

*the*  
**LOST  
STORY**  
*of*  
**VIA  
BELLE**

MELANIE DOBSON

## Praise for Melanie Dobson

With graceful prose and a stirring dual-timeline narrative, *The Lost Story of Via Belle* shines light on buried family secrets, deep wounds, and the enduring hope that rises from the ashes of betrayal. A powerful novel of resilience, perfect for fans of Lisa Wingate and Susan Meissner.

**JENELLE HOVDE**, author of *No Stone Unturned*

With the warm nostalgia, charm, and intrigue of a Grace Livingston Hill novel but infused with a voice and a twist all her own, Melanie Dobson invites us into a world of broken dreams and safe landings. . . . An enrapturing story of courage, *The Lost Story of Via Belle* is a hope-filled haven for the weary heart.

**AMANDA DYKES**, winner of a Christy Book of the Year award and author of *Born of Gilded Mountains*

*The Lost Story of Via Belle* has everything a compelling dual-timeline needs: mystery, suspense, and strong heroines who stand up for themselves and those they love. The present and past slowly weave together to form a satisfying conclusion, one I'm still thinking about well past the last page. Don't miss this one.

**T. I. LOWE**, award-winning author of *South of Somewhere*

I read this delightful mystery in one sitting! . . . Readers of vintage romantic fiction will enjoy finding nuances of their favorites, while also recognizing their own modern-day dreams of traveling back in time to spend a day among the books in a certain turreted library.

**DAENA CREEL**, author of *Grace Livingston Hill: Life Stories* and The Grace Livingston Hill Cookbook series

This story occupied both my waking and sleeping hours. *The Lost Story of Via Belle* is a masterful novel filled with mystery, romance, and courageous characters I will never forget.

**DIANN MILLS**, award-winning author of *Canyon of Deceit*

On an atmospheric island with a ruined castle, a page-turning mystery unfolds. . . . Melanie Dobson writes with a heart bent toward healing, and again she delivers an intriguing story of the bonds of family, the mystery of time, and the power of love.

**PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY**, *New York Times* bestselling author, on *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*

Dobson is quickly establishing herself as a new powerhouse in dual-timeline Christian fiction. This is a potent examination of redemption after scars, and, more simply, a good story, told well.

**LIBRARY JOURNAL**, starred review of *The Winter Rose*

Drawing from historical events and modern-day issues, Dobson creates a story that transcends the years and combines multiple themes. . . . A great book for fans of WWII inspirational stories.

**HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY** on *The Curator's Daughter*

*Memories of Glass* is a remarkable, multilayered novel. . . . The mysteries kept me turning pages, leaving me with much to ponder.

**LYNN AUSTIN**, bestselling, award-winning author of *The Lumber Baron's Wife*

Star-crossed, forbidden love and the disappearance of family members and hidden treasure make a compelling WWII story and set the stage for modern-day detective work in Dobson's latest time-slip novel.

**CATHY GOHLKE**, Christy Award Hall of Fame author of *This Promised Land*, on *Hidden Among the Stars*

Readers will delight in this story that illustrates how the past can change the present.

