

Trial
at the
Ridge

KINSEY M. ROCKETT



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“When trials come, let the Savior refine you into gold.”

“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you: bless and curse not.

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

—Romans 12:10–14, 19–21

*For the Lord Jesus Christ, who is my Creator,
my Redeemer, and my King*

*That we might see trials as opportunities to grow
spiritually and to draw closer to Him.*

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Historical Note

The decade in which this story takes place is commonly known as the “Roaring Twenties.” Although the United States experienced a brief recession following World War I, the economy quickly recovered and began to thrive. Business expanded. Real wages increased. New inventions hit the marketplace.

Not for everyone, however, was this decade roaring with prosperity. During the war, American farmers found their crops to be in high demand; afterward, this declined a great deal, thereby considerably reducing the market value of the crops. Meanwhile, the cost of farm products increased substantially, yet land value, which had bounded before the war, now plummeted. Due to the increased financial burden, many farms with mortgages faced foreclosure.

Prologue

February 22, 1924, Friday

A cold-hearted north wind whistled a mournful tune as it slithered down from the mountains and swirled between the snow-sprinkled evergreens. Lit by a sliver of moon, the trees cast long, dark shadows across the silvery, snowy slope.

Something flickered—a shadow, perhaps, but not one of the broad, familiar shadows cast by a sturdy tree. A stealthy movement, a faint rustling, a glimpse of sleek buff hair—whatever else it might be, this was no shadow. This was a stranger. An intruder with evil intent.

A pair of slanted amber eyes scanned down the mountain slope, focusing on a rancher's field where a herd of healthy cattle snoozed peacefully, unaware of the impending danger. The tawny creature licked his lips with a rough, pink tongue. He could almost taste the tender beef.

Slinking between the trees, the predator padded furtively* through the shadows and descended the hills with astonishing agility. Stealthily creeping along the fence, he selected his prey. Seconds later, the awful, agonized squall of a dying calf rang through the night then abruptly became forever silent.

* furtive: characterized by stealth; surreptitious; expressive of hidden motives or purposes; shifty

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In the nearby farmhouse, a light flickered. After several moments, the door flew open, and a rancher stumbled onto the porch wearing his work boots, work pants, nightshirt, and Stetson hat, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand and grasping his rifle with the other. Behind him hurried his slightly plump wife, who clutched a glowing lantern. A line of concern creased her forehead. "Mark, what's happening?"

"Some predator is fixin' to nab one of our calves!" her husband exclaimed. "Wait 'ere, honey. I'll get 'im!" Cocking his rifle, he sprang from the porch and raced for the field. Those cattle were his family's livelihood, and no critter would get away with stealing them!

The unwelcome visitor glanced up from his meal, irritated at the interruption. Why could not he, a great cat, eat in peace? Why must he be chased away like some ordinary stray pussy? Sensing that to stick around was no longer safe, he slunk away in a sour mood, flicking his ears in disgust. His right ear smoothly tapered to a delicate point, but his ragged left ear drooped at an unnatural angle, evidence of a ferocious fight in the past.

A gunshot sliced the air. Minus a tuft of fur, the fierce cat hunkered down with his ears laid back and slithered away into the night.

"Did you get him?" came the lady's anxious voice.

Mark squinted into the predawn darkness. "Not sure. I think I missed."

"What was it?" his wife asked, shivering in the mid-February cold.

The rancher stepped into the cattle pasture. "A cat, Bess. A huge mountain lion. I didn't get too good a look, but it 'peared something was wrong with 'is ear. Kinda flopped over at a peculiar angle. It weren't natural." Stopping short, he stared down at the torn remains of a young calf lying at his feet. "Bess, he got one of the little 'uns."

"Poor little tyke! Mark, we can't let that nasty creature just waltz in here and start killing. Do you think he'll return?"

PROLOGUE

Her husband set his jaw in a firm line. “No doubt he’s aimin’ to come back, seein’ as he knows there’s calves here,” the rancher affirmed grimly.

