

Chapter 1

JULY 12

CHICKADEE CREEK, IDAHO

The door complained loudly as it swung open before Chelsea Spencer. To a stranger, the gloomy interior of Rosemary & Time might resemble something out of a horror film, shadows and strange shapes abounding. But the antique store was as familiar and welcoming to her now as it had been when she was a child.

Many things used to frighten her. Some things still did. But not this place.

She located the light switch and flipped it on. Shadows went into hiding, and the strange shapes of moments before became familiar shelves full of books and old dolls, displays of costume jewelry, ancient furniture, knickknacks and bobs of all sorts, and plenty more. There was also a musty odor, thick layers of dust, evidence of small rodents escaping the elements, and dense spiderwebs in the corners.

“Aunt Rosemary,” she whispered. “How did it get like this?”

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Outside, rain began to fall from the slate-gray heavens, and a gust of wind rattled the old building. Chelsea turned to close the door, shutting out the storm.

In her memories, the shop on Alexander Street was a quaint place, with lots of wonderful nooks and crannies where a girl could curl up with a good book and get lost for hours in some imaginary world. In her memories, the shop smelled of apples and cinnamon and was bathed in golden sunlight. Had she remembered it wrong, or had it changed that much since she was a girl of eight?

Oh, that wonderful summer in Chickadee Creek with her warmhearted great-aunt, the sister of Chelsea's maternal grandfather. Sometimes she wondered if that season had been real or if she'd only dreamed it.

Drawing a slow, deep breath, she moved farther into the shop, running her fingers over the dusty display tables and counters. Many hours of cleanup, repairs, and reorganization awaited her. Days of it. More like weeks. But perhaps that was a good thing. Physical labor was what she needed. Labor that would leave her too weary to think—or feel. That would be ideal.

The door flew open, banging against the wall. She squealed as she spun around, halfway expecting to see . . . to see . . . *him*. But it was only the growing storm, blowing rain into the shop. She hurried to shut the door again, this time making certain it was securely latched. Making sure she was safely inside. Making sure nothing—and no one—could get in.

The terror hit her then, as it so often did, out of nowhere. As powerful as a punch in her solar plexus, the panic almost took her to her knees. Instead, she leaned on a display case as tears welled in her eyes.

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“Oh, God,” she breathed out. “I’m afraid, and I’m so tired of being afraid. Help me get beyond it.”



Liam Chandler stood at the front window of the house, watching the hundred-foot-tall lodge pole pines sway from side to side. Rain, driven before the wind, ran in sheets down the glass.

Jacob loved to be here when it stormed like this.

Liam closed his eyes for a few moments. In those weeks immediately following his brother’s funeral, he hadn’t welcomed reminders of Jacob. He’d pushed every thought of him away. They’d made him angry. They’d hurt. They’d made him want to lash out. They’d made him feel guilty for being alive.

But that had begun to change. Slowly. Little by little. Over the months, he’d started to write down random memories of Jacob in a journal. Writing about his brother, about himself, about their family, had begun to heal something inside of him. Eventually he might even figure out why things were the way they were in his family.

“What about your career?” In his mind he heard the phone message his mom had left for him yesterday. *“Are you going to throw it all away?”*

He clenched his jaw as he looked out at the storm again.

All his life, he’d wondered why he didn’t measure up in his mom’s eyes, why he hadn’t been as good as Jacob. Jacob, her favorite son. Years ago, when Liam had talked about going to California to try to break into the movies, his mom had scoffed and told him not to waste his time. She’d told him he needed a sensible career, like his father’s. Now things were different. Perhaps

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it was because Jacob was gone, because Liam was all she had left. Or maybe she wasn't as indifferent as he'd believed her to be.

Still, going back to Hollywood held little appeal for Liam at the moment. Was what he did in front of the cameras really a career? As far as he could tell, it wasn't talent that had garnered him attention from directors, producers, fans, and eventually *People* magazine and the tabloids. It was his looks, and he'd had nothing to do with those. Inheriting good genes wasn't a talent.

But Jacob? His brother had been at the front of every line when they were passing out talent. His voice had been the kind that could make the angels weep. He'd been proficient on half a dozen musical instruments. If he heard a hummed melody once, he'd been able to create a symphony from it on the keyboard. Jacob Chandler had been destined for greatness—before the Big C came calling.

Drawing a deep breath, Liam turned his back to the storm. Lamplight warmed the large, rustic room in which he stood. The rustic part was intentional. The house itself was less than five years old. Liam had it built after the premiere of his first major movie, one in which he'd had more than a minor role. He'd intended to use the house for hunting trips and short getaways, not for a permanent residence. His thinking had changed about that. The quiet of the forest appealed to him. And it wasn't as if he was completely isolated. Chickadee Creek was only a few miles away. Although only a single lane, the dirt road that connected him to the small town was maintained throughout the year. He had power, a landline, and even cable service that included the internet. The builder had told him that only the electricity and landline would have been available to him as little as two years before the house was built. Cell service

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remained spotty in these mountains, but that wasn't a negative in Liam's mind. Without his smartphone—he refused to connect it to the Wi-Fi in his home—the world left him mostly alone. Almost no one had his landline number. Just the way he wanted it.

