

*under a  
blanket  
of blue*

CAROLINE SMITH

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# 1

Katherine Ryan yawned, got dressed, and went down to get her coffee in a fog. After years of getting up at 4:15, you'd think she'd be used to it by now, but her mind refused to acclimate. Coffee was the only thing that saved her most days.

She hummed to herself while she reached for her favorite mug and pressed Brew on her coffee pot. The view from her kitchen window was dark, but the landscape of her hundred-acre ranch was imprinted into her brain and bones. If she opened the window, she'd feel the chill of the May morning and smell the sweet smell of sage and horse with the morning dew. She'd hear the stream bubbling down the little slope where her favorite willow tree gracefully dipped her branches in the water there. That was where Willow Creek Rehabilitation Ranch had been born.

With the help of the inheritance her grandmother left her, she had built a life and business she was proud of. It was too bad some of the most important people in her life didn't see her for the woman she'd become and not the girl she'd been.

Soon, her crew would stir, and she'd oversee the feeding of horses and people, hay delivery, rehabilitation and class schedules for both horses and students, phone calls, and clinic visits. Her mental to-do list got longer, and her body almost audibly groaned in anticipation of the work to come as the mechanical whir of the coffee pot signaled its end. One sip of the life-giving java sent a shiver of pleasure to her body and mind and eased some of the persistent ache of her daily chores. She absolutely loved what she did, but it made a body tired.

The quiet was broken as her two beautiful children thundered down the stairs, making enough noise to wake the whole county. There could be only one reason for this much excitement from them at five in the morning; today was the last day of school before summer break.

"Morning, Mama!" Elizabeth, Katherine's eldest and—even at seventeen—her spitting image, simultaneously kissed Katherine on the cheek and grabbed a banana.

"Y'all are in a good mood this morning. Are you that excited to be done with school?"

"Absolutely! Three whole months of nothing to do but read." Andrew barely looked up from the book he was currently reading, and almost walked into his sister. Katherine and Elizabeth were used to steering him where he needed to go and preventing him from running into walls for the sake of his literary hobby.

"When has that ever happened?"

"Well, come to think of it, never. But I can dream." Andrew shrugged and almost dislodged the other books under his arm and the banana Elizabeth had put on his open book. Katherine reached out to steady him.

“Sorry, kiddo, you won’t be gettin’ off that easy. But I promise that you will get a break every day to pick up a book. And who knows, maybe we’ll actually go on a vacation this summer,” replied Katherine.

“Really? That’d be awesome!” Elizabeth started listing all of the places she’d like to visit. She was so involved in her planning that she almost didn’t hear the bus honk when it arrived.

“Come on, Liz! We’re going to be late.” Andrew snapped his book closed and shoved it in his bag with his breakfast.

Katherine handed them their lunches as they darted for the door. “Don’t forget that your dad is picking you up today.”

“We won’t! Bye, Mom. Love you. See you after school,” their voices trailed off as they ran up the gravel driveway.

Katherine looked out the window after them and thought for the millionth time that she was probably the luckiest mom ever. She sipped her coffee and reluctantly started on some paperwork that was lying on the kitchen table. A few minutes later there was a soft tapping on her back door. She got up to answer it and saw her ex, Ethan, through the screen door.

“Can I talk to you for just a second?”

She nodded at him and then stepped back to let him in. Ethan was a tall, handsome man. He stood six foot three with dark brown hair and blue eyes. The beard he always wore, because he looked like a self-proclaimed baby if he didn’t, had grown in the few days since Katherine had seen him. Katherine remembered that he’d started letting it grow when he had enthusiastically helped her build the house and stables that supported them. Then, six years ago, Ethan Parr, decided that they no longer shared the same dreams and goals of ranch ownership, after all. After months of arguing, and years of unhappiness, Katherine set him free to go live out his own life. She knew she was right where she was supposed to be.

He had come back looking wary and worn eighteen months later and said he was going to build his own place right here if that was okay with her. She remembered the day he’d sent the divorce papers, about six months into his absence, and was more than a little surprised he’d want to come back. Rationalizing her need for extra muscle and the chance for him to actually be in his children’s lives, she had acquiesced, and he’d renovated a small cabin on the other side of the property. His current job as ranch manager didn’t seem to satisfy him, and she knew he had been growing restless.

“Seems you’re going to LA. Robert called while you were in the shower, I guess. Said he couldn’t reach you, so he called me. Looks like a new jockey ran his baby into the rail first thing this morning.” He leaned into the doorframe, but never fully entered the house.

