

CLARA PINES

cowboy's
holiday
housesitter

TRINITY
FALLS
SWEET
ROMANCE

COWBOY'S HOLIDAY HOUSESITTER

TRINITY FALLS SWEET ROMANCE - BOOK 8

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 HOLIDAY HOUSESITTER

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 compassion forces him to offer the pretty young woman and her daughter a place to stay.

Winona is distractingly 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 there is no way he would ever risk upsetting things by doing something as silly as admitting his feelings.

When Ansel begins seeing glimpses of the city life his new guests 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.

Ansel is quick to open his home. But what will it take to make him open his heart before it's too late?

WINONA

Winona Lee looked out the window as they drove into the sweet little Pennsylvania town, and felt her stress level finally start to recede.

“Parker,” she said softly, turning the radio down.

Her thirteen-year-old daughter dutifully pulled out her earbuds, eyebrows raised politely.

“This is it,” Winona explained. “It’s called Trinity Falls. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Where are the waterfalls?” Parker asked, ever practical.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Winona admitted. “But I’m sure we’ll find them as soon as we get settled. Maybe there’s even a hiking trail.”

“Are we getting pizza?” Parker asked, moving on from the falls.

If Winona hadn’t known better, she might think that Parker had no interest in the town, or talking with her mother.

But Parker was a good kid. She just needed a little time away from the city to figure out what she wanted, and how to get it without hurting herself or anyone else.

Her scattered, yet straightforward questions were a defense mechanism. Parker had never spent more than a day or two away from their old neighborhood in Philadelphia. If they started talking about feelings or the future, Winona was pretty sure her daughter would start crying or screaming, or worse

yet, just put the earbuds back in and shut her mother out completely.

So, Winona was perfectly happy to talk about dinner, if that was what Parker was comfortable with.

“I’m going to cook for you,” Winona decided. “Your favorite, spaghetti and meatballs, if I can find a grocery store on the way.”

“That was my favorite when I was like five,” Parker said, rolling her eyes in a way that had become all too familiar.

“What’s your favorite now?” Winona asked, trying to remember what it was like to be a teenager talking to a parent.

Parker shrugged.

“I haven’t made my famous spaghetti and meatballs in a long time,” Winona said lightly. “Let’s find out if you still like it.”

“Garlic bread?” Parker asked, a note of interest in her voice.

“Sure,” Winona said, her heart warming a little at the positive response. “We can make garlic bread.”

“Sweet,” Parker said, slipping the earbuds back in.

Winona smiled at her daughter and turned the radio up again. The local station was playing all Christmas music and the sounds of the simple, yet familiar melodies made her feel brave.

She might be driving them into the unknown, but the unknown always had a chance of being something wonderful, something better than what had come before.

As if the town were giving her a sign that she was correct, she spotted a grocery store ahead. The front window was decorated for the holidays with a miniature replica of the town itself, complete with Christmas lights and candy cane decorations hanging from the tiny lampposts.

“Look at that,” Winona said to herself. “It’s just like a snow globe.”

She pulled up out front and unhooked her seatbelt.

“Do I have to go in?” Parker asked, slipping out one earbud.

“Only if you want,” Winona said. “But the house is out pretty far. I thought you might want to help pick out some stuff to eat for the next couple of days while we’re getting settled.”

“Sure,” Parker said, unbuckling her own seatbelt.

Another minor victory. Although offering a teenager food was pretty low-hanging fruit.

They headed up the steps together, and walked in through the big glass doors.

Inside, the store was beautiful, like something out of a movie set that was meant to look like a grocery store in California or something. Bins of fresh fruit and vegetables, shelves featuring hand knitted scarves and Christmas stockings, and a table with pretty holiday candies were all in a display area near the front of the store. And the whole place smelled like fresh baked goods.

“How can I help you?” a smiling young woman wearing an apron with a name tag that said *Lucy* asked as she approached.

“We’re new in town,” Winona admitted. “Just looking to stock up on some essentials before we head to our place.”

“I’ll just grab you a cart,” Lucy said, giving Parker an extra smile.

Parker looked after her, tilting her head slightly to the side, as if she were trying to figure out what the sweet woman’s game was.

That look broke Winona’s heart, and it was the main reason she had given up everything familiar in her life to move to this tiny town in rural Pennsylvania.

Parker was smart, and she had always been an athletic kid.

When her dad left, she had given up her soccer ball for a skateboard, and the friends she’d had all her life had slowly

stopped coming around.

Winona had worried a lot, but then other kids started coming by and Parker seemed to perk up a bit.

But the relief was short-lived.

It quickly became clear that the kids in Parker's new circle weren't like the studious, athletic girls she had hung out with before.

Winona had no problem with dark eyeliner or loud music. She figured most kids went through a phase or two when they were teens.

But Parker's grades began to sink.

And then there was the phone call from the police station on the night Parker and her friends were caught painting graffiti on the public library.

Though it had taken a little time and a big leap of faith to arrange it, Winona had known that night that she needed to do something extreme.

She hoped that a big change like coming out to Trinity Falls would give Parker another chance to decide who she wanted to be.

For now, they planned to be housesitting until New Year's, but Winona hoped to spend that time finding a rental, so that they could stay if Parker was thriving.

"Here you go," Lucy said, pushing a cart over. "If you're wanting something easy for your first night, there are pre-made sandwiches and salads over by the deli. Anything else you need, just yell my name. I'm Lucy, and I'm here all the time, so we'll be seeing each other."

"Thank you so much, Lucy," Winona said. "I'm Winona, and this is Parker."

"Nice to meet you," Lucy said. "Those are easy names to remember - like the '80s movie star, and Spiderman's real name."

Parker couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from turning up at that. Winona chuckled, grateful that this happy young woman was the first person they had met in Trinity Falls.

They took the cart and made a quick sweep of the store, grabbing what they needed. There was fresh ground beef, plenty of tomatoes, peppers, and onions for sauce, and a lovely fresh baguette for making garlic bread. Winona grabbed some cereal and sandwich fixings, along with some other necessities, and she kept her mouth shut when Parker threw a bag of chips and a box of cookies in the cart. After the long drive, some cookies and a cup of tea sounded just about perfect.

The shelf of knitted goods was conveniently located right by the checkout line. While they waited for their turn, Parker fingered the braided woolen ties on a lumpy purple and blue hat with a homemade brown paper price tag.

The lumpy hat reminded Winona of better times. It fit into Parker's pre-eyeliner-friends look, and they would be spending more time outside here.

"It's cold here," Winona said. "Do you want to grab a hat?"

Parker pulled it off the shelf without answering and crammed it on her head before looking in the tiny mirror.

"*Slay*," she murmured to herself before yanking it off her head and putting it in the cart. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Winona said.

One thing Parker didn't seem overly wrapped up in was her appearance. In Winona's opinion, Parker was lovely. She had thick red hair that she usually wore in two ponytails, or two buns if she didn't want it in her way. A sprinkle of freckles under her green eyes made her look younger than she was.

At Parker's age, Winona had hated her own compact, athletic frame. But as far as she knew, Parker wasn't really hung up on what she looked like.

Kids nowadays had it harder in some ways, but if Parker's two friend groups were any indication, the girls were a lot more accepting of their growing bodies.

Back in the car, Parker took the tag off the hat and shoved it back on her head.

Winona bit her cheek to stop herself from telling her daughter she was beautiful.

This phase of parenting was a little bit like suffering unrequited love. She had to try and play it cool most of the time, so Parker would feel comfortable opening up.

But it wasn't easy. Most of the time, Winona just longed to wrap her arms around her daughter, squeeze her hard, and tell her that everything was going to be all right - just like she had been able to do for most of Parker's young life.

But Parker didn't really do hugs anymore, so for Winona, being the best mom she could be meant meeting Parker where she was. And right now, a hot, home-cooked meal and a quiet ear were what Parker needed most.

The main street led them out of the well-lit village and onto another, smaller road that wended through woods and farmland for a long time.

Without GPS on her phone, Winona wasn't sure how she would have navigated the twists and turns that eventually had her heading up a path where the forest was so thick that the branches met overhead.

At last, she turned between massive gates and drove past what looked like a little house, and then down a drive lined by big trees.

"Are we housesitting for Batman or something?" Parker joked drily.

But she was practically right. The house at the end of the drive was a massive Victorian building, big enough to be a hotel.

The GPS pinged for Winona to turn left.

"That's not it," she said, turning slowly onto a gravel road.

They traveled further into the woods for long enough that Winona wondered if maybe they had missed it somehow. Then suddenly, the trees cleared and they were looking at a charming home that could have been a miniature of the gigantic one they'd passed on the way in.

The roof overhang and the gingerbread trim really made it look like something out of a fairytale. A single light glowed on the front porch, making Winona feel like she was being welcomed home. And it looked somehow familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on why.

"Hey," Parker said. "It looks like your snow globe."

Of course. It *did* look a lot like the tiny house in the snow globe Winona kept on her desk.

"It kind of does, doesn't it?" Winona said.

"Did you know it looked like this?" Parker asked.

"Nope," Winona said. "But I think I love it."

"Let's look at the inside before we start throwing around words like *love*," Parker quipped, echoing a real estate show they had watched a time or two.

Winona laughed and parked the car around the side of the house where there was a nice little pull-in.

The two of them scrambled out and headed up to the porch.

The service had said there would be a lockbox or a note from the owner. But Winona didn't see either at the front door.

"Hang out here," she told Parker. "I'll check out the back."

Using her phone for a flashlight in the fading twilight, Winona tramped through the tall grass to the back of the house.

There was an even nicer covered porch in the back, and it looked like maybe a screened one, too.

But still no lockbox or note.

She went the rest of the way around the house to get back to Parker, who was crouched by the door.

“What are you doing?” Winona asked.

“Grabbing the key,” Parker said. “In the movies, people out in the country always keep it under the mat.”

She swept her hand up triumphantly, something tiny glimmering in her fingers.

“Great job,” Winona said. “I guess you learned something from all those scary movies.”

“Lots of stuff,” Parker told her. “Don’t split up, don’t kiss boys, don’t swim in the lake, there’s always a key under the mat—”

“Okay, okay, let’s just get in first, then I’ll take notes,” Winona laughed, grabbing the key from her.

But when she slid it into the lock, the door just pushed open.

“Whoa,” Parker said. “It was just open the whole time?”

“I guess we’re pretty far out in the country,” Winona said uncertainly.

She supposed the house was awfully far off the beaten path. But still, they would never have left their city apartment unlocked. *Never.*

“That’s why there wasn’t a note,” Parker said. “Country people don’t lock doors.”

“I’ll just go in first,” Winona said.

But when she stepped inside, Parker followed right behind her. Winona figured the kid probably didn’t want to be alone outside, and maybe she was right. There were enough trees out there for some pretty big animals to make their home here.

She patted the wall by the door and was relieved to find a switch right away.

She flipped it and suddenly went from feeling like she was hovering in the doorway of a spooky house to standing in a

beautiful center hall, looking into a perfectly normal living room.

The room itself stretched all the way from the front of the house to the back, with large windows along the outside walls that she imagined let in a ton of light in the mornings.

The inside walls were lined with bookshelves that overflowed with all kinds of objects, including books, pottery, and action figures. An oversized, well-used couch and love seat gave the formal space a welcoming feel. They were placed at an angle to each other, facing a wood stove set on a small slate platform.

It was all a bit disorganized for Winona's taste, but there was something wonderful about it, too, that stopped her fingers from itching to straighten it all up.

"Where's the TV?" Parker asked, ever practical.

"Maybe there's a den or something," Winona offered.

They continued their exploration, crossing the hall to walk through a dining room with two corner cupboards and a large table.

The eat-in kitchen was behind the dining room. Winona was happy to see that it was relatively recently equipped with nice appliances, in spite of cupboards that couldn't have been installed more recently than the Kennedy administration.

Behind the kitchen stood a tiny back hall with a powder room, laundry area, and a door on the other side, opening to the back of the living room.

The place might have looked small compared to the bigger house they had seen first, but compared to their apartment, it was a mansion.

"Let's run up and find our rooms," Winona suggested. "Then you can start carrying stuff in while I work on dinner."

Parker nodded and followed her back to the front of the center hall and up the stairs.

The main bedroom stretched across the front of the house and had a screened porch attached. The second bedroom was

filled to the brim with toys, games, and art supplies.

The two bedrooms in the back seemed to be the guest rooms where Winona and Parker would sleep.

Winona let out a silent sigh of relief that there was no one else in the house anywhere. She had tried to be subtle, but she'd checked all the bathtubs and closets, too.

“Want to help me bring the groceries in?” she asked Parker.

“Sure,” Parker said.

Half an hour later, their suitcases were in, groceries were put away, Parker's skateboard was leaning by the door just like back home, and Winona was stirring homemade sauce while the meatballs baked.

Parker sat on the back bench of the kitchen table, listening to music, her head nodding so that her hair glinted in the soft light of the fixture above.

She was probably only sticking close because they were in a new place. But Winona knew better than to take a moment with her daughter for granted.

The house was a little untidy, and had a lot more stuff in the fridge than she had expected for a housesitting gig. But it was charming, spacious, and functional. And the blessed country silence fell around Winona like a mantle. Time felt like it might stretch out just a bit without the flash and flare of the city around them.

It already feels like home, she told herself as she pulled the tray of meatballs from the oven.

As if on cue, the back door flew open, slamming slightly on its hinges, and a little boy in a blue coat blasted into the house, coming to a sliding stop when he spotted her.

The boy opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a man appeared behind him.

The man was tall, with a head of dark hair peeking out from under a cowboy hat. His jeans hung low on his hips, and the flannel he wore showed off his wide shoulders.

Winona gulped, her fear turning to wonder as her brain unhelpfully pointed out that this was the most attractive man she had ever seen.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his handsome face tight with displeasure.

ANSEL

Ansel Williams stared at the woman standing in his kitchen.

He had noticed light in the windows when they pulled up out back. But his mother sometimes did a bit of cooking at his place when she was deep in baking mode and her own ovens were full at the big house, so he didn't think much of it.

The scent of something delicious wafted to him as soon as he opened the door, seeming to confirm his suspicions.

But the woman standing in front of him was decidedly not his mom.

The stranger was short and slender, with elegant posture that made her look like a dancer or an athlete. She had a mane of auburn hair to her shoulder blades, and a spray of freckles across her nose. Her bright blue eyes were locked to his.

Ansel felt like he had been struck by lightning.

Reality set in a second later. She was a complete stranger, which said something out here in the country where he knew just about every face he saw. And she was in his house, and hadn't even answered when he asked who she was.

"Lucas," he said evenly. "Run outside and play for a minute."

His son turned to him with wide eyes.

"I'll go with you," a voice said from the kitchen table. "Come on."

Ansel watched as a girl a bit older than Lucas slid out from the bench and headed for the door. She had to be the woman's daughter. She had a pair of red ponytails and her mother's freckles. But where her mother stood tall in her compact frame, the girl slunk away from the table like the last thing she wanted was to be noticed.

Lucas followed after the girl like a puppy.

"The owners aren't home right now," the woman said, her voice light and clear as a bell. "I'm the housesitter. Can I help you with something?"

He blinked at her, unable to believe her audacity.

"This is my house," he said after a moment.

"Did you not leave on your beach trip yet?" she asked. "Did I get the date wrong?"

Suddenly, the cool confidence was gone from her expression, replaced by something like panic.

"We're not going on that trip," he told her, realizing finally what was going on. "We canceled it. I emailed the service over a month ago."

"You didn't cancel," she said.

"I absolutely did," he told her, bristling with impatience.

"Did they confirm with you?" she asked. "Because they've been sending me reminders about this every week, and I got a phone call from them yesterday to make sure I knew where I was going."

He pulled his phone from his pocket, heart pounding, and searched for the message he had sent to the service.

They hadn't even replied, but he didn't think much of it. He would have expected them to be in touch to charge his card for her fee if they hadn't received the cancellation.

When he looked up, he saw that she was standing by the window, her hand pressed over her mouth like she was trying not to cry.

It was such a familiar expression that he felt like he'd been punched in the stomach.

He had stood in just that spot with just that look on his face so many times when Dana was sick.

A scream from outside pierced the silence in the kitchen.

Ansel turned on his heel and ran for the door, slamming it open and bolting out onto the back porch.

His heart pounded, and he felt like a towering idiot.

These people were strangers, and he had let his son disappear with the girl.

His mind flashed images of Lucas being teased or hurt.

Instead, he saw his son wearing an oversized helmet, standing on a skateboard and howling with laughter as the girl pushed him at roughly the same speed old Mrs. Lennox pushed her shopping cart over at the Co-op grocery.

The girl was also laughing, and the two of them looked like they had been best friends all their lives.

He heard a sigh of relief behind him and turned to see the woman with the auburn hair smiling at the kids.

"I thought they were being attacked by a bear," she admitted, her blue eyes twinkling.

"Is that a big concern where you come from?" he asked her.

"Definitely not," she laughed. "We're from Philadelphia. There, I would have been worried that they'd been hit by a bus. I'm Winona, by the way, and my daughter there is Parker."

She had her hand stuck out, and he couldn't help taking it.

Her hand was small and soft in his, warm, too.

"Ansel," he told her. "And that's Lucas."

"Nice to meet you," she told him. "We'll try to get out of your hair as quickly as we can."

"Is it just the two of you?" he heard himself ask.

“Just us,” she agreed.

She was nodding, but her smile was gone.

Sympathy washed over him, and he remembered how he felt when Dana passed. If he hadn't had a home and a job and a stable place for Lucas, it would have been so much harder.

Whatever this woman's situation, she was a single parent, too. It didn't feel right to kick her out when the sun was already down.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Why don't you stay the night? You can figure out what to do next in the morning.”

“Really?” she asked, those blue eyes fixing on his again. “You don't even know us.”

“Well, *you* had to have a criminal background check to get on the site,” he reminded her. “So, it really comes down to whether you trust me.”

“Your wife will be here, too?” she asked.

“My wife is dead,” he said simply.

“I'm really, really sorry,” she told him. The look in her eyes said she was serious - it was not just another rote sorry-for-your-loss.

“Thanks,” he told her, feeling oddly moved. “Anyway, it's just Lucas and me. You're welcome to stay or go, whatever you choose.”

She glanced over at the kids.

Parker was showing Lucas some of the stickers on the bottom of the board, and he was looking up at her like she was imparting the secrets of the universe.

His chest warmed at the sight of his usually reserved son, making friends, and enjoying himself with another kid.

He glanced over at Winona and saw her expression had softened too.

“Thank you,” she said quietly without taking her eyes off the kids. “We'll stay the night, and I promise I'll find another

place tomorrow.”

“That’s fine,” he told her. “I’m glad they’re hitting it off.”

“Me too,” she said, turning to him. “So, how do you feel about spaghetti and meatballs?”

ANSEL

Fifteen minutes later, Ansel was sitting at the table with their guests, feeling almost as if Winona and her daughter had been there forever.

Winona had gotten the two kids busy making garlic bread the moment they came back in, while Ansel set the table and she prepped a quick salad.

Now it was all served, and everyone was enjoying the plates covered in fragrant, colorful food.

Ansel and Lucas ate plenty of home-cooked meals up at the big house with Lucas's grandma and grandpa, but it had been a while since Ansel had made an effort like this at home.

Not that it really seemed like an effort. Winona and Parker made it all look easy.

The kids were demolishing garlic bread like it was a job. Ansel strongly suspected Lucas's interest was partly because he had helped to make the bread. He normally wasn't a big eater.

He caught Winona smiling at the kids and couldn't help a smile of his own.

"I live with just my dad," Lucas said suddenly to Parker. "Do you live with just your mom?"

"Yep," Parker said. "Most of the time."

Ansel could see that computing in Lucas's head. Most of his friends had two parents at home.

“My mom is dead,” Lucas said. “Is your dad dead?”

Ansel almost choked on his meatball. But Parker didn't even blink.

“Nah,” she said. “My parents are divorced. My dad works for a radio station in Philadelphia, he meets famous people all the time. He met The Rock once.”

“Whoa,” Lucas said, sounding very impressed.

That was actually kind of impressive. Ansel should have known such a beautiful woman like Winona would have an impressive, important husband.

He wondered what had happened. But of course, he couldn't ask.

He glanced over at Winona, whose lips were pressed together slightly, like there was something she wanted to say, but was choosing not to. The rest of her was perfectly composed.

“He has the coolest apartment, too,” Parker was telling Lucas.

“I can't believe how delicious this meal is,” Ansel said quickly, hoping that changing the subject would remove the discomfort Winona felt.

“Spaghetti and meatballs is my favorite,” Parker said with a big smile for her mom.

“I'll be able to cook more often, now that we're out of the city,” Winona told her with a warm smile in return. All the tension was gone from her face, and she radiated love for her daughter.

“You had a small kitchen in the city?” Ansel guessed. He hadn't spent much time in cities himself, but on television, the apartments always looked so tiny.

“I had to work a lot more hours to pay our city rent,” Winona said. “There wasn't a lot of time for real cooking. Everything was so expensive there.”

“My favorite food is macaroni and cheese,” Lucas announced. “I like it cold for breakfast.”

“I swear I do feed him real food sometimes,” Ansel joked.

“Oh, but macaroni and cheese can be so good,” Winona said. “Especially if you doctor it up a little with some vegetables, and a little buffalo sauce.”

“No way,” Lucas said, looking truly horrified. “Why would you ruin the perfect food?”

Everyone laughed, and then Lucas joined them.

Again, Ansel felt a pang, wishing he saw Lucas laugh like that more often.

Winona passed the salad bowl around for seconds, and Ansel found that he did have a bit more room for the crisp, fresh greenery.

“I’m in middle school now,” Lucas was telling Parker. “I’m in sixth grade.”

“I’m in middle school, too,” Parker said. “Eighth.”

“Whoa,” Lucas said. “You’re older than me.”

“I’m thirteen,” Parker told him with a smile.

Ansel was a little surprised. Parker looked like maybe she was in seventh grade, and that only because of her composure. She was hardly taller than Lucas.

And her mother hardly seemed old enough to have a thirteen-year-old child. He would have guessed Winona was still in her twenties.

“Want to see my room?” Lucas asked Parker. “I have about a million comic books.”

“Clear your plate first,” Ansel reminded Lucas.

He was proud to see the boy come right back to the table and grab his plate and cup. Parker joined him, taking not just her own things, but her mother’s, too.

“Thank you,” Winona told her.

Lucas dashed back from the kitchen and grabbed Ansel's things, which made him smile.

It was nice to see an older kid setting a good example like that.

The two darted off, already thick as thieves.

"He's such a sweet boy," Winona said, leaning back in her chair. "Is he always so funny?"

"He's actually a pretty quiet kid," Ansel admitted, shaking his head. "He really took to Parker. It's nice to see him open up like this."

"It's great to see Parker letting her hair down, too," Winona said, her blue eyes crinkling from her big smile. "I'm really hoping she'll make some new friends out here."

There was a little pause after that last statement that made Ansel wonder if there had been something wrong with the old friends.

"Is she homesick?" he asked instead.

"The divorce was hard on her," Winona said, a little tension back in her mouth as she slid her finger against a drop of the condensation on her glass. "I'm hoping a fresh slate and me working less will help."

Again, he felt her emotions flowing off her. This time it was pain, instead of joy.

He hadn't felt attuned to someone like this in a long time. Normally, it was only his siblings that he could read like a book.

"I'm sure it will help," Ansel told her. "It's clear how much she appreciated the meal tonight, and the time with you."

He certainly could commiserate with her. He knew all about what it was like to want the best for his child and worry that he wasn't hitting the mark. And as a single parent, it wasn't easy to be and do everything for Lucas himself.

"Do you have family in the city?" he asked.

“It was just the two of us,” she told him, shaking her head. “My parents moved down to Florida, and my in-laws were never involved much. I was pretty young when we got married, and they never really approved.”

His heart hurt at the idea that her ex’s parents hadn’t accepted her. As a young mother, she had needed more support, not less.

“It’s impressive what a good job you’re doing with her,” he told her earnestly. “I honestly don’t know what I would do without family around. Especially Lucas’s grandparents. It means a lot to have them so close.”

“They’re not in that giant mansion at the end of the trees, are they?” Winona joked. “The one when you first turn in.”

“Actually, they are,” he laughed. “But it’s not as fancy as it seems from the outside. It’s just a big old house that needs work on just about everything, and we can only manage to do some of the things.”

“No way,” she breathed. “But it’s amazing.”

“It’s been in the family forever,” he told her. “Along with the farmland, which is where I work. It was kind of a magical place to grow up.”

He couldn’t squelch the unhappy thought that cropped up in his mind so often these days.

How much longer will the homestead be in the family?

He knew his parents couldn’t really afford to maintain all the buildings on the massive piece of land.

And with his sister working for the rancher from the city, who seemed to be buying up farms that hadn’t even been for sale, he knew it could only be a matter of time before his parents got an offer they couldn’t refuse.

“You have to see Parker’s posters,” Lucas yelled, as he blasted into the room. “They’re all signed and everything.”

“My dad gets the celebrities to sign stuff for me,” Parker said.

She shrugged like it didn't mean anything, but it was easy to see the pleasure in her eyes. She was proud of her dad, and if things hadn't worked out between her parents, that had to hurt Winona.

But when he glanced over at her, Winona was smiling fondly at her daughter, like her happiness was the only thing that mattered.

"Have you laid out clothes for tomorrow, Parker?" Winona asked. "We're getting up super early."

"Oh, right," Parker said. "Can you help me with my chargers?"

"Sure," Winona said, hopping up right away. "Let me deal with these dishes really quickly, and I'll be right up."

"I'll get them," Ansel told her.

"We invaded your home," she said, looking surprised. "I can't leave you alone with a sink full of dishes."

"Lucas will help me," he told her lightly, trying not to read into the fact that she seemed genuinely stunned that he was offering to clean up after she cooked a big meal.

"Thank you," she said, her smile reaching her eyes.

He felt a pang of something sweet, but she had turned and headed upstairs with Parker before he could identify it.

"They're nice," Lucas piped up, interrupting his self-reflection.

"They sure are," Ansel told him.

"I'm glad they came here by accident," Lucas decided. "Maybe they'll stay."

"Let's get to those dishes, buddy," Ansel said, chuckling, and secretly wishing the world could really be as straightforward as the way his son looked at it.

He wondered all the time if Lucas was lonely. He knew the boy didn't seem to have any school friends he wanted to have over, or any who invited him to birthday parties or sleepovers.

It was hard enough not having a mom. To be saddled with social issues felt doubly unfair.

When Ansel was in school, there had been so many Williams kids and cousins that he couldn't have been lonely if he'd tried. The real challenge for him had been making his own reputation when everyone already knew half his family.

"Will Parker ride to school with us tomorrow?" Lucas asked hopefully as he carried the empty sauce pot over to the sink.

"Maybe," Ansel said. "Should we ask them in the morning?"

"Yes," Lucas said with a grin.

WINONA

Winona sat beside Ansel the next morning as he pulled his truck out of the homestead's long driveway and onto the road she had come in on last night.

Somehow, the spooky woods with the trees that met overhead had been transformed into a fairytale forest. The bare branches were silhouetted by the pale pink of the dawn sky as birds and squirrels busily foraged for breakfast all along the path.

"That's where Thomas lives," Lucas said from the back seat, pointing to a long driveway.

"Is Thomas one of your friends?" Winona asked.

"Thomas is a horse," Lucas said. "But he's too old to ride. Sometimes, I go over there and brush him. His owner says he likes it."

"That sounds really nice," Winona told him.

"Yeah," Parker said, but she was giggling. "That's really funny that his name is Thomas."

"Why is it funny?" Lucas asked.

"I mean, it's kind of formal for a horse, isn't it?" Parker asked. "Shouldn't he just be Tom, or maybe Tommy?"

Lucas started laughing, too.

Ansel smiled, and Winona could feel how much he was enjoying the silliness from the kids.

“Oh, that’s where Mandy lives,” Lucas said suddenly, pointing to a little brick house.

“Let me guess,” Parker said. “Mandy is a chipmunk.”

