

KAREN
BARNETT



SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

UNCORRECTED
PROOF

Ever
FAITHFUL

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL

Ever **FAITHFUL**

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

BOOKS BY KAREN BARNETT

Mistaken

The Golden Gate Chronicles

Out of the Ruins

Beyond the Ashes

Through the Shadows

Vintage National Parks Novels

The Road to Paradise

Where the Fire Falls

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMibooks.com/EverFaithful

Ever **FAITHFUL**

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL

**KAREN
BARNETT**



WATERBROOK

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

EVER FAITHFUL

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version and the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Apart from well-known people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-7352-8958-1
eBook ISBN 978-0-7352-8959-8

Copyright © 2019 by Karen Barnett

Cover design and illustration by Mark D. Ford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

WATERBROOK® and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barnett, Karen, 1969– author.

Title: Ever faithful : a vintage national parks novel / Karen Barnett.

Description: First edition. | New York : WaterBrook, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018046955 | ISBN 9780735289581 (paperback) | ISBN 9780735289598 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Yellowstone National Park—Fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3602.A77584 E94 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018046955>

Printed in the United States of America
2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

*In memory of Billie Barnett, who
always had a teacher's heart.
And to all those who work to change lives
through education, including the teachers in
my own family: Patty, Janelle, and Jonnie.*

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling,
“Look up and down and round about you!”

—JOHN MUIR, *Our National Parks*, 1901

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful



April 1933

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Elsie closed her eyes for a moment and breathed in the steamy air, imagining she stood beside Grand Prismatic Spring instead of the massive laundry boiler in the back of the Mammoth Hot Springs Lodge. She tucked a damp curl behind her ear before loading another stack of folded bedsheets and towels onto the molly cart. After pushing it through the swinging doors, she rolled the cart down the wooden ramp, the outside air a welcome respite. Two more summers—three at most. That’s all it would take

Mary stood waiting, fiddling with the pink kerchief protecting her pale-blond hair. “There you are. If we get these last housekeeping cabins finished in time, we can meet Hal and Bernie at the cafeteria for lunch.” She flashed a smile at Elsie. “You’ll come, won’t you?”

Elsie guided the cart’s wheels through the icy slush on the sidewalk. “You’ve only been back in Yellowstone two days, and you’re already angling for dates? I thought you told me you weren’t seeing pack rats anymore.”

Pack rats, pillow punchers, pearl divers—the concession staff had a language all its own, and it all sounded like more laughs than being boring

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

old porters, maids, and dishwashers. The rangers lumped the lot of them together, calling them all *savages*. No one could remember how the ridiculous name was chosen, but it had stuck for close to fifty years already.

“Hal’s been promoted to front desk at the hotel—hadn’t you heard? And though he’s hardly the man of my dreams, I don’t see any better choices around here at the moment.” Mary leaned in with a conspiratorial air. “I hear the new gear jammers are coming in a couple of weeks. They always hire the best-looking fellas to drive the tour buses.”

“That’s probably why the jammers are notorious for having a girl at every stop.” Elsie veered left to avoid a puddle. “I’d like to join you for lunch, but I need to run home and check on Mama. I’ll be back right after, and we can fold the rest of the sheets.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask how she is. Your last two letters didn’t sound promising.”

A knot formed in Elsie’s stomach. “She had a few bad spells this winter. The doctor says it’s her heart. He wants her to rest more.”

“Has she had heart problems before?”

“She had rheumatic fever as a child.” Elsie tightened her grip on the cart handle. “But I’ve never seen her like this.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. She’s like a second mother, not just to me, but to all the pillow punchers.” She unlocked the cabin door and pushed it open. “I suppose it was a good thing you were here to help and not off at college with the rest of us.”

Elsie had told herself the same, though it did little to ease the sting of being left behind. “When does Rose arrive, do you know? I’ve missed her.”

“Around the same time as the jammers, I believe.” Mary grabbed Elsie’s hand and squeezed. “I’m glad I came early. We’ll be the three musketeers for at least one more summer. Who knows where Rose and I will go after graduation?” She heaved a sigh that stirred the dusty air in the room. “Oh,

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

my. This cabin looks worse than the last one. How is that possible? Ugh, the smell.”

