

CHRISTIAN ROMANTIC  
SUSPENSE



Don't  
Give Up  
on  
Me

AN OTTER  
BAY NOVEL

JODI ARTZBERGER

# **Don't Give Up on Me**

AN OTTER BAY NOVEL

Jodi Artzberger

*Don't Give Up on Me*

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Dear Reader

*Dedicated to you, the reader.*

*Thank you!*

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. —John 3:16*

## *Chapter 1*

*And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. —*  
Revelation 21:4

Amanda's hand hovered over the keypad in front of her. Looking back over her shoulder, she shivered and pulled her coat a little tighter. Turning back, she put in her security code with a shaky hand. The keypad lit up red and buzzed. She jumped, put her hand to her chest, and took a deep breath. *There's nothing to be afraid of.* She shook out her hand, scanned the parking lot, and tried her code again. The pad turned green and, with the familiar click of the door unlocking, allowed her to enter. She darted into the building and tugged the door closed until she heard the click again—locked. Amanda released the breath she had been holding in and rolled her neck and shoulders.

The lobby was cold, eerie and quiet. Outside, there was no breeze and no ocean mist to create the usual night fog. If it weren't for the smell of salt in the air, you'd never know you were in a coastal town. Otter Bay, Maine, was unusually still tonight.

Amanda glanced around the lobby—everything appeared normal. Trying to ignore the uneasiness that had settled into her gut, she moved past the receptionist's desk and pushed through the doors. With determination and purpose in her steps, she headed towards the offices.

Shadows played across the hall. The safety lights lining the hallway did nothing to chase them away. A chill followed her and ran down her spine. She shivered and picked up her pace. The sound of her heels rang in her ears as they clicked on the tiled floors and echoed off the walls.

As the business operations manager for Cragge Automotive Group, Amanda oversaw the company's day-to-day business and made sure everything ran smoothly—not just for their corporate office but for their dealerships as well. After the day she'd had, she was ready to get this problem fixed and get back home.

Amanda rounded the corner and saw light filtering into the hallway from under Lee's office door. "Lee, I'm here. What can I do to help so we can get out of here? Just let me know whatever—" Amanda stopped when she opened the door and realized Lee wasn't in his office. She shook off her coat and set her things in the empty chair next to Lee's desk.

She scanned the paperwork on his desk and read through his notes. The screen in front of her revealed nothing. She shook her head and wasn't sure why she bothered. Lee was the best at

his job, the best IT guy around. His notes didn't tell her anything. For her, aside from checking email, using a few social networking sites, and being trained on the programs she used for work, IT and programming were a foreign language.

Amanda twirled the pen she'd picked up, intermittently tapping it on the edge of Lee's laminate desktop. He had to be back soon.

Since earning her MBA, Amanda had been working with her father, Lawrence Cragge, who was the general manager of Cragge Automotive Group. She'd hoped they could bond over their work. But they both remained busy on different projects, and no matter what she did, nothing seemed to change between them.

A Cragge always held the General Manager position, and she was next in line. Then she would be Amanda Cragge, president of Cragge Automotive Group. The thought made her skin crawl. If only she had a brother, then he would be bestowed the honor of carrying on the Cragge tradition instead of her.

Wanting to get out of there as soon as possible, she stood and went back to the hallway. She looked up and down the hall. "Lee, are you here?" She had just spoken to him as she drove back to the office. His car was in the parking lot when she pulled in. *Where could he be?*

The reception area and front offices were dark when she came in. "Lee? Are you here? Charlie?" If she couldn't find Lee, maybe Charlie, their security guard, could help her. She hadn't passed him either when she entered the building.

Amanda stepped back into Lee's office and grabbed her phone. With the flashlight app on, she walked down the hallway, through IT and accounting's bull pen where she headed out into another hallway.

Reaching for the light switch, Amanda hesitated when she heard something. "Lee? Charlie?"

Before she could turn around, she was grabbed around the waist and jerked back against her assailant. A cloth was placed over her mouth and nose. Dragging her deeper into the lifeless hallway, her attacker pinned her back against himself, preventing her from escaping his clutches.

Amanda tried to scream, but the caustic smell violated her senses and stopped her from screaming. She tried to struggle, but confusion and fright engulfed her. She heard the clatter of her phone as it slipped from her grip and hit the floor. The light went out.

She tried to push back and wriggle out of her attacker's hold, desperately trying to reach behind to get to her attacker, but it was no use. She grabbed and dug at her attacker's hands and arms, hoping to loosen his grip. He tightened his hold and pressed the cloth harder against her mouth and nose, choking out her breath, forcing her to gasp through the vile rag.

With everything she had, she attempted to fight against the darkness that was trying to take over, to fight the stars that were before her eyes, and to fight the body that was holding her against him.

As she struggled against her attacker, she tried to claw and pry at the cold, leather-gloved hand over her mouth and tried to reach the face behind her. His hot, sticky breath brushed against her cheek and his beard scratched her face and ear.

She stomped on her attacker's foot with the heel of her shoe. He grunted but said nothing. He lifted Amanda off the floor, tightened his hold on her even more, which pushed out the remaining air from her lungs and caused Amanda to gasp again for air.

She couldn't fight anymore. A whimper escaped, and heaviness overtook her limbs. Her attacker's grip was too strong and too much for her to fight off. The smell, the cloth—dizziness winning, weakness winning. Her body stopped fighting and her world went black.