“Is Robert being paranoid, or is Pinocchio really injured?” Katherine was skeptical.

Ethan nodded and lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug, “Yes to both. He says that the vet there is incompetent. Milton says it’s just a hairline fracture, but Robert is convinced that it’s a compound fracture. He says he’s already gotten you a flight and it leaves in an hour and a half. He only trusts you with his horses, apparently.”

“That’s great, but I’m not a vet. Why can’t he trust Dr. Milton to read the x-ray?”

“Not the point. Pinocchio is coming out here no matter what kind of fracture he has, apparently. You’ll fly out today and John will drive the truck. He’ll only be a couple of days behind you. Besides, you’re due a visit to your sister and the track.”

Katherine rolled her eyes. “But I don’t wanna. Liz and Drew are getting out for the summer and I was excited to start summer vacation with them.”

Ethan chuckled, “You sound like you’re five, Katie.” He’d treated her like she was for most of their marriage. Katherine was tempted to stick out her tongue in defiance but satisfied herself by raising an eyebrow at him instead.

“Come on, Eth. You know I hate it when you say stuff like that.”

“Look, I know how much you like to be with the kids, but this is business. I’ll take care of the kids. I’m picking them up today anyway. You should go and pack. Jules is gonna drive you to the airport.” He nodded at the coffee mug in her hand, “Don’t have too many of those before you fly. Makes you jittery.”

His ordering her around was certainly something she hadn’t missed since they’d been divorced. Not that he ever had any of his own life in order. Now, the roles were reversed. She was the boss and usually did most of the ordering when they saw each other. He’d been joking that she’d become too independent for her own good, but apparently that didn’t stop him from treating her like a child. Again.

She watched him leave, smirk still on his face, and wondered if he’d done this on purpose. She checked her phone. No missed calls, but she wasn’t about to chase after him just for another argument where she’d end up going anyway.

Katherine shuffled back upstairs to pack her bag. She never knew what to take to LA because there was no telling what kind of function or soiree would be going on at her famous sister’s house. She also tended to have spontaneous business meetings whenever she went to the track. At home she lived in her jeans, t-shirts, boots or bare feet, and ponytail. In LA she felt like she needed to leave that behind and be the wealthy and chic businesswoman and sister to the ever-glamorous Allyson Ryan. She thought she’d left that life behind when she left her circles in Atlanta, but it seemed to always find a way back to her. Just like Ethan did.

Katherine dug out her phone and dialed her sister. After the second ring, a fully awake Allyson picked up.

“Well, good morning, little sister.”

“It is a good morning because coffee exists.” Ally chuckled and Katherine decided to get straight to the point. “Guess who’s flying in today for a quick visit?”

“Yay! It’s been too long. I’ve missed you.”

“Ally, it’s only been, like, six months.”

“Well it seems longer. Are you bringing my favorite niece and nephew?”

“No, today is their last day of school. I was really looking forward to having their first week of summer vacation with them.” She whined again, not caring what she sounded like.

“Are you really pouting? You used to sound like that when you were five. Cheer up; you’ll have the rest of the summer with them.” Ally paused. “So...how long are you staying?”

*Uh oh.* Katherine was afraid to answer, she'd heard the devious smile in her voice. "I don't know, just the weekend, hopefully. Why? What are you plotting?" She frowned at the excitement she could imagine dancing in her sisters' blue eyes.

"Oh...well, I'm hoping you'll be here until at least tomorrow night. Nigel and I are throwing a little party. I'm hoping you'll want to come."

"What's the party for?" Katherine pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to sound just as excited as her sister.

"Nigel's new movie is about to start production, so we've invited about fifty of the cast, crew, and some friends over to celebrate. Do you have a dress?"

"Fifty is not 'little.' I'm not sure I have anything to wear to a swanky Hollywood party. Maybe I should stay at a hotel..."

"Don't be ridiculous. And it won't be swanky..."

"Are you cooking or is it being catered?"

"Catered, but I don't know what that has to do with anything."

"Anytime you throw a catered party, it's always swanky. You cooking would be an intimate, yet casual get together."

"I guess you *do* know me pretty well."

Katherine continued to try to ease the tension in her head. "Is Nigel going to be there?"

At least Ally's husband was down-to-earth, unlike a lot of the other people in their world. Katherine could talk to him about books, sip whisky, tease him about his British accent, and about how much he loved her crazy, over-the-top, beautiful sister. And ignore how much she felt like a misfit in their world. In every world, actually, except her cocooned world here at home, with the kids and the horses.