**LISA WINGATE**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shelterwood*, on *Catching the Wind*

# THE LOST STORY OF VIA BELLE

**ALSO BY MELANIE DOBSON**

*The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*

*The Winter Rose*

*The Curator's Daughter*

*Memories of Glass*

*Hidden Among the Stars*

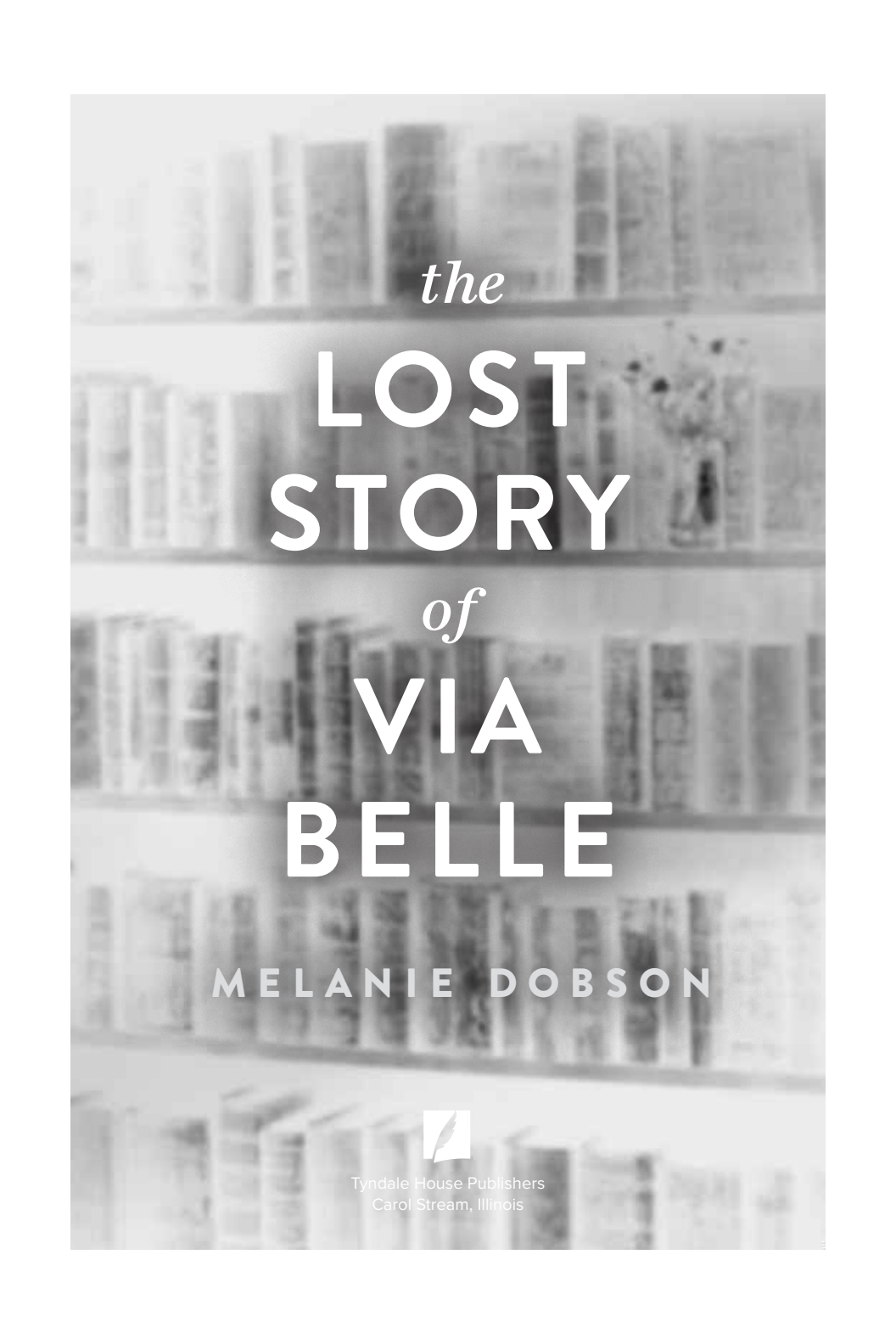
*Enchanted Isle*

*Catching the Wind*

*Beneath a Golden Veil*

*Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*

*Chateau of Secrets*



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*Dedicated to Grace Livingston Hill  
April 1865–February 1947  
Your faithful, creative, sacred legacy  
inspired me to write this story.*

*Awake, Moon calls, but she burrows deep  
Under her blossomed shield.  
Moon rules the midnight realm.  
What has he to do with her?*

*Awake, he begs. A thief, she thinks.  
One to snap and steal and destroy.  
Shadows will surely strip away  
The safety of her cocoon.*

*Please, Moon whispers. I need you.  
What need have you for one so scared?  
To reflect, he says, a mystery.  
Mend this chasm of great fear.*

*Wonderment in the witching hour.  
An unfurled glimpse of light.  
Moon glows delicate upon her face  
And crowns her queen of night.*

# Olivia



AUGUST 1940

Olivia Ashe savored the sunset as light folded into the evening hours, casting a rainbow of color across the golden lake. White blooms trumpeted the fading light along the path, her moonflowers—*Datura innoxia*—celebrating the quiet hours. The world outside was embroiled in conflict, but here, among her flowers, she found peace.

