

**The
Legally Binding
Christmas:
A Courtroom Adventure**

The Legally Binding Christmas: A Courtroom Adventure
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Praise for *The Legally Binding Christmas*

Well, would you look at that. It warms my heart to see an attorney burning the midnight oil on a creative endeavor, of all things, and this story will surely warm the hearts of readers. If you don't feel like watching *It's a Wonderful Life* for a third time this holiday season, mix things up a bit and read this sweet Christmas story instead.

- Mary Laura Philpott, co-author of
Poetic Justice: Legal Humor in Verse

In *The Legally Binding Christmas*, lawyer Landis Wade continues the good fight to save Christmas for True Believers in a riveting courtroom drama. Defense attorney Thad Raker returns to battle a high-powered opponent intent on using eminent domain to take a humble-looking property that, as it turns out, is critical to the very spirit of Christmas. Along the way, his own faith in the season and himself is restored. A heart-warming story for all ages.

- Charles Blackburn, Jr.,
author of *Sweet Souls and Other Stories*

Landis Wade once again proves that the combination of Christmas cheer and courtroom drama makes for an irresistible read. Only a lawyer at home in the courtroom could have conjured the intrigue of the jury trial that appears here. From

judge to opposing attorney to the client who listens—but only partly—to his lawyer, Wade deftly weaves together large amounts of verisimilitude with a good bit of Christmas magic. The result is a rollicking story that serves justice up on a colorful Christmas platter.

- Maxine Eichner,
Graham Kenan Professor of Law, UNC Law School

If you don't believe in Santa when you start this book, then you will when you finish. A perfect complement to *The Christmas Heist*, with just the right mix of suspense, humor and magic, this book will be equally enjoyable to teenagers and adults alike. I love it!

- Bud Schill, co-author of
Not Exactly Rocket Scientists and Other Stories

Landis Wade brings to life the genuine and true magic of Christmas in a classic legal battle. Attorney extraordinaire Thad Raker again accepts the challenge of protecting Christmas, as well as an unusual client who is about to lose his property to the government. The courtroom duel pitches Raker against a well-funded, pompous opponent. The outcome will warm your heart and *The Legally Binding Christmas* will be an instant seasonal favorite.

- Tommy Odom,
North Carolina Eminent Domain Trial Attorney

Landis Wade has employed his considerable legal skills to wrap a fanciful Christmas tale in the package of a hotly contested eminent domain lawsuit. An interesting array of trial participants, matched with numerous literary comparisons such as the landowner's opposing pompous counsel, who "would blow like a whale in distress," keeps one's attention as the trial proceeds until the marvelous verdict is pronounced.

Wade convinces us that to once again achieve True Believer status is a worthy goal.

- Forrest A. Ferrell,
Superior Court Judge, retired

To *The Christmas Heist* readers,
whose kind words
led me to write another.

Also by Landis Wade

The Christmas Heist: A Courtroom Adventure

32° Bringing You the Latest News	DAILY NEWS Blog Post	December 23
	Legal Affairs Blog Post	
Last Day Sale 40% OFF ALL CHRISTMAS ITEMS	Trial of the Century in Courtroom 3150 - Christmas is on the Line	Last Day Sale 40% OFF ALL CHRISTMAS ITEMS
		

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**THE
LEGALLY BINDING
CHRISTMAS:**

A Courtroom Adventure

by

Landis Wade

LYSTRA BOOKS
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Chapel Hill, NC

To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!

'Twas The Night Before Christmas



Seven Years Earlier – Summertime

5:55 p.m.

The twelve jurors shuffled into the courtroom and down the two rows of seats they had occupied for the past three days. They sat down and looked straight ahead. Attorney Thad Raker took notice; they weren't looking at him, or at his client. It was not a good sign.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

The foreman stood. "Yes, sir. We have."

"Hand it to the bailiff, please."

Landis Wade

The bailiff accepted the slip of paper and walked it over to the judge, who read it, handed it to the clerk and nodded for her to proceed.

The clerk asked the jury to stand and acknowledge the verdict. “In the case of Roscoe Ledbetter versus Gloria Patten, you answered the issues on the verdict sheet as follows:

“Issue 1: Did Gloria Patten negligently lose control of her motor vehicle and cause damage to Roscoe Ledbetter’s personal property?

