

# Coming Home For Christmas

## Chapter One

### *Ten years later*

“He’s so tall and handsome as hell. He’s so bad, but he does it so well.”

“It’s too early for all that, Taylor!”

A petite blonde buried under her fluffy pink comforter stuck one arm out to reach for her phone. It took some doing, but eventually, she found it on her nightstand. She pulled it back under the blanket and clicked the answer icon. She groaned into the receiver, “what?”

“Just making sure you’re still alive,” her best friend’s perky voice filled her ears, “seeing as how your, may I quote, epic failure of a life has gone to complete hell and all.”

“Sadie, it’s too early to be quoting last night’s wine-induced texts.”

“Mel, it’s almost noon,” Sadie informed her.

“I’m an unemployed loser, living back at home with her parents,” Melody reminded her, “I’m *supposed* to sleep till noon.”

“The dramatics!”

“Easy for you to say, you have an amazing place, your job is great, you started your fashion line,” Melody rattled off, “...and now the secret boyfriend.”

“I don’t have a secret boyfriend,” she said in a heartbeat.

“I’ve known you for over ten years,” Melody scolded her, “I know how you get when you have a boyfriend. Why the secrecy?”

“I don’t have one! It’s not- it’s complicated.”

“You always told me everything,” Melody said with a touch of worry in her voice.

“I got to go, Mel; I’ll call you later.” Sadie hung up before she could question it further.

When they chose their colleges, Melody had opted to go to South Madison, just two states over. She liked that it was only a four-hour drive back home.

Sadie, on the other hand, longed to be a prominent fashion designer. She moved across the country to Sunlanda. It was warm year round there with the ocean close by. It was home to Sunset Valley, a huge city where many fashion designers started.

Despite the distance, they’d managed to stay close. However, the last few months had been odd. Sadie was keeping something from her; she could feel it, but what? Why?

Melody pushed her big blanket off her and got up. She walked across the plush white carpet to her closet.

Her head was pounding from the bottle of wine she and her mom had consumed last night. Well, mostly her, but who was counting?

Her childhood room still looked like it belonged to a child. Her bedspread was pink, as were all her throw pillows. Even though the old heartthrob posters were gone, the white squares on the walls remained. They had intended to turn it into a proper guest room, then she moved back in.

She slipped her very old and worn sweatshirt on. It was still huge on her and came down nearly to her knees, the joys of being short. Still, it was her favorite, one she’d never part with.

She headed to the small blue and white bathroom across the hall.

She looked a mess. Her green eyes were tinged with red and puffy underneath. Her flaxen hair was an unruly mess. Her makeup from the night before was smeared all over her fair skin. She took some time washing her face and brushing her teeth.

At least she wasn’t sharing this bathroom with her brother Cooper anymore. She did kind of miss having him around, though. He was so busy lately she rarely ever heard from him.

Coop was in his last year of school in Sunset Valley. He was going to be a film editor for movies. He was thriving in school. Unlike her, she was undeclared for her first few years. Then she chose journalism. She did fine in school and passed, but she didn't thrive. She never found a passion for it or a job after graduating.

Once she'd freshened up, she headed downstairs. The creaky wood steps led down to the large living and dining room. She stopped halfway and gasped at what she saw.

All the dining room chairs were set up with drawing tablets in the living room. Her mom and a handful of other older women were sitting and drawing a man. A very *naked* man, who was sitting on a stool in front of them. His shimmery blue eyes sparkled when he caught her gaze.

"Hey," he said casually as if he *wasn't* naked in her living room.

"Uh, hi," she managed to get out; her face was growing hot.

She couldn't help herself from looking down at those taunt abs. To that v shape going down...

He was holding a bowl of fruit over that particular part. She snapped her eyes back up fast.

"Stay still! I'm almost done!" One of the ladies yelled.

Her mom, Georgie, turned and smiled as she spoke, "oh, hi, honey."

They talk about how men get more handsome as they age. It was true for her mom too. She was aging so beautifully. Her blonde hair was streaked with a few greyish highlights and tucked in a messy bun. Her eyes were bright, and her skin crinkled with laugh lines as she smiled.

"Mom, what in the world is going on?"

"It's my art class! This is Trent. Trent, my daughter Melody."