She'd spent much of her afternoon staring at a blank page on her typewriter, neatly rolled into place as it waited for her words.

Once again, she'd failed.

The page pleaded for a story, but she had none to offer. Instead of the beginnings for her next novel, she had typed a letter to her publisher, asking for another extension. By the first of the year, she'd promised, she would deliver a manuscript.

By then, she prayed, the stubborn block would be gone.

In years past, when words refused to come, she would spend an afternoon paddling across her family's small lake. The steady rowing, the

sweet forest scent, sprung a wellspring of ideas, her characters becoming quite chatty after an hour or two. Once anchored, she'd sit on the shore with a pen and tablet to channel the fresh flow.

But those days of immersing herself in imaginary worlds, discovering her story along the way, were long gone. The rowboat was as rickety now as her mind, abandoned in the reeds. Who knew what became of the paddle.

Olivia cradled two bouquets of lilies and phlox, freshly picked from her garden, as she rounded Ashe Lake. On the hill behind her stood Haven House, the two-story country home she and Graham had constructed a decade ago on the foundation of his parents' former house. They'd built a wide porch to entertain. A quiet space upstairs for her to write. All during the 1920s before the stock market crash turned the world on its head.

In the years after the crash, when so many in Pennsylvania lost their homes, she and Graham had filled it with friends and family who needed a place to live. A haven, they decided, for anyone in need. A house where stories overflowed.

The back patio once offered a fine view of Ashe Lake, but trees obscured most of the building now, except her office. Graham had built a turret just for her with a half circle of windows overlooking their gardens and then the lake and trees. For ten years, it had been her sanctuary.

Her aunt, Hattie Belle, was the only person who continued to live with Olivia, her second-floor room lit up tonight with an electric lamp. Hattie had cared for Olivia as a girl, and now she loved every child in their small church as if they were her grandchildren. During the night hours, Hattie crocheted blankets for the newest mothers.

During the day, Hattie had taken on the roles of housekeeper and cook, so Olivia could focus solely on her craft. Since Graham's passing, Olivia could have subsisted on milk and crackers, but Hattie insisted on proper meals—meat at least three times a week, fresh vegetables, and her weekly whipped potatoes and peach pies.

Via Belle—the pen name Olivia used on all her books—had to release a novel soon. Without the income, she and Hattie wouldn't be able to continue living in Haven House. A smaller place in Catawba would suit them fine, but the old property with the lake and forest had been Graham's home too. She wanted to preserve it for all of them.

To the east of Ashe Lake was a forest of cedar and maple. Over the past three years, her rubber boots had worn the dirt path smooth from her nightly trek into the trees. Hattie worried about her venturing out at twilight, but the steady chorus of cicadas, the breath of wind rustling branches, the ripples on their small lake—all of it soothed her soul, especially now when words refused to come.

How she wanted to hear God's whisper in the breeze. Words that spoke to her heart.

Why had He stopped speaking to her?

Even if she no longer heard Him, she knew He was near. She could feel the warmth of His being. A presence that reordered chaos. But still she longed to hear His voice.

She needed no flashlight for her hike. The moon was supposed to be at its fullest tonight, and a battery-powered beam couldn't compare to its crisp, clear light. When she ducked under a branch, the brilliance of sunset dimmed in the forest, sprinkling golden rain across dozens of granite stones, broken and worn.

The Ashe family plot was more than a resting place. It was a library, really, with each tomb memorializing a collection of stories. Some had been forgotten over time, others celebrated for generations.

