

Prequel to Lea Wait's *THREAD AND GONE*

UNDER THE EAVES: A MESSAGE FROM THE PAST

Mary Clough wiped her dusty hands on her shorts.

No one had cleaned the attic for years. Decades? No; more than that. Centuries. Her ancestors had built the old colonial in 1770. She was the last of them. The one who'd promised her fiancé she'd sell the house.

She'd been working for months, and had finally managed to sort most of the furnishings in the rooms she and her parents had used every day. She'd left the attic for last.

As a child she'd hidden here, behind and between old cartons of books and fabrics, fragile Christmas tree ornaments, warped snowshoes, metal and wooden trunks. She'd curled up on the Victorian horsehair couch to read forbidden books.

This attic had been her sanctuary. Her private place, full of unknown treasures. Long-discarded clothes to try on. Musty books full of stories from the past. Faded ships' logs left by seafaring ancestors. Quilts stitched by their wives. Samplers proudly embroidered by their daughters.

An occasional field mouse, alive or dead, would appear when she unfolded an old quilt or opened a box of long-discarded toys. She didn't mind. Mice deserved a warm place to spend the winter as much as she did. Maine winters were long and cold.

Her memories of this place were happy.

But this was July, and it was stifling under the eaves. Mary's wispy blond hair stuck to her head and dust streaks covered her arms and legs.

How could she discard treasures that meant so much to generations before? Each crate was filled with stories, she knew, not just flow-blue china from the Far East or school books used to teach a captain's children on board a schooner heading around the Horn.

But at seventeen she was the only one left. The only one who cared about these things and their stories.

And she loved Rob. They were going to start a life together, and he needed the money this house and its contents would bring to buy a lobster boat to support them, and their children to come.

Mary had a quick vision of the little girl she'd been, loving this place and these things. Her children wouldn't know that joy.

She wiped away a tear. Rob would laugh at her. Who would cry about getting rid of all this junk?

She reached up to the beams where her great great great grandparents had hung herbs to dry for the winter, and picked up a hummingbird's nest someone a hundred years or more ago had found. Who'd collected nests? A boy, or a girl? Dozens of nests had been carefully saved. She dropped the tiny nest into a garbage bag. A treasure once, now junk.

One day when she was twelve she'd unpacked cartons of old books and lined them up on the rough cross boards just above where the slanted roof met the floor. They were still there. This afternoon she had time to fill one more carton with the leather bound, sometimes mouse-nibbled, books.

The first two slipped from her hands, falling into the narrow space under the beam, next to the outside wall.

She knelt on the rough pine boards and reached for them. Pages had fallen out of one book; the other binding was intact. As she lifted the books out of the dusty opening she felt something else, stuck in the crevice. Leather? Maybe another book had fallen there, years ago. She managed to pull it out.

Not a book. A small leather case, sealed with sealing wax.

How long had it been there, between the floor and the wall?

Carefully, she unfolded the leather, breaking the red wax.

Inside was a folded piece of heavy paper, covered with elaborate hand-writing. She couldn't read the French words.

Beneath the note was a piece of needlepoint. Needlepoint different from anything Mary had ever seen.

Who'd stitched it? When? And why was it sealed in a leather case in her family's Maine attic?

As Mary held the message from the past, she vowed to find out.