At that, Lucas laughed so hard that he couldn’t catch his breath to tell her who or what Mandy was. Even Winona was smiling now, and Ansel chuckled a little as he drove them on through the countryside.

It was hard not to notice how different this was from Parker’s morning trip to school back in Philly.

Though she loved the city’s history, Winona couldn’t help but compare those dreary gray sidewalks, streets, and buildings to the explosion of natural color all around them here in Trinity Falls.

“This bridge freezes over sometimes,” Lucas said as they crossed it. “And the ice isn’t visible, so you always have to be careful in the wintertime, especially at sunset.”

“I always tell Lucas about that,” Ansel said. “A friend of mine had an accident there in high school and was lucky to survive it.”

“In a few more years, I’ll be able to drive,” Lucas said, sounding pleased about it.

“We’ll see,” Ansel laughed.

They took the rest of the drive in friendly silence. By the time they pulled up at the middle school, Winona was feeling much more relaxed than when they had gotten into the car.

Ansel parked, and they all got out.

“Where do I go?” Parker asked, suddenly looking a little nervous.

She had chosen a pair of faded jeans, her dad’s old Misfits t-shirt, and a pair of purple Chuck Taylors. And of course, she was wearing her jacket and the lumpy woolen hat.

Winona smiled calmly at her daughter, inwardly soothing herself at the sight of the hat. Some part of her would be with Parker today.

“We’ll just pop into the office and say hello,” she told her. “They’ll let you know exactly what to do.”

Parker nodded, looking stoic and calm again.

“I know where the office is,” Lucas piped up. “Want me to walk with you?”

A quick agreement was on Winona’s lips, but she looked to Parker instead. Much as she wanted to be polite to their very generous hosts, she also didn’t want to force her daughter to enter the school with a younger kid, if she didn’t want to.

“Sure,” Parker said with a smile for Lucas.

Pride bloomed in Winona’s chest, and she had to take a deep breath to keep her tears at bay.

Please let this be a fresh start for her, she prayed. Please let her go back to being the sweet, funny kid she was before.

“Mind if I tag along?” Ansel asked.

“The more the merrier,” Winona told him.

Lucas and Parker moved ahead. She was already losing sight of them through the crowd of kids pouring into the school. Winona was grateful to have Ansel by her side.

When they reached the entry, Ansel guided her to the left, where there was a glass door with the word *Office* over it.

“I guess I could have found this on my own,” she laughed.

“That’s okay,” he told her. “I’ll sit in the waiting room. I wanted to check my email anyway.”

Lucas and Parker were already waiting when they came in.

“Hello there,” the secretary said with a smile. “You must be Mrs. Lee. I’m Madge Perkins.”

“Hi, Mrs. Perkins,” Winona said. “It’s so nice to meet you in person. This is Ansel Williams.”

“Oh, we go way back,” Mrs. Perkins laughed. “Ansel used to be a student of ours.”

“Nice to see you,” Ansel said with a warm smile.

“Now, we have some papers for Mrs. Lee to sign,” Mrs. Perkins said. “But first, let’s get Parker off to class.”

She pulled a piece of paper from her desk and handed it across the counter to Parker.

“This is your schedule,” Mrs. Perkins said. “This column is the classroom number. One hundreds are on the first floor, two hundreds are on the second floor, and the three hundreds are up top.”

“Thank you,” Parker said, scanning it.

“I’ll bet Lucas here can help you get to your first class,” Mrs. Perkins said, winking at Lucas.

“Definitely,” Lucas said. “Let’s go.”

Parker’s eyes flew to Winona’s.

In her daughter’s panicked expression, Winona saw some of the pivotal moments in her young life. The flash of concentration before taking her first step, the sudden terror when she realized she was going into pre-school *without her mom*, even that night at the police station when Winona arrived to retrieve her, and Parker looked like she wasn’t sure her mother would even want to claim her and take her home.

“Have a great day,” Winona said quietly, hoping her daughter understood the real message, the one that would mortify her if Winona said it out loud: *You’ve got this. And I love you, no matter what.*

Parker nodded. She wasn’t smiling, but she looked in control again, as usual.

Winona watched the two of them disappear out the door and into the crowd once more.

“Now, I have a few places for you to sign, Mrs. Lee,” Mrs. Perkins said, pointing to a few spots that were marked.

Winona bent over the counter and began the paperwork.

“The other piece is about your residency situation,” Mrs. Perkins said, as Winona worked. “We understood you were in a short-term rental, and of course, those who are in short-term

rentals have thirty days to supply a proper residential lease or an agreement of sale for a property in the district. However..."

Winona looked up, ice water running through her veins.

"Well," Mrs. Perkins said, looking uncomfortable. "You wrote in that you had a short-term rental for the Elizabeth House on the Williams Homestead. But... well, Mr. Williams is right here. And his own son is using the Elizabeth House as their residency address. So, either he's moved out, or you haven't moved in. Or... you're living together?"

Winona gulped, watching the escape from the city she had built so carefully for herself and Parker tumbling down.

"She *is* living with us," Ansel said, before she could answer. "There was a mix-up with the housesitting service, and they sent her over by accident. The two of them are staying in our guest rooms until they can find a rental of their own."

"I see," Mrs. Perkins said. "That's unusual, but there's nothing to say you can't do it. Just make sure you remember the thirty-day rule, Mrs. Lee."

"Of course," Winona said quickly, as her slamming heart began to slow to a normal rate again. "I'll find another place as fast as I can."

"And bring a copy of the lease here for us," Mrs. Perkins reminded her.

"Yes," Winona said. "I'll definitely do that. Thank you."

"Well, thank you," Mrs. Perkins said with a smile. "Parker is all set for the day. I'm sure Mr. Williams has filled you in on pick-up time and procedures, but if not, there's an email waiting for you with that information."

"I'm truly grateful," Winona said. "And especially for all your hard work over the phone and online."

"It's my pleasure," Mrs. Perkins said with a warm smile. "Come say hello anytime."

They headed out into the now-empty hallway. Winona could hear the reassuring sounds of teachers speaking to

students in the nearby classrooms.

“Thank you,” she told Ansel when they got back to his truck.

“For what?” he asked.

“For letting us keep using your address,” she said. “Having the move go smoothly is so important for Parker. It would have been awful to have to drag her back out of class.”

“I told the truth,” Ansel said gruffly. “That’s all. You’re staying in our guest rooms. End of story.”

She tried to repress her smile as he opened the passenger side door for her.

Country men certainly were more chivalrous than the city ones.

And though she hadn’t known him twenty-four hours yet, she could already tell that Ansel Williams was a good man.

As he started up the truck, she found herself hoping that after her settling-in chaos was over, they could still be friends.

Definitely just friends.

WINONA

Winona stepped into the real estate office, with Ansel still by her side.

“Welcome,” a well-dressed, pretty lady at the front desk said. “My name is Sloane.”

“Winona,” she replied. “And this is Ansel.”

“Nice to meet you, Winona,” Sloane said. “And good to see you, Ansel. Come on in.”

They made their way to the two chairs across from Sloane’s desk.

“How can I help?” Sloane asked, her eyes moving curiously between Winona and Ansel.

Winona felt her cheeks begin to heat, but she forced herself to focus on what she needed.

“My daughter and I just moved out here from the city,” she told Sloane. “We’re looking for a small two-bedroom apartment.”

“Okay,” Sloane said. “Can you tell me a bit about your budget and any wishlist items for the apartment?”

Winona complied. That part was simple, the budget and the school district were the only things that mattered.

Sloane took notes, and when Winona was finished speaking, she leaned back in her chair a little and sighed. Winona had expected her to start typing her parameters into the computer. This wasn’t a good sign.

“Something’s wrong?” she guessed.

“What you want isn’t impossible to find,” Sloane said. “And your budget is a challenge, but apartments like that do exist.”

“Can we go look at some?” Winona asked.

“Unfortunately, we can’t,” Sloane told her with a sympathetic expression. “Trinity Falls is basically a small village inside a larger rural community. What you see is what you get. The whole downtown is basically four blocks of shops. Each shop has an apartment or two above it, many of which could meet your needs, but none are available right now. There are two apartment buildings out on Ambler Road with one-, two-, and three-bedroom flats. But there’s always a waitlist for those.”

“Oh,” Winona said, her heart dropping.

“The first thing we’re going to do is call the apartment manager and get you on the waitlist,” Sloane said with a smile, grabbing her cell and tapping the screen a few times before putting it to her ear.

A moment later, Sloane passed the phone to Winona, who gave the lady on the phone her info, and handed the phone back to Sloane.

“The next thing I’m doing is putting an alert into the listing app for myself,” Sloane said. “That way if anything else pops up, I’ll know right away.”

Her busy fingers were tapping away again already.

“Don’t worry,” she told Winona. “With patience, we will find something. We always do. It’s just tough in a farming town with big country houses. The inventory for anything small is always tricky.”

“The trouble is that I only have thirty days,” Winona said softly. “After that, my daughter can’t stay enrolled in school.”

She knew that her savings weren’t enough to pay for a hotel for thirty days and still have what she wanted for a

security deposit, first month's rent, and a little buffer. She had been hoping to find something right away.

"Okay," Sloane said calmly. "That just means we might want to think outside the box and look at some options that fit your budget, even if they aren't quite what you want."

"Like what?" Ansel asked suspiciously, his deep voice sounding out of place in the conversation.

Winona turned to him, wondering why he was getting involved.

"Well, there's the loft over the self-storage on Route 1," Sloane said. "It's technically in the school district, though the bus ride is kind of a hike. It's in your budget, and it's empty right now."

"Can we look at it?" Winona asked, feeling instantly more hopeful.

"No," Ansel said firmly.

"Why not?" Winona asked him. "She just said it fits my budget and it's in the district."

"It's basically a refrigerator," Ansel retorted. "A metal building with an unheated first floor and you're living on top? I'll bet the heat bills are more than the rent."

"He's got a point," Sloane said. "That apartment has a lot of turnover. It could well be the utility bills."

"Do you have anything else?" Winona asked.

"There's a house at the corner of Green Glade and Chestnut," Sloane said. "But it's pretty run-down, and the rent is a bit higher than you wanted to spend. And utilities will definitely run higher there because it's a big house. Again, it's on the far edge of the district."

"Hm," Winona said.

"Last possible option is renting a room from Agnes Mandrake over on Harvard Ave," Sloane said, with a frown. "But I want to warn you that she's not an easy landlady."

"Does she have a lot of rules, or—?" Winona began.

“*Absolutely not,*” Ansel said suddenly, standing up. “You and Parker will stay with me, and that’s that.”

“Ansel, I can’t do that,” Winona said, leaping up from her chair to follow him to the door.

“Sloane knows what she’s doing,” Ansel said firmly. “If she says these options aren’t good, you should listen to her. You’ll wait until she finds you what you want. My house is good enough until then.”

Winona turned back to Sloane.

The pretty real estate agent was eyeing Ansel thoughtfully, a half-smile playing on her mouth.

“I think he’s right,” Sloane said simply, turning to Winona. “If you have the option of staying on the Williams Homestead, you should definitely take it.”

“Thank you,” Winona told her.

“My pleasure,” Sloane said. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I find something.”

Ansel held open the door as Winona headed out, feeling like she was going to start crying, though she wasn’t sure why.

She bit her lip and tried to focus on what was happening right now.

We’re going to the Co-op to grab some things for dinner. Then I’m going back to Ansel’s place, and I can hole up in the bedroom and cry or regroup the minute we get there...

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately, closing the office door behind him.

That was new. Ron never used to ask her what was wrong. And he was usually the one who caused her hurts in the first place.

“I’m just a little overwhelmed,” she told him honestly, starting to walk toward the Co-op so they wouldn’t just be standing in the middle of the sidewalk. “It’s kind of you to offer us a place to stay, but we just met, and I’m leaning on you too much.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Ansel said, shrugging. “We’ll figure everything out.”

The weight on her chest seemed to lift slightly, and Winona was left reeling. When was the last time she had figured something out as a *we* and the *we* meant more than just herself and Parker?

“Now, I’m hoping you can show me what you got to make more of that spaghetti and meatballs,” Ansel was saying as they headed up the steps of the Co-op grocers. “Lucas can be a picky eater, but he was really into it.”

“We’ll see if the ground beef is still on special,” Winona said automatically. “Otherwise, we might want to choose something else. This is a really nice store, but you can go over budget quickly.”

Realizing what she had said, she felt her cheeks heat in shame.

“At least, people on a budget should pay attention,” she corrected herself.

“I’ve got a budget, too,” he said, looking down into her eyes. “I know the place may look impressive, but the farm doesn’t earn consistently, especially with weather patterns changing and equipment prices rising. Good farmers spend carefully.”

She smiled at that idea, and at his kindness in sharing with her. Not every man had the self-confidence to admit he wasn’t a billionaire.

“You’re rich in everything that matters,” she said. “You have a wonderful son and a comfortable home. And you have family close, and clearly everyone in this town knows and loves you.”

“I feel lucky about every bit of that every single day,” he told her. But there was a wistful expression on his face.

He hid it again quickly, scanning the produce aisle like he was looking for something. She took his cue that he didn’t want to get into it and began shopping.

Although the ground beef was regular price today, there was a special on chicken, so she grabbed some, figuring she could make stew if she got started the minute they were home.

“Why are you getting that?” he asked.

“It’s on sale,” she said. “And it will make a nice stew.”

“Did you already have a recipe?” he asked her.

“Nope,” she said. “But I can just figure it out, or look one up while we’re here.”

“I never would have thought of that,” he said, shaking his head.

“You guys eat a lot of take-out?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” he said. “Or we eat macaroni and cheese. Or we eat at my parents’ house.”

“So, you never go hungry,” she said with a smile. “I like cooking at home. It’s relaxing for me. But I also work at home, so that makes it easier.”

“What do you do?” he asked, following her into the produce aisle, where she grabbed a few potatoes and looked at the carrots.

“I’m a proofreader,” she said. “For college textbooks, mainly. It’s steady work and it pays enough for Parker and me to live on. I like that I can drop her off at school in the mornings and pick her up in the afternoons. She opens up a lot on the car ride, since there’s nothing else to do.”

“That’s really nice,” Ansel told her.

“It works for us,” she said, shrugging.

“But there’s something you’d rather be doing?” he asked, suddenly looking very interested.

“Just a hobby,” she said with a smile, thinking about it.

“Want to tell me about it?” he asked.

“I’ll show you,” she decided. “When we get back.”

They finished their shopping, but when they had checked out, Ansel stopped in his tracks and turned to her.

“I want to talk to you about something,” he said. “Want to grab a cup of coffee before we head back? There’s a café right on the corner, and this stuff will stay plenty cold in the truck.”

“Sure,” she told him, wondering what could possibly be going on.

They dropped the groceries off in his truck, and headed to the corner together, where Ansel opened the door of a coffee shop with a sign that said *Jolly Beans* over it.

A bell tingled as they walked in and she drank in the scent of freshly brewed coffee and baking bread.

ANSEL

Ansel's heart pounded as he followed Winona into *Jolly Beans*.

Am I really doing this?

But it felt like divine intervention had landed Winona and Parker in his home. If he didn't take action now, he probably never would.

He watched as Winona made her way between the tables, her elegant posture making her look like a queen in spite of her small stature and her challenging circumstances.

There was something compelling about the way the woman charged headfirst into difficult things. She was fearless, in a very appealing way.

Why would anyone ever divorce her?

But that wasn't his place to wonder. Right now, he was trying to cement their friendship, and maybe ask her a favor.

"Hey there," Holly said, smiling warmly at them as she walked past with a tray of beverages. "Sit anyplace, and I'll be right over to help."

"The window seat," he murmured to Winona, figuring it was about as private as he could get.

He didn't relish having the conversation in public, but it didn't feel right to ask her back at home. There, she might feel hemmed in or obligated. This was the closest thing to neutral territory he could offer her in Tarker County.

“Oh wow,” she said, smiling at the snowflake making station they had for kids over by the window. “That’s so nice.”

“This town is really all about the kids,” Ansel said. “The rest of us are just here to make it fun for them.”

“My kind of town,” Winona said. “Parker would have loved it here when she was littler. Did you see that amazing dollhouse in the real estate office window?”

“That’s been there since I was a boy,” Ansel laughed. “We used to get so excited when they put the little Santa Claus in the chimney the week before Christmas.”

She sat with her back to the window, and he took the seat opposite her.

The late morning light formed a sort of halo behind her and he couldn’t help thinking that she looked like an angel.

His intention had been to ask her to help him out, but it was hard not to think of other things he might ask her.

It made him feel off-balance.

Ansel hadn’t really had romantic feelings for anyone since losing Dana. It wasn’t like he hadn’t gone on a date here and there - more out of obligation to the nice people who were trying to set him up than because he wanted to. But no one had given him this floating sensation in his chest, like the future was wide open and there might be good things in it.

On the other hand, he might be about to make her lose all respect for him.

This is for Lucas’s future, he reminded himself. Get over your need to play it cool all the time.

“Thanks for doing this,” he told her.

“I like coffee,” she said with a smile, humor playing in her eyes.

“I meant talking with me,” he told her. “I guess it’s been a while since I wanted someone’s opinion on something important. And even longer since I asked for help outside my own family.”

“What kind of help?” she asked.

He took a deep breath.

“My parents are thinking about selling the homestead,” he told her.

The words hurt coming out. It felt more real to him than it ever had before, now that he had said it out loud to someone.

“Why?” she asked, sounding surprised and maybe a little outraged.

The tone endeared her to him even more, and he met her eyes and smiled.

“They’re getting older,” he said, shrugging. “It’s just my brother Logan and me working on the farm now. Levi went to law school and has an office in town. Brad’s in Chicago. And our little sister, Emma, is working for a city guy who bought a bunch of land out here. It’s getting harder to get good farm hands, and pretty much all the buildings need maintenance. It breaks my heart, but I understand why they have to consider it.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said softly. “I can tell how much the place means to you. I can’t imagine how it feels to think about letting go.”

Her blue eyes were warm and full of compassion.

He swallowed and looked away for a moment, composing himself. It was one thing to feel sad about it himself, but her sympathy was almost too much.

“Anyway,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about what else I might want to do.”

“Like other than farming?” she asked, tilting her head slightly, so that a wave of auburn hair slid over her shoulder.

“I’ve always liked tinkering with computers,” he said, looking down at his hands. “There’s a coding course at the community college, where you learn how to design a website. It starts next week.”

“That’s amazing,” she told him immediately. “Web design is huge, and you could still work from home if you wanted, so you’d have plenty of time with Lucas. What a great idea, Ansel.”

He looked up at her and saw she was being completely sincere. She had an earnest expression on her face, like it was perfectly normal for a farm boy like Ansel Williams to be interested in learning how to design websites.

Relief coursed through him.

“I’m glad you think it’s a good idea,” he told her. “And yeah, getting time with Lucas is always a huge priority.”

“Of course it is,” she said, nodding. “And it could be creative work, too. Not to mention that you’d be working with people, which I suspect you’ll be really good at.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked, unable to resist.

“Everyone around here seems to love you,” she laughed. “Have you never noticed that you’re a people-person?”

“I guess not,” he said. “But thanks.”

“Just calling it like I see it,” she said with a smile. “Anyway, I think this is a spectacular idea, and you should go for it. Even if your family doesn’t sell the farm, it’s good to spend time doing things you enjoy.”

If that wasn’t an invitation to ask her, he didn’t know what was.

“I wanted to talk to you about whether you might be able to help,” he told her, jumping right in.

“Me?” she asked.

“Indirectly,” he said. “But it would be pivotal, yes.”

“Okay, what can I do?” she asked.

“The course is Monday through Thursday in the afternoon, and it’s right at the time when I need to pick up Lucas and feed him,” he said. “If you and Parker stayed with us, I was just thinking... maybe I could hire you to watch him in the

afternoons, and maybe make dinner, too? It's an eight-week course and I don't want to lean on my parents too much."

"Especially when they're deciding whether or not to downsize," Winona agreed. "You don't want to add to them feeling overwhelmed with the homestead."

"Exactly," he said, venturing a glance at her eyes.

She looked really excited for him, and for herself.

He waited for her to say *yes*.

"I'll have to talk to Parker about it," she told him instead.

"Of course," he said, smiling in recognition at the way she was thinking of her daughter's needs first, even when a possible solution to all her problems was right in front of her.

"I'll talk with her tonight so we can answer right away," she assured him. "And Ansel?"

"Yeah?" he said, looking into her eyes again.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I think we both know that what you're offering helps me more than it does you. You're a good man."

He knew he should argue, but her words made him feel like a hot spring had just bubbled out of his heart, and his whole body warmed under her praise so that he couldn't speak.

"What can I bring you two?" Holly asked brightly, rescuing him from looking any more foolish than he already did.

"What do you recommend?" Winona asked.

"The gingerbread latte is so good," Holly said. "And if you're hungry, we've got a really nice turkey cranberry wrap today."

"A gingerbread latte for me, please," Winona told her.

"Make it two," Ansel said, surprising himself. He normally didn't like fancy coffees, but the way Winona was ready to jump in and try something new made him want to do the same.

“Coming right up,” Holly told them with a smile. “Just call for Holly, if you need anything.”

He watched after her for a moment. Holly was a nice girl, but he could tell her sister’s illness was weighing on her. He remembered how tough the holidays were when Dana was sick.

“She seems very nice,” Winona said with a smile, jutting her chin toward Holly when he looked back.

Shoot. Now Winona would think he was interested in Holly.

“Oh, I’ve known Holly forever,” he said defensively. “Her sister is ill. I was just remembering how that can make the holidays tricky.”

Winona’s smile disappeared, and she nodded.

“Sorry to bring up a tough topic,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m all over the place today.”

“Thank you for helping me,” she told him. “Not just your offer, but what you said at the school, and stopping me from getting in over my head on a rental that won’t work. I’m lucky to have made a good friend right out of the gate here.”

He glanced up at her, wondering how she could be so poised and self-assured all the time. She made it look easy.

“Now,” she said, leaning forward conspiratorially. “I’m going to be hoping for a housing miracle to pop up sometime soon. In your opinion, which of the shops in town would be the best one for me to live over?”

He chuckled.

“Silly question?” she asked.

“Nope,” he told her. “I was actually just realizing how funny it is that I have so many opinions on that.”

She laughed too, and the clear, bell-like sound tickled something inside him.

For a moment, he had the selfish thought that he didn’t want her to live above any of the shops at all. He wanted to

keep her all to himself.

WINONA

Winona glanced over at Parker, who was looking out the passenger side window of the car, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Winona and Ansel had gone together to pick up the kids. But now Winona was taking Parker back out, alone, to buy some new school supplies.

Parker did need new notebooks, and it would be nice to get a few more things to help her feel like she really had a fresh start.

But more importantly, it was an opportunity to hear how the day had really gone.

Winona was pretty sure Parker was too polite to share anything negative in front of their hosts. So, when she had said everything at school was *great*, Winona hadn't been ready to take it at face value.

As she drove along, a thousand questions popped into Winona's mind.

How was your day, really?

Were the kids nice?

Were the classes harder than back home?

Who did you sit with at lunch?

But she kept them in, somehow, knowing that Parker would speak when she was ready.

They had made it all the way out of the homestead and most of the way back through the tunnel of trees on the road that led to it before Parker spoke.

“The teachers are cool,” she said casually.

Did that mean less homework? Were they younger? Nicer? Winona had about a thousand follow-up questions to that precious piece of information Parker had parceled out.

She swallowed back all but one.

“What do you mean?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the road.

“They don’t treat me like something’s wrong with me,” Parker said, shrugging.

Winona felt her heart begin to shatter, but she kept her lips sealed, waiting for more.

“Back home, they were like, *so nice* to me when Dad moved out,” Parker went on. “And then when they stopped being overly nice they were always giving me this *look*, like, I’m-disappointed-in-you-Parker, or you-can-do-better-Parker.”

Parker was very perceptive.

She was right that her teachers had felt sorry for her at first. Winona had talked with the school to make sure Parker was cut some slack while she mourned the family unit they once had been.

And the teachers had been concerned when her grades slipped and her attitude toward school changed. Parent-teacher conferences had always been positive for Winona until then. Afterward, it was nothing but a litany of complaints that sounded more and more accusatory as Winona struggled to bring her back on track.

Winona nodded, confirming her daughter’s feelings. Even if Parker was responsible for the way the teachers had treated her recently, she wasn’t wrong about it.

“These teachers are different?” she asked.

“They just treat me like a normal kid,” Parker said, leaning back and looking content.

“Good,” Winona said. “I’m doing my best to find us an apartment in the district, so I’m glad you like it so far.”

“The gym teacher is nuts,” Parker said with a half-smile. “She was an Olympic fencer, and we were fencing in class today. You should hear the wacky stuff she yells at us. She said she’s starting an archery club, too.”

“Do they have a soccer team?” Winona asked hopefully, not loving the idea of her daughter being around a lot of arrow shooting.

Parker rolled her eyes.

“I have no idea, Mom,” she said.

“But you like the school?” Winona asked.

“If we can’t go back to the city, then this is pretty good,” Parker said, shrugging.

“Okay,” Winona said. “Well, I went to the real estate office today. The lady there did her best, but she said it could take a pretty good while before something we can afford pops up. And the school needs us to have a lease by the end of thirty days. There’s a possible solution, but I wanted to run it by you before I make a decision.”

“What?” Parker asked.

“How would you feel about staying with Lucas until we find something?” Winona asked. “His dad is going to be taking some classes, and if I can give Lucas a ride after school and get dinner ready after, then we can stay. I guess he’d write us a lease for those rooms.”

“Do you like him?” Parker asked.

The words were clear and loud, cutting through the cool air of the car and ringing in Winona’s ears.

Winona glanced at her daughter in surprise, and saw that she had turned away from the window and was looking right at her, fixing her mother with her blazing green gaze.

For a moment, she felt like a butterfly pinned to a board.

It was like her daughter had looked into her very soul and seen the shameful attraction she felt for the poor widower, who was only trying to be a friend to her.

“Lucas’s dad?” Winona asked, though Parker had been pretty clear.

Parker nodded once.

Winona sighed.

“Ansel is very sad about losing his wife,” she told Parker carefully. “And you and I need to build our new life together before I can think about that kind of stuff—”

“Good,” Parker said sharply. “Because I already have a dad.”

“I know that, Parker,” Winona said, pain crushing her chest again, like it had when Ron first left.

She tried to push it down and forget about it. Her hurt feelings weren’t going to help her daughter. Parker’s delicate young ego was partly wrapped up in the way she saw her father. It was important that Winona didn’t damage Parker’s feelings about her dad in any way.

Winona focused on the road ahead for a while, her feelings slowly dissipating.

It was easier out here, where the big trees and wide sky made her feel small, like her troubles were only temporary things, compared to the permanence of the rocky hillsides and stone houses.

“Yeah,” Parker said suddenly, her eyes directed out the window again. “I like it at Lucas’s.”

“Good,” Winona told her. “I’ll talk to his dad tonight. If it goes well, I’ll let you know, and you can unpack.”

“Can I get a bean bag chair for my room?” Parker asked immediately.

“We’ll see,” Winona told her, feeling relieved that they were back on their usual ground again.

Parker was surprisingly resilient for a kid her age. Winona knew how lucky she was to be her mom.

She snuck a glance at her daughter, wondering how her whole heart could really be outside her body like this, slouched on the passenger seat with her hat pulled down low, staring out the window and dreaming of things Winona couldn't even imagine.

“Why are you always *looking* at me?” Parker mumbled.

“Because I love you,” Winona said in a sappy voice, with a half-smile, knowing what would come next.

“Ugh, *Mom*,” Parker groaned, pulling the hat fully over her eyes.

But she was smiling.

Winona felt a tingle of good things coming their way as she pulled onto Route 1 and headed for the bigger shops they didn't have in town.

ANSEL

Ansel sat in his usual spot at the dining room table of the big house, soaking in the sound of his siblings chatting, and the savory scent of his mom's chicken stew.

The Williams children were all adults now, but sitting around the family table always made him feel like he was a kid again.

