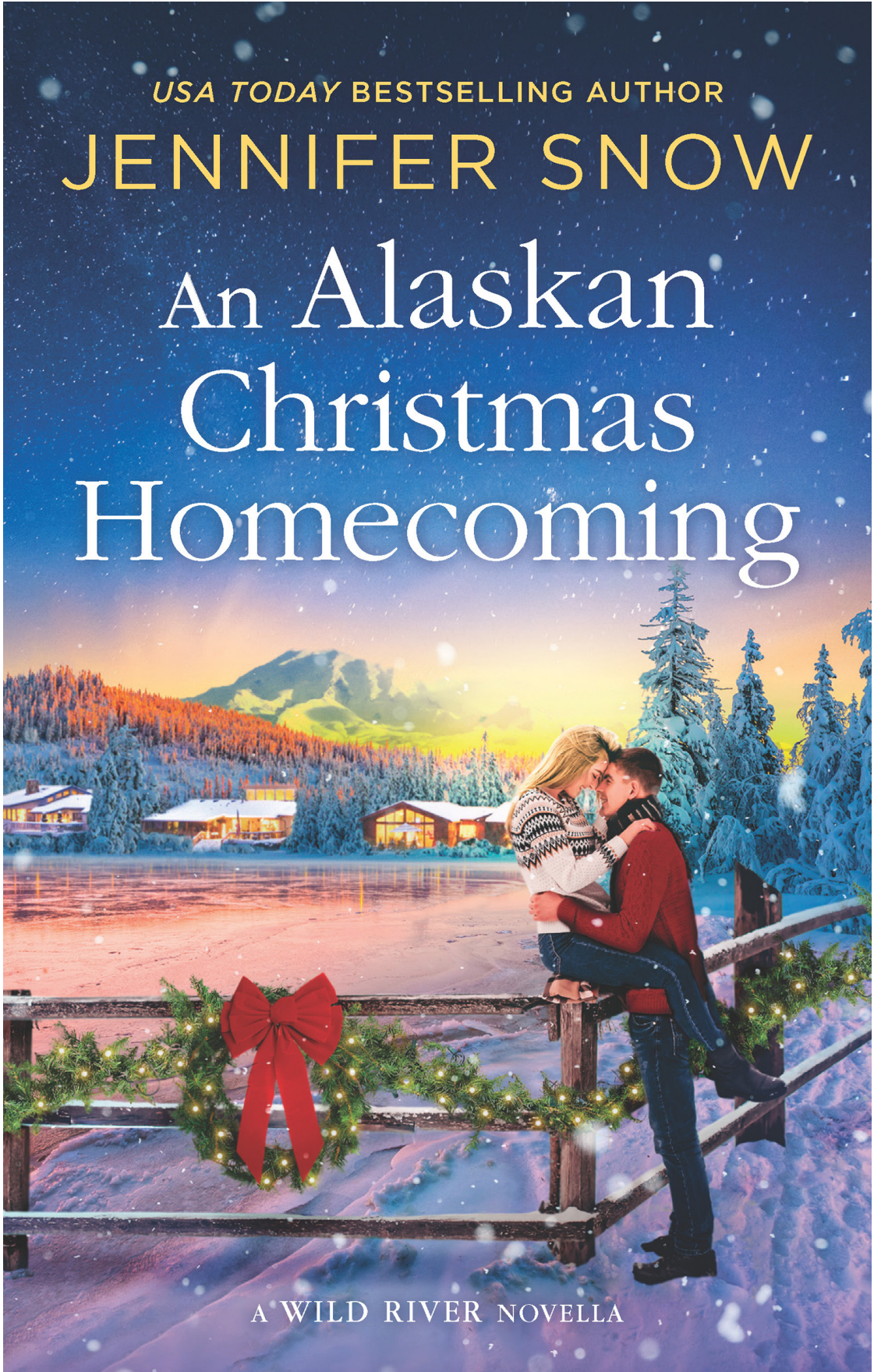
A WILD RIVER NOVELLA



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## Praise for *USA TODAY* bestselling author Jennifer Snow's Wild River series

“Heartwarming, romantic, and utterly enjoyable.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Melissa Foster on *An Alaskan Christmas*

“This first title in the Wild River series is passionate, sensual, and very sexy. The freezing, winter-cold portrayal of the Alaskan ski slopes is not the only thing sending chills through one's body.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“Set in the wilds of Alaska, the beauty of winter and the cold shine through.”

—*Fresh Fiction* on *An Alaskan Christmas*

“Jennifer Snow's Alaska setting and search-and-rescue element are interesting twists, and the romance is smart and sexy... An exciting contemporary series debut with a wildly unique Alaskan setting.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Readers will enjoy the mix of sexy love scenes, tense missions, and amiable banter. This entertaining introduction to Wild River will encourage fans of small-town contemporaries to follow the series.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“*An Alaskan Christmas* drew me in from the first page to the last. I tried to read slower so that I could savor the story and feel every emotion. I reveled in every nuance, felt the cold, the wind and snow, and loved the small town and the mountains... I can't wait to return to Wild River.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“*Alaska Reunion* has a little bit of everything—drama, humor, friendship, and love. It's a well-written story that will draw readers in.”

—*Romance Junkie*

**An Alaskan Christmas  
Homecoming**

*Jennifer Snow*



To all the fans of Wild River, Alaska—thank you for your support! Happy reading!

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## CHAPTER ONE

IT WASN'T THE sight of her sister blissfully in love that bothered Jade Frazier. Or the fact that Maddie was in love with a guy Jade had dated first. She'd gladly given her blessing on that union. Heck, she'd been responsible for setting them up on the Valentine's Day Blind Date Ice Fishing event hosted by SnowTrek Tours the year before. No. It wasn't her sister's happiness driving Jade to the brink. It was *her* single status after the last several failed relationships. Staring at another upcoming holiday alone was depressing.

Ho ho, holiday loneliness.

It was this damn small town. She'd lived in the ski resort town in Alaska her entire life. Which meant she knew every man in town and had dated at least half of them. The ones her age, the ones a few years older... If she kept climbing the age scale, she'd either be dating divorcés or look like she had daddy issues.

She scanned The Drunk Tank, the local watering hole on Main Street, hoping for new blood... She'd even settle for a holiday fling with a tourist. But the faces illuminated by the string of Christmas lights decorating the bar were all far too familiar.

She sighed. Loudly.

Loudly enough to catch the attention of her sister and Mike in the booth across from her. They slowly peeled away from one another and turned to face her.

"So, how's the fashion degree coming along?" Mike asked politely. He didn't see Maddie shake her head beside him.

"Jade switched courses to interior design," Maddie said.

Her sister's encouragement was unyielding, and Jade appreciated the support, but she could hear in Maddie's tone that this switching subjects for her online degree was getting old. From makeup artistry to special effects to fashion design

to interior design... At twenty-eight years old, Jade had to get serious about her future career.

But this was it. Interior design was her calling. And it wasn't as though she'd switched from rocket science to botany. At least her attempts to find her "thing" had been in the same vein. And this final term assignment would prove that to everyone.

"It's going great, actually. We have a really fun assignment that accounts for fifty percent of our grade—decorating a business for the holiday season."

Mike glanced around. "It's already December. Are there any businesses who haven't been decorated since October? Ow!" he said, glancing at Maddie, who'd obviously kicked him under the table.

