

1 A New Start

1891

The strain of three riders and the supplies loaded quickly in the dark of night was almost too much for the small, rickety wagon. Troy had been concerned that the noisy squeaking of the cart's wheels as it clattered and shivered down the dusty road would draw attention when they first left Tuscon. Instead, it surprised and relieved him that no one had followed, or so it seemed. The brush tied to the back of the wagon had successfully covered their tracks, and he and his family were now safely away from Rod's revenge.

Several years earlier, Troy had heard about Spring River from a peddler. It had been described as a "very out-of-the-way location in the middle of nowhere." What better place for a new start? Wyoming was two states away from the territory of Arizona. Sheriff Wilson wouldn't send anyone after them; in fact, the sheriff was the one who had told them to leave town, even helping to pack the wagon. Still, Troy worried that a report would be sent by telegraph associating him with the recent horrific event. Would the sheriff in Spring River have the authority to arrest him?

The journey had been a strange encounter with time. Though advancing one hour into the future due to the time zones used by the railroads for the past eight years, the family of three went back in time seasonally. Spring was just around the corner when they left Arizona at the beginning of February. As they proceeded farther north, winter weather caught the weary travelers in its snowy web more than once. Now that they had arrived at their destination, more than a month later, the first budding of trees was still a few weeks away.

It was a cow town, much smaller than Tucson, with a livery, saloon, and a hotel—at least the sign above the weather-worn front door stated it was a hotel. Even though it boasted two stories, Troy guessed the small wooden structure would have only a handful of rooms available. Nevertheless, it reminded him that he and his family needed a place to stay and, as his growling stomach affirmed, food to eat. The difficulty was that they had no money. He would need to find a job first. Scratching his head, Troy wondered if such a thing would be possible to find in such a two-bit town.

Farther down the main street, which, from his observation, was the only street, they passed a small post office that, according to the sign, was also the telegraph office. Next to it was a doctor's office and a tailor shop. Troy noticed that only a few houses lined the street. He guessed most people lived on outlying ranches like the two they had passed on their way into town. A small church that he presumed doubled as a schoolhouse was at the far end.

Troy pulled on the reins, stopping the horse in front of the general store with a sign above the door that read Mom and Pop's Mercantile. A customer was just exiting with a bundle under one arm and a baby in the other.

"There's a notice in the window, Mama. Says, 'Help Wanted.' I'll go in and see if I can get me a job."

"Are you sure we're far enough away?" Mary's voice was quivery, as it always got when she was nervous.

"I think so. We need the money. Even if I can work for just a few days or so, it'll help us fill our stomachs. We can't go on without eating." He flashed one of his big grins that always melted her heart. "Pray for me, Mama."

"I will, son. God has promised to meet our needs."

Troy clambered out of the wagon, tipped his hat to a young woman passing by, then tied the horse to the hitching post. Glancing around to be certain they hadn't been followed, the sound of creaky hinges caught his attention. Looking to his left, he couldn't help but see the sign waving in the rustling breeze from the building three doors down. The letters stood out to him as if they were a mile wide—Sheriff's Office.

A sudden tenseness arose in his throat. The gnawing pain in his stomach was magnified by the delicious smell of freshly baked bread wafting across the street from a homey-looking café. He brushed off his clothes even though, being covered in trail dust, it would do little to improve their condition. He knew he reeked of sweat from days of travel, but, despite his physical appearance, smell, and lack of confidence, he straightened his shoulders and opened the door.

At the counter, an attractive young lady was paying for some linen. Troy glanced down at his shabby britches and patched coat. He felt coarse and insignificant compared to her.

The shopkeeper cast a furtive glance in his direction; Troy lowered his eyes and pretended to examine a barrel of apples. The owner led his customer to the back of the store, showing her some items she'd inquired about.

