

## An Excerpt From...

### Along Came Love

by Carrie Turansky

Heavy snowflakes flew toward Lauren Woodman in a swirling cloud. Gripping the steering wheel, she leaned forward, straining to see through the snow-spattered windshield. The approaching dusk and dancing flakes limited her view to no more than a few yards ahead. She slowed and shifted to a lower gear. At this rate, it would take her at least fifteen minutes to drive the last few miles home.

She sighed, knowing it would be better to arrive late than end up in a ditch or stuck in one of those waist-high drifts lining the road.

A movement up ahead caught her attention. She squinted as though that would clear her frosty windshield better than her groaning wipers. A man was hiking along the roadside, his head bent into the wind and driving flakes.

*What on earth is he doing so far out in the country on a night like this?*

As she drew closer, the beam of her headlights illuminated him. Tall and broad-shouldered, he straightened and turned toward her car. The steel-framed backpack he was carrying accounted for some of his bulk but not all. He wore a dark knit hat pulled down to his eyes, and some sort of snow-caked scarf covered the lower half of his face. He lifted a gloved hand in the universal sign of a hitchhiker.

Lauren's heart thudded. She couldn't stop. He was not only a stranger but most likely homeless or deranged, to be out in this weather.

*Help him find his way home, Lord.* She fixed her eyes on the road ahead and drove past. As soon as she got back to her aunt's house she'd call the police. They'd pick him up and help him find shelter until the storm passed.

She lifted her gaze to the rearview mirror and he came into view. Resigned to being left behind, he hunkered down into the wind and trudged on.

Suddenly, a flash of brown darted across the road in front of her car. Lauren gasped, jammed her foot on the brake and jerked the steering wheel to the left. Her car skidded and spun like a sickening carnival ride.

A scream tore from her throat. Clutching the steering wheel, she frantically pulled it to the right. The snowbank loomed before her. She made one last desperate attempt to swerve away, then rammed into it with a crashing thud.

A deathly silence roared in her ears. Her heart pounded in her throat, choking off her air. Pain ricocheted through her shoulder and neck, where the seat belt held her in place. Through her daze she heard rapid footsteps crunch across the snow, and then someone rapped on her window.

"Miss, are you all right?"

The sight of the stranger peering through the side window jarred her back to her senses. He opened the door and the interior light flashed on.

Lauren stiffened and pulled back. He wasn't wearing a scarf. A dark, shaggy beard and a frozen, snow-covered mustache hid the lower half of his face, giving him a wild appearance.

"It's okay." He leaned in and gently laid a large glove-covered hand on her shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

Frosty, pine-scented air flooded the car. She pulled in a sharp, cold breath and her thoughts cleared. "Yes, I...I'm fine. But what about my car?"

With trembling hands, she pushed her long red hair over her shoulder and reached to unhook her seat belt. A frustrated moan escaped as she struggled with the latch.

"Maybe you should just sit tight and rest a minute more. I'll check it out for you."

She looked up at him and was surprised by the gentle concern in his dark eyes.

"I'm okay, it's just this crazy seat belt," she insisted, finally releasing the latch.

He stepped back and plodded through the snow toward the front of her car. "I don't think you've done too much damage," he called over his shoulder. "Good thing you missed the deer. That could've totaled your car."

His deep voice cut through the snowy evening silence and sent a shiver down her back. She slowly leaned out the open door, watching him.

Who *was* this man — a threat or a rescuer? With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she realized it was too late to slam the car door and lock herself inside. She was stuck in the snowbank and needed the help of this rough-looking stranger if she was going to get out.

*Oh, Lord. Should I trust him?*

Summoning up her courage, she climbed from the car to check the damage herself. Teeth chattering, she fought to control her wobbly legs and settle her runaway emotions.

"How are you doing?" He turned toward her.

"I'm all right." She reached down and brushed away a layer of snow. "Oh, no, look at it!" The impact had crumpled the fender and smashed it into the tire.

Spending the barn renovation money on a tow truck or car repairs would force her to push back the opening of her gallery, but if she filed a claim, her insurance would skyrocket. "I really don't need this," she whispered past the tightness clogging her throat as tears stung her eyes. *Stop! It won't do any good to cry, especially in front of a stranger.*

He squatted down to take a closer look at the damage. "Don't worry. I can get you out of here." He scanned the woods beyond the road, dropped his pack from his shoulders and climbed over the snowbank.

