

No Other Will Do



KAREN
WITEMEYER



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

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To one of the strongest women I know,
my grandma—Vera Burgess.

Nearly a century old and still ready to take on the world.
From her blackberry jam to her persimmon cookies,
she filled my childhood with sweet memories,
and her never-quit attitude has given me an example
of fortitude and perseverance I aspire to duplicate.

I love you, Grandma!



What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

James 2:14–17

Prologue

WINTER 1882
COOKE COUNTY, TEXAS

Malachi Shaw made the arduous climb back into consciousness with great effort. But everything Mal had accomplished so far in his thirteen years of life had required great effort. Not that he had achieved anything worth bragging about. Orphaned. Starving. And . . . cold.

That's what his senses picked up first. The cold. And not just the huddling-under-the-saloon-stairs-in-a-too-thin-coat-during-a-blue-norther kind of cold. No. This was a cold so harsh it burned. Which made exactly zero sense.

With a groan, Mal lifted his head and tried to draw his arms beneath him to push himself up. That's when the rest of the pain hit. His shoulder throbbed, his ribs ached, and his head felt as if it had collided with a train. Oh, that's right. It had.

Memories swirled through his mind as he slowly crawled out of the snowdrift that must have broken his fall. He'd hopped the train, just as he'd done a half dozen times over the month

since his drunk of a father finally got himself killed—run over by a wagon while trying to cross the street. The old man hadn't been good for much, leaving Mal to scrounge for food in garbage bins while he spent whatever coins he managed to earn at the card tables on whiskey. But at least he'd kept a roof over their heads—a run-down, leaky roof supported by slanted, rickety walls that couldn't even hold the wind out, but a roof nonetheless.

The morning after they'd laid his father in the ground, the lady who owned the shack kicked Mal out on his ear. Barely gave him time to gather his one pathetic sack of belongings. A sack, Mal discovered as he frantically searched the area around him, that was nowhere to be found.

“No!” He slammed his fist into the frozen earth near his hip, then slumped forward.

What had he expected? That God would suddenly remember he existed and lift a finger to help him? Ha! Not likely. The Big Man had never cared a fig for him before. Why start now? Much better to sit back in heaven and get a good laugh watching poor Malachi Shaw fumble around. Taking his ma so early, Mal couldn't even remember what she looked like. Giving him a father who cared more about his next drink than his own flesh and blood. Then even taking that much from him. Leaving him alone. No home. No one willing to give him work. Leaving him no option but to ride the rails, looking for some place, any place, that would give him a fair shake.

And what had that gotten him? A run-in with a gang of boxcar riders who hadn't appreciated him infringing on their territory. Mal reached up to rub the painful knot on his forehead. There'd been four of them. All twice his size. Each taking his turn. Until the last fella slammed Mal's head against the steel doorframe.

Malachi didn't remember anything after that. Obviously,

they'd thrown him off. He could barely make out the tracks at the top of the long embankment. It was too bad God hadn't just let him break his neck in the fall. But then, where would be the fun in that?

"Gotta keep the entertainment around, don'tcha?" He scowled up at the gray sky that would soon be deepening to black. "Wouldn't want you and the angels gettin' bored up there."

Mal brushed the snow from his hair and arms with jerky movements and pushed to his feet. He beat at his pants, dusting the snow from the front and back as he ground his teeth. His fingers burned as if someone were holding them to a flame. His ears and nose stung, as well. He couldn't feel his feet at all. Not good.

He stomped a few steps until most of the white had fallen away from the laces of his boots. Cupping his hands near his mouth, he huffed warm air into them. Not that it helped much. The only thing that would keep him from turning into a boy-sized icicle was shelter. And a fire. And a coat. The thick flannel shirt he'd gotten from the poor box at the church did little to cut the wind. And now that it was wet from the snow, it chilled him more than protected him.

At least there weren't any holes in his shoe leather. The soles were thin but solid. If he were to count his blessings, like the preacher who'd given him the clothes advised, he'd at least have one. Better than nothin', he supposed.

If only those fellas had left him his sack. No sack meant no food, no dry clothes, no flint for a fire.

"Quit your whining, Mal," he muttered to himself. "Groanin' won't fill yer belly. If ya wanna get warm, do somethin' about it."

Straightening his shoulders, Malachi lifted his head and scanned the landscape, looking for any hint of a building in the area. A barn with animals heating the air would be best.

