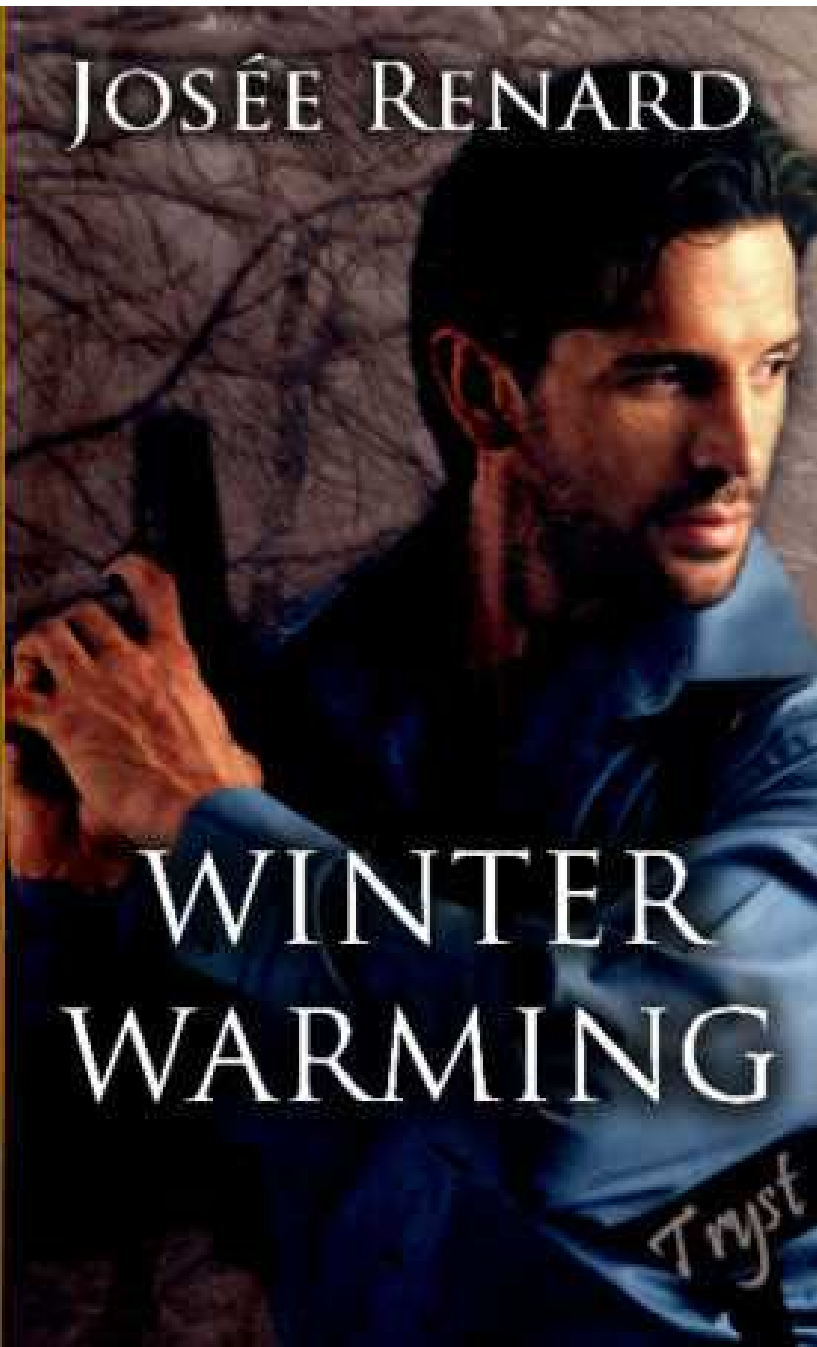


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JOSÉE RENARD

WINTER
WARMING



Winter Warming

By

Josée Renard

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Dedication

To my dear friend, Jude.
Thanks for the name and, even more, for your friendship.

