

Amelia's Legacy

Chapter One

Spring, 1924

“Nancy Sanderson, what have you to say for yourself?”

Handcuffs pinched her wrists. The cold barrel of a Derringer pressed into her ribs.

Nancy lifted her chin and stared down her beautiful nose at her accusers. “I will never betray my friend.”

“So you are in collusion with the miscreant?”

Nancy swallowed and wracked her brain. What did collusion mean?

“Are you listening to me, young lady?”

Nancy snapped to attention. She’d been daydreaming again. “Yes, ma’am.”

In Grandmother’s office, she endured yet another long drawn out lecture dealing with her recent behavior at school. Her back rigid, Nancy sat on the edge of her chair.

Grandmother clasped her hands and peered at Nancy through tortoiseshell spectacles. “I don’t think you were, but I haven’t the time to fool with you. I’ve business to attend. You’ve earned your punishment, go to your room at once. I won’t see you until breakfast.”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Nancy tiptoed to the door, but once through it, ran for the stairs and her room—her sanctuary. She got right to work, so she’d be free to join Nate when he came for her after midnight. Picking up a large, black Bible, she thumbed through the worn pages to find, “...every scripture on respecting one’s elders and list the benefits of such behavior.” She frowned into the ancient tome. But she wasn’t sorry. She’d stood up for what she believed was right.

Elena Newcombe, one of her classmates, had bobbed her hair and was dismissed. What a nest of vipers Elena had unleashed with that simple act. Nancy twirled a strand of her own hair

and stared out the window. Nancy and several of her friends dared to stand up in open defiance of the dismissal. They'd all been reprimanded and had received demerits on their records. Of course the worst for Nancy came later when she delivered the headmistress' letter to Grandmother.

The clock on the bedside table ticked away the minutes. She glanced at it and gnawed her lower lip. If she finished her homework before ten o'clock, she'd have time for a nap before Nate came for her.

A soft knock at the door interrupted Nancy's struggle to finish her grammar homework. She knew who it was before she heard the whisper, "Miss Nancy?"

With an exasperated sigh, she crossed to open the door. "Yes, Sissy?"

Sissy offered a napkin-wrapped bundle. "I brought you a sandwich." She frowned and shook her head. "It ain't right, old as you are. She treats you like a child."

Nancy glanced around outside her door, expecting to see her grandmother's stern countenance. "Thank you, Sissy. You'd best get on with your work before she catches you."

"Good night." Sissy cast over her shoulder as she sped away down the hall to the servant's stairs.

Nancy unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite, chewing as she sat back down at the desk. So much for Grandmother's punishment. She smiled at her reflection in the dressing table mirror. She had the staff's sympathy. They always took her side. She leaned over her books and scribbled away at her schoolwork.

A pebble struck the window. Nate arrived right on time, as usual. Nancy grabbed her jacket, pushed open the sash and climbed out. It took only a moment to lower the window, then she moved soundless as a cat to the edge of the roof. Dangling her legs over the side, she stretched to reach the limb of the old maple tree.

Nate grabbed her legs to lower her to the ground. "You're a regular monkey."

She took off across the grass. "Let's get out of here before we're seen."

Seated in his car, Nancy glanced at his handsome face. In the semidarkness, she could just make out his handsome profile. She'd met Nate Conners, a sophomore at the local college, at a friend's party. Catching her gaze, he leaned forward. "Mind if I smoke?" She gave her head a shake and crossed her arms over her chest to calm her nerves. Tonight they were going to a place he'd told her about—a forbidden place—a roadhouse. The mere thought of the word sent a thrill racing down her spine. She loved Nate's wild side. He seemed to like her too. She grinned into the darkness. The fact that her grandmother would never approve of him made him all the more interesting.

They rounded a corner and there it stood—the roadhouse, a rough-looking place, windows darkened to the outside world. Nate rapped on the door. It opened a crack, revealing only a dark interior. Nate whispered something, and the door opened just wide enough for them to squeeze through.

Inside, they followed a portly gentleman down a wooden staircase. Another door at the bottom opened into a dank cellar full of cigarette smoke, the clinking of glasses, and low chatter. Sultry jazz filled the thick air. At the bottom of the stairs Nate pivoted and moved toward the back. Turning, he glanced at Nancy and whispered, “The proprietress.” He stopped in front of the woman. “Hallo, Lena.”

Lena glanced past Nate to Nancy. She sniffed and shook her head.

The woman had the reddest hair Nancy had ever seen. It had to be fake. Pancaked makeup, dark lipstick and rouge plastered Lena’s ruddy complexion. Her eyes bore into Nancy. “I warned you about this, Nate.” She poked a ruby-red fingernail at his chest. “You can’t bring her in here. She’s underage.”

He leaned close to Lena. “Lena, Lena, we won’t stay long. Just one itsy-bitsy drink?” Nancy was ready to fly away at the first hint of Lena’s disapproval. She was not one to stay where she wasn’t wanted. She turned away and tried to tune out their conversation. Her eyes raked over the crowd of faces. A tremor skipped down her spine as she came to the realization, she could be recognized by some of these patrons, and reported to her grandmother. So Lena’s response to Nate did not disappoint her.

