

ALL THINGS HIDDEN



Chapter One

Large icicles dripped from the overhang of Bedford Community Church just as they had done for the last one hundred and something years. Charlotte tucked the green bean casserole closer to her as she ducked, trying to miss the drips of water. It didn't work, and an icy drop hit the back of her neck and dribbled down her back.

"Oh, bother." She wiped the back of her neck and hurried to the fellowship hall for a special meeting of the Women's Group. Charlotte glanced at her watch and sighed. She was thirty minutes late, which meant she most likely had missed out on Melody Givens's potato salad, made from her great-grandmother's recipe. It always went first.

She moved to the long folding table covered with a faded plastic tablecloth. Bowls and platters of various sizes covered its surface. Most of the bowls were half-empty, all except Melody's large, blue potato salad bowl that was scraped clean. Seeing the bowl nearly caused tears to well up in her eyes—but not because she had missed the salad. It was more that she was thankful Melody was on the mend. Melody's recent fight against breast cancer had made Charlotte realize even more how quickly life can change, seemingly overnight.

Charlotte placed her casserole on the table and scanned the room, looking for an empty space to sit. Nearly all the folding chairs were filled with brightly bundled churchwomen. Perhaps the hint of warm air, and the sunshine casting long arms over the vast prairie, had drawn everyone from their winter hibernation. Either that or the curious postcard Hannah had sent out to all the church ladies, hinting of a fun surprise to be revealed at today's luncheon. It had been enough to stir Charlotte from her home even though she hadn't finished up Sam's birthday preparations.

The noise of ladies' voices rose and bounced around the room like lottery balls in a glass box. Charlotte's stomach rumbled, adding to the noise, and she scanned the food. She'd attended enough church potlucks—or smorgasbords, as Pastor Evans called them—that she knew which serving dish belong to whom. And equally telltale was the offering inside. Cecelia Potts's potato-sausage casserole. Andrea Vink's pigs in a blanket. Anita Wilson's almond coffee bread.

Charlotte took a serving of each. Then her lips puckered into a reined-in smile as she remembered Bob's comment at the last church potluck: "I have no doubt that God's heavenly feast won't start until Mary Louise Henner sets her plate of Swedish meatballs in cream-of-mushroom soup on God's banqueting table."

Charlotte spotted an empty chair in the back of the room. She quickly finished filling her plate and then hurried that direction. Nearly there, a hand gently grabbed her wrist. Charlotte paused. She glanced down, spotting Melody.

“I couldn’t save you a seat, but I saved you this.” She lifted a small paper plate with a scoop of potato salad. “I had to protect it with my life.” Melody’s chuckle sounded like one of Santa’s elves.

“Thank you! I owe you one.” Charlotte took the plate with her free hand and settled into a chair at a table filled with some of the older ladies. She’d just taken her first bite of potato salad when the pastor’s wife, Nancy Evans, rose.

“Okay, ladies.” Nancy flapped her hands in the air, reminding Charlotte of hummingbird wings. The voices stilled in record time, and all eyes turned to the front.

“Now, I know we usually share up-and-coming events at the end of the meeting, but I also know you’re all eager to hear about our surprise project. So, Hannah, would you please head up here and share just what the ladies of Bedford Community church are going to be up to?”

Hannah hurried to the front of the room. In her hand she held an old book. Charlotte leaned forward, trying to get a better look. The burgundy cover looked familiar. She bit her lower lip as she remembered where she’d seen it before. It was one of the old hymnals the church had used when her kids were small. Just spotting the cover with the embossed cross and gold lettering took her mind back to the days when her three kids lined up on the pew, their short legs sticking straight out. Charlotte had passed out sheets of lined paper and colored pencils in an attempt to keep Bill, Denise, and Pete occupied during the long sermon. *How many drawings of cows and sheep, horses and tractors had been drawn, using those old hymnals as a lap table?*

Her bottom lip pouted at days gone past as she also remembered Bill and Denise playing hangman and tic-tac-toe. Then there was Pete, who'd been more interested in writing in the book. *He always did find a way to get into trouble—even sitting on a church pew.*

"Hello, ladies."

