

**SNOW
IN
LOVE**

FOUR STORIES

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POINT➔

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A sleepy Christmas song played on the speakers overhead as I finally stepped up to the next available rental car clerk. She didn't even try to put a friendly smile on her face. I supposed a day like today would take the customer service out of anyone.

"Hi," I said. "My flight was canceled. I need to rent a car."

"Credit card and ID, please."

I pulled out my license and slid it across the counter. "I don't have a credit card."

Well, technically I did. My parents had given me an emergency credit card but I knew if I used it now, a purchase text would flash on my mom's cell phone screen. It would say something like: *Amalie is in Denver when she should be in Italy—you know, that place she begged to go for an exchange year? The place you paid for her to go? The place she ran away from after four months instead of the scheduled nine because apparently she's not as strong as she thought?*

"Doesn't the airline pay for my rental since they canceled my flight?" I asked the clerk.

She laughed, but when she realized I was serious, she added sadly, “Oh, honey, no. They don’t, not when it’s weather related.” She picked up my license and showed it to me as if I didn’t know what was on it. “But you can’t rent a car. You’re only seventeen.”

“Right . . . so I take it the airline won’t pay for a hotel either.” I had exactly nineteen dollars left after buying my plane ticket with the earnings from a side job I wasn’t supposed to have. I could feel the rolled-up wad of cash in my pocket, digging into my thigh as if mocking me about how little it would buy.

“Next!” the lady called over my head and then handed me back my license. “Good luck.”

Tears stung the back of my eyes as I gathered my things and walked away from the counter. Bing Crosby crooned overhead about snow and mistletoe, and for some reason that made me want to cry more. I had been in an airport or on a plane for the last sixteen hours. Denver was my second layover; I was only supposed to be here for forty-five minutes. Now, with the snowstorm, I’d already been here three times that long, and counting.

I tucked my wallet into my backpack and slung the bag onto my shoulder. I’d checked my suitcase back in Milan, and it now sat on a plane, apparently unable to be removed before the plane reached its destination. Hopefully, the weather would soon clear, and my suitcase and I would both fly that plane home to California.

I found an empty spot against the wall and slid down it until I sat on the floor. Would I be allowed to sleep in this rental car place? I pulled out my phone and stared at the screen. For the

millionth time, I thought about texting my mom. But I wasn't desperate enough yet. A text message wasn't going to be how I told my mom I'd left the program in Milan early. I needed to show up on her doorstep in person and explain things. The magic of Christmas would save me from her wrath. She loved Christmas.

"Hey, I think I know you," a voice said above me. The statement surprised me, because I knew nobody in Denver, Colorado.

I looked up to see Sawyer Harris: my high school's senior class president, and winner of last year's best smile award. He was staring at me, proving why he had absolutely deserved that award.

"Hey," I managed after too long of a pause. "What are you doing here?"

"You know, just hanging out," he said, his eyes sparkling with humor.

"Right, you're stuck too." *Just put your foot in your mouth, Amalie, and wait for your brain to reinhabit your skull.* I wasn't even sure why I was acting so starstruck. I had never had a crush on Sawyer, unlike half the girls at school. Sure, he was cute and seemed nice, but he was completely out of my circle and I didn't have the desire to change that.

He nodded. "The weather was great for snowboarding, not so great for leaving. You heading home for Christmas?"

"Yep. Yes."

"You went somewhere for an exchange year or something, right?"

"How do you know that?" I blurted.

He flashed me the famous smile again. “Not too many people venture quite so far.”

It didn’t really answer my question, but I accepted it. “Yes . . . I ventured. Now I’m trying to get home. So, snowboarding? Here in Colorado? Or is this your layover?” *There, finally some understandable words.*

He pointed over his shoulder to nobody in particular. “Yeah, me and some friends were here snowboarding. You probably remember them from school. Logan Thompson and Wes Chan. Oh, and my older sister, Heather.”

