Will love thaw her heart before it’s too late?

Once Upon a Snow Storm

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Heat sparked Callie Olson’s cheeks. Her breath stuck in her chest. What was Gary doing back in town?

Her hands trembled as she folded the bolt of red flannel. His footfalls echoed across the roughhewn boards of the mercantile. Clumps of snow fell from his boots. Dirty ice chunks melted at his feet. *I know how they feel.*

She wrapped the material in brown paper. The twine scraped the raw end of her finger. She winced. She’d pay more attention when peeling apples for pie after Sunday supper.

“I’ll have just enough time to finish Julia’s nightgown before Christmas.” Mrs. Perkins tucked the package under her large coat.

“Julia is very fond of red. I saw her admiring the new shipment of fabric last week.” Callie peeked over the woman’s shoulder. Gary’s blue-eyed gaze snared her.

“We’re so lucky to have a sensible girl minding the counter. I know you won’t forget and let Christmas surprises slip.”

Isaac Baxter stepped in from the store room. “We are lucky. Mr. Perry couldn’t find a better clerk.”

Isaac’s praise colored Callie’s cheeks. The few times she’d heard him speak, he’d never wasted words. She snuck a gaze through her lashes. His broad shoulders filled out his flannel work shirt.
Callie tore her gaze from Isaac and Gary. Her pulse thumped. She offered Mrs. Perkins a weak smile. “Confidentiality is something we pride ourselves on here at Perry’s Mercantile.”

“A wonderful quality in a business and a young lady.” Mrs. Perkins nodded at her. The door swung shut behind her.

She swept her gaze through the store. Where were all the holiday shoppers?

“You have many wonderful qualities, Callie. Your being able to keep a confidence is only one of them.” Gary’s voice slid around her, warming her like a sip of hot cocoa on a frosty morning. “Mr. Baxter.” Gary gestured Isaac towards the counter. “I’ll wait.”

Isaac’s brows dipped into frown. He turned his back on Gary and focused on Callie. “Let Mr. Perry know the rocking chairs and side table he ordered are in the back room”

“Thank you for carrying them in.” Callie noted the bits of shavings on the cuff of Isaac’s coat. She inhaled the sharp clean cedar scent. “You make the finest furniture around. The rose you carved into the last table, it was beautiful.”

Isaac studied her face. Did she have a dusting of sugar on her nose from restocking that afternoon? “If I ever open a tea room, I’d love to have it furnished with an entire set of matching chairs and tables in the rose design,” Callie said.

“Once the tracks get laid all the way up here for the train, we’ll get more visitors.”

Callie searched Isaac’s face. Was he merely placating her? “You don’t think it’s a silly idea?”

“I don’t think there’s anything silly about a subject that makes your face light up.” Isaac glanced down at the gloves clutched in his hands. “Speaking of lighting up, will you be attending the Christmas Ball?”
Callie’s mouth went dry. Was Isaac asking her? Gary scowled. After all he’d put her through, he had no right to glower.

“Are you asking me to the Ball?”

Isaac met her gaze. “Will you go to the Christmas Ball with me?”

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Last time she’d opened her heart, the man had left muddy tracks all over it. The stains had faded, but weren’t completely gone.

Both men stared at her. Heat flushed her skin. She wiped her sweaty palms on her apron front. “I don’t know.”

Isaac’s eyes dimmed. His gaze sliced towards Gary. “When you make up your mind, you let me know. I’ve got one more delivery to make before night fall, unless you need anything.”

“Thank you, Isaac, I’m fine. Mr. Perry is always delighted with your wood work.”

Isaac settled his hat on his head. “Good afternoon, Callie.”

She watched him duck beneath the bell over the front door on his way out. Part of her wanted to call him back.

Gary stepped up to the counter.

Her fingers curled into a small fist beneath the counter. “When did you return to town?”

Gary smiled. “Have you been watching for me?”

