

Chapter One

The slight scratch of yarn brushed across his fingers as he turned the yellow and blue ridiculousness around in his hands.

“They seriously knitted you a trophy?” Sheriff Cooper Lowe laughed from his seat in the guest chair and twisted the monstrosity toward the mayor.

Owen McMurphy, Holly Grove’s mayor, yanked the thing from Coop’s hands, placing it back on his desk. “The seniors take their Hat-A-Palooza very seriously, Sheriff. I’m surprised you weren’t roped into it too.”

“Adam was with me that week. I’m only allowed to skip such town events when I’m spending time with him.”

Coop smiled as he spoke of his son. The best damn thing he’d ever done. His ex-wife, Lori, might still be a sore spot for him, but he could

never regret his choices. They had given him the sweetest six-year-old who made his heart grow every single time he heard *I love you, Daddy*.

“How is the little guy? He’ll be at the tree lighting next week, right?”

Coop growled internally, remembering the snarky phone call with Lori two nights ago. She’d pled her case to take Adam on Christmas this year even though it was part of Coop’s two weeks with his son during holiday break. She and her husband, Tyler, planned a ski trip to Colorado, and they wouldn’t be back until after Christmas. He’d argued with her, but when Adam got on the phone and gushed about riding an actual snowboard, like on the X Games they watched together, Coop couldn’t deny him. And Lori knew it.

“He’ll actually be with his mother for Christmas.”

“That sucks, dude. I’m sorry.”

Coop shrugged, but his fist remained clenched in his lap. Time for a subject change. “So how does one even turn yarn into the shape of a trophy?”

“I bet if you show up at Thursday night knitting club they would be more than happy to teach you. I’m actually about to meet with our newly promoted Parks and Rec director in about three minutes. Or are we supposed to pretend that isn’t why you’re sitting in my office giving me crap about the Jets and my yarn trophy right now.”

The rush of adrenaline that pumped through Coop’s body at the mention of Jessica wasn’t new, nor were Owen’s jabs. Coop spent way too much time wandering the town hall building they shared hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Her smile had become one of his favorite parts of any day, an addiction he never wanted to shake.

Owen continued. “Why don’t you ask her out to dinner?”

“We have dinner all the time,” Coop countered, glancing away from Owen’s knowing stare.

“No, I don’t mean as her neighbor when she asks you to come in and share whatever meal she made after you mowed her lawn or trimmed her bushes or fixed her fence. Or how you *always* grill two steaks and call her to say you have extra. I mean like you say, *Hey Jess, I really like you and I’d like to take you out on a date.* You have dinner, maybe hold hands. Kissing is sometimes known to happen.”

Coop did like Jess. Liked her way more than he could ever allow himself to act on. And kissing her, Owen would ask for Coop’s man card right now if he knew the number of hours Coop had spent imagining what it would be like to feel her lips on his. But complicated didn’t even begin to describe the two of them.

“Well, if you’re such an expert, Mr.-Vermont’s-Hottest-Bachelor or whatever that magazine called you, then maybe you should...”

Lillian, Owen’s assistant, spoke through the intercom. “Mr. Mayor, Miss Robertson is here for your two o’clock.”

The lifted eyebrow and smirk from Owen made Coop want to throat punch his boss, but instead he shrugged and stood to leave. When his gaze landed in the doorway, his stupid lungs failed to function.

Jess' chestnut hair fell in waves over her shoulders. The tiny scar next to her eye, the one where she'd fallen jumping on the bed as a kid, winked at him as she flashed the smile he craved more than oxygen.

"Hey, Sheriff," Jess straightened the rainbow of folders in her hands, but her phone slipped from the top of the pile. Coop grabbed it before it could hit the marble floor.

From where he kneeled, Coop ran his gaze from her heels, past her impossibly long legs in her black wrap dress, before landing in the depths of her brown eyes. He reached up and placed the phone in her hands. His fingers grazed her palm, and he ignored the current that shot up his arm from her touch. "Hey Jess. Feeling ok today?"

"Thanks," she laughed, securing her phone on top of her folder stack. "And yes, I'm fine, like every other day when you ask. A little tired. Could I get any clumsier though?"

“Doubt it,” Owen joked, and she gave him a playful scowl.

Coop moved next to Jess at the door. “I’ll leave you guys to it.”

He smiled and stumbled to walk through, but Jess stopped him with a hand on his forearm. “And thank you for shoveling my walkway, *again*. You know you don’t have to keep doing that. Just like you didn’t have to mow my lawn all summer.”

“Pretty sure I saw him cleaning out your rain gutters the other day when you weren’t looking too,” Owen added with a taunting smile while Coop glared his way over Jess’ shoulder.

“What? You did?” she turned, looking between them. “You know I’m not helpless, right?”

Coop knew that to be a fact. She was more than capable of taking care of herself, but that didn’t stop the insistent part of his brain from taking over and helping her where he could.

“I already had the ladder out cleaning mine, so it wasn’t a big deal. And your sidewalk and driveway are right next to mine. Besides, I like

it. It's good cardio, and the scraping noise relaxes me. You're doing me a favor really. Plus, if I see you anywhere near a ladder right now I'll arrest you."

One hand landed on her hip, and Coop wondered if all of her perfectly organized, color-coded folders were about to hit the ground just like her phone almost had. "There is no law against household chores."

"When you're nine months pregnant? Standing on a ladder? I'm creating one. Right this minute. Yep, already done."

She rolled her eyes and lowered herself slowly into Owen's guest chair. "You are ridiculous, Cooper. Go boss around the deputies down the hall."

"Fine, I'm leaving, but seriously, no ladders. You need a light bulb changed or a trip to the attic..."

"I will call the cavalry to come to my rescue. I promise."

He gave a satisfied nod and turned to leave, ignoring the taunting glare of his so called friend, the mayor.

Coop walked down the hallway toward his office. His department's receptionist, Jane, spoke to someone about a parking ticket at the front desk while his three deputies wrestled over the last chocolate frosted donut.

He entered the tiny room that barely fit his desk, sinking into the plush leather office chair he'd paid way too much for.

Coop sighed.

Worth every single penny.

Elbows on the desk, Coop's hands covered his face as his thoughts drifted back to Jess and the first day he'd seen her rocking on the porch swing of the Maple House Inn. He'd had to steady himself on the truck door to keep upright as she'd flashed him a tentative smile.

Hell, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and that was before. Before he knew the depth of her beauty. The kindness she

showed to everyone around her without even trying. The pain she'd endured but the strength with which she'd begun to heal. Coop hoped that their friendship had been a comfort to her. That he had lightened her burden even a little. For the last eight months, he'd used everything in his power to bring that smile to her face.

When they ate dinner together or she fell asleep on his shoulder every time they tried to watch a movie, he'd begun to let himself dream of being a permanent part of her life.

The night she gasped and grabbed her belly, yanking his hand to the exact spot where the little boy kicked, the awe in her eyes had branded a part of his soul he'd never get back. He'd wanted to sink his lips to hers and finally taste the sweetness of his Jess. But she wasn't his. He was her friend, her best friend. She needed him to be that for her, and he would soak up every minute she allowed him to be in her presence. With everything that had happened to her in the last year, with the broken pieces of the man he had become when Lori walked out still

jagged and bleeding, he wasn't sure either of them were capable of more.

But sometimes he liked to go back to that first moment and picture her on the porch swing. He'd close his eyes and see the future with her that had flashed in his mind before reality slipped in. Coop had never been one to believe in love at first sight. Until the day he met Jessica Robertson.

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