“That’s what happens when you latch the door and leave it abandoned for months on end.” She understood too well. Elsie reached for the bottle of vinegar and a handful of newspapers. “I’ll start on the glass. You can knock down the cobwebs.”

Mary wrinkled her nose and lifted the broom. “If I find any spiders, it’ll be up to you to dispatch them.”

As Elsie scrubbed the veil of dirt from the panes, sunlight filtered into the tiny space and revealed a fine layer of dust coating the room. It was the maids’ job to refresh the old cabins, just like spring renewed the world each year, and prepare for the visitors to come.

She’d continue making beds and sweeping floors until she had enough money for the teacher program at the University of Montana. She’d dreamed of being a teacher since she was little, and spending her winters helping at the school in Gardiner, just outside the park’s northern boundaries in Montana, had only deepened the desire. Every new student arrived with potential hidden inside, like the seeds sealed up in the cones from the lodgepole pine trees. It was her job to help them find it.

After sweeping and dusting, Mary tucked the crisp white sheets around the mattress and patted the top. “I think we’re almost done here. Are you sure you can’t join us for lunch? Hal’s brother will be odd man out if you don’t come.”

“Bernie is an odd duck, no matter what I do.” Elsie shoved the dresser back in place after cleaning behind it. “Of course, I’m no catch myself.” Her hand went to her collar out of habit, her fingers checking that the blouse was buttoned all the way to the neck.

Mary straightened, her eyes darkening. “Bite your tongue, Elsie Brookes. Any man would count himself lucky to earn your affection. You just don’t

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

grant it easily.” She leaned on the broom. “Maybe this summer we’ll both find nice boys to take us away from all this.”

“Take us away? Why would anyone want to leave?” Elsie glanced out the open door toward the distant springs, the late morning sunshine casting a golden glow over the rising steam. If she could secure a teaching position in Gardiner, she would stay forever.

“You’ve got a classic case of park fever. You should just marry a ranger and get it over with.” Mary dropped her broom and dustpan into the cart. “What about the new fella? He’s a little quiet, but he looks like a movie star. What was his name?”

“Teddy Vaughn.” Elsie managed to speak his name without her voice wobbling. The first time she’d encountered the brown-eyed ranger, she’d somehow lost all ability to string words together or even swallow for a heady moment. But she couldn’t let her heart go there. No one would ever want her in that way. “I’m dedicating my life to education; you know that. I’m not looking to get married.”

“I’ll never understand you.” Her roommate wrinkled her nose. “Why waste time on other people’s children when you can have ones of your own? You and Ranger Vaughn would make beautiful babies.”

Elsie couldn’t help giggling at Mary’s silliness. Just having her friend back in the park made everything brighter. “Why don’t you head off to meet the boys for lunch? I can finish the last cabin.”

Mary brightened. “Really? But what about your mother?”

“I’ll still have time to check in. Go have fun.”

Her friend tore off her kerchief and fluffed her hair. “You’re the best, Els. I’ll give Bernie a peck on the cheek from you.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Elsie made short work of the last cabin and then pointed the molly cart in the direction of the laundry. A small herd of elk grazed on the green lawn

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

surrounding the lodge. A cow elk, heavy with her unborn calf, lifted her head to stare back, chewing leisurely. The animals had over three thousand square miles of park to wander but seemed to prefer it here. And the visitors enjoyed the close proximity to the wildlife.

“There’s my girl. I was looking for you.” Her father strode toward her, the broad-brimmed Stetson casting shadows over his face. “Are you finished for the morning?” He reached for the cart handles.

“You don’t have to do that. I’ve got it.”

“You think I’m too good to haul laundry?” He cast her his usual grin. “How do you think I won your mother’s affections? It wasn’t with my stamp collection. Or my dashing good looks.”

“She said it was your servant’s heart.” Her mother’s true words wrapped around her own heart.

“Yes, indeed. ‘Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.’ It’s not just the key to a happy home, Elsie—”

“I know. It’s the key to a happy life.” Only her parents could make the golden rule sound romantic. “And I’ll remember that when I finally get all my pennies saved for college. Then I’ll make you proud.”

“I’ve always been proud. You were meant for bigger things than this place.”

“Bigger than Yellowstone?” The idea rippled through her. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Bigger than being a simple ranger like your old man.”

