

A Cowboy at Heart



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Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

PSALM 51:9-10



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ONE



Apple Grove, Kansas
May 1886

The first fingers of sunlight danced across the tips of tender wheat plants that had poked through the rich Kansas soil only two weeks before. Jonas Switzer stood on the western border of the field, his face to the rising sun, and marveled once again at this evidence of the Almighty's provision. Last fall he had sown this wheat into ground prepared to accept it, and throughout the long winter months it laid dormant with no visible sign of the planting. But now it rose from its earthy bed to bask in the warmth of the sun.

Jonas knelt to inspect a single plant barely taller than his finger. Though he was not normally given to poetic comparisons, something about the crisp morning air and the smell of the soil turned

his thoughts toward symbolic expression. His life was much like the single grain of wheat from which this plant had sprung. How many times had he felt dried and shriveled, a tiny kernel buried in a barren field? When his beloved wife passed eighteen years ago, something died inside him. If not for the blessing of his daughters he would have sunk into the earth and disappeared forever, his life smothered by a grief he thought he might never throw off. But as they grew, the joy they gave him showered his parched world. He learned to trust that somewhere above the trench in which he was buried, sunshine warmed the earth and rains fell to nourish it.

Then they left the Amish. Jonas closed his eyes against a wave of sorrow. First his Emma and then his Rebecca had chosen to build their lives outside the faith in which they were raised.

It is their right. Their choice.

That he knew, but still his heart grieved that the children he loved had not found the same contentment in the Plain ways he clung to. That his grandchildren were being raised in a lifestyle foreign to his.

"Pride it is that makes you think yours is the only way. At least they are Christian. Gott sei Dank!"

His mother's voice rang in his head, and a smile tugged at his lips. Her attitude toward the Plain way of life had been forever skewed by the few years she had spent with her *Englisch* husband. And yet he did thank *Gott* that his children and their husbands professed a Christian faith, though Bishop Miller would argue that their way was not enough because they did not separate themselves completely from a sinful world.

Jonas stood with a sigh. All he knew was that his daughters were happy and they lived their *Englisch* lives in service to the Almighty and to their families. They had showered his life once

again with blessings, with fine, strong sons-in-law and happy, smiling grandchildren. With a full heart he formed a silent prayer of gratitude for Emma and Luke's two, Lucas and Rachel, and for the baby Rebecca and Colin were expecting, who would be born before summer's end.

His gaze swept the sun-bathed field. A breeze rustled the fledgling plants, creating waves that swept from one end of the field to another. He was but one small plant, but at least he had broken free of the soil and could feel the warmth of sunlight once again.

A movement in the distance caught his attention. Beyond the wheatfield he spied a pair of horses standing on the slight rise that separated this field from the wide creek that watered his small herd of cattle and goats. Wild horses, perhaps? Squinting, he stretched his gaze. Were those saddle pommels on their backs? Not wild, then. But where were their riders? With a glance toward the house in the opposite direction, where *Mader* no doubt waited for him with a hearty breakfast, he headed toward the horses.

When he was halfway around the wheatfield, something else came into focus. What was that post sticking up from the ground? Yesterday there had been no post. He scanned the area around his farm, alarm tickling his stomach when he realized there were many posts, strung out as far as he could see. And was that a *wire* strung between them? His eyes were not so good today. Sound drifted to him from the location of the horses. Men's deep voices.

Slapping a hand on the top of his straw hat to keep it on his head, Jonas hurried toward the horses at a trot.

As he neared the rise, men came into view... *Englisch* men, four of them in their buttoned shirts and snug trousers held up by leather belts cinched around their waists. They worked at some activity. It took Jonas only a moment to identify what they were

doing. Two of them were digging while the other two wrestled a large roll of barbed wire off a wagon. The wagon's bed was filled with sturdy wooden posts.

He could hardly believe his eyes. These men were building a fence. On *his* property!

Jonas stood on the top of the rise, watching them work with his hands hanging uselessly at his sides. Someone had made a grave mistake, one that must be corrected.

One of the men with the wire caught sight of him and straightened. "Woodard, we got company."

Woodard stopped digging and looked up. He planted his shovel in the soil and hooked a palm across the handle, staring at Jonas with a measuring look. "Howdy."

The man managed to turn the word into a threat. Jonas kept his face impassive, but an alarm rang inside his ears. The four *Englischers* wore menacing scowls, and their rough appearance hinted at a familiarity with violence. An ugly scar ran down Woodard's unshaven face from cheekbone to chin.