Chapter One

Jude wondered if it was possible to freeze to death in the space of a single block.

Winter was solidly in place—and she used that term advisedly—as she walked the main street of Lone Butte from her rented apartment to the UFO Café. She wore every piece of outdoor clothing she owned, and she was still shaking by the time she got halfway down the block.

But Jude Carmichael, a Sunshine State girl born and bred, knew the cold was a small price to pay for her safety. And she felt safe in this tiny, isolated town in the wilds of Montana. Not just because no one would ever think to look for her here, but because of Rory Wellwood.

He watched over her as he watched over all the residents of *his* town. But he also *watched* her in a completely different way, a way that made the skin on her arms tingle. Too bad she couldn't take him up on his offer. An unspoken offer that nevertheless gleamed in his eyes when he looked at her, and shone through in his smile when he saw her.

Rory Wellwood was the polar opposite of her ex-husband, an ex who believed that safety was hell and that the important things in life were drugs, violence, pain, and crime.

As a naïve eighteen year old, Jude had seen none of that—only the twinkle in Hank's eyes and the promise of another, more exciting life. And that was exactly what she had for the next ten years, though not in the way she'd expected. Jude spent ten years in a marriage where every day was an adventure as frightening as an out of control roller coaster, where she had no idea where she would sleep or even *if* she would sleep.

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Hank's associates—she called them that because he didn't believe in friends—were as evil and twisted as he was. She thanked God for his jealousy; the one thing he refused to do was share her. It took her ten years to get the courage, and the money, to leave him, and she'd been running ever since.

Jude had lived in twenty states in the past ten years. She'd stayed in Chicago for a single month—the shortest stay—and Charleston, North Carolina for almost a year—the longest. She was an expert at running.

She'd learned a lot over the past twenty years, but the most important thing was that men were not to be trusted.

Not even Rory Wellwood.

It didn't matter that his well-lined, handsome face promised security. It didn't matter that his deep brown eyes promised a passion she'd never experienced, and his long-fingered hands promised comfort.

Jude Carmichael was *never* getting involved with another man in her life. One was enough. Hank Conroy was more than enough man for a lifetime.

And more than that, she knew she'd be running sooner rather than later. She'd been in Lone Butte for almost a year, and Hank would soon be closing in. Once she'd left him, he swore he'd make it his life's ambition to find her and punish her for leaving him.

Punishment first and then take her home with him. That was his goal. Her goal was to stay safe. And she felt safe here, as safe as she'd felt in twenty years. She knew she'd have to leave...

And she was ready for it. She always was.

She had a bag packed and stashed in the trunk of her car. She *never* went anywhere without her identification. Her bank account was accessible from anywhere in the country, and she didn't own a computer, but used the one at the library so there was no information left behind in her apartment.

She lived on the third floor of a building with an old-fashioned fire escape, which she could access from her bathroom window. She had brand new and expensive locks on all the windows and the door, and she backed those up with heavy-duty pipes to prevent them from being

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opened.

Smoke alarms beeped their red lights at every corner and in the middle of each room. Jude didn't wait for a year to change the batteries; she did it every three months without fail.

Her car—a perfectly maintained twenty-year-old Volvo in nondescript beige—was always filled with gas, the oil was changed more often than necessary, the tires were brand new. She'd installed an expensive GPS in case she got caught on the logging roads that carved through the trees on the surrounding mountains.

Jude was the poster child for the slogan, *Be prepared*.

Hank had caught up to her twice, and both times she'd been lucky. In Ithaca, a cook at the café had walked out the back door for a smoke and seen Hank with his left hand wrapped in her hair and his right smashing her face. The cook had a cleaver in *his* hand and had chased Hank away, though, sadly, hadn't managed to slice his arm off. Hank had a small cut on his arm, not even stitch worthy, but no serious damage.

She'd spent three weeks in the hospital, six months and five operations getting her face back in place, and Hank had spent a total of seven days in detention once the cops had found him.