“Answer: Yes.

“Issue 2: Was Gloria Patten’s conduct in the operation of her motor vehicle excused by a sudden emergency?

“Answer: No.

“Issue 3: How much, if any, does Gloria Patten owe Roscoe Ledbetter for the damage she caused?

“Answer: \$75,000.

“Is this your verdict, so say you all?”

The jurors responded in the affirmative. The judge dismissed them. And the case was over. Just like that.

Raker realized Gloria Patten was in a tough spot. She was 62 years old and didn’t have \$75,000 to pay the plaintiff, much less to pay him, and the court would sell what was left of her damaged car and most of her personal belongings to pay the

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judgment; she would be left with no assets, an apartment she couldn't afford and no place to go. And for what? Three dead cows, some damaged farm equipment and a spoiled winter crop. She would suffer because of the way he tried the case.

Gloria interrupted his thoughts with a hand on his arm. "It's not your fault, Thad. You told me to tell the truth. And I did. It was the right thing to do."

Raker looked at her and thought of his late grandmother, who was too sweet to lay blame even where blame was due. It was his job to advise his client about strategy, and he had failed, because the jurors had spoken; none of them believed her story. Ms. Patten's truth was nothing more than the product of her vivid imagination.

As he left the courtroom, Raker heard several lawyers joking about the trial. Raker knew he deserved it. He had based the defense on the magic of Christmas. It was no way to win a case.

On the drive home, he was discouraged. Depressed, more like it. He wondered what would become of Gloria Patten. The future of his own career was another question, but he chided himself for giving it a thought when he'd let his client down.

Landis Wade

A sad song played on the radio as he pulled into the driveway of his modest two-bedroom house. His sister, Laura, greeted him at the door with a beverage.

“I think you need this, little brother,” she said.

“Thanks. Sorry I’m so late. The jury didn’t come back until around 6:00.”

“Not to worry, Thad. You know you can count on me.”

All his life, Raker’s big sister had been his lifeline, but even more so in the last four years. Without her help, Raker knew it would have been impossible to carry on after his wife’s funeral.

Just then, a little ball of fire in the form of a 4-year-old girl with a head full of blond curls ran into the room. “Daddy, you’re home!” She wrapped her arms around his knees.

“There’s my girl.” Raker bent down to give her a kiss on the head. “How was your day?”

“It was so much fun, Daddy. Aunt Laura took me to lunch and then we came home and took Comet for a walk.” As an afterthought, she said, “They don’t let dogs eat at restaurants.”

Comet must have heard his name because he charged into the room and joined the welcome. Raker rubbed his head. “Hey, pup. How ya doin’?”

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Comet replied with a wagging tale; he had an excited look on his face. The dog was a mutt, no ifs, ands or buts. Raker discovered him as a puppy wandering the streets on Christmas Eve, one month after Liz was born. He shot out of nowhere and into Raker's heart when he needed him most. Raker brought him home, fed him and made him part of the family.

"Oh, and Daddy, we saw Ms. Sarah today. She said to say hi."

Raker looked at his sister for an answer.

"At lunch," Laura said. "Sarah wanted to catch up with me and see Liz, so we went to a restaurant near her office. She asked how you are doing."

"She will know when she reads the morning paper."

"Thad, even though she's a lawyer, I doubt she cares only about your cases."

Raker thought about Sarah Kennedy and felt uncomfortable. Sarah was Laura's best friend and had spent time at his house visiting with Laura while she cared for Liz. She was kind to his little girl and even took her on outings from time to time, but when he thought about Sarah as a woman, he forced himself to think of her only as a friend and colleague. It was too soon to think about another woman in his life.

Landis Wade

“Can we play, Daddy?” Liz took his hand and he remembered, despite everything else, that his life still had light in it.

“Tell you what,” Raker said. “You brush your teeth, get in bed and I will read you a story. Be there in 10 minutes.”

After Liz ran off and Comet followed, Laura gave her brother a hug. “Hard day?” she asked.

“All days are hard days, Sis.” He hugged her back. “Shouldn’t it be getting less painful by now?”

“That’s difficult for me to say. I haven’t been in your shoes. It might get harder.”

“Harder?”

“Liz is 4 years old and growing up fast. She will remind you of Elizabeth more and more as the years go on. And she will start to understand and see the sadness that haunts you and this house every day. Have you thought about that?”

