

## Coming Home For Christmas - by Heidi Mae

### Prelude

“Mom! Melody is putting on makeup!” The shrill, obnoxious, and tattling cry of the pimply face demon rang through the air.

The flaxen-haired teen turned from her large mirror with a scowl. Her forestry green eyes narrowed as they took in the obnoxious little brother attached to the voice. His stringy blonde hair was hanging in his brown eyes and he had a smug smirk on his plump lips.

“Melody! I said no makeup until you’re fifteen!” Her mother yelled from a distance.

“It’s just lotion, mom!” She yelled out the fib as she held a glare at her brother.

“No amount of that’s going to hide those freckles,” he scoffed at her.

“Shut up, Cooper,” she snapped in annoyance. He was only a year younger than her. It felt like a decade sometimes, honestly.

“Will you two please hurry? We have a long drive?” Her mom Georgie’s voice floated closer, as did her footsteps.

She stepped into the doorframe and sighed as she walked into the room. She was wearing a festive red sweater with a pair of jeans. Her long blonde hair was left down and silky smooth. There wasn’t one freckle or blemish on her creamy complexion.

People often said Melody was her mom’s twin. She had similar hair and a heart-shaped face. Her features, like her dark green eyes and a dash of freckles, were from her dad.

“Mel, I told you your freckles are cute a dozen times.” Georgie’s soft brown eyes studied her knowingly. “Don’t try to cover them up.”

“But mom!” Melody whined.

“Do you think your father’s freckles are ugly?”

“No,” she mumbled in annoyance.

As if it was the same thing, but she knew better than to argue.

“Good, then give me that.” Georgie snatched the makeup away from her.

“Now hurry it up! We need to get you to the Thorne’s place so we can get on the road.” Georgie urged her along.

“Why do we have to go to the Thorne’s anyway!?” Cooper whined, “we’re old enough to stay home! We’re teenagers!”

“You’re not,” Melody pointed out, “you’re only twelve.”

“Neither of you is old enough to stay home alone overnight.” Georgie cut off the argument. “I want you both downstairs in five minutes. Dad and I would like to get to the hotel with time to get a drink.”

Her parents were going to a wedding out of town this weekend. Since it was an overnight trip, they were staying at her parent’s best friend’s house for the night. Which also happened to be *his* house.

Austin Thorne, the star of every daydream she ever had.

She took one last glance in the mirror with a sigh. It wasn’t that she hated her freckles so much as how young they made her look. If she covered them, maybe, she’d look older. She would be fourteen in a few short weeks. She needed Austin to see she wasn’t a stupid kid anymore. If only her mom would let her wear makeup. What was the big deal anyway?

She combed her hair out one last time. A ponytail? She reconsidered.

“Melody, Let’s go!” Georgie yelled.

“Coming! Sheesh.” Melody rolled her eyes and hurried down before her mom had a fit.

Melody stared out the window as they drove into the small but bustling town of Frost Crest. The town was situated inside a large valley. It was surrounded by the snowy mountains the state of Illington was known for.

All the old-style brick storefronts were adorned with lights. The cobblestone roads were dusted in snow. The pine trees lined the streets were all decorated

with lights for the season. This town, to put it mildly, loved Christmas. There would be events every weekend; it was so much fun. She was a Christmas baby and loved it, having been born on December fifteenth. A delighted smile took over her face as she enjoyed the sights. She watched as a young couple walked down the sidewalk holding hands. He stopped to kiss her cheek, and she lit up with a smile.

Someday, Melody thought, with a longing sigh.

Once her dad had driven down Main Street, he turned right down a long road. It led up into the mountains, where a few houses overlooked the valley. The biggest one was the Thorne estate. Her dad drove up the long, windy driveway leading up to it.

It was large house with stone detailing and white wood; it had a lot of huge windows. Dr. Thorne has designed it himself. It also had a porch that wrapped all the way around. Her dad, Doug, parked and turned to them. His curly copper hair was hanging in his eyes, as always. Her mom was constantly nagging him to cut it.

“Last stop!” He boomed his voice like a train conductor, making Melody giggle. Cooper just scoffed. He was still annoyed about having to come.

“Cooper!” Georgie looked at him sternly, “I expect you to behave. Melody will tell me if you don’t.”

“That’s right,” Melody agreed quickly.

“Oh, have fun, be good and mind Mary,” Doug said, rolling his eyes as he flashed an easy grin. “Now go so that we can go!”

They each leaned over to kiss their parents goodbye. They then climbed out of the car.

They kicked the snow off their boots as they stepped on the porch. Just as Melody was going to knock on the big wooden door, it opened.

