

She Came to See the Snow

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the Snow

A Colorado Christmas Romance

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Dedication

To my daughter-in-law Kristen Urban, who brings out
the beauty of the Christmas Season!

And grandguys: Cameron and Isaac and our newest
grandchild due this Thanksgiving.

A special thanks to my editor Fay Lamb for her
amazing skill, vision, and attention to detail!

To my heavenly Father, who made this all possible!

1

"Cora, thanks for letting Ashlyn stay here today." Tate Rivers tipped his hat, appreciative of his neighbor's generosity.

The older woman smiled, the edges of her dark eyes crinkling. "Of course, Tate. She's always welcome."

Tate reached down and grabbed his daughter's tiny gloved hand. "OK, sugarbean, tell Miss Cora good-bye. We need to get go..."

The sound of an approaching vehicle caught his attention. An SUV rumbled down the road toward the house, dust and dirt spewing in its wake.

"That's my granddaughter," Cora said. She stepped out of the house and joined them on the porch, letting the screen door slam behind her.

The vehicle rolled to a stop, and the driver's door popped open. A young woman dressed in blue jeans and boots climbed out. She was petite and attractive with long auburn hair swirling about her shoulders. Moving toward them, she wrestled her arms into a black quilted jacket. "Hello there."

"Haley." Cora treaded down the porch steps, her slippers slapping the weathered wood. "I about gave up on you."

The two met on the stone walk and embraced.

"My flight arrived late in Denver, and the rental car company was packed," Haley said.

Ashlyn tugged her hand from Tate's grip, and before he could stop her, she lunged down the steps.

"Ashlyn." Tate followed after her.

She ignored him and scampered along the walk as fast as her three-year-old legs could carry her.

"This is my little neighbor, Ashlyn," Cora explained to her granddaughter as Ashlyn barreled toward them, arms flailing like a baby bird trying to take flight. She reeled to a stop and swung both arms around Haley's leg.

What in the world? "Ashlyn." Tate quickened his pace.

Haley startled a second then broke into laughter. "Well, hello there." She tousled Ashlyn's blonde curls.

At least Cora's granddaughter wasn't offended. Still, Tate had no idea why his shy little girl was clinging to a woman they'd never met. Reaching his daughter, he hunkered down beside her. "Sugarbean, let go of the nice lady."

The blue eyes that met his showed no remorse. "I like Miss Cora's friend."

"I'm sure she's very—"

"I like you, too." Haley bent down to Ashlyn's eye level, breaking the death grip on her leg. "My grandmother told me about a precious little girl who comes to visit with her and Granddad. Would that happen to be you?"

"Uh-huh." Ashlyn's giggle touched Tate's heart. A sound he'd seldom heard...actually hadn't heard in over a month, not since Ashlyn's Nana and Pop left town to help with his sister Amy's kids. Amy was on bed rest with her fourth child, and her husband was serving in Iraq. Tate's sister needed their parents. But the absence of Ashlyn's Nana and Pop made being a

single father harder. Without them here...well, he thanked God for Cora and Ned.

"Ashlyn, let's get you out of the cold." Cora picked her up. "In fact, we all best get inside."

Standing upright, Tate brushed dirt from his gloves. "Cora, thanks again. I need to get Ashlyn home."

Cora shifted Ashlyn on her hip. "OK. I'll put this little cherub in her car seat for you."

"Bye, Miss Cora's friend." Ashlyn waved all the way to the truck.

Northern winds had been gusting all day, and with evening creeping in, the chill intensified. But as Haley smiled and waved to his daughter, Tate barely noticed the cold.

"She's adorable." Haley shifted her attention to him. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Haley Blackwell, Cora and Ned's granddaughter."

"Tate Rivers." Tate removed his glove and extended his hand. "Sorry. My daughter isn't usually so friendly."

"Then I feel privileged." Haley grasped his hand. A smile punched dimples in her rosy cheeks.

Beautiful and gracious. A rare combination.

He blinked. Great attributes but the last thing he needed was another female in his life. His last relationship cured him of that. Broken dreams. Tattered heart. He had no intention of making that mistake again.

Besides, he'd yet to figure the little girl in the car seat.

"I appreciate your understanding." Tate smiled. "Welcome to Fairplay."

"Thank you. It's been a while since I've been

here." Haley paused to glance around. "Soaring mountains, fresh air, lush evergreens. It's as beautiful as I remember, except there's no snow."

Tate snickered. "You and the ski resorts. The rest of us aren't complaining."

