



## Amethyst

by Lauraine Snelling

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*Eastern Pennsylvania, Fall 1886*

Her father's words itched worse than a burr in her camisole.

"Go find Joel." He'd said those words more than once or even twice. Every time he got to feeling poorly, he'd point his bony finger at her and utter those same words. What did he think she was--a gypsy who could look in tea leaves or a crystal ball and find out where the boy had disappeared to? What possibly irked her the most was that "feeling poorly" meant he'd had one--or many--too many drinks and would come home feeling right sorry for himself. And convinced he was dying.

More than once Amethyst Colleen O'Shaunasy, called Colleen because her father had thought her mother's naming her after a pinky-purple rock was the height of stupidity, wished she could join the temperance movement. If there were some way she could destroy the local tavern, she would. Or at least shut it down. But there was far too much work to be done on the farm if she wished to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table to go gallivanting off to join a women's movement. Not that all the hard work would help her any.

"Did you hear me, girl?"

"Aye, Pa, I heard you. But no one knows--"

"That's what ya allus say. Ya ain't got the brains God gave a goose. Find 'im before I die, or you won't even have this house to live in. Ya know a woman can't inherit land. I'm just lookin' out for yer own good."

*Like you have all these years chasing away any beau who came calling?* Her father didn't think she knew of his perfidy, but she'd found out, thanks to the local gossip. He wanted her home to take care of her ailing mother and him. Not that he worried much about any ailing female, unless she collapsed in the field, as her mother had. An affront to his dignity that was.

"If you have any suggestions as to how I should go about finding Joel, I'd be most grateful if you would share them with me." Of all the five siblings, only her brother Patrick had managed to live long enough to sire any children, and then only one son, Joel, who was seven the last time they saw him, more than five months earlier. After his father's death in an accident, his mother, who'd been suffering from consumption, took the boy off, and they both disappeared. Eventually they'd heard that Melody's body was found in a river to the west, but there was no sign of the boy.

"Write to her kin and ask if they know where the boy might be. Maybe he is with them."

"Do you know their names?"

"Surely your ma wrote that down in the Bible. Daft woman was at least good about keeping records like that."

Colleen narrowed her eyes. Never did he have a good word to say about her mother. Not that he ever had a good word to say about anyone, but still, she'd borne his children and his ire and worked herself to death.

If her father had worked as hard as he drove his wife, the farm most likely would have supported them quite well, but he'd always found something to be ailing about that needed a drink or two to alleviate.

"I've looked in her Bible. There are no records within its pages."

"There's the big one, the family one what's been passed down the generations. Where did it get to?" He reared up in his chair and stared around the room as if the book might come leaping out of a corner or off a shelf.

"Didn't you give it to Patrick when Mother passed on?" Colleen moved the coffeepot to the hotter part of the stove. She'd have a cup of coffee before heading out to do the evening chores. After milking in the morning, she'd finished digging the potatoes and stored them away in the cellar, along with the other root crops, all in their bins and covered, some with straw and others, like the carrots, with sand.

"Do I got to do all yer thinkin' fer ya? Didja ask those folks what took over his farm?"

"Why, no. I never thought of that." She glared at him. "Of course I asked them." *But perhaps I will do so again.* The Bible was too large for easy travel.

The next afternoon she took time out from banking the house for the winter with used straw from the cow barn, made sure her skirt wore no traces of her morning activities, that her russet hair was corralled in a topknot, and strode down the road. Across the field would have been a mite faster, but the road seemed more proper. She took along a jar of her special raspberry syrup as a calling gift.

"How nice of you to come calling," Sally said with a smile at her arrival and invited her in.

While the coffee heated, they chatted about the lovely fall weather they'd been having. Their conversation meandered to the Women's Missionary Society that Sally had gotten involved in at the church. Colleen had always wished she could, but her father considered anything beyond Sunday attendance frivolous. Her interest perked up again when the discussion went on to the crops left in the garden.

"My Judd always takes care of the harvesting." Sally turned from lifting the coffeepot and refilled their coffee cups. "Did you dry any cut corn this year?"

Colleen shook her head. "Just beans." Other than the corn for the chickens and the cows, which now resided in the corncrib, ready to be used for shelled feed during the winter.

"I'll send some on home with you, then. Nothing like dried corn cooked in cream. I add a bit of onion too, for extra flavor."

"That would be right nice." Colleen took all her resolve in hand and said, "When your husband first moved here, I asked him if he'd found our family Bible anywhere." While she spoke, she sketched the size of it with her hands. "Have you found anything since then?"

"Not that I know of, but there are some things up in the attic that I've not gotten around to sorting. We could have a look-see if you want."

"That would be most obliging of you. If you have a lamp, I'll do the crawling up the ladder."

"We'll both go, and thataway I'll know what all is up there."

As soon as they both stood upright in the attic, they raised the lamp high, then crossed to a pile of boxes pushed into a back corner, a broken rocking chair, and a chest of drawers, minus one.

"Well, I never. My Judd could fix these right up. He's real good at fixing things."

