

His Christmas Miracle

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HIS CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

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May your Christmas spirit stay true!

Chapter One

Moving to Jackson, Wyoming had never been on Aria's radar, yet looking out the front window of her newly opened bakery, she couldn't remember a time when she felt more at home. She smiled as she watched the snow fall and people hustle to get to where they were going. This was home for her and her daughter. She waved to an older couple as they walked past the bakery with bags filled with Christmas decorations, something she couldn't wait to do with her daughter. There was something magical in the air around Christmas time and she couldn't wait to give that little bit of magic to Alexis. This year they were going to have a real Christmas tree, decorate their new little house, make gingerbread cookies and drink hot chocolate after building a snowman. She would do this right for Alexis.

Aria was behind the counter when she heard the bell ring and she didn't need to look up to know that Jayce Connelly had walked into her bakery, like he'd done every day since she'd opened two months ago. He had been coming in at exactly 7:45 a.m. every morning, always wearing faded dark-blue jeans that had never looked better on a man than they did on him, an unzipped black jacket and a long-sleeved black shirt that hugged his chest. He had muscles like she'd never seen on a man before; she guessed when you were hauling trees around all day, you were bound to have the muscles to go with it.

He stopped to talk to almost every customer in her bakery; Jayce knew everyone and they all loved him. She'd come to notice that no one talked to him about his Christmas plans and as much as she wanted to ask why, she also didn't want to pry. He shook the snow from his hair as he headed to the counter. When he finally made it, he smiled at her and she felt her knees go weak. She hated how easily he got to her. Okay, maybe she loved it a little too much.

She was a divorced mom of a seven-year-old little girl and he was the town's most eligible bachelor, with a past no one ever talked about.

She knew she didn't stand a chance, but she could still dream. And boy, did she ever dream about Jayce Connelly. He had mystery about him, the town's lumberjack who operated the only Christmas Tree Farm within forty miles even though it was obvious the man didn't like anything about Christmas. He didn't decorate his farm and he didn't attend any town Christmas events, which she found strange, but again, she knew better than to start asking questions.

"Morning, Aria." The way he said her name always sent shivers up and down her spine. His voice was low and raspy and she loved it. His hair was wet from the snow falling outside but he still looked hotter than most models.

"Hey, Jayce, the usual?" she asked him, even though she already knew the answer. Every morning he came in and ordered a large black coffee, a breakfast sandwich, and two blueberry muffins to go. She wiped her hands on her apron and waited for his answer, wishing that she was more like her best friend, Hannah, right now and actually knew how to flirt with a man like Jayce.

He looked at her differently today and she didn't quite know what to make of the intensity in his eyes.

"Yeah." One word answers were what he gave her on most days, which should annoy her, but there was something about the way he looked at her that told her he didn't mean any harm; it was who he was.

"All right." She grabbed two muffins, put them in a bag and handed it to him before getting his coffee. "Here you go." She handed him his drink as she heated his breakfast sandwich. She was about to ask him about picking out a tree with her daughter when she heard Hannah coming around the corner.

"Hey, Aria, did Mr. Hot Stuff come in already?" Aria flinched at the nickname they had given Jayce behind closed doors. They both turned around to see Hannah rounding the corner with a plate of fresh-baked muffins. It was obvious that she hadn't seen Jayce yet and to make matters worse, some of the customers seated close to the counter were now listen-

ing to the exchange. She loved Hannah like a sister. When she'd moved to town with Alexis, Hannah had been the first one to welcome her, and when she decided to open the bakery, Hannah was the first one to volunteer to help her get it off the ground.

But at that moment, she really wished Hannah wouldn't be so outspoken. She glanced at Jayce, who was looking between her and Hannah with a big smile on his face. She felt his eyes on her and knew a blush colored her cheeks. She was going to have to kill her best friend; there was no doubt about it. "Hannah...." She tried to make her voice come off as a warning but when Hannah continued to speak, she knew she hadn't gotten through to her.

"It's not like I'm the one who gave him that nickname. You're the one who's always saying how hot the man is, and I mean you're right, he's all muscle and man, even if he is my brother-in-law."

Aria coughed, and if a person could die of embarrassment, she would be dead right now. She couldn't believe her best friend had just said that out loud, and that Jayce now knew she thought he was hot.

"Hannah!" She couldn't believe this was actually happening. This had to be a dream, but when she looked back at Jayce, he was grinning. Oh, God, this was really happening.

When Hannah finally lifted her head and saw Jayce standing there with a huge smirk on his face, Aria wanted to hide and never come out ever again. Maybe she could move to Alaska. "What? Oh, shit. Hi, Jayce." Hannah looked at her and mouthed *I'm sorry*.

She watched as Jayce took a sip of his coffee like this was a normal occurrence for him—which it probably was. It was no secret that Jayce had a reputation for getting around, which was another reason to stay away from him. The last thing she needed to do was bring a man into Alexis's life and watch him walk away when he found something better than a single mom.

He laughed and ran his hand through his wet hair. "Hannah, always a learning experience when you're around."

"Oh, please, it's not like you didn't already know you were hot." And just like that, Aria watched Hannah walk back into the kitchen, leaving her alone with the big bad wolf.

"Sorry about that. Sometimes I wish she had a mute button." What else was she supposed to say? He looked amused by the whole thing more than anything else, which made her feel a little better.

He tilted his head to the side, his eyes locking on her, making her more than a little nervous about the rest of this conversation. "Don't worry about it, Aria, it was very educational," he told her as she handed him his change.

She smiled at him. "Yeah, we learned that Hannah has a big mouth."

He laughed, and God, she loved the sound of his laugh; she found it calming. "We did, but more importantly, we learned that you think I'm hot stuff. Have a good day, Aria." Before she could say anything else, Jayce was out the door and she was left speechless behind the counter, with her customers looking at her like she'd provided them with their weekly entertainment.

She turned on her heels and walked into the kitchen. "I cannot believe you said that to him."

Hannah looked up from the mixing bowl. "First, I didn't say it to him since I didn't know he was there. Second, he didn't look offended at all."

Aria sighed and rested her back against the wall. It was one thing to secretly fantasize about Jayce, but having him know she thought he was hot was a whole different ball game. "How am I supposed to look at him tomorrow or go get a tree now?" she asked, running her fingers through her hair.

"The same way you look at him every day, Aria, like he's a piece of candy cane you can't wait to get your hands on," Hannah told her, laughing.

"Oh, my God, you are ridiculous, Hannah. Plus, the man hates candy canes or anything related." She pushed herself off the wall and walked toward the oven that was about to ring.

She saw something flash across Hannah's face, a sadness she hadn't seen before, but before Aria could press further, Hannah spoke up. "He's not the one eating the candy cane in this scenario, Aria, and you know I'm right."

She turned around to look at Hannah. "It doesn't matter if you're right or not. The man is out of my league, Hannah, and I would never start something with a man like that. I can't be selfish about this. I have to think of Alexis."

"I've known Jayce for over ten years, Aria. You might be surprised by what he wants out of life. Hell, he might be surprised by what he wants and thinks he can't have. And Jayce would be a great dad to Alexis if it ever came to that." Aria was surprised and curious—Hannah rarely came to anyone's defense.

"What is that supposed to mean?" As if she didn't already have more questions than answers when it came to Jayce.

"That you don't know the kind of man Jayce Connelly really is." The timer on the oven beeped and she had never been more thankful to be saved by the bell...except now all she could think about was what Hannah knew about Jayce that she didn't.