Deep in thought, Bess pursed her lips. “We had better make sure to tell the neighbors about this, especially the Whitlocks. Abbie mentioned the other day that they would be letting their sheep out on pasture soon. Their place is almost paid off, but not quite. Since they could hardly sell any crops last autumn, they’re counting on that wool.” She shifted the lantern to her other hand. “They’re good neighbors, Mark. I hope nothing happens that could make the bank foreclose.”

“Don’t you fret none, Bess,” Mark assured her. “Old Mr. Greylin is a very understanding man. If he intended to foreclose, he would ha’ done it last fall when their crops wouldn’t sell and they couldn’t make the payment. ’Sides, I’ve never ’eard of ’im turnin’ an honest family out into the cold. There’s no danger of ’em losing their farm.”

Mark Haltson would not have spoken with such confidence had he known that Old Mr. Greylin, the good bank owner, had died of sudden heart failure only hours before. There was no guarantee that his successor would be as gracious.

Thirty Days Left

February 29, 1924, Friday

“Harold, spell *adjacent*.”

The boy squinted up at the ceiling in an attitude of concentration. “A-d-j-a-c-e-n-t,” he spelled carefully.

Miss Watersill, the elderly schoolteacher, nodded her approval. “Very good. William, spell *tangible*.”

A sturdy eleven-year-old in one of the middle rows ran his hand through his rather curly brown hair. “T-a-n-g-a-b-e-l-e?” he halfheartedly guessed.

A tall redheaded boy immediately to his left hooted with laughter. William’s ears turned pink.

Gazing rather sternly over the wire rims of her spectacles, the teacher stated, “Incorrect.”

Not quite under his breath, the tall student mumbled, “I could have told you that.”

“Zachary,” Miss Watersill said to him crisply, “*notorious*.”

“N-o-t-o-r-i-o-u-s,” Zachary spelled with confidence.

“Correct.”

Zachary cast a scornful glance at William, who appeared to be intent upon the pattern of woodwork in the bench in front of him.

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“Nathanael,” the teacher continued, “*subterraneous*.”

A blond thirteen-year-old perched in one of the farther rows of benches straightened up. “S-u-b-t-e-r-r-a-n-e-o-u-s!” he cheerfully rattled off.

Half smiling, the teacher said, “Very good, Nathanael.”

When he glanced sideways, William saw Zachary pressing his lips together in suppressed frustration. *He doesn't seem very happy that Nathanael spells as well as he does*, William mused. Miss Watersill's voice interrupted his thoughts. “Remember, everyone, that the school spelling bee is on Saturday, March 29, which is four weeks from tomorrow. You are dismissed.”

At once, the single-room schoolhouse became a beehive of hustle and bustle and youthful chatter as the students got up, straightened their books, and resumed conversations with their friends. Several boys scurried outside for a quick game of marbles.

“William,” said Miss Watersill, “would you please put another log on the fire? It has become rather chilly in here.”

“Yes, ma'am,” the boy replied cheerfully, hastening to obey. After he added a medium-sized chunk of seasoned pinewood to the potbellied stove in the room's center, William paused to warm his hands before heading outside. A four-mile walk awaited William and his brother Nathanael, and a spell of wintry cold held the mid-February afternoon in its icy grip. Although springtime warmth was beginning to push winter from the valley, the season was leaving with evident reluctance.

Feeling a nudge, William turned to see Zachary Greylin behind him. Tall and lanky, the red-haired boy was about twelve and towered three or four inches above William. He smiled condescendingly. “Congratulations, William, on your great improvement in the details of the English language.”

“Please don't mock me, Zach. I can't help it if I struggle with spelling.”

THIRTY DAYS LEFT

“Oh, would you rather discuss arithmetic then? Or how about history?”

Hearing the interchange, Nathanael crossed the room in a few swift strides and stepped between them. “Zach, leave my brother alone.”

