

Amelía's Legacy

Chapter Two

Impatient, Amelia Woods-Sanderson tapped her fingers on the desk. Her grandchild, her only heir, was far too wayward and undisciplined. She had no doubt it was due to the influence of the child's mother. She bit her lip and glanced at the portrait of her son. How could he have married such a person?

She pushed away from her desk, stood and gazed out of a bay window overlooking the grounds of her town house. Her scrutiny halted at the bushes near the front entrance. She made a mental note of a branch that extended out over the gaslight. She'd need to speak to the gardener about that.

As the sun began its afternoon journey, she mused over the safeguards she was about to set in place. Safeguards to protect not only the fortune she'd amassed, but the company as well. Her most prized possession. At her insistence, Smith-Sanderson Associates had recently delved into the oil industry. This venture had already proved quite rewarding. As a result, her only heir or rather, heiress, stood to inherit quite a large fortune.

Amelia closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Was she doing the right thing? She often made difficult decisions, so why was this one any different? She turned back to her desk, sank into her chair and took up her fountain pen. She knew why. There were lives in the balance. The well-being of many. The right thing to do was clear enough. She must protect the company, its employees and her vast fortune.

She dropped the pen again and picked up the silver-framed photograph on her desk. Even dressed in her school uniform, the girl was attractive. Lovely chestnut hair fell in waves down her back and skin as smooth and creamy as a baby's. There was so much of her father in her. Amelia gave a soft sigh at the memory of her son, so fine, so handsome. He'd been such a wonderful mixture of the Smith and Sanderson families. So good-natured too, which is what had gotten him into trouble. She set down the photograph and picked up her pen. *Regret is nothing but a waste of time.* She must prepare for the afternoon's conference.

Tired with a splitting headache, Nancy barely endured the school day. She wanted rest, and plenty of it. Of all times for Grandmother to spring a meeting on her. Dread filled her heart as she walked into the house after school and trudged up the stairs. In her room, she loosened the laces of her shoes and kicked them off, then changed out of her uniform. Pleated gray wool skirt, navy coat and plain white blouse. Soft silk suited her so much better.

She tied the sash of her favorite day dress, slipped on a pair of brown pumps and adjusted the combs in her hair. On the way out the door, she paused to look with longing at her bed. If only she dared take a short nap first. Better not.

She berated herself for her spinelessness as she made her way down the stairs. Outside the study door, she stood for a moment listening to the voices inside. She only recognized one, that of Mr. William Boston, "Uncle" William to Nancy, Grandmother's attorney. She suppressed a groan. Boring. She knocked softly and waited for the summons.

Grandmother sat at her desk, facing her guests. Actually, only one of the men was truly a guest in Nancy's opinion, as Uncle William was so often in attendance there. He was not truly her uncle, but a trusted family friend. The two men stood as she entered.

Her grandmother nodded. "There you are. We've been waiting."

"Good afternoon, Nancy," Uncle William said.

Grandmother introduced the younger man. "Mr. Robert Emerson, my granddaughter, Miss Nancy Sanderson."

Robert faced Nancy. "How do you do, Miss Sanderson?"

"Very well, thank you," she answered, peering up at him. He was vaguely familiar to her, but she couldn't place him. Probably met at one of Grandmother's dull parties.

"You may sit, Nancy." Grandmother rang for tea to be brought in.

While they waited, Uncle William made small talk, in his usual boring way. She tried hard to concentrate, refusing to let her eyes glaze over from boredom. She sat up straight, with her legs crossed at the ankles and tucked beneath her chair, exactly as she had been taught.

Sissy entered and set the tea tray on the side table. She cast a sideways glance at Nancy, who lifted a brow and met her gaze.

Grandmother addressed Sissy. "You may go now. My granddaughter will pour the tea." Though her grandmother spoke softly, Nancy understood quite well. She was on display. But why?

She glanced from her grandmother's face to Robert Emerson's before turning to the task at hand. Quite adept at the social graces, she even managed to enjoy them sometimes, as they kept her hands busy. This was different.

Perhaps it was due to the lingering effects of the night before, or just the constant chaffing of her grandmother's ordering her about. She struggled to keep her hands steady as she poured the tea and handed the delicate cups to the guests. Somehow she managed not to spill a drop.

Returning to her chair, she sat in silence, sipping her tea. Grandmother began to speak in the grand tone Nancy knew so well.

"Mr. Emerson, William tells me you graduated magna cum laude?"