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"Hello? Detective Ryker Scott with the Otter Bay Police Department. Is anyone here?" he called out as he entered the building. He clicked on his flashlight and flashed the light around the lobby. The front door had been unlocked. He looked back at the door—no marks, no signs of forced entry. The cars in the parking lot indicated someone should be here.

Ryker had heard dispatch over the radio on his way home. Dispatch said the call came in from a distraught woman who said her daughter had been working but had not come home yet and she wasn't answering her phone. Since the call was for the Cragge offices, he wondered if the caller was Mrs. Cragge, so he offered to respond to the call.

Inside the smaller offices, nothing appeared disturbed. Weaving his way around the desks and partitions, everything seemed normal. He called out again, "Detective Scott with the Otter Bay Police Department. Anyone here?"

Cautiously, he continued. Ryker approached an office with its light on. He knocked and carefully pushed opened the door. Empty. He noted where someone had been working and noticed a coat and a woman's purse in the chair next to the desk.

Ryker stepped out of the office and made his way back down the hall. In the bull pen, he glanced around. The sinking feeling in his gut had Ryker pull back his jacket and go for his Glock. With his wrists crossed, his Glock in one hand pointing down and his flashlight in the other lighting the way, he continued to move through the offices.

As he neared the back of the offices, he noticed a partially opened door. A woman's black leather shoe prevented the door from closing. He repositioned his Glock to the ready position and carefully eased the door open.

The beam from his flashlight swept another hallway, it illuminated a woman collapsed on the floor. Ryker hit the light switch in the hall, scanned the hallway one more time, and knelt down to check for a pulse. Weak, but it was there. Holstering his gun, Ryker rolled the woman over on her back, smoothed back the hair out of her face. His breath hitched.

Amanda.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Amanda lay before him. Her lips had begun to turn a shade of blue and her skin was pale. He leaned over and couldn't feel her breath on his cheek.

Ryker pulled out his phone and dialed 9-1-1. He began administering CPR. In between breaths, he identified himself to the operator and requested backup and an ambulance.

“Come on, honey, breathe. I need you to breathe.”

## *Chapter 2*

Ryker never expected he'd end up in the hospital tonight. As he stared out the window from Amanda's room, he replayed the evening over and over in his head. Every detail. Finding Amanda on the floor . . . he rubbed his hands over his face . . . the image wouldn't leave him. Stepping back, he shoved his hands into his pockets and paced. And prayed.

When he was an Army Ranger, he saw a lot, lived through a lot, and he had the scars to prove it. He was proud of his time in the military, but that's not who he was anymore. He never personally knew the people; they were a job. It was also the reason he was no longer doing that job. What he had now was so much greater. He would always be thankful for serving his country, but unfortunately the scars he caused were scars people had to live with, thanks to him. Choices he made destroyed lives, and he had no one to blame but himself.

Seeing Amanda tonight holding on for dear life affected him more than anything he had ever seen in the army. She made it personal. Now he had an idea what the others had felt.

Turning back to the window, he watched the rising sun chase the dawn away with streaks of yellow and orange as the sun crested the outlying bluffs of the town where he grew up. His shoulders slumped and he dropped his head. Returning to Otter Bay was more difficult than he imagined. He thought he could handle it, but maybe he was wrong. This wasn't going to be easy, but he also knew he had to be there. God wanted him there.

He watched and waited for Amanda to wake up. He prayed for her and for God to give him the words he needed for when she did wake up. He knew she wasn't going to be happy to see him. He had hurt her, he knew it. She had every right to be mad at him, to hate him. And she had every right not to want him there.

But Ryker still had a job to do. When his partner, Adam, stopped by Amanda's room earlier, Ryker didn't like the update he'd brought.

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The recurrent beep of machines, muffled voices, and harsh bright lights greeted Amanda through the fog her brain tried to clear. Her body weighed a ton. She tried to move. She blinked her heavy eyelids against the harsh artificial light.

The putrid smell of antiseptic enveloped Amanda.

She struggled against the fog and pain. Her body protested every move she made. *Why am I here?*

Her head pounded and pulsated to the rhythm of the beeping. Her entire body, including her lungs, were screaming in pain. The muscles in her stomach refused to let her move without

crying out something was wrong.

As the fog began to lift, the room came into focus. Amanda saw she wasn't alone. Someone was looking out the window. She willed her vision to adjust. His shoulders were broad underneath a well-worn leather jacket. Tall with dark hair, cut close. Familiar. She stared and fought to clear her mind. It couldn't be . . . but if she didn't know better, she'd swear he was going to have eyes the color of mocha when he turned around.

She had to rid herself of the thought. There was no way it was him. He walked away years ago.

In her attempt to clear her dry, burning throat, all she could manage was a raspy breath. It made her cough, and it got a lot worse when the man standing at her window turned around and made eye contact with her.

He rushed over and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Amanda, relax. Please, lie back down. Let me get you some water."

Amanda's eyes tracked his every move.

Ryker retrieved the cup filled with water from her bed table. He held the straw to her mouth, helping her to take a sip of water to soothe her sore, dry throat.

She was barely able to clear her throat. "Ryker," she said, almost above a whisper, "what are you doing here? Why are you here?"

Amanda thought she had to be dreaming. There was no way it was him. Whatever happened to her, whatever caused this headache, whatever caused her body to feel like someone had dragged her across the cliffs of Otter Bay, must also be playing tricks with her mind. She must have hit her head pretty hard.

The last time she saw Ryker, he had left her, walked away from her, and she never heard from him again.

