

The Lost Letter

by Donnie Stevens

Chapter 1

Summer 1975 Shenandoah Valley, Virginia

Trudy wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand as she walked on a carpet of withered petals she'd pinched from flowering plants on both sides of her. The orange sun still shined down on Vanderveer Acres Farm with a punishing heat even though the workday ground toward a close. Already, she'd pruned the overgrown sprouts and plucked the wilted blooms from more than half the rows stretching for a hundred feet under the black-netted canvas. She bent and cuffed her jeans before stepping into the lower plant beds so she wouldn't get wet or muddy from the mid-morning irrigation. When she stood, she flipped her long blonde ponytail back over her shoulder.

Since it was Friday, Mr. Vanderveer would soon ring the bell hanging from the packing shed post, and all the hired hands would ride in on wagons from the peach orchards to receive their pay. She and Richard planned to go to the Buena Vista Diner later for burgers and shakes, and to the drive-in to see *Jaws*, this summer's blockbuster movie hit. Tonight would be extra special since she had permission to use her mother's Chevy Impala—much nicer than the old-model Ford pickup Richard drove around the farm.

Suddenly, water spewed everywhere. Trudy squealed and hopped around, looking for the fastest way out of the beds. She sprinted through a clearing in the rows of flowers and potted

shrubs, sidestepping and jumping over plants as best she could. Since the irrigation system was controlled manually, someone must have intentionally turned on the water.

Ah, yes. It had to be Richard. She herself had started today's series of pranks. Earlier this morning, before Richard rode out to the peach orchards, she'd grabbed his hat from the tractor seat and hurled it on top of the shed. Winking at the wagonload of workers waiting to be taken out to the orchards, she'd gambled they wouldn't tell on her. She'd gone down to the plant beds, working where she could easily watch Richard's reaction.

He'd rushed from the shed, climbed onto the tractor, and glanced around for his hat. In the shed, the barnyard, and under the wagon, he'd searched diligently for several minutes before Raymond, his young brother, finally told him where his hat was and pointed toward Trudy.

She'd tried hard not to burst out laughing, and pretended not to notice as he looked her way, shaking his head and mumbling.

Since he'd be waiting for her to run into the shed where he could laugh at her, she crept around to the back instead. When he come looking for her, she'd better be ready. She turned the outside spigot on full force but kept the nozzle lever off and crouched low behind pallets of mulch.

When footsteps approached, Trudy peeped through the pallets. Fingers slid under the suspenders that held up his baggy gray trousers, Richard peered right, then left from under his wide-brimmed hat—heart-stoppingly attractive, even in work duds.

When she'd met him two years ago, she never imagined she'd fall in love with this shy and timid boy, not easy to know or befriend at first. Like her, he and his young brother only came to Virginia in the summers—to work for their grandfather on Vanderveer Acres. Trudy and her mother visited Uncle Harry and Aunt Margaret on their neighboring farm when her dad, a

US Army special op, traveled to foreign countries. After summer, Richard returned to his native Netherlands for the school year while she went home to North Carolina.

Maybe it was his accent, his dark eyes under his wavy brown hair, or his tanned, muscular physique that captivated her. She'd sympathized with him because he was an outsider like her, since her dad's position in the army frequently moved their family to military bases all over the world. Whatever the reason for her fascination with him, Trudy had but one thing on her mind now. To spend every minute of every day she could with him before they parted again to go back to school.

When he turned to leave, Trudy tossed a wood chip at the barrels in front of her. Whirling back at the soft sound, he slowly approached. Holding her breath, she waited with her hand clenching the nozzle handle. As soon as he walked near enough, she vaulted from her spot, and squeezing the trigger, she sprayed him with the full force of water from the hose.

"Ahh!" he hollered, stumbling back, waving his arms and knocking his hat off.

Every way he turned, Trudy stayed with him, spraying him from head to toe and laughing. "You thought watching me run from the plant bed was funny, did you?"

Unable to pull away from the gushing water, Richard grabbed her hand on the nozzle handle and wrestled with Trudy but only ended up drenching them both from head to toe. They tripped on the tangled hose. Dropping the nozzle, Richard landed on his back with Trudy sprawled on top of him.