But there was nothing. Nothing but snow-dusted prairie grass with a few random post oaks sticking their heads up every now and again.

What'd he expect? For a closed carriage to show up with one of them fancy drivers who'd call him *sir* and ask him where he'd like to go?

Take me to the nearest barn, my good man, Malachi imagined saying. *And don't spare the horses.*

With a snort, Mal flipped up the collar of his shirt, stuffed his stinging hands in his pockets, and started trudging east. Gainesville shouldn't be too far away. That's where he'd been when he got the brilliant idea to hitch a ride in the third box-car from the end. Not his best decision. But the fellas already occupying the car had jumped on him pretty fast. The train couldn't have traveled too many miles from town before he'd been tossed. Surely there'd be a farm or ranch nearby with a barn he could hunker down in for a night or two. All he had to do was find it before full dark hit.

By the time he came across the first structure, Mal was shivering so hard, he could barely keep his balance. The wind pounding him from the north kept pushing him off track, making him fight to walk a straight line. But, hey, at least it wasn't snowing. That preacher man would be proud of him. He'd just doubled the size of his blessing list.

Mal chuckled, but the expulsion of air turned into a cough. One that made his chest ache. Hunching his shoulders, he ducked his head and turned full into the wind, cutting across a field to shorten his path to the barn.

Light glowed from the windows of the house that stood a short distance away. Smoke blew out the chimney at a sharp angle, as much a slave to the wind as he was. He usually took steps to avoid people, but in this instance, he was too cold to even consider looking for a more suitable hideout. If he could

just bed down in some straw for the night and get warm, he could be away before the owners woke up in the morning.

Suddenly thankful for the encroaching darkness, Malachi flattened himself against the far side of the barn and inched his way around until he reached the doors at the front. Opening the one closest to him just enough to squeeze through, he slipped inside and held the door, fighting the tug of the wind in order to close it quietly. The last thing he needed was for the slam of a door to bring the farmer running. Farmers tended to carry shotguns, and Mal wasn't too fond of buckshot.

He peered through the crack he'd left open and watched the house, ready to make a run for the field, if necessary. But no one came out to challenge him. He released the breath he'd been holding and closed the door the rest of the way. Looked like his blessing list was up to three now. Mal grinned and trudged to the darkest corner he could find.

The smell of hay tickled his nose, but he was too happy to be out of the wind to pay it any mind. With numb, shaky fingers, he managed to undo the buttons on his flannel shirt. He removed it along with the long-sleeved wool undershirt he wore and stretched both over the empty stall door. He tried to undo the laces of his shoes, but his fingers were too stiff to pick the knots free. His feet would have to wait until he regained some feeling in his hands.

He huffed his breath over his cupped hands, then moved into the stall and buried himself in the pile of straw. He lay still for a long time, his bony arms curled in front of his thin chest, his knees pulled up tight. The dampness of his trousers caused his teeth to chatter uncontrollably. He closed his eyes and imagined everything warm he could think of. A roaring fire. A wool blanket—no, not one of those scratchy things. A quilt. A thick, soft, down-filled quilt with lace at the edges like he saw in a shop window once. A steaming bowl of barley soup.

The pang hit his stomach hard. *Great*. He knew better than to think about food. Now he wasn't gonna be able to think about anything else. Mal opened his eyes and squinted through the shadows. Maybe there was some feed in the corncrib he'd passed on the way in. It wouldn't be the first time he'd made a dinner of field corn pilfered from a bunch of livestock. Awful stuff. Hard and dry, and it always stuck in his teeth. But it would hold back the gnawing in his belly and maybe even let him sleep.

Reluctantly, Malachi unfolded himself and brushed off the straw. He clenched his jaw to still the chattering of his teeth and slowly made his way to where he recalled seeing the crib. One of the horses snorted as he passed and kicked at his stall door.

"Easy, boy," Mal murmured in a soft voice. "No reason to get worked up. I ain't gonna hurt nuthin'."

In the dwindling light coming through one of the windows, the horse watched him with big, brown eyes that made Mal's neck itch, but the beast quit his bangin'. Malachi eased past, keeping his gaze on the horse, not liking the way he stared at him. Down his long horse nose. All snooty. Like the shopkeeper's wife who used to shoo him with her broom every time she caught him going through the garbage bins behind the store. As if he were a rat or some other kind of vermin.

