

Chapter Three

Thomas erased the boards, and the steady *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh* provided a comforting rhythm.

What had he done? Why did he allow her to leave? What was she doing? Thinking? Was she happy? Did she miss him ... even half as much as he missed her?

Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. So foolish. It had sounded like a good idea. Create a believable history—a life so different from Bentonsport no one would question it.

But it had happened too soon. Much too soon. As he'd held her hand at the St. Louis train station and the steam surrounding them provided perfect cover from Matilda's piercing gaze, he'd thought leaving her in St. Louis was the wrong move. But, by then, it was too late. The steam lifted. She was gone.

If he could turn back time, he'd have asked the Lockhardts to keep her in their home and give her time and space to adjust. He could have visited with her, though supervised, reassuring her of his commitment and love. Then, together, they could've planned the path forward.

Instead, he'd leaned on the wisdom of others. He'd been wrong.

After replacing the eraser on the wooden shelf, he sat to write

Sara, as he had on the train back and again when he got home. He'd planned to write one letter a week, but a single day stretched out much longer than he had anticipated. The postage for several letters was pricey but worth it. At least for these first days. Later, he would try to go back to the plan of one each week. Maybe. But now, she must know she was in his thoughts, he wanted her to return as soon as she could, and he loved her.

Dear Sara,

Not an hour passes when I don't think of you.

As I stated in my previous two letters, asking you to go to St. Louis so soon after your arrival was a mistake, and I am sorry. So very sorry.

When I put myself in your place, I cannot imagine how muddled you must feel. I, too, made the journey from one century to another, but I stayed put. Going to a major city within that era would have been far too disorienting. Again, I am sorry.

Please write soon and often so we can close this chasm of space. We have overcome time. We will overcome this distance. And, soon, God willing, we will never again have to overcome either.

Sara, I love you. I cherish you. Once you can, I want you to come home. Home, dear. Bentonsport with you will always be home, whether yours or mine, but even here, without you, I feel like a lost traveler. If you encounter any difficulties, take the train home. As you know, the academy is just blocks away.

*With love,
Thomas*

As he had done the day before, as soon as he finished, he put on his overcoat, scarf, and gloves, closed up the academy, and walked to the post office.

His mind was whirling, and his heart was heavy. He had been

a fool—a fool—to let her go. Just as he'd counted down the days when he first arrived in her Bentonsport, he now counted down the days until she returned to him.

The wind gusted, and he wrapped his scarf around his neck. He walked the dirt road, remembering its slick black surface in Sara's world. He wished he could bring home many things from her world. This was one. But Sara was the only one who mattered. How amazing that God had let that happen.

As he reached the road leading to the hotel, he turned right. Christmas was behind them, but with the townspeople reluctant to box up the beauty of the season and return to the gray winter days, decorations still graced the buildings and the streets. Getting the children to settle back in to lessons today after Christmas break had been hard. Good thing, it would be a short week, having had no school on Monday and Tuesday and a half day planned for Friday, New Year's Eve Day.

He reached the main street and headed right, past the Greef Store filled with townsfolk replenishing their cupboards after the holidays. Each time the door opened, the warmth of the indoor air and the scent of spices, coffee, and bread spilled onto the sidewalk. How much nicer *this* Greef Store was compared to the one in Sara's world offering gifts and antiques.

Sara ... Why did he let her go?

As he tugged on the post office door, the bells hanging beneath its framed window jingled. All this cheer out of tune with his spirit.

"Well, hello, Thomas." Benjamin Richards, the town's postmaster, took off his wire-rimmed glasses to clean the lenses. Then, placing them back on, he leaned forward on the well-worn wooden counter.

Thomas almost laughed. How good it was to see Benjamin and be back home. He tucked the letter under his arm as he removed his gloves. "Hello, Benjamin."

"I forgot to mention how we missed you over the holiday. Did you make it home after all?"

Thomas cleared his throat. For a few weeks there, he'd feared he'd never make it home—home to his time, his Bentonsport. But he couldn't say *that*. He scuffled his feet in the awkwardness of these conversations that followed him from Sara's world to his own, the minefield of being truthful and yet not revealing his strange adventure.

"The weather was predicted to be bad, so I visited some friends." He slid the letter toward Benjamin. "It was good to see them, but it is good to be back."

The postmaster picked up the letter and smiled at the address.

The doorbells jingled. Before Thomas could see who had walked in, Benjamin said, "My, another letter to this young woman, 'Miss Sara Peterson' in St. Louis. Is this your friend?"

Thomas's neck heated. How did he not think to mail the letters from different post offices? He could have alternated between Bonaparte, Bentonsport, and Keosauqua. His throat was dry, and he was beginning to formulate his alibi when Mrs. Lockhardt spoke behind him.

"No, Benjamin, she is my friend." She approached the counter. "Thomas has been a lamb to help me get Sara acquainted with the town and the people who live here—by letter, of course—so when she comes to live with us, she should feel right at home. Transitioning to this rural area might be difficult after being raised in St. Louis. Benjamin, perhaps you and your family could help her feel at home when she returns?"

"Well ..." Benjamin put Thomas's letter in the bag to ship out. "My family would be happy to be of service to ... Miss Peterson in any way we can."

"Very good." Mrs. Lockhardt nodded. "Thank you. Which reminds me ..."

Thomas took the opportunity to escape.

Walking back to the academy, he tipped his face to the leaden sky, his heart just as heavy. Did Sara miss him? Was she writing him? Did she remember him?