



Book excerpt of “Imaginary Things”  
by Andrea Lochen

It would’ve been easier to think of our stay with my grandparents as a fresh start if their home in Salsburg hadn’t been the place I’d been shipped to whenever I needed to recover from my other failures in life. My mom had first sent me to stay with them the summers I was seven and eight, after serious “behavior problems,” as she called them. Then after some spectacular mischief my sophomore year of high school I was exiled to Salsburg again for the entire duration of the school year. Most recently, when I was eighteen, they took me in for part of my pregnancy.

So the symbolic significance of the fact that I was going there now, after I’d lost my job as a receptionist at Lakeview Dermatology, was not lost on me. Or them, I was sure. But they had always been good about taking me in, dusting me off, and attempting to set me back to rights again. Winston and Duffy Jennings were not stern, preachy types nor were they permissive, indulgent push-overs. Since my mom had made them grandparents before they were even forty, much too young to be dubbed Granny and Pops, Duffy had insisted I call them by their first names instead. She owned a small beauty salon and over the years had learned to talk auctioneer-fast, pausing rarely to catch her breath, lest someone interrupt her. She called it like she saw it; sometimes she called me a dumb-ass and sometimes she called me a snickerdoodle, and whichever it was, usually rightfully so. Winston was a semi-retired farm equipment mechanic who had adapted to his wife’s loquaciousness by speaking up only when necessary; his silence was occasionally restful but most of the time kind of unnerving.

My grandparents rarely left their one square mile of southeastern Wisconsin, their beloved population-

of-one-thousand town, and they acted as if driving all the way to the “big city” of Milwaukee was as treacherous and cumbersome as hitching up a team of horses to a covered wagon and setting out for the great unknown. Driving alone both ways with a baby was unappealing to me, and I was an appallingly lazy correspondent; I patted myself on the back if I remembered to send them a Christmas card with a recent photo of David in it. So the pathetic fact was that the last time we’d come to Salsburg for a visit was for David’s second birthday, and if I was nakedly honest with myself about it, I’d admit it was because I had been flat broke (though nowhere near as destitute as I was now), and I had known I could count on them to buy cake and presents.

Still when I had called Duffy two weeks ago to explain my financial woes and plead my case, I had barely squeaked out that I’d lost my job, when she’d interjected, “Why don’t you two come and stay with us for a spell? You know, Anna, that we’ve got those two spare bedrooms just collecting dust and storing Winston’s old Revolutionary War junk, and it would be so nice to spend some time with you and Davey. Why, I haven’t seen the little guy since he was still in diapers! It would be good for him to get out of that big city and get some fresh air and experience a taste of small town living.”

And that had been that. What I’d hoped for, of course, as I had dialed their number, and though the length of a “spell” had not been agreed upon, something about this stay seemed much more permanent and serious than all the others before it. I had no home to return to this time. I was leaving no one behind who really gave a damn. This was not merely a respite from my life. This was my life.

# Imaginary Things

