

“A moving, enchanting story of love and loss. Amanda Wen takes readers on an adventure that weaves past and present together in a beautiful tapestry of skillful storytelling. I was blown away by this book and its timeless message.”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award–winning author of  
*Freedom’s Ring* and *The Tea Chest*

“Amanda Wen seamlessly blends the historical and the contemporary in this lyrical debut. From Annabelle, a courageous young woman building a life on the Kansas frontier, to Sloane, a museum curator searching for answers within the pages of a diary penned over one hundred years ago, *Roots of Wood and Stone* spans generations in a brilliantly rendered narrative that explores the heart behind the places we call home.”

AMANDA BARRATT, author of *The White Rose Resists* and  
*My Dearest Dietrich*

“Compelling. Rich. Winding through past and present and linking them in surprising ways, Wen’s debut novel captures the legacy of a historic farmhouse and all the people who’ve made their lives there. I was rooting for Sloane out of the gate, and my heart went up and down with her story until the well-drawn conclusion. Wen writes with warmth and a delightful voice about heritage, family, and the nature of what’s truly important.”

JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, author of *The Love Note*

“Now and then I am fortunate enough to read a book that so thoroughly captures me that I forget I’m reading. It’s rare, but when it happens it feels a whole lot like magic. Amanda Wen has written such a novel. In *Roots of Wood and Stone*, Wen invites readers in, introduces them to characters who feel like dear friends, and gives them the gift of a tale well told. And in the telling, Wen reminds us of the beauty of friendship, love, and finding out the fullest meaning of home.”

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *Stories That Bind Us* and the  
Pearl Spence novels

“In Amanda Wen’s sensitive Christian novel *Roots of Wood and Stone*, a nineteenth-century diary draws a Kansas pair closer as they unearth personal pains. . . . Vulnerable and multifaceted characters deal with the heartbreaking realities of eldercare, but also learn to trust God’s plans over their own well-intentioned decisions. Characters’ thoughts and emotions are pulled between their desires to cling to old habits and fears and their needs to risk opening up to others. . . . With a resonant, alternating time line that highlights the past’s continuing influence on the present, *Roots of Wood and Stone* is a satisfying, moving novel that combines ancestral stories with a new romance.”

*FOREWORD REVIEWS*

ROOTS  
*of*  
WOOD  
*and*  
STONE

*Sedgwick County  
Chronicles*

AMANDA WEN



KREGEL  
PUBLICATIONS

*Roots of Wood and Stone*

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publishing Data**

Names: Wen, Amanda, 1979- author.

Title: *Roots of wood and stone* / Amanda Wen.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Kregel Publications, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020034239 (print) | LCCN 2020034240 (ebook) | ISBN 9780825446689 (print) | ISBN 9780825477188 (epub) | ISBN 9780825468698 (kindle edition)

Subjects: GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.E524 R66 2021 (print) | LCC PS3623.E524 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020034239>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020034240>

ISBN 978-0-8254-4668-9, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7718-8, epub

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 / 5 4 3 2 1



## CHAPTER ONE

SLOANE KELLEY STOOD in the lobby of the Sedgwick County Museum of History, the thick buffalo robe hanging warm and heavy on her arms. A line of first graders filed past to stroke the robe's coarse brown fur. But no matter how many little hands poked and prodded that robe, it held up. It was resilient.

Just like the pioneers who'd worn it.

The last child, a girl with wide brown eyes and a riot of red curls, trailed her hand over the robe. "It's softer than I thought it'd be."

"That's a great observation." Sloane loved those light-bulb moments when history came to life.

"That *is* a great observation, Josie." Mrs. McPherson, the dark-haired teacher charged with controlling the chaos, rewarded her student with a warm smile.

But Josie looked instead to a beaming, T-shirt-clad woman at the back of the room. Same brown eyes, same coppery curls.

Mother and daughter, no doubt.

Jaw tight, Sloane turned to hang the robe on its wooden rack. She scanned the placard beside it, covered with facts she'd researched. Facts to fill gaps in people's knowledge.

A semi-successful cover for the utter lack of facts about her own past.

"Okay, class." Mrs. McPherson's voice rose above the din. "What do we tell Miss Kelley?"

"Thaaaaaaaank yoooooooooooouuuu."

Sloane both smiled and winced as the childish chorus bounced off the lobby's ornate tile walls at earsplitting volume.

## ROOTS OF WOOD AND STONE

“You’re welcome. Thank you all so much for coming.”

“Now, friends, the bus is waiting. We’re going to *walk*, please. It’s pouring, and the steps might be slick.” Mrs. McPherson nodded to the red-haired chaperone, who leaned into the handle of the beveled glass door. Outside, a large yellow school bus idled at a low growl, and rain sheeted from a leaden April sky.

As the kids hurried to the bus, laughing and shrieking in the deluge, Sloane breathed a sigh of relief. She enjoyed field-trip kids, but their departure meant a welcome return to the museum’s usual hushed reverence. How did teachers deal with it all day every day? No way did they get paid enough.

A flash of green caught her eye. Mrs. McPherson stood in the doorway, wrestling with an enormous umbrella a gust of wind had yanked inside out. Sloane started forward to help, but a suit-wearing man on the sidewalk beat her to it. Shifting the large cardboard box he carried to one hand, he held the door with the other.

“You got it?” he asked.

“I think so.” Mrs. McPherson popped the umbrella back into place and gave the man a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“Welcome. Stay dry.”

“I’ll try.” The teacher clambered aboard the bus behind her students, and the man strode into the lobby, the shoulders of his suit soaked, the lid of the box spattered with rain.

With his free hand he shoved drenched dark blond hair off his forehead. “It’s a monsoon out there.”

“Another gorgeous spring day in Kansas.” Sloane flashed a wry grin and pushed her glasses further up onto her nose. “Can I help you?”

“Sure hope so.” Ocean-blue eyes crinkled at the corners, and a crease next to the man’s mouth deepened into a dimple. He was handsome enough, in a drippy, rain-soaked sort of way. “Are you the one in charge around here?”

Sloane gave a short bark of laughter. “Don’t I wish.”

“Maybe you can help me anyway.” He set the box on the old wooden welcome desk and tapped its top. “My sister and I have been helping our grandma with a little decluttering.”

Sloane stifled the urge to roll her eyes. She should’ve known his angle the second she saw that bedraggled box. The museum was constantly turn-

ing away people tasked with cleaning out the homes of elderly pack-rat relatives. People who thought the dusty, moldy junk they uncovered was worth a small fortune simply because it had a few decades under its belt. And that the museum, scraping by on barely there government funding and donations they had to beg for, somehow had piles of cash to fling about in exchange for these “treasures.”

