



Soldier's Christmas Crush (Trinity Falls: Home for Christmas #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: He's snowed in with his forbidden crush—his best friend's little sister...

Single dad Jensen Webb is completely dedicated to his toddler, Henry, and the sweet, simple life they share in small town Trinity Falls. After losing Henry's mom, the veteran knows how lucky they are to have a big, extended family all around.

But he has two regrets. And they're both coming home to roost this Christmas season.

Jensen and his best buddy, Ransom Wright, joined the Army together after high school graduation. Both of them were eager to serve and to learn important skills.

So he shouldn't have been surprised when Ransom's baby sister, Willow, came to him a few years later with questions about joining up to become a nurse. After all, Willow always followed the two of them around with stars in her eyes. Naturally, Jensen encouraged her to follow her dreams.

And her big brother hasn't spoken to him since.

Jensen has been home for a few years now, but his former best friend has finally wrapped up his own service and is coming home this holiday season.

And so is little Willow.

But Willow isn't so little anymore. And from the moment Jensen lays eyes on her again, he's afraid that if he's not careful he's going to make things much, much worse with her big brother.

When a massive storm leaves the two of them snowed in together, will Jensen be able to resist his feelings for Willow, and ignore the instant bond she forms with his son?

And if he can't, will Ransom ever forgive them?

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WILLOW

Willow Wright looked out over the freshly cut Christmas trees for sale at Cassidy Farm, feeling like a kid again.

The tourist farm was a fun place to visit any time of year. Willow had plenty of fond childhood memories of coming here for pick-your-own blueberries in the summer and apple cider in the fall. But there was just something magical about Cassidy Farm at Christmastime.

Children chased each other around the trees while adults considered bunches of holly, pine boughs, and fresh wreaths laid out on tables. The fragrance of the evergreens combined with the dusting of snow on the ground to complete the holiday scene.

Willow wandered through the tree section, searching for something specific.

She and her brother Ransom always used to beg their mom to buy the biggest trees—balsams and firs that were far too tall to fit in their low-ceilinged living room.

But today she was looking for the tiniest tree they had—one she could lift onto the roof rack of her car by herself, and then carry up the narrow staircase to her new apartment.

My own apartment...

She had already filled the two reusable shopping bags on her shoulder until they were practically bursting at the seams. After being away for so many years, she couldn't

resist indulging in all the local treats.

She had even grabbed five of Cassidy Farm's famous, freshly made pies to bring with her when visiting friends and family.

So far, she was having a pretty amazing day, with even more to look forward to in the coming weeks.

Life was good.

Mostly. There was still one thing troubling Willow, but she wasn't ready to think about that visit just yet. Today was just for her.

When she interviewed for the nursing position at Tarker County General Hospital she was thrilled when they offered her a job on the spot. She accepted the salary offer, but negotiated for her start date to be after the new year to allow herself a bit of a buffer.

Willow had always dreamed of becoming a nurse. Her time in the Army had allowed her to pay off her degree and gain crucial experience. What she hadn't expected was the perspective, discipline, and sisterhood that came with it. Those years had shaped the person she was today.

Now she was exhilarated at the idea of being home, and over the moon about her new job, but also in need of a little rest and relaxation.

And if she was being honest with herself, she needed some time to get used to the pace and the solitude of civilian life again.

"Willow Wright?" a familiar female voice called out, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Willow turned to see another young woman with dark hair, hazel eyes, and a megawatt smile.

“Natalie Bell,” Willow cried, recognizing her current landlord from their school days together.

Willow had been lucky to be coming home right as Natalie and her brother were renting out the apartment over Carla’s Place, the senior center in the village.

She and Natalie hadn’t been in the same class, but they both sang in the chorus, and had always been friendly.

It felt like fate when she signed the lease online for the little apartment, and she’d been hoping for a chance to get together at some point to thank her in person.

“Hey, it’s great to see you in real life,” Natalie said, echoing Willow’s own thoughts. “And it’s Natalie Cassidy now.”

She had a dreamy smile on her face, and Willow could hardly blame her. All the Cassidy boys had always been heartthrobs, and now she was married to one.

They’ve got nothing on Jensen Webb , Willow’s younger self argued from the back of her mind .

“Right, you and Shane Cassidy,” Willow said, nodding and trying to ignore her own silly thoughts. “I heard about that. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Natalie replied, looking super pleased. “So, is the apartment all right? Are you comfortable?”

“It feels just like home,” Willow said. “Thank you again for letting me take it. ”

“It’s our pleasure,” Natalie told her. “We were so happy when you decided to. Let us know if you ever need anything.”

“Will do,” Willow told her, doubting that she ever would. The apartment was lovely.

“So, have you been over to the center yet?” Natalie asked.

Everyone Willow bumped into asked her that, which always made her smile.

Captain Erik Anderson had opened up a veterans center in Trinity Falls this year, hoping that the rural setting would draw new vets who might not be comfortable traveling to the city to ask for help accessing resources.

He was also sending the vets out as volunteers in the community, something Willow had been happy to get involved with.

Willow guessed that it was a cause close to Natalie’s own heart, since her brother had served as well.

“I sure have,” she said proudly. “I’m going to be working with them up at the Open-Air Market, setting up a first aid station. I’m a nurse now.”

“Nurses are always in demand,” Natalie said with clear admiration in her voice.

“Natalie,” someone called out from the plant center. “Sorry, but can you look at this for me?”

“Cassidys are in demand too,” Willow teased.

“On this farm, if no place else,” Natalie laughed. “See you around?”

“Definitely.”

Willow made her way down the line of Christmas trees, soaking in the upbeat noise of so many families shopping, until she found just what she was looking for .

The little tree was about three feet tall with cheerful green needles. It wasn't the fullest, most luxurious specimen Willow had ever seen, but it would be easy to carry, and she knew it would brighten up the apartment.

“Charlie Brown tree, huh?” the young woman with a tag that said Melody asked her when she carried it up to one of the plastic tables where Cassidy Farm set up extra registers on busy nights.

“Oh, I don't know about that,” Willow laughed. “It probably just looks small because there are so many bigger trees nearby. It'll look just fine all by itself.”

“That's the spirit,” Melody said.

“Let me give you a hand with that,” one of the teen boys stationed near the tables offered.

“Her bags are probably heavier than that tree, Wyatt,” Melody called to him.

“I'll get all of it,” the boy decided, heading over.

“Oh, I'm fine,” Willow told him.

“I'd better get something,” the boy said. “My dad will lose it if he sees you walking to your car with all of that by yourself.”

She followed his eyes over to the parking lot, where Shane Cassidy was directing a

group of workers.

“You’re Shane Cassidy’s boy?” she asked, letting him take her little tree.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as they set off.

“So then you know my old friend, Natalie,” Willow said, then immediately wished she hadn’t. Stepfamily dynamics could be rough, especially where teens were involved.

But luckily, that didn’t seem to be the case here .

“She’s the best,” Wyatt said immediately with a genuine smile.

“That’s good to hear,” Willow said.

“My dad is a lot more chilled out now,” the young man confided. “Plus, she knows how to play the guitar.”

“Right,” Willow said, smiling. “She was always amazing on the guitar. This is me.”

She pointed to her mom’s old station wagon. It was as ancient as the hills, but it still ran really well, and better yet it was free.

“You could probably fit this thing in the backseat, you know?” Wyatt pointed out.

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?” Willow replied, opening up the back, putting the bags inside, and grabbing a couple of bungee cords.

Wyatt hoisted the little tree up on top and they fixed it in place together. It really did look almost comically small up there. But the sight still made her smile.

“Thanks a lot, Wyatt,” she told him, fishing in her pocket for some singles.

“No tips,” he told her, jumping back as if she might be about to pull a grenade out of her pocket.

“Really?” she asked. “How does your dad get anyone to work here?”

“He pays a living wage ,” Wyatt said in a way that made it sound like he’d heard the phrase repeated a time or two.

“Good for him,” Willow laughed. “Tell him Willow Wright said hello, and congratulations.”

“I will, Miss Wright,” Wyatt said politely, making her feel about a thousand years old .

Maybe he thinks I’m old just because my car is.

She patted the steering wheel reassuringly as she got in, feeling a little guilty for thinking anything bad about the wagon.

She had so many happy memories in this thing.

Mom used to drive them all through the country on clear nights.

Willow and Ransom would sometimes just lie down in the “wayback” and look up at the stars through the rear windshield.

Nowadays, Mom would probably get arrested for letting us do that.

Those had been good times. She missed her brother so much. It was strange, since he

was right here in Trinity Falls, but their relationship just wasn't the same as before.

Don't think about it...

But as she pulled out of the parking lot and down the gravel drive toward Knowlton Road, the thoughts invaded anyway.

Growing up, she and Ransom had been so close. They never had a dad around, so Ransom made himself his little sister's protector and supporter. The titles went unspoken, but as an adult looking back, she could see that he had taken his self-appointed responsibility very seriously.

Ransom had kept a sharp eye on her, but he had also always been willing to include her in his games and schemes.

As soon as she was old enough to be allowed, she tagged along with her big brother and his friends on their treks through the woods and excursions in the village, and he made sure everyone was nice to his baby sister .

The one boy he never had to worry about was his best friend, Jensen Webb.

Jensen was always kind and patient with Willow, ready to slow down when she couldn't keep up, and happy to respond right away when she wanted to practice a knock-knock joke.

As she got older, he was also the one most likely to listen when she wanted to talk.

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Jensen grew up strong and tall, with a deep laugh and twinkling eyes.

And by the time she was a teen herself, Willow had developed a helpless crush on her brother's handsome best friend.

The fiery jealousy she had felt seeing him in his tux along with her brother and their dates on prom night had stayed with her for years.

Looking back, she was pretty sure Jensen must have known. She'd been too innocent not to be obvious.

Her brother had certainly noticed. He finally stopped inviting her along on their adventures, and started closing the door on her whenever Jensen was over.

Eventually, the boys graduated and moved on, both choosing to pursue military service, as so many of the football players had done under the advisement of their coach, who had served in the Army himself as a young man.

Then, during spring break of her senior year of college, they had all been home at the same time. Axel Williams threw a party at his aunt and uncle's place, and she'd been curled up on the sofa by the fireplace when Jensen came in, flushed from chopping wood.

"Senior year, huh?" Jensen asked. "What's next for you?"

Willow had tried bringing up the idea of joining the military as a nurse with her brother twice already, and he refused to even talk about it. Get a job at a hospital or a

doctor's office, he told her, shaking his head. You don't need to join up.

But here was Jensen Webb, his gray eyes lit up with gentle curiosity, ready to listen to her, like always.

She opened up to him, and instead of shutting her down like Ransom had, he sat with her and asked some good questions.

Her answers launched a serious conversation about the Army that went on for almost an hour, and ended with both of them bent over her phone, scrolling through all the options she might have.

When she got home that night, she told everyone all about her amazing conversation and her final decision to serve. Mom had been pleased for her. But Ransom was so upset that he stopped speaking to Willow for days, and nothing had been the same between them since.

And as far as she knew, he still wasn't talking to Jensen Webb.

We're all home for good now, she reminded herself as she drove past snowy fields and farmhouses. We're going to work this out.

She adored her big brother, and she knew how close he and Jensen had been. The three of them had nothing but time now to smooth over the rough patch. She would find a way to make things right, no matter how much time it took.

She was just crossing over the bridge on Route One, and almost back to Trinity Falls when the car began to splutter and stall.

"No," she murmured. "No, no, no..."

But the battery light popped on, and the spluttering quieted just as the radio faded out.

She managed to pull safely onto the half-shoulder, bumping a little on the mound of plowed snow just in time for the engine to die completely.

Gray clouds were darkening in the sky, and with the battery dead, her flashers weren't going to work.

This could cause a serious accident.

She hopped out of the car to find the flares she was pretty sure were in the back, and call a tow truck.

Within seconds, she felt frozen through. The wind up on the bridge was harsh and cold. It whipped her long, dark hair into her face, and by the time she got it out of her eyes, she could see a red pickup truck pulling up behind her, lights flashing.

She had a moment to be nervous, but then reminded herself that she was in Trinity Falls. Folks stopped to help each other here, not to take advantage.

A large, familiar form hopped out of the truck and began striding toward her, and her heart forgot how to beat.

Can that actually be him?

But of course it was. She would know Jensen Webb anywhere. He had a beard now, but it only seemed to set off his gray eyes even more. A sense of relief settled over Willow as he approached, just like when she was a kid, and she felt her shoulders go down a tiny bit in relief.

“Willow?” he said suddenly, stopping in his tracks.

“Hey, Jensen,” she replied, suddenly feeling like she was twelve again, scribbling his name in her diary surrounded by puffy hearts .

“What happened?” he asked, his eyes moving to the car.

Suddenly, the weight of her brother’s anger landed on her again and she felt guilty for being so happy to see his best friend.

“I think my battery went,” she said. “Radio turned down, and it just sort of spluttered and died.”

“That’s a bad alternator,” Jensen said right away, his deep voice calm and certain. “Come sit in my truck while we call the shop.”

“Uh, okay,” she reluctantly agreed.

With Willow’s luck, the next person to drive past would be her brother and he’d be convinced Jensen was trying to lead her into more bad decisions . But there was no point arguing, because the wind seemed to be going through her coat and directly into her bones.

Jensen jogged ahead and opened the passenger door for her.

“Here you go,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, noticing the toddler in the backseat, who was looking at her with interest.

“This is Henry,” he told her. “Henry, this is my friend, Willow.”

My friend Willow, she thought to herself with satisfaction. Not my best friend’s little

sister, Willow.

But it only reminded her that the two men weren't speaking anymore, and the satisfaction turned back into guilt.

"Hi, buddy," she said to the little boy, who was taking her in with gray eyes just like his father's .

He blinked at her, wrapping his little fist around the brown teddy bear on his lap.

"Give me a sec," Jensen said, closing her door and then getting on the phone.

She watched him pacing and talking for a second, then glanced back at Henry.

"Your daddy will be right back," she told him.

He looked a little worried, but maybe that was just how toddlers looked. Willow didn't have a lot of experience with kids, since she had always been the youngest.

This one looked like he'd rather be with his dad, but it was probably best that he was staying with her in the nice warm truck, even if he didn't know her yet.

"That's a very nice bear," she tried.

He still didn't respond, and his bottom lip quivered a little. What was she going to do if he started crying?

"Knock, knock," Willow said in desperation.

Henry's eyes flickered to hers with interest, but he didn't make a peep.

“ Who’s there? ” she asked herself. “Bear.”

He smiled at that.

“ Bear who? ” she asked. “Bear with me, I’m not done telling jokes. Knock, knock.”

He was really watching her now.

“ Who’s there? ” she asked. “Tank. Tank who? You’re welcome. Knock, knock.”

Dimples appeared on his little cheeks. She didn’t think he really understood the jokes, but he clearly liked that she was being silly.

“ Who’s there? ” she asked herself enthusiastically .

He leaned forward a little, like he was trying to figure out what she was going to do next.

“Hatch,” she replied. “ Hatch who? Bless you.”

Henry’s little face broke into a smile and his gray eyes danced along with it, just like his daddy’s.

“Hey, there,” Jensen said, opening his door and sliding into the truck beside her. “Ryan’s coming up from the shop with the tow truck. He’ll be here in about two minutes—he was on his way back from Providence Road anyway.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Willow said, relieved.

Henry made a happy squeaking sound. When she turned back to him, he was smiling and waving his bear at her.

“Oh-ho, someone made a new friend while I was gone,” Jensen said, his deep voice filling the truck.

“Well, I already met you, Henry,” Willow said. “What is your bear’s name?”

But Henry closed his mouth tight, as if to tell her he wasn’t ready to talk with her yet.

“That’s Dusty,” Jensen said. “He’s Henry’s favorite.”

Henry pulled Dusty close to his chest, as if to demonstrate how much he loved his stuffed friend.

“Nice to meet you, Dusty,” Willow said.

Neither Dusty nor Henry had any reply, but the toddler grinned at her.

“Oh, here we go,” Jensen said, his eyes on the rearview mirror.

By the time she looked up, the tow truck from the local shop was already pulling past them.

“Do you have your keys?” Jensen asked her .

“Sure,” she said, getting ready to get out.

“Nah, stay put,” he told her. “I’ll just say hi to him.”

She handed off her keys and then watched as Jensen popped her trunk and pulled out her two shopping bags.

Ryan had slipped out of the tow truck, and he was smiling as he looked on. Willow

was pretty sure he was laughing at her tiny Christmas tree. Jensen shook his head at the other man, then put her bags in his truck before going back for the tree.

Before long, the two of them got the old station wagon hooked up together and Ryan drove off toward town with it.

Jensen turned back to the truck, and heaven help her, Willow couldn't help noticing how gorgeous he looked with the wind ruffling his dark hair.

"That's a lot of pies you've got there," he teased as he got back into the truck. "You must be pretty hungry."

She laughed, grateful for the distraction from her earlier thought, and maybe just a little ashamed that he'd seen her stash of goodies.

"Well, they're not all for me," she told him.

"Of course not," he said as he pulled back onto the road. "You're a chocolate cupcake girl."

How did he remember such a silly thing?

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JENSEN

Jensen watched Willow smile that secret smile of hers.

She had always been fun to talk to, even when he was a little kid that mostly wanted to talk about stuff like which dessert was best or how many days were left before summer vacation.

But now... well, Willow had grown up while he wasn't looking, into a distractingly pretty young woman. She even smelled nice, like there was a hint of vanilla in her hair.

You're already in the doghouse with her brother. You can't notice stuff like that.

It had always been kind of cute back when she was just an awkward tween, batting her eyelashes and blushing at him all through middle school. That kind of thing was easy to brush off when they were kids.

But they weren't kids anymore. It would be a very different story if she flirted with him now .

She's not flirting though. So why am I even thinking about it?

He should have been relieved, but for some reason he felt vaguely disappointed instead.

"Let's get you home," he said gruffly, tearing his eyes away. "Ryan will call when

your car's ready. Where are you staying?"

"I've got an apartment in town," she told him, shaking her head.

"You're home for good?" he asked, looking over at her again without meaning to.

"I've got a job waiting for me at Tarker County General," she said, nodding.

She looked really happy about it. Something about that filled his chest with a sensation like warm honey.

"That's great, Willow," he told her. "I knew you would do amazing things with your degree."

She bit her lip and all the good feelings dissipated. The last time he'd talked to her about her career, her brother had turned his back on both of them.

They drove on in silence for a few minutes.

Though he hadn't spoken to her since that night at the party, Jensen knew that no one else understood the pain he felt at being shut out by Ransom like Willow did. It was bad enough to lose a best friend—he couldn't imagine how it must have felt for her to lose the support of her brother.

"I'm really sorry about what happened," Willow said softly after a few minutes. "I knew he didn't approve of me joining the Army. But if I had any idea he would cut you out like that, I never would have told him I talked to you."

The heartbreak in her voice cut him to the quick.

"Hey," Jensen said, glancing over. "Don't you feel bad for one second. Your brother

has always been very protective of you, that's all."

"And I appreciate it," she said right away. "Believe me, he was the best big brother I could have had growing up."

"He just didn't want you in harm's way," Jensen said. "I should have understood that he'd look at it like that."

Willow smiled down at her hands and shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"I know it cost you your best friend," she said after a moment. "But you should also know that it meant a lot to me that you took the time for that conversation—you're the reason I joined up, and I'll always be grateful."

Jensen nodded. He was too moved to try and say anything in reply, so he focused on the road.

She seemed to relax a little, her attention moving to the view out the windows.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she murmured.

"I remember when I first came home," he said, nodding. "I mean, I always loved Trinity Falls, but the wide-open space and the trees... it was all better than I remembered."

"Yeah," she said, smiling out the window. "I guess I never appreciated it before I saw the rest of the world. I used to think winter was just brown and gray here, but look at all this. "

They were passing houses with beautiful greenery hung from the porch railings and red-ribboned wreaths on the doors. Lights and decorations in the yard would come alive with even more color as soon as the sun went down.

“And the snow makes it look like a Christmas card,” Jensen agreed. “So where are we headed?”

“I’m renting the apartment over Carla’s Place,” she said.

“Oh, that’s great,” he told her.

Carla’s Place was Natalie Cassidy and Chris Bell’s grandmother’s old house.

When Carla Bell passed a few years ago, the two of them turned the first floor into a hangout for the town’s seniors.

A bunch of the businesses in town donated food and drinks, as well as funds toward the utility bills.

The rent Willow paid to live in the upstairs apartment would probably add to the pot.

“It stays quiet at night,” she said. “And if I get lonely during the day, I’ve got all the company in the world downstairs.”

“I’ll bet,” Jensen chuckled, as he pulled onto Park Avenue. The older folks would definitely gravitate toward a sweet young woman like Willow.

“Cookie ,” a little voice announced suddenly from the back seat.

Willow turned back with a smile for Henry.

“That’s right, buddy. We just passed the bakery,” Jensen said. “Sometimes Mal gives you a cookie, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Henry said softly, as if he had just remembered that Willow was in the front seat .

“Well, we’re taking our friend home right now,” Jensen told him. “But maybe we can stop for a cookie on our way back to our house.”

He frowned, wondering if Willow would think he spoiled his boy. It was just that Henry didn’t talk much, so Jensen liked to encourage him when he did.

“I like sweets too, Henry,” Willow said gently.

Jensen had to chuckle at that understatement. Willow had a serious sweet tooth when they were kids, and that hadn’t changed if her bags from the farm were anything to go by.

He pulled up in front of Carla’s Place. The wide front porch he remembered was still there, but there was a swinging bench hanging from it now and plenty of chairs so folks could get a little fresh air.

“Stay in here with Henry for a second and I’ll carry your tree up,” he offered.

“Oh, no,” she told him. “I’m fine.”

“I can’t let you carry a tree upstairs all by yourself,” he said.

“Have you seen the tree?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

He chuckled again. She wasn’t wrong. Her tree was more like a branch compared to

the one he and Henry had picked out and set up last week.

He thought about Willow all by herself in the apartment with her tiny tree and felt a little pang of sympathetic loneliness.

“Let me at least carry it to the door,” he said.

“Fine,” she told him. “If you insist.”

There was that sweet smile again .

He hopped out of the car, grateful for the cold air against his heated skin, and a break from her delicate perfume.

The tree was light enough to carry one-handed, and he turned to her when he passed her window to see if she was laughing at him for insisting on carrying the little thing. But she was turned toward the backseat, like she was talking to Henry again.

It was funny how Henry had taken to her. He normally clammed up completely with new people. He wasn't exactly being chatty with her, but it was pretty impressive that Willow had heard him speak at all on their first meeting.

Jensen bypassed the front porch and went up the spiral fire escape staircase on the side of the house, leaning the tree against the wall at Willow's doorstep. He couldn't help taking a quick glance in the window while he was up there.

The space was small but neat and tidy. He could see a kitchenette and the opening to a bedroom with the foot of a bed and its soft pink comforter just in view.

Jogging back down the stairs, he found Willow still turned around talking to Henry. He grabbed her bags out of the back and started to carry them up too.

“Wait,” she called out to him.

He turned to see she was hopping out of the truck.

“Let me see those,” she said.

He came over obligingly and she grabbed the bag with the pies, set it down in the passenger seat, and began rummaging through it .

“Here we go,” she said brightly, pulling out a familiar white box with the Cassidy Farm logo. “A cherry pie for you and your dad, Henry.”

“My favorite,” Jensen said.

“I remember,” she told him with a shy smile. “It was nice to meet you, Henry, and you too, Dusty.”

Henry didn’t reply, but Jensen couldn’t help noticing that the stuffed bear wiggled in Willow’s direction in a friendly way.

“I guess I’ll see you around town,” Willow said, handing the box to Jensen.

She looked a little sad, and he wanted to say something more. But what was there to say? He could ask about Ransom, but she might feel weird answering.

I wish things could go back to how they used to be.

But he knew that wasn’t on the table, and there was no point even thinking about it, let alone saying it.

“Sure,” he told her instead. “Good luck with your tree.”

That earned him a beautiful smile, and the next thing he knew, she was carrying her own bags up the spiral stairs to her door.

He waited until she was inside before he got back in the truck.

“Pie,” Henry practically squeaked.

Jensen smiled and looked in the rearview mirror to find Henry grinning at him.

His heart warmed instantly, and the world was bright again.

Henry had always been small for his age, so getting into a front-facing seat was something they had waited for. It was so much fun to be able to see his little face now.

“That’s right,” Jensen told him. “We’re going to go home and have some cherry pie.”

“Yes ,” Henry agreed, hugging Dusty under his chin.

“Okay, buddy,” Jensen said. “Here we go.”

He could tell by Henry’s snuggling that he was going to be lucky to get him home before he fell asleep.

“Let’s put on some music,” Jensen said, flipping on the radio.

The local station was playing all-Christmas-music, all-the-time during the holidays, just like when he was a kid. “Deck the Halls” was on, and the cheerful strains filled the truck.

“Do you know this one, bud?” Jensen asked Henry, pausing for a moment before

continuing. “It’s about decorating the house for Christmas and putting on your nice clothes so you look extra sharp.”

He glanced in the mirror, and Henry was smiling at him over Dusty’s head.

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Jensen didn't really expect Henry to reply most of the time. The pediatrician had said that just talking with him conversationally and giving him space to answer would encourage him to communicate more verbally when he was ready.

He tells me how he feels with his expressions, Jensen reminded himself. He'll talk more when he's ready.

Jensen kept up a steady stream of conversation about the music all the way home, even singing for a bit when an Elvis song came on, which made Henry giggle .

By the time they got there, his sweet toddler was still awake, but very sleepy. Jensen was happy that he managed to get him upstairs and into cozy pajamas before he nodded off.

When Jensen came back downstairs, he remembered that Willow's pie was still in the truck, so he jogged out to get it. He meant to just put it in the fridge, but the breeze picked up on his way back inside, carrying the delicious scent of the sweet treat to him.

"Just one slice," he told himself quietly as he headed back inside.

The house in the Trinity Falls countryside that he bought just after Henry was born wasn't especially big, but it had a nice front porch, and lots of windows.

When Jensen first came home from the hospital after losing Lara, he had longed for space, especially with a preemie to care for.

The old city apartment had been fine before the tragedy, but afterward he felt cooped up.

The place was too small for him to pace in as he inwardly raged at the injustice of it all whenever Henry slept.

And he found himself worrying about disturbing the neighbors instead of just feeling secretly grateful every time tiny Henry showed off his strong young lungs, screaming his head off for night feedings.

So he'd bought this place sight-unseen with the help of a local agent, in spite of the old carpet, peeling paint, and other issues she'd warned him about.

At the time, it was the only place available that was close to family, and Jensen had been desperate to get back to Trinity Falls with his son.

Two and a half years later, he had channeled much of his energy and sadness into renovating the house bit by bit.

In some ways it felt like a tribute to Lara.

He painted the living room pale yellow for her favorite color and installed birch cabinets in the kitchen because of that one time, years ago, that she had folded over the page of one of her magazines to a spread showing a birch kitchen.

Back then, he'd been working in the corporate world, and they'd planned to stay in the city until their unborn baby was school age, putting away as much in savings as they could.

"But a girl can dream about the future," she would tell him as she buried herself in her home decor books.

Sadly, Lara only ever got to see their future in those dreams. He liked to think that she would have approved of him hightailing it out here with Henry when he did. It didn't feel right to stay in the city when he was suddenly a single dad, without support.

But he would never know. She would never shout out a declaration of approval or start a fierce debate with him again.

Shaking his head to clear it, he strode into the kitchen and placed the pie box on the counter.

Afternoon sunlight filled the space, highlighting the fingerpainted masterpieces that covered the fridge. Jensen loved watching Henry's face when he made art. His little brow furrowed with concentration as his fingers swirled and dotted the paper.

Every parent probably thought their child was a miracle, but to Jensen, Henry was so much more than that. He was Jensen's whole world, and seeing him content and engaged never failed to fill his heart .

We're okay, he reminded himself. He's happy, and that's what matters.

He grabbed a knife from the drawer and opened the white cardboard box, revealing the familiar sight of his favorite pie.

The Cassidy bakery didn't bother with fussy latticework or messy crumble toppings, this sturdy cherry pie was covered with a hearty crust that hugged the contours of the berries beneath, so rich that it practically melted in your mouth.

Jensen cut a thick wedge and ate it right there over the sink, looking out the back window at the bird feeder he'd set up last winter.

As the flavors of the tangy-sweet dessert burst in his mouth, he watched a cardinal hop around in the snow under the feeder, happily snatching up the seeds that had spilled over the edge of the box when the chipmunks that lived in the old downspout got into it.

And he found himself thinking of Willow again, her bright blue eyes, and the way she peeked at him from behind that curtain of dark hair.

He'd spent a lot of time these past years thinking about how much he missed Ransom. But he missed Willow too.

Now that she was home, maybe he could finally make things right with his best friend. They were both single dads, and they probably had more in common than ever.

Maybe we can rebuild our friendship, he thought to himself. Lean on each other from time to time.

Willow was home now, and safe. Maybe that would be enough to start pulling down the wall between them.

But the thought of her brought back the moment in the truck when she smiled her secret smile, the scent of her hair teasing his senses. Jensen could think of a thousand words to describe that smile, but one floated to the surface of his mind above all the others.

Dangerous...

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

WILLOW

Willow sat beside Joe Cassidy in his truck the next day, carrying a bag with a pumpkin pie in it on her lap as they left the little town behind and headed out toward the open countryside on her way to visit Ransom.

“Thank you again for doing this,” she told Joe. “I really appreciate it.”

“Least I can do for one of our brave soldiers,” he told her. “Besides, I was heading home anyway.”

“Well, thank you,” she said.

Her car was still in the shop, and without it, Willow felt absolutely useless.

Trinity Falls didn’t exactly have a bustling taxi or ride-share scene, so it was tough to get around without a vehicle.

In desperation, she had wandered down to Carla’s Place to see if anyone there might be headed back to the farmland west of the village and gotten lucky when Joe offered her a ride.

Joe was her landlady’s father-in-law now, and she hoped he didn’t feel obligated on that account. But if anything, he seemed pleased by the company.

“How’s your brother doing these days?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. “He keeps pretty busy with the kids.”

She honestly wished she knew more about Ransom’s life. Maybe today would be the beginning of that.

