

***Hold Back the Night* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

Sometime during the night, gang graffiti bled through the three coats of white paint the Reverend Thomas Stonehill and his ragtag congregation had slathered over the sanctuary walls. Sometime during the night, a homeless man picked the lock and made himself a bed under the unorthodox picture of Jesus that graced the front of the church. Sometime during the night, urban phantoms dumped trash on the steps, dug up the last chrysanthemum plant in the narrow flower bed and left a note in the mail slot complaining about the dessert at the Wednesday night sharing supper.

“More ice cream. Less talk.” Thomas crumpled the two sentences in his hand and stared somberly at the old man who was gathering his belongings into a utilitarian stack honed by years of living on the street. Once he finished Thomas held out the note. “Did you write this?”

The old man shook his head.

“Do you know about our Wednesday night sharing suppers?”

The old man just stared at him.

“Every Wednesday night at six we serve a meal here for anybody who’s hungry. You’re always welcome. And next time you need a place to stay, ring the bell. I’ll open the door for you. No need to break in.”

“Churches ain’t supposed to be locked,” the old man mumbled.

“And kids aren’t supposed to get their kicks out of spray painting walls and smashing furniture, but sometimes they do.”

The old man inclined his head toward the picture that had watched over him as he slept. “Person who painted that must have taken a kick to the head.”

The grim line of Thomas's mouth relaxed a little. “Think so?”

“Jesus with four different faces.” The old man shrugged. “Who’d think like that?”

“How do you know it’s Jesus?”

“That face looks like him.” The old man pointed to one of the four images superimposed over the edges of the others.

“The white one, you mean? Maybe if you were black, the one beside it would look like Jesus.”

“What kind of church is this? What call you got to come down here to the Corners and mess with people’s religion?”

“What call you got to drink yourself blind every night and wake up in a strange place every morning?” Thomas asked the question without a trace of condescension in his voice. He knew he had no right to judge. He was no better than the man in the cast-off clothing, no better than anyone.

“Ain’t got much pity in your soul for a sick old man, do you? What kind of preacher are you, anyway?”

“The kind who thinks pity’s a waste of time.”

Thomas looked at his watch. It was gold, twenty-four carats, with a new imitation leather band that was already cracking. “We’ll be having church here in less than an hour. You’re welcome to stay.”

“Nah.” The old man scratched himself, starting at his sparsely forested head and progressing steadily downward to places that most men didn’t scratch in public. “I’ll be moving on.”

Thomas reached for his wallet. He pulled out three dollar bills and handed them over. “Will we see you on Wednesday?”

The man stuffed the bills in his pocket. "Don't take charity."

"Then think of it as supper with friends."

"Don't want no friends." The man strapped his belongings together with a belt and lifted the bundle to his shoulder. Without another word, he limped across the room and disappeared out the door.

The door slammed again a few seconds later behind a young woman herding two sleepy-eyed children in front of her. Her eyes were red, and her dark hair was uncombed. Her thin body seemed to fold in on itself, as if to protect the children with her shadow. Thomas didn't smile.

"You're early, Ema. I haven't even set up the chairs yet."

"I'll help." She attempted a smile. It was hard, since her lip was badly swollen. "I don't mind."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Sure."

"The kids, too?"

"They don't eat this early."

"There's cereal out on the kitchen table upstairs. Milk and juice in the refrigerator."

"I couldn't—"

"You will." Thomas hiked his thumb toward the hall and the stairs leading to his apartment.

"And there's ice for your lip."

"Oh, my lip's fine. I just bumped into—"

"Wrap the ice in a dish towel. Twenty minutes on, twenty minutes off, until church starts."

She nodded. In moments she and the children had closed his apartment door behind them.

And Thomas Stonehill was alone with a painting of Jesus and his own thoughts.

He was comfortable with neither. The picture was new and disturbing in its intensity. His thoughts were old and tormented him constantly.

He stared at the picture and filled the silence with the voice that had once held a congregation of thousands of souls enthralled.

“So, J.C., there go some of your little lambs, starting Sunday morning with the wolf right behind them.”

He didn’t expect an answer. He had given up believing in answers the same day he resigned from one of the most prestigious Protestant churches in the Midwest.

He moved closer. The four images seemed to merge, but he hardly saw them anyway. His vision was turned inward. “One homeless lamb, one battered, and two little ones so hungry and scared they don’t know how to laugh. Imagine that, J.C., kids who’ve forgotten how to laugh—if they ever learned how in the first place.”