"It's nice to meet you, Melody," he said in that same casual tone. She forced her eyes to meet his handsome face. Sculpted cheekbones and a bright white smile greeted her.

Still, her eyes wanted to look down...

“Why the bowl of fruit?” She found herself asking. “Isn’t that super cliché?”

“It’s a fun twist of irony. Early art classes usually paint a bowl of fruit,” he explained.

“You should hold a gift box over it. Be festive,” she suggested.

“Oh, good idea!” One of the ladies said gleefully.

“Santa hat too!” Another one agreed.

“Next time, ladies. We’re almost done for today.” Georgie smiled at Melody, “do you want to join us?”

“Please, do,” Trent chimed in with a flirty smile, “any other wardrobe suggestions?”

‘Oh good gravy, why did I engage with a naked man?’ She thought to herself.

“I’m good, thanks,” Melody said quickly. She shook her head as if shaking that scene from it. She hurried into the safety of the kitchen.

“Got a look at your mom’s new hobby?” Her dad Doug laughed when he took in the sight of her very red face.

His shaggy coppery hair was still ruffled from sleep as he sipped his coffee while reading the paper.

“How can you be okay with her painting naked men?” She asked as she filled her mug.

“It’s art,” Doug smiled, and when he did, she could see the wrinkles deepen around his eyes.

She scoffed at that, “I saw some of the drawings.”

“Well, it’s an attempt at art,” he corrected himself, “marriage comes with trust, Mel. I know she’s just looking.”

“I guess,” she muttered as she sipped her coffee.

“Besides, it gets her motor running if you catch my drift.” He added with a shimmer in his deep green eyes.

"Dad!" She nearly spits her coffee out. "I don't want to hear this!"

"Your father and I have gotten used to an empty nest, hon," Georgie's voice filled the room as she walked in.

She stepped over to the island where her husband sat. She stood next to him, and he patted her butt.

"We're free spirits now," she said with a dreamy look. Her dad flashed her a big loving smile.

Melody felt a little wrong about intruding on this love shack thing they had going on. Not to mention grossed out over it. She caught them making out in the laundry room earlier this week. In the middle of the day!

"Trent's a nice guy, single too. I'll get you his number!" Georgie offered cheerfully.

"Mom!" Melody groaned, "I'm not dating the nude model."

"Why not? You should date and get out more."

"Mom."

"He's a nice guy -

"I've seen him naked."

"He was wearing a fruit bowl," Georgie defended, to which Doug cracked up.

"Mom... no." Melody groaned.

"Okay, fine! You should get out there, though!"

"Your mother is right," Doug agreed, "You'll never meet anyone hanging out with us every night."

"I haven't even been here two weeks yet," she muttered.

Sheesh, she was even cramping her own parent's style.

"We're just saying! Besides, wouldn't it be nice to have a date for Austin's welcome home party?"

With that, she did spit out her coffee.

“His what?”

“He’s coming home,” Doug informed her.

“Coming home for Christmas?”

“No, for good,” Georgie said with a smile, “His residency in London is over.”

“For good?” She repeated as the room started to spin.

“It was always his plan to come back here and work with his dad,” Doug shrugged.

“Right.. .yeah,” she mumbled as she felt the room getting smaller.

“Mel, are you okay?” Georgie asked.

“Good, yeah, fine... on second thought, I’ll take the naked guy’s number,” she muttered before dashing back up to her room.

She collapsed back onto her bed. If only it would swallow her up as that day came flooding back.

*“Mel, if you don’t date someone soon, you’re going to be a virgin forever,” Sadie warned her.*

*The petite but fiery raven haired teen was sitting on her big comfy bed across from Melody. Several strands had come loose from her ponytail and framed her bronzed and flawless face.*

*They had a bowl of popcorn and a bottle of vodka. Sadie had gone down and snuck it from her brother Rafe’s party. She was a sneaky little thing like that.*

*"You don’t understand, Sadie”-*

*"Oh yes, I do!” Her lips form a scolding scowl as she holds her brown-eyed gaze firm. “Look, girl, you either go for it with Thorne, or move on. This is getting ridiculous now.”*

*"The timing isn’t right,” Melody defended, “he’s in college, and I’m in high school.”*