Her dark eyes rounded. "Colorado. Snow. Christmas time. They just go together."

Which reminded him, he and Ashlyn needed to set up a tree. "Christmas will be Christmas even without snow. Although, it might be a first around here."

Haley chuckled. "Thanks for the encouragement. I think."

"You're welcome." He grinned. He couldn't help it. "Well, I better go." He tipped his hat and headed to his truck. He oozed out a slow breath. Haley was a beauty with no ring on her finger.

He hated that he'd even looked.

Haley paused, letting her pulse decelerate as Tate walked away. The little girl was too cute, and her father—

She took a well-needed breath.

Her grandparents had spoken about their neighbors, a computer engineer single dad and his preschool-age daughter. An image had formed in Haley's mind of an older man, serious, subdued—the suit-and-tie type. Not an upper twenties male, rugged, handsome, and wearing a cowboy hat.

Haley bit the corner of her lip. The way he interacted with his daughter, sweet as sugary molasses. Dangerously attractive. Good thing she'd only be in town a week.

Darkness descended over the mountain, settling like a blanket upon the valley. Haley spun on her heel, letting her gaze travel and reveling in the crimson painted sky that haloed the white capped peaks. God couldn't have created a more perfect location for her to celebrate Christmas.

A time to celebrate and a chance to rest. To read. To breathe.

A reprieve from the busyness of life. No deadlines to worry about. No middle-of-the-night phone calls dragging her out of bed for a breaking story. No last minute requests from Sam, her editor.

Behind her, a porch light flickered on. "Haley."

Haley turned, almost embarrassed by her musing.

"It's cold out there, dear. Come in. Granddad will get your bags after supper."

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Haley headed toward the house. The spicy scent of barbeque drifted out to greet her. Good food, family, and Christmas. What could be better?

Snow.

She said a little prayer.

2

Haley turned in early for the evening. She'd worried her job at the Daily News would stay with her, but even upcoming deadlines couldn't rally her brain to stay awake, no more than the newest novel she'd brought with her to read. Quickly, she drifted off to sleep.

When she woke the next morning the book was draped across her chest. She glanced at the bedside clock. *Eight*. She couldn't recall the last time she'd slept so long or so late.

Clambering to her feet, she yawned and stretched.

A touch of chill hovered in the air sending a shiver tingling across her skin. She pulled a throw around her shoulders. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and soaked up the warmth.

Memories swirled then: Christmases past when she and her family traveled eleven hours from Fort Worth to spend the holidays with her grandparents. Her sister, Beth, had shared this tiny room with her. Each morning, bundled in a quilt, they would sit beside the window and peer at the snow-dusted landscape. The stories they created about skittering squirrels, cottontail bunnies, and families of deer had to be what inspired her to write.

She chuckled and tugged the woolen throw tighter.

Those were the best times. Life had been simple,

their family intact—before her father left.

Daddy. She scrunched eyes against the unwelcome memories, even the sweetest recollections hurt like unhealed scars.

But too late, her mind already tumbled back.

Her father had been her hero. He'd been doting, playful, and witty when she was young. But as she grew older, depression and anger became his norm. She could still hear the heated arguments between her parents. Arguments that had driven Haley and her sister to find refuge in their bedroom closet until the yelling ceased.

Though he'd never been physically violent, he constantly prodded and criticized, instigating a spirit of hostility and oppression in their home. And when his anger flared, the names he called her mother, Haley would never forget.

But the good days, when her father treated her and her family with care and respect, kept Haley's hopes up.

Delusional thoughts as it turned out.

She sighed, recalling that horrific day, when she was fourteen. Five days before Christmas. The day her childhood imploded. The day her father packed up and stormed out of the house.

She'd begged her mother to stop him, but Mom just sobbed. "I can't. He has another woman," she'd said.

Haley's world crumbled further when she learned this wasn't the first affair. Her father had been unfaithful most of his marriage to her mother.

For years around Christmas time, Haley would naïvely pray for her father to return. That they would be a family again.

It never happened.

With a shiver, Haley snapped back to the present. She tugged the blanket tighter.

Crazy. It had been forever ago. Her mother had remarried and moved on. Her sister was also married. Beth and her husband had a baby on the way. Things had turned out OK—at least for them.

Still, Christmas had never been the same.

Haley leveled her breathing, tried to still her emotions. This year would be different. She would celebrate her Savior's birth in Fairplay, Colorado, with her grandparents. Even without a special man in her life, she vowed to enjoy herself.