He gazed at Trudy and chuckled with exaggerated zest. "Gosh! That felt great."

"Yeah!" Her lips curved into a mischievous grin. "I'm sure you wanted me to wet you down."

He cocked his head at her, and a wicked grin split his face. “I say, Trudy, looks like you’ve done gone skinny dipping again but forgot to take off your clothes.”

As she rested her chin on his chest, heat rose to her face. “I still can’t believe I let you dare me into that last summer. You’re never going to let me forget, are you?”

“I want to remember everything about you, Trudy.” Richard propped his head up with his right arm, allowing his left hand to rest on the curve of her hip. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you half a world away while I’m at college.” He grinned. “I won’t have anyone to pick on.”

If only she could allow her fingers to chase her gaze over his taut, rippled chest. She smirked. “Does that mean you’re going to miss me?”

“Every hour of every day.”

“I’m going to miss you too.” As she stared into his brown eyes, her heartrate hitched. “Just make sure you don’t look for someone else to pick on.”

He squinted. “Don’t worry. If it were up to me, I would stay here and go to school. Father is just so adamant about my starting college in the homeland.”

Banking the passion which talk of separation had only heightened, Trudy sat up and unclipped her hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders so it would dry faster. She flattened her mouth. “That means almost another year before we see each other again.”

“We can write every week like we’ve done before. Next year, after I turn eighteen, I’ll have more say over what I want to do with my life. Father can’t stop me from going to any school I want.”

Trudy lay back down next to him, propped on her elbow. “It won’t happen fast enough for me.”

“When I return next summer, you’ll be graduated high school, so we can start planning our future. Do you think your father and mother will approve?”

“Sure, they will. Mom and Dad want me to go to college too. But I can go to school and still be married. I know other girls who’re married and continuing their education.”

With his free hand, Richard reached over and gathered strands of her hair cascading over her left shoulder. He rolled them into a bundle.

“What are you doing, Richard?” She rose, pulling her hair loose.

“I want to see what you’ll look like with your hair under a bonnet. After all, you’ll be a Dutch wife.”

Trudy reached for one of his suspenders, pulled it out, and let it snap back against his wet shirt.

“Ouch!” he hollered and sat up, rubbing his chest. “What’d you do that for?”

“I see right now, these suspenders have to go. They’re beginning to warp your mind.” She giggled. “Yes, I think you’d look great in a pair of bell-bottoms and one of those fluffy-sleeved disco shirts.”

He chuckled. “Miss Trudy, you’re a girl with a free spirit, I must say.”

“What’s wrong with that? After all, aren’t you the one who’s arguing with your father all the time?”

Richard rolled onto his side, pulling Trudy down with him. Staring into his handsome face, she couldn’t resist leaning over and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Father and I just don’t always see things the same way. He wants to have his way with everyone. All he thinks about is how to make more money.” An impatient sneer escaped him.

“What’s wrong with that?” Trudy laughed. “You can’t have too much money, can you?”

“No, but Father uses it to control everyone.”

Trudy’s eyebrows drew together. “Have I done something to upset your father or grandfather?”

When the Vanderveers hired her two years earlier, she’d been the only girl working on their three-hundred-plus-acre spread. Certainly, no small change, this job. The wealthy and highly respected Vanderveers supplied seasonal fruits, flowers, and shrubs to retail groceries and smaller nurseries and florists across Virginia. She’d reckoned they’d given her the job as a favor to Uncle Harry. She worked hard to prove she could be as productive as the boys her age, and Richard’s grandfather often bragged about her. It pleased Richard’s father even more when he found out she saved all the money she earned for college.

His brow furrowing, he deepened his voice. “Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know. They used to talk to me and pick on me all the time. They hardly speak to me anymore.” Not this summer. Not like they had at first.

“They probably have a lot on their minds since we’re in the midst of harvesting.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s intuition, but I feel like something’s not right.”

Richard reached over and brushed strands of hair from her face. “If something was wrong, I’d know about it.”

“I know. But as you just said, you and your father don’t always agree. Maybe I’m the reason.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“But it bothers me. Did you notice your grandfather and him staring at us while we were having lunch with the workers from the orchards? They were talking about us.”

