From a Distance preview

Small-Town Brides

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DKD Books

To those seeking love...

There is ONE who never stopped loving you.

God.

He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

Isaiah 40:29 (KJV)

Contents

Chapter 1

Mother woke me with a gentle shake of my arm while shushing me. The room was dark. Not even fingers of moonlight peeked through the tiny window of my room.

"Shanna, hurry," she whispered. "And be quiet. Get dressed, and don't ask questions."

At thirteen, I wanted to know the reasons for anything that was demanded of me. I wanted to know why I had to get up in the middle of the night, why must I get dressed in the dark? Why couldn't we use a candle? But mother asked me to be quiet, and for once I listened.

She must have known I was confused.

"We are going away tonight. I don't know where we will go, or what we will do, but I can't stay here. I can't let him do this to you again."

We were leaving because of me. What about her? He hurt her all the time, but tonight was the first time he had knocked me against the wall. I went to bed crying because she wasn't allowed to comfort me. Mother tossed things into a valise. I wanted to ask if I could take my books along. Fear kept my lips clamped to keep from breaking the

silence. Would she even know what was inside when she was done? I started to slide off my nightdress.

She grabbed me by the arm. "Don't. Just put on your dress on over it. It will fit. Carry your shoes. You can put them on when we get farther from the house."

She opened the door for me, and the cold wind hit my nose. No, I left something in my room that I had to take with me. My father had given it to me. I turned to go back.

"No, we have to go now. Hurry Shanna, we have to get to the train before he wakes and finds out we've left.

The ground was hard, not soft the way it is in the summer, and it stung my feet. I whimpered. Mother urged me on. "Faster. Walk faster." It was so quiet outside. In the winter, there are no crickets or buzzing June bugs. Just the sound of breath going in and out. Could Mother hear my heart as it beat hard in my chest?

Then hoofbeats broke the silence. He had discovered our absence.

He pulled the horse up next to Mother and reached down and grabbed her by the hair.

Mother cried, "Run Shanna!"

I couldn't. I couldn't. Where would I go? And if I ran, what would he do to her?

We couldn't escape evil. It came behind us in the form of a man.

Chapter 2

The scent of clean laundry freshened the kitchen as Shanna Becket folded the last one of her stepfather's shirts and placed it on top of the others on the kitchen table. The shirts, stiff from the damp fall day, took longer than usual to dry, which meant getting the ironing finished did too. Winter was weeks away, but today brought a taste of what was soon to come. The door creaked open behind her. He was home early. Too early. She backed farther into the shadows of the kitchen.

"I don't smell anything cookin'. What have you been doing, lazy woman?" His words slurred.

Her heart thumped against her chest as he stumbled toward her. His foot caught the corner of the kitchen chair. It wobbled, then settled.

He banged his fist on the tabletop.

She jumped and hustled to the stove.

"I told you I want food waiting on the table when I walk through that door. There's not even a pot on the stove. Starting it now won't

get it done before I get here. You're nothing like your mother. Don't have her bonnie looks and you don't listen to my orders."

"Maybe she shouldn't have. Then she'd still be alive." Her breath caught in her throat. Why had she spoken? She grabbed the handle of the cast iron skillet. Potatoes. She'd fry those quick. Get some food into him before he became impossible.

"It's time for you to pay me for letting you stay here. A man needs a woman in his bed on cold nights, and you'd do fine. After all, I've seen to it no one else wants ya." He snickered, and then yanked her braid.

Eyes stinging from the pain, she whipped around, skillet in hand, and smacked him against the side of his head. His eyes widened, and then he stumbled backward, fell, and hit his head on the edge of the table. He lay there, not moving.

Shanna dropped the skillet. It crashed to the floor and landed next to her stepfather's unmoving feet. She backed away, clasping her hands together, wringing them the way she'd earlier wrung the water from his shirts. Was he dead? She touched him with the toe of her boot. Nothing. She'd killed him, for sure trading this jail for another. Did they hang murderers or shoot them? She didn't want to know the answer.

She studied him. His eyes remained closed. Could she risk getting close enough to see if he still breathed? She had to if she didn't want to be like him. Holding her breath, she stuck her finger under his nose. His wiry mustache jabbed into her skin.

He sucked in air, almost inhaling her finger. Her heart pounded. She fell back, clasping her mouth to keep a scream from escaping. He would wake soon, and when he did, she'd pay for knocking him out. She had to leave and escape this nightmare she'd been trapped in since her mother died. Standing, she spun and looked at the clock. Could

she make it to the next town in time to catch a train? Any train would do, as long as it took her far from him. She'd have to move with haste.

