



# *The Warmth of Winter's Heart*

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Animals, Fable, Magic

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Winters in the Irish countryside were apt to be cold and frigid, unforgiving but beautiful all the same. And just as they did every year in the month of December, heavy clouds gathered overhead, laden with a wintry storm. Snow overtook the land, coating the rolling hills and forests in a thick layer of white. And when the swirling flakes ceased to fall, the sun glinting again off the freshly fallen powder, the world looked transformed. Gone was the dreary, deadened winter, marked by bare trees and brown grasses, all replaced by the snowy wonderland. Icicles clung to tree branches and dripped down to the roots below, melting in pale sunlight.

Rowan had always thought winter to be a wonderful, magical time. Face and hands pressed to frigid window panes, she would stare out at the freshly fallen snow every morning, awed by the storm that had drifted over the land while she slept. Her parents, though, didn't share her enthralled enthusiasm. They always worried over the lack of income from the farm and how they would keep the family alive and healthy for another season. And more than anything, they warned Rowan against the woods in winter.

"The woods are a dangerous place in the snow and ice, Rowan," they would say, year after year. "Mysterious things happen there and it's far too easy to get turned around and lose your way. Please stay close," they urged, worry creasing their brows and turning their lips down into frowns.

So, despite her fascination with the cold, magical season, Rowan stayed tucked away inside, only leaving to

feed the sheep or attend to her other barn chores. And even then, her father always kept a close eye on her, sticking by her side in a way he never would have considered in summer. He was too busy during the long, balmy days, and he trusted her, then. But winter was always a different story.

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One late evening, Rowan sat by the wood stove, enjoying the crackling fire's warmth and reading a short novel by its light. Dinner had already been eaten and plates had been cleared away, but her father's meal still sat at the table, covered to try to preserve some of its warmth. Normally, he took great efforts to be finished with his chores by the time dinner was served, or at least before night fell. But, outside the window, there was little save for darkness. A few stars were starting to emerge, their light pricking through the black sky.

Just then, the door creaked open, the hinges groaning under the weight of the thick oak boards. Rowan's father slipped inside, shutting the door against the howling winds and snow that blew inside, chilling the air.

Stomping his boots on the doormat and brushing the piles of snow from his coat and hat, he stripped out of his winter gear, just leaving his wool socks, thick trousers, and tawny sweater. He left his things to dry by the door and made his way past Rowan, who offered a small smile, and into the kitchen where her mother waited.

"Sorry I took so long getting back," he mumbled, sounding weary and worn.

"What happened, dear?" her mother asked. She looked relieved, but concern was still etched into her features.

"It's the dog, he ran off," he grumbled, shoving a hand back through his messy hair. "Something spooked him when he was out herding the sheep back to the barn and he bolted into the woods. I called him and searched as long as the light lasted, but he didn't turn up."

"Poor Faolan, he must be freezing out there on his own," her mother fretted. She smoothed her hands over the wrinkles in her skirt, biting her lip.

"He'll just have to last until morning. I'll keep looking then," Rowan's father muttered, giving a heavy, defeated sigh. He sunk down into his chair and picked at his meal. All the while, Rowan watched from the doorway, head poked around to listen from the living room.

Dread and despair knotted in her stomach and Rowan stumbled back to her spot by the wood stove. Dropping

quietly to her knees, she watched the flames dance and flicker, though her thoughts were anything but warm. Faolan was her best friend, he had been ever since he was a pup. The little patch of black and white fur she'd saved a pretty penny to buy at the pet shop in town had grown into a dedicated herder, a playful companion, and a treasured member of the family. Rowan had no intent of letting the border collie freeze out in the wintry blizzard. He meant too much to her, and she couldn't imagine losing him.

Steeling her nerves, Rowan got to her feet. Though, as much as she wished to bravely go out into the storm, her parents' warnings echoed in her head. Anxiety bubbled up in her chest, but the image of Faolan curled up in the snow, his coat matted with ice, shivering and exhausted, was enough to jolt her into action. Danger or not, she wouldn't abandon her best friend.