After all these years, she still didn't want to see him. She had heard he was back and now he stood right in front of her, helping her. He had no right to be there. He had no right helping her, acting like he cared. Him of all people.

"How are you feeling?" Ryker sounded like he was coaxing a scared cat out of a tree. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Ryker, why are you here?" Amanda rasped out.

Setting the cup down, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm here to investigate what happened last night. Do you remember what happened?" Ryker pulled up a chair and sat down next to her bed.

"Last night? No, I don't remember anything. What happened last night?" Looking around the room, she hoped to find a reason she was in the hospital and a reason for her past to be standing in front of her.

She glanced back to see Ryker watching her. Breaking eye contact and scanning the room again, Amanda closed her eyes, squeezing them shut, trying to remember last night, but her mind didn't want to cooperate. She couldn't remember anything. She had to know what happened and why she was in a hospital bed feeling like she did, facing the man she'd never wanted to see again.

Amanda clutched her blanket until her knuckles turned white and pulled it higher, using it for a barrier. “What time is it?”

“It’s 7:25 a.m., Thursday. Do you remember being at the office last night? Wednesday night.”

“No. I never work at night. Unless—” she started, bringing a shaky hand to her forehead to rub it. She closed her eyes trying to fight the emotions that threatened to overtake her. Exhaustion and pain were a good combination to justify a good cry. Between whatever made her feel like this and facing Ryker, she didn’t think she could take anymore.

Ryker must have noticed the panic setting in. He leaned closer and used a soothing voice. “What? What do you remember?”

“Nothing. My head hurts and I still don’t know why you’re here.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m a detective with the Otter Bay Police Department. I transferred in last month.”

Amanda groaned internally. She’d heard he was back but hoped he hadn’t planned on staying. Otter Bay was not a big community. Now she would have to see Ryker around town. She didn’t think the pounding in her head could get any worse.

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Ryker wanted to do more than ask questions. He wanted to take away Amanda’s pain. Her beautiful brown eyes told the story of the pain she had endured last night.

Before he could ask another question, Amanda’s mother came rushing into the room followed by her father and another man. Her mother kissed Amanda on the top of her head and grabbed her hand. “Amanda, sweetheart, are you all right? We tried to stay last night, but the doctors said they didn’t expect you to wake up right away. I’m so sorry we weren’t here when you woke up. I told your father I wanted to be here but he insisted we go home.”

Amanda’s father, Lawrence Cragge, was distinguished, posture ramrod straight, nothing out of place, an air about him that commanded respect. “Dear, we were of no use here last night. She had the good detective with her, watching her,” Lawrence said, giving Ryker his unwavering attention.

Ryker stood to his full six-foot-two frame and crossed his arms over his chest, holding Lawrence Cragge’s cold, hard stare.

“Mom, I hurt and my head throbs and I want to get out of here. That’s how I’m feeling.”

Ryker watched the man who’d followed Amanda’s parents into the room as he walked over and kissed Amanda on the cheek. Ryker’s jaw clinched. Ryker had no right to Amanda. But there was something he didn’t like about the man now standing beside Amanda’s bed, holding her hand.

Sparing his daughter a glance, Lawrence looked back to Ryker. “Detective, do you have an update?”

“I do, sir, but I would like to finish questioning Amanda first before I share what we found. I don’t want to influence her testimony about last night.”

Before Lawrence could say another word, the door to Amanda's room swung open and a short, round man with a stethoscope around his neck came into the room. "Miss Cragge, I'm Dr. McKnight. I'm here to see if you are ready to be released. How are you doing this morning?"

"Sore, tired, and beyond ready to go home." Desperation laced through Amanda's words.

Lawrence stepped into the doctor's path. "Doctor, I'm Amanda's father. If she needs to stay in the hospital for more evaluations, please make sure she does."

"Dad! No! I don't want to be here a minute longer than I need to be."

"Well, if you will excuse us then," Dr. McKnight said, "I would like to do a quick exam to see if Amanda is ready to go home."

Ryker watched Amanda look up at the man standing beside her bed. "Donovan, you should go. Thank you for coming."

He smiled at her and released her hand. "I'll be outside, waiting for the verdict. I'm not going to leave you."

Amanda closed her eyes. "I just want to go home and rest. Please, Donovan. Go home and I'll call you later."

"Only if you're sure."

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you for coming."

Ryker watched Donovan lean down and kiss Amanda on the cheek again.

"We'll be outside in the hall waiting, sweetheart." Amanda's mother squeezed her hand.

Ryker followed Amanda's parents and Donovan out of the room. His phone rang and he excused himself.

Lawrence Cragge watched Ryker while Amanda's mother and Donovan discussed Amanda going home.

The call ended, and Ryker walked back over to Amanda's parents. "You'll have to excuse me. I will be in touch later today."

"Detective, can we get an update on last night? I would like to find out when I can open the offices."

"With all due respect, sir, your daughter's safety comes first. Once I get her statement, I can share what we found."

Amanda's mother snapped her head towards Ryker, "Found? What do you mean *found*?"

Ryker handed his card to Mrs. Cragge. "Please call me and let me know if Amanda has been released. I can finish questioning her later today."

Before Amanda's mother could speak, Lawrence interjected, "Please see you are able to wrap this up, the sooner the better. Otter Bay does have a reputation to uphold, and I would hate to see one of our own not be capable of closing something as simple as this."

"Lawrence, that is uncalled for. I have no doubt Ryker will do his best."

