



SOMETIMES, EVEN THE STRONG ONE
NEEDS SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO.

CSPA BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD-WINNER

MARIANNE EVANS



FISHER MEN OF ANTIOCH #2



The Stronghold

Marianne Evans

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Stronghold

COPYRIGHT 2018 by Marianne Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2019

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0156-1

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

In loving memory of Ruth Evans

My time with you was cut far too short, but remains so precious. As an RN, you healed bodies and spirits. As a mother, you raised an incredible family. Your legacy lives on!

What People are Saying

4 ½ * Top Pick – A great read, the narrative is a balanced blend of skillful character development and anticipated—as well as totally surprising—scenes that are sated with plenty of romantic tension.

~ Romantic Times on Forgiveness

Marianne Evans is the queen of Christian romance.

~ Nancee Marchinowski, Book Reviewer and
Blogger at Perspectives by Nancee

This talented author satisfies both heart and soul

~ NYT Bestselling Author Ruth Ryan Langan

Fisher Men of Antioch

The Return
The Stronghold
The Journey

Other books by Marianne Evans

Devotion
Forgiveness

Woodland Church Series:

Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts, Key

Sisters in Spirit Series:

Aileen's Song
Siobhan's Beat
Kassidy's Crescendo
Maeve's Symphony

AND MANY MORE

'My son,' the Father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'

~ Luke 15:31

1

Aaron Fisher twisted the knob on the radio, cranking the volume on the oldies station. His lips curved as the Byrd's version of *Turn, Turn, Turn* played. The poignant melody filled the air with nostalgia as the words of Ecclesiastes rang out through flawless harmonies...

A time to every purpose under heaven...

Aaron and his older brother, Phillip, had always joked that the classic song resonated across generations because the lyrics came straight from The Great Author, God Himself, through the biblical verses.

A flood of gratitude covered his spirit. Tides had turned between him and Phillip. Resentment, anger, bitterness had been torn away in recent months, exposing a newfound closeness and affection. Before his sibling's return to their hometown of Antioch, Indiana, Aaron would never have dreamed of resuming strong bonds with Phillip. Aaron had stored

too much pain after Phillip's leaving to believe in new beginnings; that emotion had barreled straight to the surface of his soul, and their relationship, when Phillip came back and replanted roots in their hometown.

Antioch was rural, a farm community governed by a slow pace, deep faith, and the kind of small town atmosphere folks craved without even realizing it—until they spent time within its borders, falling into its slow pace and vibrations of peace. Phillip had learned that lesson the hard way, and Aaron had learned to forgive and move forward with his brother all over again.

Praise God.

Aaron smiled once more at the lyrics, then focused on the road.

Members of the Antioch High School marching band high-stepped across the practice field. Aaron rolled down the driver's side window of his vehicle, ignoring the chill of air spiced by wood smoke transforming to the very essence of autumn. Preps for Friday night football were in full swing. Tonight, the Antioch Tigers would be taking on their arch rivals from Arcola. He tapped his fingertips in time to the school anthem then lifted his hand in greeting to Scott Pepperfield, who drove past in the opposite direction. He needed to stop by Pepperfield Farm Supply and pick up a gear case replacement kit for Ben. Now that harvest season neared its end, youngest sibling Ben would have time to work his mechanical magic on the family's aged but still serviceable tractor.

First things first, though. Aaron checked the clock on the dash of his truck and accelerated slightly. He had about ten minutes to spare. Right now, he had to attend Dad's appointment at Briar Medical Center. His

parents wanted him to be another set of eyes and ears as Dr. Skogee diagnosed issues Dad had following a heart attack six months earlier. The cause seemed to be related to his medications, and had reached a point that required attention. Flicking on the turn signal, Aaron executed a left onto Second Street, passing through the outskirts of Antioch's three-block town center.

The medical facility stood just ahead. Aaron shifted restlessly as he neared the end of his drive and Dad's health issues claimed priority focus.

~*~

Emma Briggs strode down the corridor of Briar Medical Center and stopped at Exam Room C. The door was slightly ajar. Emma retrieved the folder tucked into a storage bin tacked to the wall outside and consulted the top page. Patient name: Jonathan Fisher. From within she heard quiet voices, intent and tender. As she focused on the words, she paused.

"The blasted light-headedness comes at me out of nowhere, Anna-love. I don't mean to scare you." Vulnerability was paired with rich affection.

"I know, and I'm not trying to be a reactionary by hauling you here time and again so you can get checked. The thing is" —the reply of a woman— "I want more seasons with you, Jonathan Fisher. Understand? *Many* more seasons."

A gentle laugh followed. "Understood, and that path curves both ways. We're not that old yet. We both have a lot of livin' to do." A sigh followed. "Good Lord knows how I hate feeling this way."

