



SECRETS *From* GRANDMA'S ATTIC

HISTORY *LOST* *and* *FOUND*

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CHAPTER ONE



“Tracy?” Tracy Doyle’s husband, Jeff, appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the sunlight that streamed in through the oversized front windows. “They’re going to be here any minute.” He tilted his head, as if trying to understand why she was sitting down now.

“I know.” Tracy sighed. There were still things that needed to be done before her sister, Amy, and her kids arrived for Matt’s birthday party—first, she needed to put drinks in the tub of ice, then add the finishing touches to the Spider-Man cake. But Tracy had gotten distracted. She held Grandma Pearl’s Bible in her hands, the pages worn soft with use. She’d recently found it in the attic, where well-meaning relatives had moved the things from Grandma’s bedroom after she’d passed. “I was just wondering about Jana and Matt.”

“What about Jana and Matt?” Jeff had put on a fresh collared shirt and khakis, even though she knew he preferred casual clothes at home because he had to wear business attire all week.

“I never really paid attention to the family tree at the front of Grandma’s Bible before, but I was looking up a verse to read to Matt tonight, and I somehow landed on this page.” She indicated the tissue-thin page, which was carefully filled out in peacock-blue ink. “I was wondering when we should add them to the family tree.”

Grandma Pearl had carefully recorded each member of the family, starting with her grandparents and parents. She’d also written the date of her own marriage, and the birthdates and marriages of each of her children and grandchildren. There was Tracy’s own name, with her birthday recorded in Grandma Pearl’s sure hand, and the date she’d married Jeff, as well as the birthdays of their kids, Chad and Sara. Her cousin Robin’s birth and marriage were there,

as were the births of her children. And there was Amy. She'd never married, but her two foster children had quickly become family.

"I was wondering if I should add their names," Tracy said.

"Maybe it's best to wait until the adoption is finalized," Jeff said. Tracy knew that was the logical answer. Jana and Matt felt like family, but they weren't yet—not officially, anyway. Their adoption still had to work its way through the Missouri legal system before Amy could make it final. But Amy loved them like they had been born to her.

"You're probably right," Tracy said. She started to push herself up, but then she noticed something else on the page.

"What?" Jeff was watching her, his eyes narrowed.

She didn't answer right away. She looked down at the page, trying to understand. She was reading it correctly. But it made no sense.

"Grandma listed each of her children," Tracy said. "Ruth, Abigail, and Noah Allen."

"Right..." Jeff was watching her, trying to understand her reaction.

"But there's a fourth name too. Ezekiel Collins."

"Under your grandmother's name?" Jeff stepped forward.

"Yes. Under her and Grandpa. Just like he's another one of their children. But who in the world is Ezekiel Collins?"

Did Tracy have an uncle she'd never heard of? But how was that possible? Why would Grandma never have mentioned him? And yet, there he was, recorded in the family Bible in Grandma's handwriting. It couldn't be a mistake.

"That's strange," Jeff said, studying the page. But before he could say anything more, the doorbell rang, and a second later the door opened, and Jana and Matt ran into the house and right through the parlor to the living room, where a stack of birthday presents waited. Tracy heard screeching as the children saw the gifts.

"They've decided they don't need to act like guests," Amy said, stepping in behind them. Jeff followed the kids into the living room

and was already riling them up, asking them to guess what was inside each box.

"They're absolutely right," Tracy said. She closed the Bible and walked over to the front door and pulled her sister into a hug. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. The kids are a little bit excited."

"As they should be. It's not every day a boy turns ten."

Amy pulled back, and Tracy saw that she had dark circles under her eyes and her hair was past due for a trim. But she looked happy. Raising two active kids would do that to you.

"Matt told me on the way over that this is the first birthday party he's ever had."

"That's really sad." The news hit Tracy like a punch to the gut.

"It's awful, isn't it?" Amy shook her head. "Their birth parents... Well, I imagine they did the best they could under the circumstances."

Amy was being charitable. Tracy didn't know the full story but understood that drugs had played a part in how Jana and Matt had ended up in foster care.

"Thank you for doing this."

"Now I'm sorry I'm not doing more. This is just a family party. If I'd known that, I would have invited his whole class and rented a bouncy house and hired a clown and—"

"Clowns are creepy. This is perfect, Trace. Thank you." Amy looked down at the Bible that was still in Tracy's hands. "Doing some light reading?"

"Something like that." And then, after a pause, she said, "Hey, have you ever heard of an Ezekiel Collins?"

Amy's brow wrinkled. "I don't think so. Who's he?"

"He's listed here in Grandma's Bible." Tracy opened the Bible to the records page and showed it to Amy.

"What in the world?" Amy looked up, her eyes wide. "Do we have an uncle we never knew about?"

"It kind of looks like that's what this means."

"How is that possible?" Amy asked.

"Can we open the presents now?" came a cry from the living room.

"Not yet," Amy called back. "You have to wait until your cousins get here."

"When will they get here?" Jana asked on Matt's behalf.

"Soon," Amy called. Then, to Tracy, she said, "When will they get here?"

"Soon." Tracy smiled. Chad and Sara were coming with their families, and Robin and her kids would be here shortly as well. Tracy decided to put the question about Ezekiel out of her mind for now. She had an excited ten-year-old ready to enjoy his first birthday party ever. She needed to focus on him for now.

