



A Surprise  
Cowboy  
for  
Christmas

ELYSIA STRIFE

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Cowboy Christmas #2

Elysia Strife

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## Chapter 1

Winter had taken its sweet time to hit that year, giving Callie an extra couple of weeks to write up her travel guide posts on various Rocky Mountain ski resorts. They wanted the extra exposure to help with delayed season ticket sales, and she always enjoyed a good ride down the mountain on her snowboard. But when winter hit, it did so with a frosty vengeance, leaving Callie second-guessing her decision to try to make it home for the holidays.

*This was a bad idea. I waited too long.*

Travel was slow on the snowy mountain roads. Callie's knuckles were as white as the landscape, her nerves hot and jittery. Squinting through the falling flakes as the downhill turn ahead, she eased her foot onto the brake pedal. There was nowhere to turn around on the mountain pass. Her best chance to avoid a wreck was to pull over. The next opportunity for her was several miles down the mountain.

Weather reports had warned of the storm but for the following day, something the resorts were looking forward to. There was no doubt in Callie's mind that the nearly white-out conditions were proof it had arrived a day ahead of schedule. Callie knew if she wasn't careful, her truck and trailer, on that remote road, was a disaster waiting to happen.

She swept a damp strand of loose hair out of her eyes and cursed every little wiggle of her truck. She didn't mind the wandering lifestyle, always meeting new people, discovering new places, and encountering foreign wonders she never heard about before. Yet with such joys came the inherent risk of battling the elements.

Callie was always on the lookout for sites and parks with trailer hooks. Every time she moved, Callie had to ensure she had survival items packed away: food, potable water, propane, diesel, motor oil, de-icer, a chainsaw, battery packs, her generator, and a lighter—among countless other things. All of her loose items had to



be packed away, the slide-out rolled in, the ceiling vents closed, propane tanks turned off, jacks up, chocks removed. A running light and brake light check also had to be performed.

*I checked the anti-freeze and oil. Tire chains are tightened. Wind break is tucked in the truck's grill.* She glanced at her engine temperature to find it low but sufficient for operating in fourteen degrees. *I've done everything I can. It's up to God and Mother Nature at this point.*

She'd been clumsy at first with backing into RV spaces, but now could maneuver like a pro through dense brush, between trees, and around rocky cliffs. She also knew when it wasn't safe to be on the road.

Conditions changed fast as she descended the mountaintop, from light snow and a glimmer of sunshine to deep, dark clouds, and blinding white winds. Tracks from vehicles ahead of her quickly vanished in the piling up drifts. She prayed she didn't need a reason to hit her breaks. On those icy roads, her truck and trailer would jackknife, undoubtedly sending her into the ditch or down the side of the mountain. Callie knew in her gut it was time to stop.

*I should've stayed at the lodge.* But her mother wasn't doing well, and it had been years since Callie had been home for Christmas.

Static cut through the radio station playing Christmas music. She switched it off and called up her GPS. Finding a forest road at the bottom, before the next hill climb began, she decided to park there for a few days or until the plows and gravel trucks came through. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had to stay on the side of the road.

Callie had been stranded from flat tires, broken down trucks, and plain exhaustion. But this time was different. She was frustrated with herself for taking the risk of adding another resort stop instead of just heading home to Idaho.

*This is what I get for pushing it too far.* She'd learned a lot from her travels but never quite got control of her impulse to explore. It was difficult for her to turn down an opportunity.

Callie watched her engine temperature rise as she used the built in Jake-brake to slow her down. It was almost up to normal temp despite the frigid gales that sent snow swirling against the passenger window. Every gust that nudged the truck made her stomach tense in anticipation of a wreck. She was effective at planning her stops in

perfect order and succession so that she would have a day's travel time between. But sometimes she and nature didn't get agree on the itinerary.

The turnout for the road approached too fast, despite Callie only going twenty-six miles an hour. She eased her foot a little more onto the brake and felt the vehicle slow. But then, traction faded away.

It was the smallest nudge from behind. The trailer brakes did their job, but the road was too slick. Callie knew by the sideways travel of her vehicle that the trailer tires skated across the icy asphalt.

*No, no!* "Shit!" Callie frantically steered the truck in the direction she wanted to go and gave her chained tires a little throttle, praying it would pull her out of the pending tailspin.

*I knew I should've bought chains for the trailer!* But the sight of the ripped off panels of her neighbor's trailer at the ski lodge and their destroyed slide-out supports had made Callie hold off. She planned to be careful instead of running more sets of chains than she could monitor.

It would've been different with a passenger to watch the other side. But Callie was independently minded.

The forest road she'd intended to stay at passed her. Callie let it go. It was behind her. The railing of the upcoming bridge was what she had in her sights now, and not by choice.

She winced and anticipated the impact on the passenger corner of her front bumper. That hit would surely tweak her frame with as much weight as she was hauling, crunch a headlight, and maybe even crumple part of her radiator, leaving her stranded until she could get a very expensive tow.

But the impact didn't come. Callie peeked ahead with one eye. The trailer swung gently back behind her and toward the railing.

Panic sent Callie's heart sprinting, expecting the railing to peel off the exterior of her trailer, maybe blow a tire or both of them. Memories of her nightmare trip through Death Valley flashed into her mind.

Callie had endured high temps of 120 and more in the southern states all the way down to negative thirty in Canada and Alaska. High temps risked overheated engines and blown tires. Frozen

climates risked engines that wouldn't start, burst trailer pipes, and impassable roads.

The adverse weather coupled with a stomach full of stale gas station coffee and the days since her last chat with a familiar voice had Callie at a crossroads. Her lifestyle had lost its appeal. The constant moving had her feeling flighty, forgetful, and disoriented.

The trailer swung away from the railing just in time and began tracking along behind her like normal.

Callie couldn't believe her luck. She switched on her flashers and decided to creep to the next pull out, wherever it was. The next hill climb approached, but Callie wasn't going to risk it, even if it meant she had to stay on the side of the road. That was safer than attempting the climb only to gain momentum in a backward slide that would for sure lead to a wreck.

"Come on," she mumbled to herself, scanning the road's shoulder. "There has to be another pull out for chaining up or *something*."

Her GPS displayed a road up ahead but on the opposite side of the rural highway. She would have to cross a lane in the blinding snow to make it.

Out of options, Callie realized she had to take the chance. "You better not be lying to me. If this is another quote-unquote road down the side of a damn boulder cliff like in California, I am going to rip you out of the dash with my bare hands and feed you to the asphalt!"

Callie switched on her fog lights, high beams, and the extra spotlight she had, hoping that if there was an approaching car, she would see it through the flakes or at least that it would see her. She didn't tap her brakes this time but simply let her truck and trailer roll until they were still. Then she pointed her spotlight through the window at the possible turn off. Callie caught a glimmer of a reflective marker for a road, though she couldn't read the number.

"Good enough for me." She switched off the lamp and set it aside. Sending a prayer to the stars, she turned the wheel and gave the throttle a little pressure. Her truck crept forward, and she descended from the highway into a snowy opening. By the faint shadows of trees, she wagered the road and turn around beneath were dirt, not pavement. Frozen dirt had more grip than icy asphalt. But if the snow melted, she might be stuck in a whole different muddy mess.

A horn blared, paired with a growling motor, as a lifted truck barreled by the tail section of her trailer, startling Callie. She slid to a stop in the pocket of the forest and threw her hands in the air.

“Unbelievable.” She glared back at the silent road. “Why don’t you slow down before you get in a wreck?”

While she put on her coat, gloves, and hat, preparing to leave the warmth of her truck and set up her camper for the night, she muttered in irritation at the lack of common sense of some drivers. Then Callie stopped herself.

*No. Forgive me for criticizing them. I really just want them to be safe. And be kinder to others.*

Callie had a different relationship with God. Her parents wanted her to go to church. Her friends often didn’t have any faith. Being on the road had changed Callie in many ways, including showing her the many ways people celebrated Christmas and God. The one thing she’d learned they had in common was holding some sort of faith in a higher power in their hearts. So she decided as long as she kept that alive, He would understand.

Thanking Him for letting her park safely on the side of the road, Callie tugged her snow cap over her head and climbed out into the snow that was already eight inches deep. From her truck bed, she pulled out her canopy, generator, and rope anchors.

Icy wind scraped at her cheeks as she erected her canvas canopy outside the door to her fifth-wheel and anchored it to the RV and into the ground with construction stakes. After eight years, she had a solid system for setting up in the middle of nowhere.

Callie got her generator running and hauled it inside the walled tent, where she plugged in her trailer. Needing the trailer skirting, she tried to open the outside storage bins under the bed compartment of the trailer, but they were frozen. Callie tugged hard on the handle, freeing one to the sound of breaking ice. She drew out the rolled up, waterproof canvas and proceeded to snap it around the exterior of her fifth-wheel, effectively shielding the belly from the brumal draft.

*No more poop-cicles for this gal.* The draft under her trailer was one of the biggest heat stealers Callie had learned to stop after being stuck with a frozen black tank dump handle and a split pipe under the kitchen sink.

“Never letting the lines freeze up again either,” she mumbled, reminiscing with a laugh as she propped up a small heater under the



trailer. Callie was confident it would keep the pipes and floor warm, until the generator ran out of fuel.

She collected an armful of wood from the back of her truck, then locked it up for the night. The trailer would stay warm for a few days, but by then she'd need to at least dig a path for her truck so she could get into town, or try to haul the trailer back onto the road even if that meant getting it towed.

Dropping the wood inside the tent, she unlocked the trailer and unfolded the steps from beneath the door, then set about lowering the jacks with her speed wrench under her trailer to stabilize and level it. The fridge and other systems wouldn't run correctly if the trailer wasn't level. And while she could leave her food outside in the snow, it was safer from bears and other curious animals inside her trailer.

Exhausted from the long day, Callie got a fire started in her little wood stove, one she installed in the fifth-wheel years ago by herself after she'd run out of propane on a trip through Canada. With the trailer warming up and the sun quickly fading, Callie setup her mobile internet and sent her brother a message with a GPS location.

*Just in case.*

She turned on her water pump with the switch by the door, filled a kettle with frigid water, switched the pump off again, and placed the kettle on the tiny woodstove. Conserving everything was essential to survival.

While she waited for the water to boil, Callie opened the cabinet doors under the kitchen and bathroom sinks so the pipes could warm up. She also lifted the bed, letting the warmer air get into the storage compartments, then finished setting things up on the counter and dressers.

The kettle whistled. After a meal of noodles and tea, she rested back on the sofa and soaked in the warmth of the trailer. Since her windows were only a single pane, she'd sewn curtains from clearance fabrics in woodland prints to help regulate the temperature. But as she glanced at them, she noticed how dusty and faded they looked from years of use.

Callie felt similarly worn-down.

Her phone buzzed with a message from her brother.

**Caleb:** I take it you're stuck and won't be home for Christmas. Can't say I'm surprised. Please check in when you can.

Callie reread the message. She tried send him an apology, but her mobile internet couldn't connect to the satellite grid or radio towers through the storm.

*Great.* Callie slumped on her sofa and put her boots up on the vinyl ottoman, swearing she'd try again in an hour and stoke the fire in a few minutes.

*I can't fall asleep. I have no one else out here. I'm on my own.* But her eyes soon closed despite her best efforts.

A knock at the door startled her awake from a heavy slumber. Callie's heart pumped hard and heavy in her chest. She put her boots on the floor and braced her head, wondering if it was a dream or if someone was really outside.

"Hello? Is anyone in there?"

Callie's mind raced through possibilities. Maybe she was parked in someone's driveway, or a highway patrolman wanted her to pack up and leave.

*Or maybe that truck did wreck, and they need help!*

Even if it was a jerk driver outside, Callie could never turn down a soul in need of assistance. She'd been there a time or ten, herself.

She got up and cracked open the door. When her eyes fell on the man outside, she wasn't sure what to think.

Snow covered his cowboy hat, like the broad shoulders of his black coat. The man rested a hand to his chest and rubbed it as if it ached. His gaze searched hers.

"I hate to bother you, ma'am. But I need your help."



## Chapter 2

The mask over the stranger's face made Callie wonder if he was there to rob her. She stepped back in hesitation.

He pulled down his balaclava, exposing a shaved jaw and a weary frown. "Have you seen a cow and calf come through here recently? They're Highlands, brown and fluffy."

"Cows out here?" she asked before she thought. "Why would a cow be out in this weather and not in a barn?"

He slumped and shifted in his snow-caked boots, exposing his weary state. "My ranch isn't too far from here. Sometimes, in the summers, we graze the cattle out this way. We put them out to pasture, so we could clean the barn stalls. But we've had to bring in a lot of other animals due to the weather.

"Some of the herd is still in the fields. So it's possible the cow thought she was going to right way when she wasn't because she can't see in this weather. We had a tree take out part of the fence. She and the calf are the only ones I can't find. I lost her tracks in this white-out."

"I'm sorry. I haven't seen any cattle. Only a pissed off driver in a lifted truck has passed me that I'm aware of."

The man hung his head and nodded as he turned away. "Thanks anyway."

Callie checked her phone for the time, sensing by the darkness outside her windows that it was later than she wanted it to be. "But I have been asleep for, gosh, three hours. So I'd need to check my cameras to be sure."

He stopped and looked up at her with hopeful golden green eyes. "I can't imagine they'd see much in this, but I'd appreciate it."

"Maybe not," she admitted. "But you might as well come inside and warm up while I look. I installed cameras around my trailer after one of the parks I was in had a bunch of break-ins. I get a full view even if I don't have a window there."

He brushed the snow off of his boots, removed his hat, and eagerly obliged. “Thank you. That wind is abrasive tonight. Storm came early.”

“I am, unfortunately, well aware.” Callie motioned for him to have a seat on the sofa while she stoked the woodstove back to life. “It’s why I had to pull down here. Trailer wanted to push me around on the road. After snowboarding up at the resort, I was more tired than I expected. I’m glad I stopped.”

“Me too. You’ve got a nice rig here. Can’t say I’ve seen many with a woodstove.”

“They aren’t manufactured with them.” She shrugged as she took the other side of the sofa and opened up the security app on her phone. “But when you live in it, especially in Canada or on the border, it has to be functional.”

“This is your home?” Doubt wrinkled his forehead.

“Yeah, I’m a travel blogger. I go where I’m asked by clients, but I also have a series on my own site, where I post stories from the little hole-in-the-wall places which I’ve called Tiny Treasures of the Travelling Tightwad.”

Callie swiped through a hundred motion alerts caused by snow to one with two dark specks heading off into the woods. “Is this them?”

The man leaned over and studied the picture. “Sure looks like them.”

“You’re certain?” She arched an eyebrow. “From blobs?”

He wagged his head and stood. “Pretty certain. Could be a bear and a cub, but it’s unlikely.”

Callie joined him, then peered outside at the snow. “You’re going back out there?”

He pulled the mask back up over his face. “That calf won’t survive this weather all night. The mother might not either. I have to try.”

“What about *you* surviving? That’s a dangerously cold storm,” she countered.

He glanced back at her as he saw himself out. “It’s just a rancher’s life.”

Callie wanted to help, to stop him from going back outside, but he shut the door between them. His boots thumped down the steps and crunched through the snow until his presence faded into silence.

She'd endured the blinding snow before on her board in a sudden gust and when the slopes had been closed. It was easier to find resort staff in their red coats, but this man was in all dark colors: black coat, dark jeans, and a brown cowboy hat.

"*He's* going to get lost out there." Callie put on her gloves and hat, zipped herself up tightly, and grabbed a rope out of a storage compartment. There wasn't much she could do. She wasn't trained in search and rescue, but she knew the dangers of every place she visited—some from research, many from experience.

Outside, she collected her spotlight from the truck and felt her way along the trailer to the bumper where she tied off the rope. Then, making a loop at the other end, she slipped her wrist through it and walked out into the storm.

"Hello?" Wind howled in her ears. Snow blotted out the visual path of her spotlight. "I didn't even get your name! Hello?"

Somewhere close by, she heard a cow mooing. Or maybe it was a man groaning. Callie wasn't sure. Whoever or whatever it was, they were in trouble if they stayed out there all night.

"Hello?"



## Chapter 3

Callie walked in the direction of the sound, adjusting her path when she heard it again. In the distance, she caught a sliver of movement. She shielded her eyes from the spotlight to get a better visual.

A dark blob lumbered toward her, three more specks emerging from behind.

“Hey!” he called out, his voice broken up by the wind. “Than—you—or—the—ight!”

Callie stayed put and waited until the cow, calf, a horse, and the man she’d met had lumbered through the snow to her. “You found them!”

