

THE
*Underground
Railroad*
BRIDES
COLLECTION

9 Couples Navigate the Road to Freedom before the Civil War

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Barbara Tifft Blakey, Ramona K. Cecil,
Lynn A. Coleman, Cecelia Dowdy, Patty Smith Hall,
Terri J. Haynes, Debby Lee, Darlene Panzera, Penny Zeller

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Freedom's Flight ©2018 by Penny Zeller

Print ISBN 978-1-68322-632-1

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-68322-634-5

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-68322-633-8

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Published by Barbour Books, an imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1810 Barbour Drive, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in Canada.

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Emma
Underground

by Barbara Tiffit Blakey

Chapter 1

Schenectady, New York
1851

Emma Trebor stood with her husband, Paul, on the church steps as their youngest daughter, Catherine, sat beside her groom in the flower-bedecked carriage. A chill breeze scuttled dry leaves across the cobblestones as the sun shone thinly in a cloud-streaked sky.

Emotions battling within, Emma smiled and waved. Of course she was happy for her daughter—more than happy—she was thrilled. But, oh, she would miss her.

As if Catherine sensed her turmoil, she turned backward in her seat. Their gazes met and she mouthed, “I love you, Mother.” Then the carriage rounded the corner, out of sight.

Emma turned toward Paul, but he had already left her side. She shook off the disappointment and smiled at well-wishers offering their congratulations. Normally she felt invisible to the community, but duty insisted they acknowledge her today, and she soaked it in. While the children had all been home, being an outsider was more an inconvenience than hurtful. As long as she had her daughters to pour her love into, she didn’t *need* other relationships. But one by one, her girls had married and moved away. Catherine was the last. Her new home in Boston was miles and miles away.

Planning the wedding had consumed Emma for months. What was she to do now? “Shame on you,” she chided herself. “Feeling sorry for yourself on Catherine’s joyous day.” But there was no denying the ache in her heart.

Paul sent word that he’d be detained and for her to go home without him. Emma sighed. She wasn’t surprised, but she’d hoped they’d ride home together. And talk.

As the carriage bumped along, she wondered if this was her future. To be alone. That mistake she’d made—that horrible mistake happened over twenty years ago. How long had she struggled with agonizing guilt? Yet God’s love had overcome her self-reproach. Even as she rode along now, she felt His compassion and mercy, knowing she didn’t deserve them, but resting in the knowledge that in His eyes, she was forgiven.

At home, her lady’s maid, Beulah, helped her undress. “We’ll miss her, won’t we, ma’am?”

“Yes, so much.” Emma smiled at her aging servant. Beulah’s once ebony hair had turned gray; wrinkles creased her black face. “Will you mind so much with just me to take care of?”

“Oh, I think it will be just about right. Give my aching bones a bit of rest.” Beulah gathered the day’s garments and headed out of the room.

“Wait, Beulah. Would you like to sit awhile with me—perhaps have a cup of tea?”

“Oh, thank you, ma’am, but”—Beulah bowed her head—“it’s best we keep things as they’ve been, don’t you think? It’s been a long day, and I’m eager to get to bed, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all. You are right, of course. I hope you sleep well.” Emma forced a smile. Did the heat she felt in her cheeks show? She shouldn’t have put Beulah in such a spot as

to decline a request. She respected her maid's wisdom and faith, but their relationship had always been as employer and employee. Why was that? Had Emma kept her at arm's length, or was it Beulah who remained aloof? Was their lack of closeness a result of her terrible deed?

Alone in her room, with the festivities behind her and the night stretching before her, Emma fluffed her pillow, turned on her side, then her back, then her side again. Errant thoughts attacked as they hadn't for years. "Why tonight, Father? I know You forgave me many years ago, so why does this haunt me tonight?"

She slipped from her bed, lit the lamp, and read from her Bible, but not even that soothed her heart. Praying helped, but as soon as she uttered, "Amen," the restlessness returned. Perhaps a cup of hot chocolate would assuage her. She slipped into her robe, left her room, and crept down the hallway, hoping not to disturb her husband.

A second thought paused her. Perhaps if Paul were also awake, they could talk. How did he feel about all four daughters married and established in their own homes? Lingering outside his room, she raised her knuckles to rap on the door. He might invite her in. No. She hadn't been in his private quarters in twenty years. She lacked the courage to intrude now.

The flickering candle cast eerie shadows as Emma tiptoed down the stairs. She was too old to be afraid of the dark, but the creaks and groans of the manor unnerved her. The grandfather clock chimed two as she hurried down the hallway. What was that noise? It came from the back of the house. The kitchen door closing? Was Mandy up? Perhaps the cook also had trouble sleeping after such a big day.

It would be nice to share a cup of hot chocolate together. Reminisce about Catherine. And Julia. And Lydia. And Charlotte. They hadn't been all together since Christmas two years ago.

Emma appreciated Mandy's culinary skills and all she did for the family, but the only discussions they had involved menus and grocery lists. Not that Emma hadn't tried to be friendly, but like Beulah, the cook remained aloof. Perhaps tonight could be a new beginning.

She pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen, surprised to find it empty. She set the candle on the worktable then peered out the window to see if anything moved outside.

A light flickered from the stables. She couldn't discern a shape in the shadows, but had no trouble distinguishing the sound of a cantering horse.



Paul rode away on Perseus, aware of the light winking in the kitchen window. It was probably Mandy, nursing a cup of tea, or Beulah, rummaging for a biscuit. They both knew about his involvement with the Underground Railroad and would not question his late-night disappearance. If it were Emma in the kitchen? That was unlikely, but if it were, he'd figure out something to tell her.

Riding in the dark heightened Paul's senses. His ears strained to detect unnatural sounds. His eyes darted from one shadow to another, every muscle tensed to react if necessary. As he reached the maple grove, Perseus slowed. Paul loosened his rein, allowing his horse to pick its way along the narrow path.

He should have come earlier to check on the *freight*, but the wedding prevented it. Ah, the wedding. How beautiful Catherine had looked. He'd been startled when he saw her in

Emma's wedding dress, her features a replica of her mother's twenty-six years ago. It had taken him back, momentarily, to that glorious, happy time when Emma was the world to him. He prayed Catherine's resemblance to her mother was only outward. Surely none of his daughters possessed her capacity for duplicity.

And yet. Through all the years raising their four daughters, he'd never seen her lose patience, nor heard a complaint about having four babies in six years. By anyone's standards, she was a devoted and selfless mother. If he didn't know better—if he hadn't seen her treachery with his own eyes—he'd believe her incapable of the slightest hint of cruelty. But he had seen. He did know. He couldn't let himself forget.

Not with freedom seekers' lives at stake. Others might refer to the poor souls as runaway slaves, but to him they were much more than that. Industrious. Resourceful. Courageous. *Freedom seekers.*

Paul ducked to avoid a low branch and urged his mount on. Although his cotton mill was a popular *depot*, he hadn't expected any *freight* for another three days. The information had been scanty this time; he didn't know how many to expect, their ages or gender. He'd provide food and water now, assess their needs, then bring more provisions after the workday ended. Nothing gave him more pleasure than helping the fugitives.

His situation was perfect. He purchased cotton for his mill in Virginia and smuggled out one or two slaves each trip. In all the years he'd been involved, his wagonloads of cotton had not been searched or even stopped. Other conductors used his mill as a safe house as well. Since the Fugitive Slave Act had passed a year ago, a few conductors had experienced a bit of trouble from bounty hunters, but none close to Schenectady.

Paul laughed to himself. He'd like to see a pattyroller try anything in Schenectady. The community was an antislavery stronghold. In fact, Amos and his wife, Hannah, escaped from a plantation in Georgia fifteen years ago. They felt so safe, they chose to stay right there and not continue to Canada—operated a blacksmith shop on the north end of town. Every man in the county would fight to protect those two. A meddlesome bounty hunter might find himself floating facedown in the Hudson River if he caused trouble.

Pausing at the edge of the woods, Paul scanned the area for anything out of the ordinary. He doubted the precaution was necessary, but lives were at stake. It comforted the runaways to know procedures were adhered to, even in safe havens such as Schenectady.

He entered the redbrick mill. After lighting the lantern, he waited for his eyes to adjust then climbed the wooden steps to his office on the third floor. He knocked on the door hidden in the closet to alert those inside that he was coming in. He took a deep breath and steeled himself for what he'd find behind the door. It was this moment, this very moment that added meaning to his life. It was never pretty, but it was always powerful.

He opened the door and a woman and two children stared at him. Fear and pain filled their eyes. Where was the hope?

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner." Paul removed the two canteens crisscrossing his back and handed them to the woman.

She passed them to the children. "Thank you, sir. Thank you." Her hair was covered with a blue bandanna, her clothing tattered and soiled.

"I'm Paul." He handed her a basket filled with apples, cheese, and bread.

"I am Tabitha. These are my children, Isaiah and Leah."

Paul nodded to each one. "You are welcome here. You are safe."

He sat on the floor. Now for his second favorite part. “Tell me your story.”

Tears coated Tabitha’s words, but none slipped from her eyes. “We started out together from Virginia, me, Samson, and my chilluns. But they sent the hounds after us. Samson said we should split up. I ain’t seen him again. I wanted to wait longer, but the conductor said we gotta go.”

“Samson is your husband?”

Tabitha shook her head. “No. Not yet. We’s gonna be married in Canada.”

Chapter 2

Emma listened as the hoofbeats faded away. Through the darkness, she made out neither horse nor rider, but suspected it was Paul. Who else could it be? Clancy, the stable hand? Unlikely.

But where was he going at this hour? She had half a mind to follow him, but discarded the idea as foolishness. He was probably as restless as she and needed air. If not for the moonless night, a ride sounded good to her as well. When he returned, perhaps they could talk.