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Walking back to his truck, Jayce couldn't stop smiling at what had happened. Hannah's big mouth had always gotten her in trouble over the years, but he had to admit, it had its moments. He wasn't blind; after going to Aria's bakery for over two months, he knew she was attracted to him. It was easy to see, and God, if he didn't feel the same way about her, she would be so embarrassed. She was beautiful, with long brown hair and green eyes that always drew him in, and those curves of hers drove him insane. But until this morning, he had been running on gut instinct; now he knew he was right, thanks to Hannah's big mouth.

As much as he wanted her, he would never be that selfish. She was a single mom with a daughter who deserved so much better than a man

who had nothing to offer them. He remembered the first day Aria and Alexis had moved into town; Alexis had been running around with their dog and had run smack into his legs. Aria had come running, apologizing, and that day was one of the best days of his life. Aria didn't know anything about his past and he intended to keep it that way, so staying away from her was his only choice.

When he got back to the farm, his brother Ryder was leaning on the front desk with a coffee in hand. Before he could wipe the smile off his face, Ryder caught him and he knew he was going to be interrogated. He loved his brother, but sometimes he wished he could understand where he was coming from. After losing his wife and child a week before Christmas, the last thing Jayce wanted in his life was the possibility of losing another woman and child he loved.

"What's up with you?" His brother's voice brought him back from his dark train of thought. After five years, he'd still not moved on. The memory of the night he lost everything still haunted him.

Best to shrug it off and hope his brother wouldn't push the subject. "What are you talking about?"

"You're smiling. You never fucking smile."

Jayce knew that he smiled every time he saw Aria and Alexis. In the short two months they'd been in town, they'd managed to make quite the impression on everyone, including him. Alexis was the kind of kid who drew you in, and once she got her hooks in you, there was no going back—just like her mom. Damn it, he had to get a grip because that wasn't happening. "Fuck off, Ryder."

He walked into his office and sat behind his desk as Ryder strolled right in and sat down with concern on his face. Jayce might be the older brother, but Ryder's sense of nurture was bigger than his own, thanks to Hannah and their daughter. "Seriously man, what's up?"

"Nothing's up." He unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite as he waited for his brother's next round of questioning.

"So this has nothing to do with Hannah going on one of her rants this morning?" Of course he knew about it; half the town probably already knew about it.

"How do you even fucking know about that? Oh, never mind, you're married to the woman. Of course she called you."

"So, you and Aria, huh?"

Jayce didn't miss the humor and concern in his brother's voice, but he didn't want to talk about Aria right now. In fact, he didn't want to talk about Aria at all. "Shut up, Ryder, don't you have work to do?" Work. He had to focus on work. Christmas was their busiest time of the year and work was something he could control.

Ryder laughed and the urge to punch him was overwhelming. "You are so fucked, man. I know that you still hurt. I get that. Losing what you lost, I can't even begin to imagine what that must be like, but you have a chance here, a chance to have something great with a woman who is obviously into you, and a little girl who worships you. I know you think you can't move on, that you shouldn't be happy, but she wouldn't want you living like this. She would want you to have it all."

Jayce slammed his fists on his desk and barked out his next words, making it clear he was done with this conversation. "Work. Ryder." His brother hesitated before leaving him alone with the words lingering in the air. He ran his fingers through his messy hair. Fuck. He hated everything about this time of year. He hated how it was a constant reminder of everything he'd lost, and as much as he wanted to let Aria in, he couldn't do it, couldn't risk losing her.

It was around 2:00 p.m. when he saw Aria walking toward the main building with a couple of bags and trays in her hands. He met her halfway and caught one of the bags when she stumbled. She looked adorable wrapped in her black winter jacket, checkered scarf, and red hat. "What's all this?"

She shifted her weight from one foot to another and he caught her by the elbow to keep her from falling. "Oh, hmm, Ryder called saying

you guys hadn't had lunch yet and he asked me if I could bring over some sandwiches, so here I am. I brought you guys coffee too."

Why did she have to look so adorable standing there in front of him, bringing him lunch like it was the most normal thing? "You didn't have to do that, Aria."

"Well, Ryder called and so, hmm, if you don't want the sandwiches, I can take them back." He hated that he was responsible for the hesitation in her voice but he couldn't be around her right now; it was too much. The memories from his earlier talk with his brother were too close for comfort, making it hard for him to breathe.

"Oh, thank God, food. Hey, Aria." He turned his head and saw Ryder coming toward them with a smile on his face. The man was dead, pure and simple.

She smiled at him, and shit, he hated seeing her reaction to another man. "Hey, Ryder. I got two sandwiches for each of the guys and I put in some desserts and brought some coffee. Hannah says she's sorry she couldn't make the delivery but to tell you she'll make it up to you tonight."

He watched Ryder take a few steps closer and kiss Aria on the cheek. "I'm sure she will."

That did it; he grabbed Ryder by the back of the shirt and pulled him away from Aria. "Take the food, Ryder," he all but barked at him; the man was pushing all of his buttons and he knew it.

When her hands were free, Aria fixed her ponytail and he could tell she was nervous about being alone with him. "So, are you coming to the town Christmas parade?"

Out of all the things she could have asked him, that was the last one he expected. Everyone in town knew he didn't do Christmas, not since the day it all went to hell and he lost so much of himself. He didn't take part in Christmas parties. He didn't decorate—in fact, he did his best to avoid Christmas altogether, which was ironic considering he sold Christmas trees. "I don't do Christmas, Aria."

The disappointment on her face broke his heart and as much as he wanted to tell her why, he couldn't find the words. She shifted her weight from foot to foot before looking up at him. "Alexis is playing an elf."

Way to go straight for his heart. That little girl had him wrapped around her little finger, but he couldn't go there with them.

In that moment, Jayce did the only thing he knew how to do: he shut her out. "I really don't do Christmas, Aria. Thanks for the food, but I have to get back to work."

He saw the shock of his dismissal register on her face and he felt anything but proud at what he'd done, but it was for the best. She gave him a faint smile. "Okay. I was thinking about coming by with Alexis tomorrow to pick up a tree."

"If I'm not here, Ryder can help you." He felt like such an asshole for dismissing her and Alexis like that. He kept telling himself that the hurt on her face was for the best, but no matter how hard he forced himself to believe it, his heart kept telling him to pull her in close.

"Okay." He watched her walk back to where her car was parked, and didn't hear Ryder come up behind him.

"That was low, even for you, man. You need to get your shit together." Ryder was right. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt the woman he couldn't stop thinking about, but what would be worse was to disappoint the little girl who was slowly becoming a part of him, because no matter how hard he tried to fight it, he couldn't stop the guilt from crawling into his head.

Chapter Two

Aria lay in bed thinking about what Jayce had said to her the day before, hating how much his dismissal hurt. She knew she was probably being overly sensitive, but having him reject her the way he did left her upset. What had hurt even more was how easy it had been for him to dismiss Alexis. Her daughter loved Jayce, but there was no way she would risk damaging her daughter's feelings if they showed up today and Jayce wasn't around to help them pick up their Christmas tree.

Aria grabbed a sweatshirt from her reading chair. When she saw all the snow that had fallen overnight, she didn't know how her little car would handle the drive down to the Connelly farm. That was one of the things about Wyoming, her city car wasn't cutting it anymore but she would have to make it work until after the holidays.

She hadn't planned on the large amount of snow when she decided to move to Wyoming. "Mama, can we have pancakes for breakfast?" Aria turned at the sound of her daughter's voice. She looked so adorable in her reindeer pajamas with her hair all crazy. No matter what anyone said, Alexis was the best thing she'd ever done in her life.