“Grandfather talks about everyone here in the States.” He snickered. “Trust me. If something’s wrong, I’d know it.”

“I do trust you.” Mesmerized by his stare, she nestled closer to trace his broad, tanned face with her finger, beginning with his eyelids and then circling his eyes, nose, and lips. How in the world had she come to the point where she thought about this boy every hour of the day, imagining her life with him forever?

Richard’s arm cradled her. His hand moved up the small of her back, sending a shiver down her spine, even in the mid-July heat. He pulled her face toward his, ever so gently, and kissed her. Despite the fact they were at work, Trudy melted in his arms. A few minutes of making out with Richard wouldn’t matter. After all, they were behind the shed. No one could see them.

He pulled her damp body closer until her curves fit snugly against him. Yielding to the familiar passion she’d grown so accustomed to this summer, she responded to his advances. Richard’s weight pushed her back, his body pinning her down. Trudy savored the tingle he ignited inside her, her breathing becoming heavier.

The snap of a twig followed by heavy footsteps caused Trudy’s eyes to bolt open. The husky form of Richard’s father, Patrick Vanderveer, strode toward them, his lips pursed and a sneer souring his face, the expression intensified by his heavy, bushy eyebrows. Richard’s grandfather, tall and lanky, followed close behind.

Heart racing, Trudy pushed Richard aside and sprang to her feet, almost falling in her haste. Richard jumped up in time to catch her. He avoided his father’s eyes as he brushed loose grass from his trousers.

“Father.” Richard spoke hastily. “I rode in to hook the wagon to the tractor to pull another load of peaches from the orchards.”

“I see what you’re doing,” Patrick shouted. “Get out of here and back to work. I have laborers waiting for you in the fields.”

“Mr. Vanderveer, it’s my fault.” Trudy’s insides knotted. “I finished pinching the wilted bloom from the flowers and sprayed Richard with the water hose. We got into a bit of a ... tussle.”

“No, Trudy. Don’t make excuses for me.” Richard picked up his hat and laid a hand on her shoulder.

Ignoring his son’s response, Patrick Vanderveer practically bellowed at her. “And you, young lady, you need to go home, make yourself proper, and put on some decent clothes. We don’t run around on this farm looking like ...” He gestured with his hand, finally at a loss for words.

The grandfather stood silently, shifting from one foot to the other, continuously pushing his heavy-framed glasses up on his nose. His jaw beneath his gray beard jerked ever so often as if he wanted to say something but held back.

“Father, none of this is her fault.” Richard raised his voice. “I turned the sprinklers on while she worked in the flower beds.” He faced Trudy with a pleading look. “Leave. I’ll take care of this.”

Trudy walked away, her shoulders slumped while Richard and his father shouted at each other. Nothing she could say would make it better for Richard. The fact she was to blame for yet another argument between him and his father weighed heavily on her shoulders. She tried not to

let the intensity of her affection for Richard show when she came around his family but, apparently that hadn't worked.

When she slipped inside the barn to place her pruning clippers and gloves back on the wall hooks, Trudy caught sight of the men through a broken windowpane. Richard walked away, his head low from the verbal thrashing he'd received from his father.

The old man turned to Patrick, his voice carrying to Trudy. "I don't think much of this—my grandson taking a fancy to some girl we know so little. Look at what she's done to him. A hired fieldhand and she has him talking back to you. It's downright disrespectful. This wouldn't happen in the homeland."

"I thought by keeping the boys in school back home, nothing like this would happen." Patrick deepened his voice. "I guess I did wrong, bringing them over to the States to work summers. I hoped it would be a good experience for them."

"Yesterday," the elder Vanderveer went on, "I heard Richard telling Raymond about a bunch of boys who make music calling themselves *Three Dog Night* and *Creedence Creek Water Revival* or something. It ain't right, these young'uns over here making fun of animals and religion in their music."

"I know, Father." Patrick placed his hands on his hips and let out a heavy breath. "It's just not the same here in the States. I wish I could keep the boys away from the local kids."

"Our boy is liable to take such a liking to that girl, he'll want to marry her. What are you going to do then?"

Trudy held her breath, although they certainly couldn't hear her in the shed.

