Embracing Her Inheritance

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Prologue

Chronicle reporter Elizabeth Travers stared at the fire station. The bright morning sun only served to accentuate her frustration with mundane assignments. Interviewing the fire chief sounded as thrilling as the latest agricultural workshop on insect and weed management, but maybe she'd get a front page story out of it instead of three lines next to the want-ad section. She was going to make it to a regional TV station this year even if she had to lie, cheat, or sleep her way there.

A fireman met her as she entered the station. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm here from the *Chronicle* to interview Chief Schmidt."

"That's me. Let's go to my office. Would you like some coffee?"

"No thank you." No station house sludge for her. "We'd like to do a story on the recent blizzard and how it impacted the area. How did you and your men cope with conditions? Were there more calls than normal?" She followed Chief Schmidt as he made his way to his office.

"Actually, thank the good Lord, we had very few calls. But we did have one extraordinary call out down near Ardmore." The chief stopped and turned to face her. "I'll never forget what we found once we got there."

The chief stared at her for several agonizing moments as if searching her soul. She imagined a grizzly scene of frozen bodies trapped in a car, but his tone was positive and excited. "What did you find?"

"A miracle, Miss Travers…We found a miracle."

Chapter One

SALLY

"May integrity and honesty protect me, for I put my hope in you." Psalm 25:21

Lately, my life has been one bombshell after another.

I inherited an annual six-figure income from a total stranger, Chase Reynolds, Jr. Discovered I had an identical twin sister, Abby Reynolds. Was bitten by a rattlesnake, arrested for theft and jailed, then bailed out but nearly murdered. Six weeks later my father died. And let's not forget, I learned Abby and I have a brother. I felt like I was back in the Marine Corps fighting in the Middle East. All this carried the emotional impact of an IED.

A long weekend of being stranded with Abby and three strangers in a little country church by a blizzard merely added to my burgeoning list. Life was never this exciting back home in Kansas City.

God had turned my life upside down, and even after two days of lounging in a hotel room in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, I was no closer to grasping the message He was trying to send me. Maybe it would all make sense when we found our brother.

"Let's go grab some lunch." Abby slapped shut the book she was reading, bringing my attention to the here and now.

"I'll second that idea. Let's talk strategy on finding our brother." We slipped on our coats, grabbed our purses, and walked across the street to Hungry Man's Diner.

Sarah, my friend from high school who waitressed at the diner, greeted us with a cheerful, "Hi, Sally, hi, Abby. Take a seat anywhere. You want your usual coffee and tea?"

"Yes," Abby and I chimed.

I selected a table that offered the best view of the diner's TV. I wanted to catch some of the news. Before grabbing a menu, I glanced at the special-of-the-day listed on the board near the cash register. Chicken strips with fries and a cup of soup caught my interest. We took our seats and I turned my attention to the news.

"… in Ardmore with Edgemont *Chronicle* reporter Elizabeth Travers. Elizabeth, thank you for bringing this story to our attention. What have you found?"

A slender brunette woman appeared on the screen. Her shoulder-length hair blew wildly across her face despite the knitted hat pulled down over her ears.

"Abby, look!" I pointed to the TV. The reporter stood in front of the church we'd been stranded at.

"Michael, I spoke with Edgemont fire chief Warren Schmidt yesterday. He and his men responded to a head injury call due to a car accident here at Christ Community Church five miles north of Ardmore, South Dakota, in the very early hours of Monday morning. It took them four hours to traverse the twenty-two miles from Edgemont to Ardmore due to the blizzard conditions." She spoke with the overly enthusiastic voice so common to reporters.

The camera panned the landscape. Despite the last two days of warmer temps, the area still looked like the Antarctic tundra we had experienced.

I spotted Sarah in my peripheral vision, her pad and pencil poised to take our order. "Give me a minute, Sarah. I want to catch this news." I pointed toward the TV, keeping my eyes riveted on the screen.

"Four people were stranded here from last Friday until Monday, along with the pastor of the church, Reverend Joshua Salem." Travers pulled a strand of hair away from her mouth, and the expression on her face turned to one of doubt and surprise. "But there's a bizarre twist

to this incident. The church shut down in May 1992 due to a fire and Reverend Salem, though not injured by the fire, died one month later. But there's more. First, let's take a look inside."