“I found this bag of some kind.” He flipped open the box, flecking the desk with raindrops. “It looked old, so my sister suggested I donate it here.”

“Sir, this isn’t Goodwill. You can’t just dump stuff here because it looks old.”

The man blinked, as everyone did when faced with stark reality.

Sloane gentled her tone. “There’s a whole process. You need to fill out a donation form, we have to assess the item, the acquisitions committee has to approve it, and—”

“Forms?” His face lit like she’d tripped some switch in his brain. “Of course. Whatever you need. I assume a separate form for each item?”

“Yes, but—”

“Good. Because there’s more where this came from.”

Of course there was. “Sir, I don’t think—”

A phone trilled from deep inside the man’s pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to take this.”

“But I can’t take this.” She shoved the box toward him, but he was digging in a brown leather wallet.

“Look, here’s my card.” He placed a crisp, blue-lettered business card beside the box. *Garrett P. Anderson, Certified Financial Planner.*

“Mr. Anderson—”

“Please, just take a look. If you truly don’t want it, call my cell, and I’ll come get it.” He backed into the door to push it open while pressing his hands together in a pleading gesture, his phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear. “Garrett Anderson. Hi. Thanks for returning my call . . .”

The door thudded shut behind him. With a sigh, Sloane eyed the box. Rain streaked its sides and added a fresh, damp note to the mustiness of the cardboard. Grabbing the box, she rounded the corner to the office she shared with the rest of the museum staff. Whatever was inside, whether it was worth anything or not—and her money was on *not*—it needed to get out of there.

## ROOTS OF WOOD AND STONE

Inside was a satchel. And she had to hand it to the guy, it was indeed old. Mid-nineteenth century from the looks of it. But its dust-dulled black leather was worn and cracked in several places, and rust reddened once-golden buckles. Amazing how people shoved things into dingy attics or damp basements, forgot about them for decades, and then got all miffed when museums weren't champing at the bit to display them.

And there would be no display for this satchel. Not when they had two just like it on exhibit, with another three in storage. Unless it belonged to someone historically significant, there was no reason to keep it.

But curiosity called nonetheless. Sloane smoothed her hand over the worn leather, her fingertips leaving tracks through the dust. Someone had owned this satchel once. Someone had gripped the handle when it was shiny and new. Worked well-oiled latches to secure priceless possessions.

Who was that someone?

Sloane cracked it open, the smell of stale leather puffing out. An inked inscription drew her in for a closer look.

*A. M. Collins.*

Collins... Collins... nope. The name didn't match any she'd uncovered during her years of researching Wichita's past and people. She'd double-check with her bosses, do a quick comb through the records, but chances were good she'd have to call Mr. Garrett Anderson back to retrieve what he'd all too eagerly dumped on her desk.

The thought gave her a perverse sense of satisfaction.

Setting the satchel carefully to the side, she sat down and rummaged through her desk for a tea bag.

A rainy, post-field-trip afternoon definitely called for some Earl Grey.



The windshield wipers of Garrett Anderson's Camry thumped a frantic rhythm against the incessant downpour. Raindrops pelted the car and wriggled like worms along the windows. Smooth pavement gave way to bone-jarring gravel as he turned off Jamesville Road onto the quarter-mile stretch of dirt leading to his grandparents' farmhouse. Instinct and experience, rather than visibility, guided him around ever-present potholes and



that awful patch near the house that turned into a chasm of muck every time it rained.

But not even the rain could keep him from plowing through his to-do list, nor could it dampen his satisfaction at having crossed off a few items.

Cart unused kitchenware to the thrift store downtown? Check.

Take old towels to the animal shelter? Check.

Foist dilapidated satchel on unsuspecting museum curator? Check and double check.

Pulling to a stop as close to the house as he could, he dashed up the rickety porch steps and through the condensation-fogged storm door.

“So was I right? Did the museum take it?”

His sister’s voice came from a greater height than usual. Garrett craned his neck to find Lauren perched on a stepladder, unloading a bookshelf.

He shrugged out of his rain-spattered jacket and hung it on the rack beside the door. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rolling up his sleeves to his elbows, he walked toward the ladder. “It means I basically had to shove it into the curator’s arms and promise to come back to get it if she doesn’t want it.”

“What makes you think she won’t?” Lauren handed down a stack of books. Dust puffed up as he took them, and he sneezed.

“Call it a hunch.” The disapproving look in the curator’s dark eyes was all the evidence he needed, though an incurable head-in-the-clouds optimist like Lauren would doubtless need more convincing.

Next time he’d make his little sister run her own errands.

Dark blonde curls swished across Lauren’s back as she reached for another handful of books and eyed the spines. “Think the library would want these?”

“*Reader’s Digest* Condensed Books? Lauren, *no one* wants these.”

“Maybe I can eBay them.”

“If you can find people who’d rather have *Reader’s Digest* Condensed Books than actual money, be my guest.”

Defiance sparked in deep blue eyes. “I will, thank you. Now, be a dear and take these upstairs, would you? I’ve started a box of stuff to sell.”

“Of course you have.” Garrett took the books and trudged up the stairs. This latest squabble was the umpteenth verse of a song they’d sung since

## ROOTS OF WOOD AND STONE

October, when their grandfather, fit as a fiddle last anyone checked, fell asleep watching television and never woke up. Orrin Spencer had been a rock for his wife as her memory failed and her mind betrayed her, but now Lauren and Garrett were at odds over their newly widowed grandmother's care. Living alone in the ancient farmhouse wasn't a viable option, but the sorry state of her savings account didn't allow for many alternatives.

The logical solution, of course, was to sell the house. Use the proceeds to finance a move to a long-term care facility. Both problems solved with a single perfect plan.

But Garrett's plan had run up against two formidable obstacles: his sentimental sister and his stubborn-as-all-get-out grandmother. Lauren had promptly given up her apartment, moved in with Grandma, and thrown herself into making the house livable for as long as possible. The arrangement was a stopgap at best, but Garrett couldn't talk them out of it. So he declared a temporary truce with Lauren, came down from Kansas City to help when he could, and did whatever necessary to facilitate the removal of decades' worth of accumulated possessions.

Like these useless books, which he had to set beside the eBay box, since the box itself was overflowing. Even so, plopping the stack down on the worn red carpet brought a small sense of accomplishment.

It'd all have to go eventually. This, at least, was a start.