Callie crossed her arms. “Why would I have any call to do that Gary Meed?” Weren’t you though?

Gary’s smile faltered. “Knowing you were here, remembering your sweet smile, it mattered more than you know, Callie.”

A lump formed in her throat. “You’ve been gone over a year Gary. You never wrote me a single letter, so how would I have known that?”
Gary dropped his gaze to the floor. “Thought you could tell it from when we danced at last year’s Christmas Ball.” He lifted his head. “I remember the way you fit perfectly into my arms.”

She jerked her chin into the air. He had no right to remind her of that night. She’d foolishly believed all the sweet nothings he’d whispered into her ear. Thought he’d meant the promise of a wedding this Christmas. _Next year I’ll kiss my wife beneath the mistletoe._ His false promise echoed in her heart.

Callie shoved Gary’s words from her mind.

“I remember the way I felt when I found out you’d moved without a word.” Her chest felt like the loosing rooster in a chicken fight.

Gary leaned across the counter. The musk of his cologne twisted around her. His warm breath brushed her cheek. “You were one of the best things I ever had, Callie. I shouldn’t have left you like that. But I knew if I saw you again, I wouldn’t be able to leave.”

Her lungs burned. His words threatened to break through her resolve to forget him. _Jesus help me. Part of me wants to believe him._

“But you did, Gary. You left and I can’t just forget.”

“You always told me to look to the future, Callie. To forget the things from my past that would hold me back.”

Her throat tightened. “That’s not fair.”

Gary lifted his hand to cup her face.

She yanked back.

His hand hung in the air. “Guess you’re still mad.”

She slid her feet against the floor, putting more distance between them. “How long will you be back in town?”
Gary slid his hand into his trouser pocket. “Depends on if I have a reason to stay.”

“You shouldn’t decide your life by other’s actions.” Her toes curled inside her shoes. “You should decide for yourself.”

The bell above the door jingled. A group of school girls giggled and tripped through the door. Gary flashed them a dimpled smile and the girls blushed.

She had still been in school the first time she’d seen Gary. Seemed she’d aged more than two years since then.

Gary leaned over the counter. His lips hovered next to her ear. “I’ll see you soon, Callie.”

He tipped his head to the girls and vanished through the door.

Her knees wobbled. She dragged in a deep breath. The scent of peppermint from the jar on the counter cleansed her foggy thoughts. Lord, don’t let him stay. I don’t know if I can resist him forever.

A steady trickle of shoppers kept her hopping the rest of the afternoon. She glanced at the clock on the shelf behind her. Four thirty. Mr. Perry should be arriving any moment to relieve her.

Her gaze shifted towards the window. She stilled. A thick layer of white, like Momma’s heavenly frosting on chocolate cake, covered the town. Large flakes, big enough to see in the dwindling light, pelted toward the ground.

She wrapped her arms around her middle. It would be a cold and long walk home. A lonely walk.

Callie squared her shoulders. Since when was she afraid of being alone? Jesus was always with her. She’d reminded her little sister Sarah of that last night when she’d been frightened of the dark in their cabin.
The bell shrieked above the front door. Mr. Perry’s long frame stumbled in with a frigid blast of air. He stomped his feet. “You’d best bundle up good before you head home, Callie. Temperature dropped considerably in the minutes it took me to get here. There’s almost a solid sheet of ice beneath the snow. Is there anyone you can stay the night with in town?”

Callie shook her head. She needed to be as far away from Gary as possible. “I’ve walked that road ever since I was a little girl. I’ll be all right.” She glanced down at her shoes. Why hadn’t she brought her boots today?

Thick wool cradled her ears. Winding the ends of her scarf around her neck, she tucked them under her collar. She buttoned her coat tightly.

“Take your time coming in tomorrow, Callie. I’d rather have you here safe than in a hurry.” Mr. Perry blinked behind his fogged glasses.

“Thanks, Mr. Perry.” She tugged open the door. Cold air seared her lungs.