"Let's just hope his best is good enough."

## *Chapter 3*

Amanda's body protested every move she made. All she wanted to do was rest. But her mind was wound tighter than a jack-in-the-box ready to pop.

She didn't want to accept that Ryker was back and back to stay.

She couldn't believe she found out because he of all people came to her rescue. And then he stayed with her—all night. This only proved that God was cruel. After taking all that mattered most from her, God sent Ryker back. Did He enjoy taunting her? Did taking her future from her and then throwing back all she lost give God joy? Was her life nothing more than entertainment for Him?

All these years without Ryker, Amanda had been just fine. She was over him. She was. She didn't hate him anymore. But that didn't mean she wanted to be around him.

Why did he have to come back to Otter Bay? Why couldn't he leave well enough alone?

Why did he stay last night? Didn't he have a partner? His partner could have stayed.

He's been here for, what, a month, he said. She certainly wouldn't have expected him to contact her. Why would he? He had made it clear, all those years ago . . . he didn't want her. She threw him out of her home the last time they saw each other. Her biting words to him were nothing compared to how he'd made her feel.

A throwaway. Disposable. Used.

It's okay. Amanda didn't need him. She was successful. Her career was going places. She was going to take over her family's business. What more could she ask for?

Besides, she dated . . . Donovan . . . once in a while.

She wasn't looking for love anyway. Putting herself at risk again wasn't in her plan. She wouldn't be trampled on and discarded ever again.

She'd lived to see firsthand what love does to people. Love caused pain. Pain she still felt but kept buried. She didn't need love and she certainly didn't need Ryker.

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Ryker pulled into the circular driveway in front of the sprawling traditional New England colonial home. A home he spent more time in growing up than his own. Memories flooded him. Happier times. Times he wished he could go back to and stay. So much had changed since those days. He had so many regrets now. He wished he could take back all the hurt he caused, especially the hurt he caused Amanda. Ryker hoped and prayed he would be able to make amends and seek forgiveness from her.

Would she be able to forgive him? Would she want to?

He knew it was possible but not because of anything he did but because of what Christ did.

God had given him an opportunity he never thought he'd have, at least one he wasn't sure he could have created on his own. His prayers for strength and courage were for more than he ever prayed for before. His reliance on the Lord would be an exercise in trust for him. He prayed for the right words. And he feared the reason God brought him home was because he would not have come back on his own.

What did that say about him? He talked about faith and trust in God, but was it just talk? Or was it real? When things got hard, did he really rely on God like he said or did he hide like a little boy?

Ryker got out of his car and headed up the red brick steps that led to the whitewashed wraparound porch. The house hadn't changed much—the same white exterior, white columns, maroon shutters, and a mahogany door greeted him. Everything was still pristine. He'd always admired how beautiful the grounds were. Nothing was ever out of season or overgrown. A perfectly cared-for lawn with huge maple trees stretched into the distance. No matter the season, the flower beds were never empty. Ryker wondered if they still had the same gardener. He and Amanda adored Mr. Cooper, and they loved when he would let them help him and let them play in the mud.

Reaching the door, he took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. He estimated the house to be a hundred years old. It had been in the Cragge family for many generations. It was big and old. Funny, when he was growing up, he didn't look at it that way. There were so many places in the house for them to hide when they were kids. In some ways, the house—mansion, rather—was a big playground to him when he and Amanda were younger. He was impressed with it then, but now it looked cold and impersonal, much like how Amanda's father had become. The door opened, and Ryker showed his credentials and introduced himself to the housekeeper, who led him into the foyer.

The foyer hadn't changed much. It had the same ornate marble floors and the same antique bench. The art on the walls was new and more modern than it had been. He wondered if the rest of the house would look like he remembered. How much had it changed?

