

Chapter 1

Rebekah Jackson laughed in all the right places as she listened to her best friend's story. After an hour of shopping — which was about all the time Francesca could handle being away from her newborn — they stood outside the newly renovated bakery in their neighborhood. Rebekah grasped Fran's arm. "Let's go in for a minute. I hear they've got amazing chewy chocolate cookies loaded with peppermint."

"I wish, but I need to get home. The baby will be hungry soon."

"This will only take a minute. Surely Tad can manage a little longer."

Fran peered at her phone as though expecting her husband might have left a desperate message, but the screen was blank.

“Let’s peek in and see what they’ve done with the decor.” Rebekah reached for the door and pulled it open.

“Surprise!” yelled dozens of voices. “Happy birthday!”

Eyes wide, Francesca whirled toward Rebekah. “You were in on this.”

“Definitely true.” Rebekah smirked and glanced around the group. “It’s not every day a friend of mine turns thirty.”

“Do you have to remind me?” But Fran smiled as she entered and began to hug everyone in sight.

Rebekah edged around the crowd to the lunch counter. “Anything I can do to help?” she asked the cousins who owned Bridgeview Bakery and Bistro.

“No, we’ve got it.” Hailey made a shooing motion. “You’re one of the guests. Go ahead and have a good time.”

Rebekah turned and surveyed the milling group. It seemed everyone in Bridgeview had been invited. Francesca had grown up here, part of the Santoro clan that populated what seemed to be half the neighborhood. What would it be like to have lived in one place your entire life?

Promise of Peppermint

She had no idea, but from now on, she was going to find out. When she'd accepted the job offer in Spokane, Washington, she'd made a good choice. Fran had declared they'd be best friends when Rebekah signed the rental agreement for the basement suite. If Fran had her way, Rebekah would feel right at home, marry one of Fran's many male cousins, and be included in everything forever.

If only it were that simple.

A guy stood silhouetted in front of the bright windows, chatting with one of the Santoros.

Rebekah caught her breath. It couldn't be *him*. She squinted to get a better look. After four years, she ought to be over Wade Roper. She shouldn't be seeing him every time a guy with dark hair, a little curly at the nape, crossed her line of vision. The first meetings with Fran's cousins had thrown her for a loop every time. At a glance, they could all fall under the description of her former boyfriend, except the Santoros tended to brown eyes, unlike Wade's startling blue ones.

The man tipped his head back and laughed, a deep guffaw that penetrated clear across the room.

Rebekah's gut froze solid despite the sunny August afternoon. She'd last seen him in Boise. He'd moved to Portland, or had it been across the river in Vancouver? Either way, this couldn't be Wade. Just couldn't.

But a man who looked like him *and* laughed like him?

She turned to where Hailey was setting desserts out at the end of the long table. "See that guy over by the window? Do you know him?"

Hailey peered over the throng. "Talking to Peter? I've seen him around a few times lately, but I don't know his name." A gleam came into her eyes. "I should remedy that. I've never seen him with a woman, so he's probably unattached... and awfully cute, don't you think?"

Rebekah shoved down the jab of jealousy. She'd been the one to let Wade go. If he hadn't married since then, he was fair game to any girl, even Hailey. It probably wasn't even him, though.

"Hey, good job helping Tad pull this party together." Basil Santoro edged through the crowd to stand beside her.

"No problem. It was fun." Rebekah smiled up at Basil. Now here was a man she ought to fall

for. They'd gone out a few times in the month since she'd moved here. He was great company, but she kept comparing him to Wade.

Wade again.

She glanced over at the man by the window as he turned. She could see him more clearly now. Her heart stopped. Definitely Wade, with the same warm grin that had charmed her from the beginning as he greeted a few people on his way around the room. He was edging closer, maybe to the food table. It didn't look like he'd seen her yet.

The only direction out would be right past him. This was going to be awkward. She'd stumble and stutter and everyone in the room would know something was up. No. She couldn't meet Wade again as needy and broken as she'd been when she sent him away. She'd psychoanalyzed herself past all that. She wasn't defined by Wade. By her need to be loved... but on her own terms. Not anymore.