Her eyes slid over her father’s frame, his long years dedicated to the park showing in his stooped shoulders. Too much work, too few staff. It was as much a part of the job as the uniform. “You look tired. What have you been doing today?”

“I went to the new campsite, making sure everything’s ready.”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

“You’re opening the campground already? It’s only April.”

They arrived at the laundry, and he slid the molly into the waiting spot. “Not the auto camp. The ECW camp.”

She thought through the acronym. As the daughter of a federal employee, she was accustomed to negotiating alphabet soup, but this was a new one. “What’s that?”

“Emergency Conservation Work. Part of the president’s ‘New Deal.’ He’s recruiting unemployed men from around the country to work on federal lands. A tree army, he’s calling it, but with civilians—the Civilian Conservation Corps. I’m overseeing the groups coming here to Yellowstone.”

“What will they be working on?” She grabbed the cleaning rags and tossed them into the waiting tubs.

“Whatever needs doing, I’m told. I’m hoping we can put some of the fellows on the bark beetle problem. That’s the biggest conservation emergency we’ve got at present.”

“Do they have forestry backgrounds?”

“I guess we’ll find out. I hope so.”

Her heart lifted as she followed him back outside. “Maybe you won’t have to work so hard this summer.”

“We’ll see. There’s always more to do. And actually—work is why I came looking for you.” He scrubbed a hand over his mouth and chin, as if trying to hide the lines gathering there. “This came across my desk today.” He took a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket. “I’m afraid it’s not good news.”

Unease trickled through her. “What is it?”

He unfolded the memorandum and handed it to her. “After last year’s low occupancy rates, the Yellowstone Park Hotel Company has decided to keep the Mammoth Hotel closed this season and use only the housekeeping cabins and campground.”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

Had she just complained about making beds? Elsie scanned the typed memo, zeroing in on the last few lines that hinted at staff cutbacks. “They can’t do this. People are counting on this work.” Including her.

Her father shook his head. “I know. But jobs are scarce everywhere. Hardly anyone has money to waste on visiting fancy hotels. Those who are still making the trip are keeping a tight grip on their pocketbooks. Why rent a room when you can pitch a tent?”

Elsie bit her lower lip, even as the selfish thoughts bubbled up like the park’s gurgling mud pots. “Who will they keep on?”

“A few pillow punchers and porters here at Mammoth, probably. We still need some folks to take care of the campground and the day lodge. But they probably won’t see very many work hours.”

“And the rest of the park?”

“The Lake Hotel and Roosevelt Lodge will stay closed, but the Old Faithful Inn and the Canyon Hotel will open on schedule. They’ll shuffle some of the best savages to those two.”

Elsie lifted her eyes and gazed out over the lines of cabins to the stately hotel in the distance. Closed? Would Mary and Rose both have jobs? Hal, Bernie, and all the others? The past few summers had been filled with their adventures and laughter. A lump settled in her throat. “I guess school will have to wait.” She hated to be selfish when so many people were living hand to mouth, but she’d postponed her dream several times already. Most students started college at eighteen, not twenty-two.

Father took the paper back and folded it. “Not necessarily. I know you don’t like me interfering, but I’ve spoken to a few people. There might be one other option for you, if you’re willing.”

“Anything.”

“Put in for a transfer to the Canyon Hotel.”

The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, with its pine forests and roaring

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

waterfalls, was several hours away from Mammoth. “But Mama needs me here.”

“Hear me out.” His blue eyes locked on her. “I can take care of your mother. And if you do this, you might actually have the money you need by the end of *this* summer.”

The world began to spin. “How?”

“They’re building a second CCC camp in Canyon. We’ll have four in all. President Roosevelt wants the recruits to have every opportunity to better themselves—maybe even earn a high school diploma.”

“I don’t understand. What does that have to do with me?”

He laid a hand on her arm. “Elsie, those fellas are going to need a teacher.”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful



Brooklyn, New York

What have you done now?” Nate kept his voice low as he tightened his fingers around his kid brother’s collar and glanced down the rain-darkened Brooklyn alley. A cop stood at the entrance, blocking their path to the street. At fourteen, Charlie already had two instances of shoplifting on his record. One more and they might send the youngster off to the reformatory. “How many times have I told you to keep your hands in your own pockets and out of other people’s?”