Since it seemed as though the girl's purchase would take a while, Troy took the opportunity to explore his surroundings. It was a typical mercantile with shelf after shelf of canned goods, calico, broadcloth, sewing notions, crocks, dishes, and tools. A small table of soaps and spices gave the air an aromatic fragrance despite the thick layer of dust that had settled over almost everything. A rounded showcase displayed medicines, pistols, and rifle shells. Buggy whips, harnesses, tools, and farming implements hung on the walls. Rifles were kept in a locked cabinet with a glass door. Copper pots, iron kettles, and pails dangled from the ceiling, seemingly competing for space with

various sizes and shapes of lanterns. There were bins of vegetables and fruits. Stacked in the front left corner near the window were sacks of flour, sugar, and grain. Sitting on the counter beside the cash register were three big glass jars filled with penny candy, a coffee mill, scales, and brown wrapping paper. Next to the apple barrel was one containing pickles, another with crackers, and one filled to the brim with potatoes. A pot-bellied stove in the center of the store revealed what he had always heard about this area of the country—even though the summers could be exceedingly warm, spring and fall could be frosty, and winters bitterly cold. Near the stove was a rustic table and two caned chairs already set up for the next game of checkers. A staircase in the back left corner led to an upstairs door. As Troy turned around and walked to the front of the store, he noticed another door directly to the right of the counter and assumed it led to the small room that extended out to one side of the store's front porch.

The gnawing returned, twisting like a knife inside him and melding into a queasy sensation that felt like it would rise up in his throat and choke him. He tried not to think about it, impatiently hoping the young lady would leave. At last, he heard her quiet steps, the rustle of her cotton skirt across the rough wooden floor, and the creaking and banging of the door as it opened, then shut.

Immediately, the old shopkeeper was at his side. "Somethin' I can be helpin' ya with, boy?" His voice conveyed suspicion.

Troy wondered if a picture of himself *had* circulated and the shop owner knew who he was. "I—I saw the sign in your window, sir."

"Oh?" The man's eyes squinted from behind small wire-rimmed glasses perched precariously on the tip of his long crooked nose.

Troy felt as though the deep brown eyes were piercing through his own. It made him feel agitated and nervous. "Yes, sir. Says you need help."

The man rubbed his thick gray beard. "And ya figure yer the one to give it, do ya?"

"I—I need it, sir."

"Well..." the old man snorted, scrutinizing Troy from head to foot. He caught Troy's gaze again with a discerning stare. "From the looks of ya, I'd say ya do." He stroked his beard again. "I—ah don't recall seein' ya around these here parts before."

"You ain't, sir. Me and my family just got into town today."

"I see." He patted his beard this time as if it helped him think. "Ya look mighty young to be havin' a family," the man continued, still eyeing Troy distrustfully.

"I'm almost nineteen, sir, but I ain't married. I got my Mama and my sister with me."

"No pa?"

Troy shifted his eyes nervously to the floor. “No—no, sir.”

“How do I know I can trust ya, boy?”

Troy’s heart started racing. “I—I guess you don’t, sir. But if you’ll just give me a chance, I’ll prove it to you. I’m a hard worker, sir. I take orders real good and—and I don’t complain none either.”

“Hmph! Seems to me a boy of yer talents—if he was tellin’ the *truth*...” The old man arched one bushy eyebrow as he emphasized the word. “...wouldn’t be so hard up for a job.”

Troy said nothing as the color rose to his cheeks.

“That yer family out there in yonder wagon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well. I reckon ya’d best not keep them waitin’ no longer.”

Troy’s shoulders sagged under the disappointing blow as the nagging pain in his stomach returned. Slowly, without looking at the shop owner, he shuffled toward the door.

“Hmph! Seems to me a boy what’s jest got hisself a job would be a might happier!”

“What—what did you say?”

“Ya heard me. Now, if yer aimin’ to please, go fetch that family of yers and bring ’em inside. I got a room fer my help. T’ain’t much, but I reckon it’s a heap better than that ol’ wagon. Well, stop yer gawkin’, boy, and get on with it afore I change my mind!”

“Y—yes, sir. Yes, sir!”

Troy ran out the door to the wagon. “Mama!” he exclaimed breathlessly. “I got it! I got the job!”

