

CLARA PINES

cowboy's
christmas
librarian



TRINITY
FALLS
SWEET
ROMANCE

COWBOY'S CHRISTMAS LIBRARIAN

TRINITY FALLS SWEET ROMANCE - BOOK 7

CLARA PINES

PINE NUT PRESS

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About the Author

One Percent Club

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Cover designed by The Book Brander

ABOUT COWBOY'S CHRISTMAS LIBRARIAN

They've got nothing in common but a little girl who needs a special holiday...

Logan Williams works hard, plays harder, and doesn't care if he's got a reputation for being rebellious. After all, growing up as part of a great big family on the rambling acres of their beloved farm, he's never had to worry much about what anyone else thinks.

But when his out-of-town brother asks him to take care of his daughter for a couple of months, Logan decides it's worth slowing down his after-work activities to get time with his irresistible niece.

Caroline Bard adores being the children's librarian at Trinity Falls Community Library. With her dream job, a little apartment in town, and her parents nearby, Caroline sometimes wonders if any one person could ever deserve so much happiness.

But when a tragedy rocks her world, she finds comfort with the unlikeliest of people.

She had a crush on Logan Williams back in high school, but never thought the athletic farm boy with the rakish smile would become a regular at the community library, let alone take it upon himself to put the magic back in the holidays for her. The bond she forms with his brilliant young niece becomes a bridge between them, and she begins to see a side of Logan the rest of the world doesn't seem to know about.

But when push comes to shove, can a man like Logan really reform his ways enough to win the heart of a woman like Caroline?

And even if he does, will he be able to get Caroline's nose out of her book long enough to notice?

LOGAN

Logan Williams took a deep breath of frosty November air, and then slowly turned the copper knob of the door to his parents' house.

He had been sneaking in and out of the Williams Homestead since he was a teenager, so he knew better than to try and slip in the side door that always let out a squeal as it opened, or the back way with the rickety wooden steps and the old door that had to be slammed to shut all the way.

No, it was best to do what he was doing now - walk right in the front door, which was always kept oiled.

Once he was in and had slipped off his boots, he could tiptoe over the thick Oriental rugs all the way to the walnut staircase, skipping the squeaky steps until he got to his room.

Logan had been out with the boys again tonight, at the little pub they called *the Barrel*, which was nothing new. But he was especially late because he had volunteered to be the designated driver, so he'd dropped everyone else off before heading home himself.

Not only did that mean that he hadn't consumed a single drop of beer, it also meant he had no excuse for the shiner he was sporting.

He eased the door open and took a look around.

The small lamp on the hall table was on, as usual, but otherwise the house was dark and silent.

He slipped inside, soaking in the warmth. But before he could reach down to take off his boots, there was a scream and a hiss like the air being let out of a tire.

“Chester,” he gasped.

He had stepped on the tip of the old tabby cat’s tail.

Stepping back as quickly as he could, he inadvertently slammed the door behind him.

Chester darted off toward the table, banging into it so hard that Logan had to run to grab the lamp before it fell over.

He caught the lamp but dropped his phone, which clattered on the only section of wood floor uncovered by area rugs in the whole foyer.

He grabbed it and checked the screen.

It was already cracked, but the cracks didn’t seem any worse.

When he straightened, he saw the cat was sitting on the chair by the table, licking a paw, like he was only an observer of Logan’s idiocy and hadn’t been part of the problem.

But there was no time to react because someone was coming down the staircase fast, someone who wasn’t worried about hitting the squeaky stairs.

“Logan,” his name burst out of his mother’s mouth in a sigh of relief and frustration.

She was wearing his father’s old plaid bathrobe and carrying a fireplace poker, her long silvery brown hair in a braid.

His father followed, wearing an old Trinity Falls Volunteer Firefighter t-shirt and pajama bottoms that matched the robe.

“Hey, son,” his dad said, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“I’m so sorry,” Logan said, throwing his hands up.

“You’re an adult,” his mother said immediately. “It’s not that we mind you having late nights. We don’t. But can’t you just come in quietly and go to bed, like a normal person?”

“I tried,” Logan said, gesturing to the cat.

But Chester was curled up asleep on the chair, as still as if he had never moved in the first place.

“Your mother thought you were a robber,” his dad pointed out.

“When was the last time someone was robbed in Trinity Falls?” Logan asked. “We don’t even lock the doors.”

“Well, it *sounded* like a band of thieves was invading the house on horseback,” his mother told him. “I’ll put on some tea. A little chamomile will get us back to sleep, won’t it, Alistair?”

“Sounds nice,” his father said, tugging his mother’s braid with a fond smile.

The two of them were still so romantic. Sometimes it blew Logan’s mind.

“I’ll just head on up,” Logan tried.

“Oh, I don’t think so, mister,” his mother teased. “You woke us up, so the least you can do is regale us with your tales of wild youth.”

She was smiling, and he could never resist his mom’s smiles, so he bit the bullet and followed them into the kitchen, knowing full well what was coming next.

His mother flicked on the light, illuminating the old pine cupboards and faded vegetable wallpaper from her grandmother’s day. A big wooden table dappled with rings from endless cups of tea was the centerpiece of the room.

You could say the Williams family was in love with history, and the enormous old houses of their homestead. But no one would ever try to say they were snobby.

The delicious scent of his mother’s cooking hung in the air and his stomach rumbled.

“Did you make chicken stew?” he asked hopefully.

“Oh, Logan,” his mother breathed. “What on Earth?”

His hand went to automatically cover his eye.

“It was just a tussle,” he said, feeling like a giant kid, instead of the thirty-year-old that he was.

“Brody Webb?” his dad asked, clearly trying to hide a smile.

Logan and Brody were the brawlers of their two families. They had been fast friends since elementary school, but the least provocation was enough for the two to wrestle it out, and then immediately make up and buy each other drinks, of course.

Tonight, Brody had said Logan’s little sister, Emma, was a traitor for working for the city rancher who was buying up all the farmland he could in Trinity Falls.

Instead of laughing it off, Logan had opened his mouth to say something about Brody’s little sister, and Brody punched him in the face before he could finish.

It was just as well. Logan couldn’t actually think of anything bad to say about Lucy Webb. She was super sweet, even if she had terrible taste in men.

“Do I need to call Leticia?” Logan’s mom asked before he could confirm.

Leticia was Brody’s mom.

“It’s fine,” Logan said, rubbing the back of his neck and wishing he could disappear into the floor. “Just a misunderstanding. We’re good.”

“I was kidding,” his mom whispered, squeezing his elbow as she scooted past to start the kettle.

His dad winked at him.

“I’ll warm up some stew,” his mom added.

Logan wasn’t exactly sure when he had gone from feeling proud of being a little rowdy to being embarrassed about it. But his parents hadn’t gotten the memo yet.

“So, what did Sloane Greenfield have to say about all this?” his mother asked, pulling the stew crock out of the

fridge.

“Uh, nothing,” he said. “She wasn’t there.”

“No?” his dad asked. “She couldn’t have been showing houses so late at night.”

“We, uh, we’re not dating anymore,” Logan told them.

“Why not?” his mother asked, looking a little annoyed for the first time.

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “She wanted to *do stuff* all the time.”

“Isn’t that the point of dating?” his mother asked.

Logan had no idea how to answer.

They said that when you were with the right person, everything just felt natural. But he had yet to meet a woman who could cure his restless spirit. The idea of filling up a calendar with endless fundraisers and dinner dates made him feel almost despondent.

Even if the guys were a little rowdy and stuck in their ways, they were down-to-earth, good people. And they were his oldest friends. So what if Logan didn’t love the idea of spending all his free time buttoned up and rubbing elbows with the fancy fundraiser crowd?

Did that mean he was destined to be alone? Would there never be someone whose braid he wanted to tug when he was joking around in the middle of the night?

His parents had set standards that were too high. That was all.

“You know,” his father said, “you could fix up the lodge and we wouldn’t have to get into these deep conversations in the middle of the night.”

The Williams Homestead consisted of a massive amount of mostly wooded acreage, studded with ancient houses, and surrounded by a patchwork quilt of family farmland.

Josiah Williams had hoped all his descendants would live on the homestead, enjoying the stately mansions on which he

had spent his shipping fortune, and working the land.

But as parents had fewer children, and more of the Williams kids wanted to live closer to the city and do things other than farm, the houses had emptied.

It wasn't until his dad, Alistair Williams, had married Annabelle Sullivan that the Williams family had grown substantially again.

Logan wasn't sure if filling up the houses on the homestead was their main reason for having so many kids, or if it was only because they loved children, but his parents were passionate about the idea of the kids settling on the farm.

When Logan and his siblings were younger, their parents told them that when they turned eighteen they could pick a property and it would be theirs to restore and move into one day, if they decided to stay.

Logan had shocked his parents when he chose the hunting lodge.

While the rustic space wasn't as large or grand as many of the other properties, Logan had always loved the enormous fireplace and the two-story, open living space with the balcony overlooking it from the bedrooms on the second floor.

The lodge was also down close to the old mill, sheltered by woods and stream, with vines growing up as high as the slate roof. As a kid, Logan had been convinced there was magic in the enormous Pennsylvania blue-granite stones that made up the walls.

Best of all, his great-grandmother, Nana Mabel, had still been living in the house when he was small. She would spoil him with a cookie any time he wandered over to help her with her garden.

But none of that made him interested in taking on the expense and back-breaking labor of actually renovating the lodge as an adult.

Until tonight.

Suddenly, the thought of some solitude and a chance to work on his own place, and maybe on himself, sounded really good. He envisioned the house getting restored, and his life getting cleaned up along with it, and he liked what his mind showed him.

“Soup’s on,” his mother sang out, placing a steaming bowl of heavenly stew at his place at the table, and turning to pull their favorite mugs out of the cupboard.

“You’re a hard worker, and a good man,” his father said, patting him on the back. “You’ll figure out what you want.”

Logan pulled out his mom’s chair for her, but his mind was already deep in the Williams woods, picturing what the old lodge might look like after some hard work went into it.

CAROLINE

Caroline Bard waved to Alice Cassidy from across the library's community room, feeling deeply relieved.

Alice trotted over like she was late for her own wedding. Her generous bosom heaved a little, but her chestnut bun with its pretty streaks of silver stayed perfectly in place.

"So sorry I'm late," Alice panted, placing a Christmas tin on the table beside a plate of brownies and a tray of homemade zucchini bread, brought by two of the other book club members. "I had to run over to the preschool to check on Rumor. That's fresh gingerbread in the tin, right out of the oven."

Alice Cassidy was always the consummate grandmother and friend, exactly the kind of woman Caroline would like to be one day.

"We're so glad you're here," Caroline told her. "It's just a book club. No need to rush or apologize."

Inwardly she was deeply grateful for Alice's timing. The other ladies had been asking her about a subject she would much rather not discuss, and Alice would surely have something better to talk about.

"We were just asking Miss Caroline why we never see her with a beau," Betty Ann Eustace said, leaning across the table to Alice with a twinkle in her eyes.

Alice only looked to Caroline.

So much for changing the subject.

It wasn't that she was embarrassed by it, really. It was just that hard to know how to answer. The truth was that as a self-proclaimed nerdy librarian in a town full of cowboys and manly men, Caroline wasn't exactly sure where she might find someone who shared her interests.

"Oh, you ladies know I don't have much free time," she joked weakly. "I'm basically married to the library, with all the activities and fundraisers we have going on."

"And you know that you have more volunteers here than you know what to do with," Ginny Davies told her kindly. "You just point us all in a direction, and we'll take care of everything. A young lady like you should be out having fun and meeting people."

"Miss Caroline might have her own reasons for preferring to spend her time here," Alice said kindly. "The Romancing the Classics Book Club should respect her privacy, even if others don't."

Caroline smiled at Alice, grateful for her help, and then immediately wondered who these *others* were, who were so curious about her personal life.

"Honestly," Caroline said, looking around the table of friendly faces. "You ladies probably understand better than anyone why I'm single. Reading these books, it's hard to imagine a man who could measure up. Mr. Darcy might not have been good with words, but he truly showed who he was through his actions."

She patted her copy of *Pride & Prejudice* on the table.

"Heathcliff and Catherine were from different worlds," she went on, caressing the spine of *Wuthering Heights*. "But he lost his mind with love for her."

Betty Ann nodded.

"And think of a knight in shining armor, riding up on his horse to save the day," Caroline sighed happily, resting her copy of *The Once and Future King* on top of the other two volumes. "Who could ever live up to that? I'm better off with a book and a nice cup of tea."

“And one of my brownies,” Shirley Ludd added with a wink, pushing the plate toward her.

“Yes,” Caroline said, taking one. “Definitely one of these, too.”

“But those books don’t all have happy endings,” Shirley Ludd pointed out, her brow slightly furrowed.

“*Spoilers*, Shirley,” Jeannie Moran exclaimed.

“Oh, dear, I’m sorry,” Shirley said.

“Oh come on, Jeannie,” Barb Stinson sniffed. “Didn’t you read all these books in high school?”

Jeannie shrugged and gave them all a sheepish smile.

“I’m so glad we’ve all decided to read them again for pleasure,” Caroline put in quickly. “Besides, we’ve changed since high school. We’ll notice different things about the books now.”

“And some of us are further out from high school than others,” Betty Ann said, and winked at Caroline.

Caroline smiled. She definitely was much closer to high school than anyone else at this table.

But she had always felt more comfortable with the women of her mother’s and grandmother’s generations. Maybe it was because she was an only child, and had always spent a lot of time in grownup spaces.

Once everyone was settled, they jumped into a conversation about *Pride and Prejudice*. This mid-day book club was the one with the older members, and Caroline couldn’t help but notice that these ladies seemed much more comfortable jumping in and sharing their thoughts and opinions.

She ran another group at night that seemed to attract mainly the young moms in town, who were always a bit more shy about opening up. And they responded best to reviewing the major plot points of the book and then analyzing it, like they were in a college class.

Though she could easily spot when someone hadn't read the book, the younger women were more likely to clam up and feel embarrassed about it. Whereas this group would flatly say if they got bored after a chapter or two, or had grandkids in for the week.

Jeannie Moran hadn't read these books in high school, and she probably only read one out of every four or five now. But she loved listening to the discussion, and her zucchini bread was a book club favorite. And when the book discussion turned to social and personal matters, Jeannie was incredibly astute. Though she might get the occasional razzing for not reading the books, it was clear that everyone genuinely enjoyed her company. And Jeannie herself was perfectly comfortable in her own skin.

Caroline hoped that as she got older, she would feel more at ease just being herself all the time.

Of course, here at the library, she always felt like herself. She knew exactly where she belonged, and what she was supposed to do. From the time as a kid when she'd gotten her very first card, right up through this very moment, she was always awed by the library and grateful to be here.

In the library, the same three rules had been posted near the entrance as long as Caroline could remember:



HOW TO USE the Trinity Falls Library:

- 1. Have respect for the books, the library, and the people in it.*
- 2. Speak quietly, and walk calmly.*
- 3. Enjoy yourself!*



THE LIBRARY WAS her safe haven.

But out in the real world, it sometimes felt like everyone else was working under a much longer and more complicated set of rules - one that had never been posted anyplace Caroline could find it.

The ladies at the table were munching fragrant, fresh-baked treats and arguing good-naturedly about the character of Elizabeth's best friend, Charlotte.

The younger ladies had mentioned the same things, and Caroline strongly suspected this bent of conversation was influenced by the most recent movie adaptation. *Pride and Prejudice* was a popular library book club pick, and she hadn't heard a lot of talk about Charlotte in past years.

As the ladies talked, she let herself check out mentally for a moment to try and lay out what she needed to do with the rest of her day.

The library was sponsoring the Turkey Drive down at the Trinity Falls Community Center again this year. She was fretting a little about the tables. Last year, she'd had to make do with a couple of card tables.

They had been fine, until Carl Webb had found a lost dog and tied him to one of the table legs while she was helping a newcomer find the bathrooms. She had come back to find a hundred-pound dog tied to a card table covered in frozen turkeys.

Caroline was a little wary of dogs, especially big ones, ever since the Taylor's dog, Tipper, had bitten her when she was little.

Thankfully, the pup tied to the card table had been easygoing and friendly, and his family came for him quickly.

But it could have been the kind of disaster that was talked about for generations in the little town. She had to do better this year, and get her hands on a table that could withstand a run in with a dog, or a stroller, or at least a brisk wind.

"What do you think, Miss Caroline?" Jeannie asked her suddenly.

She opened her mouth and closed it again, feeling foolish.

“About Charlotte’s decision to marry for sensible reasons instead of for love,” Alice put in kindly, saving her.

“Given Charlotte’s options, and the time she lived in,” Caroline said carefully. “I think it was incredibly smart for her to do what she did. And I’m glad she was able to make the best of her decision.”

“But Elizabeth turned down a sensible choice and fell madly in love with the perfect man,” Ginny said with a dreamy expression.

“Elizabeth Bennet was an extremely lucky person,” Caroline said. “Men like Fitzwilliam Darcy are very rare in the real world.”

She caught Alice smiling to herself as she turned back to her book.

Alice and Joe Cassidy were blindingly happy, and had been married since before Caroline was born. If she hadn’t liked them both so very much, it almost would have almost made her jealous.

Instead, she smiled too, and found herself hoping against all odds that she might find her true love one day.

But it was more likely she wouldn’t, and that was just fine. She had her friends here at the library, her nice little apartment, and more books than she could ever hope to read.

Caroline Bard had a good life, just as it was.

CAROLINE

When her shift at the library was over, Caroline walked briskly up Park Avenue, fluffing her scarf up around her chin against the cold November wind.

One of the volunteers was taking the evening hours, and it was saving Caroline's hide, because it meant she could get to the hardware store before it closed and try to solve her turkey drive table problem.

Michael normally opened the hardware store up by five in the morning, but it meant he closed promptly at six in the evening, and sometimes a bit before, if things were quiet.

Most things in Trinity Falls were closing by six anyway. At this time of year, the lampposts normally lit up just before the shop windows began winking out.

She walked past the little real estate office and smiled as she glanced inside. A week from now, the Victorian dollhouse in the window would be decorated for the holidays, and the candy cane decorations would be hanging from the lampposts along the street.

While Caroline loved her hometown any time of year, Trinity Falls was especially beautiful during the winter holidays. Everyone seemed to share her passion, and the shops and houses were adorned with Christmas lights and fresh, evergreen wreaths.

At the library, they had loads of wonderful programs celebrating holidays from all over the world. And there was the annual Hometown Holiday celebration, with singing and

Santa Claus, that ended with the tree-lighting ceremony right outside the library.

Like she always did, Caroline hoped there would be snow. Pennsylvania got its best snow in January and February, but there were plenty of Decembers when they got an early preview.

She passed the rest of the shops on Park, and turned left onto Ambler Road, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw light still glowing in the window of the hardware store halfway down the block.

She sped up to a jog as she got closer. It would be awful to come this close and get there as Michael was locking up. She was a little breathless as she pushed open the door, sending the bells overhead jingling.

“Hey there, Miss Caroline,” Michael said, stepping out from behind the counter and looping his thumbs through his denim overalls.

“Hi, Michael,” she said, thinking for about the millionth time how funny it was that people much older than she was called her *Miss Caroline* just because she read to their grandchildren every week at the library.

“Good you came in when you did. I was getting ready to close up,” Michael said with a friendly smile. “How can I help you today?”

But the door opened again before she could speak.

Her eyes went to the entrance, and she felt herself blush from her hairline to her toes as soon as she saw who it was.

Logan Williams stood in the threshold. A brown cowboy hat shaded his face, but she would know that lean, muscular form anywhere. No one wore a pair of faded jeans and boots like Logan.

Logan had been a senior at Trinity Falls High the year Caroline was a freshman. While she spent her free time in the library, or with the theater club, Logan was a star on the football and basketball teams. He moved through the school like royalty.

And from the first time they crossed paths, Caroline had a helpless, hopeless crush on him.

It had started in the fall. She had a tiny part in the school play, and Mr. Thompson, the Woodshop teacher, broke his leg in a sack hop at the town Harvest Festival, so he couldn't build sets.

The principal made an announcement asking for help, but no one expected much of a response. Anyone interested in theater would already belong to the club, and the theater kids she knew back then weren't exactly known for their woodworking skills.

The whole group was stunned when they headed into the auditorium the day after the announcement to find Logan Williams bent over Mr. Thompson's drawings, a tool belt slung around his hips.

Most of the football royalty wouldn't have been interested in helping out a bunch of theater nerds, but by the end of the week, Logan had recruited a couple more guys to come in and help out, and the set was miraculously ready in time.

Caroline had been in awe of his easy way with the tools and the materials, his confidence with his friends, and even the genuinely friendly way he talked to her and the other theater kids.

It didn't hurt that he was as handsome as one of the drawings in her favorite Greek Mythology book.

And it seemed like he was always trying to catch her eye.

She'd played out a thousand conversations with him in her mind, but anytime he said more than two words to her in real life, she froze up completely, forgetting how to speak, or even breathe.

She swore she'd get past it, but before she knew it, the play was over and there were no more chances. And too soon after that, Logan finished his senior year and graduated.

They had both stuck around Trinity Falls, so she caught a glimpse of him with his friends once in a while. But just like

back then, they ran in different circles. He was still friends with all those popular boys from school.

And she basically just hung out with the library patrons, if you could call the library a social circle, which she didn't think anyone would.

Logan closed the door behind him, the jingle of the tiny bell snapping her out of her memories and back to the present. His movements were strangely graceful in the small space.

"Hey, Michael," he said, turning back to them and pulling off his hat. "Hi, Caroline."

She cringed without meaning to when she saw his bruised and swollen eye.

His hand went automatically to his face.

"I should see the other guy, huh?" she joked weakly, immediately wishing she could slap herself.

Oh, so now you decide you can talk around him?

Logan blinked down at her, looking completely mortified.

But that couldn't be right. Logan Williams was a rough and tumble guy, not the type to be ashamed of a little black eye.

"Good to see you," Michael said to him. "Feel free to look around. I'm going to help Miss Caroline, if that's all right? Then I'll see what I can do for you."

"Sure," Logan said, nodding and turning to look at the paint chips in the book hanging from the wall.

What right did any man have to look so handsome while squinting at a silly booklet of color samples through a swollen eye?

She felt her cheeks heating again.

"So, how can I help?" Michael asked Caroline.

"The library is sponsoring the turkey drive again this year," she told him, clearing her throat and feeling grateful for

the distraction. “We used card tables to collect donations last year, but they were pretty flimsy.”

“Oh yeah,” Michael said. “Seem to remember someone tying a donkey to one of ‘em last year.”

She opened her mouth to correct him and saw his eyes were twinkling. He was teasing her.

“Something like that,” she laughed. “Anyway, we don’t have much of a budget for outdoor tables, but I thought maybe you could show me how to build something simple?”

Michael frowned and rubbed his belly.

“Have you done any furniture building in the past?” he asked her.

She shook her head.

“You’re pretty handy though?” he asked.

Feeling less hopeful than before, she shook her head again.

“Okay,” Michael said. “I’m going to be honest with you. Building even a simple table isn’t easy. Plus, I’m guessing you’ve got to be able to transport it?”

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t think there’s room to build or store it at the community center ahead of time. They’ve got the playgroup in there and the kids’ karate.”

“And the middle school mixer,” Logan put in suddenly.

“Yes, it’s rented out for other stuff, too,” Caroline agreed.

“So, for a lot of reasons, building a regular table isn’t a great plan,” Michael said. “But I have another idea. It’s not fancy, but it might get you through in a pinch. Better than card tables, at least.”

“I’m all ears,” Caroline said.

“You could use sawhorses,” Michael said. “And only secure the top when you get there, on the day. Still might need to tie the top onto your roof rack, but you’d be able to fold up the legs.”

“Sure,” she said. “Perfect.”

For about the millionth time, she was grateful that Trinity Falls still had its own small hardware store. No way would the guys in the polo shirts up at the big box hardware store on Route 1 give her this kind of help.

“Now you could buy pre-made sawhorses,” Michael went on. “But you’re going to be much better off making your own. How are you fixed for tools? You won’t need much - just a drill, a hammer, and a circular saw.”

Her heart sank.

“I have my multi-tool,” she said, indicating the multi-head screwdriver tool with a drawing of the hardware store etched on them that were always in a small bin by the check-out counter. “And I, um, might have a hammer at home.”

“Is there someone you can borrow tools from?” he asked kindly.

That question caused an unexpected pang in her chest. When her dad passed suddenly a couple of years ago, her mom had sold the house in town and moved to the condos. The garage, with its scent of oil and Dad’s handy projects, belonged to someone else now.

“I’m sure one of the library patrons would help out,” she said, swallowing over the lump in her throat.

“That’s great,” Michael said. “Everything else you’ll need, I’ve got here. If you want to look around, I’m going to see if I can help Logan real quick, and then we’ll get you squared away.”

“Thank you,” she told him.

He turned away, and she put her attention on the flashlights by the counter.

Ever since she was a little girl, she had loved going to the hardware store with her dad. She wasn’t much for getting her hands dirty, but she loved the gadgets Michael kept at the counter - colorful carabiners, putty for hanging posters, laser measuring devices, and every size and type of flashlight imaginable, all hung on hooks or displayed in cups and bins.

Michael had items for the holidays too sometimes, as well as business cards for local contractors.

She had just grabbed a magnetic flashlight that claimed to have light powerful enough to light up a whole room, when she heard what Logan was saying.

“Yeah, it’s for the old lodge,” he told Michael. “I’m hoping to just get it to neutral before I decide what to do next.”

In his hand were chips for cream-colored trim paint.

“No,” Caroline gasped, without meaning to.

The men turned to her.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, feeling her cheeks heat.

“What is it?” Logan asked.

His voice was so deep, but gentle and encouraging.

“It’s just... you’re not going to paint that chestnut woodwork, are you?” she asked, feeling very much like she was overstepping, but unable to help herself.

Logan studied her face for a moment and then his broke into a gentle smile.

“You sound just like my mother,” he said softly.

“It’s only that the woodwork on the Williams Homestead is very special,” Caroline told him. “Most of the trim on the houses in Trinity Falls was done in pine or oak. That chestnut is beautiful, and very high-quality, it was meant to be seen.”

“She’s got a point,” Michael put in. “Besides, paint is impractical. If you want to freshen up that trim, you can just give a light sand and put a stain on it once in a while. It’ll last forever.”

“And chestnut blushes into a deeper, more beautiful color as time passes,” Caroline added.

Logan quirked a half-smile at her, and her stomach did a little flip-flop like at the top of a roller coaster.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped,” she said.

“If I didn’t want opinions, I certainly wouldn’t be here,” he joked. “Lead the way to the stains, Michael.”

She watched after them as they headed down the aisle.

“Come on, Caroline,” Logan called back to her. “I need your eyes on this.”

Smiling to herself, she scurried after them. At least there was one person in town who didn’t call her Miss.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Michael was ringing Caroline up, while Logan waited with his sandpaper and staining supplies.

“Hey,” Logan said. “I appreciate your input on the woodwork. I’ve got a proposal for you.”

“Yes?” she asked, trying not to fixate on the word proposal. He wasn’t wearing a ring yet, but she knew it was only a matter of time before someone like him was off the market. Frankly, she was surprised it hadn’t happened already.

“I wanted to offer you a trade,” he told her. “I’d be happy to help with your table. I’ve got the tools, and a truck to move it with, so you don’t have to strap anything to your roof.”

“Oh, wow,” she said, relief washing over her.

Of course, one of the volunteers would have tools, but she had been feeling more and more worried about doing the work as she watched Michael ring up the various items.

“And maybe you could come take a look at my place?” he asked. “I’d love your opinion on anything else you think I should keep in mind when I’m restoring it. I can tell how much you like it.”

“I saw it on a school trip,” she said stupidly.

Of course, she had seen it. Every schoolchild in Trinity Falls went on that trip. The Williams Homestead was part of Trinity Falls history.

“Well, I guess it made an impression,” Logan laughed. “Hang around for me, and I’ll get your stuff into my truck. Can you swing by tomorrow after work?”

“Sure,” she said, feeling more excited about it than she probably should have.

Even if being around Logan made her feel a little awkward, it was well worth it to see the Williams Homestead again and to get his help.

Once again, she was struck by the fact that in spite of his rougher qualities, Logan was a nice boy, just like back in high school.

A nice man, a little voice in her head reminded her.

She paid quickly and then waited for Logan, as he had suggested.

“You two need help out?” Michael asked. His keys were already in his hands. He was clearly ready to go home.

“Nah,” Logan said. “We’re good. Caroline, can you carry our bags and I’ll get your wood?”

She scurried over and grabbed the bags, then ran ahead and held the door open.

The cold wind from outside felt good to her warm cheeks. It was probably wishful thinking, but she thought maybe she tasted snow in the air.

Logan headed past her with the wood for the tabletop and some two-by-fours.

“Tastes like snow,” he said lightly, heading for a late model pick-up truck.

She watched as he opened the back and placed the wood in the bed very carefully. Something about the big man being so deliberate and gentle with her things made her heart skip a beat.

When he straightened up and turned to her, she realized she was staring.

“So, you know where my place is?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

Of course, she knew, everyone knew the Williams Homestead.

“Once you pull in past the gatehouse, go left as far as the road will take you,” he told her. “Might be a little more overgrown than you remember.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Give me your phone,” he said. “I’ll put in my number so you can call if you get lost or something.”

She handed over her phone, feeling a little ashamed that it was such an old model. But he tapped in his own number and then handed it back to her without comment.

When she took it from him, their hands touched, and she felt a little tingle of happiness at the warmth that exuded from him.

She made the mistake of looking up at him.

The light from the lamppost above put a slight halo around his brown hair.

He gazed down at her with a strange look on his face. It was like he was searching for something in her eyes, but even he didn’t know what.

Logan Williams looked lost.

Caroline had a wild impulse to reach up and stroke his jaw.

“I, um, better get home,” she said instead, wondering what had gotten into her.

He nodded slowly, and put his cowboy hat back on.

She turned and willed herself not to rush.

Be normal, for heaven’s sake, her inner critic begged.

“Hey, Caroline,” Logan called to her.

She stopped and turned.

“See you tomorrow,” he said, giving her another of those lazy half-smiles that made her stomach do little flips.

