

Three



The Lord calls us to help those in need. I never feel as if I'm doing enough. And then sometimes when I do help, I end up in a mess of my own making, and it's not clear how to get out of it.

—From the journal of Alex Sinclair

Sarah ignored the sting from Mr. Smith's words. He was most likely as tired, hungry, and cold as she was. Her clothes hadn't fully dried, and the combination of the crisp morning air and the damp cotton sent shivers through her. She wished for a campfire and hot coffee. Did he carry coffee? She hoped so. One cup in the morning helped her focus and gave her energy to face the day.

Energy she planned to use to show Mr. Smith how helpful she could be.

The wagon hit a rut, and they swayed in unison. The action caused her stomach to flip in a not-so-pleasant way, and she pressed her lips together. Concentrating on anything other than the motion, she glanced at him.

His chiseled jaw was set as he stared straight ahead, focused on the road before them.

She wanted desperately to ask how much longer till they stopped, but he radiated a don't-talk-with-me look. Most likely due to her use of *we*.

He glanced at her. "Whit?"

"What?" she asked.

"Yae, whit?" He nodded his head.

Sarah enjoyed the lilt of his accent, but it was difficult to understand some of his words. "I don't understand. What does whit mean?"

He stared at her a minute and a grin appeared, which then turned into a large boisterous laugh. He wiped his hand down his face.

She wasn't sure what she'd said that was so funny. Nor could she concentrate on the conversation well at the moment. She glanced at the road, trying to quell the nausea building.

"Whit means exactly what ye said. What. It's how my people say what." He pronounced the word slowly, even though his *what* still sounded like *whit*.

"Oh. Now I understand." She swung her head his way and nodded, appreciating the play on words and the thawing between them, then threw one hand over her mouth and the other over her stomach.

His eyes widened as he pulled on the reins.

She glanced everywhere in her bid to find a place to run. The motion churned her stomach further. She threw off the slicker, clung to the side of the wagon. "I have to stop. Now." Before the words were out, she jumped from the moving wagon.

"Miss Baker! Whoa."

She landed on her side. The impact halted all thought, including the reason she had leapt from the wagon. Then it

appeared again. She pursed her lips together as she pushed herself to her feet. Her gaze landed on a large bush, and she ran for it. Pain radiated down her leg as she hobbled around it. But the urgency of her quest took over again and all thoughts of Mr. Smith, the wagon ride, and leaving Washton flew out of her mind as she bent over. Memories of how her mother would rub her back and hold her hair away from her face flooded her mind. Tears streamed down her face.

A few minutes later, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her body shook. She had nothing left in her system, but her stomach convulsed as it eliminated the rest of the motion sickness. She hated this part. How long it took for her to recover.

“Miss Baker? Are ye all right?” Footsteps approached the bush where she hid.

Her cheeks burned on top of her head spinning. If she didn’t answer, he might see her. Her heart pounded in her ears as she pushed sound out of her mouth. “Y-yes.” She swallowed multiple times, her throat sore. “Give me a second.” She closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, held it, then blew it out. The dizziness subsided. She pushed herself to her knees and peeked over the bush. Her gaze collided with his across the top of the foliage.

His eyebrows were raised, but he didn’t say a word.

She wanted to climb into the bush and stay there. “I-I—”

He raised his right hand. “No need to explain. You should’ve spoke sooner.”

She shook her head, then stopped. Her body wasn’t ready for much movement yet.

Mr. Smith stood straight and searched the area “I think you’ve chosen a good enough place for us to stop.” He glanced at her over his shoulder. “Can you eat or do you need time?”

Food would help. Not knowing if she should speak or nod, she was able to produce one nod.

He clapped his hands together. "Great. I'll pull out some grub." He headed toward the wagon which was quite further down the road.

She scanned the distance from where she jumped and the wagon. As she stood, her knees wobbled like a newborn calf's. Her hip and leg hurt. She'd have a few bruises from her landing. But what else could she have done?

Once steady, she slowly limped her way to the campfire he set up.

He frowned at her leg.

She tried to hide her awkward gait but had to bite her lip to prevent expressing how much it hurt. Her hip bothered her more than she'd thought. Her vision blurred and she blinked. How would she show him her usefulness if she couldn't move well?

He patted a wooden crate. "Sit." Then he went to the wagon and tugged on a canvas sack.

She gingerly lowered her body onto the box, willing the throbbing to subside. Five minutes later, the pain subsided enough for her to glance around. Trees, dried grass, and wildflowers surrounded them. Multiple bushes were gathered in bunches on each side.

He knelt by the fireplace and opened the bag.

"Are we near the village you mentioned?" Not knowing the area was a little disconcerting.

"Aye. There's a settlement here called Silveyville I come to once a year. Now's as good a time as any to visit."

"You don't have a set itinerary you follow?"