Jade refused to acknowledge the truth of Mike's words or get discouraged. Sure, she was getting a late start, but there had to be some shop in town in desperate need of her help. Noticing a bandage on Mike's forearm, she changed the subject. "Did you hurt yourself on a tour?" Mike was a tour guide for SnowTrek Tours and often led wilderness expeditions in the unpredictable Alaskan backwoods.

"No. I got a new tattoo," he said.

Jade wrinkled her nose. She wasn't a fan of body modifications. "What is it?"

Mike lifted the edge of the bandage to display a watercolor design of an ice fishing hut with the aurora borealis in the background. Obviously, a tribute to how he'd met her sister. As much as Jade disliked tattoos, the gesture was romantic, she'd give him that.

And it looked really well done, unlike the messy, unprofessional-looking ones that often left the Black Heart tattoo shop in town. "It looks good. Where did you get it done?"

"Redemption Tattoo—the new shop on Main Street."

Her mouth dropped. "The one opened by the ex-con?"



Mike shot her a look. “How about less judgment and more open-mindedness? Griffin’s a good guy. A Wild River local who did some time for falling in with the wrong crowd, that’s all. He’s here to get his life back on track.”

Maddie looked admiringly at Mike, but Jade wasn’t so sure. Wild River was an accepting place, but she suspected Griffin would have an uphill battle in gaining back the respect of his hometown.

\* \* \*

HE WAS LIVING in a holiday television special.

Wild River, Alaska, was a quaint tourist town, and despite it being his hometown, Griffin Geller stuck out like a sore thumb.

As he prepared his tattoo gun with fresh black ink, he stared out at the snow and the white mountaintops in the distance. He missed Las Vegas, the year-round mild weather, the bright lights of the city and the exciting, fast-paced lifestyle...but that wasn’t the future he needed.

Moving there ten years ago right after high school graduation had felt like a dream. Striking out on his own, working his way up by apprenticing in local tattoo shops, learning the craft from artists he’d admired from afar, he’d been living his best life. Tattooing was the only thing he was ever good at.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t had the opportunity to do much of it since opening his shop on Main Street the month before. He’d figured there was a market for his services, given that the only tattoo shop in town had been shut down twice in the last year for health code violations. But it seemed no one was looking for new ink...

The only customers he’d had all week were the two women sitting side by side, treating the experience like a spa day.

He snapped on his plastic gloves and rolled his stool toward them. “What are we getting, ladies? Matching roses? Inspirational quotes?”

“We actually just want our existing tattoos redone. They’ve faded,” Cassie Reynolds, the owner of SnowTrek Tours, said. He recognized her from the one business association meeting he’d attended before vowing never to return again. The stares and judgmental looks had been too much.

He examined the faded *Best* and *Friend* tattoos on each woman’s wrist. This would take all of three minutes and he could charge maybe ten dollars for the work.

Jail had been less painful.

His business would struggle to survive here in this small town, but if it meant living on the straight and narrow, staying far away from the trouble of his past, this was where he needed to be. He was lucky to be getting this new start.

Three minutes and forty-six seconds later, he removed the plastic gloves and forced a smile. “All done.”

“We love them. Thank you,” Cassie said as they approached the counter.

The other woman with her was some sort of doctor at Wild River Community Hospital. He’d nearly gagged as he’d worked when she filled her friend in on an angioplasty she’d performed the night before. She was looking at the tattoo with appreciation, but she’d barely looked at him the entire time she’d been here. This had obviously been Cassie’s idea.

The adventure tour owner scanned the shop as she paid. “You haven’t decorated yet.”

“Decorated?” He took the cash and handed her back change from the twenty.

She waved it away. “For Christmas. Not sure if you’ve noticed the abundance of holiday spirit all over town...”

He’d noticed. Just been desperate to avoid it. He cleared his throat. “Christmas isn’t exactly my thing.”

“Shocking,” the doctor said under her breath.

It might actually shock her to know it used to be his thing. He’d loved everything to do with the holidays—the sights, sounds and smells. His family owned the local diner on Main

Street, which was open every day of the year, so they hadn't celebrated in the traditional sense, but they'd gathered with the community on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, families meeting up to eat together or lonely residents with nowhere to go. It had been a special time of year. One he'd looked forward to.

Getting arrested on Christmas Eve had quickly changed that.

"You at least need to decorate the window for the local business association competition," Cassie said, sliding back into a thermal winter jacket.

He shook his head. "I don't think I'll enter."

The doctor sighed and tried a more direct approach. "Look, if you want to draw in business, people need to be less afraid of you."

"Erika," Cassie hissed at the woman before sending him an apologetic look.

"What? It's true," Erika said. "The holiday decorations will show them you're one of us. You're not whatever embellished rumor they think you are."

He sighed. He'd rather tattoo a Christmas tree on his forehead, but she had a point. "I'll think about it."

Cassie smiled. "Great. If you need any decorations, I have a ton left over from my reindeer display."

"Thank you." Her kindness wasn't unappreciated. He suspected their tattoo touch-ups were more to help his struggling new business than because they'd really needed them.

Cassie offered an encouraging smile as they headed toward the door. "Hang in there. The first year is always the hardest."

She had no idea.

The bell above the door chimed as they exited onto Main Street, and Griffin sat on one of the plush leather waiting room chairs and stared out at the falling snow.



How the hell had he let his life turn out this way?

## CHAPTER TWO

HAD *EVERYONE* IN town gotten an early start to their decorating?

Bundled warmly in her faux fur winter jacket and fashionable yet practical heeled leather boots, Jade carried her interior design portfolio down Main Street, eager to show off her holiday-themed ideas. But every business had their storefront displays completed already. She'd tried the local seniors' home, thinking they'd appreciate her help, but the decorating committee—a group of adorable, feisty little old ladies—had shooed her out of the complex quicker than she could say *Bah, humbug!* The Wild River Resort Hotel had claimed that they were going with the same decorators as last year. The fancy five-star accommodations boasted the same white trees and silver accents throughout the common areas every year, and Jade hadn't been successful convincing them to try something new.

Improving her sales skills would be her biggest challenge in this career. She was confident in her decorating skills, but her pitch to potential clients was somewhat lacking. She didn't have the experience, so she needed the work, but how did she get work without the experience?

Acquiring a location and gaining a business's trust were part of the assignment and she couldn't fail. She was personable, well-liked in town... She just needed to find a procrastinator who was too busy to do their own decorating.

As she passed Redemption Tattoo, she paused, seeing a man hanging fake sparkly green garland that looked like it had been reused over and over since the eighties from one corner of the window to the other.

Ho ho, hell no.

She hesitated briefly before squaring her shoulders and opening the door. That tacky eyesore of a decoration would bring down the property value on Main Street, and obviously

this guy needed her expert advice as much as she needed the job.

A blast of heat hit her as she entered and looked around. It wasn't at all like the other tattoo shop in town. This one was clean and nicely furnished in leather and chrome. Tattoo designs were framed and hung on the wall, not held up with duct tape or displayed in faded old binders. The air smelled fresh and sterile as well. Definitely not what she'd been expecting.

"Can I help you?" the man from the window asked.

Confidence radiated from her as she said, "Actually, I'm here to help you."

"Doubt it. Look, whatever you're selling, I'm not interested," he said, his gaze landing on her portfolio.

"Is the owner here?" she asked. She wouldn't waste her sales pitch on an employee...no matter how attractive he was. She took in the dark brown hair, combed to one side, partially shaved underneath, the thin, muscular frame and eyes that were so dark they looked almost black from this distance. She didn't recognize him. New in town? Someone Griffin Geller had brought back from Las Vegas?

