

Connie's Christmas Prayer

by Anna Schmidt

*The bird also has found a house. And the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay down her young.*

—Psalm 84:3 NIV

Chapter One

Arizona Territory

December 1868

Constance Lancaster wondered if she might have to spend the rest of her life serving rough-looking cowhands and prospectors in the small cafe her mother owned. But Constance—known to her friends as Connie—longed for the life she had left behind in St. Louis—the good times the family had shared, her schoolmates with whom she had confided her hopes and dreams, and the hustle and bustle of life there.

Compared to St. Louis, Whitman Falls in the Arizona Territory was positively primitive. She missed the house they had lived in—an impressive three-story dwelling that had been the envy of all her friends. She missed the lavish parties her parents had given several times a year—especially the Christmas ball.

That life had come to an end when her father died suddenly, and a parade of angry men knocked at the door of the large house, demanding to be repaid for loans they had made to him to keep his business afloat. Distraught and humiliated,

her mother had sold everything to pay off the debts. But her breaking point came when friends and neighbors turned away. Some even crossed the street to avoid contact.

After that Connie and her mother had joined a wagon train headed west to California. Lettie Lancaster had promised her daughter a new and better life, but when they reached Arizona, Lettie admitted she could go no farther. The wagon and supplies had used up the last of their money, and she and Connie were running out of food.

The other travelers on the wagon train had stayed a few days at Fort Lowell while the wagons were repaired and the livestock rested. The wife of the fort's commander had been the one to suggest that Lettie would be the perfect candidate to take over a small cafe in the growing cow town of Whitman Falls. The owners had recently packed up and headed back east and abandoned the place.

"I can cook," her mother had muttered, and that seemed to have settled the matter. Now with Christmas only a few weeks away and the start of a new year a week after that, Connie could see nothing but more work and boredom in her future. She had to find a way out of this town. Perhaps if her mother remarried, then there would be nothing to stop Connie from returning to St. Louis. Her friends had written her—at least one had—and she was fairly certain she would find a welcome there.

With a sigh, she turned her attention back to clearing the counter where three cowhands had just finished their supper. Another customer sat alone at the table in the back corner, his black Stetson set low over his forehead, shading his eyes. That was another problem with life on the frontier—not a decent-looking man to be found. And certainly not one that ever seemed to have so much as cracked the spine of a book. Her mother, an educated woman who loved poetry and art, had passed on her passion for reading to Connie.

The men at the counter spoke in low voices, eyeing her from time to time, but limiting any actual communication to raising their coffee mugs to request a refill. They all appeared to be the right age for her mother, but out here life took a toll on people—these men might be too young. And not one of them looked like someone who might read a poem or admire a painting.

Still lost in her revelry, she picked up the coffeepot, and as she turned to pour, her apron pocket caught on a nail. The coffee sloshed onto her hand, and she cried out in pain.

The three men at the counter stared but did not move. Only the cowboy who'd been sitting alone came to her aid.

“Let’s get something to cover that,” he said, and in a matter of seconds he relieved her of the coffeepot, took a gentle hold on her injured hand, and reached for the pan of congealed bacon drippings her mother kept next to the stove. With slender, surprisingly clean fingers, he spread the grease over the burn.

“Want me to go for the doc?” one of the men at the counter asked.

“Of course not,” Connie replied, snatching her hand away and smoothing out the glob of grease. “Here.” She tossed the cowboy a flour sack towel to wipe his hands on. “Thank you,” she added.

To her surprise, the man began tearing the sack into strips. “Best wrap that,” he said, and before she could react, he had once again taken hold of her wrist and wound the soft cotton fabric around the wound. In the dimly lit interior of the cafe, she continued to focus on his hands—tanned to a deep golden brown that reminded her of caramels. At the same time, she realized that unlike most of the men who frequented her mother’s establishment, this man smelled nice—a mix of soap and the lime aftershave the barber down the street slapped onto his customers’ cheeks.

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” she said, knowing full well that her mother would be horrified that she would engage a total stranger in conversation.

Judging by the smoothness of his clean-shaven jaw, he appeared to be too young for her mother, but perhaps he had a friend—or a father.

She saw the corner of his mouth quirk into a semblance of a smile, but she still could not fully see his face because of the hat—a hat she saw now was made of a soft felt with a thin braided leather band around the crown and accented with a small, bright red feather. He wore a blue homespun shirt with no collar and black wool trousers. He'd left his outer coat—a heavy, tanned, sheepskin jacket—on the chair. “Are you passing through or . . .”

The other three men leaned closer, their curiosity matching hers.