“A shame your mom’s not around,” Joe said, nodding. “Understandable though.”

Everyone knew that their aunt in Boston was having health troubles.

Mom had opted to sell off most of the farm and join her up there.

Willow wondered if she would have made that move if she’d known then that Ransom was going to come home from his service and immediately take over as a single parent to the two kids Cassie had left him with.

But Willow was glad it worked out like it did.

Mom deserved a quiet retirement and a chance to be there for her beloved sister in her time of need.

And it made sense to pass the farm off to someone else.

Growing up, neither Willow nor Ransom had shown any interest in keeping the business going.

They each had their own dreams, and Mom had always respected that.

“Here we go,” Joe said, rousing her from her thoughts as he pulled onto the narrow dirt and gravel road that led through a thicket of honeysuckle to the section of land Mom had kept for Willow and Ransom.

This was where Mom's cousins and their kids used to stay when they came for the summer. There was a small pond, a big red barn leftover from the days when they'd kept goats, and an A-frame cabin overlooking the woods.

It was strange to think of Ransom living here with his kids, but Willow figured it was good that he had a home to come back to.

"He know you're coming?" Joe asked quietly. "Or do you need me to wait and make sure he's home?"

"He knows," Willow said.

She had sent a text to tell him she wanted to stop by, and he had responded with a thumbs-up.

Compared to their teen years when their text chain had been a never-ending series of jokes and Muppet memes, it was pretty dark, but at least it was a response.

She wasn't exactly sure how long she would be here, or how she was getting home again, but hopefully Ransom would give her a ride.

Things are going to get better between us, starting now, she reminded herself.

As they pulled closer to the house, a movement in the trees caught her attention.

A moment later, three dark forms burst out of the underbrush—German shepherd dogs with glossy black coats, practically flying alongside Joe's truck, as if to welcome them.

"Wow," Willow said.

“Beautiful animals,” Joe said approvingly.

She watched them out the window, leaping with incredible grace, their mouths open in what really looked like friendly smiles.

“Thank you so much for the ride,” she told Joe as he pulled up in the circle by the house.

“Don’t mention it, young lady,” Joe told her. “It was on my way. ”

She hopped out with her bag, giving him a wave as she jogged up to the front of the house.

The dogs trotted up to greet her, and she put her bag down, worrying a bit about the fact that there was a pie in it. But they completely ignored the bag and sat down in front of her, panting and grinning at her.

“Hello,” she said to them. “Aren’t you well-trained and polite?”

They cocked their heads, ears flopping over as if they were trying to understand the question. Ransom had always been good with animals, but these three beauties were exceptional.

They accepted her pats, compliments, and behind-the-ear scratches for a few minutes, nuzzling their velvety snouts into her hand. But it was cold outside, even with the bright sunshine taking the edge off, and she was starting to feel it.

“I have to go see my brother,” she told her new companions, grabbing the bag and heading over to knock on the big wooden door.

“Come in,” Ransom yelled from inside.

Not even getting up to greet her and let her in probably wasn't a great sign.

She figured she would just crack the door open to ask Ransom if it was okay to let the dogs in with her. But when she turned back, they had all trotted off to investigate a suspicious squirrel that was scampering across the lawn, and didn't seem to have any interest in following her.

She opened the door and stepped inside. The high ceiling was as impressive as ever, and it was deliciously warm inside with a roaring fire going in the big fireplace.

Ransom stood in the open kitchen, stirring something that smelled absolutely delicious—fresh onions and peppers in butter, maybe?

The house looked so welcoming. The kids had clearly made some of the festive Christmas decorations scattered around the space. And the sofas were draped in mountains of blankets and knitted sweaters. It felt cozy.

“Wow,” she said appreciatively. “The place looks really nice.”

“Come on in,” he said with a perfunctory smile. “I'm right in the middle of this.”

“Lasagna?” she guessed, heading over.

He nodded and she smiled. Dad's famous lasagna had always been a favorite of theirs.

“I guess Travis and Mae are going to be happy tonight,” she said.

“They're good eaters,” he confirmed, with a genuine smile.

Willow was sad not to be seeing the kids during her visit, but she figured coming

over here for the first time when they were at school was for the best. It would be so nice if she could take the chill off things with Ransom before seeing her niece and nephew.

Silence fell over them, and Willow set the bag on the table.

“There’s a pie in there for you,” she said. “Hopefully the kids will like it.”

“Thanks,” he said.

She decided to do what they had always done in the kitchen. She wandered over to the island and grabbed the tomatoes and headed to the sink to wash them off.

The radio was playing “O Come All Ye Faithful” softly. It sounded like the local children’s choir singing.

She got to work chopping tomatoes for the sauce, feeling better the moment her hands were busy.

“Thanks,” Ransom said, glancing over after a minute. “I appreciate it.”

“How’s everything going?” she asked.

But that was clearly the wrong question. He wasn’t really ready to open up yet. She could literally see him shutting down.

“The kids are adapting really well,” he told her. “They’re tough as nails. And I’m figuring it out.”

“You’re clearly killing it,” she told him, gesturing all around them. “You’ve got this place looking like a home. I remember when it looked more like summer camp.”

“We sure made a lot of s’mores around that fireplace,” Ransom said, smiling down at the sizzling peppers in the pan.

“Well, seeing how everything looks now, I guess planning Christmas won’t be as hard as I thought,” Willow said. “It’s nice and warm, and you’ve got the kitchen up and running.”

Mom and Aunt Rhonda were planning a visit for the holidays, which had given Willow a surface excuse for stopping by. The two women were anxious to see Travis and Mae. And Aunt Rhonda’s doctor had approved the journey. So Willow and Ransom would be hosting the holiday together at his house.

“It’s actually not as hard to heat as you’d think because of the roofline,” Ransom said. “I’m pretty sure I have the bedroom situation figured out too.”

Willow listened as he laid out his plans for where Mom and Aunt Rhonda would stay, and then they discussed food, dividing tasks and meals between them.

“This is a lot for you with the kids,” she realized out loud as he added ground beef to the pan. “Do you want me to just handle the food?”

“I’m fine,” he told her curtly. “You think because I’m a man I can’t handle kids?”

You think because I’m your little sister I couldn’t serve in the military, she wanted to lob back. But she bit her tongue.

“Not at all,” she told him. “I think because you’re a single parent you’re busy, and I’m here now with nothing to do, so I’d like to help.”

He sighed, then looked up at her.

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess I’m still figuring this out.”

Her heart went out to him, and for about the millionth time she wondered how Cassie could have just left the minute he got home. They had been divorced a while, but Willow figured that surely she could have helped the kids transition to life with their dad before heading out with her new guy.

Having been raised by a single parent, she knew that Ransom took it hard that his own kids were now in the same boat.

But she didn’t think he had much to worry about.

Their own mom had been amazing, better than any other two parents, in Willow’s opinion.

As long as Ransom did his best to follow in her footsteps, the kids would be just fine .

She wanted nothing more than to tell him all that, but she couldn’t think of a way that didn’t sound forced.

“It’s weird being home, isn’t it?” she heard herself say instead.

Her plan was to avoid talking directly about her own service, since she knew the idea of it had put him so much on edge. But it was an innocent enough question for him.

“Yeah,” he replied. “But it’s mostly good. I honestly don’t have a lot of chances to worry about it. The kids are the best medicine I guess.”

“That’s really nice,” she told him, meaning it.

They worked on, talking more about the kids and their lives. He even asked about her

new apartment, and she was happy to tell him all about it. The conversation was light and easy, and she tried her best not to think about it for fear of ruining the good vibes.

In no time, the lasagna was assembled, and he was putting it in the oven.

“Let’s have a look at this pie,” he said with a smile as he headed over to the table.

The pie was pumpkin, his favorite, and she had ordered it in advance because Thanksgiving was over.

“Is that...?” he asked, opening the bag and taking a big whiff. “No way.”

“Surprise,” she said with a goofy smile. “They made it just for you.”

“Thanks,” he told her, lifting it out with a look of happy anticipation.

She held her breath a little, watching his face .

“ No way, ” he said again when he saw what else was in the bag. “You brought Scrabble?”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d have time to play,” she said.

“I see what this is,” he said teasingly. “You think now that you’re all grown up, you can finally beat me. Don’t you?”

She laughed, feeling relieved to slip back into their old banter.

“I’m putting on some coffee, then we’re eating pie and playing this,” Ransom said firmly. “You can stay awhile, right?”

“I was hoping you’d drop me in town when you pick up the kids,” she said.

“Sure,” he said. “Where’s the car?”

“In the shop,” she told him, hoping he didn’t ask any follow-up questions that would force her to mention Jensen. “Bad alternator, I think. It just sort of gave out on me.”

“Well, whatever’s wrong, let’s fix it,” he said. “I know it’s an old car, but it’s got some good memories.”

Warmth flooded Willow’s chest and she felt herself relax a little more.

Things might not be perfect between them, but this relationship was going to be just fine after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

WILLOW

Willow awoke the next morning in her little apartment with sunlight flooding through the windows.

She sat up slowly, running a hand through her hair and feeling almost disoriented by the late hour.

I haven't slept that well in forever .

It was probably the afternoon yesterday with her brother. It had been so long since they'd spent time together that wasn't fraught with tension. But yesterday had been halfway to old times.

She smiled to herself as she got up and grabbed clothes to put on after her shower, thinking more about her visit with her brother.

Ransom had absolutely annihilated her in Scrabble, and it had put him in an excellent mood. They also ate half the pumpkin pie, drank a pot of coffee, and reminisced about the old times.

And though he hadn't asked about her service, and she hadn't wanted to bring up his, he did ask her about her new job. And he told her about his own plans. When he dropped her off back at the apartment before school let out, she'd hugged him on impulse before hopping out of the car.

Things are going to be okay. We might not be back where we were just yet, but we're

going to get there.

Once she was showered and dressed, Willow headed to the door that led down to Carla's Place.

Back when the house was remodeled to create the senior center, the interior staircase must have been relocated to the back of the house.

It now opened into the kitchen, and as far as Willow was concerned, it was a great adjustment because it allowed the scent of coffee to drift up to her in the mornings.

Though she had her own kitchenette, she enjoyed sharing a cup of morning java with the folks downstairs.

So when she grabbed her groceries at the Co-op last week, she also picked up some coffee and creamer to add to the donations in the downstairs kitchen.

She had even slipped two of the pies she had bought into the fridge the other day when no one was looking.

"Oh, look who decided to join us," Reggie Webb chuckled teasingly as she entered the downstairs area.

"What is that, your fifth cup?" Mrs. Lennox teased Reggie, taking the heat off Willow.

The two of them were regulars at Carla's Place. Reggie was a talker, and he was here just about every day to chew the fat and learn all the new gossip around town.

Mrs. Lennox lived in the apartment building behind the little house. But she spent so much time here that Willow suspected her fixed income made it easier for her to

spend the winter days here than pay to keep the heat turned up all day at her own place.

In both cases, Carla's Place was having the impact Natalie and Chris had hoped it might in the seniors' lives—giving them a warm place to socialize, and a destination where everyone felt welcome.

It was the same way their grandmother's home had always been when she was alive, but it was official now for her old friends.

And Willow couldn't think of a better way for them to honor her memory.

"Good morning," Willow said to them both. "I haven't slept like that in forever."

"Well, you deserve it, sweetheart," Mrs. Lennox said firmly. "Come have a cup of coffee and some of that nice hazelnut creamer you brought us."

"How did you know?" Willow asked.

"We get standing donations from the businesses in town," Reggie explained. "So when we saw something new in the fridge, we figured it was from you."

"The coffee stuff is always the same, but the pastries are different," Mrs. Lennox amended rapturously. "That Mallory likes to try new things."

Mal owned the bakery just up the block on Park. Willow smiled at the idea that she donated to Carla's Place. After spending years away, it was easy to forget the way the people of this community supported each other.

Like Jensen giving me a ride yesterday...

She tried to stop the thought in its tracks, but that was easier said than done. The man was somehow even more crush-worthy now than he had been back when she was a teenager. And that was saying something .

But she was working on things with Ransom right now, and the last thing she needed was to be driven to distraction by his former best friend. Again.

Sam at the new veterans center in town had set her up with a volunteer gig at the Open-Air Market that started this afternoon.

Hopefully, it would keep her busy enough that there would be no time to think about Jensen.

She'd also joined a group chat with some of the other vets, and it was just now occurring to her that Jensen might be in that as well.

But there's nothing wrong with that, is there?

Reggie poured her a mug of coffee and topped it with a bit of the fancy creamer she'd splurged on before holding it out to her.

"Thank you," she told him, taking it.

She had just had her first sip when her phone buzzed in her pocket, making her think of that group text and the possibility that it was Jensen, like she might have summoned a text from him just by thinking about it.

Then it buzzed again and again—a call, not a text.

No one called her these days. She slipped the phone out of her pocket with her free hand.

At least if it was a call, it wasn't going to be...

Jensen Webb

Her heart skipped a beat and she warned herself again not to be silly as she swiped the screen to take the call.

"Hi, Jensen," she said.

"Hey," he replied. "How are you? "

Jensen's deep, rich voice was practically hypnotic. Willow had always loved hearing him talk, and on the phone it was even more compelling since his good looks couldn't distract.

"Fine, thanks," she said. "How are you?"

"Great," he told her. "Listen, Ryan called me to let us know that your car is ready. He didn't have your number. It was the alternator, like we thought. I'm headed into town anyway, can I give you a lift to the shop?"

That sounded so good, but...

"I... went to see my brother yesterday," she said, heading out of the kitchen and into the little hallway.

"Oh, yeah?" Jensen said with interest. "How did that go?"

"It actually went okay," she told him, grateful to have someone to tell. "Things aren't exactly back to normal yet. But I think they might be soon."

“That’s great, Willow,” Jensen said. “I’m really happy for you. For both of you.”

His voice was so sincere, but there was sadness in it too. Willow wasn’t sure what to say and for a moment there was only silence on the line.

“I think it will be okay again for you too,” she said finally. “He just needs to get his head around it in his own time.”

“Sure,” he said, not sounding as hopeful as she’d wanted.

“Anyway,” she said. “I’m thinking it’s better if I don’t hop in your truck again today. Just until things are normal again. ”

“Sure,” he said again. “We can avoid each other for now, if you think it’s best.”

Avoid each other sounded harsh, but she guessed it was what she was asking.

Jensen’s voice had a note of sadness to it, and for a second she wondered what that was about. But any reminder that he and Ransom weren’t close anymore probably hurt.

“Anyway, thank you, Jensen,” she told him. “I really appreciated your help yesterday.”

“It was my pleasure, Willow,” he said, his deep voice sending a tingle through her chest, even over the phone. “I’m here for you, always.”

When she headed back into the kitchen, her two companions were sitting at the little table, eyes big as saucers, like they had been listening in.

“Was that my nephew?” Reggie asked.

Oh heavens, that's right. All I need is the town's busybody thinking there's something going on between Jensen and me...

"Yes," Willow told him. "He was just letting me know my car is ready at the shop. Ryan Jackson called him since he didn't have my number."

"I see," Reggie said, but his eyes were twinkling. "You want a ride over there?"

"I'm just going to walk," she said. "It's pretty out, and I could use a chance to stretch my legs."

Reggie nodded and she headed over to the sink, quickly finishing off her delicious coffee, and washing out the mug before heading back upstairs to put on her boots and coat.

When she was ready to go, she headed out using the fire escape this time to avoid further conversation. Shivering in the morning cold, she found herself fretting all over again about Ransom.

It's not a big deal that Reggie knows that Jensen called me, she told herself firmly. There's no reason for it to get back to my brother, because it's not exactly hot gossip.

Besides, what was Ransom going to think? It wasn't like Jensen was going to encourage her to enlist again .

She crunched down the snowy drive and out to the sidewalk, heading down Park past the ballet theater toward Harvard Avenue.

Cars came and went slowly and one or two bundled-up moms with strollers passed her on their way to the morning story hour at the library. She wondered vaguely if Jensen took Henry to those. He probably did. It would be kind of weird not to.

Maybe he has to work though.

She had heard the sad news from her mom when his wife passed a few years ago, and that was when he moved home to Trinity Falls. She figured he wanted to raise his son in the same small town where he had grown up himself, with family nearby to help out.

That made sense. But what could he be doing for work?

She thought she would have heard if he was working at one of the local businesses. Maybe he had some kind of remote job or online gig like so many people did these days. But that didn't necessarily mean it would be easy for him to pop out to library activities.

Stop thinking about him, she reminded herself, turning her attention to the house she was passing instead .

The Branford place always made her smile.

Trinity Falls might have some new things happening, but plenty of things stayed the same.

Mrs. Branford had always loved the holidays so much.

Every single tree and bush in the yard was hung with lights.

She'd hung those same lights every year when Willow was a little girl, as well as homemade decorations that her children made.

Now it looked like there were even more homemade decorations in the yard, and Willow smiled at the idea that they must be from the Branford grandchildren.

Willow walked on, finally turning right on Harvard and heading toward the corner of Ambler, where the auto shop was located.

It was lucky that Trinity Falls had its own mechanic, and especially nice that she could walk to it from the village. Hopefully, she wouldn't need it much, but she was driving an older car, so maintenance was going to be key.

"Hey there," one of the guys at the shop said, waving to her. "How can we help you?"

"I'm here for the old station wagon Ryan brought in," she said.

"Right," he replied. "Hang on."

She headed into the open shop. Once she had her car back, she wouldn't be cooped up at home. Then maybe she could stop thinking about Jensen.

"Hey, Willow," Ryan called out to her with a smile. "Jensen got you on the phone, huh? You guys were lucky you caught me when you did."

So much for my escape.

The rest of the morning passed happily enough. She dropped the car off in front of Carla's Place, left it there, and walked over to the Co-op to buy a few ornaments and a single string of lights for her tiny tree.

When she got back home, she put on her Christmas pajamas, started soup in the slow cooker, and decorated the little tree while she played a Hallmark movie on her laptop to set the mood.

Before long, the tree was bright and festive, and the whole apartment smelled amazing.

Ransom had the old bins of family decorations at his place, since he had a whole house and kids, and they would all be celebrating over there. But maybe by this time next year Willow would have a few special ornaments too.

By the time she got everything cleaned up, it was time for her volunteer shift at the market. She changed into jeans and a sweater, pulled on her boots and coat, and headed out.

The area at the north end of town where the Trinity Falls Open Air Market was located was on a huge stretch of land.

Soon, there would be a highway coming in, connecting Trinity Falls more directly with Philadelphia.

During their talk yesterday, Ransom told her all about how some local businessman had purchased the land to keep it from being used for commercial purposes.

But then his assistant, who sounded like a very smart woman to Willow, convinced him that the town could really use that land for community events and services .

Back when Willow was a kid, all of this had just been open fields and trees. But as she pulled into the area, she could already see that there was a nice big gravel parking lot, a wide grassy field, and a great big, covered space that was open on three sides, and currently lined with tables.

It was kind of exciting to think of all the cool stuff that could be done with a space like this. Sam, the young woman who was the coordinator at the veterans center, had mentioned that it was great for the farmers market in winter and even in the summertime when it was rainy.

But seeing it, Willow could imagine parties, dances, and fundraisers of all kinds

happening here too.

“Hey, Willow,” Sam said, waving to her as she walked up. “I’m so glad you made it. We really appreciate you lending a hand.”

“I’m happy to help,” Willow told her with a smile. She meant it too. Nothing made her feel more like she was part of Trinity Falls again than joining her neighbors for a project.

“Well, follow me,” Sam said. “We’re thinking we’d like the First Aid booth to be set up in back near the bathrooms and the stage.”

Willow followed her toward the one closed wall of the big structure, where there were doors leading to bathrooms on each end of the wall and another that said kitchen . Just in front of those things was a small platform stage.

On one side of the stage, someone was putting together a booth that looked like it would hold coffee and beverages. On the other was a booth that said First Aid .

And squeezed in between the First Aid booth and the stage was a big table with a soundboard on it.

Jensen Webb stood by the soundboard, fishing something through a tangle of cables.

“Hey, Jensen,” Sam said brightly. “This is Willow, our nurse volunteer. Willow, this is Jensen, he’s in charge of setting up the sound, but he can also help with anything you need at your booth.”

Jensen glanced up in surprise and when his gray eyes met hers, Willow felt that familiar tingle rush through her chest.

I'm in so much trouble...

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

WILLOW

Willow headed over to her booth to see what kind of supplies she had to work with as soon as Sam scurried off to welcome more volunteers.

I'm not going to get distracted just because my old crush is here. I'm going to do my volunteer work...

"So much for avoiding each other," Jensen said softly.

She looked around worriedly, but they were practically standing next to each other, and there was no one else around.

"Sorry," she told him. "I didn't mean to be unfriendly. I'm just thinking about Ransom."

"Did you mean what you said on the phone?" Jensen asked. "Do you really think I can make things right with him?"

Willow looked up at him, finally making eye contact. His gray gaze was so serious.

She was suddenly thrust back to the past, where she was the hopeless third wheel in the epic friendship Jensen had with her brother.

The two of them had been inseparable—like they were on another plane of existence sometimes, laughing like they were on top of the world and tromping around the woods behind Jensen's house pretending to be soldiers or cowboys.

“I do,” she said, her heart hurting for him. “I was feeling hopeless about things myself, but yesterday was nice. Not quite like old times, but close.”

“I guess I need to find a reason to get in touch with him,” Jensen said, nodding.

They both applied themselves to their tasks after that, but it was in companionable silence instead of the tension from earlier.

Willow was happy to see that there was already a good selection of items at the booth. She noted down a list on her phone of other things they ought to have. Maybe Tarker County General would be willing to donate a few things.

When she had everything set up more or less the way she wanted it, she scanned the area to see if she could find something better than the folding chair she had.

“What do you need?” Jensen asked when he saw her looking around.

“Oh,” she said. “I was just thinking it would be good to have a bench over here, in case someone isn’t feeling well and needs to lie down.”

“I think there’s one out by the entrance,” Jensen said. “I’ll help you carry it.”

“Let me just check with Sam first to make sure it’s okay to take it,” Willow said .

She jogged through the crowd of volunteers who were setting up various tables.

The festive atmosphere of it all made her smile.

Folks she had known since childhood and plenty of new faces had all gathered to make this event a success.

After a few minutes, she found Sam by the big model train set, talking with someone.

Sam turned immediately as Willow approached.

“Hey,” Willow said. “Sorry to interrupt, Sam. Is it okay for me to take the bench from out front? If someone isn’t feeling good it would be good to have something other than a chair.”

“Sure,” Sam said. “Great idea. Should I have some of the guys bring it back for you?”

“That’s okay,” Willow said without thinking. “Jensen and I can carry it.”

Sam nodded and gave her a knowing smile.

Is my crush on the man that obvious?

It was kind of humiliating, honestly. But she wasn’t going to embarrass herself. They were both here to help out, and that was all.

Sam probably just fancies herself a matchmaker, she decided . She’s not from Trinity Falls, so she doesn’t know there’s a history.

Willow headed back through the market and waved to Jensen.

“We’re good to take it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she told him. “Thanks a lot for helping me.”

“Not a problem,” he said.

“I didn’t know you were a tech guy,” Willow said.

“Well, I know my way around the audio stuff at least,” he told her. “I have a studio set up at home for work. ”

“Really?” she asked. “What kind of work?”

“Corporate trainings, mostly,” he said, then pressed his lips together, like he didn’t want to say anything more, which was odd, but she wasn’t going to press.

“That sounds like a good job,” she told him.

“It’s freelance,” he said. “So it has its ups and downs, but it leaves me mostly flexible for Henry.”

“That’s great,” she told him. “And it’s so nice that you came back here to work.”

“I could say the same,” he said, flashing a smile at her that would have sent her reeling back in high school.

Why does he have to be so gorgeous?

They got outside and found a plain bench just under the roof overhang.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Willow said.

“Are you sure you’re okay carrying it with me?” Jensen asked. “I can probably get it on my own.”

“Maybe if the market were empty,” Willow said. “But it’s going to be tough to get through that crowd even with two of us.”

He looked back at all the people moving around the market and nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “But I’m guessing it’s heavier than it looks. So you have to tell me if you need to put it down.”

That sounded an awful lot like a challenge to Willow’s ears.

“I’ll be fine,” she said lightly.

He nodded, and they moved to opposite sides of the bench.

“On three,” she said. “One, two, three...”

Sweet heavens , she thought to herself as she lifted. The wrought-iron bench didn’t look like much, but it was as heavy as an elephant.

“See what I mean?” Jensen asked.

“Oh, I’m fine,” she said, managing not to huff. She couldn’t have him thinking that nurses weren’t real Army. If she could haul a wounded soldier out of a ditch, she could carry a bench without complaining.

“Great,” he told her.

They started moving and she was relieved when he turned them so that he was the one walking backwards.

“So, you’re barely home and you got signed up for this, huh?” Jensen said with a smile.

“I like signing up for things,” she managed.

“I guess it’s in our blood,” Jensen chuckled. “Or maybe there’s something in the

water out here.”

“Well, there’s not much else to do in Trinity Falls,” Willow joked.

“There’s plenty to do,” Jensen retorted.

But if he was planning to list out a bunch of things, she would never know it.

“ Stop,” she yelled, just in time to keep him from backing into Maggie Sullivan, who was carrying a tray of homemade candles.

Jensen stopped so fast that Willow bumped the bench into her midsection.

“ Oof ,” she huffed.

“Oh, wow,” Maggie said. “Sorry about that, guys.”

A couple of the other vets were gathered around one of the tables and she heard some good-natured chuckling .

“Need any help with that, Webb?” someone called out.

“I’m good,” he replied.

“Sure you don’t need someone else to help you?” another guy shouted back. “Your partner there looks a little small to be carting stuff around.”

“My partner is perfect,” Jensen said gruffly, glancing over at Willow.

She nodded to him.

If she had wanted to not be seen with him, she should have been more thoughtful about this. Every eye in the vicinity seemed to be on them now. But it was too late to turn back.

At least he didn't let them say I was a weakling, she thought with satisfaction.

Jensen grinned at her, and they kept moving.

She tried to keep her eyes on the path between them and her booth to avoid another disaster.

They managed to survive a near-miss with one of the ladies carrying in supplies for the hot chocolate stand, and though her muscles were burning, Willow felt good.

Just when they had almost reached the area with the stage, a lady came in with a little girl who seemed like she might be kindergarten age.

The little girl spotted the bench floating in the air and her eyes lit up.

Before Willow could say a word, the little girl was running for them.

“Yay,” the girl yelled, hopping onto the bench midair.

“Hallie,” the mom yelled .

Willow barely managed to hang on. Jensen met her eyes, and they lowered the bench gently to the concrete floor.

“You can't do that, Hallie,” the mom said worriedly before turning to Willow. “I'm so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Willow told her. “She’s so cute.”

“Thank you,” the mother said. “Come on, sweetheart.”

“Bye, ” Hallie yelled to them with a big grin on her face as her mom dragged her away.

Willow met Jensen’s eyes. He was smiling at her with real warmth.

“You okay?” he asked. “I know this thing is super heavy. We can take a break if you want.”

“It is really heavy,” she admitted, laughing. “And my arms might be aching just a little bit. But we’re almost at the finish line. I can take it.”

They lifted the bench together, not needing a countdown this time, and she couldn’t help noticing that they moved in synch with the thing now, almost like they were doing a training march.

Before she knew it, they had placed the bench at the back of her booth, right where she wanted it.

“Thank you,” she said, straightening and rubbing her hands.

“Are your hands numb?” he asked, quirking a brow.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Yours?”

“A little bit,” he said, nodding.

There was just the tiniest beat of tension between them again. Willow knew for her it

was all about her crush. But she had no idea what it meant for Jensen. Maybe she was just imagining the whole thing.

“Well, thank you again,” she told him, trying not to meet his eyes.

They moved back to their respective spaces, and she decided to call the hospital to see about a supply donation.

I just need a little distraction, she told herself. It’s definitely getting easier to be around him.

But as the main office picked up, she happened to turn in Jensen’s direction.

He was gazing at her thoughtfully, a funny little smile pulling up the corners of his mouth.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly.

While she waited to hear back from the hospital, Willow helped out River Young, who was organizing chairs around the hangout area.

River was newly home too, and it seemed like he had really been throwing himself into volunteer work with the center.

Willow had seen his name pop up in the chat a lot.

River seemed a little distracted today though.

Maybe I’m not the only one with something on my mind today...

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

When the admin at Tarker County General called, Willow came back to her booth to accept a donation of supplies from the hospital. Jensen wound up helping them carry in some of the items, and he reorganized the booth with her afterward .

Back when she was younger, Willow had been on the shy side. But now that she had come out of her shell a bit more, and Ransom wasn't there to take up all his attention, it was really fun to talk and joke with Jensen. And the work was easier with extra hands.

"Time to wrap up," someone yelled out as the interior lights were dimmed, highlighting the fact that it had gotten dark outside while they worked.

"Today flew by," Jensen said softly.

He was looking down at her, but suddenly it felt like they were standing too close together for her to meet his eyes. She nodded, wishing they didn't have to say goodbye. Today was the most fun she'd had in a long time.

"Hey guys," Sam said with a happy smile as she approached. "It's time for us to wrap up here, but all volunteers are invited to the Chinese place in town for dinner, Captain Anderson's treat. Will we see you there?"

Bowl of Joy hadn't been in town when Willow left for college, but she'd heard it was a wonderful spot. She had been meaning to try it.

Biting her lip, she glanced over at Jensen. It wouldn't be a good idea for her brother to see the two of them there together before they'd both had a chance to make peace

with him.

“I can’t tonight,” Jensen said quickly, as if he had read her mind. “Maybe another time.”

“Are you sure?” Sam asked him. “You could just stop by for a few minutes.”

“Nah,” he said. “Tell the Captain I said thanks, though. I’ll see you later. ”

He grabbed his coat from the chair behind the audio table, gave Willow a quick wave, and headed out.

Sam leaned in, as if she were about to say something about Jensen, and Willow braced herself, hoping she could handle it without giving herself away.

“Willow,” a familiar voice called out before Sam had the chance to say anything.

Willow looked up to see her old friend Mallory Fisher approaching, her auburn ponytail swinging behind her as she jogged up.

“Hey, Mal,” Willow replied. “How’s it going?”

