



Simone Fields comes to Singapore, Michigan in 1840. Her inheritance is stolen under strange circumstances during a massive blizzard. Now, in 2023, she seeks the help of Annie Prescott and the two work together to solve the mystery.

Sands of Time

By Cyndi Whitfield

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Sands of Time

Can two women
living centuries apart come together to solve
a 180-year-old mystery?

Cyndi Whitfield

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CHAPTER ONE

The alarm shrilled in her ear and Annie Prescott blindly reached over to shut the phone off. Throwing her legs out of bed, she sat up, pushing long brown strands of hair from her eyes.

Mom is dead.

The thought reverberated in her head like a horrible mantra and she wished she could go back to sleep. Maybe wake up an hour from now and realize the last five days were nothing but a terrible nightmare.

Tears came to her eyes as she thought back to last Wednesday when Jill called her at 7:00am.

“Mom is in bad shape, Annie. The doctor is talking about hospice. I think you need to come to Michigan.”

She’d looked around her small apartment in Rochester, New York, and everything seemed surreal. Hospice? But that meant Mom didn’t have much longer.....

She immediately packed up her Ford Escape and was on the road at 9:00 a.m. Barring traffic issues, the trip would take nine hours. Add in a few stops and she wouldn’t be there till just before nightfall. Fortunately, luck was on her side and, other than some rush hour traffic in the late afternoon, it was clear sailing. She pulled into Holland Hospital just before 9:00 p.m. It was located on the far west side of the state, near Lake Michigan.

The sisters had kept in touch by phone and Jill met her in the waiting room on the 6th floor.

After a tearful embrace, they sat down to talk.

Jill, her short blond hair in a pixie cut, was casually dressed in a tee shirt and jeans. The older of the two, she had inherited

their mother's petite figure, weighing in at 110 pounds soaking wet.

Annie, on the other hand, always seemed to have an extra 20 pounds on her taller frame and had brown eyes and long brown hair, perked up with blond highlights.

"A hospice nurse will be coming by in the next half hour to talk to us. She went over things with me, but I need another set of ears. It's difficult hearing this stuff and I wanted you to get it firsthand."

Annie took her sister's hand across the table and they stopped talking for a moment, both trying to control their tears.

"Mom's breathing is bad," Jill finally choked out. "They have her on a CPAP machine to increase her oxygen intake, but she doesn't like it because it's covering her whole face. It can't be comfortable."

The nurse did, indeed, join them a few minutes later and Jill, as medical power of attorney, signed the paperwork to admit their mother into hospice.

Afterwards, the two women went to Devora Prescott's room. Jill had been there since she'd been admitted several days earlier with pneumonia, but Annie hadn't seen her mother in a couple months. She was shocked by the change. Besides the CPAP machine, her mother's face was pale and she looked distressed and unwell. Her short blond hair, usually curled attractively about her face, was flat and matted against the pillow.

"Mom!" Annie went to the bed and gave her mother an awkward hug. The CPAP didn't allow for a kiss on the cheek.

They could hardly hear Devora when she spoke, the heavy plastic covering most of her face. When her nurse came in, they asked if she could wear a simple oxygen mask for a while so they could converse with her.

It made a difference and Devora was glad to see her youngest daughter. The three talked for a while, but Devora began struggling for air and they called the nurse to replace the CPAP.

Annie made sure the hospital added her cell number to Devora's emergency list before they left the building.

The next day, Devora was given morphine so she wouldn't be aware of her struggle to breathe. Not knowing if she could hear them, her daughters continued talking to her. At one point, Jill got a strange look on her face and glanced at Annie, then Devora.

"Mom, can you see Dad? Is he there with you now? Move your foot if he is."

Their father, Alec, had passed away almost ten years before.

Devora's foot bounced up from the bed and her daughters stared at each other in shock, eyes filling with tears. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to let her go if they knew their father was waiting for her. The two had had a wonderful 30-year marriage before he'd died at the young age of 53. Devora, now, was only 62.

She passed away late the next afternoon with both daughters beside her.

A simple ceremony had been planned at one of the two funeral homes in town and many people came for the short viewing and service.

In the four years Devora had lived in Saugatuck, she'd made many friends. Jill and Annie were aware she'd joined the town gardening club, a book club and a canasta group. She'd met friends for lunch and dinner several times a week and made sure no grass grew under her feet. That is, until several months before when her pulmonary fibrosis grew worse and she needed oxygen 24/7. That slowed her down a bit.

Then, just a month ago, pneumonia had set in. It took a while, but Devora beat it. Unfortunately, the illness left her lungs in an

extremely weakened state. There was nothing more doctors could do.

The funeral had been the day before. Now, Annie pulled on a summer robe and wandered out to the kitchen where she found her sister sipping coffee at the table. Jill looked like Annie felt; hollow-eyed, pale, empty. How would they get through this? The three women had been close.

Jill, living less than three hours away, had been coming in at least once a week over the last few months to get Devora to doctor appointments. Many times, she spent the night with her. It hadn't been easy with a husband and eight and ten-year-old kids at home, back in Chicago. But with Annie in New York, there hadn't been much choice. Annie planned on making up for it now, though.

