

A man in a brown cowboy hat and a blue denim vest over a striped shirt is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The background is a scenic landscape with a river, trees, and a sunset sky. In the distance, three people on horseback are visible on a grassy bank. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

IN HONOR'S DEFENSE

KAREN
WITEMEYER

HANGER'S HORSEMEN • 3



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Witemeyer, Karen, author.

Title: In honor's defense / Karen Witemeyer.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: Hanger's horseman ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2022002391 | ISBN 9780764232091 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764240058 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493437207 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.I864 I52 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220120
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022002391>

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

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author is represented by the Books and Such Literary Agency

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my Posse.
I couldn't ask for better brainstormers,
more dedicated readers,
or dearer friends.
Thank you for blessing my
writing journey and my life.

But the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord:
he is their strength in the time of trouble. And
the Lord shall help them, and deliver them: he
shall deliver them from the wicked, and save
them, because they trust in him.

—Psalm 37:39–40

PROLOGUE

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
1895

Invisible people rarely received correspondence. A fact Damaris Baxter had accepted long ago. So when the housekeeper entered the parlor and held out an envelope with *her* name occupying the address line instead of her aunt's, it took a moment to process the unprecedented event.

As the youngest of eight children, with no particular radiance of either face or manner to draw attention, Damaris had grown accustomed to being overlooked. In fact, she held the Baxter family record for being left behind on outings most frequently with an impressive total of five. Her brother Joseph had managed the feat twice, being the one most likely to wander off after being counted, but he'd never truly been forgotten, just temporarily misplaced. Their parents had forgotten about Damaris for an entire afternoon

on one occasion, not missing her until she failed to appear when called for supper.

Mama had scolded her for being too quiet for her own good, accusing her of hiding away to read books instead of participating in family activities. She'd demanded Damaris pay closer attention in the future so as not to be left behind again. Mama had wept through the entire exchange, of course, then nearly hugged the life out of Damaris at the conclusion of her lecture, assuring Damaris that she was loved if not memorable.

Being invisible had its uses, however. Forgettable girls rarely got called on to recite lessons in front of the class. Or asked to dance when one had a perfectly good book to read. Yet when one reached marriageable age, invisibility became a significant disadvantage. There was always someone prettier, wittier, or more charming to draw the attention of available suitors. Which was how Damaris ended up as a companion to her great-aunt Bertha at the age of twenty-three. Not only was Damaris on the shelf, she was in the back corner behind the knickknacks, collecting dust. At least with Aunt Bertha, she'd found a way to be useful.

Damaris pulled her scattered thoughts together, set aside her needlework, and reached for the letter. "Thank you, Anna." She tried not to sound as astonished as she felt, but her voice carried a touch of breathlessness despite her best efforts.

Anna noticed, of course, and smiled. "It's from Texas, miss."

"Texas?" From Douglas? But the handwriting on the envelope wasn't his. Not that she was an expert on her brother's

penmanship. He was fifteen years older and had been absent for more of her life than he'd been present. He'd moved to Texas right after his son was born and had only returned to Missouri once, the Christmas after his wife died.

Seven-year-old Nathaniel had seemed so lost during that visit, so withdrawn. Damaris's heart had ached for the grieving little boy. At sixteen, she knew enough to realize there were no words to take away his pain, so she didn't offer any. She simply made sure he was never alone. She sat on the floor next to him while he played. Brought him cookies from the kitchen. Offered to read him stories. When he finally grew comfortable enough with her to crawl into her lap and help her turn the pages, she'd fallen completely in love. She wrote him letters and sent him small gifts for his birthday and Christmas each year, never really minding that he didn't write her back. Young boys couldn't be expected to correspond with eccentric aunts they probably didn't even remember meeting. She'd been in his life for ten days. A mere drop in the ocean of his young existence. Douglas wrote to their mother a few times a year, so Damaris managed to keep up with Nathaniel through secondhand sources.

"I hope it's not bad news," Anna said when Damaris made no move to open the letter.

Damaris's heart pounded. What else could it be when it came from a stranger? Unless . . . could it be from Nathaniel? He'd be, what, fourteen by now? Perhaps it was *his* handwriting.

Please, Lord. Let it be from Nathaniel, not some stranger with ill tidings.

Damaris placed the envelope in her lap with all the care of a seamstress laying out a piece of expensive Venetian lace. She smoothed her hand over the front before stealing herself to flip it over and discover what lay inside. Her hand trembled slightly as she removed and unfolded the stationery.

Miss Damaris Baxter,

I write with a heavy heart to inform you of your brother's untimely death. Douglas Baxter was found drowned in Lake Madison on March 7, 1895.

