

# Beyond the Melody

A SWEETWATER CROSSING NOVEL

AMANDA CABOT



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# Chapter One

**Wednesday, March 20, 1946**

He should have stopped hours ago, the way he had each of the other days. If anyone had asked him, he couldn't have explained why he'd kept going, why his foot remained firmly planted on the gas pedal. It wasn't as if the suspension of this ancient Ford could compare to that of his Packard, making driving a pleasure. As it was, he felt every bump, and there had been many of them.

It wasn't as if anyone was expecting him. His arrival would be a surprise, as it had been at each of the other homes he'd visited. It wasn't as if he was in a hurry to reach Sweetwater Crossing, even though it was the last stop on his journey. Once he'd finished there, he'd have no reason not to resume the life everyone expected of him. That knowledge should have had him delaying, not hurrying, but here he was, driving longer than usual.

Every other day he'd stopped while it was still daylight, telling himself it was dangerous to try to read the Burma Shave signs that were his primary form of entertainment when he had only headlights for illumination. He'd ignored common sense today, instead giving in to the irrational thought that he was supposed to spend tonight in Sweetwater Crossing.

The air was cooler now that the sun had set, and he could feel the light burn on his left arm, the predictable effect of riding with his

arm on the ledge of the open window. He wouldn't have done that at home, but it was much warmer in this part of Texas than it had been in Massachusetts, and even though he'd been in the South for several weeks, he'd yet to become accustomed to the fact that it felt more like early summer than the last days of winter. Today had been unseasonably hot, particularly during the early afternoon, but he had continued driving. It had felt right to do that, and Jamison Andrew Edward Smythe IV was not a man to argue when something felt right, not after all those weeks and months when nothing in his life had.

It was time to stop, at least for a cup of coffee. Jim had lost track of how far he was from Sweetwater Crossing, but the glow of neon in the distance told him he was approaching civilization. Good. He'd stop at the first place that served food. And then he saw the sign.

WELCOME TO SWEETWATER CROSSING, THE FRIENDLIEST LITTLE TOWN IN THE HILL COUNTRY. The capital letters and the boastful slogan made him grin, as did the fact that he'd reached his destination.

He slowed when his headlights picked out the name 'Skateland' on a building on the right side of the road, then headed toward the neon sign proclaiming the building on the opposite side of the highway to be the Crossing Café. That was where he'd get a cup of coffee, a slice of pie, and directions to the closest motel.

As Jim pulled into the parking lot and saw another sign announcing that the café was open from eight until midnight, he also saw that though the small building blazed with light to attract patrons, the lot was empty except for an old Chevy truck and a 1941 Ford coupe. Perhaps this was like some of the other towns he'd visited, where few ventured out after dark except on weekends, but if that was the case, why didn't the owner close earlier? It was fortunate for him that the man hadn't.

When Jim opened the front screen door, a bell tinkled to announce his arrival, just as it had in countless other small-town diners and restaurants. From the exterior, he assumed this would

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be like all the others, nothing special. He was wrong. He stood in the doorway, trying to hide his surprise as the heavysset man whose gray hair and weathered face made Jim suspect he was in his mid-sixties greeted him from behind the counter.

This was not like the other restaurants he'd visited. Oh, it had two booths flanking the window, half a dozen stools providing counter seating, and three tiny tables-for-two covered with red-and-white-checkered tablecloths like the others, but that was where the similarities ended. Instead of plain white, the Crossing Café's walls were green. Instead of a pressed tin ceiling, this one was coffered with dark wooden beams.

Those made the café unique, but they seemed almost insignificant when compared to the arches that led to a small back room. Though he'd eaten in some of the finest restaurants in Boston, Jim had never seen anything like them. Like the ceiling beams, the arches were dark wood, but their curves and the fact that there were two sets of them made this an extraordinary room.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar aromas of hot oil and coffee while he continued to admire his surroundings. As was the case with many such establishments, a jukebox stood in what appeared to be a place of honor with a few feet of empty flooring in front of it, allowing several customers enough space to stand as they made their selections.

