

A decorative flourish consisting of intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral patterns, framing the title text.

*A Worthy  
Pursuit*

KAREN  
WITEMEYER



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To Laura Baker,  
librarian extraordinaire and the first person  
I ever trusted to read my stories.  
It is your encouragement and knowledgeable feedback  
that gave me the fortitude to pursue my dream.  
You taught me to see the world through lenses  
different than my own and deepened my  
understanding of the human condition.  
You have left your mark on me, my friend,  
and I thank God for the gift.

Be strong and of a good courage, fear not,  
nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy  
God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will  
not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

—Deuteronomy 31:6

# Prologue

FEBRUARY 1891

AUSTIN, TEXAS

SULLIVAN'S ACADEMY FOR EXCEPTIONAL YOUTHS

"I'm closing the school, Miss Atherton, and that's my final word on the subject." Dr. Keith Sullivan shut the attendance ledger on his desk with an ominous snap and pushed to his feet, forcing Charlotte to stand as well. "I've sent wires to all the students' parents, informing them of the closure and offering to reimburse a percentage of the tuition to compensate them for the inconvenience of ending the school term earlier than expected."

A reimbursement of funds? From the man who'd refused to purchase a single new text in the last five years? It was all Charlotte could do to keep her jaw from coming unhinged. There must be another source of income—one large enough to overshadow the loss of tuition. Dr. Sullivan charged exorbitant fees for his exclusive school. Only the most noteworthy students

were accepted into the small academy—unless, of course, a particularly wealthy family sought entry for one of their children. In that case, a well-placed donation seemed to make up for any lack in giftedness. Charlotte could only imagine how large a donation would have to be to convince him to close the school entirely.

Backing out of the way as her employer strode around his desk, Charlotte fiddled with the cameo at her neck then marched after him. “What of Stephen Farley? His parents are in Europe. They couldn’t possibly collect him before we close the doors. And John Chang is an orphan here on scholarship. He has no place to go.”

She paid the Chinese boy’s tuition herself out of her monthly stipend and had for the last three years. She’d fought to get him into the school after one of the women from St. Peter’s Foundling Home had brought him to her attention. John had been only four at the time, but when he’d climbed onto the worn bench of the secondhand piano in the orphanage parlor and flawlessly picked out every note of Fanny Crosby’s “Safe in the Arms of Jesus,” she’d known she had to tutor the boy. God had bestowed a rare gift on the child and placed him in her path for a reason. She couldn’t have him torn away from her now.

“Arrangements have been made for them to board at St. Peter’s.”

Charlotte fought down the protest tearing at her throat. Stephen wouldn’t last a day there with his penchant for finding trouble. And John. Dear heaven. The boy had been picked on mercilessly by the other children because of his foreign heritage, even as a toddler. He’d been so traumatized, he hadn’t spoken a word for months after coming to the academy. He was still much too withdrawn for Charlotte’s liking. No telling how far the boy would retreat into himself if he were forced to return to St. Peter’s.

And what of Lily? Ice shards speared Charlotte's heart as a new, more sinister possibility cast its shadow over Dr. Sullivan's bizarre behavior.

"Miss Dorchester will stay with me, of course," Charlotte asserted, any other contingency being untenable.

Dr. Sullivan pivoted to face her. "Don't be ridiculous, Miss Atherton. You are headmistress, not mother, to these children, regardless of that piece of paper Rebekah Dorchester had you sign. Lily will return to her grandfather, where she belongs. He plans to be here in the morning to collect her. You," he said with a suddenly beneficent smile that did nothing to thaw the ice impaling her chest, "will surely find a new position in record time. Here." He pulled a paper from a thin stack of folders in his arms. "I've taken the liberty of putting together a list of potential employers for you. These are some of the finest female academies in the country."

Charlotte took the paper from his hand and willed it not to quiver. "Chicago. Boston. Charleston." Her eyes continued down the list. "All so far away."

Dr. Sullivan beamed at her. "You are a brilliant music instructor, Miss Atherton, and have proven yourself quite capable at administration as well. I've already sent glowing letters of recommendation to each of these institutions. Any of them would be lucky to have you."

But none of them would accept her if she had a child in tow.

Charlotte glanced up from the page to meet her employer's eyes—not a difficult task since the man stood an inch below her in height. Neither was it difficult to read the guilt behind his smile. The list of prestigious schools, letters of recommendation, unnecessary compliments—all appeasements for his conscience. He knew how unlikely the staff were to find replacement positions mid-term, just as he knew how wrong it

was to turn his back on the pupils he'd promised to educate. Yet he was closing the school anyway. Closing the school and narrowing her options so that she had no choice but to give Lily Dorchester into her grandfather's keeping if she wished to retain a teaching position.

