



# Table of Contents

Foreword . . . . .	ix
Chapter 1 Out of the Blue . . . . .	1
Chapter 2 A Change of Mind . . . . .	8
Chapter 3 A Case of Two Esthers. . . . .	19
Chapter 4 Grandpa’s Old Bookshelf . . . . .	28
Chapter 5 Duke Street . . . . .	36
Chapter 6 Case Number 66. . . . .	41
Chapter 7 Light in a Dark Place . . . . .	48
Chapter 8 At the Crossroads. . . . .	57
Chapter 9 A New Direction . . . . .	66
Chapter 10 From the Past to the Future . . . . .	71
Chapter 11 Higher Education . . . . .	79
Chapter 12 Going It Alone . . . . .	88
Chapter 13 The Man at the Green Dragon . . . . .	94
Chapter 14 A New Beginning. . . . .	102
Chapter 15 A Conflict of Interests. . . . .	108

Chapter 16 No Continuing City.....	114
Chapter 17 The Church Sale.....	117
Chapter 18 Alone.....	124
Chapter 19 The Widows' Club.....	132
Chapter 20 In the Multitude of Counselors.....	138
Chapter 21 Teach Us to Number Our Days.....	146
Chapter 22 Of Strawberries and Fresh Asparagus.....	153
Chapter 23 Second Honeymoon.....	160
Chapter 24 A New Millennium.....	165
Chapter 25 A Body to Surrender.....	171
Chapter 26 A Will to Surrender.....	178
Chapter 27 I Surrender All.....	185
I'm Free.....	193
Sources.....	195



## CHAPTER 1

# Out of the Blue

Emma struggled to open her eyes, but they were too heavy, or disconnected, or somehow very far away. It would be so much easier to surrender to the half consciousness that swirled about her head and flowed down to the tips of her fingers, barely perceptible at the furthest reaches of her awareness. But she was a Hurst, and Hursts never surrendered.

She forced her arm to move, to reach over almost instinctively to where her sister lay beside her. But Katie's spot was empty. That wasn't right.

Perhaps Emma wasn't awake after all, and this was just some freakish dream pretending to be reality. Perhaps she had merely to give in to the compulsion to sleep, or to pass out, and everything would be normal when she woke up for real.

Something shuffled beside the bed. Then someone breathed, and Emma knew that she was indeed awake, and that something was very, very wrong.

## Emma – A Will to Surrender

She forced her eyes to open. It was still night—the lack of sunlight through the window confirmed that—and yet she could distinctly make out the delicate scroll of white on the blue wallpaper beside her. Why was the light on in the middle of the night? And where was Katie?

“Emma,” called a voice through the haze. It was Mam. She was bending over her daughter with worried eyes. Pap was right beside her. “Emma, are you all right?”

“Do I have a boyfriend?” Emma asked in reply, as if the question made any sense.

“Yes,” said Mam with a catch in her voice.

“Well, who is it?”

“Don't you know?”

“No.”

Emma lay still again. She was almost eighteen—of course she had a boyfriend. Frank. Yes, Frank Eby. No, it was Christ. Or was it John? It was so hard to think.

Emma forced her eyes open again and looked at her mother with anxious questions. “What's wrong?” she asked.

Mam's right hand slipped up and gripped her mouth, as if she were holding something back, as if speaking would give life to her fears.

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Emma was hungry when she woke the next morning. Sunlight flooding the room announced that the hour for breakfast had long since passed. Why hadn't Katie wakened her? She pushed back the layers of quilts that shielded her from the Pennsylvania winter and immediately regretted it. Nineteen thirty-five was a cold year.

## Out of the Blue

Then she remembered her mother's anxious face framed by the pattern in the wallpaper the night before. Hadn't she passed out or something? She half remembered her mother whispering words like seizure and epilepsy to her father as she had fallen back to sleep.

Emma dressed quickly, allowing thoughts of breakfast to distract her from any further worries about the night before. It was still March—too early for fried potatoes—so breakfast was sure to be either pudding or fried mush. Either would suit; she was ravenous.

Besides, Mam wasn't a doctor. How could she tell a seizure from a nightmare—or a passing bout with a bad stomach? Then again, Mam's brother had suffered from seizures.

Thankfully, no one said much about it when Emma got to the table. Of course, everyone had already scattered to their various chores by the time she got there, so they couldn't have said much even if they had wanted to. Still, the lone plate of mush waiting for her in the middle of the table was silent testimony to the fact that something unusual had happened.

Emma was comforted by the group denial. It meant she could go on with her life as if nothing had happened. That is, until she had another spell just six weeks after the first one—again in the middle of the night. Apparently this wasn't some passing flu.

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“I'm sorry to tell you, Miss Hurst, but your mother is right,” said Dr. Wenger, the man who had cared for Emma since she was a baby. “The fainting spells, as you call them, were most probably seizures. And since I can't find any reason why a girl as

## Emma – A Will to Surrender

healthy as you should be having seizures, we're probably looking at a case of epilepsy.”

“Epilepsy? But how did I get it?”

“Sometimes people develop epilepsy after a fall or some other brain injury, but for most people, it just comes out of the blue.”

“Can you cure it?”

“No. But we can do a fairly good job of treating it with medication. I'm going to start you on a bit of phenobarbital and see if that does the trick. I don't want to give you too much at first because it might make you drowsy. We can always increase the dose later if you need more.”

Emma took the medication, though she was not happy with the idea, especially since—just like the doctor had warned—it did make her drowsy. Nor was it the cure-all she hoped it would be, for whenever she was under an unusual amount of stress or low on sleep, a seizure would overpower the medicine and throw her body into violent fits.

Usually when that happened, her tongue would suck back against her throat, causing her to hold her breath. Pap was afraid she might choke to death.

“Emma,” he said after a few of these breakthrough spells, “I made you this here block to keep you from choking. I'm gonna tie it to your bed and whenever you feel a spell coming on, I want you shove it in your mouth like this . . .” He demonstrated by placing the thin wooden block gently over his tongue and sliding it back in his mouth.

Emma didn't know what to say, but she had a suspicion she wasn't going to be very successful holding a stick in her mouth when she was convulsing. Oh well, what Pap wanted, Pap got.

“I'll try,” was all she said.

## Out of the Blue



And she did try. But it was as she suspected. Not only couldn't she hold onto the block once the seizures began, but she bit down upon it so tenaciously that she would often find, on coming to, that her cheeks and gums were bruised and torn from the uncontrolled battle between the block and her teeth.

But that was only a physical pain, and she could deal with it easily enough. The emotional pain—that was almost unbearable. So far, all of her seizures had been at night, and she had been very careful to keep those a secret; so she was fairly sure that no one outside the family knew she was an epileptic.

But, what if she would be seized during the daytime? What if she would go into a spell at the store, or at church, or at singing school? That would be the end of everything.

There was a way to fix that though—she could just stay home. Of course she couldn't stay home always—she did have to go to church—but even there she could sit on the back bench of the old ladies' section so she could make a quick escape through the anteroom if she felt a spell coming on.

It seemed like a good plan—if you could call a dateable young lady sitting among women three times her age good—but it was