He stared at the picture, but in his mind he saw the front of another church. He saw an altar spread with snow-white linen, a starkly simple golden cross and polished silver cornucopias overflowing with chrysanthemums, dahlias and the fruits of the autumn harvest. All the blessings of God’s good earth on God’s good table. For God’s good people.

“One homeless, one battered, two hungry and scared,” he said softly. “And one who talks to a God he doesn’t even believe in anymore. That’s what passes for God’s kingdom around here, J.C. Welcome to the Corners. Welcome to the Church of the Samaritan.”

The silence stretched into an eternity Thomas didn’t believe in, either. Then, from St. Michael’s Catholic church, three blocks away, bells chimed a Sunday morning welcome.

“Sorry, J.C, but nothing doing,” Thomas said, turning away. “You can’t fool me. I know you too well by now. If you had a voice, it would sound like tears.”

* * *

Garnet Anthony was awakened by church bells in the distance. The bells blended into the symphony of car engines, rap from somebody's stereo, and the screams of a neighbor's child.

She opened one eye and saw that it was later than it should have been. She opened the other and saw that in stumbling to bed in the dark last night she had paired a magenta satin sleep shirt with chartreuse boxer shorts.

It was the best rationale for sleeping nude that she could think of. She was just glad she didn't have company in her bed this morning to witness the mismatch.

Not that she'd had company there for a long, long time.

Garnet slowly sat up and shook the scramble of dark hair that was constant visual proof that the stereotypes people held about nurses were simply that. Her hair was long, thick and insolent—and she liked it that way. Even when it was tied back from her face, tendrils found their way into her eyes and ears, and curls bounced against her neck.

As she scrubbed sleep from her eyes, the mirror beside her bed reminded her that nothing about her called forth images of soothing voices or healing hands. She owed her outrageous face to generations of immigrant ancestors who had made the Corners their first stop in the U.S. of A. Some—the luckiest—had moved on to other, healthier places, but not before they had flooded the Corners' gene pool with a splash of this and a shower of that.

She had wide Slavic cheekbones and tilted almond eyes that she owed to a mystery country in the east—of a color green that brought to mind the hills of Ireland. Her tawny skin had been a gift from her father, who was half Egyptian, and her mother, who claimed Comanche blood. An infusion of Puerto Rican sunshine and Nordic frost had given her both a generous smile and enough caution not to use it very often. On the rare occasions when teachers had praised her during her school years, they had told her she was “striking” or “interesting.” “Pretty” had been reserved for girls from more conventional backgrounds.

Garnet fought her way out of bed and crossed to the refrigerator for a long drink of milk straight out of the carton. She drank milk on waking and coffee at bedtime. She ate pasta for

breakfast and pancakes at supper, and indulged in desserts any time the law allowed. She had never lived her life the way the world expected, and most of the time she didn't give the world's opinion more than a passing thought.

Except that today, considering what lay ahead of her, the world was probably right, and she was probably *loco*.

A quick shower later, and nearly dressed, Garnet noted that the child in the tiny apartment next door was still screaming.

Thirteen-month-old Chantelle probably wanted her breakfast. Her mother, Serena, no different from most sixteen-year-old girls, liked to sleep late. Of all the young mothers Garnet knew, Serena was the finest. But that didn't mean she had magically matured during childbirth into a woman who could willingly sacrifice all her own pleasures and desires for the sake of the bawling six-pound bundle of trouble that, in one supremely painful moment, had become her lifetime commitment.

In the hallway, Garnet buttoned the sleeve of her white blouse with one hand and knocked on Serena's door with the other.

"Hey, Serena, your kid's hungry. Either get up and open the door so I can take her home and feed her, or get up and feed her yourself."

"Go 'way."

Garnet switched hands to button her other sleeve and continued to pound. "I'm not going anywhere," she said. "Open up."

The door gave way under her fist. On the other side of the doorway Serena pulled her T-shirt down so that it almost covered her panties. "You know, you oughta be somebody's mother."

"What? And be so busy with my own kids I'd miss chances to order you around?" Garnet squatted and held out her arms. Chantelle, tears dripping down her chin, came into them and wiped her face on Garnet's blouse.

Garnet rose, clutching Chantelle against her. "Thanks, runny nose," Garnet said wryly. "I probably have another clean blouse."