In her room, she dropped to her knees next to the bed. She grabbed the broken handle of the valise and pulled it out. It was big enough to hold two outfits and her mother's Bible. A house full of things that belonged to her parents, and she couldn't take any of it with her. As she gathered her things, she tried to memorize the small stitches of her grandmother's quilt and the smooth wood of the bedstead her father had made for her.

What else did she need? Money. Without it, she wouldn't get far. She took care of the chickens, and he'd taken all the egg money. He called it his pay for letting her stay in her family home. As if she'd had a choice. That he couldn't count money made it possible for her to sneak several coins out every week in hopes of using it to get away. If he had ever noticed the loss, she would have suffered another beating. She slid out the bottom drawer of the bureau and settled it quietly on the floor. Sliding her hand into the yawning cavity, her fingers searched for the cloth bag and dragged it out. Would there be enough for a ticket out of town?

Outside, Scout, their only horse, stood tied to the fence, still saddled as the scalawag hadn't unburdened the beast. She mounted the horse and hung the unbroken handle of the valise on the pommel.

She rode hard until she arrived at the crossroads. If she dismounted here, her stepfather wouldn't be sure which way she would go. She'd walk the rest of the way. She grabbed the valise and slid off the saddle.

"Scout, you run far from here. Don't go back there, find another home where they'll love you and treat your right. You've been a good friend." She stroked his nose. "I wish I could take you with me." She smacked the horse on the rump, sending him in the opposite direction she'd go.

Aidan Sollar folded his newspaper and prepared to stretch his and Crispin's legs. The small terrier belonged to his brother, but like most things Doyle wanted that required care, it had soon become Aidan's responsibility. The dog snuggled closer to Aidan, sticking his nose under Aidan's arm as if to hide his eyes from the bright sun.

He'd left Chicago early in the morning, and the rhythm of the tracks had almost lured him to sleep. And would have if the toddler in the car hadn't kept crying. The woman with the child sent an apology up the aisle with the news that this orphan child had been rejected and was headed back to the orphanage. After that, he and most likely all the passengers didn't have the heart to be angry or demand the woman take the child to another car. He was headed back to New York, and so was the child. Neither had reason for merriment.

The train slowed, and the car shivered to a stop at a small-town station. Aidan stood, left his paper on the seat, and gathered the dog into his arms. "Time for a walk, buddy." He would set Crispin down when they were away from the tracks. Let him walk about to stretch his legs.

"Another short stop for water, folks. We'll be pulling out in fifteen minutes. Don't get left behind." The conductor hollered.

Aidan noted the time on his pocket watch. He would give himself ten minutes to loosen his tight leg muscles, too. Stepping off the train into a brisk wind, he reconsidered the ten minutes. It had grown colder, and the sky had lost the sun and now looked as if it held snow in its clouds. He stepped off the platform and set down the dog. They

strode away from the station. Mindful of the time and unsure which way to go, he stopped a man coming out of the post office. "Sir, could you tell me if there is a market or a diner close by, I'd like to pick up a sandwich to take on the train."

"Two streets over. Maisie's Diner. Tell Penny I sent you. She's quick about getting food together and wrapped if she knows you're with the train."

"Thank you, sir. Come along, Crispin." As he stepped in that direction, a young woman ran toward the station, clutching a valise to her chest. One handle dangled, slapping against her side. Just then she glanced back, almost lost her footing, regained it, and then ran faster. She should have left sooner, but she'd make it in time. Not everyone had access to a timepiece. Now he sounded like his father.

Was he yelling her name? She looked backward and didn't see him. But the thought that he might be close spurred her to move faster. She stumbled, regained her footing, and sprinted. Shanna's lungs burned from running in the cold air the last half-mile to the station. She managed to get her ticket and board the train with time to spare. She scooted into the first empty seat. She should stay away from the window, but she had to know if her stepfather had followed her, that she hadn't imagined him calling her name.

Some kind soul had left a newspaper behind. She scooped it up, hungry for news. She hadn't been allowed to read about the world since her mother died. Stepfather didn't think much of educated women, and it bothered him that Shanna could read and he couldn't.

The last time he'd caught her with a book, he'd tied her to the kitchen table for days so she would remember that her place was to take care of him and not to fill her head with nonsense. She'd been reading the Bible. She peeked out the window. No sign of him. Her shoulders sagged, and the breath she'd been holding eased from her.

"Excuse me, Miss. I was sitting here, and there isn't another empty seat. Would you mind if I sit next to you? Or must I find another car?"

A small dog jumped from his arms onto the seat and stared at her. She shriveled against the seat. Would he bite?

"Crispin, the lady hasn't granted permission. He's a friendly one."