“Praise the Lord!” Mary exclaimed excitedly, clasping her hands together in delight and thankfulness. Troy reached up, put his hands around his mother’s thin waist, and lifted her from the wagon.

The pile of blankets in the back jostled about until seven-year-old Angie poked her head out and peered at them through wide eyes. “Does that mean we get to eat?”

“We’ll have a roof over our heads. There’s probably a pump around here for water,” Troy informed them.

“I’m starving, Troy. Please—” Angie piped up.

“I’ll—I’ll see what I can do, Angie. Can’t promise nothing.”

“A room! Oh, Troy, I prayed for a room.” A tear trickled down his mother’s cheek.

“Did you pray for food, Mama?” Angie asked.

“Yes, dear, I did,” Mary assured her.

“Then where is it?” Angie complained.

“Just be patient, Angie.” Troy winked at his sister as he pulled the two worn carpet bags from the wagon. “Mama’s prayers are always answered.”

“Not always, Troy,” Mary whispered to her son.

The disturbed expression on his mother’s face brought to his mind painful recollections from long ago along with fresh, haunting memories that tore at his soul. It wouldn’t be good to linger on either of them. He glanced about the street; no sign of Rod or the town’s sheriff. They were safe—for now.

The storekeeper ushered them through the door next to the counter into a small but cozy room. Mary was glad to see a window; a musty smell permeated the space, revealing it had been closed up for a while. She made a mental note to let in some fresh air as soon as the shopkeeper left them to themselves. The furnishings were simple but sufficient: a bed covered with a colorful quilt, a chest of drawers with a washbowl and pitcher, an oil lamp, a braided rug, a caned chair that matched the two in the shop, and a wood stove.

“Only got one bed,” the old man muttered apologetically as he blew the dust off the old pine dresser. “Only expected to house one person, not a whole passel.”

“It’s wonderful, mister—“

“Name’s Williams, ma’am. Jeremy Williams, but folks ’round here jest call me ‘Pop.’ Reckon ya can do the same.”

“It’s wonderful, Mr. Williams. I mean, Pop. We’re deeply grateful for the chance you’re giving Troy.”

“So that’s yer name.” Pop adjusted his glasses and peered up at the handsome young man, whose six-foot height cleared his own by five inches. Ya never did tell me.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Yes, my name’s Troy. This here’s my mother, Mary, and my sister, Angie.”

“The girl looks a little peaked.”

“She’ll be fine, sir,” Troy assured him.

“No, I won’t, Troy. I’m hungry!”

Troy gave her a sideways glance. “Angie,” he murmured under his breath.

“I can’t help it, Troy!”

“I’m sorry, sir, I—“

“Sorry? Well, no need to be. Mom—she’s my missus, she and I ain’t had supper yet. I reckon she can add a little more water to the soup.”

“Sir, I—“ “Now, son, ya said ya took orders real well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then don’t argue with me, boy. Supper will be ready in about twenty minutes. Mom and I live above the shop. Jest mosey on up the stairs in the back corner.”

“Yes, sir.” Troy extended his hand. “I’m real grateful, sir.”

The old man clasped the strong, rough hand in his feeble one. “I got a feelin’ I’m the one who should be grateful. I like yer family. Yer a brave fellow to be lookin’ after yer ma and sister, what with no pa.” Realizing his emotions were showing, a thing Jeremy always tried to conceal under a crusty façade, he quickly jerked his hand away and into his pocket. “Mind ya now, boy, I ain’t seen yet whether I can trust ya. Ya have to prove yerself.”

Troy blushed again. “I understand, sir. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“Humph! We’ll see,” Jeremy muttered as he hobbled away. “Ya might want to wash up a mite afore yer come to dinner,” he called out to them as he started up the stairs. “Use one of them galvanized buckets from the shop. The well’s in the middle of town. Soap and towels are in the dresser.”

“Thank you, sir!” Troy called back, grinning. He knew all three of them were a sorry sight to behold.

“Maybe I’ll have time to slip into a different dress,” Mary said self-consciously.

