

SECRETS OF ROSENLI MANOR

by Heidi Eljarbo

EXCERPT

GREAT-AUNT AGATHA passed away in her sleep on a night when God had lit every star in his heavenly front yard. At least, that's how Lilly chose to see it. The message arrived from her father, and she shuddered as she recalled how he'd passed along the news. He'd called her his "stingy aunt" and said she'd "finally departed her miserably wealthy life."

Lilly had never truly known the old woman. Other than a few early childhood memories, she'd only heard stories. The problem with hearsay was never knowing how to separate facts from gossip, entwined and entangled as they were. Aunt Agatha's name always came up during family gatherings. Festering envy had seemed to cause all sorts of rumors and reports, which had rapidly changed from mouth to ear time and again. Lilly's relatives had strong opinions about most things and gladly shared them. Especially their disapproving views. "Agatha probably did this" and "Agatha most definitely might have done that" dominated their conversations. Not once could Lilly recall anyone uttering a friendly word or an encouraging comment.

Only one person in the family had cherished the old woman—Lilly's mother—but she had passed away the summer before Lilly started second grade. Sweet recollections of calling on Aunt Agatha with Mother were etched into Lilly's remembrances with a gentle hand. Tea parties on the lawn amid an abundance of blooming perennials in hues of pink and lilac. A straight-backed butler who carried trays of lemonade, sandwiches, and cakes into the drawing room with its pastel decor. Scented floral arrangements of roses, peonies, and dianthus in a vase on a cream-colored, crocheted lace doily. Aunt Agatha with a tender smile, sitting with Lilly amidst soft

pillows on the sofa, showing her collections of monogrammed stationeries with botanical illustrations and various embroidered napkins. The lovely items had stood in stark contrast with the simpler things Lilly was used to.