He nodded with exaggerated movement and raised his voice to compete the howling wind. “Any chance we can hunker down in your tent until daylight returns? If we try to head back now, I’m not sure *I’ll* be able to find the way.”

“Of course!” Callie shone her spotlight back in the direction of the rope and led the group to her campsite for the night.

She held the door flap open to the canvas tent she’d set up outside her trailer. It was a tight fit, but it was better than the animals being out in the snow and cold. Callie untied her rope and closed up the canvas for the night.

The man began swiping snow aside with a boot and exposing the dirt beneath. “What made you come up with the idea of a canvas tent?”

Callie motioned up at the steeply pitched roof and sturdy frame. “Spent some time in Canada. It’s not often you’ll see trailers on the road there. I learned that this is really useful for drying things out and keeping the trailer from getting trashed. If I stay somewhere cold for a long time, I usually wrap the outside of the trailer to keep the walls from bursting and frost from collecting in the corners. Lived on the road a long time.”



“That must be nice to be so prepared and able to carry everything you need with you.”

“It can be. Sometimes it’s a lonely life,” she admitted.

He gave her a timid smile. “I appreciate the use of your tent. Not a lot of folks help each other out these days. I’m Rowan by the way.”

She took the hand he offered, and they shook. “I’m Callie, and I’m happy to help. While I don’t know much about caring for animals, I do know they probably need water and blankets. Yes?”

“That would be appreciated. Though I wouldn’t use your grandma’s quilt.” He motioned to the muddy calf. “I’m sure there will be a few other messes by morning.”

“Will moving blankets suffice?” she asked.

“Perfect.”

Callie grabbed the moving blankets from the items she had wrapped up for transit and handed them to Rowan. While he covered the animals, she pulled a bucket out of a storage compartment under her bed, turned on her pump, and used the bathtub faucet to fill it with water.

When she opened her front door and handed it to Rowan, she said, “I have some left, but my tank is low because it’s easier to haul the trailer on ice when I have less weight to slosh and push me around. Snow is one thing. Frozen roads are another. We’ll have to start melting snow if you need much more.”

He thanked her and offered the bucket to the cow. “Any chance you have a spare heater?”

Callie dug through her cabinets and grabbed her small desk heater. She plugged it into the humming generator and switched it on. “It isn’t much, but it has a tip over sensor.”

Rowan helped the calf snuggle up to its mother. His horse shifted aside as Rowan swept the snow away from another spot. “I’m in debt to you. I didn’t think they would get this far out. I considered turning back.”

He rubbed his horse’s neck as the animal folded its legs and lay in the spot he’d made. “No hay, tonight. I’m sorry, Buck.”

Rowan turned to Callie and motioned a gloved hand at the cows. “They’re all exhausted. Anyway, Butterball there—”

“The calf?”

A chuckle slipped through his words. “Yeah. He almost didn’t make it into this world he was so twisted up inside his mother. I spent a good long time working to keep those two alive. I didn’t want to give up on them after all of that.”

He drew a radio from his jacket and switched it on. “Copperhead, Viper. Do you copy?”

“Copperhead reads you. What is your ETA?” a voice responded.

“I’ve found a place to hole up for the night. Found the missing pair. I’ll return in the morning.”

“Copy. Do we need to prepare medical supplies?”

“Negative. Not at the moment. I’ll radio out tomorrow morning what our status is. Viper out.”

Rowan switched off the radio and put it back in his coat. “I won’t bother you anymore, tonight. And we’ll be gone at first light in the morning. Thank you, again.”

Disappointment filled Callie’s heart. It had been so long since she was needed by someone else that she didn’t want him to hurry off. “Please don’t worry about it. I like the company. And I might not have hay, but I have apples. Will that work?”

The weariness tensing Rowan’s face lifted a little. “That would be something at least. Yes, please.”

Callie climbed back up into the trailer and grabbed the bag of apples from her pantry. “Use them all if you need.”

Rowan slowly took the bag in hand with a slight shake of his head. “I think you just might be a Christmas miracle.”

She laughed softly, surprised by such a remark. “It’s not even Christmas yet.”

His face flushed with embarrassment. “I guess I just don’t know what to say, but I feel fortunate to have found you. You’ve got a modern day manger set up like an island of hope at a time when we had no place else to go. Butterball is no Baby Jesus, but he is still an innocent youngling at the mercy of the world. And your hospitality is unexpected. Thank you.”

Rowan closed the door behind him. His boots thumped down the steps as he clicked his tongue. “Hey, Buck, buddy. You want an

apple?”

Callie thought it was cute the way he talked to the animals. She opened up the security camera app on her phone and selected the view of the canvas tent outside the front door.

Rowan fed the animals, taking nothing for himself. Then he curled up with his horse and covered his face with his hat.

Callie considered switching off the porch light to let them sleep but figured it was likely safer to leave it on. It bothered her that Rowan hadn't even saved an apple for himself or considered sleeping inside where it was warmer. She had little to offer him in such conditions except some coffee and hot noodles. But it was better than nothing. So Callie heated up some water, made him a small meal, and grabbed a slice from a baguette in her cupboard.

She couldn't imagine a life like his, chasing down animals in the snow. The thought made her wonder what he would've done if she hadn't been there.

*My idiotic need for one more article on a vacation spot happened to get me stranded me in the perfect spot.*



## Chapter 4

The weather report, when it finally came through, called for another foot of snow by the end of the week. Callie swore under her breath. There was no way she would make it home for Christmas. She was going to be stuck there for weeks.

She finished stirring a bit of shredded cheese and canned chicken into the noodles she made for Rowan. The steam comforted her after their hike back to the trailer in the snow.

Callie added a dash of creamer to his coffee and picked up the items.

It was always a trick to open the RV door while holding something, but the limited counter space didn't give her an option to set things down, open the door, and then pick them up again. Callie pulled the latch with her pinky, trying to stay quiet so she didn't startle the animals.

Buck lifted his head, waggled it with a snort, then rested back on the cold ground. The mustang's woolly winter coat slowly dried out, easing some of Callie's concern for the animals.

The heater helped a little bit, but it was still cold in the tent area. Rowan had wrapped the calf's feet in one of the blankets, and Butterball seemed content. But wind pushed against the canvas, billowing out the sides.

Callie glanced at the stakes just to be sure they held, then crept down the steps to where Rowan lay. He still hadn't moved.

She gave him a visual once over, checking for the usual signs of hypothermia. But his face was a rosy tan, his lips a bit split but mauve, not purple, and his eyes were open and watching her from under the brim of his hat.

"Hey." She lifted the items and wondered if he'd caught her staring.

"For me?"

She nodded. Beside her, Butterball's tail flicked at an invisible fly. Callie bit a lip to keep from giggling. "Must be dreaming."

Rowan sat up and hesitantly took the items. "Thank you. Yeah, might be. But it's a rough rest in the snow."

Even though the group was warmer than before, Callie wasn't sure it was enough. "Tell you what, I will keep the fire stoked and leave the door open so the inside heat can help out here tonight."

He savored a spoonful, his eyes watering. "You have done so much. I can't ask more of you. Besides, Butterball is a bit of a mountain goat. He might try to climb the steps to where it's warmer."

"I'll fold them back up. It's not a problem. I'll just need to slip out for a bit more wood, then I'll keep it going for the rest of the night."

He tried to stop her, but Callie was determined to give them the best chance she could. It didn't feel like an obligation but a newfound purpose.

She snuck out of the tent flap and felt her way through the blizzard along the canvas to the trailer and up to her truck bed. Snow covered the tarp when she reached inside. Several logs were frozen together, making it a struggle to collect an armful of wood. Something soft and warm brushed up against her.

"Let me help you." Rowan's voice was a whisper over the storm. But his breath was hot over her ear.

Callie couldn't believe he'd leave his animals alone. "It's okay. I've done this before, more than I like to admit."

Nevertheless, Rowan took her armful, added a few more logs to the bundle, then took her hand and led her back to the tent.

Callie's stomach fluttered at the contact. When they were back inside the warmth of the shelter, she slipped herself free to secure the door flap behind them.

Rowan climbed the steps and set the wood in the bin by the stove. He straightened and glanced at her as she joined him in the RV. "I apologize if I'm stepping on someone else's toes. I just didn't want you to get lost out there after everything you've done for us. I live in this weather: snow, rain, and the blistering summers."

"I would have made it. I just have to think about how to do it right." Callie didn't envy Rowan's lifestyle. She liked her cozy

trailer, a space with familiar things. “I’ve been stranded a time or two.”

“Yeah.” He planted his hands on his hips while he studied the fire in the stove. “It’s basically daily life for me. But you have more gall than most living this life. My last girl grew up on a farm but wanted a big house and a man in a suit with lots of money, so she could have a yacht on the lake and stay at resorts on all of her vacations. Grew up rough but wanted nothing to do with hard work.”

Callie leaned against the counter, watching him stoke the fire and refill the stove. She studied people everywhere she went, often pulling from their stories for her blog posts about life in each region she visited.

“Have the house and the money but not the suit or the class. I’m just a dirty cowboy in a hat and boots.” He shook his head and walked to the door where he picked up his food. “I apologize for overstepping my boundaries.”

Callie didn’t like seeing rejection on his face. “Stop, Rowan. I appreciate what you did. It was just unusual contact for me. I haven’t had a serious relationship in years.”

His brows quirked in confusion. “Why not?”

Exasperation with her ex resurfaced, and she threw her hands in the air. “My last boyfriend wanted an easy, predictable life with a normal sized bathroom. This isn’t that. And while I’m not a fan of dealing with the tanks, the constant set up and take down—”

She rolled her eyes skyward as she thought of all the frustrations of living in an RV. “The septic smell, tank treatments, refilling propane, leaking seals, mold from humid air when running the propane too long, not having a dishwasher or a normal sized fridge...nothing beats being able to pick up and go anywhere. I love meeting new people and seeing new places, but no one wants to leave their stable lives to join me.

“If I wanted to live somewhere sunny I could go any time I wanted. If I get tired of my neighbors, I can easily move. Rent is way cheaper, especially out in the woods. I am home where ever I am.”

That was a lie. The trailer was a familiar place to rest her head, but it was not *home*.

“Why didn’t you go somewhere warm?” Rowan’s gaze pried hard on hers while he ate. It was enough attention that it made



Callie's thoughts crash into one another. In his fixation was a shimmer of longing that exposed his isolation out there—a feeling she knew well.

“I—” The wind picked up and cut her off when it ripped open the tent flap. Callie squeezed past him in the doorway and pulled the door flap shut.

Rowan repositioned the stake that had pulled loose and pushed it deeper into the ground with the heel of his boot.

She thanked him then confessed. “I was going to go down to Arizona for the winter, but my mother isn't doing very well. So I had a change of plans which led me to make a few ski stops on my way home to Idaho. She fell a few weeks ago on the ice and fractured a leg.”

Butterball shifted, snuggling closer to his mother, but leaving the blanket in the snow.

“Ouch. I'm sorry to hear that. Breaking bones is no fun.” Rowan repositioned the worn fabric over the calf then patted the calf's head.

His tender touch broke something inside of Callie. All of the years of moving around and using her blankets to protect things when the slide outs were rolled in and stuff rattled around as she bumped along old beat-up roads felt worth it and yet lost as she stared at the same fabric now warming the calf.

*Did I pick the wrong path in life?* She could've built a family of her own to love and spent holidays at home. Maybe if she'd been there more, she would've prevented her mother's accident or supported her brother when he and his wife lost their first child. But her family said it was fine, told her to make something of herself and focus on her future.

Callie wasn't sure she had much to show from her years away except lessons learned from failure, a following on social media, and a travel site loaded with pictures of adventures. But it all suddenly meant so much less with Rowan beside her. The trips were fun, and she'd met tons of new people. But she wasn't sure she had much of herself left.

“I worked hard to build a reputation as a travel guide, and it's led to many requests for me to visit and write articles on towns, resorts, or hidden gems, often with expenses paid. My job is *to vacation*. You'd be surprised how few people are interested in it

after I explain the logistics of constant travel on a budget. Only the rich get it easy. But the worst part is not being around when family needs me.”

None of those she'd met got to know Callie on the inside, her struggles, her small triumphs, or the things that really mattered deep down. It was finally time to make amends with her family and herself. But it hadn't quite felt like she was on the right track until that night. Using what she'd learned to help Rowan showed her that she could be and do more. But if she wanted to go down that path, it meant she'd have to let herself get close to others and learn to trust them, which didn't always work out in her favor. She'd left home to get away from guilt trips and take actual trips to fun places. But maybe—hopefully—her friendship with Rowan could be different.

*Who am I kidding?* Callie scolded herself. *We've both got too much going on in our lives.*



## Chapter 5

Rowan rubbed the calf's head. "How long are you planning on staying here in the snow, Callie?"

"As long as I have to. Why?" She sat on the steps, enjoying the heat from the trailer.

He ran a callused hand over his jaw. "That's not going to work. You're going to need more wood, propane if you use it, and to dump those tanks soon."

There wasn't much Callie could do. "I'll disconnect the truck if I have to and cut a path up to the road. I've got track boards, chains, flares, shovels..."

"It won't be enough," Rowan interjected. "I gather you've snow camped before." He motioned to the setup around them. "But I've lived in Montana for my whole life. This snow won't go away any time soon."

Callie's heart sank. If she was stuck, like really stuck, that meant she wouldn't be getting home in time for Christmas or to help her mother around the house. "I really don't want to spend money on a tow at this point. The snow's getting deeper, and that will mean a semi-rated tow truck will have to pull me out."

He joined her on the step, sitting just close enough that his side brushed hers. Callie's heart fluttered at the concern in Rowan's eyes.

"We can get you out. I'll bring the skid steer back in the morning and haul the trailer to the ranch. It's on tracks, you know. They do better in the snow."

When she tried to retort, he continued with a warning tone. "Trust me. This is the only way you and your trailer are going to survive. We're going to wake up to a foot of snow tomorrow. I feel it in my bones as much as a man knows when he's been bucked, and the ground is just seconds away."

Callie gritted her teeth and accepted her reality. "Just let me know how I can repay you."

A slight smirk danced on his face. “We’ll work something out. For now, just rest. I’ll check the fire now and then. Thanks for everything. See you in the morning.”

Rowan hesitantly rested a warm hand on her knee, then got up and laid down with his horse again.

Callie covered him with her last spare blanket, folded up the steps to the RV, latched the door to the side of the trailer, so it would stay open, then pulled herself up and inside the doorway.

She sank wearily onto the sofa. The firelight mixed with her exhaustion had her quickly drifting off.

Rest was fitful at best. Callie felt stiff and cold. She piled every coat on top of her, even resorting to throwing the rug over her legs, trying to stay warm. When she finally dipped into the darkness of sleep, it was gone a second later.

She blinked to find Rowan’s backside had replaced her view of the woodstove. Callie stifled a laugh.

Rowan swiveled to look back at her. “Oh, sorry. I thought you were still asleep!”

She watched him stoke the fire and put in a few more chunks of wood. “I was. Guess I sensed I wasn’t alone in the room.”

“We’re definitely not.” Rowan shifted aside, exposing the tip of a nose barely peeking up into the doorway. Nostrils flared as Butterball sniffed the air.

Callie sat up and put her boots on the floor. “Too cute.”

“I don’t suppose you have any more snacks?” Rowan asked.

She got to her feet and opened the fridge. “I’ve got a half bag of carrots, one banana, and a couple of small potatoes. But other than that, all I have is prepackaged stuff and maybe two cups of milk. Why don’t you just help yourself to whatever you need. I’ll send you a bill,” she teased.

Rowan nodded and started to ask how much. But she saw her opportunity to cut him off this time.

“I’m kidding. No repayment necessary.” Callie tried to fill a kettle with water, but nothing came out of the tap. “Damn it. Line’s frozen. That’s going to be a fun repair if it’s split again.”

She grabbed a bottle of water from her tiny pantry and filled the kettle, then set it on the wood stove. Unable to wash dishes, she

grabbed two clean mugs. “Guess I’ll be melting snow later to clean with.”

“Nonsense.” Rowan fed the calf, cow, and horse from where he sat in the open doorway. “You can stay in my house. I’ve got hookups. We’ll get you taken care of and repair whatever needs it.”

She knew he had to be freezing after spending the night with the animals outside. But he seemed to have more energy than her. “How are you so spritely this morning? I could barely sleep.”

“Like I said. Just a rancher’s life.” He glanced back at her as Buck nibbled on the carrots in his hands. “Anyway, I’ve got a big horse trailer with all the works. So you’re in good hands.”