The small dog licked her hand. She shivered. He had such warm, soulful eyes, like Scout. She stroked his soft ear. She swallowed. Was this proper? The dog was sweet, but she didn't know what was the correct thing to do in this situation. But if she took the man's seat... She glanced out the window and gasped. Her stepfather galloped down the hill on the horse toward the train. How had he figured out where she went? How did he find the horse? It must have returned home. She smacked the paper against the window. "I suppose so."

"Thank you. And, um, that's my newspaper you have plastered against the window."

She couldn't let him have it, not until the train pulled away from the station. But how could she keep it?

"Are you looking for the secret message? A lot of people are, but I think that's just a rumor."

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she grasped at a chance to hang onto the paper that hid her. "How do you know?" She pressed the paper tighter against the window and pretended to search the text as if she knew what she was looking for.

"My father knows the publisher. There's a rumor spreading that whoever finds the message will win a thousand dollars. The thing is,

no one knows what the message is supposed to be or how it even will appear in the paper. It's all a bit crazy."

The train whistle blew again, and the car lurched forward. "I see. So there's no hope of finding money in the pages." But was he lying so he could find it for himself? That money would help her start her new life.

"I'm afraid not. If you don't mind, could I have it back?"

"Let me check one more time." Her fingers quivered. If she pulled down the newspaper, would she be staring into her stepfather's eyes?

"It won't be there."

The train picked up speed. She'd done it. Escaped. The newspaper fluttered to her lap. She craned her neck, staring back at the station. The hairs on the back of her neck tingled. Her stepfather stood on the platform with his fist raised. Had she gotten free of him at last? Or would he track her down?

Chapter 3

Shanna couldn't stop shaking. Not only was she cold, but now that she had escaped, she had no destination to go other than where this train was headed. New York. What would she do when she arrived?

"I picked this up in town at Maisie's." The man unwrapped a sandwich. The sweetness of roast beef and onions wafted toward her. Her mouth watered.

She'd eaten there before her father died. He, too, had a roast beef and onion sandwich. It had been a delightful day for her. The family had taken grain to be sold, and it had been a good harvest. So good that her father decided they should dine in town, as it was likely never to happen again. Her mother had laughed and patted her father's cheek.

"I was told they were fast and good. Would you like to share it with me?"

Should she take food from this stranger? Would he jerk it away from her the minute her hand touched it? Would he want something in return? "I'm—"

"Please say yes. It's too much food for one person."

Surely he wouldn't be mean in the presence of others. His smile appeared genuine, not like Stepfather's with his lips stretched so hard they had to hurt. She considered the small amount of change left after purchasing her ticket. She'd be foolish to turn down food. What if she didn't find employment right away? "Thank you, sir."

The train wheels under her clacked against the steel. What would she do when she got off the train? What skills did she have to offer? She could read, sew, and bake. She took the last bite of the sandwich and watched the changing scenery through the window. Could she find a position as a seamstress or maybe governess without references? A child's sob broke through her thoughts. Alarmed, she whipped around. Was he being hurt?

"He's an orphan on his way back to the orphan's home. It seems no one wanted him." The man next to her flipped a page of his paper.

The constant crying touched her in a place she'd vaulted deep in her heart. Her baby sister, Coleen, had cried until her stepfather silenced her forever. If only she could curl up on the seat and cover her ears. The painful memories tugged and tore at her heart. *Please stop. God, make the child be still.* Her silent begging went unanswered. Shanna couldn't listen any longer.

"Excuse me, sir." She stood and made her way back to the child and the older woman who held him. She looked plumb worn out. "Can I help? I could hold him for you."

The woman studied her for a moment. "You can't take him back to your seat. You'll have to set him on your lap next to me as he is under my charge."

"Yes, ma'am as it should be. Taking the boy out of your sight might make him cry even more. What's his name?" The towheaded child's face shined with tears.

"Georgie." The woman scooted out of the way, making room for Shanna to get into the seat.

"Hi there, little one. Would you sit on my lap and keep me warm for a bit?"

The boy stopped mid-sob and reached for her. She swept him up and then settled with him on her lap. "Let's look out the window for cows. We can count them. Would you like that?"

His lips trembled, but he remained quiet.

"Ah, he's calmer already. His sister has curly red hair like yours. You must remind him of her."

"Look there's one now. Can you moo?" She stroked his cheek. His skin was soft as warm butter under her fingers. How she longed to be a mother. Now she was too old to marry. The child sighed and popped his thumb into his mouth and then leaned against her. Soon he was asleep.

"Well done. Do you have children of your own?"

