

# Snow Angel Cove: A Clean & Wholesome Romance (Haven Point, 1)

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New York Times bestselling author RaeAnne Thayne welcomes you to Haven Point, a small town full of big surprises that are both merry and bright

Nothing short of a miracle can restore Eliza Hayward's Christmas cheer. The job she pinned her dreams on has gone up in smoke-literally-and now she's stuck in an unfamiliar, if breathtaking, small town. Precariously close to being destitute, Eliza needs a hero, but she's not expecting one who almost runs her down with his car!

Rescuing Eliza is pure instinct for tech genius Aidan Caine. At first, putting the renovation of his lakeside guest lodge in Eliza's hands assuages his guilt-until he sees how quickly he could fall for her. Having focused solely on his business for years, he never knew what his life was missing before Eliza, but now he's willing to risk his heart on a yuletide romance that could lead to forever.

New York Times bestselling author RaeAnne Thayne finds inspiration in the beautiful northern Utah mountains where she lives with her family. Her books have won numerous honors, including six RITA Award nominations from Romance Writers of America and Career Achievement and Romance Pioneer awards from RT Book Reviews. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached through her website at [www.raeannethayne.com](http://www.raeannethayne.com). Oh, this wasn't good. At all.

Eliza Hayward stood with sleet pelting her like hard little pebbles, gazing at the blackened, charred bones of her future. Cold dread wormed its way beneath her coat like the wintry wind blowing off Lake Haven, just a few hundred yards away.

"I don't like this place," Maddie muttered, gripping her hand tighter. "It's ugly and scary."

"Yes. Yes, it is."

This couldn't be real. She had driven the two hours from Boise with such eager anticipation, singing Christmas carols all the way, loud and silly enough to make a five-year-old giggle. She had been so excited about this new chapter of their lives in this lovely Idaho town nestled in the raw and stunning Redemption Mountains.

It had been an amazing opportunity all the way around-a big jump, career-wise, to her first hotel manager position, but also a nice salary increase, a really attractive benefits package and, best of all, an included apartment on the property for her and for Maddie so she could keep her daughter close.

Now that cute apartment, the salary bump, the insurance, everything, had disappeared in a puff of smoke. Literally. Though she couldn't see any flames, tendrils of smoke still curled from the rubble of the building.

The air smelled harsh and acrid, far different from the sweet, citrusy scent of pine she remembered permeating the town when she had visited the month before during the interview process.

The fire had to have flared within the past few hours. Fire crews still worked busily all around the burned hotel coiling hoses, stretching yellow crime tape around the perimeter, putting out a hot spot here or there.

No wonder she hadn't heard from Megan Hamilton. The woman was probably still in shock.

Oh, Eliza hoped no one had been hurt.

That dread sidled up to her again, menacing and dark. What was she going to do now? She had tied off every single loose end in Boise. Her job, her apartment. All gone. Their things had been packed and put into storage until she had a chance to figure out what she might need here in their new life, this new start.

She had even used a big chunk of her savings as a down payment on a newer SUV to get around the mountain roads.

Now what?

She gripped Maddie's hand more tightly. She would figure something out. Isn't that what she had been doing for three years?

"That's not where you're going to work, is it?"

"Well, it was supposed to be." She forced a smile for Maddie, doing her best to ignore the flutters of panic taking wing inside her. "I guess they had a fire today."

She drew in a calming breath, trying to make her brain cells snap into gear so she could come up with a plan. The sleet seemed to sting harder with each passing second and the wind had picked up in the past few moments. Apparently the big storm the forecasters had been predicting—the reason she had come to town early instead of waiting until the next day or Sunday—had blown into Haven Point.

Maddie shivered a little and Eliza was just about to take her back up the small hill toward the parking lot where she had parked when she spotted a familiar woman about her age in jeans and a sooty jacket, talking to a firefighter in turnout gear with the word Chief written on his helmet.