Loneliness engulfed her like fog creeping along the river. She slumped into a chair and raised her eyes heavenward. “What do I do now, Father?” With a series of deep breaths, she quieted her anxious thoughts and waited for calmness to prevail. When it did, the words flowed from her. “You’ve been so good to me, Father. I have four beautiful daughters, a wonderful home. I’ve no right to ask for more, but You’ve promised the desires of our heart. Please, show me how to reconcile with Paul. I’ll do whatever it takes, if You will show me the way.”

She kindled the fire in the cookstove and heated a pan of milk then added cocoa, vanilla, and sugar. The hot chocolate warmed her, but she yearned to share it with someone. An hour passed. No rider returned. No household help appeared. She went back upstairs and wandered into Catherine’s room then the vacant rooms of each of her daughters. Their years together had passed so quickly, although it didn’t seem like it at the time. Then she was content with her life—she hardly missed Paul. She should have, but the girls kept her distracted. She hadn’t considered how everything would change when her daughters were grown and married.

Emma returned to her room and grasped her Bible. It fell open to Psalm 130. “*Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. . . .*”

The clock chimed four, rousing Emma from a light slumber. Her first thought was of Paul. Had he returned? She put on her robe then stood in front of his door. She could peek in to make sure he was there. Her fingers grasped the doorknob, but it was not so easy to break a twenty-year-old habit. Her hand dropped. She’d wait for breakfast. He never missed the morning meal.

Unsettled, Emma returned to her room. Riding in the dark was not safe. What if his horse had tripped and he had fallen? What if he needed help and no one knew? She chided herself for being ridiculous. He was probably in bed, sound asleep.

But what if he wasn’t? She could go to the stables and see if Perseus was there. That might ease her mind.

Emma changed quickly into her riding clothes. Her boots thudded on the wooden

stairs, louder than she wished for such an early hour. She passed through the house and out the back door. Darkness swallowed the light of her single candle and she stumbled a few times. A dog barked in the distance. Nearing the stables, she heard a horse snort and stamp.

She reached out for the latch, but the door swung open. A man filled the frame. "Oh!" Emma gasped. Was it Paul or the stable hand? The shadows concealed his face. She stepped back.

"Emma!"

Paul. Thank goodness, he was safe. As her anxiety fled, she longed to hug him, but the moment passed. Emma wrapped her arms around herself.



Paul rubbed his jaw. "You startled me." What was she doing out here? What did she know about his absence? Why was she wearing her riding clothes? It was too early for an outing. He forced a smile. "Were you headed somewhere?"

"No. . . I. . . well. . . saw you leave last night and wondered if you were back. And I thought if you weren't, maybe you'd had an accident or something." Emma looked down. "Maybe you needed help." She glanced back up.

Confusion clouded her eyes. For a moment he wished to comfort her, but held himself back, fearful she'd return the affection, and he wasn't prepared to handle that.

She'd seen him leave. What could he say, if she asked where he'd been? So far he'd never lied to her to keep his secret—she'd been too preoccupied with raising their daughters to notice his absences. He didn't want to start lying now. "I'm sorry to have worried you. I'm fine, as you can see; however, I am eager to catch some sleep."

"Yes, of course." Emma turned from the stable toward the house. "Look, there's a light on in the kitchen. Mandy is probably up. Are you hungry? Would you like something before you return to bed?" Her voice sounded artificially light, as if she were forcing cheerfulness. Was she covering up something?

"No, I think sleep is what I need most. Go on ahead. I just remembered some instructions I want to give Clancy. I'll be right along."

He watched her return to the house. She looked small and fragile alone in the dark. He ached to take her hand and see her safely inside. Instead he waited until she reached the back door, just in case she tripped, then he reentered the stable and found the groom.

"Clancy, I want you to let me know if Mrs. Trebor goes on any late-night rides."

"Do you want me to detain her?"

"No. But tell me if she leaves and how long she is gone."

"Should I follow her?"

"No. Not yet. Let's see what happens. I may be overreacting."

Paul delayed a few more minutes before heading into the house, hoping Emma wasn't waiting for him in the kitchen. He didn't want to face any questions—but why hadn't she asked where he'd been? Her not asking was as troublesome as if she had.

The smell of coffee met him before he opened the back door. Mandy looked up as he entered. She reached for the pot.

"None for now, but keep it hot for me, will you? I'm beat."

"Yes, sir." She edged closer and lowered her voice. "What we gonna do about her nosing around? She gonna find out; I just know she gonna find out."

Paul frowned. “She will if you keep talking right here in the kitchen.”

Mandy wrung her hands. “But what we gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I’m too tired to think. We’ll pray for God’s continued protection.”

With four long strides, Paul was out of the kitchen, but he paused at the foot of the stairs, puzzling over something Emma had said—that he should “return to bed.”

If she’d looked in his room, she’d know he’d not been to bed, so she wouldn’t suggest he return to it. Instead of checking his room, she went to the trouble of dressing and going out to the stable to see if he was home. In all these years, then, had she never entered his room?