“Aw, I was just having some fun with him.” Abruptly, Zach changed the subject. “So, Nathanael, just four weeks ’til the big spelling bee.” A hint of sarcasm crept into his voice. “I can’t imagine you plan on winning.”

“I don’t know about *planning*, but it certainly is my hope.”

“Ah, assuming you still live around here.”

Unruffled by Zach’s merciless teasing, William spoke up, “What do you mean?”

Zach feigned surprise, “Oh, you mean you haven’t heard?”

Nathanael’s blue eyes studied the taller boy keenly, sensing that something was afoot. Quietly, he asked, “Zachary, what aren’t you telling us?”

Zach grinned. “You’ll find out soon enough.” Turning on his heel, he strode briskly away.

Indignant, Nathanael would have caught up to Zach and insisted upon knowing what it was that he refused to tell them, but the silent pressure of his brother’s hand on his arm checked him.

Nathanael and William Whitlock’s home lay approximately four miles outside of the little town. Accustomed to the distance, the two brothers could often make the journey home in about an hour in decent weather. Once the two had left town, Nathanael said, “Thanks, William. I probably would’ve spoken without thinking if you hadn’t stopped me. And later, I would have regretted my words.” He sighed. “How can you stand Zach’s teasing? He openly mocks you for struggling with schoolwork, but it doesn’t seem to particularly bother you.”

“I don’t mind it too much,” William replied with a little shrug. “What bothers me is when he goads you ’cause you’re the fastest speller in the school. He doesn’t like being second best.”

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Nathanael kicked a small stone down the rough, unpaved country road. “He’s jealous, and I think he’s trying to pick a fight. He knows my tendency to act without thinking.”

“Remember what Father says,” reminded William in a brotherly way. “It takes two to argue.”

Not one to be gloomy for long, Nathanael brightened. “That’s true. Maybe if I consistently hold my peace, he eventually will too. I hope so.” A sudden thought struck him. “By the way, what do you think he meant? *Assuming* we still live around here? What haven’t we heard?”

“I don’t know.” William had been pondering those very questions himself for the last mile.

Nathanael fell silent. Something was up. Certainly, that was more than just meaningless teasing. *But what did he mean?* Nathanael asked himself. *Why wouldn’t we still live around here? What does he know that we don’t?* Normally talkative, Nathanael said very little during the remainder of the walk.

The town and its surrounding farms sprawled in a broad valley with majestic mountains guarding the north, rounded hills tumbling in the south and patches of evergreen forest dotting the land in between. Although many communities in North Idaho revolved around the logging and mining industries, this valley’s rich soil and good grazing had attracted quite a number of farmers and ranchers to the area. Nathanael and William’s family was among them.

Sometime before the boys reached home, they espied* a ridge rising familiarly above the treetops not far in the distance. Jutting from the northern mountains, the ridge was clearly visible for more than a mile although from further distances it blended into the mountains behind. This striking formation marked the place entitled

* espy: to catch sight of (something distant, partially hidden, or obscure); glimpse

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Sunlight Ridge. While it was by no means the largest or the richest of the farms in the valley, Sunlight Ridge was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful. This farm was the place that the Whitlock family called home.

Rummaging around in his pocket, William withdrew a penny whistle and began to play. When Nathanael had taken up the fiddle the previous year, William had decided to learn an instrument as well so that he and his brother could practice together. Music did not come easily to the eleven-year-old, but he could pipe a few tunes. On this particular afternoon, he was playing, or rather attempting to play, “Home Sweet Home.”

After about three measures, the whistle abruptly squawked like a startled chicken, eliciting merry laughter from both boys.

When Nathanael and William turned off the road onto their family’s property, William inhaled deeply and spoke for the first time in half a mile. “Smells like snow.”

Nathanael also drew a refreshing breath and glanced up at the thin layer of grayish-white clouds. He smelled nothing but pine. *William’s the weather-wise one, all right*, he said to himself with a smile.