Levi was joking around, as usual, his deep voice somehow making the punchlines even funnier, as their father shook his head and smiled.

Emma was laughing like a hyena at Levi's dumb jokes. Ansel figured she was laughing at least in part just because she was so happy to be back here.

Emma had taken a job for Sebastian Radcliffe, the city man who was buying up farmland in Trinity Falls like there was some sort of real estate race that only he knew about.

Folks around here didn't trust him, and Emma going to work for him hadn't endeared her to anyone.

For a while, she had been avoiding family dinners, Ansel assumed because she wasn't sure what her own brothers would think of her for working for the enemy.

And it seemed like Logan was a little peeved about it. He'd been quieter than usual lately. Ansel wondered if he was pining after that children's librarian. Logan seemed to be sweet on Caroline, and he had even brought her to

Thanksgiving dinner. But ever since the internet service came back on, Ansel hadn't seen Caroline around.

Instead, his brother had been working hard on the lodge house here on the homestead. The lodge was always meant to be Logan's, but with their parents thinking of selling to Emma's boss, it seemed like an odd time for him to finally start renovating it.

"Hey, Ansel," Emma said suddenly. "What's with the other car at your house?"

The whole table went quiet, and all eyes turned to him, except for Lucas and his little cousin Josie, who were whispering to each other.

"It's a long story," Ansel sighed. "But I set up a housesitter so Lucas and I could go on our trip, but when I canceled, the message didn't go through. The poor woman showed up here with her daughter, and they had no place else to go."

"Such a shame," his father said, shaking his head.

"The woman wouldn't happen to be young and beautiful, would she?" Emma teased, her eyes sparkling.

She probably thought she was just gently taunting her poor older brother, who had pretty much sworn off dating in order to permanently mourn his dead wife.

She had no idea how close she was to the truth.

He was attracted to Winona, whether he wanted to be or not. And it was eating him up inside. The poor girl just wanted to find a safe home for her daughter. She didn't need some pathetic widower drooling over her.

"I was *kidding*," Emma said, rolling her eyes and smiling at him.

That was in character, when they were growing up, they were all ribbing each other constantly.

He automatically glanced over at Logan, who would have normally been first in line to give him a hard time. But Logan was staring down at his stew like it owed him money.

“Do you really like her?” Emma asked, her head tilting to the side slightly, like a curious chickadee. “Is there something there?”

His eyes flew to Lucas. Luckily, he was still whispering with his cousin.

Ansel had no idea how Lucas would react to the idea of his father being interested in a woman. And it was so good to see Lucas acting like a kid. He had been so serious lately, and clearly having a hard time making friends at school.

Ansel certainly couldn't get involved with someone right now. Not when his son needed all his love and attention.

“No,” Ansel told his sister as calmly as he could. “Of course not. But she seems like a nice lady, and they want to settle in Trinity Falls. So, I've invited her to stay until she can find an apartment. She's helping out around the house until then. It's a win-win for both of us.”

It occurred to him that he was starting his classes on Monday and he still hadn't shared that information with his family.

As much as they liked to tease each other, he and his siblings had always been close. And Ansel honestly couldn't remember a serious decision he had ever made without consulting his mom and dad.

But something about telling them that he wanted to learn how to do web design felt too vulnerable. Surely, Emma and Levi would laugh at him, and he already felt foolish enough that he could hardly envision walking into the classroom.

Not to mention how Logan would react.

Logan had been enraged when he found out his parents were thinking of selling off the farmland. And when he realized that they'd told Ansel first, his reaction had been one of complete betrayal.

For all that Ansel had been what their mom called *the strong silent type* since he was a teenager, and Logan had been a self-proclaimed *bad-boy*, the two of them had always seen eye to eye on just about everything.

Nowadays, they ran the farm together with almost no outside help, relying on each other to ensure that everything ran as smoothly as possible.

He couldn't bear the idea of seeing that pain in his brother's eyes again. Logan would definitely see Ansel pursuing a backup career as a betrayal. Like he'd already given up on the farm just by considering something else. But Logan didn't have a kid to worry about.

"Well, I think it's lovely," their mother said, breaking into his spiraling thoughts. "And if she's trying to get the two of them settled into Trinity Falls, you'll have to bring them to the Hometown Holiday celebration this weekend. That's such a lovely day in town, and a great opportunity to meet lots of people."

"Oh, and what about going to see *Amahl and the Night Visitors* over at the Community Center?" Emma suggested.

"Ansel doesn't like that one," Levi laughed. "He always hid his eyes when the mother was caught stealing."

"And one time, he ran away," his father put in, eyes twinkling with humor.

Then they were all off to the races, remembering funny moments from the past, and Ansel realized the talk had moved on from his housesitter and his plans for next week without him even trying.

Even if they were all laughing at him, it was a small price to pay.

When the meal was over, he and Levi began clearing the table right away, as they had always done as kids, while Logan washed dishes and Emma started the coffee.

"Bring her around for supper one night," his mom whispered to him, catching him by the elbow as he carried a stack of bowls. "Your father and I would love to welcome her personally."

Love for his mom welled up in Ansel's heart.

“Your mother just wants to give her a tour of the house,” his dad put in, with a wink as he passed them. “Any excuse to show off the old girl.”

His mom chuckled and gave her husband a gentle whack on the shoulder as he passed. Everyone knew that Alistair Williams loved how proud his wife was of his family home.

“Really though,” she said, turning back to Ansel with a serious look. “Bring her as soon as you can.”

For a moment, he swore she saw through everything and could sense the intentions he was trying desperately to fight down.

Then she patted his cheek and walked briskly for the kitchen, calling out to Emma not to forget to put a pinch of cinnamon in the coffee grounds, as if Emma would forget after all these years.

Ansel followed after her, feeling silly for suspecting anything. This was his family. They knew he was the same Ansel as always - quiet, steady, and focused on his boy.

WINONA

Winona poured coffee into a mug and added milk, watching it swirl. Until this week, she hadn't thought much about where the milk in her coffee came from.

Now she knew it was the reason Ansel was up so early some mornings. He and his brother took turns milking. And the milk in her coffee was the most fresh, delicious thing she had ever tasted.

She padded into the living room, wondering what she should do with herself today.

The weekdays were easy. There was work, and getting the kids to and from school, as well as planning out and cooking dinners.

But even though it was the weekend, her body clock had her up as early as usual. And without her city routine, she felt a little lost.

I'm going to save a ton of money, she reassured herself.

But that wasn't exactly true. A cup of coffee and a newspaper from the local deli didn't add up to so much. And it gave her a reason to get dressed and stretch her legs in the mornings.

It had probably been the only thing dragging her out of bed those first few terrible weeks after Ron was gone.

That, and Parker, of course.

When she got back to the living room, she was surprised to see that Parker was lying on one end of the sofa with her feet hanging over the arm, tapping away at her cell phone, just like back home.

Except that back home, she would have stayed in her room to do it.

The guest rooms here were a little drafty, and Ansel seemed to keep the house colder than they were used to anyway.

If it gets Parker up and out of her room, it's a good thing, Winona decided. *Now, if only I could get her off that phone...*

“Are you chatting with your new friends from school?” she asked Parker lightly.

“We’ve been here for like *two minutes*, Mom,” Parker said, rolling her eyes.

So, she was texting with the old friends.

Winona tried to bite back the panic that cooled her heart. She had known the internet would make it easy for Parker to stay in touch with those girls, no matter where they went.

The important thing was that Parker was *here*, safe in Trinity Falls, and not out gallivanting with a crew of kids who seemed bent on getting into trouble.

“I was thinking about making some muffins,” Winona said. “Want to help?”

“Nah,” Parker said, her eyes still locked on the screen.

It would have been expecting too much to get her off the phone on the first try, but Winona was still disappointed.

She fought back the urge to slip her own phone out of her pocket, and sat by the window instead, sipping her coffee and looking out into the wide lawn behind the house, bordered by the still-dark woods.

The grass was blue-green in the dawn light. Birds hopped around, searching the ground for insects. Winona spotted a

pretty brown cardinal, and a moment later, the bird's scarlet mate alighted on a nearby tree.

She watched them for a few minutes, letting the calm of the scene soak in, and was surprised when Ansel came striding out of the tree line, with Lucas by his side.

He waved to her, and she waved back, feeling a little embarrassed. Did he think she was just sitting at the window, pining for him like a puppy?

She hopped up quickly and headed back into the kitchen, where she poured out the last sip of her coffee and busied herself cleaning the mug.

"You're up early," Ansel's deep voice sang out as he came in the back door.

"I usually can't sleep past six," she admitted, turning to face the boys. "Good morning, Lucas."

"Good morning," Lucas replied happily. "We did the milking, and a bunch of other chores."

His cheeks were pink from cold and exercise, and he looked so happy.

I wish Parker looked like that.

"I was going to start some muffins," she offered, glancing up at Ansel.

He was so handsome.

She immediately regretted looking at him. But she couldn't seem to tear her eyes away.

She drank in his flushed cheeks and sparkling hazel eyes greedily. How could any man be so sinfully beautiful? With all the dark hair and those broad shoulders, he looked like he belonged on television, not in a regular kitchen, smiling down at Winona Lee like she was someone special.

"That sounds good," he told her. "But we're just back for a quick break. We still have one chore left. We thought you two might like to come along."

"I'd love to help," Winona said. "Let me grab Parker."

She popped back into the living room.

“Parker,” she said. “Want to explore the farm and help with a task?”

“Nah,” Parker said, without looking up from her phone. “I’m good.”

Winona felt a wave of shame wash over her.

“That’s too bad,” Ansel’s deep voice said from the doorway. “I could really use some help getting the horses fed.”

“Horses?” Parker echoed, her face lifting from the phone screen.

“They love their morning feed,” Ansel said. “It’s my favorite job of the day.”

Parker was off the sofa in a single, fluid motion, the phone forgotten on the coffee table as she hurried over to join them.

“Okay,” she said. “What do we do?”

Winona smiled as Ansel gave them a rundown of proper footwear and bundling up. How had he intuitively landed on the one task on the whole farm that would capture Parker’s interest?



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, they were all trooping into the stables.

The scent of hay was sweet in the cold December breeze, which also carried notes of leather, something lemony, and the earthy scent of the horses themselves.

Winona had read about those smells, but never experienced them firsthand. She smiled, trying to contain her own excitement, and kept her eyes on Parker.

“Here we go,” Ansel said, stepping inside with Lucas at his heels.

Winona watched as Parker followed them, looking around warily.

The stables were a little echoey, multiplying their footsteps, and amplifying the sounds of big creatures breathing and snorting in the shadowy space.

“Keep in mind that the horses are shy,” Ansel said, his deep voice soft and gentle. “Move slowly and speak in a reassuring voice. Once they get to know you, they’ll greet you when you come.”

Parker nodded, her ponytails bobbing.

“First thing we need to do is get some hay down from the loft for them,” Ansel went on. “So, we’ll say hello, and then maybe someone can help with that.”

Before anyone had time to respond, the first horse stepped into sight.

He was a big bay with thick, velvety, brown fur and an inky-black mane. He angled his head over the stall door to greet Ansel with a snort and a gentle toss of his hair.

“Well, hello there, Duke,” Ansel said, reaching up to scratch behind a velvety ear. “We have extra company today. Are you in the mood for treats?”

Duke snuffled at Ansel’s chest. It seemed he was very much in the mood for a treat.

Ansel chuckled and waved Parker over.

“He’s a big boy,” Ansel told Parker. “But he’s the sweetest horse you’ll ever meet.”

Parker stood close to Ansel, looking up at the horse’s wide face.

“You can pat him, if you want,” Ansel told her. “Just move slowly. Or if you want, you can give him a treat first.”

“Treat,” Parker murmured, not taking her eyes off the horse.

“I normally just give them fruit,” Ansel said. “But today is special. Hold your hand out flat, and keep it flat for him.”

He handed Parker something, and she did exactly as she was told. Winona saw that it was a sugar cube, just like the heroines gave to their horses in the books she had read as a girl.

When she was younger, Winona would read just about anything with a horse on the cover. At one point, she'd probably known all the names for the different varieties and patterns, even though she'd only seen a few in real life. She even had some Breyer figurines of a few of her favorites.

“Just like that,” Ansel murmured. “Offer it to him.”

Parker turned back to the horse.

Winona held her breath as the big animal lowered his head to snuffle at her daughter's hand.

A moment later, Parker was giggling as Duke licked up his treat and snuffled at her for more, exploring her jacket with his lips and even sniffing her hair.

“That's all for now, boy,” Ansel laughed. “But I'm glad you made a new friend. You all can feel free to look around and see the other horses. I just need to get the hay down for feeding time.”

“I'll help,” Parker offered suddenly.

“Yeah?” Ansel asked her. “You have to climb the ladder to get up to the loft.”

Parker glanced back at her mom, as if to ask permission.

Winona nodded to her, feeling oddly touched that Parker still remembered her existence given that they were sharing space with an actual horse.

“Great,” Ansel said. “Lucas, want to start washing out the water buckets and refilling them? Maybe Winona can carry them back in for us.”

“I'd be glad to,” she said, feeling grateful to have a job. Something about caring for the beautiful animals seemed like a privilege.

She followed Lucas to the first stall, where he opened the door and entered confidently, speaking softly to the big gray mare inside. He patted her flank and took her water bucket, closing the stall door behind him.

“Now we go out to the hose,” he told Winona over his shoulder on his way out.

She followed and watched the boy carefully rinse out the bucket and refill it.

“Okay, you can just bring it into the stable again,” he told her.

“Do I go into the stall and return it to the horse?” she asked, feeling nervous.

“Yep,” Lucas said. “Violet likes her fresh water. She’ll tell you so.”

Winona had no idea how a horse could thank her for a bucket of water. But she figured she was about to find out. She couldn’t possibly admit she was nervous when a kid as young as Lucas was obviously unconcerned about it.

She lifted the heavy bucket and followed Lucas back, waiting while he opened Violet’s stall again.

“Go on,” Lucas said.

Violet looked up at her, watching.

“Hello, Violet,” Winona said softly, willing her voice not to shake. “I’ve got your fresh water for you.”

She turned her back to the horse to hang the bucket.

As soon as she was finished, she felt something big and warm rub against her shoulder blade and then nudge it.

“She’s saying thank you?” she whispered to Lucas.

He nodded his head up and down, eyes dancing.

“You’re very welcome,” Winona said, turning to face Violet.

Violet lowered her head and Winona found herself placing her palm against the wide plane between the creature’s

beautiful eyes, then trailing her fingers back to scratch lightly behind one ear.

Violet huffed in contentment, startling Winona.

But she managed to hold on, giving the big girl a few more pats before retreating back out of the stall.

“Good job,” Lucas said. “She likes you now.”

Winona felt herself break into a happy smile.

“Come on,” Lucas said. “It’s Clifford’s turn.”

He moved to the next stall, opening it to reveal a massive, yet elderly sorrel, whose back dipped lower than the other horses’ backs, his hip bones showing a bit through his shaggy fur.

The horse whickered softly in greeting and Lucas took a moment to stroke Clifford’s neck and lean his head against the big horse before grabbing his bucket.

“Clifford is really old,” he confided on their way back out. “Dad named him back when he was a kid.”

“After *Clifford the Big Red Dog*?” Winona asked.

“Yeah,” Lucas said, turning to her with a big smile. “How did you know?”

“Just a hunch,” she laughed. “That was a very popular book back in our day.”

“Mine too,” Lucas told her solemnly. “Anyway, he’s the oldest of the three.”

She watched him clean and refill the bucket, then she carried Clifford’s water back in.

He wasn’t as curious as Violet had been, but he was calm and sweet-natured, in spite of having a stranger in his stall.

Finally, they made it back to Duke.

Winona heard soft voices back at Violet’s stall, and turned to see that Parker was helping Ansel to feed the friendly mare.

Something about the big man in his fleece-lined flannel and cowboy hat talking gently to her daughter made Winona’s

heart squeeze like it was overfull. She had to force her eyes away to focus on the task at hand.

Once the horses were all watered and fed, Ansel led them out, one at a time.

Winona listened as he told Parker how to clean their feet, demonstrating while she held the halter of each horse in turn for him.

While they did that, she and Lucas mucked out the stalls and spread fresh straw for the animals.

By the time they were finished, she was sweating lightly, in spite of the cold.

“Well done,” Ansel said, after looking over the stalls. “Now it’s time to turn them out.”

“What does that mean?” Parker asked, her forehead furrowed.

“It means that we’re going to walk them out to the pasture,” Ansel told her. “They like to spend the day outside together, grazing a bit and stretching their legs. We’ll come back before the sun goes down and bring them back in for another nice meal and their bedtime routine.”

“They stay outside all day in the cold?” Winona asked before she could stop herself.

“That’s why their coats are so shaggy,” Ansel told her with a smile. “They like to socialize and feel free, just like we do. So, unless the weather is really bad, I get them outside for as much time as possible every day.”

“They have blankets,” Lucas pointed out.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ansel said. “When it gets extra cold, we put their blankets on them.”

Parker nodded, looking appeased.

“Why don’t you take Duke?” Ansel offered lightly.

Parker’s eyes widened, but she nodded.

Winona watched with pride as her daughter grabbed the big boy's harness and calmly led him out of the stall, through the stable, and outside to the pasture.

Ansel opened the gate.

The big bay gave Parker a gentle nudge in the chest before cantering off into the large, grassy area with palpable joy.

Parker looked after him, clearly awed.

When she turned back, she looked right into Winona's eyes, and Winona could see the horse's joy reflected in her daughter's expression of wonder.

Tears of gratitude came to her eyes unbidden. *This* was why they had come. This was the wonder and gratitude she wanted filling her daughter's life.

"Are you okay?" Ansel asked her softly.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, not trusting herself to say more without sobbing. "You have a beautiful life."

He squeezed her shoulder lightly, his big hand enveloping half of her upper arm.

Winona felt a tingle of rightness go straight down her spine.

It felt like Ansel had been made to understand her.

And it was as if every second of her life before now, good and bad, had been crafted to lead her to exactly this moment, standing in the pale December sunlight, watching her daughter watch a horse.

ANSEL

Ansel stood in the kitchen making hash browns and listening to Winona and Parker sing along with the Christmas songs on the radio.

What the two of them lacked in talent, they made up for in silliness. It was fun to see them dancing around, occasionally using the spatula as a microphone as they prepped batter and whisked eggs.

They had even tried to rope him into it a few times, but he had refused with a smile, preferring to enjoy the performance from the audience.

The kitchen smelled incredible, and it was nice and warm with the cooking going on, and so many more people than usual filling the space.

Everyone had come in from caring for the horses with pink cheeks and growling bellies. Instead of just muffins, Winona had declared that they needed a full out brunch.

Ansel told her that in that case, all hands would be on deck. But Lucas had dashed off before they could give him a task.

He wondered belatedly if maybe he was lavishing too much attention on their guests and Lucas was feeling left out. He'd thought that the attention the boy was getting from the women would be enough to make up for any lack of focus on his part. But he should have known better.

It had been just the two of them for so long. Of course, he and Lucas were used to being each other's world.

He had just let himself get worked up enough to be looking for excuses to pop upstairs, when Lucas appeared in the kitchen doorway.

Lucas had turned up the collar of his flannel and had put on a pair of sunglasses. He immediately began lip syncing the Elvis tune that was on the radio, sending Parker into hysterical giggles.

"Amazing," she yelled.

Lucas stopped lip-syncing and started laughing, looking very pleased with himself.

"What made you think of the sunglasses?" Parker asked, as he trotted over to join her.

"I got them for the beach," he said, shrugging. "But now we're not going."

Parker nodded, like it was totally normal that he'd want to get some use out of the glasses by wearing them indoors during a cloudy day in the middle of winter. And she didn't complain when he scooped a fingerful of batter out of her bowl and stuck it in his mouth.

"Mmm," he said happily.

Ansel bit back the instinct to tell the boy not to eat raw batter. It was just so nice to see him happy.

"Lucas," Winona said gently. "Do you think you could help me with something?"

"Sure," he said, darting over to her agreeably.

She began showing him the strawberries she was hoping he could prepare, using a butter knife and the old wooden cutting board.

Ansel instantly recognized that she was just distracting the boy from the raw batter. But she was doing it in such a nice way, giving him a fun task that he would enjoy.

There was something wonderful about seeing her auburn head bent over his son's dark mop of hair, the two of them murmuring to each other about strawberries and stems.

Lucas had his grandmother, of course. But seeing him with a woman the right age to be his mom did something to Ansel's insides. The more so because it wasn't just any woman, it was Winona.

He had seen the look on her face today by the pasture as she watched her daughter's wonder at seeing the horse find his freedom.

It was hard to articulate, even to himself, but there was something familiar in that look.

Maybe it was that Winona parented the way he did - with everything she had, and her whole heart right on her sleeve. That fierce, powerful love was beautiful and frightening.

It awoke something inside him, beyond just a simple reaction to her attractiveness as a woman.

He wanted that spark that was in her to burn for him, wanted her fierce wild love to extend to him and Lucas too.

And he wanted to be there for her, ensure that she had more happy, reverent moments, like the one this morning, and less of the inevitable worry that went along with being a single parent.

"Nice work," she said suddenly to Lucas, who had cleanly shaved off a stem.

Lucas's face stretched in a happy smile, and his eyes went straight to his dad, looking for confirmation.

"Excellent," Ansel told him, nodding, his chest warming.

Lucas applied himself to the next berry.

Ansel watched, as his favorite person in the whole world carefully cut off another stem.

The love he felt for Lucas was simple and uncomplicated. And it was worth everything he had ever given up to nurture it.

He couldn't make school easier for Lucas. The teachers didn't make it sound like anything bad was going on, but Ansel couldn't help noticing Lucas never came home talking about any one particular friend.

He couldn't bring the boy's mother back. And Lucas's memories were all of her weak in bed, spending the little energy she had smiling at him and telling him she loved him. He would never know the Dana that Ansel had known, a dark-haired tomboy who lived for jumping horses and laughing her deep, belly laugh.

The one thing he could offer the boy was his undying loyalty.

And since Lucas wasn't having a lot of luck in the friend department, Ansel absolutely could not take his eyes off the ball.

No matter how he might appreciate the kindness in Winona's eyes or the charming way she handled herself in a tough situation, he couldn't get wrapped up in anything with her, or with anyone else. Lucas had to be his everything.

A buzzing on the counter drew his attention to Parker's phone, which had been sitting there charging.

Parker glanced over and then went back to mixing blueberries into the batter and chatting with Lucas, ignoring the phone completely.

Ansel's eyes went straight to Winona.

The expression on her face as she watched her daughter pleasantly surprise her for the second time in a morning had Ansel transfixed.

Winona was the embodiment of love and wonder. The beauty of her heart made him tremble inside. She was showing him exactly who she was, without him even asking.

She gets it a little voice in his head whispered.

And he realized in an instant that she did.

For all the difference in their backgrounds, Winona was just like him - another adult living her whole life for her child,

even as she struggled to figure out how to make it work.

Another thought was in his mind before he could even figure out where it came from.

I am in so much trouble...

WINONA

Winona stood at the center of the display of fragrant Christmas trees on the front lawn of the Trinity Falls Community Library, watching Lucas laughing and chasing Parker between the rows of cut evergreens.

Parker was running from him as part of the game, but not really trying to lose him. The knitted braids hanging from her hat tapped her bouncing ponytails as she flew between the sweet-smelling trees.

Other kids were running around and laughing too, colorful scarves flying out behind them, as their parents and caregivers selected the perfect balsams and firs.

Folk music played by a local band carried through the loudspeakers down in the parking lot, the sound of acoustic guitars and sweet, soulful voices adding to the ambiance.

“The fire company does this every year?” she asked Ansel.

“It’s one of their biggest annual fundraisers,” he told her, nodding. “And they deliver the trees to anyone who can’t transport theirs.”

“Where do they get the trees?” Winona asked.

“Cassidy Farm donates them,” Ansel told her.

Cassidy Farm was a beautiful farm that was open to tourists, according to a group of ladies she had bumped into at the Co-op. It was on Winona’s list of places in Trinity Falls to visit.

“They donated all of these?” she asked, looking around.

“Sure did,” Ansel said. “Pretty generous, right?”

“Very, very generous,” she agreed.

“Well, our fire company is mostly volunteer run,” Ansel said. “And they work hard. Everyone does their best to support them.”

“That’s why you’re buying your tree here,” she said.

“Sure is,” he told her.

Just then, Lucas ran up, panting. He was still wearing his sunglasses.

“Is it time to pick a tree?” he asked his dad.

“We should get a really tall one,” Parker said, running up behind him.

“But, Parker,” Lucas said, turning to her with a serious expression. “If we get one that’s really wide and fat there will be more room for presents under it.”

“Let’s find one that’s tall *and* wide,” Ansel announced, marching off toward the section where the biggest trees were held.

Parker rolled her eyes, but she was grinning as she jogged after him, with Lucas at her heels. Winona followed, thinking how nice it was to see Parker acting like a kid.

They might have been here a short time, but the experience was already worthwhile. They were making memories here that Parker would carry with her for a lifetime.

By the time she caught up, the others were all standing around a completely massive tree.

“What do you think?” Ansel asked.

“That was so quick,” she said.

“It’s the biggest one they have,” he told her, smiling. “And I don’t see any bare spots on it.”

He held it out and moved it around. It was so big he could hardly spin it.

The kids were staring at her, practically quivering with anticipation.

“It’s gorgeous,” she declared.

They all cheered, and one of the firefighters came over to help with the purchase.

She groaned inwardly at the idea of the cost of such a massive tree, but fair was fair. She should be paying for half. And at least she knew it would go to a good cause.

But when Ansel saw her open her purse he shooed her away.

“It’s only right,” she protested. “We’ll all enjoy it.”

“Seriously, put that away,” he told her. “You’ll hurt my feelings.”

She could see that he was serious, and that he would be plainly insulted if she insisted.

“I’ll make cookies tonight, then,” she promised him, to ease her guilt.

“I can’t say no to that,” he said with a grin.

She shook her head and smiled back at him.

“What’s next?” Lucas asked, when his father had paid, and the firefighters were carrying the tree off to his truck.

“Well, there’s a bit more to the Hometown Holiday celebration,” Ansel said. “But we’ve got to get that tree in some water. And of course, we need to take care of the horses.”

Winona glanced over at Parker, wondering if she would complain about having to go home before dark when there were so many kids out wandering.

Back in Philly, she might have protested a little on principle.

But she merely nodded like she understood.



AN HOUR LATER, they were all standing in Ansel's living room, looking up at the tree, which was so big that it took up nearly half of the front section of the room.

"It looked big at the sale, but I had no idea," Parker said.

"It's so *big*," Lucas yelled happily.

"Guess I'll have to grab the ladder from the shed to decorate it," Ansel said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Winona was smiling so hard that her cheeks hurt.

It was the most beautiful tree she had ever seen, and as far as she was concerned, it was oversized to match its owner's generous heart.

"But first I'd better just see to the horses," Ansel said. "You guys okay here for a bit?"

"Of course," Winona said. "I'll start the cookies."

"I'll help," Lucas decided.

Winona glanced up to see if Parker would decide to join them, or finally retrieve her phone and lose herself in it.

But Parker was by the door, putting her boots back on.

"What are you doing?" Ansel asked her.

"You said we have to see to the horses," she said, blinking at him as if it were the most normal thing in the world for her to volunteer for a chore without being asked.

Ansel's expression softened and Winona felt that for a moment she could see his soul painted on his face.

His surprise melted into affection, and he smiled at her daughter and patted her shoulder before grabbing his jacket.

When his back was turned, the corners of Parker's lips turned up, and Winona's heart melted.

When was the last time Parker's dad had made her feel proud of herself like that? Winona honestly couldn't

remember.

“What kind of cookies are we making?” Lucas asked, bounding up beside her. “Can we add the eggs last so I can eat the dough?”

“We’ll see what kind of ingredients you’ve got,” she told him, trying to hide her smile. His dad had obviously talked to him about eating raw baked goods today. “What kind do you like best?”

“I like chocolate chip,” he told her. “But Dad likes oatmeal raisin.”

