

BEACONS OF HOPE  BOOK THREE

# Undaunted Hope



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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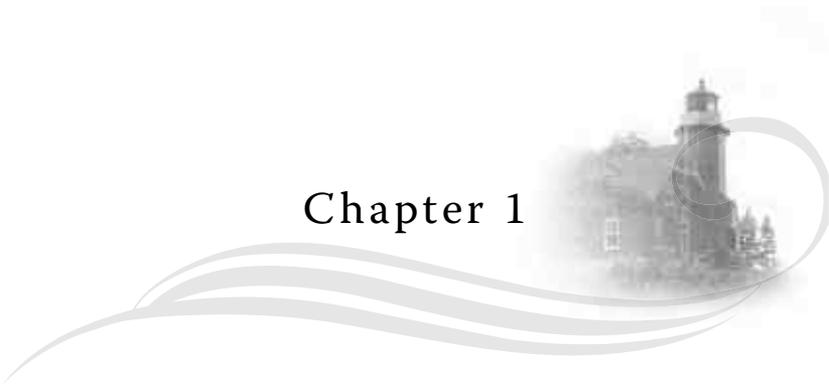
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*To women everywhere who have  
experienced helplessness and hurt*

May you find courage to face your fears  
and walk through to the other side.





# Chapter 1

EAGLE HARBOR, NORTHERN MICHIGAN  
SEPTEMBER 1871

*Y*ou're not the new teacher," the bald, round-faced man said again in his childlike voice.

"But I am," Tessa Taylor insisted. She pushed the wrinkled letter toward the proprietor of Cole Mine Company Store and Office.

The man's chubby cheeks were flushed red. His eyes shifted in distress toward the shop door. And he refused to so much as glance at the official document she'd carried over the past week, her beacon of hope, her only escape from the past that haunted her.

"The new teacher is supposed to be a man," the storekeeper said. "And you're a woman."

She braced her hands on the spotless glass countertop and leaned across it, taking in the name badge he wore pinned to

his vest. “Listen, Mr. Updegraff. I’m T. Taylor, which stands for Tessa Taylor. I’m the new teacher for the Eagle Harbor School. I’m sorry you thought you were getting a man, but lucky for you, I’m worth ten men.”

At the sight of her hands on the counter, the man shook his head and made *tsking* noises at the back of his throat. When he reached beneath the counter, Tessa jerked her hands off the glass and took a quick step back.

She’d heard tales about the wild, untamed regions of upper Michigan, of the brawling, drunkenness, and lawlessness that were rampant. It would be just her luck if he pulled out a gun and shot her on the spot.

She could see the headline in the *Detroit Free Press*: Town Demands a Man Teacher, Shoots All Women Who Apply for the Job.

As Mr. Updegraff lifted his hand, Tessa started to raise hers in self-defense, but then stopped. It wasn’t as if she could catch the bullet if he decided to shoot her.

To her surprise, he plopped a frayed rag onto the glass and began to swirl it in circular, squeaking motions in the very spot she’d touched. His brows puckered, and his flabby jowls shook at his exertion.

Behind her, the store was deserted except for one woman with a baby propped on her hip and two children running around her in circles and tangling in her listless skirt, one giggling and the other crying. They were racing awfully close to the glass jars of pickled beets that sat on a low shelf.

For all the noise the children were making, the mother didn’t seem to hear them. Instead she let her dirt-encrusted fingernails trail over a grain sack of potatoes marked with a crude sign that read *Two dollars a bushel* in sticklike elementary handwriting.

Next to the potatoes stood barrels of apples, turnips, melons, cucumbers, cabbages, and carrots—apparently the stock of local farmers. But the prices on each of them were outrageously high.

“I don’t suppose you take arms and legs in payment for the fresh produce, do you?” Tessa couldn’t refrain from muttering.

But Mr. Updegraff was too focused on removing her fingerprints from the glass to pay attention to her sarcasm.