When he returned to the living room, Lauren stood at ground level, surveying the freshly emptied shelf. "There. Dust it off, put a few of Grandma's knickknacks up there, and voilà."

"Good." Emboldened by progress, he glanced around the living room to see what else could make a quick impact. Ah. The knitting basket.

The knitting basket.

Garrett's heart sank. Half his childhood memories involved Grandma in her blue recliner by the fireplace, bathed in sunlight while silvery needles clicked away on her latest project. Piles of blankets, the pale pink sweater on the coatrack, intricate doilies draping every available surface, all testified to her favorite hobby.

But when was the last time she'd knitted? He picked up the basket and frowned at the tightly wound balls of yarn, at needles that had been eerily still for far too long.

Just one more thing the relentless thief known as Alzheimer's had stolen from his grandmother.

"What are you doing with that?" His sister's voice pitched low with suspicion.

"Lauren . . . she can't. Not anymore."

Lauren jutted her chin in the air, like the petulant toddler she'd once been. "You don't know that. Just because you haven't seen her knitting doesn't mean she can't."

Garrett looked once more at the dusty yarn. His latest sneeze was a far more eloquent argument than any verbal one.

Lauren folded her arms. "Fine. But how do you know she won't miss it? If something that's always been there, right by her favorite chair, up and disappears, don't you think that'll upset her?"

"Or having her favorite thing right here, knowing she's supposed to know what it is and what to do with it, but she doesn't? How will that *not* upset her?" Garrett shifted the basket to his other arm. "You know as well as I do she's gone downhill the last few weeks. I'm wearing a suit because she thinks I'm Grandpa."

"She'd think that even if she weren't sick. You look just like him."

"Fifty years ago, sure!"

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Stop yelling."

"I'm not yelling."

"Now, what's all this yelling?"

A frail, white-haired woman shuffled in from the dining room. Garrett felt, rather than saw, the I-told-you-so look Lauren tossed his way.

"Orrin. When did you get home?" Grandma's smile shone warm and genuine.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Garrett met her in the center of the room. *Play along*. It was what all the Alzheimer's websites instructed.

"Hello, Rosie." He leaned down and feathered a kiss to her soft, wrinkled cheek.

"Where'd you find my knitting basket?" She reached into it, caressing a ball of buttery yellow yarn like a beloved pet. "I've been looking everywhere for this."

"Must've been put away somewhere by accident." Lauren rushed forward,

took the basket, and returned it to its spot beside the chair. “There. Back where it belongs.” She cut a pointed glance at Garrett.

“Wonderful.” Grandma’s pale blue eyes gleamed. “Tonight, after supper, I’ll start on a new . . . a new . . . Oh, what am I trying to say? It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“Sweater?” Lauren suggested. “Blanket?”

“No, it goes around your neck.” Grandma swirled her hands in demonstration.

“Scarf,” Garrett and Lauren replied in unison.

“Scarf. Right.” Confusion flitted across Grandma’s face. Her train of thought had derailed. Again.

Lauren stepped in with a gentle hug. “How about some TV, Grandma? I think the Royals are on.”

Grandma’s face lit. “Now that sounds like a plan.”

Garrett helped her settle on the sofa while Lauren reached for the remote and clicked the TV to life. Within minutes, his grandmother was fixated on full counts and fly balls, waving the little felt pennant she kept in a 2015 World Series Champions mug on the end table.

This was the crux of Lauren’s argument. Grandma was happy here, no denying it. And when the time came, it would break her heart to leave her home of more than sixty years. No denying that either.

But sooner or later, the bandage had to come off. Lauren and Grandma preferred to peel it away millimeter by millimeter. Mitigating the pain, sure, but prolonging it to a torturous degree.

He’d always preferred to rip it off.

Either way, it was painful. Garrett had known that from the moment of her diagnosis.

But he’d grossly underestimated how painful it would be.



“By the late flood, onion beds were paralyzed, beautiful lawns ruined, horrid stench brewed, streets washed out and everybody inconvenienced.”

Rustling from the next desk tore Sloane’s attention from the *Wichita Daily Eagle*’s account of a 1904 flood to her office mate, Colleen.

“Taking off?” Sloane asked.

Tugging her silvery ponytail from beneath the collar of her trench coat, Colleen nodded toward the rain-streaked window. “You should too, unless you want to swim home.”

Sloane glanced back at the black-and-white photos of floodwaters so deep people boated down Main Street. “I don’t think it’s quite that bad yet.”

As her colleague departed, Sloane shifted in her chair and did a couple shoulder rolls. Lowering the lid of her laptop, she spied her mug of tea, still half full but no doubt stone-cold. That always happened when she was wrapped up in the past.

Her favorite place to be.

Well, second favorite. Her true favorite was her apartment, under her fuzzy orange blanket, a steaming order of Chinese carryout on the coffee table and an old movie on TV. *Romance on the High Seas* might be the winner tonight. Or maybe—

Her gaze fell on the worn-out satchel propped against her desk, and her bubble of daydreams popped. It wasn’t just her tea she’d neglected this busy afternoon.

Okay, one more quick task, and then she’d take off. Call the guy—what was his name again?—and tell him, *You’re right, it’s old, but we’ve got half a dozen just like it, so I’m calling your bluff. Come take it back. Does Monday work for you? Great. And please, for the love of local limestone, don’t bring us anything else from Grandma’s basement.*

Now where was his card? Sloane pawed through piles of photos on her desk without success. It wasn’t in any of the drawers either. Where in the world—

Oh. Right.

Sending up a silent prayer of thanks for a weekend that was apparently much needed, she reached for the satchel and peered inside. Bingo. *Garrett P. Anderson, Certified Financial Planner.*

Of course. Certified financial planners usually had names like Garrett P. Anderson. In fact, he—

Something deep inside the satchel caught her eye. Something she’d missed during her earlier examination.

## ROOTS OF WOOD AND STONE

It was small. Black. Leather. A Bible, maybe. Or some other book. Or—  
Sloane's eyes widened as she slid the book out of the satchel and into  
the light.

It wasn't just a book.

It was a diary.

An old diary, from the looks of it. Slipping a pair of archival gloves  
from her desk drawer, she slid them on, cracked open the cover with care,  
and inhaled the earthy smell of ancient paper. Her pulse quickened at the  
childish scrawl on the opening page.

July 29, 1861

Dear Diary,

Hello. My name is Miss Annabelle Mary Collins.

I am nine years old.

—————❖—————  
CHAPTER TWO

*July 29, 1861*

MERCY, IT WAS quiet here.

No teasing big brothers. No thundering footsteps.

