

A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer



An Inspirational Novel by
Jack Zavada

Author of *Mary's Christmas Gift*

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If you enjoy this book, please visit the author's Web site, www.inspiration-for-singles.com

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My Christmas gift to you



Last Christmas season, I wrote a short novel, *Mary's Christmas Gift*, and offered it free on my web site, www.inspiration-for-singles.com. The response stunned me. Nearly 11,000 people have downloaded *Mary's Christmas Gift* since last November, and one reviewer called it "...an absolute delight."

I was encouraged to try again, and this year's short novel is titled *A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer*. During the 1970s and early 80s, I had four western novels published in paperback, so I was eager to try my hand in that genre again. I truly enjoyed writing this book.

A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer is about those times we all go through when we feel alone and discouraged. It may seem that the whole world is against you—but that doesn't matter a bit, if you understand that God is for you. Despite what many people and groups say, that is the true meaning of Christmas: God is for you.

I hope you'll share this gift with your friends as well. Please send them to www.inspiration-for-singles.com/cowboy.html, where they can download their own copy, or print this out and give a hard copy to them.

My prayer for you is that God will bless you abundantly in the coming year, and that you will feel his unconditional love in your heart, now and for the rest of your life.

Jack Zavada
Author, *A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer*
www.inspiration-for-singles.com

Chapter One



Gretchen Norgard could not remember a time when her hands were not red and raw from hard work.

When she and her husband had moved west from Minnesota to Nebraska, she was stunned by the harshness of the land. They built a sod house on the prairie, carefully stacking chunks of grassy dirt they had cut from the earth. Gretchen had worked every bit as hard as he had, but after two years it was painfully evident to both of them that they could not survive as farmers. So back to Minnesota they went, where Latham graduated from seminary and was ordained a minister in the Methodist Church.

Early in their marriage, Gretchen had learned that pitying herself brought no consolation. It only made her more miserable, so she shook that thought out of her head now and continued with her morning chores.

Since Latham's death a year ago, Gretchen had been working from the pre-dawn hours until bed time, eking out a sparse living for herself and her 12 year-old son Walter. She believed that she possessed only two remarkable skills: She could play the pump organ passably well, and she was as fine a cook as any woman she had ever met.

So she had taken the latter ability and launched Norgard Café, the only eating establishment in the Kansas town of Straight Down. Wagging tongues had gossiped about her at first, for embarking on such a bold enterprise just a month after her husband had died of pneumonia, but then they did not know how little money their Methodist pastor had saved.

Opportunities for a widow were limited in Straight Down. True, she could have moved back to Minnesota, but she and her husband had cast their lot with these hardy souls four years ago, in 1882, and it was here she intended to stay, boom or bust.

The back door to the kitchen burst open, interrupting her thoughts, and Walter hurriedly stumbled in, so loaded down with cordwood that she could not see his face.

“Mind the stove,” she told him, “it’s hot already.”

Walter dumped the armload of split logs into the wood box, tugged off the wool mittens she had knitted for him, then held his hands near the stove to warm them.

“Thermometer on the general store reads ten degrees,” he said. “Good thing there’s no wind this morning.”

She helped him shrug out of his heavy coat and stocking cap, then hung the coat on a peg on the wall. Walter stomped the snow off his high-top shoes, and got dishes and silverware out of a cabinet. They had been following this routine so long that she did not have to tell him what to do. He set the small table for both of them, got a potholder from a nail next to the stove and poured steaming coffee into two heavy mugs. He spilled a dash of heavy cream into his mug then dumped in two teaspoons of sugar, but he left her coffee black.

“Did you get your schoolwork done?”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t like those arithmetic problems much. Don’t see why I need to know that stuff. I’ll never use it anywhere.”

She smiled, recalling when she had felt the same way. Walter was a handsome boy, with sharply cut features and a square, firm jaw, just like his father’s. The product of two Swedes, his hair was the same tawny blonde as hers, but he possessed his father’s jade green eyes.

Gretchen forked fried bacon onto both their plates, then added scrambled eggs from a second skillet. Opening the oven door, she pulled

out a pan of biscuits and placed two on each plate. Sitting down at the table with him, she brushed back a strand of loose hair from her forehead.

“Would you say grace this morning, please?” she asked him. They alternated at meals. Both folded their hands, bowed their heads and closed their eyes.

Walter hesitated a moment, then in a low voice said, “Thank you, Lord, for this fine food, for the love we have, and for your gift of salvation. Amen.”

Her eyes were misty when she raised her head. She patted him gently on the arm. “Well said, dear.” This tall, often awkward boy was the joy of her life.

They ate quickly. Gretchen rose from the table and returned to the stove. Walter finished his coffee, then hurried to the dining area of the café with a tray of coffee mugs and silverware. Placing them on all the tables, he got a long pair of tongs, removed a piece of burning wood from the kitchen stove's firebox, and ran into the dining room, where he tossed it into a potbellied stove in the center of the room. He added tinder and kindling until that fire was strong. After another trip to the wood pile in back, he filled the box beside that stove as well.

Right on schedule, Walter unlocked the front door. He turned the cardboard sign in the window around so that the “Open” message faced outward.

As he walked back through the open doorway into the kitchen, his mother was just clamping the lid down on his round metal lunch pail.

“What's in there for today, Ma?”

“Ham sandwich, two boiled eggs, and oatmeal cookies,” she replied. “Eat any more than that and you'll be dozing through your afternoon arithmetic lessons.”

“That would be fine with me, but Miss Quinn would wake me up with that yardstick of hers.”

Gretchen laughed, a light, dancing sound that always brought a crooked smile to Walter's face. She kissed him on the forehead and handed him his coat and the lunch pail. "No dawdling along the way. I don't want you to be late."

"Not today. At least it's warm inside the schoolhouse."

He headed back through the dining room just as the front door opened. A large, well-dressed man entered, hastily shutting the door behind him. He shuffled briefly on the coarse bristle mat, wiping the snow from his brightly polished boots.

"Hello, Walter." Stafford Polk was the most important man in town and owned a fourth of the property on Main Street, including the building that housed Norgard Café.

"Morning, Mr. Polk," Walter said glumly. "Gotta get going to school." He sidestepped the large man, careful not to touch him as he went through the front door and closed it gently behind him.

Polk walked back to the kitchen and rapped loudly on the door jamb. "Mrs. Norgard?" he announced in a booming voice.

"Oh! I thought the bell on the front door was just Walter going out."

"He left for school," the big man said. "I wanted to catch you this morning before you got busy."

"It's always busy in a café, Mr. Polk. You'll have to talk while I work. The breakfast trade will be here any minute."

Polk huffed, as if he had not been paid the requisite homage. "Please step into the dining room, Mrs. Norgard. I don't want my clothes smelling like fried bacon the rest of the day." He was decked out in an expensive black wool overcoat, tall silk hat, and kid gloves. As far as Gretchen knew, Polk was the only man in town pompous enough to wear a formal top hat.

"Oh, all right!" she snapped. "But just for a moment. I'll not have my biscuits burn, sir."

"There's the matter of the January rent," he said, when she followed him into the dining room.

“Is that all? You know I’ve never once been late with my rent in the year I’ve been in your building, Mr. Polk. And besides, it’s only the middle of December. Why do you come to me now?”

“I know how you spoil that son of yours, Mrs. Norgard. I don’t want you spending my rent money on a bagful of Christmas gifts for him.”

She bit her lip before replying. Besides his chores at the café, Walter hired out for farm work in the summer and had painted the outside of several stores and houses in Straight Down. He was hardly spoiled and worked as hard as she did.

“I’ve bought my boy a pair of ice skates and a harmonica,” she said, hiding her clenched fists behind her back. “God knows I wanted to give him more, but I’ve other bills to pay besides your rent, Mr. Polk.”

“Mrs. Norgard, as a clergyman’s wife, uh, widow, you should take care about taking the Lord’s name in vain,” Polk scolded, a smug smile across his pink face. Among other positions, he was the president of the church board of elders.

She closed her eyes, then turned and walked back toward the kitchen. “Will you be eating breakfast here this morning, Mr. Polk?” she asked, over her shoulder.

“No, madam. I ate at home with my wife.”

“Then if there’s nothing further, I’ve work to do. You’ll get your January rent on time, Mr. Polk. You have my word on it.”

“I’ll hold you to it, then.” He opened the door and brushed out as haughtily as he had come in.

Gretchen grabbed a heavy towel, yanked down the oven door and pulled out a pan of biscuits. Their tops were brown, but in a few more seconds they would have been ruined. She scolded herself for telling him what she had gotten Walter for Christmas; it was none of his business, and being childless, Polk could not know the joy of giving presents to a son.

The tiny bell on the front door rang again. She ducked her head out of the kitchen to see who had come in and was greeted boisterously by two of the local limestone quarrymen who lived in sleeping rooms.

Within minutes, every seat in the dining area was filled with railroad workers, businessmen and laborers. About the same time, Keira O'Brien, a pretty, red-haired teenager, sprinted in, put on an apron and began taking orders. She served as waitress, assistant cook, dishwasher, and helped bake pies and bread for the next day.

By 9:30, the breakfast trade was over. Lunch business was far lighter, but the two women had plenty to do preparing for the supper crowd. With the baking done, Keira left, to prepare her elderly grandfather's dinner and take care of him for the evening. Walter showed up at the back door within 15 minutes after school dismissed, to serve as waiter for the supper customers.

"How was school today?" Gretchen asked, as she opened the oven door and checked on an immense pot roast.

"I can't get the arithmetic," he said red-faced, looking at the floor. "My head just won't work that way."

Gretchen was about to make a flippant remark when she noticed the look of hurt in his eyes.

"You're *not* stupid, honey," she said gently. "It's true that some folks have a knack for it and others don't. But you need to learn this to graduate, and to make your way in the world."

"Plenty of the fellas who come in here don't have any schooling," he returned. "They seem to be doing all right."

"Aye, as quarry workers and ditch diggers. But it's a hard, crushing life Walter. Physical labor is honest and good, but it wears heavy on a body over time."

He sat down on a wooden stool. "I don't understand it, Ma. Pa did mostly bookwork and preaching, except when we were cleaning and working around the church, and he up and died from pneumonia. He was a good

man, and he was doing the Lord's work. Why did God let him die? I miss him." Tears formed in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. "I miss him."

Gretchen could no longer hold back her own tears. She went over and hugged the big lad, patting him gently on the back. "I don't know, son. I ask God that every night, but he has his reasons and has no duty to explain them to us." She took the bottom corner of her apron and gently dabbed the tears away from Walter's cheeks. "Can you tend to our customers for a while? I have to go out back."

"Sure. Okay." He took out a red handkerchief and blew his nose. Then he went to a basin of soapy water and washed his hands. He took a dry reed from a cup on a counter, held it over the chimney of one of the kerosene lamps until it caught fire, then lit the lantern for her.

Gretchen pulled on Walter's coat, took the lantern, and went out into the alley behind the building. The outhouse was on the other side of the alley, near the woodpile.

Another inch of light snow had fallen since the last time she'd been out in the early afternoon. It was dark now, although the fresh snow reflected what thin moonlight there was.

Next to the woodpile was a long, snow-covered mound she had not seen before. She turned up the wick in the lantern and held it at arm's length. The mound moved!

Gretchen let out a gasp, reached down and snatched the ax.

Chapter Two



Gretchen put the lantern down in the snow, gripped the heavy ax with both hands and raised it above her head.

Just as the thing moved, she saw the crown of a hat and realized it was a man.

He roused himself slowly, stiffly, as if he had been lying there for some time. He wore a dirty canvas coat, jeans, leather gloves, and a hat that looked as if it had seen many hard times.

“Uhhhh. Where am I?” he asked groggily.

“You’re next to my woodpile,” she answered, lowering the ax. “What are you doing here?”

“Reckon I passed out.” He began moving his arms and turning his head. Audible pops came from his joints.

“Are you injured?”

“Lady, I got too much snake bite medicine in me to feel a thing.”

“So you’re drunk, then.”

“*Was* drunk. *Was* drunk. And from the look on your face, I can tell you’ve never enjoyed the experience.”

“Liquor creates more problems than it solves, mister...mister...”

“Beckworth, ma’am. Pete Beckworth. From down Texas way.”

“Well, then, Mr. Beckworth, see if you can get to your feet and get inside. We’ll need to see if any of your fingers or toes are frostbitten.”

“Obliged,” he said. Tottering on his feet for several moments, he gradually regained his balance.

“See that door there? Where the light is? That’s the back door to my café, leading into the kitchen. You go in and sit down and I’ll be in directly. If my son says anything to you, just tell him his mother sent you in.”

Nodding, Beckworth tottered up the path to the back door, while Gretchen picked up the lantern and went into the outhouse.

He turned the knob and let himself into the kitchen. No one was there. Immediately he felt the heat from the cook stove. He removed his hat and tossed it in a corner. Yanking off his gloves, he held his numb hands near the stove, feeling the warmth gradually soak into his fingers. He found a wooden chair and pulled it up close to the stove. After several moments, he realized that snow was melting off his clothing. He was unsure how long he had lain there, but had a foggy memory of staggering down that way in the late afternoon.

“Who are *you*?”

Beckworth turned to see a boy standing in the open doorway. He was tall, with hair the color of ripe Kansas wheat. He held a tray of dirty dishes and silverware. Rushing over to the dry sink, the boy set the load down on a counter.

“My name’s Pete Beckworth. Your maw sent me in. There’s no need to be scared. I’m not going to hurt anybody.”

“Sure, you could *say* that,” the boy shot back, “but how do I know it’s true?”

The back door opened and Gretchen came in with the lantern. “Because *I* say it’s true, Walter. She blew out the lantern and hung it back on a nail on the wall, then took off Walter’s coat and hung that up as well.

“Guess I don’t look like the height of trustworthiness,” Beckworth commented to no one in particular, catching a glimpse of himself in a small mirror on the wall. He wore a week’s beard, had dark circles under his eyes, and even he would admit that his bathing habits were less than regular.

In that moment, he realized he had fallen a long way from being one of the most skilled trail bosses ever to lead a herd of longhorns north from Texas.