A small cry escaped Damaris. Her brother drowned? It couldn't be. Douglas had been athletic and strong, good at nearly every sport, including swimming. How vividly she recalled the summer after she turned five, when he'd taken it upon himself to teach all of the youngest Baxter siblings to swim. She'd been too young to do much more than cry and cling to him, but by the end of the summer, he'd had them all paddling across the swimming hole unaided—her included. How could he have drowned?

"Are you all right, miss?" Anna turned from where she'd been adjusting the blanket on Aunt Bertha's lap, the older woman snoring softly in her rocker by the window.

"It's my brother Douglas. He's . . . They found him . . ." She couldn't say it. Couldn't make it real.

Anna's eyes softened in sympathy. "I'm so sorry. Should I wake the missus?"

Damaris shook her head. "No. Not yet." She needed time to compose herself, to get a grip on her emotions before she

broke the news to her aunt. And what about her mother? Had *she* been informed? Surely a letter of this sort would be sent to the deceased's parents. So why had this one come to her?

Blinking back the mist from her eyes, Damaris refocused on the letter.

The cause of death was determined to be accidental. A true tragedy, ending the life of a man in his prime. You have my most sincere condolences.

Damaris dropped her gaze to the signature—Ronald Mullins, Esquire. A lawyer? She would have expected notification to come from a minister or friend. She'd never heard the name Ronald Mullins, nor did she recall any mention of him in the letters Douglas had written to Mother.

Mr. Douglas Baxter named you, Miss Damaris Baxter, guardian of his son, Nathaniel. You have also been named trustee of the boy's estate, including the bank funds and property left behind by Mr. Baxter. I will provide you with a copy of all relevant documents when you come to claim the child.

I place myself at your disposal, Miss Baxter. I stand ready to assist you in any way that might prove helpful during your time of mourning.

*Sincerely,
Ronald P. Mullins,
Esquire*

Douglas had chosen *her*? Damaris could barely find the strength to blink through the paralysis of shock. He'd entrusted Nathaniel's care to the baby sister he barely knew. Why not their parents or Bartholomew? Bart was only a year younger than Douglas and had children close in age to Nathaniel. He seemed the logical choice. Yet Douglas had chosen her. Perhaps because she had no attachments to hinder or distract her. Of all their siblings, she was the only one with no family to keep her rooted in St. Louis. She was free to leave at any time, free to devote herself fully to Nathaniel's care.

Or maybe . . . Damaris caught her breath. Maybe the choice had belonged to Nathaniel. The idea kicked her heart into a rapid rhythm. What if Nathaniel had remembered his aunt Maris and requested that she be named his guardian?

To be chosen for herself—it was the secret desire of her heart. To be important to someone. More than a glorified servant who fetched and carried and entertained at her aunt's whim. To be wanted truly for herself. Seen instead of invisible. Valued instead of tolerated.

"I must pack." Damaris jumped up from the sofa with such speed that her forgotten basket of needlework threads toppled to the floor along with her embroidery hoop.

A snuffling sound echoed from the window as Aunt Bertha stirred. "Damaris? Why are you fluttering about, girl? You know I dislike being disturbed during my afternoon respites. Clumsy child," she chided as her gaze landed on the upturned basket and contents spilled across the carpet. "Clean up your mess, then bring me one of my tonics. I can't have my nerves upset."

Anna hurried over to help right the sewing basket. Damaris smiled her thanks but didn't stay to help. She had trunks to fill, railroad schedules to check, and a nephew who needed her.

“Sorry, Aunt Bertha. I don't have time to fetch your tonic. I'm moving to Texas.”

— CHAPTER —

ONE

MADISONVILLE, TEXAS
SIX WEEKS LATER

Nathaniel? Is that you?” Damaris looked up from the misshapen loaf of bread she’d just turned out from the pan.

Running footsteps thundered down the hall, but no voice rang in answer to her question. Not that she expected a response. Her nephew preferred pretending she didn’t exist to engaging in any form of verbal communication. Sullen looks, exaggerated eye rolls, and stomping frustration were more his style. After she’d arrived in Texas, it had taken less than a day for her beautiful delusions of mothering a sweet, heartbroken boy out of his grief to wither and die in the face of reality.

At fourteen, Nathaniel was more man than boy, at least in stature and stubbornness. He matched her in height and surpassed her in cunning, constantly finding new ways to torture her. She’d been awakened by a chicken pecking at the quilt threads atop her midsection, a snake slithering down the back of her nightgown, and a pair of frogs dropped on

her face. It had taken more fortitude than she'd realized she possessed not to run screaming back to Aunt Bertha.