“Yes, I have. I know I’m sad. I just don’t know how to fix it. And I know I need to do better, for Liz’s sake.” Raker paused. “I’ll go read to her; it’s as much for me as it is for her.”

Laura hugged her brother again. “I love you, Thad. See you at 8:00 tomorrow morning. Oh, and I can’t stay late tomorrow night. Can you be home by 5:30?”

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“Is this another date with the soon-to-be Mr. Right?” Raker asked.

“Another date, yes, but I know your jury is still out on whether he’s the right one,” Laura said.

“It’s just because you deserve the best,” Raker said. “I’ll be home in time.”

Raker found his daughter sitting up in bed, the covers pulled to her waist. Comet was curled at the end of her bed and he looked up, ready to listen, too. “So what will it be tonight?” Raker went to the bookshelf.

“Not a book, Daddy. Tell me the story again!”

Raker had the anxious feeling he got in his chest every time Liz asked him to tell the story. It took him back to a happy time, but the memories were hard on him; he felt incomplete, a hole in his heart. “But you’ve heard the story more times than you can count.”

She pleaded again, with her smile mostly, and when that didn’t work, she said, “Oh, please, Daddy, just one more time!”

Raker sat down on the bed and squeezed her tight. “You are such a little mess.”

“Daddy,” she whispered, both arms around his neck. “I know I’m a little mess, but tell me the story again. Tell me how I got my name.”

Landis Wade

Raker reached over and turned out the bedside lamp, leaving only the soft glow from Liz's Mickey Mouse night light. Then, as he did every time he told the story, Raker lay down beside her, put his arm around her and took a deep breath to settle his nerves.

“Elizabeth Henry Raker, you were named after two very special people. One was a brave man named Henry Edmonds, who, at great risk to his freedom, went on trial five years ago to save Christmas and then, for some unknown reason, vanished. The other was your mother, Elizabeth, who gave birth to you four years ago and ...” This was the hardest part, acknowledging out loud that Elizabeth was gone, and trying to explain it to his little girl. It never got easier, but he did it because he wanted Liz to feel pride in the mother she never knew.

“Henry taught me to believe again, just as I did when I was a child. But your mother always believed. She believed in the goodness of people, in hope, in charity, but most of all, she found a way to believe in me even when I didn't believe in myself.” As he had done countless times before, Raker ended the story with tears in his eyes. “They would have loved you very much.”

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Raker stood up and began to tuck Liz in, nice and tight.

She stopped him. “Wait. You left out the part about my nickname.”

“You know how you got your nickname.”

“I know, but tell it.”

“We blame your nickname on Comet. His vocabulary is limited to one-syllable words. I wanted to stick with Elizabeth, but he talked me out of it. We settled on Liz.” Comet wagged his tail.

Liz giggled. “Comet can’t talk.”

“Tell that to Comet. Good night, Liz.”

“Good night, Daddy. I love you.”

“Love you more.”



Present Day – November

8:30 a.m.

Thad Raker was in his law office looking through a window obscured by dense morning fog; he was waiting for a potential client to arrive. The weather fit his mood. It was Liz's 11th birthday. She didn't ask him to tell her bedtime stories anymore, not even the one about how she got her name. He missed that little girl.

He had raised her as a single dad, with the help and tough love of Laura, who now had a husband and two children of her own. She continued to make

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sure he rose to the best challenge life could offer — being Liz’s dad.

As Raker’s mood began to lift, so did the fog; his view now revealed the first floor of the county courthouse across the street. His mind wandered to the cases he had argued there over the years.

His most famous case was the criminal trial of Henry Edmonds that had started two days before Christmas, almost 12 years earlier. The newspaper reporter covering the case had called it the “trial of the century.” To Raker, it was the trial that changed his life in more ways than one. It made him a True Believer, and gave him the courage to ask Elizabeth to marry him. They were married two weeks later.

Raker came back from his reverie when a voice called from the office foyer. “Anybody home?”

Raker put on his jacket and walked to meet the person behind the voice. He found an elderly man, about 5 feet 10 inches tall, with fine gray hair pulled around his ears and tied in a tight ponytail. He wore black slacks, a blue shirt and a red vest under a tweed jacket. His face was full, with bushy brows and a prominent nose; it was a cheerful mug, with laugh lines like lightning strikes on either side of his mouth. He smiled when he saw Raker. There was something about the man that Raker liked right away.

