



INTO *the*
STARLIGHT

secrets of
SWEETWATER
CROSSING



AMANDA
CABOT



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Booklist

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secrets of SWEETWATER CROSSING • 3



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STARLIGHT



AMANDA
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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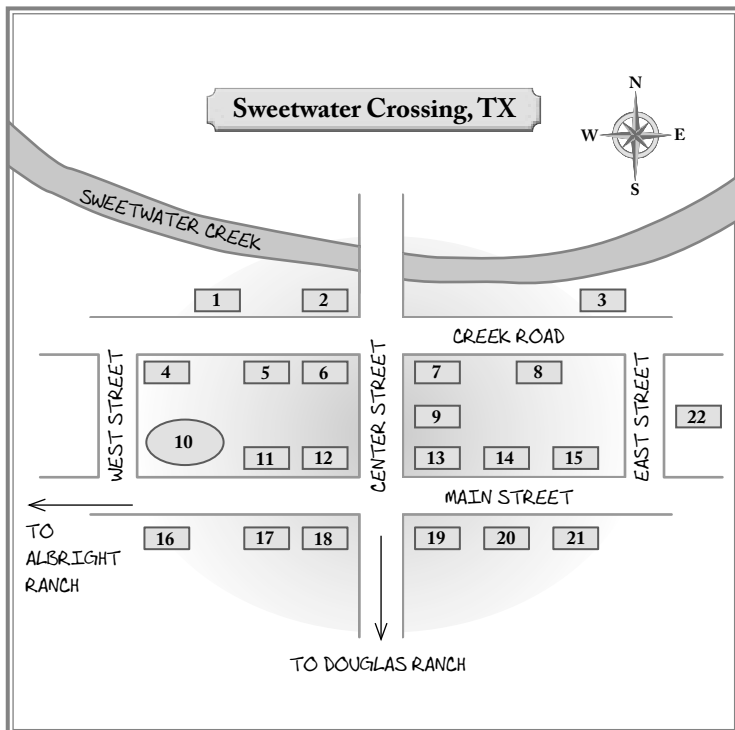
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For Lorie McDonald,
a woman of many talents
and a true friend.



- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 – Mrs. Sanders’s Home | 12 – School |
| 2 – Cemetery | 13 – Church |
| 3 – Finley House | 14 – Mayor’s Home and Office |
| 4 – Saloon | 15 – Mercantile |
| 5 – Tearoom | 16 – Livery |
| 6 – Teashop | 17 – Sheriff’s Home and Office |
| 7 – Parsonage Annex | 18 – Ma’s Kitchen |
| 8 – The Albrights’ Home | 19 – Doctor’s Office |
| 9 – Parsonage | 20 – Post Office |
| 10 – Park | 21 – Dressmaker |
| 11 – Library | 22 – Miss Heppel’s Home |

Chapter

One

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 1883

Dreams weren't supposed to die, but Joanna Richter's had, all except one.

The concerts at Munich's glorious Odeon and Vienna's incomparable Musikverein had nurtured the dream she'd cherished for almost as long as she could remember, but it had crumbled, destroyed by something the doctors told her was invisible to the human eye. The majesty of the Swiss Alps had sown the seeds of another dream, one that had withered before it could fully flower. Now there was only one left.

Joanna smiled as she entered Sweetwater Crossing. It might lack the museums and monuments that Grandmother Kenner had called the essentials of a civilized city, but this small town in the Texas Hill Country had something far more valuable: her home. It wouldn't be the same with both Mama and Father gone, but the house itself wouldn't have changed. It would shelter her and maybe, just maybe she'd be able to find a new purpose for her life here, a chance to finally be the best at something.

She slowed the buggy, wanting to savor the first few minutes of her homecoming. Other than the new parsonage that had been built after the last one burned, the town looked the same, and oh, how comforting that was. She'd once sought change. Now she valued stability. Being here would provide that.