“Those both sound good,” she told him. “Maybe we can invent our own cookie with elements of both.”

“See you in a bit,” Ansel called from the front door.

Winona looked up in time to see Parker give them a wave before slipping out after him into the starry December night.

“It’s going to smell like *cookies* in here when they get back,” Lucas crowed in delight.

Winona smiled at his joy.

I wish every single day could be like this one.

WINONA

Winona looked around her bedroom, taking inventory one last time.

Though it was a big room, it had been blessedly empty when they arrived - just a bed, a dresser and desk with a chair, and then a small love seat and storage footstool in the corner.

There was a spider plant hanging in the window, and there were a few books on the built-ins, but her room seemed to have been spared the mountains of odds and ends that filled the rest of the house.

Parker and Lucas had disappeared to explore the farm after chores this afternoon, so Winona finally had time to unpack in earnest.

Though she had only brought a few suitcases, it was important to be organized, and to set up the room in the best way possible, since this was essentially now her office as well as her bedroom.

That meant swapping the locations of the dresser and desk, so that the desk had a view of the window and the best light in the room.

She also moved the footstool into the closet and used it to store her sweaters so they would be easier to reach than up on the closet shelf.

Everything else was basically straightforward, and after not too long, she had things set up perfectly to work from home.

Ansel had invited her to work in the kitchen or dining room, if she preferred, since he would be out on the farm all day and the kids would be in school.

But for now, at least, she felt more comfortable being self-contained in a space with a door. That way if Ansel came home for lunch or took time off, she wouldn't be in his way.

Satisfied that she had done all she needed to do, she got to work on what she *wanted* to do.

Dragging a big, sealed container out of the closet, she hummed to herself as she began emptying the contents onto the desk.

Some of this would fit in the right-side drawers, since she had managed to get all her work stuff nicely organized on the left. The rest would go back into the container to be brought out on weekends or whenever she had a bit of free time.

She had just unloaded all of it and was considering what should go where when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," she called out, feeling a little surprised that Parker was back already and looking for her. The kids' energy made her feel like they wouldn't be back until the sun was down.

"Hey," Ansel said, pushing the door open. "I was going to put on another pot of coffee. Can I bring you a cup?"

"That sounds nice," she told him. "I'm just getting settled in."

She gestured stupidly at all the junk on her desk, wishing he'd knocked on the door before she dragged the container out of the closet.

"Are those *little trees*?" he asked, stepping in, his hazel eyes alight with interest.

"Yes," she said. "You found my secret hobby."

"Oh," he said, stopping short. "I don't want to intrude."

"No, no," she laughed. "It's fine. You may as well know about it. It's harmless."

“You build train sets?” he guessed.

“Oh, wow, that would be cool,” she said. “But no. I make snow globes.”

“Can I see them?” he asked.

“Well, I have to make some more,” she told him. “I only have mine right now.”

She reached into the container and grabbed the paper-wrapped globe.

He watched intently as she opened it.

“Oh wow,” he breathed, taking it when she held it out. “You made this?”

“It’s my favorite,” she told him, nodding.

He looked at it for a moment, a strange expression on his face.

“It kind of looks like my house in there,” he said.

“I made it long before I came here,” she said quickly, extending her hands to take it back, and feeling exceptionally stupid. Of course he would notice it looked like his house.

“No, I just mean it’s a neat coincidence,” he said. “That’s all. I love it. The detail is incredible. It’s magical.”

“Thank you,” she replied relaxing a little. “Just so you know, your house is the perfect snow globe house. I’m probably not the only one who put one just like it under glass.”

“Guess I’d better be on the lookout for any giants who make snow globes,” he joked, giving her a half-smile.

She felt it down to her toes.

After what Ron had done, she had sworn she would never date again, let alone have a real relationship.

How was this man breaking down her walls without even trying?

“It’s great how Parker is helping out with the horses,” he said, tearing his eyes from hers. “I hope she doesn’t feel like

she has to do that. What you're doing for Lucas after school is more than enough help."

"She loves it," Winona said, feeling another twinge of pride at her daughter's ability to jump in and roll her sleeves up. "It was so beautiful to see her with Duke yesterday morning."

He nodded, and she could see the fond memory twinkling in his eyes.

"I was worried about her back home," Winona admitted softly. "She fell in with a rough crowd of girls after her father moved out. It ended with her being part of a group that was caught spraying graffiti on the local library. When that happened, I knew I had to get her away from those kids. I'm so grateful we're far from all that, in a place where she can get fresh air and a good perspective on life."

He looked into her eyes again and nodded, the compassion clear on his face.

She was stunned at herself. She hadn't meant to share all that. Winona wanted nothing more than for Parker to have the chance to remake her own reputation here in Trinity Falls.

There was just something accepting about Ansel that made her feel comfortable talking to him.

He opened his mouth to reply, but a scream broke the gentle quiet between them.

"*Mom,*" Parker's panicked voice came from downstairs as the front door banged open. "*Mom, it's Lucas.*"

The transformation of Ansel's face was instant and chilling. His jaw set like stone, and he ran from the room, footsteps pounding on the stairs before Winona could even take her next breath.

ANSEL

Ansel flew down the stairs to find Lucas on the sofa with Parker's arm around him.

Lucas was supporting his left arm with his right, and his face was ghostly pale with pain.

"What happened?" Ansel yelled, grabbing his jacket off the hook and thrusting an arm in.

"I was teaching him how to skateboard," Parker said softly. "He lost his balance."

Fury burned through him. There was plenty to do on the farm, and no reason his son needed to be on a silly skateboard.

Soft footsteps on the stairs behind him told him that Winona had joined them.

"I can drive to the hospital if you want to sit in the back with him," she said, her voice pitched higher than he had heard it before.

She's worried about him, a voice in the back of his head said.

She's only worried because it's her daughter's fault, another one whispered. She brought her troubled teenager here, and now my child is hurt.

"I'll take him," he bit out, just managing to hold in his temper.

"I want Parker to come with me," Lucas whined.

“I don’t mind going,” Parker said softly. “I’ll sit with him the whole time, or just wait in the lobby, whatever you want.”

“If I drive, you can focus on Lucas,” Winona added.

“I think you’ve done enough,” Ansel growled, lifting his son in his arms.

Lucas whimpered and buried his face in Ansel’s neck, and Ansel could feel the tears on his damp little face.

Winona was at the door, ready to open it for him, and he could hear Parker sniffing on the sofa.

But the only person who mattered, the only one he answered to, was crying in his arms, his little body shivering with pain.

I should never have let them stay...

He strode for his truck, grabbing his keys from his pocket.

“You’re going to be just fine,” he told Lucas as he walked. “I’m going to take you right to Dr. Webb, and he’ll get you fixed up.”

Lucas just curled his body closer.

Ansel opened the truck and grabbed a blanket out of the back, wrapping it loosely around Lucas before setting him gently down in the passenger seat.

“I’m going to get your seatbelt on you, and then you can use this to cradle your arm, okay?”

Lucas nodded, wincing with every movement.

Eventually, they got him positioned with the blanket supporting the arm as much as it could.

“The bumps will hurt,” Ansel told him. “Try not to let the arm move, okay?”

“Okay,” Lucas whispered, not making eye contact.

Ansel had his old buddy Kellan on the phone before he was back in the car, and explained what was going on as he started the engine.

“Sounds like a break,” Kellan said. “Meet me at Tarker County Hospital. We’ll need an x-ray.”

The command to meet at a hospital triggered awful memories of his time there with Dana, and he clenched the steering wheel, fighting them back.

This isn't the same. It's just his arm...

“You okay, man?” Kellan asked.

“Of course,” Ansel said. “I’m on my way.”

Once he was focused on the journey, Ansel felt slightly better. He drove as fast as he dared, while trying not to jostle Lucas too much.

Getting out of the homestead on uneven gravel was the hardest part. But the miles melted away once they were back on the paved roads.

Doing his best to distract Lucas, he spent the whole drive recounting stories of the times he and his siblings had spent growing up on the farm, and all the fun they’d had with the horses, exploring the woods, sleeping out in the meadow, and making s’mores by a bonfire.

He chose not to mention that none of them had needed to learn how to skateboard to have a good time.

Before he knew it, he was pulling up at the emergency room.

Kellan was already standing outside waiting for them. The big presence of his cool-headed high school buddy reassured Ansel, and he felt himself let out a breath.

“Okay, we’re going to get out slowly,” he told Lucas, hopping out and heading to his door.

“I can do it myself, Dad,” Lucas said, lowering himself to the ground before Ansel could lift him.

“Let me guess,” Kellan called to Lucas as he strode over to meet them. “I should see the other guy?”

Lucas grinned and shook his head.

“He was on a skateboard,” Ansel said, trying not to show his distaste.

“Well, thank goodness for that,” Kellan said brightly. “When a kid gets any older than Lucas and hasn’t broken a bone yet, we assume they’ve been inside playing video games too much. Getting out there and getting some exercise is worth banging yourself up from time to time, right kid?”

Lucas nodded, smiling again.

“Come on,” Kellan said. “Let’s see what’s going on with that arm.”

They headed in and Ansel felt lucky all over again to have a family doctor like Kellan. It would have been terrifying to walk into this hospital full of bad memories again, with a hurt child this time.



A FEW HOURS LATER, they were back in the truck again.

Lucas had a black cast on his arm and a set of instructions about how to care for a broken bone, as well as a big silver Sharpie for friends to use to sign the cast.

Kellan had said it was a hairline fracture, and typical for a childhood injury. The growth plate by the wrist was intact, and that was the important thing.

Lucas had been amazingly brave, and all the nurses doted on him. But back in the car he was as silent as he had been on the way to the hospital.

“Are you okay?” Ansel asked after a few minutes.

Lucas shrugged.

“Did I do something that upset you?” Ansel asked.

He was pretty sure he hadn’t. He and Lucas always got along. He definitely wasn’t used to the silent treatment.

“You didn’t have to be so mean,” Lucas said quietly a few minutes later.

“What are you talking about?” Ansel asked. “I took you to the hospital, and I sat with you the whole time.”

“Not to me,” Lucas said. “To Parker, and her mom.”

Ansel swallowed back his surprise and tried to formulate an answer that was better than: *It's their fault you're hurt.*

“Parker was just teaching me how to skateboard because I asked her to,” he said. “She made me wear her helmet and practice how to bail out so I wouldn't get hurt. And I was super scared, but she told me I was doing a good job.”

Ansel bit his tongue and nodded.

“And then when I got the hang of it, I started having a lot of fun,” he said. “She told me I looked cool. And when I fell, it was only because I didn't bail out like she showed me. I knew I was going too fast, but I just didn't want to stop, even though I knew I should.”

Ansel could certainly relate to that. He'd broken a bone or two growing up for similarly dumb reasons.

“And when I told her my arm was really hurt, she believed me,” Lucas went on. “And she took me home right away, even though she knew she might get in trouble.”

The happenings of the afternoon began to lay themselves out differently in Ansel's mind, and he felt a sudden wave of guilt for his overreaction.

“Parker is really nice,” Lucas said fiercely. “And so is her mom. You didn't have to make them feel bad.”

The kid is right. I'm a monster.

“I'm sorry, Lucas,” Ansel said tightly. “I'm your dad, and you're my only son. Sometimes I just feel protective of you.”

“That's okay,” Lucas said, smiling at him with so much understanding that it almost hurt to see it. “But could you say that again to Parker and her mom? So they don't feel bad anymore?”

“Of course,” Ansel told him. “I'll talk to them tonight if they're still up. Or first thing in the morning, if not.”

“Okay,” Lucas said, looking content. “Can we put on the radio?”

“The Christmas station?” Ansel asked.

“Yeah,” Lucas said, nodding. “That sounds good.”

WINONA

Winona sat in the living room with Parker.

Parker lay on the sofa with her head in her mother's lap, letting Winona stroke her head, just like she used to when she was little. Her nose was pink and her eyes were swollen from crying.

They had been sitting here, waiting for hours.

"You know, there's usually a pretty long line at the emergency room," Winona told her again. "It's okay if you want to eat some dinner, or even go to bed. I'll wake you up when they get back and let you know how he's doing."

"I just wanted to go with him, so he wouldn't be scared," Parker said softly. "I remember I was really scared the first time I went to the emergency room."

"I didn't think that at all," Winona said, thinking back. "I remember you being really brave, actually."

"That's because you were so scared," Parker said, laughing a little through her tears. "Thank goodness Dad was there to make jokes and stuff."

Winona smiled, remembering Ron's silliness. She was glad Parker had some good memories of her father. Of course, things were always easier with two parents. Ron had been able to hang out with Parker while Winona sorted out insurance forms and talked with the doctors.

"I don't think Lucas's dad is telling him jokes," Parker said darkly.

“Lucas is going to be okay,” Winona assured her again.

“His dad is really mad,” Parker whispered miserably.

Winona choked down her fury at the man for being so heartless to her daughter, and tried to remain calm for Parker’s sake.

“He’s just worried about Lucas,” she said carefully. “I remember how worried I was about you.”

“Which time?” Parker asked.

“*All* the times,” Winona said, shaking her head and letting Parker see her half-smile.

If they couldn’t laugh, what was the point of living?

Parker smiled back, and then went quiet again.

“What?” Winona asked her, stroking her hair again.

“Is he going to make us move out?” Parker asked.

Winona longed to promise her daughter that he wouldn’t. But she had only known the man a few days. It was wrong to try to give Parker a false sense of security.

“If he does, it’s okay,” she told her instead. “We’ll find another place.”

“I really wasn’t trying to hurt him,” Parker said, tears leaking from her green eyes again. “I made him wear my helmet and everything. I even showed him how to bail out and made him practice. He started off so nervous. He wasn’t trying to be some kind of daredevil. I screamed for him to bail out, but he just kept flying.”

As much as it hurt to see Parker in pain, Winona couldn’t help but be proud to see her showing compassion and regret.

She really was a good kid. The graffiti back in the city was clearly an isolated incident that probably came from pain and loneliness. Parker had wanted to connect with those girls so badly that she’d made a mistake. She was just a kid, and she deserved the benefit of the doubt. Her reaction to Lucas getting hurt was proof that she was still on the right track.

“I know that you didn’t want him hurt,” Winona told her. “And I think Lucas knows it, too. When Ansel feels calmer, he’ll understand. Or he won’t. Some things are in our control, like trying to do the right thing. And some things aren’t, like other people’s feelings.”

It was a lesson she had learned well, after all that had happened with Ron.

“We’ll do our best to set Ansel’s mind at ease,” she went on. “But if it doesn’t work out, it’s no big deal.”

The door opened before Parker could reply, and Lucas ran in at top speed.

“*Parker*,” he yelled. “Look at my cast!”

Parker swiped the tears off her cheeks and was on her feet immediately, with a smile for Lucas as she admired his cast.

“It’s broken, but *barely*,” he told Parker.

Winona rose and turned to try and gauge how Ansel was feeling.

She caught the harsh expression on his face, his jaw as tense as before they left, as he turned on his heel.

“It’s time for bed, Lucas,” he said tightly. “Remember that Dr. Webb said you need lots of rest if you want to heal quickly.”

“Good night,” Lucas said to Parker and Winona. “See you in the morning.”

He headed up with Ansel right behind him.

“What do we do?” Parker asked her mother softly.

“We go to bed,” Winona said firmly. “Let’s go up now and be out of his hair. Then we can see what’s what in the morning.”

Parker nodded and headed upstairs, but she stopped before opening her door.

“I don’t think Lucas is mad at me,” she said, gazing up almost shyly at her mom.

“Definitely not,” Winona assured her. “He thinks you’re the bee’s knees.”

Parker rolled her eyes, but she also smiled at her mom and offered her a fist bump.

Winona bumped her fist with her daughter’s, knowing that it was a true sign of affection, since Parker seemed to have outgrown hugs. Maybe Winona wasn’t going to win any parenting awards, but she was doing her best, and Parker was hopefully going to get some sleep tonight.

As she headed into her room, she tried not to picture the expression that she’d seen on Ansel’s face when he came in.

But it was hard.

You have to take your own advice, her inner voice told her.

But that was much easier said than done.

ANSEL

Ansel jogged up to the house after early morning chores the next morning, feeling completely out of sorts.

Last night, he had rushed downstairs after tucking Lucas in, only to find an empty house.

At first, he'd been afraid that Winona and Parker had left completely. His mind showed him images of them packing the car while he and Lucas were at the hospital, and just waiting until they saw that Lucas was okay before heading back out of town, and out of Ansel and Lucas's lives.

But when he rushed outside, he saw their car was still parked beside the house.

It felt awful to think that they had scurried off to bed rather than face him. But at least it meant he still had the chance to apologize.

He had rushed through this morning's chores, cutting a few corners, which he never did, so that he could get back to the house before Winona left for school with the kids.

It would be embarrassing, but he knew that Lucas would like to see the apology himself, so maybe it was better this way.

He took his boots off on the front porch and peeled off his jacket before pushing open the door.

He had expected to hear the hustle-bustle of the kids getting ready for school.

Instead, he was met with silence and the delicious scent of coffee and something fresh baked.

There was a note on the kitchen counter.

We're heading out a bit early since it's my first school drop-off. Coffee is made and there's coffee cake in the pan on the stove. -W

Ansel grabbed the note off the counter and held onto it. He wasn't sure why it played on his emotions, it was a simple, factual thing, not meant to do anything but catch him up.

So why did he feel tears prickling his eyes.

It's been a long time since there was someone to leave me a note...

Dana had left him a note or two back in the day. She was a free spirit and not inclined to bake or to do anything earlier than planned, but sometimes, he came home to a scrawled message that she was going for drinks with a friend or running to the store.

Those little missives, on small slips of paper or the backs of receipts, meant she knew that she was important to him, and he was important to her. That someone in the universe cared if one of them wasn't where they were supposed to be.

Winona was clearly angry at him, afraid of his temper, or both. But she had still taken the time to make sure he knew where she and the kids were and what was happening.

Ansel sighed and forced himself to place the note down again, smoothing the corners from where he had gripped it too hard.

He poured himself a mug of coffee, but he left the cake alone. He was a complete idiot, and did not deserve coffee cake.

Instead, he walked over to the window with his coffee and looked out, wondering how long it would be before she got back.

If they had left pretty early, then maybe not so long.

What are you even going to say to her? the voice in the back of his head demanded.

It had a point.

He wanted to make things right between them, but even if she forgave him for his awful behavior last night, there would still be something difficult between them—a thread of tension, born of the unwanted attraction he felt for her.

He didn't like to admit it, but yesterday, before Parker came home with Lucas, he almost had the feeling it was a mutual attraction.

And after what had happened with his own brother at the Home for the Holidays celebration, he felt hope in his heart that even an old-fashioned, dyed-in-the-wool farmer could find love.

Visions of Winona in the soft afternoon light of her room haunted him - her hair like the glowing sunset as she showed him the tiny globe she had made with his home inside it, long before she had ever seen the house.

He'd seen her pulse at her throat, and would have sworn that her slightly parted, pink lips were telling him things she wouldn't let herself give voice to.

The restrained desire to take her in his arms had been almost like pain. But Ansel was in no position to give her what she wanted.

He couldn't even think of his own wants and needs these days. Lucas was struggling and nothing else mattered. Until that was resolved, Ansel would be treading water.

He wasn't always struggling, the voice in his head reminded him.

And that was true, but back then, Lucas had been so little. Ansel hadn't felt it was right for such a small child without a

mother to have a father who split his love with a girlfriend.

The sound of a car coming down the drive roused him from this dangerous line of thought. He stepped away from the window and leaned against the counter to wait for Winona.

A moment later she walked in the front door, carrying a bag of groceries. Her phone rang before he could speak, and she pulled it out of her pocket, swiping the screen to answer as she held it to her ear.

“This is Winona,” she said, her face going blank.

She listened for a moment, a furrow appearing on her forehead.

“I’ll come right now,” she said, her voice high-pitched and trembling. “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

She hung up, and was so distracted that she let the grocery bag tip forward a little. Apples fell out and spilled onto the floor, but she seemed to be almost frozen.

“Winona,” he said, moving to her quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“Parker’s in trouble at school,” she whispered.

He took the bag from her arms and realized she was trembling.

Her world was falling down. She had sacrificed heaven only knew what to come here, practically empty-handed, to help her daughter. And now there was trouble again.

“I’ll drive you,” he decided. “Do you need to do anything before we head out?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again, like she was considering telling him no.

“I know you can drive yourself,” he said, his voice a little husky. “But you don’t have to. I’m coming with you.”

She paused a moment.

In that instant, before she nodded at last, he suddenly understood how awful she must have felt last night when he

wouldn't let her drive him to the hospital.

"I'm so sorry, Winona," he said. "I'm sorry, and I'm an idiot. Let's get to the school now and see what we can do."

She let him lead her out to the porch, and she waited while he slipped his boots back on.

He got her into the truck, and then hopped in the driver's side and pulled away from the house.

Somehow, he felt the urge to drive as carefully with her as he had with Lucas last night, even though it was her heart that was hurting and not her body.

They drove the whole way in silence. After what felt like forever, they arrived at the school and headed in together.

"Mrs. Lee, I'm so glad you could make it," Madge said, her voice as sympathetic as if they were at a funeral. "Vice Principal Reed is waiting."

She gestured to an open doorway.

Winona headed in and Ansel followed, determined to stay by her side, unless she asked him to leave.

"Mrs. Lee," the vice principal said without standing to greet her. "Please have a seat."

Vince Reed was a self-assured nincompoop, and had been since he was in school with Ansel. He would have thought a man would have to change and grow to become the vice principal of a middle school, but Vince's boorish behavior suggested that was not the case.

Winona did as she was told, and Ansel sat in the seat beside her.

"Mr. Williams, it's always a pleasure to see you," Vince said importantly. "But student confidentiality requires that you are not present in the room while Miss Lee's behavior is being discussed."

Ansel was ready to get up and go when Winona put a hand on his arm.

“Mr. Williams is a family friend,” she said in a soft, clear voice. “I consent to him being present.”

Ansel managed not to smile, barely.

“Very well,” Vince said, sounding displeased. “We have a serious situation here and there are going to be serious consequences for Parker. I know she has had problems in the past. We were willing to let her have a clean slate here, but—”

“I’m sure your time is as valuable as ours, Vince,” Ansel broke in. “Can you explain what happened today without the history lesson?”

The vice principal frowned and then nodded.

“Miss Lee threatened several sixth grade students with physical violence,” he said.

Winona gasped and looked like she was going to cry.

“Why?” Ansel asked. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Vince sniffed. “This kind of behavior is obviously unacceptable. Perhaps expectations are different in the city, where you have a rougher element. But here in Trinity Falls, we do not tolerate threats.”

Somehow, Vince had managed to insult the entire city of Philadelphia and its citizens in addition to Winona’s child. He really was in top form today.

Ansel felt her stiffen beside him.

“I’d like to hear what Parker has to say,” Ansel said quickly. “Can you get her in here?”

Vince’s eyes went to Winona, and she nodded once.

WINONA

Winona watched as an ashen-faced Parker was escorted into the room by Mrs. Perkins.

Her heart dropped to her stomach.

She had never seen her daughter like this. Parker usually did a good job expressing her emotions. But right now, she looked like she had stamped them out altogether. And Winona knew it was probably in an effort not to cry.

Her own throat began to ache, and she forced herself to keep her expression neutral, so that when Parker met her eyes, she would be reassured.

She was furious with Parker for making threats, especially to younger children. But Parker was still Winona's daughter, and it was her job to protect her.

"Miss Lee, we've brought you in so you can confirm what happened for your mother and her... friend," the vice principal said, in a way that implied that something untoward was happening between Winona and Ansel.

Winona felt her cheeks burn, and anger bubble up in her belly.

"Actually," Ansel said in his deep loud voice, "I'd like for Parker to explain what happened on her own. No need for you to speak for her, Vince."

"Fine," the vice principal said, lifting his hands and leaning back in his chair. "Parker, why don't you explain why

you chose to threaten violence against some of the youngest students at our school.”

Parker took a deep breath, and then began, her voice unsteady at first.

“Lucas Williams is in the sixth grade,” Parker said, looking to Ansel. “He broke his arm yesterday, and came to school today with a cast. He had a special pen with him so that kids could sign his cast, and they did.”

Winona studied Parker, wondering where this was going. But she had closed her mouth in a straight line.

“I see no issue with that, Miss Lee,” the vice principal said.

“Did you see what they wrote on his cast?” Parker asked.

“There was some talk about that,” the vice principal said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “But the nurse covered it with fresh gauze, so it wouldn’t be a distraction to the other students. Ansel, I was planning to call you later.”

“You were planning to call me *later*?” Ansel growled. “I want to see my son *now*.”

“There’s no point mixing up one incident with another,” the vice principal sighed.

“Parker, exactly what did you say to those kids?” Ansel demanded.

“I told them that if they ever messed with Lucas again, I’d knock their heads together,” she said clearly and proudly. “And it wasn’t a threat. I’ll do it. He told me those boys have been bullying him a long time. It has to stop.”

Winona felt her heart warm and begin to beat again.

She should have had more faith in Parker. She had always had a strong sense of justice, and it was like her to stick up for an underdog.

That clearly meant a lot to Ansel. She looked up at his face, which was somehow even more handsome than ever, though it was rigid with fury.

“Let me get this straight,” he said in a voice so calm it was almost frightening. “My son has been bullied by this group of boys for a long time. The teachers and administration all turned their back on him, and no one even bothered to get me involved. And then, when this poor girl stands up for him, because no one else will, you want to *punish* her for it?”

“Mr. Reed,” Madge said from the doorway. “Here’s Lucas. His father wanted to see him?”

Winona could have kissed Madge for going to get Lucas without waiting for the vice principal to ask.

Lucas looked ashamed. He was holding his hand protectively over his injured arm.

Instead of the cool black cast with Parker’s signature that he’d gone to school with this morning, the thing was wrapped in white gauze.

“No one is mad at you, Lucas,” Ansel said in a clear, firm voice. “As a matter of fact, I think Vice Principal Reed would like to apologize to you for allowing this business with those boys to get so out of hand.”

Lucas looked up, his eyes a little wide with surprise.

“We’re all sorry you’re having a hard time,” the vice principal said, stopping short of apologizing for the school’s part in the hard time Lucas was having.

“I’d like to see the cast, son,” Ansel said.

Lucas moved forward right away, and allowed his father to unwrap the gauze and look inside.

Winona didn’t look, but she could tell from Ansel’s expression that what was written there was inappropriate and awful.

“If Parker is going to be punished for protecting Lucas, then every single kid who wrote on this cast, and every kid who watched and did nothing is going to be punished, too,” Ansel said in a soft, dangerous voice. “And I’d be very careful how you react, because I’ve got actual evidence right here on an eleven-year-old’s arm. And you’ve got nothing but hearsay,

and a very unhappy mother who isn't going to sit around while you victimize her daughter for doing what none of your staff had the guts to do."

"Ansel—" the vice principal began, in a wheedling tone.

"That's what I thought," Ansel said, standing. "We're done here. Both kids are going back to class. And if you put so much as a mark on Parker's record, I'll be back with a lawyer. Get your house in order, Reed."

With that, he marched out the door with Lucas trailing behind him.

Winona stood and saw that Parker was watching after Ansel, an expression on her face like he was Superman.

"Mrs. Lee, I apologize," the vice principal said suddenly, standing. "Apparently, we misunderstood the situation."

"We'll expect to hear from you as soon as possible with a written plan on how to improve matters for Lucas," she heard herself say in a cool voice. "If an actionable plan with scheduled follow-ups isn't in Ansel's inbox by the end of the week, I'll be writing to the school board to issue a formal complaint about how today was handled."

The vice principal nodded nervously.

Winona turned on her heel and headed out, feeling strangely confident.

The others were waiting, and had clearly heard her. Ansel smiled warmly at her, and the kids looked less shaken than before.

She smiled back, feeling for the first time in a long time like she was part of something bigger than herself.

She'd almost forgotten how nice it was to feel like another adult had her back.

WINONA

That afternoon, Winona drove out of the school parking lot with the kids in the backseat giggling together.

