



Marcie eased away from the curb to drive to the post office and waited for her uncle to calm.

“What happened when you saw him in the store? I’ve never seen you so riled.”

He swiped a hand over his stubbled face. “Did I go too far?”

“I think you know you did.”

“Yeah, I guess. But I just can’t help it.” He slapped the dashboard. “It’s Lundquist. He brings out the worst in me. Now he owns half the land our relatives cleared and homesteaded for years.” He flexed his hands and grimaced. “I’ve worked my fingers to the bone all these years, and for what? We’re further behind all the time instead of ahead. My money disappears while everything he touches turns to gold. I should call him King Midas.”

“But he’s having trouble, too. That’s why Kris came home.”

“Lundquist doesn’t have trouble compared to me, but I was surprised to see Kris.”

“I wish you hadn’t torn into Lars like a bowling ball knocking down pins.”

“Ya.” He rubbed his head. “I bulldozed his shoulder so hard I hurt my head.”

"I'll bet." Marcie suppressed a laugh.

"I know I only have myself to blame."

"Why are you more upset now than usual?"

He squinted. "You really want to know?"

"Would I ask if I didn't?"

"Here's why." He spread empty hands. "Our business is doing worse than you know. I'm behind on payments and haven't even posted all our debts in the ledger yet. I'm sorry it's this way, but everything depends on this season. The bank's threatening to call in my loan. If I don't make a big payment by Christmas, they'll evict us after the first of the year. I haven't told your aunt yet."

Marcie swallowed. "That's awful. Please don't while she's not feeling well. But be honest with me so I can help."

"Ya. I need to be honest with somebody." His head dropped to his chest. "Even if you find a miracle cure for spruce blight today, it's too late. If I don't send a large payment by the end of December, they'll start foreclosure."

"There's no leeway or alternate plan?"

"They say not." He tossed his head. "And I thought those bankers were my friends. We served on Chamber of Commerce committees together. I bought girl scout cookies from their kids." His voice broke.

"They have a job to do." Marcie tried to comfort. "I'm sure it's hard for them, too."

He pulled his red farm hankie from his pocket and twisted it. "I can't lose the land we have left. It's sacred. Great Grandpa Halvorsen homesteaded it himself straight off the boat."

"You think we could lose all of it?"

"I'm afraid so. His first home was a shanty. He cut timber and grubbed roots out of the ground." As her uncle lifted his head to stare through the windshield, both his hands shook. "It broke my heart to sell the first half. I couldn't survive losing the rest."

"They might seriously sell off the whole thing? Uncle, you

must let me know things like that.” Her quick intake of breath made the steering wheel lurch and the tires crossed the painted line. She almost clipped the corner edge of the bank’s clock tower.

“No use trying to break into the bank that way,” Halvor quipped, then grew serious again. “I hoped to find an answer without you and Ingrid knowing.”

“There must be some way to save things, something we haven’t thought of yet.”

He shook his head no. “I’ve searched and tried everything I know. I don’t have any ideas left.”

“We’ll think and pray. Like you told the Lundquists—with me home, we’ll work hard enough, long enough, to turn things around.” *Lord, make that true.*

“Thanks, Marcie. I’d like to believe that. Thanks for being willing. I don’t want you worried.”

“But that’s part of belonging to a family.”

His head jerked. “I guess. By the way, Ingrid added you to our payroll. It isn’t much each month, but we’ll share what comes in.”

“Don’t do it now, not while we’re in trouble.” She patted his arm. “My university work-study grants cover me this term.” *Well, that’s mostly true.* “Maybe pay me later when things improve.”

“It’s already set up. We won’t change our minds.”

Her chin jutted. “You’re a stubborn Norwegian.”

“You’re another.”

She smiled back at him for a moment before returning her eyes to the road.

“I’ll never forget what you did for Mom and me after Dad died. Even more after Mom got sick.” Marcie shook her head. “We couldn’t have survived on our own. I’m glad to help now.”

He swiped his eyes.

“I hope you both know what you mean to me. You and Aunt Ingrid spoiled me with college care packages with extra to share. I was the envy of my dorm.”

“We had fun.” He grinned. “That was mostly your aunt.”