Yet underneath all the pranks, sarcasm, and anger lived the little boy she remembered. A boy who'd lost the linchpin that held his life together—his father. Was it any wonder he was spiraling out of control? He had no one to tether himself to. No one except her, an aunt he barely knew and trusted even less.

After crying herself to sleep for the first week, mourning not only her brother but her starry-eyed dreams of home and belonging, Damaris resolved to meet her nephew's challenge. Self-pity never accomplished anything. If she wanted a real relationship with her nephew, she'd have to fight for it. Stubborn for stubborn. No matter how hard he pushed, she'd prove herself reliable, winning him over with constancy and care. If he lashed out in anger, she'd respond with patience. If he avoided her, she'd seek him out. If he ignored her, she'd persist with one-sided conversations.

"How was school?" she called, lifting her voice to carry down the hall to his bedroom. "Do you have much homework? I can help you with it after dinner if you like."

Miss Tatum had stopped by last week to let Damaris know that Nathaniel's grades had dropped significantly over the last month. He only attended class half the time, and when he did show up, he failed to engage in his lessons. Worst of all, he'd started getting into fights during recess.

He needs you, Lord, but I get the feeling he's pushing you away as much as he's pushing me. Show me how to help him.

Heaven knew she'd need divine intervention to get through to the boy. While she believed in her ability to dose him with

a constant flow of affection, she had absolutely no confidence in her ability to discipline him. She'd tried scoldings and reprimands, but they only brought out more rebellion and pranks, so she'd been terribly lax of late. She knew he needed boundaries, but those proved difficult to establish when he didn't recognize her authority.

"We're having sausage gravy on toast tonight." One of the few dishes she made of which he willingly ate a second helping.

Her cooking skills seemed more suited to stove than oven. She could fry, sauté, stew, and boil to some degree of success, but disaster struck whenever she attempted roasting or baking. On the stove, she could move from a too-hot spot to a cooler one or vice versa, but the delicate mathematics of balancing the variables of wood, heat, and dampers never failed to give her the wrong answer when it came to the oven. Hence the lopsided bread in front of her. She flipped the outturned loaf right side up and placed it on a cooling rack. At least it wasn't burnt. Just slightly caved in on one side.

Not everything could be beautiful. A truth Damaris had come to terms with long ago when her own appearance failed to mature into anything other than plain. Yet a thing's outward beauty should not determine its value. Bread's value lay in its ability to fill an empty belly, not in how well it delighted the eye. She wouldn't scorn her misshapen loaf just because it wasn't as pretty as the ones in the baker's window.

"Can we have some of them fried apples you made last week for dessert?"

Damaris squeaked and spun around. "Nathaniel! You startled me."

Her nephew leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed defensively over his chest, and his too-long brown hair hanging across his eyes. The prickly pose and droopy mane couldn't hide the satisfaction gleaming in his eyes, however. He was *proud* of making her jump. For someone who had tromped through the house with all the delicacy of a drunken buffalo five minutes earlier, he certainly could move with stealth when he wanted.

"So, can we? Have the apples?"

Damaris smiled, her aggravation melting away as her heart softened. Nathaniel so rarely asked her for anything. "Of course."

There was a half-bushel of tart green apples in the root cellar. Maybe she could even make a brown betty with some bread cubes and extra cinnamon and sugar.

"Thanks, Aunt Maris."

Warning bells rang in the back of Damaris's mind. He never thanked her. Just ate whatever food she placed in front of him and disappeared either outside or into his room.

Nathaniel pushed away from the wall. "I'll be back before suppertime."

Shaking off her cynicism and suspicion before he could sense them, Damaris brightened her smile. "Be careful."

He shrugged as if to dislodge her concern before it could settle on his shoulders, then disappeared down the hall. The front door slammed a moment later.

Damaris sighed. Someday he would accept her affection. Return it, even. After all, love was the strongest force on earth. Because it wasn't *of* earth. It was divine. God's very nature. It would win the day eventually, if she held true to

her course. She must focus on the outcome, not on memories of salt in her tea or frogs on her face.

An involuntary recollection surfaced of slimy amphibian bellies against her lips and sticky feet massaging her chin. One frog had even fallen inside her mouth when she woke and gasped in fright. Damaris shuddered. She'd used half a packet of tooth powder that morning, trying to erase the taste and feel of the creature. Thank heaven Nathaniel had yet to repeat the same prank twice. She didn't think she could survive a second amphibious encounter.

Never mind all that, though. She had apples to fetch. She wasn't about to turn down her nephew's first request, not when it was so easily granted.