The shelves along one wall were stocked with flour, sugar, beans, tea, coffee, and rice. Another set of shelves running down the middle of the store revealed more practical items like lard, tallow, clothespins, baking powder, and condensed milk. A large portion of the store, near the back, was overflowing with kegs of powder, fuses for blasting, hard hats with candles, drills, sledgehammers, along with numerous other mining supplies she couldn’t begin to name.

It hadn’t taken Tessa long during her four-day voyage on the *Temperance* to realize the steamer was loaded with barrels and crates headed to Copper Country in preparation for the harsh winter that would soon cut the mining communities off from the lower part of the state.

The idea of being trapped in the north for the winter had given Tessa pause for only a moment before she’d cast it aside. She was going on an adventure, she’d reminded herself. And adventures always had an element of danger to them. That’s what made them exciting.

She drew in a deep breath of the strong odor of salt pork that mingled with the spiciness of tobacco. Even if she’d already run into the first major roadblock of her adventure, she wouldn’t let a little thing like a mix-up in her gender stop her.

“If you’ll point me to the schoolhouse,” she said.

“You just go on and get out of here,” Mr. Updegraff said, almost petulantly still rubbing at the glass. “We’ve never had a woman teacher, and we’re not about to start having one.”

“Let’s call a gathering of the school board and parents and let them decide.”

At a crash of glass, Mr. Updegraff’s head snapped up. His eyes rounded at the sight of the rapidly spreading pool of purplish liquid on the floor amidst shards of glass and lumps of beets.

The woman with the baby on her hip yelled at the two children who’d stopped running to stare at the mess.

“Uh-oh, uh-oh,” Mr. Updegraff said as he fumbled for a corn-husk broom in the corner, his worried eyes never once leaving the puddle.

For the first time since Tessa had embarked on her journey, she experienced a real pang of worry. Would she be out of a job before she even began? “Mr. Updegraff, please listen—”

He strode around the counter, broom in hand wielded like a warrior charging into battle. “Go home, lady. I won’t talk to you anymore.”

As he waddled with single-minded attention toward the broken jar of beets, Tessa released a whistling sigh and glanced out the grocery store window to the other businesses that lined the main street of Eagle Harbor—the smithy, several boardinghouses and taverns, a carpenter shop, livery stables, and the spire of the Methodist church rising beyond a smattering of identical-looking log cabins.

With firm, decisive steps, she crossed to the door, opened it, and stepped onto Center Street. The thoroughfare was little more than a dirt path engraved with wagon ruts.

She lifted her face, first to the thickly wooded hills that bordered the eastern edge of town, and then to the wide expanse

of Lake Superior that hemmed in the west with its bald, rocky bluffs and fierce coastline. She drew in a breath of the September air that already had a nip to it.

Everyone had warned her that she was moving to the frontier, that life in the far north was more rugged than out west. But their warnings had only fueled her desire to travel to the Upper Peninsula all the more. It was the perfect place to distance herself from her past and to start life over with a clean reputation, where no one would ever have to know about her past mistakes.

She let her sights linger on the hundreds of gulls perched on rocks in the bay. Their calls were muted by the waves crashing against boulders. The constant roar even drowned out the shouts of the *Temperance* deckhands as they began unloading the cargo onto one of the two docks in the harbor where it would be transported and stored in the warehouse built near the shore.

Her faded orange carpetbag sat where she'd discarded it on the long wooden platform.

She might as well retrieve her bag and check into one of the boardinghouses. Then she'd at least know where to have her personal trunks delivered once they were unloaded from her berth.

With a bound to her step, she headed back to the harbor, the path growing gradually sandier as she neared the water. If the town thought they could get rid of her so easily, they were in for a surprise. She usually got her way, and she wasn't about to let that change now. She'd simply have to convince everyone that she was the right person for the job—even if she wasn't the man they'd been expecting.

“Why are men always deemed more worthy?” she muttered, thinking of the struggle her older sister, Caroline, had experienced when she'd wanted to become head lightkeeper of Windmill Lighthouse near Detroit. Even though she'd been

more experienced and competent than most men, she'd faced discrimination simply because of her gender.