“But you paid for it, and my best-cook-in-the-world aunt made fabulous goodies,” Marcie added. “I want to learn from her and help her now.”

“Follow her around more, and her skills will rub off. I’ve kept you too busy helping me outside.”

“It’s been fine. We’ll make both work.”

As they drove along Main Street, Marcie braked at the town’s only traffic light.

“It’s that durned spruce blight,” Uncle Halvor said, chafing his rough hands. “It’s ruining me. We’ll leave you the farm when that time comes. I just hope there’s something left.” He blinked a few times, and his voice caught.

“Don’t talk like that, Uncle. God will help us.”

“I hope so, but it’s hard. It seems like He’s showing up late.” He coughed into his sleeve, and his chest rattled.

“Sometimes it’s the last minute. I’ll just believe enough for both of us,” Marcie said.

“Thanks. We’ll know soon enough. Did I mention stopping at the post office before the clinic? I can’t forget.”

“No, but I will. What do we need?”

“Three rolls of stamps for early Christmas mailers.”

She entered the post office parking lot. “Let me run in. You stay here and rest. I’ll just be a minute.”

The crease between his eyebrows lessened. “Now that you mention it, that sounds good.” He reached for his wallet. “Here’s money for three rolls.”

She waved a hand. “I’ve got it. We’ll settle up later. Three rolls? You’re mailing three hundred?”

“Yeah. I’m contacting all possibilities to chase the sales we need.”

“Okay, if you think that big a project is justified.”

“I have to try.”

She nodded. “I’ll hurry. Then once we get Aunt Ingrid, we’ll

drive straight home. I don't think she'll feel like doing anything more after today's tests.

"For sure she won't. She didn't want me there. Told me to run errands." He quit talking and swallowed hard.

"She doesn't want you to worry."

"But she's my wife! We need answers." As he closed his eyes and leaned back, the taut lines in his face softened. "Thanks, Marcie. I am beat."

She closed the truck door with a thunk, nearly colliding with Kris as he hurried toward the building from the far side of the lot.

"Sorry, I almost knocked you down," he said.

She spun to see if Uncle Halvor saw. Thankfully, his eyes were closed.

She climbed the steps, and Kris opened the door for her. "We have to stop meeting at front doors like this." He quirked a smile.

"I know. Twice in one day after years apart."

He paused. "Sorry about that scene at the grocery store. I'm not sure what set your uncle off, but he clearly has it rough these days. I'm sure having you home will help."

"I hope so. It's not like him to get that upset."

They had barely entered the post office when Kris's dad followed them inside.

"Son, I forgot to give you these letters to mail. Got to pay our bills on time as long as we can."

"Sure, Dad."

Marcie looked from one to the other. The grown-up Kris looked more like his handsome father, except for Kris lacking the fine lines edging Lars's blue eyes from years in sun and wind. She liked the cheery Christmas tree logo stitched on Lars's Lundquist Christmas Farms hat. She must design one for their farm. Kris's thick, wavy blond hair in a stylish cut looked great without a hat.

“Last winter’s blight hit us all,” Lars said, “but your uncle got the worst of it since Norway spruce is what he mostly grows.”

“True.” Marcie frowned. “I sent him a hundred experimental seedling trees of a blight-resistant trial variety from our university nursery, but he says he’ll stick with what he knows and what’s worked in the past. He resists new ideas, and trees grow so slowly, it’s hard to convince him anything new could be better. He’s counting on us finding an answer to the problem.”

“I hope you do. And most older guys get stuck in their ways.” Kris rolled his eyes.

Lars stepped forward. “Hey, be kind. Some of us old-timers try new ways. Marcie, that’s what got your uncle so upset at the last Chamber of Commerce meeting. I mentioned diversifying Christmas tree varieties, and you would have thought I suggested treason. He accused me of destroying tradition. Things got even worse when they elected me president to take over from him in January.”

“I’m sure.” Marcie winced. “He or his dad have been president here almost since the chamber started.”

“I offered to work out a smooth transition with him, but he says he can’t work with me.”

