

*One Special
Christmas*

EXCERPT

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Chapter One

Saturday, November 1, 1884

Mama used to say that Christmas was the season of miracles, but Christmas was almost two months away. Greta Engel tried not to wince when she heard her brother coughing. For the three days that Otto had breathed normally she had let herself believe that Dr. Fletcher had been wrong and that Otto would live to be an adult. But now ... She shuddered as the coughing intensified. This was different from the horrible wheezing he'd had in Houston, but it was no less frightening.

There was no question about it: the cough was worse, much worse, and the way Otto gasped for breath worried Greta more than Nigel's threats had. Otto's face, which Mama said resembled the porcelain their grandfather used, was now flushed; his fair hair was darkened with sweat; and his eyes—the same light blue as Greta's—were dulled by pain. This was the sickest her brother had been since they left Houston.

Greta tried to calm her nerves. She and Otto might not need a miracle, but if he was going to have his dream of the perfect Christmas come true they needed to find a town with a doctor who could stop the coughing. And to reach that town, the wagon that had started making ominous creaks earlier today had to hold together long enough for Blackie to pull them there. And then,

once they found the town, the doctor needed to be in his office and willing to help them, even though Greta had only a few coins to pay him.

Maybe they did need a miracle.

“Where are we?” Otto asked between coughs. “I don’t see any mountains.”

That was because they hadn’t reached Colorado. Yesterday when they’d entered the Hill Country, Otto had smiled at the sight of gently rolling hills, limestone outcroppings, and the live oak canopy they’d discovered on one stretch of the road. Today he seemed to have forgotten that they were still in Texas, hundreds of miles from Colorado Springs.

The road they’d been traveling reached a T intersection, forcing Greta to choose a direction. The route to the left appeared smoother and better traveled, probably leading to a larger town. She tightened the reins, preparing to turn Blackie that way, then stopped. *Turn right.* No one had spoken, and yet she heard the words as clearly as if someone had been seated next to her.

As the wagon lurched toward the right, Greta spotted a small wooden sign almost obscured by a prickly pear cactus. The letters were faded, but she could still make out the arrow and the words, “Sweetwater Crossing 3 Miles.” Surely the wagon could hold together for another three miles until they reached the town whose name made her smile for the first time since Otto had begun coughing. There was something almost fanciful about the name, and today more than ever Greta needed a reason to smile.

She turned to look at her brother. “We’re going to Sweetwater Crossing,” she told him.

Though Otto’s only response was renewed coughing, Greta’s spirits rose at the prospect of reaching the town in a few minutes. It might not be their final destination, but her instincts told her it was where they needed to be today, and she trusted her instincts.

“C’mon, Blackie.” Greta wouldn’t force the animal to trot, but she hoped he could pick up his pace a bit. Otto needed a doctor, and he needed that doctor soon. Greta had done all she could.

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The sun went behind a cloud, the sudden darkening of the sky causing her doubts to resurface. What if she was wrong? Greta took a deep breath, telling herself that leaving Houston had been the right thing to do—the only way to protect Otto and give him a chance to see Pikes Peak before he died. Greta knew that, but no matter how often she told herself that, she hadn't been able to dismiss the fear that Nigel would be angry enough to search for them and that he'd do what he'd threatened.

She couldn't let that happen. That was why whenever she ventured into a town to buy the supplies they so desperately needed, she'd kept Otto hidden under a blanket in the back of the wagon, why on rainy nights they hadn't dared stay in a hotel, even if they could have afforded a room. But now there was no choice. They had to find a doctor and pray that if Nigel was having them followed, his tracker wouldn't discover them.

It wasn't yet Christmas and what Mama called the season of miracles, but there was no longer any question about it: Greta and Otto needed a miracle.



“Sweetwater Crossing’s residents deserve a choice,” Matt Nelson told his brother as they exited the livery.

Earl Dodd, who served as the town’s blacksmith as well as the owner of the livery, had assured them that Neptune would be reshod by the time they’d picked up their mail. “You know Jake Winslow likes to talk,” he’d said, “especially now that his brother is running for sheriff. He wants to ensure that everyone in town votes for Byron.” Earl clicked his tongue in apparent disapproval. “It’s an awful shame that Sheriff Granger had that fit of apoplexy.”

Matt couldn't argue with that—it was indeed unfortunate that the man who'd been Sweetwater Crossing's lawman for over a decade was now bedridden, unable to move anything on the left side of his body—but Matt could argue with the fact that ever since the War Between the States, when their term of office expired,

neither the mayor nor the sheriff had an opponent. When Matt had asked longtime residents why, they'd simply said, "That's the way it's always been." But not the way it should be.

"Uncontested elections don't seem American to me," Matt said. "Folks deserve more."

As his brother nodded, his lips curved upward in what Matt had heard described as a fatuous smile, revealing the direction of Toby's thoughts. "And I deserve a bride." It didn't matter that they were discussing the town's need for a lawman. These days Toby had only one thing on his mind: courting Rose Hannon.

