

Close To The Mistletoe

CHAPTER ONE

What the hell was she doing here?

Holly Murphy tugged at the hem of her tight skirt as she followed her best friend, Stacy Williams, into the Wagon Wheel Tavern. Actually, she knew what she was doing here. Tonight she was Stacy's wingman—or was it wing-woman? Whatever it was, her duty was to accompany Stacy on her first foray into the single world, in celebration of the finalizing of her divorce. It's what friends did. Even if they hated going to bars. Even if they hated dressing in tight clothes that showed off more of their flaws than necessary. Even if they had to order one drink and let it get warm so that they could be the designated driver.

"Come on. You look great," Stacy said, holding the door for her, an annoyed, hurry-up look on her face. "It's Friday night. The place will be filled with people. And by people, I mean *men*."

And that's what had Holly worrying about her outfit—the one Stacy picked out for her. She'd prefer to wear a nice pair of jeans, cowboy boots, and a big, comfy sweater, especially on a cold winter night. Stacy had nixed that idea, insisting she borrow the tight jean skirt that accentuated her hips and thighs, the thin, gold shimmery sweater that cut way down into the cleavage her new bra formed out of her average-sized breasts, and the leather jacket and three-inch heels. Basically making her into a shorter, chunkier, brunette version of the tall, blonde bombshell Stacy. The kind of man Stacy wanted to meet tonight wasn't the kind Holly dreamed of meeting. She didn't want exciting men interested in one-night stands. What she dreamed of was a man who would be interested in a home and family, someone solid and dependable, handsome, and interested in someone not so glamorous.

But tonight wasn't about her. Tonight was a celebration for her friend. So, she pasted on her best smile, ignored the feel of the skirt hitting her mid-thigh, and marched into the Wagon Wheel.

Stacy was right. The place was packed.

She'd been here a few times when she first moved to Westen six years ago, fresh out of college. It really hadn't changed much since that day. The wood-paneled walls, floor and bar area gave it the rustic feeling that went with the title. Neon-tubed signs for beers and alcohol flanked the bar area, that featured a huge wheel from some nineteenth-century wagon anchored in the center of the back of the bar mirror. Bottles of every kind of alcohol sat on the spokes. Of course since it was the first of December, there were Christmas lights—the big-bulb kind in various colors—and gaudy strings of silver tinsel strung around the bar and wagon wheel. Off in the corner of the poolroom was a fake Christmas tree, with the same lights and garland covering it.

The other difference was the clientele.

Instead of just truck drivers looking to relax after sixteen hours on the road, and local farmers coming in for a night away from home, there were couples doing line dancing, construction workers playing pool with some punk rockers, and what looked to be new millennials filling up the booths.

"I told you a lot of the newbies in town come here on the weekends. It's all the talk at FiberCO," Stacy said, and headed to a spot that just cleared at the bar.

FiberCo, a fiber optics manufacturing company, was one of several new enterprises that moved to the

outskirts of town in the past year, taking advantage of the new highway connecting the area around Westen with both the state capital in Columbus and the cities in the northeast section of the state. After the town was nearly blown up by a crazed meth dealer, the state started infusing building capital into the area. The resulting influx of new workers and jobs for long-term residents had Westen expanding both physically and financially.

“Aren’t you concerned Drake will be here, too?” Holly asked, as she squeezed into the spot between Stacy and a group of men talking football.

Stacy shook her head. “He doesn’t party in town. I learned that through the divorce. He likes to drive into Columbus. That’s where he met his whore girlfriend.”

“What can I get you girls?” the female bartender asked.

“Two mojitos, if you have them,” Stacy ordered.

“Sure thing.” Something else new to the Wagon Wheel. More cocktails were being served, adding to the usual menu of beers and whisky.

The music shifted from a country dance song to hard-bass rock, and several of the couples at the tables walked onto the dance floor. Holly watched them for a few moments, wishing she felt confident enough to join them. She loved dancing around her house, but hated anyone seeing how awkward she was.

“There you go, ladies,” the bartender said, setting their drinks down. Stacy handed her a twenty and told her to keep the change.

“Let me help pay.” Holly reached into her bag for her wallet.

Stacy stopped her and smiled. “Not this round. I’m just glad you came out to celebrate with me.”

“I am, too.” Holly raised her glass. “To a new beginning.”

“To freedom!”

They clinked glasses and took a drink. Stacy turned to lean back against the bar and started scanning the room. “Oh, look. There’s Joe. Let’s go say hi.”

“Joe? Who’s Joe?” Holly hurried to follow her friend to the far corner of the bar.

“A friend from work,” Stacy said over her shoulder. “He said he’d be here tonight.”

As they neared the table, Holly saw two men. The tall, dark-haired man seemed to have shoulders that went on forever. His burgundy Henley shirt—open at the collar, and sleeves pushed up to show off muscular forearms—stretched down his body and tucked into a pair of jeans slung low on his hips. To top it off were a pair of boots—not cowboy boots, but hiking-work boots. If that was Joe, Holly could see why Stacy wanted to say hi. Right now, Holly wanted to say *take me home and have your way with me*.

Both men slid off their barstools. But it wasn’t sexy-shoulders-and-arms man who smiled as they neared. The shorter, slightly balding man stepped away from the table and pulled Stacy in for a very close hug. *Friend. Right.*

“Holly, this is Joe, and his friend, Nick,” Stacy said, as she slid onto a vacant barstool.

“Nick’s just moved to town,” Joe said, holding a barstool for Stacy. “Thought he could use a night out.”

Holly smiled at both men and tried to wiggle onto the high stool. No easy feat when you were barely

taller than the stool, and your skirt was too tight and too short.

“Here, let me help,” Nick said in a deep voice that sent heat from her ears all across her body as he held the stool steady for her with one hand and took her elbow with the other.

Grabbing on to the table with her free hand and placing her foot on the rung of the stool, she gave a little shove and twisted her behind onto the seat. She swore she heard a tearing sound. Then the skirt gave. Suddenly, cool wood met the back of her bare upper thighs. Then the split went higher and her bare bottom met the slick barstool. She froze.