

TO MEND A DREAM

Tamera Alexander

*To everyone who ever made a perfect plan, then
had God change it—for the better.*

*We can make our plans, but the
LORD determines our steps.*
PROVERBS 16:9 (NLT)



 CHAPTER ONE 

Nashville, Tennessee
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WHAT SHE WOULDN'T GIVE FOR THE CHANCE TO BE BACK IN that house again. If only for a day . . .

Savannah Darby carefully refolded the stationery and tucked it back inside the drawer of her bedside table alongside the family Bible—and her impossible wish.

“This is my side of the dresser!”

“No! It's *my* side!” The metallic scrape of her brother's leg braces punctuated his frustration.

“I know it's mine because—”

“Andrew! Carolyne!” Savannah pierced her younger siblings with a look, then lowered her voice by a degree, not wishing for the mothers and children on both sides of their room and across the hall to hear them. Again. They'd waited for months for an opening to move in here. She couldn't afford for this not to work, in more ways than one. “I've already received two warnings about your arguing, and we've not been here three weeks yet. Please,” she added firmly, seeing Carolyne's mouth fly open, “keep your voices down.”

Carolyne pouted. “At least in the boarding house we had our own dressers.”

“No, you didn’t.” Savannah gathered her sewing satchel. “In the boarding house you each had your own overturned crate.”

Guilt bowed ten-year-old Carolyne’s head. But Andrew, two years older and impatient to become a man, merely scowled.

“We all must share. And no more arguing.” Savannah kissed them both on the forehead, despite Andrew’s halfhearted attempt to dodge her affection. “I’ll see you back here this afternoon. Andrew, be careful with the deliveries. And remember, only one crate at a time.”

His frown deepened.

“Carolyne, when you finish your chores in the kitchen, read your lessons I outlined and study your French. Work the arithmetic equations I wrote out for you last night too. Andrew, see to your studies, including the reading in *Macbeth*. There’s a volume in the library downstairs. And remember you have a—”

“I know, Savannah.” He turned his back to her. “I’ve already said I’ll go.”

Hand on the doorknob, Savannah schooled a smile. “Next time, I’ll do my best to be excused from work to go with you, but—”

“I’m not a child. I can go by myself.”

“I know you can. I want to go for me, to hear what he has to say. Not because I think you’re incapable of going alone.”

His expression softened a fraction, and Savannah seized the momentary truce and took her leave, already late for work as it was. And dreading the price she would pay with Miss Hildegard.

She hurried down the two flights of stairs.

While she used to dream of getting married and having children, she’d never expected to become *mother* to a six- and eight-year-old at the age of eighteen. Now, four years later, her father and mother gone,

along with her older brothers, there were moments when she thought she was handling the responsibility fairly well. The rest of the time she desperately prayed she wasn't botching the job.

At a quarter past eight, the common room of the Nashville Widows' and Children's Home buzzed with life. Moving here represented a new start for them and was a great deal safer than where they'd been several blocks east. And not a rat in sight. Mice she could handle. But rats . . .

She shuddered, remembering what it had been like awakening at night in the boarding house to hear the rodents scurrying about in the dark. Or worse, when she felt one scuttle across the foot of her bed.

The succulent aroma of freshly baked cinnamon bread drifted from the kitchen and helped to banish the bad memories even as the homey scent encouraged her hunger, as did the promise of coffee. But the queue for breakfast was already twenty deep, and the clock on the wall insisted she keep moving.

Outside, the skies boasted a crystalline-blue color, and the sun already felt warm on her face. Summer had staked its claim.

Monday mornings always seemed busier somehow, both in foot traffic and on the streets. Scores of farm wagons and carriages vied for passage, with freight wagons only slowing their progress, the drivers pausing as cargo was loaded and unloaded. At every corner she was delayed. And the minutes rushed past.

She spotted the mercantile ahead and, once closer, saw Mr. Mulholland, the proprietor, standing just inside the doorway. Aware to the penny of how much she owed on her account, she thought of the bill she'd received last week reminding her of the outstanding balance, and a stab of guilt pierced her when she averted her gaze as she passed.

The man had been so kind to extend her credit. And though she

had no idea how she would manage it, she intended to repay every penny. Someday.

Out of breath, she raced down an alleyway, her mind turning again to Andrew's visit with the doctor. Determined not to borrow trouble until trouble left her no choice, she hurried inside the back entrance of Miss Hattie's Dress and Drapery Shop, then down the hallway, hoping to get to her sewing station before anyone realized she was—

She ran headlong into a red-faced Miss Hildegard.

Savannah reached out to steady the older woman, then quickly realized it wasn't Miss Hildegard who was about to go sprawling. Hand against the wall, Savannah managed to steady herself, only too aware of the veins bulging in her employer's neck.

"Pardon me, Miss Hildegard! I didn't—"

"*Finally*, Miss Darby, you see fit to grace us with your presence!"

Savannah's face went hot. "My apologies for being tardy, Miss Hildegard." She knew better than to try to offer an excuse. Nothing short of sudden death would satisfy this woman. And even then, Miss Bertha Hildegard would demand forenotice.

The woman huffed. "We are *all* in a state, Miss Darby! Betsy Anderson has taken ill and only now sent word, the slothful girl! So *you* must take her appointment this morning."

Not yet trusting she'd escaped with so minor a scolding, Savannah nodded quickly. "Of course, ma'am. I'll leave straightaway, right after I finish hemming the draperies for Mrs. Garrison's—"

"Mrs. Garrison can wait! This appointment is for redecorating an entire house, Miss Darby. Draperies, bedcovers, duvets, pillows, window shades . . . everything. The patron also mentioned furniture, for which we'll work with Franklin's." An odd look crossed the older woman's face. "The newly arrived owner, a Mr. Aidan Bedford, and

his fiancée, Miss Sinclair, are expecting you. Or rather, are expecting Miss Anderson. But you'll have to do."

Accustomed to the woman's disparaging comments, Savannah found them easier to endure when remembering that the former owner, Miss Hattie, had held her work in the highest regard. Miss Hattie's was the finest dress and drapery shop in town, and Savannah needed this job.

Miss Hildegard started down the hallway and gestured for her to follow. "The soon-to-be Mrs. Bedford visited the shop day before last and perused fabric samples. Our most *expensive* samples." If it were possible for a woman to salivate over the sale of fabric, Miss Hildegard was doing just that. "The couple has moved from Boston, and Miss Sinclair—such a cultured, lovely young woman—made it quite clear they're eager to make this house their home."

Savannah was already making a mental list of what to include in her sewing satchel. At the same time she found herself assessing the earnings a job like this could bring. Andrew not only needed new leg braces, but she'd also read recently about a physician up north who had developed boots made especially for people born with clubfeet. The boots were expensive, as were the leg braces. But what a difference they'd make for her brother. Plus, both of her siblings had grown several inches since last summer, and though she could sew anything, fabric didn't come cheaply.

She hated that Betsy's illness—and therefore her coworker's loss of this extra commission—meant personal gain for herself. But if Betsy couldn't do the job, somebody else would. And it might as well be her.

"I'll gather what's needed, Miss Hildegard, and leave straight-away. What's the address?"

Miss Hildegard's dark eyebrows drew together. "Let me make

myself clear, Miss Darby. I will *not* have you ruining this opportunity *or* making Mr. Bedford and his fiancée uncomfortable. The couple has every right to make that house their home.”

Savannah frowned. “Why would I ruin such an opportunity, ma’am? And as for the couple, I’ve not met either of them, so—”

“The house you’ll be redecorating . . . where they’re living? It’s Darby Farm.”