He shook his head. "It's more a loose map. Terrain and weather play a part. Plus adding a traveling companion." He

winked. “We passed Davisville, but I didn’t stop there.” He shrugged. “I come and go whenever I choose.”

The idea of choosing her schedule, to come and go as she pleased, was the opposite of everything Sarah knew. She sighed. “Being able to come and go as you please sounds lovely.”

He blinked. “Uh ... right.” He produced a coffee pot and frying pan from the sack. Picking up the pot, he strode in the opposite direction of the bushes she had claimed. He went far before he bent down and scooped up something.

Now that her senses were righted, she could hear the faint trickle of water nearby. A creek. Of course they would need water.

Longing for something to do while staying put, she picked up a stick and poked the fire. She felt a little lost without a routine. And a smidgen guilty. The rest of Mr. Smith’s words had finally landed in her brain and her heart stopped. She had caused him to miss one of his stops. Plus he was setting up camp in this place because of her. She was sure she wasn’t helpful at all in his eyes.

Doubts stacked on top of one another, adding to the full bushel of emotions swirling in her heart as her mind replayed the events of last night. Her chest tightened. Luke and the girls appeared in her mind, and she wondered how they fared this morning. Hopefully better than she was.

She rubbed her nose. Thrust the stick farther into the fire.

Mr. Smith’s feet appeared in her peripheral vision. “I think the fire has been prodded enough. Ye can brew coffee, and I’ll set up camp.” He handed her the filled pot.

Sarah couldn’t raise her gaze to meet his eyes. She didn’t have anything to hide, yet she wanted to crawl into the bush she’d found earlier. In the daylight everything was exposed.

More pronounced. The sun shone on things that were easy to hide in the dark.

How could she have been so bold to run away? To ask this stranger to take her with him. And walk away from Luke and neglect to say goodbye to the girls. Besides all those considerations, she hadn't thought through her limitations with travel. Her face, neck, and ears burned. Especially after being so light-headed earlier. She set the crock over the fire, trusting the coffee would help her mood.

Mr. Smith carried a second wooden crate from the wagon. He set it down near the fire and headed back to the wagon.

She leaned over and peeked inside the crate. It was full of foodstuffs. No longer hungry, she could at least prepare a feast for him. She stood and a pain shot through her leg. She sat and pressed all over, from her knee to hip to figure out where the pain came from.

He returned with another crate. Glanced at where her hands rubbed her leg. "Is it paining you?"

A tear dripped down her cheek and she swiped it away. Nothing was going the way it was supposed to.

He stepped closer and crouched down. "Maybe we need to find you a place to stay so you can rest. The ground is no place to be when you ache, lass. There's no way to not walk to town without my help, but maybe we can swing it. I'm assuming you have enough coin to pay for room and board?"

Sarah froze. "Um. Actually ... um ... I ..."

He narrowed his eyes. "Don't tell me you don't have any funds?"

She studied the ground, not liking her dependence on him, yet she did need his help. Besides, he'd already seen her at her worst, so she had nothing more to hide. She met his gaze. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't get any money before I left. I wouldn't steal something that wasn't mine."

He stood and placed his hands on his hips. “And pray tell, how did you expect to find a place to stay?”

From this angle, she felt small, indeed. She bit her lip. What else could she say? She’d been a guest in the Taylor home even though she had lived there for five years. They had provided for her, yet she didn’t have anything of her own. The ranch needed every coin.

“Hadn’t thought that far ahead, aye?” He paced, dust clouds forming around his boots.

She nodded mutely.

“I think I need some vittles in me stomach before we discuss this topic further. He knelt and cracked an egg into a small bowl. Then a second, and a third. He lifted his head. “How many eggs do ye normally eat at breakfast?”

“I don’t need to eat. I’m not too hungry after ...” She waved her hand in the direction of the bush.

“I disagree. In fact, you need to eat because of ...” He pointed in the same direction.

Sarah raised her eyes to the sky.

“The Good Lord isn’t going to tell you how many eggs you want.” He cracked another egg. “I’ll make you one. You need something, even if it’s a puny amount.” He vigorously stirred the eggs and poured them into the pan. Clearly, he’d been cooking breakfast in the open like this for years, which meant her cooking skills were not needed.

Would there be anything she could do to balance out the help and kindness he’d shown her? There had to be something. She just needed more time to figure out what it could be.

* * *

ALEX FOCUSED on stirring the eggs in the pan as he mulled over his options. With her injured leg, he wasn’t comfortable

dropping her off somewhere. She'd be a burden more than a help to anyone. His mission had been about helping people, not causing them more work.

Still, she couldn't stay with him. It was unacceptable. And even though she hadn't been coy or flirtatious, and he had no designs on her, their traveling together would be viewed as such. He couldn't protect her from the gossip.

What was he to do?