Pouring herself coffee, the young woman joined her sister at the table.

“Did David and the kids get home alright last night?” She asked.

Her sister nodded. “Yeah. It’s best they get back to a normal routine. School will start in another month.” It was now the beginning of August.

“You’ve been here so much more than me. Why don’t you go home and I’ll work on getting the house cleaned out?”

Jill looked up from her coffee. “Absolutely not! We’ll get it done in half the time with both of us. David is okay with the kids for this week. I’ll leave Saturday morning.”

Most likely, the house would still not be emptied, but they could accomplish a lot in five days. Devora had been very organized. When moving to Saugatuck four years earlier, she’d gotten rid of a lot of her things. The home she and Alec had raised their daughters in was in Rochester Hills, Michigan, across the state. Going from a 2,400 square foot colonial there to a small home half that size had required it.

Annie sipped at her coffee, dreading the prospect of tearing apart their mother's beloved home.

"I'm glad Mom settled in Saugatuck," Jill told her. "It seemed like a crazy move at the time, but it put her closer to me and certainly opened up her world to new things. I mean, *canasta*?"

Both women laughed. Their mother had never been one to play games. But the friendships it brought her had been immeasurable.

Looking back, Devora had always maintained ties with people she knew.

Friendships are like plants, she once told them. You can't neglect them. If you give them attention, they'll grow.

Even after moving across the state, she kept in touch with most of her friends from Rochester Hills. They spoke on the phone and visited back and forth. Add to those people all the acquaintances she'd made in Saugatuck and it explained the multitude of mourners at her funeral service the day before.

"She taught us how important friendships are," Annie said quietly.

"Remember how she would counsel us when we fought with a girlfriend?" Jill asked. 'Friends are treasures,' she would say. 'Patch things up and move on. You don't want to lose someone you care about over this.'"

They both smiled sadly, then glanced at each other, eyes welling.

"How are we supposed to move on without her advice?" Annie wondered. "I always asked her opinion before I made a big decision."

Her sister nodded. "I heard an interesting quote recently: 'Don't be sad it's over, be glad it happened.' Maybe we should try to look at the positive side. We had an amazing mom and not everyone does. She's gone now, but we have great memories of her and Dad and growing up in Rochester Hills."

“You’re absolutely right, Jill, but I’m not ready to see positivity in any of this. I want to be sad and angry and get through the worst of this grief.”

Jill stood and walked to the refrigerator. “We made it through losing Dad and we’ll do it again.”

Annie sighed. *Easier said than done.*

“I’m going to warm up a piece of quiche the neighbor brought over and then get down to work.”

Jill threw open the door to the fridge and sighed. “It’s wonderful so many of Mom’s friends and neighbors brought food over for us, but all this?”

Besides the quiche, it held a cheesy chicken casserole, veggie pizza, lasagna, a large container of homemade chicken soup and a large pan of mac and cheese. On the countertop were assorted cookies and brownies and an apple pie. All comfort foods.

“I think we should work together on each room,” Annie suggested. “If neither of us wants an item, we should either throw it out or put it on a pile to donate.” Annie’s orderly mind had taken over.

“Agreed. Ooh, maybe quiche and a brownie,” Jill said and her sister marveled again at the unfairness of a person being able to eat whatever they wanted and never gain an ounce.

The week flew by and the sisters were able to go through most of the house in that time. They only took one prolonged break on Wednesday afternoon. It had been an emotional day of remembering past times with Devora, brought to life again through pictures, mementos and notes written in their mother’s hand.

Wiping her eyes once again, Jill stood up firmly.

“We need to get out of here for a while. Just a few hours. It’s 1:00. I don’t know about you, but I need a break from all that

food in the refrigerator. What do you say we go out for lunch? This is a tourist town. Let's go see what other people are doing."

Annie seized the moment, and they left within minutes, taking Jill's car.

Saugatuck on a beautiful August afternoon was busy. Jill was right. People came from all over to enjoy the small-town feel of the city, positioned on the western edge of Michigan and the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. There were countless open-air restaurants and shops; boutiques and art galleries welcomed people with their opened doors. Families picnicked at the parks near the lake's edge and children ran around, enjoying the beach and water.

Annie had been to Saugatuck many times before when visiting her mother, but had never spent more than a few days at a time there. She could see that the warm weather really brought in the crowds.

The women chose a restaurant with outdoor seating to better enjoy the beautiful day. Over salads and glasses of wine, they talked about Devora moving to the area.

"I remember her and Dad coming here to visit every summer after we were grown. They'd camp nearby or stay at one of the area hotels. She always said it was so much fun." Jill stared into her wine glass.

"She was restless after Dad died. It was hard for her living in that house all alone. I remember being shocked when she said she wanted to move here. I mean, it wasn't like they had friends in the area. We tried to talk her out of it." Annie felt suddenly guilty.

"But she made the move and never looked back," Jill added. "She loved it here. And the mountain of food in the refrigerator is a testament to all the friends she made!"

Both women laughed before Annie spoke again. "She came here by herself and found that house. Didn't she say it was a historical home? I can't remember the story."

