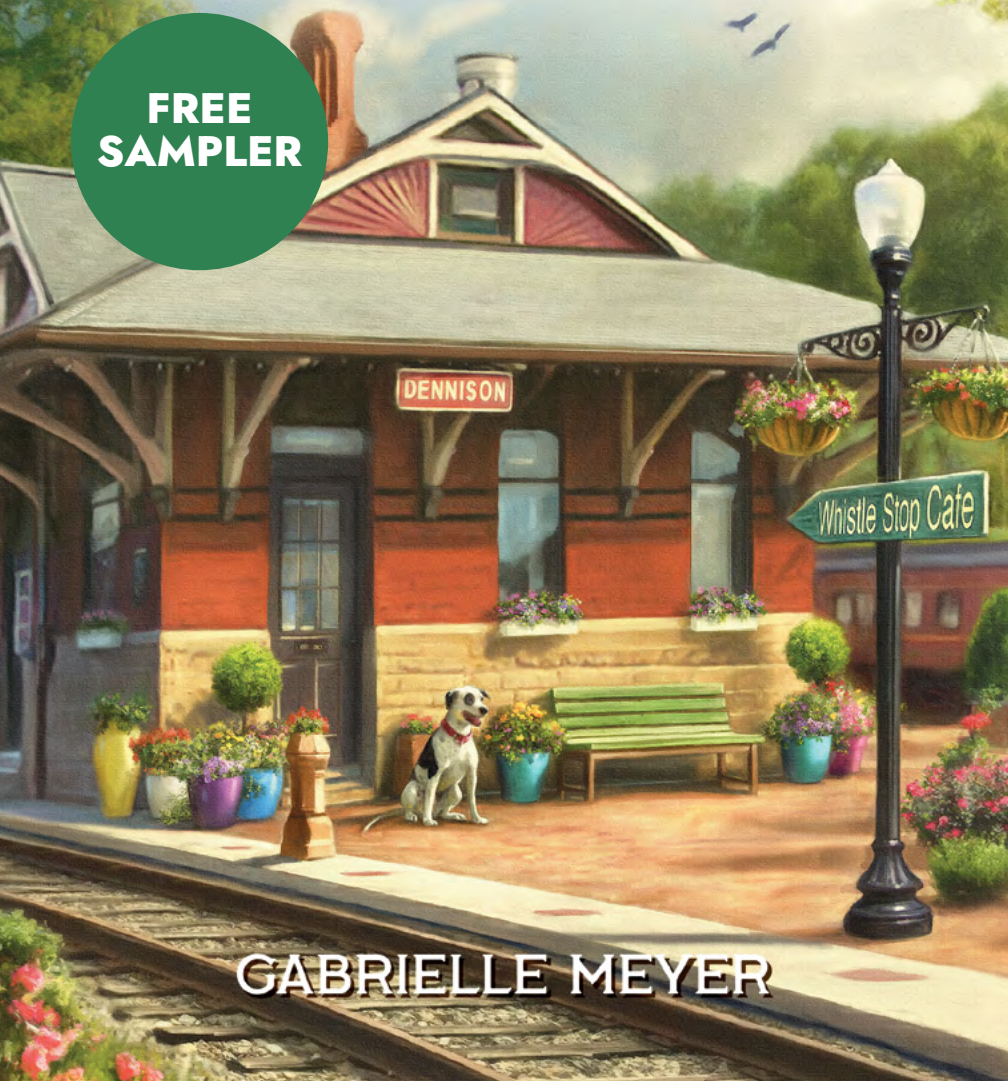




# UNDER the APPLE TREE

**FREE  
SAMPLER**



**GABRIELLE MEYER**

# CHAPTER ONE

Dust motes floated on the warm, thick air as Debbie Albright shoved a cardboard box into an attic corner of the new-to-her home. A sneeze started to build in the back of her nose, forcing her to stop what she was doing and put her forefinger above her lip. Her eyes watered, but the feeling soon passed.

“Your allergies will never survive this move.” Janet Shaw, Debbie’s best friend, tossed her a box of tissues. “Should we take a break?”