“You’re going to Bowl of Joy , right?” Mal asked. “Valerie and Ana and I are going to grab a table now. If you want to sit with us, we’ll save you a spot.”

“Go on,” Sam said, patting Willow’s shoulder. “I’ll see you guys over there.”

“Okay, thanks, Sam,” Willow said.

But the young woman was already hurrying off to speak with the people at another booth. Her enthusiastic energy was obviously contagious.

“She’s super nice, right?” Mal said with a smile.

“She really is,” Willow agreed. “Yes, I’d love to hang with you guys. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Want to meet over there, or ride with us?” Mal asked.

“I drove, so I’ll meet you there,” Willow told her. “I just need to grab my stuff.”

“See you in a few minutes,” Mal said before turning away. “Valerie, wait up. Table for four.”

Willow smiled. It would be good to hang out with friends.

She already missed the women she had served with.

Those friendships were deeper than any she had known before.

All of them had spent so many hours together doing important work with real consequences.

Sometimes she wondered if she would ever have a friendship like that again.

I’m home, she reminded herself. I’ll be back at work soon, and I know everything will fall into place.

Today with Jensen had been so much fun. Their friendship wasn’t exactly new, but even with so much history between them, it felt like she was getting to know him all over again.

Stop thinking about him, she scolded herself.

She grabbed her stuff and headed out to her car. It was snowing lightly, masking the transition of the gravel lot into the grassy field and making the whole thing look soft and pretty, almost like Trinity Falls was trying to help her remember that she was happy to be home.

As a child, she'd never imagined wanting to see the world outside this sweet little town. But when her brother and Jensen and so many others turned to the military or went away to college, or both, it was hard not to wonder if having an adventure away from home was the right thing to do.

For the most part, her time away had given her context for how much she loved it here, and how special the community was.

Willow got into the car, which somehow seemed even colder than it was outside.

She heard her mother's voice in her head, telling her to be nice to the old girl and warm her up for at least five minutes, so she sat there with her teeth chattering and the engine rumbling for three full minutes before giving up and pulling out.

The homes at the north end of town were larger—big stone colonials and Victorians on more spacious pieces of property. As she drew closer to the village, the houses started to get a little closer together. Christmas lights twinkled all over town, the soft light reflecting in the snow.

She couldn't help thinking back to the days when Mom bundled them up and took them out to drive around and see the Christmas lights before bed.

She and Ransom would sit in the back, gazing out at the beautiful decorations.

She could picture her brother now, back when his cheeks were soft and rounded, the warm glow of the streetlamps lighting up his face.

She couldn't help wondering if he took Travis and Mae out to see those same lights. Hopefully, she could offer to do it with him one of these days.

She pulled into town and found a parking spot in the lot by the library. Getting out, she spotted her friends being seated at a table in the front window of Bowl of Joy . They were smiling and chatting, and she got a warm feeling in her chest at the reminder that she still belonged here.

“ Willow,” Mal called out happily when she stepped into the fragrant warmth of the restaurant.

Colorful paintings and hangings brightened the walls, and each table had a pretty little candle glowing at its center.

“Hi, guys,” Willow said, shrugging off her coat and hanging it on the rack before sliding into the remaining empty seat.

“Willow, this is Ana,” Mal said, indicating the pretty dark-haired girl across from her. “She and her mom run the dress shop on Ambler.”

“Hey, Ana,” Willow said. “It's nice to meet you. I hear great things about your shop.”

“Thank you,” Ana said with a friendly smile. “We love it here. The town has been good to us.”

Mei, the owner of the restaurant, stopped over to take their orders. It was clear that she knew the other three women well. Willow wondered if they came here often. The group decided to order a couple of different dishes and share it all family-style.

“Does everyone feel ready for Saturday?” Ana asked, leaning in.

“We got a lot done today,” Mal said. “My booth will be fine, and I helped a bit with the trains.”

“I was on general crew,” Valerie said, shrugging her shoulders delicately. “I think we have everything set up pretty nicely.”

It was hard for Willow to imagine Valerie setting up chairs or moving booths around. Valerie had always been incredibly elegant. Growing up in a farming village like Trinity Falls, the height of fashion for most girls was well-fitting jeans, warm sweaters, and maybe a pretty dress for church.

But Valerie had always been a fan of sleek black outfits that would have been more at home on the runway or a Manhattan street than out here in the sticks.

When Willow heard that Valerie had opened a boutique jewelry store here in town rather than moving to Paris or something after high school, she had been stunned.

But this week she had seen the shop.

“I walked past your shop the other day,” she told Valerie. “The display is gorgeous. Did you do it yourself?”

“Visit anytime,” Valerie said, nodding. “It’s on the busy side this time of year, but I can show you around.”

“It wouldn’t be so busy if you opened more hours,” Mal scolded Valerie lightly.

“No way,” Valerie said with her signature sniff. “I would have to hire someone, and I don’t want anyone else in there.”

“She refuses to upsell,” Mal said to Willow, shaking her head.

“The whole point is the right piece for the right person,” Valerie said, not seeming to care at all what her friend thought of her business practices.

“If you’re selling trinkets and you can push a little extra merchandise, fine.

But I’m helping people make once-in-a-lifetime purchases.

The key is to get it right, and that means being there myself. ”

Willow smiled at Valerie’s passion for her work. It was nice to think that her sophisticated friend was so dedicated to her customers.

“How about you, Ana?” Willow asked. “Are you extra busy at this time of year?”

“Yes,” Ana said. “Thank goodness I have my mom and she has me. We like to work together, but days like today I can still get away to help out with other things.”

“I’ve got a couple of college kids who help me out at the bakery,” Mal said. “But it’s not the same as being there myself, so I try not to step away unless it’s important.”

“I don’t know,” Valerie said. “The Williams girl seems good. She’s got my lunch order memorized.”

“She’s the best one I’ve got, and she graduates next year,” Mal said. “I don’t know what I’ll do without her.”

“Here you are, girls,” Mei said, coming over with a tray of drinks and a steaming bowl of dumplings they hadn’t ordered. “Dumplings are on the house.”

“Oh, amazing,” Willow said, inhaling the fragrant aroma. “Thank you so much.”

“I hope you enjoy your night out,” Mei said with a smile before hurrying off.

“So how has everyone been?” Willow asked.

“Nope,” Valerie said with a wicked smile. “No way.”

“What?” Willow asked, genuinely confused.

“We gave you a couple of minutes for small talk,” Valerie said. “Now we want to know what’s going on with Jensen Webb.”

“Nothing,” Willow said reflexively.

It was only when everyone’s eyes snapped to hers that she realized she had said it too quickly, and maybe also a little too loudly.

“I... haven’t seen him since I was home on break from college,” she said, tracing her finger along the path of a drop of condensation on her water glass.

“Come on,” Mal said with a teasing smile. “We all saw him hanging on your every word today.”

“He was Ransom’s best friend,” Willow explained, trying hard not to smile at the suggestion that Jensen was into her. “We were just catching up, that’s all. ”

“I don’t know about that,” Valerie said.

“He’s so handsome,” Ana whispered.

“For sure,” Mal agreed with her. “Even if you were just catching up, it looked to me like he wanted it to be more than that.”

“Really?” Willow couldn’t help asking.

“I’ve never seen a man happier to be moving a wrought-iron bench,” Valerie said definitively.

“How would your brother feel about you and his best friend falling for each other?” Mal asked, her brow furrowing as if it had just occurred to her that maybe this was why Willow wasn’t happy.

“They’re um, not as close as they used to be,” Willow admitted in the understatement of the year.

“What happened?” Valerie asked. “I thought those two were joined at the hip?”

But Mei arrived with a waiter and two enormous trays of food, and Willow was saved from having to talk about the rift between her two favorite men.

They all bowed their heads for a moment of silence before serving themselves, and Willow found herself praying for restraint.

I need to make things right with Ransom, she reminded herself when the moment passed and they were all spooning out the delicious food.

So does Jensen. And I don’t need to fall back into mooning over him.

How can I prove to my brother that I’ve grown up if I haven’t even outgrown my schoolgirl crush?

The subject mercifully changed to Christmas plans, and Willow found herself grateful to have a group of women to talk and dream with. They were so positive, even Valerie, for all her sniffing and straight talk.

Willow knew her transition home would be challenging in so many different ways. But with friends by her side, and a community to serve and to lean on, she was sure she could come out on the other side of all of this a stronger, better person.

She just needed to get her head straight about Jensen. It wasn't like he was spending all his time thinking about her.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

JENSEN

Jensen's boots crunched in the snowy grass as he made his way up the hill to his cousin's barn early the next morning.

Josh had opened a horse rehab place over the last year. One of his regular guys had to call out today, so Jensen had offered to help out. He was honestly happy for the distraction.

Henry was already supposed to spend the day with grandparents anyway because Jensen had a corporate training scheduled. But it had been canceled. Again. So it ended up being a perfect day to do some farm work.

Deep breaths of the frosty air helped him feel centered. Missing out on one gig wasn't a big deal. He had savings, so he and Henry would be fine. And he would have payment coming in soon for that other job he had done this month.

He cringed mentally when he thought back to the silly nature of the voice work he'd picked up, but it wasn't like anyone who knew him would ever hear it or realize it was him even if they did.

The sun was just coming up, painting the snow on the fields a rosy pink that made him think of Willow Wright's blushing cheeks.

Do not think about that girl. She's definitely not thinking about you.

"You okay?" Josh asked.

“Yeah,” Jensen said. “Sorry, just a little distracted.”

“Horses are good medicine,” Josh said with a grin.

“I thought we were supposed to be the ones helping them,” Jensen teased.

“Oh, we are,” Josh told him. “These two just need a quick groom and a nice swim.”

Jensen waited while Josh opened up the barn and then they stepped inside together.

There was nothing like the warmth, the sweet scent of hay, and the gentle huffing and stomping of the big beasts.

Jensen had grown up around the farm, so horses were nothing new to him, but he’d never taken one for a swim before.

“These boys are mostly here for rest,” Josh explained as he opened up the first stall door. “This guy is Archer, and he’s got some ligament inflammation. Easy, buddy, we’re okay. ”

He led a big bay out of the stall. Maybe Archer had inflamed ligaments, but he was beautiful, and his body language told Jensen he craved movement.

“Racehorse?” Jensen guessed.

“Yep,” Josh said. “They both are. Do you want to take him out while I get the other?”

“Sure,” Jensen said, approaching the big stallion as calmly and slowly as he could.

Horses liked calm and confidence. They had to know what to expect. The big animals

could be dangerous if you were scared or loud. He took the harness and stroked the big boy.

“Grab a lead from over there, if you want,” Josh told him.

Jensen grabbed one from the hooks on the wall and led the big horse outside.

Archer huffed in a big breath of the cold morning air, letting it out again in frosty clouds around his muzzle.

“Feels good out here, doesn’t it?” Jensen asked him.

Josh followed a moment later, a big gray mare on his lead and a bucket of supplies in his other hand.

They got to work cleaning out hooves and brushing the big animals down. Jensen could tell Archer was enjoying his grooming, so he took a little extra time along his withers, smiling when he saw the beast’s furry back ripple with pleasure.

“We’re mainly just using the groom as an excuse to check on them,” Josh said, handing Jensen the mare’s lead so he could take over with Archer.

Jensen noticed he was paying special attention to the backs of the big animal’s rear legs.

“You want me to get their stalls cleaned out while you hold them?” he asked Josh when he was finished.

“Nah,” Josh said. “One of the boys will be along for that while they’re swimming.”

They walked together toward the big prefab metal building at the top of the hill. This

was the showpiece of Josh's business, and Jensen had been wanting to see it for a while.

"Have you seen Ransom?" Josh asked unexpectedly, as they headed for the doors.

"Not yet," Jensen told him, shaking his head. "But I want to."

Josh nodded.

The cousins were close, and Jensen figured Josh knew what a big deal it was that his best friend wasn't talking to him.

"I'm trying to figure out how to approach him," he added. "It's not easy."

"He was always so protective of Willow," Josh said as he pressed a button and the doors swung slowly open. "I figured it was because he saw himself as the man of the house and all that."

"It's understandable," Jensen admitted. "I was an idiot not to realize he'd be upset that I encouraged her to join up."

They stepped into the dim space with the horses.

It was massive, even bigger than it looked from the outside.

The ceiling was exposed and lined with skylights that were partly covered by snow.

What light there was reflected in the dark water of the big, heated pool, dancing in the steam clinging to its surface.

"Ransom signed up himself, soon as he could," Josh said, his voice echoing slightly

in the big space. “So did you.”

“It’s different with Willow, I guess,” Jensen said.

“She had such an obvious crush on you,” Josh said with a smile, shaking his head. “He was probably afraid she would just blindly do whatever you said.”

“She was just trying things out on me,” Jensen said, shaking his head as well. “Since I was her brother’s friend, it was safe to bat her eyelashes at me, that’s all. It wasn’t a serious crush.”

“I don’t know about that,” Josh said.

Archer tugged at the lead, clearly eager for his swim, and the two men focused on swapping out leads for poles.

“Don’t let him dance around too much, if you can help it,” Josh said, nodding to Archer.

Jensen nodded, and stroked the horse’s back in long, slow sweeps, moving closer to discourage the animal from trying to prance too much. It worked, more or less.

Archer was a beautiful creature, all sleek muscle and absolutely quivering with unspent energy. It was hard to imagine a racehorse having to keep still for too long.

“He’ll work that off in the pool,” Josh said, as if he had read Jensen’s mind. “Wait until I get to the other side, and then bring him in.”

“Hang on, buddy,” Jensen told Archer as they watched Josh lead the mare down the ramp into the water.

Once she was in, Josh held out the pole that was attached to the mare's harness and walked around the perimeter of the pool as the mare began to swim.

Archer seemed to know right away when it was his turn. He moved down the ramp, ears pricked up, posture playful as he stepped into the water .

A moment later, they were walking together. Jensen matched Josh's pace, and there was something almost hypnotic about the sound of the horses' rhythmic breathing echoing off the walls and ceiling, and the lapping and splashing of the water against the sides of the pool.

He found his mind returning to the conversation from earlier.

She had such an obvious crush on you...

Had he been the only one who hadn't seen it? Even Ransom had made him promise. Would he have done that if it had really been nothing?

Jensen could still picture the way the light filtered through the trees in the backyard that afternoon as he and Ransom sat among the roots of the old sugar maple. Though Willow normally tagged along with them, Ransom had chased her off that day.

As they sat under the tree, he gazed at Jensen with a sudden intensity.

Let's make a pact.

They were young teens, and they hadn't made pacts since they were little boys. But Ransom's eyes were flashing with a ferocity that had Jensen automatically nodding instead of asking questions.

My little sister is off-limits, Ransom had said.

And Jensen had gone along with it without asking a single question.

Willow had been blushing at him and making some innocent attempts at flirting.

But he obviously wasn't going to take advantage of that.

Ransom was protective of his little sister, but Jensen was protective of her too.

It was good that she was testing out her charms on someone who would never hurt her .

When Ransom held out his arm, Jensen grasped it without a second thought.

Willow is off-limits, he repeated.

Forever, Ransom added, nodding sternly, as he grasped Jensen's arm.

Jensen had nodded and repeated the word.

After all, he would never think of his best friend's baby sister that way. She was just a kid.

We all were, he thought to himself.

But did that pact really hold, now that they weren't kids anymore?

Does it still hold, even when our friendship didn't?

WILLOW

Willow spent the day Friday organizing her apartment, and baking her famous chocolate chip cookies.

She honestly hadn't made them since high school and she was a little worried that she might have lost her touch, or that the oven in the apartment might require adjustments to the temperature or the timing.

But happily, they came out golden and gooey, just the way everyone had always loved them.

Maybe I'll stop by and surprise Ransom tonight, she thought to herself. He could never be unhappy to see me when I have a nice plate of cookies.

She put the idea on hold though, and headed out to do a little shopping. Downtown Trinity Falls was so much fun at this time of year, and wherever she went she saw familiar faces.

There were gorgeous apples in the bins at the Co-op Grocer, so she bought a bag along with the rest of her groceries. When she got back home and had everything unpacked, she washed them off, cut them up, put them in a nice bowl, then headed downstairs to Carla's Place for a little company.

For once, no one was puttering around the kitchen, so she kept going into the living room space.

A couple of the ladies sat on the sofas and chairs, crocheting, reading, and chatting.

Joe Cassidy and Reggie Webb had taken spots at the little table by the window with the chess board in front of them, gossiping like a pair of hens about Quinn Allen, who was running Wilson's tree farm this year, and engaged to the owner's son, Beau.

"Hello, Willow," Mrs. Lennox said, looking up from the sweater she was making. "How are you today?"

"Great, Mrs. Lennox," she replied. "These apples looked too good to pass up at the Co-op, so I bought a bag."

"Isn't that lovely?" Mrs. Lennox replied as Willow set the bowl on the coffee table and curled up in one of the easy chairs. "It's a shame you missed honey crisp season."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Ying said, nodding. "Those are the very best apples."

The honey crisp apples at Cassidy Farm lived up to their name—so crisp and juicy, with a delicate flavor that made her mouth water just thinking about it.

"Well, I'll be here for them next year," Willow said.

"I'll bring you over a bushel, young lady," Joe declared, winking at her.

That won him smiles and happy remarks from the gathering .

"What are you up to today, Willow?" Mrs. Lennox asked.

"I helped yesterday with setup for the big event at the new open-air market," she said. "But today, there's a crew of volunteers doing decorations. So I was thinking of going over to my brother's place with a batch of cookies."

“Lucky brother,” Reggie declared. “Now is it true that he’s seeing someone?—”

“Easy, Reggie,” Joe said, cutting his friend off. “Let her get settled in before you start whispering to her about her family. He means well, Willow, I promise.”

“Of course he does,” Willow said, smiling at the other gentleman and tucking away his interesting gossip to think about later.

“Your brother lives right down the lane from Ron and Judy Webb, doesn’t he?” Mrs. Lennox asked.

“He sure does,” Willow replied, trying not to blush at the mention of Jensen’s parents.

What has gotten into me?

“I see,” Mrs. Lennox said, looking a little shy for a moment. “I was wanting to visit with Judy tonight, but I feel so bad whenever she has to come all this way to pick me up.”

“Why don’t I drop you off on my way?” Willow offered immediately.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to be any burden,” Mrs. Lennox said.

“It’s no bother,” Willow told her. “It really is on my way.”

“Thank you, dear,” Mrs. Lennox said, lighting up .

“It will be nice to go on a little road trip together,” Willow said with a smile.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Lennox said, her face brightening up. “A girls trip.”

It wasn't even a fifteen-minute drive, but compared to Mrs. Lennox's usual walking commute across the apartment parking lot and through the little alley to the kitchen door of Carla's Place, Willow realized it certainly might feel like an occasion.

"Shall we head over at four?" she offered.

"Perfect," Mrs. Lennox said. "I'll meet you out front."

And sure enough, when Willow came back down at four on the dot, Mrs. Lennox was waiting for her with a big smile on her face.

"Can I hold that for you?" she asked, indicating the plate of cookies Willow was carrying.

"Yes, thanks so much," Willow said.

Mrs. Lennox took the cookies, and the two of them hopped into the station wagon.

"Isn't this lovely?" Mrs. Lennox said as Willow started the engine. "You don't see a nice big front seat like this anymore."

"I guess not," Willow agreed, seeing her mom's old car through someone else's eyes for a moment. "I always loved this thing. We took a lot of road trips in here. You'd be amazed at how much stuff you can fit in it."

As they pulled out, Mrs. Lennox told her all about her late husband's old van and how they used to volunteer for the Co-op, driving out to pick up grain and other supplies back when the place really operated cooperatively.

Willow remembered her grandfather telling her something similar about driving to Philadelphia to pick up spices and other items. They chatted happily all the way out

to farm country, and down the lane to the Webbs' driveway.

"Goodness, I could talk to you all day," Mrs. Lennox said, placing a hand on Willow's arm when they had arrived.

A knock on the driver's side window made Willow jump. She looked over and saw that it was only Judy Webb, Jensen's mom.

"Hi," Willow said, rolling down the window.

"Didn't mean to scare you," Judy said with a big smile. "I was just so glad to see you. It's been forever. How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm glad to be home," Willow told her. "It's so nice to see you, too."

"Listen, I know you're just dropping off my friend," Judy said. "But Jensen is here, and I know he'd love to see you as well. So would Ron, and of course little Henry. We've got a big roast in the oven. Why don't you come on in for a bit?"

Willow's mouth was already watering at the mention of that roast. Judy and Ron loved to cook, and it was sure to be a wonderful meal.

"She'd love to," Mrs. Lennox announced, handing Willow the cookie plate and hopping out of the car before Willow could even reply.

"Yes, thank you," Willow said. "I might just stay a few minutes though. I really should stop by my brother's place."

"That's my girl," Judy told her, patting her cheek. "Why don't you head on out back to see Jensen first? I know he'll chop more wood for me if he's got company."

Willow's stomach twisted at the thought that maybe her crush on Jensen had been so obvious back in school that Judy would send her straight to Jensen.

Does this mean she approves?

"Okay," she said, eager to get away as she felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment.

Ron and Judy's house was an enormous cedar shake colonial with light blue shutters.

Willow had trooped all the way around it before she realized she was still clutching the plate with the cookies in her hands.

She had been so distracted by her chat with Judy that she hadn't thought to put it down in the passenger seat after Mrs. Lennox got out, like she meant to.

"Willow," a familiar deep voice called out to her.

Jensen stood by the woodpile, axe in hand. He looked larger than life, his wide shoulders straining at the flannel he wore, his gray eyes fixed on her.

"Hi," she said, stopping in her tracks like her feet knew that if she went any closer he would realize she was staring.

"Come on over," he said, gesturing to the logs they had used as benches around the old fire pit forever. "Keep me company."

She hesitated, and he turned back to his task, placing another piece of wood on the old stump. With a flash of the axe and a sharp crack, the wood split and the pieces thumped onto the ground.

Don't be weird, Willow told herself sternly. You've been out here a million times

while he and Ransom were chopping wood.

She picked her way down the slight hill, boots crunching in the snow, and seated herself on one of the logs.

Jensen looked up from his work and grinned at her.

“What’s that?” he asked, looking at the plate in her hands. “Please tell me it’s those cookies you used to make.”

“You remember them?” she asked, surprised.

“Of course I remember,” he said. “I still dream about those things.”

She couldn’t help laughing at that. Pies, chocolate cupcakes, and now cookies... Did they have any memories not based around desserts?

“Well, come have some when you’re ready for a break,” she told him, figuring that she could always make more for Ransom another time.

And I’ll go straight to his house next time. No stops.

Jensen left the axe sticking into the big log he’d been chopping on and came to sit beside her.

Instantly, she felt like he was too close. She could practically feel the warmth pouring off him and taste the spicy forest of his aftershave on the air.

“ Hey, kids ,” Judy called out as she came down the hill. “ Someone wanted to come see Willow. ”

Willow turned to see Henry on Judy's hip. The toddler clung to his grandma like he was feeling shy, but his gray eyes lit up with interest as soon as they landed on Willow.

"Hi, Henry," Willow said, remembering to keep her voice calm and even. She was super excited to see him, but she didn't want to scare the little guy.

He didn't reply, but his little mouth turned up in a smile.

"Hey, buddy," Jensen said, gray eyes crinkling as he smiled at his boy.

Henry immediately tried to swim out of his grandmother's arms to go to his daddy.

"Okay, okay," Judy laughed. "I get the message."

She lowered him gently to the ground and he darted over, passing Willow to get to Jensen.

"Just for a minute, Henry," Judy said. "Daddy's supposed to be chopping wood for me right now."

"I was just taking a quick break, Ma," Jensen said as he swept Henry up in his arms. "Are you going to chop some wood for me, buddy?"

Henry laughed, the bright sound like bells in the cold, still air.

"Okay, Henry," Judy said. "You said your hellos. But I need your help setting the table."

"Your favorite job," Jensen said.

“No,” Henry wailed, snuggling his little face into the crook of Jensen’s neck.

“I could watch him down here if he wants to stay for a bit,” Willow offered. “If you think he would sit with me.”

“Do you want to sit with Willow while I chop some more wood?” Jensen asked.

Henry stayed snuggled into his daddy’s neck.

“Or do you want to go with Grandma?”

The little head shook right where it was .

“Okay, let’s go see Willow,” Jensen said, coming back to sit beside her again on the log.

“ Knock, knock ,” Willow said softly.

The little face peeked out at her curiously.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

Henry started wiggling, and Jensen let him slide to the ground. He stayed right by his daddy, but he was gazing at Willow, his eyes wide like he wasn’t sure, but willing to play along if there was a chance that she was about to be silly.

“ Justin ,” she said.

Henry took one step closer, eyes bright with anticipation.

“Justin who?” Judy asked.

“Justin time for dinner,” Willow replied.

“That’s a good one,” Judy chuckled.

When she looked over to Jensen’s mom, Willow felt something touch her knee. She turned back to see that Henry had let go of his dad’s legs and moved to hers. His little hand was on her knee and his eyes were sparkling like he couldn’t wait for her to do another one.

“Knock, knock ,” she said again.

This time she waited. Henry didn’t answer, but he tapped her knee with his little hand in excitement.

“Who’s there?” Jensen asked.

“Wooden shoe,” she replied.

“Wooden shoe who?” he asked.

“Wooden shoe like to hear another joke?” she asked.

Jensen groaned and Judy chuckled.

Willow kept her eyes on Henry, who smiled at her and made a little squeaking sound .

“You would like another joke?” she asked him.

He nodded his head up and down hard.

“Okay,” she said. “Let me think of another one.”

“Looks like you all are just fine for a bit,” Judy said softly. “Just bring him back up to me anytime.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Jensen said, getting up. “Guess I’d better get back to work then.”

“Knock, knock,” Willow said softly to Henry.

But instead of smiling at her, he put his arms up.

“Oh, did you want to sit in my lap?” she asked him, her heart melting.

“Up ,” he agreed.

“Okay, I’m going to lift you up,” she told him, holding out her hands.

He didn’t seem at all bothered, so she scooped him up and sat him right in her lap.

He smiled his buttoned-lipped smile again, showing off his little dimples, and she couldn’t help smiling back.

Movement over his shoulder caught her eye. Jensen had lowered the axe and was gazing over at them with the funniest expression on his handsome face.

JENSEN

Jensen turned back to his chopping, trying to hide his shock at the scene unfolding before him.

He wanted so badly to stop and watch the interaction going on over at the log, but he wanted Henry to have this moment even more. And if the little one turned to see his dad was watching, he might snap out of it and break the magic bubble he and Willow seemed to be occupying.

Henry didn't talk much, and he didn't warm up to people easily. He was also shy about anyone holding him but his dad and grandparents. But here he was, chuckling and smiling at Willow, and then verbalizing and even holding his hands up to be held.

When he was in her arms and looked up at Willow fearlessly, like he couldn't wait to see what she would do next, Jensen had to turn away before either of them saw how much this moment meant to him.

He forced himself to grab another piece of wood, swallowing over the lump in his throat, as Willow kept murmuring those silly knock-knock jokes.

She had liked telling them when she was a kid too. He remembered her tugging at his sleeve to try them out on him when she was five or six. Who would have thought she would be mesmerizing his son with them one day?

She didn't seem to take it personally at all that Henry wasn't trying to talk to her. She just jumped in and carried the jokes on her own, like it was the most natural thing in

the world that the two-and-a-half-year-old might just like to relax and listen to her.

When Jensen was pretty sure the two of them were doing just fine in their own world, he dared to start chopping wood again.

It felt good to do physical labor when his mind was churning. He lost himself in the effort of it, and chopped until his muscles burned.

Mom and Dad joked about needing the firewood, but he had the sense that it really helped out a lot.

The old house was so big and drafty, and with the price of heating oil so high, Mom usually kept the thermostat pretty low.

Jensen had offered more than once to buy them a new gas heater, but Dad insisted that the old oil burner would last forever.

Honestly, Jensen figured it was mostly just his pride.

Or maybe it was his friendship with Nate Linck, who came out to clean the burner and change the filter every year.

Jensen could remember their booming, happy voices filtering up from the basement when it came time to clean the heater, even back when he was a little boy.

At any rate, using the old wood-burning stove took the edge off throughout the house and kept the den cozy and warm. And since Dad hurt his back, it was harder for him to do this kind of work himself.

One more reason I'm glad I came home when I did, so I could notice when they needed help.

Staying longer in the service might have earned him a pension, but this time with his parents was priceless.

And if I hadn't come home, I wouldn't have Henry...

The jokes had slowed down and Henry's laughter was fading. The little guy normally went to bed pretty early, and he was probably getting sleepy.

Jensen finished up the last few pieces and then turned to look.

Willow sat on the log, gazing out into the woods behind the house, a tender expression on her face. And Henry was fast asleep on her chest, limbs flung out in utter abandon, his little face tucked into the crook of her neck, just like he always did with Jensen.

A wave of emotion washed over him at the sight, and he let his eyes meet hers without meaning to.

Something passed between them, and he felt an achy tension, like a rope connected their hearts and it was pulled too tight for comfort.

He stuck the axe back into its log and then moved to sit beside her without the first idea of what he was even going to say.

What is this? What's happening to me?

"Hey," she whispered. "Do you want a cookie?"

The light question when he was thinking such weighty thoughts made him smile.

"Yeah," he whispered back. "I'd love one. "

“Okay,” she said. “But you have to get it so I don’t wake him up.”

Jensen nodded and grabbed the plate that was balanced on the log beside her. He pulled back the plastic wrap, releasing the rich chocolate fragrance. Willow always made these cookies on the larger side, and they looked soft enough to melt in his mouth.

“Wow,” he murmured. “I haven’t had these in forever.”

She had brought them out here with her so many times, the three of them heading deep into the woods, balancing on the rocks that lined the creek.

They would meet up on a Saturday afternoon, Ransom wearing his old Eagles cap and a big grin, Willow proudly clutching a paper bag of still-warm, homemade cookies and shadowing her brother step for step.

Jensen pulled one out and took a bite, closing his eyes with pleasure as the gooey chocolate burst on his tongue.

“Glad you still like them,” Willow whispered, smiling.

“They’re so good,” he told her, making a real effort not to shove the rest of the big cookie in his mouth at once, even though he was pretty sure she’d seen him do that plenty of times over the years. “My favorite.”