*"You'll be eighteen in a few weeks, "Sadie pointed out, "You'll graduate in the fall. Same time he goes from med school to a residency."*

*"I mean, yeah.. we could," Melody's heart started to thunder as it always did when she even considered telling him how she felt. They'd known each other her entire life. He'd always been there for her, always watched out for her. This could ruin the long-standing lifetime friendship they have.*

*"I don't think I can do it." She said as those thoughts took over.*

*Sadie handed her the bottle.*

*"Then I'm serious. You need to move on."*

*"I can't do that either," Melody took a breath and a swig, "I have tried, remember, Billy"*

*"Well of all the goofy guys to date, Billy?" Sadie scoffed.*

*"There isn't anyone that's going to compare to Austin," Melody sighed softly.*

*"I know girl, but you got to date, it's not good for you to wait around like this, for what? he has no idea."*

*"I know but- what do I even say?" Melody mumbled.*

*"Are you considering finally telling him?" Sadie's eyes went wide.*

*"I think so," She said, taking a deep breath to ease her nerves. "I have to try at least, right? We've seen Grey's Anatomy. He goes off to do his residency, and he'll meet a Meredith."*

*"**You**are his Meredith," Sadie said with determination in her eyes, "go tell him."*

*"If I don't chicken out," she mumbled as Sadie handed her the bottle and she took a brave gulp.*

*She shuffled from the room. The party was in full swing. Most everyone was in the kitchen gathered around the booze.*

*"Has anyone seen Thorne?" She asked, and someone pointed to the basement. She noticed Rafe, Sadie's brother coming up she watched as he ducked into the other room. Then she headed down slowly. She was feeling*

*so nervous she thought she might die. She saw Austin sitting on the couch, staring off into space and headed over.*

*She sat down next to him but couldn't look at him. She knelt down and let her hair cover her face like a curtain. There were a million things she wanted to say. Entire speeches she'd written down, but all she could do was sit there, until finally she blurted out, "I think I'm in love with you," in one very quick, rushed, breathy whisper.*

*"Come here," he said in a husky low voice; her entire body was getting chills.*

*"Really?" Was she dreaming?*

*His gentle hand brushed her hair from her cheek. She turned to face him as he looked at her. He was the most handsome man in the world. His thick chestnut hair was a little spiky and messy, and his blue eyes, even in his drunken state, were piercing. The facial scruff he tended to have now that he was older added a new level of hotness. Something flickered in his eyes as they dropped down to her lips.*

*Was he going to kiss her? Was her dream about to come true!?*

*"Austin," she whispered as she longed for his lips.*

*His eyes washed over her face as if he were seeing her for the first time. She couldn't pull hers away from his. He leaned in, and his lips parted. She gasped in anticipation.*

*Then suddenly, the mood shifted. His eyes opened wider, and he sat back. He looked horrified over what had almost happened.*

*"Austin?" She questioned what could have happened to sour the mood so fast.*

*.. I thought you were someone else. I'm sorry," he said with a sheepish look.*

*"You thought I was someone else?" She questioned, but he'd looked right at her?*

*Then again, he was drunk.*

*"That girl.. blonde..." Austin stammered nervously, "I'm-"*

*He cut himself off like he was trying to find the words. "Jesus, Bell, you know I'd never kiss you."*

*Were the ones he finally chose. He might as well have shot her in the heart.*

*Somehow she managed to say something and she laughed it off. Or at least tried to. She ran from the room before he saw her cry.*

*And did she ever... she cried herself to sleep every night for almost three months after that night.*

The words that broke her seventeen-year-old heart...

Somehow five years later, they still hurt just as much.

They'd both come home for Christmas the first year after that, but she couldn't handle seeing him. She pretended to be sick over the holidays and missed everything. She stayed back at school the second year, lied, and claimed she had to work.

For the next three years, she lucked out. He started a residency in London. Since he couldn't leave, his parents went to him. She was counting on that being the case this year too.

"My dumb luck," she muttered in frustration.

How was she going to get through the holidays now?

"Stop, Melody! It's been five years; you're over him," she told herself.

She knew as she lie there in his sweatshirt that she'd treasured for ten years. She was lying to herself.

She'd never get over Austin Thorne.