She opened her arms and hugged Alexis, kissing the top of her head. "Yeah, baby, we can have pancakes. Chocolate chip?" She took Alexis's hand as they walked into their kitchen.

"Yes, please. Are we still picking up our tree today?" She smiled as her daughter jumped up and down while she clapped her hands. Her daughter loved Christmas; there was no doubt about it. And she would be damned if she let Jayce Connelly mess that up for her.

She collected the flour and sugar from the cupboard and mixed the ingredients for their pancakes. "We are, baby. Ryder is going to help us and if you ask him nicely, I'm sure he'll have hot chocolate for you."

"Is Jayce going to be there too?" The look in her daughter's eyes almost broke her. She had definitely let her daughter become too attached

to Jayce. She was going to have to talk to Jayce about it, no matter how hard it was going to be for her.

"I don't know, baby." She did her best to keep Alexis busy between breakfast and getting her ready, anything to avoid talking about Jayce. By the time they were ready to head out, Alexis was bundled in her pretty pink snowsuit with her white hat, scarf and gloves. Her daughter loved pink. Aria got herself dressed and fought hard to find the courage to face the possibility of seeing Jayce today.

"All right, baby, let's go get our tree." The snow was falling harder and the accumulation on the ground made it hard for her to drive. When the car hit a patch of ice hidden by all the snow and started sliding, all she could do was say a silent prayer that they would be all right.

The car stopped as it hit the snowbank on the side of the road, and she tried pulling out of the bank and back onto the road, but it wasn't moving. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Mama, I think we're stuck." Her daughter's sweet little voice echoed through the car. With one glance outside, she knew no one would be driving down this backroad anytime soon.

She turned around to look at her daughter, giving her the best reassuring smile she could conjure up. "Looks that way, baby. Okay, let's see if we can call Hannah to come and help us. Shit, no service." Of course, the one time she needed to ask for help, she had no way of doing it.

"You said a bad word."

"You're right, I did." They didn't have that many options. There was no way they could stay in the car; she wouldn't risk it. They were about a mile away from Jayce's house. If they bundled up, they could make it before someone drove past them. "How do you feel about walking?" she asked her daughter.

"Can we have a snowball fight?" Alexis asked her with a smile that always made her heart melt a little.

She looked down at what she was wearing and in that moment, Aria cursed herself for not putting on her snow pants. No matter how they

did this, she was going to get wet and cold. "Maybe when we get home, but for now, let's just focus on walking." She got out of the car and sank knee-deep into the snow. There was no way Alexis could ever walk a mile in this much snow. "Actually, baby, you're going to get on my shoulders, okay?"

Her daughter frowned with worry before whispering, as if she was telling her a secret, "I'm too big for that, Mama."

She unbuckled Alexis and helped her out of the car seat. "It's going to be okay, baby. I want you to keep warm, so grab that blanket and wrap yourself up." Once she made sure Alexis was wrapped in the blanket, she helped her daughter on her shoulders and started walking. Aria was definitely signing up for the gym after the holidays, no excuses. About halfway to Jayce's house, her foot sank down in the snow and she felt a sharp pain go up to her knee.

"Mama, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, baby. I think I hurt my ankle, but we're almost there." By the time they reached the main house, she was sweating and freezing at the same time and her ankle felt like it was on fire. When Alexis screamed Jayce's name, she found herself hoping he wasn't home, but just her luck, a few seconds later, the man she wanted to avoid came running out the front door, looking like he was ready to kill someone.

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The second he heard his name being screamed by the little girl he'd come to love more than he should, Jayce was out the door, his heart beating so hard he thought it might pop out of his chest. So many scenarios ran through his mind as he stepped out of his front door. Why would Alexis be screaming his name?

Aria walked across his snow-filled field with Alexis on her shoulders, limping and looking like she was about to pass out. He ran to them, not caring that he wasn't wearing a jacket, because when he saw the agony on

Aria's face, the only thing that mattered was making sure both of them were all right.

"Jesus, what the hell happened to you?" She looked up at him and he swore under his breath when he saw frostbite starting to form on her face. He looked at Alexis who was bundled up in a snowsuit and blanket looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Can you grab Alexis, please?" she asked him breathlessly.

He reached for Alexis, making sure she was okay before lowering her to the ground. "Come here, darling. What happened?"

Aria straightened her back, and he could clearly see her body ached from walking in the snow and carrying Alexis. "My car got stuck in the snow, so we walked."

"You walked?" He knew his tone was harsher than it should be, but the thought of them walking alone in the middle of a snowstorm did not sit well with him.

"Yes, we walked, Jayce." She blurted out the words with annoyance, something that made him uneasy.

She was upset with him and he didn't like it, not at all. "What's with the attitude, Aria?"

"Oh, you can just—"

Before she could finish her sentence and probably tell him to go to hell, he felt a little hand grab the side of his shirt. When he looked down, he stared into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Concern flashed in his little princess's eyes. "Jayce?"

"Yeah, princess?" he asked her as he crouched down in front of her.

"Mama hurt her ankle in the snow." Her tiny voice was broken, filled with fear, and he wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. He was shocked; where was all this coming from? He hadn't felt like this in five years, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling this was meant to happen, that Aria and Alexis were supposed to be right there with him.

"Alexis." Aria's voice shocked him back into the moment.

He grabbed the blanket from Alexis and wrapped it around Aria before crouching again to speak to Alexis. "Why don't you run to the main house, get out of those clothes, and I'll get Ryder to make you some hot chocolate?"

"What about Mama?"

He stood back up and looked right at Aria as he spoke. "I'm going to take care of her, I promise." He saw something flash behind her eyes, something that told him she wanted him to keep his word. She wanted him to take care of her; her eyes couldn't lie to him.

"Okay." He barely registered Alexis's voice before he heard the sound of padded feet running toward the house.

He looked Aria up and down, checking for any other injury she might have, before settling his hands on her shoulders. "Can you walk?"

"I'm fine, Jayce. I don't need your help." Her voice said one thing but the way her body leaned against him for support told him another. She was strong and independent. It was one of the things he liked about her, but in that moment, she needed his help and he wouldn't be walking away.

"Oh, I beg to differ. Up you go." He slipped one arm under her knees, wrapped the other around her waist, and lifted her into his arms, smiling at her surprised gasp.

"Jayce, put me down! Oh, God, I'm too heavy. Put me down."

He laughed, because God, if she only knew how perfectly she fit in his arms, how perfect she felt close to him. "Stop squirming, Aria, and you are not too heavy."

"Jayce, I'm serious, put me down."

"I can't do that, Aria," he told her as he walked toward the house.

"You're infuriating." She buried her face in the crook of his neck as he carried her to the house, and he swore under his breath when she snuggled her ice-cold nose into him, but he wasn't about to complain.

"Right back at you, darling." They stayed silent until they got to the main house. Ryder was waiting for them. His brother looked as worried as he was.

"Aria, are you okay?" Jayce didn't wait for her to answer. He walked to the kitchen, satisfied when he saw Alexis sitting at the counter with a hot chocolate and cookies, before heading toward the stairs.

"Her ankle's hurt. Can you grab some ice and bring it to my bedroom?" Jayce told his brother as he started up the stairs.

"Okay, Jayce, this is far enough. I'm not going into your bedroom."

He stopped midway, and looked at her as if she were crazy. If she thought he was letting her out of his sight now, she had another thing coming. "Yes, you are. I'm going to look at your ankle, then you're going to take a warm shower, and then we'll talk about why you still drive that piece-of-shit car of yours in the middle of winter."