She looked so pleased at the compliment that he was reminded of the way she used to blush anytime he looked at her during that last summer the three of them hung out together, before the pact.

“I’m going to start a fire,” he heard himself say.

He wasn't sure if he was doing it because he needed a little space from her before he said or did something stupid, or if he wanted to provide her with warmth so their walk down memory lane could last a little longer .

He busied himself placing the wood in the pit, then getting it started, all the while wondering why he was doing this, and why she wasn't arguing. Surely she didn't want to just sit out here in the cold reminiscing with him all day.

Then why is she here?

He worried that it was only because his son had fallen asleep in her arms, but she seemed happy enough.

Once he had a nice fire crackling, he lowered himself to the log beside her again.

"That takes me back," she said, eyeing the fire. "We ate so many roasted marshmallows it's a miracle all our teeth didn't fall out."

"We needed the energy for running around in the woods," Jensen said, chuckling.

"I guess we did," she agreed.

"Remember the Tarzan rope Ransom and I set up over the creek?" he asked.

"How could I forget?" she said. "You guys worked on that for days."

"But you were the only one willing to be the first to actually try it out," Jensen said.

He saw her in his mind as she was then—her long brown hair in a messy ponytail, and a smudge of dirt on her cheek. But the look in her crystal blue eyes had been like summer lightning.

“I wiped out,” she said now, with a look of chagrin. “I scraped my knees on the rocks. I still have a scar.”

“I got you Band-Aids,” he remembered.

“And you carried me back to the house,” she said, nodding .

She looked away from him and down at Henry again, and Jensen swore her cheeks were flushed.

Is she blushing?

“I never could figure out why you ran up and grabbed the rope like you did,” he said. “You were so brave, Willow.”

“I only did it to try and impress you,” she said. “I was scared to death.”

“You didn’t look scared,” he said, shaking his head. “You looked so fierce.”

She smiled and gazed into the fire as the light flickered on her face, making her cheeks glow.

“Why were you trying to impress me?” he heard himself ask.

She didn’t say anything for a long time. Just when he was about to give up and ask her something else, she turned to him, fixing him in that bright blue gaze.

“I had a crush on you,” she said simply. “I wanted you to like me.”

His heart seemed to forget how to beat.

“Not a real crush, though, right?” he managed to ask. “You were just a kid trying out feelings on someone you trusted.”

But her gaze slid back to the dancing flames.

“It was real,” she said after a moment. “But don’t worry, I won’t stalk you now or anything.”

“That doesn’t worry me,” he said automatically.

His heart had remembered how to beat again, and now it was pounding wildly in his chest, making him think all kinds of thoughts he shouldn’t be thinking .

But how was he supposed to help himself?

Here she was, with his child on her chest, telling him that she used to care about him, making him feel things he never thought he would feel again...

“I’m sorry,” she said suddenly, turning back to him. “I didn’t mean to make things weird. I just wanted to get it off my chest. I mean, I honestly thought you always knew.”

Her expression was stricken, and he could have punched himself for putting that look on her face.

He knew he had to do something, say something, to show her that it was all right, that it was more than all right.

“Willow,” he breathed.

He reached for her, his hand meeting hers on the rough bark of the log they were

sitting on. Even through their gloves, he felt a charge of electricity sizzle through him at the innocent touch.

The sound of voices floating down the hill snapped him out of his trance.

Willow pulled her hand away just as his mom and Mrs. Lennox arrived.

“Well, would you look at that,” Mom said fondly. “I can’t believe it.”

“Didn’t you say he was shy, Judy?” Mrs. Lennox asked.

“I guess our Willow has a magic touch,” Mom declared. “How nice that you two have a fire going. Why don’t I take Henry on up to bed? He can sleep until you head home, okay, son?”

“Thanks, Ma,” he replied, moving to get up .

“No, no,” Willow said right away. “I’ll just go up with you. He might stay asleep if I carry him.”

“That’s nice, dear,” Judy said as Willow stood carefully.

“Oh, look at that,” Mrs. Lennox laughed. “You got into your brother’s cookies.”

“I didn’t tell him I was coming by today,” Willow said. “So I’ll just stop by his place with more cookies tomorrow.”

Jensen watched the three of them disappear up the hillside to the house until the sound of their voices faded away, leaving him alone.

Without thinking about it, he grabbed another cookie and turned back to the fire,

eating it slowly and allowing the simple pleasure of the warmth and the chocolate consume him while he let the image of Willow Wright's ocean-blue eyes linger in his mind for just a moment longer.

You shouldn't be thinking about your best friend's little sister like that, a little voice in the back of his head whispered. And you shouldn't be eating his cookies either.

He stood and grabbed the plate, feeling frustrated with himself. Life had actually been relatively simple up until now, and he hadn't even appreciated it.

Losing Lara and raising Henry alone was a devastating challenge, but at least it was the kind of struggle everyone on the outside could understand.

And though he was prone to getting stuck here and there along the way, the path back to normal moved in one direction, with family and friends to hold him up when he thought he couldn't go on, and cheer him on when he found his footing.

But now that Ransom and Willow were home, he felt unmoored again, like before. And he realized how much he had isolated himself, even here at home.

For a big part of his life, the two of them had been his whole world, and now the tension of having unresolved issues with both of them was making him restless, especially knowing that he could bump into either of them at any moment.

There was no roadmap to getting back to normal when you had wrecked a friendship.

And there was no way to define the wild emotions Willow kept stirring up in him.

There's one way, the little voice whispered.

But Jensen would never allow that to happen. He needed his best friend right now,

maybe more than ever. And he was pretty sure Ransom needed him too. They were both single dads now, trying to make good lives for their children.

Telling himself that he could make things right with Ransom while he was falling for Willow was deluded at best. And if he wasn't careful, he was going to ruin things with both of them.

It was real...

But Willow admitting that she'd had a teen crush on him wasn't the same thing as saying she cared about him now.

These days, she was probably dreaming of falling madly in love with a doctor at the hospital where she was about to work.

They would get married, and she would live in a big house and drive a fancy car and never want for anything at all .

Willow was a good person. She deserved all that and more.

So the best thing he could do if he actually cared about her was to pull these strange feelings out by the roots, and ignore the electricity that seemed to spark through his veins every time she was close.

How hard could that be?

WILLOW

Willow walked around the Open-Air Market the next day, trying to focus on all the fun at hand instead of obsessing about the events by the fire with Jensen last night.

The market's huge model train set was up and running, and children and their parents had gathered around to watch it. It had attracted such a crowd that she couldn't really see what was happening. But from the reactions of everyone gathered there, she could tell it was a hit.

She had been manning the first aid station for most of the day so far, but when Sam sent another volunteer over to sit in the booth for a little while, Willow had taken the chance to stretch her legs and get something to eat.

In the unlikely event that there was some kind of medical emergency while she was gone, she was only a call and a quick jog away.

I wish I had someone to walk around with, Willow thought to herself, her mind going to Jensen and her brother, as it so often did.

She could have texted Mal and her friends, or anyone else she'd known growing up in town. But somehow last night had left her feeling like a sailboat in a big storm—tossed around too much to focus.

Something about the frosty air, the cozy feeling of cuddling a bundled-up Henry, the glow from the fire, and the twinkling of the stars had put her in a trance that had apparently been some kind of truth serum for her.

Why did I tell Jensen I used to have a crush on him?

Whatever the reason, he hadn't reacted the way she expected. She'd thought he would roll his eyes and chuckle, or maybe tease her a little. Instead, he'd given her that intense look that made her cheeks heat. And now she kept replaying it, wondering what it meant.

He isn't interested, she reminded herself. You had a crush, but he didn't. He got married to someone else, and they had a child. He was probably just surprised, that's all.

But it hadn't looked like an expression of surprise, not exactly. And the way he practically growled her name and reached for her hand...

When Judy and Mrs. Lennox came down before she had a chance to find out what he was about to do next, Willow had wanted to cry in frustration and relief all at once. But then the way he'd been for the rest of the night, so distant and cold, told her all she needed to know.

I can have a million other crushes , she reminded herself sternly. But I only have one brother.

She'd been keeping an eye out for Ransom all day today, but chances were slim that anyone would stop by the First Aid booth unless something went wrong.

I'll go see him soon, she told herself. And I'll make more cookies.

Jensen hadn't been around today either. She had thought he would be here working the sound system, but so far, he was nowhere to be found. Maybe he'd show up later, when the performances on the stage started, and maybe the icy wall that had sprung up between them last night would melt.

She thought back to his behavior after they had all headed back to the house. Once he'd put Henry to bed, they'd all enjoyed a nice dinner together.

But Jensen hardly looked at her during it.

When it was time to go, she figured he would at least walk her out to her car and maybe she could apologize for telling him about the crush. But he didn't even offer, and his dad ended up accompanying her outside instead.

"It's so good to see you again, sweetheart," Ron had said. "Don't be a stranger."

The problem was that she was starting to feel like a stranger, even in her own life. She had expected that to a certain extent. After all, she had been gone a long time.

But if friends weren't friends anymore, and family wasn't family, what was the point of being back here at all?

It's my fault.

She should never have told Jensen about her crush last night. Whatever his initial reaction, it was clear that he really wasn't cool with it. And for heaven's sake, he was a widower. He was probably still grieving for his wife .

Guilt twisted in her chest again, and she fought back the tears that prickled her eyes.

If he would just give her a chance to apologize, she could maybe move on from it. Instead, she figured she'd be replaying her stupid confession on a loop for the rest of her life.

She spotted Mal's booth up ahead and hurried over, hoping to maybe bend her ear. But her friend was clearly doing too much business to chat, so she just stood in line

and bought a snack instead.

When she got to the checkout, there was a little sign that said the booth was donating all of today's proceeds to a children's hospital, and she couldn't help but smile.

There was one reason to be back. Only in Trinity Falls would a business owner decide to turn over such a huge day of sales to charity.

"That's really nice, Mal," she said, nodding to the sign as she paid.

"Least I can do," Mal said, shaking her head. "You okay?"

Willow cursed her face for always showing all her emotions.

"Totally fine," she said. "I just need this pick-me-up."

She would have said more, but there was a big line behind her, so she just thanked her friend and headed back toward her own booth.

Another high school friend waved to her from across the market and she waved back as best she could with her hazelnut coffee in one hand and a pumpkin muffin in the other .

I'll feel better after a little caffeine and something to eat, she told herself.

The rest of the day melted away without any medical incidents other than a lightheaded older lady needing to sit for a few minutes and have something to eat, and a man who slipped and fell in the parking lot but was absolutely fine, thank goodness.

The action on the stage had started around noon with a local children's choir, then the

Trinity Falls ukulele band, followed by some kids doing a musical skit.

Being near the stage gave Willow a front row seat to the performances, so she wasn't as bored as she might have been.

The musicians all seemed to have their own people taking care of the sound, so she figured she wouldn't be seeing Jensen today after all.

In between the acts, the local radio station came on the speakers. WCCR played all Christmas music all the time from November to New Year's, so the festive sounds continued even during the breaks.

Another live band was on the stage now, playing acoustic versions of all the holiday rock songs. People were singing along and swaying to the music.

As the sun sank, someone turned on the twinkle lights and thousands of tiny bulbs filled the space with a magical golden glow. The crowd let up a collective sigh of appreciation at the sight, which was followed immediately by the wailing of a child .

Willow was on her feet instantly. She wasn't sure how she knew this wasn't just the tired cry of a little one who wasn't getting their way, but she did. It was the sound of a small child in pain.

She was halfway through the crowd when she spotted Henry sitting on the concrete floor of the market, tears flying out of his sweet little face. Jensen crouched beside him, speaking low, one arm wrapped around the boy.

"Oh dear," Willow said calmly. "It looks like you fell down, Henry. Did you hurt your hands?"

Sure enough, the little one lifted up his hands to show her a pair of scraped up palms,

the right more than the left.

“Oh, that does hurt, doesn’t it?” she said, feeling relieved that it probably wasn’t anything worse. “Would you like to come to my station and choose some special Band-Aids to help you feel better?”

Henry had stopped crying so hard while she was talking. Now, his solemn gray eyes met hers and he nodded up and down.

“Okay,” she told him. “Do you want your dad to carry you? Or do you want to walk?”

But he made a third choice, lifting his arms to her instead.

“You want me to carry you?” she asked.

He nodded again, so she slid her hands under his arms and scooped him up. He settled on her hip and leaned into her neck, as if she had been carrying him around all his life.

For the first time, she glanced over at Jensen. His eyes were on his son, slightly widened, as if he was surprised .

“Okay, here we go,” she said, tearing her eyes away from Jensen.

She wasn’t the only one who had heard Henry’s howl. The crowd parted, allowing her to carry him swiftly back to her booth.

“I’m going to put you down on the bench, okay?” she asked. “You can sit with your daddy while I get my nurse things ready.”

Henry didn't reply, but he allowed himself to be placed on the bench without any complaints. Jensen sat right down next to him.

"The first thing we have to do is get your hands clean," Willow told him. "It's going to sting, but only for a second because I have magic spray that helps take away the hurting."

Henry looked up at her, his eyes still so solemn.

"Stay here for a minute?" she told Jensen. "I have an idea."

Normally, she would have brought the boy into the bathroom to wash his hands in the sink.

But he was so small and sad that she figured it might be better to just fill a basin with warm soapy water and bring it back out for him instead.

She grabbed her basin and got right to work, returning a moment later with the bath for his hands and a sealed bottle of cold, clean water.

"Okay, Henry," she told him. "First, I'll look at your hands and then we'll give them a bath."

"Hold them out, buddy," Jensen murmured. "So she can see them."

Henry hesitated, but she didn't say a word. A few seconds later, he held out his little hands. The abrasions on his palms were angry and red, but there didn't seem to be anything embedded in them, thank goodness.

"Oh yes," she said. "I know that hurts, but you'll be able to get them nice and clean."

Are they ready for their bath? Remember, when you put your hands in here it will be nice and warm, but it will sting a little.

As soon as you pull them out, we'll rinse them with cool water and use the magic spray. ”

Jensen rolled Henry's sleeves up almost to his elbows.

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“Here we go,” Willow said holding out the basin.

Jensen took Henry’s hands and plunged them into the water. She could see the instant that they began to sting, because he whimpered and his lower lip began to tremble like the tears were coming back.

“You are doing a great job,” Willow told him. “You’re making sure your hands are nice and clean so the magic spray can work.”

Jensen rubbed his thumbs over Henry’s little palms very gently.

“That’s fine,” Willow told him. “Let’s rinse with nice, cool water. Hold your hands up for me, Henry.”

Henry stopped whimpering when his hands were out of the water and eyed the water bottle with interest.

“This water is nice and cool,” Willow told him, removing the lid and tilting the bottle over his hands. “Ready?”

He nodded, and she poured the water very slowly and gently onto his little hands.

He wiggled and whined a little, but didn’t cry.

“You are very brave,” Willow told him, placing the bottle down. “Now it’s time for magic spray.”

She grabbed the bottle of antibacterial spray used for burns and scrapes. It had a mild analgesic that would numb the pain in Henry's little hands.

"Here we go," she said, misting a little over one hand so he could see it didn't hurt. "And a little more."

Henry watched her spray both hands without complaint.

"Now we dance," she told him, demonstrating by waving her own hands around. "That helps the magic spray to dry."

Henry smiled at her, but didn't wave his hands around, he was content just to watch her. That was fine though, because she was so relieved to see him starting to smile a little.

"Okay," she told him after a minute. "Now you get to choose some Band-Aids."

The Band-Aids were really mostly for fun.

The real work had been making sure there was nothing embedded in his hands, and getting him cleaned up and some antibiotic on him.

But even if the Band-Aids only gave a temporary opportunity to keep the abrasions clean, she was pretty sure they would distract him.

She pulled out the small bin of cool Band-Aids she had been collecting for just such an occasion. Henry grinned and watched as she spread out a handful of the bigger ones on her table. When she put down one that was covered in a pattern of bears, he let out a huff of delight and pointed to it.

"Oh, Dusty will like that one, won't he?" she asked him. "Okay, let's pick one more,

and then we can put them on. ”

She kept laying out Band-Aids until he chose another one with cowboys.

“Great choice, Henry,” she told him cheerfully as she put the others back in her little bin. “Now, which hand gets the bears?”

He thrust out his right hand and watched with great interest as she carefully removed the Band-Aid from its backing and smoothed it onto his little palm.

“And which one gets cowboys?” she asked.

He held out the other hand, giving her a real smile for the first time today.

“Excellent,” she told him, putting the other bandage in place.

When she was finished he held out his own hands, palms up, and studied them.

“Great job, Henry,” she told him. “Now if you want, I can get you some cold water bottles to hold. Would that feel better?”

“ Nah, nah ,” he said, his eyes sparkling.

“No water bottles?” Willow asked.

“I think Henry wants a knock-knock joke,” Jensen said.

“Oh,” she said, smiling at her little friend. “Knock, knock.”

Henry beamed up at her.

“Who’s there?” Jensen asked.

“Tank,” Willow replied.

“Tank who?” Jensen asked.

“You’re welcome,” Willow replied with a big smile.

Henry laughed and the sweet, happy sound filled Willow’s heart. It was so nice that he was feeling better .

“You used to love those jokes when you were a kid,” Jensen said fondly. “How do you remember so many of them?”

“My mom used to put one in my lunch bag every day,” she told him, touched that he remembered so many things about her. “It was kind of our thing. She must have done hundreds of them. You don’t forget the best ones.”

“Hey,” Jensen said suddenly. “What are you up to tomorrow?”

“Not much,” she said automatically. She honestly had no plans at all.

“Henry loved the trains today,” Jensen said. “River Young was telling me that there’s a train you can ride over at an arboretum about an hour and a half from here. I was thinking of taking him tomorrow. Would you want to go with us?”

She should say no.

“Yes,” she said immediately. “I’d love to.”

“Great,” he said. “We’ll pick you up around eight, if that’s okay?”

“Perfect,” she said.

Henry hopped off the bench and took off toward a little girl who was holding a big apple cider doughnut.

“That’s my cue,” Jensen laughed, getting up. “We’ll head home now, but see you tomorrow.”

“See you then,” she said, smiling as she watched him catch up to Henry, who was eyeing the little girl’s doughnut, but not grabbing for it.

Jensen waved to the girl’s mom, crouched to talk to Henry, then scooped him up and the two of them disappeared toward the front of the market .

We’re going on a day trip tomorrow, she thought to herself happily.

She felt a pang of guilt immediately afterward, but it was easy to push it aside. After all, they were traveling far outside of Trinity Falls. They were unlikely to bump into anyone they knew. And maybe they could talk during the drive about ways to get Jensen together with her brother.

The band onstage thanked the crowd and began carrying their instruments offstage. The radio came on just as “Jingle Bells” was winding down.

“Thanks for listening to WCCR,” the deejay said. “I’m Ho-ho-Hope Holiday and we’re playing all Christmas music, all the time, from November to New Year’s. We’ve got more Christmas classics coming right up. But first a word from one of our sponsors.”

The sound of sleigh bells on the radio was followed by a female voice sharing the news that the Trinity Falls Co-op Grocer now offered fresh-squeezed orange juice

daily.

Willow smiled at the idea that the Co-op had radio ads these days.

“Fresh-squeezed goodness from Florida gems,” a very familiar male voice added. “ORANGE you glad we’ve got juice?”

“Jensen?” she murmured, amazed.

The first strains of “The Nutcracker Suite” began to play on the radio, but half the people in the market were laughing, looking astonished, or both.

So she wasn’t imagining it, that really had been Jensen Webb. Or at least, it had sounded an awful lot like him. And based on the reactions here at the market, it was the first time they were hearing it, too.

Why in the world did you make a radio commercial, Jensen? And why didn’t you brag about it to your friends?

One more thing to ask him about tomorrow...

JENSEN

Jensen pulled up in front of Carla's Place just before eight o'clock the next morning.

He had Elvis Presley's Christmas hits streaming from his phone onto the car speakers instead of just listening to the radio, but he knew he couldn't avoid his commercial forever.

He'd gotten so many texts about it last night, and even more this morning. Some of them were congratulating him, some were gently teasing him, and a few were just emojis or pictures of oranges.

His cousin Lucy, an up-and-coming local artist who had worked for the Co-op for years and designed their holiday window display, sent him a really nice message, telling him that she was proud of him for using his skills to promote a local business.

But mostly he felt like the target of a very elaborate prank.

How did this happen?

He hesitated after parking. On the one hand, he wanted to get Henry out of the car and go up the fire escape to knock on her door like a gentleman.

On the other, if there was any chance that she was the only person in Trinity Falls who hadn't heard his radio spot yet, he couldn't risk walking past Joe Cassidy and Uncle Reggie, who were out on the porch sipping their coffee, in spite of the cold weather.

The two of them would definitely give him a good ribbing—which he normally wouldn't mind at all.

But on his first outing with Willow, it just didn't feel right.

My first outing with her?

He'd told himself over and over last night that today didn't mean anything because they were just going to a daytime activity with Henry, something any pair of friends might do.

But of course he'd also spent the whole evening desperately trying and mostly failing to avoid dreaming up elaborate dates to invite her on.

Just as he was about to turn off the truck and head up to get her, Willow appeared on the fire escape with a backpack, practically sprinting his way.

Maybe she's excited to see me, too.

He watched her wave to the two older gentlemen on the front porch and prayed that what they yelled back had nothing to do with him.

When she had almost reached the car, he hopped out and ran around to open the door for her.

"Good morning," she said brightly.

It honestly felt like sunlight was glowing from those blue eyes of hers, like a burst of vitamin D on a cold winter day.

"Good morning," he replied .

She hopped into the truck, and he closed the door gently behind her.

“Morning, Tropicana,” Joe Cassidy called out to him, chuckling and giving him a wave from the porch.

“Orange you a lucky guy?” Uncle Reggie asked, waggling his bushy eyebrows.

Jensen waved back, pretending not to understand their jokes, and hopped back into the truck. He wondered if Willow had overheard, but predictably, she was turned around to face Henry, who was already grinning at her.

“More knock-knock jokes?” Jensen guessed.

“Are you getting tired of them?” she asked.

“Never,” he told her.

“Knock, knock,” she said in a singsong way that made Henry chuckle.

Jensen waited a beat, in case Henry decided to answer, then joined in when the little one stayed silent.

“Who’s there?” Jensen asked.

“Boo,” Willow said.

“Boo who?” he asked.

“Don’t cry,” she said. “I’ve got plenty more knock-knock jokes.”

Jensen groaned and she chuckled.

“Nah, nah,” Henry piped up suddenly, his little voice much louder and more certain than usual.

Jensen was so amazed that he just turned and blinked at his son in wonder.

“Who’s there?” Willow asked.

But Henry was so tickled that he melted into helpless laughter without saying another word. It was the happiest sound Jensen had ever heard, and it made his heart feel like it was going to burst right out of his chest.

“You’re such a funny boy, Henry,” Willow told him approvingly. “Good job.”

Jensen looked between the two of them and felt a wave of gratitude that his son had found someone who got him, even though he didn’t say much yet.

Willow turned back to face the front and placed her backpack at her feet.

“Ready?” Jensen asked.

“Very ready,” she told him. “I can’t wait to see this place.”

He pulled out, humming along with “Blue Christmas” as he did. There was still snow on the ground, but the sun was rising into a clear, blue sky, at least for now. And the old sense of adventure he used to get as a kid on a fresh adventure shivered happily down his spine.

“Wow, WCCR is playing a lot of Elvis today,” Willow said approvingly.

“Oh, it’s streaming from my phone,” Jensen said. “Henry really likes it.”

She smiled and he felt a little pang of guilt for the fib.

They made it out of the village and onto the long ribbon of Route One in no time. Once they were under way, Willow peeled off her coat and set it on the backpack that was already at her feet.

“Want to put all that in back with Henry?” Jensen asked.

“It’s fine,” she told him. “Besides, I’ve got some road trip snacks in there.”

“What snacks?” he asked automatically, then smiled, feeling like a ravenous teenager all over again.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased. “Are you hungry already?”

“Always,” he joked. “But let’s save it until we get closer. If someone drifts off they might wake up unhappy and then a snack will be great.”

“Good thinking,” she told him. “So do you do this kind of stuff all the time?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Like just taking off at a moment’s notice to do something cool you just heard about?” she asked.

He could have joked back, but something told him to be honest.

“Henry was really excited to tell me about the trains yesterday,” he told her, keeping his eyes on the road. “When he uses his words, I always listen.”

Willow was quiet, but when he glanced over she smiled at him and nodded.

“That’s really nice,” she said softly.

He was relieved that she understood what he didn’t want to elaborate on in front of the boy. Henry had mostly made train noises and muttered train, train and choo choo to himself yesterday. But it really meant something that he had been inspired enough to speak.

The pediatrician said Henry would meet his milestones in his own time.

And Jensen definitely didn’t want to push the little guy.

He had passed the hearing test with flying colors already, and they had an appointment coming up with a speech pathologist, just to be sure.

But Jensen figured it couldn’t hurt to give his boy more of the things that got him excited enough to want to talk.

If nothing else, Henry would enjoy himself today, and that was worth taking a day off.

“You’re an amazing dad,” Willow said. “He’s a lucky boy.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Jensen said without a thought. “He’s... my everything.”

He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the most important person in his life was blissed out watching the snowy trees blur past out the window.

“He loves car rides,” Jensen said.

“Smart boy,” Willow said approvingly. “And what a sense of humor.”

Jensen looked over at her, but she looked like she was dead serious.

He knew Henry had a great sense of humor, and he could always see the workings of the boy's mind, even when he didn't choose to speak.

But sometimes it scared him that maybe other people would think there was something wrong with Henry, or that they might feel sorry for him as a dad, just because his son didn't like to talk, or was doing things at his own pace.

"How many toddlers would try to tell a knock-knock joke?" she asked, turning to Jensen. "Your little boy is definitely paying attention."

"Thank you," Jensen replied, surprised to feel a little overcome.

He was used to his parents saying positive things about Henry, but it was so good to hear all his own feelings confirmed by someone who had no reason to know he was worrying.

Willow probably didn't even know what the benchmarks were for a kid Henry's age.

Jensen certainly hadn't before becoming a father himself.

"I guess we got lucky with the weather today," she said, mercifully changing the subject. "We won't have to worry about getting snowed in on a train or anything."

They chatted as he drove on, about old friends, plans for the holidays, and other light topics. Jensen wasn't normally a huge talker, another reason he felt okay about his son being on the quiet side, but it was surprisingly easy to share an upbeat conversation with Willow.

The more they talked, the more he appreciated how much she had grown over the

years since they had spent time together. It wasn't just her insights on Henry, it was her perspective on the world and her role in it. And when he asked her about her new job, she had so many good things to say.

"Anyway, I know I'm the one who asked them to let me start in January," she laughed after listing out half a dozen reasons why she thought Tarker County General was a wonderful place to work. "But the more I talk about it, the more I realize it's going to be kind of hard to wait."

"You're going to be an amazing addition over there," he told her honestly.

"Well, the Army experience definitely keeps us cool under pressure," she said, nodding.

"That too," he said. "But I meant your enthusiasm. If you believe they're in such a great position to grow their services for the community, how can they say no?"

"I'll definitely give it all I've got," she said with a smile. "Hey, are you ready for a snack? "

"Sure," he said, glancing at the dash clock and realizing they were probably almost there. "Thank you."

"Excellent," she told him as she pulled a white box with a cellophane top out of her bag. "I didn't have time to make cookies, but I stopped by the Co-op and grabbed some banana muffins."

"They smell amazing," he groaned in appreciation. "Much better than the snack I brought."

"What did you bring?" she asked.

“Goldfish crackers,” he replied, shrugging.

“Don’t you dare say a word against goldfish crackers,” she retorted. “They’re the best.”

“I’ll probably think so again as soon as Henry’s a little older,” Jensen chuckled. “Right now, we eat way too many of them. You’ve probably never found them in your pockets when you were doing laundry.”

She laughed and set a muffin in his cupholder, before reaching into her bag for something else.

“And I picked this up for you,” she told him, setting a bottle of fresh-squeezed orange juice in the other cupholder.

She knows.

“Why OJ?” he asked, his stomach sinking.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said lightly. “I just had a craving for it for some reason, and it can’t hurt to have a little extra vitamin C during flu season.”

He glanced over, but her expression was completely innocent. Except maybe the usual sparkle in her blue eyes was a little extra sparkly?

He was getting ready to ask when Henry whimpered in the backseat .

“Hi, Henry,” Willow said in a soft, cheerful voice. “We almost made it to see the Christmas trains. Would you like a snack?”

Jensen watched in the rearview mirror as the furrow in Henry’s brow smoothed and

he nodded his little head up and down.

“Great,” Willow told him. “I brought some muffins. Do you like banana muffins, Henry?”

“I think he will,” Jensen said. “Would you mind breaking him off a piece of mine?”

“I’d be glad to,” Willow said, grabbing the muffin and peeling a chunk from the top. “Here you go, Henry.”

He took it without hesitation then looked at it for a moment before taking a bite.

“Mmm,” he hummed quietly after a moment.

“Oh, I’m so glad you like it,” Willow told him. “These are my favorite.”

Henry took another bite, his eyes twinkling right back at Willow’s, and Jensen suddenly felt really good about the trip.

Nothing’s going to go wrong today, right?

WILLOW

That afternoon, Willow stood on the snowy ground, holding her phone up in front of her as she took in the festive sights all around.

Every tree in the arboretum seemed to be adorned with a different arrangement of lights, decorations, or both.

A few inches of snow covered the ground, and the people wandering around among the trees and trains were all laughing and smiling, carrying souvenirs in recycled shopping bags from the gift shop in wrapping paper patterns.

After riding the Christmas train around the arboretum so many times they had lost count, and looking at all the little trains under glass, Henry was finally ready to say that this would be his last ride.

Since the train only allowed two riders per car, Willow and Jensen had been taking turns accompanying Henry. This last time she had convinced Jensen to ride, so she could take a video of them.

The sun had already set, but she found an area where thousands of Christmas lights would illuminate the riders enough to show their faces. As she waited for the train to come around, she drank in the fresh, frosty air, and smiled at the thought of the amazing day they had shared.

