

# FICTION

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## THE QUILT

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THE QUILT HAD BEEN magnificent once. Passed down through the years like a sacrament between mother and daughter, it had been made by Sarah's great grandmother and her friends—all of them from Manchester. On long winter evenings they sat together and pieced patches of materials embroidered with gulls, squares and compasses, sego lilies, beehives, temples, tabernacles and one blazing Union Jack. When spring came, the friends put quilting frames up beneath flowering trees and stretched the material taut across them. Then they took their places around the frames in an unbroken square and began quilting with tiny perfect stitches, thousands of miles away from England.

The quilt would be Sarah's one day.

As she spread it over her own grandmother (who was sleeping again) she couldn't help but wish that the quilt were a little newer looking. There was a distinctly used quality to it: the quilt, in fact, was ratty with years. Sarah herself would have carefully wrapped it in blue tissue paper and stored it safely in the corner of her cedar chest. By the time the quilt belonged to her, it would hardly be worth having.

The grandmother stirred. A hand, brittle as dry leaves, fluttered.

"Parley?" The grandmother's voice was thin and flat as wallpaper. Parley was her brother. Sarah knew he had died in either World War I or World War II—she couldn't remember which.

"It's okay, Gran," Sarah said. "Go back to sleep."

The grandmother had been rambling a great deal that day—more than usual—calling out the names of people who had died long ago, talking of incidents that no one remembered. At least Sarah didn't remember them.

"It's all right Gran," she said again in a breathy voice.

The grandmother's hand folded into itself like a flower.

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Sarah sighed and sat down in the chair where she had been reading a Gothic romance checked out of the school library. She picked up the book, looked at a page or two, then put it back down and gazed out the window.

How could anybody read on such a perfect spring day?

The apricot trees were raining blossoms now—together they stood whispering like girls. Sarah had walked under their low heavy branches that very morning, plucking herself a few sprigs of blossoms which she later braided into her hair.

Sarah would give anything to be outside again where things smelled fresh instead of old like the objects in the grandmother's house. They were everywhere: porcelain figurines of shepherdesses draped with stiff ruffles, heavy gold-rimmed china, ornate silverware, charcoal sketches on rotting paper, brown and ivory photographs of strange people, musty-smelling copies of books by a man named Trollope, and then, of course, the clocks. Sarah had never seen so many clocks in one home. They were in every room—sometimes two to a room—and they were old, which might have been the reason no two of them ever told the same time.

"Did I tell you?" The grandmother's voice rose suddenly as crickets at night.

"Tell me what, Gran?" Sarah picked up her book again.

"Tell you what Father's other wives did to my mother after he died?"

"No, you didn't." Sarah tried to answer politely, but she wasn't interested. Not really. Polygamy, like the grandmother's things, belonged to another age.

The grandmother didn't continue and Sarah didn't encourage her.

It wasn't that Sarah didn't love her grandmother. She did certainly. A granddaughter always loves her grandmother. Why else would she have volunteered to stay with the grandmother over the Easter vacation while the rest of her family went to southern California? She thought suddenly of David, who had promised to come see her while everyone was out of town. Sarah lightly touched the flowers in her hair and smiled to herself.

When the doorbell rang, Sarah started guiltily. She dropped her book and dashed to the door.

It was only old Sister Wakefield, the grandmother's neighbor of many years. She stood on the porch, holding a steaming bowl in her hands.

"Hello, Sarah," she said.

"Hello, Sister Wakefield," said Sarah, masking her disappointment.

"I thought I'd bring you and your grandma some good bean and ham soup."

Sarah grimaced inwardly. No matter the weather or the occasion, Sister Wakefield was always good for a bowl of bean soup. Sarah's brothers called her "the Beaner" behind her broad back.

"Thanks," she said. "That's nice of you. Please come in."

Sarah took the bowl and carried it into the kitchen. When she returned, she found that Sister Wakefield had taken off her bright green sweater and had made herself comfortable on the couch.

"How's your grandma today?"

"About the same," Sarah replied, critically appraising Sister Wakefield's appearance. Shapeless slate-colored polyester dress, sensible shoes, flashing glasses, gray brillo-pad hair—Sarah wondered why old women looked so much alike and why they just let themselves go once they reached a certain age. She, Sarah, would never be old. At least not in the sense that Sister Wakefield was. Sarah was quite positive that if she exercised regularly and ate sensibly for the rest of her life, she would look relatively young until the day she died. She had read somewhere that this could be done.

Sister Wakefield was shaking her head now like a wire-haired terrier. "It's real hard for me—for all of us who knew your grandma well—to see her like this."

Sarah agreed although she wasn't quite sure what Sister Wakefield was talking about.