Warmth flooded through Joanna's veins as she turned onto Creek Road and approached her destination. It was there, just as she remembered it. Her smile broadened as she gazed at the building where she'd spent most of her life. The stone that Clive Finley had chosen for the three-story house was strong and durable, unlikely to crumble or burn, giving her a feeling of safety and security. The columns that supported the veranda stood tall, as though proud that their role was more than decorative, or so Joanna had claimed when she was a child. The double staircase served as a reminder that there was more than one way to reach a destination, and the three dormer windows seemed to herald the presence of the three Vaughn girls, even though she and her sisters never slept in those rooms.

Her sisters had laughed when she'd described the house that way, saying she was being fanciful. Perhaps she was, but this was Joanna's home, her beloved home. It hadn't changed, though she had, as one by one her dreams had vanished.

She frowned at the memory of why she'd been so eager to leave Sweetwater Crossing. The disappointment that had verged on despair. The overwhelming sense of failure. The realization that there would be no happily-ever-after with a handsome rancher for her. That dream had been the first to die. Fortunately, she had told no one—not even her sisters—what she'd dreamt. And now there was no need.

As she had so often in the past, Joanna guided the buggy between the stone pillars marking the entrance to Finley House and along the curved drive that led to the house itself. When she'd reined in the horse, she inhaled deeply in an attempt to calm her nerves, regretting the action a second later. It was only

when the pain in her lungs subsided that Joanna could climb out of the buggy, and even then her hands had begun to shake. It was one thing to know that her parents were not there, quite another to enter the house that held so many memories and not see them. Reminding herself to take shallow breaths, she mounted the front steps and knocked on the door. After a year and a half, Joanna Vaughn Richter was home.

It seemed forever but was no more than thirty seconds before the door opened and the petite blond with deep blue eyes who looked so much like Mama that Joanna could hardly breathe stared at her.

“Joanna?” The woman’s voice trembled more than Joanna’s hands had, and her eyes widened in what appeared to be shock. “Is it really you?”

Joanna nodded. “It’s me, Emily.”

The last time she’d seen her older sister had been only hours after Emily’s wedding, when she and her handsome groom had left Sweetwater Crossing to return to George’s ranch. Emily had been beautiful then—everyone in town acknowledged her as the prettiest of the Vaughn girls—but that beauty paled compared to the Emily who now smiled at Joanna. There was a new softness to her sister’s face, a gleam in her eyes that hadn’t been there before, transforming her into the picture of a happy woman.

“I can’t believe it.” Emily took a step forward and wrapped her arms around Joanna’s waist as she’d done so many times when they’d been children. It had become more awkward once Joanna grew to her full height—half a foot taller than Emily—but Emily had always persisted in her efforts to soothe Joanna when she’d been distressed. Today it was Emily who appeared distressed. “Louisa and I’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m sorry.” Though the words were inadequate, they were the only ones Joanna had. “I should have written, but I couldn’t.” For so many reasons.

Emily broke the hug, then reached out to take one of Joanna's hands and lead her indoors. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that you're back and safe."

Despite the warmth of the September day, the house was cool. That shouldn't have been a problem, but something triggered a coughing spasm, the first Joanna had had since she'd arrived in Texas. The doctors had warned her against becoming overly excited. Perhaps that was the cause, because there was no doubt that she was excited to be home. Excited and at the same time a bit apprehensive, knowing that even though the house itself had not changed, many other things had.

She bent over, trying to stop the coughing. When she could again breathe freely, she looked at her sister. "I'm sorry," she said, wondering how many more times she would have to apologize.

Emily's blue eyes, so different from Joanna's brown ones, reflected concern. "You're ill. What can I do? Should I call Louisa?" As if she'd only just registered the unrelieved black Joanna wore, Emily asked, "Why are you in mourning? Was it your grandmother?" She shook her head. "Oh, listen to me. I should be helping you, but instead I'm bombarding you with questions."