Charlotte snapped back to the present at the sound of her best friend's voice.

"It's great to have so many of you here." Hannah Carter's whole face lit up as she stood in the center of the fellowship hall, looking every bit like a four-year-old at Christmas. "I'm going to start by sharing something I found in our own church basement." Hannah's laughter bounced from her lips. "And you thought it was just the place to stash outdated choir robes. Well, listen to this." She cleared her throat.

*"Now let us climb Nebraska's loftiest mount,
And from its summit view the scene below.
The moon comes like an angel down from heaven;
Its radiant face is the unclouded sun;
Its outspread wings the over-arching sky;
Its voice the charming minstrels of the air;
Its breath the fragrance of the bright wild-flowers.
Behold the prairie, broad and grand and free—
'Tis God's own garden, unprofaned by man."*

Charlotte paused, the fork halfway to her mouth. A poem? Hannah always came up with creative ways to announce up-and-coming events, but never with a poem

before. Charlotte looked around the silent room; it was clear that Hannah had gotten everyone's attention.

"It's a lovely poem," Eulalia Barry commented.

"Can you read it again?" Nancy said from where she stood at the punch bowl. Hannah must not have heard her because she put the poem back inside the Bible and placed it on the table.

"Only problem I saw . . ." Melody pointed her fork in the air. ". . . was where it talked about climbing Nebraska's loftiest mount—unless they mean the haystack over at the Stevenson farm!"

"Sugarloaf Hill *is* a mountain." Eighty-seven-year-old Anita Wilson leaned closer to Charlotte, as if it were her job to defend the highest peak in Adams County.

Nancy Evans tapped her fork against her water glass. "Ladies, attention please. It was a lovely poem, but Hannah does have a purpose for reading it. She's announcing service events, remember?"

The murmurs in the room stilled to a hush. Hannah cleared her voiced and continued.

"If you're wondering where I got this poem, it came from a box in the basement—from one of many boxes. The poem is titled "Nebraska," and it was written in 1854 by a fellow named George Washington Bungay. The boxes are filled with wonderful things, ladies. I found an old church cookbook, written by the women in our congregation in the 1920s. Can you believe that? There are Sunday school registers from when my husband Frank was just a boy. And Charlotte," Hannah found her among the other faces and focused her gaze. "I found a photo of Bill when he was

baptized. What a sweet little thing. Remind me to show you after lunch.”

“And the service project is . . .” Nancy’s smile spread like butter melting in the sun. She cocked one eyebrow and motioned with a wave of her hand, encouraging Hannah to continue.

“Oh yes, the point of all this is that Pastor Evans has asked if the women of the church would clean out the basement. It was due for a spring cleaning at least a quarter of a century ago.” Hannah chuckled at her own joke. “He also asked that we go through the items and create a display for the 130th anniversary of the founding of the church, which is coming up in about a month.”

More murmurs erupted, but this time Hannah wasn’t distracted. “Believe it or not, our Bedford Community Church is one of the oldest churches in Adams County!”

Charlotte bit her lip. Even though she did like the poem and was eager to see that photo of Bill, the thought of going through those stacks of boxes in the basement didn’t excite her. If she was serious about spring cleaning, she’d start in her *own* basement. *I bet it also was due for a spring cleaning a quarter of a century ago.*

“Do you have a time and date set when we’ll meet?” Mary Louise asked. Like most of the women, Mary Louise was a farmer’s wife and seemed eager for a new project to embark on—something different to bring interest to the long winter days.

“How about tomorrow?” Hannah clasped her hands together. “I can be here to open the church, and maybe some of you can swing by after dropping your kids off at

school. Or grandkids, if that's the case." Hannah turned and met Charlotte's eyes as she said that.