Serena yawned. "If you'd left us alone..."

"This was the best of two alternatives. If she'd kept on crying, I would have come over here and murdered you in your bed."

"At least I wouldn't have to get up."

"You are one lazy woman." Garnet reached out to rumple Serena's curls to take any sting out of her words. "Want me to feed her while you take a shower?"

"Nah. You feed her junk."

"Peanut butter and pancake sandwiches are not junk."

"I bought her favorite cereal yesterday." Serena held up her hands to stave off Garnet's next words. "And juice. I bought juice, too."

"You've been listening to my lectures."

"I just got a talent for self-preservation." Serena dragged Chantelle from Garnet's arms. "It's Sunday. Why are you dressed like a nurse? Don't you get a day off?"

Garnet was the administrator of Mother and Child, a unique maternal health project that struggled to provide both health care and social services to the women and children of the Corners. Garnet had carved the program and the job out of nothing, bantering and begging and threatening her way to obtaining grants from private charities and public programs so that no one in the community would have to suffer the way she once had.

She was administrator and nurse practitioner, secretary and janitor. She loved the variety, the constant challenge, the smiles on the faces of children who might not be alive if Mother and Child didn't exist.

And she despised everything and everybody who interfered with helping those children.

"I've got to go see somebody," she said.

Serena bounced her daughter on her hip, and Chantelle quieted. "Where?"

Garnet looked past Serena to the one-room apartment that was probably the nicest home the young woman had ever known. It was almost painfully clean, but Chantelle's toys cluttered the floor in colorful disarray. Garnet approved of the combination. "Wilford Heights."

"Uh-uh. That's Coroner territory."

"People territory."

"You're crazy, girl."

"Just doing my job." Garnet crossed her arms and prepared for battle. It would be good practice for the day to come. "And I'm not going to let a bunch of punkass kids keep me from doing it just because they think the dirt outside some housing project is worth dying for."

"You'd be the one dying."

"Better not be. These kids know me. I've delivered their girlfriends' babies, held their mamas' hands while they tried to come down off drugs. They aren't going to shoot me."

"It's Candy you're going to see, isn't it?"

Garnet turned her gaze to Serena. "She's been having cramps and she's afraid to come to the clinic tomorrow."

"It's not the Coroners you'll have to worry about, then. It's the Knights who'll shoot you. They see you going over there, they'll guess who you're going to visit."

"Let them."

“You’re crazy.”

“No. Sane. Somebody’s got to be sane in this place. Otherwise those kids aren’t going to know there’s a better way to live than shooting each other over street signs and hand signs and colors.”

“Candy knew what she was doing when she started kicking with Francis and his friends. She knew Demon wouldn’t let her get away with it.” Serena poked Garnet’s chest with an index finger to make her point.

“Francis is a good man.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it.”

Garnet was glad to see Serena was worried about her. It was always a good sign when a kid like Serena, who already had the world on her shoulders, could still worry about somebody else. “I’ll be careful,” she promised.

“Listen, if Hell has a zip code, it’s the same as ours. You can’t change that, Garnet. The Corners has been here for a hundred years, and it’ll be here another hundred. Everything’ll be exactly the same when Chantelle’s grandkids are out playing on the sidewalk.”

“If Chantelle’s grandkids are *able* to play on the sidewalks, then it *won’t* be the same Corners. It’ll be a better place.”

“I still don’t think you should go.”

“It could be you over there, needing me.”

Serena’s response wasn’t fit for the baby’s ears.

“You’d better hope that’s not Chantelle’s first word,” Garnet said.

“Let me know when you get home.”

“Just don’t go back to bed. I don’t want to have to wake you up again.” Garnet leaned over and kissed Chantelle’s cheek.

Half an hour later Serena’s door was cracked when Garnet strode down the hall—in a fresh white blouse. As she passed she heard the clang and screech of cartoons. She wondered if Chantelle was watching them, too.

Thomas had to set up chairs and install the pulpit under the picture. With three chairs under each arm, he made his way to the front of the church. The graffiti gleamed at him as he unfolded the chairs.

There was nothing to be done about the graffiti this morning. Another coat of paint might subdue it. Then again, it might not. The MidKnights had wanted their message to last through eternity. It had been painted a deep royal blue and outlined in black enamel. The artist had talent. Their symbol, a sword, had been rendered in loving detail. The profane, mysterious message accompanying it had been carefully stroked, layer upon layer, until it seemed to leap off the wall—right through three coats of white paint.