Troy closed the door and glanced around the cramped quarters. He sighed. It was better than nothing. He couldn’t help blaming himself that they’d had to leave home so quickly; he was sure they’d never be able to return.

“Troy,” Mary slipped her hand into his. “Don’t you think we should take a moment to thank the Lord for His provision?”

“Sure, Mama, sure,” he responded.

2 A Close Call

Dinner with Jeremy and Tess Williams was pleasant.

Tess was a sweet, amiable woman with soft green eyes and wispy gray hair pinned into a loose bun. Her winsome smile put everyone at ease immediately. From the way she doted on Angie, it was obvious she loved children.

Troy admired the elderly couple, whom he guessed were in their seventies. He’d never known his grandparents but decided he would have liked them to be similar.

Tess tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “Did ya have far to travel today?”

“We came quite a distance,” Mary said, not wanting to give away too much information. “It felt good to get off the wagon. We’re so thankful for the room.”

“It isn’t much. I wish we had more beds fer ya,” Tess said regretfully.

“It’s fine, ma’am,” Troy piped up. “I can sleep on the floor. Mama and Angie can take turns sleeping on the chair and the bed.”

“Are you all right, Angie?” Mary asked, noticing that her daughter, who had been so hungry, was hardly touching any food.

“I—I don’t feel so good, Mama.”

Mary reached over and felt Angie’s forehead. “I believe she has a fever, Troy.”

“I’d be glad to fetch the doc fer ya,” Jeremy volunteered.

“No!” Mary and Troy answered quickly in unison.

“Thank you, sir. I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Troy stated optimistically. “I’ll take her down to the room so she can rest, Mama. You stay here and finish. You can bring our plates down later, if that’s all right with you, Mrs. Williams. We can return the dishes in the morning, or I can bring them up later tonight if you’d like.”

“Mornin’ will be jest fine, Troy. And, please, call me ‘Mom.’” She turned to Mary. “I have some sassafras tea that might be of help.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Troy gently helped Angie to her feet and held on to her as they descended the stairs. When they reached the last step, Angie collapsed. Troy quickly scooped her up in his arms, carried her to the room, and laid her on the bed. He felt her forehead; she was burning up. A doctor might be necessary, but they had no money. If Angie became delirious, as she often did when feverish, there was no telling what she might say. He needed wisdom and prayed for his mother to come soon.

It was only ten minutes until Mary arrived. “I couldn’t wait to check on Angie. Mom said she’d bring the food to us later. She made up some tea, and I wanted to get it into Angie as soon as possible. I hope it doesn’t make her feel more nauseous. She didn’t eat much. Her stomach has to be almost empty.”

Angie started moaning; she was delirious. “Mama! Mama, where are you?”

“I’m right here, darling.” Mary dipped a cloth in the wash bucket’s cool water and placed it on Angie’s forehead, then took her daughter’s limp hand in her own.

“Mama! Don’t let them hurt, Troy, Mama! Don’t let them hurt him!”

Mary and Troy exchanged anxious looks.

“Shh, Angie. It’s all right. No one’s going to hurt your brother.”

“They’re coming, Mama! They’re coming!”

“We’ve got to keep her quiet,” Troy whispered nervously.

Angie began convulsing.

“What are we going to do?” Mary’s look of fear pierced through his heart.

“I’m going to ask Pop about getting the doctor.”

“No, Troy. It’s too risky. We have no money. Besides, if she talks while he’s here—“

“It has to be done, Mama. I’m not going to endanger her life to save mine.”

“Oh, Troy.” Mary stood up, buried her head on her son’s chest, and wept.

Troy put his arms around her trembling form. “We need to be strong, Mama. It’s just another time we need to put our faith to the test.”

“God has tested our faith so much, Troy, so much. I don’t know if I can go on.”

“Mama…” He gently pulled her away from him and took hold of both her hands, looking her directly in the eyes, his own filled with compassion and the admiration he held for her. “God has promised to work ‘all things together for good.’ Isn’t that what you always tell me? I can’t see good coming from any of this, but—“

“God sees the bigger picture,” Mary finished as she nodded in agreement. She knelt by the bed and began bathing Angie’s forehead again.