"No. I've not had a husband. Why do you suppose he cried so much? The man I was sitting next to said he was on his way back to the orphanage. He shouldn't be afraid to return."

"It's more than that. Today required me to do one of the hard parts of my work. I had to take him away from his older sister. The family wanted a brother and sister, but decided they didn't want a little one to take care of. It's fortunate they kept the sister but a difficult parting for him."

"I don't understand. Do you mean when they saw him they said they didn't want him?"

"That would have been easier on him. He's been with the family for several months when we received word they wanted to send him back. It took me another few weeks before I could return from New York to

pick him up. I had hoped they would change their mind by the time I arrived. They didn't."

Shanna pulled the boy closer to her and smoothed his hair. He snuggled tighter into her arms. Had the boy suffered at the hands of his adoptive parents? "People are awful to children."

"Yes, some are, but there are good people in the world, too. I've seen it. Children are taken care of and loved like the precious gems they are."

"I'd like to see that with my own eyes."

"It's satisfying work when it goes well."

"Do you think he'll ever see his sister again?" *Coleen.* Coleen's skin had been soft like Georgie's and her hair a beautiful shade of red.

"Where is this trip taking you?"

She forced a small smile, unsure of where she would end up. "New York City and I hope to stay. Do you know where I can look for employment as a seamstress or a governess? And would you be able to recommend an inexpensive place I can stay until I find work?"

"You boarded a train with no plans for when you arrive?" The woman's eyes widened. "What about friends or relatives there? Can't you stay with them?"

"There's no one. I'm an orphan like Georgie." Shanna brushed a kiss on top of Georgie's head, willing the burning of tears in her eyes to pass. She'd never again see the things her mother and father worked so hard for, never again sit in her grandmother's rocker, never again run her hand across the table Grandfather had built. They were things, that's all. They were taken from her, but she'd hang onto the memories forever.

"What's your name?"

"Shanna Becket, ma'am."

"How old are you? Are you a runaway?"

"I'm twenty-four. I'd rather say at my age I've escaped a hardship I could no longer endure. I've no family left, no husband, not even a cousin that I could go to for help. It seemed if I wanted to see my next birthday, I needed to leave as soon as an opportunity showed itself. I've been praying for one for a long time. Today was the day." Though she had hoped to leave in a manner less frightening.

"No one will be looking for you then?"

Shanna shivered. Her stepfather could find out where she went, but he was lazy, and it would take effort and money to find her in a large city. Besides, he wouldn't know if she took another train once she arrived in New York. "No, ma'am. I'm alone in this world."

"I'm Miss Parcell. The agency where I work takes orphans across the country to their new homes. I've been told I can hire a few more women to help me when I return from this trip. It's apparent that you are good with children."

"If..." She fought against the visions of the children she might have had by now. Would any of them have the look of herself or Coleen? "If it had been possible, I would have had a house full of them by now."

Miss Parcell smiled. "I understand. I felt that way too, but God has chosen to use me in this capacity. Would you like to work with me? If you were looking to be hired as a governess, you must be qualified. You'll need to meet the agency's approval, of course."

"I'd be saying prayers of thanks tonight if I could work with children. But can you help me find a place to stay until I get accepted?"

"Do you have money then?"

"I have a little, less than two dollars. The train ticket cost more than I expected. Can I find a place for that? And I'll need a little food."

"That's not enough! It's going to be at least a week or longer for the board to decide. Goodness, you will be living on the streets by then."

The extent of her situation slammed into Shanna. The train car darkened. She'd made a horrible mistake.

Aidan Sollar stroked Crispin under the chin. As much as it angered him to be once again put in charge of his brother's latest infatuation, this furry pet with his small ears and wiry coat had won him over. If the future played out as it had in the past, by the time he returned home, Doyle wouldn't want the dog. This time, though, Aidan would keep the dog for himself.

He peered over the seat at the girl who had taken his newspaper. She'd been running from something or someone when he spotted her. Her hat was several seasons old, and she wore an apron over her dark skirt. Almost as if she'd been baking and realized it was time to leave and then forgot to remove it. It didn't appear she would be returning to her seat since she was holding the now-quiet child. What a blessing if the child might be silent for the rest of the trip.

It gave him time to collect his thoughts and decide how to present the hotel information to his father. The workers hadn't made the progress he'd hoped for. The cold weather and snow slowed everything in Chicago. Father would be angry.

Angry enough to take him away from the project? The sandwich he'd eaten grew brick-hard in his stomach. So far his brother hadn't been interested in moving to Chicago to run the hotel, but if he had even a glimmer of Aidan's excitement, Doyle would demand it be his, and father would give it to him. Aidan moved Crispin to the seat next to him.