"He does. And, I do, too. But for now, let that all

go. Let's just focus on getting you better."

Shaking free, assuming her professional demeanor as an RN, Emma rapped on the door and pushed it open. "Good morning."

Dual smiles came from a late-fiftyish couple. They struck her as genial and warm, but anxiety coated the air.

"I'm Emma Briggs, Dr. Skogee's new RN, so we haven't met yet. How are you today, Mr. Fisher?"

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Emma Briggs. Tell you what—we'll let you and Doc be the judge of how I am today." The feisty, charming man possessed sparkling eyes and a killer grin.

"I'm his wife, Anna." Anna squeezed her husband's hand in a gesture that appeared instinctive. "Welcome to Antioch. We heard Ruth Carrol retired a few weeks back."

"She did. Off to warmer climates in Phoenix and a son who's eager to have her back in the family fold."

A few more pleasantries were exchanged, a brief bout of familiarity meant to break the ice rather than place instant focus on health-related uncertainties.

Emma settled on a stool and rested Jonathan's chart on her lap as she rolled forward. "So, talk to me about the symptoms you're having. How's the angina?"

"Am I late? I was told I could come in." A man came through the door who promptly filled the smallish exam space—both physically and figuratively. He was well over six-feet, intense and vital, carved from a foundation of strength and a rugged, naturally honed masculinity. Dark brown hair crested above his brow, curled against the collar of his button-down. Jeans sculpted long, lean legs and a muscular build.

His image stole Emma's focus, and the capacity for sound reasoning.

He extended his hand. "Hello. I'm Aaron Fisher. I'm Jonathan Fisher's son. You must be the new nurse Doc's been telling us about."

"Emma Briggs, yes, and it's nice to meet you." The gentle slide of a rough, calloused palm against hers electrified her senses. That edgy, compelling gaze drew an admiring silence that stretched.

He released their handshake and turned toward his father. "How're you doing, Dad?"

"I suppose we'll be finding that out soon enough."

Emma regained propriety enough to cover awkwardness. "We're about to start the pre-screening of you father. Doctor will see you shortly and he'll ask a few more questions, I'm sure. After that, we'll consider the best ways to move forward."

"Fair enough, and thank you for that, ma'am." Aaron's smile was wide.

Manners and gentility still mattered in this town. Discovering that softened the harder spots of her soul that had built, scabbed, and nearly overwhelmed during the past year.

"You asked about the angina." Jonathan's statement prompted Emma back to the present, and away from a perfectly hewn man who embodied an aura of protectiveness and strength...

"Yes, I did."

"Ma'am, I'll be honest with you. The pain isn't nearly as concerning to me as the lightheadedness. The occasional bouts of dizziness and the way my chest goes all tight when I try to do the simplest things—things I could do before without a second thought or any kind of problem."

Emma reviewed his chart, but took note of the way Aaron's posture went taut, his eyes narrow with concern. Loving care. Nice, she thought. "I see you're on a regimen of ACE inhibitors. That can contribute to the symptoms you describe."

Jonathan cleared his throat, studied the floor. "Then, there's the cough."

"Cough?"

"Yeah."

When words stalled, his wife took over. "We go to bed. A short time after we settle in for the night, he starts to cough."

Emma nodded. Common. Most likely the result of the blood pressure medication he had been prescribed.

Jonathan shifted on the exam table.

His action pulled her back to the moment at hand.

"All I know is, I want to get to the other side of this thing."

Emma's focus was Jonathan, but her gaze strayed to Aaron. His lips, full and tempting, quirked into a lush curve, distracting Emma all over again. She straightened, embracing the streak of nursing determination that lifted to the surface. "We'll do our best to get you to that goal."

"My farm's in decent shape following the harvest," Jonathan continued. "My family's coming back together like it should. Life is good. I want to be around to enjoy it."

Emma gave his arm a squeeze. "Then let's see to it, Mr. Fisher. The doctor will be right with you."

"Nurse Briggs, thank you. You've been wonderful."

"It's Emma, please." She smiled at all of them. "And we're here to help you manage the meds and

how best to cope with the health issues you're facing."

"Emma?" Anna's quiet summons regained Emma's full attention.

"Yes?"

"I promise we'll take what you and the doctor say to heart. Jonathan means the world to me. The world, and then some."

Emma blinked, a little shaken by their obvious love for each other. Thank God for Antioch, Indiana, and the affirmation that good, strong people still existed in this mixed-up world. Was Aaron the same? She wondered, her intrigue toward him continuing to build. Protected by the armor of professionalism, Emma didn't dare explore the sudden and unexpected swirl of emotions that centered on Aaron Fisher. Time to walk away from an emotional time bomb.