They'd found him because they staked out her hospital room. Jude had suggested it because she knew he'd show up to finish what he'd started. That time, Hank ran for cover the minute one of his *associates* had posted bail.

The second time was in Woodland, just outside Sacramento. Jude had fallen in love with the pretty, little town and had found a job at the Main Street Diner and an apartment only a block from it. He'd found her small living space and set fire to it, with her inside. Lucky for her the next-door neighbor had a dog whose barking had saved everyone in the building.

Hank had been long gone when Jude left the hospital three days later, her few belongings burned to ashes and her lungs still heaving from smoke inhalation.

Nope, no men for Jude Carmichael. She'd lived ten years without one, and she wasn't interested in a relationship. She just wanted to get

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through another day and still be working at the UFO Café, still going home to her third-floor walk-up on Frontier Street, still serving coffee and eggs over easy to Rory Wellwood.

She didn't want much, Jude mused. Just a little safety. Just a little time and space to become even more a part of Lone Butte. She wanted to grow old here, like Mrs. Rupert, the mayor of Lone Butte who'd lived in the same house at the end of Frontier Street for almost ninety years and who still walked to the UFO Café every day for a tuna salad sandwich on whole wheat and a Diet Pepsi—ice cold and still in the can—for lunch.

Jude *loved* her job. She loved the UFO Café with its quirky alien spacecraft outside the door, and its menu covered in pictures of UFO sightings. She loved her customers, all of whom treated her with respect and didn't ask any questions she couldn't answer.

And she loved this town. Lone Butte was different from anywhere she'd ever been, and she thought she'd been everywhere. Small towns all over the country were all the same, she thought, before she drove into Lone Butte.

She'd been wrong.

Lone Butte was what every small town should be. It was warm, despite the frigid temperature. It was welcoming, even though most small towns took time to get used to strangers.

Lone Butte and its inhabitants had welcomed her with open arms, treating her as if she belonged, and for that, she was grateful. For that, she was sorry, because it was going to make it harder to leave and easier to ignore the twinges of fear that would tell her it was time to go.

Jude would stay here as long as she could, but she *would* go when she started to twitch. She'd go not for her own safety this time, but for the safety of the people she was learning to love.

She'd go for Mrs. Rupert. For Sue Ellen, who worked the day shift at the UFO Café with her. For Sam Howick, the owner of the café and the father of two red-headed twins—Brendan and Kieran—who spent each afternoon in the booth in the corner, drinking milk and eating Sam's excellent chocolate chip cookies while they waited for Sam or his wife, Maura, to be finished work.

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She'd leave because of Maura, the nurse at the clinic down the street who looked after the inhabitants of Lone Butte with dedication and cheerfulness.

And she'd leave, most of all, because of Rory Wellwood. Hank would see right away the connection she had with him, a connection that consisted of nothing more than yearning and a few shared intimate glances. *That* would be enough for Hank Conroy, more than enough.

* * * * *

Rory Wellwood sat at his usual table—the one in the window so he could watch over his town while he drank his coffee—and tried not to stare at Jude Carmichael. It wasn't an easy task.

She wasn't traditionally beautiful, but Rory had never seen a woman he wanted more than he wanted Jude. He thought about her every minute of every day, and most of the night as well. He thought about those dark blue eyes and the hands that served his breakfast with the skill of a pianist.

He thought of what he wanted from her, and he knew it wasn't going to be easy. For a long time, Rory had thought she wasn't interested in him at all, but he realized that she didn't appear to be interested in any man who was at all suitable for her.

She was comfortable with Mr. Paley, the school principal, who never went anywhere without his obviously beloved wife. She laughed and joked with the Hansen brothers—eighty-five if they were a day. She smiled at the teenage boys, and he knew if he'd been one of them, he'd have fallen down in a faint when she smiled.

Her long, thick hair fell straight down over her shoulder in a cascade of dark brown, highlighted with strands of silver and gold.