“You must be Mr. Masters.” Raker held out his hand.

“The name is T. W. Masters, but everyone calls me Twirly. Don’t know why. They just do. Guess it’s because my parents gave me the nickname. Yep, that must be why they do it. On the other hand, maybe they do it because I talk a lot and it sounds like I’m going in circles. Or maybe they do it because when I was a child I took a ride in a helicopter. What a ride. Do you like to ride in helicopters? No? Anyway, Twirly’s my name. Yours is Thad Raker, right?”

As the man talked, Raker sensed the meeting was going to be a waste of time. But he did the courteous thing, inviting Masters into his office and offering him a seat. Raker took the chair behind his desk.

“Should we get the reindeer test out of the way?” Masters asked.

Raker was surprised. How did Twirly Masters know about the reindeer test? Raker developed the test because of the notoriety that followed the “trial of the century.” During the first six months after the trial, Raker received at least two calls a week from people who claimed to have some connection to Santa Claus. Most of them were criminal

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defendants calling from the jail. They wanted the lawyer who got the guy off by proving he worked for Santa Claus. Any lawyer who could do that was the lawyer for them. That's why Raker came up with the test.

"Name the eight reindeer," he would say. The most interesting lies Raker heard in his career came from potential clients who had taken the reindeer test. He remembered one guy who, without hesitation, used the last names of the top eight players from his fantasy football team. Another guy named seven planets and Rudolph. Another tried vegetables. Among them were kale, butterbean and turnip. One finished up with the names of presidents: "On Washington, on Lincoln, on Kennedy and Reagan."

For the first four years, Raker agreed to represent anyone who passed the reindeer test, partly because they sounded sincere and partly because Raker wanted to believe in their stories. But he finally had to admit that he was being too gullible. When he discovered that the clients who passed the test were either frauds or needed psychiatric help, he politely withdrew from their cases. Only once did the blinders stay on too long. It was the Patten case, and like the "trial of the century," it made the news.

Landis Wade

“How about it?” Twirly Masters broke into Raker’s thoughts again, “Do you want me to take the reindeer test? It’s not a problem. Matter of fact, I can do it in reverse.”

“Excuse me?”

“Know them so well, I can do it backward.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Don’t mind a bit. On Blitzen, on Donner, on Cupid and Comet. Now Vixen, now Prancer, now Dancer, now Dasher.”

“That was —”

“I’m not through yet. Don’t forget Rudolph. And then there’s Olive.”

“There’s no reindeer named Olive, Mr. Masters.”

“Sure there is,” he said. “Just sing the song. He’s Olive the other reindeer, the one who used to laugh and call Rudolph names.”

Raker was about to smile when he remembered how tiring it had been to deal with eccentric clients who came to him only because of his success in the Edmonds case.

“How did you find me, Mr. Masters? When you called, you said you knew someone involved in the case against Henry Edmonds.”

“Please call me Twirly. All my friends do, and I want you to be my friend. After all, we have so much in common, and —”

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Raker cut him off. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I have a busy schedule. The question is part of my due diligence in deciding whether to represent you.”

“Due diligence. I like that phrase. In layman’s terms, doesn’t it mean to check things out, be careful, turn over every stone, look before you leap and that type of thing? Am I right? Sure I am. You can’t be too careful, can you?”

“No, you can’t.” Raker thought he hadn’t been careful enough when he agreed to meet with Twirly Masters. “So who do you know from the trial? Is it Judy Robertson?” Judy had been the prosecution’s main witness, from the county tax department. She had become a good friend to Raker after the trial, even more so after Elizabeth’s death.

“No, it wasn’t Ms. Robertson. And it wasn’t the prosecutor Jason Peabody, the one she married, either.”

“Do you know someone in law enforcement? Was it the police officer?”

Masters laughed. “No, it wasn’t the police officer.”

“Well, if it wasn’t Robertson, Peabody or the police officer, who was it?” Then Raker had an idea. “Was it the woman who witnessed the scene at the Topsy Tavern?”

“No, it wasn’t Shelly Barker.”

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“Then how do you know her name?”

“I know a lot about that trial.”