Had she never come in to watch him sleep, as he did her? Of course not. It was a silly thing to do, yet he had continued the practice year after year. Many a night he’d sat in the chair near her bed, gazing on her face, her beautiful, angelic face. Some nights he’d been unable to stop himself from kissing her hand or the top of her head, love for her welling inside. Most nights he contented himself with just watching her sleep. Doing so helped him keep his distance during the day. It helped him keep the facade in place.

But this new knowledge tugged on his heart. Was it respect or indifference that kept her out of his room? And now was she truly worried about him riding in the dark, or did she suspect something? She was dressed to go riding. If he hadn’t been home, where would she have ridden to look for him?



Emma heard her husband pause outside her door. She sat still, her heart pounding in her ears. Would he come in? She stared at the doorknob, willing it to turn, willing Paul to walk through the door, to envelop her in his arms, to kiss her again. He’d loved her once. Couldn’t he love her anew?

His footsteps continued past her door, and she sank back into the chair. Where had he been? He’d been gone for hours. One didn’t ride for hours in the dark without a purpose. But one could be gone for hours, riding only a short distance.

Did he have a mistress? Pain pierced her chest as if she’d been stabbed with a knife. It had been years since they’d been intimate with each other. Could he have found solace elsewhere? She bit her lip to keep from crying out. It wasn’t fair. She’d never locked her door; she’d have welcomed him anytime. He was the one who rejected her, not the other way around. Sometimes she dreamt he came, that he looked at her adoringly and kissed her hand. Such pleasant dreams.

But now—what was happening? Was he seeing someone else? Emma rose from her chair and paced the room, wringing her hands. With whom was her husband meeting?

Perhaps no one. She was overreacting. He might have fallen asleep or lost track of time as he pondered their married daughters. He was a good man. His integrity would prevent him from indiscretions.

Emma knelt on her prayer pillow and stilled her mind. She envisioned coming before the Great I Am and poured out her heart. She rose from her prayer with renewed strength and conviction. Not only would she reconcile with her husband; she’d make peace in the community and friends among her servants. Beulah might believe it was best to leave things as they were, but Emma couldn’t. She had all this love to give. All the attention and care she’d poured into her daughters needed a new outlet, but more than that, she felt God’s leading in this endeavor. He wanted her to reconcile, and so she would.

Eager to begin the day, she chose a blue outfit and laid it out. How frustrating that fashion dictated corsets and tiny buttons down the back, making it impossible to dress oneself.

A half hour later, Beulah bustled into the room, huffing a little.

Emma smiled. "Did you sleep well, Beulah?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you." She tightened Emma's corset. "Do you have a special day planned?"

"Yes, Beulah, I do. A very special day that involves Mr. Trebor, our household, and our community." Emma was giddy with anticipation. Today was the beginning of a new life. She hugged Beulah, felt her lady's maid stiffen, but squeezed gently before letting go. "I know you believe things are better left as they were, but it's time I showed you how much you mean to me. Prepare yourself. There will be more hugs coming."

At the top of the stairs, Emma drew in a deep breath. Beulah hadn't hugged her back, nor smiled at the declaration of more affection to come, but Emma hadn't expected the change to be easy. Even so, by the time she was ready to enter the breakfast room and face Paul, her mouth felt as dry as burnt toast.

Her husband looked up as she entered. "Good morning, dear," he said. "I expected you might sleep late, considering our eventful day yesterday."

"Good morning." She drew in a deep breath. "Paul, I must speak with you." She moved her plate setting from her usual spot at the opposite end of the table to his right side.

His brow furrowed as he watched her. "Of course, dear, but I haven't time this morning. I'm needed at the mill, you know." He started to rise.

She put her hand over his, pausing his exit. "Please eat breakfast with me."

He didn't look at her, kept his gaze toward the window. "I'd love to, dear, but really I can't. I'm sure you understand." He slid his hand from under hers and hurried from the room.

Emma sat alone, her determination unaltered. If he had no time for her at home, then she'd join him at the cotton mill.

Chapter 3

Emma lingered, drinking her tea, mulling over her brief encounter with Paul. He had left before finishing his breakfast and had made no eye contact. Because he didn't want to be alone with her? Guilt over his nocturnal activities?

She'd never doubted Paul's fidelity before. He seemed above that sort of thing, but she was easy to deceive. She'd been duped before with disastrous results. Had he played her false all these years? Appearing upright and honest—a devout man of God—all the while carrying on an affair?

Perhaps she should give up the idea of reconciliation and plan a trip to New York City. Charlotte, her eldest, often asked her to come. The city was festive in the winter, and with Charlotte's connections, there'd be plenty of social opportunities. And her eldest had been married three years; mightn't there be a baby on the horizon? What a happy distraction that would be!

But no. She wouldn't leave. Not yet, anyway. She loved Paul, and if he still cared for her, they could begin again. Unless. . .he'd taken a mistress. . . .

Her heart reached heavenward. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Dear God, don't let it be too late."

Of course it wasn't too late. God would not be urging her if it were. She was jumping to conclusions. Paul had been out one night that she knew of. These doubts attacking her heart were not heaven sent.

