

Chapter One



Thin rays of afternoon sunlight filtered through the leaves of the old maple tree that dominated the front yard of the Howard family home. Unshed tears blurred Alice Howard's vision as she squinted up at the tree's majestic canopy. How was it possible that more than fifty years had passed since her father had dug a gallon-sized hole and planted that spindly twig? Yet she remembered the day as if it were yesterday. Father had planted the tree for two reasons: first, to celebrate the birth of his third daughter Jane; and second, to honor the memory of his beloved wife Madeleine. As a result, the tree had always evoked mixed feelings in Alice. She had dearly loved her little sister, but like any normal twelve-year-old girl, she had also mourned the loss of her mother.

And now Father was gone too. For the first time, the reality of this loss penetrated her heart like a well-aimed sword, and her tears began to fall freely. It had been such a shock to receive that phone call today at work. Her father had seemed perfectly fine earlier that morning. Fred

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Humbert was the one to call. He explained how he'd left his hardware store to take a look at the leaky kitchen faucet that her father had told him about yesterday. He had knocked several times before he let himself in.

"I found him sitting in his chair in the study, Alice, just like he'd peacefully gone to sleep. But when I tapped him on the shoulder, I knew something was wrong. I guess he'd had a heart attack. I could tell he was gone. Probably had been for a couple of hours. I knew it was no use to call the paramedics, so I decided to call you. I figured you'd know what to do."

Alice had sped home and had spent the rest of the day dealing with *things*. Now that the arrangements had been made and her two sisters had been notified, there seemed to be little left to do, other than to wait.

It was the waiting that undid her. All she could think of was Father and all the little things she would miss about him, like his sunny smile, and the way he liked to sneak table scraps to Wendell and then complain that the cat was getting too chubby. She would miss his reading aloud to her from the local weekly newspaper and the way he added his own editorial comments that never failed to make her chuckle. No, life would never be the same again.

Of course, Father had been quite old and his health had been failing for years, but Alice had never really prepared herself for the reality of his actual absence. Perhaps

she'd been in denial. There was no denying it now. He was gone, and there was a big hole in her life. She sat down on the creaky front porch swing next to Wendell. With a deep sigh, she ran her hand over his warm, gray and black fur and wondered what was going on in that feline brain right now. Did he know what had happened this morning? Of course, he must. After all, Father had always claimed that Wendell was "insightful—for a cat anyway." She scratched his favorite spot, on the top of his head right between his ears, and continued to wait. Oh, if only Louise and Jane would get here.

"*Alice!*" called a shrill voice from behind her. "Alice Christine, where *are* you?"

Alice glanced toward the north side of the house in time to spy a flash of vivid red hair just passing through the overgrown rose trellis. She recognized the shade as "Titian Dreams"—the color that Aunt Ethel's hairdresser applied to her roots every four weeks. Alice knew she might be able to avoid Aunt Ethel if she hurried into the house, but what would be the use? Her aunt would eventually catch up with her anyway. For, despite Aunt Ethel's age (which Alice suspected was mid-seventies, although Aunt Ethel kept this secret) she was a sharp old woman, both in wit and in tongue. And during the ten years she'd lived in the carriage house next door, she'd become one of Alice's greatest challenges in life.

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It had been Father's suggestion to relocate Aunt Ethel nearby. He had been concerned about his younger sister's growing old alone, and at the time it sounded like a good idea to Alice too. She'd envisioned the three of them becoming a sort of family. And indeed they had in their own way.

"I'm on the porch," Alice called.

"Oh, Alice! What are you doing just sitting around at a time like this? Land sakes, there must be a hundred things to do right now."

"Yes," Alice said with a tired smile. "And I've been doing them."

"But I was just chatting with Carlene Moss down at the newspaper, and she said that you hadn't notified them of Daniel's demise yet. Naturally, they'll want to do a front-page story about Daniel's life of service here in Acorn Hill—probably need a good photograph too. I think I may have one that will work. Goodness knows that man gave his life to his congregation. For more than six decades too! And what about the memorial service, Alice, have you decided what to—"

"I thought I'd leave some decisions until Jane and Louise arrive."

"And when might that be?" Aunt Ethel peered down at her watch as if she were the stationmaster waiting for a delayed train.

Alice shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I'm guessing Louise might arrive later this afternoon and Jane by tomorrow evening."