2

A strange, unexpected push of yearning worked through Aaron. Emma Briggs, RN, was gorgeous with that wavy tumble of blonde hair, those warm, chocolate eyes, and that petite, temptingly curved figure. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and protect her. Sure, part of that reaction came from curiosity. She was new in town. An unknown, intriguing entity. Aaron's verdict hit fast and hard. She was real sweet, with a caring attitude that came across as genuine. She wasn't polite or cordial out of expectation, but out of authenticity. If she had been around these parts for long, he would have known about it...and maybe even pursued—

“Jonathan, Anna, how's my Fisher team?”

Dr. Skogee stepped into the exam room, placing an end to Aaron's conjectures. After greetings, Doc sat on the roller chair and moved closer to the exam table, consulting the paper file while performing a more detailed inquisition regarding medication levels and analysis. Testing options were discussed as well.

Aaron keyed in on the conversation as it turned to reoccurring dizziness, and Dad's episodes of lightheadedness.

“The blood pressure medication you're on might need adjustment.” Dr. Skogee stood and pulled out a stethoscope. “Let's take a listen. Lay back on the table and let's do a cursory check.”

Dad wheezed a bit, but seemed to do OK.

A tech entered the exam room and wheeled an EKG machine.

Soon, Dad was strapped and monitored. A few minutes later, Dad lifted to a sitting position. In an instant, the blood drained from his face. His eyes glazed and he sank, trying to brace against the table. "Not good." He fell back to the table, barely conscious.

Dr. Skogee nudged Aaron and Anna to the side, stationing himself next to Dad. "Aaron, go get Emma."

~*~

Aaron's grip on his cell phone tightened as he brought Phillip up to speed on Dad's medical episode. "I thought he was getting better!" Phillip's panicked tone cut through their cell phone connection.

"He is, Phillip, that's part of the problem. Well, sort of."

"Fill me in."

Aaron continued his account of the way Emma and Dr. Skogee had calmed the situation. "According to the most recent round of tests and blood monitoring, it seems like his overall health is improving, but the medication levels need to be reduced."

"OK, that sounds fair and simple enough. Why did he end up in a crisis? I don't understand."

"It was his blood pressure medication. High BP isn't as much of an issue these days, but his medication is still working to reduce his numbers. They've almost gotten too low. That's why, when he moves too quickly, especially from a seated or prone position, he gets dizzy." Aaron used Emma's descriptives, envisioning her even as he conversed with his older

brother. "So, it's good news. But..."

"I hate 'but.'"

"Dad's heart valves have gone narrow. Lack of space is making it tough for oxygen and blood to flow the way they should through his body. Doc wants to figure out the best way to solve that problem."

Emma pushed through the door to the waiting area where Aaron slouched in a chair. She took a seat, holding a thick manila folder. Probably Dad's medical history.

"Phillip, I gotta go. The nurse just walked in."

"Call me on your way back to the farm."

"Yep." Aaron disengaged the call. "Hey, Emma."

"Hey." She paused. "Your dad is doing just fine right now. Dr. Skogee wants to review what comes next."

"Which is?"

"We'll adjust his medication levels, as we discussed. That should give him an immediate boost, but we recommend further testing."

"More tests?" Aaron straightened, his alarm on the rise all over again.

"I'm afraid so. We're referring your dad to a cardiologist in Fort Wayne."

"He needs a specialist."

"Yes. One who can determine if the insertion of coronary stents is indicated."

"Stents mean surgery." Aaron leaned forward, raking back a tumble of hair. "He's already been through so much."

"I understand that, Aaron, but this is for the best. Further diagnosis might help him get back to the life he's longing for."

"True."

A telling silence ensued.

~*~

Aaron stopped at Pepperfield's, picked up the gear case kit for the tractor and drove to the farm, eager to bring Phillip and Ben up to date. A flurry of text exchanges indicated they were waiting for his arrival. Phillip's fiancée, Mila Thomas, was at the farm as well, helping with lunch preparations. Gathered family and a nourishing meal would give Mom and Dad less to worry about when they returned home after getting new prescriptions from the pharmacy.

Lulled by the rise and fall of barren land, by the familiar dips and turns of Rural Route Three, his mind drifted. Slowly, perfectly, the image of Emma coalesced. He absorbed the impact of big brown eyes, that wide smile framed by soft, full lips.

What was her story? Certainly, that intrigued him. But there was something more to his reaction. Something about her pulled at him—that misty layer of vulnerability, perhaps? She had revealed such warmth during the session with Dad, then she seemed to retreat behind a demeanor of well-cultivated professionalism. Something about her put Aaron in mind of a wounded, trapped farm animal, fearful of a stranger's approach, but filled with longing and hope, as evidenced by the way she'd reacted to Mom's praise and encouragement.