“Let’s look at those fingers,” Gretchen ordered. “Wiggle them. Do you have feeling in all of them. Are any numb or tingling?”

“No, they’re all right now,” he replied, doing as she said. “I don’t think any are frostbitten. It’s warmed up some outside since this morning.”

“How about your toes? Can you feel your toes? Take your boots and socks off and let’s have a look at them.”

“No, ma’am. Nothing doing. This here’s an eating house you’re running here, and me taking my boots and socks off would clear it out quicker than a skunk strolling through.”

Walter chuckled, then caught himself. “You smell like whiskey,” he observed.

“That’d figure, since that’s why I was drinking. I’m starting to warm up now, so I’d best move along and let you tend to your business. I’ll go out the way I come in so’s not to disturb your customers.”

“No, you won’t be doing any such thing. Take your chair over to that table, Mr. Beckworth. I’ll be feeding you a decent meal before you’re on your way.”

“Ma...”

“Walter, I needn’t remind you of the parable of the Good Samaritan.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then get a bowl and serve Mr. Beckworth some of that stew, biscuits and coffee.”

“I don’t have any money,” the cowboy mumbled.

“Did I ask you for any? Maybe someday you’ll be able to return the favor for me, sir, though that’s not why I’m feeding you.”

“No, ma’am. I mean, yes, ma’am. Christian charity is a good thing.”

“Now you’re catching on.”

He looked the slender woman over. Her dark blonde hair was short, probably easier to take care of, he figured. The boy bore a great resemblance to her, although her features had a sterner cast about them. He would not have called her pretty, yet she had an air of determination about her that he found satisfying. He guessed her to be in her early thirties—six or seven years younger than him.

“Who do I owe this free meal to?” Beckworth asked as he sat at the table and took up the knife and fork.

“I’m Gretchen Norgard and this is my son Walter. I’m the widow of the Reverend Latham Norgard, who pastored the Straight Down Bible Church here until his death a year ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

She got a potholder and took the big blue enamel coffee pot off the stove. “I have customers to tend, Mr. Beckworth. Walter, check their water glasses and see if any more dishes need to be cleared.”

“Yes’m.”

Alone in the kitchen, Pete Beckworth dug into the stew and found it an amazing change from the stew that trail drive cooks served up when he had moved cattle across the plains, up to the Kansas railheads. The biscuits were light, airy too, not the doughy sinkers he was used to. He tried to recall the last time he had eaten in a restaurant and could not remember. For the past several months he had lived on free lunch counters in saloons or on hard sausage and crackers. Instead of worrying about where his next meal came from, he had been more concerned about his next bottle.

Before Beckworth could get up from the table, Gretchen bustled back in, filled his coffee cup again, then returned the pot to the stove. “Would you like a second helping, Mr. Beckworth? I know you cowboys are big eaters.”

“Cowboys? How would you know I’m a cowboy, ma’am? Or *was*?”

She smiled then, a smile born of the wisdom and confidence of making her own way. "By the cut of your clothes, and that wide-brimmed hat in the corner is a working man's hat, stained with sweat and trail dust. And those boots of yours, sir, worn across the middle of the uppers. That's from a stirrup rubbing on them, from years in the saddle."

"You've got a keen eye, Mrs. Norgard. Yeah, I was a trail boss, driving the big herds north. I rode for Shanghai Pierce, Goodnight and Loving, and a passel of small outfits, until..."

"Until they invented barbed wire?" Walter asked.

"Until my left leg got busted up in a stampede," Beckworth answered, staring down at the floor. "The boys took me into a little town on the Panhandle, but all they had was a veterinarian. When *his* patients came up lame, his answer was to *shoot* 'em, so he didn't have much experience setting broken bones. Botched me up good, and I've had a hell... 'scuse me, ma'am... *devil* of a time getting on and off a horse since."

"Mr. Beckworth, would you like a piece of apple pie?" Gretchen broke in.

"Mrs. Norgard, I haven't had a piece of pie in over a year. I'd appreciate it."

She served him a large slice on a pie plate, and he ate the dessert slowly and deliberately. A grin briefly danced across his face when he finished.

"Walter and I live upstairs," Gretchen explained. "If you have no place to stay tonight, Mr. Beckworth, you're welcome to sleep on the floor in the kitchen or dining room. I have extra blankets."

"No, ma'am," Beckworth said soundly. "I bunk over at Worden's livery stable, where I work. I thank you kindly for the offer, though, and for this tasty meal you gave me tonight. I'd best be going now, because there'll be work waiting for me, and you and your son have customers to take care of."

Gretchen clumsily clasped her hands in front of her. "Walter and I will...remember you in our prayers tonight, Mr. Beckworth. We will ask the Lord to watch over you and to...turn your life for the better."

For a moment the cowboy's mouth dropped open as he surveyed her and found her completely serious. He could not remember, in his entire life, another human being offering to pray for him. He stood, using the table for support, then reached out his hand and shook with Walter, who seemed hesitant to touch him.

"Young man, pay attention to your schooling and remember your father's example," Beckworth said. "A preacher's a man to fashion your life after. You don't want to end up a broken-down cow puncher like me." Then he took her hand in both of his and held it for a moment. "You have done me a kindness tonight, ma'am, one that I will not forget. Your cooking and your hospitality have fortified me. I thank you again."

"God be with you, Mr. Beckworth."

He retrieved his hat and coat, retreated through the back door, and was a half-block down the street before he turned and looked back. To be treated with manners, with *respect* once again affected him deeply. It brought back the days when he rode tall, with men tipping the brim of their hat to him or giving him a curt nod on a boardwalk.

A light snow began falling as Pete Beckworth limped his way down the street toward the livery, three blocks away.

When he got in, he went about the chores he had neglected, feeding and watering the horses boarded there, cleaning stalls, spreading fresh straw, and finally, kindling a fire in the small stove in his room. The place was hardly big enough for a cot, the stove, a small wooden table, and a creaky chair, but in the winter, the small space was an advantage because the stove kept it comfortably warm.

He sat on the bed, bone-weary, took off his hat and coat, then fought to get free of his boots, using a wooden bootjack he had nailed to the floor. Removing the boot from his stiff leg always left him in pain.

As he sat for a moment before putting out the lantern, he caught a glimpse of himself in the shard of a mirror some previous occupant had tacked to the opposite wall. Beckworth flinched at what he saw: a week's worth of beard, a dirty smudge on his forehead, and rheumy, bloodshot eyes.

Pulling the rough blankets over him and putting out the light, he vowed to himself that in the morning he would dig in his saddlebags and find his straight razor.

Something had made him feel like cleaning himself up.

Chapter Three



At the close of business, Gretchen had an odd premonition that something was going to happen. She didn't know *what*, exactly, but she had the unmistakable feeling that an important event was in the offing.

As she sat at the small table in the kitchen, reconciling the day's receipts with the order tickets, she struggled to keep from laying her head down and sleeping right there. She was exhausted and wondered how long she could keep up this pace. Walter helped in the morning and evenings, and Keira came in during the day, but Gretchen did most of the cooking.

Even so, they were barely getting by. They had money for the bare necessities in life, but no more. The town of Straight Down was growing rapidly, so she expected competition to crop up at any time. She knew that if that happened, Norgard Café might go under.

"Ma, did I tell you I got a hole in my shoe?" Walter asked, from his place at the dishpan, finishing up the supper dishes.

"What?" Her mind was elsewhere.

"I've got a hole in the bottom of my right shoe," he repeated, standing on his left leg and holding the sole of the right shoe toward her, so she could see it.

"Well, you'll have to fold some newspapers and put them inside over the hole until the first of the month," she said. "Then we'll have enough money for Mr. Faletti to put a new sole on."

"Yes, ma'am." He continued washing the dishes.

"I'm doing the best I can," she told him. "I'm sorry I can't provide better for you, Walter, but everything costs so much."

"I know. It's okay. Next time it snows I'll get out earlier, so I can beat the other fellas to shoveling walks. When we had that big snow a couple weeks ago, I made a quarter in one day."

Gretchen stood and put her hand on his shoulder. He was as tall as her now. "I'm so proud of you, son. I'm proud of the way you pitch in. I couldn't make it without you. Someday we'll have more money. You'll see."

A loud rap at the café's front door cut off the boy's reply.

"Did you put the 'Closed' sign out and blow out the lamps in the dining room?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll go tell 'em we're closed for the night." Walter dried his hands on a towel and went through the darkened dining room. Gretchen sat down at the table again, weary. She heard the small bell when Walter opened the door, some muffled conversation, then heavy footsteps back to the kitchen. She looked up and saw Wendell Houghton, the president of the town's bank.

"Good evening, Mrs. Norgard," he said, taking off his fedora and reaching out to shake hands with her.

"I'm afraid we're closed for the evening, Mr. Houghton," she said. "Everything's put away and we're just about to go upstairs."

"Oh, I'm not here for a meal. I have some good news to tell you." He sat at the empty chair near the small wooden table. Houghton was a friendly man, in his late fifties, she guessed, with a round nose and a bristly black moustache. She had never seen him when his eyes weren't dancing. Evidently he enjoyed his life and his work. He had also been a faithful supporter of the church and her husband.

"I could *use* some good news," she admitted, nodding toward the open ledger.

"Jacob Bruner's estate has finally been settled," Houghton began. Bruner was a German carpenter who had died several months ago. "He had no living relatives. He was all alone, except for that old black dog he had. A farmer took the animal in. Anyway, Mr. Bruner had \$140 in our bank, and

his shop and tools down by the railroad tracks. His will stated that the entire works is to go to you.”

Gretchen stared at Houghton a long moment, stunned. She glanced over at Walter and saw his eyes widen. “What?” she asked. “Why would he do *that?*”

“Let me read that portion of his will,” Houghton said, pulling the paper and a pair of spectacles from an inside coat pocket. He perched the glasses on his nose and leaned toward the kerosene lamp.

“To Mrs. Gretchen Norgard, I bequeath Lot 21 on Commerce Street in the city of Straight Down, the shop building upon it, and all contents therein. I also bequeath to her any and all assets remaining in my account, Number 247, at The Cattlemen’s Bank in Straight Down.”

She had gone pale. “I...I don’t understand why he would *do* such a thing.”

“This letter explains it all.” Houghton handed her another piece of paper. She unfolded it, held it toward the light, and read it aloud so Walter could hear:

Dear Mrs. Norgard:

By now you have been informed of my final wishes regarding my worldly goods. Although my holdings are not large, they were earned through honest labor, in service to my fellow citizens of Straight Down.

I bequeath my shop building, the land it occupies, with taxes paid through 1886, and my money left in the bank to you and your fine son.

When your family moved to town, your husband searched me out straightaway to do some repairs on the church. That was the first of many profitable

conversations we had together. As you are aware, I became a member of the church through your husband's kind persuasion, and he was also the instrument through which I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. No greater gift could one man give another than to lead him to salvation.

Because of your good husband's industry and friendship, I am even now, as you read these words, enjoying the eternal reward which would have been lost to me, save for him. My worldly goods seem a pittance in return, but my hope is that they make life's journey in some way easier for you and your son.

With sincere appreciation and fond regards, I am,

*Jacob Augustus Bruner
signed this 11th day of June, 1886.*

"I don't know what to say," Gretchen breathed, when she finished reading. "This is all very unexpected, Mr. Houghton."

"I can't think of anyone in town more deserving," the banker said, his eyes twinkling. "It's some Christmas present, eh?"

Walter laughed. "Yeah! We're rich!"

"Not hardly," she said, but couldn't suppress a smile. "Are there any lawyer's fees or debts we have to pay?" she wondered.

"No, that's all been settled. The building, contents, lot and money are yours, free and clear. However, I feel obligated to warn you that a problem *may* arise."

"What is it?"

“Both of you give your word to swear to secrecy?”

“Yes,” she said. They looked at Walter and he nodded silently.

“Stafford Polk wants that property, Mrs. Norgard. He tried to buy it from Bruner several times, but the carpenter wouldn't sell at any price.”

“What would Mr. Polk want it for?” Walter inquired. “He owns about a fourth of all the stores and lots in town anyway.”

“It's not common knowledge yet—Polk is trying to keep it secret—but the railroad is going to make Straight Down a stop for its passenger trains. With the growth we've had, they feel it would be worth their while to sell tickets at the depot. The trains will be stopping for passengers and to take on water. If a business were to open in Bruner's shop, a *café* perhaps, the passengers would have time to get off, buy a box lunch, then be on their way. Many outbound passengers would likely eat before leaving, as well. The location right near the depot makes this prime real estate now, Mrs. Norgard.”

“And Mr. Polk would open a *café*?”

“More likely a saloon, with a limited menu. You see, the passengers won't have time to walk down here, to *your* *café*. Whoever is closest will get that railroad business, and with trains coming through several times a day, it would be a gold mine.”

“You said the property is ours free and clear, Mr. Houghton. How does Mr. Polk think he could get his hands on it?”

“He's not saying. But he's called a special meeting of the church board of elders for Monday night at seven. I asked Reverend Bogner if there was any urgent business, and he said he knows of none. As one of the elders myself, I'll be going to that meeting, and I think it would be in *your* best interest to come as a spectator, Mrs. Norgard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Houghton. Thank you very much for bringing this wonderful news to us, and for advising us about the meeting. Walter and I will keep this in closest confidence, and I *will* be attending the board meeting Monday night.”

“Excellent!” Houghton stood, clasped her hand warmly, then shook with Walter and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “I can’t think of two more deserving people to receive this gift.”

“I’ll have to sign transfer papers and complete legal dealings?” she wondered.

“Yes. I’ll let you know on that. I won’t presume to tell you your business, Mrs. Norgard, but there’s every good reason to clean out Bruner’s building and move your café’ there.”

“This is all so much to think about.” She glanced at the open ledger and the small pile of currency and coins. “God is good,” she said. “God is good.”

“He is indeed,” Houghton said with a laugh, as he clapped on his hat and strode away. “Merry Christmas to you, folks.”

“And to you too, sir!” Gretchen collapsed onto the chair, and after they heard the front door close, she put her head in her hands and began sobbing.