*I would have thought my brother was too. Strange the things that end up in attics.* Colleen pulled out the top drawer--empty. The second drawer was missing, and the third held baby clothes, wrapped carefully in a knit blanket that the moths had turned into shreds.

"Oh, how sad." Sally lifted the things out and, after dusting the top of the chest, laid them there.

"They only had the one child." Colleen caught her breath. "My mother made many of those."

"Do you want them?" Sally sent her guest a gracious smile.

Colleen thought a moment. She remembered her mother sewing some of the gowns and shirts by lamplight, her stitches so fine as to be nearly invisible. But wouldn't it be better for the dear little garments to be used? After all, her childbearing years were about past, and with no man in her life other than her father, she would never need them. The thought made her heart clench. *But I want children to love and a man who loves me and to whom I can be devoted.*

She stroked the tucks in one little gown. One piece--would it hurt to keep one piece in memory of her mother?

Sally took the initiative and handed the perfect little gown to Colleen. "You take this one. I'll take the rest down and wash them all. Will be a few months yet before I need them, but I will think of your generosity when I dress my baby."

"Thank you." Colleen took the garment and, folding it carefully, placed it in her apron pocket. When she tugged at the bottom drawer, it refused to open. She pulled again, but only a squawk rewarded her efforts. The women each took a handle and pulled firmly to gain only an inch. "Again." This time the drawer gave up the battle with a groan, and therein lay the family Bible. "Ah." Using both hands, Colleen lifted the heavy book out and set it on top of the chest as Sally removed the clothing bundle.

Both women sneezed at the dust generated by moving things around.

"I can tell you I am going to give this attic a thorough cleaning. Don't know why I put off coming up here."

"A companion always makes one braver."

"True."

Colleen held the lamp closer to the pages as she opened the cover. Sure enough, Mother had recorded all the information she needed, even to the town Melody had come from. "Do you mind if I--"

"You needn't ask. This Bible is yours. Let's take it downstairs and dust it off."

"Thank you." Such simple words for the feelings welling up like an artesian spring. She now had the Bible, part of her mother, part and parcel of the family.

After staying long enough to be polite, she took the tiny dress and the heavy book back with her to the homeplace. The chill in the air told her that her father had left sometime

earlier, most likely as soon as she walked down the road. And there was no doubt in her mind where she would find him, if she cared to go looking. She checked the tin where she kept her egg and cream money. Empty!

No more! From now on she would keep the money she earned someplace safe, where his marauding fingers would not find it.

\* \* \*

That night, after her father returned home and fell asleep, Colleen sat at the worn kitchen table composing a letter to Melody's parents, pleading with them to give her any information they had learned about the boy named Joel, her nephew. Her father's heir.

Dear Mrs. Fisher,

I am sorry for waiting so long to write to you, but I had no idea how to contact you. Melody did not leave your address, and I just found the family Bible in the attic of their house, which is now owned by another. I hope this letter finds you well, although I am sure you are still grieving for your daughter. She was a good wife to my brother and a friend to me. Joel was the child of my heart and greatly loved.

I know a long time has passed, but my father is insistent that we find Joel, as there are no other male heirs in our family and my father is afraid he will die before seeing Joel again. I cannot begin to tell you how grateful we would be for any bit of information. Is he living with you or do you know where he is? I know that Melody took Joel to see someone in a small town in Dubuque Valley, Pennsylvania. If I don't hear from you, I plan to go there and make some discreet inquiries.

I hope that all is well with you and yours, although I understand that the sorrow of losing your daughter never goes away.

I thank you in advance for any help you could offer.

I remain respectfully yours,  
Amethyst Colleen O'Shaunasy.

Colleen addressed an envelope, folded the letter, and inserted it, sealing the missive with a drop of wax from the candle she kept for that purpose. She'd walk into Smithville, the closest village, in the morning to mail it. Her father didn't allow the horses to be used for transportation when feet were available. Unless they were his feet.

She pulled out the pins and let her hair, which was constantly fighting to fall free, tumble around her shoulders. The required one hundred strokes a night gave a sheen to the russet fall that glimmered in the lamplight. Her mother had always said her two best features were her hair and her eyes. The rest of her left a lot to be desired, as far as she was concerned. She had a jaw strong enough to outclamp a bulldog and a forehead broad enough to write on, and while most women were curvy, she had looked once in the mirror and thought she saw a broom with hair.

"Ah, Mother, why did you go off and leave me like this?" She continued with the regular strokes, thinking back to her sister-in-law. Melody had been so lovely when she and Patrick were married, and while the boy had been born a bit early, if one bothered to count, he'd been a precious baby. Since their house was right across the field, Colleen had spent as much time there as she could.

When she reached a hundred strokes, she tied her hair back in a club with a bit of cotton ripped from a larger piece, blew out the lamp, and slipped underneath the covers. The moonlit shadows of the red oak branches danced on the floor, the limbs themselves brushing the house boards with familiar taps and sighs, as if seeking entrance.

Her father's snoring from the room below her grated her nerves like the washboard grated the skin off her knuckles. What if she were to find Joel and bring him back here? What kind of example would her father set for a young boy?

"Ishda." She muttered one of her mother's favorite sayings. *Mother, I miss you so.*

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