And no Papa with his booming voice and hearty laugh.

Just a bird chirping outside the open window and leaves rustling in the slight breeze.

Annabelle dipped her pen in the inkwell and returned it to the crisp new page. At least the scratch of pen on paper would make a little noise.

Uncle Stephen and Aunt Katherine gave me this diary. I have never seen so much blank paper before. I am not at all sure how to fill it.

She'd never had her own room before. And what a room it was. Blue and gold flowered wallpaper, the fanciest she'd seen. A lovely writing desk.

And the lace curtains at the windows took her breath away. She'd never seen anything so perfect, so delicate. Like the gown of a fairy princess. She was sure they were boughten, as they'd never had anything that fine, but Aunt Katherine *made* them.

This place was beautiful.

But it wasn't home.

I am to live here with them until Papa returns. My room is nice. It has a blue flowered quilt on the bed and ~~boo beu~~ very pretty lace curtains at the windows.

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But I would trade all the lace curtains in the world if I could have my Papa back.

A knock came to the door, and Aunt Katherine stepped into the room. She and Papa had the same slate-brown hair, though hers had more silver in it. Behind her spectacles shone eyes the same gray-blue as Papa's, like rain clouds before a downpour.

Those eyes peered back at Annabelle whenever she looked in a mirror.

Aunt Katherine beamed as she came up behind Annabelle. "I simply can't get over how much you look like Mary."

Annabelle frowned. People always said she was the spitting image of Mama. The same round cheeks, pointed chin, and thick honey-colored hair. But no matter how much time she spent in front of a mirror, no matter how hard she tried, she never saw Mama.

Maybe Papa did.

Maybe that was why he always seemed so sad.

"I am so happy you've come." Aunt Katherine wrapped her arms around Annabelle's shoulders. Annabelle started at the scent of her aunt's rose-water perfume.

The same kind Mama wore.

Perhaps if Annabelle shut her eyes tight and thought hard, she could pretend it was Mama hugging her. Not an aunt who was mostly a stranger.

It was no use. Not even she, with what Papa called her "fancy-full" imagination, could pretend that. The hug felt nice, but not quite right. It was a little too forced. Too fragrant. Too much.

Annabelle swallowed against the hurt in her chest and squeezed her eyes tighter to keep the stinging tears in. It wasn't Mama hugging her.

It wouldn't be Mama ever again, not until heaven.

Uneven footsteps creaked the floorboards as Aunt Katherine released her, and Uncle Stephen ducked into the doorway. So tall he nearly scraped the ceiling, yet his smile was warm, his brown eyes kind behind wire-rimmed spectacles.

"Now, isn't this nice?" he said. "All these years praying for a child, and here we are. Our own flesh and blood."



He meant well, but Annabelle squirmed. Papa had said on the way here that her aunt and uncle had always wanted a child of their own.

Hot anger had flared at that. “But I’m not their child. I’m yours. Yours and Mama’s.” She’d stamped her foot against the buggy’s floor, but Papa silenced her with that look of his, that line in the sand she dared not cross.

“You know I’ve not got much choice in the matter, darlin’.”

She’d stiffened. He’d been the first to sign his name to the list of volunteers at the rally. He’d been lauded as a hero, flags waving and bands playing. Everything about this had been his choice.

“Do you suppose Papa’s made it to Indianapolis yet?” she asked.

Aunt Katherine opened the window a bit more, and the breeze ruffled those beautiful curtains. “I’m certain he has.”

“Then is he fighting Johnny Reb?”

Uncle Stephen chuckled. “Not yet. He and your brothers likely have a lot of paperwork to fill out, and physical examinations to pass.”

Mercy. That sounded almost as boring as being here.

Uncle Stephen’s uneven gait filled the room. The result of a childhood riding accident, Papa had said. It didn’t slow her uncle down any, but it must’ve been enough to keep him from joining up with Papa.

“I’d be there if I could.” He sighed and slipped his arm around Aunt Katherine.

She patted his cheek. “Selfishly, I’m glad you can’t.”

Annabelle gave a silent harrumph. She would’ve joined up too, and she’d told Papa as much.

“Now, Annabelle,” he’d said. “War is no place for a young lady.”

For most young ladies that was doubtless true. But if Mr. President Lincoln could see her hold her own with her brothers, he’d surely make an exception.

“What if I cut my hair? Wore boys’ clothes? Gave a different name? Could I come with you then?”

Papa had brushed his thumb over her cheek, the no in his eyes clear before it even left his lips. “You might be able to make them think you’re a boy, but you’d never convince them you’re old enough. Boy or girl, sweetheart, nine is nine.”

## ROOTS OF WOOD AND STONE

Annabelle's heart had sunk, though she hadn't let her hopes get high enough to hurt when they fell.

"Do you like your new diary?" Aunt Katherine hovered like a hummingbird over the writing desk where Annabelle sat. "Your papa said you like to write and draw."

"You'll want a record of all your adventures," Uncle Stephen added.

Annabelle scoffed. "I haven't had any yet."

Uncle Stephen's eyes crinkled. "But you will. The good Lord is cooking one up for you as we speak. One that'll take everything you've got. He'll not let you go, though, not for an instant. He promised in his Word to always be with you."

Papa had promised that too. Yet not even twenty-four hours ago, she'd watched him ride away without a backward glance.

His country needed him. She knew that.

But no one stopped to think that maybe she needed him more.



Sloane's breath left in a whoosh as she laid the diary on her desk. Being abandoned by a parent, even for such a noble cause, would have left a deep wound.

A wound Sloane knew all too well. And one she'd rather not focus on right now.

So who was this Annabelle Collins? A census index might shed some light. And Sloane might be able to find Annabelle's father through Civil War records. If she'd lived in Indiana, her diary should go to historians there.

But if that were the case, how had her diary, her satchel, come to reside in a beat-up cardboard box in Sedgwick County, Kansas?

Sloane had no idea.

But she might know someone who did. She reached for Garrett Anderson's business card. He'd be pleased, no doubt, to learn he'd brought something of value after all. She could picture the smirk that would spring to his face when she told him.

But this wasn't about him, or the satchel, or his grandma's cluttered house. This was about Annabelle Collins and getting the words of her

heart to their proper home. Besides, if he didn't know anything about Annabelle, which he probably didn't, then the call could be brief, and they could both go on with their lives.

Satisfied, she picked up her phone, sat back in her chair, and dialed.



"How's it going in here?" Garrett stepped into the kitchen, awash as usual with interesting aromas.

"Pretty good," came the absent reply from behind Lauren's clicking camera. "Just a few more shots and we'll be set."