Quietly, so not to call her parents' attention, Rowan slipped on her boots and coat. She wound a thick, woolen scarf around her neck and donned a matching hat and mittens, hoping they would keep her warm enough. The lantern her father had been using was hung by the door as well, still lit and glowing softly. Rowan gently lifted it from its hook, needing some kind of light to search by. Giving one last glance back at the kitchen, finding her parents talking to each other in hushed, serious whispers, Rowan slipped out the front door. The hinges creaked a bit, like a final warning, a final alarm for her parents to catch her and stop her, but they didn't seem to notice.

Outside, the blizzard whipped snow up in a frenzy, blowing and swirling around. The wind snapped through the icy branches and howled furiously as it rushed by. Undeterred, Rowan headed straight out to the forest that edged her family's property. The snow already reached up to the tops of her boots and was thick and heavy, the wet flakes clumping together. Trudging through the snow and pushing against the wind proved to be a challenge on its own, and that was before Rowan even reached the dense growth of the woods.

Though, it wasn't long before the fields were behind her and she stood before the dark, twisting trunks that marked the start of something wild and mysterious. The farm had been cleared, had been tamed, but the forest was another beast, one Rowan had never tackled in the depths of a winter night. Swallowing down her nerves, she stepped into the forest, with only the pale glow of the moon and the flickering lantern light to guide her.

Once she was far enough from the house and she was confident her parents wouldn't hear her, Rowan started to call for Faolan. She whistled and shouted his name, hoping to hear excited barking and pawsteps crunching

in the snow. Though, she had no such luck, no eager dog bounding up to her and jumping on her with glee. Only the lonely call of an owl answered her, echoing out into the dark night.

Rowan wandered and searched and called until her limbs were numb with cold and her throat was raw. Keeping her spirits high was becoming more and more of a painstaking task. How could she go on when she felt so defeated, so hopeless? At first, her only fear had been for Faolan. Rowan just wanted him to be safe, wanted to make sure no snarling wolves or lurking creatures had caught him. But the farther she roamed the more she realized every fear she had for her dog she should have had for herself. Freezing, starvation, predators, they were all dangers she could succumb to just as easily as Faolan could.

Stumbling over a gnarled root, hidden by the ever rising drifts, Rowan fell face first into the thick, heavy blanket of snow. For a moment, she just laid there, letting the anguish and despair and desolate sorrow wash through her. She was hopelessly out of her depth, exhausted, and too cold to continue. Returning home didn't seem like much of an option either. Even if she had the energy to trudge back the way she had come, Rowan wasn't sure of the way back. At first, she had done her best to memorize landmarks and travel as straight as she could away from the farm. Though, the longer she walked, the more the shadows seemed to twist and morph the things around her. Trees flickered into ominous creatures and moonlight reflecting off the snow became lingering ghosts, all until she blinked and rubbed her eyes and the mysterious and eerie became mundane once more.

Before she knew it, Rowan had lost her way, gone astray from her straight path and meticulous marking. Instead, she just wandered, lost and confused and desperate. Finally, she pulled herself up from the snow bank she had fallen in, giving a half hearted attempt to brush away the snow that clung to her skin and hair. Giving in to her hopeless fate, Rowan nestled herself into a small hollow beneath the roots of a great evergreen tree. She placed the lantern beside her, its dim glow lighting up the tiny hollow. It did little to shelter her from the wind and cold, but with her back to the tree's trunk, she felt just a little safer.

Rowan pulled in a deep breath, the cold air stinging in her lungs. While she sat to rest and wait until morning, hoping she didn't freeze before the sun crept back out over the horizon, she realized she had been foolish not to heed her parents' warnings. They were only looking out for her and, having lived at the edge of the forest far longer, knew its dangers much better than her. Even with Faolan lost and his safety at risk, she knew now that

she shouldn't have come after him. Little good it did, only managing to get the both of them lost out in the woods.

A few tears rolled down Rowan's cheeks, hot, but cooling quickly on her skin. She'd never felt so lost, so desperate before. The frigid darkness of the night had seeped into her heart, leaving her feeling just as desolate and empty inside. Without Faolan, without her parents, without her warm, safe home, Rowan was lost. Soon, though, her tears were spent and she sniffled in the cold.

