

More THAN
WORDS CAN *Say*



KAREN WITEMEYER

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KAREN WITEMEYER



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To Peter.

You're the quiet one of the family, but you have a huge heart when it comes to connecting with others. I admire the young man you already are, and I am enjoying the journey of watching God transform you into the mature man of faith He's designed you to be. You make your mama proud!

But as for you, ye thought evil against me;
but God meant it unto good.

—Genesis 50:20



CHAPTER

1



MAY 1896—HONEY GROVE, TX

“The council has denied your appeal, Miss Kemp.” Mayor Longfellow delivered the blow with a finality that threatened to buckle Abigail’s knees.

His aldermen, who had risen to their feet when she entered the City Hall meeting room, shifted around the large table until they all stood on one side, leaving her alone on the other. Some of the more pompous officials nodded in solemn agreement with the mayor’s pronouncement. Others wore more sympathetic expressions. One or two even cast her apologetic glances. A timid fellow in the back avoided her gaze entirely.

Despite the displays of regret, however, *none* of them spoke up against the injustice being done.

“This isn’t right.” Abigail Kemp, her legs wobbling, strode up to the table and pressed her hands into the polished oak surface next to the stack of ledgers she’d left them to review and the business plan she’d written to demonstrate her capability. “I’ve been running the Taste of Heaven Bakery on my own for more than a year, ever since my father took ill. In that time,

the bakery has earned a profit every quarter.” She grabbed the top ledger and opened it to a middle page, jabbing her finger at the numbers that proved her words true. “We pay our taxes on time and support all civic activities on the town square. You have no right to take away my bakery.”

“No one is doubting your abilities, Miss Kemp,” the mayor said as he rounded the table. His voice was calm, his smile friendly, if a tad condescending.

Feeling like a wounded deer facing down a pack of wolves, Abigail straightened and threw her shoulders back to regain every inch of her five foot, six-inch stature.

Chester Longfellow bared no fangs, however. Neither did he lunge for her jugular. He simply closed the cover of her ledger and stacked it neatly atop the other evidence she’d provided in support of her appeal. “I’m afraid the law is the law, Miss Kemp.” He picked up her papers and held them out to her. “We consulted Judge Hardcastle for his recommendation, and the judge concurred. The ordinance must be upheld.”

Abigail made no move to take her ledgers. To do so would be to concede defeat, and she wasn’t done fighting. Not when her livelihood was at stake. If she lost the bakery, she’d have no means of providing for her sister. Besides, the Taste of Heaven was her family’s legacy. *Her* legacy now.

“That ordinance is completely outdated and should have been repealed years—*decades*—ago. The idea that women be forbidden from owning business property within the city limits is ridiculous. There are dozens of women successfully running their own enterprises in town. Dora Patteson’s millinery shop. Judith Kell’s laundry. Norma Wilson’s dressmaking—”

“Yes, we are aware,” Mayor Longfellow interrupted. “You’ve already argued this point, Miss Kemp, and rehashing it now will not gain you any benefit. The ladies you mention all rent

their space from male property owners. They don't own their businesses outright. When you inherited the Taste of Heaven following your father's death, you became a business owner and therefore have been operating these last several months in violation of the laws of this city. We extended grace in giving you time to grieve your father before confronting you on this issue, but I'm afraid we can postpone no longer." He extended the ledgers again, nearly prodding her midsection with them.

With no choice but to accept them, she folded the books against her chest but lifted her chin in silent defiance. She would not bow her head in defeat. Not today. Not ever.

Mayor Longfellow showed no sign of being impressed by her fighting spirit. His bland expression assured that no matter her opinion, the matter was settled. "You have until the end of the month to either put your property up for sale or find a financial backer to serve as a silent partner."

Abigail set her jaw. No, she had until the end of the month to construct and execute a third option, because neither of the ones he'd presented were acceptable.

Two weeks didn't give her much time, but she was no stranger to working under pressure. She'd find a way around this discriminatory ordinance. These stuffy male councilmen might want to hold her down, but like a well-made bread dough, she planned to rise to the occasion.



Abigail strode away from City Hall on a full head of steam. Her face must have given away her mood, for any pedestrians she encountered along her path gave her a wide berth. None made an effort to approach or even wave at her. None, save the person she least wanted to see.

"Afternoon, Miss Kemp." A thin man approached from the

opposite direction, his gaze fixed on her as if she were his destination and not simply an acquaintance met along the way.

Abigail gritted her teeth. A smile was out of the question, but she managed a slight dip of her head to the drugstore owner who had been trying to convince the Kemps to sell him their property ever since her father took ill.

“Mr. Gerard.” Her steps did not slow. In fact, she picked up her pace as she brushed past him. It might not be precisely polite, but she’d been dictated to enough for one day and feared what might happen if Samson Gerard chose this moment to proposition her again.

He proved dauntless in his pursuit, however, for after tipping his bowler hat, he immediately pivoted and matched his stride to hers. His infuriatingly long-legged gait made it impossible for her to outdistance him without running.

