
THE PRODIGAL FATHER

Chapter 1

Friday December 18, 2015

Scott sat in his truck and watched the quarter-sized snowflakes falling softly. A couple of inches had gathered on the lawn - a white contrast to the tan tufts of December grass that poked through here and there. He'd been there nearly half an hour watching the people enter and exit the church while trying to sum up the courage to go inside. Despite the refrigerator coldness of his ten-year-old Ford pickup, his forehead was beaded with sweat. The windshield kept fogging, and he'd cleared it a half dozen times with a swipe of the back of his hand.

Thirty-two years, he thought. *Thirty-two years since I last walked into that chapel.* He glanced at his watch - 7:55 - the viewing was supposed to end in five minutes. He took a deep breath, undid his seat belt, and pushed the door open. He slid out from under the steering wheel, smoothed down the front of his pants with his sweat slicked palms, and walked through the swirling flakes toward the church. It was the first time he'd worn a suit since... well, that was another part of his life. He was surprised it still fit him, although it was a little tighter than he remembered. Snowflakes gathered on his shoulders, and he brushed them off. Someone has spread ice melt on the sidewalk, and his shoes crushed through the blue and white crystals.

An older couple approached the door just in front of him; the man held the door for his wife and continued to hold it for Scott.

"Thank you." a puffy cloud surrounded the words before he entered the warmth of the building.

"My pleasure," the white-haired gentleman answered. He leaned forward and looked at Scott's face through the glasses. "Scotty Simms. Is that you?"

Scott inhaled as his gaze dropped to the floor. It had been ages since anyone had called him Scotty. "I'm afraid so."

"It has been such a long time. You probably don't remember me. I'm Brother Myers. I used to be your scoutmaster." He extended his hand and took Scott's. The handclasp was firm and friendly. "I'm so sorry about your father. He was such a good man."

Bile rose in Scott's throat, and he was unsure what to say. At last, he blurted out, "Thank you."

Brother and Sister Myers moved down the hallway toward the Relief Society room. *The carpet used to be orange, Scott thought, now it's blue - times change.* His resolve to be here dissolved like the snowflakes that clung to his shoulders. He hung back next to the exit door. The Myerses paused at a small table holding a book for visitors to sign. Next to it was a longer table covered with a white cloth. Mementos from his father's life were carefully arranged on its surface. Scott stood motionless, examining it from a distance. He exhaled sharply and with a shake of his head, turned to leave.

At that moment, the outside door opened again, letting in a blast of cold air and a swirl of snowflakes. Scott stepped out of the way as another couple entered the church. In their late forties, they exuded the aroma of wealth. The woman turned and looked at Scott, nodded her head gently, and followed her husband down the hall. Then she paused, turned slowly, and walked back.

"Is that you, Scotty? It has been such a long time."

Scott scanned her face without any sign of recognition. "Yes," he said softly as he placed his hand on the door, ready to escape.

"You wouldn't remember me. I had such a crush on you when you were a priest, and I was a brand-new beehive."

"Cheryl," her husband said softly from his place a dozen yards down the hall. He beckoned with one hand.

"Cheryl Madsen," Scott blurted out as a memory surfaced like a bubble in a lake.

"I'm surprised you remembered me, Scotty. It's Cheryl Barlow now. That's my husband, Cal." She pointed with one hand down the hall. "I'm sorry about your father." She started down the hallway toward her husband. "It's good to see you again."

Scott nodded his head. He took another deep breath, squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, and walked toward the Relief Society room. Outside the door, he picked up a program. His father's picture stared at him; his chocolate eyes seemed to bore into Scott's. *He's gotten old.* He heard the door behind him open again and the sound of stomping feet as someone shook the snow from his or her shoes. Summoning his courage, he walked into the room. His sister, Jill, stood at the end of the casket; his mother was beside her in a wheelchair. Jill's hair was the color of the falling snow. *Have I gotten that old?* he wondered. Involuntarily, his hand brushed through his hair to the growing bald spot on the crown of his head. Jill was a grown woman. She'd been a teenager when he left.