“I was hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.” Nate gave him a quick shake and released him. The truth of the statement stewed in his own gut. If he’d been able to find work, maybe the boy wouldn’t be forced to snatch a bite here and there to fill his empty gullet.

Their father wasn’t much help. Staggering home once or twice a month, the former cop rarely met their eyes—just plunked a few coins on the table before disappearing again.

If only Sherman had lived.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

His life had become a Sears and Roebuck catalog of *if onlys*. He glared at Charlie and reached for the boy's pockets. "What did you take?"

The kid twisted away from Nate's probing. "None of your business."

"You're making it my business—keeping you out of reform school." A jolt of pain burst through Nate's hand, as if he'd been bitten by a rat. He yanked his fingers from his brother's pocket, light from the lone streetlamp glinting off the shard of glass jammed in his skin. "What's this?"

"Had to go out a window."

"Looks more like you went through one." Blood slid down Nate's knuckle. The officer was moving toward them. "Give it to me. Whatever you took, give it to me."

The boy scowled and jammed a small, paper-wrapped package into Nate's hand.

Hopefully not worth much. He shoved Charlie back toward the garbage cans. "Get out of sight. If you get taken in again—"

"Ma'll kill me."

"No, she'll kill *me*. You're my responsibility." The words burned in his throat. How many times had Sherman said that to him in years past? It had been second nature to the eldest son. Nate had never expected the mantle to fall to him. He wasn't worthy of it, a fact his father reminded him of every chance he got.

Charlie crept back, disappearing into the shadows like an alley cat. Nate noted that his brother seemed a little too practiced at making himself scarce.

An icy wind swept the chilled rain against Nate's face as he stared at the package, his blood smeared on the brown wrapping. Words spilled across the paper. It didn't matter how much he squinted; the letters refused to take shape in his mind. Given a few minutes, maybe he could sort out a few of them. He considered dumping the parcel into one of the trash cans behind

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

him, but what would that teach his baby brother? Nate stuffed the bundle into his pocket. The kid could return it tomorrow. Would that be enough of a lesson?

“Who’s back there?” The policeman advanced, a baton in one hand, light in the other. “What are you doing?”

The light blinded Nate as he curled his bloody fingers and held them close to his chest. “Bird-watching.” Glib responses slipped from his tongue a little too easily these days.

The man stepped closer. “Nate? Nate Webber?”

The familiar voice sent a wash of warmth through him. “Yeah.” He tipped his flat cap to shield his eyes from the glare, trying to make out the face. “Murray?”

“Never thought I’d run into you here. I’m tailing a cat burglar. A break-in. Seen anyone?”

A break-in? Nate kept his focus steady, fighting the urge to glance behind him. “Out here?”

The circle of light trailed over his open jacket, lingering on his chest. “Is that blood?”

“A scrape.” He pulled the jacket closed. Still needed to fix those buttons. “Nothing to worry about.”

Murray walked closer, his face appearing out of the darkness. Sherm’s friend had always been a baby face, even though he had a good five or six years on Nate. The low light highlighted his round cheeks. His gaze held Nate in place. “How are things at home? Your . . . ma?”

The emotion in the man’s voice cut worse than the glass. “You know how it is.”

The officer’s gaze dropped. “I . . . I do.”

A second policeman thundered into the alley. “Murray, you got ’em?”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

Murray turned his attention to Nate, his eyes pleading. “Tell me you’re not involved with this, Nate. I couldn’t take it. Couldn’t stand giving your mom more bad news.”

Nate’s skin turned cold, the package weighing his pocket. He took an involuntary step back. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Murray’s partner sidled up to him, billy club drawn. “Empty your pockets.”

“Why? You need a dime?” A lump grew in his throat. What had Charlie gotten into? “Come on, we’ve all got empty pockets these days.”

The man gripped Nate’s fraying lapel, shoving him back against the brick building. “Say another word and I’ll drop you, genius.”

“Hey, take it easy.” Murray laid a hand on his colleague’s arm. “He’s Sherm’s brother. Unlikely he’d be knocking over jewelry stores.”