"Pardon me." Jonas spoke in the same soft manner he would use to greet any stranger. "There has been a mistake. This fence is misplaced."

Woodard held Jonas's gaze while he turned his head to spit. "No mistake. This here fence belongs to Mr. Andrew Littlefield. Heard of him?"

The name meant nothing to Jonas. He shook his head.

"Whew, doggie," said his digging partner. "Them Amish really are backward, ain't they?"

The others chuckled. Jonas gave no outward sign that the insult had affected him, though inside his nerves stretched taut.

A man who would insult another would be quick to injure as well.

A smirk twisted Woodard's features. "Mr. Littlefield's a powerful man in these parts. He's your neighbor to the north. Moved up here from Texas to start him a ranch a while back. Gonna bring a herd of Texas Longhorns up from Amarillo."

"We will make him welcome."

"Welcome him, will you?" Woodard barked a harsh laugh, and the other men joined in. "Well, I'll tell you right now that the best welcome you can offer him is to get your livestock off of his land."

Jonas looked in the direction in which the man jerked his head. A little to the east, beyond the thorny hedge he'd planted to border the wheatfield, a few of his cattle were making their way toward the creek for a drink.

"Pardon, please, but it is my farm the cows are on."

"Now, that's where you're wrong." Woodard pushed his oblong *Englisch* hat back on his head with a finger. "See this fence?" He pointed out the length of wire that stretched to the west as far as Jonas could see. "This here's Mr. Littlefield's property. He's filed a homestead claim to this land. The boys and me been working all night to get this fence in place."

"But this is my farm, my home." Jonas waved both hands to encompass the land that surrounded them.

"Yeah? I don't see no sign." He glanced at his companions. "You fellas see a sign?"

With their smirking gazes fixed on Jonas, they shook their heads. "Not a one."

"Well, there you go." Woodard's smile did nothing to veil his scorn. "Looks to me like this fence is the only thing marking the

boundary.” He waved to the area behind him, including the creek. “That means this part belongs to Mr. Littlefield. And that part,” he gestured toward the wheatfield and house behind Jonas, “must be yorn.”

A flicker erupted in the back of Jonas’s brain. Did they mean to take his farm, his home? The area on his side of the barbed wire was a fraction of his property. What, then, of the field beyond the creek, the one he and Big Ed had plowed only a few days ago in preparation for planting corn? What of the pasture where his cattle and goats grazed? Angry heat suffused his face, but he took care to pitch his voice so that none of the anger might escape.

“The land belongs to me. Almost twenty years have I lived here. A trench I dug all around, as I was told to do.”

Woodard’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. He tossed his shovel aside and closed the distance between them with a menacing stride, stopping only when he was close enough that Jonas could smell the rank odor of his breath. The others also moved. They went to the wagon and each picked up a rifle before coming to stand behind their leader.

“I don’t think you heard me, Amish man,” Woodard said, his voice as low as Jonas’s. “This property belongs to Mr. Andrew Littlefield. If you want to go on breathing, you’ll keep to your side of that fence.”

A cold lump of fear cooled Jonas’s burning anger. The message was clear. If he or his livestock crossed that fence, they would be shot.

Injustice churned like acid in his stomach. It was because he was Amish that these men did this. They knew he would not retaliate.

They are right.

Did Jesus not forbid His followers all revenge and resistance? *He has thereby commanded them not to return evil for evil, nor railing for railing.* The words rose from deep inside, placed there by years of repetition of the Confession that all Amish professed. Though his sinful self would love to rail against these rough men, he could not.

Maintaining his silence was the only way Jonas could keep his anger in check. Without a reply, he turned away from Woodard and began the trek around the wheatfield and back to his house. Behind him, derisive laughter rose from four throats into the morning sky. Jonas kept his head up, though his back burned from the weight of their scornful stares.

I will not rail against them. I will not dishonor the faith to which I have pledged my life.

The laughter stopped, and soon he heard the sound of shovels carving into fresh soil.

But neither will I give up my home. I will stand my ground, but peacefully, with my friends at my side.

He lengthened his stride, a sense of purpose giving him fresh energy. He would hook Big Ed up to the buggy and go to his Amish brothers for help.



“Ow, stop! It hurts, Katie.”

Katie Miller looked calmly into a pair of reproachful blue eyes belonging to her young sister-in-law. “The bandage must come off, Hannah, else how can I see if the wound is healing properly? Hold still. I will be gentle.”