Raker thought about Augustus Langhorne Stark, the judge at the trial, and he shivered. He doubted Judge Stark knew Twirly Masters, but on the other hand, maybe he did and this was a sick joke being played on him by the retired judge.

The other key witnesses at the trial were Hank Snow and Henry Edmonds himself. Snow had wanted to send Henry to jail and ruin Christmas for thousands of children. If Masters was connected in any way to Hank Snow, Raker wanted nothing to do with him.

As if reading his mind, Masters said, “It wasn’t Hank Snow.”

“But you do know him?” Raker was suddenly suspicious of Masters.

“As I said, I know a lot about that trial. I was there for most of it. On the last day, the courtroom was filled to capacity. What a wonderful day. Don’t you think it was a wonderful day? Yes, just spectacular. Anyway, I was there. I had a personal and professional interest in the outcome.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that is why I am here.” Twirly Masters leaned toward him. “You’re thinking about the Patten case, aren’t you?”

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“Mr. Masters,” Raker said, losing patience. “The Patten case was not a good experience for me. I let my heart rule where my head should have urged caution. The newspaper sold a lot of advertising during that trial, and the headlines weren’t kind.”

“I remember,” Masters said. “One headline said: ‘Flying-presents defense crashes the case.’”

“And your point is what?” Raker asked.

“The Patten case was an unfortunate loss. I bet one of your attorney friends said you can’t win them all. Isn’t that what they say to make you feel better? I don’t know why they say it, because, after all, it *is* possible to win them all. Anyway, yes, I know all about the Patten case, and you should have won.”

“But she was not telling the truth,” Raker said.

“Oh, but she was telling the truth. She just wasn’t believable. And she talked too much.” Twirly Masters stopped and smiled. “Like me, she tends to get her mouth running like a motor. That’s the reason I hired her. Liked her style, I did.”

“You hired Ms. Patten?”

“Yes, I did. I did indeed. What happened was not her fault. There was a sudden emergency and I know what caused it. If you’d had some real evidence, you might have stopped the man responsible. It’s too

bad. Yes, too bad. He kept right on going and going and going.”

“Who kept right on going?”

“Why, Hank Snow, of course.”

Raker was discomfited by the second reference to Hank Snow. He was 1 for 2 in trials where Hank Snow was involved. Before the trial, Snow had visited Ms. Patten and suggested she not disclose what had happened, because no one would believe her and it would cause her to lose her case. When Raker learned that Snow wanted the information to remain secret, he was sure they should share it with the jury. Raker had been wrong.

“The jury didn’t believe her story about hundreds of Christmas presents falling from the sky, did they? Or her story about unidentified flying objects?” Masters asked.

“It was a little hard to believe, but the story seemed plausible to me after I represented Henry Edmonds. It did happen on Christmas Eve, after all. I thought they had fallen out of the sleigh.”

“You didn’t have all the facts, Thad.”

“And you do?”

Masters lowered his voice. “Hank Snow set you up. Yes, indeed; he set you up good. I have to give the man credit for being sneaky. He knew the jury

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wouldn't buy her story. But more than that, he knew that if you lost the case, nobody would believe in flying presents and he could continue his work."

Raker waited for Masters to say more.

"But let's not dwell on the past. What's done is done," Masters said. "We need to focus on my case, because we can't let Snow win again, can we?"

"You think Hank Snow is conspiring against you?"

"It's only a hunch. More like a feeling. I need more time to be sure."

Raker studied Masters more closely. "Why are you here?"

"It's like this, Thad. You and I are on the same team. We are both True Believers."

Raker was caught off guard. He became a True Believer during the Edmonds trial and married Elizabeth, but 11 months later, she was gone, along with most of his beliefs. The Patten case killed off the rest.

"I'm not a True Believer," Raker said at last. "Not anymore. So maybe I'm not the lawyer for you."

Masters got out of his chair and walked to the window. Raker could see him looking at the courthouse. He then turned to face Raker.

“Thad, may I offer you some advice? There are two kinds of people, those who believe and those who don’t. Some say there is no difference between the lives of believers and nonbelievers, but I have seen the difference with my own eyes, felt it in my heart. Yes, I have. Yes, indeed. Times are not always easy. Tough things happen to good people. Life can hit you hard. You can suffer for reasons that are unexplainable. And there are things you can’t control. But I can tell you something that’s absolutely, positively wonderful and true. You and only you control your beliefs, and no one can rob you of them. Belief is free. Yes, it is. And maybe, just maybe, if you believe hard enough, you will have a return on investment that cannot be measured or predicted.”