“What’s wrong, Ma?” Walter crouched near her chair. He put a gentle arm around her shoulder.

“It’s been so hard since your father died,” she said. “Now all this. I don’t know if we can do it.”

“Sure we can!” Walter broke into his odd, lopsided grin. “We’ll have the best café this side of Topeka.”

She hugged him back. “God forgive me for saying this, but Stafford Polk is a very greedy man, honey. I think we’re in for the fight of our life.”

Chapter Four



Pete Beckworth was yanked out of a deep sleep by a jarring pain in his ribs.

“Wake up, you worthless saddle tramp. There’s work to be done,” a gravelly voice shouted.

Pete sat up on his bunk and saw George Worden, the owner of the livery stable, standing inside the doorway of the cramped room. Worden was holding a shovel upside down. Pete realized his boss had been jabbing him with the handle of it.

“What time is it?” Pete asked. His room had no window and he did not own an alarm clock. Worden kept a few chickens, and normally the rooster’s crowing was Pete’s wake-up call.

“It’s dawn, and if you want to keep working for me, you’ll get up and get moving. Clean out the stalls, lay down some fresh bedding, then chop me some firewood.”

“Okay, okay,” Pete replied, tugging on his boots. Worden left the shovel leaning against the wall and departed.

Pete took his coat from a nail on the wall, clapped on his hat, and grabbed the shovel. His game left leg was stiffest in the morning, stubbornly refusing to cooperate with the rest of his body.

He went about his morning chores methodically, stopping occasionally to flex his numb fingers. Although he was wearing leather gloves, the stable had no heat. Hauling a wheelbarrow full of manure out to the corral, he glanced at the thermometer tacked to the side of the building and read 20 degrees. Pete dumped the manure onto a growing pile. Farmers would come in, load some up, then spread it on their fields. If the

pile got too rank, he would have to shovel it into a wagon, then drive it to the dump outside of town, where he would shovel it off.

Pete tried to ignore his gnawing stomach. Worden ate breakfast at home with his wife. There was no place to cook at the stable, but Worden kept a pot-bellied stove going in the office, and on it was a blue enamel coffeepot, filled with a strong, chickory-braced brew.

When he got caught up, Pete cracked the office door. "How about some coffee?" he asked Worden meekly.

"Yeah, okay. Get in here and close that door. The draft's getting in." Worden was sitting at a desk, a pencil in his hand, going over the books.

Pete walked to the stove, warmed his hands near it for a while, then poured himself a cup of coffee in a heavy china mug. As the mug warmed, he wrapped his hand around it. The hot coffee felt good on his insides, but his stomach demanded food.

"I'm caught up," he told the boss. "Care if I go get something to eat?"

"Oh, all right, but be back here in a half hour. Ed Carpenter's horse needs liniment on that front left leg, and Stafford Polk's sorrel has a loose shoe. Take it down to Luther's first thing when you get back."

"All right." He looked at Worden for a moment.

"What? Oh, you want your money." Worden dug in his pocket, produced a twenty-five cent piece, then flipped it over toward Pete.

As usual, the toss was short. Pete had to bend down and pick the money up off the floor. Worden did that deliberately, and also insisted on paying Pete daily instead of once a week, saying he would squander a week's pay on liquor. Pete did not spend *all* his money on whiskey, but it galled him all the same. Come lunch time Worden would throw him another quarter, and at the close of the day another one.

"Joe Meeks' buggy harness has a bad crack in it," Pete said. "You want me to patch it when I get back?"

“Yeah, but be neat about it, dammit. When folks are driving a patched harness, they don't want it to show.”

Pete had a comeback but choked it down. Worden was a foul-tempered, vindictive man, but Pete needed this job, and the stable owner knew it. He tolerated Pete's weakness for drink but constantly lorded it over him.

Finishing the last of his coffee, Pete returned the mug to a shelf, leaving it mouth up. If anyone came in during the course of the day, they would choose one of the mugs facing mouth down. Washing the mugs and cleaning out the pot at the end of the day was also included in Pete's chores.

Clutching his quarter, he walked up the street to the bakery. Because of the cold outside, the windows were steamed up, but the enticing aroma of baking cookies drifted out on the boardwalk. He entered and headed directly to a small table in the corner, which held day-old baked goods at reduced prices. Carefully lifting a glass dome, he used a sheet of waxed paper from a stack on the table and extracted three glazed doughnuts. Turning to the display case, he saw Mildred Stevenson, the plump owner of the bakery, watching him disapprovingly. Pete held up the doughnuts in his left hand and gave her the quarter with his right.

“That will be a nickel,” she said flatly. She went to a brass cash register, rang up the sale, then dropped two dimes into Pete's outstretched hand, careful not to touch him. “And don't be eating those in front of my place, you hear?”

His face red, he lowered his head and mumbled, “Yes, ma'am.”

Once outside, he walked west on the boardwalk until he came to the mouth of an alley, then went in a few steps until he found a wooden packing crate. Using a gloved hand, he brushed the snow off it and sat down. He greedily ate two of the stale doughnuts, then forced himself to wrap the third in the waxed paper, to save for the afternoon.

For several minutes he sat in the alleyway, watching the respectable people moving about the streets, women in heavy coats, their hands thrust into fur muffs, the men in overcoats and mackinaws. The cold made their breath form frosty plumes, as they strode ahead, full of purpose.

Not so long ago, he had been one of them. Hard-working. Sober. Meriting a tip of the hat or a politely voiced greeting.

Now, on occasion, he would see a mother with her son in tow, stopping and pointing at him from across the street, no doubt warning the boy that if he did not obey and apply himself, he might end up a no-account drunk as well.

The anger had left him long ago, but not the shame. From time to time a church man or some well-meaning soul would lecture him about the evils of drink and implore him to seek Jesus and turn his life around, but Pete had never followed their advice. Advice was all they were willing to give—not a decent job or some workable way to get straightened out.

Pete absently rubbed his chin, and feeling his coarse beard, remembered his vow from last night to get himself cleaned up. He had a small dishpan back at the livery and a cake of lye soap that he used to wash up, but most days it never crossed his mind. *What's the use?* he asked himself.

He looked down the street, and far in the distance he could see the open plains. This clear, crisp morning made life stand out in sharp contrast—the difference between him and the respectable folks, and the difference between driving cattle across the wideness of the land, sitting a fine horse, and here, trapped in the unnatural confines of a town and a menial job he hated, cleaning up after horses.

Presently he stood, finding his leg more loose now. He proceeded across the street toward the hardware store.

“Hey! Watch out!”

Pete stopped, then lurched backward. A tall man driving a buckboard jerked back on the reins, stopping his snorting team just a few feet away.

"Sorry," Pete muttered, waving his arm for the man to pass in front of him.

"Dirty bum," the fellow growled as he rode by. "Watch where you're going next time."

Pete felt the tips of his ears grow hot. Sometimes the insults were too much to stand. But he set his chin and continued across the street, keeping an eye out for traffic this time.

He checked the big Regulator clock dutifully ticking away in the hardware store window. He still had fifteen minutes until he had to be back at the stable.

Just as he was pondering what to do with the rest of his freedom, the door of the store opened and Gretchen Norgard stepped out.

She considered him a moment, startled. "Ah, Mr. Beckworth. How are you this morning?" The cold had brought a blush to her cheeks. He noticed now that her eyes were a pale shade of blue, and sparkling for some hidden reason.

He blinked. It had been a long time since anyone had called him "mister." Pete recovered, taking off his hat, and said, "I want to thank you again for that fine meal last night, ma'am. I...appreciate your kindness."

"Well, you're quite welcome." A half smile played on her lips. "Mr. Beckworth, do you have any spare time on your hands?"

"Ma'am?"

"I have some work for you, if you're interested. I've just come into possession of a building, down by the depot. My son and I will need help cleaning it out, and moving the furnishings from our café into it. Would you be interested?"

He realized he was kneading the brim of his hat in his hands. "Well, yes, Mrs. Norgard. I have a job at Worden's Livery, but a boy comes in about supper time. My evenings are my own."

"Good!" she said, smiling again. "You come to the café Tuesday evening, about seven. You'll have something to eat, then you and I and Walter will go over there and see what needs to be done."

"I can't keep taking your charity, ma'am."

"No! I don't expect you to, sir. You'd be willing to barter a few small chores for your supper, wouldn't you?"

He found himself grinning. "Yes, ma'am. That would be a fine bargain."

"Good, then. We'll see you Tuesday night, Mr. Beckworth."

"Have a good day, Mrs. Norgard." He watched her retreat down the boardwalk.

He had intended to take his two dimes over to Chump's Green Door Saloon for two glasses of beer, but instead crammed them into his front pants pocket. He glanced at the clock again and decided to make his way back to the livery.

For the first time in months, a laugh escaped from Pete Beckworth's lips. He resolved, when his work was through for the day, to find his saddlebags, dig out his straight razor, and make use of that cake of soap.

Chapter Five



All eyes turned to the door when Gretchen Norgard entered the small room.

She took a quick survey of the faces and saw a group of frightened rabbits, especially the pastor, Leo Bogner. The church board sat around the long wooden table, their coats and hats hung on pegs on the far wall. A stove in the corner made the small room off the side of the church comfortably warm.

“Good evening, Mrs. Norgard,” they all said in turn.

“Good evening, gentlemen. Where’s Mr. Polk?”

“He’ll be here soon,” said Reverend Bogner, his voice cracking. He was a tall scarecrow of a man who reminded Gretchen of Ichabod Crane, from Irving’s story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Most of the time Bogner acted as scattered as Crane as well.

Gretchen nodded her head so slightly toward Wendell Houghton that only he recognized the acknowledgement. If she had only one ally on the board, it was the bank president.

Next to Houghton sat Joseph Faletti, an Italian immigrant who repaired shoes and ran a small leather goods shop. He was smiling under his large black mustache, but his eyes betrayed his nervousness.

Harvey Stetz, owner of the town’s drug store, sat next to Faletti. The bald, portly man seemed unusually engrossed in studying his clasped hands, probably so he did not have to make eye contact with her, Gretchen thought.

Opposite them was Theodore Wade, Straight Down’s only doctor, who looked exhausted as usual. He was a gaunt man with a shock of unruly white hair and wore thick, gold-framed eyeglasses. Gretchen thought she

saw his head nod once or twice. She half-expected him to fall asleep during the meeting.

To Wade's left sat Rolf Oglesby, a rancher who lived about four miles outside town. He did not exhibit the same anxiety as the others, but his brown, lined face was drawn up tight into a frown, perhaps because he had to ride in on a cold winter's night at Polk's bidding. Gretchen knew Oglesby as one of the pioneers of Chase County. She guessed him to be near seventy, a widower who had remarried. His two sons still lived at home on the ranch, while his daughter had married and moved to Kansas City. Gretchen concluded that this rugged, independent man would be the least intimidated by Stafford Polk.

She was about to ask Faletti about his wife, who had fallen on an icy sidewalk last week, when the door burst open and Polk made his entrance.

"Sorry I'm late, gentlemen," he stated, though it sounded insincere. As he was about to hang up his coat and the absurd silk top hat, he noticed Gretchen sitting on a bench at the side of the room. "Oh, Mrs. Norgard! Forgive me. I didn't see you...sitting there."

"Good evening, Mr. Polk," she said coolly.

"Er, this is a special meeting of the church board that I called to discuss a, well, delicate matter," he said to her, as he sat at the head of the table. He placed a leather portfolio in front of him. "The public would not be invited, but, uh, out of respect for your husband, I, as president, have no objection to your observing."

"That's good," she shot back. "Because the church's bylaws state that *all* meetings of the board of elders, special or otherwise, are *always* open to any member of the congregation who cares to attend. Right, Reverend Bogner?"

"Well, I..."

"There's a copy of the bylaws on that bookshelf," she said, pointing. "Would you like me to read it to you?"

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Norgard.” Polk’s face was flushed. He was a compulsive liar and became infuriated when someone dared to catch him at it. He rapped his knuckles on the table, as a makeshift gavel, and said, “This special meeting of the Straight Down Bible Church board of elders will come to order. Harvey, you’ll take minutes.” Polk had a habit of ordering people around. Stetz took a pad from a shelf, found a pencil, and began scribbling away.

Polk untied the leather portfolio and drew a stack of papers from it. He acted as if he were reading from one of the sheets, but Gretchen knew that he, too, was avoiding eye contact with her.

“I’ve called this meeting tonight to discuss a recent bequest to a member of this church, Mrs. Norgard, there,” Polk began. “The rest of you may not have heard yet, but Jacob Bruner, a member of this congregation who passed away a few months ago, recently willed Mrs. Norgard his carpenter shop, the contents of the building, and the lot that it stands on.”

No one commented. Gretchen checked their faces. Oglesby might have been showing surprise, or indigestion, she could not tell which. Faletti’s eyebrows shot up, but only for an instant. The others looked angry or guilty, except for Houghton, whose face was as expressionless as a sphinx.

“It is my contention, as board president, that Mr. Bruner intended for that property to go to the *church*, but was not of, er, sound mind when he made out his will.”

“I have a letter right here in which Mr. Bruner elaborates on his wishes, and it certainly seems to me to be the product of someone of a sound mind,” Gretchen interrupted, pulling the folded paper from her handbag.

Polk was visibly shaken, obviously unaware of the letter. “You...you are out of order, Mrs. Norgard,” he stammered. “The chair has not recognized you.”

“Well, maybe you’ll recognize Mr. Bruner’s handwriting,” she snapped, standing and handing Polk the paper. “And if you don’t believe this letter is genuine, you can compare it against Mr. Bruner’s handwritten receipts for carpentry work he performed on this building. My husband was very careful about keeping them in the church records. All of you board members authorized the work and know that Mr. Bruner performed it.”

Polk sat silently, reading the letter, his face becoming even more fligid. Gretchen glanced at Wendell Houghton and caught the banker trying to suppress a smile.

“This letter changes nothing,” Polk stated, passing it on to the doctor. “The fact is that when the late Reverend Norgard spoke with Mr. Bruner regarding his eternal destiny, Reverend Norgard was operating as a paid agent of Straight Down Bible Church. As such, he was engaged in official duties, and on those grounds, it is my belief that this property should be the possession of this church.”