“Poor little girl,” Troy said sympathetically, stroking his sister’s long, curly, brunette hair. Suddenly, another child’s face flashed through Troy’s mind—that of a five-year-old girl lying motionless in a dark room. The troubling thought made him feel dizzy. He clenched his fists and tried to clear the disturbing picture from his mind.

“Mama, tell them Troy didn’t do it! Tell them, Mama!”

“Shh. Don’t worry, darling,” Mary said, patting her daughter’s hand reassuringly, “I will.”

A knock on the door startled them. It was Mr. Williams. Not wanting him to hear anything Angie might blurt out, Troy opened the door barely wide enough to squeeze through.

“I was checking that the shop door was bolted and heard some sort of commotion goin’ on,” Jeremy said. “Everythin’ all right?”

“My, ah—my little sister’s fever is worse, sir.”

“Ya goin’ to fetch the doc?”

“I was thinking on it, sir.”

“Well, don’t jest think on it, boy! Git a move on!”

Troy put his hand on Jeremy’s arm. “We can’t pay him, sir.”

“Never mind that. She’s needin’ a doctor. I’m sure I’ll be able to spare ya to do some chores fer him after a while. I know the doc pretty well. He’ll be considerin’ that plenty enough pay.” He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “Tell ya what. I’ll go fetch the doctor myself. It still gits chilly around here at night. Jest let me grab my duster, and I’m off.”

“Would you like me to come with you, sir?”

“Ya think I can’t walk fast enough or can’t see well at night, boy? I know this town like the back of my hand. I’ll get there quicker without ya.” Then, his voice taking on a sympathetic tone, he added, “Ya stay with yer Ma and sister, Troy. They need ya.”

“Yes, sir, and thank you.”

“Anythin’ I should tell doc besides the fever?”

“She’s been delirious, had convulsions.”

As if on cue, Angie started tossing and turning. Low moans escaped her parched lips. Troy thought quickly. He closed the door completely before his sister started talking again, in case she said something incriminating.

“If ya need more help,” Jeremy added before heading outside,” ya fetch Mom. She’s done lots of doctorin’ in her time.”

“Thank you,” Troy responded, grateful for the offer yet knowing he couldn’t take it.

Troy locked the shop door behind the old man, then returned to his mother’s side. “We’d better start praying Angie keeps quiet while that doctor’s here,” he said as he dipped the cloth back in the water, then handed it to his mother.

Gently reapplying the cloth, Mary glanced up at Troy with a worried look and a catch in her throat. “It doesn’t seem to be helping.”

Troy paced back and forth across the small room a few times. He didn’t know what to do. It would be better for Angie’s sake if the doctor came quickly. Yet, if the doctor came too soon while his sister was still feverishly rambling, it could be disastrous for him—even fatal. He closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath. His focus needed to be on Angie’s health, not his own welfare. Still, if something happened to either one of them, he worried that their mother wouldn’t be able to bear the burden; she’d been through so much already.

His thoughts transported him back to the beautiful ten-room house he’d known as a young boy. It was a memory he wanted to keep yet needed to forget. Ever since they had to leave that house, he would try to picture it in his mind from time to time, to envision what life had been like before people discovered where his father had gotten his money. The two-story dwelling was embellished with massive pillars across the front and ornate marble fireplaces in every room. A curved staircase

graced the grand entrance. The dining room table, with intricately carved legs and matching seats, was outdone only by the sparkling silver tea set and delicately patterned china. The parlor boasted a mahogany settee with velvet cushions. The bedrooms each had a four-poster bed, floral wallpaper, and gilded mirrors. The servants—a cook, butler, and housekeeper—added to the prestige that accompanied such finery. After his father went into hiding, their house was taken to pay back the money to the bank Colby had robbed.