"You look amazing today." Basil slid his arm around her shoulder. "That turquoise top brings out the color of your eyes."

Wade wasn't far away now. He'd see her any second. Then what? Rebekah looked up. "Basil?"

He grinned at her. “Yes?”

She slid her arms around his neck. “Kiss me,” she murmured. “Kiss me like you mean it.”

Basil’s eyebrows waggled. “I thought you’d never ask.” And his mouth lowered over hers.



“It is good to see you here, Wade.”

Wade covered the elderly woman’s hand on his arm with his own. “You look lovely today, Marietta.” She was the birthday girl’s grandmother and related to half of the people in this room, including his friend from work.

“Why, thank you.” She beamed up at him and patted his arm.

“How is your garden growing?”

“How nice of you to ask. I have an overabundance of tomatoes and green beans. Why don’t you stop by later, and I’ll give you some?”

“Mmm. Sounds good. I’ll do that.”

Marietta’s gaze slipped past Wade’s shoulder, and she frowned, mumbling something in Italian.

He turned to see what had caught her eye. The broad shoulders of one of Marietta's grandsons faced him with a girl's hands, tipped with turquoise nail polish, around his neck. That had been Rebekah's favorite color, and the woman in question had long blond hair similar to hers. That was all he could see of her, locked as she was in a passionate kiss.

Wade shook his head. And here he thought he'd finally stopped seeing Rebekah Jackson in every woman with the faintest resemblance.

The couple broke apart. The woman gazed up at the man, an adoring smile on her face, as her hands roved over his shoulders.

A bolt of lightning jolted through Wade's body from the clear blue sky, and his heart stopped. Rebekah. It was her. He'd know her anywhere.

"...hussy," Marietta growled.

He forced his gaze back to the neighborhood matriarch. "Who is she? I don't think I've seen her around Bridgeview." Not that he'd lived in Spokane long, but still.

"Her name is Rebekah, and Francesca has befriended her. I don't know what she sees in her." Marietta glowered. "I thought Basil had

more sense than to be taken in by someone like her.”

Wade fought the impulse to defend Rebekah. He’d certainly never have used the word hussy to describe her. She’d been so wounded when they first met, so insecure. He should be glad she’d found a boyfriend — Marietta would have worded things differently if the couple were married — as solid as one of the guys he played three-on-three with several evenings a week.

They weren’t married. Was she even dating Basil? Marietta sounded surprised, and Wade would lay strong odds she knew everything that went on in her domain. Then why had Rebekah kissed the guy like there was no tomorrow?

He turned toward the couple, and her gaze locked on his over Basil’s shoulder for one long moment. The air seemed to buzz while everything and everyone drifted out into the vague periphery. Only he and Rebekah remained.

Oh, and Basil Santoro, who turned to see what the woman in his arms was staring at. Basil offered Wade a lopsided grin then murmured something to Rebekah that Wade couldn’t quite catch. He dropped another kiss to her cheek and stepped aside.

“Wade? What a surprise.” Her fingers caught Basil’s.

“Rebekah.” Wade filled his eyes. She was as gorgeous as she’d ever been in a lacy turquoise top and slightly flared skirt, her long legs ending in impossibly tall shoes in a matching color. He remembered her love of heels that high. They put her at just the right height for proper kissing.

He blinked and managed to overcome the sudden urge to do just that. But no, he’d lost that right four years ago on that painful night when she’d dodged away, setting him free. How could he have convinced her he didn’t want to be free? He wanted to be hers, cherishing her forever.

“What brings you to Spokane? To Bridgeview?” She found words before he could.

“I, uh, I’m working for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, monitoring fish habitat.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the Spokane River a few blocks away.

She smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “Sounds like your dream job.”

“Wait.” Brows raised, Basil toggled his finger between them. “You two know each other?”

Rebekah could answer that one. Wade waited.

“We, um, both graduated from Boise State.”

