

# The Refuge

## CHAPTER 1

**October 9, 1849**

You can't cheat death. We thought we could. At least we hoped we could. That was why I sat in a blue Shaker dress, staring across a narrow table at Eldress Maria in her like garb as she told me about Walter. She had fetched me from the cellars and my duty of peeling apples to lead me to this little room where twice a week she encouraged me to confess my every sin. I was ready enough to do that now. To do anything to block away the truth of her words tearing my heart asunder.

"I am sorry, Sister Darcie."

She did look as though she might be. Actually sorry along with being concerned over how I might react to her news. A Shaker through and through, she was left at a village somewhere in the east when she was eight. A blessing, she claimed. Opened the door for her to a perfect life. Then forty-some years ago when she was twenty-nine, a mere five years older than I was now, she came here to teach the Shaker way to those who joined together to form the village of Harmony Hill. Ever a true believer.

I could not say the same. We were here, Walter and I, merely to escape cholera. To escape death. And then Walter did not. Oh, cholera didn't slay him. But death can come in many ways. Like a steamboat explosion. That is what Eldress Maria said stole Walter from me. He'd gone with the Shakers on a trading trip downriver to New Orleans, picked for that duty because he'd been a river man before we married.

Married. Not something the Shakers recognized. Here in the village, men were brothers and women sisters and never the twain could meet in what seemed a God-ordained relationship to me but sinful to them. Neither Walter nor I believed being man and wife was wrong in any way, but we didn't come here to convert to the Shaker way. We only intended to stay among these peculiar people for a little while. Just until the autumn winds blew away the bad air that brought cholera death.

I stared at Eldress Maria. A tear made a laborious trip down through the wrinkles on her cheek. Whether a tear of sorrow or simply a tear from an old woman's watery eyes, I could not know.

My own eyes were dry. I couldn't take it in. The words hung in the air between us, but I didn't want them to be true. Walter couldn't be dead. Not now. Not before I could tell him my news. My hands slipped under my apron to cradle the small swelling there.

Eldress Maria leaned across the table toward me. I sensed she wanted to hold my hands, but I kept them under my apron. I had no idea how long I could keep my secret hidden as well.

"We do understand this news may be difficult for you, Sister Darcy, since you are so new to the Shaker way. How long have you been here among us?" Another tear slid down Eldress Maria's cheek. She was not without feeling for me.

"Three months. We came in July." Somehow I managed to push out an answer. Words that didn't matter. Nothing mattered now. Nothing except the baby Walter and I must have made right before we came to this place where marriage vows were negated and marriage beds denied.

I would have told him before he went down the river to trade the Shaker brooms, seeds, and jams. I did suspect I was in the family way back then at the first of September, but we had no way to talk. Not without breaking the rules.

In August I had managed to whisper a word to him during one of those times when we were learning steps to the dances they claim as worship. Dancing for church took some getting used to, but practicing the steps proved useful that day. A stumble here, a misstep there, and I ended up near Walter, close enough to arrange a midnight rendezvous.

I climbed through an open kitchen window and made it to the tree behind the Gathering Family House first. I had no problem sneaking out since the three other sisters in my assigned room were all snoring and sound asleep. And little wonder they snored, with orders to sleep laid out like a corpse in those narrow beds. On your back. Arms down to your sides. The Shakers had rules on how best to do most everything, but a body should be able to sleep however she wanted. How I wanted was to be curled next to Walter. Definitely against Shaker rules.

That night I heard him coming before I saw him, and my heart pounded with as much sweet anticipation as any time during our courting days. We weren't newlyweds. We'd shared four years together before coming to the Shakers, but the separation made his touch that much dearer. That night as I stepped into Walter's embrace and rested my head in that sweet spot below his shoulder, I realized how much I missed Walter's arms around me and his manly

smell. And now I must miss them forevermore. At last tears filled my eyes and breath came hard.

“Are you sure he is dead?” I choked out the words.

She inclined her head until I couldn't see her eyes under the brim of her bonnet. I wore a like white bonnet, my copper-colored hair twisted into a braid and hidden beneath it. I had refused to cut my hair like the other sisters, because Walter loved stroking his hands through my curls. I blinked away tears and stared at Eldress Maria.