“I wondered if I might have a word,” he said.

Abigail kept her gaze focused on the street in front of her, doing everything in her power to discourage this conversation. “I’m afraid this is not a good time, sir. As you can see, I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“Yes, your pace is rather, um, brisk, but I believe I can keep up. No need to slow on my account.”

Breaking into a run was growing more tempting by the moment. Yes, she’d make a spectacle of herself, but the chances of Mr. Gerard joining her in such a display were exceedingly slim. Unfortunately, while working in a bakery all day gave one prodigiously strong fingers, wrists, and forearms, it did little for the legs or lungs. She could already feel perspiration gathering on her upper lip, and her chest had begun to heave ever so slightly.

Yet the sooner she reached the bakery, the sooner she could be rid of this man. So she pressed on, doing her best not to huff when she asked, “What do you want, Mr. Gerard?”

“Your building, of course.”

That brought her up short.

Abigail halted and spun to face him. His smug smile rankled, but it was the calculating gleam in his eye that put her on her guard. “What did you say?”

He shrugged and kept on smiling, as if unaware of the daggers he tossed at her heart. “I want your building. That can’t be a surprise to you. Perhaps I stated my intention a tad bluntly, but in deference to your apparently tight schedule, I decided to omit the standard niceties and cut to the chase. My offer to buy still stands. My price is fair and will allow you to set up shop in another town that doesn’t have such strict ordinance codes.”

Ordinance codes? He knew about the appeal. About the decision. But how?

Abigail narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice to keep any passersby from overhearing. “You put the council up to this, didn’t you? Dug up this obsolete ordinance about women not owning businesses and somehow persuaded them to enforce it. Just so you can get your hands on my shop. Well, I promise you, Mr. Gerard, that if I sell, it won’t be to you.”

“Careful where you fling those unfounded accusations, Miss Kemp.” He chuckled, though no levity softened his gaze. He placed his hand over his heart and sketched a slight bow. “I assure you that I had nothing to do with uncovering that ordinance. In truth, I didn’t even know it existed. Not that I’m sorry it came up, of course. Whoever dug up that old law did me a great service.”

Samson Gerard was a slug, but Abigail had to admit that he’d always been aboveboard in dealing with both her and her father. Yes, he coveted their prime real estate on the town square and made no secret of that fact. Yet theirs wasn’t the only business

he'd sought to buy out. Many of her neighbors had received similar offers.

But if *he* hadn't targeted her with this obscure law, who had? The mayor might have made it sound like they had given her time to grieve before bringing the issue forward, but the more likely scenario was that no one recalled the ordinance's existence until someone brought it to the council's attention. That someone could have been Mr. Gerard, but that idea didn't sit as well with her now as it had a moment ago.

"How did you know about the council's decision?" she challenged, not quite ready to deem him innocent. "I just came from meeting with them. The rumor mill works fast in Honey Grove, but not *that* fast."

"You forget that my wife's father is an alderman. He knows of my interest in your property and informed me of the council's decision ahead of time. He knew your appeal would be denied. The law was too clear to argue. So he told me the date and time of your hearing so I might be the first to offer a solution to your problem."

"You are not the solution to my problem, because I won't be selling."

"You will if you don't find a financial backer." Did he really have to look so sure of her demise? It was hard enough to hold on to hope amid her own doubts without someone else shoveling skepticism on her head. "And no man in town will invest in a business without being given a say in how to run it. I may not know you well, Miss Kemp, but you've proven to have a stubborn streak—one that would surely irritate any business partner you might acquire. Knock heads on too many issues, and you'll find yourself on the losing end of a dissolved partnership, which would leave you without a building altogether. Once you're out of the way, your partner—whose name will be

on the deed to your property—will be clear to sell. I'll make him the same offer I've made to you, and my guess is he'll accept. So your choice is to take my money now, or watch me give it to someone else in a few months. Either way, you end up without a storefront. You can ensure you have the funds necessary to start over elsewhere if you deal with me, or roll the dice on a financial backer and risk losing everything your father built. The wise choice is clear."

Clear to him, maybe, but she wasn't ready to concede. Not yet.

"You are entitled to your opinion, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me." Abigail turned away from the irritating man and resumed her trek to the bakery, wishing she could leave all her problems behind so easily.

Mr. Gerard didn't follow, but he did call after her. "Unless you have a secret male relative lying around who will stand up for you, Miss Kemp, my offer is the best you're going to get."

Abigail stiffened but kept walking. If she had a male relative, she wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place, because her father would have willed the bakery to him. He'd never thought a daughter good enough to carry on the family business.

She stewed over that regret for a moment or two, but as she let go of the old hurt, it fell into fertile soil and germinated an idea. An idea so crazy it just might work.

A smile creased her face. Only God could bring good out of a meeting with Samson Gerard. He might be a slug, but he'd given her a strategy. One that, if it worked, would give her father the male heir he'd always wanted.