Caught up in his thoughts, Mal didn't see the shovel until his shoe collided with it. It toppled to the floor with a clatter that echoed off the rafters. Mal froze, his heart thumping harder than a blacksmith's hammer.

A hinge creaked. He spun to face the sound. On his left. Toward the front. Between him and the door.

Footsteps.

Malachi snatched the fallen shovel and pulled it back, ready to strike. He'd smash and run. As soon as the farmer showed himself.

A figure emerged from inside a front stall. A tiny figure with round green eyes and a halo of curly black hair standing out around her head. Pale skin. Plump, rosy cheeks.

Mal slowly dropped his arms and set the shovel aside. There'd be no smashing and running. Not when God had sent him an angel.

"Who are you?" the angel asked, her childish voice holding only curiosity. No accusation.

Mal couldn't say a word.

The angel didn't ask another question. Just stared back at him. Only then did Mal remember he didn't have a shirt on. He circled his arms around his middle, trying to hide his scrawny, naked chest. He didn't want to offend the angel. Or have her see the bones that showed through his skin. A man had his pride, after all.

"You must be cold," she said at last. Then she started unbuttoning her coat, and before he knew what she was about, she had the thing off and was wrapping it around his shoulders.

The heavy wool felt like heaven, still warm from her body. Heat seeped into his frost-nipped skin, thawing him until he thought he might melt like candle wax in an oven.

"Don't just stand there gawking like you've never seen a girl before," she demanded. "Put your arms in the sleeves."

His angel scowled at him, her lower lip protruding in an exasperated pout as she lectured him. Then, because he obviously wasn't moving fast enough for her liking, she reached out and did it for him. Peeled his arms apart and stuffed them in the too-short coat sleeves.

"You're near to frozen," she complained when her hand first touched his wrist, but the observation didn't cause her to slow down at all. She just reached for the buttons next, did them up, then started rubbing his arms up and down through the sleeves, the friction heating his skin even more. He stared down at the

top of her head while she worked. She only came up to about his chin. Tiny little thing, his angel. Bossy, too.

She pulled away after a moment. “Hmm. This isn’t good enough.” She stalked over to a sawhorse situated near the tack wall, threw the bridle that had been sitting atop it to the ground, and grabbed hold of the striped saddle blanket draped across its middle.

“Sit down,” she ordered as she dragged the thick blanket over to him. Once he complied, she flopped the blanket onto his lap. She stared at him again, all thoughtful-like. Her gaze hesitated at the ends of the coat sleeves, where his wrists and hands hung uncovered. “Oh! My mittens!” A grin broke out across her face and she bounded away, into the stall that she’d emerged from earlier.

She hurried back and thrust a pair of bright red mittens at him. “Here. Put these on.” Her face clouded again for a minute, then cleared. “And my scarf!” She unwrapped the long knitted strip from around her neck and twined it about his, wrapping it up over his ears and head, as well. “That’s better.” The triumph in her voice made him smile.

She examined him again, the frown lines reappearing above her pert little nose. He was beginning to feel a bit like one of those snowmen the kids liked to build by the schoolhouse when the weather turned wintry. He half expected her to fetch a carrot and jab it against his nose. Not that he would have minded. A carrot would taste a fair sight better than cow corn.

“Your feet,” she said at last. “There’s still snow crusted in your laces. Aunt Henry is always fussing at me to get out of my wet boots and stockings before my feet shrivel. If you were walking around in the snow out there, though, we’ve got more to worry about than wrinkled toes.”

Aunt Henry? What kind of person was that?

The girl glanced up at him. “Old Man Tarleton got lost in a

blizzard a couple years back, and his feet got so cold, they froze solid. Three of his toes turned black and fell off.” She reported that grisly piece of news with a decidedly non-angelic degree of enthusiasm. “So we better get those shoes off.”

She sat down in front of him and started picking at his laces.

Enough was enough. He couldn’t let his angel touch his stinky feet. There was no telling what muck he might have stepped in.

“I’ll do it,” he grouched. He tried to push her away and take off the fuzzy red mittens, but she wouldn’t let him.

“Keep those mittens on!” She glared at him so fiercely he didn’t dare argue. “I’ll not have you catching your death on my watch.”

Why was she doing this? Helping him instead of calling her father to send him away. Giving him her own clothing. Talking to him as if he were any other person. Not the piece of gutter trash he knew himself to be.