She walked up the steps to the front door that banged against a metal box used to prop it open. The cameraman followed closely behind. The stairs and landing were again covered in snow—we had shoveled it—but a new much smaller path for the reporter had apparently been cleared.

Now the camera panned the sanctuary, showing the burned half of the church and four boarded windows. Dead leaves and snow dusted the floor.

"How are these people faring now, Elizabeth? How did the fire department effect rescue?" the news anchor asked.

"That's the amazing part, Michael. Chief Schmidt said what occurred here was nothing short of a miracle. The man claiming to be Reverend Salem—"

"Claiming?" Abby said over the reporter.

"—greeted the chief and his men and fed them pancakes, eggs, bacon, and hot coffee. The sanctuary was clean and warm. Everyone was quite well."

"How could any of that be possible in such a derelict building?" the anchor responded. "And the person with the head injury?"

"She stated Jesus had healed her, if you can believe that." Sarcasm tinged the reporter's voice. She frowned and lifted her eyebrows. "The paramedics thoroughly examined her and found her in good health. The police and a wrecker were dispatched to help them get back on the road as soon as highway maintenance had it cleared. As I observe this crumbling building, I can't help but wonder if the events that took place here this past weekend were a genuine miracle, as Chief Schmidt reported, or nothing but an elaborate hoax."

"We look forward to hearing more as you investigate further," the anchorman said. "Thank you, Elizabeth. And now a look at today's weather."

"What's got you so interested in this report, Sally?" Sarah asked. Apparently she watched it while waiting for our order.

"Because she's talking about us."

"What? How horrible. That must have been awful."

"That's just the thing, Sarah. It wasn't. The church didn't look at all like what we saw on the news just now," I said.

"Exactly," Abby agreed. "No boarded windows, plenty of warmth from the wood-burning pot belly stove, and all the food we needed."

"There was even electricity when we first arrived, but the storm knocked it out later that day. They're saying it was a hoax." I dropped back in my chair and looked at Abby. "How can they possibly think four total strangers staged a hoax in the middle of a blizzard…and that any one of us would know the reverend who pastored that church?"

"Well, Sally," Sarah said, "you'll just have to set them straight."

Certainly not a task I wanted to add to my to-do list. My opinion of the media was so low you'd have to pull it up out of the gutter. *Setting them straight* struck me as impossible. I cringed. Was this yet another bombshell about to explode in my life?

Talking strategy about how to find our brother melted like the snow outside. Instead, we spent our lunch discussing how or even whether to respond to the reporter's claims, without coming to any conclusion.

Chapter Two

CHASE

"Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate
on understanding." Proverbs 2:2

I was standing at the check-in desk when Sally and Abby entered the hotel lobby. My two suitcases sat at my feet. I had just flown in from Great Falls, Montana, and hoped to get settled into my room before stepping into the boxing ring with the petite spitfire Sally Clark.

"Chase! What a surprise. What are you doing here?" Abby hugged me.

I noted the surprise on Sally's face, then turned to my sister—oops, my adopted sister—Abby. I would never get used to calling her that, not after fifty-eight years of only knowing her as my sister. Not the wisest decision my parents ever made not to tell us Abby was adopted. "I came to update you with what Karl found out about the orphanage you were in and to help you two with the search for your orphaned brother. I was just checking in." I turned back to the hotel clerk who handed me the key card to my room. I pocketed the card, then picked up my suitcases. "You both look good. Radiant, in fact. Why don't you join me in my room. You can tell me all about your weekend being stranded and then I'll fill you in on what Karl found."

They followed me down the first-floor hallway to my room and made themselves comfortable at the table while I stashed my suitcases, tossed my Stetson on the bed, and hung my coat. Given how much Sally protested last week when I showed up uninvited to her father's

funeral, I didn't know quite what to think about her lack of protest at my presence now.

"So how are you two doing after your ordeal? All caught up on your sleep?" I took a seat at the table.

"I wouldn't call it an ordeal by any means," Abby said. "And yes, we've been doing nothing but relaxing for the last two days."

"So give me the full story." I leaned forward on the table.

"Wait, Chase."