It wasn't just the trains, it was walking among the beautifully lit trees, hearing Henry speak a few times about the trains and the snow, and even eating lunch in the small

cafeteria, where they had bumped into the conductor who was also taking his lunch break.

He'd introduced himself as Ralph, while smiling at Henry over his bowl of soup. And said that Henry had been his favorite passenger today. Henry had grinned up at him, practically speaking through his joyful expression.

But she couldn't help getting a little stuck on what happened next.

"Quite a kid you two have there," Ralph had said, obviously mistaking them for a couple.

Willow had been too surprised to say anything, and Jensen had just smiled and thanked the man. Honestly, Jensen seemed pretty quiet all day. Not in a bad way, but ever since their talk in the car about Henry, Jensen had looked happy but also really thoughtful.

A rumbling on the tracks alerted her that she was about to miss her last chance to get a good video of the Webb boys.

She took a deep breath, focused on the spot where the train would come into view, and willed her hands not to shake.

A moment later, the little train appeared, moving at a sensible but brisk pace. Jensen and Henry were in the car right behind the conductor's, and though Henry was slumped against his daddy like he was tired, he was smiling ear-to-ear.

Willow began recording, pleased to find that the glow of the Christmas lights was more than enough to light their faces.

As they passed, Henry noticed her, and cried out something with an expression of

happy excitement. It sounded like wow , but she suddenly realized he was saying Willow.

Jensen's eyebrows lifted in surprise and then he leaned down to kiss the boy on top of his woolen hat.

“ Wow, ” Willow echoed, forgetting for a moment that she was making a video.

By the time the last ride was over, Henry was half-asleep on his daddy's chest. Jensen carried him back to the truck and opened Willow's door for her before going to the back and getting Henry settled in his seat.

Happily, the little guy was sleepy enough that he allowed himself to be strapped in without too much fuss. Jensen handed him Dusty, and Henry hugged the little bear to his chest.

“What a day,” Jensen said as he hopped into the truck himself. “Did you have fun?”

“It was amazing,” Willow told him honestly. “This place is incredible, and you guys are so much fun to hang out with. ”

Henry whimpered in the back, and she turned to see what was wrong and how she could help.

“Are you okay, Henry?” she asked.

“He's just sleepy,” Jensen said. “Aren't you, buddy?”

Henry nodded, a betrayed expression on his face, like he couldn't believe his daddy would keep him out when he was tired.

“Well, you can take a nice nap in the car,” Jensen told him. “Should we have some music?”

Henry didn’t argue with that, and Jensen was already tapping the button for the radio anyway.

A pretty rendition of “Angels We Have Heard on High” was playing, and Henry did seem to relax as soon as Jensen got the truck moving.

They got out of the arboretum parking lot, down the backroads and onto Route One while “Angels We Have Heard on High” melted into “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.”

By then, the heat had kicked in, and Willow peeled her coat off again and placed it on her backpack. As the last strains of the song faded out, a female voice suddenly announced that the Trinity Falls Co-op Grocer now offered fresh-squeezed orange juice daily.

Jensen reached for the radio dial, but Willow put her hand on his to stop him.

“No way,” she told him. “There’s no way you’re changing the station right now.”

“Fresh-squeezed goodness from Florida gems,” Jensen’s voice sang out from the radio. “ORANGE you glad we’ve got juice?”

“You know that’s me?” he asked, his voice sounding a lot more resigned here in the car beside her than it had booming out of the speakers.

“Everyone knows that’s you,” she said, trying her best not to laugh, but unable to keep a smile from her face. “It’s awesome. How did you not tell me about it when we were catching up?”

“I didn’t even really mean to do it,” he said gruffly. “It just kind of happened.”

There was a brief moment of silence while Willow tried and failed to figure out how that could be true.

“I feel like that doesn’t really explain it,” she said at last. “I mean, people try to break into acting their whole lives. You didn’t accidentally make a juice commercial. Unless you were just saying that stuff anyway, and someone recorded you?”

She held her breath, hoping that making light of the matter might help him feel less guarded about things.

“No,” he said, after a moment. “I wasn’t just walking around saying orange you glad we’ve got juice.”

She couldn’t help laughing at that and he chuckled too, glancing over at her with real warmth in his eyes.

“Well, you don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to,” she told him. “But you should know that I think it’s the coolest thing ever. And with all the attention you’re getting, I’d say people are thinking a lot about orange juice—so you’re definitely helping the Co-op too.”

“My work has been slowing down,” he said suddenly.

She nodded, pressing her lips together so she wouldn’t make any sound that might stop him from sharing what he clearly needed to get off his chest.

“We’ll be fine,” he went on. “I have savings from when I was working in the city, but I really want to save that for Henry’s education. Anyway, my online corporate trainings have been tapering off, and my freelance work is always slower this time of

year.”

“I guess that’s natural for any business,” she said, nodding. “It ebbs and flows sometimes, right?”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “Anyway, I did an online training once for a casting office in Philadelphia. One of the agents there called me once or twice to ask if I wanted to do commercials. She said my voice and my look were really good.”

Willow just managed not to giggle at the expression of horrified disbelief on his face when he said look .

Though her heart went out to that casting agent, because as far as she was concerned Jensen Webb most definitely had the voice and the look to be a star if he wanted.

If she was in charge of casting, it would be pretty much impossible for her to not want to call him in for every leading man role that came up.

And how could anyone not love that voice?

“Anyway,” he said. “I never really thought too much about it. I told her I had a little boy and couldn’t travel to the city for that kind of thing.”

“That makes sense,” Willow agreed.

“Well, last time when she got in touch I was having a really slow month,” Jensen said. “And she mentioned that this would be voiceover work and I could record at the radio station here in town, so no traveling at all.”

“Wow, that’s perfect,” Willow said.

“She sent me my lines and they were just exactly what I would say in the commercial,” he went on.

“My contract was with the agency, not the Co-op, and it just said Grocery Store OJ Spot . I know this sounds dumb, but with the lines I have, I figured it was for a supermarket chain down in Florida, so I didn’t think too much about it. ”

“Fresh-squeezed goodness from Florida gems,” Willow repeated, nodding.

“It definitely never occurred to me that it was for the tiny co-op store in my own hometown,” he said, shaking his head at his own ignorance.

It hurt her heart to see him feeling foolish.

“You did this for Henry,” Willow said firmly. “Was the pay good?”

“Surprisingly so,” he agreed. “We’re set for December and I already have a couple of offers for other spots, though after last night, I’m not too eager to take them.”

“You managed to get through a slow month without touching your savings,” she said. “You’re a single parent. I’d count that as a pretty big win.”

“I guess so,” he said, steel-gray eyes focused on the road.

If they were strangers, she might have thought he was mad. But she knew Jensen well enough to recognize that look. He was just thinking it through.

Hopefully, he was giving weight to what she had said. After all, her own mother was a single parent, and Jensen knew how much Willow and Ransom admired her for always finding a way to have food on the table and school supplies in their backpacks.

“Besides,” she added. “You’ve given the whole town so much pleasure. You can’t even imagine what it was like at the market when it first played. I wish you’d been there. ”

“Oh yeah?” When he glanced over he wasn’t smiling, but his eyes were twinkling.

“People were smiling,” she said, picturing it all in her head. “Some were even repeating your catchphrase.”

“It’s not my catchphrase,” he told her. But he was actually smiling now.

“I had kind of forgotten while I was away,” she told him.

“But there’s just not that much that goes on around here.

You start to treasure these fun little surprises when they crop up.

And you’ve got a real gift. Hey, if you play your cards right you could be going out to dinner on this story for years. ”

He chuckled and kept his eyes on the road, but she could see his shoulders sink just a little as he relaxed into the idea.

If she had helped him view the situation in a different way, she was glad about it. He was a wonderful father, and she didn’t think he should be ashamed of doing what it took to provide for his boy.

“Thanks for putting it that way,” he said after a moment. “And I guess that’s more than you needed to know about my work situation.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your work situation under control,” Willow said with a

smile. “Besides, I think I probably shared more than I should have myself the other night.”

It was a weak joke, meant to dispel what remained of the obvious tension from the other night. But Jensen didn’t even crack a polite smile. He just drove on into the winter night, his tight jaw somehow making him more handsome than ever, and his expression one she had honestly never seen before.

Willow sucked in a breath and tried hard not to die of embarrassment.

We can’t be that far from Trinity Falls, can we?

Route One stretched out in front of them in the darkness and she literally couldn’t think of a single thing to say that would move them off the topic of her stupid confession.

Even Henry had betrayed her by falling asleep in his car seat so she couldn’t distract herself or change the mood with a few good knock-knock jokes.

Another mile or two melted away and when she realized they were close to home, she stole a glance at Jensen. He was gazing at the familiar road with that same look from before, the one that she knew meant he was now deep in thought.

Probably trying to figure out why he brought me out today.

He turned onto Ambler, and she was relieved to focus on the familiar sights of childhood.

The big, gorgeous homes on the north side of town were strung with icicle lights that reflected in the snow.

And as they traveled south toward the village, the houses got closer together and the decorations got more and more festive.

By the time they turned onto Park and were pulling up in front of Carla's Place, she had almost forgotten her earlier embarrassment.

"Willow," Jensen said as he turned the truck off.

She turned to him. Even in the relative darkness she could see there was something intense about his gaze .

"Thank you so much for letting me tag along today," she heard herself say brightly.

But she was sure that he knew her too-light tone was just covering up her nerves.

"Would you like to go to dinner with me?" he asked.

She was so surprised that she didn't say anything for a moment.

"You can think about it—" he began.

" Yes ," she said quickly. "I'd love to go to dinner with you, Jensen."

"I'll text you then," he said, hopping out of his truck and jogging to her door, opening it for her like a prince in a fairytale.

Willow wanted to pinch herself, but she tried her best to stay cool.

She wasn't some teenager in puppy love, no matter how much he might make her feel that way sometimes.

She was a grown woman, and though she was mature enough now to understand that he wasn't without flaws, she still liked him so much.

Too much, she thought to herself helplessly. I've always liked him too much...

"I can't walk you all the way up with Henry in the car," he said, his voice so deep she could feel it in her belly.

"That's okay," she told him.

"I'll text you," he told her again, his gray eyes burning.

She nodded, feeling breathless.

When he reached out to cup her face in his warm hand, she thought for sure that he was going to kiss her, and her heart began to race .

But he only leaned down and kissed the top of her head instead, making her heart ache with his sweetness.

"Good night, Willow," he murmured stroking her cheek with his thumb once before letting go. "I'm going to watch you walk up."

"Good night," she said, feeling like she was in a dream.

She practically floated up the fire escape, and when she got to the top she turned to see him standing there, leaning on his truck, his eyes fixed on her.

She waved to him before opening up her door and slipping inside.

Somehow, her small apartment didn't seem big enough to contain her happiness. She

wrapped her arms around herself in a big hug, smiling from ear to ear.

When her phone buzzed almost immediately in her pocket, she didn't think it would be Jensen already.

But there was his name on the screen.

Jensen Webb

thanks for coming with us today

wednesday night at 7 work for you?

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WILLOW

The beginning of the week passed slowly for Willow, but she was grateful for the chance to calm down about this thing with Jensen before it actually happened.

She did manage to get over to Ransom's house with cookies, and though they only hung out for a minute or two before he had to take the kids out, it felt more like old times already.

Maybe Ransom could handle this—Jensen and me...

But of course there was no Willow and Jensen.

The more she thought about it, the more she tried to remind herself that she was an old friend.

Even if the gentle caress and kiss on top of the head made her heart flutter, it might have been a sweet gesture toward a woman he thought of like a younger sister.

She was old enough to know better than to jump to conclusions. She shouldn't think of it as a date unless he made it crystal clear.

Going to dinner sure sounds like a date ...

She had wondered if he would text her again and maybe give her some context. But her phone stayed frustratingly silent, and she managed not to text him beyond the yes, sounds great, she had sent back the night he asked.

And maybe it was better not to know if it was a date or not. It was probably not a bad idea to share a private meal, and see if the pull she felt might lead to something real and lasting before she risked the tenuous peace she had made with Ransom over nothing.

When Wednesday night finally arrived, she pulled out her favorite long, wool skirt and a soft sweater to go on top. She brushed her hair until it shone, and even though she didn't normally wear makeup, she smoothed on a little shiny lip gloss before pulling on a pair of pretty brown leather boots.

Her phone buzzed right at seven and she grabbed it, hoping it wasn't a last-minute cancellation.

Jensen Webb

i'm coming up

didn't want to startle you

She could only smile at his good manners. As a matter of fact, if she were standing in her kitchen after dark and a face unexpectedly appeared in the glass top of the door, she would probably scream her head off.

A moment later, there was a gentle knock, and then there was Jensen Webb standing at the door, looking more handsome than ever.

She opened the door and took him in for a second. He was so tall and so handsome with his dark hair and that close-cropped beard—he really did look like a movie star.

“Hi,” she said, feeling suddenly breathless.

“Hey,” he replied. “You look beautiful.”

“I’ll just grab my coat,” she managed before jogging off to get it while willing herself not to blush.

You look beautiful.

It was a date for sure. She tried to fight back the big, silly smile that was spreading across her face as she grabbed her coat and headed back to the kitchen with it.

“Let me get that for you,” Jensen said, holding his hands out.

She handed it over and let him slide her coat over her arms. He smoothed his big hands over her shoulders once he was finished, and she felt like she was going to swoon.

“Ready?” he asked her.

She nodded, and he opened the door and let her lead the way down the fire escape.

His truck was waiting out front, and she knew enough to wait for him to get the door for her, as he liked to do. When he opened her door, he offered her his hand. She didn’t really need it, but she took it anyway, feeling a little tingle of happiness shoot right through her at the gentle touch.

When they were both in the truck and buckled in, he started the engine and pulled away from the house.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I thought maybe we’d go to Nana’s,” he said.

“Amazing,” she sighed, smiling and leaning back in her seat .

Nana’s was a small, family-owned restaurant in Springton Valley, with delicious, old-fashioned food.

Nana’s son, Charles, ran a tiny brewery on the premises where he always had two tanks going.

One was a micro-brewed soda or lager of his own invention, and the other was the family’s famous homemade root beer.

Willow had been obsessed with that root beer as a child, and it sounded amazing right now.

“Bottomless root beer,” Jensen said with a fond smile.

“You remembered,” she said, wondering if there was anything about her that he didn’t remember.

When her family had brought Jensen along on their outings, he and Ransom were usually talking non-stop about sports or school projects. She hadn’t thought he was paying any attention to what she chose to drink.

“Of course I remember,” he told her. “You were such a tiny little thing. You had my total respect for how many root beers you could put away.”

“I never managed to eat my dinner,” she said, smiling and shaking her head at the memory.

“Your mom didn’t seem to mind,” he said with a smile.

“She was surprisingly cool about it,” Willow agreed. “Although it was bottomless, and you know my mom loves a good deal.”

“Or maybe she was impressed with you too,” Jensen teased her. “Does Nana’s sound good for tonight?”

“It sounds amazing,” she told him.

He nodded, looking pleased, and they drove on in friendly silence for a while.

Nana’s was an interesting choice. It was just far enough out of Trinity Falls, and just small enough that they were unlikely to bump into anyone they knew. But the possibility was there.

She felt a little burst of pride that Jensen didn’t mind being seen out with her, followed by a flicker of guilt. She had the same reason he did for not wanting to be seen.

Don’t overthink it, she told herself. Ransom won’t be there, and he’s the one you’re worried about.

The flicker of guilt burst into a real flame, but she did her best to put it out. If the interest budding with Jensen was something real, then her brother would have to understand. They were all adults, after all.

A little voice whispered in the back of her mind that Ransom might never see her as an adult, but she decided to ignore it. People grew and changed. If she could, then her brother could too.

At last, Jensen pulled off Route One and onto a long, winding driveway that took them back to a sweet, stone cottage surrounded by tall trees, with a wooden sign out

front that simply said: Nana's.

As a child, Willow had never thought anything about it.

But with some perspective, she realized how sweet the place was.

Nana herself had come to Pennsylvania from down South as a young girl.

Willow wondered now if maybe she had opened her small restaurant because she missed driving down a different narrow lane to another small country house for an old-fashioned meal with her own Nana.

Jensen opened her door for her and took her hand again as she hopped down onto the light crust of snow. This time, he didn't let go as they walked up the steps to the front door.

"Welcome home," Nana said, opening the door for them and giving her signature greeting. "May I take your coats?"

"Hi, Nana," Willow said, admiring the older woman's still-elegant posture as she and Jensen removed their coats and let Nana put them on the hooks by the door.

Nana wore her silver hair in a bun, as usual. And she had a pretty apron with a pattern of gingerbread men on over her denim dress.

"Your fella called ahead, Willow," Nana said, winking at Jensen. "So I've got a nice table for you out on the porch."

The cottage had a center hall where the bathrooms were located.

Its entrance was half-blocked by a big bookcase, covered in plants.

To the left of the hall was the kitchen.

To the right, the main dining room spanned from the front to the back of the house, taking up the space where the living room and dining room would have been before it became a restaurant.

On the porch meant in the heated sunroom that ran along the side of the restaurant, just on the other side of the main dining room.

The porch had only two tables, and was lit with a row of mini chandeliers.

It had the prettiest view of the trees on the side of the house, many of which now twinkled with Christmas lights.

It was also private from the rest of the restaurant.

Willow couldn't decide if it was romantic, or just a smart idea for two people who really didn't want to run into anyone .

“Oh, that's so nice,” she said, deciding there was no reason it couldn't be both. Jensen wanting to protect her relationship with her brother until she could talk to him about everything was romantic.

“Shall I bring you menus?” Nana asked, as she walked them through the main dining room and onto the porch. “Or would you like a family meal?”

The family meal was several courses of homemade goodness, each a surprise, served like you were a guest at Nana's home.

“ Family meal, ” she and Jensen said at the same time.

Nana gestured to the nicest table at the very back, and Jensen pulled out Willow's chair for her.

"If memory serves, the young lady will have bottomless root beer," Nana said with a smile as they took their seats.

"Yes," Willow said happily. "I was hoping you still had it."

"Normally, we don't do it as bottomless these days," Nana confided. "But we do like to support our troops, so you two drink up."

"Oh, wow," Willow said, moved. "Thank you."

"And what can I bring for you, young man?" Nana asked, turning to Jensen.

"Does Charles have a new experiment on tap?" Jensen asked.

"Vanilla cream soda," Nana said with a smile. "No beer tonight."

"Vanilla cream soda sounds great," Jensen told her. "Thank you."

"Very good," she said. "You two get settled, and I'll be back with your drinks and your meal. And if there's anything else you need, just give a holler."

"Thank you, Nana," Willow said.

They both watched her glide to the kitchen, her back as straight as a ballerina's.

"How old do you think she is?" Jensen wondered out loud.

"Ageless," Willow decided.

Jensen chuckled and they both looked around. For the most part, the place looked the same, which was a comfort.

“I wonder if Henry will love the root beer when he’s older,” Willow wondered out loud.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

Jensen gave her a funny smile.

“What?” she asked. “You don’t want him having soda?”

She knew a lot of parents were a whole lot stricter about that kind of stuff than anyone had been back when they were kids.

“No, no,” he said. “Not that at all.”

She tried and failed to read his expression.

“If you want to know the truth,” he said, leaning in. “This is the first voluntary date I’ve been on since I lost Henry’s mother. I guess I didn’t expect to start the evening talking about him, even though I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I already miss him.”

“You’ve been on involuntary dates?” Willow asked.

“Well, my mom tells me she got inundated with requests as soon as an appropriate amount of time had passed,” he said. “Whatever that means. I kind of doubt there were requests. She probably just worries that I’m lonely.”

“Are you?” Willow heard herself ask. “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that.”

But he smiled at her with twinkly eyes, just like the last time she asked too many questions.

“I’m definitely not feeling lonely right now,” he told her.

She felt her cheeks heat and looked down at her hands, wondering why she was feeling so shy all of a sudden.

“And I think I kind of liked being lonely before,” he said quietly.

“At first, it didn’t even feel right for me to smile or laugh.

But Henry made short work of that feeling.

It was unfair what happened to Lara. She didn’t ask for a risky pregnancy, but once she was in it, she was ready to do whatever she could to give Henry the best possible chance.

And now it’s my turn to do the same for him. ”

“That must have been so hard,” Willow said, her heart aching.

“By the end, she was on bed rest in the hospital,” he said. “I know she was uncomfortable and scared. But she kept a lid on her temper, and every word out of her mouth was so positive. If it were possible to control blood pressure by force of will, she would still be here.”

“She sounds heroic,” Willow said, nodding. “I wish I had met her.”

“Me too,” Jensen said, nodding slowly. “She would have liked you a lot.”

“Why?” Willow asked .

“You say what you mean,” Jensen said immediately. “You’re energetic and curious.”

“Thank you,” Willow said.

She had gotten plenty of compliments from guys over the years that all added up to you’re pretty . Being praised for qualities she actually cared about and would be proud to have meant so much more to her.

“I worry sometimes about Henry growing up with just me,” Jensen admitted. “I do my best, but he’s still behind on so many things. He was born early, and they said it would take time to catch up.”

“He’s just going at his own pace,” Willow said firmly, surprised to hear a defensive note in her voice. “And he seems like he’s having fun doing it.”

Jensen smiled at that.

“I want him to enjoy life,” he said, nodding. “He’s got to enjoy it for her too.”

Willow swallowed over the lump in her throat and was grateful when Nana and Charles slipped onto the porch with their drinks.

“We brought you two glasses to start, love,” Nana said, setting two root beers in front of Willow.

“Thank you so much,” Willow said, laughing. “I guess you really do remember how much I love this stuff.”

She was joking, of course, but not completely. Condensation slid down the icy glasses, taking her back to her childhood, and it was all she could do to politely wait for her first sip.

“And here’s that vanilla cream soda,” Charles said, placing a glass in front of Jensen.

“I hope you enjoy it. It’s great to see you both again. ”

They all exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes, and when Nana and Charles headed out, Willow took a sip of her root beer.

The sweet flavor burst on her tongue as the bubbles rushed to her head.

“As good as you remembered?” Jensen asked, his deep voice amused.

“Better,” Willow declared. “Would you like some?”

“Can you spare any?” Jensen teased.

“I think I’ll be okay,” Willow laughed.

“You know my dad would make me pay for my own glass if he were here,” Jensen said. “That’s only supposed to be bottomless for you .”

“Your dad is a true gentleman,” Willow said approvingly, pushing her glass toward him. “But I think we can make a one-sip exception.”

He obligingly took a taste, and she watched him close his eyes.

“Oh wow,” he said. “That takes me back.”

“Now give it back,” she teased. “I can’t spare any more.”

“I like watching you drink it anyway,” he said, his eyes twinkling as he pushed it back to her.

A few minutes later, Nana and Charles appeared with steaming bowls of chicken

soup with rice and the two of them dug in, enjoying the delicious food and the cozy atmosphere without having to say a word.

As nervous as she had been about this night, Willow felt so comfortable now that it was happening.

She was excited to be here and share a meal with Jensen, but she didn't feel any need to try to be more sophisticated than usual, and she didn't worry too much about whether her lip gloss had survived the soup.

After Charles came to clear their bowls, Nana returned with her famous pumpkin ravioli accompanied by a crisp salad and a basket of fragrant, fresh-baked bread and honey butter.

They enjoyed their feast while reminiscing about the past and trying to imagine what activities Captain Anderson would dream up next for the vets at the center.

"Really though, I think he's going to take it easy until after the wedding," Willow guessed. "He's been talking about his fiancée so much that I can't imagine him throwing himself into any other big projects until they come back from their honeymoon."

"That could be," Jensen agreed thoughtfully. "I just can't picture the man slowing down for any reason. He's so excited about how things are going."

When their meal was finished, Jensen paid and pulled out Willow's chair for her.

"You're so old-fashioned," she teased him lightly.

"I am," he said, his deep voice dead serious. "Does that bother you?"

She shook her head.

He took her hand, and they headed through the dining room and toward the entrance.

But before they reached it, the front door opened, and in walked Chris Bell, his wife, Grace, and their little girl, Izzy, along with Chris's service dog, Molly.

For a split second, Willow panicked. Chris and her brother had always been close.

If he spotted them here, there was no way Ransom wouldn't hear about it.

Before she had a chance to react, Jensen tugged her hand, pulling them both down the hallway that led to the bathrooms, and behind the bookcase with the plants.

Jensen pressed her against the wall, practically covering her with his big body.

With her cheek pinned to his chest, Willow could hear his heart pounding.

A wave of shame washed over her, and it was all she could do not to burst into tears.

"I don't think they saw us," Jensen murmured in her ear.

She hated her heart for the silly little shiver that went through her at the feeling of being in his arms with him whispering to her, no matter the reason.

He doesn't want to be seen with me. And if I had any shame, I wouldn't be out with him either.

JENSEN

Jensen held Willow to the wall, his heart pounding so hard that he was surprised the whole restaurant couldn't hear it.

Willow trembled against him, the light vanilla scent of her hair teasing his senses.

Every instinct told him to grab her and march her back out to the restaurant to let the whole world know she was his girl.

But he had no right to think those kinds of thoughts. Tonight was wonderful, but falling for Willow without Ransom's blessing wasn't. And he was definitely falling for her—there was no denying that.

Which meant it was time to be honest with his best friend.

I'll tell him how much I respect her and how much I adore her...

Willow wiggled out of his hold, moving back down the hallway toward the door. He realized that Chris and his family had already followed Nana into the main dining room while Jensen held Willow, dreaming about a future he hadn't yet earned.

He jogged to catch up with Willow, wincing when she opened the front door to Nana's herself, and headed down the front steps toward the parking area.

"I'm sorry about that," he heard himself say. "I hope I didn't startle you."

She shook her head, but didn't say a word.

When they got to the truck, she let him open her door. But she didn't take his hand when he offered it. He got in quickly himself, but before he started the engine, Willow turned to him.

"We can't do this," she said simply.

"Nothing is going on between us," he retorted automatically. At least, not yet.

"If nothing is going on, why did you drag me off to hide?" she asked.

He opened his mouth and closed it again.

She was right, of course. If he didn't think they were doing anything wrong, why would he want to hide?

Little Willow Wright, when did you get to be so wise?

"We can't do this," she repeated softly.

This time, he didn't have the heart to argue. He turned the key and the truck roared to life with all the passion Jensen felt but couldn't express.

The snowy scenery slipped past them in a blur, and he knew that this was it, the end of his time with Willow. He wished he could ease his foot off the gas and make this journey last a lifetime.

It was impossible to resist stealing a glance at her .

Willow gazed out the window, her expression impassive, but her eyes... oh, her eyes.

Make things right with her brother, a little voice in his head told him.

And maybe he could. Maybe now that his feelings for Willow had wrapped themselves around his heart so tightly that he wasn't sure how it would continue to beat, he could better understand why Ransom had wanted to protect her from the world.

But Ransom had always read him like a book. If he went to his friend now, Ransom would know in an instant what was going on. He'd shut it down before Jensen even had time to plead his case, and likely never speak to him again.

I'm going to lose them both.

But that thought was too awful. So Jensen drove on, past the moonlit farms and fences of his youth, trying not to think about his life beyond these few moments in the car with Willow.

Too soon, he was pulling up in front of Carla's Place, knowing that their first date was going to be their last.

He got out, opened her door for her, and accompanied her all the way to the top of the fire escape.

His thoughts were screaming a million reasons why she should change her mind, but he kept his mouth shut while she jiggled her key in the lock.

She turned to him before going inside, and there was such sadness in her blue eyes as she looked up at him, but also a certainty that made him glad he hadn't embarrassed them both trying to make her go against her instincts.

"Thank you, Jensen," she said so softly it was almost a sigh.

“Good night, Willow,” he told her, using all of his self-control not to reach for her.

She slipped inside, and when the door closed behind her, he headed back down the fire escape to his truck.

His heart ached, but he forced his memory back to those days in the woods, and the same look of determination on Willow’s little face as she braved muddy creek beds and even that Tarzan rope to stay close to the big brother who adored and protected her so fiercely.

Jensen Webb was no better than a fool if he thought he could get between the two of them and still sleep at night.

Whatever had been blossoming between himself and Willow, it was over now.

JENSEN

Jensen sat on the floor of the children's section of the Trinity Falls Community Library the next day, grateful for a chance to lose himself in Henry's world instead of thinking about Willow.

She had been in his dreams last night. In the dreams, he ran through his house, chasing the subtle scent of her perfume and the sound of her laughter, but never able to catch her.

"Merry Christmas to all," Miss Caroline read with a smile, holding up the last page of the classic picture book. "And to all a good night."

The semi-circle of toddlers responded to the ending by applauding, laughing, crying, or wandering off, according to their personal instincts.

Miss Caroline smiled warmly at the assembled grownups and launched into her usual two sentence speech thanking them for coming and reminding them of next week's schedule.

Henry had decided to make a break for it, so Jensen nodded to the good-humored librarian and took off after him, down the half-dozen steps to the main section of the library.

"Hey, Webb," a familiar voice called out just as he managed to catch the boy by the hand.

Jensen looked up and spotted Ransom coming in the main doors, a child on each side of him.

The boy was older. Jensen knew that his name was Travis, and his little sister was Mae.

“I heard about you and Willow,” Ransom said. “I talked to Chris.”

Jensen’s heart nearly stopped beating.

He’d figured Ransom might hear they’d been spotted together at some point, but he’d assumed that he’d probably make it past the very next morning before they had a confrontation about that long-ago pact.

At least we’re in the library, he thought stupidly to himself. He probably won’t take a swing at me in front of the kids.

“He told me the old folks were saying you got her a tow truck and everything,” Ransom went on. “That was nice of you, man.”

Jensen breathed a sigh of relief. Natalie and Chris owned Carla’s Place together. If Willow was renting the upstairs apartment, it made sense that the older folks who hung out there knew about her car troubles. The regulars probably enjoyed keeping an eye on all her comings and goings.

“It was no problem,” he told Ransom. “It’s really good to see you. And the kids.”

“This is Travis,” Ransom said, lifting the hand Travis held. “And Mae. Say hi, guys.”

The children politely said hello and Jensen introduced himself and Henry, feeling like

he was in a dream.

“Listen, we should get together soon, but the kids have activities right now,” Ransom said. “Why don’t you come by on Christmas, like old times?”