She finally got the laces undone and gently tugged his shoes off. He tried to pull his feet beneath the horse blanket before she saw the sorry state of his socks, but she wouldn’t let him. She peeled the hole-riddled stockings from his feet one at a time, *tsking* over how icy his toes felt. He was just happy to see they weren’t black like Old Man Tarleton’s. They were filthy, though. Ugly. He pulled them away from her clean white hands and did his best to hide them under the saddle blanket.

She made no comment, just plopped onto the dirt floor in front of him and yanked her shoes off. What was she . . . ? His angel pulled the thick wool socks she wore off her feet and went digging under the blanket for his toes. Before he could react and scramble away from her, she latched on to his right foot, dragged it out, and pushed on the sock. She captured his left just as easily. ‘Course he’d stopped trying to get away by then. His brain might be half frozen, but he recognized an unwinnable battle when he saw one.

The warmth of the socks brought a tingle of awareness to his feet that quickly expanded into a searing pain so deep, he wanted to kick her away so she'd stop touching him. But he didn't. Wouldn't. Ever.

He'd just encountered the biggest blessing his scrawny list had ever seen. No way was he gonna do anything to hurt her. So he gritted his teeth and sat still while she flopped the horse blanket down over his stinging feet.

"Now for the inside." She stood and pushed her bare feet back into her boots and disappeared into her stall again. When she emerged, she waddled, carrying a full pail of milk in front of her. He jumped up to help her carry it, taking it from her hands.

"It's still warm," she said. "I don't have a cup, though."

Malachi's mouth salivated at the thought of drinking fresh milk. "I don't need a cup." He'd just put his mouth directly on the pail and tip it until the creamy goodness slathered his throat. But no. He couldn't do that. Couldn't drink like an animal in front of her. Couldn't defile the milk by putting his mouth all over it.

He glanced around. There. On the workbench. A canning jar half full of nails and tacks and other odds and ends. Malachi rushed to the table, unscrewed the lid, and dumped the contents, careful not to let any fall onto the floor. He wiped the dust off on his still-damp pants and blew out the center. "This'll do."

Her nose wrinkled. "But it's *dirty*."

He grinned. "Little dirt never hurt me."

She smiled in return, and the action almost felled him. Never had he seen anything so beautiful, so *good*, aimed his direction. Smiles like that were reserved for other people. Deserving people. Never for him.

Clearing his throat, he pushed past her and strode back to the milk pail. He didn't want to dirty the rest of the milk by dipping the jar in so he set it on the floor and lifted the pail.

“I’ll hold it,” the girl chirped, still grinning as if this were some grand adventure.

Weakened from his ordeal, Mal’s arms shook with the weight of the pail. Some of the milk sloshed over the sides of the jar. His gaze flew to the girl, his chest tight.

“Keep going,” she urged, not angry in the least that he’d spilled milk on her fingers. “Fill it to the top.”

The tightness eased. He followed her instructions, then set the pail down and took the jar from her.

He lifted the glass jar to his lips. His eyes slid closed as the fresh, creamy liquid rolled over his tongue. He savored the sweetness, drinking slowly, deliberately. And when a third was all that remained, he made himself stop and set the jar aside.

“Why aren’t you finishing it? Aunt Bertie always makes me finish my milk before I leave the table.”

Wasn’t it Aunt Henry a minute ago?

Malachi shrugged it off. The aunt’s name didn’t matter. “I’m savin’ it fer later.” He’d learned never to eat everything he found all at once. He never knew how hard it would be to find something the next time. Better to squirrel some away while you had it.

“But we got plenty more.” She tipped her head toward the milk pail.

“That’s yours. Your family’s.”

The girl looked at him strangely, as if she didn’t understand what he’d just said. “The aunts won’t mind.”

Mal shook his head.

“Suit yourself.” His angel glanced around the barn, looking less than fully in charge for the first time since he’d met her. Then she hugged her arms around her waist and tried to hide a shiver.

“You’re cold,” Mal accused with more harshness than he should have, but doggone it, the girl should have told him she was getting cold.

He immediately threw her mittens back at her and stripped out of the coat. “You need to go back to the house, kid. Go sit by the stove or somethin’.”

“I’m not a baby.” But when her lower lip came out in a pout his resolve hardened. She was far too young to be shivering in a cold barn when a warm house was available.

“Scram, kid. I’ll be fine.”