"I am not a child, Jayce. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"We'll see about that." He didn't miss the look his brother was giving him and hell, he couldn't blame him. For five years, he'd been purposefully distant with women, yet there he was, acting like Aria and Alexis were his. He nodded, acknowledging what his brother had been telling him for months: his feelings for Aria were much deeper than he had let on and now that he had her in his arms, in his house, he didn't plan on losing her.

"I would listen to him, Aria." Jayce smiled when he heard his brother and watched Aria as she twisted her head to get a good look at Ryder.

"He's your brother. Of course you have to side with him. Jayce, put me down. I'm serious. I am not going in there with you."

"What the hell is wrong with my bedroom, Aria?" he blurted, sounding more aggravated than he probably should be.

She sighed and he wanted to laugh at her reaction. "You have sex in there. I am not going in there."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, sweetheart, but Jayce hasn't seen any action in a while." That was it, he was going to kill his brother—after he

killed whoever was spreading rumors about his sex life. Done listening, Jayce climbed the rest of the stairs and headed for his bedroom. He carefully sat her down on his bed before slowly taking off her boots.

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Aria couldn't be more embarrassed or angry with herself than she was right in that moment. Not only did she really need Jayce's help, even if she didn't want to admit it, but she was sitting on his bed, with Jayce kneeling in front of her. All she could think about was how his beard would feel on her skin.

She tried to look anywhere but at him as he helped her out of her jacket, but every time his fingers touched her skin, she felt herself become unsteady. His room wasn't at all what she would have imagined. It was big with full windows on one wall, giving her a perfect view of the forest behind the house. His furniture was heavy wood, probably handcrafted. The wood was dark, but the light green on the walls made it the perfect combination.

When he started taking off her boots, she tried to get away from him. "Jayce, it's really not that bad."

"Then it won't hurt if I take a look at it." He pinned her with a look that told her that no matter how much she tried to talk her way out of this, he wasn't having any of it. An intensity shone in his eyes that she hadn't seen in him before. It surrounded her with calm, like he would take care of everything.

She took a deep breath and sighed in defeat. "Fine."

He took off her sock and she tried hard to remember if she had painted her toenails recently. God, what was she doing? He didn't care about her toenails. "Where were you going?" he asked her, not taking his eyes away from her swollen ankle.

"We were coming here to get a tree. I promised Alexis we would get a tree today." As she spoke the words, she realized she probably wouldn't

be getting a tree today. Not only was her ankle hurting her like crazy, but her car was still stuck in a snowbank.

"You did notice it was snowing like crazy outside, right?" The sarcasm in his voice pissed her off. Not everyone had family they could depend on like he did, and the last thing she wanted to do was disappoint her daughter.

She looked at him, forcing her voice to be strong and steady when they locked eyes, because the way he looked at her was making her world turn. "Yes, but today is the only day off I get and I promised Alexis—" He used his fingers to put pressure around her ankle and she bucked off the bed when pain soared through. "Ow!"

"Definitely sprained. I don't think it's broken," Jayce said calmly.

"This cannot be happening." She dropped her head in her hands. It was the last thing she needed. Between running the bakery and getting her house ready for Christmas, she didn't have time for a sprained ankle.

"Oh, my God, Aria, what happened?" She looked up when she heard Hannah's voice, but before she could answer, Jayce spoke up like he was the boss of her, pissing her off some more. "She's going to be off her feet, Hannah. Can you handle the café?"

"Excuse me, but I'm right here and I will not be off my feet." She raised her voice. Jayce looked at her with a smirk on his face, a smirk that she wanted to wipe right off.

"Aria, you have a sprained ankle. You can't even walk." Deep down, she knew he was right, even if she didn't want him to be. She was going to figure this out; she had to for Alexis's sake. There was no way she would let this ruin her daughter's Christmas.

"He's right, honey. I can handle it until you're better." She glared at Hannah, wondering whose side she was on. There was no way she could be off her feet during the busiest time of the year. She had a business to run. This could not be happening.

That was when it hit her. Aria wouldn't be able to give Alexis the Christmas she'd promised her. "It's Christmas, Hannah. I can't leave. Plus,

there's the Christmas parade and all the things I promised Alexis we would do."

"I'll take her to the parade." As Jayce spoke the words, Aria heard Hannah's intake of breath, and she felt Ryder's eyes on the both of them. Whatever was going on obviously shocked them.

"What?" She must have misheard him because the day before, he had dismissed the parade. She didn't understand why all of a sudden he wanted to go.

"I said I'll take her." He looked at her as he spoke the words. There was a challenge in his eyes; something was storming in his head.

She knew better than to push him, but there was no way she would put Alexis in a situation with someone who didn't want to be in it. "But you told me you didn't do Christmas."

"He doesn't," Ryder said from the doorway.

When Jayce heard his brother's voice, Aria felt the tension in the room grow. There was a story she didn't know about and whatever it was, it was a sore subject for Jayce. "Ryder, not now."

"But you want to take Alexis to the parade?" Aria asked him, because he looked like he was going through a battle of wills in his head.

"Yes," he told her without hesitating.

"Hmmm. Okay then, if you're sure about taking her. Can someone drive us home?" she asked, looking around the room, but everyone was looking at Jayce.

He stayed silent for a few minutes, and then he got off the bed and paced back and forth. He stopped in front of her, and when his eyes dropped on her, it was as if he was trying to see her soul. "No."

The words were almost whispered, and if she hadn't been paying attention, she wouldn't have caught them. "What do you mean, no?"

"You can't get around, Aria. You'll stay here." He told her like it was the simplest decision he'd ever made.

"Excuse me? No, I won't." She couldn't stay there. She'd promised Alexis that they would decorate their house together, and bake cookies

and put up a real Christmas tree. For the first time since Alexis was born, she was determined to give her daughter a real Christmas experience and she wouldn't be able to do that if she stayed with Jayce.

"This is fucking priceless, man. Aria, he's right." She looked up at Ryder as his voice filled the room. He wore a smile suggesting this was some sort of a joke, but the look on Jayce's face told her he was dead serious.

"Ryder, you cannot be serious. I can't stay here."

"Why not? What's wrong with my house?" By the tone of his voice, she knew she hurt his feelings. The truth of the matter was there was absolutely nothing wrong with his house. If she was honest, his house was perfect, but it was just that, *his* house.

"Nothing is wrong with your house, Jayce. It's beautiful, but I promised Alexis the perfect Christmas and you said it yourself, you don't do Christmas."

"You can decorate here, and we can even put up a tree." He told her, pain laced through his voice, his jaw tight.

She dropped her hand to his forearm and was surprised by the warmth she felt when she touched his skin. "Jayce, it's obvious that this is not a good time for you and I can't disappoint Alexis."

He took a step back from her and paced again. She'd upset him, but what else was she supposed to say? "Jesus Christ, Aria, I'm not going to disappoint Alexis. I love that little girl."

"Understand where I'm coming from here, Jayce. Yesterday you told me you weren't even going to the Christmas parade and now you want to transform your house into a winter wonderland."

"You're staying here and that's final, Aria." As soon as the last words were out of his mouth, he stormed out of his bedroom, leaving her speechless. She had no idea what had just happened, and she hated the feeling that she was responsible for hurting him, but nothing made sense to her. One moment he dismissed the Christmas parade and the next, he offered to take her daughter and let her transform his house into a Christmas village.

"He'll give Alexis the best Christmas possible, Aria, trust me on this. Give him time and be patient."