Gretchen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. As usual, Polk was using bluff and bluster to try to force his way on others.

“No, sir,” she said, standing behind Oglesby, her hands clenched into fists. She could feel hot tears forming in her eyes but fought hard against them. She was not going to let Polk steal this from her and her son.

“Now Mrs. Norgard,” he said, trying to smooth the matter, “As a member in good standing of this congregation, I should think you would *want* to see the church receive this property. As the former pastor’s wife, you know too well how cash-poor this institution is.”

She also knew that Polk wanted to buy the property from the church for his own business interests, but she did not play that card, sensing that revealing Polk’s motives might jeopardize Houghton, since Polk was a member of the *bank*’s board of directors as well.

“What I know...what I know,” she started, battling to keep from breaking down, “is that Jacob Bruner left his property to me and my son—

personally—and that if he had wanted it to go to the church, that's how he would have written his will.”

“An attorney in Topeka thinks differently,” Polk cut her off. “I've advised him of the situation and he says we have a legitimate case. Now if you'll hand me that letter back, Rolf...”

Gretchen stepped in and snatched the letter from the rancher's hand. She stuffed it into her handbag and clutched it to her chest.

“No, Mr. Polk. This letter is *mine*, addressed to me, and I'll be holding onto it for safekeeping.”

His chin jutted out in defiance. “Very well! Gentlemen, you have heard the situation. I call for a motion to authorize the payment of \$100 from the church's general fund to pay Kingston Bennett, attorney at law, of Topeka, Kansas, to prepare a legal action against Mrs. Gretchen Norgard, to contest Jacob Bruner's will and to ask the court to award his property to Straight Down Bible Church.”

Trembling, Gretchen watched Harvey Stetz frantically writing the motion down on the pad.

“So move,” mumbled the doctor, staring at the table.

“Second,” Stetz added, his face twitching when he said it.

“All those in favor signify by saying ‘aye’,” Polk said. All board members voted in favor. Gretchen was angered but could not blame them. She had been in town long enough to know how Stafford Polk operated. He had some sort of leverage on every man sitting at the table, including her friend Wendell Houghton.

Polk looked up at her, a smug smile on his face, “I'm sorry it had to come to this, Mrs. Norgard, but if you had offered to surrender the property to the church, this could have been avoided.”

“I don't recall anyone *asking* me to do that,” she snapped back. It was true. Stafford Polk, so accustomed to overpowering anyone who opposed him, had, in his haste, forgotten to merely ask her for the building and lot.

Polk recovered quickly. "As there is no further business, gentlemen, the chair will entertain a motion for adjournment." They wrapped up the meeting quickly, and the dirty deed done, each man grabbed his coat and hat and fled, like insects scurrying away when someone puts on a light.

Gretchen made for home too. She had no desire to talk further with Polk, and she would not jeopardize Houghton or Oglesby by speaking with them where the board president could see.

As her shoes clomped noisily on the wooden boardwalk, her mind raced ahead, from one imagined scenario to another. Sure that no one was around to see her, she paused by a column supporting a store's porch roof and broke down in tears. She let it out for several minutes, knowing that it was not just tonight's matter that caused the sobbing. She was tense, tired, and tight as an overwound watch. When the release finally subsided, she felt considerably better.

She wondered what Latham would have done. He had been a studious, thoughtful man, never given to extreme bursts of emotion, but he possessed a remarkable strength, an indomitable steadiness born of his absolute faith in God. She missed him so that at times her heart actually ached.

Gretchen decided Latham would have fought this matter too, and in that moment she resolved to do so, although she was at a loss as to where the money would come from. She might be able to draw on the bank account Bruner had left her, but she suspected Polk had anticipated that and had ordered Houghton to freeze those funds.

Arriving at the café, she climbed the outside stairs to their living quarters on the second story. Walter opened the door and let her in.

"I heard you coming up the steps," he said. "How did it go?"

"Polk wants the carpenter shop, all right. He got money from the church to hire a lawyer from Topeka," she told him as she took off her coat and gloves.

“A lawyer! How are we going to fight that?” Walter asked. “We don’t have no money for a lawyer.”

“We don’t have *any* money for a lawyer,” she corrected him.

“Yeah. That’s what I said. What are we gonna do?”

“Right at the moment, I don’t know. We *are* going to fight this thing, but I’m not sure how.” She felt incredibly weary, as if all the life had been pulled out of her.

Walter sat down on one of their three parlor chairs and handed her a ledger and a small wooden box. “I knew you’d be tired when you got back, so I did today’s bookwork. The checks and the cash balanced out to the penny.”

Gretchen gazed at him, astonished. She put a hand on his cheek and gently caressed him. He beamed with pride. “Is this the same boy who said he can’t get arithmetic?” she asked quietly.

“Well, maybe you’re right. There *is* some good use for it. And I filled all the lamps in the dining room, washed the chimneys, and brought some wood in.”

She hugged him tightly, then put the ledger and cash box on an end table. This big, shy boy had every fine quality of his father.

“Thank you, Walter. With a son like you, no one will be able to overcome me, even Stafford Polk.”

But in her heart, Gretchen already felt defeated. Polk was a ruthless, conniving man who would go to any length to get what he wanted, including intimidation, extortion, and perhaps even violence.

When Wendell Houghton had told her about Bruner’s will and gave her the letter, she felt that their lives were finally going to turn around, that all of their hard work would be rewarded. A new, bigger café, right next to the railroad depot would be sure to succeed.

Now, she knew she would need a miracle to make that happen.

Chapter Six



Pete Beckworth felt something he had not known in years: hope.

Maybe it was the Christmas decorations about town. The merchants had bedecked Straight Down with evergreen garlands, from one lamp post to another, across store fronts, and even on some of the hitch rails.

He tried to remember the last time he had received a Christmas present and recalled his years with old Joe Hook, on the Bar-J spread, south and west of Abilene. Hook had been a grouchy, cantankerous rancher, constantly plagued with ill digestion, but he had done something that still brought a lump to Pete's throat every time he thought of it.

That Christmas back in '78, Hook had bought every cowboy in his outfit, including the cook and his helper, a \$2 silver-plated pocket watch, and if that were not extravagant enough, he had each man's name engraved on the back of the case. Pete could still remember how those range-hardened punchers' eyes had welled up when they opened those little boxes.

Then he silently cursed himself, because he had traded his watch to a barkeep in Topeka, for a half-full bottle of whiskey.

Pete squinted up at the stars and shook his head. He had been drifting and drinking too long. He did not know what he could do with one stiff leg, but he vowed to find *something*. Deep inside him was that longing all men have to be treated with respect.

He had landed in Straight Down by coincidence, or so it had seemed a couple weeks ago. Usually his reason for being somewhere was that he had been fired from a menial job further east and was forced to move on.

Straight Down was an odd town, he thought. It derived its name from being built on the edge of a large cliff, but that was where the vein of water ran and wells could be dug, so that was where the houses and stores sprang up. Opposite an alley behind many of the stores, the cliff formed a natural border, and many years ago someone had erected a fence there to keep children from falling over the hundred foot drop.

The West as Pete had known it was vanishing. With the expansion of the railroads, big herds of cattle no longer had to be driven hundreds of miles to railheads. Smaller ranchers were fencing in the open range. As the railroads crisscrossed the country, more and more settlers came with them. Now, instead of riding a week's time without seeing another white man, a fellow saw a landscape dotted with windmills and farm houses and burgeoning towns, like Straight Down.

He crossed the street, headed down an alley, and went to the back door of the Norgard Café. He rapped twice with his knuckles.

"Oh. It's you," Walter said, opening the door.

"Come in, Mr. Beckworth," Gretchen called to him from the kitchen. "You're right on time."

The warmth of the cook stove felt good. He had shivered through the day, doing his chores at the stable. Now, his stomach growled in anticipation of a decent meal.

"Sit down at the table there," she pointed. Silverware and a coffee cup were laid out. He shucked his coat and hat and sat down, then she placed a steaming plate filled with ham, mashed potatoes, cornbread, and beans in front of him. She filled his mug with dark, hot coffee.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asked.

"We already did," Walter said. "I'm going to sweep out the dining room, Ma," he told her, picking up a dust pan and broom.

"That's good. I'll sit and talk with Mr. Beckworth while you work."

Pete felt self-conscious, looking down at a sumptuous meal he could not pay for. Some odd impulse made him bow his head for a moment, and he silently thanked God for this strange bit of good fortune. He surprised even himself. He had not prayed since he had been a lad.

"Thanks for the meal," he said.

"Don't thank me. You'll earn it. As I said, when you're finished, we'll go over to the carpenter shop and see what needs to be done."

"Your son doesn't like me much," Pete observed, between bites. The ham was smoky and strong, just the way he liked it. And the cornbread was light and fine, not tough and sodden, the way some trail cooks made it. Even the coffee seemed remarkable.

"He doesn't have much patience with strong drink. Neither do I. But I see tonight that you've shaved and cleaned up."

Pete felt embarrassed, not knowing what to say. He nodded a bit. "Reckon it was overdue," he finally mumbled.

"I feel obliged to warn you, Mr. Beckworth, that there may be trouble if you do this work for me. I inherited Mr. Bruner's carpenter shop, the contents, and the lot it sits on, which was originally bequeathed to my late husband. But Stafford Polk has his eye on it, and he intends to have it for himself."

"I've heard of Polk," Pete replied, putting down his coffee mug. "He owns the note on Worden's Livery, where I work, and several other businesses in town. He must be a pretty powerful man."

"He is. And maybe I'm a fool to buck him, but that property is rightfully mine and my son's, and with the railroad starting passenger service in Straight Down, it will be a wonderful new location for our café."

"So you plan to clear it out, clean it up, and move your business there?"

"That's where you come in, Mr. Beckworth, *if* you want the job. There's much work to be done. I can't get away from here during the day, and I'm afraid by nightfall I'm just too tired to do much."

“What trouble do you expect from Polk, then?”

“He’s already taken steps with the church board to have a Topeka attorney file suit against me. Doing it through the church makes it seem more...legitimate, shall I say, then he will force the church to sell it to him. There’s been talk he wants to open a saloon or gambling house.”

“Why doesn’t he just buy it from you?”

“Because I wouldn’t sell. It’s a prime location. Being next to the depot will mean the difference between having a thriving business for me and my son or eking out a living here, as we’ve done for the past year.”

Pete smiled as he finished the last of his meal.

“You find this amusing, sir?”

“Mrs. Norgard, I have always admired women with a strong backbone. You, ma’am, have my admiration.”

Her hand flitted briefly to her cheek as she blushed a deep red. “I may have a strong backbone, Mr. Beckworth, but I’d still be a woman with a 12 year-old boy facing Stafford Polk. I’m asking you a great deal. More than I have a right to ask, I’m sure.”

“Then don’t ask,” he said. “Let me offer instead. I’ve lived a fool’s life far too long. I don’t know if this is my ticket out of it or just my ticket out of town, but I’m willing to throw in with you in this fight, come what may. Will you accept my offer of help?”

Something softened in her eyes and she rose quickly from her chair. She took a potholder, removed a bowl of peach cobbler from the warming oven over the stove and set it in front of him.

“I accept your offer, Mr. Beckworth,” she said softly, “and may the Lord protect us both in this dispute.”

“Amen to that,” he added, picking up a spoon and attacking the dessert.

Fifteen minutes later, when Gretchen turned the key and opened the front door to Jacob Bruner's carpenter shop, Pete Beckworth held the lantern above his head and drew in a sharp breath.

The place was large enough to hold four of the current Norgard Café dining rooms. But it was also filled with lumber, sawhorses, workbenches, tools, and great mounds of sawdust.

"This place is *huge*," Walter said with a gasp.

"It's also going to need a great deal of work." Gretchen walked to a dirty window in the back of the room, wiped the grime off it with a rag she had found, and peered through. "The first order of business will be to turn it around."

Walter tilted his head and looked at her. "Huh?"

"The railroad tracks are in the back right now," Pete explained. "We'll turn the back into the *front* entrance and put a big sign up, so the train passengers will be sure to see it as they're coming into town."

Gretchen brought an oil lamp over and lit it from the lantern. She looked around again with the additional light. "Well, as you might expect with a carpenter, the place is stoutly built. We'll have to put a wall up over there to block off the kitchen."

"I'm curious about something," Pete said. "If Polk wants this place, how did you manage to get the key to it? Didn't he try to bully Bruner's lawyer into refusing to give it to you?"

"Ah, but Mr. Houghton, the bank president, had the key. It took some quick talking, but I eventually persuaded him to give it to me. He warned me to expect some sort of legal action from Mr. Polk, however, to prevent me from making changes to the building or moving my café here before the hearing takes place."

Pete rubbed his chin in thought, then half-smiled. His face felt good, free of beard stubble. He felt...*taller*...than he had in months. "Have you hired a lawyer, Mrs. Norgard?"

“Can’t afford it,” she said abruptly. “Mr. Bruner left us some cash in the Cattlemen’s Bank, but Polk *did* succeed in forcing Mr. Houghton to freeze that account. I fully expect that as soon as there’s any activity here, Mr. Polk will send the town marshal down to stop it. He’s got him browbeaten too.”

Pete held the lantern up as he explored the large room. In his mind’s eye, he could see the place full of tables and chairs and every one of them occupied by hungry customers. He imagined a couple cooks back in the kitchen, waitresses scurrying about, and Gretchen Norgard at the cash register, smiling and taking payments.

Unconsciously, Pete’s hand slid down to his right hip where, for most of his life, a .45 caliber Colt revolver had been holstered. But that had been bartered away years ago as well.

He did not want to tell Gretchen his plan, but recalled a man he had known on the plains. He thought he lived in Topeka, and very likely this fellow would know what to do. Pete also hoped the man would remember that he owed his old trail boss a favor.

Chapter Seven



“Mrs. Norgard, you were in that carpenter shop last night.” Stafford Polk said, his face twisted in anger. He stood in the doorway of the café’s kitchen as she worked furiously cooking for the breakfast trade.

“That’s right, I was,” she answered. “Did one of your spies tell you that? No matter. It’s my property, and I plan to proceed with the renovation of it.”