LOGAN

Logan watched Caroline walk away, his heart still pounding like it did back in high school when he caught her watching him build sets for the play.

She was such a quiet, modest person, unlike the cheerleaders he had dated back in school, and the more sophisticated versions of those same women he dated now and again these days.

He couldn't say why it was that he felt like he was tripping over his own feet every time Caroline was near. But her hand had brushed his when she was standing close enough for him to smell the light vanilla scent that must be her shampoo, and he had thought his heart must have been beating loud enough for her to hear it.

Right now, knowing that she was coming to the lodge tomorrow, Logan felt like his chest was filling up with tiny bubbles.

He got in his truck and started the engine, laughing at himself just a little for feeling like such a kid.

"Thanks for listening to WCCR," the deejay was saying on the radio. *"From November first all the way to New Year's Day, we're playing all Christmas music all the time, so don't you dare move that dial."*

Frank Sinatra began singing about Santa Claus coming to town, and Logan shrugged and sang along.

His voice wasn't great, but he was alone in the truck, and he figured maybe a little singing would help distract him from thoughts of Caroline Bard.

He'd always had a thing for her, but today had been different.

We're grown-up now, he thought to himself. *That changes things.*

But he wasn't able to dwell on what those changes might be, because his phone started playing his brother's ringtone.

"Brad," he said, picking up on the car Bluetooth. "How's it going?"

"Hey, Logan." The warmth in his brother's voice traveled across the world and into his car like they were still sitting opposite each other at the big wooden table in the kitchen at home.

"Where are you?" Logan asked.

"Welp, that's why I'm calling," Brad said, unconsciously settling back into a Pennsylvania accent. "I'm in Singapore."

"No way," Logan said.

"I'm working on that hotel project," Brad said.

"You worked really hard to land it," Logan remembered. "That's great. Congratulations, brother."

"Well, be careful what you wish for, that's all I have to say about that," Brad said, sounding chagrined.

"What's going on?" Logan asked.

"Jillian's sister just gave birth to her firstborn, almost three months early," Brad said.

"Oh, I'm really sorry," Logan replied, meaning it.

Jillian had been looking after Brad's daughter, Josie, ever since she was a baby, and her mom ran off. Brad had to travel for work, so Jillian was like a nanny and a mother wrapped into one for the little girl. When Brad and Josie visited from Chicago, Jillian always came with them, and she was a

favorite with the whole Williams crew. Brad liked to say that Jillian's sensible child-rearing philosophy and good cooking let him feel Josie was being brought up like a proper Pennsylvania girl, even if she had to do it in Illinois. Their mother agreed, which was high praise indeed.

"Me too," Brad said. "Sounds like mom and baby will probably be just fine, eventually. So that's hopeful news. But Jillian is on family leave, indefinitely."

"Oh, that must be hard for Josie," Logan said, without thinking.

"Sure is," Brad said. "But we understand. Jillian has to do this, and we wouldn't have it any other way. Family is family."

"Of course," Logan said. "I didn't mean she shouldn't be there with her sister. So, who has Josie now?"

"One of the moms at her school invited her to spend the week with them," Brad said. "But it's not ideal. I have no idea what she's feeding them, or how much the television is on. I need to get her out of there."

"What's the plan?" Logan asked.

Brad paused.

Suddenly, Logan couldn't help wondering why he was the one on the phone with Brad.

Surely, Brad should be calling Mom or something. Logan could hardly give him any advice. He'd never had kids of his own, probably never would.

"I, um, was hoping you might be able to help out," Brad said, finally.

"Me?" Logan asked.

"Well, Mom's about to go into the busy volunteer season," Brad said. "And Dad is well, Dad. I know it's mainly planning times for you as far as the farm goes right now. And Josie will have online school anyway. I thought maybe you could take her for a while until I finish the job."

“Oh,” Logan said, so stunned that he had literally zero follow-up.

“Besides,” Brad said with a smile in his voice. “You’re her favorite.”

“I am?” Logan asked, pride unearthing itself from the onslaught of emotions surging through him at once.

“She told Jillian that,” Brad said. “Right in front of me, I might add.”

“I am fun,” Logan said, thoughtfully.

He was already running through ideas of what Josie might like to do when she wasn’t taking her classes. There was plenty of fun stuff on the farm, and Trinity Falls village was practically a paradise for kids, especially around the holidays.

“So, you’ll do it?” Brad asked.

“When did you say you were coming back?” Logan remembered to ask.

“I didn’t,” Brad said. “I’m hoping in time for Christmas, but it’ll probably be closer to New Year’s. I’ll come in to visit with her as often as I can, but...”

“But you’re in Singapore,” Logan said.

“Yeah,” Brad replied. “It’s not exactly a trip down the turnpike.”

His voice suddenly sounded older and more tired. It was the voice of the overworked single dad that Logan always expected to hear, instead of the tirelessly cheerful man Brad infallibly was. It was the sound of a brother who needed his help.

“Of course I’ll do it,” Logan said. “I’m glad to get some time with my niece. Take as long as you need. We can Zoom when she misses you. But I’ll try to keep her busy enough that she won’t have a chance.”

“I know you will, brother,” Brad said, the smile back in his voice. “That’s why I asked you.”

Brad launched into an explanation about dates and plane flights, and Logan did his best to commit it all to memory as he drove down the familiar country roads toward home.

Logan had been running the family farm for more than a decade. He'd had a market to watch, seeding and harvesting to do, and everything in between, books to keep, equipment to maintain, contracts to review, and even a couple of guys on payroll.

But all of that suddenly seemed like child's play compared to taking care of Josie. This was going to be the most important job he'd ever tackled.

His hands tightened on the wheel as he wondered what he'd gotten himself into. He didn't know much about taking care of kids. But his brother was counting on him. And so was his niece.

I won't let you down, Josie. Don't worry.

CAROLINE

The next day, when her shift ended, Caroline made it to the door of the library before she turned back, glancing up at the Children's section.

Ginny was smiling at her from the computer table, as if she had expected Caroline to be worried, and was trying to tell her that everything would be just fine.

And it would be. Ginny had been a volunteer forever and knew the library like the back of her hand. Not to mention that the head librarian was still in the building.

Caroline gave a little wave and strode through the big lobby that the library shared with borough hall and the police station.

There was still no snow, but as soon as she stepped outside she could taste it in the air, and the sky was the distinctive metal-gray of a Pennsylvania November.

For once, she wasn't hoping for snow tonight. While the Williams Homestead was still in Trinity Falls, it was all the way to the north, with miles of winding lanes through the forest between here and there.

Caroline crossed the street and got into her hatchback, throwing her bag onto the passenger seat, and started the engine.

The little car had served her mother well for many years, and so far it had been very amenable to Caroline's use as well.

But Caroline seldom used it to do more than take a quick jaunt up to Route 1 for anything she couldn't get in town.

"We've got a real journey ahead of us tonight," she told the car, in the same encouraging voice she used when she was going to read *Where the Wild Things Are* to the tiniest kids. In general, they could handle it, but there was sometimes one who got freaked out by the monsters.

The car started up immediately, and she smiled when she heard Mariah Carey belting out a list of all the things she didn't want for Christmas on the radio.

It was one of her favorites, and she mouthed the words, but didn't sing them. Even by herself in the car or the shower, Caroline was not a singer. But she did love music.

As she drove, the little town of Trinity Falls melted away into houses that were a bit further apart, and then into the Pennsylvania countryside she'd known all her life.

Though the fields were squares of brown and gray now, they were still beautiful and orderly. In the spring and summer, those same squares would explode into emeralds and golds, seemingly overnight, all under an endless cerulean sky.

As she got farther away from town, the farmland became more and more separated by stretches of trees and woodland.

Caroline made the right onto Providence Road, loving the way the ancient trees met overhead like a secret tunnel in a fantasy novel. In the summertime, light filtered through the leaves, making Providence feel like its very air was painted a soft green. But the woods were striking, even now, with their graceful bare branches stretched across the sky.

Every time she drove up Providence Caroline thought about looking out the school bus windows at the dark forest for the very first time, and the shiver of excitement she had felt at being practically inside one of the fairytales she loved.

After a time, the trees opened up enough for her to see the stone gatehouse with the copper roof.

She signaled and turned into the Williams Homestead.

The children on the school trip were told that once upon a time, there had been a gatekeeper who lived in the stone house by the main gate with his family.

Now the gatehouse was empty, and the gate was always open, welcoming guests onto the property. Sycamores lined the paved drive to the main house, their lovely, lumpy bark giving each of the big trees its own unique personality.

She turned left and followed the bumpy gravel road back into the trees toward the lodge.

Though the unpaved road wasn't as elegant as the sycamore-lined drive, it was even more interesting. Along its length, the woods cleared here and there, revealing little meadows, along with sections of the paths that twisted through Williams Woods, and even glimpses of the burbling creek.

In elementary school, they had walked all the way down to the lodge on one of the trails that wound through the trees, their teacher showing them the many different plants that could be found in southeastern Pennsylvania. She pictured the mayapple, the wild geranium, even jack-in-the-pulpit, and a plant whose name she couldn't remember, with a leaf that smelled like lemon candies when you crushed it, all native to the area and fun for children to spot.

At last, she reached the lodge and pulled her car into a turnaround.

Hopping out and glancing around, she noticed immediately what Logan had meant about it not looking the same as before.

While she remembered a certain wildness to the lodge, it hadn't been like this. Vines now crawled up nearly every wall, and thick moss grew on sections of the terra cotta roof tiles, giving the whole place a forgotten look. The roof of the small turret around the side of the lodge was covered with a bright blue tarp, and the paint on the porch pillars was peeling in long curls.

“Caroline,” Logan called out.

She walked down the path to the house and found him in a little clearing out front, sawing one of the two-by-fours for her

table.

It was cold enough out that she could see his breath pluming, but he had clearly been working hard for a while. He was down to just a t-shirt, his cheeks flushed, muscles straining through the thin cotton.

His expression when his eyes caught hers was filled with quiet joy.

She was reminded again of the teenager he had been, helping out with the play, and the obvious happiness he took in helping others.

A strange feeling stirred in her heart, but before she had a chance to try to understand what it was, something streaked toward her.

“*Swift*,” Logan yelled.

It was a dog, some sort of border collie maybe, black and white with a feathery tail. It was barely touching the ground between leaps, giving the impression that it was flying toward her.

Caroline was normally a little afraid of dogs, but this one wore such a joyful expression that she found herself smiling back, even as she put her hands up in front of herself instinctively.

“*No*.” Logan jogged toward her, his long strides no match for the dog’s effortless speed. “*Sit*.”

The obedient creature lowered its furry bottom to the ground instantly, sliding in the mud in a seated position for the last foot or so of its journey before stopping precisely at Caroline’s feet.

As soon as its body was still, the dog began barking rapturously at her, as if in welcome. Or maybe it was laughing.

Caroline laughed, too.

“It’s nice to meet you, puppy,” she said.

“You okay?” Logan asked, jogging up to her.

“Absolutely,” she told him. “I was just a little startled.”

“This is Swift,” Logan said. “He loves making new friends.”

“I think I know how you got your name,” she said to the dog.

“No, probably not,” Logan laughed. “He was my baby sister’s Christmas present back when she was a teenager, so she named him after Taylor Swift.”

Caroline let out another laugh, feeling her nervousness about the day slip away as she did.

“But he’s always liked me best,” Logan added. “So, he’s sort of become my dog.”

She crouched to pat the black and white fur, suddenly feeling right at home.

LOGAN

Logan watched Caroline patting and talking to Swift, her hands buried in the dog's silky fur.

He'd seen the way her whole body stiffened when she spotted the dog sprinting her way. But she was relaxed now, and enjoying herself.

She opens her heart so bravely, a little voice in the back of his head pointed out.

The idea was intriguing.

He had tried to talk to her a couple of times back in school. But she always got quiet for some reason.

Everyone knew Caroline Bard was super smart. She always had her nose in a book, and she got good grades. He had figured she just didn't want to be friends with a farm boy like him.

But seeing her now, smiling and talking to Swift like they were old friends, made him wonder if maybe he'd had it wrong...

"He's a good boy," she said, straightening up. "I can't believe he sat down while he was still moving."

"He has a sense of humor," Logan said, gazing down fondly at the dog. "He knew that would make you smile."

When he looked back at her, he saw that she was smiling again, and thought it was a look worth getting a little muddy over.

“So, you’re already building the table?” she asked. “I thought I’d be helping with that.”

“Almost done with it,” he told her. “It’s an easy project. The house, on the other hand...”

They both turned to look at the lodge.

“I’ve always loved it,” she said quietly. “It seems like something out of a fairytale. I love the curved windows, and the funny roof lines, and the little turret, even the color of those big stones.”

“Me too,” he said, nodding. “I’m really excited to get to work on it. Even though I know I have a long road ahead of me.”

“There will definitely be some projects out here,” she said. “But how’s the inside?”

“Want to see for yourself?” he offered.

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

He’d been a little overwhelmed when he got to the lodge this morning and saw how bad things were. His family loved the history of the property, but maintenance wasn’t their strong suit, not with so many buildings on the land.

But Caroline’s enthusiasm renewed his own excitement. The lodge was special. It was going to be worth putting in the work to uncover and restore its charm.

He stepped up onto the porch, glad that the mahogany decking had been hardy enough to withstand years without staining. He would get to it soon.

Opening the big front door, he gestured for Caroline to come inside.

She stepped in, wiping her feet on the mat, just like his mother would have, even though the house was a disaster.

“Oh, it’s just as lovely,” she breathed, her eyes taking in the big room.

Earlier, he’d noticed the cracked and discolored paint, the old windows needing putty, and the floor, which needed to be

sanded and refinished, as well as the thin layer of dust over the ancient furniture.

But seeing it now, through Caroline's eyes, he remembered the soaring two-story ceiling with the balcony above, the majesty of the massive, arched windows that always made him think of church, and the built-in bookshelves around the enormous fireplace.

"I can't believe this will be your home," Caroline said, turning to him with shining eyes. "It was built with so much love. Imagine making all that woodwork without a single power tool."

She was right. This house had been built without even the simple implements he was using to make her sawhorse table. His eyes caressed the wood that was the reason she had spoken to him in the first place.

"You were completely right about the woodwork," he told her. "I was looking at it again this morning, and I can't believe I was going to paint it. It will look nice when it's refinished. Thank you again for speaking up."

She smiled, and her cheeks flushed pink.

"Want to see the rest of the place?" he offered, trying to restrain his smile at her blushing.

When was the last time he had seen a woman literally blush?

She nodded and he gestured to the dining room. This space was smaller and very formal, with wooden wall panels.

"I'll refinish the wood in here, too," he told her. "And maybe brighten the space with some better lighting."

"Can you put modern lights in here?" Caroline asked.

"My dad had all the buildings rewired about ten years ago," Logan told her. "He said maybe it would have been better to re-roof, but the old electrical wires were dangerous."

"That was so wise of him," Caroline said. "The firefighters are always saying people should be modernizing their electrical systems."

The firefighters?

A strange little flare that felt almost like jealousy stung his chest.

“Oh right,” he remembered. “You’re all part of the town hall building.”

“Yes,” she said. “They have a different entrance, down by the police station, but almost all of us come out to the little amphitheater to eat our lunch when it’s nice out, so we all know each other’s gossip.”

“Anything I should know?” Logan teased.

“Well, the city guy who bought up all those farms has been pulling a bunch of permits,” she said.

“Oh, wow,” he said.

“That’s public knowledge,” she said quickly. “Ellie wouldn’t share anything she shouldn’t.”

“Of course not,” he agreed.

Ellie was the secretary for the borough. She was kind-hearted, honest, and quick to smile, even when she was collecting five dollars for a parking ticket.

“Latest police station gossip is that the ladies at the bank don’t appreciate being given wet change out of the meters to be counted,” Caroline told him.

“What can they do about that?” Logan asked.

“I’m not really sure,” she admitted. “I mean, it rains a lot, and they can’t let the meters get jammed up.”

“Keep me posted on that one,” he told her. “What about the library? What’s the gossip on the street?”

“Oh, there isn’t any,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “We librarians know how to keep quiet.”

He laughed, and they headed into the kitchen.

It was a long galley, with a window and glass door on the far end, both of which were almost completely covered by

vines. The cupboards were ancient, covered in lumpy blue paint.

“These must be original,” Caroline said wistfully, stroking one of the lumpy cabinet doors. “Imagine all the wonderful meals that were cooked here.”

“Would you replace them?” he asked. “They look pretty far gone to me.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “These cabinets are solid wood. Anything you replace them with won’t be nearly as nice. And of course, there’s a historic significance to these. They just need a little clean-up. You could paint them again, if you wanted a different color. If you take off the doors and sand them, they’ll look just like new.”

He smiled at her enthusiasm.

“What about the balcony?” she asked. “We weren’t allowed to go up there on the school trip.”

“Sure, come on,” he said.

They wandered through the house, and he got a kick out of the way she talked about the woodwork and the layout. She was so good at putting what he’d always felt about the place into words. All of it solidified his instinct that this house was worth working on. And since he had a little time over the winter, he might as well get started.

Though now he would have Josie for most of that time. And a little kid probably didn’t want to have to hang out in an old house.

They headed outside, and had just made it around to the back when Caroline spotted the old rose garden.

Twenty years ago, Logan’s great-grandmother had still lived in the lodge and tended to the roses as if they were additional Williams children. His dad liked to say that his grandmother lived as long as she did from her hard work, weeding, pruning, and fertilizing the copious plants. There was a time when vases and bowls of roses of every variety brightened all of the tables on the homestead in the summertime.

The bowls of roses had disappeared with the passing of Nana Mabel.

But their unharvested counterpoints continued to bloom. Some were choked out by bush honeysuckle, or failed to thrive without Nana Mabel's compost. But many others soldiered on, in spite of the untended garden.

"How beautiful," Caroline breathed, looking at the last of the knockout roses blooming on the rotten wood trellis that led out to the rest of the garden.

"Everything beyond that, all the way to the tree line, was roses in my Nana Mabel's day," he told her.

When he closed his eyes, he could almost see the riot of color in the summertime. Bright reds, deep pinks, and even yellow, white, and peach-colored varieties splashed against the deep green leaves.

"It must have been incredible," Caroline said.

"It was," he agreed. "It was her pride and joy. She recruited me to help her sometimes when I was little. There were twenty-five different varieties, and she taught me all their names."

"What kind is this?" she asked, stepping under the old woodwork to gaze at the deep pink blooms still clinging to the vine.

The wind lifted her hair from her shoulders, and he took a second to admire her under the trellis. With her long hair and simple woolen coat, Caroline had a timeless beauty. She looked like she could have belonged in this garden at any time during the property's history.

She glanced up at him, and must have seen something strange in his gaze.

"What?" she asked, stepping back slightly and bumping the old trellis and knocking one of the supports out of place.

Immediately, Logan saw that the whole thing was going to collapse. But Caroline was still studying his face, and had no idea. He ran for her, catching the top of the trellis in his hand

just in time to protect her head as the rest toppled over behind her.

“Oh,” she said.

His eyes went to her lips, as pink as the petals falling all around them, and he realized that he was now standing so close that she was in the circle of the arm that was still holding up the trellis. He let the rest of the debris fall gently to the ground as he gazed down at her, hypnotized.

She was looking up at him, the expression in her eyes still slightly surprised, but there was something else there, too.

All the stiffness he remembered from high school was gone. Her eyes weren't flashing to the floor, and she wasn't turning away.

This place truly was magical. For a moment, it seemed that anything was possible. It was even possible that Caroline Bard might be looking up at Logan Williams with something warm and almost inviting in her eyes.

It must be a dream...

He leaned forward, soaking in that sweetness, his eyes sliding down to her mouth again as his heart pounded frantically.

The jangling of his phone cut through the haze of his dream, and he blinked, pulling back from Caroline and sliding the noisy thing out of his pocket.

BRAD & JOSIE WILLIAMS

“I, uh, I have to take this,” he said, scrambling back from her and closer to the lodge, where reception was better. “Hang on.”

“I have to go anyway,” her voice came from behind him.

He turned back, but she was already marching off toward the front of the lodge, presumably for her car.

There was something odd about her energy, almost like she was upset. But nothing had happened. He hadn't actually

kissed her, no matter how much he might have wanted to.

He thought about calling out to her to ask what was wrong.

But he had already slid to accept the call.

“Uncle Logan,” Josie yelled into the phone.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he replied, smiling at the sound of her voice. “How’s my favorite girl?”

“I’m coming to visit you,” she told him excitedly.

“I know. I can’t wait to see you,” he told her honestly.

“I’m going to bring a lot of books,” she informed him. “Also, my horse stuffy, and probably a couple of other ones.”

“You know there’s plenty of room at Grandma’s house,” he told her, chuckling. “Bring all you want.”

“Dad said no more than two checked bags,” she told him crisply.

“Bring all that will fit in two checked bags,” he corrected himself. “Anything you forget, we can probably borrow from your cousins.”

She launched into a detailed list of what she planned to bring and leave out.

Logan couldn’t help being impressed at how organized she was. He remembered when she was a toddler, and Brad had his hands full chasing her around the farm.

Now, Logan was questioning whether he was really even qualified to be in charge of her, when she clearly knew what she needed for herself.

“Are you listening to me?” she asked suddenly, her little voice clear as a bell.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Yes, you said an extra blanket. But you know Grandma has a ton of quilts, I think you could probably fit a lot more toys if you don’t bring the blanket.”

“Good thinking, Uncle Logan,” she said. “This is why you’re my absolute favorite.”

“I heard that,” her father yelled good-naturedly in the background. *“I’m right here.”*

Logan laughed, feeling lucky for getting this time with his niece, even if he was still a little nervous about it.

By the time they got off the phone, it was getting dark.

As he made his way back to his truck to head to the big house, he saw the table, and stopped to drag it onto the porch, in case it rained or snowed.

He thought again about Caroline, and how she had left so abruptly when he got the call.

She was probably just trying to give me privacy, his optimistic side tried to tell him.

But it was more likely that when the spell of the rose garden was broken by his phone, Caroline had been horrified to realize that Logan Williams was looking at her like he wanted to kiss her.

CAROLINE

Caroline drove home on autopilot, her heart pounding.
I think Logan Williams almost kissed me...

The unbelievable thought echoed in her mind, even as a stern little voice in the back of her head reminded her that he'd cut off their moment with a phone call.

The way he backed up from her, like he was repulsed by the idea that he'd been thinking of touching her...

She had fled for her car, but she'd heard the first two words of that call before she got out of earshot.

Hey, sweetheart.

"Ugh," she muttered to herself, feeling toweringly stupid. "Of course Logan has a girlfriend."

Logan had been quite the ladies' man in school. And he was even taller and more strapping now, with that serious look in his eyes that she was certain hadn't been there before.

It made perfect sense that he had a girlfriend - probably someone fashionable and fun-loving, who didn't spend her whole life obsessing over her job, someone who would never realize at the end of the day that there had been a pencil sticking out of her ponytail since she reorganized the I-Can-Read books at nine in the morning.

"It's fine," she reminded herself out loud. "I told the Book Club the truth, I don't expect to settle down. I have my books, and my mom, and my library community."

Thoughts of her mom anchored her a little. She had to head home to change clothes, and then she was going to pick up Chinese food and go over to the condos to hang out with her mom.

It was a tradition she had gotten into the habit of when her dad passed. It wasn't just that she didn't want her mom to be lonely. It was more that the two of them had to pull together to stay standing in the absence of such a big presence.

Her dad was physically enormous, a mountain of a man. But he also had a big heart, and he had filled the house with his booming laugh, and kept a steady stream of his lonely young workers popping by for dinner. Bill Bard had owned a landscaping company, and he loved his work. He did so well with the lawns and gardens of Trinity Falls that the community college eventually heard about him and hired him to mow the fields, something he took as a huge honor for a small businessman.

Caroline's mom still worked at the ice cream shop in town, where she loved seeing all the kids as they grew up.

Caroline had been the first in the family to attend college. Her parents were both very proud of her. She had expected to travel to find work, but then somehow, the children's librarian in town had retired just as Caroline got her degree, and she'd been hired after one interview. She couldn't believe her luck.

When she was settled in her new job, right here in Trinity Falls, the three of them had been so happy. She'd gotten her own little place, but there were still Sunday suppers back at the house on Green Glade Avenue. Sometimes, it felt like they couldn't be happier, like their little family of three had taken more than their rightful share of the total joy that existed in the universe.

Of course, Caroline knew that joy wasn't a finite thing, and she learned that unfortunately, neither was sorrow. But both felt better when they were shared.

She pulled up in front of the shops on Park and hurried up to her apartment over the real estate office.

After visiting the Williams Homestead today, her little apartment certainly looked like a box made of boring flat walls with no woodwork or personality. But at least it was covered in books, which in her opinion, made the loveliest decor.

The only trouble was that she had so many that it was hard to know where to put them all. While she kept the Children's section of the library absolutely pristine, and organized with almost military precision, her own collection here at home was overflowing its shelves until books lined every surface.

She changed clothes quickly, choosing a pair of yoga pants and a fluffy sweater her mom had bought her. Their hang-out nights were for curling up on the sofa and being cozy - no work clothes allowed.

When she was done, she grabbed her keys again and headed across the street to Bowl of Joy, the Chinese restaurant.

"Hi, Caroline," Mei Chen called to her from where she stood by the counter, stapling an order rundown on a take-out bag. "How's your mom?"

"She's good, as far as I know," Caroline told her. "I'm going to see her now. I'll tell her you asked about her."

"Good, good," Mei said.

Caroline paid and Mei handed her a warm paper bag that smelled like absolute heaven. She inhaled the scent and let her eyes close.

"You love your soup and broccoli," Mei laughed. "I could make a good Chinese daughter-in-law out of you, if Hao has his way."

"A friend of mine taught me how to order off-menu," Caroline said, smiling and remembering the day Mei had fixed her the meal her own family loved best. "And I'd be lucky to marry Hao, if he could just grow up a little faster."

Hao was in the second grade now, and a really passionate reader. Caroline could hardly keep up with his interests to update the running list in her mind of which books he might like to try next, but she did her best. Last year, when she handed him a children's book about how steam engines

worked, he had announced that he was going to marry her when he grew up, which really tickled his mother.

His adorable little sister, Jia, was only four, but she loved sitting on the bean bag with a picture book, talking to herself out loud about what she thought the words should say.

“For your mom,” Mei said, tucking a bag of homemade almond cookies into the bag in Caroline’s arms.

“Thank you,” Caroline said, smiling at the idea that the two were fast friends, even though Mei was so much younger than her mom.

She headed back out to her car and turned on the radio. There wouldn’t be time for a whole song between downtown and the condos, but Caroline loved her Christmas music. She nodded her head to Elvis’s crooning about being home for Christmas and pulled up in the condo guest lot.

At this time of the evening, the lobby was empty, but when she came to visit her mom during the day, she always had to budget a few extra minutes to chat with the people who loved to sit on the sofas and hold court. It was a bustling building, and she was grateful her mom was here.

On the way up, she tried not to look at her reflection in the gilded mirrors of the elevator, for fear that she might catch a hopeful, or embarrassed, gleam in her own eyes. After the almost-kiss from Logan, she wasn’t quite sure how she felt.

And she didn’t want to go unpacking it all right now. So, she kept her eyes on the number display until it reached six.

When the doors opened, she headed down the hall to her mother’s unit.

The building had mostly two-bedroom flats. But when her mom was searching for one, they had learned that all the small differences in layout and view were extremely important, impacting the price. The result was that even someone like Caroline’s mom could afford to live in the same building as Elsie Carmen, the Vance Paper Company heiress.

It probably also helped that The Towers were the only condo with an elevator in all of Trinity Falls. If Elsie Carmen

wanted to stay in town and live in a condo, she had only the one option, same as Caroline's mom.

She knocked on the door, where her mom had already hung an evergreen wreath with tiny ornaments on it.

"Caroline," her mom said happily, pulling her into a big hug, paper bag and all.

Before she knew it, Caroline was curled up on her mom's couch, a bowl of soup in her hands, ready to find out about all the kids who had visited the ice cream shop today when her mom gave her *the scoop*, as she never got tired of calling it.

But instead, her mom leaned back slightly, frowning as she studied Caroline.

"What?" Caroline laughed.

"Where were you today?" her mom asked. "Anything special going on at the library?"

"There's always, always something special going on at the library," Caroline told her. "But today I left early. I need a table for the turkey drive and the cheapest way to get one is to make one."

"*You're* making a table?" her mom asked in a surprised way, glancing down at Caroline's hands.

"Are you counting my fingers?" Caroline laughed.

"Well, you're not handy," her mother pointed out. "Your father and I didn't want you to have to be."

Caroline's parents had been handy out of need. They'd bought the house on Green Glade, the very last street on the far edge of the Trinity Falls school district, to get their bright toddler into the best schools they could afford.

But times were tight, and the house needed work when they first moved in. Caroline's mom was still a little traumatized from working so hard on it, and had no interest in maintaining a house again.

"If it makes you feel any better, I've got help," Caroline told her.

“That’s so nice,” her mom said. “Who?”

“Logan Williams,” Caroline said, horrified to feel her cheeks warm as soon as the name left her lips.

“Good-looking boy,” her mother surprised her by saying. “But he got into a bit of trouble back in the day, didn’t he?”

“Still does, I guess,” Caroline said, shaking her head and thinking of the black eye.

“But such a nice boy,” her mother said fondly. “They’re good people, his family. Did you know his mother used to take photos of you at the school events for me since I had to work?”

“She did?” Caroline asked.

“Oh, yes,” her mother said. “Made me cry the first time she gave them to me. It was so sweet of her.”

Caroline thought about Annabelle Williams, the matriarch of the Williams Homestead, taking the time to make sure Caroline’s working-class mom felt like she was part of the school community, and her own eyes stung a little at the idea of it.

“If not for Annabelle and the other moms, I might not have had the nerve to join any of the committees in town, or even move into The Towers,” her mom went on. “I’m sure Logan has a good heart.”

“I think so too, Mom,” Caroline said, meaning it.

Logan *was* a good man. Even if he had made it clear tonight that she should stamp out her silly fantasies about him as anything other than a friend, he had been more than kind to her about the table, and allowing her to visit the lodge.

She vowed to keep that in mind going forward.