Her skin dry and chapped from the cold and wind, her body tired, and her heart filled to the brim with despair, Rowan let her heavy-lidded eyes fall closed. If she only fell asleep, all of this would be over. She could frolic in the land of dreams with Faolan at her side, not a worry in the world. Though, before Rowan could doze off, lulled to sleep and ensnared in winter's icy grip, a shift in the winds started her awake. All of a sudden, the wind began to whip in a circle around her, expanding outward until she was caught in a bubble of stillness, the whirling winds like a shield, blocking her from the raging blizzard.

Then, into her protected bubble stepped a beautiful, almost ethereal horse. It was tall and grand, quite stocky and sturdy but with warm eyes and a gentle, melting expression. The horse's coat was pure white, almost melding into the snowy backdrop. Only its dark, kind eyes and greyed muzzle stood out against the white all around. Gazing in awe, Rowan took in the horse's great, feathered legs and its long, thick mane and tail.

The horse gave a soft nicker, its breath clouding in the cold air. And as it started slowly towards Rowan, she carefully rose to her feet. The whole moment seemed like something of a dream, surreal and magical, but fragile and delicate all the same, like the wrong move could send her back to the harsh reality of the waking. Yet, Rowan knew she was awake, knew this was all real. For when the horse lowered its muzzle, allowing her to reach out and pet it, the creature was warm and solid beneath her touch.

After a beat, the horse straightened, pulling its head back and away from Rowan's hand. A moment later, though, it bent one leg, coming low to the ground in an elegant bow. At first, Rowan just watched, dumbstruck by the mysterious animal's behavior. Stepping forward, she realized the horse was inviting her into its back, offering her refuge from the cold and snow below. Gratefully, Rowan jumped up on to the horse's back, settling herself just behind its shoulders.

It slowly rose back to its full height, the movements graceful and smooth. In a moment, the horse was calmly walking off in the way Rowan had come, the winds still keeping in a circle around them, keeping the harshness of the blizzard away. A serene sense of calm and safety washed over Rowan, easing her fears and sorrows. Though, what appeased her anxiety most was the little black and white ball of fur the horse stopped before, nuzzling it gently. Just then, relief flooded through Rowan, a warmth that swelled in her chest and spread all the way down to her toes.

“Faolan!” she called excitedly, rousing the sleeping dog. Faolan, though snowy, looked no worse for wear as he shot up from the snow drift he had fallen asleep in, tail lashing back and forth. Barking and whining, ecstatic, Faolan leapt up into Rowan’s waiting arms, onto the horse’s back. All the while, the horse kept still, only watching with kind eyes and the occasional gentle nicker.

Again, this time with Faolan in company, the horse walked with a calm sense of purpose. Swaying gently with each step it took, Rowan nestled her face into Faolan’s thick fur, relieved to have found her friend. Though, it wasn’t long before the gentle rocking motion and the absence of wicked winter wind made Rowan grow drowsy. Late into the night, she couldn’t resist the pull of sleep and eventually drifted off into a quiet, dreamless sleep.

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When Rowan woke, it was to a stream of sunlight settling across her eyes, dust floating in the warm light. And, when hazy memories of the previous night came flooding back to the front of her mind, she was surprised to find herself warm and dry, sheltered from the cold that lingered outside. Cracking open an eye, Rowan realized she was in the sheep barn, snuggled up with Faolan in a pile of straw and hay. A few lambs slept nearby, tucked in next to their mothers. Gentle bleats and rustling straw disturbed the silence every so often, but all was peaceful and at ease.

The morning was calm and quiet, no sign of the night’s raging blizzard. No wind howled and no ice pelted the tin roofing. When the sun came out, it brought peace with it, allowing the world to settle and rest without fear. The sentiment seemed familiar, Rowan realized. And it was then that she remembered the mystical, ethereal horse who had brought her to safety the previous night. However eerie, however dark and sinister the place

may be, Rowan was certain, then, that the woods were not all bad. Whether it was real, magical, or just a figment of her imagination, the spirit horse had rescued her and Faolan when they were lost and most in need of help. The beautiful, kind horse had brought them home again, ensured they were safe, and offered comfort to Rowan's heart when it was filled with darkness.

Despite her parents' warnings and their own fears, Rowan knew that there was good residing in the woods behind the farm. Perhaps it was hidden to most, but there was good in the world and it came when it was desperately needed, saving not just a girl and her dog, but everyone who loved them, everyone who cared for them. In the depths of winter's cold heart came tidings of comfort and warmth, of joy and love.

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