The gate creaked as she opened it, a sound she loathed. The scent of pine and chatter of cicadas welcomed her into this private place but not the guardian disguised with wrought iron. The gate had never liked her.

Many of the stones, draped with lichen, were illegible. She regretted not writing down the Ashe stories when Graham had told them to her, in the days after they decided to build their home on this inherited land.

For that matter, she wished she'd done a lot of things while Graham was alive.

His parents rested at the eastern edge of the cemetery beside a number of Graham's ancestors, their graves surrounded by a fortress of weeds. She'd buried Graham, the dearest of men, by the fence closest to Haven House. Closest to her.

Graham's story was chiseled in stone. His life marked by dates, then words that would honor him always: *A servant of God.*

As reverend of the Catawba Presbyterian Church, Graham had served her and their community well. And she had loved him from the moment they'd met, back when she was a student at Elmira College in New York. He'd just begun working for a local church, and her service attendance, three times a week, had been impeccable. When he finally proposed marriage on her nineteenth birthday, along with a move south to Lancaster County, she'd gladly accepted. They'd had a remarkable twenty-two years together.

She laid the first bundle of fresh lilies and phlox on a pile of dried bouquets. Like with every visit, she pressed her fingers to her lips and touched the granite. Though Graham was no longer in this world, the memories were fresh. His unwavering kindness and unfaltering faith. The steadfast calm whenever she stormed. All of it lived on.

A whole chorus of cicadas trilled in the trees. The cemetery might feel like a lonely place for some, frightening even in the dark, but here with her memories of the past and prayers for the future, she found strength.

Stepping back from the stone, coolness brushing over her arms, Olivia continued her conversation with Graham as she often did on her evening visits, always a whisper as if she might disturb those who'd gone before her.

"The words are still stuck," she whispered. Lodged somewhere between her head and fingers. Clinton Herring, her publisher for the past twenty years, said she needed to dig deeper, find the source again—the *muse*, he called it—that had produced thirty novels. Graham hadn't taken the

words with him, Clinton said, she just needed to find where they'd been hiding.

Clinton, bless him, was quite pragmatic about things like love and loss. But he was brilliant at business. Just because Graham was gone, he'd said, didn't mean she had to stop writing.

Sales had dipped during the Depression years but remained steady enough for Herring & Son to continue releasing her books. Readers today needed stories, he'd said, that spoke to their heart. They needed her.

And Clinton needed her books to support his company's bottom line.

Before Graham died, she'd reached her first million in sales, and the royalty payments, on top of her advance income, provided enough money to build Haven House. But without a new book to promote, her income was dwindling. She wasn't destitute—she could still provide for herself and her aunt—but she couldn't sustain their home much longer.

It usually took her six months to write a novel, but last October, Clinton had given her another extension—an entire year to finish her next story. The time hadn't helped. With two months left before the extended deadline, a whole ream of paper remained blank on her desk. She had no story to fill the pages, and not enough time, she feared, to finish one if an idea finally struck. Even the words she'd managed to write were nothing more than drivel.

A good beginning was what she needed, then the rest of the story would pour out.

If Graham were still alive, they would dream up the first chapter together. Something urgent and compelling. Something strong enough to captivate her attention and that of her readers.

But she couldn't think of a new beginning and certainly not a middle when she was solidly stuck in the dreaded middle of her personal life, not sure which direction to turn now that Graham was gone.

Would God give her another story or was He guiding her into a new place?

She blinked slowly, the soft moss on Graham's grave returning in focus.

Next to him, in the smallest plot of all, rested Annabelle Leigh Ashe, their only child. When Annabelle was born, Olivia thought she would embrace motherhood for the rest of life, but then their baby girl had fallen asleep in 1921, a month before she turned one, and never awakened. Almost two decades had passed since her daughter's death, but some mornings, when Olivia first woke, the grief was fresh again. Perhaps that's why she often couldn't sleep during the night hours. Her heart and mind feared another life would be lost.