“It’s *not* your property.” Hands on hips, his chin sticking out, Polk spoke with an air of authority. He was a man who was not accustomed to being defied. “The *court* will rule whether it’s your property or not.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it! It *is* my property, granted to me in a legal and binding will, until the court proves otherwise, and unless it does, I’m going ahead with the work on it.” Gretchen’s face was pink from the heat of the cook stove, and tiny beads of sweat had formed on her forehead. She glanced at Polk as she put two plates of food on a tray for her waitress to take into the dining room. The big man’s fists were clenched. Instead of ringing the small bell for Keira to come and pick up the food, Gretchen hoisted it in the air herself, and proceeded toward the doorway. “Stand aside, Mr. Polk, or you risk getting eggs and bacon on that fine suit of yours.”

Polk reluctantly gave way. She knew he would not carry the conversation into the dining room, where it would be heard and repeated all over town.

“You won’t win this,” Polk said under his breath. “The judge is going to rule in favor of the church.”

She turned her back on him, passed the tray off to Keira, then brushed past Polk, into the kitchen. Fuming, he stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

"Everything all right?" Keira asked, when she came back to the kitchen.

Gretchen had already informed her waitress about her plans to move the café to Bruner's building, next to the depot. With an expanded business, she would need Keira, perhaps another waitress, and a cook as well.

"I wish I *felt* as confident as I sound," Gretchen confessed to the girl.

"Ah, that Stafford Polk! Everybody in town hates him, but you're the first to stand up to him, Mrs. Norgard. He's nothing but a bully, except he threatens people with his money instead of his fists."

"Well, I've no money to fight him with. And my guess is that he'll delay the hearing somehow, then throw me out of *this* place at the end of the month."

The red-haired girl's eyes widened. "Can he *do* that?"

"He's the landlord. And I rent on a month by month basis, without a signed lease. In this town Stafford Polk can do pretty much as he pleases."

As usual, the rest of the day was so hectic that Gretchen had no time to fret about the matter. When Walter came in after school, he dove into his chores with no prodding. The boy was well aware that it took his best effort as well as his mother's to keep the café running.

Finally, after the supper crowd had left, the two of them sat at the small table in the kitchen, eating their own dinner.

"Is that Beckworth going to show up tonight?" Walter asked, "Or is he drunk again?"

"It's *Mr.* Beckworth," she reproved him, "and what's this about him being drunk?"

"The fellas at school say he's just a worthless saddle tramp who only works at the livery until he gets enough money to buy a bottle, then drinks 'til he passes out."

Gretchen leaned over and put her hand on her son's forearm. "Do you remember how hard it was for us right after your father died?"

"Yes, ma'am." He averted his eyes to the table top.

"Everyone handles hurt in their own way," she said softly. "You and I have handled ours by working so hard we're exhausted by the end of the day. Mr. Beckworth has a big hurt inside him too, Walter."

"But drinking isn't right, Ma. Pa used to say that all the time. He said we have to *pray* more when we get in trouble."

"Your father was right. We *do* have to pray more. But maybe Mr. Beckworth isn't saved. Maybe he doesn't know *how* to pray."

Walter thought about that. "Yeah. I guess you're right."

"How do you feel when you can't get your arithmetic problems and everybody else in class can?"

He looked down again, avoiding her gaze. "I feel stupid. Worthless. Like I do the best I can and it still isn't good enough."

"Imagine if you were Mr. Beckworth." Her eyes glistened in the light of the kerosene lamp. "Cowboys are proud men. Tough. Independent. Then his leg gets injured and he can't do that kind of work any more. What meant the most to him was taken away. How do you think Mr. Beckworth feels?"

"Stupid, I guess. Worthless." When he looked up at her she saw his green eyes welling up.

She reached over and hugged him, held him tight for a full minute.

"Mr. Beckworth doesn't need our pity, honey. In fact, I'm sure he'd get very angry if we pitied him. What he needs is our help and compassion. It's only because you and I both know what hurt is like that we can help him. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I think." Walter took out his red kerchief and wiped his eyes. "I sure miss Pa."

"I know," she said, putting a hand to his cheek. "So do I. We'll always miss him, until we get to heaven and we're all together again."

"So Mr. Beckworth isn't coming for supper tonight?"

She took a metal lunch pail off a shelf. "No. I saw him earlier in the day, and he said he was going over to the shop right after his day was done at the livery stable. I gave him the key and he was going to do some cleaning up over there. I told him I'd take him his supper and that we'd join him when we were done here. Do you have homework to do tonight?"

"No. I can go with you."

"Good!" She filled a quart jar with hot coffee, then screwed the lid on tightly. They put their coats on, she carrying the lunch pail and Walter holding the coffee in his mittened hands, and they walked the three blocks to the carpenter shop.

When they went in the front door, they found Pete Beckworth shoveling a pile of sawdust into a large bucket. He had swept the wood floor clean of debris, had stacked the sawhorses in a corner, and had put all the tools in three wooden toolboxes.

"Good evening!" Gretchen greeted him, smiling. "You've gotten quite a bit done."

"I figured we'll need some of these tools when we start fixing the place up. I'm no carpenter like Bruner was, but I've put up a barn or two and some bunkhouses in my day. If you don't mind that it's not perfect, I can do that work for you."

"I'll just wallpaper over your mistakes," Gretchen said, her eyes twinkling. "Stop now. I've brought your supper."

They found a stool and some wooden chairs and sat at one of the workbenches. She handed Pete some silverware and took the lid off the lunch pail. A heavenly aroma poured out. Pete looked inside.

“Chicken and noodles! That’s one of my favorites.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I forgot to bring a cup,” she said, as she unscrewed the lid from the jar of coffee.

“There’s a tin cup on that bench over there.” Walter said. He got up, retrieved the cup and handed it to Pete. “Here you are, sir.”

Pete got an odd expression on his face. His lower lip quivered for a moment. “Ain’t been called ‘sir’ for a long time,” he said clumsily, removing his hat and setting it on the table.

“Eat up before it gets cold,” Gretchen told him, trying to cover his embarrassment. “Polk was in this morning. I’m afraid he may try something...drastic. I’ve never seen him that angry.”

“He doesn’t have a leg to stand on,” Pete assured her, his mouth full of food. “He can bluff and bluster all he wants, but he can’t run us out of here before that hearing.” He realized he had said ‘us’, and it made him feel good.

A noise on the roof made them look at each other curiously. Walter looked out a window. “It’s frozen rain,” he said.

“That will make it slick,” Gretchen said, glancing at Pete’s stiff leg. “Be careful when you walk back to your room tonight.”

He nodded silently. After he had finished eating, he and Walter pushed a few of the workbenches against one wall, then stacked the lumber in a corner.

“We’d best be going, Walter.” Gretchen stood. “We both have to get up early in the morning.”

“I’ll stay a bit longer,” Pete said. “I want to sort out the supplies we need for the kitchen wall and a front counter. “I think there’s enough lumber and nails here that you won’t have to buy anything. If it’s all right with you, I’ll lock up when I leave.”

“That sounds fine. You keep the key. Same arrangement tomorrow night?”

He handed the empty lunch pail and jar back to her. "From the taste of your cooking, I think I'm getting the better end of this deal, Mrs. Norgard."

She smiled, and it was a clean, pretty smile that had a remarkable softening effect on her face. "Mind what I said, now, Mr. Beckworth. It'll be slippery tonight so be careful."

"I'll see you both tomorrow night. Thanks for the help, Walter."

"Sure." The crooked grin appeared across the boy's face for just an instant.

After they left, Pete worked another half hour. He did a quick inventory of the lumber and hardware Bruner had accumulated and found plenty of wood for the remodeling, and even enough to build some tables. Since they would be covered by checkered tablecloths, as in the other café, Pete's crude carpentry would not show.

He blew out the lamps and checked the pot-bellied stove again. Pete had been burning lumber scraps and sawdust. Nothing flammable was near the stove. The fire would eventually burn out with no further fuel.

After making sure everything was safe and secure, Pete locked the door, put the key in his front pocket, and started to walk toward the livery stable, at the far end of the street. He quickly discovered that the ground was slippery under his boots. His stiff leg did not help any. A cane would have helped, but his pride was too great to use one.

He had crossed the tracks and was making his way down an alley when the first blow hit him.

His good leg buckled and he went down on the ice, hard. The fall jarred his spine, sending a bolt of pain exploding inside his head.

Pete thought he had slipped until he looked up and saw two men standing over him in the shadows. Both wore muslin flour sacks over their heads, with holes cut for their eyes. One was short and stocky, the other tall, in a plaid mackinaw.

Tall started kicking Pete viciously in his game leg. The cowboy tried to roll on his side but the ice was too slick for him to get any traction. Short applied his boots to Pete's head and ribs. Even with his heavy canvas coat on, the pain was excruciating.

Pete alternated between grabbing for their legs and wrapping his arms around his head for protection. When he covered one spot, they attacked in another. One kicked his groin and within a second after the jolt took his breath away, he felt himself losing consciousness.

"That did him," Tall said, cackling.

"Give 'em some more. He ain't full out yet." The short man tried to stomp on Pete's face but the ground was too slick. He could not balance on one leg and step down with the other.

"Awww, that's good enough," Tall ordered. "The cliff'll do the rest."

Pete was vaguely aware of what they were saying, but he could not see. He felt something wet, then realized, by the smell, that they were pouring whiskey on him. He felt a tug and thought one of them had stuffed the empty bottle in his coat pocket.

"Over to the edge," Short grunted.

Pete felt himself moving, being dragged along the ground, but could do nothing to stop it.

"Damn, it's slippery," one of them swore.

"I ain't getting' close to that edge. Hell, we could go over ourselves."

"Well, then just give him a push. It's downhill, and he'll pick up some speed and go right through that fence."

Then Pete realized he was sliding downhill, toward the picket fence that rimmed the cliff where the town had gotten its name from. A thin coat of water on top the ice made it impossible to get a handhold.

A loud cracking noise brought even more pain. Pete moaned, sensing he had stopped sliding.

"Son of a...He's hung up on that fence! He didn't go over the side."

“Well, *I* sure as hell ain't gonna go down there and knock him loose. Them boards is all rotted and broke. He won't stay on there for long.”

Pete heard them laughing as they walked away. “One little twitch and...a hunnert feet straight down!” They laughed again, cruel, guttural sounds that echoed in the frigid air.

For a moment, Pete Beckworth grasped that his legs were hanging over the edge, dangling, heavy and numb. He tried to shout for help but all that came out was a pathetic croak.

Then everything went black.

Chapter Eight



“Ma! Come quick!”

“Walter, I can’t. We’ve got customers,” Gretchen shouted back to her son, who was standing at the back of the kitchen, the door open. “And I thought you were at school by now.”

“It’s Mr. Beckworth,” Walter said. “He’s in trouble.”

Gretchen dropped the pancake turner onto the floor and ran over to her son. “What? What’s this about Mr. Beckworth?”

“He’s hung up on the fence by the cliff. He musta slipped on the ice. Some men are trying to rescue him now.”

Taking a skillet of bacon off the stove, Gretchen stuck her head into the dining room and said to her waitress, “Keira! Watch the kitchen for a few minutes. I’ve got to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” The girl gave a curt nod, Gretchen hurried back into the kitchen, grabbed her coat, and followed her son down the alley.

“I saw ‘em on the way to school,” Walter explained. “Marshal Jeffers had a rope tied around him and they were lowering him down to where Mr. Beckworth is. The ice is slicker than grease.”

When they reached the scene, Gretchen put a hand to her mouth. Five men had a long, thick rope and were slowly letting the town marshal down the icy incline to where the shadowy figure of Pete Beckworth could be seen, hanging halfway over the cliff. Two men held the bridle of a harnessed draft horse, long plumes of frosty vapor puffing out of the animal’s nose. A third man watched the end of the rope, tied around a singletree hitch, fastened to the horse’s traces. Two others kept track of the marshal, guiding the rope down to him.

"A couple more feet," Marshal Jeffers yelled up. "He looks to be unconscious. Slow and easy, men, I don't want to smash into him. There's not much holding him here."

Jeffers had the rope tied around his waist and was lying on the ice, his boots pointed toward the other rescuers. His arms were outstretched toward the helpless cowboy.

"Hey! Can you hear me?" Jeffers bellowed.

"His name is Beckworth," Gretchen called out, her voice cracking. "Pete Beckworth."

"Beckworth!" the marshal repeated. "Can you hear me?" There was no response. The lawman turned his head back for a second. "Let me down another two feet—slow and easy. Slow and easy."

They inched him down the ice until he was able to get his hands on Pete's coat. With gloved hands, Marshal Jeffers got a tight grip on the collar and lapel of the sheepskin jacket.

"We may have to tear him free, boys. I believe I've got him. Bring us up."

Two men led the horse toward the street, drawing the rope tight. A man holding the bridle said to the other rescuers, "Keep a hold on that rope in case this harness breaks."

They clamped down on the rope again, walking backwards as the horse pulled the two men upward.

One of the pickets of the fence caught on Pete's boot top. Jeffers could not let go with one hand to free it. "Keep pulling," he roared. "We've gotta bust him loose!"

Twenty feet away, Gretchen held her hands tight against her mouth. She watched the fence pull and bend, and finally the old boards cracked as loudly as a rifle shot. The marshal and his burden snapped free. At the top of the hill, the man holding the horse pulled the heavy animal ahead faster.

Finally the two reached the top. Jeffers, his face red with exertion, knelt on the ground, trying to catch his breath. Two men worked to remove the rope from around the lawman's waist.

"You know this Beckworth, Mrs. Norgard?" one of the rescuers asked.

She and Walter ran up. "He works at the livery," she said. "He's been doing some odd jobs for me. He looks like he's been hurt."

"Hurt, hell," another of the men, wearing the dusty clothes of a quarryman, observed. "He smells like cheap whiskey, and looky that bottle stickin' outta his pocket."

"He's just some worthless ol' drunk that fell down the hill and you risked your life for him, Marshal," another said.