"Are you finished, Mrs. Trebor?" Mandy carried a tray to clear the breakfast dishes.

"Oh! Yes. Thank you, Mandy." Emma rose. "Will you tell Clancy, please, that I would like to take the buggy to town?"

"Yes, ma'am." The cook collected the leftover eggs and sausages onto her tray and left the room.

Emma walked to the window overlooking the garden. Most of the blooms were spent; only a few asters and chrysanthemums remained. They'd be gone too after the first hard frost. The garden's bleakness subdued her mood further.

She turned from the window and pulled a cord hanging near the door.

A bit out of breath, Beulah appeared.

"Please sit down a moment."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I'm fine to stand. Is there something you need?"

"Do you remember that blue-flowered chintz we bought too much of for Catherine's trousseau? We made a dress from it, but there were yards and yards left."

"I remember it."

"Could you gather it for me, please, along with my sewing kit? Put them in a hamper for traveling."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And I was wondering, Beulah, if you’d like to come with me. I’m going to sew garments for the poor with the women’s auxiliary.”

Beulah’s gaze met Emma’s. “I’ll get ready.”

“But do you want to come?”

“I want to please my employer.”

“Beulah, I’m asking for your honesty. If you truly want to please me, then you’ll give me sincere answers, not what you think I want to hear.”

Beulah rubbed her forehead. “For this particular question or all the time?”

“All the time.”

Beulah planted her hands on her hips. “Why do you want to use that fancy chintz for poor people’s clothes? It’s gonna be soiled and tattered in no time.”

“Maybe so, but don’t you think poor people like pretty things too?”

Beulah’s smile grew slowly then flooded her face. “They sure do. Yes, ma’am, they sure do.”



Paul’s gaze drifted to the third-floor windows as he neared his cotton mill. Noise from the machines drowned out his arrival and covered any sounds the hideaways might make.

Before heading up to his office, he checked the shed holding his supply of cotton. Each bale weighed five hundred pounds, and there were two left; he’d need more soon. Perhaps he’d go himself this time. The round trip could take a fortnight and would be a way to avoid Emma. Maybe in his absence, she’d find a hobby to replace mothering their daughters. She needed something to do, but he couldn’t have her looking his way.

Although—what if they could recapture the life they’d shared the first years of their marriage? He’d come home after a hard day, and she’d greet him with a smile, admiration shining from her eyes. They’d share the frustrations and successes of the day with each other, listening to and caring for one another. Sometimes they’d ride around the estate together. Other times they’d dance, just the two of them. He could feel the softness of her hands in his, inhale her fragrance as she leaned into his embrace.

Paul shook himself from his daydream. He had no business entertaining such thoughts. Nothing good would come of it. He’d not put the freedom seekers at risk over his own pleasure.

He sought his foreman, Joe, among the carding machines. Carding was the most dangerous job in the mill, and Joe oversaw the men running the machines carefully. The huge, rotating cylinders, covered with thousands of sharp wire teeth, could maim or kill a careless worker. Fortunately, no such accidents had occurred at Paul’s mill, a fact he attributed to his overseer’s constant attention. “Where’s Joe?” he shouted over the noise of the machinery to one of the carders.

The man pointed upward.

Paul ascended the steps to the second floor, where women spun the carded, clean cotton into threads that were wound onto large wooden bobbins. He smiled at the children playing marbles in a corner near a window. Their job was to remove the full bobbins and replace them with empty ones, but the task left free time for play. He was glad for that. A part of him was sorry that children as young as ten had to work, but he was thankful to provide jobs that didn’t entirely rob them of their youth. He spoke with one of the boys, raising his voice

to be heard over the machinery. “Have you seen Mr. Joe?”

The boy nodded. “Trouble with a warper.” The youngster had several full bobbins he was carrying to the third floor.

“I’ll take these for you.” Paul continued up the stairs, where the warpers and weavers worked. The room was quieter than the lower floors, with a rhythmic pulse as weavers worked the cotton warp and weft threads into fabric, yet even here there was a constant din. He handed the spools to a woman working a warper. “Have you seen Joe?”

“I believe he went to your office, Mr. Trebor.”

It wasn’t as if his office was off limits to his foreman, but it wasn’t common for him to come up to the third floor, even to visit his wife and daughter, who worked on the looms. “Joe,” Paul called as he entered the room.

“Yes, boss.” His overseer stood in front of the closet leading to the secret room, where the family was hidden.

The men’s eyes locked. Neither smiled. Paul spoke first, his face nonexpressive. “Have you checked the freight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is it ready to go?”

“Unfortunately, it can’t leave until the next stockholders’ meeting.” Joe walked to the door. “I’d better get back downstairs.”

Paul nodded as he processed the code. The freight—the freedom seekers hiding in the secret room—couldn’t leave until the stockholders—those financing the escape—could get funds to purchase berth on a ship heading through the canal to Canada.