Callie rested on a cushion of the dinette and watched him in awe. “Maybe *you’re my* Christmas miracle.”

Doubt pinched his face. “Impossible. I am no gift to anyone.”

Callie’s high crashed. A dark hurt and loneliness replaced Rowan’s earlier happiness. Maybe he was lying about helping her. She had no way to know if he would come back for certain.

He got down from the RV and zipped up his coat. “I’ll return in a couple of hours with the skid steer. Don’t go anywhere.”

Callie peered out one of her slide out windows at the blowing snow. *Doubt I could if I wanted.* But inside, she knew she’d at least need to make it into town, and that meant clearing a road for the truck to get out if Rowan didn’t return.

“Promises, promises,” she muttered. Callie had been left stranded and lost more times than she cared to admit. Either someone didn’t show to meet her or they gave her bad directions, sending her on a wild goose chase because she wasn’t a local. And while Callie always found something positive on every *adventure* in the middle of nowhere, she grew tired from the effort of searching because often strangers didn’t really care about her best interests, only their entertainment or getting back to their own life.

“What was that?” Rowan asked as he bundled up the calf and repositioned the blankets over the cow and horse. “Wind’s still howling.”

“A lot of people have made me promises, Rowan.” Callie walked to the doorway and looked down at him. “So I don’t expect you to return. You take care of your family, human and otherwise.” She smiled at the fluffy calf that blinked up at her.

Rowan's eyebrows knitted in determination. "I keep my word, Miss—"

"Avertine."

He tipped his cowboy hat at her. "Miss Avertine, all Connors do what they say, or they die trying." Rowan opened the flap and ushered the animals out into the storm. "Someone has to keep integrity alive."





## Chapter 6

Callie took in the stillness of their absence. *Back to normal. Just me to worry about. It's better this way, right? Simpler?*

She set about making herself a quick oatmeal breakfast and realized Rowan never stayed for coffee. When she checked the time, she couldn't believe it was already eight in the morning. The sun had only been up for a mere fifteen minutes. Time seemed to move quickly during Rowan's stay

Sitting at the kitchenette alone suddenly felt emptier than it ever had. Callie didn't want to linger too long or expect Rowan to return. There was no telling what he'd encounter on his long journey back to the ranch. She couldn't count on him for her survival.

But she had to be honest with herself. She was more scared of what would happen if she let him lead her back to his place. *What would that entail? What expectations would he have?*

In her early travels, she let others guilt trip her into doing things that she didn't want to simply because they'd helped her first. It's why Callie never took help from strangers, she always lived alone, and she did what she could for others without giving them a chance to return the favor. Favors were bargaining chips, and Callie hated gambling and the guilt of owing anyone money or otherwise.

Fewer close relationships meant less obligation and expectation. Leaving home had given her freedom and taught her self-reliance.

With her dishes in the sink, she closed up the trailer, packed up the tent, locked up the woodstove so it would slowly go out, and then picked up her shovel.

*If this isn't going away, I have to get out of here.*

Outside, icy gusts prickled her cheeks and tousled her hair until she got her hood pulled up over her head. Callie put on her gloves and got to work, shoveling the snow away from her truck and trailer while planning a path up to the road.

But progress was slow with the snow constantly filling in the areas she'd already dug out. An hour later, she was chilled to the core, her toes aching inside her boots. In that time, she'd only managed to clear the area around her truck and trailer plus another twenty foot path ahead. She had another fifty more to go, and half of that stretch climbed the bank to the road's surface.

Her back ached, and she was certain she'd strained it with all the heavy lifting so soon after her ski trip and a terribly cold night's sleep.

A plow barreled by, a rumbling shadow in the snowy forest, slinging a massive wave of gravel behind it and curls of snow into a berm atop her planned path.

*"Oh, come on!" This is going to take forever!*

Defeated and out of breath, Callie unlocked her truck and climbed inside to warm up. But when she turned the ignition key, the truck struggled and died.

Groaning, she climbed back out, unloaded her generator and battery charger, and got the truck hooked up. She fumbled with cold fingers for the block heater cord and got it plugged in. The mess she'd found herself in the night prior had made her forget to plug in the block heater.

*Guess I have to warm up in the trailer.*

Callie wearily collected an armful of wood from the bed of the truck and started back to the trailer. But her legs and back were tired and shaky from all of the shoveling. Catching her boot on a stump buried in the snow, she fell, face first into darkness.

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A throbbing pain in her cheek woke Callie sometime later. Snowflakes covered the sleeves of her coat and the pieces of wood she'd been carrying. Fog blotted out her thoughts. Her neck ached as she stiffly lifted her head and looked around.

The generator had run out of fuel. No cars passed by on the nearby road. Even the wind in her ears had fallen silent.

Callie had never felt so alone.

*I'm going to freeze to death. I have to get up.* But her body didn't want to do what she asked. Aching cold gripped her so hard that she couldn't even shiver.

She managed to roll herself onto a side and drag a leg up, closer to her. But when Callie tried to get onto her hands and knees, her limbs simply refused.

*I've been too cold for too long.* Callie thought about things that made her angry and tried to force herself to move and warm up by bending her joints repeatedly.

A second attempt to get up sent her stumbling forward into the fresh snow. Callie choked up from her frustration.

*I don't want to die out here!*

She sniffled back the tears that formed from her fear, and Callie squinted at her blurry RV. *Maybe I can crawl.*

She wriggled forward in the snow, making painfully slow progress. But her energy didn't last long. Callie took a break to catch her breath, until frostbite concerns entered her mind.

I can't stop. Callie ignored her throbbing cheek and crawled to the steps of her trailer, one arm reach at a time. Trying to get her feet under her was a challenge she wasn't up for.

Callie slumped over the steps and peered up at the door handle. It seemed unbelievably far away.

*It's warmer inside. I have to get up.* She tried again, but her legs were numb and refused to listen. Callie's desperation made her growl and strain for the door handle. But it was too high.

*I need a stick. I could pry it open.* Callie slumped down over the steps and scanned the trees for downed branches. Breaths took more effort, and she found her eyes closing. Her head drooped. All she wanted was to sleep.

Her body gave out as she drifted off, and Callie sank back into the snow.

*It's fine, she lied to herself. Just a short nap. I'll wake up soon. I'll find a stick. Then I'll be—*

Thought left her mind as Callie stared up at the snowflakes drifting down. It mesmerized her, sending her into a tranquil sleep.

Arms gently lifted her from the snow and rocked her against something gloriously soft and warm. The movement roused her just enough to encourage her eyes open.

A glimmer of sunlight grazed the cheek of a shadowed face. Gold threads wove through the concerned green eyes that scanned

her. Callie forgot about the frozen world and basked in the bright white backdrop and the absence of the cold, of fear, and of death.

The one who held her, moved her body with ease and care. She was certain she'd been found by an angel.

“Callie, it’s not your time.”

Her blissful state burst, and awareness of the frigid air biting at her flesh raced into her mind.

Rowan’s cowboy hat sheltered her face from the storm. Beneath the brim, his gaze was filled with fear. “Callie?”

All she mustered was a groan.

Rowan’s face neared hers. He rested a cheek to her forehead. “I’m going to get you somewhere warm, okay?”

Callie struggled to sort the pressure that laced around her body. Hot liquid touched her lips that smelled of lemon, ginger, and honey. She choked down a sip.

He picked her up. “You’re riding with Dred Johnson. He’s a hand that works for me. I’ll get the wood, trailer, and your truck back to the ranch.”

She strained to feel her body, but her limbs were numb and refused to move to her demands.

Rowan rested her in a warm, cushioned seat. “You need to eat this.”

A piece of soft candy appeared under her nose, smelling of cinnamon. Callie clumsily accepted the treat Rowan fed to her chilled lips.

“I’ll keep her safe, boss,” a man said beside her.

“Just make sure she doesn’t choke. Blood sugar’s clearly tanked. We’re going to need to check her fingers and toes as soon as she’s back.”

The door shut before Callie could thank Rowan. Realizing he needed her keys, she clumsily reached for her coat pocket.

A plastic package crinkled in the cab that smelled of warm hay, pumpkin, and spices.

“He already got ‘em, Miss Avertine. Don’t you worry. Even if we get stuck, we got pumpkin pie and horse blankets in the back seat. We’ll be good for a few days at least, I reckon.”

Callie's neck protested when she glanced over at him. Dred wasn't much taller than her, though he thoroughly filled out the sleeves of his coat. The stick of a sucker poked out of his wiry amber mustache.

She wasn't comfortable with the situation, but didn't have the energy to stand on her own feet. Trusting strangers, especially men, with her life was not something Callie was used to. Dred seemed to pick up on her feeling.

"I won't try nothing. Rowan would kick my ass if I ever hurt a woman." Dred offered her a lollipop with a grin. "You want one? They're caramel apple."

Callie still struggled to chew the cinnamon candy. Her jaw ached, and her attention was focused now on finding a way to sleep.

"Ah, you're still eatin' what ya' got. No worries. There's plenty for whenever you're ready." He squeezed her shoulder, waking Callie. "Stay with me. I want you talkin' before ya go to sleep again. If you want any more snacks, just say so."

Dred tapped a small bucket crammed in a cup holder. "I keep candy in here for the kids when I help out with the farming and ranching youth groups in the area. Should've lost my teeth to candy by now, but I had most of them knocked out by a horse when I was ten. So most of them are fake already anyway."

Callie stared at him as he talked about reconstructive surgeries and getting his implants. He smiled, showing off his near perfect teeth.

Dred didn't miss a beat as he redirected all the vents to blow hot air at her while talking more about the horse that knocked him toothless.

Callie wondered if he was so chatty because he was full of sugar. Thinking of sweet things made her wonder about Rowan.

Outside her fogging window, she saw a rig on tracks pick up her RV and maneuver it backward.

Dred kept talking as he pulled forward and turned them around in the space her trailer had occupied.

The door behind Dred opened, and a younger man climbed inside. "We got the truck started. Ace is driving it back."

"Copy." Dred looked in the rearview. "Callie, meet Duncan."

She tried to twist and greet the youngster, but her spine protested. Callie winced. She'd have to get a look at him later. It was simply a relief to be somewhere warm.

“Hey, Dunce, get her that blanket will ya?”

“Sure, *Dill weed*.” The young man chuckled as he leaned forward and unfolded a blanket over Callie's legs.

Callie thanked the young man with eyes like robin's eggs.

“Rare color,” she uttered.

Duncan blushed. “So I hear.”

They drove out onto a path that looked oddly plowed to Callie. She peered into the side mirror and glimpsed the skid steer pulling her RV onto the road behind them. The headlights of her truck swept in behind the trailer.

Callie's eyes drooped from exhaustion and the comforting heat. Dred went on another long tangent. This time, he didn't stop her from drifting off to sleep.





## Chapter 7

The truck slowed to a creep, waking Callie.

Dred's voice embodied regret. "Tell Rowan we've got another one down."

The radio chatter in the backseat had Callie perking up. According to the truck's clock, it had been half an hour since they'd left the highway. Her toes and fingers still tingled from the cold, and her body ached, but she managed to wiggle herself upright so she could see what had the men's attention.

A dark lump in the field among the other cattle broke her heart. "Dead?"

Dred sighed. "Won't know 'til we check it out, love."

She raised her eyebrows at him, then glanced back at Duncan who shrugged.

Dred pulled off beside a gate and turned to her, chuckling. "Do not get out. I don't want Rowan to turn me into a steer before dinner."

"Steer?" she feebly asked.

"Young, neutered, and destined to become dinner."

"Ah."

Together, Dred and Duncan grabbed a stack of blankets and a large, flat sled. They carted everything out into the field, got the cow rolled onto the sled, and bundled it up. Then they ran the rope out the gate to the truck's hitch.

A gust of brumal air curled inside the truck when Dred got back inside. Callie cringed.

After getting himself situated, and putting the truck in Drive, he looked over at Callie. "She'll make it. Doofus is walking with her."

His grin was in place, but Callie could tell even Dred was worried.

“Every few years we get a bad one,” he continued. “Lost two cattle last week. It was dry but much colder. Snow insulates just enough that sometimes it helps. But don’t you worry your pretty lil’ head over them apples. We’ll get her warmed up in the barn with the others.”

Dred glanced back as he cautiously hauled the downed cow out of the field. “Just wish we had more barns. Three-sided sheds and shelterbelts can only do so much.”

“Shelt—?”

Dred pointed to the thick rows of trees and vegetation lining the fields. “Like big wind breaks without needing an expensive permit to build it.”

He bit into his lollipop with a crunch and tossed the stick in a trash bag in the pocket of his door. “Anyway, I’m going to drop you off at the house, then take the ol’ lady up to the barn.”

“Her first,” Callie blurted. “I’m warm.”

Dred shook his head. “No can do, I’m afraid. Rowan doesn’t like us breaking rules. Women first. Then the animals. Besides—” He grumbled a low note. “No girls allowed in the barn, the bunkhouse, or the shop.”

Callie couldn’t help her surprise. “Why?”

He held up a hand. “I think it’s a dumb rule, too. But he’s got his reasons. All I know is it makes him mad every time I’ve asked over the last two years. So we just know to not ask.”

Off limits areas were common on Callie’s travels, but that didn’t mean she always obeyed. “I can’t even go see it?”

“It’s not you that’ll be in trouble, Miss.”

She weakly crossed her arms. “It’s Avertine. And rules are more like guidelines unless you become a repeat offender.”

Duncan opened the barn doors, and Dred drove inside, dragging the cow in with them.

Dred hid a smile behind a hand. “Bit of a spitfire, ain’t ya?”

She tried to smirk, but her lips were still cold. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

After Duncan had the cow sled unhooked, Dred parked them outside. “Just please stay in here where it’s warm.”

After a glance back to where Rowan maneuvered her trailer beside a timber frame home, she staggered out and followed Dred into the barn.

“Damn it, woman!” Dred threw his hands in the air.

“What’s she doing in here?” Duncan whined. “She’s going to get us in trouble!”

“I know; I know.” Dred closed the door behind them and gave Callie a wary glance. “Her choice. I told her.”

Duncan set an electric blanket over the cow and gently checked one of the ears. “Darn near frost bite.”

Dred scratched his chin. “Alright. Just stay with her until she can stand. After I check on the others in here, I’m going to do another loop to survey the fields. We might have more down after last night.”

Callie stayed close to Dred as he peered inside each stall at a variety of animals from cattle to horses, alpacas, and pigs. It was a struggle to keep up on her stiff legs, but Callie was hoping to catch a glimpse of Butterball. “How long do they have to stay packed in like this?”

Dred rubbed the neck of a horse that poked its head out of a stall. “Just until the severe cold is over.”

The clucking in another stall made Callie sneak a peek through the chicken wire atop the door to find a flock of chickens waddling in and out of a small door to a sheltered grazing area. A large bird strutted over toward her.

“Is that a turkey?” she asked Dred.

“Yes,” Rowan said beside her.

Callie jolted at his surprise appearance. “You snuck up on me.”

Rowan rested his arm atop the stall’s stub wall and tilted his head toward the pen. “His name is Jerky because after that wild bird joined the chickens, he decided it was his job to defend them. So stay away from him.”

The way his focus cut into her told her that Dred was right about his rule.

“What are you doing in the barn?” Rowan curtly asked.

“Where else am I supposed to be?” She pointed to the cow on the floor. “They had to get her. I didn’t want to miss a chance to see

the barn and look for Butterball.”

Rowan’s eyes shone with hurt and a bit of irritation. “They’re in the corner. You need to be inside where it’s warm so you can rest.”

Callie wasn’t sure if his ideas were as sexist as they came across, but she had to know for sure. “Because I’m a woman?”

“Because you deserve better. Because it’s safer. And because I just picked you up out of the snow, half-dead.”

She laced her stiff arms together. “Safe is boring.”

Rowan’s jaw muscles danced. His nostrils flared and he looked away at Duncan and the cow struggling to sit up on the floor.

“What is it, really?” Callie challenged.

Rowan shifted between his boots. Snow melted on the shoulders of his coat. “Please let Dred escort you to the house. I will talk with you when we are done.”

Callie sighed, started to walk away, and then stopped. *I need to be more grateful. He probably saved my life.*

“Thank you for helping me today. I just want to be sure we’re even. So let me know how I can—”

“We are even.” Rowan pointed to the door. “Please go to the house.”



## Chapter 8

Callie hated that she felt scolded, but she acknowledged Dred waiting for her by the door and decided it was best to not stir the pot when she was exhausted and likely not thinking straight.

She let him lead her to the timber-framed house tucked back in the snowy trees. They met up with Ace outside the front doors.