"We need to get him to the doctor's office." Gretchen crouched over Pete. She looked up into their faces. All of the men knew and respected her, so they nodded, picked the cowboy up by his arms and legs, and carried him down the street.

"You go on to school, Walter," Gretchen ordered her son.

"Gee, Ma, can't I come along?"

"No! Go on now. And if you're late, you tell Miss Quinn to stop by the café and I'll explain it to her."

"Aww, okay." Slings a stack of books held together with an old belt, he trotted down the street toward the one-room school house.

* * *

When Dr. Wade emerged from his exam room an hour later, Gretchen Norgard rose from the straightback chair in his anteroom, where she had been waiting.

"Is he going to...make it, Doctor?" Worry tightened her face.

"Yes, yes, of course," Wade replied, wiping his hands on a towel.

"I think, at heart, he's a *good* man, Doctor. He just got off the path somewhere and turned to alcohol instead of God."

The old physician peered at her through his thick glasses. "That was not the cause of *this* incident, Mrs. Norgard."

"But he reeked of alcohol. Even had a half-empty bottle in his coat pocket."

"He had no alcohol on his *breath*," Wade explained. "This man has not been drinking. He has been severely beaten."

Her breath drew in abruptly. "Beaten? Who would have done that? He had no money to speak of."

"I don't suspect robbery was the motive. But why are *you* so interested in him, Mrs. Norgard?"

"He's done some work for me at the old Bruner shop, that's all," she said.

"Then that explains it." Wade lowered his voice, even though they were alone in the offices. "I think we both know who is behind this, Mrs. Norgard."

"Polk?"

Wade, a member of the church board, knew full well about Polk's desire to have the former carpenter shop for his own. Apparently the doctor had concluded that Polk would do whatever it took to delay or prevent Gretchen Norgard's move into the building.

"Mrs. Norgard, it might be best if we kept the truth about Beckworth's beating between the two of us."

"But the whole town will believe he's just a drunk, that he slid down the hill and into the fence because he had too much to drink."

"Well, I suspect his reputation in Straight Down isn't pure sterling to begin with," Wade returned, sitting wearily on a chair at his desk. "My theory is that whoever beat Beckworth *wanted* him to fall off the cliff and *wanted* it to look like an accident."

"May I see him now, Doctor?"

"Of course. Go on in."

"Oh, Doctor," she said, turning, before she closed the door behind her, "put his treatment on my account."

Pete was lying in a single bed, wool blankets pulled up to his chin. A small stove in the corner of the room gave off enough heat to prevent him from getting chilled. He blinked and looked up at her when she came in.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Beckworth?"

"Like I got trampled in a longhorn stampede and lived to tell about it," he answered. His eyes watered as he tried to prop himself up in bed.

Gretchen sat on a chair beside him. "Did Dr. Wade tell you he thought Stafford Polk hired this done?"

"No. He didn't say much at all when he was working on me. It was two men, with sacks over their heads. Probably just hired toughs. Took a real relish in their work. Does Polk own the law here, too?"

"Well, the marshal is appointed by the town council, and Polk has enough leverage on them to get what he wants. I don't think we can expect much help from Marshal Jeffers. This came upon you because you were working for me at the carpenter's shop, Mr. Beckworth."

"I'm a big boy, Mrs. Norgard. It's not your fault. But now that we know how far Polk is willing to go, we'll be more careful." He wanted to warn her about keeping Walter close, but did not want to worry her unnecessarily, so he let it go.

"I really should be getting back to the café. The lunch trade will be in," she said, glancing at a wall clock.

"Doc said he's sure I don't have any broken bones—maybe a cracked rib or two, but all things considered, I was mighty lucky."

"I don't believe in luck, Mr. Beckworth. I believe in the protection and love of God. And his hand certainly must have been on you to keep you from going over that cliff."

Pete looked over at her. She was completely honest, totally sincere in her belief. And in that moment, he realized that this plain, hardworking widow was the most beautiful woman he had ever known.

“Get your rest, Mr. Beckworth.” She gently touched his forearm. “I’ll be over after we close with a hot supper for you.”

“I look forward to it, ma’am.” As she rose and went to the door, he said, “Oh, Mrs. Norgard. Did you happen to see that whiskey bottle Doc Wade said was in my coat pocket? Somebody must have taken it out before they brought me over here.”

“Yes, I caught a glance of it...”

“Do you remember what the label said?”

She thought for a moment. “No, I only saw it for an instant...wait! I think it was ‘Pecos’ something-or-other.”

Pete nodded. “That’s enough. Pecos Pride. It’s the cheapest rotgut you can buy, and only one saloon in town sells it. Now, if I can get that barkeep to tell me who he sold that to yesterday...”

“You won’t be doing any such thing, sir. You’ll be in that bed until Dr. Wade says you’re fit enough to be up and around.”

Pete grinned and nodded his head as she left, but he already knew how he was going to fight this.

The first thing he had to do was send a telegram.

Chapter Nine



“Mrs. Norgard, I don’t see your attorney. Is he present?”

“No, Your Honor. I can’t afford an attorney. I’ll be representing myself.”

The old judge’s forehead furrowed. “That’s not a wise course of action, madam. People always assume that all they have to do is tell the truth and things will come out right, but it doesn’t always work that way. I suggest...”

Everyone turned when the door at the back of the courtroom thumped, then opened quickly. A man swept in and closed the door quickly behind him.

“Sorry about the disturbance, Your Honor,” he said in a squeaky voice. Gretchen inspected him in a few seconds. His derby was tilted sideways on his head, his necktie perched crookedly under his collar, and his brown suit seemed a size too large for his bony frame. Thick spectacles magnified his eyes so much they appeared twice their normal size.

“Take a seat so we can get on with these proceedings,” the judge shot back sternly.

Instead, the man plopped a thick leather valise on the oak table near Gretchen, then walked to the bench and handed the judge a business card.

“Elmer Aberdeen, Your Honor,” he said, gasping for breath. “Attorney at law, Topeka. I’ll be representing Mrs. Norgard in this action.”

“Did you *run* all the way from Topeka?” the judge asked. The dozen people in the courtroom broke into raucous laughter.

“No, Judge.” Aberdeen smiled. “I just got in on the train and it took me a few minutes to get to the court house.”

“We’ll overlook your tardiness since you’ve apparently never been to Cottonwood Falls before. Are you ready to proceed, then, Mr. Aberdeen?”

“Indeed I am, sir.” The thin man retreated to the defense table and sat on a wooden chair next to Gretchen. He opened the briefcase and withdrew a pile of papers.

The court clerk, who seemed irritated by the interruption, stood and read from a document: “A Contest of the Will of Jacob Augustus Bruner, late of the town of Straight Down, Kansas. Plaintiff, Straight Down Bible Church, a nonprofit organization, represented by Kingston Bennett, esquire, versus Defendant Mrs. Gretchen Norgard, of Straight Down. Er, represented by Elmer Aberdeen, esquire. Judge Herbert Mackinson presiding.”

Stafford Polk sat at the plaintiff’s table, to Bennett’s right. Polk’s face had clouded when Aberdeen entered the room. The case had been entered as a bench trial, meaning the judge would render the decision instead of a jury.

“Proceed with your opening statement, Mr. Bennett,” the judge ordered.

Polk’s attorney, Kingston Bennett, also from Topeka, stood and walked slowly toward the open area in front of the bench. A tall, impeccably dressed man with longish silver hair, he grasped his right lapel and launched into what he apparently thought was impressive oratory.

“We intend to show the court that the decedent, Jacob Bruner, intended to will his property, namely a wooden building and its contents, situated on Lot 21, including said lot, as well as \$140 in Account Number 247, in the Cattlemen’s Bank of Straight Down, to the Straight Down Bible Church, and not to Mrs. Gretchen Norgard, plaintiff in this case.”

Gretchen started to object but Aberdeen put a hand on her forearm and gave a quick shake of his head. She eased back in her chair.

Bennett, who seemed soundly impressed with his own legal skills, laid out a case centering on the premise that the Reverend Latham Norgard had

acted as a compensated agent of Straight Down Bible Church when he had conversed with Bruner several times, and that Bruner's gratitude was "inadvertently misdirected." The bequest, Bennett insisted, was mistakenly made by Bruner because he did not understand Reverend Norgard's official capacity in the church.

After twenty minutes of introduction, Bennett had the clerk read the will aloud. The lawyer then called Stafford Polk to testify, as president of the church's board. Puffed up like a rooster, Polk recounted his years of service on the board, the improvements that had been made to the church and the increase in the congregation under his tenure. Led by Bennett, he also produced copies of two other wills, both from widows, who had left their meager life savings to Straight Down Bible Church.

When Bennett had finished, the judge said, "You may cross examine this witness, Mr. Aberdeen."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Aberdeen replied, rising from his chair. "Mr. Polk, I must say that's a very impressive record you've achieved as president of the board of Straight Down Bible Church."

"I can't take credit for all of it," he struggled to act humble. "We have a fine board, and we've had some dedicated pastors over the past ten years."

"Was Reverend Norgard a dedicated pastor?" Aberdeen asked.

"Why, yes. Yes, he was a good man, an educated man. He served the church very well for five years, until his untimely death. He had many wonderful accomplishments as pastor of the church."

Aberdeen rubbed his chin for a moment. "Did you ever give Pastor Norgard any gifts, Mr. Polk?"

"Gifts?" Polk's confidence vanished. Gretchen leaned forward at the table where she was seated.

"Yes, gifts, sir. In a manner of speaking, Reverend Norgard was your employee, the *church's* employee. Many employers give their employees gifts for a job well done."

Polk squirmed in the witness chair. "Well, maybe there was some food on occasion. A dressed turkey at Christmas."

"Any other gifts?"

"A ham at Easter."

"Did you place any stipulations on those gifts, Mr. Polk?"

"What?" A few beads of sweat appeared on Polk's forehead, even though the courtroom was inadequately heated by one stove in the corner.

"Did you place any conditions on how those gifts were to be used?" Aberdeen repeated.

"Well, er, no. It was just food. A good will gesture. A gesture of appreciation."

"Did you instruct Reverend Norgard or Mrs. Norgard to share those gifts with the rest of the congregation?"

"No."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't hear you," Aberdeen said. "Would you repeat your answer?"

"No!" Polk snapped, his face a deeply crimson now.

"No further questions for this witness, Your Honor," Aberdeen told the judge.

Bennett's case faltered after that. Polk's handsome, confident lawyer was visibly shaken, fumbling with his papers and slumping in his chair.

Peering through his thick eyeglasses, Aberdeen opened his rebuttal by having the clerk read the paragraph of Bruner's will that referred to the bequest of the shop and land. The clerk then handed the document to the judge.

"The court will note that Mr. Bruner's will specifically identifies *Mrs.* Norgard as the recipient of this bequest, and not her husband, the late Reverend Norgard." Aberdeen told the judge, sweeping his arm toward Gretchen.

“So noted.” The judge stated. An odd expression came over Judge Mackinson’s face, betraying neither impatience nor anger, but perhaps curiosity.

“I now call Mrs. Gretchen Norgard to the witness stand, Your Honor.” The lawyer went over, took her by the arm, and gently led her toward the chair next to the bench, as genteelly as if he were escorting her across a ballroom for a waltz.

After being sworn in by the clerk, Gretchen sat, watching her attorney with wide eyes.

“You have in your possession a personal letter from Mr. Bruner addressed to you, do you not?” Aberdeen tried to stifle a bemused smile.

“Yes. But it’s in my handbag over there.”

He stepped back to the defense table, picked up the tapestry purse, came back and handed it to her. She took the letter out and unfolded it.

“Is the plaintiff aware of this letter?” the judge interrupted.

“They are, Your Honor. I believe it was read at a church board meeting by Mr. Polk and some other members of the board of elders. But since it is a personal letter, addressed to Mrs. Norgard, she has kept it in her possession since then.”

The judge nodded. “Witness will read the letter aloud.”

In a quivering voice, Gretchen read the document, then handed it to the judge.

“I’m curious about some dates, Mrs. Norgard,” Aberdeen began. “Would you tell the court when your husband passed away?”

“December 16th, 1885,” she said.

“The court will note that the date of Mr. Bruner’s will is February 10, 1886. The court will further note that the date of Mr. Bruner’s personal letter to Mrs. Norgard is June 11, 1886. Both the will and the letter were written *after* Reverend Norgard’s death, and clearly name *Mrs.* Gretchen Norgard as the recipient of this bequest, and *not* her late husband.”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Kingston Bennett said, jumping from his chair. He stuttered for a moment then added, “Mrs. Norgard would be the legal heir to her late husband’s estate in any case.”

The judge frowned. “Overruled, Mr. Bennett. Neither document refers to Reverend Norgard as *heir* of Mr. Bruner’s estate.”

“But Your Honor...”

“Sit *down*, Mr. Bennett. Proceed, Mr. Aberdeen.”

Aberdeen continued. “Mr. Polk testified that he sometimes gave your husband food, and that he put no stipulations on how those gifts should be used. Did other people in the congregation ever give you gifts, Mrs. Norgard?”

“Objection, Your Honor. Hearsay. If the gifts were given to the pastor, Mrs. Norgard has no firsthand knowledge of any stipulations.”

“Overruled, Mr. Bennett. Continue, Mr. Aberdeen, but let’s see some relevance to this.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Mrs. Norgard, did you, *personally*, ever receive any gifts from members of Straight Down Bible Church when you were the wife of the pastor?”

“Yes, many times. Our son Walter was growing like a weed at the time. Kind women from the church would often give me their sons’ hand-me-down clothes for him. They knew we didn’t have much money.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, as Mr. Polk said, there was food. A great deal of food. And occasionally on Christmas some of the women would give me needles, embroidery thread, things like that. And books. People were always giving Latham and me books. We appreciated that very much.”

“Were those books for your personal use, or were they for the church library?”

“Straight Down Bible Church doesn’t have a library, Mr. Aberdeen.”

“Mrs. Norgard, were all of these gifts given to you in your official capacity as the pastor’s wife, or were some of them from personal friends?”

“Why, they were friends. I’m still close friends with many of those women today, although I don’t have much time to visit with them, running the café and looking after Walter too. But they understand. They continue to give me small gifts from time to time, and I try to respond, as much as our budget allows.”

