

# Coming Home For Christmas

## Chapter Two

It was well past noon at Throne house when a tall, hairy, unshaved Austin emerged from bed. He groaned like a bear waking from hibernation.

The last eight years were nothing but hard work and very little sleep. He reluctantly rose from his bed, walking across the soft carpet to the attached bathroom. It was recently remodeled. It was done in a white clean and very bright modern look. His dad was constantly updating the house.

He managed to get himself together after a quick shower. He'd have to go get a haircut soon. It was overgrown and shaggy. No matter what he did, his unruly brown hair would hang in his eyes. He needed a shave badly, but he had his razor packed away. He was moving into his apartment later today, so he'd wait.

He was dressed in a thick navy sweatshirt and dark jeans. It was cold already in Frost Crest. Snowy too. He missed it, though. He loved his beautiful wintery town. Even in the summers, it stayed cool and breezy. One could see the snow on the mountain tops in the distance all year. London was amazing, but as they say, there is no place like home.

As he stepped down the familiar steps, it smelled like home too. A combination of cinnamon and freshly baked bread filled the air.

The large mountain home his dad had designed was perfect for this town. The big windows showed either view of the mountains or the town tucked into the valley below, depending on which you looked out.

The living and dining flowed into each other. They were big and open, making it easy to entertain them as his parents often did. A grand piano sat in the corner, as did a built-in bar. Soon his mom would have the entire room flowing with holiday décor. The tree first, then they decorate; that was the tradition.

The walls were white but had stone accents. It went well with the polished wood floors. The dining room table was massive, it sat near a large window with a breathtaking mountain view. It was always full of cookies and candies. Past the dining was an archway into a vast kitchen. His mom was an avid

baker and cook. His dad ensured she had every appliance and tool she could use, with tons of counter space and room for her to move around.

He popped in to find his dad at the small eat-in kitchen table, sipping coffee. His mom was taking a pan from the oven.

“Morning, son,” his dad, Edward, looked up from his paper. His hair had gone full grey and thinned a little at the top. His brown eyes were full of warmth as he smiled at his son. “Slept good, I bet.”

“For the first time in eight years,” he admitted with a laugh.

“I’m so glad for this break,” His mom, Mary, said with relief in her deep blue eyes. Her brown hair was streaked with grey and kept in a loose braid. Her face, although weathered, was still so pretty. “You work far too hard, Austin.”

“The life of a doctor. It’s how it is, darling,” Edward reminded her, “It’ll settle now that he’s here.”

“Until January, anyhow,” Austin agreed.

Crest Center would be more relaxed than the hospital in London as well. He grabbed himself some coffee and a caramel roll. It was going to be a nice break, much needed.

He’d always dreamed of coming home and working with his dad. He wanted to build a house and set roots down eventually. Once he found someone to share life with and build a family with. He finally had the time to start pursuing that last dream now that he was home.

“I’m so excited to have my son working with me.” A wide smile took over Edward’s face. It was as much his dad’s dream as his.

“Me too,” Austin agreed with an easy-going grin.

“You can’t just eat that,” Mary protested when he rose from the table. “Let me make you something! How about an omelet?”

“Mom, I’m fine,” he laughed and kissed her cheek. “I’ll grab a big lunch at the diner once I’m moved in.”

“Do you need any help, son?” Edward asked.

"They said it's already furnished, so no. I'll just bring my bags in." He was moving into an apartment above the diner on Main Street.

"I wish you could stay here longer," Mary whined, "I missed you so much!"

"I'm going to be just minutes away, mom," He assured her.

"Mary, he's twenty-six years old. He doesn't want to live at home with his parents." Edward told her and she sighed in defeat.

"I don't see why not," she complained, "hot meals, fresh laundry, cookies!"

"How's he supposed to date you barging in with snacks?" Edward teased her.

Mary laughed heartily at that, and her blue eyes watered a little. "One time, and I'll never live it down."

When his parents visited him in London one year, he'd had a coworker he was casually seeing over one evening. They were luckily only watching a movie and cuddling in his room when Mary came bursting in with bars. She was still so embarrassed, and his dad never let her live it down.

"I thought you were studying a case or something!" She exclaimed.

Edward was still chuckling as he rose to get himself more coffee. He squeezed her shoulder on the way back.

Austin laughed at the memory. His mom may be a tad overbearing, but she always meant well. He grabbed a few cookies from the counter.

"I better get going," he brought his mug to the sink and rinsed it.

"Take that peach cobbler over to the Reeds after you get settled in." Mary directed.

"Peach cobbler?" He questioned.