When she saw Eliza and Maddie, the other woman's eyes widened, looking huge in her lovely features that looked taut with stress and exhaustion.

She cut off her conversation with the fire chief and headed in their direction. Though they had only met twice—once for Eliza's initial interview and then the follow-up where she had been offered the job—the woman held out her arms and folded Eliza in a hug that smelled strongly of smoke.

"You're here. Oh, Eliza." Her voice wobbled and her slim frame trembled, too, like a slender

branch shivering in the wind. "I should have called you. I'm so sorry. It didn't occur to me. I only... It's been such a terrible afternoon. I thought you weren't coming to Haven Point until tomorrow or Sunday."

She imagined receiving this sort of news over the phone and was almost grateful she had driven in early and had witnessed the damage for herself. "I wanted to beat the storm. Was anyone hurt?"

"Not seriously. Thank heavens. One of the housekeeping staff suffered some smoke inhalation while trying to help us evacuate the guests. Other than that, everyone is fine. We were only about half-occupied and we were able to get everyone out quickly. It's been a nightmare few hours trying to find other places for them all to stay."

What if this had happened a week from now, when she was in charge as the hotel manager? She hated even imagining it.

"What happened? Do you know?"

Megan rubbed at her red-rimmed eyes. "I was just speaking with Chief Gallegos about it. The investigators aren't sure yet but all indications point to some kind of electrical event. They think it started near the guest laundry. It's a miracle it happened when it did, on a slow week, first of all, and then late morning before the weekend guests checked in, when we were fully staffed with the maintenance crew and the housekeepers to help evacuate. If the fire had started in the middle of the night, things might have gone very differently. The situation could have been much, much worse."

Eliza could certainly appreciate that from Megan's point of view. As far as she was concerned, though, the fact remained that her exciting new opportunity was now a pile of ash and debris.

Megan suddenly spied Maddie, pressing her face now into Eliza's wool coat to keep out of the wind. "But you. And Maddie. I'm so, so sorry."

She wore the same sorrowful expression that Eliza had seen on her friends and neighbors after Trent's funeral.

"I can't believe this happened right before you were supposed to start. I've been so excited to have you on board, too. I just feel like we really clicked during the interview process. Your ideas were innovative and exciting, exactly what this old inn needed to shake things up."

Eliza heard the "but" and knew what was coming.

"Obviously everything has changed. Oh, Eliza." Megan's eyes welled up and spilled over, trickling down her soot-grimed face. She pulled a bedraggled tissue out of her pocket.

"I understand."

"I don't know what we're going to do. We have to close indefinitely. I guess that's obvious. I need to speak with the insurance company to find out if we should rebuild what is left or raze the whole thing and start over. And to have this happen right before Christmas! I feel so terrible for my staff. Some of them have been at the inn since before I was born, when my grandparents owned it."

Though that leashed panic inside her wanted to break free and ravage everything, Eliza forced a smile, cuddling Maddie closer for comfort and warmth. "You obviously don't need a new manager when you've got nothing for me to manage. Don't worry. I understand."

Megan gave a little whimper and more tears dripped out. "I'm so sorry I dragged you out here. You quit your job and everything. Can you go back to it?"

She wouldn't, even in the unlikely event that they might hire her back. With the owners' son firmly entrenched in the top managerial position and mismanaging everything from the linen orders to the payroll, she suspected it wouldn't be long before the Diamond Street Inn would go under.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." She had no idea how, but she would figure something out.

"Don't cry. It will be okay." Maddie spoke softly to Megan, looking bewildered at the situation but distressed, too. She was such a sweet little soul, always concerned about the pain someone else might be experiencing, whether at the hospital or on the playground.

Megan gave her a watery smile, then reached down and hugged her. "It will be. You're absolutely right. Not immediately, but things will eventually be okay."

"Is there something I can help you do now?" Eliza asked. "I can find somewhere to stay and help you cancel bookings or something?"