The victorious graffiti seemed to point out the futility of everything Thomas was trying to do. But over the past year he had grown to accept the feeling that little he was doing would make a difference, anyway. He had spent two years doing nothing at all before he moved to the Corners to start the Church of the Samaritan. That had been far worse. Here, at least, he was struggling, not drifting. If he and the people of the Corners were going to drown, they were going to go down fighting. Together.

A woman’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“You could get the boy who did that, you know, get him and his friends and tell them to paint you a mural over that mess. Jesus at Gethsemane or the Last Supper. Only way it’s ever gonna get covered up.”

Thomas turned. For the first time that morning he smiled. "You're early, Dorothy. Did you come to give me advice or help set up the chairs?"

"I'm on my way to Mass at St. Michael's." Dorothy Brown joined him in front of the graffiti. She was a tiny woman of indeterminate age, dark-skinned and silver-haired. This morning she was dressed in a perfectly preserved green rayon suit with padded shoulders and a pillbox hat with a short green veil. Dorothy had lived in the Corners as long as anyone could remember. She had taught in the Corners' schools, served in local government and chaired any board worth chairing. Her ruling passion was to create a community in this place that some people called a ghetto.

"Can't say those boys of ours got no talent." She cocked her head. "I'm betting Ferdinand Sanchez did that one. His mother taught him to draw like that. She was a pretty little thing. Used to spend hours with him teaching him to do stuff. Then one morning she just up and left. His father's no good."

"I've crossed Mr. Sanchez's path a time or two."

"Old Testament on this side—" Dorothy pointed to the opposite wall "—New Testament on that. Ferdinand could do it."

"Last time I saw Ferdinand, he was urinating on the front steps."

"Trying to get your attention."

"He succeeded." Thomas folded his arms. "So it's Mass this morning?"

"Your turn next week." Dorothy hiked her purse to her shoulder. "I spread myself around."

"Like icing on a cake."

"What am I missing here this morning? You gonna preach on something interesting for a change?"

“The miracle of the loaves and fishes.”

“Just don’t go getting down on folks like you usually do. They need some God on Sunday mornings. Get tired of hearing about how they’re supposed to change the world. Most of them just sitting here wishing they’d got a little sleep last night or had something to eat for breakfast.”

“And God’s supposed to fill their stomachs?”

“He got a better chance at doing it than you got.”

“I’ll give them some God.”

“Give yourself a little, too, while you’re at it.” She patted his arm. Before he could think of an adequate response she was gone.

Thomas stared out the window, watching Dorothy’s small figure disappear into the fog of a Corners’ autumn morning.

Three young men materialized out of the same fog. Two wore black hoodies left open to the elements, the other had chopped the sleeves off a denim jacket and covered it with custom patches. Underneath they wore muddy-hued plaid shirts buttoned just at the collar over black T-shirts and sagging khaki work pants. He knew that when they got closer, he would also see an array of piercings and tattoos, including the required knight’s sword, tattooed on the inside of the right forearm.

Along with similarities there were differences. One wore a black watch cap pulled low over his ears, one a generic cap with the bill turned up. One wore nothing on his head except a folded bandanna tied to one side over cornrows divided and braided with military precision. Thomas knew the boys well enough to realize that the one with the watch cap was the one to worry about.

They weren’t walking fast, and they weren’t walking slow. They strutted as if they owned the sidewalk, the street and the neighborhood. If they had been on the other side of the street, their stride would have been jumpy and defiant. They were members of the MidKnights, often just referred to as the Knights, and the other side of the street, where the Wilford Heights housing project began, belonged to the Coroners.

And this place, where Thomas stood, where his small congregation would soon gather to try to find meaning in their existence, belonged to a God that Thomas wasn't even sure he believed in anymore.

As the young men approached the sidewalk in front of the church, Thomas watched closely. The church was nothing more than a converted storefront, the congregation nothing more than a few souls who, in giving voice to the despair that plagued their lives, spoke for a whole community. But the church and this congregation were Thomas's life.

He would be no less ruthless than any MidKnight in protecting what was his.

Despite her reassuring words to Serena, Garnet had expected trouble from the moment she promised Candy Tremira that she would go to Wilford Heights to examine her.