“No, ma'am.” He tied off the ends of the fabric and released her. At the same time, he tipped back his hat and looked directly at her for the first time. “I plan to settle here—if that suits you.” The light from the lantern hung over the counter showed that his eyes were a startling shade of blue-green, deep-set beneath the ridge of his forehead, and eyebrows that arched with his last comment.

Connie felt her cheeks grow hot, and she saw the three customers exchange grins and nudge each other with their elbows. “Go or stay,” she said with all the nonchalance she could muster. “I can't think why my opinion would matter.” She retrieved the coffeepot and refilled the mugs.

“Oh, it matters,” she heard him murmur as he returned to his place in the corner.

He put his coat on and gathered his dishes—the ones Connie's mother had served his supper on when Connie had been late coming from her lessons with Reverend Cantor. He carried the dishes to the counter and set them down, along with a single gold coin. Connie and the three men stared at the coin while he tipped his hat and headed for the door.

“Wait! Sir, this is too much, and I haven't change for . . .”

He paused, his hand on the doorknob. “Well, I wasn’t expecting change,” he said, “but not wanting to offend you, how about I come back tomorrow for supper and then we can call it even?”

Connie was pretty sure the coin would pay for a week’s worth of suppers. “Tomorrow and three days more,” she bargained.

She saw the full flower of his smile. “Won’t say no to four well-cooked meals, Miss. See you tomorrow.” He paused and looked back at the men at the counter. “If any of you are looking for work, I’ll be needing some help out on my ranch.”

The three cowhands glanced at each other, slapped down some coins—not gold—as they gulped down the last of their coffee and followed him outside.

It had started to snow, and as he and the others passed by the window, Connie saw him turn up the collar of his coat against the cold north wind. As she cradled her injured hand, she realized she didn’t know his name.

Isaac Porterfield had learned to make decisions based on the feeling he got for a particular situation. That’s how he had decided to volunteer for the Union Army and, once the War Between the States finally ended, it was how he had decided to head West and work as a scout, leading wagon trains of settlers across the Plains. On one of those trips, he’d ended up in Colorado helping a friend mine for silver. The two of them had made a good deal of profit. His friend had married and now owned most of the real estate in the town of Roaring Gulch. He’d wanted Isaac to partner with him, but sitting inside an office juggling bank accounts and such was not Isaac’s idea of the life he wanted.

So Isaac had taken his cut of the profits, converted it to gold, and headed south into Arizona Territory where he had been immediately captured by the unexpected beauty of the region’s grasslands and open range—a surprise because

he had been told this was barren desert country. Even with everything covered in an early snow that had struck this high country in October, he could see the splendor of the land, could imagine building a home there, starting a ranch, raising a family.

And so he had taken ownership of several hundred acres of prime land that included barn, one-room cottage and other outbuildings outside Whitman Falls near Fort Lowell—the military base for a regimen of soldiers charged with keeping the peace between the landowners and what was left of the native population. As a former soldier, he was welcomed at the fort and had spent most of his time there since coming to the area—until today.

Building a life went beyond hiring dependable help, putting up a house, and becoming part of the community. It meant finding the right woman to share his life and a future with. His first idea had been to attend church services on Sunday in the hopes of meeting people and starting his search for that woman, but he was not a patient man, and Sunday was still four days away. Surely, there was no harm in spending some time in town, getting to know the locals. For one thing, having managed the large ranch on his own for weeks now, he needed to find some cowboys willing to work for him.

But when he rode into town the weather had been against him. A cold north wind and the threat of more snow had left the streets deserted. The mercantile had been empty of customers other than a couple of old coots warming themselves by the potbelly stove. Neither the hotel nor the local saloon seemed to hold any promise. Earl Gladstone, the banker, had mentioned the cafe, and so, hungry and discouraged, he had decided to get a solid meal before riding back to the fort.

The woman who served him a plate of beef stew with a side of cornbread and a mug of black coffee was old enough to be his mother, or at least his elder sister. She was friendly, but distracted and clearly overworked. She kept glancing

toward the door, and when he had asked if she was expecting someone, she huffed and replied, “My daughter, Constance. I was expecting her an hour ago, but she’s probably got her nose buried in some book and forgotten the time. I want her to finish her schooling. I made arrangements for her to sit for lessons with Reverend Cantor between doing her chores and working here. But she’s a dreamer, that one—not like my others. ’Course she’s the only one I’ve got with me now. The others are all out on their own. You got any children, Mister?”

“Not yet.”

“My advice? Pray for boys. A girl will drive you to an early grave.” And with that, she had turned back to greet three cowhands entering the cafe and bringing with them the cold air and a flurry of snow.

