

Chapter One

Almost. Two syllables with so much promise and no damn reward. The most disappointing word in existence.

Logan Slade stifled a grimace and spun the ring on his left hand with his thumb. The silver band glinted with each twist. He eyed the nervous movement, willing it to stop. It was an absentminded habit. One he'd almost managed to quit.

His mouth twisted. *Almost...*

"We'd almost have snow," the white haired man at his side chided again. "Yes, siree. Just needed to be a few degrees colder. They're predicting sleet tonight instead. Strange, huh? December ice in Georgia? Guess the Angels left the fridge open," he laughed.

A shaft of frozen air abraded Logan's forearms and he tightened his clutch on the door of Hartford Insurance Agency's lobby against the wind's whip. He began to regret his impulse to jump up and assist the elderly man out. The chill from outside pierced his skin but he kept up his grip, willing the older man to shrug into his coat a little faster.

"My Pearl loved the snow," the man mumbled. His jubilant expression melted away. "We almost had some her last Christmas." Gnarled fingers struggled to fasten the top button at his neck.

"Here. Let me." Logan tucked his heel against the door and gingerly threaded the button through its hole.

"Almost..." the man whispered, his gray eyes lifting.

Logan stilled. It was damn near impossible to count the regrets haunting the depths of his aged gaze. They pooled in the corners of his eyes, seeping into the crow's feet and coating his white lashes.

Almost. Logan had almost not come today. Was no more than two thoughts away from calling the trip off when he finally twisted the key in the ignition and allowed his truck to haul him from his ranch.

And, after arriving, he'd almost left. Empty handed. But with a heart crammed full of a thousand more regrets than he already carried.

Logan straightened, renewing his hold on the door. *Almost be damned.* He wasn't leaving until he did what he came here to do. What he should've done a long time ago.

He wasn't leaving until he saw his wife. And he wasn't leaving until she left with him.

The man's eyes still hovered on him. Logan summoned up a polite smile.

"Thank you, son," the elderly man said, shrugging further into his coat and edging out. "Yes, siree. Just a few degrees..."

The arctic blast receded as the door closed and Logan returned to his chair by the exit.

The massive grandfather clock in the corner sounded the five o'clock hour, doling out bellows and chimes. Each lilt of the bells pierced his ears and dropped into the hollow of his gut.

"How much longer do we have to sit here?"

Logan jerked his head to the side. The teenaged figure beside him slumped further into a crumpled heap on the wide lobby chair. A thick hood obscured her face.

"Please sit up, Traci," he muttered through stiff lips.

"This is stupid." The hood shifted with her grumble. "Bet she won't even see you."

"We're in public." Logan clenched his teeth, his knee bouncing with agitated jerks. "Sit up, please."

The hood dropped back. Emerald eyes flashed up at him. "The sign says they close at five. It's five," she stressed. "There's no one here but us now. She's not coming."

Logan sucked in a breath, his chest tightening. That shade of green. That defiant expression. So familiar. And so painful.

"You heard that man," Traci continued. "It's gonna sleet. We need to leave."

No. No chance in hell he was doing that.

SYTYCW Editor Critique:

This skillful opening cleverly uses subtle cues to reveal character, plot and setting without falling into the common trap of too much explaining. Some things are stated clearly (Logan has a wife) while at other times we learn things from the characters' actions. For example, we know Logan is caring and compassionate by the way he helps the old man button his coat. And we know Logan has regrets about his past and doubts about the future – not only by what he's thinking and feeling ("a heart crammed full of . . . regrets") but by the language. Notice that Logan "allowed his truck to haul him from his ranch." Normally I'm

not a fan of the passive construction, but this phrase is just right to suggest Logan's reluctance to come to town.

And why the reluctance? We don't know, but we want to! All of the questions that are left unanswered are ones that draw us into the story. Why are Logan and his wife separated, and why is he so determined to get her back? And what's the deal with the sulky teen, Traci? There's lots of potential for drama and emotion in the situation, and the author has already made us like Logan (he's kind to old people!) so we want to read on to see the story unfold.

There's some excellent writing here too. Each of the three characters we meet can be easily differentiated by their "voice" in the dialogue. And the use of repetition with the word "almost" creates a poetic and evocative tone. It can be very difficult to pull off that kind of stylistic effect successfully –well done, April!