Debbie grabbed the box before it flew past her. “We don’t have time for a break. I want to get all the storage boxes out of the living room before Ian gets here with the furniture.” Janet’s husband would be arriving any minute, and Debbie and Janet still had several more trips to make up the two flights of stairs to the attic.

The air was hot and stuffy, and a hundred years’ worth of dust lined the cracks and crevices of the old shiplap on the ceiling and walls. Beneath Debbie’s feet, the boards creaked in protest, reminding her that the home was old and she had a big job ahead of her. But she couldn’t be happier or more excited to finally be back home in Dennison, Ohio. The craftsman-style bungalow she had purchased would need quite a bit of work, but she wasn’t afraid to tackle the project, especially with her friends to help.

“It looks like Mr. Zink left a few treasures for you,” Janet commented as she lifted the lid of an old trunk, its rusty hinges screeching. “He mentioned that his nieces and nephews left behind a few odds and ends.” Debbie shoved the crumpled tissue into the pocket of her overalls as she moved around several boxes to join Janet. “But he said most of it would probably need to be thrown away.”

“This one looks like it’s full of old newspapers.” Janet bent down and lifted one of the yellowed pages, her blue eyes opening wide. “This one is from December 1941.”

Debbie took the paper from Janet and tucked one of her brown curls back into the handkerchief tied around her head. Despite the heat, a chill climbed up her spine as she read the headline. IT’S WAR! PEARL HARBOR BOMBED! Even though it

had happened before she was born, she still felt a keen tug in her heart when she thought about WWII. “I can’t even imagine what it would have been like to live through such a difficult time in history.”

“There are dozens and dozens of others,” Janet said as she lifted more newspapers out of the trunk. “Some are from the *Dennison Daily Transcript* and talk about all the troops coming through our train depot.”

“I could read these for hours.”

Janet stood up straight. “We’ll have to go through all this later.”

“I probably won’t have much free time, even after I’m settled.” Not with all the work she had to do on the house and the plans they had to open the Whistle Stop Café in the old train depot down the street. After leaving her corporate job in Cleveland, Debbie had come back to town to fulfill her dreams. Somehow, she’d convinced Janet to help her with the café, knowing what an amazing cook and baker her best friend had become over the years. Their grand opening would be in two weeks, which meant they still had a lot of work ahead of them.

As Debbie lowered the newspaper back into the trunk, something else caught her attention. “What’s this?” She carefully moved some newspapers to a nearby box and then returned to the trunk to see what was stored beneath.

An olive-green metal box with the words SPECIAL SERVICES, US ARMY sat at the bottom of the trunk. Leather straps on both sides made it easy for Debbie to lift out, but they were stiff and cracked with age. She was afraid they’d break, though the solid metal box was heavy and felt almost indestructible.

Janet watched as Debbie set the metal box on the dusty floor.

“It’s definitely military issue, whatever it is.” Debbie ran her fingers along the stenciled words. Iron-clad corner protectors and rivets lined the seams, while clasps held the top and bottom together. “And it’s old,” she added.

Debbie unhooked the clasps and gently opened the stiff top of the box, revealing an amazing surprise. “It’s a portable record player! Or whatever they called these back then.”

“Do you know how it works?”

Debbie had seen one similar to it in an antiques store once, and the owner had showed her how to operate it, but the one she’d seen had been in a lot worse shape. “If I remember correctly...” Debbie let her words trail off as she lifted a crank handle from the bottom left-hand corner and inserted it into the front face

of the box. She used it to wind the mechanism. When it was tight, she shifted another lever and the turntable began to spin.

“Amazing!” Janet’s voice held awe. “I can’t believe it still works.”

“These things are worth a lot of money,” Debbie said. “I need to let Mr. Zink know he forgot to take it.”

“I wish we had a record to listen to...” Janet rose and went back to the trunk where she moved the rest of the newspapers. “Look.” She lifted a thin cardboard sheath.

Debbie smiled as she withdrew a disc. The label in the center had a handwritten note on it. “To Ray, with love, Eleanor.” And under that, in the same hand, was written the song title, *Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else but Me)*.