"Your grandma in her day was a strong woman—real mind of her own that one had. She used to boss your grandpa around something fierce. Poor Henry," Sister Wakefield chortled, and Sarah smiled in return, wishing that Sister Wakefield would take her sweater and leave.

"But then she was a real lady. You could tell just to look at her. And you could tell by her things, too." Sister Wakefield threw a half-covetous glance around the room. "She always had to have the best, that's for certain."

Sister Wakefield fell for a moment into private memories while Sarah sat fidgeting covertly. The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed.

"I think most of the sisters at church were a bit afraid of her," she said, rousing herself, "which is probably why old Bishop Peterson kept her in the Relief Society all them years. 'Course the bishop was afraid of her, too." Sister Wakefield chuckled again, then nodded to herself. "You know, Sarah, me and your grandma—we never counted on being this age." Sister Wakefield turned huge fish eyes blandly on Sarah. Then she slapped her knees with both hands and stood up. "Well, gotta be goin'. You take good care of your grandma now."

Unnerved, Sarah stood up and followed Sister Wakefield to the door. Sister Wakefield paused on the porch and took a deep breath.

"The apricot trees are nice this year, aren't they?" said Sarah, searching for something to say.

"They was always your grandma's pride and joy."

"I like them, too," said Sarah.

Sister Wakefield snorted. "Well that don't surprise me none. You got a lot of your grandma in you from what I've seen, Missy. You're the spittin' image of her when she was young."

Sarah's mouth flew open, and Sister Wakefield narrowed her eyes.

"Don't believe me, huh? Go take a look at that picture of her on the mantel." Sister Wakefield heaved herself off the porch and waddled down the walk. "Tell your grandma I come by when she's feeling better." Sarah nodded and watched the elderly woman go.

Look like her grandmother? Sarah found the notion unpleasant, almost repulsive. She thought of her grandmother lying across the bed, beached like a piece of human driftwood. A moan filtered down the hallway.

"I'm coming, Gran," said Sarah, throwing the door shut.

She found the grandmother sitting upright in bed.

"Did you give Ellie her chickens like I told you to?" she demanded. "I won't have Ellie saying we took any of her chickens. That woman will say anything to make us look bad." The grandmother trembled like a knotty old aspen.

The grandmother's spells had taken a turn for the worse. Sarah's parents had asked her to call if something like this happened, but she could manage just fine on her own. She would show them all—her father, her mother, everyone else waiting to point a finger—that she was old enough to take care of things and old enough to know her own mind about David, too!

"I will!" cried the grandmother suddenly. "I will marry him."

Sarah gasped. The grandmother was glaring at her defiantly.

"He will be mine," the grandmother went on, "and I will not share him with another."

Rattled, Sarah began moving about the room like a marionette—fluffing needlepoint pillows, rearranging the grandmother's pins and combs on her oak dresser, straightening the quilt once again.

"Now calm down, Gran," said Sarah. "I'll get you some milk."

"You know something, they wouldn't even stop to pick me up," said the grandmother.

"Take it easy, Gran. Now I mean it." Then, more gently, "Lie down and rest. You'll feel better if you do." Sarah reached for the old woman's hand. The grandmother clung to her.

"We were walking to church on Easter Sunday, Parley and I. Our mother had washed and ironed our old things the night before. Didn't have enough for new clothes that year. After father died, the other two wives, Aunt Louisa and Aunt Emily (they were sisters) took all his money. Parley didn't care, and I pretended not to—didn't want to hurt Mother's feelings. My poor little mother. Father loved her because she was so pretty, but I saw her grow old right before my eyes.

"She sent us on to Church ahead of her that Sunday. We walked along the road, trying not to scuff our shoes. Then out of nowhere we heard a car—there weren't many around then. We ran to the side of the road just like a couple of rabbits and who do you think it was? Aunt Louisa and her daughter Ellie. Had on new dresses and hats and gloves. Aunt Louisa honked. Ellie waved and laughed at us. They didn't even stop to ask us for a ride." Fierce tears sheathed the grandmother's eyes. "They didn't even give me the opportunity to turn them down to their fat, self-satisfied faces."

She slowly closed her eyes, wilting into the bed. Sarah stood perfectly still, feeling as though she would suffocate in that heavy, dark room where the grandmother lay shrouded in memories. She turned and left the room, shutting the door determinedly behind her.

In the front room again, Sarah wandered aimlessly about, her arms folded across her chest. She noted in a distracted way that the furniture needed dusting and the plants watering. As she took silent inventory, Sarah noticed Sister Wakefield's green knit sweater wadded in the corner of the couch. With a sign of irritation, Sarah moved forward to pick it up, but the memory of the old woman's visit stopped her. What had Sister Wakefield said as she was leaving? Something about Sarah and the grandmother. Forgetting the sweater, Sarah turned slowly and moved toward the photographs that adorned the fireplace like a garland. When she was close enough, she touched each one separately, holding her breath.