Large snowflakes bit her exposed nose. Her mitten clad hands nestled deep in the corner of her coat pockets. She stepped off the wooden sidewalk.

Her left foot slipped. She banged her hip against the hitching post. Heat shot down her leg.

Tears smarted and she blinked them away, rubbing her hip. At least she hadn’t fallen.

Callie squared her chin and with a tad more caution, followed the white road towards home. Soon the scattered roof line of town disappeared in the swirling snow. Naked tree branches bowed under the weight of their snowy burden. Her normally green world glittered in icy splendor. *Is this what the earth looked like on the first snowfall, Jesus?*

Silence assaulted her ears. Cold snaked inside her hood. She tucked her chin closer to chest, trying to duck beneath the wind.
Darkness sprang from the forest, gripping the last of daylight. Snow muffled her footsteps. Callie twisted her head around, but her hood hid the view. She couldn’t hear anything with the howling wind.

Bites of snow slapped her face. She squinted. Why hadn’t she thought to bring a lantern? The snowstorm blocked the meager mid-winter light. Her feet ached from the cold. She tried to wiggle her toes inside her shoes.

*Two more miles.* She imagined the crackle of the fire and a steaming mug of tea. Even with her eyes closed, she knew the way home.

Callie’s teeth knocked together. She clenched her jaw. It didn’t do any good. The chattering of her teeth echoed through her head. The snowflakes blurred together, a fuzzy curtain enveloping her. She blinked.

Forcing one foot in front of the other, she stumbled forward. The road stretched longer than Momma’s homemade taffy. She tried to blow on her hands through her gloves, but the frigid air stole her breath the instant she opened her mouth.

Something loomed in the shadows. She froze.

A horse emerged from the swirling snow. Wagon wheels creaked against the frozen ground. The wagon halted.

She stared at the driver, trying to make her sluggish mind work.

“Would you like a ride home?” Isaac Baxter’s deep voice reached through her foggy thoughts.

“Please.” Callie forced her stiff legs towards the wagon. She lifted her shoe onto the spoke. Her leg slipped off the wheel.
Strong arms wrapped around her. She hadn’t heard Isaac climb down from the wagon. “Can you hear me, Callie?”

She nodded against the rough wool of his jacket. Had he picked her up? She couldn’t feel whether her feet still touched the ground.

Her eyes drifted closed.

Something sharp pinched her arm. “Wake up.” Isaac’s dark brown eyes, glowing in the lantern light, stared at her. “I know your father raised you with more fight than that. You stay awake, Callie Olson.”

“Didn’t your father tell you it’s not polite to pinch people?”

A small smile moved Isaac’s mouth. “You stay alert for a few more minutes. I’ve got a hot fire at my place.”

The hard wagon bench pressed against her backside. She locked her legs against the footboard as Isaac sprang into the seat. Her gaze followed the swing of the lantern. Isaac’s square jaw gleamed in the dim glow.

She bumped against his side, thankful his broad shoulders helped block the shrieking wind. Her head bobbed.

“Stay with me, Callie.”

She yanked her head up. His voice vibrated against her cheek. Had they already made it to her house?

Warm air soothed her throat. She forced her eyelids open. A single candle flickered in the window of a small front room.

*Thud.* Isaac kicked the door closed with his boot.
Thick log walls muffled all but the strongest gusts of wind. Isaac gently lowered her to a rocking chair near the wood stove. He tucked the ends of a worn quilt around her. “I’ll have the coffee perking in a jiffy.”

She shivered beneath the patchwork quilt. The clean sharp scent of cedar helped clear her head.

Isaac opened the draft on the wood stove. Coals glowed red and with sure movements, he stacked logs on top of one another. Flames licked the dry fire wood, crackling with eager tongues.

Her gaze followed the light spilling from the open stove. A braided rag rug blocked cold air from seeping in under the front door. Beneath the main window a sturdy table held a thick open book and large oiled wooden bowl. *What kind of books did Isaac read?*

Callie couldn’t remember her father ever reading a book. Even on Sunday mornings he listened to the pastor instead of finding the passage himself.