Raker was already weary and his day was just getting started. He wanted to tell Twirly Masters to leave but he couldn’t do it. He had a feeling, nothing more, but it was one he hadn’t experienced since the day he met Henry Edmonds. Raker thought himself the fool, but he decided to hear the man out.

“Tell me your problem, Mr. Masters.”

With that, Twirly Masters returned to his seat. He reached inside his coat pocket, pulled out a folded document and handed it to Raker. It was a notice from the county. Raker thumbed through it

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quickly, long enough to figure out the gist of the matter.

“The county is condemning your property. That’s what this is about?”

“I prefer to use the word ‘stealing’,” Masters said.

“Why does the county want to take your property?”

“They say they want it for a park. Can they do that?”

“They can,” Raker said. “With eminent domain, the government can take private property for a public purpose.”

For the first time, Masters’ affable demeanor was shaken. “You’re telling me they can take my property and turn it into a park even though the way I’m using it has more value to the public? That’s silly, wrong and shortsighted. It doesn’t go down well, I have to tell you. It’s kind of like eating cereal with sour milk.”

Raker began to think like a lawyer; this was going to be a simple, straightforward case. “Don’t worry. They must compensate you and we can hire an expert to get you the highest price possible.”

“I don’t want the county’s money.” Masters’ voice rose. “There is something much more important here than money. Can’t you see that?”

Raker could not see that because the law was clear. Besides, his clients always reacted this way. They were shocked that the government could take their property, and then dismayed at the value the government placed on it. What matters, he would explain to them, is the fair market value of the property, not how much it means to the owner who doesn't want to part with it, because it is always about the money.

“Mr. Masters, I know you say you don't want the money —”

“I don't. No way. No how. I don't even have a bank to put it in. Money won't replace the service I provide at the property.”

“I know it may be unsettling to lose your property like this. Has it been in the family a long time?”

“You might say that,” Masters said. “About 300 years.”

“That is a long time. Can you tell me about the property?”

“It's 90 acres off old Highway 11, across from the Ledbetter farm. There's an old house up on the ridge about half a mile from the road.”

“Are you talking about the Haints?” Raker was surprised.

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Masters laughed. “That’s the name the school kids gave it years ago, and the name stuck. The house does look haunted, and I do like the name, but I can assure you we harbor no ghosts. I have more important things to do.”

“When I was a kid,” Raker said, “we used to ride our bikes out there, head up the dirt road to the house and peek in the windows. It always looked deserted to me. I can’t remember seeing anyone in the house or on the property.”

“Good description. It does have that feel to it. But don’t you think it’s important to keep a low profile when trying to keep secrets?” Masters asked.

“I don’t follow,” Raker said.

“You weren’t supposed to see anyone. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“What wouldn’t be a surprise?”

Masters didn’t answer the question. “Is there a way I can keep the property? It’s very important. Yes, indeed.”

Raker turned in his chair and glanced at the statute books on his shelf. He grabbed one and flipped through it until he found the page he wanted. After reading for a few minutes, he set the book down and turned back to face Masters. “There is a process for challenging the condemnation of

your property,” Raker said, “but the law favors the county.”

“All I want is a chance. Will you represent me?”

Raker took a moment to make up his mind. Twirly Masters would be an interesting client. And he liked his passion. “I will,” Raker said, “as long as you understand that I am not a miracle worker.”

Twirly Masters jumped to his feet and put out his hand. “Ah, but you are a miracle worker, Thad Raker. You saved Christmas once before.”

“Now wait a minute,” Raker said, while shaking Masters’ hand. “This case is not about saving Christmas.”

Masters smiled. “Are you sure?” And with that, he reached into his shirt pocket, took out his card and placed it in Raker’s hand. “I have to head north for a few days to take care of some business. Call me if you need me.”

As Masters left his office, Raker looked at the card. The insignia was a wrapped Christmas present sitting on a sleigh. Masters’ contact information was displayed on a Christmas tree. Flipping the card over, Raker saw fine, cursive handwriting that read, “I believe in you.”