Paul contributed to the stockholders’ fund, but he wasn’t in charge of managing it. The current freedom seekers were safe in the cotton mill, but he was expecting another delivery in two days—one large and one small *bale*. Hiding five people in one location was risky. Too risky.

Suddenly, above the din, a voice shouted, “Fire!”

Chapter 4

Emma parked the buggy in front of the First Presbyterian Church and glanced at Beulah. "I'm not sure where the women's auxiliary meets. Reverend Bachus will know."
"They meet at the Potters' home." Beulah met Emma's gaze. "At ten."

Emma looked at the dainty clock circled in diamonds and rubies that she wore as a pendant. It read ten fifteen. "We're late." She turned the buggy around and urged Apollo to a trot. It took only a few minutes to travel down the street and around a corner to get to the Potters' modest abode. Mr. Potter was a barber, with a shop on the canal. His means were simple, but the home was well cared for.

Emma paused at the front door. She dreaded being late. Perhaps it would be wise to wait until next week, when she could plan her arrival to coincide with others and not draw attention by her tardiness.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Beulah huffed under the weight of the fabric-filled hamper.

"Yes." Emma nodded. "But we're here now. We'll go inside." She knocked, a bit louder than she intended.

Mrs. Potter answered. Her eyes widened momentarily; then a smile replaced the surprise. "Mrs. Trebor, how lovely to see you. Oh, and Beulah too. Please come in."

Their hostess led the way to the parlor. As they entered the room, the hum of conversation stopped, and all eyes watched Emma. Warmth spread from her neck to her cheeks, but she drew in a deep breath and straightened her back. "Good morning, ladies. I apologize for my tardiness."

"Nonsense. We are just getting started." Mrs. Potter gestured to an empty settee. "There's room right there. Please have a seat."

Beulah placed the hamper between them as she and Emma sat. Emma forced cheerfulness into her voice. "I've brought fabric from Catherine's trousseau, but of course I'm happy to work on whatever needs doing." Why were they still staring at her? Emma shot a smile around the room. "I wasn't sure what was needed more, children's clothing or women's."

She glanced at Mrs. Potter, hoping for a friendlier countenance. She was not disappointed. "It's all in demand, my dear, even men's clothing for that matter."

Emma opened the hamper and pulled out a length of the chintz material.

"We're sewing for the poor, my dear." Mrs. Linde, on her left, scowled. "Why would you bring *that*?"

Beulah lifted her chin. "Because poor people like pretty things too."

Emma looked about the room. Ten women filled the chairs, not counting her and Beulah, and at the moment not a one was speaking. Remarkable.

Disapproving silence settled over the room.

Mrs. Potter picked up a half-finished child's dress made of a drab olive-green cotton. "Catherine's wedding was beautiful, was it not, Mrs. Linde?"

"Yes. It was beautiful." The sour woman focused on her sewing as if it required every ounce of her concentration.

Mrs. Potter glanced at Emma. "Did you make her gown?"

"My mother and I did. It was my wedding dress, and now I suppose it belongs to my four daughters."

Silence again. Small talk was not Emma's forte. Mrs. Potter was trying to bring normalcy into the room, but now even she stitched away without speech.

None of the women were strangers. Every Sunday morning they smiled and nodded at her coming and going from church, but she knew so little about them. Too little to know what to say to take the attention off herself and onto one of them.

Did the warmth Emma felt on her cheeks show? This was a mistake. Why did she think she could show up and make friends? The women had gone from staring at her to not even looking at her. That she was not welcome was as obvious as a blackberry stain on a white apron. She rose. "I'm sorry. I just realized I left my favorite thimble at home. Perhaps Beulah and I will return next week." She faced her servant. "I'm sorry, Beulah."

Mrs. Linde's gaze never left her work. "Let her stay. We'll see she gets home all right."

When the door closed behind her, Emma paused on the porch. Why had she ever thought she could waltz back into the sewing circle after all these years, as if she'd never left? Was she still being ostracized for her long-past sin, or had she done something else to offend them? Well, she didn't need them. She could sew for the poor at home.

Except, how would she bear one lonely day after another? Keeping her hands busy was only part of the solution. Her heart needed an outlet as well.

Mrs. Linde's voice came through the closed door. "I don't care, Lillian Potter. You shouldn't have let her in. It's too risky. That's all I'm saying. It's too risky."

Emma left the porch pondering why it was *risky* for her to rejoin the sewing circle. Nothing about her person could possibly put anyone in peril. She understood they might feel justified punishing her for her past, but how did that fit with risky? Something secretive was going on that everyone in that room knew about.

Including Beulah.



"Fire! Fire!" The words echoed through the mill. Paul flung open the secret door. Wide-eyed stares met him.

"You are safe—at least for the moment. I must go downstairs to assess the situation."

Tabitha nodded. "What do we do?"

"Right now, nothing. If you smell smoke before I get back, then climb out the window near my desk. There is a ladder attached to the outside wall and you can crawl down to safety."

Tabitha's eyes revealed her fear, but she nodded. "I understand, sir. We stay here, as long as we can, but if we must, we crawl out the window."

