

A Promise to Break

Love, Faith, and Politics in the 1930s

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Prologue

Shawnee, Oklahoma, April 1922

"Where're we going, Papa?"

My father, Malcolm Calvis Trimble, Sr., placed his hand on my back and hurried me along.

"To a crucial meeting, Sibyl," he answered. "We've decided to support Jack Walton."

I was dressed in disguise, my hair stuffed into an old Cardinals baseball cap, Papa's bomber jacket swallowing up my small frame. With the way I was decked out, I could have fooled any of the neighborhood boys into thinking I was one of them.

Papa stopped, pulled his fedora over his eyebrows and rubbed his fingers down his lapel. He knew the importance of looking his best. "You must be absolutely mute, do you understand?" I nodded and he continued. "You must listen carefully because this man has good things to say."

"I will, Papa." He smiled down at me like he was pleased and I swelled with awe. Such a handsome and smart man.

Papa ushered me down an alleyway toward Shawnee's Convention Hall Building, a two-story, red brick giant with a basement and elaborate cornice around the top. The building had a columned entry facing Union Street and another facing Ninth Street, where we approached.

"Some of our state Constitution was written in this building, Sibyl. Our own community leaders helped draft it in 1906," said Papa proudly. "Nearly fifteen hundred people attended!"

It seemed like that many people shoved in now. Hundreds of men and a few boys around my age pushed in around us. There were no other girls, just me dressed like a boy. I smiled at my secret and held it close, intent to make Papa proud of my discretion.

I was only eleven years old but I understood political meetings. Papa had brought me to meetings before, but never one like this. There were so many people!

I clung to Papa's coattail as we pressed toward the entryway. Papa was important. He shook hands with several men, their conversation injected with words like *enlightened*, *reformist*, and *progressive*. These gentlemen, friends from the business side of town who knew one another, dressed like Papa in pressed suits with matching vests. Most of the others in the crowd were farmers; I could tell by their overalls and the smell of sweat, hay, and cow manure.

No one acknowledged my presence as Papa dragged me down a hallway. We went through a double door toward the front of the cigarette-smoke-filled room. When we stopped, I stood on tiptoe to peek between the men's shoulders so I could see the podium.

The buzz of people's voices hushed as a speaker approached the front. The Farmers Union president, John Simpson, spoke and then introduced Jack Walton. "Our Jack," as Papa called him, started slow, but soon his presence dominated the room. As he got worked up, he hollered for farmers all across Oklahoma to vote for him. He condemned the bureaucrats who gained from farmers' hard work and spent it all on their pride. My favorite part was his promise that if elected there would be a feast for the hungry. Papa was a banker, so we never went hungry, but a feast sounded fun. I heard new words like *socialist*, *justice*, and *communism*. Although I didn't truly understand what "struggle for political rights" and "social justice for the downtrodden" meant, my heart beat fast, and my spine tingled from the passion in the air.

Our Jack's voice grew louder as he spoke, until he screamed, "God wills it!"

The people immediately shouted back, "God wills it!"

Animated men raised fists, and their faces turned red in eagerness. They clapped and screamed, loud, deep voices reverberating through the building. Walton's promises were like throwing a bone to a starving dog. I heard a man near me mumble, "He's touched a chord of discontent."

Walton yelled again, "God wills it!"

The crowd, now in a frenzy, responded, "God wills it!"

"God wills it!" This time I yelled with them. I'd lost myself, carried away in the emotional tide. Yes! I pulled off my baseball cap and waved it in the air. My long hair fell loose around my shoulders.

Walton yelled out once more, "God wills it!"

The crowd answered once again, "God wills it!"

Suddenly, everyone grew quiet and my childish voice screamed out alone, "God wills it!"

Men's laughter echoed and faces turned to find the culprit. Papa picked me up and set me on his shoulders, my long legs dangling over his chest. I swung my hat through the air. The crowd cheered. I felt like a heroine!

When Papa set me down, he gave me a look I had *never* seen before. Pride. In me! It shone on his face. He smiled and I grinned back at him, then I stuck out my chest and pulled my shoulders back. I had done well. I decided right then and there to join forces with Papa and this movement. I would make my life count! I would make a difference! I'd follow Papa's ideals to the letter; why I'd even follow Our Jack if that's what Papa wanted me to do. You could bet your bottom dollar on it.

On the way home, I scurried to keep up with Papa's long strides. He ranted nonstop. "Child, Our Jack made a lot of good points. We have a decentralized and self-contained society.

Good towns. Main Street values. Children of the soil form the majority of our state's population. Most of the more than two hundred thousand people in Oklahoma live on farms. Jack means to help them. Sure, he's a Democrat, but what does that mean to us Socialists as long as our agenda is heard?"

He leaned over and whispered, "You'll see. Eventually we'll develop a utopian world run by the people. That is, if we band together for the benefit of all."

Papa glanced at me as if I might answer, but kept talking. "Your grandfather was an old-fashioned Christian socialist. He used to quote, 'If we all came from the same father and mother, Adam and Eve, how can anyone prove they're better'n we are?' After all these years, I agree with him. Socialism has changed during the past decade. It's our turn to make a difference. One way is with this coming election. We need Walton for the next governor."

I understood almost nothing he said, but it did not matter.