She looked up at Ryder, who unlike her, did not look confused; he looked smug, like he'd figured out something no one else had, and she didn't like it. "This is crazy. I can't simply stay here."

"My brother can be an asshole, Aria, but he has his reasons. Seeing you hurt today, if I had to guess, probably made something in him click, something he probably didn't even know he still had in him."

Chapter Three

She hadn't seen Jayce since he stormed out of his bedroom and she didn't know what to do. Ryder had reassured her that his brother just needed time to clear his head—of what she didn't know—and that everything would be fine. Ryder and Hannah helped her settle in on Jayce's sofa before leaving for the day, leaving her alone in Jayce's house with a little girl who had no idea what was happening.

"Alexis, can you come here for a minute?" she called from the living room.

She smiled when she saw Alexis walking slowly from the kitchen, holding a cup. She was making sure not to spill anything on the floor, which made Aria smile. "Look, Mama, Jayce made me hot chocolate."

So her daughter had seen him. All right, that meant he was only avoiding her. "Did you say thank you?"

"Yes." She followed her daughter's eyes and she locked gazes with the man who had managed to drive her crazy in less than two days. He leaned against the wall, still wearing the same faded blue jeans that clung to his body, with a black thermal shirt, and God, he looked so good it hurt. He smiled at her as if he knew what she was thinking, but he didn't because if he knew, she had no doubt he would never let her stay.

She looked backed at her smiling daughter, who drank her hot chocolate like it was the best thing she'd ever had. "Good. Can I ask you a question?" *This is where it could be tricky.* Life was so uncomplicated for children, but she hated the idea that she might disappoint her daughter.

"Hmm...mm."

She ruffled Alexis's hair, making her giggle, and when she looked back at Jayce, he looked at them with a longing she had never seen on him before. She quickly shrugged off the confusion; this was about her daughter, not her feelings over Jayce. "How would you feel about us staying here for a little while? At least until my ankle is better."

"Can I play outside?"

She made sure to look at Jayce before answering, since this wasn't her house. She didn't want to overstep. He nodded and she smiled at Alexis. "Anytime you want."

"Can we still have a Christmas tree, and cookies and decorations?"

"As long as it's okay with Jayce," she told her honestly.

"Will Santa find me if we're not home?" The cracking in her daughter's voice all but broke her heart.

"Santa will always find you, no matter where you are," Aria told her as she kissed the top of her head.

She watched as her daughter put down her empty cup and then walked to where Jayce was standing. Aria found herself smiling when he dropped to his knees so that they were the same height. She loved how he always made sure Alexis felt like an equal. "Jayce, can we have a tree?"

Aria held her breath, because as much as she knew Jayce wanted to make them feel at home, she knew that the reason he didn't celebrate Christmas still hung over his head. "Yeah. How about you and I go pick it out tomorrow?"

"Yay!" Alexis threw herself at him, and he welcomed her like it was the most natural thing in the world. Seeing him with her daughter was not helping her make sense of what was going on. Having him be nice to her, she could handle, but having him be nice to her daughter, well, that was making her fall for him even harder. The last thing Aria needed in her life was to fall in love with a man who didn't love her back, especially with the risk of hurting the little girl, who was bouncing up and down the room.

"Settle down, Alexis. Now go get ready for bed."

"Can Jayce tuck me in?" With that simple question, Aria felt herself fall a little harder. She needed to get out of this house sooner rather than later. If she didn't, it wouldn't just be one heart breaking.

"Come on, princess." She watched as Jayce picked Alexis up, and when her daughter snuggled closer to his body, Aria wondered what being pressed against Jayce's chest would feel like.

She must have fallen asleep while he tucked Alexis in bed because the next thing she knew, she was being carried up the stairs to the guest bedroom. "Did she settle in okay?" Aria asked him, her face buried in his neck. She loved his smell, pine and something else she couldn't quite put her finger on.

He lowered her to the bed, careful not to hurt her ankle, and she doubted he understood how much it meant that he was being so attentive. She hadn't been cared for by a man in a long time, and having Jayce take care of her probably felt better than it should, but she couldn't make herself care.

"She fell asleep two pages into the story," he told her, placing a pillow under her ankle.

She knew she probably shouldn't bring it up again, but she felt like she had to give him one more chance to back out of their arrangement, one more chance to send her home and not put himself through the hassle of having them around. "Listen, I know you said you didn't mind us staying here, but honestly, I can manage by myself, Jayce."

He looked at her, aggravation dipping his brows. "I thought we settled this earlier. You're staying here." His words were sharp.

"Okay, but if it gets too much with Alexis, you have to promise to tell me and we'll get out of your hair." Spending a couple of hours with her daughter was one thing, but having her around constantly was a whole other thing. She didn't doubt that he cared for Alexis, but her daughter could be a handful.

"That won't happen, Aria." He spoke assertively and she believed him. She didn't know what made her believe he wouldn't get tired of her or Alexis, but she knew deep down he told the truth.

The room fell silent. He seemed to debate telling her something or walking away. When she was about to wish him good night and save him from the obvious agony of his decision, he spoke the words that would make everything clear, the words that would change everything. "I was married once."

"I didn't know," Aria managed to say through her surprise. Of all the things she had pictured him saying, that was the last thing she expected.

"It was long before you came to town. No one really talks about it anymore." Which would explain why Hannah had never mentioned that her brother-in-law had once been married.

His statement raised a million questions, but all she managed to ask was apparently the hardest one for him to answer. "What happened?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed, his back to her. His shoulders hunched forward as if he were carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. "My wife and my daughter were driving into town for a Christmas Eve mass. I was already there with Ryder. She told me she was fine to drive and that I shouldn't worry so much. They never made it to the church. She swerved to miss a deer, and was hit by a truck. She died on impact. My little girl died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital."

She couldn't stop the tears from falling down her face. The pain he must have felt losing his family like that.... God, she didn't know how she would survive if something were to happen to Alexis. Losing a wife and a child would be enough to kill a weaker man, but Jayce had survived.

Everything made sense now: the way he avoided Christmas parties and didn't decorate during the holidays, and even why he wouldn't attend the Christmas parade. Suddenly, the pain and anger she felt for him were replaced by guilt, guilt that she was making him live through one of the worst holidays for him, and she couldn't do it...she couldn't hurt him like that. Whatever she had to do, she would manage on her own. "Oh, God, Jayce. I am so sorry.... God, here I am pushing Christmas on you when it's probably the last thing you ever want to do. I can't stay here, Jayce, I can't.... It's just not right."

She wiped her tears and when he turned around to face her, where she had expected to see hate, anger, and hurt, she saw hope on his face. "No, Aria, I didn't tell you to make you leave. I told you because for the

first time in five years, I feel alive, but only when I'm around you and Alexis. I feel like maybe Christmas won't be so bad this year."

"Jayce—"

"Don't say anything, Aria. I needed you to know. Let's get you to bed. You've had a long day." He helped her under the covers and kissed her forehead before leaving her alone in the dark. When the door closed behind him, she cried for him, cried for the family he'd lost, and for the broken man who had her falling in love.

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Jayce woke up feeling as if he'd been run over by a truck. He hadn't meant to tell Aria about his family but the second she started talking about leaving, he knew he had to open up to her. Losing his wife and his daughter had almost killed him and if it hadn't been for Ryder, he would probably be buried in the ground next to his family. Not once in five years had he thought about the possibility of falling in love, sharing his life with someone. Then Aria walked into town and everything started to blur.