Well, he might think he'd herded her like a heifer into a chute, but if she'd learned one thing in her twenty-eight years, it was that even when backed into a corner, one always had a choice. *Always.*

After Dr. Sullivan nodded to her in that condescending way of his that made her skin itch—as if she hadn't a brain for herself and would be lost without a man to give her guidance—he swung the office door wide and gestured for her to exit. Biting her tongue, Charlotte passed through the doorway and silently resolved to toss his list of schools into the belly of her stove the moment she returned to her room. Her career could be sacrificed easily enough. Protecting Lily took precedence.



With the dark of night cloaking the halls of the school, Charlotte placed her two carpet bags outside her door and gave a final glance over her room. The rug lay properly aligned with the angle of the floorboards. No stray papers across the desk. No wrinkles in the coverlet atop the bed. All as it should be. She gave a little nod of approval, a nod that would have to serve as good-bye as well, for she would not be returning. She'd taught at the academy for ten years—seven as music instructor, three as headmistress. A tiny part of her ached for the loss of the familiar, the safe. Yet she had no time for sentimental attachment. She'd made a promise—a promise she intended to keep, no matter the cost.

Straightening her shoulders, Charlotte turned her back and



pulled the door closed, clicking the latch silently into place. Then, careful to stay on the balls of her feet so her heels wouldn't click against the wooden floor, she made her way to the staircase that led to the boys' dormitory. She crept up the stairs then down the hall and eased open the door to the sleeping chamber.

"Stephen," she whispered into the darkness, her eyes not yet adjusted to the full-black of the attic room.

"Here, Miss Lottie."

Charlotte sucked in a startled breath. Heavens, the boy was practically on top of her. How could she not see him? She turned her head in the direction of the sound and squinted until she made out two small shadows a few steps from her elbow.

"John's with me."

A telltale rattle had Charlotte gritting her teeth. "Stephen," she scolded in a hushed tone as she ushered the boys into the hall and closed the door, "you were supposed to leave that paraphernalia behind."

"I only brought the essentials, Miss Lottie. I swear. Just like you said." The boy clutched the sack to his chest and glared up at her. One would think he carried gold coins in that bag, not a collection of gears, bolts, and baling wire. "I can't leave them behind. Miss Greenbriar will throw them in the garbage."

Where they undoubtedly belonged. Nevertheless, Charlotte couldn't deny the boy his treasures. With absentee parents who couldn't be bothered to visit or even write, heaven knew the boy had little enough to call his own.

"All right. But keep them quiet. We can't afford to wake any of the staff."

Some of the rigidity left his shoulders, and he nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Satisfied, she pivoted to face the door to the girls' dormitory on the opposite side, yet her feet refused to cross the hall.

Drat it all. She hated second thoughts. Horrible, impractical things. It wasn't as if she were stealing the children, after all. She was protecting them. So why did she suddenly feel like a villain? Charlotte huffed out an impatient breath. This was what came of sneaking about at night. It made perfectly innocent activities furtive and played havoc with her carefully laid plans.

Unable to break free of her misgivings, she took hold of both boys' arms then hunkered down in front of them. Stephen looked down at her, a frown tugging on the corners of his mouth.

"Whatcha waitin' for, Miss Lottie? We gotta get Lily. Mr. Dobson's waitin' on us."

"I'm not sure that taking the two of you with me is right. Perhaps St. Peter's is the better option. The safer option."

John slipped his hand into hers and squeezed with a desperate strength. "Stay with you."

It tore her heart out to think of leaving him behind, but if Dorchester somehow discovered where she'd taken Lily . . .

Stephen crossed his arms and glared at her. "I'm not stupid, Miss Lottie. I know something's up or you wouldn't be sneaking us out in the middle of the night. But I'm tellin' you right now, if you take me to that orphanage, I'll run away. I'm nearly twelve, plenty old enough to find work as a stable hand or errand boy for one of the local shops. But I'd rather stay with you and the little ones. Lily and John need a big brother to look out for them."