Jill frowned. “She did say something about that, but I’m not clear on it, either.”

The table was quiet for a few moments as they each sipped their wine.

“We should be talking to a realtor. Find out what the house is worth. It goes as is. No painting or recarpeting or anything like that.” Jill was adamant and her sister agreed.

“Right. But none of that is really needed anyway. Mom took good care of the place. She had a handyman. What was his name? Clive? Cletus? Something like that.”

Jill laughed. “Calvin. I think she called him ‘Cal.’”

It was Annie’s turn to laugh. “Calvin is probably well into his 70’s and can barely walk. Mom would feel sorry for him and offer to pay double just to *try* to get him up on that roof!”

Jill hooted. “You may be right.”

“I do remember Mom talking about the old wooden shed out back. She told me Cal was going to rebuild the whole thing and paint it this summer. I wonder if Cal knows Mom is gone?”

Jill frowned. “I don’t remember meeting him at the funeral.”

After lunch, they walked slowly back to the car, enjoying the energy of the small town.

Jill suggested they walk to the beach. After parking the car back at Devora’s, they retraced their steps to the end of the street where Lake Michigan lay, its waters sparkling in the late afternoon sun. The beach stretched out far below, a few people walking from the public stairway not far from where they stood.

It would be hard leaving this place, Annie realized. But her life was back in New York.

Returning home, they worked a few hours longer, making their way through boxes of Christmas ornaments and Halloween decorations. It was almost 7:00 p.m. when they took platefuls of food out to the backyard patio.

Annie sat down and happened to glance toward Devora's perennial garden at the back of the yard. A young woman stood there. She looked to be about Annie's age and had soft, curly brown hair to her shoulders and wore a navy, flowered dress almost to her knees. She had flats on her feet.

Annie was startled for a moment, then called across the yard.
"Hello?"

The woman smiled tentatively, then disappeared behind the large trees at the back of the flower garden.

"Who are you talking to?"

"I saw a woman standing in the garden, but she's gone now."

"I looked over there when you called out. I didn't see anyone."

The sisters glanced at each other.

"She had on a flowered dress. Really, you didn't see her?"

"Not even a glimpse."

"Wonderful. Now I'm losing my mind." Annie picked up her fork and began eating.

Saturday arrived and Jill packed up her car. Annie made sure to hand off the leftover brownies to her sister, causing them both to laugh. Then they cried again. It had certainly been two emotional weeks for the women.

"Keep in touch! If this gets to be too overwhelming for you, call me right away. I can figure something out for the kids and come back for a few days."

"I appreciate you staying all week to help. We've got most of it done. I'll be fine from here." She had a realtor coming by the next day to give her an estimate on what the home was worth.

Watching her sister drive down the street, Annie already felt lonely. Sharing their sorrow had been much easier than bearing it alone would be.

Stepping back inside the house, she glanced around the living room. They had made great headway and there were only some boxes in the storage/laundry room that Annie had to get through. With the exception of larger pieces of furniture, items to be donated were stacked in their mother's office.

A sense of melancholy filled her at the thought of selling this home. Painted yellow with white trim, it was surrounded by a dozen trees, on just over an acre of property. Lake Michigan lay at the end of the street. The house itself consisted of a living room, office, kitchen, small laundry/storage room, two bedrooms and a full bath downstairs. The upstairs had just one large bedroom and bath.

It was the perfect size for one or two people and she wished she could take it to New York with her.

Slowly, like a flower opening, a thought came to her. *Maybe I could move here.*

No! What was she thinking? She ran a flower shop in Rochester and thoroughly enjoyed her work. She reported only to the owner, a woman named Harriet Knightly, who was in her mid-60s. The older woman had very little to do with the shop and left its day-to-day ministrations to Annie, including the hiring and firing of employees.

She'd had ideas about asking Harriet if she planned to sell the shop at any point. The older woman was near retirement age, after all. Annie could buy the place and really have control over everything.

But with Devora's health worsening over the last months, she hadn't approached her boss. Maybe this was the reason. It wasn't meant for her to own Petal Pushers in Rochester, New York.

But she could start a shop here in Saugatuck, couldn't she?

Without stopping to think about it, Annie pulled her laptop out from under a corner table and Googled 'flower shops in Saugatuck.'

There was only one!

Certainly, there would be enough business for two in this town. Her mind whirled with ideas, with what-ifs, of how she could make this work.

Of course, she'd be leaving friends behind and that wouldn't be easy. She'd been in New York for almost five years, since she and Bradley got serious and his job transferred him to Rochester. She'd moved with him, anticipating marriage down the road.

But Bradley was an ex-marine and she realized soon after moving in with him that he suffered from PTSD. Loud noises scared him, he woke screaming from nightmares. That part she could deal with, but the worst of it was the way he began treating her. Making every effort to cut her off from friends, verbally abusing her, twisting things around to make her feel intimidated. She began to lose herself.

They were together for over two years when she woke up to what was happening. She either had to pull herself together and swim for her life or drown with him. One day while he was at work, she packed up everything she could and loaded her car, moving into a motel until she could find an apartment. She kept her job at Petal Pushers but prayed he wouldn't come looking for her. He didn't. Bradley called and texted, but she ignored both and moved on with her life.