Eight-year-old Hannah studied her with a measuring look, as though deciding whether or not to trust her. Finally, with a brief nod, she placed her bandaged hand again into Katie's waiting one. She turned her head away, face screwed up and eyes shut tight, her muscles tense. Seated next to Hannah at the sturdy kitchen table, Ella Miller held her daughter's uninjured hand, worry lines carving crevasses in the smooth forehead beneath her prayer *kapp*.

And well she might worry. The injury to Hannah's hand had not been serious until infection set in. By the time they sent for Katie, it had swollen to twice normal size, and angry red lines stretched halfway up the child's arm.

Katie unwound layers of cotton bandages, a half-formed prayer for the girl running through her mind. When she pulled the last strip gently away from the wound, she let out a pent-up breath.

"*Das ist gut*," she told *Mader* Miller.

A relieved smile washed the worry from the woman's face. "See you there, Hannah. The smelly salve that angered you so has worked."

Katie pressed the skin around the wound with a gentle finger. Thank goodness the swelling was greatly reduced from two days ago, and the red lines had all but disappeared. "Wiggle your thumb and finger."

The girl did, and Katie breathed a prayer of thanksgiving.

"By the good Lord's grace, she will recover fully," she announced, and then she turned a serious look on Hannah. "But you must be more careful when playing around your papa's plow. You could have lost your hand, and then where would you be?"

A dimple appeared in one peachy cheek. "I would not have to milk cows."

“Ach, what a girl!” *Mader* Miller swatted at Hannah with a tea towel. “Indeed you would, but twice as long it would take you. In fact, you can return to your chore tomorrow and see how you like working as a one-handed dairymaid.”

Scowling, Hannah slumped in her chair and remained silent while Katie cleaned the wound and slathered it with a layer of ointment. When a fresh bandage had been put in place, the little girl tested the tightness by gingerly clenching her hand into a loose fist.

Satisfied with the result, she bobbed her head. “*Danki*, Katie.” She looked shyly up. “Maybe if I hurt my other hand you will come more often. I miss you.”

The words twisted Katie’s heart. Since she’d returned to her parents’ home four months ago, she had only seen her family-by-marriage a few times outside of the district’s twice-monthly church services. But though she loved them, there were too many reminders here. She and Samuel had lived in this house during the five years of their marriage. At this very table they had sat side by side for meals with Hannah and *Mader* and *Fader* Miller. In the room at the top of the stairs, they had slept as husband and wife. A sense of grief threatened to overwhelm her.

She shook it off and tugged playfully at one of the laces dangling from Hannah’s *kapp*. “If you do, next time I shall make the ointment doubly smelly just to plague you.”

Hannah wrinkled her nose, and Katie tweaked it.

“Off with you, now.” *Mader* Miller snatched a basket off of the counter and pressed it into Hannah’s hands. “The hens have waited long enough for their breakfast, and the eggs need to be gathered.”

When the child had skipped out the door, the older woman

set a mug of coffee on the table in front of Katie. "It is good to see you, daughter. Too long has it been since you visited."

Unable to meet her mother-in-law's eyes, Katie stared at the steam rising from the mug. "I know. I am sorry."

Silence fell. Katie glanced up to see *Mader* Miller's unfocused gaze fixed on something visible only to her. A sad smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. With a rush of guilt, Katie realized she wasn't the only one whose memories of Samuel wedged like thorns in her heart.

She broke the silence with a whisper. "I miss him."

Mader Miller nodded. "As do I." Her eyes focused on the window. "And so does John."

At the mention of *Fader* Miller, an uncomfortable knot formed in Katie's stomach. Though she and *Mader* Miller had grieved Samuel's passing as only a wife and mother could, their grief combined could not touch that of his father's. In the span of a few months, Katie had watched the man go from mourning to near-obsession with his son's death. A mournful cloud hovered over him, and instead of dispersing with time, it grew darker and denser and more distressful for those around him. Though he continued to administer his duties as bishop to the Amish community of Apple Grove, grief had made him rigid. Because he found no comfort for his pain, how could he give comfort to the families who looked to him for leadership? The community of Apple Grove sympathized with the devastating loss of a son, but they whispered that their bishop should attempt to put the tragedy behind him instead of wallowing in his grief. Thus would he advise others, but he seemed unable to heed his own advice. At home every conversation centered on Samuel until finally, unable

to bear the constant reminder of her loss, Katie had moved back to her parents' home. There she had been able to begin to let go of the pain of Samuel's death, and more and more remembered the joy of his life.