Isaac bent over her feet. Ice crystals melted in the ends of his dark hair, winking at her in the fire light. “You need to get your boots off.” She leaned forward.

Isaac lifted his gaze to meet hers. “Let me help you, Callie.”

She leaned back into the folds of the quilt. Numb as her limbs were, her cheeks flushed at the feel of his fingers against her ankle. *Plop.* One shoe hit the floor.

“Your stockings are soaked.” His hand brushed her calf muscle as he tugged down her stocking. “Don’t you have a pair of boots?”

“It was sunny when I left home this morning. I didn’t think a storm would blow in so fast.”

Isaac slapped her wet socks over the edge of the wood box. “You should have stayed in town until it passed.”
Callie stared at his wide palms against the too-white flesh of her foot. Her throat tightened.

“It’s safer for me at home right now.”

“A place isn’t safer if you have to risk your life to reach it.” Isaac studied her face. His features softened. “This is going to hurt.” He briskly rubbed her feet and calves.

Sharp hot stings pricked her skin. Her breath caught. Tears burned her eyes. She blinked.

Isaac’s swift hands never stopped. “I’d never hurt you thoughtlessly.”

Callie clenched her jaw. Gary’s words, empty promises, echoed through her heart. She raised her gaze to meet Isaac’s. Fiery darts zinged up her leg. “It hurts.”

“Which means you haven’t lost the ability to feel.” His fingers slowed. “And that means you can heal.” Isaac dropped his hands from her feet. “I’ll get you a pair of my socks.”

He ducked into a darkened door off the side of the living room. Callie stretched her fingers.

Heavy throbbing shot through her joints.

A pair of wool socks in hand, Isaac’s long stride ate up the distance. He squatted down.

“I can do it.”

He handed her the socks.

She pulled the thick wool over her ankles. They stretched almost clear up to her knees.

“Guess they’re a little big.”

She smiled. “Better than too small.”

Isaac pulled two enamel mugs down from a shelf above the sink. Steam swirled above the coffee pot spout. “Can you hold the mug without spilling it?”

“I think so.”
Isaac waited until she had both hands wrapped around the mug. “I’ve got it.” Warmth spread into her hands, making her fingers ache. Her body shuddered with another shiver. The surface of the dark liquid rippled.

“I’m going to move the horse out of the storm. I want to make sure you’re completely warmed up before I take you the rest of the way home.” Isaac pulled a hat and gloves from a small basket next to the door. “You’re safe here.”

Callie stared at the door after he left. She’d known Isaac Baxter her entire life. The look in his green eyes made her feel more than safe.

Safety was something she wanted, but it wouldn’t be enough. She needed more from a man than just protection. As much as her heart wanted to run from Gary, she wouldn’t let it be an excuse to hide in safety.

She took a cautious sip of the steaming coffee. Hot liquid trailed down her throat and spread in her stomach. Her gaze traveled around the snug cabin. The lone candle illuminated the dark pressing against the panes. Curtains would help cheer up the window and block the cold, maybe some of the sunny yellow cotton they’d gotten in last week.

With pointed toes, she tested her feet. Instead of sharp pain, tingles pranced along the skin. Isaac’s thick wool socks itched. She welcomed the sensation. No frost bite.

She drew the quilt tighter around her. What would have happened if Isaac hadn’t happened along on her when he did?

The door opened. Bits of snow dashed inside. Isaac shoved the door closed. “Can’t say I remember the temperature dropping this fast before. I had to break the ice on the water bucket for Clarence.”
Isaac held his hands out in front of the fire. “I’ve got some soup beans I can heat up for supper. Are you hungry?”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you any more than I have.”

Isaac lowered his hands. “Any man who doesn’t want to be inconvenienced by you, Callie Olson, is a fool.” The flames reflected in his eyes. “And the one thing my daddy didn’t raise was a fool.”