“Ready for ice cream?” her mom asked.

“How can you eat ice cream after working in the ice cream shop all day?” Caroline laughed. “Besides, Mei put some cookies in the bag for you. Again. Why does she do that?”

“Because she knows I love them,” her mother said fondly. “And I think because I learned how to make black sesame ice cream for her when she was feeling homesick.”

“You did?” Caroline asked.

“It’s really good, too,” her mom said. “I’ll give you some next time you’re at the shop. I always keep a pint in the back for her.”

“Annabelle Williams isn’t the only nice lady in town,” Caroline said, looking down at her noodle soup because she knew her mom was awkward about compliments.

Her mother gave her a little shove with her shoulder.

“Want to watch a Christmas movie?”

“Obviously, yes,” Caroline told her.

Her mom started listing their favorites, and Caroline felt herself realizing that even though their lives had changed, she was still probably holding onto plenty of happiness. And it really was better when it was shared.

LOGAN

Logan made his way through the corridor after clearing the creepy airport security process, his heart pounding like wild.

He'd never really thought about traveling, and the last hour had only reminded him why. People had been taking off their shoes for some reason, and dogs were sniffing around while x-ray machines showed the insides of people's bags like something out of a medical show gone very wrong.

Now they were all bursting into what felt like a bizarro version of a shopping mall, specifically designed to hide the warren of incomprehensible signs pointing to and from about a million gates.

Was this what airports were always like?

What had Brad been thinking, putting Josie on a flight by herself?

The flashing screens showing flight times, and the walls splashed with massive advertisements were a constant distraction. And the press of strangers from every side amped up his stress levels.

He didn't like the idea of his niece being here by herself.

The lady in customer service had told him that Josie would be *accompanied by our flight staff*.

But the only staff he'd seen so far all looked pretty aloof, and they were moving faster than anyone else. How was little Josie even supposed to keep up?

I'm coming, Josie, he thought to himself, clutching the pink teddy bear he'd bought for her at a kiosk. He had been genuinely stunned when the lady told him the price, but it didn't feel right to show up for Josie empty-handed.

At last, he arrived at the gate, right on time to greet her as she got off.

But the gate was basically abandoned. He knew he'd only been allowed through security because he was picking up an unaccompanied minor. But he figured there should be people from the airline here.

He began to pace back and forth worriedly. Was her flight delayed?

"You okay, son?" he heard a woman ask.

"Just waiting for my niece's flight," he said, turning to see an older lady with a friendly smile. "But no one's here. It's weird."

"Did you check the board?" she asked, pointing to one of the big flashing signs that showed the flights. "Sometimes they change the gate."

Sure enough, there was the flight from Chicago, showing as gate D-7 now.

All the way on the other side of the airport.

"Thank you," he called to the woman, breaking into a run.

He felt like he was back on the high school football field as he dodged weary travelers, looking for openings and powering his legs like nobody's business to get some distance.

All he could think of was Josie stepping off that plane and no one being there to greet her. He couldn't start off with her that way.

He nearly knocked over a man carrying a small dog.

"Sorry," Logan yelled to the man, darting through the crowd.

"Animal," he heard the man mutter.

Well, Logan probably deserved it. If he'd ever been on a plane before, he would have known those big signs were there because changes were common.

But Logan had never been inclined to travel. There was plenty to keep him occupied in Trinity Falls, and he strongly suspected the rest of the world would be a disappointment in comparison anyway.

At last, he reached D-7. There was no crowd, so he had clearly missed her getting off the plane.

But as he got closer, he saw a couple of people in airline uniforms gathered near a bank of chairs.

His heart sped up until they all started laughing.

"I've got another one," a familiar little voice said. "What has a nose and flies but can't smell?"

"A dog with a cold?" someone guessed.

"An airplane," Josie said.

They all laughed.

"How many of these do you have?" one of the flight attendants asked her.

"About a million," Josie told her. "What did the football player say to the flight attendant?"

"What?"

"Put me in coach," she said.

Even Logan had to smile at that one.

"Nice one, Josie," he called to her.

"Uncle Logan," she squealed, leaving her new friends in the dust as she streaked across the carpet to him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He chuckled and hugged her back.

Her little arms were surprisingly strong. It felt nice to hug her back without worrying he might break her, like when she was tiny.

“Sorry I was late,” he told her. “They changed the gate.”

“That’s okay,” she told him. “We were just hanging out.”

“She was telling us airplane jokes,” a man in a pilot suit said, striding up to them. “You’ve got one funny kid here.”

“Thank you,” Josie said, before Logan could respond. “I’ll tell you some more next time, but we’ve got to head to the farm. My grandma will be freaking out until I get there.”

“Thank you, young lady,” the pilot said, patting her on top of the head. “We’ll all be looking forward to it.”

Logan took her backpack from her and put it over his own shoulder.

“How did you know Grandma was worried?” he asked as they headed to baggage claim.

“Just a hunch,” she said. “Also, she told my dad last night that she was worried sick about me being on a plane by myself.”

She wasn’t the only one, but Logan kept his mouth shut.

“But I’ve been on a plane a million times with Dad and Jillian,” she said. “So, I’m fine. Besides, the airport people take care of me.”

“Did they happen to get you to a bathroom?” Logan asked.

“Not yet,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “I think that’s your job. But let’s get my suitcases first, before someone else does.”

“Okay,” he told her. “Hey, this is for you.”

He handed her the pink teddy bear, wondering suddenly if she might be too old for it. It had been a while since he’d seen her, other than on video chats.

“You didn’t buy this here, did you?” she asked him sternly. “Things at the airport are always way too expensive.”

“Were you always this smart?” he asked, trying to hide his guilty smile.

“Come on, let’s get my stuff,” she said, holding the overpriced bear in a way that told him she probably *was* too

old for it.

Pay better attention, he scolded himself.

The last time he'd been able to spend quality time with Josie, she'd been barely more than a toddler. And while Logan hadn't changed much during the time in between, Josie definitely had grown into a pretty cool eight-year-old.

They made it to baggage claim and got her two suitcases, each of which was decorated with a curling bow on the handle.

"Those are pretty bows," he told her. "Did you make them?"

"They're to make it easier to find my suitcases," she told him. "Dad says the best cheap suitcases all look the same."

Looking around, Logan saw that she was right. Nearly everyone was pulling identically shaped black, orange, or blue cases from the conveyor belt.

Next, he stood outside the ladies' room, wondering how much trouble he would get into if he tried to follow her in there, just to make sure she was okay. But she came out just fine after just a minute or two, and they headed out to the car.

He clenched his hands into fists as he watched her put on her own seatbelt. She demonstrated testing it to show it was fully clicked, as if she could tell how nervous he was.

"Good," he said, nodding before heading up to his own seat.

"It's a long drive to the farm," he told her. "I don't know if you remembered that. But you can definitely go to sleep, if you want. I'm just going to text your dad to tell him you made it, unless you'd rather call."

"He has a meeting," she told him. "But texting is okay."

He sent Brad a quick message to let him know his daughter was okay, then he started the car.

The drive was long, but not unpleasant. He glanced back in the rearview mirror regularly. Josie seemed to be drifting in and out of sleep. It had to have been a long day for her already.

When they were just about back in town, he heard a loud yawn from the backseat.

“I was sleeping,” Josie announced, sounding kind of surprised.

“Being on an airplane makes people tired,” Logan guessed. “But we’re almost home. Hey, want to stop for a scoop of ice cream?”

“I didn’t have any lunch,” Josie said.

“Better make it two scoops then,” Logan replied, grinning at her in the rearview mirror.

She giggled with delight, and he pulled up at the ice cream shop. When he got out of the car, he saw through the store window that Caroline’s mom was working today.

For some reason, the thought of Caroline had that feeling of lightness in his chest again, like his heart had wings that were unfurling. Though she had clearly shown she didn’t feel the same last night.

I’ll show her I can be a good friend, he told himself, uncertain why that felt so important.

“Well, hello there, Logan Williams,” Caroline’s mom called out when he opened the door for Josie, sending the bells above it jingling. “And who can this be?”

“I’m Josie. His niece.”

“My goodness, you can’t be Brad’s little girl,” Mrs. Bard said, shaking her head in mock disbelief. “She’s just a tiny little thing with two pigtails.”

Logan smiled. That was how he remembered Josie too, a three-year-old with two pigtails, tearing around the farm with her father running behind her as fast as he could, trying to keep her out of trouble.

“We’re going to have ice cream for lunch,” Logan told her.

“I won’t tell, if you don’t,” Mrs. Bard said, winking at him. “Now, we won’t have our holiday flavors until next week, so you’ll have to stop by again to try those. For now, just take a

look around, and let me know if I can grab you two some free samples before you make your decision.”

Josie’s eyes lit up at the mention of samples, and she was instantly hovering over the glass, gazing at the rainbow of flavors in their barrels.

Logan finally felt his shoulders drop a bit.

As proud as he was that she was self-assured and smart, he was definitely enjoying this bit of evidence that Josie was still a kid.

CAROLINE

Caroline stepped into the ice cream shop, the bell jingling over the door as she held out the warm container she cradled in her hands.

“Lunch,” her mother said happily.

“Homemade chicken noodle,” Caroline said with a smile.

Moments like these, she felt really lucky to live above the real estate office right in town. She could start soup in her crockpot in the morning, then pop back over from the library at lunchtime to eat it, or grab a bowl to take to the amphitheater when the weather was nice. Most days, she brought lunch over to her mom as well, though their schedules didn’t line up quite well enough to actually eat together.

“You just missed Logan and Josie,” her mom said, taking the container. “My gosh, they are just so sweet together. And she is *super* smart.”

That stung a little.

Caroline scanned the ice cream barrels under the glass, while she tried to be sure her expression didn’t reflect her feelings.

Obviously, she would expect any girlfriend of Logan’s to be beautiful. But smart, too? It felt almost unfair.

But of course, she was being ridiculous. Logan was a lovely man, and she should be happy for him to have a partner who had every good quality.

“You okay, sweetheart?” her mom asked.

“Yes,” Caroline said. “Yes, sorry. I’m just thinking that I need to get back to the library to grab books for story time. I can’t remember if I pulled them yet.”

“It’s so nice we’re in the same business,” her mother teased. “The business of making children happy.”

“Yours is stickier,” Caroline teased back.

“And more delicious,” her mom said. “Want a cup to go?”

“No thanks,” Caroline said. “I’ve got to motor. Love you.”

“Love you too,” her mom said.

The truth hung in the air for a moment. They didn’t used to say *I love you* every day. Bill Bard had taught Caroline one more important lesson on his way to heaven, and that was to treasure every moment with family.

She gave a little wave before she sent the bell over the door jingling again as she headed back over to the library.

“Oh, Caroline,” her mom called to her. “I let Logan know that he and Josie could say hi to you at the library. They might swing by. She had something to do over there anyway.”

Caroline waved again, not trusting herself to reply.

Why would her mother send Logan over with his girlfriend to rub her face in their happiness?

We’re friends. If he’s happy, then I’m happy for him, she reminded herself sternly.

But encouraging herself to have the right feelings was different actually from feeling them. A little flame of jealousy flickered wickedly in her chest, in spite of her best efforts to douse it.

She crossed the street and walked past the amphitheater and up to the doors to the municipal building, feeling grateful for the touch of cold air to cool her warm cheeks.

Once she was inside, she jogged up the steps to the Children’s section and her office, where the three books for

today sat on her desk.

She took them and walked down to the big palladium window where the head librarian was encouraging everyone to sit in a semi-circle, facing the rocking chair.

All her regular toddlers and preschoolers were there, but she almost did a double-take when she noticed the big man and little girl who were looking around the half-circle with embarrassed expressions.

“We’ve got a newcomer,” Helen told her as she headed over. “Her name is Josie. She’s a little older than the others, but her uncle signed her up.”

Josie?

Caroline’s feet were carrying her automatically to the window, even as her mind whirled and things began to click into place.

Her mother’s remarks made sense now. The only thing that didn’t add up was why this kid was at her morning story hour instead of one of the after-school kids’ book clubs.

She stole a glance and noticed that Josie had two books in her lap: a Pippi Longstocking with a bookmark about midway through, and a copy of *Mathilda*.

She was clearly reading above grade level.

“I’m so glad you’re all here today,” Caroline said to the children in a soft, friendly voice, like she did every week.

There was a chorus of caregivers saying hello.

“And,” Caroline said, taking a deep breath and a big risk, “I’m so glad that our guest reader is here today, too.”

She looked over at Josie, saying a silent prayer that she had guessed right. Plenty of excellent readers wouldn’t want to read out loud in front of others.

But Josie’s face lit up.

“Come on up here, Josie,” Caroline said. “I’m Miss Caroline, and we’ve got three books for you to choose from.”

She laid out the books on the floor and Josie was visibly torn.

Ultimately, she grabbed *Chicka-Chicka Boom Boom*.

“I’ve never read this one,” she said to Miss Caroline.

“I think you’ll like it,” Caroline told her. “Go ahead and take the seat of honor.”

Josie went and sat in the rocking chair, suddenly looking awfully small.

Caroline second-guessed herself again, and opted to stand behind the rest of the group. If Josie struggled, she wanted to be ready to help.

But the little girl looked like she was right in her element.

“This book is called *Chicka-Chicka Boom Boom*,” she told the children, holding out the book and letting everyone see the cover.

Within a few sentences, Josie had discovered the delightful rhythm of the book, and she read in a clear voice at just the right volume to entertain the kids without disturbing the folks on the computers just beyond the story corner.

Caroline lowered herself to the floor beside one of the moms to listen to the rest.

“She’s wonderful,” the mom whispered. “Where did you find her?”

“Would you believe me if I told you she just wandered in?” Caroline asked in wonder.

“Trinity Falls is a magical place,” the mom said, shaking her head.

The toddler boy in her lap started clapping his hands with excitement as he listened to Josie reading the end of the book.

When it was done, everyone gave her a little round of applause.

“Can I read another?” Josie asked Caroline.

“We would love that,” Caroline told her. “Go ahead.”

By the time Josie had read *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Goodnight Moon*, the kids were entranced.

She finished up, and Caroline stood to thank everyone for listening.

Then the little ones were storming the rocking chair to pat Josie's knee and try to climb onto her lap.

To her credit, the little girl handled the situation with grace and kindness, holding chubby little hands and laughing along with her new friends.

"Okay, everyone," Caroline said. "Let's head up to the big table and do our art project."

The caregivers walked their little ones up to the big table in the Children's section, where each child had a paper coconut tree and a bowl full of letters to glue to it, just like the letters that climbed up the tree in *Chicka-Chicka Boom Boom*.

"You were amazing," Caroline told her when the small crowd faded. "I can't believe how lucky it is you stopped in."

"That was really fun," Josie said, hopping up. "How did you know who I was?"

"I just went to say hi to my mom at the ice cream shop and she said you and your uncle might swing by," Caroline told her. "Plus, the library had your name down for today's story time."

"Wow, that's really lucky that your mom works for an ice cream shop," Josie said dreamily. "Do you eat ice cream every day?"

"I think my mom does," Caroline confided. "She really believes in her product. I have my own apartment now, so I don't eat as much ice cream as I used to."

"Hey, can I help with the art project?" Josie asked. "It looks like they could use a hand."

Caroline turned and saw the Pruitt family's nanny trying to help both the two-year-old twins with their paper trees at once, while the four-year old wandered off.

“That would be amazing,” Caroline said. “See the lady with the two tiny kids and the big one walking off?”

“I’m on it,” Josie declared, jogging up the steps.

“She’s phenomenal,” Caroline said, looking after her.

“Thanks so much for bailing me out,” Logan said. “I think I might be in over my head here. That’s Brad’s daughter. She’s staying with me until he gets to town. I remembered how much she loved story time last time she was here, so I signed her up. But I think that last time must have been a little longer ago than I thought.”

He chuckled as he looked over the crowd of younger children.

“Doesn’t she have school?” Caroline asked.

“They’ve been traveling for a while,” he said shaking his head. “So, most of her schoolwork is online.”

“Well, if she ever wants to stop by the library, she’s more than welcome,” Caroline said. “She’s so great with the little ones.”

They both looked up to see Josie with the three Pruitt kids and the nanny.

“*On your mark,*” Josie whispered. “*Get set. Go.*”

All three kids raced to affix their glue-sticked letters to the tree and then melted into giggles.

Josie laughed too and then high-fived each of the kids while the exhausted nanny smiled at her gratefully.

Logan and Caroline watched her quietly for a few minutes, and to Caroline, it seemed as if there were a feeling of warm camaraderie between them.

Too soon, the half hour was wrapping up.

“Thank you so much for coming, everyone,” Caroline sang out, jogging up the steps. “Let’s put on the clean-up song.”

She grabbed her phone and started the song, before placing it on the table.

The children dutifully surrendered their projects and helped clean up, except for Ada Phillips, who clutched her glue stick and screamed like she was being kidnapped when her grandmother tried to take it from her.

“That belongs to Miss Caroline,” her grandmother told her patiently. “When people lend us their nice things, we have to give them back when we’re finished.”

“*Nooooo*,” Ada howled.

“Ada, would you like to trade that glue stick for *Chicka-Chicka Boom Boom* or for *Goodnight Moon*?” Caroline asked her, holding up the two books.

Ada frowned at the books in Caroline’s hands, the battle in her mind clear on her little face. Caroline bit her tongue, and kept the options held out calmly.

At long last, Ada reached for *Chicka-Chicka Boom Boom*. Caroline held out her hand, and Ada pressed the glue stick into it as she grabbed the coveted picture book.

“Bless you, Caroline Bard,” her grandmother breathed. “Can we check it out, or do you need it for your next group?”

“She’s very welcome to check it out,” Caroline said. “I’m so glad she enjoyed it.”

Ada allowed herself to be led away from the table, the book clutched tightly to her small chest. Caroline felt for Helen, down at the desk, who would have to take it from her long enough to scan it.

“That was amazing,” Logan said quietly. “You’re like a toddler whisperer.”

“Not really,” Caroline laughed. “Kids her age like to have choices. It’s hard to be old enough to know what you want, but still not have any control of your life. Choices help with that frustrated feeling.”

“Where were you when I was a kid?” Logan teased.

“I guess I should get ready for my next group,” Caroline said.

“Right,” he replied. “And I’ve got to get Josie to the house to see her grandma. Hey, sweetheart, time to go.”

Sweetheart.

Another piece of the puzzle clicked together as she realized that he must have been talking to Josie on the phone last night.

He doesn’t have a girlfriend, the jealous little voice in her head whispered triumphantly.

Suddenly, she felt sillier than ever for letting herself get all worked up over nothing.

Josie dashed over and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“This was so much fun, Uncle Logan,” she said, grinning up at him. “Thanks for signing me up.”

Logan’s delight was palpable.

For all that he said he was in over his head, it looked to Caroline like he was doing a great job with Josie. Something about seeing the big man so besotted with the tiny girl made Caroline’s heart squeeze like it was too full.

“So, we’ll see you tonight?” he asked, turning to Caroline. “To work on the table?”

For a moment, she blinked back the naked emotion she thought must be on her face, feeling mortified.

“Yes, see you tonight,” she told him, trying not to meet his eye. “And thank you again, Josie. You were amazing.”

“Thank you, Miss Caroline,” Josie said. “I’m so glad we came here.”

LOGAN

Logan smiled to himself as they headed out of the library.

Though he had messed up big time by signing Josie up for the toddler story time, Caroline had neatly saved him from his own demise.

He repressed a shudder at the idea of how bad it would have been if he made Josie listen to stories with toddlers on their first day. That would have been a hard one to come back from.

Instead, she was bright-eyed and excited about having been able to help.

“Hey,” he told her, on a whim. “Let’s swing by the Co-op. I want to grab some lemonade for Miss Caroline, so we have something to offer her when she comes by tonight.”

“Okay,” Josie said, looking up at him with a secret smile. “Wow.”

“What?” he asked.

“Dad said you might never have a serious girlfriend,” she said, shrugging.

He frowned at his brother’s assumption, though, it was probably pretty accurate.

Then he realized what Josie was saying.

“Miss Caroline is not my girlfriend,” he told her, maybe just a little too loudly.

One of the young moms on the park bench outside the Co-op looked up and her friend elbowed her.

“She isn’t?” Josie asked, sounding really sad about it.

“No, of course not,” he said.

“What do you mean *of course not*?” Josie asked as they stepped in the doors of the Co-op. “She’s really nice.”

Too nice for me, he thought to himself.

“She is really nice,” he agreed. “But we’re kind of different types of people. She likes to read and spend a lot of time in the library.”

“And you like to be outside,” Josie said, nodding her head. “But that doesn’t mean she can’t be your girlfriend. She makes you smile in a way that you don’t smile at anyone else.”

Logan was starting to feel a little irritated that the kid was so intuitive. He headed over to the cold beverages refrigerator fast enough that Josie had to trot a little to keep up with his long strides.

“Here we go,” he said, grabbing a bottle of lemonade. “And sugar cookies.”

Josie kept her little mouth blessedly shut as he searched the aisle and found the Pennsylvania Dutch sugar cookies Josie liked.

“You’re sure she’s not your girlfriend?” Josie asked quietly as he grabbed the bag of sweets from the shelf. “If she’s not your girlfriend, why is she coming over tonight?”

“We’re building a table,” he told her.

“And why are you getting her favorite stuff for her?” Josie asked reasonably.

“Because she doesn’t ask a bunch of questions all the time,” Logan retorted.

Josie laughed at him, completely unintimidated.

“You should probably also get a healthy snack,” she suggested, eyeing the cookies and lemonade in his hands.

“Like what?” he asked.

“Maybe if you start with some carrot sticks, that would be a good idea,” Josie said.

He nodded and did as he was told, figuring that if Josie was going to be with them, it was an even better idea.

“You should get some fresh-cut flowers,” Josie said, as he was heading to check-out.

Logan swallowed back a retort that Caroline wasn’t his girlfriend.

“We’re meeting at the old lodge,” he told her. “And it’s kind of a mess.”

“Jillian says fresh-cut flowers can brighten up even the darkest space,” Josie said primly.

The little bunches of flowers in the buckets by the register were notoriously expensive. But he nodded to her, and she darted off, crouching by the display to make her selection.

“Is that Brad’s little girl?” Lucy Webb asked him with a smile as she paused on her way to the coffee station with a box of napkins.

Lucy worked at the Co-op, and Logan had known her family forever. Her brother Brody was the one who’d given him the black eye, which he tried to keep angled away so she wouldn’t notice.

“Sure is,” he said, feeling unearned pride as they both watched Josie carefully considering her choices. “I’m watching her for a couple of months while he’s on travel.”

“What about that nanny of hers?” Lucy asked.

“She’s with her sister,” Logan said. “Her nephew was born very early, and she’s taking leave to be with them.”

“So sweet of her,” Lucy said. “But it’ll be hard for Josie. I’m glad she’s got you.”

A woman at the coffee counter spilled a little coffee and looked around. Lucy dashed off to the rescue with the napkins, giving him a little wave as she did.

“Okay,” Josie said, returning with a bouquet of daisies. “These look nice and fresh. And daisies are cheerful, but not super romantic. Perfect for someone who isn’t your girlfriend yet.”

He took them, choosing not to acknowledge that added *yet*, and flipped the arrangement to see the price sticker.

“Not bad,” he said, surprised.

“Daisies aren’t expensive compared to other flowers,” Josie said. “And they’re just as pretty. It’s a good thing I’m here, Uncle Logan.”

Little as he liked to admit it, it probably was a good thing she was here.

He wrapped an arm around her as they approached the register. And a silly dream began forming in the back of his mind.

What if Caroline changed her mind about him? What if one day, she was coming over because she was his girlfriend, not because he was doing her a favor? Was that so far-fetched?



TWO HOURS LATER, he looked down at Josie’s sleeping form with a fond smile.

It was storming outside, but inside his parents’ house, it was toasty warm with the fireplace crackling, and there was something about a sleeping kid that made the place feel even cozier than usual.

His mother had fussed and exclaimed over Josie when they arrived, and tried to get her to eat an unreasonable amount of stew for a kid who had just eaten two scoops of ice cream.

To her credit, Josie never ratted him out. She just said she was too sleepy to eat much. And then, true to her word, she had passed out on the front parlor sofa ten minutes later, the pink teddy bear clutched to her chest.

As he gazed down at her, Logan felt oddly justified that she wasn't too old for the bear after all.

"She seems so much younger again when she's sleeping," his mother murmured.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"So, Caroline Bard, huh?" his mom asked. "You're setting your sights a little high there, aren't you?"

"It's nothing," he said. "I'm just helping her build a table for the turkey drive."

"Does she know that?" his mother asked. "That it's nothing, I mean. It's not right to lead her on."

"Why would she think anything was happening?" he asked. "I'm helping her build a table. That's it."

"I heard about the lemonade," his mother said, giving him a look.

He ran a hand through his hair.

"You think Sloane Greenfield liked to keep busy?" his mom went on. "No one does more than Caroline Bard."

"Again, Mom, we're just friends," he told her.

"Well, if you break her heart, I'll never forgive you," she told him. "The Bards are good people. And Caroline does a lot for this town. She has a heart as big as her dad's."

Thunder boomed outside, as if to emphasize her point.

"Okay, Mom, okay," he said, raising his hands in front of him.

"And if you're going to be just-friends with her, you'd better do a better job of it than you do with your other friends," she said, glancing pointedly at his eye.

He bit back a laugh at the idea of brawling at the Barrel with Caroline Bard. He honestly couldn't even picture her at the pub at all.

"I, uh, don't think that'll be a problem," he told her, trying his best to keep a straight face.

“It better not be,” she said fiercely.

There was a flash of lightning outside and then a crack that made the whole house shake. Something groaned loudly outside, and then there was an earth-shaking crash.

Before they could even react, the lights went out, leaving nothing but the glow of the fireplace to illuminate the room. Somehow, Josie barely stirred in her sleep.

“Not my willow oak,” his mom cried out, dashing to the front door.

They pulled on their coats in silence and stepped onto the porch.

Even through the lashing rain, Logan could easily see the prone form of the big willow oak on the ground.

And it had taken all the wires down with it.

His mother sniffled and he pulled her into a hug.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he told her.

It was odd timing that his mom had just mentioned Caroline’s dad, because it was Bill Bard who had told her again and again that the willow oak had shallow roots and needed to come down. But Logan’s mother loved the big oak that blushed pumpkin orange every fall.

“It’s good that it didn’t damage anything else,” she said, her voice sounding smaller than usual.

He chose not to point out that it had pulled down the power, cable, and internet lines.

After all, no one had been hurt, and it hadn’t hit the house. That was really the best outcome they could have asked for.

“Why don’t you give your father a call to warn him about the lines?” she asked, pulling out of his arms, and getting right to work. “I’ll call Tanner and see if he can help with the power.”

Logan’s cousin, Tanner, was an electrician, and a real blessing to the family. Before Tanner got licensed, the

Williams men were prone to tinkering on their own, with predictably disastrous results.

Relieved to see his mom back in her usual practical, problem-solving mode, he headed back in to call his dad, making a note to himself to help her choose another tree to plant in the springtime, one with nice deep roots.

CAROLINE

Caroline drove out of Trinity Falls after a long day at the library. The afternoon storm had all but stopped, but the thick, gray clouds still lingered overhead.

Though she was feeling tired from her hard work, something about the peaceful drive with its changing scenery was soothing. She found herself turning on the radio again, and feeling upbeat as she got closer to the Williams Homestead.

It was fully dark by the time she pulled in and passed the gatehouse. But there were no lights on in the big house at the end of the rows of sycamores.

That didn't seem right, especially on the day Josie had arrived. But maybe they had all gone out to dinner or something. She hoped she wasn't making Logan miss out on anything.

Driving slowly and carefully, she traversed the winding road through the trees until she reached the lodge at last. Happily, there was a light glowing on the porch, and she could see Logan and Josie working away at the table.

Caroline parked her car and headed up, thinking that was sweet to see the two of them engaged in a project together.

"A tree came down in the storm, Miss Caroline," Josie shouted to her before she reached the stairs. "And now there's no power at the big house, and no internet *at all*."

"Wow," Caroline said. "Is everyone okay?"

“No one was hurt, and it didn’t hit the house,” Josie said briskly. “Grandma said it couldn’t have happened a better way.”

“Of course, Grandma is no fan of the internet,” Logan put in with a wicked grin. “She wants you all to herself, Josie, with no movies or video games to distract you.”

“I need internet for my school,” Josie said immediately. “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t care. Grandma lets me bake, and we’re going to decorate the whole farm for the holidays. We don’t need movies.”

“Well, hopefully we’ll get power back at the big house soon,” Logan said. “So, you guys can do all that other stuff.”

“Is that likely?” Caroline asked. “How big was the tree?”

“Huge,” Josie said before Logan could answer. “You won’t believe it.”

“Well, if you’d like to come to the library with me tomorrow, you can do your schoolwork on one of the computers there,” Caroline said. “I’d be glad to have you around. Especially if you have a well-timed break when there’s a story hour.”

“Can I, Uncle Logan?” Josie asked excitedly.

Logan glanced over at Caroline, as if he were trying to assess if she was really okay with it.

“Honestly, the library is full of children all day,” she told him. “It’s why we’re there, to serve the community’s needs. And Josie has a need we can easily fill. Besides, she’s old enough to sit at the computer by herself once I get her up and running. She can even help with the littler kids if she has spare time.”

“If I dropped her off in the morning,” Logan said slowly, “I could come back and help my brothers with the tree for a couple of hours.”

Josie started jumping up and down.

“Then it’s settled,” Caroline said. “Now, what’s going on with this table? It looks suspiciously like it’s almost finished,

and I've barely touched it."

"It was no problem," Logan told her. "There's still one thing that will have to be done the day you set it up, but I can show you."

"Snacks first," Josie said excitedly.

Caroline glanced up at Logan and it seemed that his cheeks flushed, right before her eyes.

What in the world?

"Sure," Logan said to Josie. "We can have some snacks."

"Come on," Josie said, smiling at Caroline.

Logan held open the door and Josie led the way into the lodge.

Sure enough, a tray was set up on the table in the sitting area. On the tray, there was a vase of beautiful fresh daisies, as well as a bowl of cut up carrots, three drinks, and a plate of cookies.