She had spent the day practically in a haze thinking about this morning, and how differently things might have gone for both children if she and Ansel hadn't been together for that meeting.

Surely, Parker would have been in a world of trouble. And Lucas might not have come home with anything but an admonishment about letting kids draw inappropriate things on his cast.

Instead, each child felt seen and heard.

She hadn't really gotten a chance to talk to Ansel about it. Since he had lost so much of his day to the school meeting, he had disappeared as soon as they got back home. And tonight was his first night of classes.

But she hoped they could connect about everything soon. It would be fun to replay the whole meeting over a cup of coffee. And Ansel clearly had a history with the vice principal if he was calling him *Vince*. She couldn't help but be curious about that.

"Mom, you were amazing today," Parker said suddenly from the backseat.

That felt so good to hear.

"Thank you," Winona said, glancing in the rearview mirror so Parker could see her happy smile. "Ansel did a great job in

there, so it was easy to follow his example.”

“Yeah, your dad rocks, Lucas,” Parker told the boy.

Lucas didn’t reply, but Winona could feel his pride in the air. He and his dad shared a real bond.

“So today is our first day together while your dad is in class, Lucas,” Winona reminded him. “Are there things you guys always do together after school that we should know about?”

“Homework,” Lucas said sadly. “Then we eat dinner.”

“Okay,” Winona laughed. “We’ll make sure your homework gets done. Hopefully, it won’t be *so* bad.”

“I have to do mine, too,” Parker said. “We could both work at the counter.”

Winona turned on the radio and they all sang to the Christmas station all the way home.

She had always loved the holidays, but all over Trinity Falls, it felt like people were really in the spirit of it. Wreaths hung from every door and strings of beautiful lights adorned most of the houses.

“When can we decorate the tree?” Lucas asked suddenly.

“We’ll want to wait for your dad,” Winona said. “But hopefully soon. It sure makes the house smell good, doesn’t it?”

“We never had a real tree before,” Parker told him.

Winona winced. It was the honest truth, but she hated feeling like Parker had been lacking anything. She gave her all she could within their means.

“You didn’t have a Christmas tree?” Lucas asked sadly.

“Of course we did,” Parker laughed. “But it was plastic.”

“Did you bring it with you?” Lucas asked.

Winona held her breath.

They hadn’t had much in the city, but they had given away anything that wouldn’t fit in the car.

Parker had been outwardly cool about it, but Winona wondered if she was just trying not to make waves.

“We only brought our absolute favorite stuff,” Parker said. “And that’s good, because you can’t have two Christmas trees if one is plastic and one is real.”

“Plastic means the needles don’t fall off,” Lucas said.

“That’s true,” Parker told him.

“Dad always wants to take our tree down on New Year’s Day because the needles fall off,” Lucas said. “But you could leave yours up.”

“Good point,” Parker said. “But it didn’t smell as nice as yours. We had to use those big jar candles to get it to smell like Christmas.”

Winona pulled the car into the homestead, admiring the tall sycamore trees with their lumpy bark as they drove past the big house and then turned left into the woods for home.

Home.

It wasn’t her home, not really. But somehow, Winona had never felt more at home any other time in her life.

As she pulled around the sweet little house to park her car, she couldn’t help thinking again of her snow globe.

What she had told Ansel was true, his house was very much like most snow globe houses.

But she had painted hers, and it matched his home exactly - right down to the deep brown of the cedar shake and the pale blue shutters.

“Do we have snacks?” Parker asked, rousing her from her thoughts.

“Sure,” Winona said. “I’ll see what’s in the cupboard.”

The kids spilled out and ran into the house, with Winona close behind.

The Christmas tree stood just inside the entry. Its branches had relaxed down, and it was ready for decorating now. And

Parker was right. Its delicate pine scent did fill the house much better than any candle.

The kids ran right past it to set up a homework station at the kitchen counter.

That suited Winona, since she liked a little company and figured it was good to monitor and make sure work got done.

Parker was pretty self-motivated, but she had no idea if Lucas was the type of kid who would sit down and do his work, or if he would need constant reminders to stay on track.

She headed into the kitchen to get dinner started while they worked.

With any luck, she could have the kids' homework squared away, dinner eaten, and showers taken by the time Ansel came home.

That way, she could offer him the chance to put his feet up and enjoy a hot meal. And she hoped he would feel that their rooms were a fair trade, though it was a high bar to set with the cost of housing going up everywhere.

A panicky voice in the back of her head asked if it had been a mistake to move out to the country.

But a single look at the kids, Parker's fiery head bent over Lucas's dark one as she pointed to something in his notebook, told her that everything about this situation was better for her daughter.

It was worth having an unusual living situation for a little while. Parker was thriving, in large part because she was focused on helping Lucas. Hopefully, the friendship would be a good thing for both of them, even after Winona and Parker got their own place.

She opened up the fridge and pulled out butter, milk, and cheddar cheese, then set a pot of water on the stove to boil.

"Can we have the Christmas station?" Lucas asked hopefully.

"Does your dad let you listen to the radio while you're doing homework?" Winona asked.

Lucas nodded.

“That’s fine, then,” Winona told him.

Lucas gave her a giant smile and leaned across the counter to turn on the old radio.

For a while, the kids worked quietly while Winona shredded cheese to the tune of Mannheim Steamroller’s *Chorus of the Bells*.

When the water began to boil, she put in a box of elbow pasta and stirred.

She was planning to make doctored up macaroni and cheese for Lucas tonight, and she figured if she didn’t actually have the kind with the powdered cheese, he might be more open to it. So far, he hadn’t even noticed what she was up to.

She poked around the kitchen a bit, finding the apples she’d spilled onto the floor this morning.

They were bruised, but they would make a delicious apple crisp for dessert.

She began peeling them while the pasta cooked.

“Hey,” Parker said quietly to Lucas. “Do you want me to give you some stickers like the ones on my skateboard to put on your cast? That would be fire.”

“No, thank you,” Lucas said. “I’m going to do art on it.”

“What do you mean?” Parker asked.

“Can we take a break, so I can show her?” he asked Winona.

“Of course,” she told him. “I’d like to see, too.”

He grabbed the silver pen out of his backpack and put it down on the counter so he could unwrap his cast.

“I’ll help,” Parker said. “If you want me to.”

He held his arm back for a moment, then surrendered it.

“I already saw it, buddy,” Parker said gently. “But if you don’t want my mom to look, she doesn’t have to.”

Winona had to hold in a sob when she realized that he had held back because he didn't want Parker to see what was written on the cast, not because he thought it would hurt.

"It's okay," he said softly, glancing up at Winona. "You know I didn't do this."

"Of course you didn't," she told him, nodding.

He nodded to Parker, and she began unrolling the white gauze from the cast.

Winona bit back her emotion when she saw the ugly things written on his arm.

"Watch this," he said with a big smile, uncapping the pen.

He touched it to the worst of the words and looped upward, stringing the letters around each other until it looked almost like a tangle of yarn. Then extended bits of the taller letters to draw the top of a kitten's face peeking over the top, as if she were playing with the yarn. Her expression was so playful that it looked like she was about to leap over the yarn at any moment.

"No way," Parker breathed.

But Lucas had already moved on. He made the next word into a winged horse.

Parker was laughing and clapping with delight by now, and Winona had put down her apple and peeler to lean on the counter beside him to watch.

He continued to transform the words on the cast into animals and landscapes until the whole cast was a kaleidoscope of happiness.

Then he drew a cartoon boy on a skateboard, balanced on one foot and looking like he was about to fall, with a teenaged girl behind him yelling, hands to her cheeks in dismay.

"It's *us*," Parker laughed. "That's amazing."

Lucas smiled, looking very pleased that she liked his drawing.

"You have a real gift," Winona told him.

“I like drawing,” he said, putting the cap back on his pen.

“I’d like it too, if I was that good at it,” Parker declared. “I have to run and record something for Spanish. Call me when it’s dinnertime?”

“Sure,” Winona told her. “Do you have much more, Lucas?”

“Nah,” he said. “Just one more thing.”

She went back to her apples and let him work, enjoying the music and the quiet work of cooking.

Back in the city, she hardly ever cooked anymore. She missed the sensual feel of the fresh fruits and vegetables in her hands and the satisfaction of filling the house with good smells.

She tested the pasta to find it was perfect, then poured it into the waiting strainer in the sink.

Lucas was standing by the stove when she turned back.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I’m making homemade mac and cheese,” she told him.

His little nose wrinkled, but he was too polite to say anything.

“Do you think you could help me?” she asked.

“Okay,” he said, seeming more cheerful right away.

She smiled to herself at his generous nature.

“First, let’s grab the butter I put in that dish,” she told him. “I’m going to drop this pasta back in the pot, and you’ll need to mix that in.”

He obeyed right away and did a nice job getting the soft, slippery butter into the pot.

“Now the cheese,” she told him.

“It’s shredded,” he said. “It will be lumpy.”

“Nope,” she told him. “It will melt. I’m going to put about two thirds of it in and save the last third to go on top before we

bake it.”

“We *bake* it?” he asked. “You don’t bake macaroni and cheese.”

“You bake this kind,” she told him.

To his credit, he didn’t argue, and did as he was told, even when she slipped some shredded chicken into the dish as well.

Once it was all mixed in nicely, she showed him how to put it in the casserole dish.

He even put the shredded cheese on top before Winona put it in the oven.

“Now what?” he asked.

“We’ll wait for the top to brown,” she told him. “It won’t take long. Then we can put the apple crumble in, so it can bake while we eat dinner.”

“Apple crumble?” he asked.

She showed him the dish of apples that she had tossed in brown sugar, lemon juice, and cinnamon and the bag of crumble she set aside.

“Want to spread the crumble on top?” she asked. “We can do that now, since it’s almost time to bake it.”

Lucas nodded and got to work, slowly and carefully putting an even layer of crumble over the fruit.

His forehead was furrowed with what she first thought was concentration.

“My dad really likes you,” he said after a moment.

Winona gazed at him, completely surprised.

Lucas continued to carefully spoon crumble onto the apples.

“Why do you say that?” Winona asked as lightly as she could.

“He doesn’t like to raise his voice,” Lucas said right away. “But he’s very protective of his family.”

She thought back to the meeting with the vice principal today, and the way Ansel had come to Parker's defense.

Lucas was right, his dad was usually gentle and quiet, in spite of his massive size. But he had been willing to go into battle for Winona's daughter.

"Did he tell you he was sorry for being mean yesterday?" Lucas asked. "And not letting you and Parker come with us to the hospital?"

"It was a little intense today," she said, feeling defensive of the big man. "I got the call from the school the minute I came in, and he came with me."

"He said it in the car last night," Lucas said solemnly. "On the way home from the hospital, he said he was sorry for talking to you like that and he was going to apologize. He said he gets protective of me because I'm all he has."

Winona's eyes were suddenly burning, and it was work not to show the sweet boy the empathy she felt for his father's pain.

It hadn't occurred to her last night, because she was so upset for Parker's sake. But Ansel must have spent so much time in hospitals when his wife was dying. Having to go to one with his beloved son must have been terrifying.

"Well, I think you might just have the best dad in the whole world, Lucas," she told the boy, willing her voice not to break.

"You're right," he said simply, spooning the rest of the crumble onto the dish. "I think this is ready now."

ANSEL

Later that night, Ansel stepped in the front door, closing it quietly behind him.

He was exhausted from a long day, and all the new things he had been introduced to in his first class tonight.

But the scent of the Christmas tree filled his senses, reminding him that no matter what changed, some things would remain the same, including the beautiful family traditions he and Lucas had enjoyed over the years.

“Hi,” Winona said quietly.

She was sitting on the velvet chair in the corner with her legs tucked up under her, sipping on a mug of tea.

She was as graceful as a little cat, and looked like she belonged right there, a content and happy fixture in his home.

“Hey,” he said. “How was this afternoon?”

“It was really nice,” she said with a genuine-looking smile. “Why don’t you put your stuff down and get comfortable, and I’ll tell you over dinner?”

“Dinner?” he echoed, his stomach rumbling.

He and Lucas normally ate early. He hadn’t thought about the fact that he’d be in class all night tonight, so he hadn’t even packed a snack.

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll warm up a plate for you. It’s really good. Lucas helped.”

Feeling surprised and grateful, he nodded to her and jogged upstairs, dropping his bag on his desk before deciding to jump in the shower for a quick rinse.

Five minutes later, he headed back down, already feeling refreshed.

Left to his own devices, he probably would have fallen into bed without eating. But he was grateful that Winona had saved him a plate and stayed up to make sure he ate.

The scent of something delicious had his stomach threatening to crawl out of his body as he headed to the kitchen.

She held out a plate with casserole and a fresh garden salad out to him.

“Beer? Water? Tea?” she asked. “Milk?”

“Water’s fine,” he told her. “I keep beer around for when one of the guys stops by, but I’m not much of a drinker.”

She smiled in a way that made him think his answer pleased her.

He sat at the counter with his plate and watched as she pulled a pitcher out of the fridge instead of just going to the tap, like he usually did.

“I know, I know, I’m a princess,” she laughed. “But I like to keep cold water in the fridge. It’s refreshing.”

“Sounds good to me,” he told her. “How were the kids?”

“Great,” she told him. “It was a real relief. Lucas even showed off his art skills, covering over those words with some pretty impressive drawings.”

“He taught himself online,” Ansel said fondly. “There are videos for kids to learn how to draw, and he really took to it. He used to carry around a sketchbook, but that stopped after a month or two.”

Winona frowned as she poured the water.

“What?” he asked.

“Why do you think he stopped carrying the sketchbook?” she asked.

It hit him that those kids at school might have made fun of Lucas for drawing, and he felt like fire was going to come out of his ears. How had he not thought of that?

All this time, Ansel had assumed Lucas didn't have many friends because he was quiet - not because anyone was giving him a hard time.

“Thank you for what you said to Vince today,” he told her. “I feel like an idiot for not knowing what was going on with Lucas. I thought he would feel safe telling me anything.”

“I think a lot of kids feel ashamed when they're bullied,” Winona said carefully. “And he probably didn't want you to worry. He knows how protective you are.”

Which reminded him...

“Winona, I'm so sorry about last night,” he began.

“Lucas told me,” she said with a smile. “It's okay. We're all guilty of being protective of our kids - especially when we're the only one they have to look out for them.”

“Thanks,” he said. “But that's still no excuse. Parker has been really good for Lucas. She didn't deserve that. I'll apologize to her in the morning.”

“That will knock her socks off,” Winona laughed. “So I won't refuse.”

“Your ex wasn't big on apologies?” he guessed, wincing as soon as he'd said it. “Sorry, it's none of my business.”

“It's fine,” she said. “And no, he's not the kind to say he's sorry. I think I'd like Parker to see that some men can actually take responsibility for their actions.”

He nodded and took a bite of his dinner.

“This is phenomenal,” he moaned. “Mac and cheese and chicken?”

“With cheddar and sour cream and a little buffalo sauce,” she said, nodding.

“Lucas did this?” he asked, amazed.

“I started with plain pasta,” she laughed. “That way he wouldn’t have to see me *ruin* his version. But I have to say, he ate a ton of it.”

“Amazing,” Ansel said, shaking his head as he took another bite.

He finished his meal in silence while she tidied up the kitchen and poured herself another cup of tea, adding milk and sugar.

“The kids did their homework and watched a little television before bed,” she told him. “It was a peaceful night. I could tell Lucas missed you, but Parker and I sat with him in his room for a few minutes after he got in bed. They chatted about their day. It was nice.”

“Thank you so much,” he said, standing. “For all you’re doing for Lucas. And for this meal, too. I feel like a new man.”

“Hey, I had an idea,” she said. “But you might be too tired, or want to wait.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“The kids are excited to decorate the tree,” she said. “They’re in bed now, but maybe we could just string the lights on so it’s ready to go whenever you have time to spend an evening on the ornaments?”

“Yeah,” he said. “That sounds good.”

He was feeling energized by his meal, and strangely reluctant to go to bed.

I want to talk to her about the classes.

He had wanted to since he walked in the door, but it made him feel like a little kid to tell her about school.

It occurred to him that maybe she was offering an activity that would allow him to do something else with his hands while he talked to her, like he sometimes did with Lucas.

If that was the case, it was a good plan.

He headed down to the basement and grabbed the bin with the Christmas lights off the shelf. When he got back upstairs, he could hear the Christmas station playing softly in the living room.

“I thought we could use some holiday music to put us in the mood,” Winona said.

“Sounds nice,” he told her, crouching over the bin to dig out the first set of lights.

“So, what was it like?” she asked him. “Were there a ton of other people in the class?”

It was like she’d read his mind.

“It was... weird,” he told her, untangling the first set of lights. “I haven’t been to school in a lot of years. And I was the oldest one there, by a lot. I sort of thought with it being offered evenings, there would be more people there who worked in the mornings.”

“Did you talk to anyone?” she asked, then bit her lip, like she was trying to hide a smile.

He chuckled.

“It’s weird, right?” he asked. “I mean it was my first day of school. I don’t know what else you’re supposed to ask.”

“I just don’t want you to feel like I’m treating you like a kindergartener on his first day or something,” she said.

“That’s how I felt,” he admitted. “Like I was afraid to go inside the building. I pulled up and sat outside for five minutes. Everyone else going in looked like they were about twelve.”

“They had to have been at least eighteen,” she reasoned.

He laughed and she joined him, the sound somehow more musical than any Christmas carol.

“Anyway, it was actually pretty exciting,” he told her, handing her one end of the lights. “The teacher knows what he’s doing, and he introduced us to the program director. She let us know she has a network of employment contacts for

anyone who completes the program and wants some help finding a job.”

“Would you want that?” Winona asked.

“I doubt it,” he said, threading the strand he was holding deep between the branches. “I mean, I like the idea of a steady income, but I’ve always basically worked for myself. I’m pretty motivated. I had been thinking maybe I’d do some design and consulting work on my own.”

“Maybe she has contacts who could help with that,” Winona suggested, grabbing another strand of lights and getting to work untangling them. “Or even past students who did the same who might be able to help you avoid some pitfalls?”

“You’re probably right,” he sighed.

“You know you can’t run your own business without talking to people, right?” she teased him gently.

“I figured the talking part would be mostly over email,” he said.

“After a while, it can be,” she told him. “At least that’s how it was for me. Once people trust you they just book you. But at first I had to do a lot of meetings and video calls to reassure my clients that I had their best interests in mind. You’ll probably have to do the same.”

“I wish my parents weren’t selling the farm,” he heard himself say.

It was something he had thought a lot in his head, but never really voiced before.

But he understood why they were thinking on it, and that it wasn’t his land. And he knew it wasn’t right to argue or complain, because they were his parents. His duty was to help them do whatever they needed to do to have the comfortable, stress-free retirement they deserved after raising so many kids with their whole hearts for so many years.

But here, with Winona, it felt safe to express his sadness.

“You must have loved growing up here,” she said softly.

“My brother, Logan, kind of flipped out when he heard,” Ansel said. “But I get it. I know why my parents might be ready to throw in the towel. And I don’t blame them. It’s just that I love this place. I don’t really know who I am without it.”

“You’re finding out though,” Winona said. “And that takes guts. They must be so proud of you for enrolling in that program.”

It was beyond embarrassing to admit that he hadn’t told them. So, he ignored her praise and began stringing the lights she held among the branches of the tree.

“It’s going to be so nice,” she said, looking up at the tree in wonder. “I’ve never seen such a pretty one.”

“You can make a snow globe of it,” he told her.

“That would be fun,” she said. “It’s the right kind of thing to put in a globe, too.”

“Do you sell them?” Ansel asked. “I’ll bet a couple of the shops in town would carry them if you asked.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I love making them as gifts for friends, but I can’t really do them on a large scale. That would require a ton of space. I just make one here and there, when I have a moment.”

“That’s too bad,” he said, meaning it.

“Do you think Lucas would want to help me make one?” she asked. “It’s so much fun. I got obsessed with it after the first one, and he has such a talent for art.”

“That would be nice,” Ansel said. “I feel bad that I didn’t get him to the beach this winter. He was pretty excited about it.”

“He really loves the beach?” Winona guessed.

“Not really,” Ansel said. “It was more about trying new things, for both of us. Though ironically, that’s happening right here at home this winter, with him on the skateboard and me at the community college.”

“That’s really nice,” Winona said.

They worked on in companionable silence for a bit longer, until all the lights were finally strung.

“Should we turn it on?” Winona asked.

“Absolutely,” Ansel told her. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

“I hereby dedicate this tree to trying new things,” Winona said with a silly smile before plugging it into the wall.

Radiant color lit the tree instantly, throwing a soft spectrum of mesmerizing shapes and shadows on the walls all around them.

“It’s so beautiful,” Winona breathed.

“Beautiful,” Ansel echoed. But he wasn’t looking at the tree.

Ansel was looking at Winona, and the way the soft colors lit up her face. He tried to memorize the wonder in her expression, wishing he could keep it in a snow globe of his own.

WINONA

Winona walked in the door the next day with a bag of groceries and a smile on her face.

The kids had gone to school happily, not seeming in any way traumatized by yesterday's events. She strongly suspected that having each other was a help.

She'd dropped by the Co-op before coming back home, hoping to find something nice to cook for dinner. There was pork loin on sale, and she decided to put it in the crockpot with some onions.

Hopefully she would have the whole house smelling heavenly when the kids came home. Even Lucas wouldn't be able to resist the tender dish if she whipped up some mashed potatoes to go with it.

She was almost to the kitchen when she heard the noise.

Instantly, she was frozen in place. People wandering back into their homes while they were being robbed often got attacked for their trouble.

Desperately, she tried to convince her feet to move and carry her backwards to the door again.

"Hello?" a woman called out in a friendly voice. "Is that you, Winona?"

"H-hello?" Winona tried to call back. It came out a frightened squeak.

A woman appeared in the doorway with a red apron in her hands. Her hair was a pinned-up braid, like Ma in the *Little House* books Winona had loved as a girl. She was smiling.

“I scared you, didn’t I?” she asked Winona, shaking her head as if she was ashamed of herself. “I should have known you were a city girl and hearing noises in the house might spook you. I left my lucky Christmas apron last time I was over here baking. I thought I’d slip in on my way out to shop and grab it. I’m Annabelle, Ansel’s mom.”

“Nice to meet you,” Winona said, finally letting out her breath fully. “You guessed right, I’m Winona.”

“Well, I’m awfully sorry I scared you,” Annabelle said. “But I do have to admit I’m glad we bumped into each other. Have you had your coffee yet?”

“I could use another cup,” Winona said, keeping it to herself that she needed to restart her heart after that scare.

“Oh good,” Ansel’s mother said with a twinkly-eyed smile. “Come on, then.”

Winona followed her into the kitchen, noticing how comfortable the other woman was around the house.

“I’m here a bunch,” Annabelle confided, as if she had guessed what Winona was thinking. “With Ansel by himself and no one to pipe up if he needs help, I try to stop by with a hot meal once or twice a week and invite them up to the house for dinner just as often. Someone needs to make sure the boys aren’t living on pizza and macaroni and cheese.”

“That’s really nice,” Winona told her.

“Not as nice as knowing you’re here doing the same,” Annabelle said. “And I heard what Parker did for Lucas.”

She had stopped and fixed Winona in her gaze, like she wanted to be sure Winona knew she meant it.

“I think that the friendship has been good for both of them,” Winona told her honestly.

“Well, Lucas has a hard time standing up for himself,” Annabelle said, turning her attention to the coffeepot. “He gets

that from his dad.”

“You could have fooled me,” Winona laughed. “Ansel stood up for Parker in a big way. He really put the vice principal in his place.”

“Interesting,” Annabelle said with a mysterious smile. “Cream and sugar?”

“Both, please,” Winona said. “And plenty of them.”

“Girl after my own heart,” Annabelle said approvingly as she poured the coffee.

Winona slipped her pork loin into the fridge and sat on one of the kitchen stools.

It felt like Annabelle wanted a nice chat, and Winona knew that was more important than whether they ate the dinner she had planned tonight or tomorrow.

“Their hearts are too big,” Annabelle said, setting two mugs of steaming coffee on the counter and sitting on the stool opposite Winona’s. “It makes them an easy target - even easier when whoever wants to give them a hard time figures out they don’t like confrontation.”

Winona took a big sip of her coffee, trying to figure out how to respond.

“I get the sense your daughter’s big heart expresses itself differently,” Annabelle said.

Winona almost spurted coffee out of her nose.

“You could say that,” she said, laughing. “She’s never been one to pull any punches. Verbally, of course. She hasn’t actually punched anyone that I know of. But she definitely doesn’t take any nonsense, and she has a pretty acute sense of justice. She was furious at those kids for what they did to Lucas.”

“He’s a lucky boy to have her for a friend,” Annabelle said. “And they’re both lucky to have you around. And me too, actually. I hear I don’t have to worry about them having a hot meal four nights a week?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Winona said quickly. “I’d be cooking for Parker and me anyway, and we’re very grateful to have a place to live. It worked out so well that Ansel’s programming classes started up right after we got here. He’s really excited about learning web design. I’m so happy for him.”

When Annabelle didn’t respond, Winona glanced up from her mug to find that Ansel’s mother had a stunned expression on her face. She tried to hide it, but it was too late.

“You... didn’t know?” Winona asked, her stomach sinking.

“Don’t you dare feel bad,” Annabelle said right away. “He’s a grown man, and he doesn’t owe me a rundown of every little thing he does with his time. I have a feeling I know why he’s taking classes and why he wouldn’t want to bring it up. Besides which, if I know him, he’s a little embarrassed to be trying something new.”

“That part is definitely right,” Winona said gently. “He had a hard time telling me about it, but he had to if he wanted me to help. I was honored that he talked to me about how the first class went last night.”

“That shows how much he trusts you,” Annabelle said with a gentle smile. “And it shows how special you are. Sometimes, it feels like he just closed the doors around himself and Lucas when Dana passed. I hope you don’t mind me bringing her up?”

“Of course not,” Winona said, wondering why his mother would think she would.

“Ansel and Lucas need someone in their lives who is energetic and persistent about helping Ansel open those doors,” Annabelle said. “It sounds like Parker definitely has that kind of energy. I’m starting to think I know where she got it from.”

She winked and Winona couldn’t help grinning back at her.

“Well, I’d better run,” Annabelle said, grabbing her empty mug and carrying it to the sink. “Shopping won’t do itself.”

She gave Winona a little wave with her apron before disappearing out through the living room.

The front door was closing behind her before her words to Winona really sank in.

Ansel and Lucas need someone in their lives who is energetic and persistent about helping Ansel open those doors.

“Was that... a set-up?” Winona asked herself, as she watched Annabelle hike back up the gravel road toward her own house, the bright red apron a cheerful contrast against the sepia-toned Pennsylvania landscape.

WINONA

On Friday afternoon, Winona opened the front door and let the kids spill into the house, laughing and chattering about what they were going to do after dinner.

The two of them had been whispering to each other a bunch lately. She figured they were planning some Christmas surprises. It was fun to see their joy in the season.

She had always wondered if Parker would like to have a sibling. It was nice to see her have this kind of warm relationship, even if a sibling was pretty much off the table.

As she stepped inside, Winona realized that the house smelled incredible.

“Hey, guys,” Ansel said, striding in from the kitchen. “It’s Friday, so I don’t have class. I got my chores done early, so I thought I’d make spaghetti and meatballs. Anyone want to help make garlic bread?”

“*Me*,” Lucas sang out happily, ripping off his jacket and picking his backpack up again.

“Let me grab your bag and get your lunch stuff out,” Ansel said, thrusting out his hand. “We can wash that up while we’re cooking.”

But Lucas was clutching the bag to his chest, looking like he didn’t want to hand it over.

“What’s going on?” Ansel asked, frowning. “Hey, what’s that on your arm?”

Lucas glanced down at the red spot on his arm and quickly covered it with his other hand. Winona hadn't noticed that on the ride home.

"Nothing," he said, eyes still downcast.

"Did someone hurt you?" Ansel asked.

Lucas shook his head hard, still clinging to the backpack.

"Give me that bag, right now," Ansel said, his voice dangerously soft.