The world seemed to tilt under Nate’s feet. “No. You’ve made a—” The sight of Charlie’s wide eyes peering out from between the metal trash cans stole his breath. A jewelry store? His heart sank to his shoes. Charlie was their mother’s last hope—the family’s, really—because no one expected much from Nate. He’d left school at ten. The best he could hope for was menial jobs at the dockyards or slaughterhouses, but lately he couldn’t even get that kind of work. *At least Charlie can read and write.* And he’d do so much more, if Nate had any say in the matter.

But Charlie would accomplish nothing if he got sent up the river.

Trying to ignore the wooden club wedged against his chest, Nate thrust his hand into his jacket and drew out the package. Directing his eyes back to the two men standing in front of him, he swallowed. “I think this might be what you’re looking for.”



UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

Police Chief O'Sullivan tapped meaty fingers on his mahogany desk. "Webber, I don't buy what you're trying to sell me. I've known you since you were a babe in arms. You wouldn't take a peppermint out of the candy bowl at the department St. Patrick's Day party without asking your pa first."

Because I'd get smacked up the side of the head. Sherman or Charlie could get away with those sorts of antics, but not Nate. Probably his father's attempt to make something, *anything*, out of his hopeless middle son.

O'Sullivan tipped his head down to stare over his wire-edged glasses. "And now I'm supposed to believe you're doing smash-and-grabs at jewelry stores?"

Nate tucked his feet under the chair to hide the holes in the soles of his shoes. Shouldn't he be in lockup? His family's legacy was the only reason he sat here in comfort. Sherm—saving him again, from beyond the grave. The idea prickled like so many needles. "Yes sir. Times are . . . tough."

"Don't I know it. And your family got the short end of the nightstick—in more ways than one." O'Sullivan picked up the blood-stained package and turned it over. "But if this isn't the definition of red handed, I don't know what is."

Nate thrust his fingers, wrapped in Murray's handkerchief, deeper into his lap. At least he'd worked the glass free. He scrambled for a lighthearted answer, only to realize the commissioner hadn't actually asked his opinion. Silence might be the best option.

The man dumped the contents of the package across the green desk blotter—two necklaces and a ring.

Bile surged up Nate's throat. His younger sibling was on a crash course with disaster and determined to take the family with him.

"Kirschbaum Jewelry." O'Sullivan read the label on the paper. "Jewish. Is that why?"

Mr. Kirschbaum. The sweet old gentleman on the next block? Nate's

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

jaw dropped. “No! No sir.” At least, he didn’t *think* so. Charlie wouldn’t be into such foolishness, would he? “Just an impulse. Needed the money.”

The older man sighed, shoving the gold chain around with the nib of his pen. “I worked with your father for years; you know that.”

“Yes sir.”

“And your brother, when he first joined the station.”

As if Sherm had served for eons, rather than four short months. Gunned down in the street his first year as a cop. Nate managed a nod, his throat thick.

“Tell me what’s really going on, Nate. Was it your old man?” Deep bags drooped below O’Sullivan’s eyes. Perhaps he’d never gotten over drumming his friend from the force. Not that he’d had much choice.

“No.” His father was a hard man and a drunk, but he wouldn’t break a toothpick if it was against the law.

“Things that bad at home? What were you planning to do—pawn the stuff? Or are you working for someone else?”

Working? The mockery of the word nearly made him laugh. He set his jaw. Best to keep his mouth shut. Isn’t that what hardened criminals did?

The commissioner stood and paced in front of the window. “Do you think I’m stupid, Webber? That I don’t know what’s really going on here?” He turned, drilling Nate with the type of glare that could glue the most nefarious crook to his chair. “I didn’t get where I am by being dumb.”

“Never thought you were.”

“Shut it. I’m talking.” The man’s voice barked, all familial camaraderie vanishing from his demeanor.

Nate turned his attention to the floor. He’d grown up with the bluster; police bravado wouldn’t cower him. It had long since lost its power.

“You’re here because Charlie’s a coward.” He jabbed a finger toward Nate’s face. “Your family has been splintering since the day Sherm fell. I thought I lost one man that day. Didn’t realize I was burying an entire

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  **SAMPLE ONLY**

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

family. Your old man turned to the bottle. Your mother never leaves the house. That younger brother of yours—”

“Charlie’s not—”

“No talking.” O’Sullivan pounded the desk with his closed fist, finally making Nate jump. “Charlie’s a coward. At fourteen, he’s feeding his own foolish impulses. I will not let him take the last good man from this family.”