She put the coat on and slipped the mittens over her small hands. “What’s your name?” she demanded.

He glared at her then finally relented. “Malachi.”

She smiled again, making him a mite dizzy. “I’m Emma.”

“Good for you,” he grouched, still feeling guilty that he’d let her get cold. “Now, scram.”

She did.

And all the light went with her. Leaving Mal alone. In the dark. Where he belonged.

He’d gotten used to the condition. It shouldn’t bother him. Hadn’t bothered him for years, in fact. But it did now. Because now he knew what he’d been missing.

Mal picked up the saddle blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. Then he grabbed his jar and turned to go back to his corner and bury himself in the hay. The sight of the milk pail stopped him. She’d left it behind.

A little thrill coursed through him. Did that mean she’d be back? Or would the milk be left here? Forgotten. Like him. Maybe he should carry it up to the front stoop. To thank her for helping him.

He bent over to grab the handle. The barn door flew open.

“Good news, Malachi!” Emma stood in the doorway, the beam of her smile so bright he nearly had to lift a hand to shade his eyes. “The aunts said I can keep you!”

 1 

SUMMER 1894
HARPER'S STATION
BAYLOR COUNTY, TEXAS

Emma Chandler yanked the hostile note free of the nail that had tacked it to the church door. She wadded the vile thing in her fist and shoved it into her skirt pocket, though what she truly wanted to do was hurl it into the street, run over it with about fifty horses, spit on it, throw dirt clods at it, and finally set it on fire and watch it wither into a pile of harmless ash that would be erased by the wind.

How dare someone threaten her ladies? The fiend had no right!

“He’s getting bolder.” The stoic voice of her friend cut through Emma’s spiraling temper, reminding her that railing at injustice rarely solved the problem. Coolheaded planning. That’s what they needed.

“Yes, he is.” Emma scanned the countryside for signs of the coward, even though she knew she’d find nothing. She never did. And this was the third note he’d left in a fortnight. Each

one in a place that penetrated the colony a little more deeply. “But at least it’s still just words.”

“We’ve no guarantee it will stay that way.” Victoria Adams voiced Emma’s greatest fear. “If words won’t get him what he wants, he *will* escalate.” Tori’s voice rang with the certainty of one who had experienced such a lesson firsthand. “Let me see the note, Emma.” She held out her palm.

Emma sighed and tugged the wad from her pocket. She dropped it into her friend’s hand, knowing that Tori would recognize at once that an escalation had already occurred.

Victoria uncrumpled the note and scanned the page, a soft echo of the threatening words escaping under her breath as she read.

“Women of Harper’s Station—

Clear out by tonight or I’ll clear you out myself. This is your last warning.”

“We have to call a meeting.” Emma marched down the church steps and began pacing the yard.

Tori followed her down the steps but didn’t pace. She simply leaned against the railing and waited for Emma to circle back around. “What will you tell them?”

The soft question stopped Emma in her tracks. She spun toward her friend. “I won’t leave, Tori. I won’t let a bully drive me away.” She flung out her arm toward the handful of buildings that clustered around the old stagecoach station that had attracted the first permanent settlers to the area twenty years ago. “Harper’s Station is supposed to be a refuge for women escaping this kind of intimidation. We’ve worked too hard building this place up, bringing the women in, giving them a fresh start. I won’t scurry away like some timid little mouse just because some pigheaded man wants to flex his muscles!”

Tori, dear that she was, made no effort to interrupt Emma's impassioned ranting. She simply held her friend's gaze and waited patiently for the kettle to stop hissing. Which it did. Eventually, Emma might refuse to sacrifice her principles, but she'd never sacrifice the safety of her ladies. Not for any reason. Not even for the ideal that brought them all together in the first place.

She paced back to where Tori waited at the church steps, releasing her indignation a little bit at a time until her mind cleared of the haze. "I'll encourage all the mothers with children to follow the sheriff's advice and move—*temporarily*—to one of the neighboring towns." Emma's shoulders sagged as she met Tori's gaze. "Including you." How she hated to send her closest friend, her partner in starting the colony, away. But Tori had a four-year-old son, and if anything happened to Lewis . . . Well, such a thought didn't bear thinking.

Tori's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going anywhere." The steel in her tone brooked no argument. "I'm not leaving you to fight this battle on your own. Besides, where would we go? All my funds are tied up in the store. I can't exactly take the merchandise with me. And if I lose that, I lose everything."