The warm, brown aroma of baking bread and the solemn ticking of the family’s grandfather clock, affectionately dubbed Old Grandfather, welcomed the two brothers as they entered the log farmhouse by the back door. Stepping from the kitchen, Mother dried her sudsy hands on a white flour-sack dishtowel and cheerily greeted her sons. Although more than two decades had elapsed since Mother had emigrated to America as a child with her family, she still spoke with a slight, rather pretty, German accent and sometimes used her native words. “*Guter Tag, meine Söhne*. How was school?”

Before either boy could reply, someone knocked loudly at the front door. *That’s strange*, thought Nathanael. *Neighbors usually come to the back door*. His healthy curiosity aroused, Nathanael bounded

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to the front door and flung it open to reveal a tall, thin man, nicely dressed but wearing an almost-grim expression. Their visitor was none other than Henry Greylin, Zachary's father and Old Mr. Greylin's nephew. "I am here to speak with James and Abigail Whitlock," he said stiffly.

In the three months since he and his family had moved into town, Henry Greylin had developed a reputation for being somewhat unsociable. For some unknown reason, he especially seemed to avoid the Whitlock family and had never really become acquainted with them; nonetheless, Mother greeted him with her characteristic warmth. "Good afternoon. Henry Greylin, isn't it? Come right on in and sit down. You're our new bank owner, aren't you? James is out at the barn, I believe. William, would you please—"

But William, anticipating the request, had exchanged his school shoes for farm boots and was running to the barn to let Father know. Within a minute the two returned, William a little out of breath from keeping up with Father's long strides. Mr. Greylin stood up. He had seemed tall before, but Father's broad-shouldered, six-and-a-half-foot frame dwarfed the new bank owner. "Henry Greylin, it's a pleasure to meet you," boomed Father, offering his hand.

Mr. Greylin reluctantly shook it. "Hm, yes, well, you must be James Whitlock. I've come on business. It won't take long."

The three adults sat down. "I'll get right to the point," said Mr. Greylin. "When my uncle died last week, seeing as he had no children, he left his assets to me, including the bank. Over the course of the week, I have been settling in and looking over everything. I stumbled across your mortgage." He paused. "You are set up to make two payments a year, one in October and one in April."

"Yes," said Mother. "When we sell our crops in the fall and our wool in the spring. Those provide our chief income."

"You failed to make your October 1923 payment. You are nearly four months overdue."

THIRTY DAYS LEFT

“We could hardly sell any of our crops last fall,” Father explained. “Now that the war is over and the European countries are back to producing most of the crops they need, there’s such a surplus that nobody wanted ours. We spoke to your uncle about it, and he graciously told us just to make the payment when we could.”

“I am not my uncle.”

Father’s mouth formed a stern line beneath his brown walrus mustache, but his tone remained calm. “What are you saying?”

“I am saying that I have more business sense than my uncle and will not tolerate missed payments, especially four-month-overdue missed payments,” Mr. Greylin stated. “In short, I am going to foreclose.”

Mother’s hands flew to her mouth. “You can’t be serious!” she gasped.

“I’m quite serious. You have until March thirtieth to make that payment. Otherwise, this farm will belong to me.”

Father tried to reason with him. “But including the one that we missed, we only have two payments left on the mortgage!”

“I’m fully aware of that, James. You won’t change my mind.”

“But I’ll pay as soon as I possibly can,” Father protested. “Your uncle and I shook hands on the deal, and I am determined to fulfill my end to the best of my ability. The economic circumstances following the Great War are outside of my ability, and your uncle generously gave us more time.”

Mr. Greylin raised one eyebrow. “Was this extra time stipulated in writing? I see no indication of it.”

“No, we didn’t see any necessity of that,” Father replied quietly. “We trusted each other.”

Appearing to take no notice of this last statement, Henry Greylin rose to leave. In a tone of finality, he pronounced the verdict, “James Whitlock, you have thirty days left. Good-bye.”