The staircase leading to the second floor curved around to expose a seating area. Ryker looked up the stairs and laughed to himself. When he and Amanda were kids, they would race down the stairs—one of them would be sliding down the banister and the other sliding down the steps on the makeshift slide they'd pieced together out of cardboard. That is, until they got caught by Amanda's mother.

~~~

Amanda's throat was as dry as the Saharan floor, robbing her of her voice. It begged for water.

She peered out through the doorway of her room, hoping not to run into her parents. She could only count the stripes of the wallpaper so many times. Relieved to be alone, Amanda made her way to the top of the stairs.

Ryker stared up at her and smiled.

She froze. Memories of the last time he was in her home came flooding back. And those same memories would serve her well to keep him at the distance she wanted him. But looking at Ryker, as he was smiling at her, heat began to sneak into Amanda's cheeks. She hated how easily she blushed and how easily he seemed to still have that effect on her, even after all these years. She had to get herself under control. Ryker made it clear a long time ago that he was not interested in her. And now he was only here to do a job.

Amanda took the steps and walked into the foyer. Her voice raw, she said, "Ryker, what are you doing here?"

"Amanda, dear, drink this," Amanda's mother said as she handed her a glass of water. "You must stay hydrated. I was on my way to see you when I heard Ryker's voice."

"Thank you, Mom." Amanda welcomed the quenching water that soothed her throat.

"And where are your manners, darling? Aren't you going to invite Ryker in and offer him something to drink?" Amanda's mother turned all her attention on Ryker. She reached out for him, but he spoke before she had embraced him.

"I'm fine, thank you, Mrs. Cragge." Ryker gave Sharon Cragge a warm smile.

Amanda rolled her eyes.

Amanda's mom placed her hand on Ryker's cheek, tilted her head, and looked lovingly into Ryker's eyes. "When did you start calling me Mrs. Cragge, dear? I'm Sharon to you, and there was a time when you even called me Mom."

Ryker felt the tips of his ears warm. He put his hands in his pockets and glanced down at the floor. "Thank you, Mrs. . . . Sharon. I'm fine, I don't need anything to drink." Ryker turned his attention towards Amanda. "Can we speak for a moment? I still need to get your statement. Once I have that, I can give you and your family the update I promised."

"We can go into the library." Amanda gestured to let Ryker lead the way. "Mom, we'll be right back."

"Detective, I wasn't sure we would see you today," Lawrence Cragge said as he walked into the room, his jaw tight and his dark piercing eyes fixed on Ryker.

"Dad, please. Let Ryker do his job and then he'll be gone." Amanda wanted nothing more than for Ryker to be gone.

"I will be happy to get that update he promised us. I would like to know what's going on and if we're in any danger. Why are we being kept in the dark? We are not the criminals." Lawrence spoke through his clenched jaw.

"Mr. Cragge, I said I would be here today and I'm a man of my word. As soon as I finish with Amanda's statement, I will give you an update on the case."

Amanda snickered at "a man of my word." Her experience proved otherwise. "Dad, it's okay. Let me talk with Ryker. We'll be right back."

Sharon placed a hand on Lawrence's arm. "Let Ryker do his job. Let's give them some space. Come with me, dear. I'm sure Amanda could use another drink of water, and I believe she could use some ibuprofen." Sharon tugged on Lawrence's arm and pulled him with her towards the kitchen. "We'll be right back."

Amanda led Ryker to the library. She faced him to offer him a seat, but she saw the look on his face. It was almost sad, and she wondered what he was thinking.

“So, Ryker, about that you’re ‘a man of your word,’ when did that start? My memory says something different.” Amanda frowned and wished her voice was back to normal so she could sound strong and confident instead of like some wounded little girl who just fell off her bike and skinned her knee.

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It seemed like it was only yesterday since Ryker had been here last. But it had been eight years. *Those eight years should have turned out differently.* The memories they shared . . . Ryker had to get it together. He couldn’t get distracted by the past. He had to focus on the present and Amanda’s safety.

“Amanda, I’m sorry for our past,” Ryker blurted out.

A gasp slipped through Amanda’s lips. “Low blow, Ryker. I thought you were here to help, not twist the knife you left in my back.”

Ryker took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not sorry for our whole past, just the way things ended. I’m sorry I hurt you like I did.”

“You’re sorry? You made the choice and I had to live with it. Which I did and I’ve moved on.” Amanda rubbed her trembling hands up and down her arms.

Ryker needed to do his job before things got out of hand.

Amanda sat in one of the Queen Anne chairs. “Didn’t you want to take my statement?”

Ryker walked over to the love seat and sat across from Amanda. He could see she was nervous. Her beautiful crestfallen eyes revealed what she’d gone through the last twenty-four hours. How much had he added to it?

Her hands fidgeted with the hem of her blouse in her lap. Beneath the front she put up was a scared little girl. Someone attacked her last night, and his chest constricted seeing her like this. She didn’t deserve what happened to her. She didn’t deserve what he did to her.

Sitting across from her, in this room, reminded him of old times—when they both would have been on the same chair or cuddled up on the love seat, planning their future together.

Ryker forced himself back to the present. Those thoughts were not going to help get to the bottom of what happened at Cragge Automotive and what happened to Amanda.

“Amanda, before we get started, I want you to know, I was planning on contacting you. I wanted to apologize. I hope you can believe me when I say I’m sorry for what happened between us, I’m sorry for how it ended.”

“You’re sorry. You walked out of my life and then you walk back in and say you’re sorry. You’ve been in town how long now, Ryker? A few weeks? A month? And because you are forced to see me, you feel it necessary to apologize? Save it, Ryker. I don’t need it. I don’t need you. If you cared, you would have reached out long before now.” She sniffed and blinked rapidly; her voice cracked. She looked at Ryker and said, “If you want to take my statement, do. If you want to reminisce, please leave like you did all those years ago and didn’t look back.”

Ryker knew this wasn't going to be easy, and he knew he was messing this up. He wanted to explain. He wanted her to see that he wasn't the same person he was then. He wanted to tell her everything and make her see why he did what he did.