“Friends give each other gifts just because they love each other, don’t you think, Mrs. Norgard?”

“Why, yes. It’s one way of showing our love.”

“No further questions, Your Honor.”

Bennett’s cross-examination stumbled badly. Instead of establishing that Reverend Norgard’s relationship with Bruner was strictly pastor to church member, Bennett led Gretchen into recounting that the old bachelor carpenter had eaten supper with them on at least three occasions.

After she had returned to the defense table, Aberdeen approached the judge with two documents in his hand. “I have a ruling on a similar case I’d like to introduce, Your Honor.” He handed a hand-written copy of the case to Judge Mackinson and one to Bennett.

“It involves the Douglas County Orphanage in Lawrence, Your Honor. As you’ll see, an uncle of one of the orphans learned of his nephew’s presence in the orphanage after the lad had been there for three years. He adopted the boy, and later gave the director of the orphanage, a Mr. Quentin Standard, a three year-old quarterhorse as a gift. In the bill of sale for the animal, the giftor, a Samuel Northridge, stated that the gift was in Mr. Standard’s name, not that of the orphanage. The board of the orphanage contested the gift. As you can see, Judge Masching ruled that the horse was, indeed, the property of Mr. Standard.”

Bennett’s face fell noticeably at Aberdeen’s last statement.

“Clerk will enter this document into the record,” Judge Mackinson instructed. “Ladies and gentlemen, I believe I’ll be able to rule in this case today,” he added. “Court will reconvene at two p.m., at which time I will render my decision.” He smacked the gavel down smartly, stood, and everyone in the courtroom came to their feet and watched him walk out to his chambers.

Gretchen turned to a smiling Elmer Aberdeen and said, “Who in the world *are* you?”

Chapter Ten



“Pete Beckworth sent me.”

Gretchen stared at the lawyer several moments, then became aware that her mouth was open. “Mr. Beckworth! But, but...” She looked down at the linen tablecloth on their table in the Grand Central Hotel dining room. “Mr. Beckworth *knows* I can’t afford a lawyer.”

Elmer Aberdeen snorted, then waved his hand as if he were brushing away a fly. “This is *pro bono*. Free, Mrs. Norgard, free of all charges. I owe everything I am to Pete Beckworth. He’ll never run out of favors from me.”

A fresh-faced young waitress came to their table, holding a small pad and pencil. “Are you ready to order, or do you need some more time?”

Aberdeen brushed his hand again. “This is on me, Mrs. Norgard. I believe I’ll have the chicken and noodles, a cup of coffee with cream and sugar, and a slice of apple pie for dessert. Mrs. Norgard?”

“Uh, uh, the same,” Gretchen stammered.

The waitress took their menus and said, “That’s one of our specialties. I’m sure you’ll like it. I’ll be back with your coffee directly.”

The young lawyer seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. He gazed around at the Christmas decorations in the dining room’s front windows, garlands of holly and evergreens on the walls, a nativity crèche in one of the large front windows looking out on Broadway. The dining room was noisy with customers’ conversations bouncing off the brick floor and walls. Everyone seemed in a jolly, carefree mood.

“I love this time of year, don’t you?” Aberdeen mused.

“I don’t understand,” Gretchen said. “Would you please explain what you’re doing here and how Mr. Beckworth is involved in this?”

"I ran away from home in St. Louis when I was sixteen," the lawyer began. "I had read too many dime novels and wanted to make a name for myself in the wild west. It was tough going, but I did odd jobs, worked hard, saved enough money to buy a decent horse, holster and six-shooter, then I drifted down Texas way.

"Work was pretty slim, but I managed to get hired on with Joe Hook's outfit south of Abilene. That was back in '78. Hook had a herd of longhorns he wanted to drive to the railhead at Dodge City and his trail boss at the time was Pete Beckworth. Pete had been pushing cattle north since the end of the War, and there wasn't a man on the range who knew more about the cattle trails than him.

"We were moving along pretty briskly, a dozen of us or so, top hands and a couple greenhorns like me, with a herd of about 3,000 head. We were just south of the Brazos River, near Fort Griffin, when the weather turned nasty on us in the middle of the night. I was one of the night herders, when a bolt of lightning came out of the sky and blew a tree to smithereens. That's when those longhorns started to stampede.

"I waved my blanket and my hat, trying to turn them, but it was no use. All I could see were pointed horns and the fear in their eyes. My pony got knocked down and I scrambled off it and got on foot. Next thing you know, Pete came out of nowhere, grabbed my arm, and swung me up behind his saddle."

Gretchen leaned across the table, enthralled. At that moment the waitress interrupted them with their coffee. Aberdeen put cream and sugar in his, stirred it, slurped down a large sip then continued his tale.

"But that wasn't the end of it," he said. "Those steers were like a sea of horns and hides. Pete's horse caught a horn in its side and started to wobble. We both knew if we went down, that'd be the end of us.

"Well, the Lord must've been listening to me pray harder than I ever did in my life, Mrs. Norgard, because right there ahead of us was a big oak tree, with a thick branch that was about ten feet off the ground. Pete rode

for it with all that dying pony had in him, and I jumped up and got hold of that branch. I swung myself around until I was sitting on top, then I reached down and pulled Pete out of the saddle. It was nip and tuck for a few seconds, but he managed to get a leg up until he was clear.

“Those longhorns were banging into that tree trunk and brushing it as they went by, but it must’ve had roots fifty feet deep. As soon as it was safe, we came down and the wrangler came by with a couple fresh horses. We saddled them up and rode out to that herd.

“The Clear Fork at the river slowed them down enough that we could get them stopped. We lost two seasoned riders in that run, good men both. The next night at supper, after we’d buried those boys along the trail, Pete said to me, ‘Elmer, you’re not cut out for this line of work.’”

Gretchen took a sip of her coffee, contemplating for a moment. “Did he fire you?”

“No, no,” Aberdeen replied, chuckling. “But he’d brought a lot of greenhorns up in his day, and he knew I wasn’t going to make it. Besides, I had my nose buried in the Bible or some other book whenever I wasn’t working.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, when we got those cattle to Dodge, we drew our pay, then rode on back to the Bar J. I stayed on ‘til a little after Christmas, but by then Pete had talked me into going back home and going to school instead of cowboying. He gave me fifty dollars and put me on the train in Abilene.

“I went to law school in St. Louis, passed the bar, then decided to come out to Topeka. Too much competition back home. That telegram I got from Pete about you was the first I’d heard from him in eight years. I suppose he bounced around from spread to spread when the trail driving stopped.”

“He’s had some trouble,” Gretchen said softly. “He hurt his leg badly somewhere along the way and has difficulty mounting a horse. And...I don’t

know whether I should say this, but he's had problems with alcohol as well."

Aberdeen's smile vanished. "Pete is a good man. He was like a big brother to me, watched out for me, kept me out of trouble. Saved my life, as I said. When this trial is over, I'd like to accompany you back to Straight Down, Mrs. Norgard, if that's all right with you. I want to see Pete again."

"I'm sure he'd be thrilled to see you Mr. Aberdeen. Did he tell you in the telegram I plan to move my café into Mr. Bruner's building, next to the railroad tracks?"

"Indeed he did, ma'am. That's a splendid idea. I'm on retainer for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. They intend to start passenger service on that line. They have big plans for Straight Down."

"That's why Stafford Polk wants that building. He'll get the church board to sell it to him."

Just then the waitress brought two steaming plates of chicken and noodles, mashed potatoes and gravy and set them in front of them. Aberdeen picked up his knife and fork and attacked the food as if he hadn't eaten in weeks.

"You'll have to excuse my manners," he said between bites. "I'm still a bachelor."

Gretchen laughed. "I run a café, Mr. Aberdeen, and we serve quarrymen and day laborers and ranch hands. I've learned to appreciate a hungry man enjoying his food."

They ate in silence, each lost in their thoughts. After they had their pie, Aberdeen pulled out a pocket watch and checked it. "It's one-thirty already. We'd better get back to court."

"That's an unusual watch," Gretchen remarked. "It has a very large winding stem."

"This? Oh, it's not worth much in money. I expect it didn't cost more than a few dollars, but it's the one memento I have left of my time on that trail drive. Old Joe Hook gave them to all the boys for Christmas that year."

“What a kind gesture.”

Aberdeen paid and left a tip, then helped Gretchen with her coat. They took their time walking the block and a half back to the Chase County courthouse, a towering white stone building at the end of Broadway.

“What do you think our chances are?” she asked, as they paused on the edge of the wide brick street.

“Chances? Madam, this is an absolute certainty! I have no doubt whatsoever that we shall prevail!”

Gretchen stared at him. “How can you be so sure?”

He held up a gloved hand and ticked the reasons off with his fingers. “First, Bruner’s will clearly states that the property was bequeathed to you, and not your husband. Second, Bruner’s personal letter to you further supports the will and reiterates his desire to bestow the gift on you, personally.” Then he held up his other two fingers and his thumb. “Three, four, and five, the decision in the precedent case which I introduced concerning the Douglas County Orphanage was made by Judge Robert Masching.”

“So? Who is he?”

“Judge Masching and Judge Mackinson, our judge, attended Yale Law School together. They’ve been friends for forty years. Judge Masching has one of the most distinguished judicial reputations in the state of Kansas. Possibly even west of the Mississippi.”

“What does that do?”

Aberdeen grinned broadly again. “Judges are loathe to reverse or contradict each others’ decisions, Mrs. Norgard. There’s sort of an unwritten rule that you don’t make a fool of your fellow jurists by opposing their earlier rulings. Didn’t you see the look on Kingston Bennett’s face?”

“Yes. He looked like he’d eaten green apples.”

“Ha! Green apples exactly, Mrs. Norgard! Let’s get up to the courtroom then.”

"I still think you're celebrating prematurely," Gretchen mumbled, as they climbed the wooden courthouse stairs.

Judge Mackinson re-entered the courtroom precisely as the wall clock was chiming two o'clock. After everyone sat, he opened the folder and began to read his hand-scrawled decision. He noted the first two reasons for his ruling, in almost the same language Aberdeen had used outside.

"And, with the addition of the case law Mr. Aberdeen cited, the evidence and precedence in this matter are quite clear. In the case of Straight Down Bible Church versus Mrs. Gretchen Norgard, I find in favor of the defendant, Mrs. Norgard. Court is adjourned." He cracked his gavel loudly, passing the papers to the court clerk for filing.

Gretchen squeezed the lawyer's forearm, "You were right! It was just as you said." As he stood beside her, the judge left the courtroom and returned to his chambers. "You didn't look very happy with the decision," she said.

"Oh, I'm elated, I assure you. But it's not wise for an attorney to gloat in front of the judge. I may have to plead in front of him again."

As Aberdeen helped Gretchen on with her coat, Stafford Polk paused briefly by their table, his face purple with rage. "This isn't the end of this, Mrs. Norgard," he growled in a low voice. "Not the end by any means."

The young lawyer pointed at the slump-shouldered Kingston Bennett, Polk's attorney. "Mr. Bennett, if your client plans to appeal this case, that's one thing, but if he is threatening this good woman, I assure you as an officer of this court I *will* file assault charges against him."

"C'mon, Stafford, let's go," Bennett said, gently moving Polk toward the door.

Gretchen shuddered as the two men left the courtroom. "Do you think he intends violence, Mr. Aberdeen?"

“I honestly don't know. Pete told me in his telegram that he suspected the men who beat him were hired by Polk. I think we would be wise to be prepared for anything.”

Chapter Eleven



“Ma’s really gonna be surprised when she sees how much we got done.”

“You’re sure you got all your homework finished, Walter?”

“Yeah. I didn’t have much tonight. No arithmetic, so that made it go faster. And I got everything ready to go at the café for tomorrow morning.”

Pete looked around. The room was taking shape. After finishing at the livery stable for the day, he had come over to the carpenter’s shop to work on the renovation. He had managed to build a front counter, and after Walter came, they framed up a wall to section off the kitchen from the dining room. The boy was a hard worker, patient and observant.

“This will be a fine Christmas present for her,” Pete said. In the week since the beating, he had managed to get up and about. He still ached, and his ribs sent a jab of pain through his chest every time he coughed, but every day he felt stronger.

“I got her some needlepoint patterns and some of that colored thread for them,” Walter told him, excited. “Mr. Hodges over at the general store got them for me, all the way from New York. She doesn’t have much free time, but she likes to do that at night, if she’s not too tired.”

“Why, that’s a fine present, Walter. I’m sure she’ll be very happy with it.”

The boy stopped what he was doing. “I wonder when she’ll be back from Cottonwood Falls?”

“Any time now, I expect. I’d wager that my friend Mr. Aberdeen will be with her. We haven’t seen each other for years, and I asked him in my telegram to come to Straight Down for a visit.”

“You think they won the case?”

“Elmer Aberdeen is a smart man, Walter, a good lawyer from what I’ve heard. I don’t think Polk had much of a case to start with. If anybody could beat him, Elmer’s the man. But we’ll find out soon enough.”

Walter put down the sandpaper he had been using to smooth edges on the front counter. “Can I ask you a question, Pete?” Pete had insisted the boy quit calling him Mr. Beckworth.

“Sure, Walter.” He stopped sawing and sat on a stool. Taking the weight off his bad leg felt good.

Walter stared down at the floor, and toed a small pile of sawdust with his shoe. “Pa used to preach about the evils of strong drink all the time,” he began. “Why is it that...you...I mean, men, take it up in the first place?”

Pete liked the boy’s straightforwardness, even though the question surprised him.

“Do you remember how you felt when your pa died? Right when it happened?”

Walter gazed out the window for several seconds. “Yeah. I was hurt. Mad. Couldn’t figure why God would take somebody who was doing his work here. Couldn’t see how me and Ma were gonna make it without him. It still hurts.”