They moved into a two-room shack five miles from town—just his mother and him, although his father came home occasionally. The last time had been eight years earlier. Nine months later, Angie was born. Then, shortly before they were forced to leave Tucson, Colby came home for just a few minutes—long enough to ruin Troy’s life.

Troy shook himself out of his reverie and looked at the small window, refocusing his mind on simple, everyday things that didn’t really matter but would take his attention off the dire situation engulfing them. *Mama could fix up some pretty curtains*, he mused. *And we could get this place cleaned up a little more.*

A loud knock on the shop door startled him from his contemplation. Instantly, his heart started pounding against his chest. The tormenting fear he’d faced off and on during the last couple of months returned with a fury, gripping his mind and body in its clutches.

“It’s all right,” Mary assured him, “Angie’s asleep.”

Relieved, Troy sighed, then quickly walked into the shop just as Jeremy started knocking again. “It’s me, boy. I brung the doctor.”

“Just a minute, sir,” Troy said as he fumbled with the key.

“It took yer long enough,” Jeremy muttered when Troy finally opened the door.

“Sorry, sir.”

“This here’s Doc Calder.”

Troy nodded his head in greeting. “Thank you for coming, sir. I’m afraid we don’t have any—”

“Stop,” Jeremy whispered. “I told ya we’d work somethin’ out.”

“Yes, sir,” Troy responded sheepishly.

“Right this way, Doc,” Jeremy said as he led the way into the little spare room.

The doctor examined Angie for a few minutes. “She seems to be all right now.”

“Yes. Her fever broke not more than a few minutes ago. She was hallucinating before that,” Mary answered.

“Mmm. You’re fortunate it broke so soon. Or rather, I should say, she’s fortunate. The longer a high fever continues, the greater the risk involved.”

“I’m sorry you had to come all this way for nothing, doctor,” Mary apologized.

“Nonsense. I don’t live far away. Besides,” he added good-naturedly, “Pop is due for a checkup, and I can never get him to come see me, so I reckon I had to come over here to see him!”

“Don’t ya go to tinkerin’ none with me! I’m doin’ all right, and ya know it,” Jeremy remarked. “Why, I could run circles around ya.”

The doctor laughed good-naturedly. “You know something, Pop? I believe you could!”

Doc Calder turned his attention back to Mary. “Since your daughter is sleeping peacefully, and Pop won’t let me take a look at him, I guess I’ll head on home. You be sure to send your boy to fetch me if she gets worse, ma’am, even if it’s in the middle of the night.”

“I will, doctor, and thank you.”

“See that she gets plenty of rest and water. It would be best if she had lots of liquids for the next couple of days—not much solid food.”

“Yes, thank you, doctor,” Mary replied softly.

Troy followed the doctor and Jeremy as they left the room. “Sir, we don’t have the money to pay you now, but—“

“Now, I told ya doc wouldn’t mind if ya jest done a few chores fer him, ain’t that right, doc?”

The doctor put his hand on Troy’s shoulder. “Let’s look at my first visit with your family as a ‘welcome to Spring River’ gift.”

“You would do that?” Troy said in astonishment.

“Yes. Does that surprise you?”

Troy hung his head. “I—I’m just not used to people treating us with kindness, is all.”

The doctor patted Troy’s shoulder. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope you’ll find the people of Spring River to be friendly.”

“Thank you, sir,” Troy replied, secretly wondering how long the welcoming spirit of the townspeople would last.

3 Toby

Troy woke early the following day, eager to begin his new job and determined to make a good impression on his employer. However, knowing his first responsibility was to his mother and Angie, he took the bucket down to the town well first. The air was moist; a crisp breeze rustled his

dark brown hair. It gave him a transitory and deceptive sense of freedom. Yet, the fear of being discovered still lingered threateningly over his head. Troy knew that Rod, in particular, would not give up the search for him until he was convinced it was futile. He glanced cautiously around at the buildings, some with false fronts, the store's name painted in large letters across the façade, others with sloped roofs and dormer windows, then down the road to each town entrance. To his relief, only a few people were stirring, and there was no sign of his pursuers.