"Well, I guess it's all right for you to sit around all day long if you like, but I have places to go, people to see."

Alice stood up. Leaning over the porch railing she peered into her aunt's pale blue eyes. "But don't you miss him, Auntie?"

For a brief moment, Aunt Ethel's veneer of busyness and efficiency seemed to crack slightly, and she even sniffed. "Well, of course, I miss him, dear. He was my only living brother, and I expected him to go on forever." She now pulled a lace-trimmed hanky from the bodice of her floral dress and dabbed her nose. "I just don't have time to dwell on it right now."

Alice partially understood her aunt's philosophy. Sometimes it was easier to keep yourself busy and distracted, to hold your emotions at bay. But maybe it wasn't always the best route—at least not in the long run.

"What about this old house?" demanded the aunt, changing the subject as only she could do. "Didn't your father leave this place to the chapel? Does that mean you'll be moving out soon?"

Alice slowly shook her head. "Actually Father left it to us—to Jane and Louise and me."

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Aunt Ethel frowned as if this were the silliest plan imaginable. “What on earth will the three of you do with this house? Good gracious, it’s falling down around your ears.”

“I don’t know what we’ll do with it, but Father had been going on about this idea quite a lot recently. He recalled when we three girls were growing up here. He kept reminding me of all the good times we’d shared in this house. I think he hoped that giving it to us would somehow help to bring us back together again.”

Aunt Ethel laughed, but there was a distinct note of sarcasm in it. “Well, now wouldn’t *that* be something. I’ll tell you what, Alice, I’ve never, not in all my born days, ever known flesh-and-blood sisters any less alike than you three.”

Alice knew her aunt was mostly right, but the tactless comment still irked her. Yet, she kept her reaction to herself.

“Well, you three would be wise to sell off this rundown old place quickly before it deteriorates even more. *Tsk-tsk*. Just look at that peeling paint.”

Alice stroked Wendell’s coat more firmly than before. The cat reacted by hopping down and sashaying across the porch.

“Oh, there’s Lloyd,” said Aunt Ethel suddenly. She waved across the street, and then called out a chirpy “*Yoo-hoo!*”

Lloyd Tynan had on his light blue seersucker suit today, with a darker blue shirt and a crisp white bowtie. He smiled

broadly and waved back. As mayor of Acorn Hill, not to mention Aunt Ethel's most recent beau, it was likely he had already heard the sad news. And, if not, he would certainly hear about it now.

"Will you excuse me, dear?" Aunt Ethel gave her flamboyant coiffure a quick little pat. "I need to go speak to Lloyd about something I'd like him to say at your father's service."

"Not at all." Alice felt a wave of relief pass over her. Thank goodness for Lloyd. If he hadn't shown up at that moment, she might have been subjected to another one of Aunt Ethel's little lectures on why Alice should get herself married, particularly now that her father was gone. This was one of her aunt's favorite topics and could always be counted on at times of weddings, births, showers, holidays, or funerals. Alice's age of sixty-two did nothing to deter her aunt either. Everyone in town knew that Aunt Ethel firmly believed that romance wasn't limited to the young.

Just the same, Alice was certain she didn't have it in her to abide that particular speech. Not today anyway. Long ago, Alice had resigned herself to her single lifestyle. She enjoyed nursing and caring for others, and she devoted herself to her youth group and really loved those girls as if they were her own. What did it matter if they were young enough to be her grandchildren now?

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Father had always provided a good buffer for Aunt Ethel's thoughtless interference, lovingly reminding Alice how useful and helpful she was to so many. He enjoyed replaying the occasional story he heard at the coffee shop (although she was certain he exaggerated) about the various patients who were "touched by Alice's selfless kindnesses" during their hospital stays—as if she were some kind of Florence Nightingale. Father would remind her of the importance of her work with the young girls in the church. It had all helped to balance things out. But now that he was gone, Aunt Ethel had the upper hand.

Alice walked down the porch steps, treading gently on the board that was loose, as she peered down the quiet street toward town. The pavement shimmered like wavy glass in the hot afternoon sun. Would this summer never end? It was September already, and yet just as hot as mid-July. She stepped onto the sidewalk and looked toward Hill Street, longing to see Louise's car turning the corner at the four-way stop before it slowly proceeded this way. But Chapel Road remained just as quiet and empty as the old Victorian house behind her.

Excerpt from *Back Home Again* by Melody Carlson.

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