“That’s a shame. Please give him time. I hope he’ll come around. He’s afraid of change and doesn’t handle it well.” She smiled so much her eyes crinkled. “I can’t believe he still calls you a newcomer after fourteen years here. I think the biggest thing he’s got against you is that you’re not Norwegian.”

“You’re right about that.” Lars spread his hands in surrender. “But there’s not much I can do about it. Norway and Sweden fought wars in the old country, but we don’t need to do that here.”

The post office line slowly advanced to the only wicket being manned.

“They only have one person on duty?” Kris asked.

“It looks that way. After all, this is Balsam,” she said. “Small-town benefits without big city efficiency.”

“True, but that can be impersonal and over-rated. Balsam is home. I was seven when we came. Nothing before that compared to living here.”

“I know. I was nine when Mom and I came,” Marcie said. “You’d already been here several years, but it’s home for me, too.” She surveyed all six handsome feet of Kris. He’d grown up fine.

“I kind of remember when you came.” His voice warmed. “You belong here. Sorry for the hard stuff you’ve gone through.”

“Thanks. It was tough, but it’s okay.” She would *not* let her eyes fill. She took a breath instead. “It’s been long enough that the loss hurts less now. Besides, I couldn’t have a better family than Halvor and Ingrid have been to me. I owe them everything.”

“You clearly mean the world to them, too.” Kris pulled a paper and pen from his pocket and scribbled something. “Here’s our phone number. Call or visit any time.”

Lars lifted his eyebrows.

Marcie tucked the paper into a pocket. “I’d like that, but it might not be a good idea. My focus needs to be on helping them and facing whatever health problem Aunt Ingrid has. I don’t want to set Uncle Halvor off again.”

“It’s nothing serious, I hope.” The gentleness in Kris’s tone nearly flooded her eyes.

“We’re not sure. We should get answers today.” She glanced at her watch. “I have to get to the clinic, and this line is long. I’d better leave and come back tomorrow.”

“No. Move ahead of us.” Kris waved her forward. “And I would like us to talk. I have ideas that might help both farms. If you see ways I can help, please tell me. If you don’t think it’s smart to come to our place, could we meet in town?”

“Maybe.” She looked away. “It’s just that Balsam is so small.”

“It is. Would somewhere farther away be better?”

“Probably.”

He snapped his fingers. “I know the place. I hear the new ice

cream shoppe in Hudson is fabulous. If you ever go to Hudson, we can meet.”

“People rave about that place. I do have to go to Hudson in two more days to get seedling test results.”

“That’s perfect. Give me your phone number, and we’ll coordinate.”

As she rattled it off, he jotted her number in the notebook from his jacket pocket.

“But I should phone you,” she said. “It’s safer that way.”

She was finally first in line and bought three rolls of stamps. Kris turned to his dad. “Can you buy our stamps? I’ll walk her out.”

“Sure, son.”

Lars took her place at the head of the line.

When Marcie reached the post office steps, it appeared Uncle Halvor was still asleep.

“I’ve enjoyed seeing you,” Kris said. “I won’t risk crossing the parking lot, but I hope you’ll phone.”

“No, you’d better not. But you will hear from me.”

Returning to their truck, Marcie wondered if the threat of losing their farm fully explained all of Halvor’s fury today. He’d been so out of control, Kris’s dad could have pressed charges. How much was the pressure of Ingrid’s undiagnosed illness? Or was Uncle Halvor getting ill himself?

She looked up to heaven for help. Halvor’s actions did not match the kind uncle whose encouragement kept Mom and her afloat after someone T-boned Dad’s car and killed him late one night. Dad’s insurance had covered funeral expenses but little more. Not long after, mom got cancer. Thank God for Uncle Halvor and Aunt Ingrid. She would support them now as they had supported her then.

Marcie put on a fixed smile as she reentered the truck. She would do whatever it took to save Halvorsen Farms. And Ingrid would be fine. She had to be. The Lord wouldn’t give them more than they could handle.



*Christmas Tree Wars*

Without letting them know, she'd get up early tomorrow to conduct her own survey to see how many brown-tipped trees could be sufficiently trimmed free of blight to sell.

There had to be enough.

*Lord, please help us. Don't let all the trees have blight. Kris and his family need help, too. They're good people.*