Maybe, if she secured the decorating opportunity here at the shop, the two of them could get to know one another...

Nope. She wasn't here for a date. She was here for a job.

"I'm the owner," the guy said.

She blinked. "What?"

"Let me guess—you were expecting some big, bald, burly guy with teardrop tattoos on his face?"

"Yes," she said honestly.

He laughed and her stomach was a field of fluttering butterflies at the gentleness of the sound. What the hell? This guy who looked like he couldn't harm a wasp if it was stinging him in the eyeball was an ex-con? Again, definitely not what she'd been expecting.



“What are you selling?” he asked in her silence.

Obviously, her blunt honesty had earned her thirty seconds of his time.

Repressing her surprise, she took a deep breath. “I’m an interior designer and I’d like to offer you my services to create your holiday window display.”

He shook his head. “Nah, I got it covered.”

“You certainly do not,” she said, eyeing the box of mismatched decorations in an old SnowTrek Tours box. Obviously, Cassie Reynolds’s discards.

“It’s not a big deal. I’m not really trying to win the contest or anything.” He waved a hand.

Crap, this was her only shot unless she wanted to decorate a back alley. She thought fast. “But you are trying to build a business here in town?”

He tossed the ugly green garland back into the box. “I’d prefer to attract clients because of my tattooing skills, not because of my holiday spirit.”

She sensed the holiday spirit wasn’t something he had much of. “You need to get them in the door first.”

He sighed. “Look, I can’t afford your services. This space on Main Street is already depleting my savings and, well, business so far hasn’t been great.”

“I’ll do it for free.” She wasn’t doing this for money, yet.

“That’s bad business sense.”

She sighed. “Look, I’m a student of interior design and I need to display my skills with an actual client as part of my term grade. Everyone else in town has already finished their displays. I’m running out of options.” Maybe she sounded desperate, but she was willing to play that card if she had to.

Griffin looked like he was considering it, but then he shook his head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Still, he’d been considering it, which gave her the courage not to take no as his final answer. “Give me one good reason

why not.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m sure you’ve heard who I am by now and all about my past... Do you want your first client to be...?”

“Someone with bad taste in garland?” she finished quickly, picking up the strand he’d been about to hang.

His expression softened slightly, and he sighed. “Okay. You’re right. This isn’t my thing.” He gestured toward the box of decorations. “It’s all yours.”

She laughed. “Yeah, no. Those aren’t going to work. I’ll be back tomorrow morning at nine a.m.” She headed for the door. “Your holiday display is going to blow your mind.”

He nodded. “Okay...great...thanks, um...?”

“Jade. Jade Frazier.”

“Thanks, Jade,” he said, and the way he said her name had those damn butterflies doing cartwheels.

\* \* \*

HE DIDN’T REGRET allowing Jade Frazier to volunteer to decorate his window. No, he was so far beyond regret that it was a distant dot in his rearview.

This was a bad idea for so many reasons.

He was a “bad apple,” and despite hoping to reinvent his future, write a new narrative and all the other life-coach-y things his prison reformation officer had spouted, he still had a reputation that no one was going to forget so easily. Damn, his own family had refused to talk to him or acknowledge the existence of his new shop, a block away from the family diner, in the three months he’d been back.

Jade seemed like a nice woman. She was trying to start her own career. Associating herself and her interior decorating company with him wasn’t a great idea.

Unfortunately, when he turned the corner the next morning at eight forty-five and saw her standing outside the shop with

three large cardboard boxes on the ground next to her, he didn't have the heart to tell her he'd reconsidered. If only she wasn't so attractive, this might be easier, but since she'd walked into his shop the day before, he'd had a hard time getting the image of her dark emerald green eyes out of his mind.

He scanned the quiet street for a vehicle but didn't see one. "Did you get dropped off?" Definitely harder to send her away now.

"Took the bus. I only live ten minutes away."

He eyed the boxes as he unlocked the door. "You took the bus with those?"

She grinned. "Not as weak as I look."

Determined, he'd give her that much. He opened the door and turned off the alarm as she bent to pick up the boxes. "Wait. I'll help." He went back out, stacked two and carried them inside.

She'd already removed her coat and scarf and hat, and his mouth went slightly dry at the sight of her in tight-fitting jeans and a snug holiday-red V-necked sweater that almost had him believing in Santa Claus again.

Damn, this was really not a good idea. He hadn't been with a woman in two years...

He cleared his throat. "So, how long do you think this will take?"

"Just a few days," she said, bending to open one of the boxes.

His eyes landed on her ass and he averted his gaze. A few days. He'd never last a few days. "That long? It's just some decorations."

"Great work takes time. Art takes time. Think of it as a full back piece. You can't do it all in one sitting, right? You do it over a few sessions, layer things in. Gain new perspective and inspiration as you work."



He swallowed hard. “I was just thinking it would only take an hour or two.”

She waved a hand. “Don’t worry. The contest judging isn’t for another week and a half.”

Right, ’cause that was what he was worried about. “Okay, well, I’ll leave you to it. There will be coffee and doughnuts in the back room if you want some.”

“Thanks,” she called over her shoulder as she took things out of the boxes. She began to hum a Christmas carol and he headed into the back room. He started the coffee and then he turned on the store music.

But even the sound of heavy metal blasting through the speakers couldn’t drown out the voice in his head telling him that having Jade Frazier around for the next few days was the most dangerous situation he’d encountered in a long time.

\* \* \*

JADE HAD SPENT all afternoon coming up with a theme for the tattoo shop window. She’d spent all evening buying the necessary items for her creation, and the window display was coming along exactly as she had envisioned it. The upside-down black Christmas tree adorned with flickering white lights—not twinkling, but actually flickering like goth candles—was the perfect spin on traditional Christmas decor. She’d been lucky to find it, as it had been the only one in stock at the department store in town... naturally. Not exactly a bestseller.

And the statue of the mythical creature Zanzibar, which she’d found at the local hobby and collectibles shop, was the perfect addition to the display. The gothic dragon climbing a tall winter castle was similar to the shop’s logo, tying everything together nicely in dark red, silver and black metallic hues.

She was more than confident that she could pull off an A-grade design, but she hadn’t anticipated how hard it would be to work so close to Griffin.

The shop had been quiet all morning. Only a few teenagers had stopped by, planning tattoos they weren't old enough to get, so it had been just the two of them. He'd sat at a desk, drawing and sketching new designs, and a few times she'd caught him glancing her way as she worked. Each time their gazes met, her heart pounded in her chest.

Reminding herself that he was not a good match for her only went so far when he was exactly her usual type. Clean-cut, clean-shaven, thin but muscular and not too tall. He was gorgeous and friendly. A professional business owner with artistic talent. The only thing she could list in the Con column was "ex-con."

Which was arguably a big one, but didn't everyone deserve a second chance?

She knew through the rumor mill that he was the son of Carla Geller, owner of Carla's Diner on Main Street. The fifties-style restaurant was a popular place in Wild River, thanks to the delicious food and the warm welcome Carla bestowed on all her customers. Carla's daughters, Molly and Gillian, worked as waitresses, and the business was a family affair.

Therefore, even Griffin's family was a checkmark in the Pro column. Having been raised by their father, who passed away several years before, leaving Jade and Maddie without any other family in Wild River, Jade always longed for a big, close-knit family like the Gellers.