But they weren't just any drinks and cookies. It was her favorite lemonade brand, and the Pennsylvania Dutch sugar cookies she had always loved.

"No way," Caroline breathed, rushing over. "How did you know?"

"It's just the stuff you used to get out of the vending machines after school," Logan said. "I noticed you had that lemonade almost every afternoon at play practice."

"I can't believe you remembered that," Caroline said, shaking her head in surprise.

"Did you notice there's a healthy snack, too?" Josie pointed out.

"That was very thoughtful, Josie," Caroline said. "Did you help with it?"

"I peeled and cut up the carrots myself," Josie said proudly.

“You are one amazing kid,” Caroline told her. “Aren’t you tired after being on an airplane and reading at the library and building tables and all?”

“I already took a nap by accident,” Josie said, wrinkling her nose. “And I missed the lightning and the tree falling down.”

“It was too dark from the storm to see anything,” Logan laughed. “You were smart to nap when there weren’t fun things to do like visit with Miss Caroline and eat snacks.”

They all sat around the table and dug into the wonderful feast.

Caroline made sure to start with some carrots, which seemed to please Josie. The little girl was so mature and practical, in spite of the enthusiasm and impulsiveness that made it clear she was still small.

“So how long are you visiting for, Josie?” Caroline asked.

“We’re not exactly sure,” Josie told her politely. “My nanny, Jillian, had to go be with her sister, because she had her baby too soon. My dad has to work in Singapore, and the rules for construction are really complicated, so it might be until Christmas, or even longer before he’s all done.”

“That’s a long time,” Caroline said, feeling her heart break for the girl, who hadn’t mentioned a mother.

“A lot of people are relying on my dad,” Josie said. “If he doesn’t go to work, then the rest of his team loses their project, and all the people who would build the building, and even the people who would work in the building one day. All those families need jobs, so it’s really, really important for him to be there.”

It seemed like Brad Williams had done a good job explaining to his daughter why he had to leave. And she had really taken it in.

“It sounds like you sacrificing time with your dad is going to help an awful lot of people,” Caroline said carefully.

Josie nodded up enthusiastically.

“So, are you looking forward to anything special here in Pennsylvania?” Caroline asked, grabbing a cookie.

“Oh my gosh, everything,” Josie enthused. “First of all, the holiday stuff is so much better here than in Chicago. There are so many people cooking and laughing and decorating, it feels like a real home.”

Caroline glanced up and saw Logan swallowing hard.

He missed his brother and niece, and wished they were around more. That much was clear.

“But you know what’s the best part of all?” Josie continued. “I get to help out on the farm. Did you know you can grow everything you need on a farm? Did you know there are like a dozen different kinds of animals here? And guess what? *I get to learn how to milk the cow.*”

“I wonder if you’ll be that excited when you find out how early you have to get up to do it,” Logan teased.

But there was real pleasure in his eyes.

“I don’t care how early it is,” Josie said immediately. “I can’t wait.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll have time to do fun things in town, too,” Caroline said.

“I’ll be at the turkey drive with Uncle Logan,” Josie told her solemnly. “We’re going to help you make sure the table is just right.”

“We pre-drilled the holes,” Logan explained. “That way we can put in screws easily when we get there to make sure the top is secured on the legs.”

“And then I’m going to get my face painted,” Josie exclaimed. “And I’ll eat funnel cake until I want to throw up. When Uncle Logan was a little kid, he ate four of them.”

“I beg your pardon,” Logan said. “That was last year.”

Josie let her head fall back and howled with laughter.

“But you’re only teasing me, right?” Josie asked, panting.

He nodded, and then shook his head, and then nodded again, sending her into more peals of laughter.

The two of them were hilarious together.

Caroline found herself laughing too, even though she was normally a little reserved. Something about Logan made her want to let her hair down. She figured he had the same effect on her that he had on Josie.

They talked some more, about the apartment in Chicago where Josie normally lived, and about all the places she had been to. The kid was already more of a world traveler than Caroline figured she'd probably ever be.

Josie asked Caroline what it was like to work in a library, and Caroline told her all the good parts and spared her the weird stuff.

Then Logan regaled them with a few funny farm stories, and before Caroline knew it, they had finished their snack and it was getting late.

Josie was laughing so helplessly now that Caroline recognized the signs of the final burst of energy kids sometimes got before they crashed from exhaustion.

“This was so much fun,” Caroline said, standing. “But I’ve got to open up the library tomorrow, so I need to get home and rest. I hope you get lots of sleep too, Josie. I can’t wait to see you in the morning.”

Logan hopped up as soon as she did, and Josie followed her uncle’s example.

She scampered over and gave Caroline a big hug, letting go before Caroline could even recognize what was happening and hug her back.

“See you tomorrow,” Josie said. “I’m glad you came over.”

“Me too,” Caroline said.

“Let me walk you out,” Logan said gruffly. “It was raining pretty hard. The mud can get slippery.”

She opened her mouth to argue with him, but he was right. It was dark and slippery out there. There was no reason to twist her ankle.

He offered her his arm and she took it.

She could feel the warmth of him through his Henley shirt, and tried not to think too hard about the way it made her feel safe.

The night around them was quiet, but for the tip-tap of the remnants of rain falling between the tree branches above, the occasional cry of a night bird, and the sound of her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Too soon, they reached her car.

“Thank you again,” she told him, letting go of his arm right away. “You saved my life with that table, and the snacks were just lovely.”

“Thank *you* for helping me out with her while our internet is down,” he replied. “She talked about you all afternoon. And it means the world to me to know she won’t start off on the wrong foot with her schoolwork while she’s here.”

The expression on his face told her that the child’s schoolwork was very important to him. She was surprised, and moved at the idea that Logan Williams was so devoted to his niece.

“Don’t worry at all,” Caroline assured him. “We’ve got this.”

He nodded to her.

She could still see him in the rearview mirror, watching after her, as she pulled back onto the dirt and gravel road that led out of the homestead.

As she drove home, she felt a sense of peace she hadn’t experienced in a long time. Her mind replayed all the funny things Josie had said, and the way Logan had looked at his niece, like she hung the stars.

Something about it had felt like home to Caroline.

She found herself wiping away tears as she pulled up in front of her apartment, though she had no idea why she was crying.

LOGAN

The next morning, Logan looked around the yard where his brothers and cousins stood around guzzling homemade iced tea as they laughed and joked with each other. They were all taking a break from the noisy business of cutting up the willow oak, while his parents talked with Gil, the internet man.

These were his favorite times - being outside with the family, working hard together while they all drank in the fresh air. It was what he missed most in the winter months, even though it was generally just him and Ansel these days, trying to keep the whole farm going. As the years went on, there seemed to be fewer and fewer instances where they had all hands on deck like this. It was a shame it took a small disaster to get them all in one place.

He glanced over at the group, trying to memorize the moment.

Ansel was cracking up at whatever Levi was telling him. Levi was an attorney now, but even he had shown up to help cut up the old willow oak and haul it out of the way for the power and internet people to get through. Though he wasn't the most skilled laborer, Levi's deep voice made him exceptionally good at telling jokes and funny stories. He always lifted everyone's spirits.

Tanner had talked with the power people, and they were already running a fresh line, under his watchful eye.

But it seemed like things weren't so easy with the internet. Logan could see that his dad was frowning as Gil explained something to them, and his mom was biting her lip.

He jogged up to see what was going on.

"I don't fully understand it myself, sir," Gil admitted. "But your system predates me. And they're telling me at the main office that they can't replace parts for it anymore. You've got to start fresh. The new fiber optic stuff is really good, though."

"But doesn't that mean running a whole new wire?" Logan's mother asked.

"Sure," Gil said. "It means all new equipment. But it will work better than what you had before."

Logan knew that would not be a selling point to his parents, who had reluctantly brought in the internet back when they had a house full of teenagers who needed it for school.

"It sounds expensive," his mother said.

"Well," Gil said, rubbing the back of his neck and looking uncomfortable, "I can't quote a job this big myself. You all have such a large piece of land, and it's a long run coming in from the street. I'll send a supervisor as soon as I can, though it might be a few days after that storm."

Logan blew out a sigh of frustration.

"And if you want my opinion," Gil added, "you really ought to get a quote to bring service to all the houses on the property. Nowadays, it's considered a necessity. I don't get a commission or anything if you do. It's just the truth. And it'll be cheaper and better laid out if the guys do it while they're out here putting in the new system than it will be to try adding it later."

"Thank you for your honesty, son," Logan's dad said kindly. "Tell your parents we asked after them."

"Will do," Gil told him, shaking his hand.

"What do we do?" Logan hissed, as Gil walked back to his truck. "We didn't budget for this. Can we postpone it?"

The next time they would have a windfall to work with was almost a year from now, after the fall harvest, and they'd been hoping to put any surplus toward roof repairs for the buildings on the farm.

“Do we even bother running it in at all?” his mother asked his father. “We certainly don't need internet wires to the other buildings. Who knows how long we'll even be holding onto all this land, with Radcliffe's offer on the table?”

Logan felt his heart begin to pound. Sebastian Radcliffe was the mysterious man from the city who was buying up farmland left and right. He was the man Logan's baby sister was working for, making tongues wag all over town that Emma had gone over to the dark side. Brody's comment about it had started their little scuffle the other night.

“What are you talking about?” he asked his mother.

She pressed her lips together.

“We know you kids love this land,” his dad said gently. “But it's a lot. All your cousins have left, and who knows if your sister will ever come back to work with you? It's not reasonable for you and Ansel to try and keep this place running on your own. Especially when it's so hard to hire good help.”

“Shouldn't Ansel and I be the ones to decide that?” Logan asked, trying desperately to keep his voice calm. “And shouldn't we wait and see if that city idiot even stays around? We know how hard it is to make a farm work. Maybe a year or two from now, when he gives up, it will be easy to get help again.”

“That rancher is offering good money for our land right now,” his mother said gently. “Much more than the market value.”

“And if he does fail, and he floods the market with all the land he already has, ours will be worth even less than it is today,” his father put in. “Besides, he offered something that we think makes the whole thing more worthy of our consideration. We'll talk about it at supper.”

Logan buttoned his lips and nodded, knowing that if he opened his mouth, he would just start yelling.

This decision was too important for that, and he respected his parents too much to try and make his point by getting into a heated argument. It wasn't a night out with the boys.

"I'm gonna pick up Josie from the library," he told them.

"Shower first," his mother said firmly.

His father elbowed her.

"I'll wash up," he agreed, heading for the house.



LOGAN TOOK a quick five minutes under the hot shower and emerged feeling better physically, even though his heart still felt like it was breaking.

He dressed quickly and headed out to his truck, waving to the guys on his way and wondering if all of them already knew what his parents were considering.

Was he the only fool whose happiness seemed to be connected to this land?

He tried to consider the possibility of doing something else with his life as he navigated the curving roads to town.

There would be money from the sale, and he suspected his brother, Ansel, might go back to school. Ansel worked hard on the farm, but he was a gentle soul, and Logan had the feeling there were other things he might like to do with his life. Besides, Ansel had a little boy to support. Maybe he would prefer a job that paid well. Logan had never thought to ask him.

Meanwhile, Logan had no idea what he would do with himself. It had never seemed pathetic to him before that his home and his identity were wrapped up together.

But now he could see that maybe it would have been good for him to go away to college after all, like Levi had, and find

other ways to serve his community and keep a roof over his head.

The thing of it was, he liked the roof that he already planned to have over his head, even if there was a tarp covering part of it.

He tried to imagine someone else fixing up the lodge, and couldn't.

Why didn't I take advantage sooner? If I had already restored it and was living in it, there's no way they would sell.

He wondered what would happen with his brother's house. Surely they wouldn't sell that out from under him and Lucas. There must be a way to carve out the big house and Ansel's from the rest before selling.

A horrible thought occurred to him that sent ice through his veins.

The two of them could probably move into the condos quite happily. And Ansel's life was wrapped up in Lucas, so he wouldn't care where he was so long as his son was with him.

But Logan couldn't imagine the Williams Homestead without a Williams in it.

That wannabe rancher Radcliffe seemed to be moving so slowly with the properties he bought. The buildings would stand empty a long time, maybe forever, before he got to them.

Logan had already seen family move away and houses fall into disrepair quickly. Pennsylvania winters were frigid, but the summers were steamy, practically turning the homestead into a rain forest.

He tried to blink away the image of the house he had grown up in with moss covering the roof and fingers of English ivy sliding into the cracks between the stones, the porch rotting out, and cobwebs covering the family photos and his mother's beloved antique furnishings.

Of course, his parents wouldn't leave all that stuff behind if they moved, but it was hard to shake the mental picture it made.

Gripping the wheel, he forced himself to focus on what he was doing *right now*. He was going to pick up Josie, and do something fun with her. They would have dinner with the family, hopefully Levi and Tanner would stick around, and it would feel like old times.

Afterward, he could talk calmly with his parents, and remind them of all the ways they loved their home and all the reasons they couldn't take it away from future generations.

Josie and Lucas are their only grandchildren, a terrible voice in his head whispered. Ansel won't marry again, Levi's hung up on someone he'll never have, Emma shows no interest in dating, and you've already been told by an eight-year-old that you'll never have a serious girlfriend...

He growled at himself and tried to focus on the road.

CAROLINE

Caroline wrinkled her nose as she placed a spoonful of powdered creamer in her coffee, stirring it quickly so it wouldn't form into disgusting lumps.

“What's that?” Josie asked.

Caroline had set Josie up at the computer in her office yesterday since time limits were in effect on the regular computers in the main library. Josie was able to concentrate better in the smaller, quieter space, but she was clearly a little bored. So, she entertained herself by peppering Caroline with questions every time she stopped in.

“It's powdered creamer,” Caroline explained. “It's supposed to make the coffee taste better.”

“Then why did you make that face?” Josie asked.

Caroline laughed.

“What?” Josie asked.

“I guess I didn't realize I was making a face,” Caroline told her. “Powdered creamer is better than nothing, but it's nothing like real cream in coffee. It's kind of like if you put sand on your toast instead of butter.”

Josie laughed.

Caroline smiled, wishing she was better company for the poor child. But she really could only stop in for five or ten minutes during her breaks between library activities and helping visitors.

“How’s your schoolwork going?” she asked Josie.

“Oh, it’s great,” Josie said. “Regular classes are pretty easy, but I get to do a special project about living on a farm. Right now, I’m writing a list of things I might like to learn about.”

“That’s amazing,” Josie said. “Then you can show it to your uncle and see what he thinks.”

“Exactly,” Josie said. “We’re going to have so much fun.”

Caroline smiled at her fondly and gave a little wave as she slipped out. She’d barely taken two steps when the library director waved her over.

“Hi, Helen,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Walk with me,” Helen said, heading for the steps down to the main library.

Caroline got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had Helen’s blessing for Josie to be in her office, and she had been carefully attending to all her duties. But maybe the director felt she was distracted having the girl there.

Helen grabbed her hand and pulled her into the History section. It was usually the quietest part of the library during the day, though students raided it for projects in the evenings.

“I just wanted to have a word with you about her uncle,” Helen whispered. “How well do you know him?”

Standing close and whispering between the tall stacks of books, Caroline suddenly felt as if she were in some kind of spy novel.

“I know him a bit,” she whispered back. “He was a senior when I was a freshman. Our moms are friendly.”

“Well, he seems like a nice enough guy,” Helen said. “But he’s not exactly dating material. I just thought you should know.”

Good heavens, is my crush that noticeable?

“We’re not dating,” Caroline said tightly.

“Josie mentioned you were at the house last night,” Helen said.

“He’s helping me build a table for the turkey drive,” Caroline said. “It’ll be much better than those card tables we had last year.”

“*You’re* building a table?” Helen asked dubiously.

“Well, mostly he’s building it,” Caroline admitted.

“Anyway,” Helen said. “He dated my niece for a little while last year. She really liked him. But as soon as it seemed like it might get serious, he headed for the hills.”

Caroline bit back her instinct to defend Logan. After all, not every relationship led to something serious.

But Helen adored her niece.

And there was something to what she was saying that rang true. Logan was handsome and kind, but he was also impulsive. Maybe he wouldn’t make a great boyfriend.

In any case, it didn’t matter for Caroline. They had nothing in common, and he wasn’t attracted to her anyway.

“That’s a shame about Amber,” she said. “She’s such a lovely person.”

Helen puffed up visibly with pride.

“Anyway,” Caroline went on, “it’s a non-issue for me. We couldn’t be more opposite to each other. He’s just helping out the library.”

“Oh good,” Helen said. “I heard he was going out with Sloane Greenfield anyway.”

Caroline felt a flare of jealousy and tried her best to suppress it.

Sloan Greenfield was the total package. The local real estate agent was beautiful, but even her pretty face paled in comparison to how kind and cheerful she was. Everyone knew her for her honesty in business and the charity work she did quietly on the side.

If Logan was dating Sloane, then he was a very lucky man. And if Caroline was really his friend, then she should be happy for him.

“I have no idea about that,” Caroline said quickly. “He really is just helping out with the table. But thanks again for the advice. You always have my back.”

“You’ve got that right,” Helen said cheerfully. “Speak of the devil.”

Sure enough, Logan stormed through the library doors and jogged up the steps to the Children’s section. There was something in the set of his jaw and the roughness of his movement that sent a prickle down her spine.

“I’ll just help get Josie packed up,” Caroline said, following him.

She could sense Helen judging her, but she didn’t care. Logan’s odd energy made her want to be sure everything was okay.

“But Miss Caroline said if I could stay a few extra minutes, I could read the first book to the kids who are coming in,” Josie was saying as Caroline stepped into the office.

“No,” Logan said firmly. “We have to go now. We don’t have a few minutes.”

“Is everything okay?” Caroline asked gently.

“Everything’s fine,” he said brusquely, as if her concern was an annoyance. “Let’s go, Josie.”

Josie grabbed her backpack and gave Caroline a quick wave on their way out the door.

Caroline stood in their wake for a few minutes afterward. Her heart was pounding like she had just been in a confrontation, though all he had done was say he was in a rush.

You’re an idiot for trying to defend him, even in your own mind, a little voice in the back of her head scolded her. He can’t even commit to a consistent friendship. And he’s wearing the evidence of how he acts with his friends right on his face.

An outrageously out-of-character image of herself punching him in the other eye flashed through Caroline's mind and she almost laughed out loud.

Maybe Helen was right. Any relationship at all with Logan Williams was probably going to have her off her rocker in no time.

She decided to keep things with him as much at arm's length as possible from here on. After all, the table was built. They would just be seeing each other when he dropped Josie off and picked her up for a few more days until his internet was fixed. It shouldn't be hard to avoid talking with him.

LOGAN

Logan could hear the family sitting down to dinner as he headed down the stairs to join them.

He'd washed up and given himself about a hundred pep talks.

The only way to get through to his parents was by communicating with them their way. And that meant staying calm and rational, and most of all, being patient and listening to what they had to say without interrupting.

Unfortunately, none of those were Logan's gifts. He was going to have to keep his hotheadedness locked down tight tonight.

"Hey, Uncle Logan," Josie yelled happily, destroying any hope he might have harbored that he could slip into the room unnoticed.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said. "Supper smells amazing. Did you help?"

"Yes," she announced. "I cut up all the zucchini and Grandma let me season it and put it in the oven myself."

"I can't wait to try it," he told her, pulling out the chair next to hers.

Ansel gave him a nod, and he nodded back.

"Hey, Lucas," he said to Ansel's son, who was too busy smiling at Josie to notice.

“Hey, Logan,” Tanner said, grinning at him from the other side of Lucas.

“Tanner,” he replied.

His father said a quick grace, and everyone dug in.

For a heavenly interlude, there were only the sounds of forks tapping plates and requests for butter to be passed, as well as the occasional contented sigh.

After a day of working outside, Logan and Ansel were always ravenous. Either of them would have relished even a peanut butter sandwich.

But Annabelle Williams always ensured it was far more than that. She was a miracle worker in the kitchen, seemingly always able to pull together something lovely, even when times were tight, and things had to stretch.

Her grandmother had survived the Great Depression, and Annabelle herself had been a teenager during the Farm Crisis.

If my parents and grandparents could survive all that, she was fond of saying, I can get us through one bad year.

As a boy, Logan had never imagined that his favorite Pancakes-for-Dinner night was more about saving on meat than it was about indulging his boyhood sweet tooth. And the conversation at suppertime made the table feel like a party was happening every single night, in good times and lean.

“Well, we appreciate your help today, Tanner,” his dad said at last, leaning back and patting his belly.

“Feed me like this, and I’ll come cut up a tree any day you want,” Tanner laughed.

“Well, we all know it’s thanks to you that I could use the oven and we aren’t eating cold sandwiches by candlelight, Tanner,” Logan’s mother said, smiling fondly at him.

“When will you all find out about the internet?” Tanner asked innocently.

Don’t say a word, Logan warned himself.

“That’s a little more complicated,” Logan’s dad said carefully. “They’re gonna have to run new lines and bring in fresh equipment. Our old stuff isn’t something they service anymore. From the way Gil made it sound, you’d think it belonged in a museum somewhere.”

Keep your mouth shut, Logan.

“That will be great, right?” Tanner asked. “That fiber optic is really good. And you could put it on the other houses, too. It’s much easier to run that stuff when you’re installing a whole new system.”

Don’t say anything...

“Mom and Dad aren’t sure about the internet, because they’re thinking of selling the farm to that city idiot,” Logan blurted out without meaning to.

“Sell the farm?” Lucas echoed worriedly, suddenly not fixated on his cousin.

“Not our house, son,” Ansel told him quietly.

“So, you knew about this?” Logan demanded, suddenly shot through with rage.

Ansel glanced over at their father, as if asking for permission.

It made Logan feel like steam was about to come out of his ears.

“And you know about it, too,” his father pointed out.

“What will happen to this house?” Logan demanded.

“If we went through with this, we would keep this house, your brother’s house, and the lodge,” his dad said calmly. “And we would sell the rest.”

“The whole farm and the forest?” Logan felt like someone had hit him in the chest with a sledgehammer.

Almost every happy memory from his childhood was out in those trees or in the sunny meadows. The idea of it belonging to someone else who could strip the trees and the wildflowers hurt him physically.

“It’s just land, son,” his mother said softly.

“What am I supposed to do for work?” he demanded.

“That’s the best part,” his father said. “He’s offered to take you and Ansel on. You’d have a regular salary and benefits, things I could never guarantee for you.”

“I don’t care about those things,” Logan said.

“You might one day,” his mother said. “One day, you might care very much about whether or not you can support a family.”

“Is this supposed to be my fault?” he yelled. “Are you doing this because I stopped dating Sloane Greenfield and you just want to get me married off and out of your hair?”

“Son, I don’t like your tone,” his father said.

“Josie and Lucas, want to help me put on a pot of coffee?” his mother asked quietly.

The kids were up from the table in record time.

Logan wondered suddenly if his yelling had frightened them, and more pain fell onto his chest.

“Now,” his father said quietly. “I’m going to speak plainly about family business. Tanner, you’re welcome to go if you don’t want to hear about it. But it’s the simple truth and no reason to varnish it.”

“I’ll stay, if it’s okay, Uncle Alistair,” Tanner said politely.

“Fine,” Logan’s dad replied. “The simple truth is this: The place is too big for us. And with only a few men to work it, we can’t turn things around enough to pay for roofing and plumbing on these old houses. No man wants to watch what his great-grandparents built fall to wrack and ruin. And what is being offered here allows you boys to continue to do farm work, if that’s what you want.”

“I’d rather not work at all, than work another man’s land,” Logan murmured.

“Why don’t you try telling that to Christopher Bell?” his father asked him, his pale blue eyes flashing with indignant

fire. “He served his country, and now he’s grateful to have a job on Cassidy Farm. What about the men we hire every year at harvest? Do you think less of them for coming here to help you empty our fields?”

Logan’s heart sank and he wished he could disappear into the floor. Part of him knew he was acting like an entitled jerk, but he couldn’t seem to help himself.

“Your mother and I were both teenagers during the Farm Crisis,” his father went on. “We watched our parents scramble when the value of their land plummeted just as interest rates shot up and crop prices dropped. It all happened because land prices went up too high, too fast. Can you blame us for thinking of getting out now, when we know that a single man could cause a localized crisis right here in our community, simply by dumping his current portfolio on the market?”

Logan opened and closed his mouth, unable to speak for fear that he would yell some more, or more likely, just weep.

He hadn’t thought about it from his parents’ perspective, or from anyone’s perspective but his own.

Even Ansel sat silently across from him.

Logan had to wonder what a regular salary and benefits would mean for the uncomplaining single dad.

“Okay, let’s have some coffee,” his mother said cheerfully, walking in carrying a tray, with Josie and Lucas at her heels.

There was blessed silence as the sugar bowl and creamer got passed around.

“Did you know Miss Caroline has to have her coffee with nasty powder instead of cream?” Josie asked, breaking the silence.

The mention of the kindhearted librarian had Logan’s heart spiraling downward all over again. He’d been in such a rush to get back here and grill his parents, that he hadn’t even stopped to say thank you to her today.

“How is Miss Caroline?” Logan’s father asked.

“I probably hurt her feelings today,” Logan said out loud before Josie could answer.

Realizing his mistake, he glanced over at his mother.

She buttoned her lips and shook her head, clearly very disappointed in him.

I will make things right with Caroline, he told himself, as the adults began sipping coffee in the awkward silence. *That's one thing that's actually in my hands.*

CAROLINE

Caroline reread the text on her phone until her eyes blurred with tears.

Keep it together. You're at work. Children are going to start coming in any minute and they need your help.

She bit her lip and willed herself to hold it together for the kids.

As if on cue, Josie burst into her office, looking radiant with excitement, and holding out a little glass jar.

“Miss Caroline, Miss Caroline,” Josie said. “I learned how to milk a cow this morning. Uncle Logan taught me. And we brought you fresh cream. It’s going to be so good in your coffee!”

Caroline couldn’t help smiling through her tears at Josie’s joy and kindness.

“Josie, this is amazing,” she exclaimed, hoping the child wouldn’t notice her eyes. “You milked the cow *yourself*, and brought fresh cream to the library?”

Josie was nodding up and down excitedly the whole time Caroline was speaking.

“Yes,” she said. “Isn’t that so cool? Now you don’t have to put that powder in your coffee.”

The tall presence of Logan Williams loomed behind the girl, but Caroline couldn’t handle his cool attitude today, so she kept her eyes on Josie.

“This is spectacular,” Caroline told her. “I don’t think anyone has ever done anything so thoughtful for me. Thank you so much.”

Josie beamed, and it was a balm to Caroline’s heart.

Just then, Helen happened past.

“What’s that?” Helen asked, pointing to the little jar.

Caroline strongly suspected Helen had heard everything and was just giving Josie another chance to talk about her accomplishment. And Caroline could have hugged her friend and colleague for giving Josie that pleasure.

“I learned how to milk a cow,” Josie squeaked.

“Hey,” Logan said, his deep voice softer than usual. “Can I talk to you for a minute, Caroline?”

She glanced over at Helen, hoping the other woman would shake her head, or tell her they had a project to work on.

Instead, she waved her away, still listening to Josie talk about what it was like to milk the cow.

“Let’s walk outside for a sec,” he said.

She wondered if he was going to tell her that today would be Josie’s last day. It was odd how sad that made her. But of course, she was already feeling sad.

Logan pushed open the doors of the building and held them for her, and a blast of cold air lifted Caroline’s hair as she followed him out.

The bright scarlets and golden leaves on the trees were gone, and what was left now were only rusty, dry remnants of that early fall splendor. The sky was gray, the sidewalk was gray, and Caroline felt like the color had been leached from her heart as well.

“I have to apologize,” Logan said, walking her toward the amphitheater.

It was cold enough out that no one else was there and the two of them stood alone in the little park overlooking the rest of the village.

“My behavior yesterday was—” he began.

But she burst into tears before he could continue, thinking about that text again.

“I’m so sorry,” he told her. “I had no idea.”

“It’s my mom,” she blurted out. “She sent me this text...”

She took a breath, willing herself to stop sobbing.

Logan waited patiently, the expression on his face assuring her that he would wait as long as it took for her to talk to him.

Somehow, that was enough to give her the strength.

“My dad loved Thanksgiving,” she told him. “He always had a new recipe to try, and a new way to cook the turkey. We used to research for weeks to come up with the perfect menu. And the cooking would start days in advance. He always took me with him to pick out a turkey. And we would bake pies until the house smelled so good. He would invite any of the boys from work who had no place to go. It was everything he loved - good food, plenty of company, and sharing old stories. It meant the world to him, and to us too.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Logan said, nodding.

“Well, we’re getting close now,” Caroline said. “So, I messaged my mom today about recipes.”

Logan nodded, his eyes sympathetic, as if he knew what was coming next, though of course, he couldn’t.

“She said it was an awful lot for just the two of us,” Caroline whispered. “And maybe we should just go to a restaurant.”

“Oh, Caroline,” Logan murmured.

That sympathy was enough to push her over the edge, and suddenly she was sobbing again.

Before she knew what was happening, Logan had pulled her into a bear hug, holding her against the warmth of his wide chest, arms wrapped around her tight enough to make her feel anchored.

“Some stuff is going on with my family right now, too,” he whispered into her hair. “And I’m learning how much I really hate when things change. Changes are hard. But we’ll figure it all out. We just have to remember that they love us.”

She wondered what could be going on in Logan’s family to make him sound so sad.

We just have to remember that they love us.

His words echoed back, and she realized she was feeling a little better. She wasn’t sure if it was the hug, or the reminder that her mom loved her more than life itself.

Or maybe it was the funny little spark of gratitude she felt when he used the word *we*.

Yesterday, she had sworn that she didn’t want his friendship. But he had apologized for that, or tried to, before she started bawling all over him. And he was here to listen today.

“Now, I think you have to go in and have coffee with cream, even if you already had some today,” he whispered, letting her hear the smile in his voice. “I’ve never seen anyone as excited as Josie was today to bring it to you.”

“She’s such a wonderful girl,” Caroline said, smiling as she backed up slightly to show him she was ready for him to release her from the hug.

“Agreed,” he said, stepping back right away. “Though I am a little biased.”