Janet stared at the record. “Do you think Ray is Mr. Zink?”

Debbie nodded. “His first name is Raymond.” She stopped the turntable and then set the record on the top before turning it on again. Her heart was pounding harder than usual as she lifted the needle and gently set it on the record.

The noise was scratchy at first, and then a clear, beautiful voice filled the attic, singing a version of the Andrews Sisters’ popular WWII-era song.

Debbie looked up and met Janet’s surprised gaze. “Who do you think Eleanor is?”

“Whoever she is, she had an amazing voice.”

“Yes, but it does sound like an amateur recording,” Debbie said. “I wonder if she was Mr. Zink’s sweetheart.”

“He never married, did he?” Janet asked. “I wonder what happened to Eleanor.”

A noise downstairs brought Debbie’s head up. “It sounds like Ian is here.”

Janet sighed. “I was hoping we could listen to the other records in the trunk.” She shrugged. “There’ll be time later, I suppose.”

Debbie lifted the needle off the record and switched off the turntable. As Janet rose and went to the stairs to greet her husband, Debbie gently slid the record back into its sheath.

Mr. Zink must have forgotten that the machine and the records were in the attic. It didn’t seem right to keep the discovery of the trunk from him. As soon as she had a bit of free time, she’d stop by the assisted-living home and ask him what

he wanted her to do with all of it.

The portable phonograph, and especially Eleanor's record, was a perfect excuse to visit with the older gentleman again and update him on her big move. He'd always been one of her favorite people, full of fun stories and interesting historical tidbits about Dennison and the train depot. She would take any reason she could get to stop in and visit.

It was Sunday afternoon before Debbie found the time to stop in and visit Raymond Zink. He had moved into the Good Shepherd Assisted Living Home a couple of months earlier, after deciding to sell his beloved home to Debbie.

She passed through the front doors and into the cozy foyer. The sitting room was full of residents and their families, and Debbie smiled at several people she knew. Though she hadn't lived in Dennison for almost twenty years, and both her parents were now gone, she had come to visit often and stayed in touch with many of her childhood friends and their family members. It was comforting to return to her old church, see her former schoolteachers downtown, into a neighbor at the grocery store, and generally feel at home again. Cleveland had never felt so tight-knit or full of a sense of community. At least, not in the same way as her hometown.

Debbie stopped at the front desk where a volunteer was sitting with a smile on his face.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I'm Stan. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Stan." Debbie returned his smile. "I'm looking for Raymond Zink."

"Ray?" Stan's grin widened. "He's holding court in the dining room this afternoon."

"Holding court?"

Stan shook his head as he chuckled. "You'll see. Dining room is down that hall and to the left." He pointed in the direction she should go.

"Thank you." She walked down the hall, following the smell of pot roast and baked bread.

Even before she entered the dining room, she could hear Mr. Zink's voice. It was loud and clear, and he was telling a story about Old Bing, the service dog that had gone to war with the Gray brothers of Dennison in June of 1918.

Debbie stopped just inside the doorway and listened as Mr. Zink continued his story. Sitting around him was a mix of people, some who looked like they were residents, others who appeared to be visiting family members. Mr. Zink held everyone's attention, from the youngest boy to the oldest gentleman.

"Bing was only nine days old when he was smuggled into the trenches by the Gray brothers," Mr. Zink said. "He served in active duty, with fifty-eight days in the trenches, and received two citations for bravery." Mr. Zink sat in a wheelchair and his body showed his advanced age, but his eyes lit up and his voice was strong as he spoke. "Old Bing survived being gassed twice and came back to Dennison with yellow teeth and patches of missing fur from the side effects. But for his service, he received the regular sixty-eight-dollar bonus for discharged soldiers."

Debbie had heard the story of Old Bing before, but she never tired of it. When Mr. Zink saw her standing there, his face lit up in a smile and he excused himself from his audience and wheeled his chair over to join her.

"Hello, Debbie. It's so nice to see you again."

"Hello, Mr. Zink." Debbie had known him from her church growing up. When she had decided to come back to Dennison to open the Whistle Stop Café, he had heard she was looking for a home and offered his. It was almost miraculous how everything had fallen into place. "I'm happy to see that you found a new audience to share your passion for history."