“Here are your keys back, Miss Avertine.” Ace extended a hand. He had more gray in his beard than the others, and the darkest brown eyes Callie had ever seen. His marred boots suggested he had worked there a long time.

Callie took the keys and dumped them in a pocket of her coat. “How long have you worked here?”

“Since Rowan’s father and older brother had charge of the place.” As the wind picked up, he adjusted his hat down, tighter over his head. Ace tapped Dred to steal his attention from the fields. “Boss wants an extra feed run, so I’m heading into town. I’m taking the ATV with the trailer. House is ready for her.”

“Copy. Drive safe.” Dred held the door for Callie and encouraged her inside.

The front entry’s tall ceiling and grand log staircases made Callie forget all about being cold. “Wow.”

Dred motioned to the left. “Parlor. Down the hallway, you’ll find the laundry, kitchen, and dining rooms. Under the catwalk, straight ahead, is the great room. To the right is Rowan’s office. You’ll be staying upstairs.”

But something was missing. It was the middle of December and their house wasn’t decorated. “Does Rowan not celebrate Christmas?”

“We all do, but we don’t have time for that stuff, Miss Avertine.” He picked the left set of steps and motioned for her to follow.

Callie made it only a few steps up before a wave of lightheadedness gripped her.

Dred steadied her and helped her to the top. “Might be best for you to just clean up and get some sleep. Your room is the first door on the right. Rowan is in the master suite at the end of the hallway, over the kitchen, though he’s rarely in there.”

Callie pushed inside the room and found a log bedroom set with a few of her items on the furniture. The light fixtures, switches and lamps featured a black bear theme while the curtains bore prints of moose and elk. “Cozy.”

“Rowan designed this place himself.” Dred motioned to the corner of the room. “You should find some of your clothes in the closet. Ace was supposed to grab ya’ some. I don’t know what he got, though.”

She walked to the closet and found some sweaters and jeans. “This works, thanks.”

Dred rested a hand on the doorknob. “If you need anything else, just holler.”

“Dred,” she hurriedly said.

He paused as he was about to close the door.

“Why is Rowan sad?”

“What makes you think that?”

She shrugged. “It’s just a feeling. This place it beautiful, but it feels empty.”

Dred hung his head and nodded to himself. “Well, you’re not wrong. But I honestly don’t pry much, Miss. I learned that lesson the first time. I guess you’d say that guideline’s become a rule. Get some rest.”

After Dred closed the door, Callie removed her boots and stepped into the bathroom. The slate tile was warm beneath her cold toes as she walked to the shower. The guest bath had a window view facing the road they’d come in on. Out in that direction, all Callie could see was the dark tree line and miles of falling snow.

*A beautiful place to be stuck for Christmas. She frowned. I’ll call home when I’ve had some rest.*

After a long shower to get warmed up, her cheek throbbed. Callie wiped away a spot in the steamed up mirror and realized just

how close she may have been to not surviving the morning if it wasn't for Rowan and his crew. Her face was decorated in royal hues and a fair bit of swelling that would definitely concern any passerby.

*Guess it's a right side only photo year.*

Finally warm, safe, and in a fresh set of clothes, Callie shuffled to the bed and checked the time on her phone. It was three in the afternoon.

*Just a short nap. Then I'll call home and find out what's going on with Rowan.*

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The cough started soon after Callie's eyes closed. It wouldn't stop, making rest difficult. Outside, the light dimmed and disappeared. Someone entered, followed by another, speaking in tongues Callie couldn't decipher with her head spinning.

Cold packs regularly traded out on her face. Spicy medicine swirled over her tongue, then soup, and honey lemon tea. Callie broke out in sweats, froze, and then had to kick the blankets off again. At some point that she couldn't remember, a fluffy black and white dog had curled up by her feet.

It was a dizzying walk to the bathroom when she needed to go. On the third day, a young woman wearing a mask helped her out of bed. When Callie returned from the bathroom, the bed had fresh sheets. A mug of tea with cloves and an orange round sat steaming on the night stand.

Callie wasn't sure where the nightgown came from or how she'd ended up in it. But it was far more comfortable than sleeping in jeans. Sinking to the edge of the bed, she savored a sip of the spiced orange tea. It quenched her thirst wonderfully, and the moment it was gone, Callie sank back into a deep sleep.



## Chapter 9

Daylight dwindled again, and Callie became aware of someone else in the room. His voice was low and soft and sad, making Callie forget all about her own troubles.

“Forgive me, Father. I have never been as kind, understanding, or faithful as you wanted me to be, as my family wanted. But I am doing the best I know how.” He sighed and fabric rustled nearby. “You can take the cattle you need, the horses or the sheep, but please do not take her, too. I have not forgotten my promise to you. But I need to know you still have faith in me.”

In her half-awake state, it took Callie a moment to realize Rowan had lost someone and blamed himself for whatever had happened. Hearing him shift in a chair beside the bed made her crack her sticky eyes open.

“Rowan?” She tried to say his name, but it came out hoarse and airy.

He eagerly leaned forward. “Callie—hi.” Rowan guided a strand of hair away from her face, checked the pulse at her wrist, and finally inspected her eyes. “How are you feeling today?”

“Voice says enough,” she rasped and squeaked. The effort of talking made her throat ache.

“Bruise looks better, and you’re conscious. For a few days, I was worried we were going to lose you.”

*Days?* “How many?” Callie stopped trying to speak and resorted to whispering.

“Four.” His voice was a soothing rumble she liked a lot.

“Sorry to be such an imposition.”

A light smile touched the corners of his mouth. “Never were. Can I get you anything?”

“Any chance you’ll let me leave the room? I’d like a change of scenery.”



He let out a bashful laugh. “Yeah, if you’re up for changing. I don’t really want the guys to see you in Penny’s nightgown.” He motioned to the tea. “She works on the ranch, taking care of the house to save up for college.”

Callie pushed herself up in bed. “She’s the one that checks in me?”

“The only other one beside myself.”

“Not checking me out?” Callie teased.

Rowan blushed. “Well I, uh—”

“Very stylish in this muumuu covered in cat faces. It does not get sexier than this.” Callie faked a model pose, which wasn’t easy in her weak state.

Nevertheless, Rowan chuckled.

A host of little clicks led a border collie up to Rowan’s side. The dog squeezed in between his knees and the bed, then licked Callie’s closest hand.

“Hi, sweetheart. You must be the one who kept me company when the others were gone.” Callie gave the dog’s head a gentle rub. The effort was exhausting.

“This is Gigi. She’s a real rocket when she’s herding in the field. But there’s just too much snow, so she’s stuck inside.” Rowan scratched the dog’s neck, drew her close and kissed the top of her head, then stood. “I’ll let you get dressed.” He paused and nervously rubbed the back of his neck. “Unless you need help. Penny’s cooking downstairs.”

“Help? From you?” Callie gaped at him, not that she minded the idea of being close to him after everything he’d done for her but not while she was changing.

His face reddened. “I meant, I’ll cook and get Penn—”

“Just shoo!” Callie laughed as she waved him out. “I’ll be dressed in a second.”

Rowan politely closed the door.

It took her far longer to get upright and dressed than she planned. Rowan seemed to ask if she was okay or if she needed anything every five seconds. Back in her jeans and a clean red sweater, she carefully walked to the door.

“Still a bit woozy,” she admitted when she finally stepped out of the room. “Will you help me down the stairs?”

He offered her a hand, which she took. Every step down sent blood rushing through her head. Gigi raced to the bottom floor where she spun a circle, looked up at them, then launched into the great room.

“You weren’t kidding,” Callie remarked.

Rowan directed her attention to a picture on the wall of him and a tiny black and white puppy. “Found her under a trailer in an abandoned mobile home park at the end of town.”

When they finally made it to the bottom, Callie noticed a radio sitting on the last post. It relayed conversations among Ace, Dred, and Duncan.

Rowan glanced at it and frowned. “I’m going to have to go back to work soon, Callie. I’m sorry.”

She nodded in understanding but immediately regretted it. Callie grabbed her sloshing head. “Ooh. Can’t do that yet.”

“Why don’t you sit here in this recliner by the fire? I’ll get Penny to bring you something to eat. And I’ll be back later tonight to check on you.”

Callie sank into the plush brown leather chair and wished he didn’t have to go. She caught his hand as he turned to leave. “Promise?”

His shoulders rose with a startled breath. Rowan hesitated, then seemed to set aside whatever fear she’d evoked. He wrapped his hand around hers, met her gaze, and nodded. The way his thumb swept over her knuckles sent her heart racing.

“Be safe, please. I’m in no shape to rescue you,” she jeered.

He smiled, slipped his hand from hers, and walked to the foyer where he picked up the radio.

“Miss Avertine, Callie. May I call you Callie?” A young blond woman set a tray of tea and food on the end table between the recliner Callie was in and the sofa beside her that Gigi had curled up on.

“Yes, of course. And thank you. Is this the tea you made me this morning?”

The woman she assumed was Penny grinned. “Little bit of whiskey makes it extra good.”

“Is that why I conked out afterward?” Callie covered her mouth in shock.

Penny sat on the sofa beside her. “I didn’t expect you to pound it.”

“Warn me next time,” Callie said with a grin.

Penny pointed to the mug. “That has whiskey in it.”

Callie sipped it and set it down. “Thanks. I will do my best to exercise a little self-control.”

Outside, Rowan crossed the snowy lawn and headed for the barn, talking on his radio. Callie couldn’t quite figure him out. One moment he was calm and sweet, the next he was stressed, sad, or had some weird rule like no women in the barn.

“So what’s his story?” she asked Penny.

Penny knotted her hands together. “I don’t know if it’s best coming from me, but I doubt he’ll tell you. He always tries to open up but then backs out and avoids actually offering any useful details. He’s really pretty private, that one.”

“I just don’t understand—”

Penny nodded. “Why he doesn’t want us in the barn.”

“Yeah.”

She drew in a deep breath. “When Sadina, his little sister, and I were younger, we climbed into the barn to play with the animals. We often did it, but the baby goats and pigs were our favorites.” Penny pointed up the hillside. “My family used to live at the farm across the ridge. They moved to a bigger farm in Washington a few years back. I stayed with Duncan’s family so I could finish senior year in high school. He is the same age as me.

“Anyway, the Connors moved the animals while they cleaned out the pens. Mr. Connors left Rowan in charge while he and the older son, Rolland, went to the feed store. The long and the short is that Sadina and I climbed into the wrong stall. Mr. Connors had recently bought a horse that wasn’t broken in yet. Sadina, bless her brave heart, tried to calm the horse down after our surprise appearance. One kick broke her neck.”

Callie took the mug of tea in her hands, hoping it could help warm her after such sad news. “So Rowan blames himself for his sister’s death because he wasn’t watching you two while keeping an eye on this entire place?”

Penny wiped a tear from an eye. “His mother died just months later of broken heart syndrome or something. She lost her only daughter.

“To make things worse, Mr. Connors couldn’t be in the house after the loss of his wife and daughter. He and Rowan got in a lot of fights.” Penny stole a cookie from the plate on the tray, then sat back on the sofa. “I don’t think he ever forgave Rowan, and that’s why he moved to the Yukon Territory. He lives in an off grid cabin up there with no way to talk to his sons.”

Callie’s heartbreak for Rowan grew. “Even Rowan’s older brother?”

“Yeah.” Penny shrugged. “Maybe he felt it was unfair to talk to Rolland and not Rowan, I don’t know. Either way, Rolland is still around. He has investments and does stock trading or something back East. He’s still in the cattle business, but doesn’t handle the herd anymore. After their father left, Rolland didn’t feel the pressure to stay, so he left too. But he stops by now and then and remembers his brother’s birthday.”

Penny toyed with her sapphire necklace. “Even remembered mine this year. But Rowan never calls him, anymore. All Rowan knows how to do is work. I think he buries himself in the ranch responsibilities because it feels like punishment or maybe because he’s trying to keep a piece of his family alive, what’s left of it.”

Callie tried out the bowl of soup, despite the sympathy knotting her stomach. *I have to get better. It sounds like Rowan needs some help.* “You’re very insightful. That explains a lot. I’ll be sure not to step on Rowan’s toes again.”

Penny took a bite of her cookie, chewed, then motioned toward the window. “Spent a lot of my childhood here. The Connors lived in the bunkhouse back then. Rowan built this place, hoping his brother would visit, maybe his father. Never could keep a girl for long because they didn’t like how much he worked. Hell, if I didn’t have the hots for Duncan, I’d be up for Rowan. He’s a hard case but a keeper in heart.”

Callie snorted a laugh. “Duncan? Not Dred?”

Penny made a face. “Not a chance.”

“But Dred is sweet and funny.”

The woman sighed. “This is going to sound hypocritical as I eat this cookie, but that man is made of candy. I like sweet, but I also need some spice, something with flare. Duncan likes dancing, camping, and overlanding. Dred only knows the drunken shimmy into his bunk, sweets, and fixing diesels.”

Callie burst into giggles which quickly turned into a coughing fit.

Penny sat forward. “Can I get you some medicine?”

“No, no. I think I’m finally getting it all out. And I’m awake. I don’t want to go back to bed yet. That medicine always seems to knock me out.”

Penny slid back in her seat. “So you know a little about us. Tell me about you. I gathered that you’re a travel writer and have been all over the continent in your trailer. But what’s something most people wouldn’t know about you?”

Callie had to think on it for a moment. “Tough question.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean I spend most of my time learning about what’s going on around me and then translating it into the best article I can that addresses all the positive experiences and potential concerns for differently capable readers.” She tucked her feet up in the chair and admired the crackling fire before her. It was disappointing to have so little to say about herself. “I don’t really think much about what I want or like. I mean, this adventure is going to make for quite a story, names removed of course. But I don’t know. I guess I like full-size bathrooms, being outside, and fruitcake.”

“Fruit—what?” Penny gaped. “You’re kidding. That stuff is so gross!”

“I grew up eating it at Christmas,” Callie defended.

“Sounds like it’s more of a tradition that evokes fond memories than a taste bud happy dance.” Penny arched a brow.

Callie wagged her head, felt it swim a little, and grimaced. “You might be right.”

“There must be something else.”

Callie watched Rowan ride by on Buck, headed out into the fields and considered a newfound interest in cowboys. She'd met several before on trail rides. None of them had struck her as quite as enticing as Rowan. Yet the way he sat hunkered forward against the wind had Callie worried about how well he took care of himself.

"When was the last time the guys had a break?" Callie asked.

"They trade off and on as needed." Penny took another bite of her cookie. "But that means that they often operate on little sleep and less food, especially in the winter."

It didn't seem fair. "I want to take them something. Can you help me cook something up?"

Seeing Ace walking toward the house, Penny got to her feet. "There's cocoa in the kitchen and soup in the Crockpot. The guys skipped lunch, so I hoped they'd come in for an early dinner. But you're welcome to take charge if you feel up to it. I have a feeling I might be needed soon."



## Chapter 10

Ace slipped in the door and closed it. He was out of breath and dusted with snow. “Penny?”

The young woman grabbed her coat. “You need my small hands, yes?”

Callie tried to get up, but the swoosh of her vision kept her in her chair. “Can I help?”

“No. You just stay right there, Miss Avertine.” Ace checked in the direction Rowan had disappeared. “I’m afraid Mama’s too far gone to save her. I wager we got minutes left for the calf if we’re lucky.”

Penny hunkered under Ace’s arm. “Rowan will never forgive me if he ever finds out I’m helping.”

Determined to assist as thanks for their care, Callie slowly got her to her feet. But she acknowledged that it was risky for her to go out into the cold with as faint as she felt. “Gigi? Any chance you’d like to go for a walk with me?”

Callie missed her Siberian Husky and felt better having Gigi around. If something went wrong, Gigi would know.

The border collie jumped down and followed Callie into the kitchen. After a quick search through the cupboards, Callie found enough thermoses to take the guys a decent lunch. It sounded like they wouldn’t be able to take a break any time soon.

Slipping her feet into her boots by the door, Callie borrowed a coat and noticed a scarf hanging up on the same hook. She snatched it up and wrapped it around her neck.

Gigi stayed close, tracking with Callie along the worn path between the house and the barn. The snow was deeper than she remembered, coming up to almost her knees.

The barn door was cracked open just enough for Gigi to slip inside. Callie only managed a small nudge with her limited strength

and joined Gigi.

Dred greeted her with a smile as he closed the door behind her like it was nothing. “What you got there, Miss?”

“Cocoa and soup. You’ll have to open them to find out which one is which,” she admitted. “I honestly don’t remember which I fill with what.”

“Long as you didn’t mix them up, I’m good,” Dred remarked, taking one and opening it. “Score! Cocoa for lunch!”