Quietly leaving the bucket in their little room, Troy slipped into the shop, found a broom, and began sweeping the floor.

"Well now, that's what I like to be seein', a man with ambition!" Jeremy cheerfully announced as he meandered down the stairs.

Troy smiled. "Good morning, sir."

"Good mornin'! That sister of yers feelin' better this mornin', is she?"

"Yes, sir. Praise the Lord."

Troy's mention of God caused the old man some consternation. He knew he'd soon need to talk with his new employee about religion. "Good. Good. Guess we wouldn't have needed ol' doc last night after all, what with her fever breakin' afore he even got here."

Troy thought back to the previous night, remembering how close they had come to Angie inadvertently revealing their secret. "We prayed it would."

"About that," Jeremy said hesitantly. "I noticed ya prayed afore ya ate last night, too. Yer pretty religious, ain't ya—yer kinfolk, too."

"Well, sir, I don't know if I'd exactly call it religious. We know the Lord if that's what you mean."

"Yeah, that's what I'm meanin'. And that's a good thing, boy. Don't git me wrong. It's a good thing fer some folks, but me and Mom are happy jest the way we is." He knit his thick eyebrows together, "If'n ya knows what I mean?"

"Sir?"

"In other words, yer to keep yer religion to yerself. I don't want ya pushin' yer beliefs on us—or my customers, fer that matter. It ain't good fer business. Ya understand what I'm sayin', boy?"

Troy took the warning as a threat that he could lose his job, something he couldn't afford. Not now. He knew he must heed the man's orders; he must tread softly and be extra-careful to please his employer, or he and his family could be out on the street with no food, no money, and no home. "Yes, sir, I think I do," he said softly.

“Good. We’ll git along jest fine! By the way, take a quick break and tell that mother and sister of yers to go upstairs and git some breakfast. Git some yerself while yer at it. I don’t want my help keelin’ over on the floor from hunger.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you!”

Mary decided it would be best for Angie to stay in bed, so Troy brought down a platter of food.

“Look at this, Troy! Ham, potatoes, eggs, biscuits. We haven’t eaten this well in I don’t know how long.”

Troy smiled. “Yes, ma’am,” he replied, then lowered his eyes to the floor. It was true; they hadn’t eaten that well since he was five.

The smell of food woke Angie out of her deep sleep. “I’m hungry, Mama.”

“The doctor said you should have mostly liquids, honey.”

“Please, Mama! I’m hungry!”

“Well, I guess it won’t hurt you to eat a little. But, after such a bad fever last night, you need to take it kind of slow.”

“I will, Mama.” Angie sat up in bed, greedily took the plate from her mother’s hands, and stuffed an entire biscuit in her mouth.

“Not so fast!” Mary scolded.

“I’m hungry!”

“I know, darling, but you don’t want to make yourself sick again.”

Troy looked up and exchanged an anxious glance with his mother. That was an understatement. They couldn’t risk Angie having another fever, for Troy’s sake, as well as hers.

Troy hurried through his breakfast and walked back into the store just as the first customer entered.

“Mornin’, Emma,” Pop said jovially.

“Good morning, Pop,” the matronly Mrs. Tucker replied. “It’s a beautiful day today! The sun is shining. You really ought to pull up that shade, Pop, and let some light into this store. It’s hard to see what you’ve got!”

“You’re right,” Tess added, coming down the stairs to take her place behind the cash register so Jeremy could show Troy some items in the back room that needed to be stocked. “I’m always gittin’ on him about that, too. He always forgits!”

Walking over to the display window, she raised one of the shades, then lowered it quickly. “Oh, no,” she informed her husband. “Here comes Toby. It sure enough didn’t take him long!” She whispered a warning to Troy. “Toby Jenson’s comin’!”

Puzzled, Troy wondered if the name was supposed to mean something to him. "Toby Jenson, ma'am?"