Mary Thorne greeted them with a big smile on her face. Her chestnut hair was pulled into its usual elegant bun. She was the epitome of graceful, with her long neck and high cheekbones. Her dark lashes against her golden complexion made her intense blue eyes pop. She was a model in her younger

days. These days she was all about hosting, baking and entertaining. She planned tons of the towns various Christmas events.

“Come in, you two,” she greeted them warmly as she ushered them inside.

They kicked off their boots and walked inside. The living and dining rooms were so huge! They were both bursting with Christmas decor, from lights to tinsel to a big beautiful giant tree. They followed Mary to the kitchen, but Cooper lagged slowly behind her.

“Cooper, don’t help yourself!” Melody scolded as her brother snatched a handful of cookies from the dining room table.

“It’s a special night; let’s say we have dessert first,” Mary said with a little wink at Cooper.

“Yay!” He cheered in eager agreement.

“I made something special for you, Melody.” Mary gestured for them to keep following her into the kitchen. They made their way to the center island, where a small peach cobbler sat. Melody smiled wide and plopped up on a stool to try it. It was her all-time favorite.

“Thank you, Mary!”

“How do I look, Ma?” The velvety voice of Austin Thorne made her forget all about the cobbler.

Be calm, Mel, she told herself, but then she had to turn around. When she did, her eyes fell on the guy who owned that melodic voice and, unknowingly, her heart.

Austin was breathtaking, literally what dreams were made of. His thick curly chestnut hair was combed to the side today it looked like he gelled it to make it look straighter. His cobalt blue eyes seemed to be twinkling; she wished they would twinkle at her.

His perfect kissable lips were set in an unsure frown; he had nothing to be uncertain about. He looked terrific in his black suit with the blue shirt underneath it. He was tall and lean, and now that he had been sixteen for a while, he was getting strong too. Melody noticed that when he came over to help her dad move a dresser the other day.

“Oh, my son, you look so handsome.” Mary cooed, standing up to look at him closer.

“You think?” He asked his frown curling into a little smirk. It made Melody’s heart secretly flutter.

“Think? My son, I know,” Mary said wisely, kissing his cheek.

“What ‘cha got here? My fave.” Austin grinned at Melody as he stole her fork. He helped himself to a big bite of her cobbler.

“It is not! It’s *my* favorite,” Melody giggled.

“Oh... my bad.” He grinned and ruffled her hair. A move she used to love, but now it made her feel like a little kid.

“What do you think, Mel Bell? How do I look?” He asked, turning to her this time. He’d called that since they were kids because her middle name was Annabelle.

She gulped and could hardly pull herself together with him standing so close.

“You look like you’re going to church or one of the holiday events,” she shrugged.

Success! She thought with relief; she nearly swooned at him that time. She needed to keep it together.

He laughed as he took a second stolen bite of her dessert. “Close, it’s the winter formal.”

“Oh, it will be fun, Austin, you’ll see,” Mary assured him as she started scooping up plates of hottish. She set one by Cooper at the table and the other by Melody.

“Why go if you don’t want to?” Melody asked.

“It’s a dance, sweetheart. I have to go to them if I want to get dates.” He winked at her and gave her an adorable lopsided grin.

Sweetheart? She was stunned silent and sure her cheeks had turned red, but he didn’t seem to notice her reaction. He got up and kissed his mom, who had a strange smile on her face. Melody was too dazed and numb to notice.

“Wish me luck,” He drawled as he exited the room.

“Wait, I need pictures!” Mary shrieked, racing after him.

Cooper said something and dashed off, but Melody didn't hear a thing. All she could think about was Austin. He called her sweetheart! That was like a grownup name of endearment.

“Who am I kidding,” she whispered to herself. It's not like she could compete with the sixteen-year-old beauty Austin's date probably was. She probably even had boobs.

It was so unfair. Why did she have to be born two and a half years after him?

Later, after a night full of yummy food and Christmas movies, Melody was wide awake on the couch, thinking about Austin. She wondered how the dance was going. She bet his date looked beautiful, and her heart churned with jealousy.

She shivered, the fire had gone out, and it was chilly. She had worn her matching red plaid shorts with a tee shirt for pajamas, which needed to be more.

She jumped when she heard a door slam. She stayed still on the couch and pretended to be asleep. But she peeked one eye open and watched as Austin walked into the house. He looked upset. She followed him with her gaze to the liquor cabinet, where he snuck himself out a bottle. He then started up the stairs muttering something under his breath.

Her curiosity got the best of her, and she carefully followed him to his room. She crept slowly down the hall and peered into his open door.