Callie set the rest of the thermoses on a nearby workbench covered in tack supplies. “Sugar will only give you a boost. It won’t sustain you.”

“I live for boost!” Dred drank half the thermos then motioned for her to follow. He led her to the stall where Ace and Duncan did their best to clean the newborn calf. “Penny saved the day again.”

The young woman stood at a sink not far away, her hair swirled up in a haphazard bun, washing her arms.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Penny threw her coat on and hurried back outside, barely giving the men half a glance.

After learning what she had about the Connor’s past, Callie wondered if being in the barn made Penny uncomfortable in a similar way to Rowan. “What are you going to name her?”

“Penny named her Lucky,” Duncan said in admiration. Ace scowled at him, making the young man’s smile fall. Duncan’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “Fine. *I* named her Lucky.”

Callie felt awkward and gave them a bit of space. Noticing Dred trying to drink his cocoa while refilling the water buckets, she motioned for him to sit and eat. “You’ll get a stomach ache from working and eating.”

“Never have in my whole life.” Dred held his cup of cocoa in one hand and carried a bucket to the sink with the other. “It’s probably best if you head back where you can rest anyway. But thanks for the offer.”

To Callie, it was a simple task, something she could help with even at a slow pace. “I don’t mind. I’ll take the south side.”

Dred turned to her and gaped. “You know which direction is which out here?”



“Always.” Callie picked up an empty bucket from a stall and carried to the sink. When Dred removed his, she filled hers. “I’ve seen the sun rise and fall enough times from that bedroom to know which way is north and south here. Kind of important when I travel a lot to be able to know which direction I’m headed.”

Callie finished filling the buckets on her side of the barn before checking on Butterball and his mother at the end. The calf stuck his nose through a knothole in a board and sniffed her hand.

“I don’t have any apples, sweetie. I’m sorry.” Callie reached over the stall door and patted Butterball’s head. The calf’s coat was much fluffier when it was dry and warm.

“Must remember you.” Ace walked up to her and smiled down at the calf. “Thanks for giving them shelter.”

“I appreciate the returned favor,” she said.

Ace scuffed a boot in the dirt. “As much as I know Rowan needs to change, he’s not going to like finding you here.”

She grumbled. “Tough shit. I am tired of living in a box. Besides, if I can help, it makes me feel better.”

“Unfortunately, Miss Avertine, we have to answer for why we allowed you in here.”

Callie crossed her arms and huffed.

“Speak your piece.”

She lifted a hand toward the stall where Duncan cared for the calf. “You’re leading Rowan to think you’re capable of something you’re not, and then also not giving credit to Penny where it’s due. Who is that really protecting?”

Duncan groaned and shielded his face in the nook of an elbow.

Dred set a filled water bucket in the last stall and turned to Ace. “She’s not wrong.”

“I tried to turn that boy around when he was younger. I’m tellin’ you, it’s wasted energy.” Ace slumped against a post. “He’ll just dig his spurs in and shut us out all over again.”

Dred lifted his free hand. “I know. I just wish he could see things her way. Penny’s a critical part of the crew when we need her. One of these days, it’s going to be impossible to avoid Rowan finding out.”

“Okay, well, since I have no need to stay here and endure what you have to with Rowan, I’ll confront the storm.” Callie motioned to the thermoses. “Please eat.” She gave Dred a pointed glance. “*Food.*”

Dred hung his head. “Yes, Miss.”

Callie sighed and walked to the door where she picked up a pair of thermoses for Rowan. Behind her, she heard Dred mutter to the others.

“He’s going to get a kick out of seeing her in his coat.”

Duncan snickered. Out of the corner of her eye, Callie saw Ace swat at Dred.

“You keep that quiet. This place has needed a change for a long time.”

Callie tugged hard on the door. It budged just enough. Gigi squeezed out with her, fur covered in hay.

“His beef with us has been stale a long time,” Dred remarked, chuckling. “We don’t need change. We need flavor!”

“Sugar is not a flavoring,” Duncan snorted as Callie leaned against the door to close it.

Dred drew a candy cane out of his pocket and unwrapped the end. “Sure it is! It’s sweet. That’s a flavor.”

*Oh, my gosh. His pancreas has to hate him.* Callie closed the door.

“Looks like you had fun. Where did you go?” Callie asked Gigi.

The dog raced ahead to where Rowan rode along a nearby fence, back toward the barn. He stopped and got down from Buck when he saw her.

Callie met him half-way.

“What are you doing out in the snow?” Rowan wrapped Buck’s reins over a post with a practiced hand, then gripped her arms. “This can’t be good for you.”

“Thanks for your concern, but I’m not made of glass, Rowan. The cold feels good on my cheek, anyway.” She lifted the thermoses. “I brought you some lunch.”

A flash of hurt crossed his eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Callie didn’t have the strength to hold the heavy bottles long and lowered her arms. “I know you’re just trying to protect Penny and the other women that visit, like me. But sometimes bad things just happen.”

Rowan blinked slowly and scanned the fields. Tired wrinkles had formed around his eyes from squinting for hours through the snow.

“Besides, I recently had a fresh reminder of my limits,” Callie added. “I’ve got enough energy for something small. So here you go. Penny said you might not make it inside anytime soon. She said she wasn’t allowed in the barn. So I volunteered.”

Rowan reluctantly took the items she handed him and straightened. His gaze fell upon the house, making Callie wonder if he realized Penny had told her everything.

“You have to accept your limits, Rowan, and take care of yourself, too, you know.” Unwrapping the scarf from her neck, Callie looped it around Rowan’s. “It’s something I learned on the road. You can make tons of plans and backup plans, get your wheel bearings greased, new tires, new brakes, the works, to be sure you’ll make it to the next place. But you can still get a flat with a nail. You can have a spare, a handyman jack, and a rattle gun with a socket for the lug nuts but be stuck on too much of a slope to safely do the repair yourself. Shit happens. All we can do is our best.”

Callie tucked the loose flaps of the scarf inside his collar and stepped back. Her neck was cold, but she didn’t have to stay outside like he did. “And we can only give life our best effort when we are at our best, which means proper food and rest.”

He opened his mouth, looking ready to protest.

She didn’t want to give him the opportunity and backed away. “Thanks for letting me borrow your coat.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” Confusion clashed with his smile.

Callie patted her leg and called the dog to her then started back for the house. “Don’t work too late. You still owe me that chat! You promised! And Connors keep their word!”

His response was faint through the wind. “Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled to herself, hoping she had helped. But it felt more forced than she wanted it to. Letting Gigi inside, Callie hung up Rowan’s coat and kicked her boots off.

Penny had the fire going and a mug of orange spice tea waiting for her. The woman seemed nervous as she skittered about the house, cleaning up miscellaneous things.

“Penny?” Callie joined Gigi on the sofa. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm hmm. Sure.”

“That sounds like a lie.” Callie positioned herself so she could watch the woman. “I’ve talked to a lot of people over the years. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Penny twisted her fingers together. “I just don’t like being in the barn. It brings back bad memories that I have to cover up with new experiences and images. So I touch lots of things and look at lots of things. It helps me forget the memory of Sadina lying there in the stall—so still.”

Callie’s heart broke for the young woman. “I think you are very brave to face your fear in order to help deliver the newborns.”

“Just do what I have to. If they have a chance to live, I want to give it to them because I can’t give it to her.” Penny sniffled and hurried out of the room.

It was then that Callie understood why Rowan worked so hard to save Butterball and his mother and why he searched so far for them.

Callie thought back to Rowan picking her up in the snow and carrying her to Dred’s truck. He had to have been far more exhausted than her after hiking all that way back to the ranch only to return for her hours later. Yet he had lifted her with ease, putting her needs before his. He had gathered the pieces of her frozen body and given life back to her.

It was time someone returned the favor, especially when it came to his heart.



## Chapter 11

Callie's phone let out a blaring ring that jolted her awake and made her head pound to the frantic beat of her heart. She squinted at the bright light beaming in through the windows. Cracks had formed between a few clouds, despite the ever-falling snow. But it was a promising sign.

*Crap!* She'd slept through the night and into the next morning, once again missing her chat with Rowan.

She turned on the sofa to search for her phone and found it had fallen on the floor. The house was empty save for Penny who hummed as she stirred a pot in the kitchen, and Gigi who was curled up on the southwestern patterned rug by the fire.

The picture ID on Callie's phone showed her brother. A small surge of panic at forgetting to call helped rouse her mind.

Callie sat up and answered. "Hey, broskie. How's the fam?"

"Oh, thank the Lord!" He puffed out a breath. "I've been trying to call you for days! Where on earth are you?"

She hummed a low note in thought and watched Ace and Rowan chat by the barn. Rowan held a cow sled and Ace a pair of nippers. Their short, jerky movements and tense postures suggested they argued. "You know, stuck in Montana thanks to the storm."

"Where exactly? I can call for a tow or whatever you need," her brother replied.

She smiled to herself. "I'm good. I found myself a cowboy."

"You what?"

Callie's heart lurched in her chest. "That's not what I meant. I was stuck on the side of the road. He was looking for some lost cattle. We sort of found each other. I'm staying at his place now. Got the trailer parked outside and everything."

"That's not how you made it sound at first." Her brother's tone suggested he'd already unraveled the meaning behind her slip of the

tongue. “Sounds like you like him.”

Based on Rowan’s trouble with women in the barn, Callie wasn’t sure there was a place for her in Rowan’s heart, only that she needed to show him the barn wasn’t cursed. “Eh, not sure. How’s mom?”

The phone rustled. “She’s getting around okay, but I think she picked up something at the therapist’s office after her last visit. She insisted on going Christmas shopping. Anyway, seems like a cold to me, but we’re watching her. I take it you won’t be home for Christmas...again.”

Callie hated the disappointment in his voice. “I was trying, really.”

“You always say that. And I get it. You have to do what you have to do. Just don’t forget about us.”

“I sent your girls birthday gifts this year,” she defended.

“It’s not the same, *Calliope*. You know that. I just don’t understand what it was about this place that made you want to leave so badly.” He sighed and something ticked in the background. If Callie had to guess, he was in their father’s office.

“You’re working on your vacation. To your daughters, that’s basically like not being there.” Callie hated feeling guilty for wanting to explore. “Why did *you* leave home?”

“Don’t pull that blame game out. I went to Boise. You left the country.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “I needed to know I could make something of myself without you all encouraging it along. As much as I love the support, I needed to know I was worth a damn by myself.”

“Why?” Her brother’s voice was tense. “You missed the girls’ first birthdays, their births, Dad’s awards ceremony, and Cousin Dalen’s graduation. Do you want me to keep going?”

Callie drew in a calming breath and slowly let it out. Her irritation always gave her a sharp tongue, but she was tired of feeling guilty. Sacrifices had to be made, and Callie figured most people had enough of their own stuff going on that she didn’t need to be there. In her mind, if it wasn’t critical to survival, then it wasn’t necessary. But that was a lesson she’d learned on the road that others simply didn’t have as much experience with.

“This conversation is heading in a direction that does not make me want to come back, Caleb. And you mistake my leaving as me not wanting to be there when I really just wanted to see more of what this world is all about. I wanted to experience it and share the wonderful things about all of the little towns like ours that go unnoticed and undervalued by society because the big cities steal the spotlight and control everything. I wanted the world to see the value of small communities because I had a good childhood. A great one compared to a lot of others I’ve seen. I know I’m lucky, Caleb. And because of that, I wanted to help elevate towns like ours. But that meant I had to give up mine.”

She thought of Rowan, how he seemed to work his life away and was unable to get himself out of his mental rut. “What happens to a person when they never leave home?”

Caleb grumbled but didn’t respond.

“They never know anything else,” Callie answered for him. “And that has a whole host of complications. Benefits too, like always being close to those who stay with them. But the consequence of not being able to see when it’s time to let go of something can burden a heart and a mind with the guilt and memories of mistakes that end up suffocating them because they are constantly surrounded by reminders from the environment and the people.”

Caleb cut in. “People get second chances in small towns, Calliope. And they’re more successful at sticking with the better version of themselves because they have support.”

“It’s not the case for everyone,” she defended. “Some leave because they want to grow on their own, get a fresh start, and not have siblings remind them during every conversation of all their past mistakes.”

“I don’t do that.”

Callie slapped a hand over her face in exasperation. “You *just did!* Damn it, Caleb!”

Her brother grew quiet on the phone.

Callie felt bad about defending herself because of her brother’s reaction. “There were a lot of times that I had worked very hard to secure a stay somewhere, put money down to reserve a space or a ticket to an event. I couldn’t just drop everything and run across the country to see you. It would have burned a lot of time, money, and

energy to be home for a birthday party then have to run back to my life and try to apologize there and patch up things I'd missed or networked contacts that I betrayed. Yes, I went further from home than you did. That doesn't mean your distance is okay and mine isn't. We made our choices. Your kids are your life. My travels were mine. Can we *please* move on?"

His response was cold and flat. "If that's what you want."

"Yes. I want to be there. I am *trying*. Please acknowledge that. Right now, the snow is almost two feet deep where I am. I don't know what else to tell you."

He grunted in annoyance. "It sounds like you should've tried to come home earlier this month."

Callie groaned and pinched the spot between her brows, attempting to push back a forming headache.

"And maybe you need to stop planning so many events and stays in advance," her brother argued. "So you can have more free time to enjoy life."

Callie knew what her brother said was true. "Still, that puts me at more risk for not having a place to stay. I am fine with sleeping overnight at truck stops, but I prefer a site with hookups. It's difficult to rest when semis are pulling in and out of the spaces around me all night. Life on the road is full of the unexpected. It's why Elijah and I didn't work out. He wanted *boring*. I wanted exploration."

"Are you saying I'm boring?" Caleb asked.

"Duh. Stressed out between your job and your kids, sure, but totally boring."

"At least I'm not a traitor."

Callie's attempt to tease her brother had failed. "Ouch."

A faint woman's voice carried over the phone. The speakers crackled and warmth filled Callie's ear.

"Hi, sweetheart."

"Mom?" Callie choked up at the rough tone of her mother's voice. A door shut hard in the background, and her mother sighed. "How are you?"

"Doing alright. Tricia is here helping. The girls are too. We've made a royal mess of the kitchen. Sure wish we had your expert frosting skills to help with all these gingerbread men."



“I’m sorry, Mom.” Callie twisted a loose thread from her sweater around her finger.

“It’s okay. Are you safe where you are?”

Callie nodded to herself. “Yes.”

Her mother sounded tired but happy. “Then that’s all that matters. We know you love us. Just know we love you, and you’re welcome here for Christmas if you can make it. And of course after Christmas, too. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of treats left over. We always do. And don’t worry about your brother. He’s been in a mood of sorts lately.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll let you go so you can get back to baking cookies with the girls. Just take care of yourself, please. I love you. And I’ll be home as soon as I can.” The weight of Callie’s absence felt stronger that day. “And I don’t have any plans after Christmas. I’d like to take a vacation from my vacation, if that’s okay.”

“Love you, too, honey. And it would be wonderful to have you stay a while.”

“Thanks, Mom. Get some rest.”

“You too.”

Callie hung up and rested her phone in her lap. Her frustration made her squeeze the device. An urge to throw it at the stone fireplace swelled inside her, but Callie knew better. It would help nothing, and it definitely wouldn’t get her home any faster. Her mother was hiding something and wasn’t doing as well as she had said. The weariness in her voice was enough to convince Callie that she needed to get home as soon as possible.



## Chapter 12

“Callie?” Rowan’s deep voice curled softly around her.

She swiveled on the sofa.

Rowan’s sleeves were damp, his jeans were dirty, and he held two mugs of cider in his hands. “May I sit with you? Or do you need a moment?”

Callie shifted over on the sofa. “Please. I apologize for being on the phone. How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough to know that you are right. And I could benefit from your advice.” He handed her a mug, glanced out at Ace, then sat beside her. “It has recently been brought to my attention that it is unfair of me to expect you to understand and follow rules that most people don’t have on their ranches. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable in the barn or outside. I just don’t want anything to happen to you or the others I care about.”

She was still in the midst of winding down from her conversation with her brother. Callie was frustrated with herself and upset that another attempt to make it home for Christmas had been thwarted by some grand plan beyond her understanding. It seemed that she could do nothing right.

Callie noticed a button on Rowan’s flannel shirt was about to slip free. As much as she liked the idea of seeing more of him, she needed to focus and gingerly reached out to fix it.

He leaned back at caught her hand. “What are you doing?”

“The button. I just wanted to fix it,” she admitted.

Rowan looked down at himself. “It’s just a button.”

