

## Chapter One

After trudging through the parking lot snow, the biting wind blew down Jenna's coat collar as she unlocked the door of her shop. She stomped her boots and scurried inside, shutting out the winter storm behind her. Jenna flipped on the lights and shrugged out of her coat as snow fell to the rug. As usual, she hung her coat on the hook and placed her purse in the desk drawer. A winter storm had dumped on the city these last twenty-four hours, but didn't hinder the hardy enthusiasm of the Jackson Hole residents.

Again she thanked God for allowing her the opportunity to open her own business, with a new start on life. The past two years had helped her heal from the abusive relationship she had put her heart into, yet it never seemed to be enough. The divorce had mentally zapped her and had it not been for the support of friends and family, she may have ended up in the nut house. She took a deep breath as her heart raced from the memories. Try as she might, they never disappeared, no matter how hard she tried. Maybe she was destined to be alone, she wasn't sure.

Looking around at the shelves filled with Christmas gift items, Jenna wished for someone to share the rest of her life with. Then again, that would mean opening herself up for another broken heart. This time of year still haunted her, but customers cheered her up and she looked forward to a busy few days for those last minute shoppers. She turned on the CD player of holiday music so it wasn't so quiet. A few small decorated trees needed to be turned on to pull in the holiday spirit and she lit up her Christmas village in the display window.

Yesterday had been a great day and today would be better. She unlocked the register and turned on the system monitor to be sure everything was ready for her first customer. Slowly, customers filled her store, the sounds of laughter came from several aisles and time passed quickly. Lunch had come and gone with her grabbing a few bites of a sandwich with a cup of warm cider she kept for customers. Friends stopped in to visit and bring her gifts, along with invitations to join them for Christmas. Her parents continued to tell her she needed to spend more time with friends because she stayed at home alone too often. There was a sense of peace at her home and she reveled in that, but perhaps they were right. She'd consider one or two of those invitations and spread her wings for a change.

*This year will be different.*

Bubble wrap protected the glass ornament she boxed up for her customer and proceeded to ring up the sale. The woman chatted as she dropped her used cup in the trash and thanked Jenna for the cider.

The bell on the door jingled over the soft holiday music, and Jenna casually looked up from her cash register to see who might be coming in so late on such a blustery evening. The storm had started early this morning, dropping seven inches of snow so far. The man stomped his boots as he pulled off his gloves and then brushed icy flakes from his sandy blonde hair. He looked around as though he were on a mission of some sort and then his blue eyes met hers.

She welcomed him with a smile. "Help yourself to some warm cider as you look around." Something seemed familiar about him, yet she couldn't remember why. Turning her attention

back to her current customer, Jenna counted the change out and put the receipt in the bag. “Merry Christmas. You drive carefully on your way home, Trudy. The storm isn’t letting up tonight.” Trudy slipped on her gloves, grabbed her package and headed out the door.

Jenna watched the man roam around her book aisles, sipping cider as he inspected the children’s games and figurines. He picked up a new snow globe she’d just set out today with a fire engine inside. As he shook it to watch the flakes fly, she noticed a lighter area on his left hand where a ring had been. Scenarios formed in her head of why he no longer wore the ring, sparking memories of her own reason from two years ago. Memories that had broken her heart and still caused a stabbing pain in her chest.

She quickly blinked back tears welling in her eyes, not wanting to dwell on the memories, and breathed in the spiced pumpkin scent of the melted wax. The holidays were hard for anyone going through a crisis and her store helped keep her mind off all that had happened in her past. Her parents had been a big help when she needed to lean on them for emotional support. They lived on the outskirts of town three miles from her own home.

A few other customers shopped around and Jenna hoped something in her store would catch their eye as a gift for a loved one. A woman laughed with her daughter over cute Christmas moose figurines, Jenna’s favorite in the store. From her spot at the register, she finished unpacking a few more items that had arrived for the holidays, but kept an eye on the man. *Who is he shopping for?* The items he looked at were more for a child. She smiled when he grabbed a boxed globe and continued looking for more items.

Outside, the early-evening blizzard continued dropping huge snowflakes, while under the store’s canopy a few slowly drifted down in front of her window. Shoppers held tight to their scarves and hats as they leaned into wind, overloaded with their bags of presents. Jenna shivered, glad she was inside her cozy shop, although she loved shopping in a winter storm. It was part of the holiday fun. Twinkling, snow-covered colored lights decorated the shops across the street, adding to the holiday charm. Bells from the Salvation Army collectors could be heard even inside her shop.

“Excuse me.”

Jenna turned toward the customer and glanced into blue eyes from her past, instantly remembering where she knew him from. “Rod? Oh my god. It’s been years. How have you been? We’ve not seen you for years.”

“After college, I accepted a job back east. I’ve been there ever since.” He tipped his head a bit as he admired her.

Jenna’s cheeks heated as she remembered her childhood crush. His chiseled jawline caught her attention and made her breath catch in her throat for a moment. “Back here for the holidays? How are your parents?” Memories swirled in her head like sugar plums of the best looking football star as she struggled not to chatter or stutter. She’d had a high school crush on Rod back then, but had never let him know and now he stood in front of her. His sandy blonde hair feathered back from his face, long enough to run her fingers through and she scolded herself for

that thought. His strong jawline and high cheek bones gave him the look of a confident man who knew what he wanted...*but why is he alone?*

“My dad passed away a few years ago so I try to come back for mom during the holidays. She told me a month ago that she wanted me to meet a special friend of hers, so that might be weird.”

“Sorry to hear about your dad.”

“He’d been sick for a long time. It was hard on mom. I can’t blame her for not wanting to be alone anymore.” Rod set a few children’s books on the counter along with the snow globe. “I’d love to see her happy again, but I’m not sure if she’d let anyone else into her life. Maybe this person she wants me to meet has something to do with that. It’d be good for her.”

Jenna rang up his items and bagged them, wishing things could have been different for her. “I love the fire engine globe. The kids do, too.”

“As a fire fighter, I think my son is going to do the same thing I did. I followed in my dad’s footsteps. Jamie will love the fire engine globe. He’s only eight, but already thinks he’s a fireman.” Rod smiled and shook his head.

“I have someone who comes in to read with the children tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock if you and Jamie have time to stop by. There will be coffee, cider, milk, and cookies.”

“He might enjoy that. I’ll mention it when I get back to moms.” Rod paused, looking as though he might be afraid to say more. He started for the door, paused again, and turned back to her. “Hey, I’d love to get together for coffee or something while I’m in town...if you’re available?”

She glanced deeper into those blue eyes she’d dreamt about so many times. Rod had been a star player and totally out of her league in high school, yet here he was, asking her out.

*Don’t stutter, silly, answer the man!* “It’d be fun to catch up after all these years. I’d love that.”

“Tomorrow night after closing? We could grab a late dinner if that works for you.”

Jenna grabbed a business card off the counter and wrote down her cell number. “I close at eight tomorrow night. I hope that’s not too late.”

Rod took the card and put it into his pocket. “I’m fine with late if you are.” He reached for the door knob. “I’ll check with Jamie to see if he wants to come in for story hour.” With the smile of an angel, he slipped out the door and into the snow storm.