"I'm not going to allow that to happen." Patrick shuffled his feet.

“Son, there’re plenty of girls back home he can find to marry. That way, we keep our wealth in our community.” Grandfather Levi pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and took off his hat. “Reckon I won’t have any choice but to cut him out of the family inheritance if he marries one of these girls over here. Reckon he won’t give me any choice.” He bent the hat brim back with both hands.

“Don’t worry, Father. I’ll take care of this.”

The determination in that steely tone hollowed out the pit of Trudy’s stomach.

A month after his return to the Netherlands, Richard sat on a cot in an Utrecht homeless shelter, his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, and head bowed. He had nowhere to go and no one to turn to as he sought how to pull his life together.

Two days earlier, in the grip of his despair, he left school, packed a bag, and thumbed a ride to the train station in Groningen to buy a ticket to somewhere. He chose Utrecht because it seemed the place farthest away—or at least the last destination listed on the ticket board. For eleven hours, he’d stared through the dusty, smoke-stained window watching nothing, listening to train wheels squeal while ignoring the chatter of passengers who boarded on and off the train at numerous stops along the way. Mad and hurting, he wanted to run away and hide where no one could find him.

With only a worn leather duffle bag holding the few clothes he had packed, a writing tablet, and a photograph of a girl taken weeks earlier in a photo booth in a Woolworth’s Department Store in Buena Vista, Virginia, he had but one thing on his mind. And that was how to make his way back to the States to the girl in the picture.

His life as it had been finished, he now yearned to show the whole world, including his father, he was his own man. He could make his own decisions and choose his own destiny. He would work hard, day and night, and save every guilder until he could afford to travel back to the States to be with Trudy.

Meanwhile, he needed to let her know what happened so she wouldn't worry, where he lived, and how to contact him. No one else knew his whereabouts, and he had no intention of letting anyone else know but her.

He reached into the duffle bag, found his writing tablet and pen, and moved over to the cot under the one light bulb in the room. He stared at the photo and then poured out his hurt and anguish on the pages.

After reading what he'd written, Richard folded the sheet of paper. Hopefully, Trudy would read his intentions and call as soon as she received the letter. Would she trust his decision to leave home and work until he could save enough money to come back to the States?

After stepping from the shelter house porch, he strolled down the narrow *Gaplaveide Straat* to the *Postkantoor* inside the *Markplein*. He asked the *postmeester* the fastest way to mail his letter. The man behind the counter suggested *luchtpost*. Richard purchased a *witte* envelope bordered with red stripes. He stuffed the letter inside, licked and folded the flap, then pressed the seal tightly. Carefully, clearly, he wrote Trudy's name and address on the envelope. From his shirt pocket, he pulled out a strip of glittering hearts he'd picked up at the floral shop where he had just gotten a job and pasted one on the back flap of the envelope.

Richard gave his letter to the *postmeester* and paid with a guilder. He watched him stamp the word *lutch* and the date on it, *August 15, 1975*. He inquired how long his letter would travel before reaching Fayetteville, North Carolina.

“Maybe five days at most,” the man told him. Five days? Richard blew out a deep breath. Too long but he had no choice.

Trudy raced to the front porch when the mail carrier walked away. After receiving the devastating news that her father was killed in Viet Nam, she and her mother had moved two weeks ago from Fayetteville, North Carolina, to Lynchburg, Virginia, to be near family. Any letters Richard may have sent her would be forwarded to this address.

Today, every day, always at this same time, she watched and waited for him. Her heart torn and hurting, she had no friends to confide in. Before leaving Fayetteville, she had written a five-page letter to Richard, pouring out her heartfelt emotions about their painful parting and the loss of her dad.

She longed to hear from the boy she loved. Would this day be the one she so anxiously awaited, when Richard’s handwritten words would console her and tell her how he planned to make everything all right? She held her breath as she reached into the mailbox.

Pulling the envelopes from the box, she thumbed through a couple cards for her mother and a letter forwarded from Fayetteville. Her heart palpitated but almost immediately faltered when she saw the letter she’d mailed to Richard, the words *UNABLE TO DELIVER-RETURN TO SENDER* stamped in red ink on the envelope.