Tessa's gaze slid to the lighthouse perched on a bluff overlooking Eagle Harbor. The side of the redbrick keeper's house was attached to an octagonal brick tower that was rather short. She guessed it to be around forty feet in height. But what it lacked in height it seemed to make up for in girth. With the pounding of the wind and waves, as well as the harsh winters, she had no doubt the tower had been built to withstand the elements rather than win prizes in beauty contests.

"But I don't care," she said, focusing on the dock and her bag. She'd vowed to herself that once she left Windmill Point, she'd never step into another lighthouse as long as she lived.

She was done with lighthouses. Forever. And she wanted nothing to do with the sea either. If she'd had her choice, she would have traveled overland instead of by steamer. But since sailing through the Great Lakes to the north was the fastest option, she'd grudgingly done what she needed to.

The truth was that she'd never be able to forgive the sea or lighthouses for all they'd taken from her.

Turning her back on the tower, she found herself facing several deckhands rolling barrels along the dock. As the only woman on board, the captain had kept her under close supervision during her voyage out of Detroit and then out of the locks at Sault St. Marie. Now that she'd reached her destination, he was too busy to chaperone her.

She moved out of the way of the crew, stepping to the side of the dock to let them pass. As they neared her, she tried not to think about the fact that she was utterly alone in the world. That she was, for the time being, without the job she thought she'd secured. And that she was also homeless.

The first deckhand eased his barrel to a stop next to her. He gave her a smile, revealing yellowing teeth that contrasted with the dark scruff on his face. “So what does our pretty little miss think of Eagle Harbor?”

*Pretty little miss?* Was that what the crew was calling her behind her back? She didn’t return the man’s smile. “As a matter of fact, the place is . . .”

She glanced to the sprawling town set amid stumps of trees that had been cleared to make room for the mining community. Under the gray sky, the log cabins appeared shabby, the laundry swinging in the breeze dingy, and the coastline sharp and imposing. Distant wisps of smoke rising from the hills signaled the mine buried somewhere beyond the town.

“I’m sure the place is charming,” she said, adding cheer to her voice, trying to ignore how deserted everything looked. A few young children played in a heap of rocks and dirt that stood between cabins, and a haggard-looking woman with her hair covered in a scarf faced a pot that hung over an open fire pit. She stirred the contents slowly without bothering to look at the newly arrived steamer, the sailing vessels apparently an everyday occurrence here.

On the shore nearby, a lone fisherman in waders stood up to his knees in the water, reeling in his line. His two husky dogs lay patiently on the beach behind him. As if sensing her attention, the man touched the brim of his bowler hat in greeting.

“Maybe the pretty little miss is having second thoughts about staying.” The deckhand grinned over his shoulder at the two men behind him. “Maybe she’d like to stay aboard the ship with us, eh, mates?”

They nodded their agreement, looking at her with an interest that made her want to wring their necks.

She'd been told there weren't many single women in the north, mostly mining wives. And she'd been fine with that, had decided it meant less worry about wagging tongues gossiping about her. Perhaps it also meant she'd have to spurn unwanted attention from the male species. After all, she hadn't come seeking a relationship. She'd come to teach, and she didn't want or need to be distracted by romantic notions.

She gripped the handles of her carpetbag more firmly and started to step down the dock toward shore.

The deckhand quickly moved in front of her and blocked her way.

"Excuse me," she said, pulling back. "I must be on my way."

"Can't you stay for just a minute?" The man's grin turned hard, and his attention focused on her mouth. "And give me and my mates a kiss good-bye?"

"Absolutely not." She narrowed her eyes at him in what she hoped was a withering stare, but inside her stomach churned. Had these men learned about her reputation? Is that why they were being forward with her? "Now, if you'll kindly let me pass."

She moved to the side, hoping to slip past him. But he side-stepped with her and continued to block her path. "Just one little kiss," the deckhand insisted, "right here on my cheek." He tapped a finger against his scruffy face.

She stiffened her shoulders and bit back a slew of caustic words that begged for release. She decided instead on a different tactic. Hoping to keep the sarcasm out of her tone, she said, "As tempting as the prospect is, I really must decline. I'm a teacher, and there are rules against teachers engaging in unseemly conduct."