"But your parents—"

"My folks don't care two figs about me, never have," Stephen scoffed, shrugging as if such an admission were as insignificant a disappointment as not getting a second helping of pudding after supper. "Only reason I'm here is 'cause they love bragging to their friends about their son being at a school for

exceptional youths, even if the only thing exceptional about me is my father's bank account. I know I'm not as special as Lily or John or most of the others, but when you gave me that book about Thomas Edison and Samuel Morse, I figured that maybe if I learned enough, I could grow up to do something important like one of those inventors. That's why I need to stay with you, Miss Lottie. You're the only one who believes I'm worth the trouble."

Without a hint of a second thought, Charlotte pulled Stephen into her arms and hugged him tight as she blinked away the moisture gathering in her eyes. "You *are* gifted, Stephen. Don't you ever doubt it. Lily has her books, John has the piano, but you understand mechanical things in a way that boggles my mind." She released him and stood, brushing away the wrinkles from her gored skirt along with the last of her misgivings. "I suppose we'll just have to write your parents to let them know where you are after we get settled. We can't allow your education to lag just because Dr. Sullivan closed his school, now, can we?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Watch John for me while I fetch Lily."

After giving John a quick hug against her skirt, Charlotte yanked on the hem of the snug-fitting traveling jacket that fell to her hips and ran a hand over her hair to check for stray strands. Not finding any, she inhaled a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Once again in command of the situation, she swept across the hall and entered the girls' room.

Unlike the boys, Lily had fallen asleep. Charlotte gently pulled the blanket down and helped Lily sit up. "It's time to go, sweetheart." The child let out a small, disgruntled moan. "Quiet now," Charlotte murmured around the smile tweaking her lips. "We mustn't wake the others."

Lily rubbed her eyes with her fist then dutifully got to her

feet. “Are we going to our new home, Miss Lottie?” she asked behind a yawn.

“Yes.” Charlotte helped the girl push her arms through her coat sleeves. “Did you pack your things?”

“Mm-hmm. Under the bed.”

Charlotte retrieved the satchel that had once been Lily’s mother’s. The initials *R.D.* had been stamped into the leather strap above the buckle. She couldn’t see them in the dark, but her fingers traced over the indentation. *I’ll take good care of her, Rebekah. I promise.*

“I remembered to get dressed after the others went to sleep, Miss Lottie. Even my shoes.”

“Excellent.” Charlotte did up the coat buttons then began straightening the child’s bed. “You did everything I asked.”

“I promised Mama I’d be a good girl for you.”

Charlotte stilled, Lily’s bed only half made. “And I promised her that I’d take care of you.” The itch of emotion gathering at the back of her throat sent Charlotte back into motion. She finished making the bed and even went so far as to tuck the blanket edges under the mattress.

Rebekah had been gone only a week. Charlotte wasn’t so selfish as to wish her back, for her friend had suffered mightily in the last months of her illness, but she couldn’t help worrying on Lily’s behalf. She’d taught children of all ages, but Dr. Sullivan had been right about one thing—she wasn’t a mother.

As if Lily could sense her distress, she placed her hand in Charlotte’s palm and squeezed. “Mama said you were the finest woman she’d ever known and told me to stay with you no matter what. It’ll all work out, Miss Lottie. You’ll see. We can miss her together.”

Charlotte squeezed Lily’s hand in return. “Yes. I suppose we can.”

They exited into the hall, collected the boys, then crept down the stairs. Charlotte steered them back toward her room so she could gather her bags, but the luggage was nowhere to be seen.

“I got yer stuff loaded in the wagon already.” The gravelly voice seemed to emanate from the very walls. Charlotte jumped then caught her breath when the school’s caretaker materialized from within the doorway that led to the administrative office.

“Good heavens, Mr. Dobson. You gave me a fright.” Charlotte reached for the cameo at her throat and fiddled with the pin until she was sure her fingers had ceased trembling.

“Sorry, Miss Atherton. Just thought we better hurry this party along.”

Dobson was a strange little creature, sporting more gray hair on his chin than his head, and he never seemed to look her straight in the eye. Yet he was diligent in his work and good to the children. Best of all, he asked no questions. Earlier today, she’d offered him a position as overseer of the property where she’d be taking the children since the academy would be closing, and he’d accepted without once inquiring about the salary. Nor had he questioned her desire to depart in the middle of the night. It was as if he understood her urgency. Perhaps he did. It wouldn’t surprise her to learn that he knew exactly what had precipitated the school’s closing and what threatened Lily.

She offered him a smile. “Lead the way, sir.”

The man had laid a straw tick in the wagon bed and piled a mound of quilts along the edge.

Charlotte nodded approvingly. “You’ve thought of everything, Mr. Dobson.”