“Psychology and biology? Must’ve had a lot of classes in common.” Basil angled a sharp glance at Rebekah as he disengaged his hands and shoved them in his pockets.

Huh. There was plenty more Basil didn’t know. “We dated for about six months.” Wade kept his gaze fixed on Rebekah.

She poked her toe at a perfectly smooth knot in the hardwood floor, looking at neither of them as she tucked her hand around Basil’s arm.

“Gotta go.” Basil shook his head. “See you at the court later, Roper.” He turned on his heel and made his way through the crowd.

“C-court?” Rebekah glanced up at Wade through a fringe of long eyelashes.

He waited a heartbeat. “Basketball three-on-three. It’s in the Santoro blood. They only tolerate me because they need another warm body.”

“You’ve been here a while then.”

“Nearly a year.”

“That’s... nice. How do you know the Santoro family?”

“I work with Peter, and we’ve started hanging out some. You?”

For a long moment, he didn’t think she’d answer. That shoe of hers received far more of her attention than it warranted. “I work for the school board.” She squared her chin and met his gaze. Unreadable thoughts raced across her face before she pivoted.

He couldn’t just let her walk away. “Rebekah.” He caught her arm.

Her minty fragrance teased at him, the same one she’d worn the whole time they were dating. He’d loved it because it reminded him of the day they’d met. That she still wore it meant she’d been putting on an act with Basil, and it looked like Basil had figured it out.

Wade’s heart leaped. She wasn’t over him, any more than he was over her. Oh, he’d tried. Tried to forget how her silky hair felt running through his fingers, how her sweet lips had tasted, how her lithe body felt pressed up against his.

She stared at his hand on her arm. Did the memories overwhelm her as much as they did him? Oh, the might-have-beens.

Around them, others sang happy birthday to Francesca. Party horns blew. Still he stood, touching the woman he had once loved. Whom he'd never stopped loving. *God, is she real? Is this a second chance for us?* “Rebekah? Can I take you out for coffee? Maybe we could meet here tomorrow after work. Talk. Catch up.”

She shook her head so hard that her hair flipped sideways, sweeping his arm with its magical strands. “No. It’s better we don’t. Thanks.” She pulled free and made her way through the crowd toward the door. A moment later she strode past the window outside.

“Pfft.” Marietta’s voice came from beside Wade’s elbow.

“Hey, now, Marietta,” said a bakery worker from Wade’s other side. “She’s new here. She might be very nice. Just because she kissed Basil—”

The old woman snorted. “She should keep her lips to herself.” She narrowed a gaze at Wade. “You can do better than that.”

“I’m Hailey North, by the way.” The young lady on the other side of him fluffed her short blond hair. “I’ve lived in the neighborhood all my life. My cousin and I inherited Bridgeview

Bakery and Bistro from our grandparents. You said you're looking for a house? I know a few people..." She smiled at him with a wink.

No. Just no. But he couldn't be that rude. He gave her a nod. "Wade Roper." No doubt she'd heard the rest. No doubt far more people had hung onto every word of his and Rebekah's conversation than he'd noticed from the bubble that encased him.

"Sooo nice to meet you."

Marietta made a rude noise.

He needed an escape.

"Pop into the bakery when it's not too busy, and I'll fix you some coffee. We make some terrific cookies and cinnamon rolls." Her eyes slid the length of his body and back up. "On the house?"

That would be an even bigger no. Wade had looked forward to the bakery's grand reopening. Now he wasn't sure he'd ever be back.

The minty aroma hadn't dissipated when Rebekah walked away. Wade glanced at the dessert table. A little sign beside luscious-looking brown disks proclaimed them as chewy chocolate peppermint cookies. "I'd like to buy half a dozen of those."

Promise of Peppermint

Hailey's eyebrows pulled together. "Tad ordered them for his wife's party, so they've been paid for. Help yourself."

"I want to take them off the premises."

"There are plenty." She rounded the table and reached across with a paper bag. "You're taking them to *her*, aren't you."

Did that even require a response? He loaded the small bag and flashed her a quick smile. "Thanks."

Now to figure out where Rebekah had gone.