"The town's busybody," she informed him. "No doubt he heard about you already. He's gonna have a heap of questions fer ya." Wanting to protect Troy from Toby's prying ways, she winked at Jeremy, hoping he would immediately take Troy to the back room and get him out of sight. She liked the young stranger and knew, all too well, how relentless Toby could be when his curiosity was aroused.

It was too late. Toby was already in the store. "Mornin', Pop. Mornin', Mom. I had just a few minutes to spare and thought I'd come visit with you for a spell."

Tess was already annoyed with him. "Any special reason, Toby?"

Toby strained his neck, trying to locate the newcomer he'd heard about. "Nothin' in particular. Just wonderin'"

Jeremy knew it was useless trying to hide Troy. Best for the boy to get the interrogation over with. He wondered how Toby had heard about the strangers. *Doc's wife*, he thought to himself. *She'd be the one! A regular meddler, that lady. Jest like Toby.* "He'd be over yonder by the pickle barrel, Toby."

Toby tipped his hat and shuffled over toward his prey.

"And jest in case ya'd like to know," Tess added, hoping to discourage Toby from his fact-finding mission, "he's got work to do."

"Yes, ma'am," Toby replied nonchalantly, "I'm sure he does."

Emma Tucker shook her head in disgust.

Once he spotted Troy, Toby didn't waste any time. "Hello, young fellow!"

Troy looked at him nervously and continued sweeping. "Sir."

"The name's Toby—Toby Jenson." Troy shook the plump hand extended to him by the tailor. An awkward moment of silence followed. "And your name would be?"

"Oh, sorry, sir. It's Troy."

Toby wasn't about to be satisfied with just a first name. "Troy what?"

Troy froze. Revealing his last name could possibly cost him his life.

"You *do* have a last name, don't you, boy?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, it's, ah..." Troy was tempted to give a fake name but couldn't bring himself to lie. "Daniels, sir. Troy Daniels."

"Daniels, Daniels. Name sounds familiar, but I don't recollect no Daniels in these parts. Where did you come from?"

Troy knew he needed to be vague, especially since Toby recognized his last name. *Hopefully, he hasn't heard of Pa*, Troy mused, trying to encourage himself. "Arizona territory, sir."

Toby fingered his chin thoughtfully. "Arizona. Arizona. Long trip." He cleared his throat. "I hear it's just you, your ma, and your sister."

"Yes, sir." Troy noticed Jeremy motioning for him to help with the merchandise he was shelving. "If you'll excuse me, I think Pop has something for me to do."

Toby reached out, quickly grabbing his arm before Troy had a chance to walk away. "Pop's a patient man. He'll wait. You got no pa, boy?"

Troy swallowed hard. The conversation was getting too risky. "Ah, no sir, not—not with us."

"Dead, is he?"

Troy's hands felt sweaty. "No, sir."

"Left your ma, did he? Too bad. Too bad. That happens from time to time. What did you say his name was?"

"Troy! I need ya to git somethin' off the top shelf." Mom's call for help rescued Troy from revealing any more.

"Coming, ma'am. Excuse me, Mr. Jenson." He shook his arm loose from Toby's grip and strode swiftly to the front of the store. "Thank you," he whispered to Tess.

Mom chuckled. "Anytime, Troy. And I have a feelin' there will be lots more!"

Troy's six-foot frame allowed him to easily retrieve the item. He handed it to Tess, but not before Toby was at his side again.

"How old are you, boy?"

Emma had heard enough. She was curious about the new arrival, too, but detested nosy people. She finished paying for her groceries, then turned to the tailor in a fury. "Really, Toby, give the boy some room to breathe!"

"What are you talkin' about?" Toby answered in sheer ignorance.

Emma was incredulous. *How can people be so blind to their own imperfections?* she wondered. "What am I talking about?" she sputtered. "You are the worst—I repeat, the worst busybody this town has ever seen! I suggest you get back to your own work. There are enough people in this town to keep your tailoring business busy from sunup to sundown!"

"All right! All right! I'll leave!" Then, just before he closed the shop door, he stuck his head back inside and said directly to Troy, a sly smile on his ruddy, round face. "But I'll be back!"