Besides, she had dreams, goals, faraway places to explore and see. God had a plan for her life. She didn't need a man around to distract her.

Breathing easier, she went to the window and flicked aside the curtain. She squinted against the morning sun. A clear day. No signs of snow.

She sighed. It had to snow.

Turning around, she rested against the windowsill. The bedroom door creaked open. Her grandparents' cat slunk in and jumped onto the bed. Haley smiled. All these years and that doorknob still didn't latch.

"Good morning, Pearly Cat."

Pearly flicked her tail and stretched a paw, her claw snagging onto the down comforter.

Sinking onto the edge of the bed, Haley gathered the furry Persian in her arms, nestling it to her chest. Pearly purred. Haley had forgotten how snuggly cats could be. That's what she needed, a nice little pet—

She cut those thoughts off with a jerk. When would she have time for a pet?

The truth: what she needed was a life. Something more than work and, well, more work.

A savory aroma filtered into the room, and Haley perked up. If tradition held, her grandparents had risen at dawn and were on their third cup of coffee by now. And breakfast was cooking.

Breakfast. Haley's stomach rumbled urging her out of the bundled warmth. She set Pearly back on the bed and shed the blanket. After dressing quickly, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen.

"Daddy, I want panny-cakes." Ashlyn puckered her little lips, crossed her arms, and thumped back against the chair.

"Be careful, sugarbean. Don't slip off your booster seat." Tate plopped a toaster pastry onto a plate and cut it into pieces. "We can have pancakes on Christmas. How about that?"

"No. I want panny-cakes now."

"Well, darlin', you can't always have what you want." Nobody knew that better than Tate. At twenty-nine he was running a business from home, trying to keep up a house and a five-acre parcel, and raise a daughter. None of which he was mastering. Nope, not the way he'd planned his life to go.

Difficult as it was, he was grateful. Thanks to the Lord, he was still treading water. He hadn't sunk yet. Although some days he felt close.

He set the plate in front of his daughter. "Eat up and finish your milk. You need to get to preschool."

Ashlyn picked up a piece and popped it in her mouth without complaint.

Tate shook his head.

"I go to Miss Cora's today, huh, Daddy?" Ashlyn said around a mouthful of pastry.

"Not today. Miss Cora has company. After school we'll come home. I'll have a surprise for you."

"No." Ashlyn whined, scrunching her face tight before taking a sip of milk.

Tate bit his lip, debating whether to laugh or groan. For someone so little and cute she sure was strong minded.

He gave in to laughter. He didn't have to look far for the culprit. She was her daddy's girl.

He shook his head and finished packing her backpack. Every day, new respect grew for his parents.

"Miss Cora and me made cookies. I forgot to bring some home." Ashlyn's fork clinked onto her empty plate. She puckered her lips.

A twinge of guilt tightened Tate's shoulders. His memory whirled back more than twenty years to the kitchen of his childhood home where the sweet scent of fresh baked cookies lingered in the air. For hours he and his sister slathered gobs of sticky frosting on baked goods, his dad joining in the fun, nibbling as he went, licking sugary icing off his fingers.

Family memories. That's what he wanted for his daughter.

"We'll decorate cookies before Christmas." Frozen dough, canned icing. Couldn't be too difficult. Not homemade, but he was trying.

"K." Ashlyn beamed.

His heart warmed. Maybe he was getting the hang of this single dad thing.

"OK, sugarbean. Let's get going." He cleaned her face and hands with a washcloth then wrestled her into

her coat.

“Miss Cora and her friend can make cookies, too, Daddy.”

“We’ll have to see.” He tugged on her gloves.

“I like Miss Cora’s friend.”

Tate smiled. “She’s nice, all right.”

“Her purtty, too.”

“Yes, her sure is.” Tate laughed. “I mean, yes, she is.” Attractive. Dark eyes. Great smile. Wavy chestnut hair.

He picked up his daughter, slung her backpack over his shoulder, and made his way out the door. “Let’s get you to school.”

Enough about Haley. He had plenty else to think about. Christmas included.

3

“OK. I’ll see you guys in an hour or so.” Haley dropped a kiss on her grandfather’s cheek then moved around the table to give her grandmother a hug.

“There’s bottled water in the fridge.” Her grandfather set down his coffee cup with a clink and scooted back his chair.

“No, no. Don’t get up. I’m fine. I won’t need water.” Haley pulled her coat from the back of a chair and slipped it on.

“You don’t have a scarf?” her grandmother muttered.