He was still living in Rochester to her knowledge and would never even know if she moved back to Michigan.

She'd be just a few hours from Jill, a definite plus. And Devora's home had been a cash purchase, so there was no mortgage. Maybe after the realtor came in the morning, she'd approach a bank in town and see about getting a loan for a new flower shop.

It wouldn't hurt to look into it, she reasoned.

Annie had just finished dinner and was loading her plates into the dishwasher when she became aware of movement near the front door. From the kitchen doorway, she could see a woman a little younger than herself standing on the porch, wearing a flowered dress.

Had she knocked? Annie wasn't sure; she'd been lost in her own thoughts.

Moving to the door, she saw the young woman smile and lift a hand in greeting. Smiling back, Annie opened the door a few inches, then realized it was the same woman she'd seen in the backyard a few days before when she and Jill had gone outside to eat.

Before she could find her voice, the woman spoke up.

"Hi, I'm Simone. I was wondering if I could talk with you."

Thinking fast, she pointed to the small table and chairs to the right of them on the front porch.

"Sure. We can sit right there." Simone was probably a neighbor, coming to give condolences, although her behavior in the backyard the other day had been peculiar.

Her guest took a seat and Annie followed suit.

"I saw you in the backyard the other day," she ventured.

Simone looked down, suddenly seeming very shy.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," she said.

"I guess you heard about my mom passing."

The woman across the table watched her for a moment, then looked down. She seemed nervous when her gaze locked with Annie's again.

"Yes, I did. You have my condolences."

There was silence for a moment and Annie was beginning to wonder what this was all about.

"Is there something I can help you with?" she finally asked.

“Yes. Yes there is.” Simone resolutely shifted her shoulders back. “I have a great favor to ask. I’m hoping you’ll let me explain, although it’s quite a long story.”

“Do you live in the neighborhood, Simone?”

“Um, I did at one time. Very, very close to here, in fact.”

Annie was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “I don’t mean to be impolite, but I really have things to do. My sister and I have been cleaning out our mom’s house and there’s a lot to finish up.”

“I know, I’m so sorry. Please, just give me a minute and I’ll try to explain. I told you I used to live in this area at one time. I did. In 1891.”

Annie thought she must have misheard. “Excuse me?”

When Simone spoke again, she talked quickly. “My name is Simone Fields and I was born in 1818.”

Annie stared at her visitor. “Well, Simone, you look pretty good considering you would be over 200 years old.”

Simone was, in fact, a very pretty young woman. She had medium brown hair that curled about her face and rested on her shoulders. She had the iciest blue eyes Annie had ever seen.

Slowly extending her arm, Simone spoke again. “Touch my hand.”

“What?”

“Touch my hand.”

Tentatively, Annie reached out to brush what looked like an ordinary hand. But her fingers slipped right through the palm. *There was nothing there.* She snapped her arm back and jumped from the chair. “Okay, I don’t know what this is about, but I’m going back in the house and you need to leave.”

She was aware of Simone standing, looking defeated, but turned to the front door and went into the house, closing and locking the door behind her as quickly as possible.

She felt a shiver run through her entire body. *What had just happened?*

Turning to the kitchen, she went in and headed to the liquor cabinet. Thank God she and Jill had left it intact.

But Simone was standing in front of it.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” Was she having a nervous breakdown because of her mother’s death? “I don’t know what’s going on. Am I losing my mind?”

She closed her eyes, then opened them. Simone was still there, a pleading look on her face.

“You are not losing your mind, Annie. Please, allow me to explain.”

“You know my *name*? How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you, but I will not hurt you. I am not here to cause problems in any way.”

This woman had to be a ghost. How else had she gotten in the house? Then a thought struck her.

“Did.....did my mom send you? Are you supposed to let me know that she’s alright?”

“No, I wasn’t sent by your mother. I have a problem that I need you to help me with. I’ve been waiting for you to come to this house.”

“Okay, now you’re scaring the hell out of me.....”

“I have an idea. I am going to sit down at the kitchen table and I want you to get a drink out of the liquor cabinet to calm yourself.”

“How do you know that’s a liquor cabinet?”

At the knowing look on Simone’s face, she just shook her head. “Never mind.”

The ghost slowly sat down in a chair facing Annie.

Cautiously, the young woman walked to the liquor cabinet and opened it, keeping an eye on Simone the whole time.

“Brandy. Mom always had cherry brandy,” she mumbled. Moving a few bottles around, she found what she was looking

for. Crossing the kitchen, she reached into a cabinet and pulled out a juice glass, then turned toward Simone again.

“Do you drink? Would you like some?”

Now I'm offering booze to a ghost. Oddly, it still seemed like the polite thing to do.

But Simone just smiled sadly and shook her head.

After quickly drinking the shot of brandy, Annie poured a little more for herself and sat down at the kitchen table, looking again at her visitor.