"It's all right, Emily." When they were growing up, Emily had felt that her role as the oldest meant she had to care for Joanna and Louisa, and that caring had included what had sometimes felt like an inquisition. "I should probably sit down and drink a bit of water." The air here was heavier than it had been in the Alps, and the doctors said that could make breathing more difficult.

"Of course." Emily wrapped her arm around Joanna's waist again. "Let's go to the kitchen. I've got pudding on the stove, and if I leave it too long, it'll be a scorched mess."

Once Joanna was seated at the kitchen table with a glass of water in front of her, Emily began to stir something that

smelled like chocolate. “We have a few minutes to talk before Mrs. Carmichael and Noah come back from their walk.” She paused and turned to look at Joanna. “Noah’s my son—my adopted son—and you remember Mrs. Carmichael. She takes care of Noah while Craig is at school.” A chuckle accompanied Emily’s explanation. “There I go again. If you got my letters, you know all that. Craig tells me I’m prone to chatter when I’m excited.”

There was no missing the smile that crossed Emily’s face when she spoke of her husband. Her second husband.

Joanna brushed aside thoughts of George. Nothing good would come from thinking of him, just as nothing good would come from remembering how often she’d wished she’d been a petite blond like Emily instead of a tall brunette, especially when George had had eyes only for Emily. “The last letter I received said you were going to marry the schoolteacher and that Louisa brought a man with a broken leg to recuperate here.”

“Oh my.” Emily made no effort to hide her dismay. “That was months ago. So much has happened since then. Louisa did more than set Josh’s leg. She married him.”

Little sister Louisa was married. Joanna knew she shouldn’t have been surprised, and yet she was. Before she could speak, Emily continued. “I don’t understand why you didn’t receive my letters. I thought it took only a few weeks for mail to reach Munich.”

“I haven’t been in Munich since early February.” Though she tried to suppress it, Joanna coughed again. “I caught scarlet fever.” And had almost died, although she wouldn’t worry Emily with that information. “It turned into pneumonia. That’s when Grandmother took me to Switzerland, because the air was supposed to be better there. She arranged for mail to be forwarded, but it appears most of it wasn’t.”

Abandoning the pudding for a moment, Emily gave Joanna

a quick hug. “My letters don’t matter, but I hate that you were sick and so far away. I wish I’d known.”

It might have been comforting to have had Emily or Louisa with her during the long recovery, but they would have tried to convince her to return home, and at that point, Joanna had still entertained dreams of an illustrious career and hadn’t wanted anyone to try to dissuade her.

“There was nothing you could have done. The sanatorium was one of the best in Europe, and the treatments helped.” As much as they could. Joanna paused, debating whether to tell her sister the final prognosis, then decided she might as well be honest. “The doctors warned me that my lungs will always be weak”—too weak to allow her to continue her training and eventually embark on a concert tour of her own—“but if I’m careful, I can live normally.”

Emily fixed one of her appraising looks on Joanna. “I’ll make sure you’re careful, and so will Louisa.”

Joanna smiled, knowing they would. Emily would cook meals she was certain would strengthen her, and Louisa would study medical books to determine whether anything more could be done.

“I’m so glad you’re home again.” Emily returned to stirring the pudding. “The important thing is for you to rest, and there’s no better place than right here.”

Though her sister’s gesture encompassed more than the kitchen, Joanna studied the room where she’d spent so many hours watching Mama cook and then helping her wash the dishes. The curtains at the window were new, but that was the only change she could see, other than Mama’s absence. The wooden table where Joanna had eaten cookies after school still had the small gouge from a broken glass, and the cupboards still had mismatched knobs after Louisa had unscrewed one and lost it in the yard. It was a simple room compared to some of the châteaux she’d visited, but that simplicity was a balm to Joanna’s spirits.

“I feel better just being here.”

Emily tasted the pudding, then added another spoonful of sugar. “I hope you’re not angry that I turned our home into a boardinghouse.” For the first time since Joanna had entered the house, her sister’s voice held a note of uncertainty.

