

Missouri MEMORIES

*The House on Cranberry Hill
Holds Love for
Four Generations of Couples*

KELLY EILEEN HAKE • JOYCE LIVINGSTON
DIANN MILLS • DEBORAH RANEY



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

© 2007 *Finishing Touches* by Kelly Eileen Hake
© 2007 *Beyond the Memories* by DiAnn Mills
© 2007 *Finally Home* by Deborah Raney
© 2007 *The Pretend Family* by Joyce Livingston

ISBN 978-1-59789-595-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

All scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Cover image © Julie Habel/CORBIS

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.



Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1



Hannibal, Missouri, 1898

“She’s gone!” Pa rushed into Libby’s room, his bellow waking her long before he roughly shook her shoulder. “What?” Libby blinked the sleep from her eyes and pried her father’s clenched fingers from her upper arm. Pa had been known to walk the halls in his sleep, but he seemed alert enough this time. . . .

“She’s left on the eve of her wedding with Royce to elope with that Lyte chap.” Sinking onto the edge of Libby’s bed, he extended a piece of paper.

Fighting the sick fingers of dread snaking over her spine, Libby unfolded her sister’s crooked creases.

Good-bye, the short note read. I love Donald and have left to marry him. I know this wasn’t the plan, but I have to follow my heart. Tabby

No apology, no asking for forgiveness—the note of a girl

who'd been loved by all, forgiven her faults, and who saw no reason to expect her charmed existence to change simply because she'd humiliated those who loved her best.

"She won't be harmed. Donald Lyte is besotted with her, and he's well enough off to provide for her. You needn't worry on Tabby's account." Libby traced the swirling loops of her sister's flamboyant writing, as delicate and lovely as the woman who wrote it.

So lovely, Captain Royce never spared a glance for her older sister. The man I've admired for so long. . . Tabby throws his love aside as though it were nothing. Libby's fist crushed the fragile paper before she caught herself doing so. She carefully smoothed the missive on her knee before passing it back to Pa.

"We must inform Captain Royce, Papa." Libby slid from beneath the warmth of her covers and slipped into a dressing gown. "The wedding must be cancelled. The whole thing will be much the worse if the ceremony begins and Tabby doesn't show up."

"Yes," her father agreed dully, not stirring from his defeated slump. "No!" He stirred, his eyes filling with horror. "No, Libby, I can't cancel the wedding!"

"It cannot go on without Tabitha, Papa. We have no choice."

"No choice," he repeated. Suddenly, his hands clasped hers in a viselike grip. "I promised Gregory my daughter's hand, and so he shall have it!"

"Papa," Libby started slowly, fearing he might have slipped into the waking sleep, which had sometimes haunted his nights since Mama's death, "Tabitha has left. She will not marry

Captain Royce. You cannot change that.”

“I know; I know that.” Papa’s eyes gleamed in the light of her bedside candle. “I have more than one eligible daughter, after all. You will take her place tomorrow.”

“I—? Papa, that’s impossible!” Libby tried to pull away, but his grip tightened painfully. “He’s in love with Tabitha! He asked to marry her, not me!”

“Nevertheless, you will marry him, Libby.” He gentled his crushing grasp. “You will wed him, or we’ll all be destroyed.”

“Oh, Papa.” Libby knelt beside him and patted his arm. “I already told you, Tabby will be fine. It’s true, we’ll have to deal with the backlash of her reckless and foolish decision, but the Collier name won’t be *destroyed* by a bit of scandal. And Captain Royce. . .well, he did care for Tabitha, but I daresay he’ll find another bride easily enough. So long as we don’t make him a cliché—left standing at the altar—it will all come out fine in the end.”

“No.” Papa shook his head with such force, Libby heard the faint *pop-pop* of bones moving unnaturally. “It’s not our reputations that will be destroyed, Libby—though surely that will come of it all, too. Our very livelihood is at stake. If one of my daughters doesn’t marry Captain Royce tomorrow morning, my business is ruined.”

“What are you saying?” She drew a deep breath and held it, bracing herself for the sharp, daggerlike thrust of his next words.

“I’ve accepted money from him, Libby. Large amounts of money to keep the business afloat—literally.” A ghost of a smile

chased across his face, leaving it even bleaker as it faded. “The shipping business would have failed without his investment. With this marriage, we were to merge more than our families—our businesses, as well.”

The breath whooshed out of her lungs as Libby realized the magnitude of the problem. They wouldn’t just be dealing with a jilted groom, but a jilted groom to whom her father owed enough money to ruin them.

“Surely. . . surely Captain Royce wouldn’t demand restitution to be vindictive. He’s a good man.” *A wonderful, handsome, honorable, hardworking man who has sat at our table, listened to our conversation, and all but become a member of our family. . . .*

“We both know he would be within his rights to seek that. He’ll be humiliated before the entire town of Hannibal—not to mention the fact that he genuinely cared for Tabitha.” Papa buried his head in his hands, fingers viciously combing through his sparse hair. “He’ll be furious.”

