

The Snow Will Fall

by Dale Lerner

Laura's hands shook as she tried to put on her gold reindeer earrings late in the afternoon on Christmas day. Mason would be there any minute, and she was beginning to lose her nerve. Could she really look him straight in the eyes and say it this time? She had tried so many times before, but somehow it never seemed like the right time. But she felt sure now was the right time. It could be her last chance to talk to Mason without Ashley around.

She got the earrings on and smoothed out her green dinner dress as she looked herself over in the mirror that hung on the back of her bedroom door. Her brown hair sat in a messy pile atop her head. A few strands spiraled down and touched her cheeks. She had put on extra makeup and bright red lipstick, which wasn't like her. She wondered if she was overdoing it.

Closing her eyes, she pumped a mist of perfume across her neck and breathed in the fragrance. It reminded her of a rain-soaked flower garden, like the one her mother used to toil in before she became a widow.

Laura opened her eyes. No, she wasn't overdoing it. She was a young woman now, and Mason had to see that before it was too late. But what chance did she really have? After all, who was she compared to someone like Ashley Amber Vanderhill? She watched in the mirror as her confidence drained away.

A car pulled in, and Laura rushed to the window and looked down. It was Mason! She felt like crying. She wasn't ready for this. She needed more time. She watched Mason climb out of his black Jeep. He had on blue jeans and that brown suede jacket she loved so much, and he had let his hair grow out some since the summer.

Laura saw her Uncle Harland step out and meet Mason in the driveway. They shook hands, and her uncle began a conversation.

Laura looked up at the overcast sky. Uncle Harland had been telling her all week it was going to snow on Christmas day. She had dreamed of taking a walk with Mason after dinner under the falling snow. They would stop near the spruce trees at the end of the road and look out over the snow-covered town below. Then Laura would take a deep breath, turn to Mason, and say all the things she had always wanted to say from the first moment they had met, back when she was nine and he was eleven—that she was madly in love with him and had always been, and that she couldn't go even one more day without telling him.

“Laura, Honey,” her grandmother called out from downstairs and broke through Laura's dream. “Mason's here.”

“Thanks, Grandma, I'll be right down.” Her courage was back. She was ready now. She could go through with it.

She checked her hair in the mirror at the bottom of the stairs, and then looked out through the little window beside the front door. Uncle Harland continued to hold Mason captive in the driveway. A little breeze blew Mason's hair, and he moved it back with his hand. But then, passing behind Mason, Laura watched as a Mercedes pulled up and parked in front of the house. It was Ashley. Laura's heart sank. All her plans were ruined.

She fought back tears as she watched Ashley march up the driveway and hook Mason's arm and march him past Uncle Harland. They were at the door before she could think of what to say.

“Merry Christmas, Laura,” Ashley said, as she came in attached to Mason's arm. “I was able to make it after all, but I can only stay for a few minutes.”

Laura took their coats and led them into the warm living room. Uncle Harland followed. Laura's mother and grandfather stood and greeted the arriving couple. The room seemed suddenly small, old, and badly lit, and Laura felt like speaking her thoughts and asking Ashley why she couldn't let them have this one dinner together, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

“Everything’s ready. Everyone come in and sit down,” her grandmother said from the dining room.

They all found their seats. The full aroma of cooked roast beef and carrots filled the room. Three wide candles sat flickering in the center of the table, and Christmas carols scratched out from an old radio in the kitchen.

“We already ate at Mason’s for lunch,” Ashley said, “and then we’ll be eating again at my parents’ house in a little while, so we really won’t be able to eat very much.”

Laura’s grandfather dug in. Her grandmother mumbled something about a bowl and disappeared back into the kitchen. Laura’s mother filled her plate and then quietly stole away to her room for the evening. Uncle Harland tucked his napkin in his shirt collar and carefully spooned out equal portions of each dish onto his plate. Laura took some roast beef and salad and watched Mason force down a few bites of mashed potatoes, while Ashley picked at a dinner roll.

Just as Laura’s grandmother whisked back in with a bowl of sweet potatoes, Ashley abruptly tapped the side of her glass with a fork.

“I have an announcement to make,” she said.

Everyone stopped eating and listened. Ashley held out her left hand and wiggled her fingers next to one of the candles. The harsh glint of a diamond ring struck Laura’s eyes.

“We’re engaged!” Ashley said, and bounced in her chair.

Laura felt suddenly numb. Her family congratulated and questioned Ashley and Mason but looked over at Laura now and then with concerned glances. Laura hadn’t noticed it before, but as she saw her family directing their glances her way, it became obvious they had known all along that she was in love with Mason. They probably worried about a day like this—a day when her heart would be broken.

“June. It will be a June wedding,” Ashley added. “We’ll graduate in May, and be married in June.”

Mason looked a little uneasy at the whole business. Laura saw him glance her way, and strangely, it seemed he looked at her just as her family had—as if he knew Laura had loved him all this time and now he felt sorry for her. Laura wanted to be like her mother and sulk away to her room for the evening.

Dinner, and all the excitement, wound down. Laura’s grandmother cleared the table and asked who wanted coffee with their chocolate pecan pie. Ashley explained that she had to get back home and help her mother, but that Mason could stay for a while longer, and she let herself out. Laura’s grandfather and Uncle Harland took their pie and coffee into the living room, and her grandmother worked on the dishes.

Laura and Mason quietly sipped their coffee together at the empty table.

“Did you know it’s supposed to snow tonight?” Mason said.

“Yes, that’s what I heard.” All they had left was uncomfortable small talk. Ashley’s announcement had seen to that.

“We could go for a walk, if you wanted to.”

Why was he tormenting her? Why didn’t he just go running to Ashley?

“Yes. That’s a great idea. I’ll get our coats.”

It was cold and getting dark out, but not snowing. Laura and Mason walked along without speaking. They both looked over at a house when its red and green lights blinked on.

“You know, Laura, you really look nice tonight,” Mason said. “I mean, I’ve never seen you all dressed up before.”

Where did that come from?

“Thank you. I think I’m a little overdressed for just being around my family.”

They walked on in silence. Mason seemed restless. Then he stopped and faced Laura.

“Listen, I’m sorry about Ashley,” he said. “She can be a handful at times.”

“Oh, that’s all right.”

“What I mean is . . . I know this is going to sound strange, but I have to say it. I’m sure now, after seeing you today.” He reached out his hands and awkwardly squeezed the sides of her shoulders. “This is crazy but . . . Laura, it’s you I’m in love with, not Ashley.”

Did he really just say that, or was it a dream? Laura’s head was spinning.

“Do you think there could be a chance for us?” he added with a worried look.

A sudden warmth poured through Laura, and she felt like a thick blanket had been wrapped around her. She didn’t know if she was going to cry or laugh.

“Well, say something.” Mason shook her gently.

Laura began to tear up, and she said, “Yes . . . yes. We have a chance.” And then she laughed and said, “Yes, I think we have a very good chance!”

A flurry of snow suddenly dropped down from the night sky and began to cover the road. They held hands and walked towards the spruce trees. Poor Ashley would throw a fit when she found out.
