

# The Outsider

JANUARY 1812

## CHAPTER 1

The harsh clang of the meetinghouse bell shattered the peace of the night. At the sound, Gabrielle jerked upright in her narrow bed. She had not been asleep, but instead had been lying very still with her eyes wide open staring out at the grainy darkness and listening to the soft breathing of the sleeping girls around her. She had matched her own breaths with theirs in hopes of bringing quiet harmony back to her thoughts, but the gift of knowing kept nipping at the corners of her mind. Visions of men with blackened faces, corn melting, and shadows of the world flitting among the trees had troubled her thoughts all day, but it was all too vague for understanding. All she knew for sure was the sense of dread awake and growing inside her.

Usually when the gift of knowing came to her it wasn't shrouded in so much mystery. Rather it was clear, as clear as her image in a still pool. But this time a handful of pebbles had dropped in to cloud the pool. Earlier she had gone to her quiet place in the woods to pray for it was often while she prayed that the knowing filled her mind, but the vision had stayed dark and murky.

The bell kept tolling the alarm as Gabrielle quickly rose from her bed. Around her the younger sisters were waking and jumping out of bed to see what might be happening. Outside one of the brothers was shouting, "Fire!"

While the girls clustered around the window, Gabrielle pulled her dress over her head and found her shoes. She had no need to look out to discover what was happening for the gift of knowing had cleared. She could see the flames whooshing through the hay and circling the posts of their harvest barn. Nathan was there in the midst of the flames crying out to her, but his voice was too faint to hear. There was no time for looking. She had to hurry to warn Nathan of his danger.

She left one of the older girls in charge before she slipped out into the hallway. It was against the rules for her to talk to Nathan without another brother or sister present, but surely tonight the rules could be broken. Nathan would be rushing out to the fire in his usual reckless way. She had to stop him before he ran headlong into danger.

Already the boys were out of their rooms and pounding down their stairway. Gabrielle hurried down the girls' stairway over to the boys' side of the house. She'd stop him on his way out and make him understand the need for caution.

"Sister Gabrielle, where are ye going?" Sister Mercy's voice stopped her.

Gabrielle spun around to look at the older woman. "Oh praise the heavens, Sister Mercy. You can help me. I must find Brother Nathan. He is in terrible danger."

Sister Mercy was frowning. "Ye know it is forbidden for you to go to the boys' side of the house. And where is thy cap?"

Gabrielle touched the dark curls that fell about her shoulders. It was a vanity to show or enjoy the feel of her hair on her neck, a vanity she'd never been able to completely put away from her. But surely at a time like this one shouldn't be worried with vanity. "But you don't understand, Sister Mercy. I must warn him. The fire!" Gabrielle's eyes widened as suddenly in her mind Nathan was falling among the flames. "We must keep him away from the fire."

"Ye talk nonsense, child. Our new harvest barn has caught fire. Every hand is needed to put out the fire and save what we can."

Gabrielle turned away from Sister Mercy back toward the boy's stairway. She was always obedient. It seemed only right to be so, but this time her mind would not let her rest. Some power stronger than her need to be obedient to the Shaker rules was pushing her.

"Anyway he is gone out to help with the fire already." Sister Mercy's voice softened as she touched Gabrielle's shoulder. "Look at me, Sister Gabrielle." When Gabrielle obediently turned to her, Sister Mercy held her candle up high to better see Gabrielle's face and asked, "Has thou seen a vision, my child?"

Gabrielle didn't like to reveal her visions. As a child it had brought her nothing but rebukes and trouble, but even among the Believers who prized and honored such gifts, Gabrielle still held them close to her. Only when she had the gift of song during the meetings could she feel completely free to share her visions. Now she reluctantly said, "Perhaps it is nothing."

"Why do ye fear this gift from the spirits, my child? Better you should learn to appreciate and use it for the good of all." Sister Mercy lowered the candle. When she spoke again, her voice was thoughtful. "I had thought to ask you to watch after the little ones while I went to help at the fire, but instead I shall stay and you may go. Remember, child, engaged in thy duty, ye have no reason to fear."