Paul shut the door behind him and raced from his office to the second floor. Smoke had filtered in, but not alarmingly so. He continued to the first floor, where smoke billowed about, but the water brigade had already quenched the blaze. He found Joe shouting at a

stranger. Male workers gathered around. The females huddled together near the stream, keeping their children with them. Some still had buckets in their hands.

“Move aside.” Paul pushed his way through a dozen men. “What’s going on?”

Joe poked the chest of a burly man. “This yahoo tried to burn down the mill!”

“Touch me one more time and you’ll be floating down that there creek.” The man stepped forward, chest jutting out.

Paul wedged himself between Joe and the stranger. “You start that fire?”

“What if I did?”

“Then you’ve got some explaining to do.” Paul spoke conversationally, but he smoldered inside. “To the sheriff.” He looked over his shoulder at Joe. “Fire out?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Damage?”

“Just to the bale shed.”

“So not a problem with the carder?”

“No, boss, it’s like I said. This lunkhead started the fire. Walked in the bale shed smoking a cigar.”

The crowd of men murmured. They glared at the stranger, hands fisted.

Smoke swirled from the small structure. The wind gathered it and tossed it skyward, along with gray ashes. Remnants clung to the ground.

The fire damage to the shed might be minimal, but no one would buy smoke-infused cotton.

A faint sound stilled Paul’s heart—the scrape of a window opening. Perhaps no one else heard it over the sound of voices. He forced himself not to look toward his office window—but Joe looked up. The stranger’s gaze followed Joe’s.

Paul cleared his throat. “What’s your business here?”

Without taking his eyes off the window, the stranger put a cigar in his mouth and took out a match, as if to light it.

Paul slapped the match from the man’s hand. “Get off my property and don’t come back. I see any sign of you, and you’ll be talking to the sheriff.” He’d like to march the stranger to the sheriff’s door right now, but that would mean a fight. He wasn’t afraid and his workers would help, but he just wanted the man gone, for the sake of the freedom seekers.

The stocky stranger curled his lip. “I ain’t afraid of no sheriff, but I’m done here anyway.” He mouthed his unlit cigar, sauntered to a nearby apple tree, and mounted a dapple gray mare.

“Everybody, back to work,” Paul called out. “Show’s over.”

A muscle in Joe’s jaw twitched. “That’s it? You gonna let that fire-starter walk away?”

“I just want him out of here.” Paul lowered his voice. “Protect the packages.” He glanced up at the window. What had the stranger seen?

Chapter 5

As Emma drove the buggy toward the cotton mill, she chastised herself for leaving the sewing circle so quickly. She was made of stronger stuff than that. And Mrs. Linde's attitude might change once Emma asked for forgiveness.

She had never publicly confessed her wrongdoing. In the beginning, her shame held her back. She didn't deserve the community's clemency, so she didn't seek it. They didn't know the months she spent in anguish, until God's persistent love won and she accepted His mercy. By then the pattern of her avoiding social contact was set, and she made no attempt to correct it. She hadn't even prayed about it—which puzzled her now. Why hadn't she tried to reconnect with the community? Her daughters provided an outlet for her affections, but was that the only reason? Had her pride played a role?

She'd go back next week, arrive on time, and be better prepared—perhaps bring a small gift for Mrs. Potter. Maybe a beaded reticule. She'd begin making it that evening. Peace settled in her soul. God would strengthen her for the tasks ahead, if she relinquished her vanity and let Him guide her.

As she neared the mill, a stranger on a dapple gray loped toward her. He reined his horse to the edge of the narrow road, stopped, and removed the cigar from his lips. "Good day, ma'am."

Nodding politely, she smiled and urged her horse on. At least strangers treated her civilly!

Near the mill, the air smelled of charred cotton. Its pungency stung her eyes. Had there been a fire? Was everyone all right? She urged Apollo into a trot. The buggy bounced along the rutted road.

Joe was outside as she stopped near the apple tree. "Good day, Mrs. Trebor." He helped her down from the buggy.

A mountain of charred cotton lay in the yard, along with countless bits of blackened fluff.

"What happened, Joe? Is anyone hurt?"

"No one was injured, but there's a financial loss." He gestured to the bales.

"That's unfortunate, but it's a blessing everyone is safe."

"Yes, ma'am."

Emma retrieved a covered basket from the floor of the buggy. "I've brought a picnic for Mr. Trebor. Do you know where I might find him?"

"He was here a minute ago. I'll send one of the men to get him."

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. I'll find him." Emma headed for the door.

"Really, ma'am, it's no trouble. Still a bit smoky inside. The air is better out here."

"The workers are back inside?"

“Yes, ma’am, but—”

“Thank you, Joe. I’ll be fine.” Emma smiled at the foreman then opened the narrow door. He was right—the odor was much stronger inside. Breezes wafted through the open windows along the length of the first floor, helping to rid the large rectangular room of the acrid smoke. Emma’s eyes watered.