Papa suddenly stopped and knelt down to my level, taking my shoulders into his big hands. He looked me straight in the eye. "Remember this, Sibyl girl. You're part of the movement now, one of a select few who understand and can become a leader." He shook his finger in my face. "Promise me. Promise me, child, that you'll follow me and help change the world."

"I promise, Papa. I'll help you change the world."

He nodded and stood up. "Nothing can stop you from stepping forward and doing your part. Nothing or nobody. Promise?"

Of course I promised. I would do anything to make Papa proud. Anything!

Chapter One

Shawnee, Oklahoma, May 1932

A steam engine chugged into the station from the north, pulling a massive wall of boxcars and several passenger cars. The brakes screeched as the train ground to a halt and the engine heaved, the roar echoing in my head like thunder.

Papa's train from Kansas City was late. He had attended another political meeting and seemed to be in good spirits as he descended the metal steps and tipped his fedora at me. He looked distinguished in his tailored suit and spit-shined shoes.

I tilted my cloche hat and hurried over to help carry his bags. We walked toward the front of the station, my high heels clicking on the brick portico. I wanted to hear all the details of the meeting. We would have only a little time to talk as we drove home in Mama's Chrysler through the center of the thriving town. The dark green vehicle sat in front of the rock train station on Main Street.

"Sibyl, wait here," he said.

Steam fogged the platform as Papa walked toward the train conductor. He shook hands with another gentleman, slapping him on the back, and I knew my wait might be hours long. Bored, I looked up at the forty-foot, castle-like tower and scanned the walkway and arches encircling the ladies' waiting room of the busy Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Depot.

The Santa Fe station, built in 1904, was made of two-foot-thick rock shipped in by rail from Bedford, Indiana. The ceiling was constructed from boxcar sidings. Meant to have a clock at the top, the city couldn't raise the funds, so the Santa Fe Railway Company put up their emblem. Many people traveled by train to this busy hub to stay at the Norwood or Aldridge Hotels and shop on Main Street.

A cluster of flourishing men in wide-cut trousers, collared shirts, and two-tone brogues walked past me. As they laughed together, they appeared to be jovial, agreeable and cocky in their wide-brimmed felt hats. Several nodded my way. Two ladies chose to ignore me. Dressed in stylish long scarves, gloves, and handbags, they twittered as they passed. A brakeman walked the line inspecting wheels while several boys scurried around to gather trunks and valises for the few pennies they could earn.

Then I saw him.

He was crouched on the opposite side of the train between two passenger cars. A hobo. He wore a tattered homburg hat and had a bedraggled, youthful face. He was probably around my age. I watched as he stood and shifted his bundle, his arms bulging and his shoulders slung back in confidence. He tightened the rope holding up his too-short, worn-out britches.

Then, just like that, the tattered man took off running, crossing the rails in front of the steam engine.

"Hey, get away from that train!" a uniformed yard bull yelled as he chased after him.

I tensed. They were running right toward me!

The guard swung a club several times, hitting the man over the head despite his attempts to dodge. After a few more blows, his knees buckled. He dropped his bundle and fell onto the red bricks a few feet in front of me.

The yard bull was within his rights. Hobos rode the rails for free instead of purchasing a ticket.

"Go on! Get out of here! We don't need the likes of you around!"

The vagrant scrambled to his feet and I backed away, scanning the area for Papa. Where was he?

"Don't worry, Ma'am, I'll take care of him for you." The bull swung his wooden stick again, encouraged by a growing audience.

The hobo was more muscular than most men. He cocked his fist and swung toward the other man's unprotected face, but his fist stopped in midair.

"Go ahead. Hit me!" mocked the yard bull. "Jail's the right place for you!"

"He's just a bum. Push him out of the way!" yelled a voice from the crowd.

"I'm not a bum!" the drifter shouted. "I'm a hobo!" He looked around at the noisy onlookers. "I'm able-bodied and I work for my meals when I can!"

I stared at him. He wore filthy, dog-eared garments and his hair was unkempt. Then his eyes met mine. Chills ran up my spine. His eyes were blue—sky blue—bluer than I'd ever seen! And they were serious. Intelligent. And so arresting! He straightened, standing even taller, and calmly wiped the black soot from his face with his sleeve.

"Someday, I'll be somebody," he said.

I quaked as if shaken by an electric spark between us. I wasn't sure I understood, but I admired his small claim to dignity. A hobo might find a place to settle and prosper, but a bum had no future because he would not work for it. That small claim and his bundle might well be all he had left in the world.

I looked aside, unable to maintain eye contact.

The moment, just as quickly as it happened, was over. The yard bull clubbed him again. Blood ran down the young man's hands as he tried to cover his head. He stumbled and rolled into a ball while the guard clubbed his back and shoulders.

"No!" I screamed before the guard finally stepped away.

Another drifter snuck toward the hobo's bundle.

I ran over, grabbed the sack and threw it toward where he lay.

Without rising, he reached out for the bag. "Just wait," he whispered, snatching it to his chest, "Someday I'll be as good as you."

"Sibyl!" Papa's biting voice came from behind me. "What are you doing? Come here this minute! You know better than to get near bums like that."

"But Papa, he's hurt," I said.

“I told you to stay put.”

“Did you see his eyes—clear as crystal?”

“Let’s get out of here!” Papa grabbed my arm and tried to steer me through the crowd. I balked and glanced backward before he finally dragged me away. Everyone else went about their business, pretending not to see the poor hobo crumpled on the ground.