"I won't stop until the good Lord takes me home." He motioned to a chair. "Have a seat. I hope everything is okay at the house."

"It's perfect. I love it." She set her bag down and pulled out the old record inside its sheath. "I came by to let you know that there was a trunk left in the attic, and I thought you might want it returned to you."

"A trunk?" Mr. Zink squinted. "What was in it?"

"An antique-looking military record player, still in working order, and this." She handed him the record.

Mr. Zink looked at it for a moment and then slowly slipped the record out of the sheath. His mouth began to quiver and his gaze seemed to slip back in time. "My Eleanor." Finally, he looked at Debbie. "Where did you say you found this?"

"In an old trunk in the attic." She watched him closely. "I thought perhaps you had forgotten it."

"I hadn't forgotten—how could I forget her?" He held the record to his chest.



“I thought I had lost this. I can’t believe you found it.”

“May I ask who Eleanor is?” Debbie asked. “She had a beautiful singing voice.”

“It was only a small part of her beauty.” Tears filled Mr. Zink’s eyes as he spoke. “I’ve never known a woman like Eleanor, before or since.”

“Was she your sweetheart?”

“She was more than that—she was my very heart and soul.” He looked at the record again and tenderly ran his hand over the label. “What happened to her?” Debbie spoke quietly.

He finally looked at her again and shook his head. “I don’t know.” Debbie frowned. “You don’t know?”

“When I left Dennison to join the army, she was standing on the platform at the depot to see me off. She promised to write and told me that when I returned, we’d be married.” He swallowed and let out a sad sigh. “But her letters stopped abruptly, and when I came home, she wasn’t here. I looked for her for months, eventually I came to the realization that she didn’t love me. It was the only explanation I had.”

Debbie’s heart broke for Mr. Zink, her own grief and pain still fresh from losing her fiancé when he died in Afghanistan as a special forces officer. Would the pain remain with her as long as it had with Mr. Zink? The realization felt weighty and suffocating.

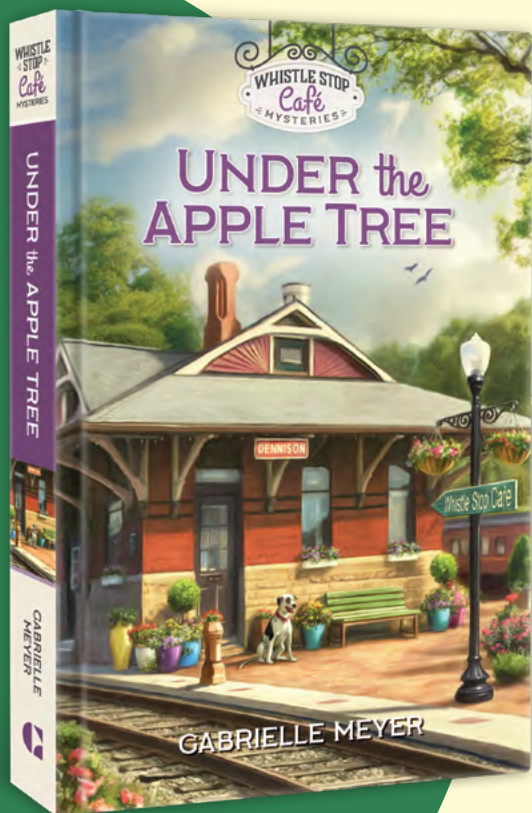
“Debbie?” Mr. Zink asked.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for this. I can’t wait to hear Eleanor’s sweet voice singing again. If only I could find her. Although, if she’s still alive, she may very well not want to hear from me. Even so, I’ve always wondered where she went and how she made out. It would do my heart good to know she was happy.”

Debbie knew in that moment what she needed to do, and she smiled. Though she had a house to remodel and a restaurant to open, she determined then and there to do whatever she could to find out whatever happened to Ray’s beloved Eleanor. “I’d love to help you find her, Mr. Zink. I’ll do whatever I can to do just that.”

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