Of course, she was getting far too ahead of herself. She needed to focus on this window display, and then, maybe, she could focus on the hot guy who was making it hard to focus.

\* \* \*

HE WAS DRAWING the line at holiday music. He played metal in his shop. Only metal.

But he was quickly losing the battle to the feisty, energetic woman standing in front of him. "It's Christmas. People expect to hear holiday music playing inside the stores."

He folded his arms across his chest. “Not in tattoo shops, they don’t.”

She sighed. “Maybe big, burly, bald men don’t, but tattoos are more mainstream now. Everyone’s getting one.”

Didn’t he know it. His only customer that day had been an eighty-two-year-old grandmother adding her third great-grandchild’s name to the string of names already on her forearm. *She* might have appreciated the holiday music. She’d insisted he turn down the “crap” he was playing.

Still, he was holding firm to this. “Nope. Sorry. All of this is already too much.” He gestured at the decorations all over his shop.

Jade sighed. “Okay, I can compromise.”

Doubtful. He suspected she never had to. Those emerald green eyes could make a man do anything, if said man was in a position to allow himself to fall for her.

Lucky for Griffin, he was not that man.

He waited as she shuffled through the music on her iPod and then connected it to the speakers. The familiar tune of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” started to play, and he folded his arms across his chest. “Sounds like the same old holiday music to me.”

“Wait for it...”

He listened closer. Something was different in this remake. “Are they saying ‘metal’ instead of ‘merry’?”

Jade grinned as the beat changed and the sound of screaming lyrics nearly blasted his eardrums.

Holy shit, she’d actually found a heavy metal Christmas album.

“So...we’re good?” she asked with a cocky smile.

He sighed. “We’re good.” Unfortunately, he was far from good. He was falling for the sweetest, smartest, sexiest woman in Wild River, and he didn’t deserve the chance to pursue her.



## *CHAPTER THREE*

HER DELIVERY WAS here right on time.

“More stuff?” Griffin asked the next morning as Jade signed the delivery slip and carefully carried the box stamped *Fragile* to the window. She set it down and, using a box cutter, opened it.

“This is the best part,” she said, reaching into the box and taking out a white frosted Christmas tree bulb. Even better than she’d hoped. She held the ornament up to show him. “What do you think?”

He squinted as he peered at the black-and-gray design on the bulb. Then his eyes widened. “Is that one of my tattoo designs?”

She nodded eagerly, handing it to him and then reaching into the box for another one. “Hope you don’t mind. I took a few photos of the black-and-gray designs and had these rush ordered overnight from the imprinting store in town. They turned out so well!”

Griffin seemed slightly conflicted as he looked at the dozen bulbs inside the box. “You had these custom made? Overnight?”

She nodded, but her enthusiasm faltered. “You don’t like them? I thought they could serve a dual purpose. Nice, fitting decorations for the tree and a way to showcase your work in the window... But we don’t have to use them.”

He shook his head quickly. “No! I mean, of course we have to use them. They’re incredible. I just can’t believe you went to all this trouble.”

Her smile returned. “I think it was worth it. It will really give the design a unique look.” She was definitely taking a chance with the less-than-conventional color scheme, but she’d wanted to give Griffin a display that he’d be proud of. The bulbs would help elevate the overall design.

“They must have cost a fair bit,” he said, looking at the rest of the bulbs.

A lot more than she was willing to admit, so she shrugged. “Gotta spend money to make money, right?” she asked, unloading the rest from the box.

“Well, at least let me cover the cost of these. You’ve spent enough and you’re doing this for free.”

“No way. I’m doing this for an A in my interior design class. Whatever it takes...” It was partially true, but she’d also wanted to do something nice for Griffin, to help generate more customers for the shop. His designs were fantastic. His artwork even had her contemplating a tattoo of her own... People just needed to see his work.

He nodded slowly and cleared his throat. “Well, at least let me buy you dinner.”

She blinked, surprised by the offer. She wasn’t opposed to dinner with him, but he’d seemed to be keeping a low profile. Before coming into his shop two days ago, she hadn’t seen him around town at the grocery store or bar or anywhere.

Unfortunately, he misread her silence. “Bad idea...sorry.”

“No! I’d like that. Um, I just thought you weren’t going out much around town.”

“I’ve been keeping a low profile...”

He looked like he was changing his mind, and she really did want to have dinner with him. Maybe get to know him a little better. “Why don’t we order in? Eat here?” she suggested.

He nodded, looking relieved. “I’ll grab some take-out menus.”

“And I’ll get back to decorating the tree,” she said, her chest light and fluttery as she went back to work.

\* \* \*

HE’D ESSENTIALLY ASKED her out. Although, he wasn’t sure ordering takeout to the shop as a thank-you was an actual date.

Did Jade read it that way?

As he ordered their Chinese food, he watched her working in the window. He couldn't help himself. What she'd done was the best thing anyone had ever done for him. She couldn't possibly understand how much those bulbs meant.

She was wildly talented and creative to come up with the idea, and having his work displayed in the front window like that was something he was proud of. He'd worked hard to make it to where he was in the industry. There were a lot of artists who never got a chance to realize their dream. He'd been doing so well...until getting busted.

And now he was rebuilding his career and his life. Jade was like an unexpected holiday angel in his time of need.

But did he deserve an angel?

An hour later, the food arrived and he turned off the loud music as they prepared to eat.

"Aw, that was my favorite song," Jade said, singing the chorus lyrics in a deep, gruff, gravelly tone.

He laughed. "Yeah, right." He knew the music must be annoying her.

"No, really, it's growing on me," she said, her gaze locked on his.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

"I think there's enough food here to feed the entire neighborhood," Jade said, sitting at the small table as he unloaded the Chinese food containers from the paper bags.

"I couldn't decide what dishes to get, so I basically ordered everything." He handed her a paper plate and plastic cutlery. "Dig in," he said.

She did, and once they'd filled their plates, he sat across from her. A silence fell over them while they ate.

It was a little too quiet. He cleared his throat. "This food is amazing." He shook his head. "You never appreciate just how

good stuff tastes until you can't have it.”

She laughed gently. “Prison food not so hot?”

“Let's just say ramen bought from the commissary is as valuable as gold.”

“Remind me never to go to jail,” she said with a grin.

Although it was a heavy topic for him, for the first time since getting out, talking about it, thinking about it didn't feel as heavy, not as hard. It was an aspect of his past—a thing he couldn't change. He had to learn to accept his mistake and move on. He suspected Jade was making the conversation a lot easier. She had a natural way of making him feel at ease, unjudged. She wasn't afraid to acknowledge it, but it wasn't a big, dark cloud over his head when she did.

His gratitude for her was growing, and his feelings went even beyond that.

\* \* \*

HE'D OPENED THE DOOR, but could she really ask? Maybe he *wanted* to talk about it. Maybe it might help. She cleared her throat.

“Can I ask what happened?”

He shrugged. “It's no secret. It was all over the news. I robbed another tattoo shop.”

She nodded. She'd read about the robbery. She knew the details, that he'd been working for a shop in Vegas and they'd asked him to get a job at the other shop so they could rob it from the inside. But she was interested to hear what had *really* happened. From him. “Things are never exactly what the media presents them to be.”