"I'll keep an eye on things for you," Emma offered, but her friend cut her off with a firm shake of her head.

"You have the bank to run. You don't need the additional worry of tending my shop. I'll keep a tight leash on Lewis. We'll be fine." Tori fisted her hands at her sides, and Emma knew at once that she wouldn't be swayed.

Victoria never showed emotion beyond the affection of friendship and love toward her son. Nothing else. No fear, anger, surprise—nothing that could possibly give someone an advantage over her. If she was worked up enough to clench her fingers into a fist, her feelings on the matter must be strong, indeed.

“I want to show my son that when you believe in something, you fight for it, even when danger threatens. You don’t hide.”

A world of pain lingered behind that statement, a pain Emma could only imagine. Tori had been fighting since the day she discovered herself pregnant after being attacked by a man esteemed by her entire hometown. Fighting for a place to belong after her father sent her away. Fighting for a way to provide for herself and her child. Fighting the fear that she’d misjudge a man’s character again someday and experience the nightmare all over again.

Emma stepped close to Victoria and took her arm. Only then did Tori unclench her fists and lay one of her hands atop Emma’s.

“We stand together,” Emma vowed.

Tori nodded. “Together.”



Two hours later, just after noon, Emma stood at the front of the church, her back propped against the left side wall, watching her ladies file in. Her heart grew heavy as her gaze skimmed each familiar face. Which ones would leave? Which would stay?

Betty Cooper tromped down the center aisle, her stocky build and no-nonsense stride blazing a trail for the four younger women who followed in her wake. The middle-aged matron oversaw the laying hens that provided a large share of the income that the women of Harper’s Station brought in. She’d been with Emma since the early days. Widowed, no children, but she had one of the biggest hearts Emma had ever encountered. She hid it well behind a gruff manner and an insistence on hard work, but she clucked over the ladies she supervised as if they were her own chicks.

The ladies of the sewing circle, several of whom had children in tow, chatted amongst themselves as they took their usual seats

in the middle rows on the right side. They crafted exquisite quilts that fetched top price in Fort Worth. If half of them left, how would the remaining ladies meet their quota? The broker expected fifteen quilts every month, an easy enough order to fill with ten ladies plying their needles every day, but if their number fell to five . . . ?

Grace Mallory came through the door next, her head bent down as usual, her gaze fixed on her feet as she slid onto one of the back pews. The quiet woman had only been in town six months and liked to keep to herself, but thanks to her skill as a Western Union telegrapher, Harper's Station now had a working telegraph system. The county hadn't yet granted them a post office, so mail still had to be forwarded from Seymour, but any lady in town could send a telegram for less than a nickel a word. Losing Grace would be a blow, if she chose to leave.

Emma's attention flitted to the others already gathered. Those who worked the community garden and put up preserves and canned vegetables to sell. The ladies who ran the café. The boardinghouse proprietress. The midwife who served as the town doctor.

And, of course, the aunts.

Henrietta and Alberta Chandler sat on the front row, staunch as ever in their support of her. Aunt Henry's eyes glowed with a fierce, nearly militant light as she sat stiff as a board, flaunting her bloomers as she always did whenever anything that might possibly relate to women's suffrage came into play. Aunt Bertie, on the other hand, sported a much softer posture and more feminine garb as she sat next to her older sister. She turned to smile at Emma and gave her a little finger wave of encouragement.

The aunts had raised Emma since she was eight—Aunt Henry instilling in her the passion to stand against injustice, and Aunt Bertie teaching her to lead with her heart. They had been the ones to help her dream up the idea of a women's colony, a place

run by women to benefit women. A sanctuary for those needing to escape, and a place of opportunity for those looking to better themselves.

Two years ago, when Emma came into her inheritance at age twenty-one, she'd heard about a small town of abandoned buildings being sold for pennies on the dollar. Residents had abandoned the old stagecoach town when the railroad came through nearby Seymour. The aunts had combined their funds with hers in an investment pool, and they'd purchased the land. Thanks to a few well-placed ads in area newspapers that first year and what some would call their growing *notoriety* since then, the colony boasted nearly fifty members—if one counted the children—women surviving and thriving by supporting one another.

