

RETURN TO WYLDER by Maria Imbalzano

EXCERPT

I walked into the Five Star Saloon a little before six, my eyes adjusting to the dim atmosphere. A throwback to earlier days, the walls were paneled in rough-cut pine and decorated with animal heads—a few with antlers. The bar's polished mahogany gleamed under strategically placed ceiling lights, and a brass footrail ran around the base. This place probably hadn't changed much since the late eighteen hundreds.

Except for the clientele, which now included women. Even so, the dress was decidedly rancher, with dozens of flannel shirts, dusty jeans, mud-caked boots, and cowboy hats.

I was about to ask for a booth in the back, away from the bar, when EJ arrived—a sparkling diamond among iron ore. A geometric form-fitting dress had replaced her tailored suit, and her lush golden-brown hair was spun into a loose bun at the crown of her head with cascading wisps falling around that beautiful face. Dark-blue eyes flashed with a hint of sapphire, picking up one of the colors in her dress.

“Hi.” Her brilliant smile did funny things to my insides.

“I was just about to grab a booth in the back.” At least there we wouldn't be the center of attention.

She steered me to one across from the bar.

“This one is better.” She sat facing the door.

I slid in across from her. “Are you orchestrating something?” I couldn't control my grin.

“I have the impression you don't know many people in town. That has to change.”

Just then the bartender yelled over. “EJ, what can I get you?”

“I'll let you know in a minute, Chad,” she called back.

I couldn't help my eyebrow lift. “No waitress here?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged. “It depends on the day. And sometimes it depends if she bothers to show up. Wanda has been working here since I was a kid. I'm not sure why she hasn't retired yet since she seemed old then, but I guess it keeps her going. So what would you like to drink?”

“I could walk up to the bar to order.”

She chuckled. “Chad will ignore you. I assume this is the first time you’ve been here since you’re looking around like it’s a novelty.”

“I tend to stick to the restaurant at the hotel. I feel comfortable there. Welcome may be a better word, but I’m not a hundred percent sure it’s true.” Although I’d been in town off and on for months, I hadn’t made any friends, other than Hank.

“The time has come to pull you out of your comfort zone. If you want to fit in with the locals, you’re going to have to start associating with them.”

Apparently giving up on me to decide on a drink, she called over to the bartender. “Chad, we’ll have two Snake River Pale Ales.”

“I’m not a big beer drinker.”

Her gaze targeted mine as if to say what we ordered was not the point of this outing.

I held up both hands to concede.