He sighed. “I moved to Vegas after graduation. I always knew I wanted to be a tattoo artist. I was working my way up by doing odd jobs around a small studio—cleaning, greeting clients—and in exchange being mentored by some really amazingly talented artists. Eventually, I needed to start making cash and I'd put in my time apprenticing, so I applied at the



Dark Rebels studio.” His voice hardened at the mention of the shop. “I started dating the owner’s sister. Fell head over heels for her, actually. Turns out it had just been an act on her part. She told me that there was a family heirloom that had been stolen from their shop—an antique tattooing gun—and they had an idea of how to get it back. I believed what they planned to steal belonged to them.”

“So, you did it.”

“At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing. In hindsight, I think I was still just trying to win over Kelly. Show her how committed I was, or something equally messed up.” He shook his head. “Anyway, it was Christmas Eve when they pulled the job. I let them in, and instead of just grabbing the tattoo gun, they cleaned the place out of cash, tattooing supplies... They’d barely made it two blocks away before I came to my senses and called the cops.”

“You turned them in?”

“No, I turned myself in, but the cops had been watching them for a while. They knew about other illegal activities going on behind the scenes at the shop, and now I was tied to all of that.”

“You did the right thing.” It would have been so easy for him to simply allow them to get away, leave and never look back.

“It was the only thing I could do. I would never have been able to live with myself otherwise.”

“How long did you serve?”

“I was sentenced to eighteen months, but I was out in eight. Overcrowding in prisons, it was my first offense, I turned myself in and I had behaved myself behind bars.”

“That had to be hard.”

“The hard part wasn’t jail. It was knowing that I’d thrown away my future. In one stupid bad decision, I cost myself my career...my family.”

She touched his hand, and a bolt of electricity sparked between them. "I'm sure your family just needs time."

"I don't know... I've been back three months. Gillian's away on her backpacking trip, and I know Molly wants to reach out, but she's being loyal to my parents and I can't fault her for that."

"Have you gone to see them?" she asked gently. Maybe he needed to be the one to make the first move.

He shook his head, staring at his food. "I've walked toward the diner and then chickened out several times... a lot of times."

His openness and vulnerability meant a lot to her. This probably wasn't a conversation he'd have with just anyone. She felt an unexpected connection to him. More than she'd felt with anyone in a long time. She took a deep breath. "I lost my dad a few years ago. Believe me, I'd give anything to have five more minutes with him. Your family can't stay upset forever. It's the holidays. A season for redemption, forgiveness..."

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know." He turned his attention to the window. "What I do know is that the window looks wonderful. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, a warm sensation flowing through her at the praise.

"In fact, you're kinda wonderful, too, Jade."

His gaze burned into hers and she swallowed hard. Her heart was pounding like the beat of the heavy metal Christmas music. He was so attractive. She liked him. A lot. He was nothing like she'd expected when she'd walked through the shop doors a few days before, and he was someone she was desperate to get to know better, spend more time with.

"The feeling's mutual," she said.

He dropped his head as though he didn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. Suddenly, it was her mission to make him believe it. She reached across the table and touched his hand.

His gaze shot up with a fiery intensity that almost scared her, but she didn't pull away. "One mistake doesn't define who you are," she said softly but firmly.

Standing slightly, leaning over the table, he reached for her, his hands cupping her face. She nodded once to answer the silent question in his expression, and then his mouth was crushing hers.

Ho ho hotness.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, savoring the taste of his lips, the smell of his aftershave filling her senses with an urgent desire.

The damn table prevented their bodies from touching, which was probably a good thing. If she pressed her body to his, she may not stop at just a kiss.

How long had it been for him? There was definitely a hunger on his end, but she believed it was because he was kissing *her* and not just anyone.

He pulled away abruptly and a look of panic entered his expression. "Shit, sorry."

"For what? The best kiss of my life?"

He relaxed just a little but still looked regretful. "I shouldn't have done that, but you're just so easy to be with, and I'm insanely attracted to you at the same time."

"Again, the feeling is mutual." She kissed him once more. "There's no reason to apologize."

He looked longingly at her lips but held back. "Gossip spreads quick around here, and I don't want people thinking you're mixed up with a guy like me."

"A guy like you? You mean someone successful and hardworking and attractive?"

"Jade..."

She kissed him again and his resolve broke. He moved around the table and took her into his arms. The embrace was long and passionate, full of desire and vulnerability. Her body

sank into his and she could feel the reaction the kiss was evoking.

The chiming of the bell above the front door had them both reeling backward, nearly knocking over the table of food.

“Shit,” he mumbled.

She wiped her mouth quickly and forced a smile, desperate to act natural, despite the fact that she was on fire. “Hello, Mrs. Silverman.” Of all people to catch them in that moment, it had to be the biggest gossip in Wild River. The head of the business association committee, she knew virtually everyone and had no problem spreading local “news” around town.

“Hi,” the older woman said slyly, eyeing the two of them with unconcealed pleasure. They’d given her the juiciest story of the week. “I just stopped by to drop off the official entry form into the window display contest.”

Griffin cleared his throat. “Oh, right... Thank you.” He took it and stared at it intently. “I’ll fill it out and drop it off?” he asked when she made no motion to leave.

“You do that, dear,” she said, glancing back and forth between them with a grin. “Bundle up if you go out. It’s a lot colder outside than it is in here.” She winked and pushed through the door.

Mrs. Silverman paused outside the window display, then waved as she headed down the street.

Griffin looked pained. “Tell me she’s not the gossip she used to be?”

“By now, half the block knows,” Jade said. Then, turning to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “And I don’t care one little bit.”

His look of gratitude was tainted with uncertainty and Jade kissed him again. She planned to keep kissing him until he stopped caring what the rest of the town thought.

## CHAPTER FOUR

WALKING INTO HIS jail cell for the first time, with its cold, stark concrete walls and the faint smell of a decaying future, a heavy sense of foreboding weighing on him, hadn't felt as hard as walking toward his family's diner the next day.

Maybe because going to jail had almost been a relief. It was the first step in getting back on track.

*This* could totally blow up in his face.

But the day before with Jade had changed something in him. Sure, he was ashamed of his past actions. He was regretful and desperate to prove that he wasn't the sum of his mistakes, but she'd also helped him realize that he couldn't undo the past and that the people who claimed to care about him should be open to hearing his apology and moving past it with him...not continuing to shut him out or push him away.

Everyone deserved a second chance, Jade had said. And while he was struggling to believe that, he wanted to believe it, and that was a step, at least.

Kissing her in his shop had solidified the attraction he felt for her, and there'd been no denying she felt the same way. He wouldn't rush into things, but the day before had been one of the less heavy days he'd had in a long time and he wasn't going to let something that special go.

He pushed through the door and scanned the room. It was midafternoon, so it wouldn't be busy. Only a few booths were occupied, and a man sat at the counter drinking coffee and reading his cell phone.

Christmas music played and he recognized the old holiday soundtrack. The songs they played in the diner every year since he was a kid. All the popular, familiar classics brought feelings of warmth and nostalgia that nearly knocked the wind from his lungs. It might be too much to hope that he'd have the chance to spend Christmas with them. Baby steps.

Should he sit at a table? Or wait at the counter?

The kitchen was reserved for family members, and in the last conversation he'd had with his parents, they'd made it very clear that that title no longer belonged to him. The hurt and disappointment in their voices when he'd made that one phone call after his arrest had made him wish he hadn't reached out. But it would have been cowardly and unfair for his family to find out about it through news sources like the rest of the world.

Before he could decide where to sit, the door leading from the kitchen swung open and his sister Molly appeared, carrying two plates of the daily special. It was Wednesday, so he didn't even need to check the board to know it was spaghetti with homemade meatballs and garlic bread. The smell of the familiar family recipe had his stomach rumbling, but the sight of his sister put all thoughts of food on hold.