Until today. Coming back here tinged all her memories with pain.

Mader Miller reached across the table and laid a hand on her arm. The touch was brief, only a moment, but Katie drew strength from the contact.

"Life is not meant to be lived in sorrow. You are young, daughter. One day the Lord will guide you into happier times."

Katie looked up into eyes glazed with tears. Much time these past months had been spent asking the Lord what the future held in store for her. Surely love such as she and Samuel had shared came only once in a lifetime. Had the Lord not given her a task to occupy her lonely days? She had begun to learn the ways of doctoring and birthing, and through that had discovered the deep satisfaction of tending to those whose hurts were physical and therefore easier to heal. And yet...

She squeezed her eyes shut. Was she to always remain a widow, forever denied love and happiness until she quit this world for the next?

Mader Miller's hand pulled away. Katie opened her eyes to see her staring through the window. "A visitor has come."

"This early?" Katie twisted around to look through the glass. An Amish buggy approached, clouds of dust from the road rising beneath the wheels.

The buggy rolled past the house and continued toward the barn.

“That is Jonas Switzer.” The older woman rose. “I will put on more coffee and warm some rolls. Go, daughter, and invite him in when he has finished his business with the bishop.”

Obediently, Katie rose and headed toward the door.

The morning sun still hung low on the horizon, its brilliant rays shafting through the leaves of the apple trees that bordered the Millers’ yard. Mr. Switzer’s buggy had come to a stop, and *Fader* Miller emerged from the barn. He stood erect, waiting for Mr. Switzer to climb down from the bench and stand before him. Mr. Switzer began to talk, calmly at first. Then he waved his arms, churning the air around him. Clearly something had upset the normally unruffled man.

I hope Emma and Rebecca are well.

Jonas’s daughters had been Katie’s friends since childhood. Though she rarely saw them now that they had both left the Amish and lived almost two hours’ ride away, Katie stayed informed through their grandmother.

She slowed her approach, unwilling to eavesdrop on the men’s conversation. But Mr. Switzer was so upset that his voice rose and fell, and she couldn’t help but overhear a few snatches.

“...weapons...fence...shoot me on my own land!”

Oh, *dear*. Someone had shot at him?

Because *Fader* Miller faced her way, she heard his answer more clearly.

“You must go to this Mr. Littlefield and explain to him the mistake. Perhaps he will listen and respond honorably.”

Katie stopped several yards away and politely turned her back, though she could still hear.

“You will go with me? I fear to go alone will result in violence.”

A stern note crept into the bishop's voice. "You threaten violence?"

"From me, no. From them? They are *Englisch*. Their honor is different from ours. If two of us go—"

"If two go, they will see a threat. If one man calls upon his neighbor to discuss a shared problem, it is a friendly visit. Have Marta bake a *snitz* pie."

Jonas's voice grew loud. "You would send me to the home of an *Englisch* man with rifles armed with a *pie*?"

Katie winced. Mr. Switzer must be distraught indeed to raise his voice to the bishop. She would never have the nerve.

Fader Miller's reply was low, alarmingly so. She couldn't make out the words, but the tone was one that would have set her knees to shaking if it had been directed at her. The sound of retreating footsteps followed.

Katie turned in time to see the bishop disappear into the barn, his back rigid. Mr. Switzer stared after him, shoulders slumped and arms hanging at his sides. Moving cautiously, she stepped toward him, and he turned at her approach. A struggle lay plain on his creased brow and troubled eyes.

She bobbed a quick curtsy. "*Mader* Miller says won't you come in for coffee and warm rolls?"

For a moment she thought he must not have heard her. He stared at her without answering. Then he set his jaw.

"*Danki*, no. I must go."

She stepped back and watched him climb into his buggy. Seated, he picked up the reins and then stopped. He looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. "Katie Miller. A favor you would do for me?"

“Ja. If I can.”

“Take a message to my house. Tell my *mader* I have gone to Rebecca and Emma, and will return after the noon meal.” He tossed a glance toward the barn, and his chin jutted forward. “I go to see my son-in-law, the *Englisch* sheriff.”

Without waiting for an answer, he flicked the reins. Katie stepped back as his buggy rolled forward. She almost called after him, “Give my greetings to Emma and Rebecca,” but somehow she doubted he would remember.