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Chapter 1



It's a frigid January afternoon, and the kids will soon be home from school. My husband, Andrew, is out feeding our cows in the blizzard that blows, and I am inside, putting away Christmas until next December. A pot of beef stew simmers on the stove as I open the two antique trunks that bookend the red loveseat along the windows in the living room. Though the weathered wooden trunks are empty, their lingering aromas of candles, ruddy cinnamon sticks, fat pinecones, and sprigs of juniper berries swirl with the warmth that glows in the windows of the wood-burning stove.

As I listen to “O Holy Night” one last time, I tuck away the stack of children’s Christmas books and gather the seven stockings that hang from the mantel behind the stove—Andrew’s and mine and our five kids’—Grace, Naomi, Abe, Life, and Esther. At 23, 21, 19, 17, and 7, the stockings are still the first thing they go for on Christmas morning, digging down to find a plump pomegranate nestled at the toe. I store boxes of ornaments, balls of white lights, rolls of ribbons, and bundles

of candles. I pack the fragile nativity that sits on the table next to the oil lamp, under which lies a long red and green plaid table runner.

The wooden nativity sits motionless each December day until sunset, when its four red candles are lit and their heat rises and spins the wheel of wooden wings that turns a rod which brings the nativity scene to life—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph at the center—and the wise men, who travel in endless circles on their way. I pack the tattered song sheets, whose edges the kids browned in the flames as we sang carols around the table, candle light flickering on our faces and the holy family journeying round and round.

This story, these pages in your hand, are about that table—the table that sits in the dining room of our farmhouse on the edge of a hay field on our family's cattle ranch at the outskirts of the small town of Salida in the middle of the Colorado Rockies. From the farmhouse, across pastures and beyond the highway to the west, the land slowly inclines through piñon, spruce, pine, and aspen trees to the massive mountain range that spreads north and south.

This story is about my family who gathers around the table—and the ranch where the table sits. The ranch looks west to several 14,000-foot peaks named after Ivy League schools such as Princeton and Harvard. They host the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness Area and blend into the Sawatch Mountain Range. The magnificent Sawatch Mountains not only display peaks named for Ute tribal chiefs such as Mount Shavano, which towers 14,231 feet above sea level, but they are also home to the Continental Divide—which sends snowmelt and rainfall either east to the Atlantic or west to the Pacific. On the Atlantic side, 7,000 feet lower than the summit of Mt. Shavano, sits the high-mountain valley that holds the ranch—and the table.

It is a tumultuous time to be a rancher in America. Ours is one of the last remaining farms in this valley where we raise over 300 head

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of Hereford cattle and produce over 30,000 bales of hay each summer. As a Colorado rancher and mother of five, this is my invitation to you to settle into life on our family ranch, to see both the peaceful and poignant facets of the inner workings of a livelihood that is becoming scarcer with each passing year. It's an invitation to enter into the seasons and the rhythms of the ranch while exploring the stewardship of life—including land, body, and soul.

I have learned, and continue to learn, many lessons through marriage, motherhood, loss, and adoption, while experiencing times of renewal, hope, and adventure through landscapes near and far. Through the stories in these pages, I invite you to pause and connect with this place and its people.

This is an invitation to our table.

♦ ♦ ♦

The table, which Andrew crafted ten years ago one autumn afternoon, is made from an Engelmann spruce tree and seats fourteen without brushing elbows (sixteen if we squeeze).

I love this table for all that it offers and represents.

What began as five thick lengths of rough-cut lumber screwed together side-by-side took shape when we brought in the hand planer and orbital sanders from the barn and fired them up. Blond sawdust spun and circled and settled to the smooth wood floor of our dining room. We opened doors and windows, welcoming the late fall air—a mingled mix of split firewood, our overgrown garden, and the sun warming the earth, frozen the night before. Barn cats peeked in the doorway and ran under the table, searching for crumbs. Their thin whiskers gathered sawdust flakes, and their padded feet made a map of tiny tracks.

We sanded, squished wood putty into the cracks and imperfections, and then sanded some more. Our hands, arms, and elbows purred along

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from one end of the table to the other as the orbital sanders spun round and round, their hum filling the house. Blunt corners were soon smooth and waves became level.

When we turned off the sanders, the quiet was wonderful . . . so soothing as the dust settled in the lowering sunlight. Stiff, we stood up straight, stretched our arms and backs, and removed our safety goggles, smiling at each other like happy raccoons. Sawdust was everywhere, along with quiet little cat tracks . . . like pawprints in the snow. I swept the table and the floor.

Our fingers felt along every plank and edge, checking for rough spots and snags. We sanded more and checked again. Soon the whole table was smooth. We wiped the wood with wet rags, admiring its new softness as the sun warmed the windows.

It was finally ready.

Andrew shook a can of stain, pried open its lid with a screwdriver, and set the can on some newspaper in the middle of the table. We brushed the deep chestnut color across the wood grain, each plank absorbing the rich hue into the fibers of its soul, forever changed. Stroke after stroke, the table took on a whole new character as the intricate designs of the tree were revealed.

We stood at the open door, admiring the table and breathing the fresh air. We circled around, looking at every inch from every angle to see how the grain had taken the stain. After touching up the lighter areas, we let the slow breeze blow across the planks while we ate lunch on the back porch stairs with the garden, corrals, and Mt. Shavano for our view.