He hadn't seen or spoken to her since he'd gone in.

He'd missed both his sisters but especially Molly. He missed talking to her. Missed her corny jokes. Missed the connection they'd once had.

He knew she'd called him a couple of times over the last three months and hung up. She hadn't blocked the diner's number. He'd waited each time, wanting to say something, but afraid he'd say the wrong thing.

*Season of redemption...* He was ready to do whatever it took to redeem himself.

Would his family be ready to forgive?

"Hi," he said, opting for a stool at the counter before his wobbly knees decided to give out.

"Hi," she said, and the pain in her tone made all his regret come surging back.

He watched as she delivered the food and then headed toward him. She glanced into the kitchen. "Hungry?" she asked.

Starving, but too nauseous to eat. "Just coffee?"



She nodded and he noticed her hand shake as she poured the cup.

“How’ve you been?” he asked. Her back was to him as she ripped open two packets of sugar and dumped them in.

“Fine. Nothing changes around here,” she said casually as she added the creamer and stirred it. She still hadn’t turned back to look at him. She was procrastinating.

He needed the time, too.

Unfortunately, when she did turn, it was just in time for them both to see their mom enter the diner. He’d never seen a person’s expression change so quickly—from surprise to hope to pain and then anger—as when his mother’s gaze landed on him.

“Hey, Mom,” Molly said, still holding the coffee cup.

His mother didn’t take her eyes off him. “You’re not welcome here,” she said bluntly.

“Mom...”

“Don’t call me that. The son I raised disappeared two years ago.”

He shivered at the chill in her tone. She was the sweetest, kindest, most welcoming woman he knew, so her words hit even harder. “I made a mistake...”

“You did time in jail. You shamed our family and now you’re back in town, running a tattoo shop.” She shook her head. “You should have stayed in Vegas.”

“I didn’t want that lifestyle anymore. I’m trying to put my life back together, and I want to make it up to you.” She was upset. He didn’t fault her at all for that, but he wasn’t prepared to give up. He loved them. He’d spend forever making it up to them if she’d let him.

Unfortunately, she stared at him as though he were a stranger. “You’re not part of this family anymore. And I heard about Jade Frazier.” She pointed a finger at him. “She’s a good person, soft heart and gentle soul. She’ll try to save you. Be

man enough to refuse that help,” she said, walking away from him and heading into the kitchen.

Molly suppressed a sob as she disappeared into the kitchen after their mom.

Griffin’s chest ached so hard he thought it might explode. Getting up from the stool, he stalked out of the diner.

He never should have stopped by. Not knowing whether there was hope of reconciling with his family had been hard, but knowing there wasn’t completely crushed his spirit.

\* \* \*

LATER THAT NIGHT, Jade shivered as she pushed through the door of The Drunk Tank, where she was meeting Griffin. Since Mrs. Silverman had told the town about their kiss, there was no point in hiding that they were getting to know one another. She was in a fantastic mood and couldn’t wait to see him. She’d submitted her photos of the window display to her professor and a celebratory drink was in order.

She scanned the crowded pub for Griffin and saw him in a back booth. The dim lighting made it a more comfy, cozy place to sit. She smiled as she headed toward him. “This seat taken?” she joked as she removed her coat and hung it on the hook.

His expression was dark when he lifted his gaze to hers, and a chill ran through her. She noticed several empty beer bottles on the table. He’d started without her and, reading his mood, she suspected *he* wasn’t celebrating.

“Everything okay?” she asked cautiously as she slid in across from him.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

“This is your ‘fine’ face? We’re still getting to know one another, so I’m not sure.” She was desperate to lighten the mood. It was as though a storm cloud was brewing above his head, threatening to break any second.

He didn't look at her as he said, "Yeah, hey, I stuck around because I didn't want you to think I'd stood you up." He cleared his throat. "But I have to go."

She frowned as he slid out of the booth.

"Go? Already? I thought we were having drinks?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Since when?" The day before they'd made out. A lot. That morning, he'd agreed to meet her for drinks. What had changed since then?

He lowered his head and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm not the guy for you, Jade."

"According to who?" She should have a say in that, shouldn't she? Obviously, he was still nervous about the two of them being together. What people would think. What they'd say. She didn't care about any of that.

"Things are just complicated right now, and I don't think you and I are a good idea."

"You're dumping me before we even have an actual date?" He had to relax. Within a week, the town would have moved on to new gossip. In time, no one would care.

"I'm sorry, Jade." He did look sorry, but also unfortunately resolute in his decision. "Have a nice holiday," he said, and walked away.

Jade just sat there, mouth agape, watching him leave. Confused and conflicted, she released a deep sigh as she slumped against the booth.

What the hell had just happened?

## CHAPTER FIVE

*December 23...*

THE LARGE GROUP gathered outside his shop had Griffin resisting the urge to turn and walk in the other direction. They didn't look like they were lined up for tattoos.

From a distance he recognized Mrs. Silverman and several other members of the business association. He forced a polite smile as he stopped next to them. "Good morning."

"Congratulations!" Mrs. Silverman said. "On behalf of the business association of Wild River, we'd like to present you with this award for first place in the window display contest." She extended the gold-plated plaque toward him, and an unexpected sense of pride welled up in him at seeing his shop's name engraved on it. A small validation of sorts.

"I won?"

"Hands down," another woman on the committee said. "This is fantastic! So unique."

He couldn't take the credit. "It was Jade Frazier's design. She did all of it. I had nothing to do with it."

"Well, that girl is talented. I expect you might lose your decorator to some other businesses around here next year, if you're not careful," the other woman said with a wink.

Mrs. Silverman shot him a mischievous grin. "I don't think he'll have to worry about that."

He swallowed hard. Unfortunately, he doubted Jade would be interested in helping him next year after the way he'd abruptly ended things the week before.

The last seven days had been torture. He'd wanted to reach out to apologize or at least explain what he hadn't been able to that evening at The Drunk Tank, but he wasn't sure what he could say. Jade had said it didn't matter what everyone else

thought of the two of them together. Maybe it wasn't important to her now, but his mother was right.

He wasn't the guy for her. She deserved so much better.

Unfortunately, that had been easier to believe up until now, when he was staring at the first place plaque with the casual, good-natured group of business owners congratulating him. He'd won, and in a small way, he felt as though the community was accepting him back. He still had a long way to go to fully earn the community's trust, but it was a start.

And he owed this first gesture of acceptance to Jade.

\* \* \*

SITTING IN A booth at Carla's Diner, she hit the refresh button over and over on her email. The term grades would be posted any minute. Jade guzzled her coffee, then tried to counteract the caffeinated buzzing throughout her body by taking a deep breath.

The store window was incredible. She was so proud of how it had turned out. Unfortunately, her chest ached whenever she walked past it. She was desperate to reach out to Griffin, but he'd been pretty clear that he wasn't interested in pursuing things. He hadn't reached out to her either. She knew the attraction between them was real, that they'd formed a special connection, but what could she do?

He wasn't ready yet and she couldn't force him into a relationship.

She hoped maybe...in time.

She hit the refresh button again and the term grades loaded on the screen. She scanned quickly, and her heart rose for the first time in a week.

She got an A! She'd done it!

"Yay!" It was a small victory after getting dumped just before the holidays, but she'd take it. Finally, the validation she'd needed to know she was on the right track with this

profession. It was something she truly enjoyed and was good at.