If he could stow her away inside the wagon until she was ready to go out on her own, he would. But he knew from being with her the past twelve hours she would have none of that. He was sure of it. Her affliction didn't help either.

Why couldn't he be heartless instead of a God-fearing man? Then he would've refused her last night or dumped her off at the first set of houses they'd passed.

But he wasn't made that way.

He had sisters. And a mother. He protected those who needed protecting. He observed Miss Baker from the corner of his eye. She needed looking after.

Resigned to his new fate, he shifted his attention to putting food in his belly and pulled the pan off the flames. Turning the skillet sideways he scooped a small amount into his tin. Placing a fork in the eggs, he handed the tin to his guest. "Here, lass. Eat something."

She hesitated. "Where's your plate?"

He lifted the pan. He'd eat right out of it.

She shook her head. "No. This isn't right. I shouldn't be making things more uncomfortable for you."

It was too late for that, but he kept the expression on his face the same. "It's no bother. I dae it all the time to limit the amount of dishes."

She tilted her head as if trying to figure out if he was lying.

“Here.” He reached farther with the tin this time. “I’d eat before the food cools.”

She stared at his offering, then reached for the tin and their hands brushed. It wasn’t a caress or anything, but her soft skin was a simple reminder he had a female companion with him.

For some reason, he didn’t dislike it. Which was a conundrum. He wasn’t used to having another person around, yet he liked the idea of not eating a meal by himself.

He closed his eyes. *Dear Lord. Thank you for this morning. For this food, health, and your provision. Be with me in all things. Amen.*

When he opened his eyes, Alex caught Miss Baker’s gaze.

She pursed her lips, nodded, then tentatively placed a small bite in her mouth. Closed her eyes. Then quickly forked some more. She *was* hungry.

Gratification filled him. Although, it helped that her lack of practiced poise made her moods easier to figure out. He bent over the pan and ate his own food, not leaving anything in the cookery. He placed the pan on the ground and reached for the coffeepot. The hot, dark-brown liquid steamed as he filled the two tin cups he culled from his inventory. After setting down the pot, he handed her one.

Miss Baker set down the tin and took the coffee. She clasped both hands around the cup and held it close to her nose. As she breathed in the aroma, her eyes drifted shut.

Alex’s heart thudded and he glanced away. Scanned the area. Took a sip from his cup. Formulated a plan for the day. They were hidden a bit here, which was good, but he’d need to drive the wagon out a ways for people to see it.

“Thank you,” she said.

He swiveled his head toward her. “Whit for?”

A small smile lit her face as she lifted the cup. “This. You were right. I needed something in my stomach.”

His heart warmed at her words of praise. It was nice to have a little appreciation for his efforts. At least she wasn't expecting him to wait on her hand and foot. And he agreed. There was nothing like hot coffee to warm the insides on a cold brisk morning. The jolt of caffeine helped too.

Steam tickled his nose as he raised his tin to his mouth and took another gulp of the strong brew. Aye, exactly what was needed, especially after a sleepless night. Where he had to take things slower than usual. Lower visibility made it difficult to see fresh divots in the road. That's where danger lurked.

He looked to the sky. A new day was dawning, and it was time to get to work. No sense dwelling on things he couldn't change. Instead, they needed to piece together some sort of plan they both could accept.

"How's the leg, lass?" He studied her.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. It's tender but not broken. I'm sure it's fine."

He nodded. "I need to set up shop, but I'll drive the wagon a ways from camp so it can be seen clearer. You can stay here—"

"I'm not going to be left behind to sit all day long. Let me help. I'm quite good with numbers."

"Nae." He shook his head. "I have an agreement with several communities which sell me their wares at a discount. I could not slight them and let it be known that you ... that is ..."

She tilted her head. "That a woman would be doing the selling?"

Relief filled him that she'd said the words. He really didn't have an issue with it, but he knew some of the shopkeepers were extremely traditional. If they refused to sell to him, he wouldn't have enough items to make a profit. "Quite frankly, aye."

She frowned. "I'm not sure I understand. What's the problem?"

"Believe me when I say that a young lady hawking wares from one city to the next would be such a novelty, the word would spread quickly."

Miss Baker made a face that was quite comical. "I really don't want to bring attention to myself."

That made two of them.

"But I think I could be helpful in some capacity. What if you get too busy at once? I could make things go faster, or hand you items from inside the wagon. Or I could stand outside and encourage people to come check out your wares. Don't you think we could find something for me to do?" Her hopeful, bright-eyed gaze caused a lump to form in his chest.

How was he to protect her reputation when she had no idea the decisions she made could cause herself harm? How could he say nae to her eagerness? He knew one thing. If she stayed in camp on her own, she'd likely find trouble. But if she was with him, at least he could keep an eye on her.

"All right. You can come with. But you stay in the wagon the entire time. Understood?"

A grin spread across her face. "Understood. I promise I won't be a bother."

Alex hoped she could keep that promise.