After lunch came the first topcoat—the smooth finish upon which many meals would be served and enjoyed—whose sheen would reflect the light of our oil lamp for many years. We laid pages of newspaper on the floor to catch any drips, and I tilted the can: a slow wave spread like

warm honey across the dark, dull wood, illuminating tiny details in the grain. Newspaper crinkled under our feet as we brushed thick strokes of shiny satin from one end of the table to the other, around each edge and corner. Imperfections became beautiful character. We delighted in the tree rings unique to each plank—a map of time rolled out as a table. We eventually applied four coats, waiting for each to dry completely. This took days, and we protected the table, like a newborn, from the kids and from any fast cat that might slip in.

A few days later, we woke and ran downstairs like kids on Christmas. Our palms tested the dark sheen: it was dry and smooth as an old church pew. We celebrated with coffee, hesitant to set our mugs on the flawless surface. The table was gorgeous.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ten years later, on this cold January day, while onions, garlic, carrots, potatoes, and beef simmer and tender together in a pot on the stove, I gather Christmas and think of how we all have our raw, rough edges. When we meet and mingle our lives together, like a garden harvest softening in broth, we are transformed at the table of life. As we sit together and share our lives and our stories, we are seen, heard, and known—something each human craves. At the table, where we all have a voice, our opinions, intricacies, and character are revealed.

The table is where our family comes together—where we gather to hold hands and bow for a moment of prayer before a meal. When you hold the hand of another, you feel their strength or fragility; soft or weathered skin; thin fingers or thick, calloused hands. You feel a hand that is cozy and warm—or freezing cold. Smells of hay, manure, diesel, sawdust, soil, and soap drift in and out of the chain of linked hands. In that moment, when we pause to pray—when sweaty ball caps and worn cowboy hats come off, and when tired bodies sink into their seats

and sigh—thanksgiving and dependence settle in, reminding us of our humanity and our need for community and sustenance.

I pack the forest-green cloth napkins, the snowman plates, and the cookie cutters. As I store away the last of the glass goblets engraved with little white spruce trees, I think of Andrew's mom, Ruthie, and how many of our Christmas traditions came from her. The year before lung cancer stole her from us, she made her famous Christmas Eve Yule log, as usual, though nothing was usual. Having lived a life of riding horses, skiing slopes, hiking mountains, biking trails, and rafting rivers, the shocking cancer made her bones ache as her strong body deteriorated more each day. Those days were similar to, though painfully different from, the way a child grows up before your very eyes.

In her green holly and red berry apron, Ruthie spread the chocolate batter onto a jelly roll pan lined with parchment paper. While it baked and warmed the winter ranch house with its aroma, Ruthie read stories to the littlest grandkids cuddled on the couch in front of the crackling wood stove. When the kids got too squirrely, she set them up with Legos or helped them make paper snowflakes and special name cards for the table. With the ding of the timer came the sound of little shoes scampering across the worn wood floor as the kids hustled to the kitchen where Ruthie helped them sprinkle the spongy cake with powdered sugar.

"Now, watch Grammy," she'd say, as she covered the cake with a thin white dish towel and rolled up the cake from one short end to the other, peeling off the parchment as she went. She lifted the fragile package and unrolled the cake onto a silver platter and removed the towel. Eager eyes watched as she whipped together cream, cocoa, and sugar and spread the sweet layer across the delicate cake. Little fingers swiped the edges of the bowl. She rolled it up one last time—into a log—letting the kids give it one more dusting of powdered sugar and a

drizzle of chocolate syrup. I can still see her standing in her apron, silver platter held by hard-working hands, soft auburn hair curled alongside her smile, looking for the best spot to hide the Yule log for her grandkids to find on Christmas Eve.

♦ ♦ ♦

But things are not always so simple and beautiful. With life comes hardship, tragedy, and loss. Strong family relationships are a shelter in the midst of the winter storms we all encounter at one time or another, and those relationships are nurtured when we gather together. The table offers a place to recover and reshape as we look to lead more purposeful, peaceful, and healthy lives—lives that are not centered merely on ourselves. As we all share a common hunger and thirst for food and water, the table is a place that not only nourishes the body, but it can be a place that helps nourish the soul.

I place the last of the Christmas decorations in a trunk, lower the old lid and flip the locks down. There is something satisfying about closure. I look out the window and see the dim glow of the sun to the west as the snow blows sideways across the hay fields. The winter day is waning, and soon the kids will be home and hungry. I see the frosty cows lined up in the snow along the path of bright green hay trailing behind Andrew's tractor. Tearing into summer's harvest, the mother cows are ravenous as they are not only feeding themselves but also the calves growing in their bellies. Snow piles on their red backs and blows in their white faces as they fill their stomachs for the long, cold night ahead. I am reminded that the different seasons of life hold their own struggle and beauty while moving toward change and growth.

At the stove, I lift the heavy iron lid from the simmering stew and breathe the steamy goodness. Stirring the hearty cornucopia with an old wooden spoon of Ruthie's mother's, I let broth fill the spoon for a

taste. The flavor is good. I'm excited to share this with my family as we gather together and talk about the day and what has happened since we sat together at breakfast.

I remove the glass chimney from the oil lamp and strike a match to light the wick. Its soft glow spreads across the table as the windows darken with the dwindling of day. I shake the match and replace the glass. In the kitchen, I open the big drawer of plates and run my fingers down the smooth white stack, counting seven. I set one at each place along with a folded white napkin and a silver fork. As the temperature drops and the snowflakes slow and settle, I know winter's stars will soon appear. Andrew is still outside, tucking in the ranch for the night—checking on all the animals and their feed and water. It's going to be a cold one, once again.