The first time he saw her, he knew he was done for, but the second he met Alexis, his head spun and the fear that he couldn't keep them safe kept him away from them. He should have been there the night his wife crashed the car. He should have been the one driving, but he hadn't been able to save them.

As he looked at Alexis, who was placing fruit on the tray they were preparing for Aria, the fear that something might happen to them was still there, but so was the longing to have them in his life, to have them in his home. He found himself wanting to take Alexis to school, help her with homework and kill any boy who showed interest. Then there was Aria. She was so damn beautiful it made it hard for him to breathe. He wanted to wake up with her every morning, to sit out on the porch with a cold beer and watch the stars. He wanted her to be his.

"Jayce, can we go wake Mama now?" He looked at Alexis, with her hair all messy, her eyes still sleepy, one of his shirts enveloping her and dragging on the floor, and he knew he loved that little girl.

"Yeah, princess, let's go wake her up." He helped her off the barstool and handed her the smaller tray while he carried the tray with the juice and coffee. He watched her carefully as she climbed the stairs, biting her bottom lip, trying to concentrate and not spill anything.

When they pulled the door open, his heart thudded heavily seeing Aria sitting up in the bed, looking like something out of a movie. She was beautiful. God, he wanted her in his life.

"Good morning, Mama." Alexis settled her tray on the edge of the bed before climbing up beside Aria. He stayed back and watched. Alexis looked so much like her mom and seeing the both of them cuddled up warmed his heart.

"Good morning, baby. It looks like you two have been busy." Aria looked at him and smiled. He watched as she took in the trays and then her gaze travelled back to him. Her eyes roamed over him and when they widened, he remembered he wasn't wearing a shirt. She gazed at him as if she wanted him for breakfast, and shit, he was hungry for her.

"Jayce made French toast. I told him it was your favorite." He couldn't help but laugh. When Alexis had come barging into his bedroom at the crack of dawn, she'd jumped in his bed, asking him if they could make breakfast. Immediately, he'd known he couldn't deny her anything, even if he wanted to.

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble, Jayce." Well, she was going to have to get used to it, because he was planning to do so much more than just taking care of her. He hadn't felt the primal urge to take care of another person in five years and he wasn't about to let her go.

"It's no trouble, Aria. Now, let's get you settled." He set the tray on the dresser and helped Aria stuff pillows behind her back.

"Breakfast in bed? You're spoiling me here, Jayce," she told him, low enough that Alexis couldn't hear her.

He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and whispered to her, "That's the point, baby." He smiled when her whole body shivered. He affected her—good, because she was getting to him too in more ways than one. For the first time since losing his family, he didn't grow anxious at the thought of Christmas. He looked forward to it.

Alexis smiled as she handed her mom a plate. "There's coffee too, Mama, and fruit, and juice."

"Wow, thank you, you two." It was easy to tell that Aria was overwhelmed, but then Alexis gave her a big kiss and her whole body relaxed.

"Jayce said that since you're hurt, it's our job to take care of you like when you take care of me when I'm sick." He smiled and when Aria looked at him, he shrugged it off like it was nothing.

"Did he now?"

"Yep, and we're going to go get a tree and Jayce said we could bring all our Christmas decorations here." If there was one thing he'd learned over the last two months was that Alexis had a surplus of energy that more often than not ended in too many words being spoken at once. All throughout the morning as they prepared breakfast, she hadn't stopped talking, which he was happy about because it gave him inside knowledge on Aria.

"Did you say thank you?" Aria asked between bites.

"Like a million times, Mama." He watched Alexis carefully and when he saw Aria shift on the bed, he knew it was time to wrap this up.

"Hey, princess, why don't you go put on the clothes Aunt Hannah brought over."

"Okay." Alexis kissed her mom and then kissed him on the cheek like it was the most natural thing in the world, and he had to admit, it felt more than natural.

"Has she been that hyper all morning?"

He smiled, sat down beside Aria, and took a bite from her plate. "Yeah, she's excited about the tree. Couldn't stop talking about it."

"We've never had a real tree before so she's been really excited." As much as Christmas had been a burden of bad memories over the years, he was happy about being able to give Aria and Alexis a Christmas they'd never had before. He knew it sounded crazy, but it was a chance to wash away the bad memories with a little holiday love.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her before getting up and checking her ankle. It was swollen but it did look better already.

"Honestly, my ankle hurts like hell and my back is killing me from carrying Alexis."

So much had changed in him that he couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that so many feelings, so many fears that had been around for five years were disappearing after only twenty-four hours of being close to Aria.

He shook off the sense that this was the beginning of something he couldn't quite understand yet. Grabbing two painkillers from the bedside table, he handed them to her with her glass of orange juice.

"Take these, and when Alexis is down tonight, I'll give you a massage." He wanted to laugh as shock registered on her face.

"That's not necessary," she told him, her voice a little shaky and a blush creeping over her face.

"Please don't argue with me," he whispered as he kissed her forehead. Before he could pull away, she wrapped her hands around his biceps. Electricity soared through his body. When he looked down at her face, he knew she felt it too. Her lips parted, her skin flushed and her eyes were lust filled.

"You're already doing more than enough." She licked her bottom lip after she spoke. He knew he should walk away, knew he should leave, but he couldn't make his body move.

"Not nearly enough," he told her before lowering his face and softly pressing his lips to hers. He had every intention of keeping this kiss light, but when he got his first taste, he couldn't stop. He wanted more, needed more. Like a man dying of thirst, he needed to drink her up.

Jayce wrapped one hand around the back of her neck and pressed her closer to him, increasing the intensity of the kiss, slowly testing her response. Her fingernails dug into his arm as he licked her lower lip. When she gasped, he seized the opportunity and took the kiss to another level. The kiss was hot and wild.

Allowing instinct to drive his next move, Jayce's hand travelled up her rib cage, up to her breast, while her fingers ran through his hair. When he wrapped his hand around her breast, her back arched, pressing it into his touch. He kissed a trail down her neck, across her collarbone, but when she begged him for more, he knew he had to stop before he took things too far. With every moan, every demand, he edged closer to losing control.

Slowly, Jayce pulled away. He took his time committing to memory the way she looked in that very moment. Her eyes half closed, her lips swollen and ready for his kiss, her neck marked by his beard. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "I've been dying to do that for months. Now rest. I've got Alexis covered for the rest of the day."

"Okay."

Chapter Four

Seven days was all it took for Aria's life to change to something she could have never foreseen. Seven days was all it took for her to fall completely and utterly in love with Jayce. After her divorce, she swore she would never let a man into her life who didn't love Alexis as much as she did. Sitting on the front porch of Jayce's house, bundled up in a snow jacket and a blanket, drinking hot chocolate and looking at her daughter throwing snowballs at Jayce, she couldn't help but feel like she'd found that man.

Everything had changed so fast between them. One minute they were flirting—well, she was doing her best to flirt—the next he dismissed her like she didn't matter. Then the day her car took the snowbank, everything changed. The first couple of days had been an adjustment for everyone but they had quickly found a rhythm that worked.

It was one morning two days ago, everything transformed. Jayce had snuck into her room before sunrise and had surprised her by joining her in bed. The instant she had felt his hard body against hers, she knew she couldn't resist him. The way his eyes had looked at her, the way his hands had traveled up and down her body, making her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, had been enough to show her the kind of man he was. When he brushed his lips on hers, teasing her, testing her reaction, she knew she had to tell him she was ready. As soon as the words had slipped past her lips, a switch flipped inside him. One minute he was on his back, the next thing she knew, he was on top of her, kissing her frantically as if his life depended on it.