“I know,” Pete said gently. “Some hurts never really go away. They just kind of scar over, but they’re always there. That’s what happened to me when I broke my leg and couldn’t ride any more. It hurt so bad inside I didn’t know what to do. I’d been drunk a lot of times at the end of trail drives. Me and the crew would draw our pay and drink beer and whiskey like there was no tomorrow. For some fellas, if you get drunk enough, you can’t feel anything. It just makes you kinda numb.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

Pete nodded, but thought for several moments before he spoke again. “Everybody’s got something inside that’s hurting them, son. We’re all looking for ways to make the hurt stop, but there are good ways and bad

ways to do that. I picked a bad way, a way that made me feel worse instead of better.”

“I guess me and Ma went to God,” Walter said, his voice almost a whisper. “That’s what Pa always taught us to do. We believe there *is* a God.”

Sadness etched Pete’s weathered face. “When I hurt my leg and my life started going bad, I thought, well, that God had quit believing in *me*. I thought he only cared about *good* folks, like you and your ma.”

“*You’re* good, Pete. And besides, Pa told me God loves everybody.”

“Even ornery jaspers like old Stafford Polk?”

Walter laughed. “Yeah, even him. But I’ll tell you a secret, Pete. As hard as I try, I can’t make *myself* love him.”

“Well, if Elmer won that court case, and I’m betting he did, Mr. Polk will just have to stew in his own juices until he sees the light. C’mon, now. Let’s get this place cleaned up and head back to the café. Your ma and Elmer should be getting in any time, and they’ll expect us...uh, you to be there.”

First they returned all the tools to the toolboxes and workbenches, then Walter swept up the sawdust and scraps of wood. Pete made sure the fire was safely banked in the stove and blew out the lamps. After they went out, he turned the big black key in the front door lock, tested it, then slipped the key into his front jeans pocket.

“I can hardly wait ‘til Christmas,” Walter confessed, as they started walking back. A fresh snow had fallen, but underneath was a treacherous sheet of ice from a sleet storm earlier in the day.

Pete gazed up at the stars, then at the boy trudging happily beside him.. “Watch your step, Walter. It’s plenty slick tonight.”

“Yeah. I almost...”

They both saw him at the same time, his contorted face grotesquely lit by a torch he carried in his left hand.

Stafford Polk.

"Polk, where are you going with that torch?" Pete demanded.

"Stay out of the way, you worthless drunk."

"Walter! Go get the marshal or a deputy." Pete pushed the boy to his side.

"But..."

"Go on!" Pete yelled. "Do like I told you."

Walter sprinted off toward the main street. Pete limped over to Polk. He stopped ten feet away.

"You better drop that torch and go back home, Polk. The marshal may overlook a lot of your dealings, but even *he* won't overlook arson."

"I told you before, Beckworth, get out of my way." Polk reached in a coat pocket and drew out a small revolver.

Pete closed the distance between them before the big man had a chance to raise the weapon and aim. Grabbing Polk's left arm, the cowboy snatched for Polk's pistol with his other hand.

For several seconds they struggled, but Pete was at a disadvantage. He had not completely recovered from his injuries, and his stiff leg was nearly useless in cold weather. Fueled by rage, Stafford Polk seemed to possess superhuman strength.

Then Pete's leg flew out from under him and he smashed down painfully onto his right knee. The torch came within inches of his face. He was growing weaker by the moment.

God, please don't let this happen, Pete prayed silently. It can't end this way. This woman and this boy...you know how much I need them, what they mean to me. Help, me, God. Help me!

Polk jerked his right hand free and smashed the pistol barrel across Pete's skull. For a moment Pete wavered, battling against the blinding lights popping in front of his eyes. Then he toppled backwards, staring up helplessly as Polk brought the gun to bear.

At the mouth of the alley, Walter and a town deputy stopped in their tracks when the starry night was shattered by a single gunshot.

Chapter Twelve



The .45 caliber bullet slammed into Stafford Polk's right shoulder, spinning him around and knocking him off his feet.

He hit the ground hard, on his back. Then he started to slide.

The ice under the thin coating of snow almost seemed lubricated. Stafford Polk clawed at the ground but could find nothing to grasp. As he hurtled down the slope, he picked up speed.

"Polk! Grab the fence!" the deputy cried from the alleyway.

Pete watched in horror, knowing the big man's helplessness. Polk's feet smashed through the rotted fence, throwing pickets and rails into the air. Polk still clutched the revolver in his right hand, but with his left, he stabbed at the debris, trying to catch something solid.

In less than a second, he disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Elmer Aberdeen sat down on the seat of the surrey, the smoking Colt pistol still in his hand. "I *had* to shoot," he said to himself. "I *had* to shoot him to save Pete's life."

"You did the right thing," Gretchen assured him. "He surely would have killed Pete if you hadn't intervened."

Walter ran over to where Pete was lying in the snow. "Careful, son," Pete warned. "It's awful slick here. We don't want to lose you too."

"You folks stay right here," the deputy yelled. "I'm gonna go check on Mr. Polk." He untied a horse from a hitch rail. The closest way to get to the bottom of the cliff was a quarter mile away, outside of town.

With Walter's help, Pete got to his feet and the two of them walked to the buggy. Pete took off his hat and squinted.

"I owe you my life, Elmer."

"Then we're even," the lawyer said, returning the pistol to his valise. "Are you all right?"

"A little shook up. But if you hadn't shown up when you did..."

"He threatened us at the courthouse," Gretchen said. "What is that burning over there?"

"A torch," Pete eased himself onto the back of the buggy. "If he couldn't have Bruner's building for himself, he intended to burn it down."

Aberdeen swiveled around on the seat. "That's mad! Was the man deranged?"

"He wasn't used to losing. I imagine for most of his life, he bullied folks into whatever he wanted. I take it you won the court case, then."

"Mr. Aberdeen was incredible." Gretchen hugged his narrow shoulders. "Polk and his lawyer didn't stand a chance."

"What happens now?" Walter asked. His eyes were white with fear. "What if Mr. Polk's dead?"

"Well, we've got you as witnesses that Elmer shot defending my life," Pete said. "I'm unarmed and Polk was aiming his gun at me. I have no doubt he would have fired. Him falling over the cliff was an accident, pure and simple."

They waited for ten minutes, then the deputy rode up and tied the horse to where he had found it. He walked over to the them.

"Mr. Polk is dead. Looks like the fall broke his neck."

"I shot him defending my friend," Aberdeen offered.

"I know." The deputy removed his hat and rubbed his forehead, almost in relief. "He still had that gun in his hand. You know what's strange about it? That's Mr. Polk's fence. He owned that strip of land it's on, and the town council warned him a half-dozen times to put something sturdier in. I guess he didn't want to spend the money." He pointed over to the spot where the two men had scuffled. "Is that your torch over there, Mr. Beckworth?"

“No. I believe Polk was going to set Jacob Bruner’s shop on fire. Mrs. Norgard here won clear claim to it today in circuit court at Cottonwood Falls. We believe Polk was trying to gain control of it through the church, then force the church to sell it to him so he could open a business there.”

“Sounds like Polk,” the deputy conceded. “He’s held this town in his grip for the past ten years. Everybody was afraid to stand up to him. I’m not going to file any charges, but I need all of you folks to come over to the marshal’s office so I can write my report on this.”

“Yes. That’s the proper thing to do,” Aberdeen agreed. He flicked the reins and got the horse moving, as Gretchen pointed the direction to the stone building.

* * *

“Sure wish you could spend Christmas with us, Elmer,” Pete said, as he and Gretchen stood with the lawyer near the town’s water tank. The steam locomotive’s fireman added water to its tank for the morning run back to Topeka.

“I’ll be back after the first of the year,” he assured them. “But I’ve got a...sweetheart waiting for me. This will be our first Christmas together.”

“Good for you!” Gretchen said. “You’re a fine man, Mr. Aberdeen, and a talented attorney. She’s a very lucky girl.”

“I’ve got to give Pete credit for sending me back to school. He saw something in me I couldn’t see in myself.”

Gretchen hugged the lawyer and Pete warmly clasped his hand, then asked, “Elmer, I thought it was against policy for freight trains to take on passengers.”

“Normally it is,” the lawyer said as they walked down the tracks. “But I won a big lawsuit for this railroad about six months ago. The president gave me a lifetime pass to ride any train whenever and wherever I want.” He climbed up the steps of the caboose.

“Good-bye, and thank you for everything.” Gretchen waved. Aberdeen winked, tipped his derby to Pete, then went in the end car.

A minute later they watched the train disappearing down the tracks. “I’d better get back to the café,” Gretchen said. “Keira can’t handle the breakfast crowd all by herself.”

“Let’s go in here.” Pete said, pointed to Bruner’s building. “It’ll only take a minute.” He produced the key from his pocket and opened the door for her.

She gasped when she saw what had been accomplished since her trip to court yesterday. “It’s wonderful! All we’ll need to do is move the tables and chairs, the cook stoves and the kitchen things over here and we’ll be ready to open.” She looked at Pete, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“I want to thank you.” He struggled for words. “You took a chance on me. You gave me a hand up when I needed it.”

“I saw the goodness in you, just as you saw it in Mr. Aberdeen,” she said softly. “...and I’ve been thinking about something.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to offer you a full-time job. Here, when we open the new café. Mr. Aberdeen said the bank will release Mr. Bruner’s bank account, so that will be enough to tide us over until the passenger service starts on the railroad. I need someone to see to the supplies, to keep up this building, to take some of the pressure off me.”

Pete stared at her, startled. “You sure there’ll be enough work for me?”

“*Very* sure,” she said, laughing. “Mr. Houghton at the bank told me there will be three passenger trains stopping here a day, maybe more in the future. Straight Down is growing, and if they open that new limestone quarry, we’ll have more trade that we can handle. If you don’t mind running the cash register and greeting customers...”

“It sounds good. Real good.”

“Wonderful! Then it’s settled.”

* * *

Christmas day, when Pete knocked on the back door of the café, Walter greeted him. "Hello, Pete! We've been waiting for you. C'mon in and see what Ma got me for Christmas."

Gretchen took a large covered roasting pan out of the oven and set it on top the stove. "Hello, Mr. Beckworth! One of the regulars at the café shot a wild turkey the other day and gave it to me for Christmas."

He inhaled the heavenly aroma when she took the lid off the pan. The table in the kitchen was set for three. She had closed the café for the day, one of the few days of the year she took off.

"Y'know," Pete said to her, "I told Walter that friends call each other by their first name, so you'd better too."

"Very well, then. And you start calling me by my Christian name, Gretchen."

"C'mere, Pete. Sit down. Look at these skates Ma got me for Christmas."

He sat on one of the kitchen chairs and inspected the ice skate Walter handed him. "Say, that's sturdy. And sharp, too. Do you know how to skate?"

"No, but my pal George does. He can teach me, on the pond outside town. And look! A harmonica, too." He handed it to Pete.

"Well, a Hohner! That's the best kind, Walter. You mind if I try it?"

"You know how to play the harmonica?"

"Sure. Cowboys and harmonicas go way back. They're a sight easier to pack on the trail with you instead of a guitar." He put it to his mouth and very softly, reverently, played "Silent Night." When he finished, both Gretchen and Walter stared at him in wonder.

"Hey, I've got something for the both of you," Pete said, going to his coat. He reached into the pocket and pulled out two packages wrapped in

brown paper. He handed the smaller one to Walter. The boy tore through the wrapping like a buzz saw.

“A Barlow knife!”

“You’re old enough to carry a pocket knife now,” Pete told him. “But you know to be careful with it when you’re whittling. Always keep your free hand behind the blade. And you never—never—pull it in a fight, no matter how bad you’re getting beat.”

Gretchen cleared her throat. “I try to discourage fighting.”

“Well, sure,” Pete agreed. “But sometimes a bully jumps on you and you’ve got no choice. This is for you, Gretchen.” She wiped her hands on a dish towel, took the squarish package from him, then carefully peeled off the paper. It was a book.

“It’s a prayer book,” Pete told Walter. “In Swedish. I heard your mother came from Sweden. That Mr. Hodges over at the general store got it for me from a book store in Kansas City.”

Gretchen stood by the stove, slowly turning the pages. “Oh my,” she whispered. “Oh my.” A single crystal tear formed in the corner of her eye and dribbled down her cheek.

“Are you okay, Ma?”

“Yes,” she stammered. She went over and put a hand on Pete’s shoulder. “It’s a beautiful gift. Thank you very much.”

He nodded, touched by her reaction.

“We got something for you too, Pete,” Walter said. He presented a small box wrapped in green paper. “It’s from both of us,” Walter added.

Pete’s big hands fumbled with the wrapping, eventually shucking it off. He removed the lid of the small pasteboard box and took out what was inside. It was a silver-plated pocket watch. He turned it over, and read his name engraved on the case.

“This is the watch Joe Hook gave me.” A lump formed in his throat and he found it difficult to talk. “How...where...?”

“Mr. Aberdeen told me that several years ago, he was selling some of his old cowboy gear to a pawn shop in Topeka, and he saw that in the case. He bought it, hoping he would see you again. He gave it to me, to give to you.”

Pete sat silent for several moments, turning the watch over and over in his big hands. Walter watched him, awkwardly, waiting for him to speak.

“Why don't we say grace?” Gretchen suggested. “Then I'll put the food on the table.” She sat. They bowed their heads, and she said, “Honey, will you start, please?”

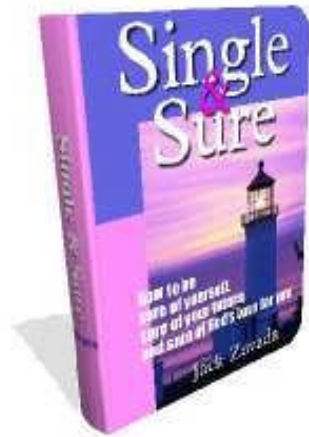
“Thank you, Lord, for my Ma and for Pete here. Thank you for this good food and all the other stuff you blessed us with today.”

Gretchen whispered, “Lord, thank you for the gift of my son, and for our friend Pete, for this food from your creation, and for the gift of salvation through your sacrifice on the cross.” There was silence. “Pete, would you offer thanks, please?”

“God,” he said haltingly, “I've been away from you for a long time. For a real long time. Today I want to thank you for bringing me back. I want to thank you for Gretchen and Walter.” He paused, then added, “And thank you, Lord, especially, for answering this cowboy's prayer.”

The End

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