As she ascended to the second floor, the smoke was less annoying, and on the third floor, it was barely noticeable. Paul’s office door stood ajar. She tapped on the frame then listened for him to bid her enter. After a moment, she knocked again, louder, then stepped inside the office. “Paul?”

Was that a woman’s voice? She followed the sound. In a closet?

Paul’s voice sounded from the other side of the wall. “Don’t worry. Our secret is safe.”

Who was Paul speaking with? And where? And what secret?

The woman’s voice sounded again with words too quiet to decipher.

There must be a room on the other side of the wall, but how did one enter it? She saw no door. She left the closet and Paul’s office and examined the wall from the outer angle, but found no entrance into another room.

Puzzled, she reentered the office just as Paul exited the closet.

There must be a door she hadn’t seen before. “To whom were you speaking?”



“Emma! What are you doing here?” Paul composed himself as quickly as he could. He planted on a smile. “I mean, you surprised me.”

“I heard a woman’s voice. Who were you with?” Emma’s gaze pierced him. She stepped toward him as if to look into the closet.

What could he say? He knew the day might come when he’d be forced to lie to protect the fugitives, but now that it was here, words failed him. “I see you brought a basket. Lunch?”

“Yes, I thought we might have a picnic under the apple tree.” Emma’s face was flushed. Her hands trembled. “You were speaking with someone.”

He faked a cough to avoid answering. “Excuse me, dear. The effects of the smoke, I imagine. Shall we go outside?” He coughed again as he took the basket from her and tucked her arm under his. A glance at her face smote his heart. Pain cloaked her tear-filled eyes, her drawn cheeks. He swallowed against the lump in his throat as he escorted her from his office along the loom-filled room. What would he do if she asked him about the voices again? He trusted she wouldn’t as long as there were workers around to overhear.

But she did.

“Paul, I heard your voice. And a woman answered.”

“You must be mistaken, dear. Perhaps you heard workers through my open window.” He closed his eyes a moment. *Forgive me, Father.* “Anyway, as you can see, the morning hasn’t gone well with the fire and all, and I’ve a lot to do. It was kind of you to come, but in the future, perhaps you can send word of your intentions, and I’ll let you know if it’s a convenient time.”

Cringing at his own words, he walked her outside then toward the buggy. He withdrew his arm from hers and set the basket on the floorboard. He hated being so cold. Despised the fact that he was causing her pain. He didn’t trust her, couldn’t let her discover his secret,

but he didn't want to hurt her. Not like this.

This wasn't a problem when the children were home. They should have had more.

It took everything he had, but he steeled himself, cementing the barrier between himself and his wife. "And, dear, don't wait supper for me. I'll be delayed tonight."



Quivering sobs threatened to burst from Emma's bosom. She had heard a woman's voice, and Paul had dismissed her. Fear and anger clashed over the renewed suspicion of a mistress. And then sorrow and shame and guilt attacked. It was too much. All too much. Her anguish threatened to scream its pain, but she clamped her lips together and climbed into the buggy. She swallowed hard, trying to find the strength to utter a calm goodbye, but the task was too difficult. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't look at him. Every muscle tensed. Go! Run! Flee!

She slapped the reins against Apollo's back. The buggy jerked and they were off. Tears blinded her. She doubled over, covered her face with her hands, bit her lip to keep from crying aloud. The buggy bumped and jolted without direction, but Emma didn't care. Nothing existed but this all-consuming pain. She sat upright, her fists clenched in anger, then doubled over again as sorrow battled her wrath and left her limp.

When her emotions subsided, she found herself near a creek on the outskirts of town. Apollo had pulled the buggy off the road and nibbled grass poking through the fallen magenta leaves of a maple tree. How long had they been there? She got out of the buggy and washed her face in the creek. Emotionally exhausted, she leaned against a hollow cottonwood stump and watched red and amber leaves float lazily by. One would think she had cried herself out, but the tears loitered near the surface, ready to overflow again had she the energy to let them.

As the afternoon turned chilly, Emma rose and returned to her buggy, but getting it back on the road proved difficult. Apollo couldn't get the buggy over the muddy ridge onto the road. Even getting out to lighten the load didn't help. Emma stood near her horse's head, urging him to try harder, but it was no use. The wheels spun in the slippery grass, and he could not gain traction.

As Emma started to unharness Apollo from the buggy, hoofbeats sounded.

The cigar-smoking stranger riding the dapple gray she'd met earlier pulled up. "Are you in a bit of trouble?"

"Yes." Emma sighed. "It seems getting off the road is much easier than getting back on."

"May I help?"

"Would you? I'd be most grateful."

The man dismounted and scrounged under the nearby trees. In less than ten minutes he brought up small branches and twigs and scattered them on the slippery grass under the wheels. "Try now."

Emma stood at Apollo's head and gently tapped his hooves with her riding stick. "Walk."

The horse strained. The buggy's wheels gripped the ground. In minutes it stood solidly on the road.

"Thank you ever so much, Mr.—"

"Steeple. Uriah Steeple at your service." He made a slight bow. "And you are?"

Emma hesitated. This was not the way introductions were done, but considering the