“I know, but even if it’s small, it’s something I can put back in place,” she mumbled.

He released her hand and nodded in understanding. “Okay.”

Callie reached the rest of the way and slipped the button through the hole. She didn't have to smooth the warm fabric with her hand, but she did. Her fingertips picked up the thump of his heart.

Rowan was either nervous or pissed.

"Please continue." Callie sipped her cider then clutched the mug between her hands, trying to steady herself for whatever he had to say.

"It seems you've stirred up the crew since you arrived," Rowan remarked in defeat.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause trouble."

From the kitchen came the susurrus of a coat, the quiet clomp of boots, and the squeak of the cold back door swinging open and shut. Penny had left the house.

Rowan's eyes tracked the young woman before he hung his head. "I have been unfair to make her so uncomfortable in the barn. I have been unfair to you and the other women who have been out here."

Callie eased back into the sofa, intrigued by the idea of other women in Rowan's life. He was a looker with a cut jaw-line and warm eyes hiding behind dark eyelashes. When he smiled, it made her heart dance. "How many others have you had out here?"

"Not many. But Ace and Dred have had girlfriends in the past. It never worked out because those two want to stay here more than I do." Rowan rested an arm across the backrest. "I tend to avoid getting close to women in town because they're already working their own farms and ranches. And the few that come out for business reasons, like the veterinarian's assistant, are already married."

"Are you planning to leave?" Callie asked.

His attention drifted to the bunkhouse just visible through the window beside the fireplace. "I've been trying to keep alive a family that left this place ages ago, my fault or not."

"Penny doesn't blame you," Callie blurted.

Rowan dragged his eyes to hers, making Callie regret her impulse. She promptly sipped her cider and lifted a shoulder as if it wasn't a big deal.

His jaw cocked to one side, and he set his mug on the coffee table. "Penny is a lot like Sadina was. She doesn't blame anyone,

even when she should.”

Callie didn't want to get into another argument after her fight with her brother. She set her mug beside his and daringly took his closest hand. “I know I am of a different world, Rowan. But I have learned something that freed me from my past while I was on the road.”

He studied her deeply, a hint of broken hope in his eyes.

She cupped his hand in the spoon of hers, then turned his palm over to inspect the calluses and recent rope burn. “The only moment that truly matters is this one, right now. And while years on one set of tires can wear them down, the path I choose today will tell me if they will hold or they will blow. So I can choose to replace them or keep them. And I can choose a highway or a rocky back road.”

Callie swept a thumb over his calluses, knowing how hard he must have worked to acquire them. Rowan didn't object to her touch. He seemed rather shocked by it.

“Making no decision is also a choice,” she continued, aiming to smooth over any awkwardness from her contact. But something told her Rowan needed it as much as she did. “It will keep me rolling on the worn tires on the same road, still building my risk for a blowout. So you need to decide if you want to keep going down the same path.

“Think about the future you want for yourself and what decisions you need to make today so that is possible tomorrow. But don't let the past determine your future. It may have got us to where we are, but *this* moment will decide the next.”

A slight smile cracked on Rowan's face. He curled his fingers around hers. “Lots of tire analogies. I take it you've been through a few sets.”

She laughed. “A few. More when I was younger and didn't have as much income. I pushed the limits a lot more back then.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and then rested his elbows on his knees. “Sometimes, I want out of this life and the burden of my family's demise. Other times, it just takes too much effort to consider trying to change things.”

Callie soaked in the heat of his hands in hers. “I know. But there are always going to be people who want things from us, just like there will always be changes we need to make in life. That doesn't overrule the fact that sometimes we're just too damn tired to

get up and give more of ourselves. You can't help anyone or change anything until you're ready. So there's no sense in feeling guilty about it. But I guess I could take a lesson on that myself with regard to my brother. He's pushy."

"I'm sure it's just because he cares but sucks at showing it. I have a little experience with that." Rowan surveyed the snow through the windows for a long moment. "Now that the sun's coming out, I think I can plow the driveway out to the road. Forecast shows a break in the storm for a few days. So if you'd like, you and I can go into town tonight and get whatever supplies you need. You might be able to make it home for Christmas Eve. But you'll have to leave early tomorrow. I mean, you're more than welcome to stay here for Christmas. But—"

"I would, yes."

Rowan stuttered. "W— uh. Which one?"

She thought for a moment. "Both. But I can't have both."

His eyebrows danced with his confusion.

Callie felt better that morning and wagged her head without consequence. "I love it here despite the challenges. It's a beautiful place. You all work together well to keep this place going. It's a raw lifestyle that I searched for on my trips. I'd like to stay and help out while learning how everything works. But I also haven't been home for Christmas in years."

"How about you get bundled up then, and I will get the plow truck warmed and bring her around," he offered.

"Right now? My cider isn't even cold."

Rowan drank the last of his mug in three big gulps and grinned. "Thought we might do a little Christmas shopping, too. I could use a break, and I was hoping it would give you a happy memory of this place before you go."

Callie had several good memories already, most of which involved Rowan.

"But don't waste your cider." He motioned to her mug. "Down the hatch!"

It was a struggle to drink her mug empty, but Callie managed. "Anything to have a chance to do some festive gift hunting."

Rowan offered her a hand and helped her up. "Don't keep me waiting too long."

Callie watched him throw on his coat and boots, then hurry out into the brisk air.

“What did you do?” Penny asked with an open mouth smile, coming in to collect their mugs. “I haven’t seen that man so excited in ages.”

Callie wasn’t sure she’d done anything. “We’re going Christmas shopping.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad he’s finally taking some time off. It’s probably been months since he took a day for himself.” Penny walked to the kitchen. “And if I remember right, he used to like peppermint hot cocoa.”

It sounded like Rowan had kept himself cooped up at the Ranch too long. “Thanks for the recommendation. I’ll see what I can do.”



## Chapter 13

Rowan pulled up beside Callie outside of the house in a dark silver truck, sporting a front plow. Chains clinked lightly on the tires as he stopped. He lowered the window. “Ready?”

The bashful blush darkening his face told Callie he was nervous and excited. She eagerly opened the door and climbed inside his lifted truck.

Rowan turned the heater on high. Even her seat was warm. The faint sound of Christmas music filled the cab. It was a pleasant change from the man she’d known the day prior.

He started them down the road. “This will take a few passes to clear enough snow that your dually can make it out. I’m not sure I’d try to pull the trailer out just yet. I think you’ll have trouble at the next mountain pass. So I want you to know, it’s okay to leave it here until the snow has melted enough that you can safely leave. Or longer if you want. Your trailer is where my brother used to park his. He hasn’t been home in a long time.”

“Why not?” Callie admired the snowy evergreen forest bordering the ranch and realized she and Rowan’s brother were in the same *wandering* position.

“He never wanted to be a rancher. He enjoys investing, playing with money, but also helping other ranchers with their financial planning. And that requires him to always be somewhere else. I know what he’s doing is good, so I can’t bring myself to be mad at him.”

Callie huffed. “Wish you could talk to my brother. He loves to blame me for never being around for important things. It’s just hard for me to get parked somewhere, then drive or fly home, then go back again.

“I tried to do it more in the beginning, but it gets exhausting being a travelling traveler. It’s like piling sprinkles on top of

sprinkles. The cookie, me, gets buried, and none of the sprinkles stay put. It's a landslide waiting to happen.

Rowan hung a hand from the steering wheel, eyes dancing among his mirrors and the rearview camera on the dash. "An analogy that doesn't involve tires? Are you feeling okay?"

She smirked. Snow curled off to the sides of the plow in sheets, and Callie found herself mesmerized by the process. "Yes, I'm fine, today. My mom is baking cookies with my nieces. Those girls always dump sprinkles on cookies. Mom sends me pictures every year of a plate of sprinkles with typically one cookie in the middle."

"Cute." He licked his lips and nodded but stayed focused on his task. "Oh, I wanted to tell you that while you were really sick, I winterized your trailer. Doesn't look like anything broke. But I'd check everything in the spring when you haul it out again." Rowan glanced askance at her. "I hope that's okay."

Callie wrung her hands together. "I appreciate that. What can I do to return for all of your kindness?"

At the end of the drive, Rowan stopped them before getting on the main road. He slid his fingers into her hands, taking her left in his right. "Nothing. You gave me hope just by being out there when I was lost. I was nearly frozen and thinking I had made the biggest mistake of my life, searching for those two. I started to doubt I would find my way back alive. But there you were. I don't know if that was God's plan or just luck. I've sort of had a falling out with him."

Rowan squeezed her fingers and shook his head as if in disbelief of his own remark. "I was always a good kid. I tried my hardest at everything, did more than I was asked. I loved my family, especially my little sister. I respected my father. And then when Sadina died, it was like all of that meant nothing. The world had turned against me. God had. Well— That's what it felt like.

"But you— You made me think maybe I wasn't forgotten about. And then when I found you in the snow, I realized that you weren't just there to save me, but that I needed to be out there, to know where you were so I could save you."

Callie smiled and returned his squeeze. "Thank you for coming back for me. It was a risk I took, not having faith in you, the weather, God, whatever. I was trying to get myself out before things got worse. And after a lot of broken promises by others, I've just learned to watch out for myself."



He lifted a finger. “And others. Ace told me what Penny did... what she’s been doing for a long time. And he said that he only mentioned it because of you.”

“It just doesn’t seem fair to scold them or ban them when all they want to do is help,” she cautiously admitted.

Rowan switched on his signal, lifted the plow, and pulled them onto the main road heading toward town. “I know. And I wanted to confront you, tell you to stay out of it because you don’t understand. But when I heard you on the phone today, I discovered you and I aren’t so different.

“Sure, maybe I stayed home and you left yours. But we’ve both been without our families even though that’s really what we want. Your brother blames you like my father does me. And yet you saw the good without the bias I have. I got lost in my fears and frustration and forgot to see the beauty of life.”

Callie hadn’t looked at it that way before. “I think we both had good intentions, just missed out on important events.”

He drew in a deep breath. “That’s one way to put it. I understand wanting to make a life for yourself on your own. I was trying to hold on to the lives my family lost, but letting their memories eat away at me isn’t always good for the ones still living around me.”

Rowan rested their hands on the console. “Anyway, I had a lot of thinking time while you were sick. Penny took care of you the most, but I checked in every morning and night. And lunch.” He winced. “And about three in the morning after I did my barn heater checks.”

Callie gawked at him. “When do you sleep?”

“Uh—” Rowan shrugged. “When I can’t keep my eyes open in the winter. Summers are much easier.”

“Do I need to drive?” she hesitantly asked.

He smiled. “I’m not drunk.”

Callie gave him a knowing glance. “But sleep deprivation can get you to that state easily on the road.”

Rowan hummed a grunt of annoyance and checked his side mirrors. “One summer, I ran a combine as a second job and ended up falling asleep and cutting a diagonal line across the field in the

wrong direction. The farmer just laughed it off and set me straight the next morning—literally.”

She snorted a laugh. “I get it.”

Rowan turned off into the town. Christmas wreathes and red bows hung from the green, iron light posts lining the streets. Storefront windows displayed a variety of gifts and goodies among painted holiday characters and lights. It wasn't a big town, just a few blocks surrounded by silos and warehouses. But it reminded Callie of home.

He parked them in an angled space outside a café and turned off the truck. “Hang on one second.”

A couple of locals chatted at a table outside the café, dressed in parkas and snow caps. Callie admired their kind exchanges with passersby and missed it. Many of her trips had taken her to bigger cities where people were too busy to stop and chat even if it was important.

*Like the kid having a seizure in the park or the older gentleman that fell at the supermarket.* Callie always stopped to help. Sometimes other people stopped too. But it was easy to think with so many others around them that someone else would do it, or so the woman she'd interviewed had said after a kid had nearly drowned at the RV park's pool two years before.

Rowan hiked up onto the sidewalk and stopped a young man who left a nearby hardware store. The teen had only worn-out coveralls and a simple snowcap.

*No gloves? No coat?*

It wasn't in her nature to sit still. Callie climbed out and joined them on the sidewalk.

“What do you say, Asher?” Rowan asked. “You up for learning from crotchety ol' Ace? We could really use your help. I'll be sure to have some cold weather gear for you at the bunkhouse. Could you make it out there tomorrow?”

Asher's deep green eyes lit with hope. “That would be wonderful. I'll be there bright and early, sir.”

From his pocket, Rowan fished out his wallet and handed the teen some cash. “Consider this an early bonus to get what you need. Just be sure you show up, and I'll give you the rest of the bonus on Saturday.”

They shook hands, and Asher hustled off to his rusted out pick-up.

Rowan curled an arm around Callie. “He asked me for a job a long time ago, when I wasn’t in a good mental place to be training others. But from what Mack says over at the fabrication shop, he’s a reliable worker. And we could use a man with his skills.”

“That’s really nice of you.” Callie pointed to the coffee shop. “Could we? I heard you like peppermint hot chocolate.”

Rowan released her so he could open the door. “After you.”

The café was warm and smelled of fresh pastries and cookies. Callie eyed the treats in the glass cases, while Rowan picked out an array of desserts and ordered a peppermint hot chocolate for himself.

“What looks good to you?” he asked.

Callie peered down at a slice of gingerbread cheesecake but asked only for a peppermint mocha.

“We’ll take the cheesecake slice too.” Rowan winked at her, paid, and then started collecting the bags of goodies the barista set on the counter.

Callie grabbed the drink tray and the to-go box of their treats and followed Rowan back to the truck. “You don’t want to stay and eat?”

“Limited daylight. We’ve got a lot to do! It’s why I loaded up on treats. Not a lot of baking time left before Christmas, especially on a ranch.” Rowan packed the treats on the seat behind his in the truck, then locked it. He took the items from her, helped her free her cup from the tray, then encouraged her to the park, a block away. “You’re going to want to see this.”

Callie sipped her mocha as they strolled along the salted sidewalk to the park. Rowan cleared off a bench with a hand and they sat. He offered her the slice of cheesecake she’d ordered, then pointed out at the maze of lights.

“Every year, the town puts up this little Christmas maze. It isn’t very big, but when you get to the fountain in the center, everyone finds a special gift. So once we’re done with our treats and the shopping, I say we go find out what the gift is this year.”

She watched kids run into the maze and a woman follow, shouting at them to slow down. “I like surprises. That sounds like a great plan.”

“So what is the favorite hidden gem of your wandering spirit?” Rowan unwrapped his chocolate filled croissant and took a bite.

Callie savored a forkful of luscious spiced cheesecake and thought about it. “I suppose I most love seeing the earlier accomplishments of human kind. Like Mesa Verde’s cliff dwellings in southwestern Colorado, the Wupatki pueblos in Arizona, or any of the Mayan ruins in Mexico. To think we are capable of building such structures with so few advanced tools is just crazy to me.”

“No National Parks on that list?”

“Oh, of course!” Callie drew the shapes in the air as she spoke. “Devil’s Tower in Wyoming is this huge, striated column left over from the core of a volcano. You can walk through Seneca Caverns in West Virginia and feel like you’re in a totally different world. And no two caverns are the same, not the ones in Missouri, Texas, or even Sand Caves in Utah. Nothing beats the colors of Antelope Canyon or Bentonite Hills. But I love interactive sites, too, like Sliding Rock in North Carolina.”

“And ski resorts?” Rowan asked.

“Traditional vacation spots have their appeal, yes.”

A man walked up to them, dressed in a firefighter’s outfit. “Rowan Connors, is that really you...in town?”

Rowan stood and shook the man’s hand. “Long time, Kyle. How have you been?”

The man adjusted his hard hat and stuffed a handful of kids’ stickers in his pocket. “Fine, fine. The wife is busy with ours, who’ve finally been released to run the maze. They go nuts for it every year. What brings you to town?”

Rowan introduced Callie to Kyle and helped her up with a hand. “He’s my longest running friend, since way back in preschool.”

“Nice to meet you.” Callie politely shook Kyle’s hand.

Rowan gave Kyle the long and the short of why they were in town, surprising Callie with his admission to having not been in for months. “Penny usually does the shopping for the house. But it feels like I’m being a cop-out to just give her a bonus and not a Christmas gift.”

“She is basically family,” Kyle confirmed. “Well, I’m going to have to get back to monitoring the maze.” He turned to Callie.

“Since you’re new to the area, and this guy you’re with doesn’t shop much, my wife would probably recommend Picky Chick’s Gifts. It’s the shop on the street across from us. It has a big metal chicken sculpture out front.”

Callie giggled. “I appreciate it. Thanks.”

Kyle left and walked back toward the fire truck parked on the street where he handed out stickers to the kids of an approaching family.