“How could I be angry? You did what you had to to save our home.” Though the news that both of her parents had died had been devastating, Joanna understood the actions her older sister had taken to ensure that Finley House would remain the family home. “Now that I’m here, I can help you, if you still have a room for me, that is.”

“No helping until you’re fully recovered, but of course there’s room for you. Beulah’s in your bedroom. I could move her, but I’d rather not, now that she’s become accustomed to it. Would you mind moving into my old room or Louisa’s? She and Josh have taken over the third floor.”

More changes. The thought of returning to the room she’d had for as long as she could remember had buoyed Joanna during the long journey from Europe. Now it appeared that that dream had also died. What other changes were awaiting her?

“Beulah?” Rather than upset Emily by admitting her disappointment that her room hadn’t been kept for her, Joanna seized on the familiar name. “Beulah Douglas lives here?”

Emily nodded. “I thought I’d written about that. She stays here during the week so she can attend school, then goes home on Friday afternoon. It’s been a good arrangement for everyone, especially Noah. He misses her on the weekends.”

A shadow crossed Emily’s lovely face. “There I go again, talking about other things. You haven’t told me why you’re in mourning, but I assume it’s for your grandmother. When did she die?”

“A few hours after my husband.”



“Stop! I can’t do it.”

Burke Finley stared at the woman seated next to him, not bothering to hide his shock. That was the last thing he’d expected Della Samuels to say. Not once during the ten days they’d been traveling had she complained, not even when the accommodations were at best mediocre and the food barely edible. Now that they’d reached Texas’s Hill Country and were within an hour of the town she claimed was the one place on Earth she wanted to visit before she died, it seemed that something had changed her mind.

“What’s the matter, Aunt Della?” The petite woman whose brown hair bore silver wings, confirming that she’d lived for more than forty years, wasn’t his aunt, though she would have been his aunt by marriage if his uncle had lived. Still, for as long as Burke could recall, he’d addressed her as Aunt.

“I can’t do it.” Della’s eyes, the same light blue as the dress she wore today, filled with tears. “I thought I wanted to go to Sweetwater Crossing, but now I’m afraid to. It probably sounds silly to you after I begged you to take me there, but I’m afraid that I’ll be disappointed. What will I do if it’s not as special as Clive told me it was?”

Burke gave her a professional assessment. Her color was a bit high, but she was showing no signs of heat distress, and her respiration was steady. Perhaps her concern wasn’t the town itself but her fiancé’s grave. “There’s no need to visit the cemetery.” Though others made weekly pilgrimages to their loved ones’ final resting places, he rarely spent time at his mother’s grave, preferring to remember her alive. There was no question of visiting his father’s grave, for he was buried on a battlefield hundreds of miles from home.

“We don’t have to go to the cemetery, but I thought you wanted to see the house he built for you and talk to the man who’s living there.”

According to the stories Burke had heard, the house Clive

Finley had designed for his bride-to-be was larger and more beautiful than the one on the plantation she'd called home. Legend had it that Della's daddy was so opposed to his daughter's moving to Texas that he wouldn't agree to the marriage unless Clive could give her the same luxury she'd grown up with. And so Burke's uncle had built a house that rivaled those the plantation owners used to flaunt their wealth.

There should have been a happy ending to the story, but there wasn't. Though Clive's house had been finished, he'd died before he could return to Alabama to claim his bride and had left the house in the care of his closest friend.

"I thought I wanted to see it," Della admitted. "Now the whole idea seems overwhelming." Her breathing grew ragged, making Burke doubt his previous assessment of her health.

"Let's get out and rest a bit," he said, gesturing toward a large live oak tree. "The shade looks welcoming." One way or another, he had to convince Della to continue, for while she might be ready to return home, he was not. There was nothing waiting for him in Samuels, Alabama. Nothing good, that is.

She shook her head. "Just turn around."

She'd regret it. Burke was certain of that, and so he said, "I never thought you were a coward." He was the coward, not wanting to return to the town where he'd spent that horrible morning. Though Felix had insisted that no one other than he would know the truth and that everyone made mistakes, Burke knew that Edna was right: some things were unforgivable.