But that would require him to be vulnerable and open himself up to his past. *Lord, help me!*

"I'm sorry, Amanda, I am." Ryker stood and walked to the window that looked out over the grounds, and took a deep breath. He had to focus on the case right now. He walked back to where he had been sitting. "Yes, I need your statement."

Amanda took a few steady deep breaths of her own before speaking. "What do you want to know?"

"Please tell me everything you remember about last night?"

"I don't remember much other than telling Lee I was on my way while I was driving back to the office. The next thing I know, you're in my hospital room. And now it seems you're inserting yourself into my life." Amanda narrowed her eyes at him.

Ryker tried not to chuckle. He always thought she looked cute when she was trying to look intimidating. Her nose crinkled. She used to get so mad at him when he would point that out. He didn't think this was a good time to bring it up.

"When you arrived at the office, did you see anyone else?"

"No. Not that I remember."

"See anything out of the ordinary?"

"No. Again, I don't remember." Amanda looked down at her hands and tucked a strand of her light brown hair behind her ear. "Wait, if I'm remembering correctly, I remember thinking the offices looked dark when I arrived, but I'm not usually there at night. So, it could be nothing."

"Do you remember what you did when you got to the office?"

"No, I'm sorry, Ryker, I keep telling you I don't remember and I mean I don't remember."

"I know you just got out of the hospital and I know you must be exhausted, but please, if you remember anything, will you let me know?" Ryker wanted to reach across and take Amanda's hand; he wanted to reassure her that he was doing everything he could to get to the bottom of what happened last night.

"Yes, of course. Now are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Let's find your parents and we'll go over everything."

Ryker waited as Amanda opened the library's French doors and motioned for her parents to join them.

Amanda's mother handed Amanda a glass of water and some ibuprofen. "Take these, no argument." Amanda complied.

Ryker noticed Mr. Cragge sat in one chair and Mrs. Cragge and Amanda sat on the love seat. Mrs. Cragge had a hold of Amanda's hand. He wasn't sure whom she was trying to reassure, Amanda or herself.

"Please, Detective, out with it. I still have a full day and would like to get back to it. It's bad enough I have to work from home and the police won't let me back into my own offices."

“Honey,” Amanda’s mother said, “give Ryker a chance. If you’ll remember, he was practically family at one time.”

“Sharon, now is not the time and I do remember, but that is no longer the case. Detective Scott, what is it going to take to get an update?”

“Mr. Cragge, as you know this is an ongoing investigation. What we have found so far is that they tossed the warehouse. We believe whoever did this didn’t think anyone would be there last night. We found both your IT guy and your security guard knocked out and tied up. Thankfully, both are fine.”

Amanda gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “I feel awful. I knew I was there because Lee had called, but I didn’t even think to ask about him. Is he okay? What about Charlie? Where are they?”

Ryker gave Amanda a small smile. “Yes, they’re fine and home. The doctor suggested they take the rest of the week off.”

“That’s it? That’s the update I’ve been waiting on?” Lawrence stood and squared himself to Ryker, and said, “Detective Scott, I’ll see you out now.”

Amanda and her mother gasped at her father’s abrupt behavior.

“Sir, I wasn’t done. There’s more. During our investigation, we found traces of carbon monoxide in the offices. We wouldn’t have been looking for it, but one of our guys noticed someone had tampered with the furnace. That’s why Amanda was unresponsive when I got there.”

“Carbon monoxide poisoning! My little girl could have died last night! Lawrence, you have to do something about this! We need more security! Maybe we need bodyguards!” Sharon’s voice pitched higher with each statement.

“Mom, you’re going a little overboard. Calm down.” Amanda tried to soothe her mother by rubbing the hand she had been holding.

She pulled her hand out of Amanda’s hold and went over to the bar and poured herself a drink. Her hand shook as she lifted the glass to take a sip that turned into a gulp. Downing that drink, she poured another.

“Mom, please stop. Not now.”

“I could have lost you last night!”

“Sharon, calm down. The good detective said whoever tossed the warehouse wasn’t after anyone working last night,” Lawrence said to his wife while never taking his eyes off Ryker.

“As we continue with our investigation, I will keep you apprised of what we find. We will release the office back to you as soon as we can, and once we do, we will need you to take an inventory to see if anything is missing.”

Ryker pulled a card from his pocket and laid it on the coffee table. “Amanda, please let me know if you remember anything else. Mr. Cragge, someone from the Otter Bay Police Department will be in touch and we’ll make sure you have our report for your insurance company. I’ll see myself out.”

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Amanda couldn't believe that Ryker was back. And not just back, but he had been in her house. It was inconceivable how he had the nerve to sit in her home and apologize. Some apology.

Sitting in her room, alone, tears pooled in her eyes and begged to be released. The numbness she had been holding onto dissolved and made a way for the pain to resurrect itself. Between sobs, she gasped for air. Amanda rested her forehead on her knees. She rocked. She wasn't sure if she was crying for what she lost with Ryker, because of Ryker, or if she was just overwhelmed from the past twenty-four hours.

It didn't matter, she didn't want to cry. None of it was worth crying over, especially Ryker. She needed to do everything she could to forget him. Again. The pain was too much. And Ryker was nothing but trouble.

## *Chapter 4*

Monday morning and Amanda's doctors had cleared her to go back to work. She was ready to get out of the house and back to her normal routine. She knew a myriad of questions were coming her way the minute she stepped inside the office, but that couldn't be any worse than Donovan's constant calling to check up on her.

Thankfully she hadn't seen Ryker since he was at her house Thursday to take her statement. That didn't mean she had stopped thinking about him, which only irritated her. All weekend long he kept creeping into her mind. The caring way he looked at her, the concern etched in his face. If she didn't know better, she'd think he truly cared.