She played her fingers over the table as though searching for the best answer. When she seemed unable to find it, I spoke first. “Walter was a strong swimmer. He could have made it to the other shore.”

Eldress Maria said Walter had been killed when the boilers exploded and sank the riverboat carrying the Shaker traders back to Harmony Hill. Such tragedies were not uncommon on the river. But Walter could have escaped death there the same as we escaped cholera. I was not wrong about him being a strong swimmer. He was strong in every way. He had once carried me across a wide creek as if I weighed no more than a dandelion fluff.

The old Shaker sister looked up at me, her eyes kind, but her words unyielding. “Nay. He did not, much to our sorrow. The other brethren escaped death and brought Brother Walter's body back for a proper burial. Even now, they are digging the grave.”

“I want to see him.” I needed to let my eyes linger on his face one more time.

“That would not be wise.” A frown added yet more wrinkles to Eldress Maria's face. “Brother Bertram says dear Brother Walter was badly burned in the accident.”

I started to speak, hope again fluttering awake inside me. Perhaps it could be a different unfortunate victim.

Eldress Maria must have guessed my thoughts because she rushed her words out in front of mine. “But not beyond recognition.” She reached across the table and this time touched my arm. “It would surely be best for you to remember him as he was.”

I shifted away from her hand, straightened my shoulders, and stiffened my resolve. I would not be denied my last look at my husband. “I must see him.”

As she leaned back in her chair, Eldress Maria shut her eyes. I wondered if she was praying or simply irritated at my obduracy. Such mulishness was not admired among the Shakers. That mattered little to me. I would see my husband.

“Very well.” The old sister opened her eyes and bent her head in concession to my demand. “Perhaps they have not yet nailed the coffin top on.”

I didn’t say so as I stood up, but a nail driven in could be prized out.

Almost blinded by tears, I turned from Eldress Maria and made my way out of the room. For a moment I stood in the expansive entrance hall to gather myself. After dashing away my tears, I stared at the two sets of stairs climbing up to the retiring rooms in the Gathering Family House. Here was where I had last seen Walter on the morning he left for the trading trip.

He was at the bottom of the brethren’s stairway and I at the top of the one designated for the sisters. The Shakers took no chances of the men and women being close enough to touch, but oh, how I wanted to run after Walter that morning and throw my arms around him. I would have, too, if not for Sister Helene grabbing my arm. She had befriended me here in the village and only intended to keep me out of trouble with Eldress Maria.

I did manage to lean over the railing and call to Walter. I cared nothing for the rules then. To be truthful, I cared nothing for them now. Even so, a person must get along wherever she lands, and Walter and I had landed here in this village by our own choice. Wisely, we thought. The Shaker village was never afflicted with the bad air that brought cholera on the summer winds.

“Walter.” I had no intention of putting brother in front of his name, in spite of Eldress Maria’s instructions that I must. He was not my brother. He was my husband. My beloved husband.

He looked up at me with a smile that I knew lit up his brown eyes even though I wasn’t close enough to see the way they sparkled with love. He held up his hand with fingers spread wide. Five weeks, he meant. His promise that in five weeks he would return and we would leave these people and once more be together.

“Too long.” I shouted the words and slipped past Sister Helene and down the steps so fast I nearly tripped on my skirt.

The brethren hustled him out the door, and by the time I reached the sisters’ door, he was already in the wagon riding away. He waved, a mixture of regret and anticipation on his face. He loved me, but he also loved the river. I was safe among the sisters. The river beckoned him.

Would he have changed his mind and climbed out of the wagon had I run after him to tell him about the baby? That was something I could never know.

Eldress Maria came into the hall behind me. “Worry not about returning to your duties today. You can resume your assigned tasks come morning. Meanwhile, I suggest you consider your good fortune to be here among your loving sisters and brothers at this time.”

“Yea.” I managed the approved Shaker word of agreement without looking back at her. Instead I hurried out the door into autumn sunshine that did nothing to warm me as I forced my feet to move toward the Shaker cemetery.

