



## Tender Mercies

by Lauraine Snelling

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*September 1887*

*Blessing, Dakota Territory*

“Good riddance.”

Pastor John Solberg stroked an impatient hand across sandy hair that no longer covered an ever broadening forehead. He watched one of his parishioners twitch her way out the door of the schoolhouse, where she’d trapped him. Good thing she hadn’t heard him.

“Why, Lord, why? Is it written somewhere that the local pastor is fair game for every woman with a marriageable daughter? You know I’m not the only single man around here.” Talking out loud with the Lord had become the norm for him in his solitary life. After all, when he knew Jesus was right beside him, why not carry on a conversation with Him out loud?

Between getting ready to teach twenty-seven students from the ages of five to fourteen in a one-room shoddy all day and his pastoral duties, lonely wasn’t a word in his vocabulary.

Usually.

He eyed the loaf of fresh bread that waited for him on the side of the desk. That was one good thing, those marriage-seeking mamas almost always brought a gift, and most often it was food of some sort. As did his neighbors. Yesterday he’d found an apple pie on his kitchen table. The accompanying note had invited him to supper on Sunday at the Knutsons’.

Now if there were more women around like Kaaren Knutson—not only lovely like a cream-colored rose but with a sweet spirit to match and wisdom far beyond her years.

*Like Katy.*

He closed his eyes, the better to see her on the backs of his eyelids. Katy Bjorklund, with laughing blue eyes, an endearing Norwegian accent since she’d only come to America

last year, and a heart always ready to help anyone in need. He'd thought her the perfect candidate for a pastor's wife.

Katy thought of him only as a friend.

On May 27, 1887, he'd officiated at the marriage of Katy Bjorklund to Zeb MacCallister.

Weddings were usually such a happy time for him, but not that one. From the time Zeb MacCallister rode into Blessing, Katy had eyes only for the stranger. Pastor Solberg had learned a valuable lesson from all that. If you don't want to get burned, stay away from the stove.

"Lord, forgive me," he murmured into his cupped hands. "Must I be so base as to think of her still? You know I have given her up. Why do the memories yet haunt me?" He pushed himself upright. "If you have a wife for me—now I'm beginning to wonder—let her be a gentle Norwegian girl who will fit right in with these dear people of mine."

He almost smiled at the thought of referring to the bread-bearing mama as "dear."

The jingle of harness caught his attention. He glanced around the schoolroom, knowing that all was in readiness for his pupils who would start in the next week. But it never hurt to check.

"Whoa there." The clomp of horse hooves ended at the same time the harness stopped jingling.

He would know that laugh anywhere. His heart felt as if a giant hand had squeezed it once and then again.

*Katy.*

Why hadn't they put two doors in this building? With no way of escape, he pushed himself upright and pasted a smile on his face.

"John? Are you here?"

"Y—." He cleared his throat. He could hear the slow drawl of her husband answer some question. Was there a third person out there? "Yes, I'm here. Come on in."

He flipped open a book and stared down the pages. The print danced before his eyes.

The door burst open, and Katy Bjorklund MacCallister entered, laughing at something Zeb had said. Spring rushed in with her.

"John, we have someone for you to meet." She glanced over her shoulder. "Come on, Mary Martha. You must meet one of our best friends."

Solberg groaned inside. *Have I acted so convincingly that she has no idea?*

“Good afternoon, Pastor.” Zeb MacCallister removed his wide-brimmed hat as he came through the low door. If he hadn’t, the doorframe would have done it for him. “Sorry to bother you, but my Katy insisted.”

The slow molasses drawl clogged Solberg’s ears. *Why can’t the man learn to speak properly? Or at least faster.* He felt like snapping his fingers to encourage the words to come more rapidly.

“Mary Martha MacCallister, I want you to meet Pastor John Solberg.” Katy did the honors with her usual flourish.

“My sister is visiting from Missouri,” Zeb added. “We would have introduced you sooner, but with you being gone and all ...”

*Mary Martha? Couldn’t they make up their mind when they named her?* “I’m pleased to meet you, Miss MacCallister.” His voice sounded stiff, even to his own ears. *Probably good I have been gone. I needed that time with my family, and marrying off a sister was pure delight. So now I’m back and ...* The day seemed to have brought nothing but annoyances.

“Ah’ve heard so much about you.”

She talked just like her brother. He glanced up from studying the hem of her skirt to see eyes that appeared to be laughing. At him? “Yes, well, welcome to Blessing. I hope you’ll enjoy your visit. If you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be.”

*Liar.* He almost turned to see who was sitting on his shoulder. He moved toward the door, ushering them before him.

“Hey, Solberg, you in there?”

Saved by a Bjorklund. The irony of it all.

“You caught me, Haakan. Come on in.”

“How you doing, Pastor?” Haakan filled the door, ducking under the frame as a matter of habit.

Since today seemed to be one of honesty, John admitted to himself that maybe if he had the broad shoulders and arresting blue eyes of the Bjorklund men, perhaps Ka—er, a young woman of his own choosing would be more disposed to accept his advances. Often he felt he lived in the land of giants when around the men of Blessing. Including Zeb MacCallister.