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

Glass clinked in the kitchen. She stole a look. Isaac emptied a Mason jar full of beans into a small pot. His damp coat brushed her hand when he walked by and set it on the stove top.

“You’d better get that wet coat off. I don’t want you to catch a chill.”

Isaac tossed her a grin. “Glad to see you’re learning from your mistakes. Though I don’t mind giving you a ride home, I sure wouldn’t want to make a habit of rescuing you half frozen the rest of my life.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You do make assumptions Mr. Baxter.”

Isaac’s grin flattened. “Assumptions and hopes can often be intertwined.”

“Was that your assumption or hope talking then?”

He shrugged out of his coat. Taking his time, he hung it on a hook beside the door. “I’m not one to pry into other people’s business. You haven’t been ready for hopes or assumptions since last Christmas. But I thought perhaps enough time had passed.” Isaac’s gaze studied the fireplace. “If I was wrong, my apologies, Callie. I’ll get you some supper and delivered back home.”

Callie watched him tuck another log in the stove. Tension filled the line of his shoulders. The urge to reach out and lay her hand on his back made her grip the mug.
She had prayed for God to deliver her from Gary. Was Isaac His answer?

With a hot pad, Isaac moved the coffee pot to the back of the stove. He brought in two bowls and half a pan of cornbread. “I have honey or a jar of my mother’s blackberry preserves.”

“Honey, please.”

Isaac fetched the jar of honey. He slathered a thick layer of the golden syrup onto a large chunk of cornbread. She accepted the cornbread. Silence stretched between them.

When steam rose from the beans, Isaac spooned two bowlfuls. He handed her one, turned a large piece of firewood on end, and sat across from her.

He bowed his head. “Dear Jesus, we thank You for this food. Thank You for sparing Callie from the storm. We pray for Your hand to stay upon us and for her safe return home. Help us to trust You, no matter what the horizon holds. In Jesus name, Amen.”

Callie stared at her bowl of beans. Suddenly, the thought of Isaac dropping her off at home and driving away for good made her throat stick. She didn’t want a horizon to hold a man who broke his promises. Isaac’s and his words weren’t flashy, but she’d had enough glitter in her life.

“Isaac.”

He raised his eyes to meet her gaze.

“I’m ready for hope in my life.”

His spoon lowered to his beans. “Don’t say things just because you think it’s what the other person wants to hear.”

She leaned forward and laid her hand upon his forearm. “I may not always say things you want to hear, but I will never say something if it’s not how I feel.”

Heat from his shirtsleeve warmed her fingers.

“Then I’d say we have a future filled with hope.”
She sat back in the rocking chair. “I may have to forget my boots at home more often.”

Isaac grinned. “I’ll just have to fetch them before I come looking for you.”

Callie’s lungs swelled inside her chest. “I’ll make sure to always stay on the road where you can find me. And I’ve made up my mind about the Christmas Ball. There is no one I’d rather be there with than you.”

“The fiddle players better be rested up, because once I have you in my arms, Callie, I don’t ever plan on letting go.”
I hope you enjoyed Callie and Isaac’s story as much as I did. Callie’s mother’s Chocolate Mayo Cake and Heavenly Frosting is my own great-grandmother’s recipe. It’s included in my book, *Pioneering Today-Faith and Home the Old Fashioned Way*. If you’d like to read the first chapter you can find it at [www.melissaknorris.com/books](http://www.melissaknorris.com/books).

Historical fiction and non-fiction are my favorite genres to read, starting from childhood when I discovered *The Little House on the Prairie* series. I offer free Pioneering Today articles on my blog every Wednesday that bring the best of the pioneer lifestyle into our modern one. You can sign up to receive new blog posts on my website [www.melissaknorris.com](http://www.melissaknorris.com).

Make sure you take your boots when you go out in the snow, unless you have an Isaac of your own.

Blessings,

Melissa