“Alright. Let's hear it. I need to know what you want from me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Simone – Autumn 1829

It didn't make sense to Simone Clarke when Pa told her he was leaving. He and Ma seemed happy enough and the three of them lived in a small home outside Kalamazoo, Michigan. They didn't have much, but there was always food on the table and both parents raised their daughter with love.

Several years before, Ma had given birth to another girl and Simone was excited to have a little sister. They were born eight years apart and she looked forward to helping with the baby. But little Catherine Marie died two days later. Ma was devastated and Pa, trying to be stoic for his small family, built a tiny coffin for her. When Ma was up and walking around again, they held a small funeral and she was buried on their property, under a beautiful maple tree at the back of the yard.

Ma said Catherine Marie would enjoy the red and golden leaves when autumn came each year. Simone wondered how her sister would be able to see them if she was under the ground, but she never asked. It soon became evident that bringing up Catherine Marie's name made Ma sad.

Simone had one friend, Alicia, who lived in an old farmhouse down the road. The two girls played with corn husk dolls and marbles and, on hot summer days, occupied themselves in the small creek that ran at the edge of the Clarke property.

Neither girl attended school as the nearest schoolhouse was many miles away, but Ma spent an hour or two each day teaching them to read and write. Emma explained that it was important to be able to do these things to get anywhere in the world.

To Simone, it was an idyllic existence. She was cared for, had parents who loved her and a friend just down the road. Who could ask for more?

But recently, Ma and Pa had been arguing persistently. They waited until after she'd gone to bed, thinking she wouldn't hear them. They talked quietly, but when voices were raised, their daughter caught the gist of what was going on. Pa missed the sea and wanted Emma and Simone to join him onboard a ship. Emma argued back that they had a home and she wouldn't leave. Pa told her he was not happy with farming or woodworking; he needed the water. And it went on and on.

The quarrels left Simone feeling strange inside, disquieted. She couldn't put into words how she felt, but sensed something was coming.

Both parents had told her the story of how they met. Pa had pulled into Port Champion one day and spied Emma Draper when he disembarked from the ship. They spent most of that day together, but his vessel was leaving port that night. He told Emma he would be back for her and, several months later, they were together again. The wedding took place at a nearby church, despite her parents' disapproval, and Douglas Clarke's new bride joined him on his ship, *Bellisarius*.

Their happiness lasted just a few months before Emma told her husband she wanted a house on dry land. Living onboard ship was not her idea of a home.

Simone was told Pa gave up his ship and his way of life because he loved her ma and wanted to make her happy. This was true, but it didn't happen without turmoil.

And now Simone was ten years old and playing in the yard with her corn husk doll. She heard Pa calling for her and ran to the small front porch where he sat on an old, worn wooden chair.

“Sit on my lap, Simmy. I want to talk to you.”

She remembered being frightened by the seriousness in his voice.

“You know I love you and your ma,” he began, then faltered. “I....Simmy, you remember I told you I was a sea captain before I met your ma?”

Simone nodded slowly, sensing something bad was about to happen.

“I’ve always loved the sea. Having lived on the land now for a dozen years.....it’s just not working out for me. You know your ma has taken in sewing to put food on the table. It seems.....well, it seems I’m not really good at anything but captaining a ship. I want to go back, Simmy.”

She sensed movement nearby and turned to see her mother standing just inside the door, a strange look on her face. Sad? Upset? Simone wasn’t sure.

“I’m returning to the sea. It’s where I belong. You and your ma will be fine. She’s bringing in enough money to keep both of you fed. You’ll be fine without me.”

He was repeating his words, maybe trying to convince *himself* they would be alright.

“No, Pa.” She could feel herself starting to cry. “Don’t go.” She threw her arms around his neck.

Douglas Clarke lowered his eyes and gently pried her from his lap. Standing, he pushed past Ma and went into the house. Not a moment later, he returned with his duffel bag. Kissing Ma on the cheek, he turned to Simone and, picking her up, folded his daughter in a great bear hug.

“I love you, Simmy. Be good for your ma,”

Her tears did nothing to deter him. Setting her back on the ground, he walked down the path that ran from their house to the road, never looking back.

CHAPTER THREE

Simone – Summer 1840

The late summer sunshine beat down on her shoulders as Simone drove the wagon along the dirt road. It was beautiful country; trees, fields and farmlands. But she was tired and the wooden seat she sat on had grown hard as a rock. She'd been on this journey for almost three days and was ready to park the wagon for a good long time.

She missed her ma something fierce and could certainly use her advice right now. But Emma Clarke had passed away the week before, leaving her 21 year old daughter behind. After burying her, Simone had set out for greener pastures. The shack they'd lived in hardly kept rain and snow out as it had become woefully in need of repair. Since her pa left eleven years before, life had never been the same. As she grew older, Ma gave her more chores to do around the house so she herself could take in more sewing and laundry. The older woman worked hard every day to support the two of them.

As Simone grew, she helped Ma with her work and they earned even more money.

Oddly enough, Emma Clarke never became bitter. "Once a sea captain, always a sea captain," she would say when Douglas Clarke's name came up. She had known from the start of her life with him that he might return to the sea. She watched for years as his restlessness built. But she was a strong woman and did what it took to keep a roof (if a somewhat leaky one) over their heads and food on the table.