Leaving her bread to finish cooling, Damaris marched over to the root cellar door built into the kitchen's floorboards. She bent down and hefted it open. Then, sweeping her skirt aside so she could watch where she placed her feet on the ladder rungs, she climbed down into the cool, damp cellar and walked over to the bushel basket of apples in the far corner near the shelves of canned goods. Taking an apple in hand, she squeezed it gently, checking for bruises. She wanted to use the very best. Finding a soft spot on that one, she placed the apple back in the basket and reached for a second. As her fingers closed around the fruit, a shadow fell across the room.

Bang! The cellar door slammed closed. Everything went black.

"Nathaniel!" Damaris dropped the apple and ran toward the ladder.

Surely he wouldn't trap her down here. He was mischievous,

but he wasn't mean. Unless . . . could this be retaliation for his window?

He'd been sneaking out at night despite her urgings that he stop. He gave no heed to her insistence that being out after dark wasn't safe. Arguing him into her way of thinking hadn't worked, yet she couldn't call herself a responsible guardian without doing *something* to stop him. So yesterday she'd nailed his window shut from the outside, hoping that the hindrance would at least make him stop and think before running off into the night. He hadn't said anything about it this morning at breakfast, just rushed off to school like normal. She'd thought he hadn't discovered what she'd done.

Obviously, she'd been wrong.

"All right, Nathaniel. You've made your point," she called as she felt her way through the pitch black, seeking the ladder. "You can let me out now."

Something scraped above her. Something that sounded like table legs on floorboards. Then a thud. Directly above her head.

"I'll make ya a deal, Aunt Maris." Nathaniel's voice echoed through the floor. Tight. Ominous. "You get yourself outta the cellar before suppertime, and I'll stop using my window as a door. But if you're still trapped when I get home for supper, you let me go wherever I want, whenever I want from now on without trying to stop me."

She shook her head. "I can't make that deal. It's my job to protect you."

"No, it ain't. It's my pa's job, but he ain't here no more, so now I take care of myself!"

Footsteps pounded, then faded away.

“Nathaniel!”

A door slammed.

He’d left her here. Trapped. In the dark.

The old, timid Damaris would have sat on the dirt floor and wept. Texas Damaris, however, had more grit. Weeping wouldn’t get her out of this cellar. Effort and ingenuity would.

Using the pinpricks of light that outlined the square of the trap door as her guide, Damaris centered herself beneath it and waved her arms until she knocked into the ladder. Grabbing hold of the sides, she fit her foot to the bottom rung and climbed. A few steps up, she reached for the door handle and pushed. It didn’t budge. She climbed higher, bending her head forward and hunching her shoulders until her upper back pressed against the door.

Please, Lord, let this work.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed with her legs as hard as she could. The door moved. Not much, but it moved. She tried again, her grunt of effort nearly becoming a scream.

To no avail. The door moved an inch. Maybe less. The table he’d positioned on top was too heavy.

All right, so effort and ingenuity based on brute strength didn’t work when one happened to be a woman with muscles accustomed more to needle pushing than table lifting. She’d have to make do with Option Two. Patience.

Her real battle wasn’t against wood and hinges. Her opponent was a stubborn, angry, heartbroken boy, and she couldn’t afford to lose. Not when Nathaniel’s well-being lay in the balance. She might be helpless to get out of this hole, but she could control how her nephew found her when next they met. His aunt Maris would not be weeping and distraught.

Nor would she be defeated and hurt. She wouldn't even be bristling with anger and indignation.

No, Nathaniel would find her calm, smiling, and ready to make him the best fried apples he'd ever tasted.

The strategy of turning the other cheek. The Lord endorsed it, so it must work.

All she had to do was not go crazy in the meantime, imagining the various creepy-crawly things that dwelled in cellars. Things that came out of their holes when the lights went out.

Sitting on the bottom rung, Damaris wrapped her skirt tightly around her legs and hugged her arms across her chest. It would only be for an hour or two. She could manage.

A creak echoed from the corner. Her gaze darted that way, but her vision couldn't penetrate the darkness.

Tiny tapping sounds clicked behind her. She drew her legs closer to her body and began to hum.

She could do this. They were just noises. Magnified by the dark.

Something itched the top of her hair. She shook her head and fluttered a hand over her bun, encountering nothing but hair and pins.

She could do this.

Something tickled her nape. She jumped up from the ladder and wiggled from head to toe.

Perhaps patience wasn't a viable option after all. As she slapped at the itchy spot on the back of her neck, Damaris fervently began praying for an Option Three.