“I'm such an *idiot!*” He grunted as his fist hit the wall. She jumped and yelped on instinct.

He whirled around, and his eyes widened when he saw her.

“Mel Bell? What are you doing in here?” He asked in a tired voice.

“I heard a noise,” she said as she took a tentative step inside. “Are you okay?”

"I'm just great," he said dryly.

He sat down and sipped from the bottle he had stolen. His face was impassive; even his eyes were void of their usual spark.

"If your parents catch you, you'll be in big trouble," Melody whispered. With that, she shut the door quietly and walked over to him.

"I don't give a shit right now," he snapped, closing his eyes.

He then put the bottle across his forehead as if her voice gave him a headache. She flinched at his reactions. Austin was never harsh with her. Something terrible must have happened, she decided.

"What happened?" She asked, needing to know. She went and sat next to him on the edge of his bed.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, his eyes staring straight ahead.

"I don't believe you; you seem upset," she pushed as she pointedly looked over at the hole he had just put in the wall.

His eyes followed her gaze, and he took a sharp breath and then glanced at her. The emptiness in his eyes a moment ago was gone. It was replaced with a realization of where he was and who he was with.

"I'm not in a good place tonight." His voice softened as he turned to look at her.

She just nodded, words failing her under his gaze.

"I'm sorry. Did I scare you? Are you okay?"

The concern was heavy in his voice. She struggled to function enough to talk to him. It used to be so much easier. It took her a few moments, making him more worried. Finally, she shook her nerves away and managed to speak causally.

"I'm fine. Lemme see your hand," she said, holding her small hand.

Her breath hitched in her throat at the idea of touching him. Not that she hadn't before. He ruffled her hair, and they hugged lots of times; she had even

danced with him at different events. Somehow though, the idea of sitting in his bedroom with her holding his hand felt different.

“It’s fine; it doesn’t even hurt.” He scoffed, always the tough guy.

“Right,” she rolled her eyes and shoved her emotion down, be average, Melody, she scolded herself silently.

“So, what did the wall do to you?” She asked.

“The dance was a bust, let’s just say that.”

“Okay,” she grabbed for his bottle. “Can I have a sip?”

“No,” he scoffed and pulled it out of her reach.

“Come on, just one,” she begged.

“I’m not giving you booze.” He was looking a little amused now, though.

“Please, Austin? I just want to try it,” she begged.

She looked up with a pout on her lips and wide, hopeful eyes. He always seemed to give in when she did that.

“Fine,” he groaned at the look, “one sip, and that’s it.”

“Thanks,” she chirped as she took it from him.

“You’re going to hate it,” he warned her.

“It looks good,” she shrugged.

She was trying to seem as grown up as possible. She took a sip, and her face puckered instantly from the bitter taste. It burned down her chest, and she felt her face turning red.

“Told you so,” his lips lifted into an amused smirk as he took it away from her.

“Now get back downstairs. You can’t be in my room with me in the middle of the night.” He shook his head at the idea of it as he stood up.

“But it’s cold down there,” she protested.

She wished he was still sitting next to her on the bed; if only she liked the whiskey more. Maybe he wouldn't think she was such a kid then.

"Here," he tossed her his sweatshirt lying on the chair.

It was one he wore all the time, and it smelled deliciously like him. She stood and slipped it on. It was huge on her and hung down almost to her knees.

"You're swimming in that thing," he gave her that crooked smile, and her heart fluttered in her chest.

"I'm sorry the dance was a bust," she said, reaching out and touching his arm.

"My date ditched me for another guy," he admitted, his beautiful face falling.

Melody gasped; who could ditch him?

"Well, then she's blind or stupid or both," Melody declared, tightening her gentle squeeze on his arm. His cobalt eyes met hers for a second and flickered.

"Thank you," He lowered his voice and leaned forward. Her heart stopped in her chest literally, *stopped*. He kissed her cheek softly and quickly, too; it was probably only one second. That was all it took, though. His lips sent sparks through her whole body.

She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and pull his lips down to meet hers, but she couldn't act. She could hardly even *move*, even after he pulled away.

"Good night, Bell."

"Night," she whispered weakly.

She somehow managed to make her legs work and left his room. The second she was out of his sight, her hand went to her cheek. It was still burning hot where his lips had been.

She made her way back downstairs. The house was silent and unchanged. Unaware she'd only fallen even deeper in love just moments ago.

She just had to get a little older, and he'd finally see her; she knew it. She just knew it. It was fate. It had to be.

“I am going to marry Austin Thorne someday,” she promised the universe.