"Don't worry," Ally said. "Nigel will be here. Do you still have that navy dress from the last party you came to?"

"Ally, I'm flying in to see about an injured Thoroughbred at the racetrack—"

"Ohh, fun. Maybe we could all have a day at the races."

Katherine closed her eyes and contained a big sigh. "No. Bad idea."

Ally was already distracted. She called to someone in the background, then said into the phone, "About that dress..."

Katherine groaned again.

"Don't worry; we'll scrounge something up."

"Fine. I'll stay til the party, but then I'm coming home to my babies."

Katherine listened absently while Ally chatted about things they hadn't caught up on in the last few days then finally managed to give her her flight information. She practically had to hang up on her so she could pack.

Twenty minutes later, Julia Reynolds, her best friend, was waiting in her bright red Jeep Wrangler when Katherine got downstairs.

"LA, huh?" Her rose gold aviators hid her eyes, but Katherine knew she'd have seen a sparkle of amusement in them without them on. After being friends for almost thirty years, Julia and Katherine knew all of each other's secrets.

“Yup.” Katherine tossed her duffel in the back seat and hopped in the passenger door. The gray leather was warm on the still-chilly morning.

“Gotta go today, huh?”

“Apparently.”

Julia shook her brown pixie cut out of her eyes and put the car in gear, shrugged. “Who knows, maybe you’ll meet some super sexy A-list actor and never come home.”

Katherine laughed at her best friend. This was something they had often joked about as teenagers when Katherine’s older sister had run off to LA to pursue an acting career.

“Not likely. Short trip anyway. I won’t be gone long. Long enough, though, I guess. Can you check on—”

“Rosco? Already done. And I’m going to stop in Jackson when I drop you and grab few things for the clinic.”

“Well, look at you. Thanks. Maybe you’ll meet some sexy cowboy in Jackson,” Katherine winked at Julia and they laughed again.

“Yeah...not likely. You do have a sister who likes to play matchmaker, though, so your chances are better than mine.”

Katherine sighed dramatically, “Ugh don’t remind me. I’m sure she’ll have some plot this time, too.”

“You managed to escape relatively unscathed last time. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Katherine chatted with Julia and sang together to their favorite songs for the rest of the drive, but her mind was on her sister and Ally’s posh husband Nigel the whole rest of the way to the airport and the whole plane ride. Katherine smiled to herself as she realized that not just one Ryan girl, but both had followed and achieved their dreams. As Katherine wandered to the transportation and baggage area at LAX she spotted a man in a suit holding a sign with her name on it.

“Ms. Ryan?” he asked as she walked up to him.

“Yes. Please call me Katherine. Did my sister send the car?”

“No, ma’am. Mr. Walker directed me to take you anywhere you wished to go. I am supposed to ask you if you wouldn’t mind heading to the race track first.”

Katherine rolled her eyes and huffed out a breath, “He certainly can be pushy can’t he? Yes, all right we’ll head to the track first. Thank you...”

“Quentin ma’am, at your service. May I take your bag?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Katherine walked to the car. Once inside, she immediately rolled the window down to enjoy the California sunshine. It had turned into “one of those days” and she could only pray that seeing Robert and Pinocchio wouldn’t make things any worse.

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## ABOUT ME

Caroline Smith graduated from Pacific Lutheran University with a B.A. in English Literature and a minor in Publishing and Printing Arts. While there she fell in love with editing manuscripts and storytelling. She has edited over 300 manuscripts and, in collaboration with one of her authors, won an IBPA Gold Ben Franklin Award for excellence in editorial and design. She is currently the publishing director and executive editor-in-chief of NOW Publishing, based in Tampa, Florida.

To better assist her authors, she is currently pursuing her Master's of Fine Art in Creative Writing at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina. When she's not writing or editing, she enjoys reading romance novels, creating workshops on meditation and natural wellness and enjoys her own daily yoga and meditation practices. She lives on a small farm in North Georgia with her three wild and wonderful children.

## TITLES

PERSPECTIVE PARENTING: A GUIDE FOR THE MODERN SINGLE MOM, 2015

WRITING AS MEDITATION: BUILDING YOUR BOOK WITH ATTENTION AND INTENTION, 2020

UNDER A BLANKET OF BLUE, 2021

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Caroline has a podcast for writers called "Inspiration to Publication" where she walks writers through the steps of writing and various forms of publishing.

She has been a repeat guest on Dr. Pamela Larde's radio program, "The Live Exchange," a guest speaker at Write the Vision Writers Conference, and interviewed in several webinars and podcasts.