“Why, Katy, Zeb, how are you? And Miss MacCallister?” Haakan smiled at each in turn. “What brings you to town?”

“We thought to show Mary Martha around some.” Katy sent a troubled glance Solberg’s way. “Now that Pastor Solberg is back, we—I thought—I guess ...” She stammered to a close, glancing from the minister to her sister-in-law and back to Haakan.

*See, another one. I didn’t expect this from my friends. Is there no safe haven?*

Haakan nodded. “Ingeborg said if I saw you, I was to tell you that the coffeepot is always on and the ladies will be hosting the first quilting meeting of the fall on Saturday. That’s a good chance for you to finish meeting everyone.” He directed the last sentence to their visitor. “Right, Pastor?”

“Ah, right.” John took another step toward the door. He felt as though the room were trying to smother him. Something was.

“Good. Then we will go to Penny’s and swing by your house on the way home,” Katy said.

The look Katy gave Pastor Solberg clearly said she was not only puzzled but concerned by his actions. His mother would have burned his ears over such boorish behavior but ... *Please, Lord, get me out of here.* When they finally got outside, John sucked in a breath of air as if he’d been underwater and about to drown. As if from a far distance, he heard the others saying “good-bye” and “see you soon,” but for the life of him, he couldn’t respond. Instead he raised a hand in farewell when Zeb had his womenfolk back in the wagon and was clucking his horse to back up.

“Are you all right?” Haakan asked.

“I will be.” John sucked in another breath of cold air and felt his head clear. Now he’d have to apologize. “You in as bad a need of a cup of coffee as I am?”

“You know me. I never turn down an offer like that.” Haakan held out a paper-wrapped packet. “Especially since Ingeborg sent you some molasses cookies fresh from the oven.” He nodded toward the loaf of bread John had tucked under his arm. “You had time to bake along with getting ready for all those children?” The twinkle in his eyes said he knew otherwise.

“Just another matchmaking mama.” John stepped back inside the schoolhouse and snagged his coat off one of the pegs in the cloakroom. “Won’t take too long to get the coffee hot. I sent Thorliff over to rattle the grates and fire up my stove. You know how hard I have to work to keep ahead of that young man, don’t you? I surely do appreciate Ingeborg sending him over to help me get the schoolroom ready for classes.” He closed the door behind him and turned to see the wagon raising a dust cloud down the road to the store. Yes, an apology was definitely in order. What an oaf he had been. After all, she

was only a visitor here, and the Lord commanded them to welcome visitors. *As angels unawares* ... He checked a groan. He hated failure.

“I don’t envy you.” Haakan shook his head. “Sometimes the questions that boy asks ... He is always thinking, that’s for certain. Just the other day he asked me why, if God wrote the Bible, did most of the books in it have other men’s names on them?”

“What did you tell him?”

“To ask you.”

“And I suppose when he asked where babies came from, you told him to ask his mother.”

“You bet your britches. I did good on how the steam engine works though, and why the hailstorms skipped over the farms here in Blessing.”

John looked up at the man walking beside him. “What did you say to that?”

“God made it so, and so it is. That was my mor’s answer to any question she didn’t know the answer. Worked with me.”

Solberg groaned and rolled his eyes. “You know, it’s farmers like you who keep us ministers and schoolteachers in business.” He opened the door to his sod house. An orange tiger cat rose from its place on the rug in front of the stove, stretched every rippling muscle, and purred its way to the door to wind around the legs of the men as they divested themselves of coats and hats. The freeze the night before and the wind from the north seemed as if they’d skipped right over fall to winter.

When the coffee was poured and they’d both sat down—Solberg in his rocking chair—the wind could be heard pleading around the eaves to join them.

Haakan blew on the coffee he’d poured in his saucer to cool. “I sure ain’t looking forward to winter this year. I must be getting old.”

“Ja, and my legendary tante Irmay lives right next door.”

“Really? When did you sneak that one by us?” Haakan looked up over the rim of his cup. Reaching for one of the cookies now on a plate, he dunked it in the coffee and slowly blinked his eyes in bliss. “Now this is the way an afternoon ought to be spent.”

“And how is that?” Solberg broke off a bit of cookie and fed it to the cat waiting at his knee.

Haakan waved a cookie. “Hot coffee, cookies, talk with a friend. What more can one ask for?”

Putting all thoughts of his earlier visitors aside, John studied the man before him. “I know it’s about chores time, and you didn’t come pick up the children because they aren’t here yet. I don’t want to seem inhospitable but ... why are you *really* here?”

Haakan examined the rim of his coffee cup. The silence between the two men stretched, the cat’s purring vibrating the stillness. Haakan looked up. “Now, you know I don’t take no part in gossip?”

Solberg nodded. “No fear of my thinking that.” He waited, watching as wrinkles chased each other across Haakan’s forehead and then turned to chase again.

“And that I ain’t an interfering man?”

Knowing the question needed no answer, John waited.

“Well, I just don’t think it’s right, that’s all, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

Hurrying one of the Bjorklund men was like trying to push water uphill. What in the world was Haakan referring to?