Garrett eyed the artfully arranged plate in the crosshairs of the camera lens and suppressed a sigh. He was proud of his sister and her food blog, but given Lauren's obsessive need to get just the right shot, dinner might be stone-cold by the time it arrived on the table.

"Anything I can do to help?" He pulled a plastic pill reminder from a cupboard. "It's time for Grandma's meds, and she can't take them on an empty stomach."

"I'm just about"—the camera clicked a few times in quick succession—"done. Yay."

"Yay." Garrett's reply was much less enthusiastic as he grabbed a couple plates sensibly portioned with sliced chicken breast, some fancy whole grain he couldn't identify, and a heaping helping of something leafy and green. Lauren was always on the lookout for the latest health trends, and while this meal was gluten free, low-carb, and undoubtedly good for him, it would also lack the flavors he was used to from his simple bachelor fare. The few times he'd tried to cook dinner during his visits were met with well-meaning lectures from Lauren about the evils of every ingredient, so he'd ceded control of the kitchen when in Wichita and settled for the occasional late-night junk food run.

"Okay, Grandma, here's dinner." He set a plate in front of her, tipped the pills into his palm, and placed them next to her water cup. "And here are your meds."

Grandma blinked at the offerings, then looked up with a devilish smile. "Where's the beef?"

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Lauren's lips curved. "You know red meat is bad for your blood pressure."

"I'm just teasing, sugarplum." Grandma reached out a withered hand and patted Lauren's. "It looks delicious as always. Now, who wants to say the, uh, the . . . ?"

"Blessing." Lauren finished her sentence as Garrett's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and frowned at the number. The Wichita area code meant it probably wasn't a client, but it could be one of the care homes he'd begun researching on the sly.

He slid from his chair and silenced the phone. "I have to take this. You all go ahead without me." Ignoring Lauren's glare, he stepped out to the screened porch and raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hi," a woman's voice replied. "Is this Garrett Anderson?"

"Speaking."

"This is Sloane Kelley from the Sedgwick County Museum of History. I'm calling in regard to the satchel you brought in this afternoon."

"Oh? Is it maybe something you can use after all?" His competitive urge surfaced, hoping for a victory over Miss You-Can't-Just-Bring-Stuff-In-Here. He tamped it down.

She paused. "Do you have any idea where the satchel came from?"

"I'd never seen it before. There's a ton of old stuff here. We've barely scratched the surface."

"Wonderful." She didn't sound impressed. "Does the name Annabelle Collins mean anything to you?"

He frowned at the puddles dotting the yard, the result of the day's downpour. Rain still fell but at a considerably gentler rate. "I'm afraid not."

"You said this was found in your grandparents' house? Did they ever live in Indiana?"

What was this woman getting at? "I don't think so. Grandma was born and raised here, and I'm pretty sure Grandpa was too."

"Did they ever travel to Indiana? Maybe pick up the satchel in an antique store on vacation, and the diary just happened to be in there?"

Garrett blinked. "Diary?"

"The one from 1861 I found inside the satchel."

"You're kidding. I could've sworn that thing was empty." Competitive-

ness tapped him on the shoulder once more. “So the diary at least has some use to you guys even if the satchel doesn’t?”

“It’s going to be useful to someone, yes, but I’m not sure it’s in our jurisdiction, so to speak. That’s why I’m giving you the third degree.”

That drew a chuckle. “What do you know so far?”

“Annabelle was nine when she received the diary as a gift from her Uncle Stephen and Aunt Katherine. I don’t suppose those names ring any bells?”

“Nope.” Garrett ran a hand through his hair. It felt like this woman was giving him a quiz he never studied for and had no hope of passing. “I’m sorry, I don’t know that much about my family history.”

“Join the club.” Sloane’s voice lost its crisp, no-nonsense edge, and the resulting huskiness did strange things to his insides. Before he could analyze that, though, she hit him with another question. “What about your grandparents? Any chance I could speak with them?”

“I wish that was possible.” He glanced out at the dilapidated red barn where Grandpa’s beloved tractor stood silent, covered with cobwebs and dust. “My grandfather passed away last fall.”

“Oh no. I’m so sorry to hear that.” Genuine sympathy seeped through the line.

“Thank you. He didn’t suffer, at least we can be thankful for that. And we know where he is now, so . . .” Garrett swallowed hard against a thickened throat. His grandfather’s rock-solid faith in Christ left no doubt as to his eternal destination. It took the edge off the ache.

“That definitely helps.”

The beautiful huskiness had returned to Sloane’s voice, and with it that strange inward pull.

“What about your grandmother? I’d love to visit with her if I could.”

Garrett switched his phone to the other ear. “I’m sure she’d welcome a visit, but you probably won’t get much out of her.”

“She’d at least know her parents’ names, and whether she ever traveled to Indiana.”

“I’m not so sure about that. My grandma has Alzheimer’s. She’s still functional and communicates well, but her memory’s like Swiss cheese.”

“Wow, I’m so sorry. That really sucks. For all of you.”

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Her offbeat forthrightness gave him pause. No one had ever said it in quite those words before, and their truth resonated in the very depths of him.

“This might sound weird, but I appreciate you saying that.”

“You do?”

“Definitely.” Everyone he shared the diagnosis with always said they were sorry. Then they asked if they could bring over a casserole. Or grilled him about her medications. Or questioned if he’d tried this doctor or that diet or these experimental treatments.

All of them meant well. They’d fix it if they could.

But some things couldn’t be fixed.

And when that was the case . . . it sucked.

He hadn’t realized how badly he’d needed to hear that from someone.

“Phew. I can be pretty blunt. It’s sometimes a problem.”

“Not for me.” Garrett cleared his throat. “Anyway, it sounds like I’m not much help on this diary, but if I find anything else while I’m digging around, I’ll—”

“Need any help?”

“Are you sure? There’s a ton of dust and mold.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before. Trust me.” Her low, throaty laugh brought an unexpected ping of pleasure. “And if there’s anything else of Annabelle’s in the house, it might tell us more about where I should send this diary.”

Her present eagerness couldn’t be further from her earlier icy demeanor, but voicing that observation probably wouldn’t win him any points. And if she was sincerely willing to come help with the house? He needed all the points he could get.

“Okay, I’ll call your bluff. How about tomorrow?”

The thoughtful pause filled with soft tapping, like she was bouncing a pencil off a stack of papers. “I’m free any time during the day.”

“Great. Ten thirty?”

“Perfect.”

He gave the address. “Do you need directions?”

“The GPS should do fine. I’ll call you if it does something squirrely.”

