December 1998

Albion, PA

I ran my hand across the rough wood of the box, and lifted the lid. The key had long since been lost, so it opened easily.

“Mom, these are priceless. There must be a hundred and fifty letters in here.”

My mother nodded, and I saw my excitement reflecting in her eyes. “That’s right, and they’re dated from about 1857 through 1869. They are all written to Mary, except maybe a half a dozen or so.”

She reached across and took a small tin container from the box and opened it. She handed me the tintype inside. “We think this is Daniel.”

I took the likeness in my hands. Nothing like I pictured him. But I had only read five or six letters so far. I put the picture back and took a letter, slipping it out of the envelope and unfolding the yellowed paper carefully.

“ ‘Johnson’s Island, March 2nd, 1864. Dearest Mary, I received your kind and welcome letter about an hour ago and now seat myself to write you… How are you off for money and have you got hay enough and does any body growl for their pay. I got my likeness taken yesterday but didn’t get a very good one…’

“He doesn’t seem very romantic or descriptive, Mom.”

“He wasn’t. He mostly talked about being sick and discouraged, but how he was trying to live a Christian life.” She hesitated, then said, “You should write Mary’s story.”

“I don’t know anything about Mary. All we have are letters to Mary, mostly from Daniel, while he served in the Civil War.”

“It wouldn’t have to be a biography. It would be fiction, woven around Daniel’s letters.”

“I would want to keep the letters accurate, then build Mary’s life around them.”

“You’ve been a single parent for 22 years,” Mom said. “You most certainly have a sense of her trails and emotions.”

I sat thinking about it while Mom got dinner. These letters belonged to my step-father, and he had offered them to me to write Mary’s story. I could get the feel of it. Mary’s wedding gown was in the attack, along with one of Lydia’s gingham dresses. My parents lived in the house that had belonged to Mary’s granddaughter Irene, and still worshiped in the Keepville Church. Mary, Daniel and Lydia all had grave markers in the cemetery there. The Girard train station was a few miles away. Mary’s son Charlie had built the picnic tables there were still used at a local park.

If I could take myself back, get into Mary’s thoughts, put myself in her place, maybe, just maybe, I could tell the story found in the letters to Mary…