Crispin turned three times and then curled himself into a ball as if he deserved the seat all to himself. Aidan stifled a grin and retrieved his work satchel. There had to be something in the papers to convince his father to keep working on the Chicago Hotel. He'd ordered red brick from St. Louis. He wanted all four sides in that beautiful red instead of using the yellow brick from Indiana on the sides that didn't show from the front. When it was finished, it would be a stunning sight. With the location so close to the rail station, and the way the city was growing, the hotel would never lack for guests. That's what he needed to tell his father, explain the possibilities and the future income.

He slid his papers into his satchel. Where was Crispin?

Shanna sat upright as something warm brushed against her leg. She choked back a scream. Were there rats on the train?

"Crispin. Crispin. Where are you?" The man she shared a seat with strolled down the aisle.

The dog. She let a small sigh escape.

Miss Parcell touched Shanna's arm. "Is something wrong?"

"That man is looking for his dog, and I do believe it is under my skirt. At least I hope it's the dog and not a rat. Can you signal him to come here? I don't want to let go of Georgie as he might wake."

Miss Parcell beckoned the man. "Your dog is here."

The man made his way to their seat. "Where is he? Crispin? I don't see him."

"He's just settled next to my feet. Why don't you leave him for now, sir? I'd hate to disturb the child." She placed a gentle kiss on top of the boy's head.

"I think we'd all dislike hearing him cry again." The man frowned. "It's just that the dog isn't mine. I'm caring for him."

"I'd say not very well if you let him escape," Miss Parcell said. "Leave the dog here for now. If we can care for a child, then we can do the same for a dog. It's not as if he'll be leaving the car. I just pray there will be no flea bites from him."

"No, there will not be. He is often bathed. Beyond pampered even." He drew his eyebrows together and stared at Shanna. "Are you sure he's not bothering you, miss?"

Shanna shook her head. "He's fine." She'd not tell him how comforting it was to have the little dog nestled against her feet, warming them. She'd not take anything for granted. If she didn't find a place to sleep, she'd miss this heat. God had blessed her this day now with three things to make her smile. She must remember to thank him in her prayers tonight.

"Then I'll return to my seat and claim him when we reach New York or before if need be." He walked away.

Why was he so kind?

"I've been thinking about your situation. I know the city. I must help keep you away from its dangers. There is a boarding house that has a small room for me. I'm not often there, nor would you be after a time. If the agency hires you, you'd be traveling on other trains accompanying children too."

"I don't understand. Are you saying I could stay with you?"

"Maybe, but I want to know what you are running from and why, and if it is as reasonable as you say, you can stay. For now. Until you're

settled with a job or employed with the agency and can get your own room."

"Bless you, Miss Parcell."

"Sally. If we're to be roommates, we shall use first names, unless we are working."

Could this moment last forever? She was warm, fed, and cuddling a child. And she had the promise of a place to sleep and work. After she told her story. But how much of it could she bear to repeat? Just considering saying the words aloud to someone else made her stomach ache. Would Sally think less of her? Or worse yet, decide to turn her in to the police when the train stopped?

"I'm ready to listen."

"It's not a pretty story. It's true that I'm an orphan, but I do have a stepfather."

"And you couldn't stay with him any longer?"

"No. After my mother—after he pushed her out of the hayloft and told everyone it was an accident, I became his servant. If I didn't do things his way, he hit me." She showed Sally her hand. "He broke my little finger in the spring, that's why it's crooked."

"Why didn't you go for help?"

"He'd turned everyone against me. I was engaged, and he told my betrothed that I willingly spent my nights in his bed. After that, no man wanted to come calling. No woman either."

Sally pursed her lips. "How did you get away?"

"When he came home early I didn't have food ready for him. He said it was time for me to earn my keep and I could start by—by crawling in his bed. I hit him in the head with the skillet and ran."

"Are you sure he won't come for you?"

"He tried. He knows I got on the train, but he won't be able to track me down once I get off. There won't be another train coming through

until tomorrow afternoon. I asked. He's miserly with his money. I can't imagine he'll spend any for a ticket if he doesn't know where I am."

"Honey, you'll stay with me tonight, and I'll do my best to get you employed by the agency. My room is quite small though, and we'll have to share the bed."

"That's okay. Better to share with you than with my stepfather. Everything I took what I had time to fit in one bag. Some things that meant a lot to me I'll have to hold in my memories. I won't be taking up much space."

Historical

Small-Town Brides Collection

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Diana Lesire Brandmeyer writes historical and contemporary romances about women choosing to challenge their fears to become the strong woman God intends. Brandmeyer is Christian Bookseller Association and The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Best Selling Christian author.

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