Unable to refute the truth of his assessment, Libby held her tongue. But nothing could chain her mind or lock up the ache inside her heart. She should know. She’d been trying to do just that since the moment Captain Royce proposed to her younger sister.

“You’ll have to take your sister’s place. It’s the only way to save face and still unite our families.” Papa straightened and loomed over her. “I will send a messenger notifying Royce of the issue—and my proposed solution. I expect he will agree for the sake of his pride.”

Libby winced at her father’s statement.

Lord, I've prayed for You to take away my feelings for Captain Royce, to help me reconcile myself to his marriage to my sister. I prayed that if their plans were not Your plans to make it so that Tabitha wouldn't be his bride. Anyone but my sister with the man I care for. . . I never dreamed You would make me that bride—or that I'd regret it so deeply. In my selfishness, have I spoiled things for everyone? Lord, please don't let it be so.



“Come in.” The low, melodious voice grated harshly in Gregory Royce’s ears. This was not the soft, breathy voice of his beloved, but rather the tones of an imposter. He pushed open the door to find the room empty, save the lone figure seated at the dressing table. He could see no evidence of Tabitha, no indication that this was a cruel trick designed to make him all the more grateful when she glided down the aisle into his waiting arms. His last spark of hope flickered and sputtered.

“So it’s true.” The words came out clipped, his displeasure evident. He shut his eyes for a moment, reminding himself this was no more Elizabeth’s fault than his own, and doubtless she was as wary as he. *Is honor worth such a price? Ah, but if not, what does a man have? I certainly have no love, not with my bride eloping with another man. What do I say to this woman whom I never saw as more than a friend. . . a sister? How do I ensure she’s willing when I know that I, for one, am not?*

“It is bad luck to see the bride on her wedding day.” Elizabeth’s bowed head reflected only brown curls, the pose concealing her face. “I’m sorry, Captain Royce.” The apology was

for more than her downcast visage, and he knew it instantly.

“I believe we are past that now.” The words came out sounding gruff, his consonants razor sharp and cutting.

“True.” She raised her head, presenting her face in the mirror. No thick fall of straight blond locks, green eyes tilted slightly at the corner, patrician nose, and rosebud mouth reflected back to him. Instead, he saw a softly rounded face, pert nose, hazel eyes fringed with thick lashes, lips turned down at the corners. Elizabeth couldn’t compare with Tabby—and it seemed to Gregory that she knew it well. “We’re far past the point where silly customs can ward off bad luck, aren’t we?” She gave a brave, if tremulous, smile. It never reached her gaze.

“No.” He cleared his throat and tried again. “I meant we’re past the point where you call me Captain Royce. A bride should call her husband by his Christian name. I’m Gregory.”

“I know.” She turned so she faced him completely, rather than conversing through the flat plane of the mirror. “And you should call me by mine. Elizabeth to most, but Libby to family.”

“Thank you, Libby.” Gregory cast about for the right words to say when everything tumbled around as though intangible. “I wanted to see. . . I need to know. . . are you willing to go through with this? Commit yourself to a marriage of convenience only?”

He saw her wince and mentally kicked himself for being such a brute. “Are you quite sure you’re not being forced into anything?” Stupid question. For one reason or another, they had both been forced into this situation.

“Yes.” She met his gaze more steadily. “Quite sure. I will see

you in the chapel, Gregory.” She inclined her head toward the door, only slightly, but with a clear message.

“Until then.” He gave a bow and left her to her preparations. What more could he possibly say? They’d be exchanging solemn vows in mere moments. Gregory walked about the grounds until the time of the ceremony, standing through it as though no more than a block of wood until it was his turn to speak.

Looking into her hazel eyes, glistening with unshed tears, Captain Gregory Alan Royce had the distinct sensation of someone slugging him in the gut. A man could be forgiven for such a thought when he was marrying the sister of the woman he loved.

“I, Gregory Alan Royce,” he gritted from behind a forced smile on what should have been the happiest day of his life, “take thee,” *Tabitha Bethany Collier*, he mentally vowed even as he substituted, “Elizabeth Anne Collier, to be my lawful wedded wife. . .”

The knot in his stomach clenched more tightly with every word he spoke until he got to “for better or for worse,” when an irreverent thought offered some relief.

It can't possibly get any worse. Not when my bright little Tabby ran away with another man to avoid wedding me. Not when I've been publicly rejected and saddled with the spinster of the family. Not when the house I've labored to construct for my beloved bride will never feel Tabitha's soft footsteps, hear her tinkling laugh, or see her sparkling eyes.

“As long as we both shall live.” The final words throbbed in his temples as he sealed his own fate. Elizabeth was now his wife, and Tabitha lost to him. Forever.