Although the photographs and the intricate gilt frames that enshrined them were old-fashioned, Sarah noticed with some surprise how modern the captured expressions, postures, and gestures actually were. The camera's subjects were scornful of time.

There was a particularly small photograph on the mantel's edge. Charmed by its size, Sarah picked it up and held it in the palm of her hand as though it were a robin's egg. A chill raced down her spine: the tiny face there—staring serenely and silently at her from another age—was undeniably Sarah's own. The fussy collar and buttons, the proper hat and gloves were strange, but the face was as familiar as the sound of her own voice. Trembling, Sarah set the photograph back on the mantel at a crazy angle, causing it to fall forward and clatter loudly. A muffled moan, light as cobwebs, floated down the hallway.

Sarah stood before the photographs uncertainly. Then speaking in a thin, high voice she said, "I'm going, Grandmother!"

Only the sound of clocks answered her as she left the house, throwing the door shut.

## II

It was twilight when Sarah stole guiltily into the darkened house.

"Gran?" Sarah crept almost fearfully to the bedroom. She sighed in relief when she heard the grandmother's regular breathing. Sarah lowered her head and stepped quietly into the room.

There in the half-light filtering through Venetian blinds, the grandmother looked like a young woman again, her face smooth and her hair rumped against the pillow. Sarah dutifully took a chair by the bedside.

"Sarah?" The grandmother awoke.

"I'm right here, Gran. I'm sorry I left you. I won't ever leave you alone like that again."

But the grandmother was lost somewhere inside herself.

"Did I tell you what he looked like?" the grandmother asked in a dreamy voice.

"Who? Grandpa?"

The grandmother smiled. "He was tall. Slender like a cowboy. My young man had a shock of blond hair sprouting like a wheat field right across the crown of his head." She laughed girlishly.

Sarah listened and smiled in spite of herself at the unexpected romance of it all. Her memories of her grandfather, of course, were quite different: he hadn't had hair when Sarah knew him, and he hadn't been slender either. She remembered him only as a short, dumpy but kindly old man who brought her bags of balloons and called her "Sis."

"We met in Park City." The grandmother's voice slipped into a distant intimacy. "I was teaching then. Taught those children everything—their multiplication tables, their ABC's."

The grandmother bobbed her head and began singing the first verse of an old alphabet ditty. Sarah turned her head in embarrassment.

"I put myself through college to do it. Earned my teaching credential at Weber with no help. Told Parley I wouldn't stay in Garden City with Ellie to boss me another day. I put myself through with no help from anyone but Parley. Some nights there it used to be so cold. But Park City was colder. That's where I taught. That's where we met." The grandmother's voice faded.

Sarah forgot her embarrassment and inched forward. "Yes? That's where you met Grandpa?"

A look of annoyance flickered across the grandmother's face. "That's where I met him," she said sharply.

Sarah sank back, feeling strangely reproved.

"Ellie didn't want me going to Park City, but I didn't give two figs about that. Now Parley was different. He didn't want me going either—I could tell it—but he wouldn't say so. Not Parley. He just hugged me real close before putting me on the train and called me 'baby sister.' He gave me five of his silver dollars all stitched up nice and neat in a little bag. 'Don't go marryin' the first man you meet, Missy,' he said to me. 'Don't go marryin' the first man you meet.' He was laughing but I saw tears in his eyes. I can't say what it did to me seeing him like that and all."

The grandmother paused and rolled her head back and forth across the pillow. She mumbled.

"What, Gran? What is it?"

"So cold."

Sarah scrambled to her feet and rearranged the old quilt around the grandmother's shoulders.

"So cold on the train. Thought I'd nearly freeze," she said frowning. "You don't know. There's lots of things people don't know." Then the frown disappeared. "But he was there at the depot waiting for me—like spring after the winter." (The grandmother smiled inwardly here.) "We did surprise each other greatly, he and I."

Sarah waited for an explanation, hardly daring to breathe for fear she might disturb the collecting memories, but to her intense disappointment the grandmother was nearly asleep.

In the sudden quiet of the room, Sarah was almost able to imagine her grandmother as a girl—young and auburn-haired—waiting determinedly with her sad, gentle brother for a train. It was her grandfather that she couldn't imagine. Not yet at least.

There was finally a small groan and then another. The grandmother's eyes fluttered open.

Sarah shifted her weight. "Are you okay?"

The grandmother nodded weakly.