“She’s very smart,” Caroline told him. “She finishes her schoolwork very quickly, and then moves on to her independent project. And she loves helping the little kids choose books, or reading to them when she has a break. She’s a very generous girl.”

She didn’t say out loud that Josie’s generous impulses reminded her of Logan, who was the kind of person to suddenly build a table, just to help someone they had only really seen in passing over the years.

“About that,” he said. “I was trying to say that I’m really ashamed of my behavior yesterday. I had just gotten some bad news, and I realize I stormed in here acting like a maniac. She can obviously stay a little late to read to the kids, or whatever, anytime. And again, I’m really sorry.”

“We’re good,” Caroline told him, meaning it.

He smiled down at her like she had just told him he won the lottery, and she felt it again, that little shiver of *something* that only Logan Williams ever seemed to send down her spine.

“Let’s go have some coffee,” she said quickly, marching back into the municipal building, before her face could give her away.

LOGAN

Logan made it home in record time. But instead of heading out to the lodge to work on it, he jogged up the steps of the big house instead.

“Hey, Ma,” he yelled, heading for the kitchen.

It smelled like bacon was cooking, and his stomach grumbled appreciatively.

For the last couple of days, he’d been getting right to work on the lodge after dropping Josie off. It meant he got way more done, but he had to admit that he missed having a hot breakfast.

“Logan,” his dad said, lowering the newspaper and giving him a warm smile.

“Did you eat?” his mother asked, from the stove. “I’ve got bacon and eggs going.”

“I could eat,” he said, grinning at her.

She smiled back indulgently and cracked a few more eggs into the blue china bowl on the counter.

“There’s something else,” he said. “Something I wanted to ask you both.”

He sensed his mother freeze up, as if she was afraid he was going to ask about the farm again. He felt a familiar pang in his chest, but pressed on, determined not to think about it right now.

“It’s about Thanksgiving,” he clarified. “Caroline’s dad used to make a big thing about it - weeks of preparation, extra guests from the landscaping company at the table, the whole nine yards. Caroline used to help him with the whole thing.”

“Sounds like Bill,” his dad said with a wistful smile.

“Caroline was upset today,” Logan went on. “She messaged her mother about picking up a turkey and her mom suggested they just go to a restaurant.”

His dad hissed in a breath.

“They sold the house,” his mother said thoughtfully. “Caroline’s in a tiny apartment and her mom’s over in the condos, so they don’t have as much space to cook in as before. And they won’t have strays from the business, since they sold that, too. I can see why Penny might think preparing a whole dinner might end with just the two of them sitting at a small table alone and feeling let down. Maybe she’s thinking a new tradition is better.”

“Very true, honey,” his dad said.

“I have another idea,” Logan said. “What if we invited them here? I could even have her over beforehand to do some of the prep.”

His mother gave his father a knowing look.

“It’s not like that,” he sighed. “It really isn’t.”

“Well, if it’s not, then I really don’t understand all this,” his father said. “You obviously care for this girl.”

“Can’t I care about her without wanting to be her boyfriend?” he asked. “You aren’t like this when I spend time with the guys.”

“You don’t worry about how the guys are feeling,” his dad said. “Or invite them over to bake pies.”

His mother cleared her throat.

“Sure, son,” his father said. “Of course, they’re more than welcome to come. And she can help out all she wants, right Annabelle?”

“I’d love that,” his mother said, smiling as she laid slices of the still crackling bacon on a paper towel to cool.

The wild thought occurred that if this Thanksgiving turned out to be magical enough, then maybe his parents would remember all the reasons they loved owning this place - the whole place - not a carved off piece of it.

“Can I be in charge of the turkey this year?” he asked, wandering over to the stove and swiping a piece of bacon.

“Fine,” his mom said happily, giving him a light smack. “Hand me those eggs.”

He handed her the bowl of eggs and grabbed bread for the toaster.

It was hard not to notice his mom humming a Christmas carol as she began cooking up the eggs in the bacon grease.

She’s probably extra happy because she thinks I have a girlfriend.

He watched the coils in the toaster glow orange and then red as the delicious scent of toasting bread joined the other smells of breakfast.

For a moment, he allowed himself to picture Caroline Bard as his girlfriend. What would it be like to spend time with her, take her out to dinner and the movies, and go to fundraisers and events?

For some reason, it didn’t seem as awful as it did when he pictured it with any of the women he’d dated in the past.

Caroline was a genuine person. He couldn’t picture her trying to impress anyone with her opinions, or wrinkling her nose at what he had chosen to wear.

But he still couldn’t *really* imagine it with Caroline, either.

After all, a nice girl like Caroline Bard wasn’t just looking to go out and have fun. She was a serious person, who would want marriage and children one day.

And those things that made him feel trapped just thinking about them.

“The toast,” his mother chirped.

Sure enough, tendrils of smoke were coming out of the toaster, while he stood there staring at it like an idiot.

He ejected the bread, burning his fingers as he plucked it out and set it on a plate.

“He’s got it bad,” his father murmured under his breath from over at the table.

Logan didn’t have the heart to tell him he had it wrong.

He couldn’t have it bad for Caroline Bard. He just couldn’t.

CAROLINE

Caroline and her mom had just finished cleaning all the big floor-to-ceiling windows in the condo, then showering and putting on their pajamas to eat ice cream and watch a movie.

The whole place smelled clean and tidy, and the sky outside was a promising swirl of gray. Maybe today there would be snow flurries, which would make their plans all the more cozy.

Caroline was dipping her spoon into a mug of coffee ice cream as her mom searched for a good movie, when her cell phone rang.

She pulled it out of her pocket on instinct, expecting to see a spam caller.

When she saw who it was, she blinked in disbelief for a minute.

“Who is it?” her mom asked.

“It’s Logan,” Caroline said, trying to hide her surprise from her mother.

She and Logan had texted once or twice about the table or Josie’s schoolwork. He had never called her.

“Hello?” she said.

“What are you doing right now?” he asked her.

There was something effervescent in his deep voice, like he knew something wonderful that she didn’t.

“I’m hanging out with my mom,” she told him. “What’s up?”

“Perfect,” he said. “Put me on speaker.”

“Hang on,” she said, turning to her mom. “He wants me to put him on speakerphone.”

Her mother nodded, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“Okay,” she told him, tapping the button and setting the phone on her knee. “You’re on speaker.”

“Hi, Mrs. Bard,” Logan said, his voice somehow sounding deep in spite of the phone’s terrible speaker.

“Hello, Logan,” her mom said politely. “How are you? How’s your mom?”

“We’re all doing fine,” he told her. “I’m calling because we wanted to invite you and Caroline to Thanksgiving, if you don’t already have plans.”

Caroline felt like all the air had just left her lungs. She swallowed over the lump that was suddenly in her throat, wishing she could tell him she hadn’t been fishing for an invitation when she told him about her mom.

But she could never let her mom know how upset she had been.

“Oh,” her mother was saying. “That’s very kind, but we wouldn’t want to impose on your family tradition.”

“Well, that’s just the thing, Mrs. Bard,” Logan said. “My mom loves to have a full table at Thanksgiving, but this year my brother won’t be able to make it. She was so excited when she asked me to invite you.”

Caroline glanced over at her mom, knowing she would never disappoint Annabelle Williams.

“What do you think, Caroline?” her mom asked.

“It sounds wonderful,” Caroline said. “What can we bring?”

“Well, that’s just the thing,” Logan said, sounding a little awkward. “I, um, I’m in charge of the turkey this year, and I may be in over my head. Any chance I can get you to contribute expertise to the process, Caroline?”

Her mom winked at her, and she felt her heart squeeze like it was overfull.

“I’d be glad to help,” she told him.

“Great,” he said enthusiastically. “Josie and I were going to head out and choose a turkey this afternoon. Any chance you might want to join us?”

“I’d love to,” she told him.

“I’ll pick you up at one,” he told her. “Your place or the condos?”

“Um, the condos, I guess.”

“See you then,” he said. “Thanks for doing this. See you later, Mrs. Bard.”

“See you later, Logan,” Caroline’s mom said, smiling.

Caroline hung up, but she held the phone in her hand for just a moment longer, wondering how one call could change so much about the holidays.

“He really likes you,” her mom said softly. “It’s funny, I never thought I’d see that boy settle down.”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” Caroline said automatically. “We’re just friends.”

“Hm,” her mother said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Caroline demanded.

“Oh, nothing,” her mom said. “Our ice cream is melting. Let’s watch *While You Were Sleeping*.”

It was one of their favorites, and the perfect way to distract Caroline from her musings. She smiled and settled into the sofa as the opening credits began, trying not to get emotional about what Logan had done.

It would be easy to tell herself he had no idea what this meant to her.

But she knew better.

He's a good man.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Caroline was dressed and ready to head out turkey shopping with Logan and Josie.

As soon as she got to the lobby, she could see they were already waiting for her out front.

She stepped outside and shivered. She didn't have her heavy coat with her at her mom's, but she figured her jacket was just fine for the grocery store.

It was kind of endearing that he wanted her to help choose the turkey. In her experience, there wasn't much to it, except getting the right size for the number of people you were expecting.

"*Miss Caroline,*" Josie yelled, waving at her from the backseat as she approached, as if there might be multiple pick-up trucks waiting for her.

She'd never really noticed before, but with the generally older population there, the condos were pretty much the only place in Trinity Falls where a pick-up truck wasn't a super common sight.

"I'm glad you could come," Logan said, hopping out and opening the passenger side door for her.

She felt her cheeks heat, and hoped she wasn't red as a lobster. His simple gesture made her feel special and cared-for.

Just friends, just friends, she reminded herself on a loop in her mind.

"Are you excited to choose a turkey?" Josie asked from the backseat.

"Sure," Caroline said. "How about you?"

“I’m not sure,” Josie said. “But Uncle Logan says it’s a Thanksgiving tradition.”

“Of course it is,” Caroline said. “And it’s not hard, you just decide what kind you want, and how big, and you’re all set. The tough decisions are all about sides and the preparation.”

“Ready to go?” Logan asked as he hopped in.

“Yes,” Caroline said. “Absolutely.”

He pulled out onto Harvard, but instead of turning left to go into town, he turned right.

While Caroline was a little surprised he wasn’t picking up a turkey from the local Co-op, she understood that meat from the local grocer was expensive. Maybe they were headed to one of the big franchise groceries out on Route 1.

They crossed the little bridge over the creek where everyone liked to ice skate in January, and headed into a section of wooded suburbia that stretched from there to the farmland beyond.

“Christmas lights,” Josie called out from the backseat.

Sure enough, a family was out putting up their decorations. The dad was up on a ladder, carefully hooking a strand on some nails. Below, the mom and a couple of little kids were untangling a big ball of lights.

Caroline thought about how much she’d loved hanging lights with her dad, and felt joy and sorrow at once.

Their lawn had always been festooned with a crowd of lit up plastic figures, too, though she and her mom drew the line at having more than one Santa Claus.

“It just isn’t right to have more than one,” she would argue with her dad, half-laughing. “It makes it less believable.”

“Do you think anyone is really being fooled by this guy?” he would ask, pointing at the two-foot-tall smiling Saint Nick on the lawn. “Besides, we have three Santas. We can’t just leave the other two locked up in the shed during the holidays.”

“Well, then they’d better all flip a coin to figure out which of them gets the spotlight this year,” her mom would laugh.

Her dad would always make a show of deciding between his Santas, and they would finally relent and allow him to have one in the front yard, one in the back, and one on the roof.

Those were such happy days. Caroline would have endured a whole battalion of Santas on the front lawn for just one more hour with her dad, and she knew her mom would happily do the same.

But nothing would bring him back. The best she could do was try to embody his holiday spirit.

“Hey, do you like the Christmas station?” she asked Logan. “We could put some holiday music on to get in the mood for turkey shopping.”

Josie cheered in the backseat and Logan grinned and turned on the radio. Elvis was crooning about having a blue Christmas without his sweetheart.

To Caroline’s surprise and delight, Logan and Josie joined right in, their voices loud and joyful, if not completely in tune, as they warbled and howled along with *the king*, as her dad used to refer to him.

“Aren’t you going to sing, too, Miss Caroline?” Josie asked.

“Oh, wow, no,” Caroline told her. “I’m not much of a singer.”

“We’re not exactly tour-ready ourselves,” Logan laughed. “But it’s fun to sing. Come on, let you hair down. Pretend you’re in the shower.”

“I don’t sing in the shower, either,” she said. “But I love listening to you guys.”

“Why even bother to *take* a shower if you aren’t going to sing?” Logan joked, sending Josie into hysterical giggles.

“Oh, Josie,” Caroline remembered. “Did you see the sign on the bulletin board about the Library Lock-in?”

“No,” Josie said. “What’s a Library Lock-in?”

“Well,” Caroline said. “In our case, it means a sleepover at the library, and a breakfast with Santa Claus the next morning. Kids who read a hundred books this year and filled out a form about each one, and kids who volunteered at the library are invited.”

“I volunteer at the library,” Josie realized out loud.

“You sure do,” Caroline said. “And if you’d been here another month or two, I’ll bet you would have read a hundred books, too.”

“Can I come?” Josie asked excitedly.

Suddenly, Caroline felt like a fool. She was getting so close with Josie it felt like she could just invite her to attend. But of course, Logan would have to weigh in and maybe her dad, too.

“Well, an overnight is a big deal,” Caroline said carefully. “Your uncle will probably want to talk with your dad about it.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Logan said right away. “I’m in charge of Josie right now, and if you’re there, I have no worries or doubts.”

“Yes,” Josie said. “I can’t wait. Do we get to tell scary stories?”

“Well, some of the kids will be a little younger than you,” Caroline said.

“Oh, right,” Josie told her. “There’s a breakfast with Santa in the morning, right? Who’s playing Santa?”

Caroline’s eyes darted to Logan’s.

“Josie pretty much outsmarted her dad two years ago on the Santa thing,” he chuckled. “She caught him red-handed eating the cookies and asked a lot of questions he couldn’t answer. Now she helps carry on the tradition for her little cousins, right?”

“Right,” Josie said. “It’s fun to believe, but it’s even more fun to help. Who’s going to be Santa at the breakfast, Miss

Caroline?”

“Well, I haven’t figured that out yet,” Caroline said. “Joe Cassidy is usually the library Santa, but he’s laid up with his knees this year.”

“Uncle Logan should do it,” Josie said excitedly. “He’s got a deep laugh, and he loves kids.”

“He might be a little young,” Caroline said. “Besides, I think your uncle has other things to do on a Saturday morning.”

“No way,” Logan said. “Let me try out.”

She laughed at the idea of a Santa Claus try-out. “We weren’t going to have auditions or anything—” she began.

“*Ho-ho-ho*,” Logan boomed, very convincingly.

“Wow,” she said. “That was... remarkable.”

“Uncle Logan pretends to be Santa eating the cookies at night when the cousins sleep over,” Josie said. “He has *experience*.”

“Well, in that case, you’re hired,” Caroline said. “I mean, sort of. There’s no pay or anything.”

“You can pay me in cookies,” Logan boomed, still pretending to be Santa Claus.

Josie laughed, and Bobby Helms started singing “Jingle Bell Rock” on the radio, and for the first time in a long time, Caroline felt *just happy* looking forward to the holidays.

CAROLINE

Caroline watched in amazement as Logan turned down a gravel road into what seemed to be a farm.

“Not the grocery store?” she murmured.

“Of course not,” he said. “Reggie Webb has the best birds in Tarker County.”

Caroline got a sinking feeling in her belly as he pulled up next to a neat little farmhouse.

“Logan Williams,” Reggie’s familiar voice called out from the front window before the door burst open.

Everyone in town knew Reggie Webb. He frequented the coffee shop and the bench out front of the hair salon, where he held court, sharing important town history and harmless gossip freely with anyone who had time to listen.

Caroline’s dad used to say that Reggie Webb didn’t have a mean bone in his body - there was no room for meanness with all the information he had on the town and its people inside him, all bursting at the seams to come out.

“Hey, there,” Logan said, hopping out of the truck.

“You brought some friends,” Reggie said with a smile. “That’s Bill Bard’s girl. And, hey, is that little Josephine back there?”

“Sure is,” Logan said. “Come on out, ladies. Let’s have a look at the best turkeys in Tarker County.”

“I won’t deny it,” Reggie chuckled. “They’re definitely the most spoiled.”

“What do you mean?” Josie asked, skipping right up to him, ready to learn.

“Well, my turkeys are free to roam,” Reggie said, walking alongside her. “And they eat organic feed, to keep them healthy and content.”

“Free to roam?” Josie asked.

“You’ll see,” Reggie chuckled.

They got behind the house and he opened a gate. Chicken wire fencing went as far as Caroline could see, past the yard and into the trees.

“Look around,” Reggie told Josie. “Do you see any turkeys?”

Josie looked hard, and Caroline joined her.

But there wasn’t a single turkey around. Maybe this was Reggie’s way of letting him know they were all sold out.

“Now watch this,” Reggie said, letting out a strange, high-pitched warble that had to be some sort of turkey call.

Suddenly, the bushes all around them came alive as turkeys poured out of the trees, waddling up to Reggie Webb, gobbling all the way, like he was their long-lost best friend.

While their beady black eyes, and the brilliant red wattle that surrounded their heads made them look almost like aliens, there was something endearing about the way they followed Reggie around, chattering excitedly like he was about to spill some interesting gossip.

“They’re so funny,” Josie exclaimed. “Why are they following you?”

“Turkeys are naturally curious birds,” Reggie explained. “Also, they’re hoping I’m going to give them some mealworms.”

“*Are you* going to give them some mealworms?” Josie asked.

“No,” Reggie told her. “But you can, if you’d like.”

“Can I, Uncle Logan?” Josie asked, bouncing up and down in place.

“Sure, sweetheart,” Logan told her, looking proud as punch that his niece wasn’t afraid of a few worms.

Caroline, on the other hand, had no interest in handing out bugs of any kind. And she was pretty sure there had to be a ton of turkey poop here in the yard. It couldn’t be good to step in that and then go into the house.

It was also getting pretty cold. She regretted not swinging home for her coat.

“Hey,” Logan said, walking over and draping his own coat over her shoulders, as if he had read her mind. “How are you doing?”

The heat of the coat was delicious, and it carried traces of sweet hay and spice that was Logan’s own signature scent.

“Won’t you be cold?” she asked, hoping it wasn’t obvious how much she was enjoying the coat.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m used to working outside every day. Besides, I’ve got my lined flannel.”

He flipped the collar of his shirt to show the fleece lining inside.

“Toasty warm,” he told her, winking. “Dad got these for Ansel, Emma, and me last Christmas.”

Emma. That was the sister who was now working for Sebastian Radcliffe, the city man who had bought up so many local farms. Caroline knew it was kind of a sore spot.

“Do you miss working with your sister?” she asked impulsively.

“Yeah,” he said. “I miss it a lot.”

“Is it harder to do everything with just Ansel?” she asked.

“Emma got a lot done,” Logan agreed. “She was great with the horses. And it was easier with three of us. But I miss her

spirit more than anything. She was always happy and laughing, even when the sun was hardly up, and things were already going wrong.”

“Sounds like Emma,” Caroline agreed. They had been in school together, though Caroline had been a total nerd, and Emma had been an outgoing athlete.

“Brad was like that, too,” Logan said, shrugging. “We used to share morning chores when we were kids. Shame it’s just Ansel and me that stayed. We’re efficient, because we both work quietly. But sometimes it’s nice to horse around a little.”

She nodded. At the library, she had plenty of company every day. She couldn’t imagine being out on a farm under the silent sky, with only one other person in all those acres.

“Look,” Josie yelled, pointing to the turkeys.

She was holding a plastic bin, and must have just dumped a bunch of mealworms on the ground.

The turkeys were going bananas, grabbing their snacks as fast as they could, while Josie practically squealed with delight.

“That’s like ice cream to them,” she yelled to her uncle.

“Nice, Josie,” he said, nodding to her with a big smile on his face.

“She loves it out here,” Caroline realized out loud. “It’s easy to forget that she’s a city kid.”

“You wouldn’t have said that if you’d seen me trying to teach her how to milk a cow,” Logan chuckled.

“But she did it,” Caroline said. “The proof was in my coffee. Which means you were very patient, and she was very persistent. You’re a good team.”

“I can’t pick one,” Josie yelled. “I don’t want to. But Mr. Webb said he can pick for us when the time comes, if you just let him know how big we need.”

“Twenty-five pounder, if you’ve got one that big,” Logan told Reggie, striding up.

Caroline followed along, eyeing the animals and wondering how anyone could possibly know how much they would weigh. She liked it much better when meat came conveniently labeled and wrapped in plastic.

“Sure,” Reggie said. “I’ll deliver the best one to you, since you all came out to visit with them.”

“Thanks a lot,” Logan said, offering his hand.

Reggie shook it enthusiastically.

“Now,” Reggie said in a quiet, conspiratorial voice to Caroline. “I heard that the two of you were an item. Is that true?”

She was opening her mouth to set him straight when Logan clasped his arm.

“Listen, man,” he said. “We will neither confirm nor deny. But I’m sure you can imagine that nothing would wreck a brand-new thing faster than a lot of talk around town.”

“Who am I going to tell?” Reggie asked innocently, indicating the trees and birds around him.

Caroline almost giggled.

“If I told you I was dating Caroline Bard, you’d beat us back to town to spread the word, and that’s a fact,” Logan said with a smile.

“But you are dating?” Reggie asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Let’s keep that mystery going a little longer,” Logan laughed. “Come on, Josie.”

“I’m gonna put you on the spot when I bring that bird,” Reggie called after them. But his voice was warm and filled with humor.

“You do that,” Logan said. “See you in a day or so.”

As the truck bumped back up the driveway to the road, Caroline allowed herself to wonder what had just happened.

But Logan didn’t say a word about it. He was too busy answering Josie’s questions about turkeys, especially about

why they didn't have turkeys at the Williams farm.

Too soon, they were back in the village, and he was pulling up to her apartment.

"Thanks so much for bringing me," she said politely, as he walked her to her door.

"Tomorrow, we get started on pies," he said. "Want to help with that, too?"

Making pies with her dad had been her favorite.

She nodded, smiling at him over the lump in her throat.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow, Caroline Bard," he said, giving her a wicked half-smile before jogging back to his truck.

Josie leaned out the window.

"You're coming tomorrow, right, Miss Caroline?" she yelled.

"I wouldn't miss it," Caroline told her, loving the huge smile on the little girl's face at her answer.

LOGAN

Logan gazed across the counter at Caroline rolling out pie crust.

Her long hair was up in a ponytail, and she was biting her lip in concentration as she considered the thickness of the dough between strokes of her rolling pin. There was a daub of flour on her cheek, and more flour scattered all over the snowman apron his mother had lent her.

The classical song on the Christmas station melted into Mariah Carey, and he saw her lips mouthing the words as she worked.

He was supposed to be mixing up another batch of crust, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. To Logan, she had never been more beautiful.

“Go on,” he murmured.

Her eyes flashed up to his.

“*Sing*,” he whispered. “Let it out. I can see that you want to.”

Her cheeks blushed pink, and she shook her head vehemently as her eyes went back to the dough.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I just... can't,” she told him, laughing. “How's that next batch coming?”

“Okay, okay,” he told her, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I'll get back to work.”

Josie had decided she wanted to go shopping with her grandmother today instead of baking, and if Logan hadn't known better, he would have thought that she was trying to leave him alone with Caroline on purpose.

But surely no kid Josie's age would be trying to play matchmaker. She was too busy exploring the farm and working on her school project to worry about that kind of thing.

Logan, on the other hand, was thinking more about *that kind of thing* every day.

He had impulsively said that stuff to tease Reggie a little bit yesterday, about not being able to confirm or deny that they were a couple, even though he knew darn well they weren't.

But he was realizing that maybe he *wanted them to be*.

And not in the way he had wanted to take a girl out dancing or to sit by the lake before.

With Caroline, everything was different. He wanted to show her what he'd been doing to the lodge, and see what she thought of it. He wanted to take her to the ice cream shop in town, and listen to her laugh with her mom, maybe even sit on a blanket in the park to take in a local concert, and see if he could get trick her into humming along.

Is this what getting serious is like?

He had dated plenty, but never gotten serious with anyone. He liked his freedom, and the chance to kick back with the guys. And he already had the biggest, best family in Tarker County, as far as he was concerned. He didn't need to set up another household, and have a woman in it telling him what to do and when to do it.

But the thing of it was, he sort of wanted to know what Caroline thought he should do about all kinds of things. He liked the idea of the two of them having their own space, away from the rest of the world - a place where her quiet nature couldn't be overrun by everyone else's noise, and where he could listen to her words and to her heart, and soak in the

sense of peace that was palpable all around him whenever she was near.

Just thinking about it made his fingers itch to get out of the kitchen and back to work on the lodge again.

But baking was what Caroline needed right now, something she was good at and enjoyed. He could tell she was happy in his mother's kitchen, making a big mess, and some of the prettiest pie crusts he'd ever seen.

"Moments like this bring him back for me," she said softly. "It's like I can see him sneaking bits of the dough and hear his big laugh when I catch him."

"So, your dad really liked to cook, huh?" Logan asked her.

"Loved it," she said, nodding with a fond smile. "He loved taking care of people in general. He gave a lot of guys who'd been in some trouble a chance with a job in his landscaping company, and even invited them home for dinner. He was always so happy for all the ones who succeeded, even if it meant they moved on."

"Wow," Logan said.

"He had a couple of older ladies whose lawns he cut for free from time to time to keep the borough from bothering them about it," she told him. "Snow shoveling, too, in the winter season. Ellie at the borough used to give him a heads up, and he'd run out and take care of them before the fine could be issued. He said it wasn't their fault if their grandsons and contractors didn't show up. No one on a fixed income should be punished for something like that."

"There was a time when the neighbors would have helped out," Logan said, shaking his head sadly.

"I think a lot still do," Caroline said. "But housing's getting so pricey. Plenty of families work long hours and don't have time to help out like they used to."

Logan loved how she always saw the best in people.

"True," he said. He knew about working long hours. Certain times of year, he hardly did anything but work. But it

was different working the farm. It was his own.

“Anyway, it wasn’t a burden to him,” she said. “He loved it. And, yes, he loved to cook, too. He would have been crazy over this special low counter your mom has for rolling out dough. We didn’t have anything like that, but he had certain special things in the kitchen that he adored - his mom’s mixing fork, a big copper pot for stew, that kind of thing.”

“Is your mom a cook, too?” Logan asked.

“No,” Caroline laughed. “I mean, she can cook, but it’s definitely something she sees as a chore. I try to bring her over a homemade lunch whenever I can, so she won’t just eat cereal and canned soup for every meal.”

“Opposites attract, huh?” Logan asked, without thinking.

Her eyes lifted to his, and for a moment, he felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“I guess so,” she said, a dimple forming on her right cheek before she turned back to her work.

She feels it too, this connection...

He felt like he could run a marathon and score a touchdown all at once. Somehow, for reasons he couldn’t understand, Caroline was opening her heart to him.

And somehow, he wasn’t ruining it. Yet.

His heart pounded as his instincts battled. Most of him wanted to sweep her up in his arms and kiss that adorable dimple and those sweet lips.

But a little voice in the back of his head warned him to go as slowly as possible, so as not to frighten her off.

The image in his mind of sweet Caroline darting away from him and back to her car when he had nearly kissed her the other night flashed through his mind. If he scared her like that again, she might not come back.

He stirred the pie crust with his mouth closed and his jaw tight, determined not to make his move until he was certain she wanted it.

CAROLINE

Caroline watched as Logan sank the last screw into the tabletop out in the parking lot of the Presbyterian Church.

She tried not to let herself look at the way his jacket stretched tight over his muscles as he braced himself.

The parking lot was already filling up with volunteers setting up tables to collect donations. Every year, residents of Trinity Falls came together to provide holiday meals to a homeless shelter in the city, as well as anyone in their own community who was in need.

Caroline had always loved the tradition. Her dad used to say it reminded him of all the things he had to be thankful for, even stuff that was easy to take for granted, like a roof over their heads and food to eat.

The big, shared lot between the church and the Trinity Falls community center that was used for fairs and festivals also held the turkey drive. There was a nice view over the community college fields, and plenty of space for people to mill around.

“There we go,” Logan said with finality. *“Your table is ready.”*

“Thank you so much,” she told him. *“I’m so grateful that you built this for me, and even more that you brought it here and got it all set up.”*

“The turkey drive is important,” Logan said, rubbing the back of his neck. “We can’t have anyone going without because a brisk wind blew away the table.”

“Or a dog,” Josie pointed out.

“You remembered that story,” Caroline laughed.

“It’s a funny idea,” Josie told her. “Do you think the dog will be back?”

“Probably not,” she said. “Unless he gets out of his yard again. But lots of people will be coming to drop off donations. Maybe someone will walk over with a dog on a leash.”

“I can’t have a dog,” Josie said, a little sadly. “Dad said city dogs don’t have a good life.”

“He’s right,” Logan said immediately. “But you can always visit Swift and all the animals on the farm. And Caroline’s right, we’ll see a dog or two around here today, I’ll bet. They’ll all be interested in the table with the turkeys on it.”

Josie giggled and Caroline couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey there, big Williams and baby Williams,” a familiar voice shouted.

“Jared and Derek Webb,” Logan said with a big smile. “You guys remember Caroline Bard, right?”

Caroline smiled and prepared to shake hands, but Jared only gave Logan a wicked grin.

“So, *this* is why you haven’t been coming out with the boys?” he said, turning his eyes to Caroline. “Can’t say I blame you. *Yowza.*”

Caroline felt herself blush from her hairline down to her toes. She quickly turned to grab her sign-in list from her bag.

“What’s wrong with you, Jared?” Logan boomed. “Have you never seen a decent woman before? Get it together.”

Josie started giggling again, and when Caroline looked up, it was Jared Webb who looked a little embarrassed. Even his

brother was frowning at him, and those two were joined at the hip.

“Girls at the Barrel love that kind of talk,” Jared said defensively, shrugging. “Sorry, though. I didn’t mean to offend you, Caroline.”

“We’re not at the tavern,” Caroline pointed out primly. “Also, no. They don’t like it. They’re just humoring you.”

Jared’s eyebrows jumped to his hairline and his brother started laughing at him.

“Are you sure?” Jared asked her quietly.