"Let me make love to you, Aria." She remembered the need in his voice, the feel of his body on top of hers, the warmth of his skin had been more than enough foreplay for her. She'd loved the way his hands had awakened her body, caressing every inch of her before sliding between her legs finding her hot and ready. He hadn't given her time to be embarrassed about how wet she was. Instead, he'd kissed her with all the passion that existed between them as he slipped his boxers down. She still

didn't know where the condom had come from, but when she felt him press himself inside her, the only thing she could do was feel.

It had been perfect, the way he commanded her body to respond to his touch, the way he savored her responses and gave her more than she ever thought she needed from a man. Their time together after that had been passionate and beautiful, but sometimes, a hint of sadness flickered within him when they baked cookies or when he and Alexis brought back the biggest Christmas tree they could find. She knew all of those things reminded him of what he'd lost, and deep down, she couldn't help but feel like maybe they were providing him with a replacement family.

"Mama, look, we're going to build a snowman." She smiled at her daughter in her pink snowsuit. Despite her growing up so fast, in that moment, she looked like a little girl having a blast. With red cheeks and nose, she looked adorable.

Aria's eyes wandered to the big snowball Jayce was building and she couldn't help but laugh. "Are you going to roll that big ball?"

Her daughter shook her head. "I'm not strong enough, but Jayce is soooo strong. He says he can lift anything!"

Aria looked over to Jayce who was crouching over the snowball when she heard him groan. "Is that right?" she asked, smiling at the relationship her daughter and Jayce had forged over the last week.

"Hmm mmm." She was about to tell Alexis to use words to answer questions, when Jayce picked her daughter up and spun her around and around before putting her down and coming straight for Aria.

"Do you doubt my abilities, Miss Whitley?" he said while flashing her the smile she'd grown to love over the last couple of days. It held mischief and promises she couldn't even begin to imagine.

"I would never do that," she told him, lifting her hands in surrender.

He looked at Alexis, who was trying to move the snowball by herself, obviously getting frustrated that she couldn't. "I think your mama doesn't believe me, princess. What should I do to convince her?"

Alexis dropped her hands to her hips and looked straight at him. "Carry her. She's always saying she wants a man strong enough to carry her." There went her daughter's nonexistent filter. She made a mental note to never mention anything in front of her again that she didn't want people to know about.

Jayce moved fast and took the couple of steps up to the front porch with determination in his eyes. "Don't you dare, Jayce. I'm too heavy." She tried to get up to get away from him but her ankle still hurt so she wasn't fast enough.

"How many times do we have to go over this? You are not heavy." He lowered his head to hers and wrapped one hand under her knees.

"Jayce...don't do it." But he wasn't listening. He picked her up like she weighed next to nothing and Aria couldn't help but bury her head in the crook of his neck.

"See, not heavy at all. Perfect." He held her close, like she was the most important thing he'd ever held in his arms, and for the moment, that was exactly how she felt. He carried her inside to the kitchen counter before walking over to Alexis and helping her out of her snowsuit. After getting the last piece of winter clothing off Alexis, he headed back toward her, shedding his jacket in the process before helping her out of hers.

She caught his hands and felt the same warmth she did every time they touched. She had never experienced anything like it before. "Thank you for doing this with her." Aria looked to the side where Alexis was coloring.

"You don't have to thank me for spending time with her, Aria."

She shrugged it off. "I know you probably have better things to do. You've already spent so much time with her."

He tilted his head to the side, perhaps trying to figure her out. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?" she asked him honestly. In truth, she had no idea what they were doing or what was happening between them.

He placed his hands on each side of her face. Goosebumps peppered her skin at the contact; she loved the feel of his hands on her. "I'm not spending time with her because I have to. I'm spending time with her because I want to. I want her in my life."

"Jayce."

"It's simple, Aria. Don't go and make it more complicated."

"I just...." She wanted to ask him where this was going, what he was doing, but she couldn't get the words out. She knew that once she spoke them, there was no going back. It would either destroy whatever it was they were building or it would bring them closer.

"Mama, can we bake cookies?" God, leave it to her daughter to have the perfect timing and bail her out when she needed it the most.

"Sure, sweetie. Can you put me down?" she asked Jayce, since he was still pinning her to the counter with his body.

"This conversation isn't over." He kissed her forehead before walking to where Alexis was coloring. "All right, princess, let's go get changed and then we can bake cookies."

Two hours later, it was as if a hurricane had blown through the kitchen. There was flour everywhere, icing on the counters and the walls, and more cookies than they could probably eat in a year, but not once had Jayce complained about the mess Alexis was making.

The more time Aria spent with him, the more aspects of his personality she was learning. As stiff as he could be in public, not once had he been anything but flexible and open with Alexis. When she begged him to sit down and color with him, he smiled and spent an hour coloring princesses with her daughter. And God, with herself, he was more than good. Jayce brought her breakfast every morning, made sure he came back to make lunch and spend some time with Alexis outside. Aria couldn't help but feel like his house was becoming her home, and that scared her.

She was wiping the counter when Jayce came back down after leaving Alexis to watch a Christmas movie. Aria was so focused on her own

thoughts that she hadn't heard him come in and when he spoke, she jumped a little, making him laugh. It was a sound that was quickly becoming one of her favorites. "Where did you learn to bake?"

"My grandma used to bake a lot when I was younger and it just stuck with me I guess." Some of the best memories of her childhood involved being in the kitchen with her grandma, whipping up new recipes. It was one of the things she looked forward to sharing with Alexis the most as she got older.

"You two were close?" he asked, leaning against the counter, his eyes fixed on her as she leaned back in front of the sink.

"Very, she practically raised me. It was hard when she passed." A tear slide down her face at the memory of her grandma.

He walked to where she was and used his thumb to wipe the tear from her cheek. "I'm sure she's very proud of what you've done and how you've raised Alexis."

"Thank you, that means a lot." He pulled her in closer for a hug and she followed his lead, the action natural. She loved being pressed up against his hard body; there was a certain comfort in being held in Jayce's arms that didn't compare to anything she'd ever felt.

Aria rested her cheek over his heart, enjoying the gentle rhythm of his heartbeat. "So about what happened outside?" So much for hoping he would forget about it. His hands rubbed her back, up and down. She knew he was trying to reassure her, but this conversation could change everything, and she didn't know if she was ready for that.

"Can we forget about that?" she asked, her face buried in his chest.

He gently pushed her back with his hands on her shoulders, and looked her straight in the eyes. There was a mixture of worry and fear in them, two things she knew would be amplified by what she needed to ask him. "No, we can't. Talk to me." His voice, steady and firm as he spoke to her, told her she wasn't getting out of this conversation.

Aria took a deep breath before speaking. "I guess things have moved really fast, you know, and that's a little scary. You went from not wanting

anything to do with Alexis during the holidays to spending all of this time with her. And she's growing really attached to you. I don't want her getting hurt."

His smile, both warm and filled with anticipation, spiked her anxiety. "What about you? Are you growing attached?"

"More than I should," she replied shyly, looking down at the floor.

He tilted her chin upward with his fingers. Their eyes connected, and he saw right through her, down to her soul. "There's something else. What is it?"

"Oh, God. I just.... Please don't get mad at me. I'm afraid that you're spending so much time with us because you see us as a replacement family and I don't know what happens after the holidays." Hurt and confusion flashed across his face. She wanted to hide and never come back out.

"A replacement family?" His words were dry, filled with hurt. God, why had she said that?

"Please don't be mad." She pressed her hands to his chest and to her relief, he didn't back away from her.