It was far from the first time Toby had been infatuated with a young woman. When they'd lived in Galveston, the object of his fancy had changed as often as the moon had hidden its face, but this was the first time Toby had fixed his attention on a girl since they'd arrived in Sweetwater Crossing earlier this year. And while he'd spouted the same sentiments Matt had heard a dozen times before, Toby seemed different this time. More earnest, almost desperate.

"Rose is the one for me," Toby continued. "I'm as sure of that as I am that you'd be a good sheriff." He gestured toward the next building on Main Street, the one that housed the sheriff's office, held the town's one jail cell, and served as the sheriff's home. "I can picture you living there."

So could Matt. From what he'd heard, the apartment on the second floor would be more than adequate for his needs. "You don't have to convince me. Pa's the one who doesn't approve of what either of us wants."

He crossed the street, preferring to walk through the park rather than next to the building that might never become his home, wishing there were an easy way to convince the man he and Toby owed so much that they were old enough to know their own minds. Because, despite the Bible's admonition to honor thy father and thy mother, the decision of how to spend the rest of their lives—in Toby's case, married to the woman who'd caught his eye the day

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she'd come to Sweetwater Crossing, in Matt's, serving as their adopted hometown's sheriff—should be theirs and only theirs.

Clearly oblivious to the beauty of the deep blue sky and the puffy cumulus clouds that drifted across it, Toby clenched his fists, then slowly relaxed them in what Matt knew was an attempt to control his anger. "Pa's being unreasonable. I know it's in the Bible, but just because Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah rather than Rachel because the eldest had to marry first doesn't mean I should have to wait for you to marry. Those were Laban's daughters. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that the oldest son has to marry first."

"True." Matt wished Pa hadn't been so adamant, announcing that he would not give Toby his blessing to marry unless Matt was married or at least engaged.

His brother shook his head in apparent disgust. "You're so stubborn you'll never fall in love."

"That's not true." At this time of the morning, the park was empty. It would be an ideal place to stroll, to clear his mind, but Matt's mind continued to whirl, trying to find a way to help his brother. "I'm not stubborn. I simply haven't met the right woman."

Though there were a number of single women in Sweetwater Crossing and several matchmaking mothers had done their best to encourage his interest in their daughters, none had stirred Matt's fancy. He might be twenty-six years old, old enough to be wed according to his mother, but he had no intention of marrying unless he found someone who made him as happy as Ma made Pa. Theirs was the kind of love Matt wanted ... eventually.

"I don't have time to think about courting a lady," he told Toby as they strolled through the park, neither in a hurry to reach the post office. Even if Matt had the time, he wouldn't consider courtship until he had a secure future to offer a wife. A man owed that to the woman he wooed. The problem was, despite what Pa thought, Matt's future was not living and working on the family's

ranch. “What I want is to leave the ranch in your and Pa’s hands and run for sheriff.”

Owning a ranch had been their father’s dream. That was why when Matt had learned about one for sale near the town where his friend had become the schoolmaster, he had come to Sweetwater Crossing, assured himself that the ranch was a good one, then helped his family sell their haberdashery in Galveston and move here.

Pa was happier than Matt had ever seen him, which meant that Ma was also happy. So was Toby. His brother had taken to ranching as if he’d been born to it. But Matt missed living in a city and having daily interactions with people outside his family. Ranching was not for him, no matter what his father believed.

“I know what I want, and you know what I want. I want you to help me win Rose. I want to become engaged on Christmas Eve like Ma and Pa.”

Matt shouldn’t have been surprised by the timing, because each year their mother told them that Christmas Eve was extra special for her because it was the day Pa had asked her to marry him and placed a ring on her finger.

“I suppose you want to give Rose the family ring.”

His brother shook his head. “I don’t care about that. All I care about is making Rose my wife. That’s why I need you.” When Matt did not respond, Toby grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop, demanding his full attention. “You don’t have to actually marry. I think Pa would be happy if you simply took an interest in someone. If you did, he might agree to let me marry Rose.”

Matt stared at his brother, wondering if the morning sun had somehow addled his brain. He and Toby were the same six feet tall and had the same dark brown hair and eyes, but it appeared that they did not share the same sense of honor. “Are you suggesting a false courtship? By now you ought to know me well enough to know I wouldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone.”

“But it would help Rose and me. Look, Matt, I’m not asking you to compromise your principles. Just promise me that you’ll

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consider it. If you show interest in a lady, I'll try to convince Pa that we don't need you on the ranch, and I'll do everything I can to help you become Sweetwater Crossing's next sheriff."

The way Toby phrased it, it sounded almost reasonable. From the number of times that they reminded him that he was more than a quarter century old, Matt knew his parents were concerned that he was still single. They wanted him, whom Pa called the steady one, to settle down and give them grandchildren. He understood that, and he wanted to honor their wishes, but he wanted to do it on his own schedule, not theirs. Today was one of the times when he wished he didn't owe them so much, but the truth was, he and Toby could never repay them for what they'd done.

"All right," he said, his attention snagged by the sight of a wagon hurtling down Main Street. One of the wheels wobbled as if it were ready to fall off, and the horse pulling it was so scrawny Matt was surprised it could move that quickly. "If I can find a woman who appeals to me, I'll court her."

"And I'll help you win the election." Toby extended his hand. "Do we have a bargain?"

"We do."