"What are you looking for?" she called, standing on tiptoe to watch him. The storm had slowed and the late-afternoon sunlight reflecting off the snow made it a bit easier to see.

"Here's what we need." He pulled a sturdy limb from a downed tree that lay just a few feet from the roadway. Hoisting the limb over his shoulder, he hauled it back toward her and climbed over the snowbank to the road.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Ever take physics?" He shrugged the limb off his shoulder and dropped it to the ground near the front fender.

"No, why?"

"Physics teaches you how to think scientifically." He grinned, his dark eyes glowing with humor. Suddenly he didn't look nearly as frightening as she'd first imagined. Certainly, his beard looked unruly, but his coat and boots looked clean and well cared for. Perhaps he wasn't a homeless wanderer as she'd first suspected.

"Are you a physics teacher?"

"No, but it was one of my favorite classes."

"Not me. I avoided science whenever possible." He lifted his dark brows and smiled. "Well, it's never too late to learn the principles of physics." He wedged the limb between the tire and the crumpled fender. "This is a first-class lever." With a swift thrust, he forced his end of the limb toward the ground. The branch groaned, the fender screeched and what she could see of his face flushed with the effort.

Lauren stood back in surprised silence as he lifted the crumpled fender away from the tire. When he finished, he heaved the limb over the snowbank and sent it flying into the woods as though it weighed no more than a broomstick.

"Let's clear away some of the snow from the front tires," he said, brushing off his gloves. "Then we'll try to start it up and back it out."

Lauren pointed to the trunk. "I've got a shovel."

"Smart lady," he said with a little chuckle. His comment warmed her all the way down to her boots. It had been a long time since she'd received any words of affirmation from a man. She popped the trunk, retrieved the collapsible shovel and carried it up front.

"Here, I'll take that." He stepped forward and held out his hand.

She hesitated a moment, gripping the handle. He could obviously do the job quicker, but she didn't like to depend on anyone else. Well, this was no time to hang on to her pride. She passed him the shovel. He quickly cleared the front of the car while she brushed off the hood and windshield.

"Okay. Why don't you see if you can start it up?" She climbed into the driver's seat. Whispering a prayer, she turned the key. The engine coughed

and sputtered but soon smoothed out to a consistent purr. She slowly eased the car back a few feet.

He grinned and gave her the thumbs-up sign. She set the emergency brake and hopped out. "Thanks. I might've been stuck here a long time without your help."

"No problem. Glad you're okay." He turned and walked toward his heavy pack lying in the snowdrift.

Fiddling with her wet gloves, she watched him. How could she drive away and leave him behind? It wouldn't be right. "Where are you headed?"

He hoisted the pack onto his shoulders. "Wild River Ski Resort." Instead of asking if she was going that way, he quietly adjusted the straps on his pack.

Frightening memories swirled to the surface and Lauren forced down a shudder. "That's a long way — at least seven or eight miles."

Frowning, he pressed his lips together and looked down the road. "Know of any motels nearby?" He turned to her with a hopeful lift of his brow.

"We don't have any hotels in Tipton." She bit her lip, debated her next words and prayed she wasn't making a mistake. "My aunt and I live just a few miles down the road." She gave a little shrug. "We have a guest room. You could stay with us if you like."

His dark brown eyes studied her for a moment. "Okay. Thanks, I'd appreciate that."

Lauren held out her glove-covered hand. "My name's Lauren Woodman."

He shook it with a firm grasp and smiled. "Wesley Evans."

Warmth and gratitude traveled through her. Though he'd initially made her wary, something told her to trust him.

"You can put your backpack in the trunk. There should be plenty of room. Just shove those paint cans aside."

She slid into the driver's seat and glanced at him again in the rearview mirror. Had she made the right decision, inviting him home? Wesley

slammed the trunk and pulled his knitted hat down to his dark eyebrows. As she forced her gaze away from the mirror, questions rose in her mind. Why was he hiking alone down this road? And what brought him to Wild River?