Lucas's eyes shot to Parker before he slowly relaxed his arms and let his dad take the backpack. This was unlike Lucas. He was such a good kid, and so close with his dad.

Winona watched as Ansel unzipped the backpack. Her heart sank when she saw what was in it.

Three cans of spray paint clanked against each other as Ansel opened the bag wide to reveal them.

"Parker and I were painting the wall," Lucas said quickly, his voice pitching higher than usual. "You weren't supposed to see it."

"You and Parker were painting on a wall?" Ansel yelled. "You should know better than that, and Parker definitely does."

Winona's heart shattered.

Parker was up to no good all over again, only this time there were no other girls to blame. And she was corrupting an innocent little boy with her delinquent behavior to boot.

Ansel started in on a rampage about why graffiti was bad, and she could hardly blame him. Winona was mortified. He had taken the two of them into his home, and they had repaid him with this.

Suddenly, Parker hurried out of the room.

Winona could hear her footsteps flying up the stairs, and the slam when she closed herself into her room.

“You don’t understand,” Lucas sobbed, grabbing his dad by the sleeve. “You’ve got it all wrong. You just have to see.”

Before Ansel could respond, Lucas darted past them and out the front door into the trees, leaving Ansel no choice but to follow.

Winona ran after the two of them, trying to keep her footing on the uneven surfaces as they dashed through the trees on the frozen ground.

At last, they stopped in front of a decrepit structure. It looked like an ancient barn, the wooden walls silvered with age and neglect.

Lucas disappeared behind it, and Ansel and Winona followed.

When she saw the back of the old barn, Winona felt a lump in her throat.

The kids had spray painted a white background and the words *Merry Christmas* in red on top, with candy canes on each side.

There was the shape of a Christmas tree outlined below that, but it wasn’t filled in yet.

Cardboard templates they must have used for the letters and candy canes were stacked in a bin next to the simple mural.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” Lucas sobbed. “It’s just the old barn and you said you’re tearing it down anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Son,” Ansel said and then trailed off, speechless.

“Parker said it was a great spot to learn how to paint murals,” Lucas said. “She thinks I have a lot of talent. We bought the paint with our own allowance. We were going to surprise you for Christmas.”

Before he could say another word, Ansel was hugging Lucas to his chest, eyes pressed closed.

“I’m so sorry, son,” he said. “I should have let you explain first.”

“Parker,” Winona murmured, turning on her heel to run back to the house.

“Wait,” Ansel called to her. “I don’t want you getting lost.”

She managed to hold off until he joined her, with Lucas by his side.

Then they hurried back to the house together.

“Wait here,” Ansel said to Lucas, pointing to the sofa. “We have to apologize to Parker.”

Lucas nodded and sat on the sofa, wiping the tears from his face with the palm of his hand.

“Parker,” Winona called out on her way up the stairs.

She knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

“I’m coming in,” she said, turning the handle, as Ansel joined her.

Parker was curled up on her bed, knees to her chest, a furious expression on her face.

“We know what you were doing now,” Winona said right away. “I’m so sorry I assumed the worst. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Someone was so busy yelling that I couldn’t get a word in,” Parker snapped back.

Winona sucked in a breath.

It was normal for Parker to lash out at her, or even at her dad, when he was around. But she was never, ever sarcastic or rude with anyone outside the family.

“Parker,” Ansel said gently, coming to crouch beside her bed. “I’m so sorry. I should never have yelled. I should have listened to you. You’re a good kid, and you deserve my trust.”

“*You’re not my dad,*” Parker yelled at him. “*I don’t want to live here anymore. I want to go live with my dad.*”

Tears blurred Winona's vision, and she backed out of the room, trying to hold herself together.

ANSEL

Ansel straightened, feeling like he had been kicked in the chest by one of the horses.

You're not my dad...

He knew he wasn't her father. Yet somehow, he felt the same frustration with her when he thought her behavior was bad, and the same pride when she did something spectacular - just like he felt with Lucas.

Confusion twisted his belly until he felt like he had swallowed wet concrete.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured one last time as he backed out of the room.

A soft sound in Winona's room, just down the hall, told him she was as devastated as he was.

He moved to her instinctively, knowing she needed him.

"Winona," he said softly, tapping on the open door.

She sat on the edge of her bed, head in her hands, crying like her heart was broken.

She looked so small like this. It was easy to forget her diminutive stature when she took up such a large space in his heart.

"I'm so sorry for my behavior," he told her. "I'm sure she doesn't mean it. She loves you so much. I'm the idiot that lost his temper. She'll see that when she cools down."

“She’s old enough to choose,” Winona sobbed softly. “She’s old enough to choose, and now...”

“Let her sleep on it,” Ansel told her softly.

“She’s going to call him,” Winona said, raising her head to look up at him. “And he’s just going to hurt her.”

“What are you talking about?” Ansel asked, feeling completely perplexed.

“I haven’t told you everything about Ron,” Winona said. “And it’s important to me that Parker... well, I don’t want to say bad things to her about her father. He loves her, in his way, and I’m glad she’s proud of him. I want her to have good feelings about her family.”

An idea of what she might be saying began to form in Ansel’s mind, but he kept his mouth shut and let her tell him what she wanted him to know.

“Our marriage wasn’t perfect,” she said quietly. “But I was always willing to make it work. We made a promise to each other, and I would never have turned my back on that. Besides, Parker deserved to have two parents, and...”

She broke off, pressing her lips together and squeezing her eyes shut tight, like she was trying not to cry.

All he wanted was to pull her close and hold her tight, to tell her that whatever she was trying to talk about was over now, and she was safe, right here with him.

“Ron does work for a radio station,” she went on, after a moment. “Just like Parker said. But it’s not quite the glamorous job he makes it out to be. The station has an intern program for college kids, and he’s in charge of it. He basically tells them when to go get coffee for people and how take out the trash, things like that. And he signs off on their hours.”

Ansel nodded. On the one hand, it was kind of pathetic to pretend to be some kind of big shot executive, but on the other, he understood why the man might want his kid to think he was more important than he really was.

“Anyway,” Winona went on. “He had an affair with one of the students. She was over eighteen, but still much younger than him, and he was her boss, on top of the fact that he was cheating on me. When it all came out, he just left.”

“Left his job?” Ansel asked.

“Left us,” Winona said simply. “He’s still with the station, and he’s still with the girl, too.”

Ansel gaped at her, unable to imagine what he could possibly say that would take away the sting of such monstrous behavior.

How could anyone lucky enough to have Winona as their wife ever even look at another woman? Let alone a student...

“They live together now, in that cool apartment Parker was talking about,” she said. “He hasn’t even told Parker that he has a girlfriend. But he told me he doesn’t want custody. That’s why the divorce was so easy. He wanted our assets, and I wanted our daughter.”

White-hot fury blasted through Ansel’s veins, and he was up on his feet, fists clenched with unexpressed violence at what the man had done.

“Doesn’t he understand how special she is?” he demanded, his voice coming out a growl. “She’s brave and smart and she has a heart of gold. How could anyone be such a fool?”

There was a creak in the floor and they both turned to look.

Parker stood in the shadowy hallway, her hand pressed to her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Parker,” Winona moaned.

But Parker bolted down the hall, and there was the sound of a door slamming again.

Winona’s eyes met Ansel’s, and they looked haunted.

His heart felt like it was shattering into a million pieces.

Parker had heard it all. Winona hadn’t even been able to tell her privately, on her own terms.

Before he had a chance to say anything, Winona was flying out of the room too, running for her daughter like her life depended on it.

WINONA

Winona's hands shook and her heart was filled with broken glass, but she ran after Parker for all she was worth.

All she had ever wanted was to preserve Parker's relationship with her father. Now the truth had come out in the most painful way possible, and when Parker was already hurting and angry.

But Winona had to put her fury at herself aside. There was no room for it right now. Parker needed every single part of her focus.

"Parker," Winona said to the closed bedroom door. "Can I come in?"

There was no answer.

After the running and slamming and the thunder of her own heart in her ears, the sudden silence and stillness was almost dizzying.

"It's fine," Winona said with a calm she didn't feel. "You don't have to open the door. But I'm going to talk to you anyway."

Still no reply.

She had expected Parker to yell for her to go away. The silence was strangely encouraging.

"Your father is a charming person," she began. "He's smart, and handsome, and fun, and he loves you."

Parker didn't make a sound.

"He's going through something right now, honey," Winona said. "Something I can't begin to understand, and it's making him irrational. But I *know* that he loves you. I know it because I don't think he could help it. No one could. You're an amazing person."

Parker didn't reply, but she didn't argue.

Winona sighed.

"I didn't have a great relationship with my dad when I was a kid," she admitted. "And now I don't have a relationship with him at all. I wanted better than that for you, Parker. That's why I didn't tell you about the custody thing. I didn't want to ruin the good relationship you and your dad have. I would never want that when every single day there's a chance that he will wake up in the morning and realize that he needs to make things right with you."

She waited, hoping Parker would say something, anything. But she was still pouring her heart out to a wooden door. And that was fine. Parker needed to hear it.

"You might choose to forgive him one day," she went on. "Or you might not. But whatever you decide, you have to know one thing about his situation right now. It has *nothing to do with you.*"

She bit her lip, trying to find the right words to explain. But her heart was still pounding too hard for her to be poetic. She was going to have to give Parker the raw truth that was in her heart.

"Parker, you are an incredible person," she said. "You're brave and funny. And you're so independent already that sometimes I wonder if you even need me at all."

She smiled and shook her head. Parker was growing up, and soon she would be out in the world on her own. They had just a short few more years together...

"But I need *you*, Parker," she told her, holding back a sob. "And I would walk through fire for you. I would go to war with a battalion of lawyers, if that's what it took for you to live

with me. So, it doesn't really matter what your father wants. If you think you're going anywhere, you're sorely mistaken. You are worth fighting for, Parker Lee."

The silence was deafening now.

"Do you hear me?" Winona demanded. "Parker?"

Still nothing.

"By the love of all that's holy, Parker, you had better not be wearing those stupid headphones," she yelled, flinging open the bedroom door.

But the room was empty.

The bathroom door behind her clicked open as she stood there staring at the unoccupied bed. Before Winona could turn around, Parker wordlessly wrapped her arms around her mother's shoulders from behind, holding her so close that she was practically hanging on her.

Winona drank in the rare feeling of her daughter's arms around her, and the scent of her shampoo and chewing gum.

All the pain Parker was feeling, and all the unspoken love she had for her mother, coursed through the strength of her embrace.

Parker was hurting, but Winona was here to bear it with her. It was her privilege as a parent, a pain that was more priceless to her than diamonds.

Winona closed her eyes at last, thanking the universe for letting her daughter be right where she belonged.

ANSEL

Ansel could hear Winona in the hallway, talking to Parker through the door, her voice rich with emotion.

His heart broke for her, but his priority was down in the living room, waiting for him.

He headed downstairs.

Sure enough, Lucas was on the sofa right where Ansel had left him, looking sad.

“Hey, Lucas,” he said gently, as he joined him on the couch. “I’m really sorry about today.”

“Parker is really upset,” Lucas said softly. “She doesn’t want to live here anymore.”

“You heard that, huh?” Ansel asked.

Lucas nodded.

“Well, she’s super mad at me,” Ansel told him. “And she has every right to be. I assumed the worst of her, when I should have known better.”

“Will she stay mad at you?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t know,” Ansel said honestly. “I hope not. I apologized to her, and I’ll do it as many times as she’ll let me. But whether or not to forgive me will be her decision.”

“That part’s not in your control,” Lucas said, nodding wisely.

“Right,” Ansel said, impressed.

“Parker told me that the other day,” Lucas said, shrugging. “About those guys at school. She said her mom says some things are in our control and some aren’t. And we have to focus on doing our best because that part is the only thing that we’re in charge of.”

“Those women are really on the ball,” Ansel said, shaking his head in admiration.

“They’re right about the kids at school,” Lucas said. “My homeroom teacher talked to me. She said I might move schedules.”

Ansel fought off the desire to sigh. If the teacher thought moving Lucas was the best way to protect him and give him a fresh start at making friends, maybe she was right.

“You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want,” Ansel said. “But if you ever do want to talk about how all this started, or anything that’s going on now, I’m here for you. That’s my whole job. And I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to. I’ll just listen.”

Lucas stole a look up at him, his eyes peeking up solemnly through the thatch of dark hair hanging over them.

“I used to carry my sketchbook around everywhere,” he said after a moment, looking down at his hands. “I was making a graphic novel about a kid who travels through outer space. It was dumb.”

“It doesn’t sound dumb,” Ansel told him. “It sounds awesome.”

“Mrs. Sawyer thought so, too,” he told his dad. “She used to ask me to look at it during class every day.”

Ansel smiled at the idea. It was special for Lucas to have a connection with a teacher, particularly in middle school, where he was changing teachers for every class.

“Anyway,” Lucas went on. “At lunch one day I was drawing, and those boys came around. I knew they were the kind of kids who got in some trouble and didn’t care about grades or anything.”

Ansel knew exactly what he meant. Those were the kinds of boys to avoid, especially if you were quiet and a bit of a loner like Lucas was, or like Ansel had been back in his school days.

He only wished Lucas had the siblings and cousins around that he'd had. It made it hard to feel really alone when you were constantly seeing family around every corner.

"I didn't say anything to them," Lucas said. "I was just focused on my drawing. But they sat all around me and one of them asked me what I was doing."

Ansel repressed a shudder. He could envision the jackals prowling around Lucas.

"They made me tell them about what I was drawing," he said. "And then they took my sketchbook."

Ansel had to call on every bit of willpower in him not to react. He wanted to leap out of his seat, scream, call the school, or find the parents and express his fury.

Instead, he managed to keep his body and his face still, then nod calmly.

"They made fun of me," Lucas said. "They drew bad stuff on some of the pictures and put them all over the school, and they ripped the rest apart. The kids with phones were all laughing at me later, I guess they posted something about it."

Ansel prayed for the strength to remain calm.

"That must have been awful," he said softly.

"Yeah," Lucas said, glancing up at him.

"Especially when it wasn't your fault," Ansel said. "You were just sitting quietly, drawing."

"That's the part that made Parker *see red*," Lucas told him. "She said so. Isn't that a cool thing to say?"

"That is cool," Ansel agreed.

"Anyway," Lucas said. "That's why I can't have a sketchbook at school anymore. And it kind of put me out of

the mood for drawing for a while. Even when I did start up again, I definitely didn't want to share it with anyone."

"I get why you felt like that," Ansel said nodding.

"So, when Parker said I should make a mural, it was kind of a big deal," Lucas said, shrugging. "I didn't even want to draw in a sketchbook. But she got me to paint something giant on a whole wall."

"You know that barn isn't stable," Ansel said. "That's why we're tearing it down."

"But I wasn't *climbing on it*, Dad," Lucas protested. "Or going inside it. We were just painting it."

"Still, if you were too close and it came down you could get hurt," Ansel told him. "And you're the most important thing in my world."

Lucas nodded, looking chastened.

He was having a hard year. Moving up to the middle school had been difficult, and being bullied at school was even worse, especially when he was moving classes all day, so it was harder for his teachers to realize something was wrong.

And having strangers move into the house was also adding stress, even if they were good to him, even if they made Ansel and Lucas's lives richer and happier.

Lucas leaned against him, and Ansel wrapped an arm around his thin shoulders. He closed his eyes, to soak in this single moment where he knew his son was safe.

And then he saw Winona's face in his mind, the soft look in her eyes when she smiled at him.

He hadn't had sweetness in his life like that in so long that he had forgotten what it was like. He wanted to kiss her so badly that it almost hurt.

But none of that mattered now.

Lucas needed him too much.

I'll talk to her tomorrow, he told himself. It's only right to make sure she knows this attraction can't turn into anything.

Our kids are our priority. If I take my eye off the ball for a second, and Lucas pays the price, I'll never forgive myself.

WINONA

Winona awoke to soft light filtering through the curtains and a sense of peace filling her heart as the events of last night came back to her.

The thing she had most feared had come to pass. Parker knew the truth about her father. And she was going to be okay.

Winona sat up and slid her feet into her slippers before padding to the bathroom to get ready for the day ahead.

Normally on the weekend, she might be planning to work on a snow globe or call and catch up with an old friend. But her old friends had all been a little weird with her since Ron left—almost like they thought her divorce might be catching.

The good news was that she wasn't going to be sitting around alone. Both kids had said yesterday on the way home from school that they wanted to decorate the tree today. She hoped the peaceful activity would help everyone get centered again after yesterday.

She hummed to herself through her shower, then dressed in her favorite jeans and a warm sweater, and headed downstairs.

The house felt empty with the kids still sleeping. But it smelled like coffee, which meant that Ansel was up and probably already out with the horses.

She pictured him coming in a few minutes from now in that fleece-lined flannel that made his shoulders look impossibly wide, his dark hair wind-tousled, cheeks ruddy, and eyes shining from being outside.

No, Winona, she chastised herself. Parker is going through a lot right now. Don't think about him like that.

She hurried into the kitchen and poked around a little, deciding on baked French toast, since she could easily keep it warm until everyone was up.

She put on the radio to keep herself company and before long, she was dancing around to the cheerful Christmas carols and feeling decidedly young.

She'd barely been eighteen when she had gotten pregnant with Parker. At times, that made her feel more affinity for Ron's new young girlfriend than she would have liked.

Winona hadn't minded growing up fast, because Parker was the apple of her eye and worth every single party she missed times one million.

But there were times when all that growing up she'd done made her feel much older than her age.

So, when Chuck Berry's "Run, Rudolph" came on and she let go and began really dancing and rocking out, she felt more like her thirty-one years than she had in forever.

The kitchen disappeared around her until there was only the speedy, blues-rock rhythm and her own laughter in her ears as she spun and tossed her hair.

The song wrapped up and she leaned on the counter, panting a little more than she might have ten years ago.

It was only then that she noticed Ansel in the doorway, gazing at her with a funny little half-smile.

"Oh, wow, that's embarrassing," she laughed, too elated from wearing herself out to be actually upset. "I guess you've seen it all now. You won't be surprised when I go on tour with the Bolshoi Ballet."

She laughed weakly at her own joke, her heart starting to pound even faster as he gazed down at her.

Ansel's cheeks really were ruddy, and his eyes were gleaming, just like she had pictured. And he was looking at her like she was a present he badly wanted to unwrap.

She cleared her throat and averted her gaze, feeling wildly confused.

She had decided she wasn't going to let anything happen. And that was the right choice. But then why did her heart tell her something different every time she was actually in the room with him?

"Winona, we need to talk," he murmured, his voice deep and husky.

"*Are you making baked French toast?*" Parker's voice carried from the stairs.

Parker sounded happy and excited, and Winona's racing heart skipped a beat with joy, though of course she was dying to know what Ansel had been about to say.

You know what he was going to say, a little voice in the back of her head told her. He wants your friendship to blossom into something more. That's why he was staring at you like you were a glass of water and he was stranded in the desert.

She tried not to think about how she would feel if that were the case. If so, Parker had bought her some time, and for that she was grateful.

"Yes, it is," she called back to her. "Want to help me make the glaze?"

The pounding of feet on the steps was her answer.

"We'll chat later," Ansel said, stepping away from her, almost guiltily.



THE REST of the day passed happily. By the time the glaze was made, Lucas was up and excited to help with the tree, so they made a plan to do that right after dinner.

They all broke off and did their own thing for a while, with Ansel heading out to do some more chores and then run a few errands. The radio had warned of a storm headed their way,

and he wanted to be sure they had what they needed to get them through.

Once dinner was over, Lucas and Ansel went up to the attic to bring down the bins of decorations and they put on the radio in the living room to keep the Christmas cheer going.

Lucas did most of the decorating, the cast not slowing him down a bit. And there was plenty of laughter as he and his dad talked about the stories behind some of the ornaments.

When they were finished, the tree was overflowing with decorations old and new. China angels and antique carousel horses watched over the cardboard gingerbread people Lucas had made in pre-school.

“We need something from you and your mom, Parker,” Lucas said suddenly, a plaintive note in his voice.

Ansel nodded in agreement.

Parker frowned and then dashed upstairs, coming down smiling and holding a small snow globe Winona had made for her.

Inside was a tiny cityscape.

Lucas and Ansel bent over the globe in Parker’s hands, studying the miniature scene.

“Wow,” Lucas cried after a minute. “It looks real.”

“Amazing,” Ansel murmured.

“Okay, Lucas,” Parker said. “You decide where it goes.”

Lucas took the snow globe from her as carefully as if it were a baby bird, cupping it in his hands protectively as he searched the tree for the perfect spot.

At last, he smiled and reached up to hang the snow globe beside a small silver frame decoration with a picture of himself and his dad inside, arms slung around each other beside a previous year’s Christmas tree.

“Perfect,” he said contentedly. “We’re all together. But we need to take a new picture this year with all of us.”

“Who wants hot chocolate?” Ansel asked suddenly.

“*Me,*” the kids yelled in unison.

“Can we drink it out on the back porch and watch the snow?” Lucas asked.

Winona glanced out the window and saw that there really were flurries coming down, as if the whole world around them were a Christmas card.

“Sure,” Ansel told him fondly. “Go grab the blankets.”

Ansel made hot chocolate in the kitchen, and the kids scrambled for blankets while Winona supervised. She told herself it was to make sure no one fell down the stairs with the big fluffy blankets. But if she was being honest with herself, she would have to admit she was really doing it to avoid being alone with Ansel.

When the hot chocolate was ready and everyone had a blanket, they all headed out to the porch with their steaming, fragrant mugs.

The kids sat on the small sofa, leaving Winona and Ansel to take the chairs on either side. Winona dragged her chair as close to Parker’s seat as she could and then sat, pulling the blanket over her lap.

They all sipped in silence for a while, watching the flurries dance down, kissing the tree branches and the grass.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Parker asked dreamily.

“What?” Winona asked.

“Remember when you used to drive us out in the suburbs to look at the Christmas lights?” Parker said. “You used to put a blanket on me, so I wouldn’t get cold in the car.”

“Those were fun drives,” Winona agreed.

It was interesting that Parker said *you used to drive us*. It was Ron who had driven the old car around the fancy neighborhoods just southwest of the city, while Winona sang

Christmas carols or played Twenty Questions with Parker until they got to the pretty lights.

When Lucas began to nod off, Ansel took his mug.

“Ready for bed?” he asked him.

Lucas nodded.

“Can I read you a chapter?” Ansel asked.

“Yeah,” Lucas yawned.

“Be back in a few,” Ansel told Winona and Parker.

Then it was just the two of them, like it had been for a while, until they had found their way to Trinity Falls.

“I talked to Dad,” Parker said suddenly, her voice sounding clear as a bell in the cold air.

“How was it?” Winona asked, after waiting a beat to see if Parker would volunteer anything.

“Everything is starting to make a lot more sense,” Parker said slowly. “At first, I wasn’t sure why you would move all the way out here just to keep me away from him. Now I know that’s not what you were doing at all.”

“I’m sorry,” Winona said softly.

“Don’t be,” Parker said, turning to her with a wry smile. “I can handle this stuff. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

Winona laughed without meaning to.

“You’re doing that a lot more lately,” Parker said, tilting her head slightly as she observed her mother.

“What?” Winona asked.

“Laughing,” Parker said simply.

Winona’s heart filled with love for her daughter, who at thirteen had the empathy to notice her mother’s well-being, even though she was still reeling from her own hurt.

She smiled at Parker, trying to keep the tears from forming in her eyes.

“Look,” Parker said suddenly, turning away from her to face the snowy woods. “This is so awkward, and I’m only saying it once. Our family only works if both of us are happy. That means you, too. So, if you want to... *be* with Ansel, you should probably give it a shot. Lucas needs me around. And... it’s nice here.”

Winona’s world turned on its head in an instant.

“Do you mean that, Parker?” she heard herself ask. “You’d like for me to date him?”

“*Please*, Mom,” Parker groaned. “Let us never speak of this again. But... yeah. Whatever. He seems to make you happy. And I like that.”

Winona was up out of her chair in a heartbeat and on the sofa next to Parker, pulling her in for a hug and a kiss on top of the head.

Parker pretended not to like it, and she didn’t exactly hug her back, but Winona could *feel* her daughter smiling against her chest.

Maybe they really had landed here for a reason.

And maybe their lives were going to be fuller than either of them had expected.

WINONA

Winona sat alone under her blanket, looking out at the snow for a long time after Parker headed upstairs. Flurries still swirled down onto the trees and some of the tiny flakes were sticking to the ground now. It was mesmerizingly beautiful to watch, and the peace allowed her mind to explore things she'd been pushing to the side for days.

Ansel hadn't come down again yet, but she knew he would, once Lucas's nighttime routine was squared away.

It made her smile to think of the big man talking quietly with his shy son. The two of them were the perfect complement for Winona and Parker, who were small but a source of constant noise and motion.

For just a moment, she allowed herself to picture the images she had been pushing away practically since the moment she got here.

In her mind, it was Christmas morning, and she was curled up on the couch with Ansel's arm around her, watching the kids open their presents. The unique, woodsy scent of him surrounded her, and she felt safe and protected. She closed her eyes and felt his warm mouth press a kiss to her forehead.

"Hey," he said softly.

She blinked her fantasy away, and looked up into the eyes of the real Ansel.

"Hi," she said, suddenly feeling shy.

“Were you sleeping?” he asked, sitting on the sofa beside her.

“Something like that,” she said, trying her best not to think about it.

“That’s nice,” he told her. “It’s relaxing, isn’t it? I come out here all the time just to think.”

“I love it,” she told him simply. “The whole house is like something out of a fairytale, but this is the best part.”

He didn’t respond, and when she looked over, he was studying her. It almost looked like there was sadness in his hazel eyes.

She was still trying to figure out why, when he began speaking.

“Winona,” he said quietly. “I told you earlier that we needed to talk. If Parker’s gone up to bed, maybe now is a good time?”

“Sure,” she said, nodding, but still feeling very confused.

Something wasn’t right. This wasn’t the beginning of the conversation she had been preparing herself for.

“You look uncomfortable,” he said. “But let me ease your fears. I know what you’re worried about, and you’re absolutely right. You and I can be great friends. It’s clear that we share values, and we definitely enjoy each other’s company. But of course, we can’t be... together. Our kids need all our focus right now. I understand that it’s what you need, and I would never ask you to have it any other way, because I’m in the same position as you. Lucas has been going through a lot. He needs my whole heart right now, as I believe Parker needs yours.”

His words hung in the air between them for a moment.

Winona tried to take them in. Each one cut like a knife.

She had spent her life sacrificing for Parker, and here she had been ready to give half her heart away to someone they had just met.

Thank you for giving him the self-control I lacked, she said inwardly.

Whatever Parker might say she was ready for, she was only a kid. Ansel was probably right, to indulge in dating when Parker's heart was still healing would be unforgivably selfish.

"Feel better?" he asked gently, with a sad smile.

She nodded, even though she didn't.

What she felt was guilty, and sad, and... rejected.

"You're an amazing mother, Winona," he went on. "Parker is so lucky. I think she knows it now, but when she's older, she'll look back on everything and be even more impressed at how you turned your life upside down to give her everything she needed to grow up happy."

"Thank you," Winona said, her voice shaking as she tried to hold back tears. "That's the greatest compliment I could ever receive. She means the world to me."

Ansel wordlessly pulled her into his embrace.

She was surrounded by the scent of him, just like she had pictured, and his arms were warm and comforting. She really did feel safe. And that was probably why she let her guard down and cried like a baby against his chest.

All the hurt of the past two years bubbled up in her and she cried for the husband who had disrespected and divorced her.

She cried for sunny, soccer-playing Parker, who would live on in her memories but no place else.

She cried for Parker, the little skateboarder with the mean friends, whose haunted eyes studied her pleadingly at the police station.

And she cried for herself. She had married so young, and she suspected she had never been really loved, and probably never would be. She knew that a life could be full without romantic love, but she had still wanted it, and twice thought it was in her hands.

When her tears finally began to subside, she realized Ansel was rhythmically stroking her hair as he held her close.