Rowan crumpled up his wrapper and popped it into a nearby trashcan.

“You’re done already?”

He swallowed his last bite and motioned to a nearby store. “I’ve got some things to pick up while I’m here. Can we meet back here in, say, an hour? That should give us time to check out the maze and for me to make a few more passes on the road before dark. Then maybe I can build a fire and enjoy some more cider. What do you think?”

Callie felt rushed. “Okay.”

“Great.” Rowan hustled off, leaving Callie befuddled and finishing her cheesecake alone. Realizing she should probably tell her family she’d be attempting to make it home in the morning, she pulled out her phone and sent her brother a text.

Savoring the last creamy bite, Callie got up and tossed her trash in the bin, then walked to Picky Chick’s Gifts across the park. The lights of the maze walls filled her with warmth, and the laughter of happy kids gave her a sense of joy she hadn’t felt in a long time. She liked the town enough that its presence tugged on her heart.

Callie looked around for Rowan but didn’t see him anywhere. Stepping inside the store, she inhaled a deep breath of cinnamon, cloves, and vanilla. The shop glittered with gifts of all kinds from jewelry and purses to candles and leather goods. It didn’t take her long to find an array of perfect gifts for her family and Rowan’s. The kind woman behind the counter even offered to gift wrap at no charge.

“I can’t thank you enough for this,” Callie admitted. “I’m on the road, got stuck actually. Rowan Connors and his crew have really helped me out. But I don’t have wrapping paper and bows in my trailer.”

The woman placed the last wrapped package in a bag and set everything on the counter. “Good man, that one. It’s too bad what happened to his family. He’s far too hard on himself.”

“Think he’ll like what I got him?” Callie asked.

She nodded. “I hope you know what you’re asking for with them, though. That man has a heart like a freight train.”



## Chapter 14

Outside, Callie spotted Rowan loading things in his truck and hurried across the park. “Find everything you needed?”

Rowan spun around and stepped in front of the opening. “Yes?”

“Is that a question?”

“No?”

Callie handed him her bag. “Ready to run the maze?”

He cautiously collected her large bag and turned to pack it into the vehicle.

“No peeking!” Callie peered around him to where he set the sack on the seat.

Rowan straightened and closed the door behind him. “You don’t get to either.”

He took her hand and led her to the maze. “Every year it’s different. So I don’t know any better than you which way to go.”

They entered the illuminated walls with color-changing lights, and tried the path to the right, but it simply circled back to the entrance.

“Rats!” Callie stomped a foot in the snow, making Rowan chuckle.

They tried another path and found themselves at a dead end. After retracing their steps, Callie and Rowan tried the third option which wound them around the center, then turned away from it.

“This can’t be right,” Rowan remarked. “We’re going the wrong direction.”

“It’s the only other way.” Callie turned a corner and found a host of screaming kids running at them. Rowan promptly ducked into a corner and pulled her out of their way and into him.

Callie's heartbeat spread into every inch of her body as she found herself crushed against Rowan's strong, lean frame. His hands drew her tighter. The desperation in his touch and the way he turned his face away from hers told her that he longed for a connection but still had reservations.

She studied his closed eyes and wondered what a tough rancher like him could possibly fear. Callie braced his cheek with a gentle hand.

"Rowan?"

He fidgeted but eventually looked at her.

"Why do you shy away from me?"

Rowan's gaze fell to the snow beneath their boots. "I want so much to hold onto you because you're this spark of life I've needed for too long. But you're leaving tomorrow, and this feels like a promise I'm not going to be able to keep to myself."

"I don't understand. What promise are you making to yourself?"

"I—" He licked a lip and shook his head. "If I let myself fall for you the way I want, but you leave and never come back, I will let you go. But in that moment, I will lose myself with you."

It took Callie a moment to absorb what it was that Rowan felt for her. "How long has this been on your mind?"

"You had me interested from the moment you came out of your warm trailer to look for me. Not a lot of people take risks like that. You could've died out there.

"Then, when you got sick, I— I just don't know if I'm ready to let myself get too attached, but it seems to be happening anyway." He drew in a sharp breath, glanced at her lips, then tore his eyes away.

Callie thought back to what the owner of Picky Chick's Gift had said. Rowan had prayed for her, had cared for her and saved her. She needed to be cautious to avoid leading him on or breaking his heart.

But Callie was in a similarly emotional place.

Stretching up on her toes, she kissed Rowan's cheek. *I need more time to figure this out, too.* "You think on it."



Before the moment could become too serious, Callie freed herself from his arms and tugged on his hand, leading him through the maze. It looped away from the center then back again, opening up to the fountain in the center of the park.

A man dressed in a Santa suit chuckled when they entered. “Ho ho ho! I see you finally found your way! Each good boy and girl gets one present today!” He leaned close and whispered behind a hand, “Adults only on the top tier. The tipsy elves are getting coal this year.”

Callie surveyed the tiny wrapped packages filling the three-tier dry fountain, and picked one from the top for herself. “It definitely has a tiny bottle shape. I can’t imagine what it would be.”

Santa winked at her then turned to Rowan. “Long time since I’ve seen you in town, kid.”

Rowan’s grip tightened on Callie’s as he shook the man’s hand. “Pastor Mathers. How are you?”

“Busy watching out for who’s naughty and nice this year.” The man grinned beneath his natural white beard.

Callie couldn’t quite stifle her giggles. “But Pastor, handing out alcohol as Christmas gifts seems a bit naughty to me.”

Pastor Mathers lifted his hands in helplessness. “Jesus drank wine. Just keep it under wraps until you’re out of the public place, yeah? And don’t tell the Mrs.” He motioned Rowan to the fountain. “Take an extra for Penny. I know she likes to make hot toddies this time of the year.”

A family entered with three kids, quickly filling the space. Santa turned to greet them, so Callie and Rowan made their way out of the maze.

“He seems like a nice man,” Callie remarked as they walked to the truck.

“They are both wonderful people. Pretty sad story, really. They couldn’t have children and her last husband divorced her because of it. But Wes Mathers isn’t the type to give up. They adopted a boy from a neighboring town. He died in a logging accident a few years ago. So now they live for the children of the town, helping with events like this one.”

Callie’s heart ached for the family. But Pastor Mathers seemed happy spreading joy to others, and she knew the children benefitted

from it as well.

*Maybe we aren't all going to succeed at what we want to. But that doesn't mean we can't find a new purpose.*

The trouble was that Callie was considering staying in one place for awhile. She just didn't know what she'd do for work when all of her experience regarded travelling. *Guess I could try to find a job as a travel agent.* But that just didn't ring right in her mind.

Callie didn't like being at a crossroads. Sure, she wanted to stay in one place for a while. But she didn't really want to give up travelling altogether or sharing her experiences with her followers. *I just have to keep looking.*

Rowan unlocked the truck with his key fob and opened her door for her. After he'd climbed into the driver's seat, backed out, and got them on the road home, he took her hand in his.

"Pastor Mathers often preaches a message about attitude and how it can change the courses our lives take. I stopped going to church because I didn't feel I could be what I was supposed to in their eyes. That coupled with the work on the ranch, I just didn't have the energy or the time. But the message makes a lot more sense after meeting you. I wasn't open to it before because I couldn't see it."

He scanned the snowy road ahead and checked his mirrors. "My affect on the others based on my own attitude seemed irrelevant because it was just how things had to be, in my mind. Except, it was my belief that was off.

"I thought that if I tried to protect everyone and always took the risk myself that it would keep them safe when all it did was made them miserable and put me in danger of not being around to help tomorrow. I see that now. And it's all thanks to you being that light out in the storm."

Callie soaked in the comfort of the warm air blowing on her cheeks and leaned over the console, resting her head on his shoulder. "I was just as lost as you, so I can't be the hero of your journey. But I'm glad we found each other."

It wasn't long before Callie's eyelids drooped, and she felt herself sinking into the abyss of sleep. Only the faint touch of something soft and damp to her forehead roused her. But Callie was so tired and still recovering that getting her body to wake up enough to get her from the truck inside the doors was a struggle.

Rowan unloaded the truck, setting their bags inside by a tree that had appeared in their absence. It bore only a simple star and one strand of red garland, but it was better than nothing in Callie's mind.

After locking the truck, Rowan came up to her, grinned, and picked her up. He carried her to the sofa and sat down, cradling her in his lap.

"I'm a little concerned for you driving home tomorrow." Rowan swept the strands of hair from her face and inspected her eyes. "Are you sure you want to go?"

Callie loved the gentle yet strong way he cared for her. "Something's up with my mom, more than my brother told me. I need to be home this year."

Sadness flitted across his face, but Rowan did his best to smile then cradle her closer. "I understand. I'd just like to stay with you as long as I can."

"Don't you need to plow the driveway?" she asked.

"Already did, while you slept in the truck. It's all ready for you in the morning. No snow in the forecast tonight."

The chest of his flannel shirt was warm and soft against Callie's cheek. He smelled of snow and a touch of whiskey. On the end table, she noticed he'd unwrapped his gift from the maze and emptied the little bottle. From what Callie had learned, people drank for one of two reasons—because they were sad or celebrating. The tight way Rowan held her, told Callie exactly which reason was his.

"Can you promise me one thing?" Regret laced Rowan's voice.

She rested a hand over one of his muscled arms and gave it a tender rub. "Sure."

"When you come back for your trailer, don't be a stranger."

But Callie wasn't sure about her future anymore. Spending time with Rowan had her plans in knots. "I don't know when I'll be back. I'm tired of not having a place to call home. And I'm the best suited to help my mom."

"You think you're going to stay in Idaho?" he asked, his voice low.

Callie was sure by his dolor tone that it wasn't what he wanted to hear. "I don't know, Rowan. I wish I could give you a straight answer. But I just don't know anymore."

Deep in her heart, Callie longed to stay there with him. But her family needed her. She wanted to be home again. And that meant finding a new job and a new place to park her trailer—after the snow melted. Callie just had too many unanswered questions about her future to know when or where she would be days or weeks ahead.

She wrapped her arms around him. “All I know is that in this moment I am happy. And I haven’t said that and meant it *completely* in a long time.”



## Chapter 15

Early the next morning, after checking on her trailer to be certain it was locked up and safe for the winter, Callie loaded her truck and climbed into the driver's seat. She'd left her gifts for Rowan, Ace, Penny, Dred, and Duncan under the tree, along with a chewy bone squeaker toy for Gigi.

She'd looked for Rowan and the guys that morning. Penny said she'd heard about an animal stuck in a semi-frozen drainage ditch in a back pasture. It didn't sound like the guys would be back for a long time.

Callie started the drive to the main road, regret filling her gut. The sun shone over the fields that morning. Steam billowed in the golden air around the clusters of cattle, horses, and alpacas. Snow glittered in the untouched patches between the animal shelters and made the trees of the windbreaks shimmer.

As she neared the main road, she glimpsed five men in a field, pulling an alpaca out of a frozen creek. She stopped and waited. Callie got a wave or two, but the men were too far away to tell who was who, and she couldn't risk driving out there in her truck and getting stuck. So Callie waved back, then pulled out onto the road.

She watched in her side mirror as the ranch vanished behind her, feeling like leaving it behind was like abandoning Rowan, too. It was bad enough that she'd done it to her own family. And Rowan had been left behind many times already.

But Callie needed to be home. She felt that too, though she couldn't quite say why.

The drive home through western Montana and into Idaho was long and uneventful with few people traveling the roads in the thick of winter. The fuel stations were decked for the holidays and busy as usual around Christmastime.

Progress was slow on the snowy roads. The seven-hour trip was nearly at ten hours by the time Lewiston came into view. But as she

passed through the lit up streets, filled with festive colors and characters on her way home, she knew it was worth it.

Callie smiled half-heartedly at the house on the corner, the one that used to be decorated as a gingerbread house at Christmas. This year it had only a tree visible in the window and a few kids' toys in the yard out front.

*I guess Mrs. Olsen finally got to be with her husband in Heaven.*

Callie wasn't sure she had the energy to greet her family with the smiles they'd surely hope for so she searched for the little coffee stand that used to sit across from the community park. But as she rounded the corner, she discovered a shop had been built in its place, one for working on automotive computers and other electronics.

She sighed and drove down the street to her parents' house. It stood among other single story ranch-style homes, the bottom half decked with red brick, the top filled with windows covered in snowflake window clings. Caleb's SUV filled the driveway, forcing Callie to park on the street.

Turning the truck off, Callie sat in the warmth and watched the blur of her nieces spinning circles in their Christmas dresses through the windows. Her brother laughed at something someone behind him said as he carried a tray of mugs through the kitchen and into the living room in the back.

Her father stepped outside and switched off the house's Christmas lights for the night. When he straightened, he paused.

"Callie?"

*Darn. No more hiding.* Callie grabbed her duffle and her laptop case then climbed out of the truck and locked it for the night. The road crunched with a mix of fresh snow and gravel under her boots as she rounded her truck and climbed the steps to the front porch. "Hi, Dad. I'm sorry about the short notice, but—"

Her father slid in and hugged her. "I don't care. I'm just so glad you're here."

Callie's eyes filled with tears. It had been too long since she'd had a real hug from family. She reached around him and pulled him close. The gesture relieved a lot of her stress that her family wouldn't readily welcome her after such a long absence. "Thanks, Dad."

Her father took her bags and led her inside. “I’ll put these in your old bedroom. Why don’t you head into the living room and join the others for some cider. I’ll—” He stopped when he saw her face. “What happened to you?”

She touched her cheek and shook her head. “I’m fine. I’ll tell you all later. Promise.”

A little white shone in his silver hair under the bright lights of the entryway, making Callie fear her mother’s health was taking a toll on her father.

“Who’s that?” Caleb rounded the corner into the kitchen with an empty tray and stopped. “You...you made it. I can’t believe it.”

“Auntie Callie!” Her nieces ran up to her and hugged her legs, thanking her for their birthday gifts. But before Callie could return the gesture, they were off again to admire the presents under the tree.

“Kids, right?” Caleb’s wife, Tricia, motioned her in from the entry and embraced Callie with strength. “It’s so good to see you! After that long drive, I bet you need a cookie.”

Tricia’s fuzzy pink sweater carried the scent of peppermint, and Callie did her best to memorize every hug. She just wished her brother wanted a hug too. Instead, he just leaned against the wall, studying her.

Tricia flung her long black braid behind her shoulder then picked up a plate from the kitchen counter and offered it to Callie. “I think it’s pretty obvious which ones the girls decorated.”

Callie thanked her and selected a gingerbread man with red sprinkles dumped over the icing and thought of Dred. “No such thing as too many sprinkles. Any idea where mom is?”

Tricia motioned into the dining room. “We already had Christmas Eve dinner, but I’ll brew a fresh pot of coffee if you’d like.”

“Please, and thank you.” After a glance at her brother, who still hadn’t moved from his shock of seeing her, Callie ventured through the archway into the dining room on the left. Her mother leaned over a piece of holiday letterhead, writing a letter.

Callie pulled out a chair and sat beside her. “Mom?”

Her mother looked up and pressed a hand to her chest. “Oh, Heavens! Callie!”

She dropped her pen to the table and hugged Callie. “I didn’t think you were coming! I was just writing a letter to you that your brother said he’d scan and email to you, since we didn’t know where you were.”

“I told him I was driving over today.”

Her mother frowned and adjusted the hair clip holding up her long silver waves. “Must’ve slipped his mind.”

“Uh huh, sure. I think someone didn’t believe me.” Callie’s eyes fell to a scar just beneath her mother’s collarbone. She reached out and swept aside the edge of her mother’s shirt. “When did you get this?”

Her mother weakly took her hand and lowered it to the table, where she braced it with both of hers. “It’s just a pacemaker.”

“Just?” Callie shook her head and wiped a hand down her face. “No, mom. Why didn’t you just tell me? I would’ve come right home!”

Her mother tilted her head and gazed upon her with admiration. “You think I would want you to give up your life, your work to be home with me while I just laid around and did nothing?”

She patted Callie’s hand. “No. I love reading your articles. It’s amazing to me to see you go to these places by yourself, figuring out how to live in every new environment, meeting the people, trying new foods. It’s like I’m traveling with you even though I can’t do it for real anymore. You have shown me and so many others all of the beautiful things in this world that most of us will never be able to see in person.”

The weight in Callie’s chest lifted. “Ghost pepper tacos are not for me.”

“I don’t blame you.” Her mother laughed lightly. “I’m so glad you’re here.” Her gaze darted over Callie’s shoulder. She lowered her voice. “I know Caleb has his own ideas about what you should be doing, but I’m proud of you. You have the nerve to do what I always wanted to but was too scared to do because I didn’t know enough about the world to believe I could do it safely. And now it’s too late for me.”