"Gran, you were telling me a story. About Park City when you were a teacher there. Remember?"

"Well now, you see, that's where we met, wasn't it? He boarded with the superintendent's people, you know, and that's why he was sent to pick me up. Did I say we were surprised?"

Sarah nodded in confirmation, but the grandmother wasn't looking.

"We saw each other every day after that," she said. "He always came in the evenings because he worked in the mines during the day. Crawled out of the earth's belly dirty as an old mule. But he wasn't like the others. He was studying on his own to be a mining engineer. Said he was going to learn everything there was to know about a mine so that when he had his own, he'd know what to do with 'em. He wanted to be rich as Mr. Thomas Kearns and build a mansion next to his in Salt Lake City. Brought me apples. Said I was his favorite. His favorite school teacher." The grandmother laughed. "One May evening he brought me lilacs and asked me to marry him. I said yes.

"School was hard after that, I'll tell you. Couldn't keep my mind on things, but then neither could the children. They wanted to be outside where things smelled fresh. So did I. I kept the door propped open and the windows up. One afternoon—two days before summer recess—Ian Davies showed up, his face all black and shirt all torn.

"Miss Sweetman! Miss Sweetman!" he screamed at me.

"Well what is it, Ian Davies!" I answered him sharp as I could.

"There's been an accident at the mines, Miss Sweetman. Lots of men are buried up there!"

"You should have seen those children after that. They were everywhere—screaming, crying, running for the door. Most of their daddies worked in the mines." The grandmother's eyes clouded. "I stood there like a fool. Finally, though, I heard myself yelling at the children. 'You are not dismissed! Take your seats now!' I grabbed one little boy by the arm and dragged him back to his desk. Then I grabbed another and threw him into his chair. They knew I meant it after that. They all obeyed me—even the big boys. I kept them there, too, until dismissal time.

"After they were all gone, I waited for him just like I always did. This time, though, it grew way dark outside. So I just tucked the chairs under the desks and cleaned the board with an oil rag till it glowed. Then I left.

"When I stepped outside, it crossed my mind to go there and look for him, but I knew what I would find. So I went home instead, and when I got there, I drew the drapes tight and fixed myself some tea—just like Mama used to after she laid someone out. Mama always used to say she'd left her home where it was green, crossed the plains, and settled in a godforsaken place like Deseret for the Lord: Surely He'd forgive her her little cups of tea."

Sarah sat very still. Then, with a tight chest, she stood up and straightened the quilt across her grandmother.

There was a rap on the front door, then another.

Sarah left the bedroom, glancing at the grandmother. She answered the door.

It was David. He stood leaning against the front porch railing, a half-grin cocked on his face, his thick hair jutting out all over his head.

"Hi, Sarah," he said.

Sarah looked at him standing there—slender and sinewy as willows. He was breathless and filled with the sweet evening air.

"David."

"I told you I'd come."

The grandfather clock in the hallway began to chime softly.

"It's nice outside," he said, taking one of her hands. "Let's go for a walk."

Sarah threw a long glance down the hallway.

"I can't—my grandmother isn't too well tonight."

"Okay," the boy shrugged. "We'll just sit out here beneath the trees."

Their eyes met and Sarah thought of the grandmother's story.

"Yes," she whispered. "That would be nice."

Laughing, David pulled her gently into the night.

### III

The next morning the grandmother was herself again—at least the self that Sarah had always known. She got out of bed by herself, put a light blue robe over her shoulders, and surprised Sarah, who was making an omelet in the kitchen.

"Gran! What are you doing up!"

"Same thing as you are."

"Are you all right?"

The grandmother, her thin face quivering, looked insulted.

"Of course I'm all right."

There was a short silence between them.

"Well, what did you do with yourself last night, Sarah?"

"I took care of you, Gran."

The grandmother dismissed this with the wave of her hand.

"What else?" The grandmother looked directly at Sarah.

At first Sarah was going to say that she had spent the night reading in the living room, but then she looked at the grandmother levelly, matching the old woman's blue gaze.

"I saw a boy last night."

"A young man?"

"Yes."

"Your young man?"

Sarah lifted her chin. "Yes. We sat outside together and talked about all sorts of things. Important things."



The grandmother twisted the amethyst ring she always wore on her right hand. Then she touched her pewter hair delicately.

"It's cold, Sarah," she said after a moment had passed. "Will you please go to my room and get my mother's quilt? You know which one it is."

Sarah slid the omelet out of the frying pan, put it on a plate, and offered it to her grandmother. They looked at one another. Then she went to the bedroom and picked the rumpled quilt up from the bed. Sarah smoothed it and folded it carefully, all the time thinking that perhaps one day the quilt would belong to her own daughter's daughter.