“*Very* sure,” Caroline assured him.

“We have to go help Mom,” Derek told his brother.

“Well, good to see you,” Jared said, glancing over to include Logan and Josie in his statement. “This has been, um, educational.”

“See you at the Barrel tonight,” Derek said quietly. “We can apologize better then.”

“Nah,” Logan said, surprising Caroline. “You guys have fun though. Tell everyone I said hey.”

As far as Caroline knew, Logan’s entire social life revolved around the tavern the locals called *the Barrel*.

It’s because his niece is here, she reminded herself. He’s staying home so that he can be with her.

Logan curtailing his life to be there for his niece was somehow even more heartwarming than the idea that he didn’t feel like going out to drink with his buddies.

“What are you smiling about?” Logan demanded suddenly.

“Nothing,” she said. “Your friends are funny.”

He nodded, looking a little relieved, though she had no idea why.

Before she could ask, Betty Ann, Shirley, and Ginny from her book club were heading her way with big reusable shopping bags of donations, exclaiming over her new table,

and there was no more time to worry about anything but the mission of the turkey drive.

But as the day went on, she found herself sneaking glances over at Logan, where he chatted and joked warmly with the people dropping off turkeys, one arm slung casually over Josie's shoulder.

He really is a good man at heart...

CAROLINE

Caroline looked around the Thanksgiving table at the Williams Homestead, feeling excited and grateful as she took her seat.

The beautiful woven tablecloth was covered with a true feast of delicious dishes, all glistening, steaming, and making her mouth water. There was chestnut stuffing, green bean casserole, mashed potatoes with butter melting on top, cranberries cooked in homemade vanilla, sweet potatoes in brown sugar, mountains of fresh baked rolls, and of course the great big, golden turkey.

And the people sitting around the table were the real treat. Everyone was clearly so happy to be there. Even the usually energetic Swift was sleeping contentedly on the rug near the hearth. The warmth in the room brought back her father's spirit just a little, and she smiled.

Caroline had been a little nervous about coming to the Williams family Thanksgiving. But after days of helping with the preparations, she felt right at home in their kitchen. And she had certainly worked hard enough to earn a plate.

Her mom was sitting beside her. She grabbed Caroline's hand under the table, giving it a quick squeeze.

Her mother had been delighted to learn she was seated right beside Annabelle, at the foot of the table, and the two were currently chatting about a volunteer project at the local school they were both working on.

Logan sat across from Caroline, flanked by Josie and his sister, Emma, Josie was chatting away with her cousin, Lucas, who was sandwiched between her and Logan's brother, Ansel.

Beside Ansel, Logan's dad held his spot at the head of the table. Caroline couldn't help notice Alistair Williams smiling fondly at his wife as she chatted with her mother.

Across from Ansel, Levi sat beside an empty seat that was meant for Logan's Aunt Trudy.

On the other side of the empty chair, next to Caroline, sat Logan's cousin, Tanner. The handsome electrician was tapping his fingers on the tabletop, as if it took everything he had not to fall on the feast in front of him.

"Almost a full house," Logan said, shrugging.

"Trudy couldn't make it," Annabelle said sadly.

"We'll keep inviting her," her husband said.

"That's Miss Trudy, who runs the inn?" Caroline asked.

"She was married to my brother before he passed," Alistair said, nodding. "I think she keeps extra busy at the inn around the holidays, so she doesn't have to remember he's gone."

"One of these days, we'll be glad we saved a spot," his wife declared. "Nobody can stay away from this family forever."

"Let's fill it up until it overflows," her husband teased. "Banish these whippersnappers to the kids' table."

Josie laughed, but Lucas frowned.

"Grandpa's kidding," she whispered to him loudly.

Lucas brightened as he smiled down at his cousin. Clearly, the quiet boy was glad to have another kid around.

"Well, I think it's time to say a few words about what we're grateful for," Annabelle said. "What do you think, Alistair?"

"By all means," he agreed. "I'll start. I'm thankful to have all of you here with us, and I'm especially thankful to Caroline

for helping with all those pies. My wife has had her hands full keeping me away from them the past few days.”

Caroline smiled and felt a flush of pleasure.

She glanced up at Logan, and he smiled encouragingly.

He had been different this past week, so gentle and thoughtful. She wondered if the holidays brought up memories for him too, or if it was something else...

“I’m thankful for food, family, and friendship,” Ansel declared.

“I’m thankful for a long weekend,” Lucas said, with real feeling.

It made Caroline wonder if he was just being a kid, or maybe he didn’t enjoy school.

“And family,” Lucas added quickly.

“I’m grateful for family, too,” Josie said. “And I wish my dad was here, but I’m thankful that he’s doing his work.”

Caroline nodded and bit her lip. If Josie could be cheerful without her dad here on Thanksgiving, she certainly could too, without feeling guilty about it.

“I’m thankful for a chance to spend time with the people I care about,” Logan said, looking right at her, then turning to include the whole table. “And I’m thankful for the holidays being here, giving us perspective on what’s most important.”

His father cleared his throat in a way that seemed significant, though Caroline couldn’t imagine why. It was such a lovely thing Logan had said.

“I’m grateful to be here,” Emma said simply. “I’ve missed so many family dinners lately.”

“We’re thankful that you’re here,” her mother said fondly, patting her hand. “And I’m thankful to have old friends at the table today. Penny and Caroline, we are so glad you could be with us.”

“And we’re thankful to be here,” Caroline’s mom said. “And for the wonderful people who open doors to us, at all the

different times of our lives.”

Caroline was so moved by the idea of her mom being welcomed by Logan’s mom when she was a young woman moving into a new town, and again now, with a grown-up daughter, having lost her husband. She suddenly found that she couldn’t speak, and just nodded and then shook her head, desperately trying to keep the tears from spilling out.

“Now look, we made her wait so long for her dinner, she’s going to cry,” Logan’s cousin, Tanner teased from beside her. “I’m thankful for a turkey that smells good enough to make a grown woman weep.”

“Hear, hear,” Logan’s dad said, raising his glass of water.

“I’m thankful that we’re together,” Levi’s deep voice boomed.

Logan’s brother’s voice had always been deep and loud, so that anything he said sounded like an important pronouncement.

“Things change,” Levi went on. “But this will always be the same - the happiness we feel when our family shares a table.”

It was a beautiful statement. She glanced at Logan, but he was frowning at his brother. Something was definitely going on here that Caroline wasn’t privy to. But whatever it was, it certainly wasn’t spoiling anyone’s mood or appetite.

“Let’s eat,” his mother said with brisk cheer, standing to join her husband, who had begun carving the turkey. “Pass your plates, and shout out light or dark meat.”

“Are you okay?” Caroline mouthed to Logan.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“He’s mad at me,” Emma said softly.

“What are you talking about?” Logan demanded, whirling to face her. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh, come on,” she said. “I know you don’t want Mom and Dad to sell the farm, let alone to the man I work for. I

might as well be a criminal, in your eyes.”

Sell the farm?

“Speaking of his eyes, I’ll have you know your caveman of a brother came home with a shiner the other night, defending your honor,” their mother said. “So, I suggest you rethink your assumptions, missy.”

“Thanks, Mom?” Logan said.

There was a moment of awkward tension.

Then Levi laughed his thunderous deep laugh, and no one could help but join him.

“Couldn’t figure out if Mom was defending you or insulting you, eh, brother?” he gasped.

“There’s no reason it can’t be both,” their mother said demurely, sending her adult children into another fit of giggles. “Now, Penny, would you like light meat or dark?”

Soon, plates were clattering, and ice cubes were tinkling in drinks as everyone piled delicious sides precariously onto their plates.

The edge of tension Caroline had sensed had dissipated now, and the room felt even warmer and more filled with love than before.

Logan was asking his sister about the farm where she worked, and the two were speaking so quickly about so many technical things, that it was as if they had their own special language.

It hit her again that Emma had said something about the family selling the farm, and the idea seemed especially cruel.

Logan clearly loved his work, and he was restoring the lodge, too. It sounded like Ansel’s life pretty much revolved around the farm as well. He and his son also lived on the homestead.

She turned her attention elsewhere, so as not to wallow in something that was none of her business.

Josie was spreading honeyed butter on a roll and listening to her cousin tell her something long and complicated about a book he was reading.

Caroline had read that book herself, and was impressed at how he was breaking it down and analyzing it. She hadn't seen Lucas Williams at the library very often, but he was obviously a book lover and a careful reader.

"So, how is business?" Tanner asked, turning to her.

"Oh," she said, laughing. "I don't think anyone has ever asked me that before. We've got tons of visitors at the library, so I guess business is good."

"I like that answer," he said. "I always suspected the librarians secretly didn't want anyone invading their quiet zone and taking their books away."

Tanner Williams had always been talkative, and a bit of a flirt. Caroline could understand how he might have been reprimanded in the library from time to time back in school.

"Not at all," she said. "We love visitors. It's our job to help our community. And some of the library's funding is based on how many guests we have, so the help is actually mutual."

"I never knew that," he said, eyebrows lifting. "That's pretty interesting."

"How's business for you?" she asked.

"Oh, it's always hopping," he said, smiling and shaking his head. "No matter how tight times are, folks definitely want the lights on."

"Did I hear you're installing an electric car charger in the municipal lot?" she asked, figuring he would be proud to talk about it.

"Borough manager asked me personally," he said, looking pleased. "It's the very first one in Trinity Falls."

"Is it true that it would take more than twenty-four hours to fully charge a car on that thing?" Levi asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Tanner admitted. “But it can charge Anna Connell’s car enough in an hour to get back to her house on Rutgers. So, it fulfills its function, and it was very generous of the borough to offer a free charging station.”

Anna Connell was the only person in Trinity Falls with a fully electric car, as far as Caroline knew. And her beautiful cedar shake cottage was only a five-minute walk from the municipal building. But progress was progress.

“One day, we’ll have one of those things on every corner,” Mr. Williams predicted.

“I hope so,” Tanner told him. “Since I’m the only one in town that knows how to put them in.”

Levi laughed again, and Ansel asked Logan to pass the rolls. The kids started giggling, over what, Caroline had no idea. And her mom and Annabelle began brainstorming ideas for the town book sale.

It was noisy, and funny, and it felt like home.

Logan caught her eye from across the table, his expression telling her he understood her quiet joy, and her heart felt like it had wings.

When everyone had eaten so much that they could hardly move, Caroline joined the others, who were all carrying things into the kitchen and helping with the clean-up. With so many hands, the work went quickly.

“I’ll put on some coffee,” Mr. Williams declared when the kitchen was sparkling again.

“Would the children like to help me get the pies from the fridge on the porch?” his wife asked.

The kids squealed and ran after her.

Logan took Caroline’s hand and tugged her toward the front parlor.

A tingle of anticipation went down her spine, and she felt like she had in the fifth grade when Alan Sullivan asked her to be his girlfriend.

It was cooler in the shadowy room without so many other people filling the space. She noticed the fireplace and the old photographs on the walls, showing generations of the Williams family against the same backdrop of scalloped wallpaper that adorned the room now.

“Why didn’t you tell me your parents were thinking of selling the farm?” she heard herself ask him suddenly.

She felt ashamed right away. Were they close enough friends for her to ask him that? And why would she ask about something that upset him when it felt like something romantic was happening between them?

“Why would I burden you with it?” he asked, dropping her hand and shrugging. “There’s nothing you can do about it. I just wanted you to have a wonderful Thanksgiving.”

She smiled up at the frank honesty on the face of the big man who was working his way into her heart. And she wondered if maybe there wasn’t something she could do about it after all...

“Why are you smiling like that?” he asked, his voice low.

“I might have an idea that could help you out,” she said softly.

“What?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“If you have time Monday, come to the library a little early to pick Josie up,” she told him. “It’s not an easy solution. But it might be an option.”

“Caroline Bard, has anyone ever told you that you’ve got a little bit of magic in you?” he murmured, taking her hand again and drawing her closer.

“*Miss Caroline, Miss Caroline, we’re going to show off your pumpkin pies,*” Josie sang out as she rounded the corner into the parlor. “Oh, hey, there you are Uncle Logan. Come on. Let’s eat pie.”

“How is there room in you for pie?” Logan demanded, letting go of Caroline’s hand so he could scoop Josie up and throw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “I saw you

eat half that turkey yourself. Were you feeding it all to Swift when no one was looking?"

Josie squealed with delight as she was carried away and Caroline followed them, smiling.

Is this what Logan would be like with a daughter of his own?

Stop that, this instant, the little voice in the back of her head advised her sternly.

It was good advice.

But it was getting harder and harder to listen.

LOGAN

A few days later, Logan headed into the library almost an hour before he was scheduled to pick up Josie.

Cold air swirled around his damp hair, and he felt the same giddy anticipation he'd felt as a little boy, looking out the window and wishing for snow.

But today he was wishing for something much more important. Snow was unlikely in November, but a few flurries might bring him luck. And he needed all the luck he could get.

He'd had a hard time concentrating on the lodge all day, knowing he would be seeing Caroline later. Ultimately, he'd decided to shower after lunch and just head over.

Honestly, he'd been having a hard time concentrating on anything since Thanksgiving dinner, and the moment her eyes had met his.

The look of pure joy on her face had broken something in him. It was like a wall had come down that he had never known was there. But he had been so overwhelmed by it that he'd grabbed her hand and dragged her to the front parlor to... do what exactly?

He still wasn't sure.

He only knew that whatever had stopped him from *getting serious* in the past was gone now. And it was all because of her. He wanted to be the kind of man Caroline could trust, the kind of man she could respect, rely on, and even love.

And he didn't want to run the risk of missing a moment with her, whether it was a happy one, a sad one, or anything in between.

When Josie had burst in, much as he loved her, he had wanted to chase the little scamp off and keep Caroline all to himself.

But that night, he realized maybe the interruption had been for the best. As much as he felt to his own soul the change that was happening in him, Caroline didn't know anything about it.

The last time he had thought of making a move had turned into an impulsive disaster. He had been ready to steal a kiss from her under the broken trellis, without even knowing what she wanted.

And she had seen it in his eyes and run from him.

This time, he was determined to do things properly. And that meant stating his intentions first, and then following through when he knew she felt the same.

You can do this, cowboy, he told himself.

He pushed open the door and strode through the lobby of the municipal building and then into the library.

There was a softness in the Trinity Falls library that didn't exist anywhere else in Logan's world. Outside, the birds sang, the church bells rang, the train whistled, and the wind whispered in the trees. Even the municipal lobby he'd just come through was echoey with footsteps and creaky doors.

But inside the library, there was a hush that was almost palpable. Soft carpets diminished the sound, even with the high ceilings. But it was more than that - almost like walking into a church. He felt the presence of decades of people quietly coming here to find comfort in the pages of all these books.

Even the light was soft and peaceful, in spite of the massive size of the palladium window that overlooked the greenery and the street outside.

Miss Helen stood at the circulation desk. She caught sight of him and waved him up to the Children's section, as if she

knew what he was here for.

Of course she knows why you're here, he told himself. Your niece is here. You pick her up every day.

He headed up to find Caroline standing in the doorway, watching Josie.

A hint of a proud smile tugged the corners of her lips up as she looked over his niece diligently working away. Her whole heart was there for Josie in a way that made him feel beloved himself.

Is this what she will be like as a mother?

He tried hard not to let himself picture her belly swollen with their child, a baby in her arms, a backyard full of little ones exploring the rose garden and the farm.

She looked up at him and something passed between them. He was sure of it.

“Hi,” she said softly.

“Hi,” he replied.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ll sit in the main office, and I’ll show you what I found.”

He followed her back to where she seemed to already have a few things set up on the conference table. There were folders, a clipboard covered in notes, and a big stack of books next to a small stack.

“Miss Caroline,” someone called out softly.

“Oh,” she said turning. “Hang on, Logan.”

He glanced over to find a girl with two round, puffy ponytails, wearing the biggest smile he had ever seen. She looked like Arnold Jones’s daughter, but surely Emily couldn’t be so tall already.

Of course, he’d made the same mistake with Josie.

“Miss Caroline, I *loved* it,” she said. “Do you have the other books in the series?”

“Goodness, that was quick, Emily,” Caroline said approvingly. “And yes, we have them, and I set them aside for you yesterday when I saw how much progress you were making on that one.”

“You did?” Emily asked, her eyes filled with adoration for her librarian hero.

“Of course I did,” Caroline said. “You’re one of our most loyal readers. I never want to let you down. Hang on a sec.”

Caroline grabbed the small stack of books from the table.

“There you are,” she said. “The second one isn’t as good as the first, but it’s still wonderful, and when you get to book three you’ll be so glad you stuck it out. I think the third one might be my favorite.”

“Thank you,” Emily said, her nose immediately in the second book. It was clear she was far, far away from Trinity Falls already.

“Get down the steps to check them out before you get lost in them,” Miss Caroline told her with a smile. “We don’t want you falling down.”

Emily laughed and looked up from the book, then wrapped an arm around Caroline and gave her a squeeze before darting off with her treasures.

“Your biggest fan?” Logan guessed. “Besides Josie, of course.”

“Emily Jones is a wonderful girl,” Caroline said, coming over to sit down. “I’m so glad she knows how happy we are to see her here.”

“Are those books for another kid?” he asked, indicating the bigger stack.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I read those over the weekend. I’m going to shelve them this afternoon, after I make a few notes.”

“You *read* all of those this weekend?” he asked, gazing incredulously at the precarious tower of novels.

“They’re all Young Adult books,” she said, shrugging. “Supposedly. I’ve found it’s really best to read as many of them as I can before I shelve them, so I can make better recommendations. We’re seeing more adult themes slip into the YA genre these days. There are kids who can handle it, but I wouldn’t want one of our precocious younger readers picking up something with a lot of violence or inappropriate content and getting scared or deciding they don’t like to read.”

“How can you stop them?” he asked.

“I can’t,” she told him. “And it’s not my job to censor. But if I notice a younger reader choosing a title I don’t think they’re ready for, I can always grab something I think they will love and offer it instead.”

“Does that work?” he asked skeptically.

“Only when I offer the other book without comment,” she told him. “I’ve learned that most kids don’t really want a lot of unsolicited adult input on their entertainment. But the right book at the right moment generally grabs their attention just fine.”

“How do you know which book is the right book?” he asked.

“Sometimes, I know the kid,” she said, smiling. “I’ve got a sort of running list in my mind for most of our regulars - what they’ve liked, what they’ve already read.”

“And if you don’t know them well?” he asked.

“Some books are just good,” she said, shrugging. “Good enough that no one in the target age range could put them down. And if they’ve read it already it’s even better, because they usually want to talk about it. And when they do, you can ask if they’ve read another one like it, and grab it for them.”

“And if they just want that first book?” Logan asked.

“Then they read it,” she said. “We’ve all seen a movie that was a little too scary or too steamy. Learning where we draw the line on our own is an important lesson, too.”

“You love your job,” he said, fully understanding it better than ever before.

“Are you kidding?” she asked. “I still can’t believe this is my career. If I won the lottery tomorrow, I would still be here right on time.”

“I feel that way about the farm,” he confided. “It’s always been that way. I love to see things growing, to be part of that cycle that nourishes people.”

She listened to him so intently, it was like every cell of her was focused on him.

“If I won the lottery tomorrow, I’d keep doing it too,” he said, chuckling self-consciously. “But it looks like I might not have a choice about it soon.”

“Well, I want you to be able to keep doing it,” she told him, after a moment. “Even if a lot of things had to change, that part could be the same - better, even.”

“What do you mean?” he asked her.

“It’s just an idea,” she warned him. “I know you love things the way they are, and what I’m suggested is anything but that. But it would keep your land with your family - all of it.”

“I’m listening,” he told her warily, hoping she wasn’t going to suggest building apartments or putting in a storage facility or warehouse.

She indicated the chair across from hers, and they both sat.

“Have you ever thought about what it would be like not to know anything at all about where your food came from?” she asked him.

He blinked at her.

“You grew up on a farm,” she said, smiling. “So, you’ve always known so much about plants and animals, and I think that’s pretty amazing. But so many children grow up in cities and suburbs, and never have a chance to really see what a farm is like, or to know that food doesn’t just come from a corner store.”

That was probably true. But Logan didn't see what it had to do with his family's farm.

"There are foundations whose sole purpose is to improve the lives of children," she went on. "And one of the ways they do it is by getting kids outdoors to enjoy themselves and learn about nature. Agricultural education is a precious commodity that fewer and fewer students can access every day. I think the Williams Homestead could be part of the solution to that problem."

"You want us to... bring kids onto the farm?" he asked, unable to understand how that would help the homestead or the children.

"It's much more complicated than that," she told him. "But, essentially, yes. I remember my school trip to the Williams Homestead when I was a little girl. It was such a special experience. And I was an incredibly lucky kid, living in a rural town with plenty of wonderful experiences like that."

That rang true. A lot of his friends in school had said the same. He remembered the year his class visited his home. It was eye-opening to understand how fortunate he was to live in such an amazing place.

"I did some research over the weekend," she said, patting the folders on her desk. "There are a couple of foundations whose missions you could easily fulfill, if you and your family chose to rethink the purpose of the Williams Homestead a little."

"Rethink the purpose?" he asked.

"Could the Williams Homestead have a mission of educating children *and* producing crops?" she asked him.

"I don't think so," he said, shaking his head. "I mean I love the idea, but I'm no teacher. And neither is Ansel."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Think about Josie. How much has she learned since she got here? Do you think she would have ever leaned to milk a cow or feed a turkey in the city? Think about how excited she is every time you teach her

about something new on the farm. She comes in here walking on air telling us about it.”

He smiled, picturing Josie’s happy face as she shared her stories.

“Here’s what I was imagining,” she told him. “You could build cabins in one of the meadows, cabins big enough to be bunkhouses for visiting children and their teachers. They could come out for a week to work on the farm, learn about nature and the history of the area, and fall in love with the place, just like I did.”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

It was a sweet idea. But she obviously didn’t understand the situation.

“We’re pinching pennies as it is,” he admitted, the words tasting bitter as he said them. “The idea is really nice, but we’re not selling because Mom and Dad want to downsize. The truth is that we can hardly maintain the houses that are already on the property. We definitely don’t have the funds to do any more building.”

“But that’s where the grants come in,” Caroline said. “I’ve done some preliminary research, and I think they would give you enough to build the cabins, and probably a sizable amount toward deferred maintenance for any of the older buildings the kids would have access to for educational purposes. That would include reroofing the barns, and even doing work on some of the houses, if they were open to the kids to explore. And of course, there would be a salary for you and anyone you hired to help. You’ll want to look at these yourself, and see which you think are possibilities, and how you would structure your program.”

She pushed a thick folder across the table to him.

He lifted his hands up instinctively.

“We wouldn’t want to take charity,” he said, shaking his head.

“This isn’t for you,” she said. “It’s for the kids. And it’s to preserve the farmland and the history for future generations of

kids.”

“That’s not what it feels like,” he said, shaking his head.

“Did you know these foundations lose their own funding if they can’t find recipients for their grants?” she asked.

“There’s plenty of needy causes,” he said.

“Not when this is your cause,” she told him, patting the folder. “How many places like your home still exist? Places that could nourish children in this way?”

“It doesn’t feel right,” he told her.

“Did you know the Cassidy family accepted a grant just last year from one of these foundations?” she asked him.

The Cassidys ran a very nice farm closer to town. It was open to tourists to pick fruit and ride on the hay wagons. The Cassidys were one of the town’s founding families, along with the Williams and Webbs. Logan frankly couldn’t imagine them taking charity.

“They received a grant to pave a parking lot for visiting buses, so that more children from the city could visit,” she told him. “I know, because I helped them with the application. They wanted to be able to offer more for students, but the cost to level and pave land with proper water management and permits was overwhelming. I went the first day the buses parked in that lot. You should have seen the kids’ faces.”

“That’s pretty cool,” he admitted.

“When you’re not hosting students, you could allow private stays, too,” she went on. “Lots of people want to get back to nature these days. Plenty of wealthy families would be interested in a farm vacation. Even if you chose to charge the minimum to schools, you could make good profit with private guests so that you wouldn’t have to accept grant money forever, if you didn’t want to.”

He thought about strangers tromping all over his family’s land.

But then he thought about the joy on Josie’s face when the first stream of sweet milk hit the pail after many attempts.

“I guess it’s something to think about,” he said slowly.

“Logan Williams,” Caroline said with a teasing smile, “I think I like seeing you have an open mind.”

“What about you?” he asked, suddenly realizing this was the best opening he was going to get.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Are you open-minded, Caroline Bard?” he asked softly.

“I think so,” she said, leaning forward and nodding.

“Things are changing in my life,” he told her carefully. “And I like one of those changes very much.”

She was doing that thing again, listening to him so hard it felt like he was drawing her closer with a magnet.

“I like spending time with you, Caroline,” he told her. “You’re kind, and smart, and funny, and you’re good to my family. You make me want to be a better person, more thoughtful, more patient, and more steady.”

She smiled and it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“And I want to be that man for you, Caroline,” he told her. “I want to be the kind of man you can respect and rely on. I want to be *your* man.”

Her eyes grew wider, and she swallowed hard.

But she didn’t look away.

“Will you think about it?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said softly, nodding with a small smile. “I’ll think about it.”

He thought his heart would explode with joy, but he managed not to shout in the library, hoping she appreciated his restraint.

“Thank you,” he told her with all his heart.

Her cheeks were turning pinker by the minute, and she had already dropped her beautiful eyes to her hands.

“*Miss Caroline*,” Josie yelled, blasting in the door. “Guess what? Oh, hey, Uncle Logan. You’re early.”

“Hi, Josie,” Caroline said, leaping up from the table, as if she had been caught doing something naughty. “What is it?”

“I finished all my schoolwork,” Josie said rapturously. “Now I can read to the kids. If we can stay, Uncle Logan?”

“Of course we can,” he told her.

He would let the child do whatever she wanted. His heart was soaring with happiness and a strange, sweet sensation of hope.

He followed the two of them down to the main library and took a seat on the floor with the families of tiny, excited kids, all facing the palladium window, and the chair where Josie would sit to read.

As Josie moved to take her place of honor, tiny snow flurries began to swirl down outside the window.

LOGAN

Logan walked through the high meadow with Josie a few days later, half-listening to her tell him all about the plans for the Library Lock-in, half daydreaming about what this meadow could become one day.

He'd been taking her all over the farm ever since that conversation with Caroline. He was trying to get a sense of which things Josie understood immediately, and which he had to teach her about. Without exception, his enthusiastic niece enjoyed the time together, learning about the farm, and appreciating the beauty of the Pennsylvania landscape.

But did that mean other kids would, too?

Logan was pretty biased, after all. He had grown up loving the land in all its seasons, even the sepia-toned winters under their soft blanket of gray sky.

But it seemed to him that anyone who came here with an open mind couldn't help feeling that same connection. And he was developing a burning need to bring out that love that grew stronger every day.

As a kid who had wiggled in his seat and stared out the window in school, it was hard to imagine that one day he would long to be a teacher, of sorts.

But lately it was all he could think about. He had even been looking at some education classes over at the community college. Sure, he had a knack for showing Josie things on the farm, but why not learn some real classroom management

skills to back that up, in case he had fifteen or twenty kids at once?

Little as he liked to admit it, once he began reading the materials Caroline gave him, he started to see her point about the grants. They really were being offered as incentive for people like the Williams family to open up their land and keep it green, while also using it to educate a generation of children about the importance of agriculture. And the USDA had Farm to School grants as well, that they could apply for once they had other funding.

Now, when he looked out on the fields, he could picture local kids coming out to tend to vegetable gardens, whose produce they could harvest and bring back to their schools for healthy lunches. He could see cabins full of kids visiting from the city, exploring the farm all day and toasting marshmallows and telling stories at night around a bonfire, just like he and his siblings had done when they used to have campouts in tents in the meadow in the summertime.

He had always felt lucky to be a Williams kid. So why shouldn't other children get to be honorary Williams kids? The Williams family could be bigger than it had ever been before. If he could eventually fix them up, every one of the buildings could be filled with kids and private guests.

And it never hurt to remind folks that there was something worthwhile about all that land between Philly and Pittsburgh that they never really thought about.

“Your phone just buzzed,” Josie pointed out.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he said as he pulled it from his pocket. “I guess I was just daydreaming again.”

“You were thinking about Miss Caroline's plan,” Josie said with a knowing smile.

He smiled back and glanced at the phone.

JARED WEBB

All the boys are going to the barrel tonight. You in?

It was funny, Logan had thought it would be a burden to change his habits for Caroline.

But it was effortless.

Why would he want to go to the same bar they'd been hanging out in for years, to hear his friends tell the same stories over and over?

Logan found he liked his new routine much better.

He and Caroline would sit at the table in the library office, talking over the farm stuff, comparing grant proposal ideas, and even making fun plans for the kids' lock-in at the library.

He asked all about her parents and about college, and how she had decided to become a librarian.

And she asked him endless questions about the farm and all his siblings, seemingly as hungry to know him as he was to know her.

How had she been right here in Trinity Falls all this time, and him right here too, without knowing that happiness was right in front of them?

They had decided together that they would go on their first date Saturday night, after the lock-in was done.

Logan thought and rethought, over and over, what that date would look like, but he finally landed on taking her to a nice restaurant in the village and then to see the Christmas lights in her old neighborhood on the far end of the district. She had mentioned several times that there were always tons of decorations there, and he could tell she missed it.

It was a simple date, nothing fancy. But he figured she would like it. After all, they always had plenty to talk about, no matter where they were. And clearly they were both homebodies, having settled down in their own hometown. There was no reason to go far to have a romantic night.

LOGAN:

Not this time man, thanks

JARED WEBB

Whipped much? Well, you can't get out of Friday
- you're the DD

Logan sighed.

He had completely forgotten about Friday night. The guys took turns, and he was the designated driver for Friday, which was also the night of the lock-in.

Biting his lip, he started texting around to see if anyone would swap him nights. But Fridays were always late nights, and no one was going to agree to do the night sober at the last minute.

“What’s going on?” Josie asked.

“I’m just checking on my friends,” he told her.

He already knew what would happen. He’d hear from them one by one that they would just take a cab.

But Logan knew their judgement wouldn’t be the best after a few too many beers. And all it would take would be for one of them to declare he could drive after all, since he hadn’t had much.