“You can cry as much as you want,” he murmured in her ear. “I’ve got you.”

It was too much.

He was too perfect, and she was literally in his arms. And yet his heart was locked away where she could never reach it.

“I-I should get to bed,” she whispered.

His arms tightened around her for a moment, as if he didn’t want to let go.

But when she pulled back, he released her.

She jumped up, wiping her eyes with her hands.

“You can leave the blanket,” he told her. “I’ll get it later.”

“Thanks,” she said, slipping back into the house without ever once looking at his face.

The hollow feeling in her chest was almost unbearable. If she had been in her own apartment, she would have put on a sad movie and eaten ice cream right out of the container.

But the man who had broken her heart without even noticing was *right there*, so she had to trudge upstairs to bed instead.

Once she was upstairs, she looked in the mirror as she brushed her teeth.

Winona felt ancient with grief, yet her reflection showed her a pretty young woman with auburn hair, bright blue eyes that only looked bluer rimmed with pink from her crying, and the sprinkle of freckles that had always made her look more youthful than she was.

If she met this woman, heartbroken in the street, would she tell her to *give up on love*?

The problem was, now that she knew Ansel Williams, she wasn’t sure there was another man alive who would fit her standards, not to mention Parker’s.

If he was well and truly off the market, then she figured she was too.

WINONA

On Monday morning, Winona pulled up to the school with two sleepy middle schoolers.

It was so cold out and they were bundled so warmly that she'd been afraid they would doze off on her before she could get them to school.

But at least Parker hadn't asked her about Ansel.

She was struggling with what to say if the topic came up again. Hopefully it wouldn't. After all, Parker had said it was awkward and she never wanted to repeat their conversation. Surely, that meant Winona never had to have what would be an even more awkward follow-up.

Winona smiled at what a teenager Parker was. It felt like only moments ago she had been trying to keep her toddler daughter still while she was trying to tame her flaming tresses into ponytails.

"Bye, Mom," Parker mumbled on the way out of the car.

"See you this afternoon," Lucas said, sliding out of his seat.

It wasn't until the doors were closed behind them and she had watched them trudge up the path to the school, that Winona remembered she had a day off.

Her next proofreading project was almost a week away. She would start it early, tomorrow, in case she got double booked. But she had been planning to get caught up on unpacking today.

She pulled out onto the road as she thought about what to do with her day.

The unpacking was actually finished. Normally, on a true day off she might curl up with a book and a cup of tea.

But after Saturday night's conversation, she hated to be in the house bumming around when Ansel came in for lunch.

She could shop, but they had planned to shop together this afternoon so that she could show him the ingredients for Lucas's favorite meals she had made.

Her phone rang, the caller's name popping up on the screen in the car. At first, she didn't recognize *Sloane Greenfield*. Then she realized that was the real estate agent who had promised to keep an eye out for a place for her.

Winona tapped the screen to accept the call.

"Hi, Sloane," she said. "What's up?"

"Can you get to the village right now?" Sloane asked briskly, without even saying hello.

"Um, sure," Winona said. "I just dropped the kids at school."

"Kids?" Sloane asked worriedly. "I thought you only had one kid?"

"I do," Winona said. "The other one is Ansel's, I drive them both, since I'm living at the house."

"Oh, good," Sloane said, sounding very relieved. "An apartment is available, but it's only two bedrooms, perfect for you and your daughter. It's in your price range, and it's right in town. But these things go fast, so we have to move quickly if you want it."

"I'm on my way," Winona said. "Do you have an address for me?"

"No need," Sloane said. "It's right above the music shop. You know where that is?"

"I do," Winona said. It was a great location, and right in town like Sloan said.

“I’ll be out front of the bank next door, waiting for you,” Sloane said.

“Thank you so much,” Winona told her. “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

“Drive safely,” Sloane cautioned her before hanging up.

Winona blew out a breath and tried to imagine life in Trinity Falls with her own place.

It was what she had wanted when she planned her move, and what she craved during each of those first days at Ansel’s place where she felt like she and Parker were uninvited guests.

But the more time she spent with them, the more she had grown to love their life with Ansel and Lucas. Even if there would never be a romantic component to their friendship, she had so much respect for Ansel—not to mention that he was just plain *fun* to hang out with.

And Lucas was a pure joy. She had begun to genuinely treasure the time they spent cooking and talking together after school.

But she couldn’t let herself get lost in all that.

This apartment sounded like everything she had hoped for, with an amazing location that would make things especially nice for Parker. The young teen could walk around town and even to the library to meet with friends. It was a perfect situation.

And of course, Ansel and Lucas were always just a car ride away. She would be able to keep taking Lucas home after school and preparing dinner until Ansel’s program was over. Nothing much had to change, except that Winona and Parker would have space of their own.

So why did she feel worse than she had when she was planning to leave Philadelphia?

Don’t think about it.

She put on the radio, letting the cheerful songs on the Christmas station distract her from the strange, sinking feeling in her stomach.

By the time she pulled up in front of the music shop, she was feeling a bit more like herself.

“Hey,” Sloane said with a smile. “I can’t wait for you to see this place. I already popped up to get the lay of the land, and it’s as nice as I remembered. The current tenants are up there now, but they know we’re coming.”

“Thank you, Sloane,” Winona told her, meaning it.

“Now you won’t always have to pay for parking at a meter,” Sloane told her. “There’s a parking spot in the alley behind the building that goes with this unit. It’s a little tight back there, but people seem to get used to it. You can take advantage of the tenants being here to ask about stuff like that.”

“That’s great,” Winona said, taking in the scene.

The big glassy storefront of the music store glittered with pretend snow and icicles situated among the rows of brass instruments. There were poinsettias in the corners of the display, and a big evergreen wreath on the red front door. Everyone in this town really did seem to get into the spirit of the season.

“The door to the apartments above is around the side,” Sloane said, leading the way. “There are only two apartments over the shop, so you’d only be sharing an entry with one other set of tenants. The second-floor unit is three bedrooms, and the one you’re looking at is a two-bedroom. It’s a walk-up, so you’ll stay in shape.”

Winona laughed. She was more than used to that from her apartment in the city.

They headed in the side door and onto a dim staircase with a metal rail, and began to climb up.

The second-floor door had what looked like a homemade wreath made of green gingham, decorated with a Styrofoam snowman. The colors were faded enough to make Winona picture an older couple with a guest room for grandkids living there.

It would be nice if she and Parker had friendly neighbors. They had loved their building in Philly, where a handful of the residents on their floor looked out for each other and exchanged plates of cookies every Christmas.

As they reached the third-floor unit, she could hear happy voices from within.

Sloane tapped on the door, which did not have a wreath.

A young woman opened it with a smile on her face. She wore a pretty blue dress, and her raven hair was braided with tiny seashells and pale blue ribbon woven into the braids.

“Hi,” she said happily. “I’m Tia. You must be Winona. Sloane told us you would be visiting.”

“Sam,” a young man said, waving from behind Tia. “Come on in. Do you need us to get out of your hair?”

“Not at all,” Winona said. “Thank you for letting me visit. Sloane said it was important to get here right away.”

“She told us the same thing when we moved in,” Tia confided with a smile.

Sloane shook her head, but she was smiling, too.

“And now, just a few years later, we managed to save up a down payment on a house,” Sam said. “Sloane’s helping with that, too. We still can’t believe we’re going to own a little piece of Trinity Falls.”

“Congratulations,” Winona told them.

Her heart ached at the sight of the sweet young couple, so happy and full of excitement about their shared future.

She wanted to miss that feeling, but honestly, she and Ron had married in a hurry, and there hadn’t been a lot of dreaming when she packed up her childhood bedroom to move into the apartment he was already living in.

“We have a lot to be grateful for these days,” Tia said, resting her hand lightly on her belly.

Winona raised her eyebrows in question and Tia nodded.

“Still early days,” she said. “But we’re glad to have a house lined up, since I can’t imagine carrying a stroller up these stairs. Other than that, it’s been a perfect home for us. Have a look around.”

“I’ll bet your daughter will love this,” Sam said, pointing to a window seat.

Winona wandered over and was charmed by the view over Ambler Road. From here, she could see the train station, the community college campus, and even some of the shops a bit further up the block.

Parker *would* love to sit there.

Sloane ushered her through the rest of the place. It was charming, with more views over the town and campus, and just the right amount of space for two people to live a cozy, comfortable life.

When they were finished, she gave her good wishes to sweet Sam and Tia again, and they made their way down the stairs.

“Walk with me,” Sloane said. “If anyone sees me outside the building, they’ll know one of the apartments is available.”

Winona dutifully followed her to the bank on the corner.

“Much better,” Sloane said. “Now it looks like you’re trying to qualify for a mortgage.”

Winona laughed and then saw that Sloane was serious.

“I know it seems like something out of a very bad spy movie,” Sloane said, shaking her head. “But this town has gotten so expensive that I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if someone banged on Tia and Sam’s door just because they saw me out front. Now what did you think of the place?”

“It’s perfect,” Winona said automatically.

Though it made her sad to think of leaving Lucas and Ansel, she knew that apartment was just right for the new life she and Parker were supposed to be starting.

“Correct,” Sloane said with a smile. “I know in some markets you can wait and see ten apartments before deciding, but here, in your price range, it might be years before we cycle through that much inventory.”

“I don’t need to see ten places,” Winona said in horror. “I don’t even want to see two. Can’t I just apply for this one?”

“Absolutely,” Sloane said. “When Tia and Sam got word this morning that the seller was handling the items they asked for after inspections on their new place, I asked their permission to show you the apartment. They offered to submit your application to the landlord along with their notice.”

“So, it’s not even on the market yet?” Winona asked.

“Nope,” Sloane said. “My hope is that the owner will be happy to just have another tenant in there without any vacancy in between. If she puts it on the market, it could get competitive. No promises on what she’ll decide, but this is your best chance.”

“I’ll do whatever you suggest, Sloane,” Winona said.

“Do you have time to put together an application now?” Sloane asked her.

“Sure,” Winona said.

“Let’s hit the café,” Sloane suggested. “I didn’t have my coffee this morning, since I was negotiating Tia and Sam’s inspections. We’ll work on it over there. Just don’t say anything about where the place is, just in case.”

“Perfect,” Winona told her.

“Go snag us a table, if you want,” Sloane said. “I’m going to pop back upstairs and let those guys know what’s going on.”

“Sounds good,” Winona said. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

WINONA

Winona opened the door to the café, smiling again at the sign that proclaimed its name to be *Jolly Beans*.

Last time, when she was here with Ansel, everything was so new to her that she had been almost overwhelmed. But now she could appreciate what made the café special.

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted over her and soft Christmas music drifted through the air, while low, happy voices filled the crowded café, making Winona feel like she was in a Christmas movie, about to have a meet-cute with some fancy businessman or small-town carpenter.

“Hey there,” Holly called to her as she carried a tray of coffees to another table. “I think the window seat just opened up. Hang on for two secs and I’ll clean it for you.”

Winona nodded and headed up to the area in the big window where a table for two sat empty.

A moment later, Holly jogged over and sprayed it down.

“Best seat in the house,” she declared, as she efficiently wiped down the top. “And you’ve been in it twice, that’s lucky. I’ll be right back with a menu.”

“Thank you so much, Holly,” Winona said as she sat and looked out the window at the little town.

Christmas was coming soon, and it was like every shop owner and every apartment dweller above was joyfully counting down the days. From what Winona could see, there

were more decorations every day. And plenty of townsfolk walking around with their shopping bags.

“It’s like a painting out there, isn’t it?” Holly asked her when she came back, nodding to the window before she placed down a menu.

“This town is so special,” Winona said.

“You’re new in town, right?” Holly said. “You were in here the other day with Ansel Williams. Are you visiting, or here to stay?”

“Yes, I’m Winona. My daughter, Parker, and I just moved here.”

“So, you *are* the one dating Ansel,” Holly breathed, lowering herself to the seat opposite hers. “You know, we all thought he’d never date again.”

“I, um, oh, wow... no,” Winona said. “My daughter and I are living in his guest rooms, but we’re not dating.”

“You’re not?” Holly asked sadly. “That’s too bad. I was so happy for him when I heard about you two. Any chance you’ll be getting together? I won’t tell a soul.”

Holly looked so hopeful that Winona briefly considered lying to her.

“No,” she said instead, feeling glum. “Definitely not. I think you’re right. He’s sworn off dating.”

“That’s too bad,” Holly said, shaking her head. “But after what his brother did at the Hometown Holiday event, you can’t blame us all for thinking romantic thoughts for Ansel.”

Winona laughed.

“Yes, I think even Ansel was thrown by that,” she said with a smile. “But it hasn’t changed his mind about dating, at least not about dating me.”

“Well, that’s clearly his loss,” Holly said brightly. “What can I bring you to eat?”

“I’m actually meeting Sloane Greenfield here,” Winona said, glancing at the door to see if her real estate agent had

already arrived. “Maybe I should wait to order.”

“Oh, no need,” Holly said. “She’ll want the stuffed French toast and a peppermint mocha.”

“So much sugar,” Winona said without thinking.

“That woman is on the go twenty-four-seven,” Holly confided. “I think she needs all the energy she can get. Like some kind of well-dressed hummingbird.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Winona agreed, thinking of Sloane’s intense and earnest energy. “Yes, if you can get that started for her, that would be great. I’d love a latte and an egg sandwich.”

“Coming right up,” Holly told her.

Winona considered sliding her phone out of her pocket, but opted to look out the window again instead. There was nothing on her phone that couldn’t wait, and the picturesque town out the window would be a shame to miss.

Holly was back with the coffees and plates of steaming food before she knew it.

A minute later, Sloane came in the door, scanned the café, and found Winona.

“Holly said I should get this for you,” Winona told her. “It’s on me. Thank you for finding me such a great place.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re an *angel*,” Sloane moaned, falling on the food and drink with so much enthusiasm Winona wondered when she had last remembered to sit down and eat something.

At last, she sat back, wiped her hands on her napkin, and pulled out her laptop.

“Remember what I said before,” she said quietly.

“Not a peep,” Winona agreed.

She watched Sloane’s fingers move across the keys. Once in a while, the agent would point to a term she had typed into the boilerplate document, like the monthly rent, the security deposit, a note with the full names of all tenants, and so forth.

But Winona had to chime in when she noticed that Sloane didn't stop to point out a typed in statement in the fee section.

"What's that?" Winona asked.

"It's nothing," Sloane said quickly. "It's standard."

"It says you're waiving your fee," Winona said.

Sloane stopped and sat up straight, looking Winona in the eye.

"I've learned that doing the right thing is sometimes more important than making the most money," Sloane told her quietly. "In your case, you genuinely need a place to live. And if there is no real estate commission, the owner is more likely to agree to accept your application without putting the apartment on the market."

"But you won't be paid for your work," Winona said, feeling horrified.

"Maybe one day down the road when you're ready to buy a place, you'll think of me," Sloane said, shrugging. "Or maybe not. But it makes me feel good to get someone into town who might be up against some obstacles otherwise."

"Because I'm a single parent," Winona said softly.

"It's illegal to discriminate based on family status," Sloane said quickly.

"But if they had ten applicants, they might choose another cute young couple," Winona realized out loud.

"We don't know that," Sloane told her gently. "I just know that less competition means a better chance. This town has been good to me, so I can afford to do a tiny bit of pro bono work now and then. And it makes me happy to welcome you and your daughter here."

Winona suddenly had a giant lump in her throat. She bit her lip, trying not to cry.

Sloane kindly turned her attention back to her laptop, tapping away at the keyboard like it had wronged her.

Winona turned her eyes to the window again. It was blurred by her grateful tears, but it was still beautiful outside.

The way this was all coming together made it feel like fate—the timing on Sloane’s call, the perfection of the sweet little apartment, the kindness the agent was showing in waiving her fee.

I’ll look back on this one day with nothing but pure happiness, she told herself. I won’t remember staring out the window and wishing Ansel would come running in and beg me not to go.

ANSEL

Ansel sat at the counter, eating the lunch Winona left for him.

The solitary container had been alone on a shelf in the fridge, waiting for him, with a sticky note that even told him how long to microwave it.

He knew it had to be unbelievably delicious, like everything else she made.

But she wasn't here to eat it with him and based on that sticky note, he knew she had *planned* not to share a meal with him, as he had gotten used to since the girls' arrival.

Somehow, that knowledge ruined everything, and he couldn't even seem to taste the food.

It was what she wanted, he told himself morosely, digging in the chicken and rice with his fork without taking a bite. *Why is she avoiding me when I gave her what she wanted?*

But if he wanted a real answer to that, he would have to think about whether or not Winona might actually have wanted something more than a friendship.

And he wasn't at all sure that his willpower would extend enough to let him hold back if he knew she actually had feelings for him.

So, he tried to ignore those thoughts, and to get enough calories into himself to make up for a morning of hard work.

Parker was a real help with the horses. He didn't have the heart to ask her to get up early on weekday mornings, though he suspected she would do it enthusiastically if he did. But having her help on evenings and weekends made him remember how much work the horses were on his own.

The front door opened, and he tried to gather himself.

"Hey," Winona said, wandering into the kitchen. "You found your lunch. You heated it up, right?"

"Exactly per your instructions," he told her, waving the sticky note he'd left on the counter next to him when he sat.

"That's great," she said, without looking at him. "You still up for some shopping this afternoon?"

"Absolutely," he told her, getting up and putting his leftover lunch back in the fridge. "I got through all the chores that can't wait."

"Excellent," she said. "If you're ready to head out, I have some news I can share with you on the way."

Maybe it was because he was an old cowboy, stuck in his ways, but the mention of *news* sent a shudder down his spine.

Whatever it was, Winona looked pretty happy, even if she still wasn't meeting his eye.

They headed outside quietly, and he gestured to his truck. He got it started up, and pulled out as Winona was rubbing her hands together and waiting eagerly for the heat to kick in.

The truck bumped a little on the gravel road, but soon enough, they were out of the homestead and the cabin was starting to warm a little.

"I got a call from Sloane this morning," Winona said. "She found me a place."

His heart dropped into his stomach and the lunch he had eaten turned to stone in his belly.

"When are you going to see it?" he asked automatically.

"I already saw it," she told him with a smile in her voice. "It's perfect for Parker and me. I put in an application on the

spot.”

She went and saw it without me?

He knew he was being ridiculous, but that hurt. Though why he should expect her to want his opinion, he had no idea. She was an adult, and fully capable of making a housing decision without his help.

And he was a friend to her, and nothing more. Would he expect Derek Cassidy to call him for advice if he was looking at apartments? This should be no different.

But it *felt* different.

How could you leave?

It took all he had to keep his eyes on the road and his hands on the wheel while his poor heart demanded things that he had no right to ask of her.

“When are you moving?” he asked, clearing his throat and trying to recover.

“Oh, it might be a while before I even find out if I got it,” she told him. “Though Sloane thinks my chances are pretty good, since I got an application in before it went on the market. She even waived her fee to entice the owner. Though I’m planning to repay her, if she lets me.”

“I’ll cross my fingers for you,” he said, wishing he meant it.

A mean-spirited side of him was secretly hoping the owners got ten more applicants and there was a bidding war that skyrocketed rents in Trinity Falls so high that she would have no choice but to stay with him forever.

If you wanted her forever, you should have had a different conversation with her last night.

But he had done the right thing, hadn’t he?

He thought about telling Lucas that Winona and Parker were leaving, and he felt even more sick to his stomach.

Stealing a glance over at Winona, he could see that her gentle smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Was she unhappy?

Had she expected the conversation last night to go differently?

He began looking at last night in a different light, thinking about the way she looked at him when he said he wanted to talk, the sadness in her eyes and how quiet she had been at the moment when he told her they couldn't be together.

He had expected her to look relieved, to talk to him about Parker and Lucas, and to make him feel like they were on the same page.

But she hadn't.

He'd chalked it up to her just not wanting to talk about the subject in general.

But maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe she had been hurting.

They reached the Co-op too soon, and he had to focus his attention on fitting his truck into a parking space.

"I've got a list," Winona told him brightly as they headed in. "You said that Lucas loves pizza, so I was thinking we could get things to make homemade pizza. If he helps to prepare it, and we get lots of colorful veggies on there, I think you'll get him to eat it, and it will be a healthier option than ordering."

"Cheaper, too," Ansel agreed.

"Maybe," Winona said. "With the price of groceries these days, it's harder to get a good value out of home-cooking for two."

She sounded a little distracted.

"Hey, maybe we can keep sharing meals sometimes, even after you move," he told her hopefully.

"Maybe," she agreed. "And even if I get this place and the lease starts soon, I'll keep taking Lucas after school and cooking until you finish your program, don't worry."

"You don't have to do that," he said, realizing that he hadn't even thought about it, and what a burden it would put

on his parents if he shifted that responsibility. Unless he quit the class...

He knew that his family was entertaining some wild ideas that might allow them to keep the farm, but Ansel was still loving the programming classes and definitely wanted to see them through.

He mentally kicked himself for not thinking of this problem when she told him she had applied for an apartment.

You were too busy thinking about losing her, and not thinking about Lucas and the future.

“Ansel and Winona,” a familiar voice sang out.

He turned to see Betty Ann Eustace and her two best friends, Shirley and Ginny, headed their way, smiles on their careworn faces.

The three older women had dedicated their lives to Trinity Falls. These days, few good things happened in town without one or more of the town’s honorary matriarchs being behind it, or at least helping in the wings.

“You two are the sweetest couple,” Betty Ann declared, looking back and forth between them with satisfaction.

“We’re not a couple,” he blurted out too loudly. “Just friends.”

“Just friends,” Winona agreed at a normal volume, nodding when the three faces turned to her.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Betty Ann said. “But also, just a little excited.”

Ansel frowned and looked at the sweet older lady, wondering why she would be wearing that gleeful smile and cheering at the idea that they weren’t together.

“You see, my great-nephew is in town, Winona,” Betty Ann said, her eyes sparkling. “He’s a lawyer, looking to relocate to Trinity Falls, and he absolutely *loves* children. He said it’s hard to find a steady woman with her head on her shoulders in the city, and I promised him I would set him up right away when he came out here. And here you are, the

perfect young woman, and with your lovely daughter, too. I can't wait for you two to meet."

"Oh," Winona said, sounding flustered.

"You will meet him, won't you?" Betty Ann asked, looking from her to Ansel and back again. "After all, you're not seeing anyone, are you?"

Ansel couldn't help searching Winona's lovely face, praying that she would say she wasn't available.

"No," she said simply. "I guess I'm not. I'd be glad to meet your great-nephew."

"Wonderful, dear," Betty Ann said, already rummaging around in her big handbag and fishing out her phone. "Put your information in here, and I'll arrange everything."

Ansel couldn't look at Winona's nimble fingers dancing on the screen. He turned to a display of candy canes instead, and pretended to be carefully comparing the options.

Finally, Winona said goodbye to the ladies and joined him.

"I feel like they didn't have this many sizes and colors of candy canes when I was a kid," she said after an awkward moment.

"No," he said, latching right on. "I was just thinking the same."

Somehow, they continued their shopping trip, though Ansel felt like he was in a haze of jealousy and confusion, and he honestly didn't know if he was managing to act normal or not.

Once they had what they needed, they checked out in silence and returned to the car.

He opened her door for her, and she gave him a sweet smile—one that still didn't reach her eyes.

"Winona," he said instinctively.

He was standing on the pavement and looking up at her in the truck, with the door still open, blocking most of the wind.

“Yes?” she asked.

For one instant, he allowed himself to imagine that he was about to declare his feelings for her, throw caution to the wind and ask her to be his own.

But then he pictured himself wallowing in self-doubt, tortured over whether he had betrayed his son.

“You deserve everything,” he told her without thinking, knowing he wanted only the best for her. “You deserve to be someone’s moon and stars, someone who shows you loyalty, and who knows how to have fun, someone who puts you first no matter what, and who is ready to sweep you right off your feet with all the wild romance a woman could want.”

She sucked in a breath, her eyes widening slightly.

“I’m glad you’re going to give this guy a chance,” he said, trying to swallow his bitterness whole. “And he had better treat you right. Because if he doesn’t, you know you can just send me after him and I’ll run him right out of town.”

Winona laughed, and the sweet bell-like sound caressed Ansel’s heart, like always.

“You’re a wonderful friend, Ansel Williams,” she told him. Her smile was more natural now, and it was so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her. “I’m so lucky we met.”

He nodded, unable to speak over the big lump that had suddenly formed in his throat, and closed her door for her.

Get it together, he ordered himself inwardly, as he walked around his truck to get in the driver’s side. *Get it together.*

But he honestly wasn’t sure he could.

Maybe Sloane Greenfield had actually done him a favor by finding Winona a new place to live.

It was one thing to resist her himself.

He couldn’t imagine watching her fall for another man.

WINONA

Winona sighed as she left the mall, feeling exhausted and pretty much the opposite of how a woman planning a date was supposed to feel.

It had been a relief when Betty Ann messaged her right away, setting up an evening together for Winona and Fisher, her great-nephew. There was no dreading it, and no trying to back out.

She had plans to meet Fisher Eustace tonight at The Village Green, the nicest restaurant in Trinity Falls, just a few hours from now.

The only thing standing in the way of her date night was the right outfit. Working from home for so long meant that Winona could be a jeans-and-a-sweater type of person every day. She hadn't bought a pretty dress in years.

She usually didn't have a problem finding clothes, but if the mall on Route 1 held all of today's trends, she was in real trouble.

It seemed she would have to choose between prom gowns in the Juniors section, patchwork oddities that looked like they were made for color-blind hippies in the Women's section, and the handkerchief-sized things passing for dresses in the so-called Ladies' section that were low-cut in the bosom, high-cut in the thigh, see-through, sequined, or all of the above.

"Whatever happened to elegant, little black dresses?" she muttered to herself as she started the car, still no closer to

having an outfit than when she'd arrived. "The mall used to be drowning in them."

She mentally scanned her closet again and came up lacking. Maybe a pair of black trousers and a pretty blouse would be good enough.

It wasn't like she really wanted the date to be successful anyway, not when she was still busy mooning over Ansel.

The tree branches met overhead as she turned into Trinity Falls, and she felt transported back to the idyllic town she had chosen for herself and Parker. Soon they would be living right in the village.

As she considered her alternatives, she remembered that there was a little dress shop right near the music store, and wondered if they might have something. It was unlikely, after she had looked through so many options at the mall, but maybe worth a try.

She might not be looking for romance, but being presentable tonight was a way to be respectful to Betty Ann, one of the nicest ladies in town. The least Winona could do was try.

She pulled up at the dress shop and dug some coins out of her purse to put in the meter.

The whole town was decked out in Christmas finery now. Greenery festooned every railing, lights hung from every shop, and a sense of excitement filled the air.

It reminded Winona of the anticipation she felt as a little kid, knowing there would be presents under the tree, good food in the oven, and the reassuring murmur she could hear from her bed at night, of visiting family talking and laughing in the living room.

The dress shop had a few colorful sweaters and handbags in the window, behind the letters painted on the glass in lieu of a sign.

"Hi there, welcome to Pura Vida," a friendly voice greeted her as she pushed open the door and stepped into the warmth of the shop. "I'm Ana, how can I help you?"

“Hello, Ana,” Winona said. “I’m looking for a dress to wear on a date. I want something pretty but... modest.”

“You had a hard time at the mall, I’ll bet,” Ana laughed. “Come on, I think I have a few options for you.”

“I did have a hard time at the mall,” Winona admitted. “But maybe I’m too picky, so don’t take it personally if I don’t choose anything from your shop either.”

“If I don’t have anything, my mother can make something for you,” Ana said lightly. “When is your date?”

“Oh, wow,” Winona said. “Well, it’s tonight, but next time I’ll think ahead. Is this her shop?”

“We opened it together,” Ana said proudly. “She loves to sew and create jewelry and bags. I enjoy the business aspect.”

“Sounds like you two make a good team,” Winona told her, feeling a little wistful. It would be great to still be close like that with Parker when she was grown up.

“We do,” Ana said with a smile. “Now, what do you think of this?”

She pulled out a lovely little black dress with a simple ornamentation of pink embroidery around the neckline.