As a young adult, Simone came to feel proud of all her ma had done. They'd had ten years together before Emma became sick. In a matter of months, she was gone, leaving her forlorn daughter behind.

The road travelled uphill and the young woman caught a glimpse of the lake, far off in the distance. Lake Michigan. She'd seen the immense body of water several times before when she and her ma and pa had travelled to see it. The young woman remembered playing on the sandy beach that stretched farther than her eye could see and making sandcastles with her father....

A man she'd met on the road the other day told her he was headed to a lumbering town called Singapore. He had friends there who worked at the mill and made a decent living. Hugh Fields was on his way to meet them, to make a better life for himself.

With nowhere in particular to go, Simone decided the next day to check out the town he'd spoken of. Hugh had said it was right on Lake Michigan. If she found Dugout Road, it led into town.

The sun was now high in the sky and she adjusted her straw hat to keep the heat off her face. Up ahead was a small sign for Dugout Road. Turning right, she continued on.

Soon she saw another sign and, drawing closer, read just one word: Singapore.

She'd found it!

It was still another ten minutes before she pulled into town. Stopping the horse, she glanced around. A number of people milled about the open area she was in and there were several buildings to her right. She slowly moved in that direction and found the Singapore Hotel. She'd never been in a lodging house before, but knew it would keep her safe and give refuge until she decided whether to stay.

Climbing from the buggy, Simone became aware of her appearance. Her skirts were wrinkled, the skin on her hands and face caked with sand and dirt from the road.

Self-consciously, she walked up three steps to the large front porch and went inside. The air immediately felt cooler and she closed her eyes for a moment.

To the left was a long desk and two women worked behind it.

“Hello!” one of them called. “May I help you?”

She didn’t seem to be put off by Simone’s appearance.

Walking toward her, Simone smiled nervously. “I would like a room please. For two nights. I’m looking for work in the area.”

The woman smiled knowingly. “We have rooms available.” She quoted the young woman a price and it seemed reasonable enough. Thank God, Ma had left her some money when she passed. Money they’d made from taking in sewing and laundry back in Kalamazoo.

Bringing herself back to the present, Simone smiled.

“And as far as work, you’ve come to the right place.”

At Simone’s questioning look, she continued.

“This town is growing and help is needed everywhere. I suggest trying the general store across the street. Helen Decatur is the owner.”

“Thank you so much!” Relief flooded through her. Maybe she’d been meant to meet Mr. Fields on the road. It had brought her here.

Simone pulled money out of her drawstring bag and paid the woman.

“My name is Patrice Meyer, by the way. I’ll take you up to your room. Do you have any bags?”

“In my wagon. Do you have a place for me to leave my horse?”

“The stable is out back. Let’s get your things in and I’ll show you where to put the horse and wagon. Breakfast is included every day and if you do end up staying in Singapore, we have rooms that rent for the month. It’s a lower rate.”

“Wonderful. Thank you.”

A half hour later, her horse, Winnie, had been fed and watered and placed in the stable and Simone was running a hot bath in the washroom down the hall from her room.

After bathing, putting on clean clothes and having a bite to eat, Simone was ready to tackle the world. It was early evening when she walked across the sandy expanse to the Singapore General Store. The dark brown building had several wooden steps leading up to a wide front porch. A few rocking chairs were stationed around a small table with a checkerboard set up. A little bell over the door signaled her entrance and she immediately inhaled deeply at the scent of cinnamon and cloves.

Up ahead and to the right she saw a woman behind the counter. Looking to be in her mid-50s, she wore her dark brown hair plaited at the back of her head. She smiled warmly as Simone drew closer.

“Good evening! What may I do for you?”

The younger woman smiled back. “I was told to ask for Mrs. Decatur. I’m looking for work.”

The woman studied her for a moment. “I’m Mrs. Decatur.”

“Oh! Well, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Simone Clarke and I’m....well, looking for a job. Are you hiring?”

Mrs. Decatur picked up a large black vase on the counter in front of her and began running a dust cloth over it, avoiding Simone’s eyes.

“That depends. Is the law after you?”

“The law? No. I’m just looking for a place to settle.”

Placing the vase back down, the older woman looked at her closely. "I'd need you here pretty much full time, sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays."

Simone nodded. "Alright."

"Okay, then, Simone. You're hired. I'll give you two weeks to prove to me you can do the job." She quoted an hourly figure that greatly surpassed what she and Ma were making doing laundry and sewing.

Mrs. Decatur asked if she could start right away and then waved a hand around the store.

"We offer all kinds of goods. Take a couple hours to familiarize yourself with our stock. Then you can tell folks where they'll find things when they come in. Some people have been here since the town was founded three years ago, but new people are coming in all the time."

She handed her new employee a paper notebook and pencil. Simone drew a quick diagram of the store, then wandered around to make notes on what was kept in each aisle. She found everything from candles to blankets to food and clothing.

Some time went by before Simone became aware of a man talking to Helen near the front of the store. He looked somewhat bedraggled and his hair was shooting up in all directions as if he hadn't combed it in a long while. His clothes were brown with sand and he looked to be in his late 30s.