And now some bullheaded, hateful man threatened to destroy all they had built. Emma clenched her jaw. *Not on my watch.*

As the women found their seats, Emma sought a last-minute dose of heavenly wisdom. *You can see what I cannot, Lord. You know what is best. Please don't let me advise these ladies poorly. Guide us in such a way that we might triumph over our enemy.*

“Emma?” Victoria touched her arm. The gentle understanding in the contact soothed and reassured her. “We’re ready to begin.”

Emma nodded and gave her friend a small smile. Then she straightened away from the wall, tugged on the edge of her tailored navy blue suit coat, the one she always wore when she wanted to project an aura of authority, and stepped up to the small pulpit the circuit preacher would use on Sunday to deliver his sermon. If they still had a town come Sunday.

The room instantly fell quiet.

Emma cleared her throat. “Thank you, ladies, for coming on such short notice. We have a matter of great urgency to discuss.”

She glanced at the familiar faces, some visibly nervous, others

curious, a few accusing, as if this current dilemma were somehow her fault. Emma immediately diverted her gaze back to her aunts. Henry nodded to her, her eyes blazing with confidence in her niece. Bertie just smiled, but the gesture was so obviously heartfelt and sincere that Emma couldn't help but be buoyed.

"I'm sure by now, word has reached most of you that a third note was found this morning. I'm afraid the author of said note has increased his demands. He has instituted a deadline, demanding we all leave by tonight."

A loud murmur swept the room as the women turned to each other with their questions.

"Ladies, please." Emma raised her voice to be heard. "I will be happy to answer all your questions in just a moment. But first, I want to make it clear that you are under no compulsion to stay. Everyone must decide for herself what is in her best interest. And know that I will support your decision no matter what it might be.

"Having said that, I think it imperative to confess to you that we still have no idea who this man is or why he wishes us to leave. Miss Adams and I visited with the sheriff after we received the first note. He did a search of the immediate area but found nothing suspicious. We wired him again today, just as we did after we found the second note. Due to the cattle rustling that continues to plague the ranchers in the southern parts of Baylor County, he is unable to lend us his protection. He reiterated his recommendation that we pack up and leave. That we remove ourselves from the threat and take up residence in Seymour or Wichita Falls or return home to our families."

"But I have no family," one lady shouted out from the back of the room. "That's why I came here."

"There's nothin' for me in Seymour," another called. "I done looked already. Without the egg money I earn workin' at Miss Betty's farm, I won't be able to feed my young'uns."

A chorus of panicked agreement rose, filling the room with desperation.

A lady in a brown dress shot to her feet. Flora Johnson, one of the newer women, who worked the garden. She'd shown up two weeks ago with a black eye and a midsection riddled with bruises. "You told us we'd be safe here." She crossed her arms over her rib cage. "Now you tell us we're on our own? That the sheriff won't even be bothered to lift a finger?" She glanced around to the crowd, all of whom had fallen silent. "I don't know about the rest of ya, but I've seen what happens when a woman tries to keep a man from gettin' what he wants. It ain't pretty. If I had someplace to go, I'd be packin' up right now." She turned back to the front, uncrossed her arms, and pointed an accusing finger at Emma. "You can't keep us safe, Miss Chandler. No one can."

Heart thundering in her chest, Emma faced her ladies, chin high. "You're right, Flora. I can't promise that you . . . that *any* of you . . . will be safe. I don't know if we are facing one man or many. Staying will entail danger, and the serious possibility of physical harm. What I can promise you, though, is that I will stay and fight.

"Harper's Station is my dream and my responsibility. My aunts and I own the land, and I refuse to be run off my property. What we face is no different than what the courageous families who settled this land faced before us. They had to fend off Indian attacks and raids from the warring Comanche. Some died. Some left. But some held their ground and prevailed.

"That is what I intend to do. Hold my ground, and do my best to preserve what we have built here. However, I will not ask anyone to fight this battle with me. Each of you must decide for yourself, but . . . I strongly suggest that those of you with children seek shelter elsewhere, if at all possible. The young ones must be protected. And be assured that if you leave, I

will welcome your return once the danger has passed. You will always have a place here in Harper's Station."

"Unless the Station's no longer standin'," a very loud, very male voice boomed. The sound carried through an open window to Emma's right.

She caught a brief glimpse of a man in a heavy buckskin coat, a dark blue bandana pulled high over his face. Then she saw a flash of metal.

"Everybody down!" Emma dove off the stage toward her aunts. She swept them both from the pew just as gunfire erupted.