Olivia missed her husband, desperately at times, but it gave her a small comfort that he slept next to Annabelle. Even though they'd slipped into the next life, healthy and strong in eternity, she liked to think of them resting here together.

The second bouquet, she laid beside Annabelle's gravestone and added a plush lamb she'd purchased in Catawba. If her daughter had lived, she'd be an adult now, but Olivia still thought the lamb belonged with her.

A downburst of moonlight replaced the shimmer of dusk, Annabelle sleeping in its warmth with the lamb in her arms and Graham at her side. Instead of speaking, Olivia chose the hymn she'd often sung when rocking Annabelle to sleep: *Jesus is the Shepherd true, and He'll always stand by you, for He loves the little children of the world.*

In life and in death, she knew Jesus loved her girl.

In her earlier dreams, after Annabelle was born, she'd envisioned a half dozen children running circles around her and Graham, playing in the garden and swimming in the lake, but she'd given up that dream when she realized, after years of hoping, that she and Graham would have no other children.

She'd found some solace in her fictional world, writing in her free hours and inviting the many children of congregants over for what she called *teas*. They drank Hattie's mint punch, then spun like whirligigs

across the wood floors, racing and hiding in walls and climbing underneath the stairs.

Every moment with those boys and girls filled her with joy. They didn't replace her love for Annabelle, but in the laughter, she could almost imagine her daughter among them, spinning and racing and hiding away too.

The children who'd once used her home as a playhouse were adults now, quite polite and mannered when they visited. She missed the squeals that once echoed between her walls. And she missed Graham tossing his shoes by the door and then loosening his collar to play like one of them.

Olivia stepped away from Annabelle's grave, prepared to follow the path of moonflowers back home, when she heard a rustling sound. An animal, she thought. Nothing of concern. A squirrel or a raccoon in the forest.

But then a stick snapped, and she whirled in the darkness. "Who's there?"

A black bear hadn't been sighted here in years, but if a bear had wandered onto her property, her voice should frighten it away.

The chorus of cicadas had quieted, and she listened for another crack of a branch or grunt of an animal.

Instead she heard a cough.

Leaping back, she positioned herself between Annabelle's gravestone and the intruder as if she could protect her daughter. A skip of her heart, the swift passage of time, seconds slipped by before she realized how ridiculous it was to guard Annabelle. The only person who needed guarding was her.

Not that she cared much about what happened to her life, but her aunt would be devastated if she had to bury her last relative. There was no sense tempting fate, be it a friend or foe who roamed her forest.

She rushed around the gate, not stopping to close it. The moon, brighter now, no longer comforted her as she followed its lead toward home. When her gaze swept over her shoulder, a shadow lingered near the trees like someone was watching her. Then the person—a child—disappeared into the woods.

*Annabelle.*

She took a deep breath, cursing her fervid imagination. Words may not be flowing from her hands, but her mind churned constantly, trying and failing to press her imagination into a stream.

Of course, it wasn't Annabelle. Olivia knew keenly the power of imagination, but she didn't believe in ghosts. Somehow a child, in the hours long after dinner, had ventured into her woods. Perhaps one of the Lamb family children—her nearest neighbors—had gotten lost.

"Who's there?" she called again, trying to soften the alarm in her voice.

No one answered.

Perhaps she should have followed the shadow, but it seemed perilous to trek into the forest without a flashlight, especially since she didn't know who had been watching her. Instead, she'd phone Jillian Lamb the moment she returned home.

The cicadas began humming again as she climbed the hill. At the top, three stone steps and a pot of flowers welcomed her home. She locked the front door behind her, then she kicked off her rubber boots and padded in her stockings through the dining room, to the telephone in the kitchen.

The switchboard operator connected her right away to Jillian Lamb, her neighbor and a member at Catawba Presbyterian. When she told her friend about the child in the forest, Jillian said her four children were playing Monopoly in their living room, nary a one missing among them.