Exactly what I’m trying to avoid. Charlie’s the only one with a future.

“That’s why I’m putting you on the first train out of here.” O’Sullivan slammed into his seat and drew out a sheet of paper.

Nate sat forward, his heart thrumming. “You’re—you’re what?”

“You’re volunteering for this new Civilian Conservation Corps. It’ll give you a chance to make something of yourself. It’s made to order for a man like you—eighteen to twenty-five, unemployed, no criminal record.”

With the last bit, Commissioner O’Sullivan retrieved the stained brown paper from the jewelers and crumpled it into a ball. He lobbed it into the corner wastebasket.

Nate choked. “That’s evidence.”

“It’s garbage, and we both know it. If you’re so determined to lose your freedom, at least you’re going to do it at the federal government’s expense.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What is this Civilian—”

“Don’t you read the papers?”

A flood of heat rushed through him. “Too busy with *War and Peace*. No time left for the daily rag.”

The commissioner shot him a long look over his glasses. “You got nothing but time, Webber. But I’m not letting you do *hard* time for something stupid like this. The Civilian Conservation Corps is Roosevelt’s answer to unemployment and idleness. He’s hiring men to work on public lands for six-month stints—a year if you do well. You’re applying. Hopefully it will bring some peace to your poor mother.”

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

My mother. Charlie. Eva. Little Lucy. “I can’t leave them. They need me.”

“Maybe this will be the incentive Charlie needs to step up. Be the man of the house.”

“He’s fourteen.”

“And how old were you?” His pen scratched on the paper as he began to write. “It’s not about age; it’s about doing what’s right. You won’t teach him that by going to prison. You’ll teach him by being a man.” O’Sullivan huffed. “And if I have to haul the boy in here and scare him a little, I’ll do it. But I won’t abide you taking the fall for him.”

“I’m the only one who can.”

O’Sullivan paused his writing. “If you think yourself so expendable, then you should have no problem with this. At the very least, you’ll be earning a paycheck.”

The statement stilled Nate’s arguments. “How much?”

“Thirty a month is what they’re saying. Twenty-five of it automatically goes to your family. I’ll have a chat with Abe Kirschbaum. I don’t think he’ll object once the merchandise is returned and the window repaired at no cost to him.”

Nate sat back in the chair, the air leaking from his lungs. A paycheck. He hadn’t seen one in months. The money was minimal, but . . . “Where would I be working? Doing what?”

“Wherever they send you, and whatever they tell you. Like the army. I figure they’ll throw a shovel at you. A little ditch digging never hurt anyone.” O’Sullivan slapped the paper in front of Nate. “Unless you’d rather recant your confession and let me bring Charlie in to face his crimes. Because if you get sent off to the Welfare Penitentiary, who’ll step in the next time he gets itchy fingers?”

Nate stared at the document on the desk, the words swimming on the page.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

“I’ve filled out your application. I know you’re a mite”—O’Sullivan paused and clucked his tongue—“slow.”

Dumb. He might as well say it. Nate closed his fingers around the fountain pen. As dumb as this whole idea. Nate scanned the paper until he found the empty line at the bottom. He drew a long breath and let it out between his lips as he inked his name. He could do that much at least. But signing his life away when he couldn’t even read the terms? Something about that seemed wrong.

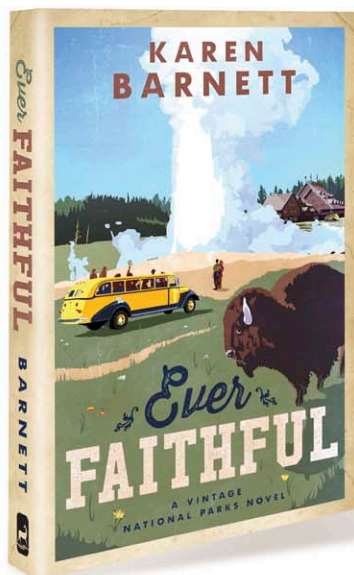
UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Buy the whole book at WMbooks.com/EverFaithful

Continue
Reading...

Order
EVER FAITHFUL
now!



BUY NOW



WATERBROOK