"Yes ma'am."

Nancy positioned herself so she could watch his face. He was an ordinary looking man with dark eyes set beneath a strong brow and a not-so-large nose. His wide mouth, often upturned in a crooked smile, revealed straight white teeth and a single dimple in his right cheek. She figured him to be about twenty-six. Old.

Grandmother addressed Nancy. "Mr. Emerson is a recent graduate of Harvard Law and will soon take his place at the Boston Emerson Law Firm." The color rose in Robert's cheeks. He cast a quick glance her way. She blinked. Had he actually blushed? She glanced at Grandmother, who seemed to be testing his ability. Perhaps she was interested in engaging his services at some future date? She frowned into her teacup.

A momentary lull in conversation seemed a good opportunity for her to offer refills. Robert continued to answer the questions her grandmother addressed to him, holding up well to Amelia Woods-Sanderson's scrutiny. Nancy admired him for it.

"My granddaughter and I will be leaving in a month for Europe. Have you ever been to Europe, Mr. Emerson?"

"Actually, no, Mrs. Sanderson. I had the chance, but opted for a summer of service instead."

Nancy turned her head to look at him. *Really?* Of course her grandmother would be impressed.

Grandmother sat forward on her chair. "A summer of service?"

"Yes, I did some volunteer work in a poverty-stricken area of West Virginia. It was quite interesting."

Grandmother's long fingers were busy folding and refolding her linen napkin. "And rewarding, no doubt. It must have improved your perspective."

"Indeed," Uncle William said. "It's that kind of dedication that assured him a spot with our firm. We didn't just allow him a place because of his father."

Nancy had paid little attention to Uncle William up to this point, but now noticed the streaks of silver in his dark hair. Funny how she hadn't noticed it before. She fidgeted with her skirt, rearranged it and re-crossed her ankles. At Grandmother's scathing glance, she relaxed and gave Robert Emerson her undivided attention.

As he spoke of the abject poverty and the faces of the children, his face showed genuine emotion. He could have been pleading their case before the Supreme Court, he was so serious. He didn't drone on, however, but kept it short and to the point. He glanced Nancy's way often, as if to include her in the conversation. When he'd finished speaking, his piercing gaze bore into Nancy. She squirmed.

He turned back to her grandmother. "You're not concerned about the continued unrest in Europe right now, Mrs. Sanderson?"

"Just what I asked her," William gave a slight shrug. "She's a stubborn woman, though—as you'll soon learn."

"Posh!" Grandmother said. "You don't want to get me started on labor unions, young man. My connections in France and England assure me the situation is well under control for the time being. I think we'll be safe enough. Besides, Nancy's been looking forward to this for some time. I wouldn't wish to disappoint her."

Nancy darted a glance at her grandmother. Was she serious?

Finally, her ordeal ended when William Boston rose from his chair. He smiled. “Thank you, young lady, for your kind attention.” He turned to her grandmother. “Amelia, thank you for your gracious hospitality.”

Robert Emerson stood and strolled over to Nancy, who’d risen from her chair. “It was very nice to meet you, Miss Sanderson, though I believe we’ve met before.”

She forced her lips into a polite smile. “I thought so too, though I don’t remember where it may have been.”

He flashed a toothy smile. “One function or other, no doubt. Perhaps a long ago birthday party? Our families are socially connected, after all. We will no doubt meet again.” His eyes warmed to hers. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

She swallowed hard. All she could manage was a nod, before he swung away and followed Uncle William and her grandmother from the room. “I’ll be in touch,” she heard her grandmother say. The front door closed and Grandmother returned to the study. Nancy frowned as she gathered the cups and saucers, placed them on the silver tea tray. Grandmother touched her hand.

“Leave that. Sissy can clean up.” She turned aside, facing the window. “Thank you for your forbearance. I know it was difficult for you to sit still for so long a time. But I very much wanted you to meet Mr. Emerson.”

Thank you? Nancy swallowed. Was she being sarcastic? Grandmother had never thanked her for following orders. Her head throbbed. “May I be excused now, Grandmother? I have...homework.”

Grandmother waved her away. “Certainly, we’ll talk at dinner.”

Nancy frowned. *We’ll talk at dinner*. About what? She trudged up the stairs. If only Nate would come tonight. Sometimes he would surprise her—ping her window with a pebble. Once in her room, she sat at her desk and removed her textbooks from a leather valise. Just a few more days of homework.