Set Something Free (continuing)

I started writing the part, after Willow moves up to Grand Lake but before the Headwaters ride, where she and Clancy start becoming close. Trying to establish a growing friendship and some of Clancy’s deeper characteristics.

Later Willow would wonder if Clancy simply picked up strays in order to do the hard work of dusting them off and steadying them on their feet, herself included. The plump cats who burrowed in the hay and slept by his hearth came at his whistle. On a snowy afternoon in November, he invited Willow inside his cabin for a cup of coffee. “I can make it Irish if you want,” he said. “It’s coming down pretty hard. The county isn’t gonna get to that road.”

Little Z, her old Chevy Tahoe, was buried under a good six inches of snow that had accumulated since she arrived. She thumped up the steps, stomped snow off her boots outside and stepped into the narrow mudroom. The boot jack helped pry the boots off her layers of wool socks, then she shook them, melting, onto the rag rug. She hung her puffy blue winter jacket on a peg beside Clancy’s Carhartt canvas coat and she followed him into a warm main room.

“I keep the coals pretty hot this time of year,” he said.

“It’s really great,” Willow said.

“Have a seat.” Clancy motioned toward a gliding rocker. Willow sat on the velvety pad and pushed the rocker with her big toe, swinging in a gentle rhythm.

Willow took a sip and wondered what such a cute mug was doing in this tough man’s space. She let out a cough. “That’s a good pour.”

Clancy settled himself in an overstuffed chair opposite Willow with one wool-socked foot up on the stool. “It doesn’t look like it’s slowing down any time soon. We might as well stay warm.”

Willow looked out the window; through the heavy flakes she could make out Murphy’s head jutting out from the barn overhang. I could sit here all day,” she said. “Pretty mug.” Steam rose above the flowing script “Horses Keep Me Stable.” It was the closest she had come to teasing Clancy.

“Used to be my sister’s. he glanced at a picture on the wall. “My horse, Sam, used to be hers too. That’s another story. Now Dalton tells me that you do some reading?”
“If you count audiobooks as reading,” Willow said. She saw a tattered Louis L’Amour western on his coffee table and could just read the spine of *The Da Vinci Code* under that. “You too, huh?”

“That library in Grand Lake,” he said. “Keeps me busy.” He blew on his coffee and slurped.

The sky darkened and Willow saw that the snow was coming faster. “Am I getting out of here today?”

“I can get you back to town in the old Jeep. We’ll be cold but it can make it through anything.”

“Are you saying Little Z isn’t going to make it.”

“Probably not tonight. I’ll plow in the morning. But I know you got to feed your cat. The Jeep?”

Magoo was probably already meowing at the door. “Diana told me she’d help if I ever got stuck out here.”

“Welp, you’re more stuck than not,” Clancy said. “I’ve got the couch. Or I can try to drive you.”

“I’ll stay. Thanks for offering.” She texted Diana and then Dalton, too. Diana sent back a thumbs up. Dalton sent little crying laughing emojis and said he hoped that Clancy had running water.

Clancy heated up ham steaks and fried eggs, and buttered thick slices of sourdough bread. “And here I was feeling sorry for you,” Willow said with her mouth half full. “You eat way better than I do.”

She washed up the dishes, treating each old plate like fine china, feeling awkward with Clancy’s things. He pulled out a pillow and wool blankets and she made up the sofa into a bed, then burrowed into the covers still in her jeans and thermal top and called goodnight to Clancy through the bedroom door that was cracked to let in the heat.

But an hour later she found herself still staring into the licking flames of the woodstove. She pushed back the blankets and scuffed in her wool socks over to the picture Clancy had glanced at when he mentioned his sister. In the firelight, she couldn’t it make out very well, so she got her phone and she focused the flashlight on the picture.

A horse was flying over a jump with a young woman clinging onto his mane. Willow thought the rider in the yellowed picture looked about the same age she was now.