He failed to look at her as he helped Lily into the back of the wagon. “Didn’t want the young’uns to catch a chill. There’s still a nip in the air.”

Indeed there was. Charlotte shivered within her coat. Despite

the springlike temperatures during the day, nighttime felt like winter. “Bundle up tightly, children, and lay close together to keep warm.”

After the three were settled, Charlotte allowed Dobson to hand her up onto the bench. A lap robe and hot brick waited for her. She turned to thank him, but he held up a hand and walked away before she could form the words. He circled around behind the wagon then climbed up beside her. He released the brake and set the horses into motion.

Charlotte held her tongue, realizing her thanks would not be welcome. She glanced over her shoulder at the children then turned to face ahead. Toward her future. This ragtag bunch was her family now, and she’d let no man take them from her.



**APRIL 1891**  
**MADISONVILLE, TEXAS**

“Whoa.” Stone Hammond tugged once on the reins, and his black immediately stopped. “I better climb the rest of the way alone, Goliath.” He slid from the saddle, pushing the long length of his duster aside as he swung his leg over the horse’s rump. “A behemoth like you is likely to block out the sun this time of day if you crest the hill, and after eight weeks of huntin’ I ain’t about to let you scare off my quarry.”

The black turned his head and gave Stone a look that seemed to imply Stone wasn’t exactly a dainty specimen himself then turned his attention to sampling the local prairie grass. Stone snorted. Crazy beast. Always so uppity. But he wouldn’t trade him for the biggest bounty on the federal marshal’s wall. No, the two of them had been through too many adventures to ever call it quits. They’d battled outlaws, renegades—shoot, even a pair of thievin’ circus performers who’d turned out to be devilishly good with knives. He and Goliath bore the scars and carried

the years of hard living upon their bodies, but their hearts beat as true today as they had when they'd started a decade ago.

They were retrievers. The best in the state. It was the one thing in life he was good at. Never once had he failed to bring in what he was sent after. And with what this job was paying him, he'd finally be able to buy himself that little place he'd had his eye on, the one far enough away from people and their problems that he and Goliath could retire in peace.

A place not too different from the log cabin he'd spied on the other side of this rise.

Pulling a pair of field glasses out of his saddle bag, he patted Goliath's neck then set out for the top of the hill. Knowing his six-foot-three-inch frame would block out the sun just as much as Goliath, Stone hunkered over as he climbed, going down to his belly for the last few yards. Bracing his weight on his elbows, he sighted the house then held the field glasses up to his eyes and focused in on the details that would tell him how best to approach.

His target had proven unusually cagey. And careful. No witnesses. No discernible trail. No demand for ransom. He'd been forced to do his tracking through society drawing rooms and county registries. Not exactly his areas of expertise. Folks tended to either cower or look down their noses at him in those kinds of places. But enduring the disdainful sniffs of a passel of pinkie-pointin', tea-sippin' ladies had eventually paid off, leading him to a bit of old gossip that gave him his first solid lead. And if he was right, he'd have his quarry rustled up before nightfall.

Stone rolled onto his back and pulled out the photograph he'd taken from the school wall. Three women and a man stood behind a group of two dozen kids spit-shined and dressed for the camera. Two black ink circles blazed up at him. One around a



young girl sitting in the front row. Another around a tall woman standing ramrod straight on the far right.

Was the girl dead? Sold? The child was a pretty little thing. Blond hair, bright eyes. A gal like that would fetch a hefty price down in Mexico. But her grandfather didn't seem to believe any serious harm had befallen the girl. He'd simply hired Stone to find her and retrieve her. But what did a pampered rich man know about the seedy side of the world?

Stone had seen evil up close, had trailed men who'd slit a fellow's throat without a second thought, who'd rape a woman then trod on her face for the perverse pleasure of having her beneath his boot. But those who hurt children? Those were the worst of the lot. He prayed the old man was right. He'd never laid a hand on a woman, but God help him, if this Charlotte Atherton person had hurt the child or sold her into the hands of one who would, he didn't think he'd be able to stop himself.

Rolling back onto his stomach, he squinted through the field glasses and ordered his heart rate to calm. No use imagining the worst. Everyone he'd interviewed had given Miss Atherton a glowing character reference. Active in her church, charitable even on her small salary, dedicated to her students. Yet why would such a paragon steal a child? There must be something darker lurking beneath the surface. Something cunning and sly and perhaps a bit demented.