A corner of Callie’s mouth quirked in doubt. “The world isn’t safe. Bad things will always happen, Mom. But how we think about them and react to the dangers and stresses is what makes us able to keep going despite the challenges.”



Her mother beamed at her and braced the side of Callie's head with a gentle hand. "That's my girl. I know I said that to you as a child, but I never could put it into play, not the way you have."

Callie lingered in the comfort of her mother's touch. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Stop. No apologies. Just some coffee and very over-decorated cookies." Her mother chuckled. "We'll make a fresh batch tomorrow so you can get some proper decorating in. Sound good?"

Caleb cleared his throat in the doorway. "I still haven't got my hug."

Callie got up, put the cookie between her teeth then hugged her brother. It was the final piece back in place, making the sense of home spread through Callie again.

Biting off the head of the gingerbread man, she pointed to it. "Lot of sugar."

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "The girls bouncing off the walls wasn't enough of a warning? This house is about to burst with sugar. Mom went nuts this year. Old-fashioned candy, popcorn balls, fruitcake, truffles, and peppermint candy white chocolate pie."

"Don't forget the pumpkin pie ice cream." Callie's father winked as he passed them to take a seat in the recliner between the roaring fireplace and the Christmas tree. "Come now, and tell us how you got that shiner."

Tricia handed Callie a mug of coffee. "A little schnapps in there."

Callie smiled to herself, thinking of Penny as she sat on the sofa. It was a wondrous feeling to be warm, safe, and in a familiar place. The same landscape paintings hung on the walls of places her father had been when he'd travelled for work when he was younger. The back yard was dark, but Callie could still see the same little birdbath and the porch swing along with a family of snowmen in the faint light from the house.

"I met a rancher."

Caleb surveyed her. "*He* hit you?"

She scowled at him. "Stop seeing the worst in people, Cal. Good grief. The man saved my life."

She filled them in on all the details as she drank down her coffee, all the while a smile grew on her mother's face. Tricia joined

them after putting the girls to bed and sat on the sofa arm beside Caleb. Callie's father was on the edge of his seat.

"The town is beautiful, quaint, and somewhere I'd like to visit again when the snow's gone," Callie admitted. "I have to go back for the trailer, but I think I might stay a while if they'll let me."

"It sounds like you've got quite the article to write," her mother said. "Thank you for sharing, Callie. I'd love to hear about all of your travels more in the morning, but for now, I'm pooped. So I'm off to bed."

Her mother and father got up, so Caleb and Callie did, too. After a round of hugs, Callie found herself telling Caleb and Tricia goodnight as well, and then slinking off to her bedroom for the night.

When she flipped on the light, she found her room basically untouched except for a small Christmas tree twinkling on the desk by the window. Callie changed into her pajamas then opened her laptop and sat at the desk to write an article for her website.

Her phone buzzed from where it lay on the bed. Callie collected it and returned to the desk. A text from an unknown number had come through asking if it was Callie's number and saying it was Rowan. A tickle of happiness crept up in her throat.

**Callie:** Hi. Yes. How did you get my number? I don't remember giving it to you.

**Rowan:** Penny did a little digging when she cared for you...in case we needed to call in a doctor or notify someone. Anyway, I just wanted to know if you made it home. Guess I'm behind the times because I didn't ask for your number. But I didn't want to pressure you. I'm just curious.

**Callie:** I'm home. How are you?

**Rowan:** Fine. How's your mom?

**Callie:** Got a pacemaker and seems a little tired, but I think she's doing okay. Thanks for asking.

**Rowan:** I'm glad to hear she's alright. Well, I won't keep you. I've got a long day tomorrow anyway. I just wanted to make sure you were safe. Goodnight. Merry Christmas, Callie.

But Callie had one more thing she needed to say. After the long drive from Montana to Idaho, she'd had a lot of time to think things

through. Even after arriving at home, and seeing family, Callie still needed something else.

**Callie:** I miss you more than I thought I could. Can't wait to see you again. Merry Christmas, Rowan. Please get some sleep.

With no response from Rowan, Callie wrote up her article and posted it late that night to her site. By the time she was done, fresh snow fell outside her window. It was likely going to be a while until she was able to return to Montana and get her trailer out.

Usually, Callie had plans already forming in her mind for the next adventure before she'd even finished the one she was on. Someone might make a recommendation on a trail hike, or she might've spotted a sign for a hidden gem not mentioned on most maps. But Callie truly didn't know where she was going to go and wondered if it was finally time that she *grow up and settle down* like her brother often suggested.

Callie just wasn't ready to let go of the wild side to life just yet. She needed a thrill and unexpected things, not a cubicle and a life of routines.



## Chapter 16

Callie woke the next morning to the excited squeals of her nieces and the scents of maple syrup and sausage. Remembering that she'd left the gifts for her family in the truck helped motivate her to get up.

*Coffee first.*

She shuffled out of the bedroom, still sleepy from the long day prior and met her mother in the kitchen.

"Morning! Merry Christmas," her mother said, handing her a mug topped with whipped cream and decked with a candy cane and a tiny gingerbread cookie shaped like a present. "The girls are going through their stockings. Why don't you go watch, and I'll bring you some breakfast."

"This feels backward. I'm supposed to be here to help you," Callie admitted.

Her mother patted her shoulder then ushered her into the living room. "I've got a zapper now that will keep my ticker moving just fine. You had a long drive. Go enjoy Christmas morning with the kids."

Callie relented and took a cushion of the sofa while the girls pulled out tiny presents from their stockings, covering the carpet in bows and bits of wrapping paper. Caleb and Tricia sat beside their girls, helping when needed.

A plate of sausages and snowman shaped pancakes appeared before Callie. She thanked her mom and savored each bite and sip as she tried to memorize every color and sparkle of the snowy Christmas morning, and each jump for joy of her nieces.

*Wish Rowan could see this.* Despite all the stress in her brother's life, between work and raising his daughters, Callie could tell moments like those made everything worth it just by the smile on his face.

As Callie washed her plate and mug, she thought back to the ranch house and their one Christmas tree with no lights. Perhaps it would still bring some joy to Rowan and the crew, even if it was a bit last minute. Her presents sat beneath it, and it seemed Rowan had picked up some gifts too. Callie hoped it made for a nice holiday for them, yet she felt like it would've been better if she'd stayed and taken over the cooking and baking so Penny could rest and enjoy the day. Instead, Callie was home being spoiled by her mother once again.

The ranch was a beautiful but solemn place that Callie felt went far unnoticed, much like she had reflected in the article she'd written. She'd omitted names and had only one picture from the nearby town to allude to where the ranch was. She hadn't asked permission to share personal or business information. So Callie kept it vague. Rowan seemed like the private type who would appreciate being kept anonymous.

Callie got dressed in the only nice skirt and top she had and grabbed her keys. Putting her boots and coat on, she slipped out of the house into the wintry morning. The air was cold against her legs, but Callie knew she could tolerate a brief moment after what she'd endured the week prior.

Her truck doors had frosted shut and crackled with breaking ice when she pulled them open. The bag of gifts would be fine if it had a little time to slowly warm up.

Back inside the house, Callie carefully unloaded the gifts onto the dining room table then folded up the bag. She turned to the girls that came over with curious eyes. "They're a bit frozen. You can open yours after you've opened everyone else's, okay?"

Her nieces nodded in understanding then skipped back into the living room to dig through the pile of gifts under the tree.

The doorbell rang, and her father got up to answer it.

Callie couldn't remember seeing anyone else outside as she fluffed the bows and ribbons on her gifts for the family. *Must be a neighbor.*

"Yes, of course. Come inside." Her father called down the hallway, "Callie?"

Callie peeked through the archway. "Yeah?"

Her father helped someone out of their coat. "Come greet our visitor."

Confused, Callie glanced at her family, wondering who they'd called to stop by on Christmas. When she rounded the corner into the entryway, she stopped.

The man removed his cowboy hat and turned to her. "Hi, Callie."

"Rowan?"

"I know I owe you an explanation for disrupting your Christmas, bu—"

Overcome with joy, Callie ran to him, eagerly wrapping him up in her arms.

Rowan returned her affection. "I know it's only been a week or so, but without you in the house, it was just too empty. It didn't feel like Christmas should...like I wanted it to."

He'd carried in the scents of fresh cut wood and newly fallen snow. Callie basked in the warmth and strength of his embrace. Somewhere behind her, she heard her mother usher her father away, to give them some privacy in the entryway and ask for help making up the guest room for Rowan.

"That's such a long drive." Callie leaned back and looked up at him. "Why come here and not take the day to rest or enjoy it with your crew and Penny?"

He wove his fingers into her hair and rested his forehead to hers. "When you told me you missed me, it broke the last barrier I had built to keep myself from hoping I'd have you in my life. I didn't want to waste this chance. For too long, I believed I didn't deserve to be happy because I had failed my family."

Callie braced his cheeks and shook her head. "It wasn't your fault. None of it was. You didn't cause Sadina's death, your mother's, or your father and brother to move away."

He drew in a deep breath. "It falls under negligence, Callie."

Irritation resurfaced. "You were a kid left in charge of a ranch. The negligence falls on your *father's* shoulders."

Rowan's brows knitted. "You fight so hard to defend me when we haven't known each other long. Why?"

It was easy for Callie to see it, but when someone had been conditioned to believe they were a failure, she could understand his doubt. "You were out there in the storm, risking your life for your animals. That was your job, but most would consider that cow and

calf a lost cause and focus on the herd as a whole. You strive to protect everyone, not just the masses. And that speaks to the values in your heart.”

“I can’t save everyone,” he said despairingly.

“No one can. You cannot be in all places at all times, seeing all things. That is God’s job. But the fact that you try is what makes you special.”

Rowan nestled his nose against her neck and drew her tightly against him. “There you go again. Where have you been all of my life?”

“Becoming the person I am now, just as you were becoming you.” Callie rubbed his back, hoping it was comforting.

“I was lying to myself,” he mumbled, “thinking we were just surviving that night together and not somehow meant to be together. But when you left, I had this aching hole open up inside me, the same kind that I felt when my sister died.”

A tear rolled down Callie’s neck from Rowan. “Then the rest of my family left. You leaving was like losing another one of them. That’s when I knew I couldn’t be without you. So I put Ace in charge. I didn’t pack much. I just knew I had to get to you before you disappeared again.

“You are the kind of woman I’ve always been looking for but never thought existed. And then there you were when I needed someone the most. It could’ve been a truck driver or another rancher. But it was you.”

Callie swiped a tear away from her face and leaned back to look at him. “I’m so glad you’ve joined us, though I never would’ve asked you to make that drive.”

“It is a long one in the snow, but you didn’t pick up your gifts before you left. And Penny practically kicked me out of the house when she figured out how I felt about you.”

He pulled a little box out of his pocket. “This was my mother’s. She had a free spirit like you, always roaming the property on a horse with no saddle.”

“You don’t have to give me anything,” Callie insisted. “I already got what I wanted for Christmas—you.”

Rowan blushed. “Well, it would mean a lot to me if you’d bring a little life back to her memory. I think this will fit you.”

Callie accepted the box he set in her hands and opened it. Inside, sitting on velvet, was a ring of two intertwined feathers, studded with small diamonds. “Oh, Rowan! It’s beautiful!”

She slid it on a finger and admired it. “Thank you. I will take good care of it.” Callie leaned up and left a light kiss on his lips.

When Rowan’s eyes closed, Callie lingered a little longer. His arms cinched around her with desperate need, and he deepened the kiss. Callie savored the plush heat of his lips and the way the world seemed to melt away.

When he finally broke the kiss, they were both out of breath. Callie’s heart pounded with the thrill of his love for her.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Got carried away.”

After a quick peck to his rough, shaved chin, Callie grinned. “I like going where the wind takes me. But for now, I think there might be some coffee calling your name from the kitchen.”

“Oh?” Rowan glanced up at the kitchen. “Coffee does sound nice. I’ve been driving all night.”

Callie looped an arm around his back and led him into the kitchen. Her mother promptly filled two mugs and ushered them into the living room where the girls opened gifts.

After introducing Rowan to the family, Callie grabbed her gifts from the dining room table and added them to the tree, with the exception of Rowan’s. “I left yours in Montana.”

Rowan rested an arm across her shoulders. “I’ll have to open them when I get back. I have a few others there for you as well. But this one was the most important.”

“Even if I took off again and wandered the continent never to return?” she asked.

A corner of his mouth curled. “Yes. I needed to give you that.”

“I’m kidding. I am definitely visiting you as much as you’ll tolerate me.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Callie looked away as her phone beeped in her pocket. She had an email from a journal out of Montana with a job offer.

“What’s got you so focused on your phone at Christmas?” Caleb challenged.



Callie chewed a nail in thought. “A company read my article on the ranch and wants to offer me a job.”

“That’s great, honey,” her mother said, finally sitting down to enjoy the festivities from a recliner.

Callie didn’t know how to break the news.

“What’s the matter?” her father asked.

“It’s in Montana.”

Caleb turned around from where he sat on the floor with his kids. Callie cringed in anticipation of the backlash from him, but instead he smiled. “That’s a hell of a lot closer to home, and you’ll get to stay in one place, right?”

“It’s remote, so I can technically live wherever I want,” Callie offered. “They just prefer I live within the state.”

Rowan looked on with eager eyes. “You can stay with us. Penny would love to have another woman out at the ranch. The guys certainly like your spunk. And I’m sure Butterball and Lucky will benefit from some extra apples and love.”

She cocked her head and squinted at him as the others exchanged gifts and went back to their own conversations. “What about you?”

Rowan set his coffee aside and turned to her, taking her hand. “I want you out there, too. I really care about you. But I don’t want to pressure you—”

“Deal.”

“Just like that?” Rowan asked.

Callie kissed him on the cheek then rested her head on his shoulder. “Yep.”

He squeezed her in delight. “We might just have to host Christmas out at the lodge next year. I have plenty of room for your whole family. If you’d like, that is. My place sure could use some of your family’s holiday spirit and someone else to do the decorating. But we could also do trail rides and a bonfire, weather permitting of course.”

“That could be fun,” Caleb admitted. “Guess my sister finally found something worth hanging onto on all of her travels.”

Callie rolled her eyes at him. “Really?”

“I’m just teasing.” He lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug and drew Tricia close. “There’s just nothing better than family, in my mind.”

“I’d like to find that feeling myself,” Rowan admitted, whispering in Callie’s ear. “If you’ll help.”

Callie kissed his cheek. “I’d be happy to.”

“I have to ask,” Rowan whispered. “After meeting your family and seeing all of this, why would you want to leave this behind?”

She studied the happy conversations of her family and the kids playing on the floor with their toys. “I grew up in a home with too much positive affirmation. When I got out into the world, I discovered the hard way that I was not as successful as I was raised to believe. I suppose, I had the opposite problem of you. So when I failed at my first few jobs and relationships, I realized I had a lot of learning to do.”

Callie admired the glimmer of Christmas lights reflecting on Rowan’s eyes. “It wasn’t until I helped you and your animals that I felt equally capable to others. I didn’t know what to do after that. It was a big turning point for me.”

He ran a tender finger over her healing cheekbone. “You impressed the hell out of me with your set up. And seeing your pretty face step out of the trailer made my heart want to leap out of my chest. I didn’t have any hope I’d find a woman tough enough and strong enough to tolerate life on a ranch. But you just keep proving you’re a fighter. I love that about you, Callie.”

Rowan gingerly pinched her chin and met her lips with his. “Merry Christmas, my light in the darkness, my Christmas miracle. I would’ve been lost forever without you.”

Callie smirked. “Now you’re stuck with me.”

Rowan rested his head against hers, a smile consuming his face. “I think I’m in Heaven.”

# Thanks for reading!

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## About the Author



Strife is a self-made author, cover designer, and editor. She is best known for her primarily sweet holiday romance and loves writing tough and humble male leads with feisty but kind-hearted women who show them just what they've been missing.

She enjoys reading on rainy and snowy mornings with a Christmas-scented candle burning and a fire going, even if it's just the fake one in her RV.

Strife lives with an amazing man who can build anything he puts his mind to and a rescued dog that steals socks and chases the vacuum. Together, they travel the country—from the golden plains of North Dakota to the warm ocean of the southern Texas coast and back to the green valleys and vineyards of Oregon. Anywhere is home as long as they're together.

Strife loves connecting with readers and welcomes all feedback and questions. If you'd like to know when Strife's next books will be out, and to ensure you hear about her giveaways, visit her website: [elstrife.com](http://elstrife.com) and subscribe via the links on her homepage.