“Good news?” Molly asked, stopping next to her booth and refilling her coffee cup.

She nodded. “Yeah. Term grades came back. I passed my interior designer class,” she said with a smile. She wasn’t going to brag about the A, tempting though it was.

Molly’s smile was sad as she nodded. “That’s amazing and well deserved—congrats. I saw the display in my bro—in the tattoo shop window,” she said, lowering her voice. “It is really wonderful. He definitely deserved that win.”

“He won the business association window display contest?” Wow. She hadn’t heard yet. Too bad they couldn’t be together to celebrate their good news. Maybe she could stop by... congratulate him? Nope. She needed to let him come to her if and when he was ever ready. She cleared her throat. “Have you talked to him?” she asked Molly gently.

Molly glanced toward the kitchen, where Carla was working. “He stopped by a week ago.”

He had? Her gut turned. “And...” She didn’t mean to pry, but she suspected that maybe that was where his bad mood had stemmed from that evening at The Drunk Tank.

“Mom basically kicked him out,” Molly whispered, busying herself with the salt and pepper shakers, her red braid falling across her shoulder.

“Of the diner?”

“Of our lives,” Molly said sadly.

Jade’s chest ached for him and she felt more than a little responsible. She’d encouraged him to try to reconnect with his family. He’d thought they weren’t ready to forgive him yet and he’d been right. She shouldn’t have interfered. “I’m sorry, Molly.” She hesitated, opened her mouth to say something, then slammed her lips back together.

Nope. No more interfering. She’d done enough.



Damn it! She couldn't help herself. Griffin was a great guy and this family was hurting. They obviously wanted to reconcile...and didn't know how. "You know, just because your mom is still unwilling to forgive and move forward doesn't mean you and Gillian can't."

Molly toyed with the string on her apron as she shook her head. "Our family doesn't work that way. Siding with Griffin would be a slap in the face." She gestured around her. "This is my life."

Jade nodded. "I understand."

Molly walked away and Jade sighed. She closed her laptop and tucked it into her case. She'd lost her appetite.

"Leaving, Jade? You haven't eaten yet." Carla's voice, as she delivered that day's special to a nearby booth, made Jade pause.

She turned with a polite smile. "I'm not hungry today."

Carla eyed her. "Everything okay, dear?"

Obviously, the woman had heard the gossip about Jade's kiss with her son. Everyone had by now. "Fine," she said simply. It wasn't fine, but there was no sense getting into something that was no longer happening. She climbed out of the booth and headed for the door. Resisting the urge to turn back took all her effort.

*Just leave. Their family dynamics are none of your business.*

She turned back. "You know, everything's not really okay." She took a deep breath and pushed on before she could lose her nerve. "This place has always welcomed people with no place to go. The Christmas after our dad died, that was Maddie and I. We were sad and facing a holiday season without him, and we came here for Christmas dinner. Everyone, especially you, Carla, welcomed us with open arms, open hearts... We've never forgotten your kindness toward us. Your kindness toward everyone." She paused. "Can't you find it within your heart to offer that same love to your son?"

Carla cringed, and Jade could see tears burning the backs of the woman's eyes. She glanced around the diner, avoiding

Jade's gaze. "This is different."

"And absolutely none of my business, I know. But all I'm going to say is, Griffin made a mistake. Don't make one yourself." She touched Carla's hand gently, and then turned and left the diner.

## CHAPTER SIX

APPARENTLY, TATTOOS WERE the new Christmas gift idea.

His shop hadn't stopped with walk-ins all day. It being Christmas Eve, Griffin hadn't expected to see anyone at all, but his waiting room was full.

Winning the window display contest had obviously been a bigger deal than he'd thought.

Men, women, some old and some barely old enough to sign the waiver for themselves, flocked in, and six hours after opening, Griffin was exhausted and calling it a day.

"First thing the day after Christmas, I'll be here and ready to give you that sugar skull, Mrs. Kingsly. I'm just afraid I won't do it justice after all the others I completed today," he told the last customer waiting.

The woman looked grateful. "I appreciate that. So, ten a.m. on the twenty-sixth?"

"Perfect." He walked her to the door and, after shutting it behind her, flipped the sign to Closed. He was happy about his productive day, but he couldn't dull the ache in his chest that it was Christmas Eve, and he couldn't get his mind off Jade. How great would it have been to spend the holidays with her?

Still, his mother was right. He didn't deserve her. She'd not only decorated his window and won him the contest, but she'd also inadvertently shown the town that it was okay to accept him as one of them again.

A knock on the door had him sighing. *Damn, people. I'm closed. Read the sign.*

He turned and, seeing his mother outside the door, his stomach lurched. She offered a quick, uneasy wave through the glass and he opened the door. "Hi..." How could one single syllable hold so much emotion? He thought the word might actually strangle him.

“Can I come in?” she asked, looking nervous—as though she was still contemplating whether or not to be there.

He didn’t want her to leave, so he stepped back quickly to let her enter.

A long moment of awkward silence followed as she took in the shop, the tattoo designs on the wall, the chairs... anything to avoid his eyes.

He waited. He had no idea why she was here, but he’d let her say what she came to say. Good or bad, at least she was here. Getting to see her on Christmas Eve, no matter what the reason, was an unexpected gift.

She took a deep breath and stared at her hands. “The shop looks great.”

Her praise meant everything, and he nearly choked on the lump rising in his throat. “Thank you.”

She opened her oversize purse and took out an old poster. She handed it to him. “It doesn’t really match the window decor, but the contest was over, so... I wanted to drop this off... Just in case you wanted to have it.”

He unrolled the old familiar poster he’d given her for Christmas the year he’d turned nineteen and gotten his first tattoo, to ease the sting.

The image of a buff Santa Claus with the word *Mama* in a heart tattoo on his chest made him laugh. “This was your gift. Your poster.”

She nodded. “I just found it among the decorations this year.”

And she hadn’t immediately destroyed it or thrown it away. That meant a lot. “Thank you for bringing it,” he said. “I’ll definitely use it next year.” It might be the only decor in his shop the following year. A thought that depressed him on so many levels.

His mother nodded and cleared her throat. “Jade stopped by the diner yesterday,” she said slowly.

His chest tightened at the mention of her name. He wanted to do the right thing, and now he wasn't even sure he knew what that was.

"She had a few things to say." His mother paused. "And she was right about it all. You going to jail broke my heart, as I know we raised you better than that. You were so smart and talented, and I thought you'd gone and thrown your life away. I felt helpless and that had to be the hardest part of all—knowing I couldn't fix things for you. It felt as though I'd lost you," she said, looking pained.

He nodded. "I know, Mom. I'm sorry."

"But I didn't lose you. You made a mistake, did your time, and now I realize that one choice doesn't define who you are. You're still the smart, talented, caring son I know. You were also brave enough to come back here and try to make amends, and I'd be a fool to shut you out when all I want is to be a family again, have you home again." Tears burned in her tired-looking eyes even as a hopeful look lit up her expression.

He swallowed hard, and dared to step forward and open his arms.

She hesitated, then stepped into them, clinging to him tight. "I'm so happy you're home, son," she said.

He didn't trust his voice, so he kissed the top of her head.

"And the thing I said about Jade." She pulled back to look at him. "Forget every word. That girl is special, so don't do anything to mess that up."

He sighed. The advice was coming a little too late.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTMAS EVE AND all alone.