Charlotte nodded, and she knew to Hannah that was as good as a promise. Truth was, it had been a long and challenging winter for her too. It would be nice to get out of the house and spend some time with friends.

For the next few minutes Hannah discussed the display that would highlight their church history, and her ideas for a community event celebrating the beginnings of the Bedford Community Church. Rosemary offered to donate an antique display case from her store, and other ladies volunteered to create posters and flyers to invite the community to their open house—or rather, open church.

When Hannah was finished, Nancy Evans took the floor and attempted to go through old business and also to talk about an Easter brunch, but it was no use. Everyone was antsy to get down to the basement and start digging into those boxes. If Hannah already dug up cookbooks and hymnals, what other treasure did they hold?

"Can we start right now?" Mary Louise piped up as she pushed back her chair.

"I don't see why not," Nancy Evans acquiesced as she absorbed the excitement in the room. I don't think Hannah would be able to stop everyone now, even if she tried."

"Are you going to join us?" Mary Louise asked Charlotte as she walked toward her.

Charlotte glanced at her watch. Tonight was Sam's birthday—his eighteenth birthday. Even though she'd already baked the cake and left it on the counter to cool,

she still wanted to straighten up the house a bit and get dinner started. Everyone was coming over, which meant three times the normal amount of cooking. Three times the amount of people and laughter too.

Yet, I would like to take a peek.

“Well, I really should head home after we clean up the lunch mess. There’s so much I still have to do today.” She bit her lip. “But I suppose I could just poke around for a few minutes. I have to admit I’m intrigued.”

Thirty minutes later Charlotte found herself sitting in a chilly basement next to Dana’s Grandma Maxine, known as Maxie to everyone in Bedford. Together they sorted through a box of random items. Charlotte reached up and pulled a scraggly cobweb out of Maxie’s salt-and-pepper hair, which was pulled back in a bun. She flicked the piece of web to the ground.

“This isn’t the cleanest place,” Charlotte commented.

“No, but the spiders seem to like it.” Maxie grinned, showing two rows of teeth.

Next to them on the floor Charlotte and Maxie had three piles: display, save, toss. So far the toss pile had more in it than anything else.

“Who in the world would have saved a file of old grocery receipts from 1974?” Charlotte mumbled scanning one of the receipts. “Then again I wouldn’t mind if Hershey bars cost ten cents again.” She closed the file and tossed it into the trash pile.

“What are you doing?” Mary Louise Henner hustled over. Her penciled eyebrows arched. Her hair was also reddish-orange—a color that was clearly out of a bottle. Now that

Mary Louise was nearing sixty, the color most likely hid gray, but it was the same color Mary Louise had been using since Charlotte met her when they were both new brides. “Are you kidding? Why would you throw away those old receipts? They’d be perfect for June’s museum.”

“June?” Maxie tilted her head. Her eyes twinkled, and Charlotte realized for the first time that Dana had her grandmother’s eyes. “I thought we were going to have the display ready by the end of this month—you know, for the church’s anniversary?”

Mary Louise shook her finger just a few inches from Maxie’s face. “You know very well that June is my niece, and she’s working with Edna from the library on the museum.”

“Museum?” Charlotte rubbed her itchy nose. Her hands felt dry and scratchy from handling the old paper. “I didn’t hear anything about a museum.”

“It’s not much to start.” Mary Louise scooped up the file of receipts. “They’re putting it in one of the old storage rooms they cleared out. June just graduated from Wayne State College, and she’s fascinated by Nebraska history. Her hope is to get the old schoolhouse west of town moved in to that lot just off Lincoln Street and then have it refurbished.”

“That old thing?” Maxie swatted the air. “It should have been demolished long ago.”

“Then you need to invite her to join us. She would get a kick out of this,” Charlotte said, but Mary Louise wasn’t listening. Instead she was already hustling to the other side of the room to rescue more “treasures” out of the throw-away piles.