After they hung up, Garrett slid his phone in his pocket with an amused

shake of his head. Never in his life had he met someone who looked forward to digging through decades' worth of junk.

But if she did find something of historical value, it'd be one less thing he needed to make a decision about. One more item checked off the endless to-do list.

And one step closer to enacting his perfect plan.



Friday's deluge had given way to a Saturday of brilliant sunshine and a sky of liquid blue. A beautiful day for a drive to Jamesville, a small town on Wichita's western outskirts. To Garrett's grandparents' house, and possible answers.

But as she rolled along the highway, Sloane stared, goggle-eyed, at the proliferation of new big-box stores and cookie-cutter McMansions, a far cry from the gently rolling farmland of not even five years ago. Subdivisions whizzed past, all with brick walls, lit signs, and names that sounded pretty but were utterly devoid of meaning. Harbor Pointe. Meadowlark Mountain. Pineridge.

Ugh. Suburbia had spilled across the countryside like red wine on a white tablecloth.

Just past the last cathedrals of conformity, the GPS chirped instructions to turn right. And when she did, onto a mud-and-gravel road marked by a shrubby-obscured mailbox, Sloane's irritation with suburbia faded to nothingness.

Stately, thick-trunked trees stood at attention on both sides of the long driveway, kissed with the pale pinks, creamy whites, and tender greens of spring. Branches split the morning sunshine into shafts of magic that danced on the hood of her car.

She rounded a slight curve, and a white two-story house came into view. A delighted squeal bubbled up in her throat. This house, this beautiful, silent testimony to days gone by, stood in a cool oasis of evergreen and elm, flanked by the quintessential red barn and a scattering of smaller buildings. Sunlight dazzled like diamonds off the puddles in the bright green yard. The whole scene couldn't be more idyllic if it tried.

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Envy welled inside her. Had Mr. Get-Rid-of-Everything spent any time here at all? He couldn't have, or he'd understand what a priceless pearl this place was.

As she drew closer, the home's age became evident. Paint peeled from both the house and the barn. One side of the screened porch listed to the left. Weeds sprang up with abandon. But despite these imperfections, its century-old charm was still there.

It was love at first sight.

She slowed to a near crawl, lost in daydreams and questions about the people who'd lived here, about their stories, their lives. It reeled her in up to her knees. Stuck fast with no hope of escape.

No.

Wait.

She wasn't just stuck in her daydreams.

She was stuck in a giant puddle of oozing mud.



❖❖❖

## CHAPTER THREE

“WORK WITH ME, Edna.” Gritting her teeth, Sloane revved the gas. “You can do it.”

But the little Hyundai’s only response was helplessly whirring and squealing its tires as it sank deeper into the muck.

Perfect.

With a great deal of trepidation, Sloane turned off the ignition and cracked the door to reveal a pool of shiny gray-brown goop. Goop that would be almost impossible to scrub out of the new pair of Toms she’d just treated herself to.

She kicked off her shoes, tossed them onto the passenger seat, and rolled her jeans to her calves, then set her jaw and climbed from the car.

Cold mud swallowed both feet up to her ankles, and she let out a yelp. When the shock passed, she leaned against Edna’s smooth, dark blue side and carefully slogged to the rear of the car to assess the situation.

Ugh. The ground beneath the back tires was part rocky gravel, part tall grass, and part mud, but the front wheels were sunk halfway into the same slop that sucked at her feet. Somehow, in nearly fifteen years of driving experience, this had never come up.

With a silent prayer for guidance, she retraced her sloppy steps, leaned inside the driver’s door, and groped around the passenger seat for her phone. Time to turn this problem over to Professor Google.

“Are you stuck?”

She straightened, and there was Garrett, leaning against the porch railing, his mouth quirked with amusement.

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“Nope. Just a quick mud mask for my feet. Did you know they charge fifty bucks for this at the salon?”

His gaze slid from her face to the mud and back again. “So you don’t need a hand or anything?”

“If all else fails, I’ll call AAA.” She lifted her phone. “Thanks, though.”

“C’mon, I can have you out of there in two minutes.” The porch steps creaked as he strode toward her. “Just put a few sticks under the tires for traction, and I’ll get back there and give it a good shove.”

“You think that’ll work?”

He bent to examine the rear tires. “This isn’t the first car to get stuck here, and it probably won’t be the last.”

Gone was his suit from yesterday, and in its place was a pair of faded jeans and a plaid flannel shirt over a Kansas Jayhawks T-shirt. He wasn’t skin and bones, but he was no beefcake either.

“You don’t really look like the sort of person who makes a habit of pushing cars out of the mud,” she said.

That dimple in his right cheek deepened. “You don’t really look like the sort of person who makes a habit of getting cars stuck in mud either. And yet here we are.”

“All right.” Swallowing her pride, she tucked her phone into her pocket. “If you can get me out of here, I’d be most appreciative.”

“Happy to help. I’ll grab some sticks.”

She wasn’t sure which was more irritating: the smirk on his lips as he turned away or how perfectly those jeans fit him. Heat blasting her face, she sank into the driver’s seat, twisted awkwardly to retrieve an old hoodie from the back, and gave her filth-covered feet a cursory wipe.

When she looked up, Garrett stood beside her open window. “Okay, we’ve got enough traction, I think.” He patted the roof and headed toward the back. “Go ahead and fire it up.”

With a turn of the key, Edna vroomed to life.

“Now give it some gas,” he called. “Don’t floor it, though. Nice and gentle.”

Mindful of the squalling fit Edna had just thrown, Sloane eased down the accelerator. The car whined a moderate protest, then lurched forward onto a patch of grassy gravel near the house. Relief washed through her as

she climbed from the car, her bag over her shoulder, her shoes dangling from two fingers. The grass was cool and damp beneath her bare feet.

“See? Piece of cake.” Garrett fell into step beside her, and her heart twinged with sympathy at the mud-spattered Jayhawk in the center of his T-shirt.

“Thank you. Truly.”

He’d been right, of course. She couldn’t have done it without him. And the satisfied smirk he wore told her he knew that, and he knew she knew that.

Being right was doubtless something he was used to.

“It was the least I could do, considering it’s my fault you got stuck.” He gestured toward the patch of mud. “This road’s terrible, even without three inches of rain. I feel bad for not warning you.”

“I was too busy gawking at the house to watch where I was going, so no harm, no foul.” She feasted her eyes on the house once more. “This place is beautiful.”

He gave a dry chuckle. “Even knee-deep in mud?”

“That patch of mud has probably been there for decades. There’s beauty in that.”