Trying to block the memories that would haunt him for the rest of his life, Burke fixed his gaze on Della. "You don't really want to go back, do you?"

Della stared at the live oak, then slowly shook her head. "You're right. I'm not a coward and I don't want to go back, but I'm afraid. I've had the image in my mind for over twenty years. What if it's wrong? What if I'm disappointed?"

Though he wished it were otherwise, Burke couldn't make

any promises. All he could do was encourage her. “There’s only one way to know.”

This time Della smiled. “You’re right. You know, Burke, if you weren’t such a fine doctor, you could be a minister. You’re good at comforting people.”

“It’s a nice thought, but any skills I have are for healing bodies.” And even those were in question. He’d always found being a physician rewarding, but even before the morning when everything had changed, Burke had begun to wonder whether serving the residents of a small town was what he was meant to do. He was no longer needed in Samuels. Felix could handle the practice, especially since he planned to let Edna assist him.

Had Della realized that? Was that why she’d suddenly decided to come to Texas and insisted Burke accompany her? He wouldn’t ask. All he knew was that he needed a new direction for his life. Perhaps two weeks in the Hill Country would help him find it.

“How much farther is it?”

Burke was heartened by the anticipation he heard in Della’s voice. “Less than five miles.”

Her smile broadened. “Let’s go. I owe it to Clive and to me.” Her apprehension apparently gone, Della leaned forward and studied the countryside, giving Burke a running commentary as they approached their final destination.

“Clive was right,” she said softly. “I like the Hill Country.”

So did Burke. The rolling hills with their limestone outcroppings, the meadows ringed by live oak trees, the fields bright with wildflowers were all appealing. And when they reached Sweetwater Crossing, the appeal only increased.

The town Clive Finley had chosen was more attractive than Burke had expected, its main street lined with well-cared-for buildings. The mercantile, mayor’s office, and church occupied one side of a block, with the dressmaker, post office, and a doctor’s office on the other. Burke gave the doctor’s office a longer

look than the other buildings, noting that the front door had been freshly painted and that the windows gleamed. Whoever the town's physician was, he cared about appearances.

"Do you want me to ask for directions?" They were approaching what appeared to be the center of town, a corner that housed the church, the school, and a restaurant as well as the doctor's office.

Della shook her head. "I'm sure we can find it on our own. Clive said it was next to the creek."

As he guided the buggy into the intersection, Burke looked both directions, grinning when he spotted a bridge a block and a half to the right. "That must be the creek." He turned toward it, silently praying that Della would not be disappointed. Though she'd begun speaking of it a scant two months ago, she'd admitted that she'd dreamed of coming here for many years. It was only after her father's death that she'd decided to make her dream come true.

"Which way do you want to go?" Burke asked when they reached the corner of Center and Creek streets. If the house was next to the creek, it would be on the north side.

Della shuddered when she saw the cemetery on the northwest corner. "Not that way."

Burke turned east, remaining silent as they passed a small house, then a larger one on the south side of the street. Though he would have expected similar homes on the northern side, there were none, simply a large expanse of grass and trees. Then he saw it.

"That's it!"

Della's excitement matched his own. The house his uncle had built was magnificent, far larger and more elaborate than anything Burke had seen in Sweetwater Crossing. While the other buildings were situated close to the street, this one was farther back, with a curved drive leading from the wall that marked the front of the property to a three-story house. A

double staircase led the way to the front door, while four columns supported a second-floor veranda. Della's home in Alabama was beautiful, but this one surpassed it in both beauty and grandeur.

"Oh, Burke. It's just the way Clive described it." She leaned over the side of the buggy, pointing to the pillars that marked the ends of the wall. "Look. They say Finley House." Tears glistened in her eyes as she turned to Burke. "Thank you for insisting that we come. I'll remember this for the rest of my life." She paused, then asked, "Do you think Pastor Vaughn will let us go inside?"