A high-pitched scream pierced the quiet afternoon air. A child's cry. Stone tensed. The toes of his boots dug into the earth, ready to spring him forward. He'd not stand by and do nothing while a child—

A tow-headed girl ran out of the cabin. Stone raised off his belly enough to grab the six-shooter from his right holster. The Colt wasn't the best for long-range shooting, but the sound

would draw attention away from the girl. He held the field glasses steady, his gaze glued to the girl as he cocked the hammer.

She screamed again then turned to glance over her shoulder. Stone froze. The girl's face was aglow with . . . laughter. She wasn't screaming. She was squealing. A boy, probably a couple years older than the girl, ran into the viewing area, a long-armed contraption of some sort in his hand. A loud *pop* echoed an instant before a rope shot out from the thing. The girl squealed again and dodged to the left. The rope flopped onto the ground. Admirably close to its target, though. If the boy rigged the rope with a barbed end, he'd have himself a harpoon. Rather impressive.

"You missed!" the girl crowed. She said something more, but her return to normal volume kept the words from carrying.

Exhaling a slow breath, Stone holstered his revolver and settled back in to observe. He tossed a quick prayer heavenward, thanking God that Lily Dorchester was alive and unharmed. For the girl *was* Lily. He'd recognized her features when she'd turned. Now she was dancing around the boy, as carefree as a tawny-haired kitten playing with a piece of string—a string the boy was wrapping up and reloading for another round of target practice.

The dancing halted with a skid. Lily ran up to the boy and cupped her hand between her mouth and his ear then pointed back toward the house. Stone scanned the yard in the direction she'd pointed. A statuesque woman with a laundry basket propped against one hip glided toward a line draped with sheets, towels, and a pair of aprons. Her back was to him, so he couldn't make out her features, but she moved with the refined grace of a society lady. No hurry to her step. Back straight as a board. Hair miraculously unaffected by the wind. At least she wore sensible clothes. Not exactly prairie calico, but her blue

skirt was free of frills and she'd rolled the sleeves of her white shirtwaist to her elbows. Add a tailored jacket, and she'd look just like the woman in the picture. Charlotte Atherton.

His pulse sped up a notch at the sight of his quarry.

But he wasn't the only hunter about. Another had her in his sights as well. One with a giggly assistant who couldn't seem to stand still in her excitement. The boy crept closer to his target, took careful aim, and waited. Waited for her to drop the laundry basket and reach for the first sheet. Waited for her to fold. Waited until the precise moment she leaned over to lay the clean linen in the bottom of the basket.

A *pop* sounded, followed by a less-than-dignified screech as the rope's end slapped against Miss Atherton's . . . end. The woman jerked upright, one hand moving to cover the offended area as she spun.

Now the truth would show itself. Stone waited for the explosion.

"Stephen Farley!"

And there it was. Would she fetch a switch? Perhaps a strop? These tight-laced teacher types always had something around for maintaining discipline. Never a drop of humor in them, and blessed little compassion.

The two pranksters darted out of his vision, but Stone didn't move the glasses to follow them. His attention was locked on the face that had just turned his way.

The photograph hadn't done her justice. Stone's breath leaked out of him in a quiet whistle. Hair the color of sunlight shining through honey. Sun-kissed cheeks and snapping blue-green eyes. Why, if she softened that stern expression of hers, she'd be downright pretty.

"That's quite a clever contraption you've put together, Stephen," she called after the fleeing children. "But if you ever

administer it in that fashion again, you'll be writing me an essay on the role of gentlemanly behavior in the advancement of civilization." She shouted the last, ensuring the boy heard her dire threat. If one could call that bit of pudding a threat. An essay? Really? That's what she used to keep the children in line?

Taskmasters the world over were hanging their heads in shame. Wouldn't a kidnapper have to enlist bigger guns to keep her charges from escaping? Locked doors, perhaps. Chains. At least a few threats of bodily harm. A coil of unease tightened in his gut. Something about this situation didn't sit right.

Stone pushed up on his elbows and started to drop the field glasses, but Miss Atherton did something at just that moment that arrested him. She smiled. Small and sweet and oh-so-secret as she slowly turned back toward her laundry. A fondness for the troublesome boy had glowed from within its depths. Not the smile of a madwoman or an abductress tasting future payments, but the smile of a mother.

It must have been that smile that kept him from hearing the nearly silent footsteps creeping up behind him. When the muffled sound finally registered in his brain, his attacker was upon him.

Stone rolled to his back, his hands curving around the grips of both pistols. They never cleared leather. For the gray-haired gnome that had materialized out of the hillside slammed a rifle butt against the top of his head, and Stone's world went black.