"I need.....I need.....Helen, tell me what I need."

"I'll tell you what you need, Fred Henny," Helen Decatur was saying in no uncertain terms. "You need a bed. Now take yourself home and pour yourself into it."

"But I came in here for something...." The man's words were slurred.

"I'm not giving you any more willow bark. Just go home and swig some water, Fred. And stop drinking so much whiskey. Mr.

Wilder doesn't believe in the stuff and with good reason. You need to stop buying it when a loaded ship pulls into port."

"Whiskey's good," the man muttered and stumbled to the door. Going out, he left the door open. Simone walked over and closed it, her eyes meeting Mrs. Decatur's.

"That man. Crazy Henny we call him. Always doing something outlandish. We caught him walking around town naked last winter. Almost froze his.....well, never mind."

Simone laughed. "I guess every town should have one crazy soul," she told her employer.

"Mr. Wilder doesn't allow spirits in the saloon, can you believe it?" It was Mrs. Decatur's turn to laugh. "Nothing will get done at the mills if these men are drinking every night, so it's forbidden. Ships pull into port, though, sometimes with barrels of wine and whiskey. You can't stop a man from purchasing the stuff." The older woman rolled her eyes.

"Who is Mr. Wilder?"

"Oshea Wilder. He's a New York land speculator who happened upon this area while looking to build a port town. He works closely with our mayor, Theo Simpson."

Simone tucked the names away for later reference.

When she returned the next day, Mrs. Decatur greeted her with a smile and proceeded to show her how to open the till. A small drawer held bills and coins. A large pad of paper and pencil were kept on the counter to add up items being purchased.

It seemed easy enough and Simone spent the next hour totaling up orders for customers and making change. Mrs. Decatur seemed happy with her progress and when the store grew quiet, she glanced at her new employee with a smile.

"If I needed shaving cream, in what aisle would I find it?" she inquired teasingly.

"Aisle five."

"What about hair ribbons?"

“Aisle two, next to the hairbrushes.”

“Hmm. You’ve done your homework. I’m impressed.”

Simone smiled. “My mother didn’t raise no dummy,” she said and Mrs. Decatur burst out laughing.

Simone worked closely with Mrs. Decatur the next few days and then was left on her own. The young woman enjoyed greeting customers and helping them find needed items.

As an extra bonus, she began to learn the names of townspeople. There were about 200 of them; some lived in town in the small homes behind the hotel and others on the outskirts of Singapore. Almost every male worked for the Singapore Milling Company. There was so much lumber available in the area, another mill was being built at the opposite end of town.

After two nights at the hotel, Simone paid for the rest of the week before finally deciding to stay in Singapore. The people were friendly, the work enjoyable and she and Mrs. Decatur got along well.

Patrice Meyer moved her to a different room, “a permanent room” as she called it. It was larger and had a bed, night table, dresser and closet as well as a table and chair in a corner by the window.

Home Sweet Home, Simone thought as she unpacked her things once again. Carefully wrapped in one of her shawls lay her mother’s jewelry box that Pa had given her during their brief time on *Bellisarius*, just after they were married.

It was made of gold and porcelain and fit in the palm of her hand. A beautiful hand painted picture portrayed a woman sitting on a large rock in the beautiful countryside, with three small children running around her. The colors were vivid and, as a small child, she’d fantasized about jumping into the picture and playing with those children.

Now, she lovingly placed the box on her new dresser. It was the only thing Emma Clarke had ever owned of value.

Simone took it as a good sign that her mother had still treasured the ornate box, even after her husband returned to the waters of the Great Lakes.

One morning, Simone walked downstairs to the small dining area where eggs, ham and biscuits were being served with good, strong coffee. A nice perk to living at the hotel.

Patrice came by as she filled her plate with food.

“Miss Clarke, I want to introduce you to another of our permanent residents.” She waved a hand toward one of the tables and Simone saw a petite young woman sitting there. She had blond hair pulled back in a bun and wore a huge smile. “This is Miss Peckham. She is going to be our schoolteacher in the fall.”

Simone nodded at the other woman. “It’s nice to meet you.” Looking around the room, she saw only a few other people. “May I join you for breakfast?” she ventured.

Miss Peckham’s smile grew wider. “Yes, please. I would love the company.”

Simone took the seat beside her as Patrice poured their coffee.

“How long have you lived in Singapore?” she asked the woman.

“I arrived in April so I’ve been here a few months. I met with Mayor Simpson when I arrived, to talk about starting a schoolhouse here in town. He agreed it was a good idea and might attract families, bringing in more mill workers.”

“That’s wonderful! When will you start?”

“In September. I’ve been given permission to use an old mill shed at the edge of town as the schoolhouse. With any luck, an actual schoolhouse will be built in the future. Much depends on how many children attend.”

“How many do you have starting in the fall?”

“It looks like about 25.”

Miss Peckham looked thrilled at the prospect of teaching and Simone couldn't help being happy for her. The woman's eyes sparkled as she talked about a future in Singapore and Simone was struck by how lucky she was to have found her calling in life so early. The woman looked to be not much older than herself.