Then off they’d all go into the winter night, endangering themselves and everyone else on the road.

He repressed a shudder and sent one more missive to his buddies before shoving the phone back in his pocket.

“You don’t hang out with them much,” Josie said, kicking at a small stone. “Is it because of me?”

He observed the small girl, and the solemn expression on her face.

“Hey,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “I *love* hanging out with you. And there’s someone else I’ve been hanging out with too.”

“Miss Caroline,” she said, looking up at him with a big smile. “She likes hanging out with you, too.”

“Did she say that?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Don’t mess it up,” Josie said, nodding, her eyes sparkling. “She’s really awesome.”

“She *is* really awesome,” Logan said. “And I have you to thank for finding that out.”

“And the willow oak,” Josie pointed out. “If it hadn’t fallen down, you wouldn’t have had enough time to get up the courage.”

“What?” Logan demanded in mock outrage. “No one has ever accused me of not being courageous.”

He lunged for her playfully and she squealed with delight, darting off across the meadow like a deer.

He even let her hide behind a tree and then he walked past it, giving her the opening to attack him instead of the other way around.

“I give up. I’m tapping out,” he yelled, tapping the tree as she pulled his arm around his back.

“Seriously,” she whispered, before letting his arm go. “Be nice to Miss Caroline. She likes you.”

CAROLINE

Caroline left the ice cream shop Friday night, with a paper bag filled with single-serving chocolate and vanilla cups in her gloved hands.

Her mom had insisted on providing a free treat for the kids' lock-in. And when Caroline protested that the ice cream shop needed to make money too, her mother reminded her that she had been working there for many years and the owner encouraged her to take as much ice cream as she liked.

"Mrs. Hawkins says she needs to give me a bonus some way," her mother was fond of saying. *"And in her world, ice cream grows on trees."*

Caroline just stood there, admiring Park Avenue for a moment before heading back to the library. Her breath plumed in the cold, night air, but she couldn't bring herself to mind a little chill, when the town was so beautiful.

The borough crew had been out last week, putting up the candy cane decorations that always hung from the lampposts in December.

Now they were all lit up, and the sweet little Tudor-style shops were all starting to decorate, too. Lights twinkled, garlands adorned storefronts, and the Victorian dollhouse in the real estate office window below Caroline's apartment was already decorated for the holidays, complete with its own set of tiny glowing lights.

Soon, it would be time to set up the special Christmas tree in the library with the ornaments containing the names of

families who needed help with gifts or other items for children.

And then there was the Hometown Holiday celebration in town, with the annual tree-lighting, carol sing-along, horse-drawn carriage rides, the firehouse Christmas tree sale, and of course a visit from Santa Claus, who handed out candy to the children.

The whole thing took place on the municipal building's front lawn, most of which was in view of the library's palladium window, which always made Caroline almost feel like the celebration belonged to the library.

She headed into the municipal building just as Ellie was about to lock up.

"Oh, good timing," Ellie said. "Are you exhausted just thinking about tonight?"

"I can't wait for it," Caroline said honestly, shaking her head. She loved the idea of the lock-in, and was really excited to see which activities the kids chose to do.

"Better you than me," Ellie laughed. "It's spooky here at night."

"Nah," Caroline said. "It's going to be so much fun."

Helen was waiting for her when she got into the library.

"You sure you're okay?" Helen asked. "This feels like a two- or three-person job."

"I'll be fine," Caroline said. "Logan will be here for most of the evening, just in case. And once the kids go to sleep, it'll be easy."

"If you say so," Helen said, shaking her head in disbelief. "I'll keep my cell turned on tonight, just in case you need me to pop back over."

"Thank you, Helen," Caroline said, meaning it.

"The kids are going to love it," Helen told her with a smile. "They're lucky to have you."

"The feeling is definitely mutual," Caroline laughed.



AN HOUR LATER, the lock-in was in full swing.

Logan and Josie had arrived early to help set up, though Logan made Josie wait in Caroline's office while they prepared one particular activity.

The other nine children had trickled in one by one, parents cautioning them to be good and do as Caroline said before asking her again and again to call if she needed anything.

She had the kids lay out their sleeping bags up in the Children's section as they arrived, and then gave them all a bit of time to run around and unwind.

The kids were clearly very happy to be there. Though the group had a pretty wide age range, they were being really nice together, and having fun, if their happy shouts were any indication.

"This is already a success," Logan murmured from where he stood beside her. "But it must be really hard not to shush them."

She laughed out loud.

"What?" he asked.

"I was kind of thinking the same thing," she admitted.

When the time felt right, she clapped her hands.

"It's time," she called out, feeling very rebellious for yelling in the library.

"Time for what?" one of the littlest kids asked.

"Time for a movie, and a whole bunch of snacks," Caroline told him.

The kids sort of looked around, confused. There were no snacks out and there wasn't a television either.

"But first, you have to find all of it," Caroline told them with a smile. "And that means it's time for a scavenger hunt."

The kids all cheered, including Maddy Webb, who was normally the quiet type. It made Caroline smile.

“Maddy, get over here and read the first clue,” Logan called out.

Maddy dashed over, and Caroline remembered that of course she would know Logan well, he was good friends with her dad, Brody.

She took the clue from his hand and her eyes lit up.

“Okay, let’s see if one of the littler kids can figure this one out,” she said. “*Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me Too. What do you think of your first clue? If you want the next one, simply look... inside the pages of this poetry book.*”

She looked around at the group of kids.

Wyatt Cassidy smiled at her, his eyes twinkling like he knew the answer too, but wanted to let the little ones get it.

“I know it,” Benny Webb yelled excitedly. “I know it! That’s from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*.”

The kids scrambled up the steps to the Children’s section to find the book.

“I knew that one,” Logan told Caroline.

“And that’s how I know you have wonderful parents,” she told him with a smile.

“My dad loved reading to us when we were little,” Logan agreed.

The kids were gathered around the next clue already. This one was harder.

“They’re nice together,” Logan said. “I wasn’t sure when you told me the age ranges.”

“A lot of these kids know each other from other activities,” she told him. “And Benny’s the youngest, but Maddy is his cousin, so he feels at home with her here.”

“That’s really nice,” Logan said. “Did you plan it that way?”

“I talked to her first to make sure she wouldn’t mind looking out for her little cousin,” she told him. “Then I talked to Benny’s dad. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Logan told her. “You’re a really special person. The way you go the extra mile for these kids, for everyone who comes in here, it’s why everyone loves you.”

Everyone loves you...

But she tried hard not to read too much into that exaggeration. Obviously, they were just getting to know each other. Logan couldn’t love her.

Though the more time they spent together, the more she was feeling like he was the kind of man she could love.

In spite of his rowdy reputation, Logan had a big heart and a generous spirit. She suspected that very few people understood the sweet soul behind the big handsome man with the mischievous smile.

His world had changed with Josie’s arrival in his life, and while having Josie in his care was a temporary situation, she sensed that Logan’s transformation was not.

He’d told her he wanted to be the kind of man she could rely on. And every day he was showing her she was right to take a chance on him.

Tomorrow night, they would go on a real date, and the tenuous sense of connection between them might blossom into something more.

And even though she was boring, nerdy Caroline Bard, and he was handsome, high-spirited Logan Williams, she found that she wasn’t nervous at all.

High school was long behind them. Maybe they didn’t have to stay stuck in those roles anymore after all, just because they had stayed in Trinity Falls.



BY THE TIME the kids had found all the clues and were settled in with snacks and a movie, it was already getting late. They had been having such a blast with the hunt, that they hadn't even seemed to care that it took a long time to get to their treasure.

"That was so much fun," Logan told Caroline with a gentle smile. "Working with kids is really cool."

"You're good with them," she told him. "I like how you helped them without giving it away."

"Thanks," he said, flashing her a grin.

She felt a little shiver of awareness go down her spine.

The kids were gathered up in their sleeping bags, completely spellbound by the movie, and it was dark in the library with soft starlight glowing in the palladium window.

She looked up into Logan's eyes and saw the same wonder in them that she felt.

Then his phone let out a chirp, breaking the spell.

"Oh no," he said, sighing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have to run out to the Barrel," he told her. "The guys are there."

So that was why he couldn't stay.

She had been thinking it was because it felt inappropriate to spend the night together, even in the public library with ten little chaperones, when they were... whatever they were.

"Okay," she said brightly, trying to cover her disappointment. "I'll see you in the morning, right?"

"Right," he said quickly.

He looked concerned, like he had read the disappointment on her face.

"Great," she told him. "Thanks again for helping out tonight. That was really awesome."

He kept his eyes on her for another moment.

She willed herself not to show him one ounce of vulnerability.

It must have worked, because he nodded to her and headed out, giving Josie a quick wave from the doorway.

Caroline gave him a moment and then followed, locking up the door to the building behind him as she watched him head to his truck.

People don't really change, she told herself. It's not my fault. It's not like I'm not enough for him.

But it hurt a little to see him run off to the tavern on the very first night that Josie had someone else to watch her.

He hasn't seen his friends in forever, she reminded herself. Just because he's going out, doesn't mean he's going to come staggering back with another black eye. I'll see him first thing in the morning. And he'll be dressed up as Santa Claus, just like we planned.

With that cheerful thought, she headed up to the Children's section to watch *Night at the Museum* with the kids.

CAROLINE

Caroline looked over the sleeping kids covering the floor of the Children's section, wondering if any were actually awake and just pretending.

Sunlight filled the library. It was almost seven, and the only reason the kids were still asleep was the late night of movies, snacks, and reading they had enjoyed.

The night had been a complete success, but this morning...

Logan was supposed to have arrived almost an hour ago with the breakfast tray the Co-op had put together, and ready to don the all-important Santa costume.

But he was nowhere to be found, and she hadn't missed a single call or text.

At six-fifteen, she had been concerned, but figured he had just run into trouble along the way.

At six-thirty, she texted him, and then called. There was no reply.

Now, Caroline was considering calling the Co-op to see if they could send someone over with the tray. She wasn't sure what else to do. She couldn't leave the children, and she knew they would be hungry.

The Santa suit was in her office, but there was no one to wear it.

The older kids would know, of course, that Santa would be a community member in a beard. But the little ones would be

bitterly disappointed not to meet him.

“*Miss Caroline,*” Josie whispered, slithering out of her sleeping bag. “*Where’s Uncle Logan?*”

Caroline beckoned for Josie to slip into her office.

“He’s not here yet,” she said carefully. “He must have overslept.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Josie said, shaking her head. “He’s coming.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Caroline told her.

But the pit at the bottom of her stomach was turning into a black hole. Logan wasn’t coming for either of them. He had gone out last night and had so much fun with his friends that he had forgotten all about the Library Lock-in.

Josie sighed, and Caroline felt terrible for her.

How could anyone let this sweet little girl down?

It was easy to forget when she was so brave and so cheerful, but Josie was currently without her father or her beloved nanny for an extended period for the very first time in her young life. It didn’t matter how much Logan and her grandparents loved and adored her, being without her dad was an enormous challenge.

The pain Caroline had been feeling at Logan’s absence began to blossom into fury on Josie’s behalf.

“Are you okay?” Josie asked.

“Of course,” Caroline said, realizing her facial expression must have steeled. “I’ll just call the Co-op to see if they can send someone over with the breakfast. That way your uncle won’t have to stop over there on his way in.”

“Okay,” Josie said. “I’ll be on duty in case any little kids wake up.”

“Thank you, Josie,” Caroline said, smiling at her resilient little friend.

Josie darted out, and Caroline called about the food.

Thankfully, Lucy Webb was on duty, and said she and another worker would run the trays right over.

Caroline thanked her and hung up.

Taking a deep breath, she called Logan again. Still nothing.

She knew she could look up the home number in the library system, and call the homestead to check on him.

But she wasn't his mother. And it was none of her business what he did with his free time.

She might have no choice if he didn't get here later today to pick up Josie. But for now, she wasn't going to be the desperate good girl hunting down her bad boy boyfriend.

He's not actually my boyfriend, thank heaven, she told herself. And he's done me a favor by showing me his true colors ahead of time.

So, she didn't need to worry about Logan. That still left her with one problem. She had a library full of children who were expecting to see Santa Claus.

This time last year, she would have been calling her dad. And he would have been a wonderful Santa Claus. He loved children, and it would have made his year to help out at the library.

"I'll take a page out of his book," she told herself bravely.

It was certainly easier said than done, but Caroline Bard had promised those children a breakfast with Santa Claus. And by golly, they were going to get it.

LOGAN

Logan stood on top of Dutch Hill, wondering what he had done to deserve the night he'd just had.

Naturally, when the guys let him know they were out but would grab a cab, he had known he would end up having to go get them.

He had already let Caroline know he couldn't stay the night. But he could see the disappointment in her eyes when he said he was going, and he could sympathize, because he felt it himself. It would have been nice to spend the whole evening talking and hanging out with the kids. And he would have felt better knowing she wasn't alone at the library.

Of course, the Trinity Falls Police Department was also in the municipal building, but they were down on the other side. Logan would rather have had his own eyes on her and the kids.

But at least he'd known he would get back to her this morning.

Now even that was looking uncertain.

He'd barely gotten into the pub when Silas had spilled a beer on him while trying to shake his hand. Then his other friends had wanted to linger over one last lager to talk trash about the rancher Emma was working for.

Logan had somehow managed to keep his mouth shut.

Finally, he'd gotten them piled in the truck and started dropping everyone off. Silas Barr lived halfway up Dutch Hill,

so he'd been the last to be dropped off, since that was even further out than Logan's place.

By the time he got Silas to his doorstep and started down Dutch Hill again, his truck was overheating.

He pulled over, opened up the hood and checked on the reservoir for the radiator. It was full. Which meant it could only be the water pump. Or a leaking hose. Or something else that would take time and tools to figure out.

He'd grabbed his phone, ready to tap out and call for help.

But of course he had no signal. He never did that far out of town.

He walked about a mile back to Silas's place, and banged on the door and window, but Silas must have been out cold.

In desperation, he'd decided to walk all the way to the top of Dutch Hill to see if he could get a signal there.

But he couldn't. So now he just stood there, feeling like it all had to be a bad dream, but knowing that it wasn't.

Glancing at his watch, he almost screamed out loud. But screaming wouldn't help. Walking might.

No one really lived on Dutch Hill, except for Silas Barr and maybe one or two other real woodsmen. If Logan wanted help, he was going to have to get all the way back down the mountain and onto the main road to flag someone down.

Taking a deep breath, and calling on everything in him to keep his patience, Logan started to walk as the first rays of dawn began to creep over the horizon.



TWO HOURS LATER, with aching feet, half-frozen fingers, and his mind hazy from being awake for more than twenty-four hours, Logan finally was able to get a car to stop.

“Logan Williams?” Reggie Webb asked, rolling his window down.

“Hey, Reggie,” Logan said. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Looks like more ’n your eyes are sore,” Reggie joked. “Get in. I’d apologize for the farm smells, but you smell like you just crawled out of a barrel of beer yourself.”

Glancing at his watch again, Logan hissed. There was no time to grab a shower or do anything but get to the library as quickly as possible and apologize to Caroline for his lateness.

“Silas Barr spilled a beer on me, but I haven’t been drinking,” he told Reggie. “I was the designated driver for the boys, but my truck broke down on top of the mountain. And I need to get to the library as quickly as possible.”

“The library?” Reggie echoed dubiously.

“Please,” Logan told him. “I know it’s a ways away, and it’s early in the morning. I’ll be glad to repay the favor any way you want. But right now, I’m desperate.”

“So be it,” Reggie told him, turning his truck around slowly. “Now we’ll go there without stopping anyplace. But I won’t push the old girl. You have to be careful. These old trucks can overheat. Even in the wintertime. I might have told you this before, but your father’s cousin once overheated a truck down by the creek...”

Logan let himself relax a little in the heat trickling out of the vents, as Reggie’s stories spilled into each other. He’d been up at four to milk yesterday, and it seemed like the action hadn’t stopped until Reggie picked him up just now.

He leaned his head against the window for just a second, and suddenly, Reggie was nudging him awake.

“We’re here, boy,” Reggie said. “I thought you were desperate.”

Logan shook himself, feeling even more miserable than before. His hands were warm again, but his mouth was dry, and his eyes were aching.

“Thank you, Reggie,” Logan said.

“Don’t mention it,” Reggie said. “I’m calling in my favor now, though I’m pretty sure I know the answer. Are you and

Caroline Bard an item?"

He was smiling expectantly.

Logan hated to let him down.

"I'll tell you the answer next time I see you," Logan told him. "Because right now, I actually don't know."

Reggie looked at him uncertainly and opened his mouth in a way that looked dangerously like he might be about to begin another story.

"Thanks again," Logan said, leaping out of the truck and waving to the old timer before running up to the library.

He tried the main door to the building before remembering that it wasn't open yet. Then he headed out to the palladium window in front, to get Caroline's attention, pulling out his cell phone as well, in case he needed to text her.

But what he saw left him frozen in surprise.

The kids were down by the window, like it was story time. And Santa Claus was already in the reader's chair, a child on his knee.

Even from behind and through the window, Logan knew instantly that it was Caroline in the suit.

His sweet, timid Caroline, who wouldn't even hum along to a Christmas carol, was fully committed to playing Santa Claus, talking with the child on her lap and making him giggle.

Pride blossomed in Logan's chest, and he almost laughed with joy. After the long, awful night, he had made it back here just in time to see her come out of her shell.

He felt horrible for letting her down, but he was filled with admiration for her resourcefulness and bravery.

Scanning the happy little faces, he let himself smile with relief. They were having their time with Santa after all.

Until a set of eyes met his.

Josie had caught sight of him, and was scowling, her eyes flashing like fire was about to explode out of them and scorch him alive.

He had never seen Josie like that, never. Not even when she was a toddler and had to take her nap or share a toy with her cousin.

The weight of his betrayal fell back on his shoulders then, and he knew he had messed up big time, not just with Caroline, but with Josie, too.

With a heavy heart, he slipped away from the window and headed to the parking lot to wait until the lock-in was over.

On the bright side, it wouldn't be long.

CAROLINE

Caroline's heart was still pounding when the next to last child was picked up.

She wasn't sure if it was still nerves, or if it was all adrenaline, but she simply couldn't believe that she had pulled off the Santa Claus switch.

She had told the little ones she had to watch Santa's reindeer while he spoke with them, so they could eat breakfast while she went to talk with him about how to keep the reindeer happy while he was in the library.

Changing into the suit in the bathroom out in the lobby had actually been pretty tricky. But Josie had appeared a few minutes later and helped her with the buttons in back.

"I'm sure your uncle is okay," Caroline told the unhappy little girl.

But Josie appeared to be all done talking about her uncle. Her lips were buttoned, and she merely applied herself to the task of getting the suit in place.

When they were finished, they stepped back so that Caroline could look in the mirror.

She had still looked like herself, but in a Santa suit.

"Grandma says there is a magic about Santa Claus," Josie said. "So that if you believe in him, you can see him. So, the kids in the library who still believe will see him when they look at you."

Caroline felt tears come to her eyes at that beautiful statement.

“Just don’t do anything to mess it up,” Josie added helpfully.

“I’ll try not to,” Caroline had said, hiding her smile.

And she was pretty sure she hadn’t. The kids were delighted, even the older ones who clearly knew it was her.

She had actually had a great time playing with them, talking, and even, heaven help her, getting them to sing a Christmas carol or two even though she didn’t join in herself.

And she’d been able to change clothes again before the parents came.

Helen arrived to start the morning shift just as Josie carried her backpack and sleeping bag down from the Children’s section.

“We can call your grandparents now to check in,” Caroline was saying, when she saw a familiar figure in the doorway.

“Hey,” Logan said.

His voice was rough and raspy, and he looked unreasonably handsome for a man who had clearly been out all night.

He took one step closer, and she could *smell* him - like stale beer and regret.

Her heart sank.

“I’m so sorry, Caroline,” he said. “I hope you’ll let me explain—”

“*No*,” she heard herself say, her hand going up to tell him wordlessly not to come any closer.

His eyes widened, but he stopped.

“I don’t know what your intentions are,” she said clearly and carefully. “But I know what I want.”

The library was so quiet that she could hear the rasp of his stubble as he ran the palm of his hand over his cheek. And she

could *feel* Helen's and Josie's eyes on her.

But she didn't care.

"I want romance," she told him. "And I want commitment. I want the kind of man who would ride up on a horse and carry me off into the sunset to live happily ever after, with marriage, and children, and a white picket fence."

She wasn't sure what reaction she expected, but it wasn't what she got.

He didn't move, or speak. He was just staring at her, listening like every fiber of him wanted to know what was coming next.

"And if I can't have that, then I am *perfectly* happy, right where I am," she told him. "I won't settle. I'll stay in this library, with my friends and my books, and you can just *get lost*, Logan Williams."

She turned on her heel and jogged back up to her office, so he wouldn't see her cry. She sank into her chair as soon as the door shut behind her, and buried her face in her hands, letting the tears flow.

Caroline had never been resentful about not having a boyfriend before. She figured she had won the lottery in life in every other way, so there was no need to worry about it.

But it seemed especially cruel to have Logan dangle himself in front of her for a few weeks, only to show her his true colors all over again right when she was starting to get her hopes up.

A month ago, she would have thought a Saturday night off by herself sounded marvelous. She would have snuggled up in bed with her fluffiest socks and a pile of books, and felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

Why had Logan Williams come along and messed that up?

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," she said, wiping at her eyes.

“You were magnificent,” Helen told her in a loud whisper, always the consummate librarian, even though the doors weren’t open yet.

“I was honest,” Caroline said, shrugging. “Not that it matters.”

“Oh, you should have seen his face,” Helen said delightedly. “And I think it matters a lot that you stood up for yourself. Especially in front of that impressionable little girl. She shouldn’t grow up thinking men can just show up whenever they please.”

Caroline felt a shiver of pleasure at the idea that she might have provided some kind of an example for Josie.

She wasn’t kidding herself that she was ever going to get what she wanted from Logan. But she was glad she could end things on her own terms.

“And I saw someone posted on Neighborly about there having been a *soft-spoken Santa with a heart of gold* visiting with the children at the Library Lock-in,” Helen went on. “I assume that was you?”

Caroline nodded.

“I don’t believe it,” Helen said with a big smile, shaking her head in mock disbelief. “The mild-mannered young librarian I hired is really blossoming today.”

“I don’t know about that,” Caroline laughed.

“I do,” Helen told her. “Go take a nap, and then have a fun Saturday. You earned it.”

CAROLINE

A few weeks later, Caroline found herself following the windy road to the Williams Homestead again.

The sky was pewter gray, and she was grateful for the bit of cheer from the bright holiday decorations on the farmhouses scattered along the way.

Her own heart had been deep in a colorless funk over these last few weeks. If it weren't for the library activities that always became more intense around the holidays, she wasn't sure she would even have wanted to get out of bed in the mornings.

She told herself it was silly to mourn a relationship that never was, especially in light of the fact that she had lost her dad less than a year ago. But one sadness seemed to bleed into the other. And the only thing that eased her pain was helping others.

Each child who smiled when she handed them a new book, and each book club member who had something they were excited to talk about glowed like a light in her darkness.

She did her best to be a shining light for others as well, making sure she smiled and laughed when she was supposed to, and went above and beyond to be the face of the Children's section.

But her mom couldn't be fooled so easily.

Caroline was grateful that her mother wasn't the type to say, *It's that boy, isn't it? I told you he was no good.*

Instead, she wrapped an arm around Caroline on movie nights, and chose comedies like *Home Alone* and *Elf* to cheer her up.

They had propped each other up just this way ever since they had lost her dad, and it was a comfort to know they could keep going.

She wondered if Logan's parents even knew there had been anything between them at all besides a casual friendship.

She probably wouldn't find out today, in any case. Logan's parents were polite and polished. They didn't seem like the type to let it drop that their son had been interested in her.

She thought back again to that night, and had to shake her head at her own stupidity.

He had been so convincing when he told her she made him want to be a better man. But that was exactly what someone like Logan Williams was known for. He was a good-looking charmer, who did what he pleased.

It hurt to know that she was less important to him than yet another night with his friends. But it shouldn't have been a surprise. She was far more surprised that he'd let down Josie. She wouldn't have pegged him for that.

Caroline turned into the homestead, finding it strange and a little intimidating to go up the main drive between the sycamores instead of down the gravel road to the lodge.

This is important, she reminded herself. The Williams Homestead means something to me, too - to the whole community.

Pulling up in the roundabout, she quickly turned off the car, grabbed her folder, and headed to the front door before she could lose her nerve.

"Caroline Bard," Logan's father said, opening the front door before she was all the way up the porch stairs. "I'm glad to see you."

Caroline smiled awkwardly, caught off balance by his welcome.

“Come on in,” he said. “I’ll let Logan know you’re here. He’s in the high field, but he’ll be down soon for lunch anyway.”

“No, that’s okay,” she said quickly. “I’m not here for him.”

Alistair’s eyebrows lifted slightly, but he still stepped back to allow her to enter first.

“Annabelle,” he called out as he followed her in. “We have a guest.”

They headed into the kitchen, and he indicated the table. She took a seat, feeling almost odd sitting down in the space where she had worked so hard by Logan’s side, preparing pies for Thanksgiving.

Soon, the family would be getting ready for Christmas dinner, without her.

“Caroline,” Annabelle said in a pleased way as she stepped into the room.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t call ahead,” Caroline said quickly. “But a volunteer stopped in to cover for me, and I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to come see you.”

“Of course,” Alistair said. “What can we do for you?”

“Well, I wanted to share this with you,” she told them. “I’m sure Logan has told you about the grants we applied for. I completed the applications, and there’s great news. Two of the foundations responded with more questions.”

“Grants?” Annabelle echoed, a tiny furrow between her brows.

“Did he not talk to you two about this?” Caroline asked, looking between them and feeling like maybe she should hightail it back out without saying another word.

But Alistair had opened the folder, and was eyeing one of the letters they had received.

“This is from PFAF,” he said softly.

“Logan was trying to win grants?” Annabelle asked.

“It was an idea,” Caroline said. “A way to hold onto the homestead and maintain it without selling it. Logan should really be the one to tell you about it.”

“I’d like for you to tell me about it,” Alistair said. “Do you think it’s a good idea?”

She looked back at Annabelle, but she was nodding too.

“I’ll try my best to explain a little,” Caroline said. “And yes, I do think it’s a good idea.”

She started slowly and carefully explaining what Logan had come up with after thinking over the idea. And when his parents showed interest, she stopped feeling self-conscious and let herself become more passionate, telling them what a special experience it had been to visit the farm as a schoolchild, and how wonderful it would be if more children could have that experience.

Finally, she showed them the grant applications Logan had worked on, and the two follow-up letters that had come in after she’d sent them in.

“Logan was working on this?” his father asked when she was finished, sounding amazed.

“Yes, of course,” Caroline said. “I assist many library patrons in finding sources for grants and submitting. But Logan came up with the full concept for what the farm could be himself, and he drafted every single application.”

“You’re good for him,” Logan’s mother said suddenly in a clear, soft voice. “It’s a loss to all of us that things didn’t work out.”

Caroline swallowed over the sudden lump in her throat.

“I think we just want different things from life,” she said.

But as she looked down at the proposals on the table in front of her, the physical embodiment of something she and Logan had both wanted badly, it didn’t feel exactly true.

“I should head back,” she said, jumping up from the table so quickly that her chair screeched on the floor. “Thank you for letting me stop by like this.”

“Come see us anytime,” Logan’s father said, his deep voice sincere.

“We’re always glad to have you,” his mother agreed. “And we’ll show these to Logan. I’m sure he’ll be grateful you came.”

Caroline nodded and headed out before the hot tears could escape her eyes.

Don’t you dare cry for him, a voice inside her head scolded. If he couldn’t be there for you when you needed him, then he’s not the one.

But if Logan Williams, with his deep laugh, and handsome smile, and generous ways, and big, warm family wasn’t the one, then no one would be.

And suddenly that felt like it mattered.

LOGAN

Logan sawed away at the fragrant pine plank. His arms ached, and sweat dripped down his forehead, in spite of the cold.

He was trying to keep the heat low in the lodge, since he was in and out so much with his projects, and Josie was outside with hers, too.

It had taken a full day of apologies and explanations to win Josie's affection again. But she had a sympathetic heart. In the end, she had laughed quite a bit at his adventures on Dutch Hill, and she understood now that he was determined never to let her down again.

When Gil had called the day after the Friday night lock-in to let Logan know he'd set up a hot spot so they could get enough internet to the house for Josie to do her schoolwork, his heart had broken fully, knowing he had no reason to see Caroline every day anymore.

He'd sent her a text to let her know Josie wouldn't be coming in, but she never responded, so he never followed up. Let no one say that Logan Williams couldn't take a hint.

With more free time on his hands lately, all he wanted was to work on the lodge. It was the only thing that eased the agony of missing Caroline.

He knew what she thought of him. And while he could have tried to nail her down and force her to listen to his explanations, he also knew deep down that it didn't matter.

Even if he got her to forgive him for this mishap, there would always be another.

The truth was, she was out of his league. One day, she would realize it and he would be right back here, licking his wounds, and trying to make the best of a life that wasn't infused with the inspiration of the most passionate woman he had ever known.

"Hey, scamp," his dad's voice carried across the front porch of the lodge.

Hearing his old childhood nickname melted the ice in Logan's heart a little. He put down his saw, and brushed his hands off on his jeans.

"Come in," he yelled as he jogged to the door.

His father stepped in and nodded to Logan, then looked around the room.

"You're making some real progress here," he said, his expression telling Logan that he was impressed.

There was a time when Logan might have taken it as a sort of backhanded insult. *You're making a lot of progress, considering you never showed any interest in this place before.*

But despite any troubles he might be having, there was a newfound sense of self-respect in Logan's heart lately.

"Thank you," he said. "What's up?"

"Can we sit?" his dad asked.

"Sure," Logan told him.

"Caroline came to visit with us today," his dad said without preamble. "She told us what you two had been working on."

Logan froze.

His father had lived an even longer lifetime than Logan on the homestead. Would he be offended, or even angry at the idea of opening it up to the world?

Guilt for not talking to his parents sooner made him feel sick to his stomach. He'd been too busy telling himself that it wouldn't amount to much. He hoped his dad had been kind to Caroline when she told him what was going on, completely out of nowhere.