Sally put her hand on my forearm, putting a stop to my words.

"I need to apologize first."

"For what?"

"For my rudeness last week. You came here to Scottsbluff to my father's funeral to show your support, and all I did was grouch at you. And now here you are to help without even being asked. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Sounds like your time being stranded has… what words am I looking for?…softened your heart?"

Sally scoffed and fidgeted in her chair. "That's an understatement. When you hear the whole story, you'll be amazed. It's already made the news—"

"Made the news? When?" I sat up.

"We saw a report while we were at lunch just now. They're asking was it a miracle or a hoax." Sally crossed her arms and clenched her jaw.

"A hoax? Hmmm. I want the full story."

Sally pulled her phone from her back pants pocket and started a recording app.

"You're recording this?" I looked at her, frowning.

She tilted her head at me and smirked. Glee shone in her eyes. "This way we don't have to tell the story a hundred times. Those who want to know can listen to the recording. You start, Abby."

"Like I told you when we spoke Monday, Reverend Salem welcomed us to the church. I guessed his age in the thirties. Do you agree, Sally?"

"Yeah, I'd say that's accurate."

"Initially the building had electricity," Abby continued, "but the storm made quick work of that. A pot belly stove kept us warm, and

we cooked all our meals there. The place looked like something out of the 1940s, but we lacked nothing…aside from having beds to sleep on."

"But the pews did have cushions about three or four inches thick. If not for that, sleeping on the floor would have been more comfortable," Sally interjected. "The age of the place was very apparent in the kitchen. The General Electric refrigerator definitely said 1940s. You know, the kind that had a small freezer section inside the refrigerator instead of entirely separate. And no stove. I thought that was especially odd. When Cohen arrived, he insisted the pot belly was stone cold. He touched it twice and never burned his hand." Sally shook her head as she spoke, her eyes wide. "It shocked me because I had coffee brewing and heard it bubbling. When I poured steaming coffee into his cup, it astonished him. Literally knocked him off his feet."

"He saw the place so differently that first day there," Abby continued. "Boarded windows, burned pews, no heat, no food. But in the end, he saw it just as we did, right down to the stained-glass window behind the pulpit. He and his daughter, Hannah, crashed into the ditch near the church. That's how they ended up there. Both of them were healed of the minor injuries they got in the crash."

"That stained-glass window has me wondering. In the news report we saw thirty minutes ago, there wasn't one. Only a solid wall behind the pulpit." Sally looked at Abby. "Any thoughts on that?"

"Not at the moment. That window transfixed Hannah. I wonder if she took a picture of it."

"We definitely need to ask." Sally nodded, her torso rocking in response.

"What else happened?" I listened attentively as they each explained their perspective of the miracle that occurred at Christ Community Church while stranded by a blizzard. Vibrancy resounded in Sally's words. Delight emanated from her face. I sensed a peace from her that hadn't been there twelve weeks ago when she came to my Montana cattle ranch to claim her inheritance from Pop.

"Turns out we all had the same dream," Sally paused, "no, it had to be a vision."

"Wait a minute. You all had the same vision?"

"Yes," Abby confirmed. "We only figured that out because Cohen heard Sally telling me about her strange dream."

"We were at Capernaum with Jesus when he healed the paralytic let down through the roof. He healed Cohen's daughter, Hannah. She bumped her head on the car window when they crashed into the ditch. She was fine that first day, but the next day she had a headache and got really sick as the day progressed. Dream, vision, however you want to describe it, it happened for real. Hannah was completely well the next morning."

"Wow," was the only word I could find to respond with.

Sally briefly closed her eyes and sighed deeply, then fixed her gaze on me. "The love that beamed from Jesus' eyes. He said two words to me. *Let go*."

"Of what?" I asked.

"The anger I unconsciously functioned from. Jesus helped me let go of it. That and the pain associated with the childhood events that provoked my anger."

"This certainly explains the radiance you each have…Wow, again. It must have been amazing to be in Jesus' presence in a physical way. I'm thrilled for you both." I dropped back in my chair, stunned. "And according to the policeman there'd been a fire at the church in 1992 and Reverend Salem died thirty days after that?"

"You got it." Abby nodded.