“I'm afraid my circumstances are quite different,” Simone explained. “I came to town without any thought as to what I would do when getting here. I work at the general store.”

“With Helen Decatur. A lovely woman.”

The two talked as they finished their breakfast.

“Would you like a tour of the town?” Miss Peckham invited.

“Yes! I don't need to be at the store until 1:00.”

The two ventured out the door and the schoolteacher pointed out the town hall directly to their right.

“Town meetings are held there,” she explained. They walked around the corner of the hotel, past the stable where Winnie was staying. “The bank is next,” she added, pointing to a tall two-story white building. Just beyond it and across the street, directly behind the hotel, were several rows of small homes, built side by side. There were about 30 residences in all, and just past those, she saw a large open field. Further out still, men were working on a half-built structure.

“Some of the men are giving of their time to build a church for the town. They come to help on their days off from the mill. We don't have a minister, so there are no regular Sunday services, but we occasionally call on a local pastor to perform weddings and funerals. Sometimes a clergyman will pass through town and conduct a service for us. Shall we continue, Miss Clarke?”

“Only if you call me Simone.”

“Simone it is. And I'm Mary Elizabeth.”

As they walked, Simone noticed street signs throughout the small town. The road along the hotel and general store was Main Street. Other names included Broad, Detroit, Cherry, Cedar, River and more. It made Singapore even more quaint in her opinion.

Mary Elizabeth proceeded to lead her new friend back toward the center of town now, pointing out the blacksmith's shop and the cemetery. It was off to the left side of town, near the water. There were only half a dozen headstones buried in the sandy ground.

"Singapore was founded just three years ago," she said by explanation. "You probably haven't met Oshea Wilder yet. He established the town. He's hoping Singapore will grow to rival Chicago, a major port across Lake Michigan."

Simone remembered Helen Decatur mentioning Mr. Wilder, the man who did not approve of spirits. She knew nothing about the milling or shipping industries, but what Mary Elizabeth said sounded like a worthy endeavor. Men would be drawn to the area for work, bringing their families with them.

"The only other building of note is Astor House." Mary Elizabeth pointed past the Singapore Hotel.

"It's a boarding house and saloon. Single mill workers live there as well as some families. It never gets too wild in there, though, because liquor is not allowed. Some of the men purchase whiskey near the boat docks, though."

Simone laughed, thinking about Fred Henny. She told Mary Elizabeth what had happened just a few days before in the store. Her friend rolled her eyes.

"Crazy Henny. You never know what's going to happen next with him."

They strolled back to the center of town before the schoolteacher spoke again. "That's about it for the town, but a second hotel might be built soon and I hear another general store

will be going in. When I got here last spring, there were less than 100 people in Singapore. Now we're nearing 200. It's really growing."

Mary Elizabeth seemed happy at the prospect and it made sense because she would have the opportunity of teaching additional children as more and more families moved to the area.

"Where are you from?" Simone asked her curiously.

"Grand Rapids. It's a fairly large town, north of here. I went to school there while still living with my parents. I caught word from a man travelling through town that Singapore was a new and growing village, so I decided to approach the mayor about starting up the first schoolhouse. Fortunately, he saw the importance of giving the children a good education."

The women talked for a while, then left to go their separate ways.

Simone had been in Singapore for two weeks. One morning, as she crossed the sandy expanse between the hotel and general store on her way to work, someone called her name.

"Miss Clarke! Miss Clarke!"

Turning around, she saw a man striding her way. She realized, as he got closer, that it was Hugh Fields. He was a tall man and very slender and wore pants, a button-down work shirt and suspenders. A hat was perched on his head.

"Mr. Fields, how are you?"

"I'm fine. So you found Singapore. Are you here to stay?" He removed his hat as he spoke.

"I think so. I have a job at the general store."

"That's great news! I didn't think I'd see you again, but I'm glad I did."

Simone could feel her cheeks turning red and glanced toward the lake.

“Are you staying at the hotel?” the young man asked her.

“Yes. And you?”

“I’m at the boarding house, but only for another week or so. I bought one of the small homes behind the hotel. It’ll give me a little more room to spread out.”

“That’s wonderful. And it sounds like the mill is very busy.”

“Sure is. If we doubled the number of men working, we’d still be putting in overtime.”

Simone shook her head. At least these people had secure jobs.

Mr. Fields cleared his throat. “Um, Miss Clarke, would you do me the honor of joining me for dinner tonight? At the hotel?”

The question came out of nowhere and she had only a few seconds to think about it. He seemed like a nice enough man.

“Yes, Mr. Fields, I would love to have dinner with you.”

A smile lit up his face and she saw he had straight, white teeth. “I’ll meet you in the dining room at 6:30 if that works for you.”

“I’ll see you then.” Giving a small wave, she headed to the general store, aware of the young man staring after her.



Simone Fields comes to Singapore, Michigan in 1840. Her inheritance is stolen under strange circumstances during a massive blizzard. Now, in 2023, she seeks the help of Annie Prescott and the two work together to solve the mystery.

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