Her face was lean, and her difficult life had left its mark. For Rory, that just made her more attractive. He was old enough himself to have more grey than black in his hair, and more than a few lines carved deep into his face.

He guessed Jude's age at forty, plus or minus a couple of years, and

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he knew they'd been tough ones. She was as skittish as a feral cat and as suspicious as an escaped con.

But he didn't care. He wanted her in every way there was for a man to want a woman. He wanted to look after her. He wanted to spend every night with her wrapped in his arms, listening to her soft breathing. He wanted her to depend on him, to look at him as if the sun rose in his eyes. He wanted her to love him.

Because, despite her unwillingness to speak to him about anything more than bacon and eggs, despite her disregard of any advances, despite her obviously frightening past experiences with men, he'd fallen in love—and lust—with her at first sight.

He'd seen a strange car—strange in more ways than one, as ninety percent of the vehicles in Montana were either pickup trucks or SUVs and this was a faded beige Volvo—drive past the station and on into Lone Butte. He'd watched it move slowly down Frontier, and he'd watched it stop in front of the UFO Café.

A tourist, he'd thought, and decided to wander down to the café for an early lunch. Tourists were few and far between in Lone Butte because they were a long way from anything that even smelled of a highway.

To get here one had to go off the interstate, onto a county road, then off that to miles and miles of winding mountain road, then straight up the mountain into town. Most people were discouraged by the county road. Those who weren't, were frightened by the signs. And those who weren't, turned around at the pull-off halfway up the hill.

Rory knew if he didn't get to the café soon, there'd be no seats left. Everyone who'd seen the car drive through town would be finishing up their business and heading for the café to check out the tourist.

He'd been lucky. Being only a few doors down from the café, he'd been one of the first to arrive and had first choice of seating. He'd chosen the prime seat in the café. The red vinyl stool at the far end of the curved counter where he could watch everything, including her, without being noticed.

Her body was long and lean and muscled. He'd guessed she'd be

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only a couple of inches short of his six feet, and she looked strong with her height. She had her face bowed over the coffee cup steaming between her hands, her rich hair curtaining her features from his view.

She didn't say much, though right away he'd longed to hear her voice, to find out whether it matched the body and the hair.

Sam had grinned at him when he'd arrived, mouthed, *She's gorgeous*, and then poured coffee, hot and black, for Rory. There it was—a perfect example of the dichotomy that pushed him away and pulled him to stay in Lone Butte.

The whole town, from the mayor to the kids at the schoolhouse down the road, wanted to see Rory happily married. They worried that he wouldn't stay, that he'd leave once again as he'd done as a young man, running away from the small town he'd grown up in to see the world. He'd joined the Army and stayed his twenty.

Rory had married young and in a hurry and been divorced just as quickly. His wife wasn't ready for Army life, and he didn't know how to make it right.

Oh, he'd had his share of women after his divorce, some of them serious, most of them not, but he never again got even close to marrying. He'd stayed away from women who might be looking for a serious relationship—divorced or widowed women with children, women with that certain look in their eye, the one that promised permanence.

On the face of it, Jude Carmichael was just his type.

Rory had become an expert at figuring out women who didn't want ties of any kind, and he'd seen Jude's resistance from the very first time she'd raised her head, pushed that gorgeous hair back off her face, and turned to see him at the counter.

She'd flinched, and then she'd set her shoulders and stared at him, her eyes raking down off his face to the badge on his faded jean shirt. She'd nodded and then turned away, focusing again on the cup in her hands.

Rory had been bowled over at the sight of her face. If he hadn't been a complete cynic when it came to women, he would have admitted right then that he'd fallen in love at first sight and that along with the love

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had come an overdose of lust.

Instead, he'd spent months denying what was perfectly obvious to everyone in Lone Butte except Jude Carmichael.