He had been planning to keep his plans from his parents until he had a viable way to make them happen. After all, he'd never been interested in anything long-term except farming. Why would they believe in his pipe dreams of more? Logan was the playboy, the rascal, *the scamp*. He had never given them reason to expect him to be capable of making such a complicated plan and following through.

But his dad didn't look angry.

As a matter of fact, the expression on his face looked an awful lot like pride.

"We're not working on it together anymore," Logan told his dad quickly. "Though I would be glad to jump into it again if you and mom are interested. There are no guarantees that we could get any funding, but I'd like to try. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it myself. I wanted to see if there was any possibility of making it happen before I talked to you."

"I think it's a wonderful idea," his dad told him. "Your mother and I were very impressed and moved that you would come up with such a thing."

"I didn't," he said simply. "It was Caroline. She told me to think about Josie, how much she loves learning about the farm, and then ask myself if other children would love it, too."

"We saw another side of you when Caroline was coming around here," his dad said, smiling fondly. "And you seemed happier than I've ever seen you. What happened?"

"I messed up, Dad," Logan said, looking down at his hands.

Strangely, it felt good to confess.

"Everyone messes up sometimes," his dad said.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, listening to the sound of the wind in the trees outside.

“I know you probably expect me to share some words of wisdom,” his dad said at last, with a wry smile.

Logan studied his dad.

The lines around his father’s eyes were more pronounced than they used to be, and his big frame was a little leaner under his flannel, but his eyes were still filled with the same humor and compassion as always. Alistair Williams *was* wise. And Logan was eager to hear his advice.

“I’m not going to tell you anything, son,” his dad said instead, shaking his head. “You already know in your heart what you need to do. You don’t need my permission.”

I do know what I need to do.

The sense of self-possession that had been unfurling slowly in Logan’s chest suddenly enveloped him whole.

He didn’t know if it was Caroline’s faith in him, or Josie’s, or the work he had done on his own, with the house and the grant applications. But he didn’t feel like wild, rowdy Logan Williams anymore.

He felt like a man who could be counted on - by his friends, by his family, and maybe most importantly, by himself. Caroline’s words to him echoed in his head, and it was all he could do not to jump out of his seat.

“I know exactly what to do,” he told his father.

“Good,” his dad said. “Because the house is looking good. To me, it seems like the perfect space for a family.”

His dad studied his face.

“A year ago, I would have flinched at that,” Logan acknowledged. “But spending time with Josie... Well, it makes me feel like I’d like to be a dad.”

“Your mom was right again,” his dad chuckled.

“What do you mean?” Logan asked.

“She told your brother that spending time with Josie would be good for you,” his dad said.

Just then, the door burst open, and Josie ran in, her cheeks pink from working outside.

“Hey, Grandpa,” she said.

“Hey there, skipper,” he replied. “What are you up to?”

“It’s a surprise,” she told him.

Logan figured it was probably pretty clear to his dad what she was up to, but thankfully, he merely smiled at her.

“What’s up, sweetheart?” Logan asked her. “Need some hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please,” Josie told him. “But I also just remembered that Saturday is the Hometown Holiday celebration. Are we still going?”

Her eyes were pleading.

“Of course we are,” Logan told her, realizing what he had to do. “We’ve got something important planned.”

“We do?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it over hot chocolate,” he promised, smiling when he saw her skip over to the kitchen.

If he could win back Josie’s trust, maybe he really could win back Caroline’s too. And he was finally starting to believe that he might actually be the kind of person that was worth trusting.

CAROLINE

Caroline opened the bin of Christmas carol books in her office and began going through them, making sure each copy was clean and legible and ready for the day's events.

The Hometown Holiday celebration included carriage rides, the start of the firehouse's Christmas tree sale, a town carol sing-along, and the lighting of the big Christmas tree.

They had learned over time that having a carol book helped people sing - not necessarily because they didn't know the words, but because they liked having something in their hands to look at, if they felt shy.

Of course, Caroline herself wouldn't be singing, no matter whether she had a carol book or not. She would move her mouth with the tune, and that would have to be enough. She just didn't feel much like singing lately, even if she had been the kind of person who liked to in the first place.

Though she had told herself that she would shake off her crush on Logan, it felt like she missed him more and more over time instead of less. Everything made her think of him lately, and it was impossible not to wonder whether she might run into him today.

As much as it would hurt to see him and not be able to talk with him, she truly hoped Josie would have the chance to come into town and enjoy the community celebration. She had also missed Josie and her upbeat personality. The office felt lonely these days.

“Need a hand with that, Miss Caroline?” Betty Ann Eustace asked, stepping into the office with her friends, Ginny and Shirley following behind her.

“Thanks,” Caroline said. “Yes, I’d love that.”

She got them set up at the table in the main office with the carol books and popped over to the storage area to grab the bin of sleigh bells they would hand out with the books.

On her way back from storage, she swore she heard someone saying Logan’s name. She sped up a bit and slipped back into her office in time to hear the rest.

“—and he drove every one of them home, including Silas,” Betty Ann was saying, shaking her head. “And *then* his car broke down on the top of Dutch Hill.”

“No,” Shirley said.

“Yes,” Betty Ann said. “Reggie Webb was all the way down on Pleasant Drive, and said Logan had pushed that truck off the road by himself and hiked down Dutch Hill almost to the gas station before he flagged Reggie down.”

“When was this?” Caroline asked.

“A couple of weeks ago,” Betty Ann said. “He asked Reggie to take him to the library, so you probably saw him early that morning, looking exhausted, from what Reggie said.”

“And he had driven his friends home?” Caroline asked, shuddering at the idea. He’d smelled like a brewery.

“He was the designated driver,” Shirley told her. “He often is. He’s rough around the edges, but he looks out for those boys, always has.”

That actually made a lot of sense to Caroline, now that she knew him better. A few things slid into place in her mind, and suddenly the incident that had changed her mind about Logan began to look very different.

But...

“He smelled like he’d been drinking,” she said.

“One of those rascals spilled a beer on him,” Betty Ann Eustace said. “According to Reggie. He had the same question for him, knowing he’d been out in his truck. Poor child. And he still came here for his niece instead of sending his mom for her and going home for a shower and some rest.”

“He’s shaping up,” Ginny decided, nodding her head.

“But you can still do better,” Betty Ann said, turning to Caroline.

Caroline felt her cheeks warm.

“Why would you say that?” she asked Betty Ann.

“You said you wanted a man who showed his love through his actions,” Betty Ann pointed out. “Like Mr. Darcy in the book.”

Instantly, her mind showed her a memory of Logan making the table for her, his muscles bulging as he sawed the fragrant wood.

“And you said you wanted a man who might be from a different world, but loses his mind with love,” Shirley added. “Like Heathcliff.”

Caroline saw Logan’s face as he envisioned his family farm being transformed into a place for children to learn. He was from a different world, but he was willing to turn his whole life upside down just because she had asked him to consider it.

“And you said you wanted a man who would ride up on a horse, and carry you off into the sunset,” Ginny said with a happy sigh. “It’s the most romantic thing I ever heard.”

Well, that was unlikely to happen, no matter who she fell in love with.

But Logan Williams checked all the other boxes.

Her heart squeezed as she thought about the rough and tumble cowboy who had stolen her heart. Maybe she had been a little too quick to dismiss him.

“Yes,” Betty Ann said, nodding her head without realizing that Caroline was having an internal epiphany. “You hold out for a man just like the one you described.”

LOGAN

Logan smiled down at Josie, wishing he could transport his brother here for a moment, just to see his daughter's happiness.

She had crouched down to talk with three little kids, whose mothers were looking on fondly.

"Have you been reading lots of books with Miss Caroline?" Josie was asking them.

"Chicka-chicka," one little girl chirped.

"*Boom-boom*," another yelled.

Josie laughed, and they laughed with her, their chubby little faces dimpling, eyes closed with joy.

He glanced at his watch.

It was time.

"Josie," he said. "We need to go find Grandma and Grandpa."

"They're right there," she told him, pointing to where her grandparents were waiting for their tree to be wrapped in netting and strapped to the roof rack.

"Can you go be with them for a bit?" he asked her. "The carol singing is about to start, and I don't want you to miss it. But I have a little errand to run."

Josie waved goodbye to her tiny fan club and ran over to him first.

“You don’t want to see Miss Caroline, do you?” she asked him softly.

“I do want to see her,” he said, feeling unfamiliar butterflies in his belly. “But there’s something I need to do first, something important.”

“Good luck,” Josie said, wrapping her arms around him in one of her sudden hugs.

“What am I going to do when you go back with your dad?” he asked, hugging her back.

“Convince my dad to move home,” she said into his rib cage.

The words were muffled, but he understood them just fine.

“You wish you lived here all the time?” he asked.

“It’s nice here,” she said, shrugging.

“Your dad’s job is really important though,” Logan told her. “But maybe we can convince him to at least bring you for all the holidays.”

“Maybe,” Josie said, pulling back. “But first go get Miss Caroline. She needs you. She’s sad.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Definitely,” Josie said. “I can tell from here.”

He resisted the compulsion to look over at Caroline, and focused on watching Josie as she darted off to join her grandparents. When his mom wrapped an arm around the girl and gave him a wave, he knew he was good to go.

Taking off before he could change his mind, he jogged down the block to the corner, where the carriage rides started. The sound of an acoustic guitar began behind him. The town Christmas carol singing was about to start.

Sure enough, when Logan arrived down at the corner, Joe Cassidy was clucking to the horses, urging them back to the starting point, where their trailer awaited.

“Joe,” Logan called out. “Wait up.”

Joe pulled up the horses.

“Logan Williams,” Joe said, his eyes twinkling with humor. “You need my carriage to pull a prank?”

A year ago, he would have been insulted. But tonight, Logan merely chuckled.

“Something like that,” he said. “But I only need one of your horses, and it’s not for a prank.”

“Hm,” Joe said, seeming less amused. “What’s it for?”

“True love,” Logan said simply.

“Ah,” Joe sighed. “Caroline Bard?”

“How did you know?” Logan asked.

“Reggie Webb said you weren’t together,” Joe laughed. “I read between the lines. She’s a good kid. Are you planning on treating her right? My wife would never forgive me if I helped you break Miss Caroline’s heart.”

“I plan to spend the rest of my life making hers easier and happier,” Logan told him sincerely.

“Which horse did you have in mind?” Joe asked with an approving smile.

Logan studied the two animals.

He knew them both well. Peanut Butter and Pickles had been pulling the carriage at Cassidy Farm for years. They were both well trained and docile horses.

Peanut Butter’s coat was glossy and smooth. His mane was still braided with the red and white striped ribbons the Cassidy kids had put in it.

Pickles had shaken out his bows long ago. He was the larger of the two, and his eyes were still gleaming with excitement, even after a long day of pulling the carriage.

“Pickles, I think,” Logan told him.

“Pickles, it is,” Joe said. “I don’t have his saddle and bridle though. He was only meant to be pulling today.”

“That’s not a problem, sir,” Logan told him. “I’ll get him.”

“Good thing,” Joe said frowning. “My knees won’t let me help you. This was the only Christmas task I was allowed to do this year. I’m supposed to wait here for my nephew to get ‘em unhitched.”

A few minutes later, Logan was bareback on the big horse, and hoping the animal would bring him luck.

It was getting dark though, and he could already hear the carols winding down.

He urged Pickles on, clucking and squeezing his knees gently.

The cold air buffeted his face and the big horse’s hoofs beat a brisk rhythm on the street as they galloped toward Logan’s fate.

CAROLINE

Caroline stood in front of the town Christmas tree along with the mayor, the elementary school principal, and a semi-circle of other townspeople.

Everyone held carol books and sang, more or less in tune and rhythm with the acoustic guitar. The sky was fading from fiery pink to a deep velvet blue, and the sweet scent of pine needles from the Christmas tree sale filled the air.

If she closed her eyes, she could picture standing in this very spot when she was a little girl, one parent holding each of her mittened hands as they swayed along to the beautiful carols.

But now that she was in charge of part of the celebration, closing her eyes wasn't an option.

Especially since things weren't exactly going as planned.

She was trying to see it as a good thing - a distraction from the fact that she had hoped to be here with Logan, listening to him sing with abandon, his deep voice filling the air enough to make up for her shy silence.

She glanced behind her, knowing there was no point. The Christmas tree still wasn't lit. The lights were supposed to have come on at the end of "The First Noel," like they always did. But for some reason, they weren't working.

Poor Esther Jones, who ran the little pottery and art shop in town, had plugged and unplugged them to no avail, shaking

her head the whole time, her eyes wide behind her glasses after each attempt.

Thankfully, Tanner Williams was attending the celebration this year, and he actually knew what he was doing. He'd stepped up as soon as he noticed there was a problem. He was working diligently to get the lights working, and sooner or later, he would crack the issue.

But the carolers had already made it to "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," which was always the last song of the evening, and the tree was still dark.

A clomping sound echoed from the street, getting louder by the minute. One by one, the carolers trailed off, stepping back to see what was headed their way.

Caroline couldn't see from where she stood, but the sound was familiar.

There were murmurs of surprise from the crowd, and at last, they moved aside enough for her to realize what was happening.

A man approached on horseback. Hoofbeats drummed the pavement to create the familiar sound she couldn't believe she hadn't recognized instantly.

Man and horse stopped short in front of the crowd, his big hands tangled in its silky mane.

Logan...

The expression of fierce determination on his handsome face was accentuated by the light from the lampposts. His hair was ruffled from the wind, and his jaw looked even tighter and sharper than usual.

He threw his leg over and vaulted off the horse, landing on the sidewalk with surprising grace for a man of his size. The football field might be long behind him, but Logan Williams still had some moves. The horse danced in place for a second, and then one of the Webb boys put a hand on its withers to steady it.

"Caroline," Logan said, his voice a harsh growl.

His commanding tone almost had her stepping backward. But she held her ground, heart pounding, waiting for him. The crowd parted, creating a path on the pine needle-strewn ground between them.

“Caroline, you’ve been right here in Trinity Falls with me all your life,” he said, moving to her slowly. “And I always knew you were smart and beautiful. But I never understood how kind and brave you were until this winter.”

She swallowed hard, and looked into his eyes, trying to ignore the whispering all around them.

“The way you look at the world - with so much hope,” he said, shaking his head. “Whether it’s a small child looking for a book, or a grown man in mourning for the only home he’s ever known, you see to the heart of things more completely than anyone I’ve ever known. And you find the way to heal our hurting.”

There were a few romantic sighs and whispers.

“I told you before that you made me want to be a better man,” he went on. “And I know I have a long way to go. But I’m not going to give up without a fight. Will you give me one more chance to win your heart? Will you let me earn the right to offer you that white picket fence you said you wanted?”

Tears blurred her eyes as she tried to hold in a sob.

“I’m here, and I’m ready to ride off into the sunset on horseback, Caroline Bard,” he told her, coming close enough to take her hands, if he wanted to. “Will you come with me?”

His eyes were on her now and she could feel a pull between them, like the universe was trying to tell her she belonged in his arms.

She opened her mouth, uncertain how to tell him what she had learned tonight. He didn’t need a second chance. He was already the man she wanted.

“Caroline, please,” he said gently.

And in spite of his massive size and his reputation, his eyes were filled with hope and fear.

Suddenly, she could see the little boy he once had been, filled with dreams and longing and an outdoor energy too big to fit in a little desk at the country school.

Here was a man who loved with all he had, who was never too busy to help, and ferried his friends up mountains on cold winter nights. Here was a man who could wield wood and metal with calloused hands, and still soothe the homesickness of a small girl who missed her father.

She didn't care about his reputation, or what anyone might think. She only cared that this man was all she had ever wanted, but been too scared to ask for.

Tears threatened again and she was afraid to try to speak.

He waited for her, the winter breeze running its cold fingers through his hair as he stood as still as a stone, like he would wait lifetimes for her answer.

"Yes," she managed.

Then his arms were around her, and he was leaning down to kiss her.

The whole town was watching, yet Caroline felt no shame. All the happy sighs and whispers faded as his lips touched hers.

The warmth of his arms around her felt like home, and his kiss sent a happy tingle down her spine. In that moment it was only the two of them, and nothing else mattered.

A burst of light made it through her closed eyes, and a cheer from the crowd reminded her that they were not alone.

She pulled back, feeling shy again, just as the whole town began to lightly applaud.

Logan let go of her arms, but let one hand slide down to the small of her back.

It took her a moment to realize that the light and applause were for the Christmas tree, which had lit up the moment they kissed.

“It’s a sign,” one woman whispered to her husband. “They’re meant to be together.”

Caroline caught Betty Ann’s eyes in the crowd, and the older woman winked at her.

“Are you ready to ride off into the sunset?” Logan asked, his voice husky.

“Yes,” she said, looking up into his beautiful eyes again.

“Good,” he told her. “Because I’m tired of sharing you.”

Taking her by the hand, he jumped back onto the horse and then swung her up to his level like she weighed nothing at all. A moment later, she was snug in his arms, her hands tangled in the big horse’s mane.

“Merry Christmas, everyone,” Logan called out as he urged the horse on.

Caroline let out a startled laugh as the horse cantered off, hoofbeats drumming along Park Avenue as Logan Williams carried her off into the sunset. She leaned back against his chest, enjoying the feeling of his warm arms encircling her, just as fresh snow flurries began to swirl down from the sky.

CAROLINE

Caroline felt like she had been living in a dream in the weeks since the Hometown Holiday celebration.

The time between the town festivity and the holiday were always busy, filled with baking, wrapping presents, and making plans for the big day. And she had been worried about how this year would feel, without her dad around.

But Logan had made it his mission to include Caroline and her mother in every single Williams family tradition.

They made tree decorations with Annabelle. They went out to Cassidy Farm with Alistair to cut the tree for the big house, and smaller ones for the lodge and Caroline's mother's condo.

And Logan came to the condo to bake snowball cookies, peppermint hot chocolate, and all the Bard family recipes Penny had preserved and prepared over the years, with Elvis Presley's Christmas albums playing in the background.

It wasn't the same as back at the old house with her father's voice booming along, but it felt like they were mixing the old customs with new, creating a wonderful new tradition all its own.

And seeing Logan learning the old recipes from her mom, reaching the baking sheets from the high cupboard for her, and singing along with the music, warmed Caroline's heart.

They had also begun looking at plans for the farmstead again. Logan had been incredibly moved to learn that she had continued submitting his applications, even after they had their

brief falling out. Now they were refining ideas, trying to find ways to maximize contributions and develop a program that kids would love.

Logan had already made plans to travel to several other farms and historic homes that had opened their doors to the public. Once Josie's dad was back home again, Logan would be heading out to do his research.

Until then, it seemed to Caroline that the two of them would be spending every spare moment together.

It was harder and harder to say goodbye when he walked her to the door of her apartment each night after a fun evening of holiday or farm talk.

They had been a couple for such a short time, but Logan had won her heart so fully that she almost couldn't remember what it had been like not to have him as a partner in her life.

Everything was like a true winter wonderland. Then the snow had begun to fall.

At first, she sat on her sofa, looking out at the flakes dancing down and she hugged herself with joy, thinking about having a white Christmas.

But then it kept falling, clouds darkening the sky, and drifts piling up so high that the cars disappeared from downtown Trinity Falls and the shops closed up.

When Helen called to let her know the library would be closed, Caroline had to face the facts.

She was going to be spending Christmas completely alone.

The phone lines were still working, so she tried to comfort her mom with daily calls.

"But all the cookies are in my freezer, Caroline," her mother would say worriedly.

"Good," Caroline told her. "We know you won't starve."

It was a silly idea, the residents of the condo building were already busy helping each other out, doing their best to ensure that no one went without anything during the storm.

“You won’t have any snowball cookies,” her mom said sadly.

“We’ll make more for New Year’s,” Caroline laughed.

But in truth she was sad. And she knew they both were - not because of the cookies, but because of her dad.

It was hard to have Christmas without him. But they had been getting by nicely with Logan’s help.

Christmas completely alone would be almost cruelly difficult for each of them.

“The heat is working, we have roofs over our heads, and we have our phones to keep in touch,” Caroline listed. “And I don’t know about you, but I’ve got a lifetime’s worth of macaroni and cheese in my cupboard. We’re very lucky people, when you think about it.”

Her mother would agree, and they would turn their thoughts to the books they were reading and the gossip around town, and by the end of the call, they were always feeling better.

She chatted with other friends too, including Sarah, who had just opened up the bookshop in town.

“I’ll come for you if I have to,” Logan had told Caroline on their nightly call. “You will not spend Christmas alone in that apartment.”

“You can’t,” she would laugh.

But now it was Christmas morning, and as she gazed out at the snowy landscape of the little town, she could see the snowplow moving down Park Avenue.

Her heart leapt, but she knew that only meant the town had been plowed. The road that went all the way out to the Williams Homestead couldn’t be cleared already. Could it?

Her phone rang, and Logan’s contact came up.

“Logan,” she said softly. “Merry Christmas.”

“Come downstairs,” he told her. “I have a surprise for you.”

Heart pounding, she slipped on shoes and headed down.

But when she opened the door, it wasn't Logan who stood in the snow smiling at her.

"*Mom*," she yelled, wrapping her arms around her mother, who was puffier than usual in her winter coat.

"Merry Christmas, Caroline," her mother told her happily, hugging her back hard. "Run upstairs and grab your coat and bag. We're going to the Williams Homestead for Christmas after all."

Caroline opened her eyes and saw Logan waving to her from his truck.

"Is it safe?" she whispered to her mom.

"He got me here in one piece," her mother said, shrugging. "Do you trust him?"

"I do," Caroline said, smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. "I'll be right down."

She ran up the stairs so fast that she practically flew. A moment later, she was heading to the truck, where her mom already waited.

"Hi," Logan said gently.

He was standing beside the passenger door, a smile on his handsome face as he took her in like a man marooned in the desert might eye a glass of water.

"Hi," she replied, figuring she probably looked just the same.

"You'll need to wear a seatbelt," he warned her as he opened her door and offered her a hand up.

"I always do," she told him.

"I know."

He held onto her hand an extra minute after she was in, and she could tell that he wanted to kiss her. But she was squeezed in beside her mother, and the idea made her blush.

He winked at her and went to his own side, swinging himself in over a wall of snow left behind by the second plow.

The trip to the homestead was a happy one. Logan drove slowly and carefully, and the three of them chatted excitedly, as Christmas carols played on the radio.

At last, they were pulling into the farmstead.

“Did you dig out by hand?” Caroline asked, feeling overwhelmed at the thought.

“It didn’t take long,” Logan said with a teasing smile.

“It’s the nicest present anyone has ever given me,” she told him honestly. “Thank you for making sure we didn’t have Christmas alone.”

“Let’s get your mom into the house,” he said gently. “Then I have one more surprise for you.”

“Another one?” she asked.

A few minutes later, her mom disappeared into the house to the sound of Annabelle Williams exclaiming happily over her.

“Wait here,” Logan told Caroline.

She stood on the front porch of the big house, looking out at the sycamore lined drive, covered in soft, picturesque snow. It felt like she was standing in a Christmas card.

When Logan returned on horseback, she couldn’t hide her smile.

“It’s not sunset yet,” he told her. “But do you think you could stand one more horseback ride with me?”

The next thing she knew, he was holding her again as the horse made its way down the snow-covered gravel path to the lodge.

When they arrived, Logan hopped down and lifted her off, keeping her in his arms an extra moment.

“I hope you’ll like it,” he murmured into her ear as he placed her down gently.

They headed up the porch steps and he opened the front door.

There had been tarps and drop cloths everywhere while Logan was painting and doing other odds and ends.

But today, they were all missing.

Caroline's mouth formed an "o" of amazement as she gazed at the beautifully refinished woodwork and the soft green paint in the living space that would make it feel like the outdoors and in were one, as soon as the snow melted.

"I hope you like them," Logan said, gesturing to the front wall.

She turned around to look, and her mouth fell completely open.

The entire front wall was lined with built-in bookcases, from the floor up to the two-story ceiling. A rolling ladder with brass hardware had been installed, ensuring that every single book would be accessible.

"What do you think?" His voice was deep, and strangely uncertain.

"I love it, I... I can't believe you did all this," she murmured, turning back to find him kneeling at her feet, holding up a tiny box with something sparkling inside.

"Logan," she whispered.

"I built them for you," he told her, his voice husky with emotion. "I've rebuilt my whole life, better than I ever dreamed it could be, for you. All those years I was restless, looking for something to make me feel complete. But what I needed was right here in Trinity Falls. What I needed was the most beautiful, kind, and patient woman in the world, to fill my mind with dreams and traditions, and fill my heart with wonder. I still can't believe you took a chance and opened your heart to me, but I am determined to spend my whole life proving you right. I want my home and my heart and my life to be yours, Caroline Bard. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she sobbed, reaching for him. "I'm so happy."

Then he was on his feet, his smile radiant, sliding the ring onto her finger and pulling her into his arms, where she sobbed like a child while he pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

As her tears slowed, she couldn't help but soak in the masculine scent of him. A shiver went through her at the feel of his strong arms wrapped around her.

"Should we go tell our parents?" she whispered, pulling back a bit.

"Of course," he said, letting her go, but keeping hold of her hand.

The horseback ride back up to the big house was the most romantic thing Caroline had ever imagined. With Logan's strong arms around her, and the twinkle of his ring on her finger, she felt safe and loved.

"Your home is so beautiful," she said, looking at the snow still sparkling on the bare branches of the trees that met overhead.

"It will be your home, too," he told her.

The idea was so thrilling that she couldn't reply. She tried to imagine life on the homestead with children visiting and activities happening.

"My dad would have loved that idea," she said softly. "He always loved pulling people together. He would have been so proud of what you're planning for this place."

"Then he would have been proud of us both," he told her.

They rode on in reverent silence, and Caroline was certain she could feel her father's loving presence with them.

When they reached the house, Logan swung down and pulled her into his arms.

Lights were glowing inside, and happy voices were chatting. The sound of Josie on a video call with her dad was unmistakable. Delicious smells wafted out of the drafty old Victorian, making Caroline's mouth water.

“Are you ready to share our news?” Logan asked her, his eyes fixed on hers.

She nodded, but couldn't seem to break eye contact. The love between them was too palpable, a bond pulling her tightly to him.

Then he was bending down, pressing his lips to hers to give her the kiss she had been too shy to receive back at the lodge.

She breathed him in, feeling lightheaded with happiness.

Logan kept her left hand in his, thumbing the engagement ring on her finger gently, as if to convince himself it was real, as his other hand splayed across her back, drawing her closer.

“Do we really have to go in?” he murmured when she pulled back for breath.

“Yes,” she breathed back, mesmerized by the haze in his eyes.

“I hope you weren't planning a fancy wedding,” he whispered, smiling down at her. “I don't think I can wait much longer to make you my wife.”

“I'll marry you as soon as you want,” she told him. “No plans needed.”

“What's going on out here?” a little voice demanded as the door swung open.

“*No way.*” Brad's voice on the video call was filled with good-natured humor as he took in the scene.

Caroline felt herself blush from her toes to her hairline once again as Logan grabbed the phone and shared the news with his brother.

“That's your wedding ring?” Josie asked softly, looking at Caroline's hand as the two men talked and laughed happily.

“It's my engagement ring,” Caroline told her. “We're not married yet.”

“Then why were you kissing?” Josie asked, tilting her head slightly.

“We were just practicing,” Logan said, quickly handing her back the phone as his brother howled with laughter, “for when the pastor says, *You may now kiss the bride*. Now, let’s get back inside where it’s warm.”

Josie grinned at them and darted back into the house to spread the news.

“Yes, we’d better make it soon,” Logan said to Caroline, with a big smile.

And in spite of her shyness, Caroline smiled back. She was excited to go inside, show off her ring, and bask in the happy glow of their families’ attention.

“You’re not embarrassed,” he noticed out loud. “You’re not blushing.”

“I couldn’t be more proud to be marrying you, Logan Williams,” she told him, her voice breaking a little on his name. “You make me brave.”

His expression softened for a moment with wonder.

“If you don’t realize you’ve made me a better woman, then you really are a fool,” she murmured.

“Prove it,” he said, with a teasing smile.

“How?” she asked.

“Sing,” he said simply.

She opened her mouth and closed it again.

“Silent Night” was playing on the radio inside. The sweet tune and lyrics carried through the window, as familiar as the shelves at the Trinity Falls library, and the freckles on the back of her hand.

Logan smiled down at her, and Caroline let go, her voice soft and shaky, but triumphant, as she joined the song.

Then Logan was singing too, and the two of them were gazing at each other, their voices rising into the blue sky above, hands linked together - the two luckiest people in the world.

Thanks for reading **Cowboy's Christmas Librarian!**

Want to read Logan and Caroline's **SPECIAL BONUS EPILOGUE**? Sign up for my newsletter here (or just enter your email if you're already signed up!):

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About the next book:

They're forced to share a home for the holidays, but only a miracle could make them share their hearts...

Single dad Ansel Williams is the strong, silent type. After losing his wife, he settled into a quiet life with his young son. Working the farm, spending time with his parents, and being there for his boy have kept him plenty busy for years. He has no need for a woman's company.

But when the housesitter he canceled shows up anyway just as the holidays are kicking in, Ansel's big heart forces him to open his home to the pretty young woman and her daughter.

Winona is annoyingly beautiful, inspiringly energetic, and as kind-hearted as can be. And her very cool, skateboarding daughter makes his introverted son laugh like Ansel has never seen before.

But while he might have a couple of vacant guest rooms for them to stay in, there is definitely no room in his heart.

And when Winona begins letting him see glimpses of the city life they left behind, he is more determined than ever to somehow resist the impossible attraction he feels for resilient

and wonderful Winona, and the instant connection he has with her brave and complicated daughter.

Be sure to check out **Cowboy's Holiday Housesitter**

<https://www.clarapines.com/housesitter.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clara Pines is a writer from Pennsylvania. She loves writing sweet romance, sipping peppermint tea with her handsome husband, and baking endless gingerbread cookies with her little helpers. A holiday lover through and through, Clara wishes it could be Christmas every day. You can almost always figure out where she has curled up to write by following the sound of the holiday music on her laptop!

Get all the latest info, and join Clara's mailing list at:

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