Tracy walked toward the bookshelves that lined the far wall of the parlor. Grandma Pearl had loved books, and the shelves were filled with hardcover editions of the classics as well as newer fiction, history, biographies, and a whole shelf of Christian titles. Tracy hoped to read through the entire collection someday. But that day would likely be far in the future, the way things were going. She bent down and set the family Bible on the shelf and straightened up.

She'd focus on Matt now, and worry about Ezekiel later.



Tracy had hoped to sleep in Saturday morning after the big party the night before, but the birds outside her window woke her with the sun. It was going to be a beautiful day; she could already tell as she climbed quietly out of bed. It was early May, and the dogwood outside her window was in full bloom. Jeff could sleep through anything, and would probably stay in bed for another hour at least. She padded down the creaky stairs into the kitchen and started the coffee.

They had been renovating Grandma Pearl's Victorian home since they'd moved in. Bit by bit, they were scraping off decades of

wallpaper and retrofitting bathrooms and realigning floors, uncovering all kinds of secret nooks and crannies hidden behind haphazardly constructed walls in the process. The kitchen was the one room Tracy had insisted they tackle first, and the big windows and gleaming white cabinets and smooth granite-topped island still made her happy, every morning.

As the coffee brewed, Tracy spent some time reading her Bible and talking with the Lord, and then, fresh coffee in hand, she set about making her list for the day. There was laundry to do—there was always laundry to do. And the bathrooms needed a good cleaning. She needed to vacuum after last night's party. It had been a busy week at the newspaper, and with the party to prep for, she wasn't as on top of her chores as she would normally be. And she'd promised Jeff she'd stop by the hardware store to get stain to refinish that dresser he'd found in the attic.

But even as she wrote, her mind kept drifting back to the name she'd found in the Bible last night.

Who was Ezekiel Collins?

Had he died at birth and never been mentioned? What if he'd run away, or disgraced the family and been disowned? But Grandma would never do that. And Tracy's mother would have mentioned him at some point. Tracy couldn't figure it out. If she'd had another uncle, she'd have known about him. Wouldn't she?

Then, Tracy had an idea. She glanced at the clock over the stove. The library would open shortly. She might not have the slightest clue who Ezekiel Collins was, but someone knew. There had to be some record of him somewhere. And the Canton Public library would be the best place to start.

Tracy made herself toast and eggs, and by the time she went back up the stairs to get dressed, Jeff was getting ready for his morning run. She'd never understand how that man could hop out of bed and go off and run three miles, but he did it, almost every day.

"I'm headed to the library," she said, and he nodded, unsurprised. She did spend a lot of time there, she supposed. Jeff adjusted

his headphones and waved before he headed down the stairs. She dressed quickly and went downstairs, and then she walked out onto the porch and into the beautiful spring day.

The sun was warm on her skin, and the magnolias and primroses were in full bloom. Just before she climbed into her car in the driveway, she looked back up at the house. It really was a gorgeous old Victorian, with its tall turret and generous front porch shaded by mature poplars and maples. Sometimes she still couldn't believe she got to live here.

She backed slowly out of the driveway. Tree limbs heavy with fresh green life arched over the street, shading the beautiful old homes as she drove. Lewis Street was bustling, the sidewalks crowded with people enjoying the warm day. There was a line outside P.J.'s, as there was most days he cooked his biscuits and gravy. P.J. kept saying he was going to remodel and add more tables, but Tracy knew that half the reason people came was for the battered wooden tables and booths that had been there for a hundred years. Robin's antique shop was open, and Jeannie's new bookshop looked to be doing a brisk business. Tracy was glad; Jeannie had worked so hard to rebuild after the fire, and now the shop was better than ever. She passed the newspaper office, housed in a historic brick building, where she worked during the week, and the florist and coffee shop. There were plenty of parking spots outside the library, which was also housed in a downtown historic brick building. Tracy stepped inside, heading for the computer terminals. She waved at Donna Wilson, the head librarian, who was seated behind the check-out desk. As an investigative reporter, Tracy was very familiar with the research tools available at the library. She would start by searching the county's vital records, she decided, and if that didn't turn anything up, she'd look in the archives of all the newspapers in Missouri.

"Hi there, Tracy." Pastor Gary Hodges walked up, his two young grandchildren in tow. Pastor Gary always looked so formal when he was preaching, with his suits and ties, but right now, he just looked like a proud grandpa.

“Hello, Pastor.” She glanced at the group of parents and toddlers gathering in the children’s section. “Storytime?”

“Indeed.” He laughed. “And you look like you’re on a mission.”

“I am, I suppose,” she said. Then she paused. Pastor Gary had been around Faith Chapel for decades. He’d been very close with Grandma Pearl. If anyone knew who Ezekiel was, he would. “I’m actually hoping to find out who Ezekiel Collins is.”

He recognized the name; that was clear. He startled, and his eyes widened.

“What made you want to look into Ezekiel Collins?” he asked. His youngest grandson, Henry, tugged on his hand.

“I found his name in Grandma Pearl’s Bible.” She watched as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Do you know who he is?”

The words hung in the air just a bit too long before he answered.

“I don’t,” Pastor Gray finally said. “But I have to admit, Ezekiel Collins is a name that I’ve long wondered about.”

Tracy wanted to ask a thousand questions, but she stayed quiet, waiting for him to go on.

“I have no idea who he is,” Pastor Gray continued. “But he sends a sizable check to the church every month. I’d sure love to know who he is and why he sends that money.”

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