I started to nod. I did remember Logan . . . sort of. Then I shook my head with a laugh. “Not really. Sorry. We were in completely different friend pools. I’m actually surprised you remember *me*.” Finally, my brain was all the way back. No more stumbling stupidly over words. I blamed it on being tired and frustrated. I would blame this day for everything if I needed to. It was completely ruining my life right now.

“Of course I remember you. Your voice is like . . .” He trailed off.

“A car without a muffler? Heraldng angels? Your sentence could’ve gone either way.”

He laughed. “Sorry. It sounded cheesy in my head.”

A guy with spiky black hair and brown eyes came up behind Sawyer. “S . . . U . . . V,” the guy said, slapping Sawyer on the back with each letter. “With four-wheel drive. Let’s do this thing.”

Sawyer nodded down at me. “Wes, you remember . . .”

“Amalie,” I finished for him. So Sawyer didn’t remember me as well as he claimed.

“Amalie,” Sawyer said. “I was getting there.”

Right. I nodded a “hi” up at Wes. At this point I felt like it was too late to stand but my neck was starting to ache.

Wes shook his head. “Don’t remember you at all.”

“Don’t feel bad,” I said even though it was obvious he didn’t. “I don’t remember you either.”

“No?” Sawyer said to Wes. “She goes to high school with us.”

“Well, not this year,” I said. Although I was about to change that. I wanted to finish out senior year back home.

Sawyer added, “You’d remember her if she sang.”

“If she sang?” Wes frowned.

“I’m not going to sing,” I said, seeing exactly where this conversation was headed.

“Fine. But her voice is like . . .”

After several seconds I said, “One day you might finish that sentence.”

Sawyer laughed.

A tall and lanky guy with a crop of bright blond hair walked up, joining our group. “Let’s go,” he said to Sawyer and Wes. “We have a vehicle.”

“Logan, this is Amalie,” Sawyer said.

Logan nodded down to me.

“How did you guys get a car?” I asked. “The lady wouldn’t rent me one.”

“My sister,” Sawyer explained. “She’s twenty-one.”

“Oh, nice.”

Logan jerked his head toward the exit, and he and Wes left. I looked out the window, where snow was falling pretty heavily now. It was probably better that I didn’t get a car; I wouldn’t have felt confident driving in that.

“Be careful,” I said to Sawyer, who was lingering behind.

He followed my gaze out the window. “Right now, the worst of the storm is north of here and headed this way. We think we can beat it.”

“Utah’s not just as bad?” They’d have to drive through a lot of Utah on the way home.

“It’s a lot better than here. A day and half and we’ll be home.” He turned his phone toward me. Some weather app was open. It showed severe snow for the next four days in Denver. Then he swiped his finger across the screen and Utah weather appeared, with four days of only clouds. He shrugged. “All I know is that if I’m not home by Christmas my mom will kill me,” he said.

My chest was tighter than ever. “This storm is going to hang around for four days?” I could be stuck here through Christmas?

“You could come with us,” he said.

“What?”

“To Fresno. In the SUV. There’s room.”

“I’m sure your friends would love that.”

“They wouldn’t care. Trust me. And Heather would probably appreciate the company. She said something about our maturity level yesterday.”

You shouldn’t get in a car with someone you hardly know, I told myself. *No matter how desperate you are*. I didn’t even know three facts about this guy. “I think I’ll pass,” I said.

“Okay.” He gave me a small wave. “Hopefully you beat us home.” He spun around and walked away. I watched him join up outside with Wes and Logan, and a girl who must’ve been his sister. She had his same sandy-brown hair and expressive brown eyes. I watched as she tied her wavy hair back into a ponytail. My own long dark hair felt matted and messy from all the travel.

My gaze drifted to Sawyer, who laughed at something Logan said.

Okay. He liked to snowboard. That was a fact I knew about him.

I bit my lip and played with the strap on my backpack as the group moved toward the sliding doors that led to the parking garage.

Oh, and he won that award for his smile last year. Fact.

I laced my fingers together, then pulled them apart again. “His last name is Harris,” I whispered. I totally knew three facts about him. I jumped up.

“Sawyer, wait!”