

The Calling of Reverend Alden

Robert Alden couldn't believe this absurdity. When he'd arrived at Bishop's Chapel he'd been full of enthusiasm for his new post. Now he gazed in dismay at the congregation, all assembled in their Sunday best and simmering like a pot of stew.

He glanced at Reverend Billings for help, but the thin, elderly man just shrugged. One would think that as the senior minister he'd put a stop to all this nonsense, but he seemed perfectly content to leave it in Robert's hands. He knew Robert was struggling with speaking in front of people, that he wasn't sure what God was calling him to do.

"Please, if you would all just..." Robert trailed off. No one was paying the least attention.

Billings finally teetered over to the pulpit. He raised a hand, and everyone quieted. Robert carefully bottled his frustration.

"Let us review our situation," Billings said. "When our church's caretaker died he generously bequeathed the chapel with money for repairs, such as replacing a few clapboards and a support beam in the belfry. We estimate the sum of one hundred dollars will be left over to be used in whatever way the congregation sees fit. A number of suggestions have been made. Would Mr. Alden read the list for us?"

Robert unfolded the paper and began, "We have narrowed it to..."

"Can't hear you," someone shouted from the back.

He crumpled the paper in his hand but continued, "More comfortable pews, fresh landscaping, or a stained-glass window."

Chaos immediately erupted, as everyone began shouting their preference over one another. Even Billings failed to calm them this time. He pulled Robert to the side.

"Any ideas?"

The pressure of the past weeks closed in around Robert. He'd interviewed a dozen parishioners, from stern businessmen to festooned ladies stuffed into outlandish dresses. Each had grown incensed when their own suggestion was not guaranteed. Disgust rose in him, and without thinking he found himself standing squarely in front of them.

"Shame on all of you!"

They turned toward him, their mouths dropping open.

"This is the Lord's house, and here you stand fighting like dogs over a bone! What on earth do we need new pews for or new bushes outside? What is the good of a stained-glass window? Where was the suggestion for food or new coats for the poor? Where was the recommendation for Bibles to be sent to the mission field or funding for the hospital that's struggling down the street?"

Indignation was stamped on their faces, but he wasn't through.

"Pride and arrogance, is that all this congregation has? Repent, I tell you! Repent on your knees, before the wrath of God falls on you!"

He could see he'd gone too far. In truth, he hardly knew what had come over him. Fire and brimstone weren't exactly his usual methods. There went his position, his future...

A tremendous crack sounded just above. A groan, and then one gong of the church bell, before he stumbled and fell backwards. Screams and dust reeled around his head before he realized Billings was helping him to his feet. He blinked and coughed, as he tried to comprehend what had happened. The church bell sat in a pile of rubble at his feet, while sunlight streamed down from the hole in the ceiling.

"Well," Billings took out a handkerchief and blotted his face. "It seems that support beam was more urgent than I had thought."

He heard cries. Terrified someone had been hurt, he scanned through the settling dust to find

something he never would have expected. The entire church was on their knees.

“Lord, forgive me...my terrible pride...vanity...I repent!”

He and Billings looked at one another. “The Lord speaks in mysterious ways, Alden. I shouldn’t be at all surprised to find this repair costs exactly one hundred dollars. And what will you do now that you’ve found your voice?”

Robert took a breath. He’d had an idea on his mind for a while. “I’ve heard the frontier is a godless place.”

“I see,” Billings smiled. “Sometimes God speaks in mysterious ways, but other times He’s clear as a bell.”