Amanda refused to let him back into her heart. She wouldn't be able to bear the pain when he walked away again. It took everything she had to push away the memories of their time together—their long walks and longer kisses.

They had been planning a future together. But that night, her future had been planned for her and she had no say in it. She would never forget how drastically and quickly everything changed.

Amanda thought Ryker was going to propose. She was sure of it. They had started talking about their wedding, where they would live, and even talked about having children one day. Amanda had never been happier. She felt such a sense of security with Ryker. No harm could come to her when he was holding her in his arms, showering her with kisses, and telling her how he would always be there for her no matter what. Amanda felt cherished and loved and protected.

That night, Amanda took her time getting ready for the party. She wanted to be beautiful for Ryker. She wore all his favorites and left her hair down just like he liked. She wanted it to be a perfect night.

Then everything changed. She had no idea what was coming. The embarrassment that waited for her—she was mortified, ashamed, and humiliated in front of everyone. She couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Amanda couldn't allow herself to revisit the past. She'd spent enough time thinking about that night, and it didn't deserve any more.

A smile stretched ear to ear as Amanda pulled into a parking spot in front of Kona Joe's. If asked, she'd say it was the best part of her day. Kona Joe's, Otter Bay's best-kept secret, was a quaint little coffee shop nestled between Marguerite's, the local Mexican restaurant and taco shop, and Binders, the local used bookstore. It had views of Maine's rocky coastline that could take your breath away.

Wonderfully delicious smells captured Amanda as she stepped into the coffee shop. She

loved the smell of roasted coffee beans. Walking past the three small bistro tables, Amanda went straight to the counter. The owners, Lilly and Joe, came around the counter and drew her into the biggest hug. She loved that about them. She never received much affection at home, but Joe and Lilly never seemed to run out. They always made her feel special. They made everyone feel special.

“Good morning, honey, how are you doing? Joe and I have been worried about you. We heard what happened. I’m so thankful to see you and to see that you’re doing well. Are you going in to work today?” Lilly looked up intently into Amanda’s eyes while she held on to Amanda’s hands.

Amanda smiled at Lilly and couldn’t help letting a chuckle escape at her rapid-fire questions. “I’m fine. No worse for wear. And yes, I’m going in to work. Besides, I can’t sit around the house anymore. It’s time to get back to my life and get it back on track.” *In more ways than one.*

Joe kissed Amanda on the top of her head, stepped back, and in a kind and caring voice said, “Lilly and I are glad to hear that, and we are so thankful you’re okay. We’ve been praying for you. What would you like today? The usual?”

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Ryker sat in his SUV sipping coffee that wasn’t Kona Joe’s while he watched Amanda go into the coffee shop. Knowing she would return to work today, he wanted to make sure she got there without incident. And he wanted to check the security again at the offices. They had no leads on Wednesday’s attack and break-in. As far as anyone knew, nothing was stolen.

Three people were attacked and, by all accounts, left for dead. Carbon monoxide, a silent killer, points to attempted murder—intentional, by the looks of the furnace.

Were they trying to steal something and couldn’t find it? Or were they after something else? Or were they after *someone*? Amanda? Lee, the IT guy? Or Charlie, the security guard? None of it made sense.

The state’s crime scene unit found very little evidence. So, whoever pulled this off was either a professional or someone who knew their way around the offices at Cragge Automotive.

And Amanda was smack-dab back in his life. He knew he should have reached out to her before now. He wanted to reach out to her, but he never thought it would happen like this.

He owed Amanda so much, and he knew she deserved so much better than him. He should have contacted her when he got back to town. No, he should have contacted her long before he returned and told her the truth years ago.

Ryker prayed all weekend for God to show him what he should do for her. He asked God to show him what she needed and to use him in Amanda’s life. He also prayed God would open Amanda’s heart to him and open her heart to Christ.

Ryker had to find a way to get through to her.

Yesterday at church, he talked with Joe and Lilly and asked them to pray. He was glad she

had stopped in to see them today.

Ryker watched Amanda leave the coffee shop and get into her car. He gave her a small lead before he pulled out after her.

The drive from the coffee shop to the Cragge offices wasn't more than a few miles, but the road, with its sharp turns, coiled and weaved through the bluffs. It was a beautiful drive, though, and one of the things Ryker loved about Otter Bay. He and Amanda used to love to "borrow" a car from her father's import lot and go for a ride through the bluffs when they were younger.

He knew Amanda could more than handle the drive, so he kept at a safe distance. He didn't want her to spot him.

A few minutes into the drive, dispatch came over the radio. "BOLO, two sports cars, driving fast and erratically, CR 39." The road he and Amanda were on.

Ryker picked up his speed to gain on Amanda. He would have to take his chances on her seeing him. He was more concerned about keeping her safe than enduring her wrath for following her.

Ryker watched in his rearview mirror as two sports cars raced towards him.

He called dispatch, gave his location, and requested backup. His gut told him there was more than stolen cars at stake.

Both cars flew past him and were headed straight for Amanda. Ryker stepped on the gas in pursuit of the cars.

As the cars approached Amanda, they closed in. It looked like they were going to go around her, but one car pulled in behind her and stayed there. The car inched closer to her rear bumper. The other car pulled out and around her, staying to her left.

As they drove around a blind curve, the car to the left sped up, pulled in front of her and slammed on the brakes.

Ryker was closing in on the three of them when he saw Amanda hit her breaks. The car behind her smashed into her rear bumper, pushing her towards the cliff's steep thirty-foot drop.

Ryker flipped on his lights and siren and gunned it. He cleared the curve and saw the two cars take off. Amanda was trying to regain control of her car as she hit gravel along the cliff side of the road. Gravel flew into the air, covered the road, and bounced over the cliff's drop to the rocky bottom below. Amanda's car spun and faced the wrong direction when it righted itself and headed straight for Ryker.