“There’s beauty in pavement too.” Garrett crouched beside a spigot next to the porch. “I should rinse off my shoes before I go in. You’re welcome to use this, but this water’s nowhere near as warm as what they’d give you at the salon.”

“That won’t bother me. I’ll just be glad to get this mud off my feet.”

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The spigot squawked to life, and Sloane stepped beneath a flow of water so cold it drew a startled cry despite her efforts to suppress it. Ignoring Garrett’s chuckles, she scraped off the worst of the mud with aching toes, then leaped to dry ground and glared daggers at him.

“Where’d this water come from, the iceberg that sank the *Titanic*?”

Blue eyes sparkling, he shed his plaid shirt and handed it to her. “Here. Rub some feeling back into them.”

The rest of her froze as much as her feet. His T-shirt-covered shoulders were broader than they’d looked, his arms more muscled than she’d given him credit for.

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Maybe he looked like the sort of person who made a habit of pushing cars out of the mud after all.

“Thank you.” Bracing herself against the side of the house, she wrapped the soft, woodsy-smelling flannel around her grateful left foot. Garrett kicked off his mud-covered sneakers and held them beneath the spigot. The water ran brown, then beige, as the original bright blue of the shoes shone through.

The screen door banged open, and a young woman with long, dark blonde hair poked her head out. “Everything okay out—whoa, what happened?”

“Just a little mud,” Garrett replied. “No big deal.”

The woman switched her gaze to Sloane, and Sloane found herself staring at a female version of Garrett. Same eyes, same nose, same cleft in the chin, same dimpled smile.

What must it be like to look at another human being and see your own reflection?

“Hi.” The woman stuck out her hand. Sloane glanced at her own to make sure it was clean enough to return the handshake.

“Sloane, this is my incredibly annoying sister, Lauren,” Garrett said. “Lauren, this is Sloane Kelley from the historical museum.”

Lauren held the door for Sloane. “Can I get you anything? Coffee cake? Blueberry buckle? Cinnamon rolls?”

That explained the fragrant mix of sweetness and spice hanging heavy in the air as Sloane stepped into the living room. At her apartment there was only one breakfast option—instant oatmeal—and she hadn’t even bothered with that this morning.

“Lauren’s a food blogger,” Garrett explained.

“*Dollop of Delicious*. Maybe you’ve heard of it?” Lauren’s smile was wide and hopeful.

“Sorry, no.” Sloane handed the now-damp flannel shirt back to Garrett. “I’m not much of a cook.”

“Let me get you something then.” Lauren’s blonde waves swished across the back of her plaid shirt as she headed to the kitchen. “You’re probably starving.”

Not until now, anyway. The drool-worthy aromas made Sloane’s stomach gnaw its protest at the missed breakfast.

“Come on in.” Garrett indicated a room to the right of the entryway, and Sloane drank in the sight. Though the floral wallpaper and deep green accents spoke of the 1990s, the bones of the house were from a century earlier. Wood-framed, thick-silled windows. Creaky hardwood floors. The gorgeous stone fireplace. This house was amazing.

“Land’s sake, if it isn’t Auntie Boop.”

A slight, snowy-haired woman piped up from a blue recliner beside the fireplace, eyes twinkling behind large gilt-framed glasses.

“Sloane, this is my grandma, Rosie Spencer,” Garrett said. “And Grandma, this is Sloane Kelley from the historical museum.”

“Oh, hogwash. I know Auntie Boop when I see her.” Rosie cut her broad smile from Garrett to Sloane. “You haven’t changed a bit except your hair. Are you letting it grow out?”

Sloane put a self-conscious hand to her wavy chin-length bob. “Maybe?”

“You remember what we talked about last night, right?” Garrett’s voice was low and close to Sloane’s ear.

She nodded. “So who’s Auntie Boop?”

“No idea. We just roll with it.”

“Gotcha.”

“Here we are,” came Lauren’s bright voice. “You didn’t say what you wanted, so I brought you one of everything.”

Sloane’s mouth watered at the tray of goodies Lauren set on the coffee table.

“All gluten free, allergy friendly, non-GMO—”

“But they taste good anyway,” Garrett interjected. Lauren rolled her eyes, and he planted a kiss on top of her head. “Save me a slice of that coffee cake. I’m going to go change.”

“M’kay.” Lauren pulled a TV tray from beside a large bookshelf, unfolded it, and placed it in front of Rosie.

“What a beautiful house.” Sloane settled on the couch. “Do you all live here?”

“All except Garrett.” Lauren poured coffee into a trio of mugs. “He’s up in Kansas City. Comes down every couple weekends or so to help out.”

Rosie blew a raspberry. “Garrett’s a big worrywart.”

Sloane chuckled. She liked Rosie.

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She liked this cinnamon roll too. Warm and gooey, with the perfect blend of sweetness and spice. Who needed gluten anyway?

Lauren leaned back in the recliner, cradling a steaming green mug. “So Garrett says you’re here about that satchel he brought in yesterday.”

Sloane took a much-needed sip of coffee. “It’s not so much about the satchel as what was inside it. A diary from 1861.”

Lauren’s eyes widened. “Wow. Do you know whose it is?”

“It belonged to a nine-year-old girl named Annabelle Collins.” Sloane’s heartbeat kicked up a notch as she watched Lauren for a reaction. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“No.” She turned to Rosie and raised her voice slightly. “Grandma? Do you know an Annabelle Collins?”

“Annabelle . . .” Rosie’s brow creased; gnarled hands curled into loose fists. “Blast it. If I ever did, I don’t anymore.”

“It’s all right. I’ve never heard of her either.” Lauren tore off a bite of cinnamon roll and turned back to Sloane. “Our mom died years ago, Dad moved to Florida, and with Grandpa gone, it’s just Garrett, Grandma, and me. And we didn’t know much about our family history to begin with.”

“I’m sorry about your mom.” Sloane lowered her mug to the table. “And you’d be surprised how little most people know about their heritage.” *Try as they might to uncover it.*

“Wait a minute. You said Annabelle was nine?” Lauren rose and fluttered across the room. “I found a notebook last week that looked pretty old. The handwriting was a little unsteady and the spelling wasn’t great. I thought maybe it was Grandma’s from when she was a girl, but what if it’s even older?”

“It’s certainly worth a look.” Excitement rose in Sloane’s chest. She shouldn’t get her hopes up.

But where history—and life—were concerned, sometimes hope was all she had.



Garrett spread an old towel on the hardwood floor of the guest bedroom. The bedroom he slept in when he visited, for as long as he could remember.