Garnet always expected trouble, and she was rarely disappointed. Optimism was a waste of time and pessimism a waste of energy. She was a realist, and by expecting the worst, she could always be pleasantly surprised if it didn't occur.

Today there were going to be no surprises.

"Where're you going, babe?" Andre Rollins asked as she waited for the walk sign at the corner of Twelfth and Wilford.

She turned slowly and raked him with her gaze. "Who's the babe here, Andre? I was changing your diapers when I was eight."

"I asked where you was going."

"I'm going across the street."

Andre moved in front of her, and two other young men flanked her. She sighed. "Come on. You boys got nothing better to do than hassle me this morning?"

"Don't go dissing us, babe," Andre said. "You show respect, or we'll teach you how."

"I respect you," Garnet said. "Only not as much as I used to." She felt a hand on her arm and fingers making bruises. She forced herself not to turn her head or wince. "See, I used to think you *were* somebody," she went on. "Back when you didn't need your enforcers to make you feel like a big man."

Andre barely inclined his head, and the fingers no longer squeezed her arm. "What call you got crossing that street?"

"My job, Andre." She moved a little closer to him.

"There's no clinic 'cross the street."

"There's a woman across that street who's afraid to come to the clinic because she knows you boys are waiting for her to show her face over here."

"Candy?"

She turned to the young man who had spoken, the same young man who had probably left fingerprints on her arm. He wore a dark watch cap pulled over his ears and rolled just to his eyebrows. The pale face that leered at her was one she never wanted to glimpse on a night when she was out on the streets alone.

"Demon, let it go," she said. "So maybe Candy took off with another guy. You think you're the first man that's happened to? It doesn't matter. You've got another woman now."

Sadly, that was true. Another young woman had replaced Candy Tremira in Demon's life. Another young woman who would learn that macho posturing and smoldering good looks meant nothing next to the reality of living with his erratic temper.

He smiled, and she was chilled by it. "Candy and I are going to have a conversation," he said.

“Andre.” She turned to appeal to him. “I’ve got a job to do. You show me where it says a nurse or doctor can only help patients who wear the right colors. Show me where it says this stupid war between you and the Coroners is going to do anything for the Corners besides make life harder here.”

Andre put his fist under her chin. She didn’t flinch. She felt Demon and Ferdinand, the third MidKnight, close ranks around her.

“You go on over to Wilford Place,” Andre said, “and you walking into trouble.”

She looked straight into his eyes. They were the color of his skin, a deep, rich brown. “Look, I’ve watched you grow up. I know what you can do and who you can be. I know who you *are*. Don’t do this, Andre.”

There was always something flickering, simmering in Andre’s eyes. Some of the kids who patrolled these blocks had eyes that were as empty as the futures they had been bequeathed. Andre’s weren’t. She stared into them, willing him to face the struggle going on inside himself, willing him to make the right decision.

“Get your hands off the lady.”

A man’s voice cut through the tension and splintered it into a thousand evil pieces. Garnet felt a hand on her shoulder, and before she could do anything, she had been flung to one side. In an instant a man’s large body was wedged protectively between her and the MidKnights.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the man asked.

For one confusing moment Garnet didn’t know to whom the question had been addressed. Then she saw the sneer on Andre’s face and knew it hadn’t been addressed to her. She had been cast aside as if she no longer had a part in the confrontation. A man in a plain gray suit was facing the MidKnights for her.

“Nobody’s talking to you, Padre.” Andre stood taller than he had with Garnet. He and the man, who easily topped six feet, were staring eye to eye. “Don’t get yourself involved in things got nothing to do with you.”

“Anything that happens in this neighborhood’s got something to do with me. You’re standing in front of my church. I live here.”

“That what you call it?” Andre reached into his T-shirt pocket for a cigarette. His gaze didn’t waver. He snapped his fingers, and Ferdinand moved around Thomas to light it for him.

“Who are you?” Garnet demanded. She tried to move, but the man continued to shield her.

“Thomas Stonehill,” he said shortly.

“Padre,” Andre said. He blew a puff of smoke in Thomas’s face. “Got himself a real important church right over there, with at least two, three people coming of a Sunday. Got himself an idea he’s gonna save the world. Starting right here on this spot.”

Shock began to recede, and anger seeped into its place. Garnet couldn’t fault the man, this Thomas Stonehill, for trying to protect her. Every time she had an audience she preached the gospel of people in the neighborhood watching out for each other.