"I appreciate that, but I've already got the front desk staff taking care of that. Thank heavens our computer system was backed up off-site and we can still access all those reservations."

"That is good news."

She squeezed Eliza's hands. "Again, I'm so, so sorry."

"Stop apologizing. This wasn't your fault."

"At least I can give you a small severance package. Something to tide you over while you look for another position."

Megan had already been so generous, offering to pay her moving expenses and including

the apartment as part of her compensation package. Eliza didn't want to burden her with one more obligation.

"Don't worry about it," she said, even though that panic fluttered harder. She wasn't destitute. She had some savings left, as well as monthly survivor benefits. She also had several solid years of experience as the assistant manager at the Diamond Street Inn.

She wondered if she could possibly return the SUV and get her down payment back-but what would she drive to interviews if she did? Her sedan had been on its last bald tire.

Job-hunting less than two weeks before Christmas wasn't ideal timing, nor did she want to move her fragile child into some grimy pay-by-the-week hotel until she found a position and could lease a nearby apartment. Right now she couldn't see any other choice.

All in all, this might be another in a string of miserable holidays.

Emotion welled up in her throat and she was very much afraid she would burst into tears like Megan.

"I have your cell number. I'll be in touch as soon as things settle down," the other woman said.

"Okay. Thanks."

"Hey, Megan," the fire chief called. "Do you want us to put up temporary fencing to keep out the looters?"

"Looters. I didn't even think about that. I'm sorry. I need to..."

"Don't worry about us," Eliza said firmly. "I'm going to go get Maddie out of the cold. Good luck with everything."

She gave Megan a hug, very sorry suddenly that she wouldn't have the chance to get to know the other woman better. She had been certain they would have been friends-and she could always use a few more of those.

The wind and sleet had died down a little while she had been speaking with Megan. The calm before the storm, maybe? She should climb into the SUV she could no longer afford and drive back through the mountain passes toward Boise before the snow began in earnest, but she didn't trust herself to drive right now, with her emotions in turmoil.

With the vague intention of grabbing a bite to eat at one of several restaurants she had spied in the town's small commercial district, she headed away from the scorched remains of the Lake Haven Inn.

"Was that lady sad because her hotel burned down?" Maddie asked after a moment.

"She was. It's been in her family for many years."

Eliza had learned during the interview process that Megan Hamilton had had no inclination or aptitude to run the hotel after she'd unexpectedly inherited it. Her interests lay elsewhere, Megan had told her, which was why she had hired Eliza in the first place.

"We can't live there now, can we?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Where will we put all our boxes?"

"Why don't we grab a bite to eat at that diner across the street from where we parked and we'll try to figure out our options?"

"Do they have macaroni and cheese?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

They headed for the crosswalk and waited for the light to change. Eliza took a moment to look around, cognizant of her surroundings for the first time since she had seen that pile of rubble.

She could see the downtown business owners had done their best to decorate their charming little clapboard-and-brick storefronts. Lights hung on nearly every facade and most had Christmas trees in the windows. A few had ornaments with nautical themes, in keeping with the vivid blue of the lake that dominated the view in every direction.

"Mama, the light is green. Green means go," Maddie declared.

"So it does."

Maddie slipped her hand free of Eliza's and scampered ahead of her into the crosswalk. Eliza followed close behind her, keeping an eye on a black SUV headed down the hill toward them.

The SUV was slowing down, she saw, the driver hitting the brakes in what should have been plenty of braking distance but her insides suddenly froze.

The vehicle's tires spun wildly, ineffectually, unable to find purchase on the road. He tried to turn into the skid but she could tell in an instant he wasn't going to be able to completely stop in time-and he was sliding straight for her child.

No. This couldn't be happening!

"Maddie!" she screamed. Acting on a mother's frantic desperation, she leaped forward to push her daughter out of the path of the vehicle.

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