In Jensen’s experience, men didn’t generally overly discuss the past and their feelings. But there was no better sign that his best friend was willing to let bygones be bygones.

“Sounds good,” Jensen said, nodding and allowing himself a half-smile.

He might not be letting it show on the outside, but it felt a lot like a missing puzzle piece in his heart had just clicked back into place.

Ransom nodded back with a similar look of satisfaction.

“Come on, Daddy,” Mae yelled, tugging his arm. “We’re gonna miss story time.”

Helen, the head librarian, frowned at them on her way past, but didn’t say a word.

“We’ve gotta use our library voices,” Ransom reminded his daughter. “See you, Webb.”

Jensen watched in amazement as the three of them headed up the steps to the children’s section. He might have stood there all morning if Henry hadn’t tugged at his hand.

“Sorry, buddy,” he said. “Come on.”

He scooped his boy up in his arms and headed out to the lobby, still feeling amazed.

It might have taken years, but it looked like Ransom was finally ready to let their past troubles be water under the bridge.

It's good that I didn't fight Willow on ending things last night...

But somehow, his stomach still twisted at the idea of seeing her around town or at family events like old times, and not being able to tell anyone the truth about how he felt.

WILLOW

Willow sat at a table in Mal's bakery. Tiny Christmas lights and holly lined the walls, and the whole place smelled like a heavenly combination of gingerbread and freshly baked sourdough.

Mal had invited a few friends to the bakery after closing time to join her for free treats and the filling of the Christmas baskets that people in town had ordered as gifts to be dropped off on porches or taken to parties.

The atmosphere was so cozy and the company so much fun that Willow was actually finding it possible to stop thinking about Jensen Webb and just enjoy herself, at least for a little while.

She had done the right thing last night, telling him that they couldn't keep seeing each other. Both of them cared too much about Ransom to risk their fresh chance to bring him back into their lives.

But that didn't mean the sacrifice didn't hurt .

It would have been so nice to let him kiss me just one time...

"How's your buddy, Valerie?" Mal asked their friend in a teasing tone as she placed a packet of foil-wrapped, egg nog brownies into a basket and passed it down to Ana, who added a mini-pecan pie.

"Which buddy?" Valerie shot back, cool as ice.

“You see?” Mal said, turning to Ana in mock exasperation. “She’s impossible.”

Ana laughed gently and handed the basket to Valerie.

Valerie added a mason jar of gourmet hot chocolate powder with a gingham-wrapped lid, and handed the basket down to Willow.

“Who’s your buddy, Valerie?” Willow asked lightly as she placed a candy cane in the basket and tied a satin ribbon to the handle.

“It’s—” Mal began.

“I don’t have a buddy,” Valerie cut in. “I fly solo. Always have, always will.”

“For now,” Ana whispered.

“Et tu, Ana?” Valerie asked. But she was smiling fondly. Ana was as sweet as the treats in the baskets, and they all adored her.

Mariah’s “All I Want for Christmas” came on the radio, and Willow smiled and nodded along.

“Who wants another gingerbread tea?” Mal asked, hopping up. “I’ve also got lemon pound cake and imperfect pecan sandies up for grabs.”

“How many courses of dessert can we eat?” Valerie teased.

“I’m willing to find out,” Willow put in. “Yes, please, to all of it. I need a sugar rush.”

“I’ll help you,” Valerie told Mal, hopping up to join her back in the kitchen, and

leaving Ana and Willow alone at the table.

“Are you okay?” Ana asked gently.

Willow bit her lip and thought about how to answer that.

“It’s Jensen,” she admitted after a moment.

“What happened?” Ana asked.

“It’s a long story,” Willow told her. “But it’s just not going to work between us. There’s too much on the line.”

“Okay...” Ana said.

“What?” Willow asked.

“You just got home,” Ana said lightly. “There’s no need to rush into anything.”

“That’s true,” Willow said, though she was pretty sure nothing was going to change.

“You’ve come so far,” Ana said. “Why not relax and see where the road takes you?”

“What are you two so serious about?” Valerie asked, as she walked back in, carrying a tray of treats, followed by Mal, who had a teapot and mugs on a tray.

Ana glanced at Willow, as if asking permission to share.

“Jensen,” Willow said quietly.

“Something happened with Jensen?” Mal asked, setting down the teapot on the table

and fixing Willow with a curious gaze.

“I... went on a date with him,” Willow said. “At least it was supposed to be a date, but I changed my mind. ”

“Why would you change your mind?” Valerie asked, frowning. “The man was practically designed for you.”

“What does that mean?” Mal asked, looking a little horrified.

“He’s tall, dark, and handsome,” Valerie said. “He’s got that super-deep, intimidating manly voice, but he’s a sweet guy. And he was already built-in-best-friends with your brother.”

Somehow, Valerie listed off all those qualities in such a brisk and businesslike manner that Willow didn’t feel a bit jealous when she hit on some of the exact things she liked best about Jensen herself.

“Is that right?” Ana asked.

“She got most of it, yes,” Willow chuckled, impressed.

“So what’s the problem?” Valerie asked, pouring herself a steaming cup of tea. “You like him, he likes you.”

“It’s Ransom,” Willow said. “He didn’t want me joining the Army. He was pretty mad at me when I decided to go. And he was furious with Jensen.”

“Why?” Valerie asked.

“Because Jensen talked to me about it seriously when I asked him,” Willow said.

“Instead of dismissing the idea out of hand like my brother did.”

“Why did he dismiss it?” Mal asked.

“I’m his baby sister,” Willow said, sighing.

“He’s always been protective of me, especially since we grew up without a dad around.

I guess he was afraid I’d get sent somewhere dangerous and get hurt, and that would be his fault somehow.

Anyway, things between us are thawing now that I’m home, which makes me happy.

And Jensen deserves that same chance to get his best friend back. ”

“I think your brother should go jump in the lake,” Valerie said decisively. “He needs to accept who you are and what you want from your life. He’s got more to lose than you do, anyway—he’s the one who’s going to be missing out on free babysitting from you.”

Mal let out a giggle and then put her hand over her mouth.

“So you think I should just choose a guy over my own brother?” Willow asked.

“No, definitely not,” Valerie said dismissively. “Jensen should jump in the lake too.”

“Why?” Mal asked, looking astonished.

“He needs to stand up and fight for what he wants,” Valerie said. “Good men don’t sneak around with women they respect. And as long as he just sits there and lets you

run away using Ransom as your excuse, he's not worthy of you."

The truth of that frank statement hit Willow like a sledgehammer in the chest.

That can't be right, can it? Jensen Webb is a good man.

But as she gazed around the table, it seemed like the others were in agreement. Even sweet Ana nodded with a sad look in her eyes.

He's always been a wonderful person, Willow thought to herself. I must bring out the worst in him.

JENSEN

Jensen looked around his home studio and couldn't help but smile.

He'd started working from home with a decent microphone, camera, and laptop back when he first moved out here.

But after his recent bit of success, he now had a pro-level mic, and he had just finished adding soundproofing panels to the walls.

His desk was currently covered in scripts and his phone had started buzzing the moment he turned it back on after recording his last spot.

The respectable amount of work he'd been getting up until this point hadn't prepared him for the flood of offers he was getting now. Jensen had never been so busy since going into freelancing. And he'd never felt so good about it.

Maybe things weren't going to work out with Willow, but after just one date, her good influence seemed to be coloring every aspect of his life.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and wasn't surprised to see fourteen notifications from his agent, Sadie. Most were emails with offers attached.

He even had a silly single dad meme in his text chain with Ransom. The two of them had been dropping the other a line here and there since they bumped into each other at the library.

Jensen had been keeping it light for now, but he was planning to have a heart-to-heart with his friend on Christmas when they got together in person.

And as nice as the work offers and messages were, he couldn't help feeling disappointed that there wasn't anything from Willow.

He pushed those thoughts aside and opened his text chain with Sadie.

Sadie

amazing work on the paper company ad

and the folks at the community center are over the moon about the free spot you did for them

He smiled again, and felt warmth spread in his chest as he tapped out a response.

glad they're all happy

Sadie

are you still committed to doing more pro bono slots?

When Willow told Jensen he had a gift, and that he'd brought his friends and neighbors a moment of happiness, his whole feeling about doing voiceover work had turned around completely.

And as soon as his perspective changed, his imagination took over.

He had taken most of the pay from the Co-op Grocer's slot and used it to buy the new microphone and the soundproofing he'd installed in the office. It was an investment,

but it meant that he wouldn't have to go to the radio station to record, and that made a world of difference.

He had also let Sadie know to start sending him bookings.

She knew his goal was to earn a comfortable living for himself and Henry, and maybe give something back as well by offering his work for free to non-profits in the community.

Amazingly, she had agreed to coordinate the non-profit work without taking a fee herself.

of course, a free slot for every paid booking

Sadie

well, then, we have a waitlist, sweetheart

i emailed it to you but my guess is that you'll jump on the trinity falls community food drive and the homecoming heroes center once you get paid for the next two gigs

i'll do all the non-profits now, just send them over

There was a pause, and he worried that maybe she was rethinking helping out with so many free spots.

Sadie

you're a good kid, you know that?

and you're a good agent

i've got to pick up henry in an hour

i'll do as many as i can before then

He turned his phone off again, then slid it into his pocket, and opened up his email. Just as Sadie said, there were half a dozen requests from local non-profits for him to do taglines for their holiday messages.

Most of the taglines were absolutely ridiculous. But he smiled as he read them, knowing they would grab attention for good causes, and hopefully give his neighbors a well-deserved chuckle. And when he thought about it like that, he didn't feel embarrassed about being a little silly anymore.

Thank you for this, Willow...

And of course she would be the one to open his mind to the power of a little silliness. She had used her own sense of humor to get through to both of the Webb boys.

Henry was so interested in knock-knock jokes now that he was sure to be talking more in his eagerness to tell a joke himself. Jensen had already heard the boy murmuring nah-nah to himself and then chuckling over the monitor after he put him down for his nap once or twice this week.

Willow had shone her light on the two of them for such a short time, and even that had been enough to help them both blossom .

Don't think about it, he told himself sternly. She doesn't want to talk to you.

He'd sent her a couple of messages, but at this point he knew he had to give her space, as much as it hurt.

And the truth was that he was committed to making things right with Ransom, and talking with him honestly about his feelings for Willow before even thinking about asking her out again. Her avoiding him just made it easier not to fall into temptation.

He lost himself in the next couple of taglines, recording each one a few different ways before cleaning them up a bit and sending them along to Sadie.

The time melted away, and before long it was time to head over to his mom and dad's to pick up Henry.

"Smells like snow out there," Dad said as Jensen came in the front door of the big cedar shake house.

"Sure does," Jensen agreed, giving his dad a quick wave before heading back to the kitchen, where Mom had the radio playing.

"This is Ho-ho-Hope Holiday and we're telling our listeners to get ready for some snow," the deejay announced. "So, here's Bing Crosby, hoping all your Christmases are white, and that you don't get caught out in the storm."

"That's right," Mom said, looking up from the peppermint cookies she was rolling out. Henry sat in his highchair watching her work while he rolled a bit of dough in his own little fists. "You can feel it on the air out there. Do you have plenty of groceries at home? "

"We'll be fine, Ma," Jensen assured her.

"Sounds like a no ," his mother chuckled. "Not to worry, your dad went to the store today. He's got a couple of bags in the garage fridge for you to take with you."

"You guys don't have to do that," Jensen said.

“Well, I guess you’ve been pretty busy,” Mom said, looking like she was trying not to smile.

“Go on,” he told her. “Say it.”

“Orange you glad we have juice?” she sang out in pure delight.

He had to laugh right along with her.

“I have been busy,” he told her. “Thanks to Willow.”

“Really?” Mom asked, fixing her eyes on the cookie dough, as if he might not be able to read how interested she was if she didn’t make eye contact.

“She helped me realize that it’s kind of nice to make people laugh,” he said. “I don’t mind lending my voice to a good cause. And what could be better than giving my family something to smile about?”

“That’s a lovely way to look at it,” Mom said, glancing up at him. “And she’s a lovely girl.”

That was an opening to talk about his feelings if there ever was one. But Jensen was determined to keep his thoughts to himself until he made things right with Ransom and with Willow. So he kept his mouth shut and grabbed a cloth to wipe down his sticky boy.

“ Dah,” Henry said happily when he plucked him out of the highchair, making Jensen’s heart surge with joy at the word.

Henry’s voice sounded a little rougher than usual, but Jensen didn’t think too much of it. He’d probably just eaten a little too much dough.

“He’s been a little sniffly,” Mom said, as if she’d had the same thought. “It’s probably a little cold. Just keep an eye on him.”

“We’ve been going to the library group,” Jensen said, nodding. “I know a couple of kids over there seemed like they had a little something.”

“That’s always the way in the wintertime,” Mom said, nodding. “Sure you two don’t want to stay for supper? It’s nothing fancy, just hot dogs and baked beans, but your dad spiced it up with that nice barbecue sauce you like.”

“Sounds amazing,” Jensen sighed. “But we’d better get home. I’ve got a couple of things to get done if the snow’s coming again.”

“Well, stay warm,” Mom said, wiping her hands on her apron and giving him a quick squeeze as she kissed the top of Henry’s head. “And take care of my favorite little guy.”

On the way out, they ran into his dad pre-salting the porch steps.

“I threw some groceries in the back,” Dad told him, gesturing toward his truck. “Get ‘em inside when you get home.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Jensen told him.

But his father only scowled and waved him off, not wanting a lot of fanfare for a good deed done, as usual.

Jensen got Henry settled in his car seat and started the truck up. And by the time he got down the drive and out to the road, flurries were already swirling down. They were just a minute or two from home, but he put on the radio anyway, figuring Henry would enjoy it.

“What do you think of that?” he asked when one of the most exciting parts of The Nutcracker score came on.

Henry started to chuckle, but it turned into a cough. The frosty air probably wasn’t great for his cold.

“Sorry, buddy,” Jensen told him. “We’ll be home soon, and we can cuddle up under a warm blanket.”

An hour later, they were at home, curled up under a blanket with an animated Christmas movie on the television to keep Henry from running around.

But he was still coughing, and the sound of it had become harsher.

Jensen had called his cousin, Kellan, who was the town doctor. But he kept getting his voicemail. He figured Kellan must be out on a real emergency.

He had also sent a text to Willow without expecting an answer, just asking if she could talk to him about Henry’s cough.

He wasn’t sure if she had any experience with pediatrics, but she was a nurse, after all, so she definitely knew better than he did.

But of course she had ignored all his messages this week, so he was pretty sure she wasn’t even going to see this one.

As he sat with his eyes on his son, trying to figure out what to do, Henry began a real coughing fit. Nearly every breath seemed to make him cough more.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

“You’re okay,” Jensen whispered, rubbing his hand between those tiny shoulder blades, and trying to get Henry to calm himself.

But the harsh coughing turned into something that sounded almost like a dog barking, and Jensen was beginning to panic.

If I try to take him to the emergency room I have to strap him into the car where I can’t reach him...

His hands moved to his phone again and he called Willow without realizing he was doing it.

Please pick up.

“Jensen?” she said, picking up on the first ring.

“Thank God,” he said.

“Is that Henry coughing?” she asked him.

“He can’t stop,” he told her.

“Could he be choking on something?” she asked right away.

“No,” Jensen said. “He’s got a little cold. At least I thought it was a little one.”

“Does he have a fever?” Willow asked.

“I haven’t taken his temperature since I got him home from my parents’ place,” Jensen admitted, placing the back of his hand against the little one’s forehead. “He’s warm, but he doesn’t seem to be burning up.”

“Good,” Willow said. “Is he struggling to breathe?”

“No,” Jensen said. “He’s just coughing so much.”

He thought he heard something happening on the other end of the call, but with all the coughing on his end it was hard to tell what.

“Are his shoulders moving up and down, are his chest and belly contracting?” she asked .

“Just with the coughing,” he told her.

“That’s good,” she said. “I’m parking out front, I’ll be right in.”

“You... you’re what?” he asked.

But she was gone.

Did she drive out here when she saw my text?

Before he had a chance to think about it, the front door was opening up and Willow was rushing in, along with a gust of frigid, snowy air.

“Hey, Henry,” Willow said calmly as she peeled off her layers. “I’m so sorry you have a cough. Let’s see what we can do to help you feel better.”

She headed right for him, and Jensen braced himself for the boy to panic.

Instead, he held up his arms, his eyes filled with tears from coughing so much.

Willow scooped him up and cradled him close.

“Do you have a bathroom with a shower?” she asked Jensen calmly as Henry shuddered and coughed against her chest.

“Yes,” he told her, leading the way upstairs to the bathroom.

“Get that shower running,” she told him. “Make it as hot as possible.”

This was a version of Willow he’d never seen before. Her tone made it clear there was no room to argue, not that he’d been planning on it. He crouched to turn the knobs and flicked on the shower. The water was already warming up.

By the time he straightened, Willow had kicked off her boots and was stepping into the tub with Henry still hacking as she held him close. She closed the glass doors around the two of them and moved close to the water, but not quite into the spray.

“Henry,” she said softly. “Let’s take some deep breaths. In, and then out.”

Jensen listened as she modeled the breaths for him.

Please, Henry, please...

The coughing began to slow. He could hear Henry gasping in breaths in between, and Willow’s gentle praise.

“That’s right,” she murmured. “Let’s breathe in lots of nice, warm air. That feels so good, doesn’t it?”

Henry quieted more, the cough subsiding almost completely.

“Do you have a humidifier for his room?” Willow asked in a calm, gentle voice.

“Yes,” Jensen said. “But I haven’t used it yet.”

“Go get it,” Willow said. “Make sure it’s clean, then fill it up. We can bring it into his room and put it right by his bed.”

Jensen ran like his life depended on it, listening to Willow croon to his boy.

“What a good job you did,” she told him. “You’re going to be nice and tired after this, aren’t you?”

Once the humidifier was cleaned, filled up, and running nicely right next to the crib, Jensen headed back to the bathroom.

“It’s all ready,” he told Willow.

“Let’s get him a cup of warm water,” Willow said.

He took off again, heading down to the kitchen, getting a clean sippy cup from the cupboard, and filling it with warm water from the tap .

When he got back up, the water was off and Willow was just opening the shower doors, releasing a cloud of steam into the rest of the bathroom. Henry rested against her chest, limp as a rag doll, his eyes glittering as he observed his dad.

“Hey, bud,” Jensen murmured, trying keep his emotions in check. “Do you feel a little better?”

Henry blinked and nodded slightly.

“I’m so glad,” Jensen told him.

“I think he has a virus,” Willow said softly. “I checked with some of the nurses over at Tarker County on my way over here. There’s a bad one with a cough going around the local pre-schools and nurseries.”

“That makes sense,” Jensen said, finally tearing his eyes from his son.

“We’ll want to keep him hydrated, and if anything like this happens again, you know what to do,” she said, indicating the shower.

Willow’s hair hung damply around her shoulders, and her woolen socks were completely soaked along with her jeans up to her knees. Her eyes were tired, but her expression was relieved.

She had never been more beautiful to him.

“Willow,” he breathed. “I...”

“Let’s get some water in this little guy,” she said. “And then your daddy can take you to bed for a nice rest.”

Jensen handed her the cup and she held it to Henry’s lips.

He didn’t take it from her hands, just drank from it like back when he was a little baby drinking from a bottle. The poor little guy was exhausted .

Willow gazed down at him with such love in her eyes that it almost hurt to watch.

When the cup was half empty, Henry pushed it away and tried to snuggle into Willow's chest.

"Let's get you to bed," Jensen told him, holding his arms out.

Henry went to him, and he held him close, feeling relief at every clear breath the boy took. When he glanced back at Willow, she was shivering.

"Get in that shower," he told her. "I'll bring you back some clothes."

"N-no, I'm fine," she said.

"Get in," he told her again. "My bathrobe's on the door."

Her eyes went to his enormous, fluffy robe and she nodded once.

He headed out, closing the door behind him, but didn't move toward Henry's room until he heard the water turn back on.

"We don't need her getting sick too," he whispered to Henry.

By the time he had his boy in his warmest pajamas, sleeping in his crib with the mist from the humidifier pointed right at him, Jensen had no idea how much time had passed.

But as he looked down at his son, he felt so grateful. His eyes burned to see that little face so peaceful, his chest moving up and down gently.

He grabbed the monitor, headed to his own room, and got his old Trinity Falls firehouse sweats out for Willow. They were still going to be enormous on her, but they were the smallest things he had, and they were warm.

When he got to the bathroom door, he paused for a moment, not wanting to disturb her.

And as the grip of the scary moment relaxed, all his thoughts about Willow came rushing back like a wave.

WILLOW

Willow stood in Jensen's bathroom with his massive robe wrapped around her.

She had finally stopped shaking. Honestly, she wasn't sure if she'd been shivering from the cold, or if it had actually been more from adrenaline.

As a nurse, she had known on paper that Henry was almost certainly going to be okay. He didn't have asthma, and there was a pernicious cough going around according to the other nurses at Tarker County General.

But it was one thing to know it on paper and another to hear a toddler you cared about coughing like that, and to hold him in your arms while his little body struggled for breath.

Jensen had handled things very well, even though it was clear he was terrified for Henry. He'd been cool under pressure and done exactly what she asked each time. Henry was a lucky kid to have a dad who was good in a crisis.

Don't think about him .

But that was the problem. The moment she'd seen that text she had been in her car without thinking about it, just desperate to get to the people she cared about most in the world.

How did that happen so quickly?

All this time, she had been frustrated with herself for not being able to let go of an adolescent crush. It had taken an emergency to make her realize that what she felt was so much deeper.

Here she was, soaking in the warmth of Jensen's robe, surrounded by his forest scent. Yet she was thinking about how much she cared about his son, and how capable he was—not about how handsome he looked, or how good he smelled.

Could this be real?

But that would make it so much worse. Because if she brought out the worst in him—made him want to sneak around and lie to her brother, maybe even to himself—then it didn't matter if she really cared about him. She had to let him go.

A gentle knock at the door roused her from her thoughts.

"Willow?" Jensen's deep voice was tinged with worry.

"Hey," she said, opening the door right away so he would see she was fine. "How's Henry doing?"

"He's sleeping," Jensen said, his expression so sweet as he talked about his boy. "Thank you so much for coming. Thank you for helping him."

"I'm so glad you called," she told him honestly.

He gazed down at her, his gray eyes alive with emotion, and for a moment neither of them said a word .

"Uh, well, this is the smallest stuff I've got," he told her, handing her a very familiar bundle of gray clothing.

“Are these your firehouse sweats?” she asked. Ransom had a set too, back in high school. She had always been wildly jealous.

“Sure are,” he told her. “They’re not fancy, but they should keep you warm.”

“I always thought you guys were so cool, being firefighters,” Willow admitted, smiling down at the shirt with the firehouse logo.

“We thought so too,” Jensen chuckled. “I’m sure we were a liability half the time, but the chief taught us a lot, and we did help out. Though we were mostly washing the trucks and pumping water out of people’s basements during summer storms.”

“I remember,” Willow said. “Ransom used to be so mad that you guys couldn’t do much during real fires.”

“We weren’t eighteen,” Jensen said, shrugging. “Looking back, I think we did plenty to support the older guys so they could focus on the big stuff.”

“I know that made a difference,” Willow told him, then patted the clothing in her hand. “Plus, you guys got the cool gear.”

“And now you get to wear it,” he said with a smile. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He headed out and she pulled the door shut again.

She dressed quickly, pulling the warm sweats on gratefully. They were definitely big on her, but so cozy that it made her smile. When she caught her own reflection in the mirror, she almost didn’t recognize herself.

I look so... happy .

Shaking her head at her own nonsense, she put her wet things by the warm radiator to dry, then headed down to find Jensen.

She knew she'd better get home before the snow picked up too much.

They'd been talking about it on the radio on her way here, but she'd been so focused on Henry that she hadn't really thought about it until now.

"Hey," Jensen said as she came into the kitchen. "I was just making grilled cheese and tomato soup. Why don't you sit and eat before you head back out?"

She was going to refuse, but she could smell the fresh basil he'd used to dress up the soup, and the golden-toasted bread in the pan looked so good that her stomach growled. And besides, she wasn't going anywhere until her clothes dried, so she might as well have a bite to eat.

"We should talk anyway," Jensen added, his voice serious.

Well, he was right about that. And based on his expression, it seemed that he'd drawn the same conclusions she had about where they went from here.

Nowhere.

"Okay," she said. "Thanks."

"Sit," he said, indicating the table. "It's almost ready."

She did as she was told, looking around the sweet little kitchen. The cabinets were a pretty wood, it looked like birch—an unusual choice but really nice. And it looked new. When had Jensen had the time to renovate his kitchen as a single dad?

“I made some inroads with your brother,” Jensen said, sliding the sandwiches onto the plates as he spoke.

“Really?” she said. “That’s great. ”

“It’s just a start,” he told her, shrugging. “But Henry and I bumped into him and the kids at the library the other day, and he invited me to come to Christmas. I hope that’s okay with you?”

She blinked at him stupidly for a second before remembering to nod. Christmas was a big deal. That was a sure sign Ransom wanted things back how they were before.

She felt happy and sad at the same time when Jensen smiled down at her, looking relieved that what had happened between them wasn’t going to stop him from reconnecting with Ransom.

“That’s really great, Jensen,” she told him. “You should definitely come. It wouldn’t feel like Christmas without you there.”

“I feel the same way,” he said, his eyes on her again, searching hers. “And I’m going to talk to him, Willow. About us.”

“ Us ?” she echoed softly, shocked.

“I know he’ll be unhappy at first,” Jensen said, his deep voice calm and decided.

“But he loves you, so your relationship with him will survive it. And I hope mine will too. But at this point, I just don’t care.

Tonight put things in perspective for me.

I need you in my life, Willow. And if that means I have to fight for you, then so be it.
”

“But I’m a bad influence on you,” she heard herself say.

He stared at her for a moment, like he didn’t know what to say.

“What are you talking about?” he asked at last .

“You’re a good man,” she said. “You always have been. But because of me you’ve been sneaking around and all but lying. That’s not who you are, Jensen. I’m not good for you.”

“The last few days without you have made your influence on me crystal clear,” he said, his eyes flashing with passion. “And I can promise you that you’re the opposite of bad for me. Do you know what I’ve done since our date?”

She shook her head, wondering what on earth he could possibly be talking about.

“Everything you said about the radio ad,” he told her. “You changed my perspective. And it’s not just about doing voiceovers. It’s about how to look at it. And it’s about how to feel more like I’m part of this place again.”

He sat down across from her and placed his hands on the table.

“I came home years ago,” he told her. “And I told myself I could lose myself in my work in the city, and in Lara. I figured no one would notice that I’d lost a piece of myself to the military.”

She nodded slowly. She knew what he meant. The transition was hard. She suspected that the hardest part wouldn’t hit her until she’d been home a little longer. And she

felt like Jensen had been through more in his time away than she had.

“Then when I wound up back here, people made allowances,” he went on. “They knew I had lost my wife and I had this tiny baby. It made sense that I wasn’t out in the community like before.”

The truth of what he was saying began to occur to her and she had to swallow over the lump in her throat at the thought of this wonderful man drowning in his own loneliness.

“But the honest truth is that I holed myself up here with Henry,” he said. “I took care of him, and worked on the house, and ran trainings online, and left home as little as possible.”

He frowned and looked down at his hands, and all she wanted was to tell him it was okay. But it felt like he needed space to put together his thoughts.

“The center asking for our help with projects has been a real help for me,” he said at last, glancing up at her.

“For me too,” she agreed. “It’s easier to get out there when you have something concrete to do.”

“That’s right,” he said, nodding. “And then after you said what you did the other night, I got to thinking about what else I can do.”

She smiled at that, and wondered if he was about to tell her he had been over at the firehouse again to sign up as a volunteer.

“I got in touch with my agent,” he said. “And I told her to book me any jobs she wants. I don’t care anymore if people hear me acting silly on the radio. It’s honest

work and I actually enjoy it.”

“You’re good at it,” Willow told him honestly. “It wouldn’t have been half so funny if you weren’t. And that voice...”

She trailed off, hoping he didn’t notice the blush she felt heating her cheeks.

“I also let her know I would do any local non-profit work for free,” he added. “That way I can keep giving our friends and neighbors something to brighten their day and maybe help out a little at the same time.”

“Wow, Jensen,” Willow said, blown away. “Just... wow.”

“I’ll still be working from home,” he said. “I set up a soundproof space in my office. But when I go out, I’ll have a pretty good conversation starter with people, I figure.”

“Definitely,” Willow said, smiling.

“It’s a good gig for a single dad with a toddler,” he said. “And it’s all because of you.”

His humble smile made her heart melt like chocolate and marshmallow over a campfire.

“What do you think?” he asked her, his expression so tender.

“I think it’s wonderful,” she told him honestly. “And it’s not because of me. But I’m glad our talk helped you decide to do it.”

“You inspired me, Willow,” he said, his voice growing husky.

“After I lost Lara, I was afraid to put myself out there, in any way. I didn’t want to get hurt again.

But you’ve made me realize that putting myself out there is the only way I’m ever going to be truly happy.

I was living in a shadow, and you pulled me back into the sun. ”

She felt her cheeks burning now, but she kept gazing into his beautiful gray eyes.

“What do you think about me talking to Ransom?” he asked.

She knew she should say no, but when she looked around for reasons, she found that they were falling by the wayside faster than she could think of them .

“We can’t sneak around anymore,” she said softly.

“That’s why I’ll talk to him,” he agreed, his eyes solemn.

“And if he’s upset?” she asked.

“What do you think?” Jensen asked.

She almost lost herself in that warm, gray gaze. She had always loved the way he stopped to focus on her. No one else in her life had ever listened to her like that.

But then she thought of her big brother, who had always protected and loved her, and tried to stand in for the father figure they didn’t have.

She pictured him on his own in the A-frame cabin with those two precious children, trying to adjust to life back home under such challenging circumstances, and she

knew she couldn't make his life harder than it already was.

"If Ransom says no, the answer is no," she said, her voice bell-clear in spite of how shaky she felt.

There was pain in Jensen's eyes, but only for a moment. Then he smiled at her and nodded, and she felt like she could survive anything, do anything for him to smile at her like this again.

"Agreed," he said.

His eyes moved to her lips, and she felt a shiver of anticipation slide down her spine.