Burke smiled and repeated what he'd said less than an hour ago. "There's only one way to know."



"Your husband?" Emily's eyes widened with shock. "You're a widow?"

The tremor in her voice reminded Joanna that Emily had been a widow when she'd returned to Sweetwater Crossing a year ago and was probably remembering the grief of the first few months without her beloved husband.

"Kurt and I were married in July, two months ago today." It had been a wonderful day, one of the happiest of Joanna's life, but the happiness had been almost as short-lived as her first dream of marriage and happily-ever-after.

"He and Grandmother died a month later. According to the doctor, it was spoiled chicken." If Louisa were here, she'd want more details, but that should be enough for Emily. "My stomach was queasy that day, so I didn't eat any, and Marta didn't like the spices, so she had only a little. The doctor said that's why she survived."

As she continued to stir the pudding, Emily raised an eyebrow. "Who's Marta?"

"Kurt's sister. She was at the sanatorium too." If it hadn't

been for Marta, Joanna would not have met Kurt, and if she hadn't met Kurt, she wouldn't have known the wonder of love and marriage.

Before she could say more, the back door flew open, and a young boy raced in, then flung his arms around Emily's legs. "Me saw new horse, Mama!"

The brown-haired boy, whom Joanna guessed to be three or four years old, must be Noah, the schoolmaster's son.

"I'm sorry, Emily. You know how he gets around horses." Joanna recognized the gray-haired woman who'd followed Noah into the kitchen as Mrs. Carmichael, the widow who'd lived in the parsonage once the Vaughns moved into Finley House. A few inches shorter than Joanna, her back still straight despite her seventy years, Mrs. Carmichael was one of the kindest women Joanna had ever met. It was no wonder Emily had welcomed her as a member of her newly forged family.

The widow glanced at the table, then stopped, her surprise evident. "Do my eyes deceive me, or is it really Joanna Vaughn?" She bent down to give Joanna a hug.

"Your eyes are as sharp as ever, Mrs. Carmichael, but I'm Joanna Richter now."

"Come see horse, Mama." Ignoring the other adults, Noah tugged on Emily's skirt.

Emily shook her head. "Later. Remember your manners, Noah. This is my sister, Miss Joanna. What do you say to her?"

"Is it your horse?"

She probably shouldn't have laughed at the boy's single-mindedness, but Joanna did. "Yes, it is." She was about to tell Noah that she'd introduce them later when she heard a knock on the front door.

"I'll answer that," Joanna said. Emily had pudding to cook, and Mrs. Carmichael appeared tired from her walk. Even though she had been gone for more than a year, this was still Joanna's home. Greeting visitors was partially her responsibility.

She rose and walked through the hallway that bisected the first floor, wondering whether she'd recognize whoever had come to call. Perhaps the Albrights, who lived across the street, had seen her arrive and wanted to welcome her back. But the couple who stood on the front porch were strangers.

The man appeared to be close to her age with auburn hair, green eyes, and a square chin that kept him from being conventionally handsome. Though the woman at his side was old enough to be his mother, Joanna saw no resemblance between them. What she saw was apprehension on the woman's face and in the way she clung to the man's arm.

"Can I help you?" Joanna asked, unsure whether she should invite them inside. Perhaps they were simply lost and needed directions.

"We're looking for Joseph Vaughn. I understand he lives here."

Joanna's first thought was that the man's voice was deep and melodic, making her wonder whether he sang in a choir, but it was overshadowed by the pain the name evoked. Joseph Vaughn was—or, rather, had been—her father.

Before she could explain that he'd died more than a year ago, Noah raced into the hallway, his rapid footsteps followed by Mrs. Carmichael's more deliberate ones.

"Me see! Me see!" Apparently Noah wanted to greet the visitors.

When Joanna reached out to keep him from catapulting himself onto the porch, Mrs. Carmichael stopped and put her hand on her heart. Blood drained from her face as she stared at the doorway.

"Clive! Clive Finley! You're back!"