Jade scanned the crowd inside The Drunk Tank for the annual Christmas Eve party. Had everyone in town coupled up overnight? She stared wistfully across her candy-cane martini at her sister and Mike cuddled up in the booth across from her, dressed in matching ugly Christmas sweaters. For the first time in her life, she understood completely why the Grinch decided to cancel Christmas.

For a brief few days, she'd been enjoying the season, launching her new career, falling in love unexpectedly...

She scanned the bar, but there was no one she wanted to talk to, dance with or really be around, and her mood would only ruin Maddie's night. If she knew Jade wasn't having a good time, her sister's protective instincts would kick in and she'd spend the night trying to make Jade feel better.

That wouldn't be fair. So, she faked a yawn and stretched. "I'm exhausted. I think I'll call it a night."

Maddie tore her eyes away from Mike and checked her watch. "It's only ten thirty."

"This school semester really took it out of me, but you stay and enjoy, and I'll see you under the tree at six a.m. for gifts," she said, forcing a smile and sliding out of the booth. Unfortunately, she wasn't really looking forward to the early-morning Christmas Day tradition with her sister. Mike would be there, which would be fine if Jade wouldn't once again feel like a third wheel. She and Maddie hadn't discussed it yet, but she knew the time was coming when Maddie would be moving in with Mike. They'd been seeing one another for a while, things were serious, and eventually it would happen. Jade would be alone. They were adults now, and that was how life went.

Mike quickly kissed Maddie and started to climb out of the booth. "I'll walk you home."



Jade pointed at him. “You will not. You will stay with my sister.”

Mike hesitated.

“You sure you’ll be okay, Jade?” Maddie asked.

“Absolutely. Have fun.” She zipped her winter coat as she crossed the wooden floor toward the door. She pushed through and stepped out into the frigid night air. Large fluffy snowflakes fell to the ground on the quiet street, and she sighed as her boots left a solitary trail down the snowy sidewalk.

\* \* \*

HE’D SCREWED THINGS UP. But these days he wasn’t so afraid to admit it and try to fix it before it was too late. Climbing the steps to Jade’s apartment, Griffin held his breath and knocked. A long moment passed, and no sound came from inside. He knocked again and waited.

Nothing.

It was Christmas Eve. Of course she wasn’t home. She had family and friends to celebrate with. She wasn’t home pining over him.

Unfortunately, there was no way he could let this night end without finding her and telling her how he felt. Apologize for pushing her away, thank her for everything she’d done for him and tell her he was falling in love with her.

Descending the stairs two at a time, he headed toward Main Street. Most stores were closed until after Christmas and the street was quiet, illuminated only by streetlights. The sound of holiday music grew louder the closer he got to The Drunk Tank. The bar was the only place still open, hosting its annual Christmas Eve party, so it made sense that she might be there. He pushed through the door and rubbed his hands together for heat as he entered and scanned the bar.

Couples were everywhere, dancing, singing holiday tunes, drinking holiday-themed cocktails. A full, festive mood enveloped him. He’d love to be here with Jade. Celebrating a

different kind of Christmas—one full of hope and the promise of a better life, a better future. If she was here, maybe it wasn't too late.

In a booth toward the back he spotted her, and his heart pounded as he made his way toward her. His gut turned seeing her cuddled into another guy... Mike? The man he'd tattooed a few weeks ago?

Then relief washed over him seeing that it wasn't her. But a striking resemblance. Her sister, Maddie?

Mike glanced up and waved him over.

"Hey, man...how's the tattoo healing?" he asked, still scanning the bar. If her sister was here, maybe Jade was, too. A candy-cane martini sat on the table across from where the couple was sitting.

"Great. No issues at all. Here alone? Want to join us?" Mike asked.

"Um...is Jade here?"

Maddie shot him an unimpressed look. "What exactly are your intentions with my sister?"

He deserved the overprotective sister drilling. "I messed up and I wanted to apologize." He looked around. "She here?"

"She left about half an hour ago. Headed home," Maddie said, seeming reluctant to let him off the hook so easy, but caving just a little.

"I was just there... No answer."

Maddie's face now took on a look of concern as she reached for her cell phone. She dialed and they all waited... No answer. "Damn, voice mail."

"Maybe she's asleep already," Mike said. "She did say she was tired."

"I should go." Maddie reached for her coat and Mike nodded.

But Griffin held out a hand. "Why don't you stay in case she decides to come back, and I'll head out to see if she's still

walking? It's a nice night. Maybe she just needed some air."

Maddie hesitated, then nodded, still looking concerned. "Okay, but text us if you find her, and I'll try calling again." She scribbled her cell number on a napkin and handed it to Griffin.

"Will do," he said, tucking it into his pocket. He walked away from the table and headed out of the bar.

Outside, he looked up and down the street, then headed in the opposite direction of her apartment. He hadn't seen her on the street on his walk to the bar.

He walked along Main Street, and as he went, he quickly surveyed his competition for the window display contest. There were some seriously impressive designs. Flippin' Pages, the local bookstore, had stacked books in the shape of a Christmas tree. The Chocolate Shoppe had used hollow chocolate figurines to create a scene with Santa and his reindeer... Great stuff.

None as amazing as Jade's, though.

He continued walking, and when his own shop came into view, his heart pounded. There she was. Standing outside looking at the display. Dressed in the faux fur coat she'd been wearing the first day she'd walked into his shop, her heeled leather boots and a festive red hat, she took his breath away.

He smiled as he approached. "An incredibly talented woman designed that one," he said.

She turned, and a slight look of hope reflected in her green eyes as she shrugged. "Wanted to take another look before you dismantled it."

"I was actually thinking of leaving it up year-round," he said.

"That's an idea."

"But then I thought if I did that, there'd be no reason for you to design a new one next year."

"Next year's won't be free," she said with a small smile.

Damn, he wanted to reach out and kiss her, but first things first. “Jade, I’m sorry. I guess I panicked a little.”

“I understand. You’re not quite ready...”

“No. I thought I wasn’t good enough for you. But, selfishly, I’m also not ready to give up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He moved toward her and took her hands in his. “I came back here looking for family. But family doesn’t have to be blood. You made this homecoming a lot easier...”

She stared up at him and he kissed the snowflakes on her eyelashes.

“I’m sorry I interfered with your own family, though. I shouldn’t have convinced you to see them when things were still too raw.”

“You were trying to help. And you did,” he said, staring gratefully into her eyes. He owed so much to her. He didn’t even know where to begin in thanking her. “My mom came to see me at the shop.” He still couldn’t believe it. It was going to be a long road to healing, but at least they’d be on that path together.

“She did?”

“She did...and while we have a way to go, I think we can get there,” he said.

Jade let out a happy sigh full of relief. “That’s really great, Griffin.”

“She also said that I better not mess this up with you and I’m desperate not to,” he said, and paused. “Because I’m falling for you, Jade.”

Her smile was wide and so incredibly beautiful as she stared up at him. “I’m falling for you, too.”

“Is that your ‘happy’ face, because we haven’t been together long enough—”

She cut off his words with a kiss. A deep, passionate kiss that beat any other kiss he’d ever had. He held her close and savored the moment, never wanting to let go of the best holiday gift he could ever have hoped for.

“So, you forgive me for being an idiot?” he asked softly as he pulled back.

“’Tis the season,” she said with a wink.

He held her tight as the town square clock chimed with the sounds of midnight, signaling the beginning of Christmas Day and the beginning of his new life in his hometown of Wild River, Alaska.

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An Alaskan Christmas Homecoming

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