When Gabrielle started to turn away, Sister Mercy stopped her. "First you must cover your hair." She removed her own cap and handed it to Gabrielle.

"Thank you, Sister Mercy." Gabrielle stuffed her hair under the cap as best she could, curtsied, and hurried out before Sister Mercy had a chance to change her mind. She loved Sister Mercy, but she was very strict about the Shaker rules.

At the barn the men and women had formed a water line, but it was futile. Already the flames were reaching for the roof. Some of the brethren were pulling out what they could from the doors, but as each moment passed it was more and more dangerous to even go close to the barn.

Gabrielle stopped a little away from the milling crowd of the sisters and brethren as her eyes frantically searched for some sight of Nathan.

The fire lit up the faces of her Shaker brothers and sisters in a strange unearthly way, and on each face was written the same grave concern. That barn held much of their harvest and thus their promise of plentiful provisions through the remainder of the winter and spring. Gabrielle heard someone shout, "Those of the world are responsible for this."

Gabrielle could only agree. Those of the world didn't understand the way of the Shakers, but the little they did know seemed to upset and anger some of them so much that they wanted to destroy the community growing at Harmony Hill.

Gabrielle's eyes flew through the people, not even lingering on the few strange faces. They must be people of the world come to help put out the fire or to perhaps rejoice in the barn's burning. When at last she spotted Elder Caleb, one of the leaders of the community, she ran to him.

"Brother Caleb, have you seen Brother Nathan?"

Even with the worry of the fire troubling him, he still looked down at Gabrielle with steady kindness. "Nay, Sister Gabrielle. I have not. Why do ye seek him?"

"I fear he is in danger. That he may yet be in the barn among the flames."

"Nay, assuredly not. All the brethren have been told to back away from the fire. We have no desire to see anyone hurt for a bit of grain."

Gabrielle grabbed the Elder's arm as he started to turn away from her. Panic squeezed a tight hand around her heart as in her mind's eye she saw Nathan still inside the barn with flames closing in about him. "He isn't out here," Gabrielle insisted. "He is in the barn."

"Control yourself, Sister. I have told you that cannot be." In the light of the flames Elder Caleb's face held reproof as he pulled away from her.

The ominous crack of timbers giving way filled the air. Then one of the young brothers was running from the barn, shouting. "Nathan's still in there."

Silence fell over the group. Suddenly one of the strangers broke from the crowd and yelled at the boy. "Where is he?"

The boy was almost weeping. "I don't know. He was right behind me, and then he wasn't."

Elder Caleb stepped in front of the man from the world. His slight figure contrasted with the stranger's tall strength. "Nay, I cannot allow you to go in there, Dr. Scott. It is too dangerous. The roof is already giving way."

The man didn't hesitate. "But I must," he said as he started for the barn.

Gabrielle stepped past Elder Caleb to grab the man's arm. "He is not more than ten feet from the door a bit to the left of the center. But you must hurry. The rafters above where he lies are aflame."

The man's eyes narrowed as he stared at her intently while he listened to her words. Then he turned and ran into the burning barn. In a few moments he was out, carrying Nathan in his arms like a child. Nathan's breeches were on fire, and the man's jacket sleeve erupted in flames. Gabrielle who had trailed after the man toward the burning barn was the first to reach them. She yanked off her scarf to beat out the flames on Nathan's legs and the man's jacket.

When others began clustering around them, the man shouted at them angrily, "Back away and give the boy some air!" The people parted to allow him to carry Nathan several steps farther away from the barn before he laid him down and knelt beside him. The man leaned down to put his ear close to Nathan's mouth.

Gabrielle held her own breath. Nathan was so motionless. Ever since she'd first met Nathan after he and his family had joined the Shakers, he'd seemed to be constantly moving. Even during silent prayer he could not be completely still. Now not even a finger twitched. The man raised his head up and said to no one in particular. "He's alive."