"I'm not surprised it made the news…or at their reaction." I leaned forward and put my elbows on the table, ready to hear more, but Sally stopped the recording app and pocketed her phone.

"I'm not sure I want reporters and TV cameras descending on me. Abby and I discussed whether to attempt a response to the TV news channel but didn't come to any decision. How did they even find out about it? I doubt Cohen said anything. Maybe the policeman or the crew from the fire station up in Edgemont? Surely they wouldn't blab about their call outs."

"Edgemont?" Chase asked.

"Sorry. Edgemont, South Dakota. That was the nearest town with a 911 response team," Sally explained.

"The reporter said she talked with the fire chief. I expect she went looking for news of how the blizzard impacted people." Abby pulled a pen and a small notebook from her purse. "Now it's our turn."

"Sally, our lawyer is very thorough in everything he does, but Karl still wonders why he didn't find this information during his initial research on you all those years ago when Mom and Pop first met you in Paris. Obviously the Lord's hand is in this. Karl's father handled Abby's adoption and the records revealed her parents died in a car accident, but not who her parents were. Nor had he been able to find anything that connected you two. Yesterday morning he called with the news he'd found the record of your arrival—you two and your brother—at the Lowenfeld orphanage. The police were unable to find any known relatives."

Sally sat up straight, her Montana-sky-blue eyes sparkled like the sun. "If he found that, then he discovered who our parents were as well."

"He did. George and Christine Leonard. Your brother's name is Robert."

"Chase, that's wonderful," Sally blurted and grabbed Abby's hand. "That should help tremendously in finding him. Was Karl able to find any adoption records on him?"

"I didn't ask him that. I could see if his office has time to take it on."

"That's a thought. Lawyers certainly know all the channels and how to open the doors." Sally released Abby's hand and shrugged. "What do you think, Abby?"

"Since the adoption took place here in Nebraska, why don't you have Mr. Brown do it? He'd be familiar with the Nebraska laws that govern such a search."

"Remind me. Who's Mr. Brown?" I said.

"The lawyer who's handling my father's estate." Sally pulled her phone out of her back pants pocket again. "I'll call his office right now and see if he has time open yet this week to see me."

While Sally made the phone call, I watched Abby. The distant look in her eyes told me she was somewhere far from the current conversation. "Abby, you seem lost in thought."

"I was wondering how Cohen and Hannah were doing."

"Tell me about them, starting with their full name."

"Cohen and Hannah Reed. Don't know much. He's a business consultant here in Scottsbluff. Divorced. Hannah attends college nearby. She's such a sweet girl."

I looked at Sally who wiggled her eyebrows then slightly tipped her body toward Abby. Was she trying to tell me something?

Abby's text message alert dinged.

"Excuse me." Abby reached down to her purse on the floor and dug out her phone.

"Did Mr. Brown have an opening?" I asked Sally.

"Yes, I'm set for Friday at nine."

"Do you mind if I join you?" Was I asking too much?

"No, I don't mind. Abby do you want to come?"

"No, I don't see the need." She continued texting.

"Well, Sally, seems my father's death set off quite a cascade of dominoes in your life. Any plans for tomorrow?"

"My father had everything put into storage when he was sent to prison. His executor is sorting through it tomorrow and invited me to join him. Thought there might be items I'd like to keep. We could use your muscles. You game?" Sally asked.

"I'm here to help in any way I can. You don't think going through your father's things will be too painful? Dredge up too many awful memories?"

She shrugged. "It might bring up memories, but like I said, Jesus washed away the pain during my last night at the church."

Abby finished typing a text message and put her phone on the table. "Sally, while you and Chase do that, I think I'll go to the library and search the archives for car accidents. Maybe I can learn more about our parents."

"Why do I feel like I'm in the middle of an adventure story?" Sally asked.

"Because you are," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes!" Abby grinned, her eyes bright. "Walking with God is always an adventure."

Abby's phone dinged with another text message. She glanced at it.

"Something pressing?" I asked.

"Cohen's asked me to dinner on Friday. I'd like to say yes. You and Sally can keep yourselves busy, right?"

"Of course we can." Sally smiled and gave me a firm nod.

Was a relationship budding between Abby and Cohen?