Amanda came barreling down the road towards him as she frantically tried to gain control over her car. He only had a split second to act. Her car was slowing down, but it skidded on the gravel. It wasn't enough. They were going to slam into each other.

If he let her hit him, they both could fly off the cliff and die. If he swerved, he would certainly fly off the cliff and die. If he hit the brakes, he'd spin out and probably fly off the cliff and die—possibly taking Amanda with him. Dying was not what he planned on doing today. He knew he would see Jesus if he died, but he knew there were things left for him to do before seeing his Savior face-to-face.

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Amanda screamed as she continued to try to get her car to right itself and get it back under control. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel. Ryker was heading straight for her and she couldn't stop.

Her car rattled as Ryker's SUV flew passed her and turned towards the cliff.

"Nooooo!" Amanda screamed as she watched Ryker's SUV split the boulders, pummel through the guardrail, and go over the cliff to the rocky bottom that waited below.

Amanda stomped on the brakes. Her car swerved and skidded to a stop on the side of the road. She flung open the door and on unsteady legs she ran towards the break in the guardrail where Ryker's SUV went through. Crunching and grinding of metal reverberated through the bluffs as the SUV tumbled down the unfriendly cliff face.

"Nooooooo!" She picked up her pace and ran towards the edge.

She was too late. Helping her shouldn't have been the end for Ryker. She never wanted anything like this to happen to him.

Panic continued to surge like a tidal wave as she scrambled along the ridge.

She thought she heard someone call her name. She stopped and listened. Her mind was playing tricks on her, she was losing it.

Amanda turned towards the crushed guardrail. She stopped. Froze. Her body wouldn't move.

She heard it again.

Her voice quivered as she called out, "Ryker, where are you?" No reply. "Please let me help you!" Amanda's heart raced, her lungs stopped working, the world tipped, and her legs gave out as she dropped to the ground. She forced herself to move and inch herself to the edge of the cliff. She peered over. She hoped she wouldn't see Ryker splayed across the rocks below. Tears ran down her cheeks.

When she looked over, all she saw was the mangled metal of what was Ryker's SUV, upside down, wheels still spinning. What if he was still inside and didn't get out? *Oh, please no! Don't let him be down there. He can't die. This can't be happening!*

From somewhere behind her, Amanda heard groaning. She pulled herself to her knees and crawled around to face where she thought it was coming from. Trembling, Amanda called out, "Ryker! Where are you?" She couldn't hear past the pounding in her own ears. She knew she needed to calm down; she wouldn't be able to help either of them if she continued to panic and had a nervous breakdown.

Just before the break in the guardrail, half behind a boulder, Amanda saw Ryker, twisted around the boulder, not moving. She forced herself to her feet and ran, tripping and tumbling over herself until she landed next to Ryker, dropping on her hands and knees. She tried to keep the fear out of her voice. "Ryker, don't move. I hear sirens, help will be here soon."

Ryker slowly rolled to his back. Amanda tried to stop him from moving, but he was on his back before she could stop him. With shaking hands and not wanting to move him, she did her

best to run her hands gently down his face, down his arms, across his chest. She was able to pull his jacket away and looked for blood, for injury, for anything that might tell her how badly he was hurt.

Ryker grabbed her hand and held it. “Stop,” he said, barely a mumble. He opened his eyes and looked up, looking into Amanda’s frightened eyes.

She spoke, “But you need to get to a hospital. You need to get checked out.”

“I’m fine, just give me a minute.” Ryker barely spoke through shallow breaths. He felt as though one of the stolen sports cars had landed on his rib cage.

“No, you’re not fine. Now is not the time to be macho. I’ll go get my car. I can take you to the hospital myself.”

The sirens were growing louder as they approached. “No,” Ryker breathed out. “I called for backup before those guys tried to run you off the road.”

Ryker started to sit up, and Amanda put her hand on him to stop him. He grabbed her hand, and she didn’t move. She stared at their interwoven hands. “Amanda, look at me. I’m okay. You can let me up.”

Another SUV came blaring up the road. A man exited and rushed over to Amanda and Ryker.

Amanda pulled her hands away from Ryker and stood. Ryker’s partner, Adam, ran over as Ryker tried to stand. Adam stopped him, looked to Amanda, and asked what happened.

Ryker started to fill him in on what happened. He tried not to take too deep a breath. “Two sports cars, new. One cherry red and the other lemon yellow. You can’t miss them anywhere and you certainly can’t hide them. They’ll be easy to spot.”

Adam looked at Amanda again and held her gaze. Amanda shivered as he looked at her like she was a suspect and responsible for all of Otter Bay’s problems. Then he said to Ryker, “Those cars were reported stolen from Cragge Automotive early this morning.” Adam looked back to Amanda.

Amanda gasped. “It happened too fast, they were driving so fast, I never got a good look at them. I was scared I was going over the cliff. Are you sure?”

“Yes, your father was the one who called them in.”

Ryker looked at Amanda with concern in his eyes. “Amanda, are you okay?”

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“Yes . . . no . . . I don’t know.” Amanda paced on wobbly legs. She had to remain strong. She didn’t want to need anyone. Especially Ryker. She paused and turned to face Ryker and Adam. “Last Wednesday and today, either I’m incredibly unlucky or there’s more going on than I know. I can’t be a target. Why would I be a target?”

Ryker finally got to a standing position and propped himself up against the same boulder he’d been wrapped around.

Adam had started taking notes and without looking up said, “Some people like to torment rich girls for kicks.”

Ryker rebuked Adam. “Adam.”

Adam looked up from his notes to Amanda. “Sorry.”

Amanda just stared at both of them and felt like she was in the twilight zone. What had become of her life over the last few days? This isn't her boring, routine life anymore.

Who would do this to her?

And why?

[Thank you for reading the preview of Don't Give Up on Me. You can purchase the e-book for \\$2.99 digital by clicking here.](#)