The jukebox was more ornate than the others he'd seen, but that was not what caught his attention. It was the woman. She stood next to the jukebox, her left hand resting on its case in an oddly protective gesture. Jim had seen dozens of women, but he had never seen *her*. Oh, no. Never.

Her dress was almost the same shade of green as the restaurant's walls and had what appeared to be flowers on the skirt. Marilyn, the woman who'd once worn his diamond on her left hand, would never have chosen such a vibrantly colored outfit, but then Marilyn would not have worn pre-war red JayEss pumps even though they had been best sellers. This woman did not seem to mind that her shoes were not the latest style.

Perched on her head was one of those silly feather and net concoctions that women seemed to think were hats, and Jim had no doubt that a pair of white cotton gloves was resting on top of her handbag, waiting to be donned before she left the restaurant. She was a woman like every other, a woman like his mother and Marilyn. And yet, she wasn't.

She was beautiful. It wasn't simply her classic oval face with such perfect features that she could have posed for a magazine ad. It wasn't simply her hair the color of warm caramel. Those things would have made him look twice, maybe even three times. But there was something more, something different, about this woman. Perhaps it was her innocence, for she seemed to radiate purity.

Jim's gaze moved slowly, cataloging each of her features, and then his eyes met hers. The irises were blue, the deep sparkling color of the ocean on a summer day, the blue of the Normandy sky the afternoon before— *Stop it!* He closed his eyes and forced himself back to the present.

When he opened them and gazed at her again, he saw something familiar there, and it wrenched his heart, for he saw his own pain reflected in her eyes.

He wanted to look away. Oh, how he wanted to look away. But he could not. Though he'd never seen her before, somehow he felt as though his whole life had been a rehearsal, a preparation for this moment. It was ridiculous to feel this way. He was a grown man, not an infatuated teenager. He ought to turn and walk away, but he could not. Something, an almost magnetic force, drew him toward this woman.

Behind her, the jukebox whirred to life, and the music began. With a feeling of inevitability, Jim held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"



Anna Finley stared. It had been less than a minute since she'd finished the repair on the jukebox and its yellow and red lights had begun to glow, casting a warm hue over the corner of the café. All that had been left was to test the machine. Once it had played a record and returned the platter to its place in the stack, she could go home. As she'd done hundreds—maybe thousands—of times, she'd slid a nickel in the slot and pressed the second selection button from the bottom. And then the door had opened.

She'd turned, curious as to why the new arrival didn't greet Mr. Schmidt by name. All the café's customers were regulars, and they knew the proprietor almost as well as she did. But this was no one she recognized. The man in the doorway was a stranger, a stranger who made her heart pound. Tall, dark, and handsome. That was a cliché, not a reason for her to react this way.

Anna swallowed deeply as she tried to slow her pulse. The man wore ordinary clothes: a brown Fedora, a light green shirt with its sleeves rolled to his elbows, a pair of dark brown trousers, brown shoes that she recognized as JayEsses. Ordinary clothes, and yet on him, they looked anything but ordinary. She swallowed again, but it did no good. She could no more keep her heart from pounding than she could stop herself from staring.

He took a few steps into the café, his brown eyes, so different from Rob's, never leaving hers. He moved with unconscious grace, his head held at an angle that on some men might look arrogant but that seemed to tell the world he was confident of his own abilities, unlike Rob who—

*Stop it! Rob is gone; you've got to stop comparing every man you meet to him.*

Behind her, the jukebox whirred, moving the platter into place. A second later, the small restaurant was filled with music as Frank

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Sinatra began to sing “Night and Day.” She ought to move. She would move. But she couldn’t. Not until he did.

The man stood motionless, his gaze locked with hers. And then those brown eyes closed for the briefest of moments, and when he raised his eyelids, she saw suffering in them, an anguish that had not been visible before. It was a grief she knew all too well, for she saw the same expression every time she looked in a mirror.

“May I have this dance?” His voice was soft as velvet, but his invitation was more a command than a request.

She shouldn’t. He was a total stranger, and she was sensible Anna Finley, a woman who had never in her life done an impetuous thing. Anna Finley would never dance with a stranger. Never. She moved into his arms.