He hopped from the truck. Turning up the collar of his corduroy coat, Aaron dashed up the porch steps, shivering as those first chilling winds of autumn-headed-into-winter gusted across the open fields and clear through to his bones. He glanced up at gray-cast

skies and pushed the door open, wrapped by instant warmth after he banged it closed and stuffed his coat on a nearby peg. "Phillip? Ben?" He strode to the kitchen.

"Sorry, just me." Mila turned from sandwich making and gave him a welcoming grin. "Ben and Phillip are in the barn."

Aaron joined her at the kitchen counter.

She stacked multi-grain bread with fresh sliced turkey, lettuce and tomato. "Today's other selections are tuna and chicken." She wiped her hands on a towel and gestured toward the fridge. "Got veggies and low-fat dip stashed in there, too."

"Nice." Aaron pecked her cheek, appreciating her thoughtfulness. Most of this spread, he was sure, came courtesy of the Thomas's grocery store. "If things don't work out with Phillip, give me a chance, OK?"

She laughed and gave him a shove in the stomach. "You're trouble."

"I've heard tell."

"How's your dad holding up?"

"We'll know more once they get here and give us the full report. Scared the life out of me watching him fall down."

Mila shot him a sympathetic look then resumed lunch detail, slicing triangle cuts through the sandwiches she had already assembled. "He's tough, Aaron."

"Yeah. Still, even the toughest people wear out. That's what scares me."

Ben banged through the side door, entering the kitchen with a fast step and an unwelcome blast of chilly air, ending a bout of melancholy.

Phillip followed close behind and homed in on

Mila like a magnet seeking north, tucking against her from behind and stirring a squeal when his cold cheek pressed against hers.

"Hey, Aaron," Ben called, "I saw the gear case in the back of your truck. Thanks for that."

"No problem." He smirked, eager to needle his baby brother with a bit of intel from downtown Antioch. "By the way, Lindsey Pepperfield asked me to tell you hey."

"Mm-hmm."

Ben gave away nothing at all. Typical. The guy could be holding a royal flush during a high-end poker game and the world would never know it. So, naturally, Aaron pushed. "She likes you."

Ben slid off his black leather work boots—it was a universally acknowledged truth that Mom would kill her sons otherwise. "Le'me put these in the mudroom before I'm exiled from the family."

Mila arched a brow with censure. Only when Ben was out of earshot did she pronounce: "You're a clod."

"I am? Why's that? An interested woman would have to take out a billboard on I-69 to ever get Ben's attention. Why not help him along?"

"Because—" Mila fumed. "—Because Ben should find his way to the person whom he's meant to be with without interference."

Aaron swiped a pickle spear. "Interference like what?"

"You're meddling."

"No, I'm prompting things along. Your baby sister has always been interested in him, hence those porcupine quills of yours that are currently digging into my skin. You might tell Hailey Beth to get a move on before it's too late."

“Getting a move on is up to Ben,” Philip said. “HB won’t make the first move. Nor should she.”

“Fair enough. I’ll quit.”

Mom and Dad arrived and everyone gathered for saying grace and digging into lunch.

“As Aaron probably told you all, we need to consult with the cardiologist in Fort Wayne.” Mom’s opening words cast a pall. “It seems surgery is indicated. They think placing a stent will increase the flow of blood and oxygen to Dad’s heart.”

“It’s called something like cardiac catheterization or angioplasty.” Dad piped up. “The best part is, after I heal, Doc says I’ll be feeling a whole lot better, and that the surgery will help me avoid a full-on bypass.”

Aaron exchanged glances with his brothers, wondering.

3

Emma found herself pondering Aaron Fisher that evening on her way home. Aaron, the son she already pictured as the family's stronghold. During a point of crisis, he had remained steadfast, calm in the storm. He had tracked her down, directed her to the exam room, then stayed silent, but narrow-eyed and protective, jaw clenched, not missing a thing that took place while she and Dr. Skogee stabilized Jonathan Fisher. Only then did his taut, broad shoulders relax. Only then did he leave the room while a deeper diagnosis took place. The idea of Aaron's strength and attractiveness filled an empty void in her spirit.

Emma considered crisis containment to be a necessary component of her job. But then had come the tribulation of last year. Happy, confident, and fulfilled by her practice at a hospital ER in suburban Detroit, Emma had tumbled hard and unwittingly into a professional nightmare while attempting to assist with an emergency Cesarean birth. Even now, horrific images flashed through her mind—memories she tried hard to keep buried.

With smooth practice, she turned her back on the past as she unlocked the front door of her apartment. Home was a brownstone just one block east of Main Street. She loved the central location because there was a daily sense of gathering, of lively purpose, and community. Even now, at close to six o'clock, folks