"For Melody," she said, "I keep meaning to get one over to her, but I've been so busy."

"Melody's home?"

“For a few weeks now,” Edward looked towards Mary, “I’m surprised you haven’t found the time.”

“Well, everyone needs cookies this time of year,” she said quickly.

“Home for Christmas?” He guessed. Last he heard, she’d stayed in South Madison after school.

“She’s living back at home for a while,” Mary explained, “Georgie said she’s finding her footing.”

“Oh,” Austin nodded; it sounded like she was struggling. He’d once have been quick to try and help her. But... that was ages ago when she was a kid.

“You know it’s a shame you two didn’t stay in touch. You were so close once.” Mary said in a quiet tone.

“Yeah, I guess,” He mumbled.

“Well, don’t forget to bring it to her,” Mary said as she shuffled from the room. Edward followed her out.

He picked it up to take it with him. He got in his car and blew out a breath. He was pretty sure it was all his fault they didn’t stay in touch—all over one idiotic drunken night.

*"Damn, Austin! That chick is all over you!"*

*Austin’s hazy blue eyes drifted off to the door at the top of the stairs as it closed. The blonde that had been hanging on him all night left to get a drink.*

*“She’s hot,” he admitted as he took a big swig from the bottle. He was single; medical school was intense. There wasn’t time to put into a relationship. He did date a little here and there, just casually. It had been a long time, though. A very long time.*

*“I ought to leave you two be,” Rafe teased as he stood up.*

*They were sitting in his basement, a cozy, dimly lit room with a big fireplace and a comfy plaid couch.*

*“Dude, it’s OK-*

*It was too late; Rafe had already raced back upstairs. He just chuckled a little and took another swig. He heard the soft footsteps and knew the girl was coming back.*

*She sunk onto the couch next to him. He turned towards her, and she was leaning down; her thick blonde was in her face. She mumbled something lowly. With her face down like that and her quiet voice, he couldn't make out what she said. All I got was a, you, towards the end. He assumed she said, I want you, or something.*

*"Come here, you," he said in a husky voice.*

*"Really?" She whispered in a shaky voice.*

*He brought his hand to brush her hair from her face, resting on her cheek. His sleepy drunken eyes fall on her glossy pink, very kissable lips.*

*"Austin..." she whispered in a breathy voice. Wait, that was a voice he knew, and it wasn't the girl from earlier. His eyes popped open and it took a moment to register what or who he was seeing. The blonde in front of him was the one he'd protected her whole life. Only she wasn't that kid anymore; she was all grown up.*

*She was inches from him, with a soft dreamy look in her emerald green eyes and a rosy glow across her cheeks that highlighted the cute freckles on her nose. Her soft, plump lips were parted.*

*When did Mel Bell get beautiful? He found himself in something of a trance. Suddenly he wanted to kiss her. He leaned closer, and she gasped.*

*That sound of that was like cold water to his face. His eyes snapped open with alertness. He backed up quickly.*

*"...Austin..?" She questioned, and he looked up to meet her shocked eyes.*

*She looked hurt, and of course, she was! He wasn't supposed to make a move on her. He was supposed to shelter her like a big brother.*

*"I... I thought you were someone else. I'm sorry," he mumbled, feeling like total dirt. "I'm so sorry."*

*Her cheeks turned redder as she gulped.*

*“You thought I was someone else?”*

*“That girl.. blonde...” Austin muttered random words, hoping to make her understand, “I’m -*

*“Jesus, Bell. I’d never kiss you.”*

*Only he almost did... what was he thinking?*

*“Right, of course not,” she let out an awkward laugh, “Um, I gotta .. go.”*

*He let her run from the room and silently begged the couch to swallow him whole.*

He only saw her one other time after that, a few weeks later. His family and hers always spent Christmas Eve together. He pulled her aside to apologize again. She didn’t seem angry at him but didn’t want to talk about it.

She went off to college the following fall, and they lost touch. He wondered if it was because she felt weird around him after that. Or if it was just that she grew up, and moved on from an old childhood friend?

He decided he’d bring the peach cobbler to Melody first. Plenty of time had passed since that awkward day. She’d probably forgotten all about it by now. He missed her and how close they were once. If they were both homes, now was the perfect time to reconnect.

He pulled up to the house. Like most houses on this block, the Reed house was a cape cod-style red brick. It was strung with lights for the season.

He stepped to the porch and noticed a little black lab puppy by the door.

“Hey there, buddy,” he leaned down to pet it. He did so with one hand while carefully holding the cobbler with the other.