“It’s perfect,” Winona breathed, hoping it would fit.

“Well, let’s see if we have a few options you can try on at once,” Ana advised. “Whatever you choose, we probably have jewelry and a bag to match.”

Winona let herself be led around the shop, marveling over the pretty dresses Ana grabbed for her.

“I’ll let you have privacy for this part,” Ana laughed as she led her to the changing area. “But just yell if you need a different size. I’ll be close by.”

After trying several options, Winona fell madly in love with an emerald-green dress that had an A-line cut, like something out of a 1950s television commercial. It would be perfect with her grandmother’s wedding pearls to dress it up.

And Fisher Eustace couldn't possibly get the wrong idea about her when she was wearing a respectful outfit like this.

"Oh, wow," Ana said, when Winona came out of the dressing room in the dress. "You look like a movie star."

"I love it," Winona said. "Do you think you have shoes for it?"

"And bags and jewelry," Ana said, nodding.

"No need for jewelry, but shoes and a bag would be great," Winona told her.

"I'm on it," Ana said, darting off to the wall where the bags were hung.

Winona stood in front of the big mirror, gazing at her reflection. She might be a mom, and she might feel tired and rejected. But she sure cleaned up nicely.

She was surprised to realize that it actually felt good to be a little dressed up. If only she were doing it for the man she had come to care about, instead of a stranger.

"You're going to break hearts tonight," Ana predicted happily as she returned with a stack of shoe boxes in one arm and a couple of bags over the other. "Let's see which of these you like best."

"Whichever you think is best with the dress," Winona said automatically.

"Oh no," Ana said right away. "I'm here to help, and your date will be there to admire, but the only opinion that matters here is *yours*."

Winona's jaw almost dropped as she took in those words.

Ana was right.

Winona could say she was going on the date to please Betty Ann, or dressing up to please her date.

But when she was looking in the mirror just now, and feeling good? That had been for herself and no one else. And it had been a long time since she thought of herself first.

“Those, please,” she said, pointing to a pair of pumps that looked like they belonged on her feet. “And that bag.”

Ana grinned at her in conspiratorial delight, and they got down to business.



LATER THAT NIGHT, she stood in front of the mirror in her room back at the homestead.

The dress had looked so nice at the store, but she had been afraid it was just the lighting or her mood making her feel great. But now, with her grandmother’s pearls around her neck, the outfit looked even prettier.

“It’s amazing,” Parker said, shaking her head in disbelief. “You look like a model.”

“I look like a short model who’s had three square meals a day her whole life,” Winona allowed with a smile. “And I *feel* like myself.”

“Slay,” Parker said, nodding sagely.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” Winona asked.

“Who cares?” Parker said, shrugging. “Not everything is about me, you know.”

Winona spun around and wrapped her arms around Parker, hugging her close.

“Help me remember this moment when you decide to start dating,” she whispered in her daughter’s ear.

“Uggghhhh, Mom, no way,” Parker yelped, as Winona had known she would. “I’m never dating.”

“Good,” Winona said crisply, releasing her. “I’ll get to keep you forever.”

She pretended to check her earrings, but she really just wanted to see Parker’s face in the mirror. Her daughter did not disappoint when she laughed and rolled her eyes.

“Well, when Ansel sees you in this outfit, he’s going to lose his mind with jealousy,” Parker decided. “Was that part of the plan?”

“No,” Winona said, horrified. “The plan is to get me out of here the minute he comes home. I’ll hole up in town someplace and read until it’s time to meet Fisher at the restaurant. Ideally, Ansel won’t see me at all. You distract him at the front door, and I’ll slip out the back.”

“Now who’s acting like a rebellious teenager?” Parker asked, raising an eyebrow.

“There’s a lot to be said for it,” Winona teased with a faux thoughtful expression.

“Are you sure things can’t work out with him?” Parker asked suddenly, her voice a little softer, with what sounded like genuine disappointment.

“We had a talk last night,” Winona said quietly. “He told me he just can’t date. He wants to focus on Lucas.”

“You’re not stopping him from doing that,” Parker protested. “You love Lucas.”

Winona smiled fondly at her straightforward daughter.

“It’s a little more complicated when you’re a parent, Parker,” she told her. “It’s hard to explain, but when you love someone as much as Ansel loves Lucas, and I love you, when you feel personally responsible for their happiness, every single decision feels heavier. Ansel doesn’t want to make any mistakes when it comes to his son. And I respect that.”

“Sure,” Parker said, shrugging. “But you’re moving on pretty fast.”

“Well, you can’t say no to Betty Ann Eustace,” Winona told her. “First, she assumed Ansel and I were together. Then when he said we weren’t, it felt super weird to tell her I’m not ready to date someone else. She had me between a rock and a hard place.”

“She’s a tough bird,” Parker said admiringly.

“I don’t think she did it knowingly,” Winona said quickly. “She was just thinking of her great-nephew.”

The door opened downstairs, and Winona could hear Lucas greeting his dad.

“I guess it’s time for me to go,” she said to Parker.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Parker said with mock sternness, then laughed.

Winona grabbed her new bag from the bed and pressed a kiss to the top of her daughter’s head before slipping down the stairs and heading for the back door.

She heard Parker asking Ansel about the horses as she closed the door behind her.

I did it.

But as she got in her car and headed up the gravel road, she realized that the victory didn’t really feel like a victory at all.

ANSEL

Ansel stood in his own living room, trying to figure out what in the world was going on with Parker.

She was grilling him frantically about the feeding schedule for the horses, worrying about whether or not he was allowing them extra oats during the colder weather, and whether or not he planned to mix alfalfa with their hay.

Those were the kind of questions that meant Parker's interest in the animals was deep enough that she was doing some homework on her own, outside of their care sessions.

Which was great. But the timing was very strange.

"Whoa," Lucas breathed from the window.

"What is it?" Ansel asked, turning away from Parker.

"Parker, your mom is all dressed up," Lucas announced. "She looks like a princess in a Disney movie."

Ansel bolted for the window, but Winona's car door was shutting, and she was heading up the drive before he could catch a glimpse of her.

"Where's she going?" he asked Parker.

Her eyes got big, and she shrugged, but it was a deliberate, staccato shrug, not her normal casual, fluid movement.

"Parker Lee," he said sternly. "I just walked in the door, and you were stalling me with horse questions."

“No pun intended,” Lucas squeaked and then laughed hard at his own joke.

“Now you’re telling me you don’t know where your mother is going?” Ansel went on, ignoring his son’s giggling. “I want to trust you, Parker. But you’re making it hard for me. I think you know *something*.”

Parker bit her lip.

He was glad he hadn’t flatly accused her of lying or raised his voice. It was important after his misstep the last time that he voice the fact that he trusted her, and let her make her own choices.

But he was frantic to understand what was going on with Winona, even though a little voice in the back of his head told him he already knew.

“She’s going on a date with Fisher Eustace,” Parker said, not meeting his eyes. “I thought you already knew about it.”

Jealousy swept through him like a tsunami.

“She’s going out with him *tonight*?” Ansel groaned. “I knew she told Betty Ann she’d meet him, but that only happened today. I thought there would be more time.”

“I guess some men take action when they know what they want,” Parker said coolly, turning on her heel and heading upstairs.

Her words were so harsh, and the meaning so unexpected.

Ansel stepped backward to look after her and almost tripped over Lucas’s school bag.

“Lucas, get your bag off the floor,” he told the boy, feeling irritated at himself for losing his cool.

“Why is she going on a date with someone?” Lucas asked sadly as he grabbed his bag. “Doesn’t she like you?”

Lord, please give me strength.

“Of course she likes us,” Ansel told him as lightly as he could. “But that doesn’t mean she can’t go on dates. Maybe Winona would like to be married again one day.”

“But if she marries someone else, she’ll move out, and Parker, too,” Lucas said worriedly.

“About that. Winona found a new apartment they’d like to move into already,” Ansel told him gently. “She and Parker are just waiting to find out if they got it. This was always supposed to be temporary.”

“No,” Lucas said. “I don’t want them to move out.”

“You really like having them here,” Ansel agreed. “Parker’s really fun to hang out with, isn’t she?”

“And Winona lets me help with cooking,” Lucas said. “She listens when I tell her stuff. She cares about me.”

Lucas’s words made Ansel’s chest ache.

“We’ll still see them sometimes,” Ansel told him, hoping it was the truth. “And Winona promised to keep spending afternoons here while I’m in classes.”

“I don’t understand,” Lucas said angrily.

Ansel’s eyes shot to his son’s. Lucas never spoke to him in an angry tone. The two of them treated each other with respect.

“What don’t you understand?” Ansel asked.

“*You fight for family*,” Lucas said firmly, a statement he’d heard his dad make a handful of important times in his life.

Ansel nodded. That was exactly what he was doing. He was fighting against his heart to put his son first.

“They’re our family too, Dad,” Lucas said. “Don’t you see that? You love her, and you love Parker. And I do too. So why aren’t you fighting for them? Why aren’t you fighting for me?”

Lucas was furious, wiping tears from his cheeks with his palms, just like Ansel had seen Parker do.

But Ansel felt like a weight had been lifted from his chest and a mask from his eyes. He could see clearly for the very first time.

“They are family, aren’t they?” he whispered, his heart breaking a little as he considered the impact his letting go was actually having on his son. This was the opposite of helping Lucas.

“So why aren’t you fighting for them?” Lucas demanded.

“You know what, son?” Ansel said, making up his mind. “You are one hundred percent right. And I should have talked to you about this a long time ago. Are you okay here with Parker while I go get Grandma to sit with you?”

“You don’t need to get Grandma,” Lucas said, rolling his eyes. “Just go. Find her before she falls in love with some other guy.”

Ansel strode for the door, then stopped in his tracks, remembering that Lucas wasn’t the only one he should have talked to.

He turned around and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, then pounding on Parker’s door.

She opened it a moment later, looking startled.

“Sorry if I knocked too loudly,” he said. “I was afraid you might have your headphones on. And, um, I’m kind of anxious to talk to you. Can I come in for a sec? It’s important.”

“Sure,” she said, gesturing to the chair by her desk.

He moved inside and forced himself to sit, though all he wanted was to launch himself into his truck and go after Winona. Parker sat on the edge of the bed and smiled knowingly at him.

“You know exactly what I’m going to say, don’t you?” he asked her, shaking his head in chagrin and wondering if he was the only person in this house too stupid to see what had been right in front of him.

“Not exactly,” she said with a smile. “But I have a pretty good idea. I’d still like to hear you say it though.”

“Parker,” he said, taking a deep breath. “You and your mom are very special to Lucas and me. We love having you here with us, being part of our lives and bringing your fresh

energy into this old house. I care about your mother a lot. But I wouldn't want to... pursue my feelings without your blessing. I know how much your happiness means to her. And, heck, to me too... I... I..."

He tried to think how to formulate his question, but Parker leaned forward and put a hand on his knee.

"Hey," she said. "I love where this is going. But time is short, and you've said everything I needed to hear for now. Yes, you have my blessing."

"Thank goodness," he said, launching himself out of the chair. "Now I just have to comb through every place in the Trinity Falls area where a dressed-up person might go on a date."

"No need," Parker told him, hopping up. "I know they're supposed to meet at The Village Green in an hour. Go get your girl. And if it all works out, maybe put in a good word for me being allowed to dye the tips of my hair red and green for the holidays?"

"I'm a little worried she'll change her mind about me if I start out by asking about hair dye," Ansel laughed. "But I'm really grateful for your help. You're a good kid, Parker. Maybe I can teach you horseback riding instead?"

"No way," she breathed, her eyes wide.

The next thing he knew she had wrapped her arms around him and was squeezing him tight.

"Do *not* mess this up," she told him sternly, as he hugged her back.

"I'll do my best," he promised her, pulling back to look into her eyes so she could see he meant it. "You have my word."

Then he was flying down the stairs again, ready to find Winona, beg and grovel for her forgiveness, and maybe, just maybe, get a chance at the happily ever after all four of them had been secretly hoping for.

WINONA

Winona paced back and forth outside the restaurant, each breath pluming in the wintry night air as she traversed the blue slate sidewalk.

She was feeling pretty silly for being out here so long, and the valet was definitely starting to give her weird looks for ruining the elegant vibe of the place.

But she just couldn't bring herself to go inside.

She'd thought accepting the date and finding something to wear would be the hard part. After all, she was here, and the front door was right there. All she had to do was walk through it.

But her heart just wasn't in it.

It was back on the Williams homestead, and there was nothing here in this fancy restaurant for her but a nice man, whose feelings she felt pretty rotten about playing with if she already knew she wasn't interested.

Ansel doesn't want you, her inner critic reminded her.

It hurt, but it was true.

Yet it still didn't mean she wanted anyone else. She hadn't been open to dating at all, until the quiet cowboy stole her heart with his protective ways.

"You okay?" the valet asked her, looking more annoyed than concerned. "You waiting for someone or something?"

“Just trying to get my nerve up,” she said, feeling like an idiot.

He smiled at that, and the compassion that was missing before was all over his young face.

“Blind date?” he asked sympathetically.

She nodded.

“Off the record, but this is a dumb place for that,” he confided. “How are you going to get to know someone when you’re all dressed up and pretending you’re not looking at the prices on the menu?”

“You know, that’s a valid point,” she laughed, feeling a little more like herself.

“I always say a coffee shop is a good place to get to know someone,” he said thoughtfully. “No pressure, and no need to put on airs.”

She thought back to the day Ansel had invited her for coffee and opened up about his plans to go back to school and his dreams for himself and Lucas.

Her heart tugged painfully, and she realized that even if Ansel didn’t want to be with her, she definitely didn’t want to be with anyone else, no matter whose great-nephew he was, or how nice he was.

I’ll just go in and tell him I can’t do this, she decided.

“You can stay out here as long as you want,” the valet told her. “But it’s warmer in there, and the food’s pretty good, if nothing else.”

“I’m going in,” Winona said. “But I’ll probably be right back.”

Steeling herself, Winona headed for the door and pushed it open before the valet could ask her what she meant.

Warmth met her, along with the aroma of roasted chicken, and another, expensive scent that was probably some sort of fancy wood polish.

She stepped into the lobby and scanned the lush carpets, baby grand piano, and pretty artwork, until a hostess approached.

“Do you have a reservation?” the hostess asked kindly.

“Winona Lee,” she told the hostess.

“Yes, right this way,” the hostess said with an odd half-smile.

Winona trailed her through the restaurant, realizing in horror that Fisher must have booked one of the booths on the far end of the space.

She was going to have to tell him no thank you and then walk all the way back, past the entire restaurant full of people.

I can do this...

The hostess gestured to the booth in the back corner, and then headed back to the lobby. Winona took a deep breath and approached, getting ready to let this poor man down as easy as she could.

“Fisher, I’m really sorry, but I can’t—” she began.

But Fisher Eustace wasn’t sitting in the booth.

Ansel Williams was.

He was wearing his work clothing, as if he had gone straight from the horse pasture to the fanciest restaurant in town.

“Ansel,” she said in surprise, a little too loudly.

A few heads turned, and she bit her lip.

“I got here early,” Ansel said, getting to his feet. “I told him to get lost.”

“You did?” she asked, looking up at him in complete confusion.

“I did,” he confirmed with a hint of a smile. “He seemed a little disappointed, but a couple of my buddies came along and convinced him to go out for a few drinks instead, on me.”

She blinked at him, trying to find her equilibrium.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, after a moment. “What about all those things you said to me earlier? That I deserved to be someone’s priority? That I deserved romance?”

“You do,” he said simply. “But not with him. With me. With someone who truly treasures and adores you.”

She gazed at him, unbelieving.

“But, you said—” she began.

“I was an idiot to push you away, Winona,” he told her. “I can’t believe I could be so blind. I wanted to keep all my focus on my family. But you *are* my family, Winona. Without you and Parker there, our house just won’t be a home.”

Tears threatened, and Winona didn’t dare to open her mouth for fear that she would sob like a child at the words she had longed to hear.

“I’m so sorry for my ignorance, Winona,” Ansel went on. “You are the most open and loving woman I’ve ever known. You nourished our family from the moment you walked in the door. And I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness or your love. But I hope one day I can earn both. You make me want to be a better man. I want to give you everything—”

But Winona didn’t need to wait to hear anything more. She launched herself at him, going up on her toes to press her lips to his.

His big hands closed around her arms, and he kissed her back so gently and passionately that she was nearly shaking.

The world disappeared, and there was only her big, quiet cowboy, and the love that shimmered between them, sending tingles down her spine.

Applause and cheers from the rest of the restaurant roused her from the haze of happiness in Ansel’s warm arms.

She pulled back, and they turned to see that the people at all the other tables were smiling and clapping, and one or two men were even raising a glass, as if in toast.

Heat rushed to her cheeks and she wished she could disappear into the floor.

But Ansel merely wrapped an arm around her shoulder and waved to their fans, dipping his head in a mock bow.

“I hope you know, I’m not ashamed to be madly in love with you,” he murmured into her hair.

“I’m not ashamed either,” she whispered back. “I just, um, didn’t expect our first kiss would have an audience.”

“Let’s make sure our second one doesn’t,” he told her, his deep voice a humorous rumble. “Shall we enjoy a nice meal?”

He was gesturing to the table again, a warm smile on his handsome face.

“What about the kids?” she asked, suddenly realizing Ansel was here and they weren’t.

He pointed to the lobby, and she saw that Parker and Lucas were there with Ansel’s brother Logan. His niece, Josie, was with them.

“They’re all going for ice cream,” he told her. “But I guess Logan wanted them to see the show first.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her and laughed, then waved to the kids.

Before Logan could stop them, the two were dashing through the restaurant. Parker got there first. She wrapped her arms around her mom and pulled her close.

“This is really okay with you?” Winona asked worried.

“*Really, really* okay,” Parker whispered, giving her an extra squeeze.

Lucas snuggled into the hug, making room for himself between Winona and Parker.

“Lucas,” Winona said happily, wrapping an arm around her sweet boy. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Dad, join the group hug,” Lucas said a little too loudly.

There was soft laughter at the tables around them.

Then Ansel was wrapping his big arms around them all, tousling Lucas’s hair with one hand and giving Parker a peck

on top of her head.

Parker didn't even fuss. She was obviously relishing the hug-to-end-all-hugs, and even the kiss on the head.

With a lump in her throat, Winona finally let go of her last worry, and drank in a happiness she had never dreamed would be hers.

WINONA

Winona sat on the living room floor on Christmas Eve, with Lucas beside her.

A fire was crackling in the hearth, soft Christmas music was playing, and the heavenly scent of the tree brought back her own childhood memories of Christmas.

“Don’t come in yet, Dad,” Lucas yelled out for probably the third time.

Lucas was working on a present for him with Winona’s help—a tiny snow globe.

“Don’t worry,” his father called back from the other room. “Parker and I are talking about horse stuff in here.”

Winona smiled at that idea.

The snow had begun days ago, and the weatherman said it was going to be a doozy.

Overnight, it had gone from a winter wonderland to what almost amounted to a blizzard. They had been snowed in together, with nothing to do but farm chores, baking, and crafty projects like this one.

If it was a test of the four of them as a family unit, Winona felt they were passing with flying colors. This cozy time in the house with each other and no one else would be a memory she suspected she would treasure forever.

On the other hand, Parker had been digging out to get to the animals every day with Ansel, battling the storm to be sure

the beloved creatures had everything they needed.

It was backbreaking labor that had the two of them ravenous when they returned in the late morning.

Thankfully, Lucas was getting to be a whiz in the kitchen. He and Winona would whip up a real country breakfast each day, and the four of them would sit around the wooden table to enjoy it together.

Then Parker and Ansel set out again each evening to do the same thing all over again. Winona was frankly stunned that her daughter wanted to talk about, or even think about horses in between.

But the riding lessons Ansel had started with her before the snow began were Parker's joy. She had developed a special bond with Violet from taking care of her, and Ansel had decided the big gray mare was the one she would be riding. Winona suspected that Parker's love of horses was very much here to stay.

And the way Ansel's brother and parents were talking about the farm these days, she might not have to give it up anytime soon, after all. Things were looking hopeful enough that she'd called Sloane Greenfield to let her know she didn't want the apartment in town, and they could hold off on looking for a new place for a while.

Sloane had been thrilled for her, and then told her that it had to be meant to be, because she had just the perfect person to take the apartment instead.

"My dad is still taking his classes," Lucas said suddenly, looking up at Winona.

"I think he enjoys them," Winona said, nodding and handing him a tiny figure to place in the scene he was setting in the little globe.

"Does that mean we have to move?" Lucas asked.

"What do you mean?" Winona asked.

"What if he gets a job far away?" Lucas asked. "I have friends in my classes now."

Winona felt sad and joyous for Lucas at the same time. It was so wonderful to hear Lucas talking about having friends at school. The change in his schedule had obviously been good for him.

“I’m so glad you have friends in your classes,” she told him. “Your dad chose his classes because he can design websites from home. But if you’re worried that he might want to take a different kind of job and move away, you should definitely talk to him about it.”

“He said he wants to stay on the farm,” Lucas said, looking down at the little tree he was holding. “But Josie’s dad has a job that means he has to travel all over the world.”

Lucas’s cousin, Josie, was staying with his Uncle Logan for the holidays because her dad was in Singapore. Lucas and Josie got along swimmingly, and Parker loved the precocious eight-year-old, too.

“Your Uncle Brad is a big-time architect,” Winona said. “That’s the kind of job where you definitely have to travel. It’s *very* different from what your dad is doing.”

“Really?” Lucas asked, looking up at her as if to confirm.

“Really, really,” Winona told him.

He leaned on her instead of answering, his warm little body melting into her contours.

She closed her eyes and soaked it in. He would only be snuggly for a bit longer, most likely. These moments were precious.

In a moment, he was bent over his snow globe again, working diligently. He had a real eye. This snow globe was a knock-out, and the cast didn’t seem to slow him down in the slightest. Parker hadn’t been kidding about Lucas being a talented artist.

“Do you think he’ll like it?” he asked, without looking up.

Winona studied the four tiny painted figures—a man, a woman, a girl, and a boy, in front of a Christmas tree—and smiled.

“He’s going to love it,” she told him.



“I LOVE IT,” Ansel exclaimed on Christmas morning after breakfast, cupping the snow globe so gently in his big hand and watching tiny snowflakes fall over the miniature version of the four of them in front of their Christmas tree.

“Yes,” Lucas said, jumping out of his chair.

“Now it’s time for Mom’s present,” Parker exclaimed excitedly. “Come on, put on your coats.”

“Put on our coats?” Winona echoed in confusion.

But everyone was pulling on boots and bundling up, so she joined them, laughing a little.

The world outside was a vision in white. The path that Ansel and Parker had dug to get to the animals was the only evidence that anything existed at all besides beautiful drifts of pale snow under the dark branches of the trees.

“Come on,” Lucas squeaked, grabbing Winona’s hand and practically dancing down the path.

She glanced over at Parker to make sure her daughter wasn’t feeling left out.

But Parker was smiling. She seemed to get a kick out of the bond between Winona and Lucas. And, after all, it meant her mom was getting some extra hugs that she didn’t have to dole out herself. Besides, Parker’s own bond with Ansel brought Winona so much joy to witness that she knew her daughter understood.

They traversed the peaceful, snowy farm, and Lucas led her to a small outbuilding. She had noticed it before, but there were so many sheds and small barns that it hadn’t stood out.

“Are you ready?” Ansel’s deep voice boomed across the snowy meadow.

“Yes,” she told him, feeling happiness at the mere sound of his voice.

The kids made way, and he unlocked the big sliding door and pushed it all the way open.

“Oh,” Winona said quietly. “Oh, wow...”

The space was beautiful inside. The walls were painted a pale green, and globe lights hung from the ceiling. There were long wooden tables built into each wall, and on the far wall, there was a mural of a farm that looked an awful lot like the Williams Homestead, with a girl on a skateboard and a boy holding a sketchbook standing in the meadow looking out over the whole thing.

“It’s a studio, for you to make snow globes,” Lucas told her excitedly. “Dad said you needed a lot of table space to spread out. And maybe Parker and I can come in here sometimes to keep you company and work on homework or my art projects.”

“Lucas, did you paint this?” she breathed, walking up to the mural, which was so alive with vibrant colors that it looked like the people and animals were going to start moving at any moment.

“Dad said this would be a better place to paint a mural,” he said softly.

Winona looked around in wonder.

She had lived in tiny city spaces her whole life, learning to put things away after every use, and to minimize unnecessary items, like art supplies.

That a space like this was just for her, and that Ansel had seen fit to create it for her...

“Do you like it?” Ansel asked quietly. “I don’t mean to say that you can’t work on your projects in the house. I just thought you might like your own special space, where you can do whatever you want.”

“I love it,” she said, turning to face him. “I can’t believe it. I love it so much.”

He lifted her in his arms, spinning her around with so much joy in his eyes that it almost hurt to look at him.

The kids started cheering, or she might have forgotten herself and kissed him.

Being snowed in together for days had made it harder and harder to stick to her convictions, but Winona was determined not to let the relationship get physical beyond a chaste kiss, until they had made a formal commitment to each other. Ansel had agreed, though she could see that it cost him to do so. The two of them were setting an example right now for two very impressionable young people, and she was determined to do things just the way she hoped Parker and Lucas would choose to do them one day when each of them found love.

But it wasn't easy when big, handsome Ansel Williams was right there beside her every day, gazing at her like she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Parker's turn, Parker's turn," Lucas yelled.

Ansel laughed and placed Winona gently on the ground.

"Okay, Parker," he said, pulling something out of his inside coat pocket. "I didn't get to wrap it or anything."

Parker stepped forward and took the pale lavender canvas item from his hand.

"It's a halter," she said happily, turning it over to look at the little brass plate on the side. "It says *Violet*. Hey, this will be great for leading her out to pasture. Much prettier than the one she has now. She's going to look beautiful. But I don't understand."

"She's yours now," Ansel said quietly.

Parker's eyes lifted to his, the expression on her face was almost pained, as if she was afraid to let herself believe what she thought he was saying.

"Violet is your horse now," Ansel said, nodding.

Parker launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and screaming with joy.

“Whoa,” Ansel said, grinning as he held her. “You almost knocked me over.”

“You gave me a *horse*,” Parker yelled. “You gave me the *best horse*.”

Winona smiled. When Ansel had asked if this was okay to do, she had been truly moved and told him it was too much. But he just told her that Violet was Parker’s anyway, because they had already chosen each other. He was just making it official.

“My turn,” Ansel said when Parker finally let go of him. “I want my present now. Come here, Winona.”

Panic set in. She hadn’t gotten him anything big. There hadn’t been time. The snow had come before she had a chance. She had knitted the warm sweater that she had given him this morning before chores, and spent the rest of her time helping the kids make things for him and cooking up big meals for everyone.

But before she had a chance to react, Ansel was on his knees in front of her.

“There’s only one thing I want for Christmas,” he said softly, his eyes filled with the light of love. “And that’s for you to make me the happiest man alive.”

“Ansel,” she breathed, looking down at his beautiful face. It was so soon. But it felt just right.

“I’ve asked the kids, and I have their blessing,” he went on. “Winona, will you be my wife?”

“Yes,” she told him. “*Yes, yes, yes.*”

Then the kids were cheering again, and he was sliding a ring on her finger and standing to take her in his arms and hold her close.

She shivered with joy against his warm chest.

Ansel cupped her cheek in his hand and gazed down at her, his brows arching slightly as if he were asking permission.

She tilted her chin up in assent.

His mouth came down on hers in a claiming kiss that sent tingles down her spine. With that single kiss, he communicated his love and desire for her. She could taste the promises on his lips as he filled her mind with visions of their future and the wedding bells, graduations, grandchildren, and everything that would come in between.

When she pulled back, he opened his arms, and the kids ran over and joined their embrace.

Before long, the outside would intrude again, especially now that the storm was over.

But for now, the four of them were together, in the peace of the quiet homestead. And when they headed up to the big house this afternoon to celebrate Christmas with the rest of the Williams crew, they would be doing it as a family.

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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!

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