"Some drifters are camping near the train track," Jillian said. "Perhaps one of the children strayed."

Olivia leaned against the kitchen counter as her mind wandered. A number of children, more than a hundred thousand she'd read, had been orphaned or displaced in the past ten years. If the shadow had been the child of a transient, would he be able to find his way home? On this warm summer evening, the shelter of her woods would offer no threat to a boy or girl, but still, if it was a child, she wished she could have provided something—food, a blanket, anything to help.

After bidding Jillian a good night, Olivia climbed to the second floor and knocked on her aunt's door.

"Come in," Hattie called, glancing up from her chair as Olivia opened the door, a crocheting hook in one hand and a lilac blue yarn folded on her lap. She wore a floral housecoat with organdy trim, her hair pinned back in a neat bun, the same honey brown as Olivia's shoulder-length waves.

"Was it a good walk?" Hattie asked.

"The walk was good, but . . ."

Hattie lowered the hook. "What happened?"

Olivia told her about the cough and then the shadow in the trees.

"Perhaps it was just—" Hattie paused as if trying not to offend her niece by suggesting that Olivia had imagined the child.

But maybe she had imagined it, like she imagined so many things. In the past, she'd re-crafted her imaginings into scenes, patching them together into a story, but now all she had were scattered shards of narrative that whirled like a tornado in her head. Even when she walked in the evening, dreaming of the possibilities, she couldn't seem to transfer her thoughts and experiences, like she'd once done, into fiction.

She was in desperate need of inspiration.

Hattie reached into her pocket and handed Olivia a stack of letters. "Most of these are from readers."

While she cherished every letter, replied to each note, most inquiries as of late referenced her next novel, and she no longer had a good response about the delay. "I'll respond tomorrow."

Hattie handed her two more letters. "I thought you might want to look at these right away."

The first was from Herring & Son. She'd open that in the morning with the others.

The return address on the second envelope was from Winfield College in Ohio. She'd heard of the school—Episcopalian, she thought—not far from the farm of renowned novelist Louis Bromfield.

A quick slide of her nail under the seal, and she removed a typed letter.

*Dear Mrs. Belle,*

*Our college is launching a literary magazine called *The Winfield Review* to foster creative writing among our students. To celebrate this venture, we are organizing a panel of esteemed poets and novelists on September 8th to discuss writing and publishing. With your prolific background and wide readership, we are confident that your expertise would be of great benefit to our student body and faculty alike.*

*On behalf of our organizing committee, I would like to extend an invitation for you to join four other distinguished writers on this panel. We would cover your travel expenses and offer compensation of \$50 for your time.*

*I apologize for the short notice but eagerly—and hopefully—await your response by telephone or mail.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dr. Simon Farrow*

*Dean of Arts and Humanities*

Professor Farrow. She knew that name. He'd written articles about theology and literature for several well-respected journals, but she couldn't imagine that he'd read her work.

Olivia held out the letter to her aunt.

Women's groups often asked her to speak and sometimes she did readings at a local bookstore, but she'd never received an invitation from a prestigious school like Winfield. Her stories were much too common for academics or literary magazines.

Hattie glanced up from the letter. "That's a gracious invitation."

“Another author must have canceled.” Why else would they wait until the last moment to invite her? The panel was in less than two weeks, and they already had four writers confirmed.

“Dr. Farrow is right. Your experience would be a great benefit to their students.” Hattie folded the letter and handed it back. “And it would be good for you to spend time among your peers. Perhaps make a friend.”

“These aren’t my peers.” Most academics she’d met were the snobbish, respectable sort who stared down their noses at novelists like her. “But the speaking fee would help our finances.”

Just until they received her next royalty check.

“If I accept their invitation, would you join me?” Olivia asked. “We’ll take the train.”

“Of course.” Her aunt patted her hand. “It would be an honor.”

“I won’t be able to offer much as the author who’s lost her voice.”

Hattie picked up her crocheting hook. “The words will come again.”

She prayed they’d return before her deadline.