It eagerly and happily wagged its tail in return. He smiled as he stood to knock on the door. No one answered, but he noticed it slightly open as he hit it. Someone must’ve clicked it only some of the way shut.

Maybe for the puppy, he assumed. He pulled it open, and the puppy went racing in. He followed it inside to the kitchen.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” He called out, “it’s Austin; I let your puppy in.”

He set the peach cobbler down on the table. The puppy was at his heel, wagging his tail. He smirked at a very messy-looking gingerbread house on the table. It had a wine cork as the chimney. As if reading his thoughts, the puppy jumped up on the table.

“No-

**Crash!**

Too late...

The gingerbread bread house went crashing down. It broke into a bunch of pieces.

He shooed the dog down and away from the broken cookies it wanted to eat. He spotted a broom hanging on the wall but no dustpan. He opened the cabinet under the sink, where he spotted one. It was way in the back, though. He got on his knees and stuck his head under to reach for it.

He was just about to grab it when -

“Stop right there!” It was a little older, but he recognized Melody’s voice instantly, before he could speak he was smacked in the back of the head with something hard, “Ow!” On instinct he then quickly lifted his head and nailed it again, hard, against the cabinet.

“Stay right there! I will call the police!” she screeched.

“Real, Mel Bell its me,” he grunted. He slowly managed to crawl out from under the sink, but he was seeing stars.

“Austin?” Her voice lowered some, “what are you doing sneaking in like this? I could’ve killed you.”

He fumbled and found what she hit him with, he opened one eye to see a hairbrush on the floor. “With a hairbrush?”

“I mean it did stop you” she stifled a laugh.

Finally seeing straight again he turned to face his old friend, “From what? Did you think I was stealing your gar-” the words got lost on his throat when his eyes fell on Melody Annabelle Reed.

Her long hair, which was damp and wavy, cascaded down her shoulders dampening the pink sweater she was wearing. That cute face with the freckly nose, he'd spent his childhood looking at was all grown up. Her cheeks were rosy, and her full lips were pouty and kissable. Her emerald green eyes no longer seemed all doe-like and innocent. Instead, they were alluring and full of life.

She was gorgeous. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Um...welcome home?" Her lips curled into a pretty smile as she set the brush down.

He quickly returned her smile as he spoke, "Hey, Bell."

The puppy raced up to her, yelping for attention, her eyebrows furrowed as she knelt.

"Well, hello there," she petted its head and then her eyes went to the mess on the floor. "Cute dog," she looked up at Austin, "guessing he did that? I'll have you know that was a work of art."

"He's not your dog?"

"No," she was still petting him, and he was kissing her now. It was adorable; they both were.

Stop! That's Mel Bell! He told himself silently and urgently.

"He was at the door. It wasn't clicked shut, so I assumed..." he explained sheepishly.

"I wonder who he does belong to?" Melody asked, "no collar."

"I guess we can try and find out," Austin suggested, "maybe there's a wanted sign up or someone out looking."

"Okay," she agreed but looked a little off. Maybe she did still feel weird around him.

She stood, and the dog ran towards the crumbs. He was to shoo it quick away again. He swept it up. She came over and held the garbage can for him to dump it in. He caught a slight scent of citrus and honey when she got closer. She even smelled beautiful. Did she always?

The front door burst open, and Melody's mom came in with a bunch of bags. She walked towards the table with them.

"Okay, Mel, I've got Santa hats, a mistletoe, a big bell, a bow.. all kinds of stuff to cover a man's -

She abruptly stopped talking when she realized Austin was there.

"What?" He asked with a chuckle.

"You don't want to know," Melody assured him.

The puppy started yelping again, and Georgie looked down in shock.

"Where did he come from!?"

"We don't know. Austin found him outside our door," Melody explained.

"We're going to try and find his home," Austin added.

"Okay good, because Doug is allergic," Georgie started pulling stuff from bags. "Better hurry and get him out of here."

"Good to see you, though, Austin!" She added with a short laugh. "Welcome back."

"Thanks," Austin said, "it's perfect to be home."

"Well, good luck with the puppy!" Georgie said. She brought her Christmas supplies into the other room.

"Ready?" Austin glanced at Melody.

"Sure," she said, but she looked a little apprehensive. She grabbed her coat from the back of a chair and slipped it on. He hoped he could find a way to earn her friendship back. He'd have to start by not gawking at her.

What was with him?

Melody knelt and picked up the puppy. It squirmed a little but then relaxed in her arms.

“let’s go find this guy’s home then,” she led the way out the door, and he followed.

He looked forward to spending the day with her for whatever reason.