A few minutes later when he heard the door open a second time, followed by a flood of apologies from the young woman who entered, he knew this must be the daughter. He knew something else as well. He knew that seeing her with her windswept hair the color of an Arizona sunset, he was struck just as he had been by the land and the dream of a ranch and a family of his own. Seeing her, he felt like he’d found the right woman to make that dream a reality. Of course, he could buy the land—already had. And he could buy enough stock to get started on a herd. He could buy what he needed to make do with the small cottage already on the land while he built a proper home.

But he couldn’t buy her.

And so he had sat in the corner, finishing his meal and thinking how best to approach her without scaring her off. He had watched her go about her work, trying without much success to make amends for her tardiness. After a while, the mother had untied her apron, put on her coat and hat, and announced she was going home.

“You close up at seven, Connie—and not a minute earlier, do you understand? Folks have got to know we’re open the hours we say we are.” The older woman had tapped on the painted notations on the glass door—OPEN 7 A.M. – 7 P.M. MONDAY – SATURDAY.

The girl rolled her eyes as she closed the door behind her mother. After checking to be sure the men at the counter had no requests, she lifted the coffeepot in Isaac’s direction to see if he wanted a refill—an offer he waved off. She immediately pulled out a book that she’d apparently hidden in her cloak and took a position on a high stool near the lantern. She opened the volume to a page she’d marked with a piece of ribbon.

He watched her as he continued to enjoy his supper. The portions were generous and the food tasty. It was the kind of Midwestern fare he’d grown up eating, and although he was fond of the Mexican influence on much of the food served throughout the Southwest, now and again there was something to be said for a bowl of beef stew—the meat tender from slow cooking and the potatoes and carrots plentiful.

Her mother had called her ‘Constance’—*constant and true*. Isaac smiled at the irony that she had arrived late to relieve her mother, so not exactly constant. Maybe more true to those dreams her mother had mentioned. He wondered what it was she wanted—what she longed for.

Once she had removed her coat, tied on her apron, and twisted her hair into a no-nonsense bun at the nape of her neck, he realized that she was older than he’d first thought—eighteen or nineteen, if he was any judge. Most females on reaching that age had marriage and family in mind. He wondered if Constance would fit that mold. Her mama had called her a dreamer, and the way she was engrossed in whatever she was reading, Isaac felt inclined to agree.

He'd turned his attention to the increasing snowfall outside the window when he heard her cry out. He saw the coffeepot she held teetering as she stared at her hand and bit her lip.

"My fault," she managed when the cowhand apologized.

Isaac stepped behind the counter and relieved her of the pot while taking hold of her wrist and finding the bacon fat. Her skin had already turned red in spots where the coffee had splattered. He'd barely had time to notice that her skin was soft as a well-tanned piece of leather when she snatched it free of his hold and tossed him a flour sack. Instead of wiping the grease from his fingers, he tore the sack into strips and once again took hold of her hand, wrapping the soft cloth around it. He'd liked the way her hand fit in his. He also liked the way her hair smelled of lavender and shone in the lamplight.

But choosing a wife wasn't something a man did based on a feeling. It wasn't the same as choosing a place to settle because in choosing a location, one could always move on. Marriage was a commitment for life. He'd searched for flaws. But when she spoke, her voice came deep—husky. She seemed interested in him—asking his plans for passing through or staying on. Surely that was a good omen.

When Isaac tried to flirt with her a bit, she turned away with a shrug. "Go or stay," she'd said as if she could not be less interested. On the other hand, when he put the dishes on the counter along with that gold coin—that got her attention—not to mention the attention of the other three customers.

Isaac knew instantly that he'd made a mistake. He'd been showing off—wanting to impress on her the fact that he was a man of means. But in a place like Whitman Falls, the law was a sometimes thing. If those three cowboys decided to ambush him, there wouldn't be much he could do about it. He'd kept an eye on them even as he made the bargain with Constance to return for the next four

evenings. Once again, he made a decision based on nothing more than a gut feeling. He took a chance and offered the three cowboys work on his ranch if they were interested—and they were.

Outside, the snow started to accumulate in windblown piles around the rough, wooden boardwalk that ran the length of the town from the saloon at one end to the cafe at the other. He made arrangements for the three cowhands to come to the ranch the following day, then unhitched his horse—a black stallion he'd bought shortly after coming to Arizona—brushed snow from the saddle, and rode slowly out of town. He used the time it took to get from town to the fort—over an hour—to further indulge his dreams of a large working cattle ranch, a rambling adobe house, his children playing in the courtyard, and his beautiful wife running to welcome him home. A man could be content with such a life.