I still did not believe it. I did not want to believe it. Walter couldn’t be dead. Not now when at last I carried his child. We both so wanted children. A houseful. Boys and girls. Walter worried I was too small to safely carry a child, but my own mam was barely taller than me. She carried four without a struggle, though the birthing of her last one had been hard. It was the cholera in 1833 that took her, along with that last child. Dear Rosie, less than two years old.

I pushed the thought away. I had enough sadness confronting me without bringing up past sorrows.

The stone pathway to the cemetery ran in front of the Centre House, where those truly committed to the Shaker way resided. The three-story building made of stones chiseled from nearby river bluffs normally brought admiration from me, but today it merely looked cold and gray. Everything was cold and gray. It mattered not that the sun shone in a sky the blue of my Shaker dress.

I glanced over at the meetinghouse, its modest wood siding overshadowed by the stone building across from it, and considered stopping to pray. The Shakers did not worship as I, but the meetinghouse was nevertheless a church. I imagined those of the village’s ministry watching me from the upper rooms over the church where they lived, isolated and no longer part of the fellowship of the whole.

For the good of the village, Sister Helene told me. “We all have our duties and theirs is to stay separate in order to make fair decisions.”

And enforce the rules. I would find little sympathy for my grief among them even were I to enter their church. Best to send up my desperate prayers as I went on toward where Walter waited. In a box. Ready to be committed to the ground. Dust to dust.

Shivering, I wanted to hurry and yet delay at the same time. My steps faltered when I reached the graveyard and saw the great mound of dirt beside a hole.

The three men appeared to be finished with their somber chore as they leaned on their shovels. I knew only Brother Bertram, the very one who had somehow discovered Walter

knew the river. Perhaps from Walter himself. That was why Brother Bertram lured Walter into a trading trip.

But it was not his fault.

“Sister Darcie, I don’t think you should be here until the others gather to pay last respects to this our brother.” That was more words than any Shaker brother had addressed to me in the few months I’d been in the village.

“I want to see my husband before you put him in the grave.”

“Here you have brothers, not a husband.” The man’s voice was kind and lacked any hint of condemnation.

I didn’t back down. “He is my husband and I will look at him.”

“He was burned, Sister. Badly. Poor man. I was told he might have jumped clear of the boat and been safe, but the sound of a child crying stopped his escape. Instead of saving himself, he went back toward the flames to rescue those he could. More than once, according to the survivors.” The brother bent his head and stared at the ground. “He would have made a good Shaker.”

“No.” I spoke the word firmly, purposely not saying the Shaker word nay. Walter would not have made a good Shaker. He was a good husband. My husband. “Where is he?”

“Heaven, I would wager, or moving toward that way. Paradise.”

I barely restrained myself from attacking him then, as I’d once seen a raccoon attack a dog that had it cornered. The critter had no hope, but even so, it flung itself on the dog’s head. I knew not why I thought of that, except I felt the same desperation. The same impossible lack of hope.

“Is his body encased in a coffin?”

“Nay, not yet. The box is being prepared. Brother Walter’s body lies in the wagon yonder.” Brother Bertram motioned with his head.

As I moved past him on my mission, he attempted to stop me with words. The same as those Eldress Maria used. “Better for you to hold him in your mind as he was. Not as he is now.”

“But I must.” I did not slow my steps.

He followed me. When because of my short stature I could barely peer into the wagon where Walter's form was covered with a blanket, he found a block of wood for me to stand upon. Without any more words, he pulled back the blanket.

They were right. Both Eldress Maria and this man next to me. I should not have looked, but it was what I had to do. My last service to my husband, to look upon his corpse with love.

Brother Bertram pulled the cover back over Walter's ravaged face. "He lived for a few minutes after he made it to the shore. Long enough to speak a few words."

I didn't ask, but the man continued anyway.

"He spoke of you. Said to tell Sister Darcie he was sorry."

I stared at the covered form in the wagon bed. "Did he say 'Sister' when he spoke of me?"

"Nay, he did not."

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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
[www.revellbooks.com](http://www.revellbooks.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gabhart, Ann H., 1947- author.

Title: The refuge / Ann H. Gabhart.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,  
[2019] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018045192 | ISBN 9780800729271 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3607.A23 R44 2019 | DDC 813/.6--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018045192>

ISBN 978-0-8007-3627-9

SCRIPTURE: King James Version

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