Even as Haley opened her mouth to say her turtleneck would suffice, Gram was out of the kitchen and down the hallway. A moment later she returned, a wool wrap in her hand. “Here, wear this.”

“It’s not really that cold, but thank you.” Haley looped the scarf around her neck twice. She moved to the door and reached for the knob.

“What about gloves?” Gram asked.

Digging into her pockets, Haley pulled out two. “Right here.”

She had everything necessary for a short walk. Loosening her scarf a bit, she chuckled. She’d always be a middle schooler in her grandparents’ eyes.

The first order of the day was to hike to the east edge of the property where a winding trail led to a granite peak that overlooked a forested valley. Each

year she and Beth used to trudge the narrow path, kicking up snow and singing Christmas carols, all the while hoping to cross paths with a wayward elk or bear cub.

Their off-key rendition took care of that prospect. Critter repellent as their granddad used to say.

Smiling at the memories, Haley curled the fingers of one hand in her pocket and gripped a walking stick with the other. She sauntered along the trail, twigs and needles crackling beneath her boots. The air was cool but refreshing, and waterfalls roared in the distance.

She pressed on, brushing past spruce trees and wispy pines, the hike longer than she remembered. Just when she wondered if she'd taken a wrong turn, the crest of the hill came into view.

She sprinted the last little bit, reaching the peak out of breath. She plunked down on a log and dropped her walking stick at her feet. With elbows propped on her knees, she cupped her chin in her hand and soaked up the view. Mighty rocks, cascading streams, and a sprinkle of rustic cabins nestled within the rich aspen forest. Picture perfect.

She took a breath and released it as a sigh.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" A man's voice sliced through the silence around her.

Startled, Haley grabbed her stick and jumped to her feet thrusting it in front of her like a samurai sword. "Who's there?" She squinted, looking left then right.

"It's just me, Tate Rivers." The rumbling timbre of his chuckle made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle.

"Tate?" She hesitated then glanced over her shoulder at the man standing beneath a ponderosa

pine, his hands raised, feigning defeat.

"I come in peace, ma'am." His crystal blue eyes twinkled.

Haley twisted to face him. She blew out a breath, willing her heart rate to slow. But with those blue eyes fastened on her—not happening. "You scared me."

"Sorry, not my intention." He shrugged then grinned. "Nice weapon."

Haley glanced at her *weapon* now pointing at him. "Walking stick." She smiled.

One of his dark brows hooked upward.

She relaxed and softened her stance, lowering the stick to the ground. "See."

He laughed, showing lovely, even white teeth. "I feel safe now. Thank you."

While a flush of heat warmed her cheeks, she laughed, too.

Tate grabbed his axe and walked toward her. "It is a nice view. Have you been here before?"

She shook hair from her face and looked off somewhere in the distance. "Not since I was a young teen."

"Well, then I guess it wasn't too long ago."

Haley pulled her gaze back. Her eyes rounded and she broke into a grin. "I'm twenty-seven, thank you."

Closer to his age than he thought. A fact that shouldn't matter, but did. "A compliment, I assure you."

"Something I'll appreciate in the future. Looking younger these days gets me nowhere. When I show up to interview someone, I get a raised eyebrow and

twenty questions about my credentials.”

“Interview?”

“I’m a journalist.”

“Really? What do you write?”

Haley gave a throaty chuckle. “Whatever rolls across my editor Sam’s desk. Cat stories, restaurant break-ins, the crisis in the Middle East.” She shrugged. “Every day is a new adventure.”

“You sound important.”

“More like crazy.” She shook her head, a single lock of auburn hair spilling across her forehead. “I work for an understaffed newspaper. This is my first vacation in three years.”

“Understood.” Tate nodded slowly, his gaze lingering on the dangling curl. Silky and rippling in the breeze. He had to thrust his hand into his pocket to keep from brushing it aside.

He blinked. *Focus*. He blew out a breath and pushed his thoughts back on track. “That’s why I gave up life in the big city, moved closer to family, and started my own business after Ashlyn was born. I still work hard and had to sacrifice a few bucks, but I’m enjoying life.”

Haley’s jaw dropped a notch.

Apparently not what she wanted to hear. Tate grimaced. Open mouth insert foot. One of his specialties. “Actually...” he started to amend the statement, but Haley took over.

“I’ve been struggling with that exact dilemma.”

To his surprise, a smile flickered over her features.

“Really? And, what’s your solution?”

“I’m not quite there yet.”

A suggestion to ditch the job and move to Fairplay quivered on his tongue, but he swallowed it. Not his