But she could fault him for thrusting her aside when she had been in the midst of working out her problem with Andre. The good reverend had committed two unpardonable sins, and *she* was probably going to pay for them.

“This is between me and Andre,” she said, trying to step in front of Thomas. “Thank you, but we can finish this ourselves.”

Thomas hardly seemed to do more than shift his weight, but he cut off her path to Andre anyway. “I don’t think the young man’s intentions are the best.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

Thomas acted as if he hadn't heard her. "The lady has a right to walk these sidewalks without you kids bothering her. Everybody has that right."

"Think so?" Andre tossed his cigarette at Thomas's feet. It bounced off his shoe. "Well, I think she don't. I think she crosses that street today, she gonna wish she never did walk these sidewalks, 'cause we be walking them right behind her."

Garnet's heart sank. Andre had committed himself now. If she ignored his warning, she would pay. She wasn't afraid; she was only sorry the chance to change things had been taken out of her hands.

Futilely, from Thomas's side, she made one last attempt to bring Andre to his senses. "Andre, taking care of Candy's my job. Even warring nations let the Red Cross come on to their battlefields to care for the wounded."

"Candy flipped sides. She hang with the Knights first, and now she be hanging with the Coroners. She not wounded," Andre said. "Yet."

"She's dead," Demon said, with a smirk. "You're dead if you help her."

"Don't make threats, son," Thomas said. The words were mild; the tone was steel.

"You gonna stop me, Padre?" Demon stepped right up to him. He wasn't as tall as Thomas, but his adolescent body had been fired in the furnace of hot city streets. His chest was broad, and under the stretched-out hoodie, Garnet knew that his shirt bulged with muscle. And quite likely something even more sinister.

"If I have to."

Demon took a step backward and looked away, as if his bluff had been called. Then he sprang.

Garnet leaped back in horror as Thomas Stonehill came crashing toward her. It took her a second to realize that he had not been taken unaware. As she watched he twisted, using his weight to take Demon down with him. In moments Demon was pinned underneath him. Thomas had the side of one hand against Demon's Adam's apple and a knee in Demon's groin.

Demon seemed to be in shock; then he raised a fist.

Thomas slammed Demon's arm to the ground with his free hand. "Hit me, son, and I'll have to choose between cutting off your air or your chance to make babies."

Andre and Ferdinand had just looked on, used—Garnet guessed—to Demon fighting and winning his own battles. Now they started toward Thomas.

"Leave him alone!" Garnet kicked off her shoe, a pump with a sizable heel. She grabbed it to use as a weapon.

Andre glanced at her, but he kept coming. Ferdinand backed off, not from fear, she guessed, but from a deep-seated belief that fighting with women was not masculine.

Garnet moved forward as Andre closed in, but before she could attempt to strike, Thomas's foot shot out and connected with Andre's ankle. The kick had just enough force to make him stumble backward.

A siren sounded. For a moment Garnet couldn't believe it. The Corners had inadequate police protection, as well as every other type of public service. Response time on direct calls was often longer than it took to dismantle a building brick by brick, and police patrols were few and far between. Now, for the first time in her memory, a police car was *where* it was supposed to be, *when* it was supposed to be.

She wondered if the Reverend Thomas Stonehill had somehow found time to pray for intercession.

Before her eyes, Ferdinand melted into the fog and disappeared down an alleyway. Andre started toward Thomas and Demon again, but Thomas had already rolled to the side. Demon was suddenly free. He sat up and looked around wildly, as if considering whether to go for Thomas, a

gun, or to escape before the police got out of their car. Andre jerked him upright and made his decision by grasping his arm and pulling him toward the alley where Ferdinand had vanished.

The police car door opened, but for a moment Garnet and Thomas were the only ones on the sidewalk.

Thomas got easily to his feet. "Are you all right?"

Garnet stared at him. She was filled with confusing emotions. His black hair was ruffled, and his suit was dusty, but otherwise he looked as if his fight with the MidKnights had been no more taxing than a Sunday school class.

"Who in the hell do you think you are?" she exploded.

He stared at her as if she were crazy.

"You come here and think you can change this place, but you don't know a thing about it," she said. "You've just made sure that the Knights will stay on my case. Well, Reverend Stonehill, you'd better say your prayers loud and clear tonight. Because the next time those boys come looking for me, they might well *use* the guns they had tucked away today!"