“Listen to this.” Maxie held up a yellowed piece of newspaper. “It’s a story from the *Bedford Leader* from 1940, talking about the history of the Bedford community and our church: ‘Every Saturday evening Reverend James McCaughey would ring the school bell, reminding the people of the Sabbath. For homestead families this meant preparation of Sunday school lessons for teachers and students alike. It meant Saturday night baths for children and the pressing of Sunday clothes for the morn. The bell carried the news that soon they’d be meeting with the friends and neighbors—for some it was the only time of the week they left the homestead. Sundays were treasured days.’” Maxie looked up. “There’s more here, but isn’t that beautiful?”

Charlotte nodded, sneezed, and then rubbed dust from her nose. “I never thought about that before. I suppose Sunday gatherings were very important back then.”

“Yes, making the church building even more important.” Maxie tilted her head and looked into the distance. “I remember what it was like growing up around these parts. There was a lot of space, and not a whole lot of folks. Getting together was a treat. It’s strange to think that the old people that I knew growing up were some of the first homesteaders. They enjoyed the landscape unprofaned by man’s hand—as Hannah read from that poem.”

“That’s right.” Charlotte placed the newspaper article in the keep pile. “I remember some of those homesteaders too—or rather their kids who grew up in the area. It’s strange to think that their ordinary lives would be so interesting to us now.” Charlotte laughed. “I should tell my grandkids that—to appreciate everything around my place

that's old, because someday those very things might be worthy of being put into a museum!"

Maxie laughed and then took a photo slide out from one of the boxes and held it up toward the egress window. "Exactly. I bet if the homesteaders were alive today they'd shrug their shoulders, not understanding how fascinated we are by their ox carts and soddies."

"Charlotte, you're not going to believe this." Hannah hustled over, waving a newspaper in her hand. "You're not going to believe this," she repeated. When she got closer Charlotte could see the paper in her friend's hand was the front page of the *Harding Tribune*.

"Look here." Hannah pointed to the middle of the front page.

"An advertisement for the Kerr Opera House?" Charlotte tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"No, under that. Don't you recognize the name?"

Charlotte squinted and looked closer.

"Elijah Coleman pleads not guilty to theft charges," Maxie read out loud. Her eyes widened, and she turned to Charlotte. "Oh my, I remember this story."

Hearing the name, Charlotte felt her stomach tighten, as if the potato salad she'd eaten had turned into one solid rock.

"Charlotte?" Mary Louise Henner hurried back over and took her hand. "Are you all right? The color just washed from your face. Do you need a glass of water?"

Charlotte nodded, but she didn't know how to explain. She turned to Hannah, opened her mouth, and closed it again, seeking help.

“Elijah Coleman is one of Charlotte’s relatives,” Hannah stated matter-of-factly. “I remember hearing about him once or twice, but I never heard anything like this.”

“Yes, Mary Louise, Maxie,” Charlotte confessed. “He was my great-grandfather. And he was accused of being a thief.” Charlotte sighed. “The community members said he took the very funds that were set aside to build Bedford Community Church.”

Chapter Two

Sam took the dollar bill and pressed it on his leg, attempting to smooth it out. He then tried sliding it into the soda machine slot again. His mouth was dry, and he needed caffeine to stay awake. He'd stayed up too late last night thinking about things—about turning eighteen, about his mom, his past, his future. Too much thinking, not enough sleep. “Come on, come on, you stupid thing.”

The machine sucked in the dollar, whirred for a minute, and then slid it back out. “This stinks.” He glanced at his watch, wondering if he had enough time to run to the office, beg for change, and then run back.

Unfortunately he only had a minute before the bell, and he doubted his teachers would fall for the, It's-my-birthday-give-me-a-break excuse. It seemed that he was the only one who thought turning eighteen—becoming an adult—was a big deal. His grandparents hadn't even said much about it. His siblings either. And he doubted his dad even remembered what day he was born on. “One more time, machine. It's my birthday. Treat me nice,” Sam mumbled out loud.