"We'll just have to avoid each other until Christmas," she said, wrenching her eyes from his. "It's only a few days. And it'll be easier that way."

"Agreed," he chuckled. "It's the only way."

She chanced a glance up at him and found him smiling at her warmly again.

"Eat up," he told her, rising from the table to grab his own meal. "We've got to get you back on the road before too much snow falls."

"Thank you," she said, picking up a sandwich half and almost moaning when the cheese stretched out between the pieces.

"Oh, wow," Jensen said.

"What?" she asked, looking up to see that he had raised the curtain to look out the window.

She was on her feet instantly and moving to his side.

Out the window snow was falling so fast and hard that she couldn't even see the trees that framed the house.

"I wonder if the road is already covered," she worried out loud, jogging out to the living room to look out the front window, even though she was pretty sure she knew what she was going to see.

She could hear Jensen's footsteps behind her and hear his intake of breath when she pulled the curtain back.

Her car was nothing but a hill of snow. And the driveway and the road beyond it had completely disappeared.

WILLOW

Willow woke up the next morning, feeling cozier and more rested than she had since leaving the service, and it took her a few seconds to remember that she was in Jensen's guest room.

There was almost no light coming in the windows, but she knew it couldn't be nighttime. She stretched, and then slipped out of bed, padding over to the window to take a look.

The snow was still coming down, big flakes flying in briskly at an angle, as if they were under orders to bury the whole town in a thick blanket of white.

I guess I'm not going back to the village just yet.

She was almost ashamed at the happy feeling that thought gave her.

She and Jensen had agreed to avoid each other until Christmas, but it seemed that the very heavens had opened up to force them together, and there was no way she could argue that .

It's just as well, she thought to herself as she tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom. Henry's not feeling well. It's good for him to have a nurse in the house.

Besides, she and Jensen were adults. They could handle a little temptation without breaking. She freshened up in the bathroom and then made her way quietly out to the living room, expecting to be on her own for a bit.

But Jensen was already sitting in the big easy chair with Henry wrapped in his arms and looking intently at a picture book that Jensen was reading to him.

“Good morning,” Jensen said, looking up at her as she entered the room.

Henry looked at her too, his big eyes solemn.

She couldn't help cataloguing his appearance. His eyes were clear, and his skin wasn't flushed, so he wasn't feverish. And thank goodness, he wasn't coughing. A sippy cup on the table by the easy chair told her that Jensen was listening to her advice to keep him hydrated.

“Good morning,” she replied. “It looks like you're feeling a little better, Henry.”

Henry just stared at her for a second, then he smiled a big smile, and she felt her heart melt.

“I was going to make us a great big country breakfast,” Jensen said. “But someone just wants to be held, so it might have to be cereal instead.”

“No pressure to cook, but I'd be glad to hold Henry if you want to take care of your own needs for a minute?” she offered. “Only if Henry would be okay with that.”

Jensen looked to Henry, but the little boy was already holding his arms out to Willow .

“Wow,” Willow said. “That's so nice.”

“Let's go to the kitchen,” Jensen said. “Grab a chair, and I'll bring him right to you. You guys can keep me company while I throw together some breakfast for us.”

“That sounds great,” she told him.

They headed into the kitchen, and she took a seat. A moment later, a very snuggly Henry was deposited in her arms.

“Oh, that’s so cozy,” she told him as he burrowed into her.

“And I’ll just grab some books, if you guys feel like reading,” Jensen said, heading out again.

“What do you think?” Willow asked Henry. “Should we read a book?”

He grinned at her and shook his little head.

She was pretty sure she knew what he wanted, but he seemed to be enjoying the guessing game, so she pretended to have no idea.

“Did you want to make a pot of stew?” she asked.

He shook his head, dimples popping.

“Hmmm,” she said. “Do you want to scrub the floors? Or do the laundry?”

That won her a husky chuckle and a single cough.

“I just don’t know what to do,” she pretended to think out loud. “What do you think we should do, Henry?”

She paused, fighting every urge to offer him what he wanted.

“Nah, nah,” Henry said softly.

She let her eyebrows shoot up and her mouth stretch into a happy smile.

“You want to tell knock-knock jokes?” she asked .

He nodded his head up and down, his eyes radiating pride.

“I’m so glad you told me,” Willow said. “Because I love telling knock-knock jokes. Now let me think of a really good one.”

But when she broke eye contact with the boy to think of a joke, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to find Jensen standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

His gray eyes flashed with emotion and when she smiled up at him, his return smile was so sincere that she felt the warmth of it down to her toes.

“Knock, knock,” she said, turning back to Henry.

His eyes got wide, and she gave him just an extra beat in case he wanted to answer himself this time.

“Der?” he demanded triumphantly after a moment.

Her heart wanted to beat out of her chest, but she kept going and tried not to show her surprise.

“Doris,” she told him.

“Oo?” he asked.

“Doris locked,” she said. “That’s why I’m knocking.”

He laughed and laughed even though she was pretty sure he had no idea what she was talking about. It was the rhythm of the joke and the grownups being silly that Henry liked.

Jensen was chuckling too, and his eyes were a little moist.

“ Nah, nah,” Henry said.

“Who’s there?” Willow asked.

But Henry just cracked up. Unfortunately, his laughter turned into more coughing this time. She rubbed his back, and was relieved when he stopped almost immediately.

Jensen set a few books and the sippy cup on the table, then headed to the stove.

“Let’s watch your daddy cook now,” she told him, grabbing the sippy cup and offering it to Henry. “I wonder what he’s making.”

Henry settled back against her chest with his cup, seemingly content to watch Jensen gathering ingredients from the cupboards.

Jensen leaned over to flick on the radio that was on the counter. “Silver Bells” sung by the local children’s choir was finishing up, and Willow enjoyed the pretty song while she and Henry watched Jensen start their breakfast.

For all that he’d said they would have cereal, it sure looked like he was about to make bacon, eggs, and either biscuits or pancakes. Her mouth watered at the idea.

She and Henry watched as Jensen put a few cups of flour into the big bowl and started adding other things.

When “Silver Bells” ended, Chuck Berry’s “Run, Run, Rudolph” came on. Jensen smiled and started dancing a little while he worked.

Henry held out the sippy cup for Willow to take it from him.

She put it on the table and watched the boy watching his daddy.

Jensen had clearly noticed that Henry was watching, so instead of just swaying a little, he began to actually dance and play his mixing fork like a guitar .

Henry squeaked with delight, and wiggled like he wanted to get down.

Willow wanted to let him, but she was worried about him coughing again if he exerted himself, or getting in the way while cooking was going on.

“Should we go dance too?” she asked him instead.

He nodded up and down and she got up with him, sliding him onto her hip.

Jensen came toward them, holding a hand out to Willow. She took it, and he pulled her in, rocking the three of them side to side.

Henry was smiling ear-to-ear, tipping his head in time to the music, clearly happy and excited to be dancing with his daddy.

Jensen pushed Willow out and spun her gently back in and she couldn’t help laughing.

“You’re a pretty good dancer, Jensen Webb,” she said.

“Did you forget about that?” he asked.

She honestly had. Suddenly, her memory was cast back to summers down at the lake. Ransom would always carry his boom box down with Jensen, and the two of them would dance and try to impress girls. As far as Willow was concerned, her brother looked ridiculous. But Jensen could really move.

The memory of how handsome he'd been in his tux, heading out to dance with some other girl on prom night hit her again, and she felt her cheeks heat.

"Oh, you do remember," he teased, pulling her in.

She laughed again, and Henry clung to her as Jensen held them close to his chest, moving them to the music with a sure confidence that made her melt as much now as it had back at the lake.

And through all the laughter and dancing and breakfast-making, Willow couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if all of this was somehow her life.

Could every day really be like this?

JENSEN

Jensen stood on his own front porch that evening, shovel in hand, looking out at the snowy fields around the house.

The storm was finally letting up, and while snow was definitely still falling, it was coming down gently now, lacy flakes floating down, instead of the relentless onslaught that had been slanting past the windows all day.

Maybe we'll be dug out by Christmas, Jensen told himself.

If he didn't have plans to talk to Ransom, it probably wouldn't have mattered to him so much that he'd try to dig them out before the snow had even finished falling.

As it was, he'd been out here for almost two hours and he'd barely been able to clear a narrow path to his truck and Willow's car, sweep the snow off them, and shovel enough of the driveway for them to get out.

At least this way when the plow finally came through, he'd only have to clean the snow that had fallen starting now.

He leaned the shovel against the porch railing, then took one last look over the snowy countryside before turning back to the house.

Warm light glowed in the living room windows as the Christmas tree twinkled festively.

He'd stuck his head in earlier to check on Henry, but he and Willow were doing just fine. She had made them a nest under the tree with couch cushions and blankets, and she had been reading picture books with him in there basically since he got up from his afternoon nap.

Thankfully, the cough seemed to have let up almost completely. Henry was still a little low energy, but mostly he was happy. And Jensen could hardly blame him. How could anyone be unhappy when they had Willow's undivided attention?

He kicked the snow off his boots and slipped in the front door. The whole house smelled incredible, the scent of the tree mixing with the chicken soup they had started in the slow cooker earlier. He left his boots on the mat and hung his coat up on one of the hooks.

Once he was back in the warmth of the house, Jensen realized he was probably a mess. In spite of the cold weather, he'd worked up a real sweat moving all that snow, and he was pretty sure his hair was plastered to his head and he probably smelled awful.

"Hi," Willow said softly from the nest by the Christmas tree as he entered the room.

The soft lights made her cheeks glow, and the sweet expression on her face told him she didn't think he looked terrible at all.

"Are you two okay if I take a quick shower?" he asked .

"Of course," she told him, waving him on. "Take your time. We're having fun."

He nodded to her and jogged up the stairs, forcing himself to stop thinking about going straight back down to kiss her.

We have to talk to her brother.

He showered as quickly as he could, then pulled on a fresh pair of jeans and a flannel, again resisting the urge to dress in a way Willow might like.

It's not a date. We're snowed in.

On his way back downstairs, he heard Henry laughing.

"Oh, no," Willow wailed in mock dismay. "My house."

"What's going on down here?" Jensen asked, stepping back into the living room to see that the two of them were now playing with wooden blocks.

"I was building a nice sturdy house," Willow said sadly. "And then it fell over."

For some reason, this made Henry start chuckling again.

"Why don't you give it another try," Jensen suggested, settling himself in his favorite chair to watch.

"That's a good idea," she agreed. "I know this house won't fall over."

Henry squealed with delight as he watched her stack up blocks.

When she had a nice tower built, she suddenly looked over at the fireplace.

"Is that Santa?" she asked. "Did I hear Saint Nicholas coming down the chimney?"

While she was turned away, Henry gleefully knocked over the tower.

“Oh, no,” he said when he was finished, then crammed his fists to his mouth as if maybe she wouldn’t notice that he was giggling that way.

Jensen was amazed and happy to see his boy talking, even if it was only a few words.

“What is it?” Willow asked, turning slowly. “Oh, noooooo. My house. It fell over again.”

Henry melted in giggles, sagging against her in a cozy way that tugged at Jensen’s heartstrings. But that kind of behavior usually meant he was getting sleepy again. It was probably best to get some supper into him before bedtime.

“Something smells good in this house,” Jensen said, pretending to sniff the air. “It makes me hungry as a bear.”

He roared a little, gently, so Henry wouldn’t be scared.

But Henry was laughing helplessly again. He was definitely getting sleepy. They’d be lucky if he didn’t nod off at the table.

“Me too,” Willow decided. “What about you, Henry?”

He nodded his little head, gazing up at her with stars in his eyes.

Yeah, buddy, we’re both lovestruck, aren’t we?

They headed into the kitchen together, and he ladled out soup for everyone. Willow kept Henry on her lap through dinner, and Jensen saw no reason to intervene. They were both enjoying their meal, and if Henry didn’t feel well, it was good for him to be comfortable in her arms .

The meal was peaceful, and they drifted back out to the living room afterward. Henry didn't make a sound of complaint when Jensen told him they should head up to bed.

Jensen took his time with his son, giving him a warm bath, finding a fresh pair of fuzzy pajamas for him, and then holding him in his arms and singing to him until he was just about asleep before finally lowering him into his crib.

As he straightened up, he realized Willow was standing in the doorway watching him.

The last few weeks, he'd noticed over and over again how capable she was and what an incredible woman she had grown into.

Maybe it was the warm glow of Henry's nightlight softening her features, or the expression in her eyes that he now recognized as longing, but in that moment, Willow suddenly seemed so young again.

It made him feel guilty to notice her beauty.

And that had nothing to do with her long soft hair and womanly figure, and everything to do with the look in her eyes and the goodness he knew was in her heart, a goodness that seemed to radiate from her, making people smile and feel comfortable wherever she went.

Her eyes widened slightly, as if she realized he'd caught her looking.

"Hey," he said softly, hoping to stop her from hurrying away.

"Hi," she whispered back.

He remembered Henry and moved toward the hallway so they wouldn't disturb him,

praying that she wouldn't run downstairs and break the spell.

But she only backed up to give him space, her big blue eyes watching him as he closed the door.

A moment of silence stretched out between them in the dim hallway, until he swore he could hear his own heart beating in his chest, and see the thrum of her pulse at her neck keeping the same rhythm.

He clenched his hands into fists in an effort not to touch her.

But in his mind he pulled her close, told her that she was all his, forever, and kissed her so thoroughly that she could never forget it.

"I think I'll turn in early," she whispered, dragging her eyes from his as if she had read his thoughts. "Good night, Jensen."

"Thank you," he whispered brokenly.

She glanced back up at him, warmth in her eyes now.

"It was a wonderful day, wasn't it?" she asked softly.

"It really was," he told her.

As he watched her head back to the guest room, he couldn't help the longing in his chest. And he wondered what his life might be like if this wasn't just some wonderful dream.

What if every day could be like this one?

JENSEN

Jensen awoke on Christmas Eve morning feeling incredible. Henry had slept peacefully through the night. And though Jensen had been up once or twice himself just to check the monitor, he was glad to know his boy would be feeling better again in time for Christmas.

And Willow is here...

He found himself hopping out of bed and jogging to the window. He wasn't sure what he was hoping to see.

Part of him couldn't wait for the snow to stop and the roads to be plowed so he could talk to her brother. And another part of him wished they could be snowed in forever. He couldn't bear the thought of being away from her, even for long enough to talk to Ransom tomorrow.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her sweet smile and heard her gentle laughter as she played with Henry and talked to him.

She cares about us. Please, let this work out...

But he had learned the hard way that the most important things in life were often not in his control. If he wanted things to turn out as they were meant to, he was going to have to do his best and then let go.

He had texted Ransom this morning and told him he wanted to talk to him about

something important tomorrow. Hopefully, they could hole up privately and he could tell the man what was in his heart.

He headed to the bathroom with the monitor, figuring Henry would be up by the time he was out of the shower.

Sure enough, he had just pulled on his jeans when he heard the monitor crackle to life.

Not wanting the little one to wake up alone if he still wasn't feeling well, Jensen headed down the hall without putting on his shirt.

But when he got to Henry's room, Willow was already there, standing by the crib, smiling and talking softly with a very happy Henry.

She looked up, and then averted her eyes immediately.

But not before he caught the blush on her cheeks.

He felt a jolt of pleasure at the idea that she liked what she saw.

"Good morning," he told her, letting his deep voice drawl just a little.

"Good morning," she said. "I've got him if you want to... get dressed."

But they were both distracted by the sound of an engine out front.

"Let me go see what that is," Jensen said.

He grabbed his flannel from the bathroom and shrugged it on as he headed downstairs

.

It was most likely the county guys with the plows, and that was probably for the best. The sooner the streets were clear, the sooner he could talk to Ransom. He was starting to think he didn't even want to wait until tomorrow.

He opened the front door with his shirt still half unbuttoned, expecting to see a truck out on the street.

Instead, he saw that the road had already been plowed.

And there was a very familiar truck in the driveway.

Ransom?

Jensen's best friend in the world stood by his truck, a cardboard drink holder with two coffees in one hand, and a paper bag in the other. Jensen was pretty sure that bag contained two egg sandwiches on hoagie rolls with plenty of ketchup.

Morning specials?

His heart surged with happiness at one more sign that Ransom still remembered the old days.

Maybe this friendship can survive my love for Willow...

But that dream was shattered instantly when he realized his friend was staring at Willow's car in his driveway. The ancient station wagon was perfectly recognizable under the thin layer of last night's snow.

"Ransom," Jensen said softly.

Ransom's eyes moved to him. He had forgotten until just that moment that he'd never

finished buttoning his flannel. But Ransom's eyes took in every detail.

“What's going on here?” Ransom asked.

If he had roared or screamed, or even cursed, Jensen might have felt better. But Ransom's voice was colder than the winter air, and hard as steel.

Jensen knew he could say it wasn't what it looked like, that Willow was only here for Henry, and that she'd gotten snowed in.

But the truth was, he wanted to put a ring on her finger and have her car in his driveway every night. He wanted this to be what it looked like, as soon as he could make it all happen the right way.

“This is what you wanted to talk to me about?” Ransom asked. “My baby sister?”

“Maybe you should come in,” Jensen said, stepping aside.

For a frozen instant, Ransom just stared him down.

Then he was clomping his way to the front door, banging the snow off his boots on the top step and stomping into the house.

Jensen followed after him, saying a silent prayer for Willow and Henry to still be upstairs.

But the two of them were back in their nest by the Christmas tree. Willow had Henry in her lap along with a picture book they weren't looking at anymore. Both of them gazed up at her unhappy brother with wide eyes.

Jensen breathed a sigh of relief that at least she was back in her own clothes.

“Willow.” The word was anger and defeat all at once, as if Ransom had still somehow hoped he’d come in here and find it wasn’t her car out there after all.

“I came by the other night because Henry was sick, and I got snowed in,” Willow said simply. “Are those morning specials?”

“If Henry’s sick, why are you calling my baby sister over here in a snowstorm?” Ransom said, turning to Jensen as if Willow hadn’t even spoken or didn’t deserve to be part of the conversation.

“I called her because she’s a really good nurse,” Jensen replied calmly. “And I value her advice.”

Ransom blinked at him for a second, as if he didn’t recognize that description of his sister.

“So you didn’t call her over here to tell her she should join NASA and go on the mission to Mars?” Ransom asked, recovering quickly. “Or maybe just fall for you instead?”

His sarcasm stung almost as much as the fact that he managed to make both possibilities seem equally dangerous and unlikely. And the mention of forgetting their pact hurt even more, since it was just about all Jensen had been thinking about lately.

Jensen turned to Willow. Her blue eyes were pleading, but he couldn’t tell if she was begging him to say something or begging him not to.

All he knew for sure was that he couldn’t hold it in any longer.

He turned to her brother, hoping that what he was about to say wouldn’t be too much, too soon for her to hear. But he was done holding back the truth.

“I love her,” he told Ransom simply.

WILLOW

Willow held Henry close, barely able to breathe as Jensen's words echoed in her mind.

I love her.

Could it be true?

She knew he had feelings for her. That much had become pretty obvious. But this was much more than just a casual crush.

Ransom's movement distracted her momentarily. He set the coffee and food on the table by the sofa, and Willow repressed a shiver at the idea that he was only doing it to free up his hands.

Please don't let them fight. Not in front of Henry.

She briefly considered taking him upstairs, but she would have to go past both men to do that, and she worried that might escalate things.

"You're not in love with her," Ransom said, his voice hard as flint. "My baby sister is a sweet, innocent girl. She's just an easy conquest before you get back to your cursed life."

Jensen's face fell and she realized that her brother couldn't have said anything more cruel.

“Do you really think that about your best friend?” she heard herself ask before Jensen had a chance to say anything. “That he somehow deserves the stuff that’s happened to him? That he’s a horrible womanizer? Or is it just that you think I’m still a little kid?”

Ransom turned to face her, a look of surprise on his face, as if he couldn’t imagine she would have anything to say in the matter.

Jensen moved to her and put his hands out, offering to take Henry.

She was glad when the little one went right to his daddy, allowing her to stand up and talk with her brother face-to-face.

“I’m not an idiot, Ransom,” she went on.

“I noticed that you felt the Army was a fine choice for yourself and for Jensen, but you thought it was too dangerous for me. And I know that Jensen Webb was always the most important person in your world, and you trusted him with your life, but now you think he’s too dangerous for me too? ”

Ransom shook his head like he was going to try to argue.

“Is that what you really think of me?” she demanded as calmly as she could. “That I’ll always be a helpless little girl?”

Ransom opened his mouth, but she didn’t let him answer .

“I loved that you protected me when I was actually a little kid and needed protecting, Ransom,” she told him truthfully. “You were the best big brother ever. I was so lucky to have a man like you in my life. But I grew up a long time ago. It’s time for you to accept it.”

“Willow,” he said softly, lowering his head, as if in defeat.

She felt all her love for her brother come rushing back to her, like the tide dancing back to the beach.

“I’m so sorry you had to find out this way,” she said. “We should have talked to you sooner. I think we were both afraid of how you would react. And I think you can see why.”

He nodded, still not looking at her.

“But if you tell me that us being together would hurt you, I won’t do it,” she said quietly. “Neither of us would ever do something to hurt you.”

He glanced up at her and she saw a flicker of hope in his eyes.

“I’ve been telling myself that I wouldn’t let myself fall in love with him because of everything you’ve been going through, Ransom,” she said softly.

“I didn’t want to make your life any harder, and I didn’t want to isolate you from him or from me.

But I’ve got to be honest with you. I don’t feel sorry for you.

And I don’t think you’re helpless. You’re my big brother, and I know you’re strong and smart and a wonderful father.

I believe in you, Ransom. What would it take for you to have a little faith in me? ”

Ransom’s face dropped back to the floor, and she knew she had her answer, even if it wasn’t the one she wanted .

Tears burned her eyes then and she ran upstairs, knowing that there was nothing else she could say or do, and not wanting Henry to see her cry.

WILLOW

Willow drove carefully down the newly plowed streets, past a wonderland of scenery that she had been looking at through car windows ever since she was a little girl. Everything looked unfamiliar now, under a few feet of snow.

She was grateful that Jensen had thought to dig their cars out last night. It had allowed her to make a quick exit while Jensen and Ransom were still talking quietly.

At first, she'd thought their voices had sounded almost friendly, but then she remembered that Henry was there, and they were both probably just being civil to keep from upsetting the boy. Jensen called out her name as she got into the car, but she just kept moving, knowing it was best to just go.

Now, she drank in the sight of the soft morning sunlight glittering on the snowy fields and pine trees.

It's beautiful, she reminded herself. This is your hometown .

But coming back felt hollow now. Home for her was never about the place. It was about the people. And she had lost access to all the people who made this place feel like home to her. Her mom was in Boston, and now her brother and Jensen...

I lost them both. And Henry too...

The feeling was like an anchor on her chest.

It was hard to believe that just last night she had been on top of the world, feeling like anything was possible, able to see her new life spread out in front of her like an incredible feast.

I'm going to be just minutes away, and I'll still feel further from them than I did when I was overseas...

But it didn't help to dwell on it. The practical side of her that had drawn Willow to nursing rose up now to comfort her. If she put herself to work, she would have something else to focus on.

She made a detour to the big box grocery store on Route One, and filled a cart with necessities for her friends back at Carla's Place.

She was pretty sure no one there would venture out in the snow in a car until things had cleared up, and it was already Christmas Eve, which meant the Co-op Grocer would be on holiday hours.

If anyone walked over to Carla's Place, it would be good to make sure some food and supplies were waiting.

When she pulled up on Park Avenue, she was amazed to see that the front walk and pathways had been shoveled already. She'd been planning to take care of that too, but someone had beaten her to it.

Grabbing as many bags as she could carry at once, Willow headed up the front porch steps. Three pairs of snow boots and three shovels were already beside the door.

She pushed it open to find a crackling fire with Mrs. Lennox, Mrs. Ying, and Reggie Webb sitting in front of it holding mugs of coffee, their cheeks pink from laughing and probably from shoveling snow.

“Willow,” Reggie called out. “Come join us.”

“Were you three out there shoveling?” she asked, feeling a little horrified that they’d felt they had to.

“We took our time,” Mrs. Lennox declared. “Don’t worry.”

“Took nearly all morning,” Mrs. Ying added with a big smile. “But it was so much fun.”

“She only thinks that because she started more than one snowball fight,” Reggie grumbled. But his eyes were twinkling, and he was clearly trying to hide a smile.

“Great job,” Willow told them, impressed. “I brought some supplies.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Mrs. Ying said. “Let us know what we owe you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Willow said, shaking her head. “It’s just for whoever stops by.”

“Let me get that for you,” Reggie said, hoisting himself off the couch.

“If you could put these away while I grab the next load, that would be wonderful,” she told him, hoping to keep him busy unpacking so he didn’t try to unload the car.

“I’ll get the next one,” he said, predictably.

But she could see by the way he was moving toward the door that his joints were already stiff from shoveling .

“Nope,” she told him. “There’s not much more, and I’ve already got my boots on. I don’t really know where everything goes here though, so it would be so great if you

could help with that.”

She headed briskly to the kitchen before he could argue, and was relieved to hear his footsteps behind her. By the time she had carried everything in, all three of her friends were unpacking groceries and other items together in the kitchen.

“This is so helpful,” Mrs. Lennox said, looking almost teary-eyed as she unpacked a big bag with packages of toilet paper.

Willow always had the sense that some of the guests relied on getting some of their meals here, and Mrs. Lennox’s reaction to receiving supplies definitely supported that. She was glad she had at least done one thing right today.

“I’m just sorry you all had to shovel the walk,” Willow said, meaning it. “I’m the one living here permanently. I wish I’d been here.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Reggie told her. “And good exercise.”

“It’s fun to play in the snow,” Mrs. Ying said with a smile. “And besides, we figured you were with your brother, helping out with the kids.”

“Oh,” Willow said, wondering how to explain where she’d really been.

“So you weren’t with your brother,” Reggie said, his eyes twinkling. “Were you with my nephew and his boy?”

“Jensen called me right when the snow started,” she heard herself admit. “Henry was really sick, and he couldn’t get Kellan on the phone.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Lennox said. “Is the little boy okay?”

“Yes,” Willow said. “Thank goodness. He had a bad cold, that was all.”

“Little guy was born early,” Reggie said gruffly. “He’s a tough one, but we all worry. Glad you could get over there to help.”

“He’s the sweetest boy,” Willow said. “I was glad that Jensen called. Anyway, by the time we got Henry comfortable, there was way too much snow for me to try and drive back here. I’ve been staying in their guest room.”

“I’m sure they enjoyed that,” Mrs. Lennox said, patting her arm. “He’s such a nice young man, and that little boy is adorable.”

Willow couldn’t help smiling at hearing someone else say the things she felt about the Webb boys.

“Are we going to be hearing wedding bells soon?” Reggie asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Reggie,” Mrs. Lennox scolded him.

“No,” Willow said, doing her best to keep her voice from shaking. “Definitely not.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mrs. Ying said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

To Willow’s absolute horror, she felt tears start to slide down her cheeks at the other woman’s kindness.

“Come on,” Mrs. Ying said firmly. “Let’s go sit by the fire and talk it out.”

“I’m s-sorry,” Willow managed as she allowed herself to be led out to the sofa.

“Don’t you feel bad for one second,” Mrs. Ying told her. “We’re here for you, same as you’re always here for us.”

“We can talk about it or not,” Mrs. Lennox added. “We’re happy to listen, or just keep you company.”

When they were ensconced on the sofa together, Willow felt herself relax a little. The tears stopped flowing as she soaked in the warmth of the fire and the quiet company of the two women who flanked her. Reggie came in quietly a moment later with a mug of coffee, fixed just the way she liked it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure,” he told her. “And if you’d like me to hold my nephew to account, I’d be glad to give him an earful.”

“It’s not his fault,” she sighed as Reggie sat down in an easy chair. “Jensen is wonderful, he always has been. It’s my brother.”

“What happened between the two of them?” Mrs. Lennox asked. “I thought they were close friends, but I heard from, uh, through the grapevine that they don’t speak anymore.”

The grapevine squirmed in his easy chair, but didn’t confess to being the spreader of the very accurate gossip.

“It was my fault,” Willow said softly. “I guess everyone knew I had a big crush on Jensen when I was a kid. When I asked his advice about joining the service, he heard me out and then encouraged me to consider it, and my brother never forgave him for it. He thought I only went for it because of my crush.”

“He still thinks of you as his baby sister,” Mrs. Lennox said, nodding .

“He still calls me his baby sister,” Willow said, shaking her head in frustration. “It doesn’t seem to occur to him that I might have made up my own mind on what I wanted to do, or that I’m capable of choosing who I want to spend time with.”

“He catch you over there?” Reggie asked, cutting to the chase.

Willow nodded, and then told the story as calmly and simply as she could. By the time she got to the end, her friends were nodding and clucking sympathetically in a way that made her feel a little better.

“It’ll all be okay,” Mrs. Lennox said after a minute. “I know it hurts now, but it will all work out somehow.”

“Thank you,” Willow said, knowing the other lady was just trying to be kind.

“Time will help me get over it. I just can’t believe I ruined everything with both of them.

We all need each other, the kids too. And now we’ll finally all be right here in the same town, and we won’t even be able to lean on each other. ”

“That’s not what I meant,” Mrs. Lennox said carefully. “I really do believe that things will work out between the three of you. From the way you describe it, it sounds like you truly care for Jensen, and he cares for you. And of course your brother loves you. He’ll see the light eventually.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Ying agreed. “You just have to give it time.”

“That’s hard at your age, isn’t it?” Reggie asked, chuckling a little. His eyes were

filled with sympathy though. “You still have so much in front of you, but it all feels so urgent, doesn’t it?”

Willow nodded. It did feel urgent .

“Well, your real job is to love them,” Mrs. Ying said.

“That’s the only thing in your control right now, and you can’t always do it up close.

You did just right today. Walking away and putting it all in your brother’s hands like you did was a great way to show him you love and trust him. Now it’s up to him.”

“It’ll all work out in time,” Mrs. Lennox said, nodding.

“Now, the time will pass anyway,” Mrs. Ying said. “But I was thinking we could spend some of it baking my famous almond cookies and watching a nice movie. What do you think?”

Tears prickled Willow’s eyes again at the sweetness and the wisdom of her new friends.

