Prologue

Ellen stared out of the window, her wooden spoon lying forgotten among the scrambled eggs popping on the stove. This wasn’t the first time. The spoon’s blackened tip testified to that. Jim joined her and ran his hand through her time-silvered hair.

She leaned back against him. “It’s hard to believe.”

“I know.” He followed her gaze across the small garden to their grandson James, who sat reading his Bible on the same old bench his great-grandfather had used. “If I had known the evening would be this beautiful, I wouldn’t have been afraid to get old.”

“He’s just like you, Jim.” Her voice was full of admiration. “He has your smile, your eyes.”

“He’s a good deal quieter.” Jim frowned. “Sometimes I just can’t tell what that boy is thinking.”

“You don’t think he’ll be happy?” Ellen forced her gaze from James and stirred the eggs again.

He massaged an eyebrow. “I don’t… I don’t know,” he sighed. “This has been ‘Grandpa and Grandma’s place’ since before he was born. That’ll be a big change.”

“Well, yes, but he’s practically lived here already for the past two summers. I don’t see why…” She trailed off, an unpleasant understanding washing over her face. “Oh.” Absently, she scraped the eggs into her mother’s green clayware bowl.

“What did he do just the other day when I said I was getting too old to try and cut that new trail?” Jim stepped back to the table and took a sip of coffee.

“He told you to stop joking… And then proceeded to finish tearing the lettuce for the salad in half his usual time.”

“My point exactly. He won’t want to talk about–” He cut himself short as James’s footsteps sounded on the back porch.

Chapter One

A light breeze ran its finger through James’s hair as he closed his journal. After gently fastening its leather tie, he slipped it under his Bible and laid them both carefully on the weathered bench. Leaning back, he let the morning’s scriptures wander through his mind as he surveyed the garden. Mounds of herbs blended seamlessly together, a vibrant web of life. The onions and garlic formed a line of sentinels, fruitlessly trying to maintain the boundary between the herbs and the regular garden plants. A sparrow lighted among the lettuces, their seed heads almost ready to be saved for the next year. Cocking its head at him, it seemed to ask permission to partake in his bounty. He smiled, staying as still as he could as the bird hopped from plant to plant. It was a joy to watch God feed the sparrows, and to remember His words: “Are you not much more valuable than they?” The orchestra of twittering birds, insects, and other morning sounds always filled him with peace. It was so different here in Woodland. There were forests and farms, and very little traffic. Even though a few power lines broke up the view of the majestic castle in the center of town, he still felt as though he were traveling back in time whenever he visited the secluded ministate. Taking in one last breath of Woodland air, he gazed up the forested slope in a moment of silent thanksgiving.

James walked to the garden, leaving shoeprints in the lush June grass. As he knelt by the onions, a movement in the kitchen window caught his eye. His grandma stood inside, preparing one of her delicious breakfasts. She was probably almost finished. Realizing just how hungry he was, he pulled several bright green onions from the soft earth with a tenderness that only a seasoned farmer could possess. The rest of the garden would have to wait. Dusting his hands off, then wiping them on his jeans, he picked up his Bible and journal from the bench. Then he jogged lightly across the lawn and up the porch stairs. Opening the door to the kitchen, he was surprised to see Grandpa Jim dressed in a nice button-up shirt and dress pants. “Going somewhere, Grandpa?” He laid the bundle of green onions on the counter.

“Yes,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “and so are you, so you’d better put on some orchestra clothes instead of those work clothes.”

“Alright.” He stood up with a smile. “I’ll be right back!”

“Thank you for the groceries,” his grandma called after him.

James paused mid-stride, grinning over his shoulder. “I’ll give you the bill later.”

His grandma’s laughter followed him as he walked to his room, wondering what surprise Grandpa had up his sleeve this time. Gently pushing the door open, then closing it behind him, he slipped the pressed shirt for the evening’s practice off the hangar.

A minute later, he rustled around in the drawer for his comb. Humming fragments of his violin part, he tried to tame the forming curls. At least now he wouldn’t look like a porcupine. Making a mental note to ask his grandma to trim it, he walked back down the hall.

“Do you want us to pick anything up while we’re out?” Grandpa Jim’s voice floated from the kitchen.

“Well…” Grandma’s smile greeted James as he joined them at the table. “You could stop by the Herdman’s for two gallons of milk, since you seem to have more of that than coffee in your mug.”

“Will do.” He poured some more milk into his coffee mug, then bowed his head. “Dear Father in heaven, thank you for this beautiful morning and for the privilege of caring for your creation. Thank you for James and for the help he’s been keeping this place up.”

James felt his face growing warm, but he smiled.

“And,” his grandpa continued, “thank you for this food. Thank you for the friends who grew it, and for Grandma who prepared it. Please use it to strengthen us that we may serve You better. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen,” James and his grandma echoed.

After they had all begun to eat, James asked, “Where are we going, Grandpa?”

“Well, we’re going to pay Grayson Warland a little business visit.”

“Business?” James looked up, confused. “Isn’t he the land steward?”

“Yes.” He swallowed some more coffee. “I’ve talked with your parents and brothers about it, so now it’s time to get your thoughts. Those men who came by wanting to buy my land this spring got me thinking.”

James looked up in dismay.

“Don’t worry, I’m not selling,” he added quickly. “You know your grandma and I have wanted to fly to visit your brothers and their wives.”

James nodded. “Charlotte’s due soon, too.”

“In just two weeks,” Grandma interjected.

“Well,” Grandpa continued, “we’ve decided to take an extended vacation there, through Christmas, so we can spend time with them and get to know the area better.” James tried to figure out what his grandpa was getting at. “We’ve… pretty much decided to move in nearby,” Grandpa concluded.

“But… But you said you weren’t selling!” James said, ignoring his grandma’s stifled laughter.

“We’re not selling,” he replied. “We’re giving the place to you.”