Instead, he wrapped his hands around hers and dropped his forehead to hers, taking a deep breath as if to center himself. "When I lost them, I blamed myself for what happened. If I hadn't been at that Christmas mass already, I would have been the one driving and maybe the accident wouldn't have happened. That's why I hated Christmas so much, because instead of being with my wife and daughter, I was out celebrating. When you came into town, things started changing for me. The more I saw you, the more I wanted to be around you, but the guilt of moving on...it ate me alive, Aria.

"When you came over and asked me about the Christmas parade, all of those memories, the guilt, it all came flashing back. That's why I shut you down like I did. Then you showed up here, hurt and freezing, and I felt like it was them sending me a sign that it was okay for me to move on, that it was okay for me to be happy. Spending time with Alexis this past week and doing all of this Christmas stuff with her, seeing it through

her eyes, it flipped a switch inside of me. Having you here in my house, it's the best Christmas gift I could have ever asked for. It kills me that you would think I would use you like that."

Releasing her hands, Jayce walked away from her, leaving her alone and crying for the loss of something she didn't even know she had. She turned around and looked at the mess covering the kitchen counters, the baked cookies and the Christmas decorations filling up the space. Too overwhelmed, she fell to the floor crying and praying for a Christmas miracle.

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Looking up at the Wyoming sky, Jayce released the breath he'd been holding since his conversation with Aria. He replayed her words in his head, 'a replacement family,' and no matter how hard he tried to be mad at her for thinking that, he couldn't. For five years, the thought of having someone in his life, someone to share the ups and downs with, seemed impossible. His grief was so overwhelming that he couldn't get past it, until he saw Aria. The truth of the matter was, he wasn't angry with her for thinking he was trying to replace his family. Instead, he was angry with himself for making her think that.

He turned around when he heard the back door open. "Ryder, what are you doing here?"

"Aria called. Hannah said she needed some girl time so I figured you might have something on your mind too." His brother leaned against the pillar in front of him, his features tight.

Everything was so messed up. He hated himself for making Aria feel as though she needed Hannah to depend on. He should be the one she went to with anything. "Shit."

"Talk to me." Ever since they were kids, Ryder had always been the one person he could tell anything to. Even after he shut him out after the accident, his brother wouldn't give up. He kept pushing him to get out

of bed, pushing him to go back to work, pushing him to grieve and move on.

Jayce ran his hand over his beard and tangled hair. "She thinks I'm using them as a replacement family."

"Are you?" his brother asked him, pissing him off.

"What the hell, man? You know me better than that," he barked back at his brother. What the hell was wrong with everybody? Didn't they see that Aria wasn't a replacement? She was everything.... Shit, he was in love with her.

A smile appeared on his brother's face, as if he knew what Jayce had just figured out. "Yeah, I do, but she doesn't. Put yourself in her shoes, Jayce, you went from zero to sixty in no time. She has every right to be confused."

"I wouldn't do that to them."

"You're in love with her." It was a statement if ever he'd heard one, and he couldn't deny it.

"Yeah, I am."

"Then maybe she should be the one you're telling this to and not me. Listen, man, when you lost them, you completely shut down and hell, no one blamed you for it. I would have reacted the same, but what happened, as tragic as it was, was not your fault, Jayce. It was a tragic accident and she would not want you spending the rest of your life alone. You know what Alexis asked Santa for Christmas? She asked for a new daddy for her and her mom because her mom was sad all the time."

"I don't know if I can be what they need." Could he overcome the fear that he might lose them too? That was the real question here. Could he take that chance?

"People talk about Christmas miracles all the time. What if this is yours? What if Aria and Alexis are exactly where they're supposed to be?" His brother's words hung in the air with the silence of the night.

Suddenly, all the guilt and worry were gone, replaced by a longing to be close to Aria, to have Alexis cuddled up to him. In that moment, it all

made sense. This was exactly what was meant to happen. He didn't know if it was a Christmas miracle like Ryder said, but he didn't care, because whatever it was had brought Aria and Alexis into his life, giving him a second chance, and he wasn't about to let that go. "Here I thought I was the smart one."

"No way, man, I'm much smarter than you and I'm so much better looking too."

"Shut up." Jayce punched his brother in the shoulder as they both laughed.

"It's good to see you smiling." Hugging Ryder, peace settled in him.

By the time his brother and Hannah left, it was well past midnight, and it was officially Christmas Eve. Jayce climbed the stairs and when he reached his bedroom door, he turned and headed for Aria's room. He pushed open the door and smiled at the woman sprawled across the bed, covered up to her neck in blankets.

When he closed the door behind him, she turned and slowly opened her eyes, pushing the blankets down to her shoulders. "Jayce?"

"Do you mind if I sleep with you?" She shook her head, which he took as his green light. Removing his shirt, he then smiled when her eyes landed on his chest, eating him up. He unbuckled his jeans next and stepped out of them, leaving him in nothing but his underwear. She looked at him with heavy eyes before sliding over to the other side of the bed, giving him room to slip under the covers with her.

Once settled, Jayce pulled her close, her head on his chest and his arm around her lower back. "Is everything okay?" she whispered against his chest, sending shivers down his skin.

He kissed the top of her head and laced his fingers with hers, trying to convey every emotion that was going through his head. "Everything is perfect, babe."

"I'm really sorry about what I said. I didn't want to hurt you." She looked up at him and in that moment, his heart came back to life. "I

know. Just let me hold you. Nothing else is going to happen, but I need to hold you."

"Okay." She pressed her cheek against him and positioned her leg between his, the action the most natural thing in the world, and God, did it ever feel right. He listened as her breathing slowed and when she was asleep, Jayce whispered the words he never thought he would say. "You are not a replacement family, babe, you're my Christmas miracle."

The End

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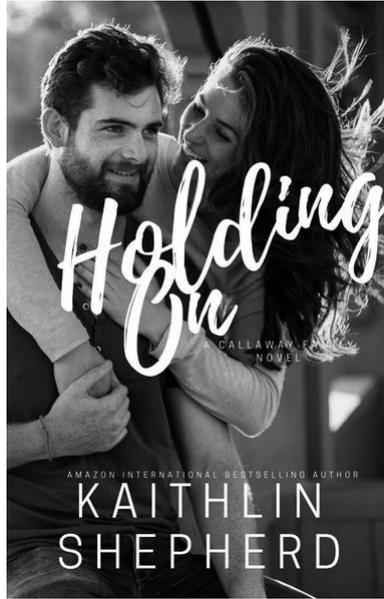
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some of his demons but the moment Jamie walks into his life he finds himself fighting a different kind of fight. He knows he could never let her walk out of his life, but Cole faces the biggest mission of his life: Make Jamie stay in Montana and if he has his way in his bed.

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About the Author

Born and raised in Canada by a working single mom and a loving grandmother, Kaithlin surrounded herself with novels by Danielle Steele and Nora Roberts provided by her grandmother.

Kaithlin quickly fell in love with reading. It was in high school, thanks to an English teacher, that Kaithlin wrote her first story (although if you ask for it, she will deny ever writing it) about a popular boy band. Inspired by constructive criticism, Kaithlin spent some time developing her love affair with words through more reading than someone would think possible.

After pursuing a higher education, Kaithlin, sat down with a pen and paper and decided to give writing a shot. With no false hope in mind, her first novel, *Make Me Whole*, slowly came to life. Putting fear and doubt aside, Kaithlin has published five books to date, and has eleven more set to be published in the next two years.

Read more at www.kaithlinshepherd.com.