“That sounds amazing,” she told Mrs. Ying, leaning on her shoulder. “Let’s make some cookies.”

As they were getting the second batch out of the oven, with the whole place now filled with the delicate aroma of almond cookies, Willow’s phone started buzzing.

She grabbed it out of her pocket, praying that it was Ransom.

But her mother’s number lit up the screen instead.

“Hey, Mom,” she said after picking up.

“No luck getting tickets out there,” Mom said sadly. “We even came to the airport very early this morning to see if anyone canceled. I think it’ll have to be January.”

In all the drama, Willow had forgotten that her mom and Aunt Rhonda were still trying to come out. Maybe it was for the best that they couldn’t be here when so much was up in the air.

“That’s okay,” she told her mom. “We’ll see each other soon. How’s Aunt Rhonda holding up?”

“She’s disappointed too, honey,” Mom said. “But she’s just fine. And we’ll be glad to see you in January. Once we head back to her place and I start cooking, she’ll cheer up right away.”

“I hope you have stuff to cook,” Willow worried.

“Oh, you know we have that chest freezer down in the basement,” Mom laughed. “We always have stuff to cook. What are you up to?”

“I’m just making cookies with some friends and then we’re going to watch a movie,” Willow told her.

“Friends from high school?” Mom asked.

“No,” Willow said. “New friends. But they’re the best. I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Mom said. “Well, we’re going to head home now. Take care of yourself and give your brother and the kids big hugs from us tomorrow.”

Willow winced, but didn't have the heart to tell her mom about anything that was going on. She had most likely called Ransom first, since the grandkids were there. If he hadn't said anything, she probably shouldn't either.

"Love you, Mom," Willow said. "Send my love to Aunt Rhonda. Merry Christmas Eve."

When they signed off the call, the others were all setting up a movie on the television in the living room, with Reggie navigating because of his claim that he was "the best with the clicker. "

She was surprised and pleased when they decided on Home Alone .

With her friends surrounding her, a big plate of warm cookies on the table, and a glass of milk in her hand, Willow found her broken heart was soothed just a little bit.

I can do this, she thought to herself proudly. I can do it for Ransom. My big brother is worth a broken heart.

WILLOW

Willow awoke on Christmas morning to sunlight streaming through the windows. She felt good, in spite of the ache in her heart. Spending the day with her new friends yesterday had been a balm to her soul, and she was finally ready to put in the work to win her brother back.

Grabbing her phone from the bedside table, she wasn't sure what she expected to see, but it definitely wasn't a missed call and two texts from Ransom.

Ransom

kids and i were hoping you'd come by this morning to open presents

and Merry Christmas

She stared at the screen in complete awe for a moment, then tapped out a quick reply before she lost her nerve.

yes!

see you in a few!

Her mood was lifted enough by the simple exchange that she was humming a happy tune as she headed into the bathroom for a quick shower.

She already missed Jensen and Henry like there was an empty cavern in her chest.

But if she could make things right with Ransom, then at least half her heart could be full.

And she had been so looking forward to seeing Travis and Mae today. She sensed that her niece and nephew needed her in their lives, and she needed them too. It was a relief that Ransom wasn't going to cut her out after all.

When she was dressed and ready to go, she grabbed the container of homemade cookies and the bag of gifts she was bringing over. Hopefully, the kids would like the stuff she had picked out. And she knew they would love her famous chocolate chip cookies, even if they weren't exactly Christmas themed.

The fire escape stairs were covered in snow and ice, so she headed down the main staircase. It was still dim inside, with the curtains pulled closed, meaning no one had been to the house yet this morning.

It made her happy to see that Carla's Place was empty. It was good to know that all her friends had someplace to be on Christmas morning. Though she hated the idea of anyone coming into a dark and empty house on Christmas, so she decided to brighten the place up, just in case.

She placed the extra plate of cookies she had made on the kitchen table and took a moment to start a pot of coffee, open the curtains, and plug in the tree.

This way if someone stopped by the place would look cheerful, and they would have a nice treat to enjoy.

Once she was satisfied that the place was as warm and welcoming as she could make it, she headed out.

The drive to Ransom's house was peaceful. Not too many people were currently on

the roads, though lots of driveways were full of cars. It reminded her of when she was little, and they sometimes had a house full of cousins for the holidays.

Maybe that will be my kids hanging out with Ransom's one day...

But when she tried to picture her future children, she kept seeing Henry's sweet smile in her mind.

She flicked on the radio, hoping to distract herself from self-pity. She was a very lucky woman in almost every possible way. It was silly to moon over what might have been.

John Lennon began singing "Happy Christmas," and she had to smile. Today was a day for peace on earth, and it seemed like Ransom was finally ready to make peace with her on his terms.

As she pulled down the narrow lane to get to his house, she thought about the effort he'd put into clearing it enough to get his own truck out. It had obviously meant a lot to him to go see his friend yesterday.

Hopefully they'll make up too at some point. They both deserve it.

She passed the barn and pulled up in front of the house, parking the station wagon beside her brother's truck. Once she had gathered up her gifts, her cookies, and her courage, she headed up to the house and got ready to knock on the door.

But it opened before she touched the wood.

"Aunt Willow," two little voices chorused.

"Hi, Travis," she said, accepting their hugs. "Hi, Mae. Merry Christmas."

“What’s that ?” Mae asked, looking at the bag she carried with great interest. “Is it presents?”

“ You’re not supposed to ask that ,” Travis whispered loudly to his little sister.

“It is presents,” Willow said quickly. “You two like getting socks for Christmas, right?”

“I like socks,” Mae replied politely, though her expression wasn’t as enthusiastic as before.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Willow said shaking her head in mock disappointment. “Because I only got you toys this time. Maybe next year I’ll bring you some socks.”

Both kids roared with laughter that Willow strongly suspected was at least partially fueled by the sweets that had been in their stockings.

“Hey, sis,” Ransom yelled from the kitchen. “Come on in, breakfast is almost ready.”

“Thank you,” she said, handing Travis her bag. “Bring that to your dad, okay?”

“Mae, where should I put my coat?” she asked, though she could clearly see the coatrack.

“Right here,” Mae told her proudly, leading her over to it. “You just put it on there.”

“Thank you,” Willow told her.

There was a nice fire in the fireplace and the kids had added green and red paper chains to the already decorated space so that it looked even more festive than before.

The three big, beautiful dogs she had seen outside last time were all sleeping by the fireplace, so beautiful they looked almost like a painting. One of them noticed her looking and thumped an inky black tail on the floor without getting up.

Willow slipped off her boots and put them by the door as well, and then headed into the kitchen.

She was prepared for things to be awkward after yesterday, but determined to power through it.

Her brother had reached out to be sure she was coming, which meant that he really wanted her here, and she was grateful for that.

“Smells amazing,” she told Ransom.

“Thanks,” he said, grinning at her before turning his attention back to the bacon he was flipping. A paper-towel lined plate by the stove was already covered with cooked strips.

“You’ve got enough for an army in there,” she teased him.

“Can’t hurt to have a little extra,” he said. “Never know who might stop by.”

“I guess,” she said, though she would be stunned if anyone just randomly stopped by in this weather on a holiday.

The living space was completely open, so she could see that Travis and Mae were back by the tree, putting together a complicated-looking train set. Their heads were close together and they were talking quietly, looking like there was no one in the world but the two of them.

“Reminds me of us,” Ransom said quietly .

“It does,” Willow agreed, smiling.

The two of them had been so close growing up. Even when Ransom had a whole crew of friends, he still made time to play with his little sister, and to hold her hand whenever she was scared.

“About yesterday,” he said quietly. “I heard what you said. And... I’m sorry, for everything.”

She moved closer and tried to meet his eyes, but he was focused on the sizzling treat in the pan, maybe because it was easier not to look at her while he spoke.

“You were ready for the Army,” he said. “I see that now. And you did so well, too. I’m proud of you. And I’m sorry I ever made you feel like I didn’t believe in you.”

“Ransom,” she murmured, genuinely moved. He had never been one to talk much about his feelings.

“I just wanted to protect you from the world,” he told her.

“I’ve always seen myself as your guardian.

But that’s your job now, unless you ask for my help.

I’ll try to keep my nose out of your business otherwise.

No promises that I’ll be good at it though, at least at first. I might need some reminding, and you don’t have to be subtle. ”

His eyes flashed up to meet hers now, and she could tell by his expression that he had said his piece.

“Thank you,” she told him, meaning it. “And I meant what I said yesterday. I really do appreciate how you looked out for me all those years. And I don’t think I’ll ever want you to mind your own business.

I still want to know your opinion, and I’ll always hear you out.

I just want you to respect my decisions. ”

“I can do that,” he said, nodding. “I just don’t want to lose you again. ”

She joined him at the stove and grabbed him to hug him close, stealing a piece of bacon off the paper towels as soon as he let her go.

“Cheeky girl,” he exclaimed, pretending he was going to swipe it back from her.

She shoved it in her mouth and chewed it up, humming with appreciation at the rich flavor of her stolen treat.

As Ransom transferred the last of the bacon and turned off the burner, there was a knock at the door.

She glanced over, stunned that her brother had been right. They had drop-ins after all.

“That’s your surprise, Aunt Willow,” Mae yelled to her with a big smile.

“ Mae,” Travis laughed, rolling his eyes. “You weren’t supposed to say that yet.”

“Is it a horse?” Willow asked right away. “I always wanted one.”

“Horses can’t knock on doors,” Travis pointed out, as Mae cracked up at the idea of a horse being at the door.

“True,” she said, heading for the front of the cabin.

There was only one Christmas surprise she wanted, and though she had no reason to expect it, a sense of anticipation rose in her chest anyway, making her feel light as air.

She pulled open the door and there they were. She had to blink a few times to make sure it wasn’t just her imagination showing her what she wished for most, but it wasn’t an illusion.

Jensen stood in the doorway, towering over her, his gray eyes fixed on her face, his expression of love and hunger freezing her in place.

“ Nah, nah,” Henry said softly, drawing her eyes to her favorite toddler, who was wrapped in his daddy’s arms.

Henry gazed at her for a moment, his twinkling gray eyes making him look so much like his dad. Then he stretched his hands out for her.

“Hi, Henry,” she breathed, taking him in her arms. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“Come on in, guys,” Ransom said, jogging over to welcome them.

Willow felt tears prick her eyes as she watched the two most important men in her life clasp hands and then hug.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:10 am

“Hey, baby, do you like trains?” Mae asked, running up to Willow and Henry.

“Let’s get his coat off,” Willow said. “And these big boots. Then he can be cozy when you show him your train set.”

A few minutes later, everyone was free of their winter things and making themselves at home. Travis sat on the floor with Mae and Henry, reading them “The Little Engine That Could” while the adults set the table.

There was no real time to talk about serious matters once the food was ready. When the kids were set up with everything they could possibly want to eat, everyone turned their attention to devouring the delicious breakfast.

It wasn’t until the bacon, eggs, and muffins were eaten, and the kids had opened Willow’s presents while Henry dozed off on her chest, that the three adults were able to settle in and talk.

Willow settled in at the center of the sofa. She had Henry in her arms and her two men on either side while the kids worked on their train under the tree, and for the first time in a long time, everything felt just right.

“How did this happen?” Willow asked, gesturing between the two of them.

“Yesterday,” Jensen said. “When you left, we got to talking.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Everything you said really hit home,” Ransom told her, his voice gruff. “You were right. I’ve been unreasonable. Nothing should be more important to me than the happiness of the people I love.”

“It’s not unreasonable to feel betrayed that your best friend and your sister have gotten together without talking to you,” she said. “And that’s what it looked like, didn’t it?”

“It’s what I wanted,” Jensen admitted. “And what I still want.”

His words sent a shiver down her spine.

“What do you want, Willow?” Ransom asked quietly.

“I don’t want to lose my big brother,” she told him.

“You won’t lose me,” he told her. “As a matter of fact, you two have my blessing, if you still want it.”

“We do?” she asked, turning to Ransom.

It was one thing to say it, but was he really going to be okay with this?

“You do,” he told her with a sad smile. “I’ll probably always have the instinct to be overprotective, especially when it comes to you being with someone. But honestly, you chose someone I already like and respect more than any other man in the world. You made it easy for me, Willow.”

“We put it all on the table after you left,” Jensen said softly. “We talked about the Army, the pact, and about everything you said. I think we all understand each other a lot better now.”

“The short version is that I was an idiot,” Ransom said with a smile of chagrin.

“A well-meaning, good-hearted idiot,” Jensen amended. “Who cares about his family.”

Ransom reached past Willow to give his best friend a gentle punch in the shoulder.

“Well, the whole pact thing was pretty silly, but I get it,” Willow said. “And I was a coward not to tell you how I really felt about Jensen. Back in school, and also these last few weeks.”

“Don’t worry,” Ransom said. “Everyone knew how you felt about Jensen back then.”

Willow shoved him gently and he ruffled her hair, just the way she always hated, making her laugh.

“Hopefully, everyone is going to know how I feel about you now, Willow,” Jensen said. “If you still want me. I know a single dad isn’t every girl’s first choice for a boyfriend.”

“You will always be my first choice for a boyfriend,” she told him. “And Henry is at least half the draw, so you’d better watch what you say about my favorite baby.”

She kissed the top of the little one’s silky head, and when she looked up again Jensen was gazing at her, his jaw tight and his eyes glittering, as if with unshed tears.

“Want to see our train, Dad?” Mae sang out happily.

Willow looked over to see that they kids had a full loop of track put together.

“Definitely,” Ransom told them, claspng Willow’s shoulder warmly before jumping

up to join his kids on the floor.

“Is this really happening?” Willow whispered to Jensen.

“It’s a Christmas miracle,” he whispered back, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze.

The feeling of being here, watching her brother with his children, Henry sleeping peacefully on her chest, and Jensen’s warm arm around her filled her with so much happiness that she couldn’t stop the tears that slid down her cheeks.

“Beautiful,” Jensen whispered, catching one of her tears with a fingertip before cupping her cheek in his hand.

They stayed like that for a while, watching the kids play, and Ransom play right along with them.

Before too long, Henry woke up and wanted to join in the fun, and the day went on—playing with toys, reading books, going outside with the dogs and watching them streak across the snow, then coming in with cold, pink cheeks to enjoy a snack of hot chocolate and cookies.

“Hey,” Ransom said quietly to Willow as the kids devoured some cookies. “Is there any chance you could stay with these guys while I run out for a bit?”

“Of course,” Willow said, a little surprised that he was leaving, but not wanting to push for more info. She had the feeling that she wasn’t the only one in the family who had sparked up a romance this holiday season, and she was happy if that was true. “Take as long as you need.”

He patted her shoulder and headed to the door, giving the kids a quick goodbye and

letting them know he had to run a tiny errand, and that Willow and Jensen would be there with them.

“What’s that all about?” Jensen asked Willow after he had gone.

“I have no idea,” Willow said, shaking her head. “But if he thinks I’m not grilling him about it when he gets back, he really is an idiot.”

“What happened to you two minding your own business?” Jensen teased.

“He’s the only one who agreed to that,” she pointed out. “I’m still nosy as can be.”

“I know where he went,” Mae announced, looking very pleased.

“We don’t know where he went,” Travis said.

“Who wants to play board games?” Willow asked quickly.

She was super curious about where her brother had gone, but she figured she probably shouldn’t let Mae be the one to spill the beans on this little secret. That was for Ransom to tell her himself, and she hoped that he’d be back soon enough with some happy news to share.

After all, her own wishes had come true this Christmas Day. How could she not want the same for Ransom?

WILLOW

A few days after Christmas, Willow stood in Jensen's mom's kitchen, looking around at the array of familiar faces from her childhood.

It was incredible how many of her friends had stayed in Trinity Falls, or come back here when they were ready to build a family and start their adult lives in earnest.

The kitchen was full of energy, laughter, and so much food.

In true Trinity Falls fashion, this was a potluck and people took the assignment seriously.

The very best dishes from the kitchens of Cassidys, Webbs, and so many others covered practically every surface in the house.

Annabelle Williams had brought a basket of fragrant biscuits.

And a huge crock of Marilyn Anderson's famous macaroni casserole had lasted all of about ten minutes.

"Willow," Jensen said softly, taking her hand. "Mom's got Henry. Let's go start a fire in the fire pit."

She smiled up at him, amazed that no matter how many times he took her hand in his, it still sent happy shivers down her spine.

“Okay,” she said.

Maybe it was sort of silly to hang out by the fire pit in late December when there was still a ton of snow on the ground from the big storm.

But it was getting hot in the house with so many people.

And they had sat together around so many fires over the years that it just felt right to escape outside to enjoy the cold, fresh air.

They worked together, gathering wood like always. Before long, they had a nice fire going, and the big logs they used for seating were all brushed off and ready for people to come gather and talk about old times.

“Should I run and grab everyone?” she asked him.

“In a minute,” he told her. “I just had to ask you something first.”

She frowned at the serious note in his voice, then realized what it had to be.

“Oh gosh, is this about the captain’s wedding?” she asked him. “I thought you would never ask me.”

Captain Anderson had been planning his wedding for as long as Willow had been back in town. It would be a huge event for all the veterans in town. They were all invited, and the captain promised that it would be an enormous and fun occasion.

“Of course I want you to go with me,” Jensen said, his eyes twinkling in the firelight.

He honestly looked more handsome than ever. Sometimes it was hard to remember that she wasn’t a kid anymore, and that he had feelings for her too.

As the happy days passed, she was pleased to learn that Jensen wasn't exactly as she'd pictured him when she was a lovesick teen. He was so much better—patient and kind with a quiet but keen sense of humor that he didn't share with everyone and that she had never expected.

"It's not about the captain's wedding though," Jensen said.

"It's not?" she echoed, wondering what it could be.

Before she knew what was happening, he was kneeling in the snow, holding up a little wooden box with something inside that sparkled almost as much as the tears in Willow's eyes.

"I might have been too blind to see it before now," he said, his deep voice rough with emotion.

"But you're the most incredible woman in the world.

I love you with everything I have, and you melt me with every glance.

Every time you read to Henry, or you let me hold your hand, I feel like I could conquer the world.

I've got a crush on you Willow Wright, and I'm pretty sure it's going to actually crush me if I don't do something about it. Will you marry me, Willow?"

"Yes," she said, laughing as her heart erupted in fireworks. "Yes, I will."

He was on his feet in an instant, sliding the ring onto her finger and wrapping his arms around her.

When he bent to kiss her, she barely had time to take a breath.

Then his warm mouth was pressed to hers, feeding on her gently at first, before he wrapped a hand around her cheek as if to hold her still so he could kiss her with the hunger of a starving man.

She had pictured this kiss a thousand times over the years, but the real thing surpassed all of her fantasies. She was pretty sure that she was just going to float away with happiness.

A whoop went up from his parents' deck and Willow pulled back, her cheeks heating as she realized they had witnesses.

Jensen let her go, but kept hold of her hand.

"I hope you like the idea of a winter wedding," he murmured to her as their friends and family began heading down the hill to congratulate them.

"As long as it's this winter," she agreed.

He pulled her close to wrap an arm around her, and they headed up the hill.

They each held out their free arm to his mom, who was the first to greet them, with Henry on her hip and tears in her eyes.

Henry went right to his daddy and stayed in his arms, reaching for Willow now and then, as if to be sure of her, while person after person came to congratulate them all.

Within a few minutes, Willow was overcome with all the well wishes and the warm hugs they received.

But it was cold, so before too long, only the younger generation was left seated around the fire.

The parents and grandparents had headed back up to the house, leaving Jensen, Willow, and Henry standing on the hillside between, listening to the happy voices float down from the house and up from the logs around the fire.

“Are you okay?” Jensen asked, gazing down at her.

“More than okay,” she told him happily. “I feel like I could fly.”

“As long as you’re flying to me,” he whispered, pulling her close .

“Only to you,” she promised.

He kissed her again, but chastely with Henry between them.

“ Me ,” Henry said suddenly.

“Kiss you?” Willow asked him.

He nodded his little head up and down, and she leaned in to kiss his cheek.

Jensen kissed Henry’s other cheek at the same time, and the little boy was so tickled that he let out a peal of laughter that rang out in the frosty night.

It was such a happy sound that Willow couldn’t help smiling up at her fiancé like a fool.

“You still have a crush on me,” Jensen teased her. “Don’t you?”

“I do,” she admitted.

“I’m so glad,” he told her, his voice suddenly serious. “And I’m going to do everything I can to never break that spell.”

When he bent to brush her lips with his again, she could feel the pull between them, and she knew there was no spell to be broken because there wasn’t a bit of magic involved.

What had started as a crush had grown into a love so strong that it had made the three of them a family—and it was built on history, but also on respect, and compassion, and so much joy.

“It’s not just a crush anymore,” she told him.

“I know,” he said, his voice rough with emotion as he stroked her cheek so gently.

“But don’t worry,” she whispered. “I still want to write your name in my diary with puffy hearts all around it. ”

His warm laughter filled her heart, and she knew everything was going to be wonderful from now on.

WILLOW

On the morning of her wedding, Willow bustled around the kitchen, happy that Jensen had relented and agreed to let her come over and cook with him instead of going out to breakfast.

Willow had been dreaming of her wedding day with Jensen Webb ever since she was an adolescent with hearts in her eyes. She always assumed she would be wearing a gigantic gown, walking down the aisle of a cathedral, and that their reception would be in a ballroom.

As it turned out, the real thing was going to be so much better.

But she still had tons of nervous energy to burn off, so she figured cooking, eating, cleaning up, and playing with Henry would be just the right way to spend the morning.

The kitchen timer went off, and Jensen strode over to the oven.

“Can I take these out?” he asked .

“Absolutely,” she told him as she slid eggs out of the pan and onto three plates.

The moment he opened the oven, the rich scent of cinnamon filled the room.

“Oh, wow,” Jensen said. “They smell incredible.”

“That’s my mom’s recipe,” Willow told him. “Now you’ll be able to tell her you finally made the Wright family cinnamon buns.”

“This was more important than the actual wedding if I want to be part of the family, wasn’t it?” he teased.

“According to my mom, probably yes,” Willow laughed.

“As long as she’s not mad at me for not asking her blessing in person,” Jensen said nervously.

“You asked her over the phone,” she said. “And you asked Ransom in person. I think that counts as extremely respectful.”

“And we saved them from buying another set of plane tickets,” Jensen pointed out.

Willow laughed, though it was true. Her mom and Aunt Rhonda coming down in January instead of on Christmas had actually worked out well. She and Jensen had been able to make all the arrangements for their simple wedding to coincide with the visit.

“Yummy,” Henry said excitedly, looking up from the toys he was playing with at the table.

“It smells so good, doesn’t it?” Willow asked him. “Let’s put your toys away and wash your hands.”

She headed over to help, but he put his arms up to her.

“You want a hug?” she asked him .

“Hug me,” he said, already burrowing into her arms.

“Oh, that’s such a nice hug,” she told him.

And it felt even better knowing he had asked for it himself.

Willow knew that Henry’s development was unfolding at its own pace, and other than giving him a little space and a lot of encouragement, it had nothing to do with her or with Jensen.

But she would always be grateful that he felt safe with her and motivated enough to use his words.

When Henry was finished with his snuggle, they cleaned up his toys and washed their hands. By then, Jensen had their plates at the table. Each plate had a serving of eggs and one cinnamon bun, drizzled with warm glaze.

“Oh, let me just grab the juice,” Willow said, dashing to the kitchen and coming back with a carton of orange juice.

She poured herself and Jensen a glass, then started a sippy cup for Henry.

“ Nah, nah ,” Henry said.

She turned to find him looking up at her from his booster seat, his gray eyes twinkling.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

“ Orange,” he said right away.

“Orange who?” she asked.

“ Orange glad juice?” he yelled, in a pretty good imitation of his dad’s advertising

jingle.

Henry broke into chuckles, clearly delighted with himself, as Jensen roared.

Henry had certainly heard that line repeated often enough. Folks loved to greet his dad with it whenever he left the house. Willow was glad that Jensen took it as the friendly greeting it was.

“Henry, you just made a very good knock-knock joke,” Willow told him. “That was amazing.”

“ You,” Henry demanded.

“I should do one now?” she asked.

“ Yes, ” he said, nodding.

“Knock, knock,” she said.

“ Who there? ” he asked.

“Olive,” she told him.

“ Who? ” he asked.

“I love you ,” she told him.

He was so tickled she thought he might slide right off his booster and under the table.

“Okay, okay, let’s eat some breakfast while it’s still warm,” she said, sitting down beside him.

They had started putting Henry's chair and booster at the end of the kitchen table so they could both be next to him. Jensen winked at her from across the table, and just like always, her breath caught in her throat.

A few hours later, she was in the ladies' room at the little church, with a few friends helping her with her hair and makeup.

"Pink or red?" Mrs. Lennox asked, holding up two tubes of lipstick.

"Just a little pink," Willow told her. "Thank you."

"Mrs. Ying, do you think we should use the pearl comb, or this veil?" Natalie Cassidy asked .

The two of them had taken over with Willow's hair, and she had known immediately not to question anything.

She had never really made a big deal about hair and makeup, but it was fun to be fussed over. And of course she wanted to look extra nice today.

Willow's old friend Holly Fields—now Holly Cabrera—poked her head in as the ladies continued to work.

"Hi, Holly," Willow said. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Oh, the whole town's here," Holly said with a smile. "We're all so happy for you. Do you guys need anything?"

"We're just fine," Willow told her. "But come in and hang out if you want."

"Nervous?" Holly asked, moving beside her.

“Not really,” Willow said, smiling back at her friend in the mirror. “Just excited.”

“You’ve been waiting for this since you were a kid, huh?” Natalie teased gently.

“I have,” Willow agreed.

She didn’t even feel embarrassed anymore. She was proud that she’d been able to spot how special Jensen was even back then.

They both had grown and changed so much, but that thread had begun back when they were kids, and she wouldn’t change any part of their story for the world, not when it led them here.

The ceremony itself was short and sweet. They had wanted to make this happen quickly, and that meant there wasn’t time for a lot of bells and whistles.

Jensen had pulled her aside many times to make sure the simplicity was really okay with her.

She told him honestly every time that it made her happy. They didn’t need anything extravagant because it was what was between them that would make the day special.

She walked down the aisle on her brother’s arm, with Mom and Aunt Rhonda smiling up at her from their places of honor at the front of the church.

Jensen waited for her, his gray eyes filled with love and awe. He looked so incredible in his tuxedo that she felt her cheeks heat and couldn’t help thinking about seeing him in a tux all those years ago on his way to prom. She had been so jealous then.

But now he was hers, and she was his.

Her hands were trembling until Jensen took them in his, then everything felt just

right.

They repeated the pastor's words to each other. Then before she knew it, he was declaring them husband and wife, and Jensen was kissing her like there was no tomorrow as their friends and family cheered.

It was wonderful to look out at the crowd and see so many happy faces.

Ransom was there with his family, and she could only shake her head in wonder at all the happy surprises they'd all had this winter.

Even the captain was smiling at her from the back of the church. In spite of all the chaos surrounding his own wedding and the days afterward, he was here to celebrate with Willow and Jensen.

The reception was held at the community center, which had been decorated with beautiful white streamers. The walls were lined with tables of food, and a local band was warming up on the far side of the part of the room that had been set up as a dance floor.

Henry escaped from his grandmother's lap and dashed up to Willow as their friends and family filed in.

Henry was wearing the cutest little suit, and his warm weight felt good in her arms.

"Mama," Henry said with enthusiasm.

He had never used that word before. It hit her like a wave of warm light, lifting her heart.

"Henry," Willow breathed, valiantly trying to hold back her tears since she didn't want to confuse her favorite little boy.

“My mama,” Henry said, patting her cheek so tenderly it was all she could do not to let the tears loose.

“My sweet, sweet boy,” she said, kissing the top of his silky head.

But then he was wiggling and running off to his new cousins, Travis and Mae, who were calling for him as they slid around the dance floor in their socks.

“Did you know he was going to say that?” Willow asked Jensen.

“I didn’t,” he said. “But I talked to him about it. And he liked the idea that you would be his mama. ”

“It doesn’t... hurt?” she asked.

She tried hard to leave space for Jensen to talk about Lara. And she knew a day like today might be hard for him. After all, this wasn’t his first wedding.

“We’ll make sure he always knows about Lara,” Jensen said. “She’ll never be gone from his life. But I think he has a big enough heart for both of you. Don’t you?”

She nodded. That little boy had enough room in his heart for the whole world.

“Does it bother you?” Jensen asked.

But before she could answer, she burst into tears, and he had to hold her close until she could speak again.

“It’s the best wedding gift I could imagine,” she finally told him.

They danced for hours, and laughed with their friends and families over memories from a million years ago.

This was Willow's first time catching up with some of these people since she'd left, and it was incredible to see them under these circumstances, and when there was good food and music to enjoy together, and so many great things to catch up on.

"It's like a homecoming party, in a way," Jensen murmured to her at one point.

"I was thinking the same thing," she told him. "Between your parents' big party after Christmas and this, I feel like we've seen just about everyone."

She glanced around and saw that beside them, her old friend Beau Wilson was dancing with Quinn, who looked absolutely radiant. Willow couldn't help noticing the happy smile on her friend's face, or that the formerly shy Quinn hadn't looked nervous or awkward once tonight.

"I told him not to date her," she said quietly to Jensen, feeling a little ashamed about it.

"Oh yeah?" Jensen asked. He looked highly amused.

"Well, I warned him that he'd better not hurt her," she admitted. "Because she's so nice."

"Doesn't look like anyone got hurt to me," Jensen mused with a smile.

"No, I guess I got that one wrong," she said.

"I guess it makes it a little easier to understand where your brother was coming from," he offered. "You've got some of his protective instinct."

"It's been a wild winter," she said, nodding. "For all of us."

"I'm looking forward to spring though," Jensen told her. "And summer and fall and

winter again. I can't wait to do it all with you."

He pulled her close, and as they swayed to the beautiful music, she could see it all in her mind—the two of them planting a flower garden with Henry in the spring, maybe a big trip to the beach in the summertime, picking apples and drinking cider at Cassidy Farm in the fall, and by next Christmas, who knew what other adventures might await the three of them?

One thing was certain. Whatever the future held, they would welcome it all together.

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Thanks for reading Soldier's Christmas Crush!