Sam laughed at him when he showed up at the UFO two minutes after Jude's shift began. He ate every meal at the café, and townspeople quickly figured out that if they wanted to find Rory and he didn't answer the phone at the station, he'd be at the café, mooning over the new waitress.

Rory's obsession and Jude's avoidance became a spectator sport, especially once the winter rolled in and no one went too far from their homes or the main street.

The UFO Café was packed every day with everyone in Lone Butte taking their turn to check out the budding romance, as they called it, and making bets on Rory's chances with Jude. He pretended not to know, but he knew there was a huge board in the kitchen with a pool on when—or if—he was finally going to get a date with Jude Carmichael.

At this rate, the person who was going to win the substantial pot was the one person who'd chosen *never*.

Jude figured she could use the winnings when she had to leave Lone Butte, though she'd leave more than a job and a cozy apartment behind this time.

She'd leave the first place that had truly felt like home to her, not just since she'd so foolishly married Hank, but since she could remember. Her childhood had been miserable enough that Hank had seemed a better option.

She laughed at that now and understood the saying *Out of the frying pan, into the fire* with every molecule of her being. Nothing could be worse than Hank Conroy. Not even her cranky, mostly drunk father and her whining, over-protective mother.

Jude had reached out to them five years into her escape. She hadn't filled them in on the disaster her life had become, but they'd been happy to hear from her, and she continued to call them two or three times a year.

They didn't ask when she was coming home. They weren't stupid, and she was sure they'd sensed something was wrong, but they'd

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done—and been—exactly what she needed.

She could hear the smiles in their voices when they answered the phone and heard her voice. They made her smile in return when they told her they loved her and she believed them.

She couldn't see them, though she did, occasionally, send them a card or a short letter when someone she knew was leaving town and could mail the envelope from somewhere far, far away.

Everyone in Lone Butte seemed to know or understand she was in hiding. Each traveler checked in with her a week before their departure, asking for any cards or letters she wanted mailed, and then never asked anything further.

Lone Butte was full of gossip, borne on a grapevine that rivaled any secret service listening post, but no one ever asked Jude for her story. It was as if they'd realized right away that her past was waiting just around the corner to reach out and grab her back again.

The only gossip about her?

Rory Wellwood.

There was a whole lot of speculation, and she heard the whispers, especially from the older patrons of the café who were often slightly deaf and so their whispers weren't so quiet, about the two of them.

And why wouldn't there be?

Rory was in the café every day. Not that it was unusual, most people in Lone Butte showed up at the UFO Café every day. But Rory took every meal at the café.

Breakfast at six when Jude's shift began. Lunch at eleven to miss the noon crowd. A very early dinner at four before Jude went home for the night.

Jude and Sue Ellen switched tables every day, but Rory *always* sat in Jude's section, and if he made a mistake and sat in Sue Ellen's, she refused to serve him, pushing Jude to take just that one table.

So, of course, there was gossip. Rory and Jude were the talk of the town and had been for a year. Lone Butte never got tired of speculating about their future. They didn't have to speculate about their present, it was right there in front of them to see.

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No one could hide anything in Lone Butte, so they knew nothing was going on between Jude and Rory except a few public exchanges in the café. But they still managed to gossip. Or perhaps it should be called speculation.

They were waiting.

Jude knew that Rory was waiting.

She also knew that—even harder than leaving Hank Conroy—leaving Rory Wellwood would be the hardest thing she'd ever have to do. She had no choice. One day soon she would pack up her bags and leave the first true home she'd ever had.

Jude had no idea where she'd go. She wasn't even sure exactly *when* she'd go. But leave she would. This time, though, she'd leave to keep Rory and the rest of Lone Butte safe. This time, it wasn't about Jude Carmichael's safety.

Although she'd miss this place and the people—and yes, she admitted it to herself, especially Rory Wellwood—desperately, knowing that she was leaving for *them* made her feel better about her departure.

But not yet, she thought. Not until the spring. No one will arrive here in the winter. I'm safe until then.