Stepping out of damp, mud-hemmed jeans, he glanced out the window to a view that remained unchanged: a vibrant green clearing leading up a slight rise to a grove of cottonwoods, on the other side of which ran Blackledge Creek.

Long weekends. Lazy summer days. Anytime he visited, sooner or later he'd find himself by that creek. Learning to fish with Grandpa. Wading in its cold, clear waters. Sitting on the banks and tossing in sticks, watching the current carry them away. City kid though he was, being here always brought him closer to some part of himself. To nature.

To God.

Those waters must've had that effect on people. His mother running barefoot through wildflowers and doing cannonballs into the creek's deeper sections remained among his most cherished memories. Even at the last, when cancer had devoured everything but her soul, when her cheekbones jutted sharp against the sheets and colorful head scarves did little to hide the ravages of chemotherapy, she still wanted to come home. Feel the fresh air against her skin one last time. The creek's rippling water on feet that would no longer support her.

Garrett yanked on a clean pair of jeans and whipped shut the lid of his suitcase. The past was long gone. Reminiscing would only heap pain upon pain.

The ancient stairs creaked beneath his footsteps as he descended to the living room, where Lauren, Grandma, and Sloane all huddled together, heads bent over something Sloane held.

"There he is." Sloane's smile was evident in her voice.

"Who?" He came around the edge of the sofa.

"Pretty sure we found Annabelle's dad." Sloane held up a tablet, eyes shining behind black-framed glasses.

The image of a stone monument filled the screen, a list of names and ranks engraved into its surface. Including a Lieutenant Collins, Company I, 19th Indiana Infantry.

"This is at Gettysburg," she said.

"Ah, the Iron Brigade."

Sloane's eyebrows arched, and he grinned, pleased to have impressed her.

"I'm surprised he made it out alive." He leaned down to study the

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picture. “That unit suffered some pretty heavy losses at Gettysburg, if memory serves.”

“Look who knows something about history.”

He shrugged. “I went through a bit of a Civil War phase as a kid.”

“A bit?” Lauren scoffed. “Your cannon collection covered your entire dresser.”

“Yes. Well.” He wasn’t about to let Lauren get started on embarrassing childhood stories. “Are we sure this is the right guy?”

“According to his service record, he’s about the right age, and I found two more Collinses from the same town in Indiana. Nineteen-year-old Charles and seventeen-year-old Joseph. I have more sources I can check to confirm, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure this is him.”

“Now, you let us know.” Rosie raised a finger and peered at Sloane over the tops of her glasses. “Can’t leave an old woman hanging in the middle of a good story.”

Sloane took Rosie’s hand in both of hers, and the gesture wrapped Garrett’s heart in warmth. “I’ll give you guys a call the instant I find out anything.”

“You’re looking a little tired, Grandma.” Lauren rose from her chair. “Would you like to lie down?”

“I *am* feeling a bit tuckered.”

“Can I help?” Garrett stood, but Lauren waved him off, a cryptic smile on her face.

“You stay. Give me the Cliff’s Notes of whatever you find in that diary.” Before Garrett could protest, his grandmother and sister rounded the corner to the bedroom, and he was left with Sloane.

“Diary?” he asked. “You guys found another one somewhere?”

“Lauren did.” Sloane slipped on a pair of thin white gloves, her face alight. “Come on. Let’s see what Annabelle’s up to.”

She looked so eager he couldn’t resist, even if he wanted to. He sank into the spot vacated by his grandmother, and Sloane scooted closer, holding the diary between them. Some fruity scent wafted from her hair. Strawberries, maybe. It brought him back to childhood summers on the farm.

“So.” He fixed his gaze on the faded pages. “What’s going on with Miss Annabelle?”



“It’s 1864 now. Annabelle’s twelve, and her father’s getting remarried.” Sloane’s finger traced the lines of childish handwriting. “I’ve had a letter from Papa, and I am to have a new mama!”

“What happened to her old mama?”

“Smallpox. The whole family caught it, and they lost both Annabelle’s mother and baby sister.”

“Wouldn’t wish that on anyone.” Garrett wasn’t aware he’d spoken aloud until he caught a glimpse of wide, concerned brown eyes.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Lauren said your mom . . .”

“Yeah. Breast cancer.” The words were dull. Empty. “She’s been gone six years.”

Sloane’s small gloved hand rested on his. “That must be difficult.”

She sounded so sad he wanted to comfort her. “Her pain’s over now. She’s with Jesus. I wouldn’t wish her back, not in a million years.”

“Doesn’t mean you don’t miss her, though. And for that, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” He returned his attention to the page. “What happens next?”

Sloane scanned the next few pages, her long eyelashes flitting back and forth. “Here’s something . . . Wow. Poor girl.”

Garrett bent his head to read the text and caught another whiff of that fruity scent.

My heart is broken. Papa and his new wife have bought a farm in Pennsylvania so they can be nearer to *her* family. And what’s worse, she is going to have a baby! Papa says she has lost babies before and is “in a delicate condition,” so she cannot travel and he cannot leave her. He assures me I will be happier with Uncle and Aunt than I ever would with him and Huldah.

I thought I was to have a mother again. A family. But Papa has a new family now, and there’s no place in it for me.

Garrett gave a bitter laugh. “Never thought I’d have so much in common with a tween girl from 1864.”

Sloane arched a brow. “How so?”

“While Mom was sick, Dad found a kindred spirit in an online support forum. A woman whose husband died of pancreatic cancer a couple

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months before Mom. So when she passed, Dad flew down to Florida to meet Debbie. I thought they were just friends, but the next thing I know, he's calling from Jamaica telling me I've got a new stepmom." Garrett tented his fingers. "He sold his practice, the house . . . I've barely heard from him since. It's like he wants to close the book on that whole part of his life."

Sloane stared at him. "You've really lost everyone, haven't you?"

"Everyone except Lauren." He flashed a wry smile. "I keep hoping, but . . ."

Laughing, Sloane shoved his shoulder. "Come on. Lots of us would kill to have a sibling."

"And those of us with siblings would sometimes kill *not* to have them."

An odd expression flickered across Sloane's heart-shaped face, but before he could decipher it she was back to business, turning pages in the diary. "Annabelle's not writing as regularly anymore. Every few weeks instead of every few days. But at least she's still writing."

"Her handwriting's getting better too."

"She mentions school occasionally. Her aunt and uncle are doing right by her. In fact, she's—" Sloane gasped. Her gentle grip on his wrist sent a jolt of heat through his body.

"Oh, Garrett, this is big."