"This won't be unseemly," he said, lowering his voice and winking. "I promise."

She was tempted to slap him across the face, but she'd learned to control her impulses over the years of having to ward off inappropriate advances. Her best course of action was to bolt past him and run back into town. He surely wouldn't attempt to accost her in the middle of Center Street.

She jolted forward and slipped past him as fast as a fish angling out of reach of a net. She only made it two paces when his rough fingers circled around her upper arm, jerked her to a halt, and spun her around.

She squirmed against his hold and dropped her carpetbag for more leverage. But he yanked her closer so that his hot breath fanned her face, and the sour stench of his sweat swirled around her. There were several small mackinaw boats tied to the dock and bobbing in the waves. Could she break free and jump into one?

"Let go of me this instant!" she shouted, stamping her heel into his boot.

The man only laughed.

"I think you better do as the lady said" came a voice from the shore.

She turned her head at the same time as the deckhand to the sight of the fisherman nearby. He was still up to his knees in water and was in the process of casting out his line again calmly and steadily, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Stay out of this, mate," the deckhand called. "This isn't your business."

"With the way you're treating the lady, you've forced me to make it my business. Mate." The fisherman watched his line arch out over the water and then sink beneath the waves.

"I suggest you keep out of things or you'll force me and my mates to make *you* our business." The deckhand grinned at

his friends as if pleased with his comeback. It was likely the cleverest thing the man had said all year—or perhaps in his life. Nevertheless, Tessa was tired of his antics. It was time to put an end to the situation once and for all.

Before she could knee the deckhand or bite his hand, the fisherman gave a short but piercing whistle between his teeth.

At the sound, the two dogs behind him bolted up. Their pointed ears perked, their snouts lifted, and their eyes riveted to their master. At their full height, with their silver-and-black markings, Tessa could almost believe the dogs were wolves. But their build was stockier, their coats thicker.

The fisherman cocked his head at the deckhands, and the dogs started toward the wharf, baring their teeth and growling.

“Oh, so he thinks he can frighten us with his puppies,” the deckhand said with a guffaw toward his friends.

At the sight of the dogs moving toward the wharf, looking like they would rip flesh from bones, the other two crewmen had lost their grins, deserted their barrels, and retreated back to the steamer.

The fisherman didn't say anything further. Instead he reeled in his fishing line as unperturbed as before. Underneath the brim of his hat, Tessa caught a glimpse of a handsome face, but that was all she had time to see before her captor yanked her forward and positioned her so that she was acting as a shield between himself and the dogs.

Low to the ground, ears back and fangs exposed, the dogs continued to advance. If she'd been a timid woman, they might have frightened her. Yet all she could think about was devising a strategy for freeing herself from the deckhand so the dogs could charge in and chew him up like a piece of rawhide.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the mackinaw.

She'd break loose and leap into the swaying boat. It wasn't much of a plan, but at least she'd be doing something more than standing here and allowing herself to be manhandled.

Before the deckhand knew what she was doing, she bent her head and bit the fleshy part of his hand between his thumb and forefinger.

He yelped and his grip slackened.

She didn't waste any time. She wrenched away and leapt toward the edge of the dock. To her dismay, her feet landed in a wet spot. She skidded and tried to stop, but she found herself tumbling over the side of the dock not even close to the mackinaw.

She hit the icy water with a splash. The sharpness immediately took her breath away. She spluttered as murky waves battered her mouth and nostrils. The water wrapped around her, saturating her heavy linen overskirt along with the fuller underskirt. The weight of the wet material dragged her down, submerging her under the waves.

As she sank, her legs tangled in the floating linen, and she couldn't get the momentum she needed to kick and force herself back to the surface. She flailed with her arms, but the pounding of the waves refused to release her.

Her lungs burned, and she had to resist the instinct to open her mouth for the air that wouldn't be there. Darkness swirled around her. Suddenly all she could think was that her adventure had hardly just begun and she was about to die.