“What I’m telling you, is that you won’t stay at all,”—Lena shot a quick nod toward Nancy—“with that baby on your arm. What do you think would happen?” She punctuated each point with a slap of her hand on the well-polished bar. “At any time, there could be agents on the premises. We never know when. I could go to prison. Now get on out, and don’t bring any more babies back in here.”

“All right. All right, we’re going.” He blazed a trail through the sea of people, as the two of them headed for a back entrance. Over his shoulder, he called to Nancy, “Let’s make tracks. We’ve been given the bum’s rush.”

She followed him through the rear door, which opened into a long, dark tunnel. Another door led out to the riverbank. Once there, he pulled her aside, and they turned to look back at the entrance.

“It was worth a try. What’d you think of it?”

She peered into the darkness. Not even a sliver of light showed around the door. She sniffed. “It seemed an interesting place.”

“One of the better joints. I was prepared either way.” He stepped to a row of low bushes and held up a couple of amber-colored bottles. “The best money can buy, just like I promised.” He jerked his head to the side. “Come on over here.”

She followed him along a moonlit path to a small grove of willow trees along the riverbank where water tumbled over smooth, dark rocks. They sat down on a large fallen tree by the water’s edge. He opened one of the bottles and tested it, then grimaced, catching his breath. “Great stuff.” When he held it out to her, she leaned away from him. He pushed it closer. “You said you wanted to try it.”

Yes, she’d once expressed the desire to try it, but now she hesitated. She’d heard the wild tales from the other girls at school. She could get into so much trouble. After a few more minutes’ hesitation, he pulled back with a shrug. “All right then. Have it your way.”

Grandmother’s disapproving face floated before her and in that split second, she snatched the bottle and touched it to her lips. After a brief pause, she squeezed her eyes shut and tipped.

The flaming liquid hit the roof of her mouth, then the back of her throat. It repulsed her. She coughed and lost most of what she'd taken in.

Nate laughed and patted her back. "It takes some getting used to, like smoking. You gotta take it slow at first." He opened the second bottle and raised it to his lips, took a drink and swallowed. "Ah." He shot a sideways glance at her.

She giggled and took another drink. Not so bad the second time, perhaps because she expected the fire. A few minutes later she relaxed, sat right down on the cold, hard ground and leaned against a tree.

She didn't mind that they'd been kicked out of the speakeasy, but enjoyed this little rendezvous more because now they were alone. Not many minutes passed before Nate became the funniest person she'd ever met.

"Miss Nancy, wake up. What's the matter with you?" Sissy shook her again and tugged the covers off her. The whole bed shook. "Land child, you get me in so much trouble if you're late to breakfast. Are you all right?" She leaned over and laid her wrist across Nancy's brow. "No fever. What could it be?"

Nancy moaned, rolled over, and sat up on the edge of the bed.

Sissy took a backwards step. "Oh my, girl you look just like my ole grandpappy when he'd been—oh my stars and garters. Don't tell me."

Nancy held up a shaky hand. "All right I won't, if you'll just be quiet. Help me get to the bathroom, I can take it from there."

Never, never again. Closing her eyes, she sucked in a deep breath, to settle her stomach. Then she struggled to make herself presentable. After scrubbing her face and brushing her teeth, Sissy helped her pin up her hair, then left her to dress. When she managed to end up at the table only five minutes late, her grandmother's eyes registered disapproval.

"I apologize, Grandmother, there's no excuse for my tardiness." Contrite, she focused her eyes on her plate. Her stomach lurched.

"Obviously, you were up too late trying to finish your work. From now on, perhaps you will accomplish it in a timelier manner."

Nancy kept her head down. "Yes, Grandmother." Sissy set a cup of black coffee in front of her.

Grandmother shook out her napkin. "That's a very good idea, Sissy. Thank you for thinking of it." Sissy backed out of the room, her eyes on Nancy's face. Nancy scowled at her.

Near the end of the meal, Grandmother glanced up from the newspaper. "I need you to come straight home from school today."

Nancy's mouth hung open as she met her grandmother's gaze. *What?*

"As soon as you get home, go and change out of your uniform and into something more appropriate for entertaining guests. Then you may join me in my office." She folded the newspaper and laid it aside. "There will be someone here I'm most anxious for you to meet."

Cryptic. Nancy's curiosity quickened. But she didn't want her grandmother to know it, so she said, "Yes Grandmother," rising to make a quick exit.

The family driver, Kip, had the car waiting so Nancy got in and sat down. She had a lot to think about on the short trip to school. Just two more weeks until graduation, then the summer trip to Europe. Then it would be off to university, and freedom. Or at least a measure of it. Her heart thrilled to the thought. She'd be out from under Grandmother's thumb. She'd no idea how the woman knew so much. She scoffed. "Small town."

"Miss Nancy?" Kip asked. "You say something?"

She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud. She peered at Kip and shook her head when he glanced over his shoulder. "Just, um...memorizing...something. For class."

Kip smiled. "Okay, Miss Nancy."

Small town, indeed. Everybody knew her business. If she sneezed, they published news of it in the newspaper.

"Nancy Sanderson, granddaughter of Amelia Woods-Sanderson, suffered a sneeze last week while walking down Main Street. This reporter overheard it said, she may have taken cold, while—"

A painful bump in the road jarred Nancy back to the present and Grandmother's strange request. What on earth is happening later today? Who is this mysterious person Grandmother wanted her to meet? She pressed her fingertips against her temples. Just thinking about it made her head ache even more.