As if to belie his thoughts, the phone rang. Amused by the timing, he shook his head as he went to answer it. "Hello."

"Mr. Chandler? This is Grace Witherstone at the mercantile. We've got that order you placed last week."

"Great. I'll be in to get it after the worst of the storm passes."

"It's supposed to hang around awhile. You might want to wait until tomorrow. Unless you want to get drowned while you're loadin' everything into your truck."

He glanced toward the window. "Yeah, you may be right. Won't hurt for me to wait another day."

"I see you got a case of paper. You writin' a book or somethin'? Maybe about our little town or the Chandler family history?"

"I'm not a writer, Mrs. Witherstone. Just want the paper for printing when the need arises."

"Well, if you decide to write about Chickadee Creek, you might be interested in knowing Rosemary Townsend is comin' back to town."

Liam sank onto the sofa. If he'd learned anything in the months he'd lived in these mountains, it was that the owner of the town's general store liked to talk. There was usually a nice mix of gossip and history included in Grace's soliloquies. Having nothing better to do on this stormy day—and preferring not to think any more about his brother and their mom for now—he might as well listen. "Who's Rosemary Townsend?"

"She owns the antique store on Alexander. She closed it down over a year ago, even before she took a really bad fall and busted

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up her leg. But she's recovering from surgery now. Guess she feels a whole lot better, because she's plannin' on opening up the shop again. Anyways, she knows the history of Chickadee Creek better'n anybody hereabouts. She's got bunches of old books and newspapers too. So if you were needin' to do research, she'd be the person to talk to. Especially if you want to know more about your own people. There's been Chandlers in these parts for a hundred and fifty years."

The woman paused. Liam assumed she needed to take a breath.

"Rosemary's from one of Chickadee Creek's longtime families too. Same as the Chandlers, although the Townsends stuck around and your folks kinda came and went, even though they kept hold of most of their property. The Townsends don't go back as far as the gold-rush days, but they was here startin' before the first world war."

"Gold rush, huh?" He knew the history of the area, but he figured he should say something to let her know he listened.

"Land sakes. Don't they teach such things in schools no more?"

"Sorry. I guess I didn't pay enough attention in history class. Tell me about it."

"The Boise Basin was what founded Idaho, pretty much. More gold come out of these mountains than the California 49er or the Klondike rushes. Maybe put together, though I can't say for sure on that. Anyways, Idaho City was bigger than Portland at the height of the rush. Biggest city in the northwest for quite a spell."

Liam nodded, as if the woman on the other end of the line could see him.

"By the time Rosemary's people came to these parts, the rush

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was long over and big companies were mining the land in other ways. Not sure what the Townsends did back then. All I've ever known was Rosemary's antique shop. Guess I'll have to ask her what they did. Or maybe I'll ask her niece. A great-niece, actually. She's come to stay with Rosemary and help out while she continues her recovery."

"Do you know her great-niece?"

"Not really. She visited for a summer when she was a little thing. Maybe eight or nine. Lots of freckles and red hair. That's what I remember most. Quiet little thing. Quiet as a church mouse. Wonder if she's still like that. Time'll tell."

"Time will tell," he echoed softly.

"Well, looks like I've got a customer come in despite the storm. Gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow. Good talking to you."

"You, too, Mrs. Witherstone. See you tomorrow." Liam grinned as he set the phone in its cradle. Next time he'd better show he knew more than he'd let on, or Grace Witherstone would have him run out of town on a rail.

THOMAS NELSON

Since *Cora* 1798

APRIL 1895

NEW YORK CITY

Cora Anderson moved toward the ballroom of the McKenzie mansion, her satin gown swooshing against the marble floor. Her gloved fingers rested in the crook of her father's arm. She felt the weight of her mother's diamond necklace against her breastbone, but it wasn't as heavy as the weight upon her heart.

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Her role tonight, she knew all too well, was to convince a man to marry her. But not just any man. It must be the man her father had chosen as the most advantageous for the family.

Aaron Anderson, her father, had made his fortune in the years immediately after the Civil War. An ambitious young man, he'd soon been able to build a fashionable residence on a fashionable avenue in New York City. A year later, he'd married above his station. Ever since that momentous occasion, he'd sought acceptance into the upper echelons of society. Sought it and failed. He was tolerated but not embraced. It was now his only surviving child's duty to achieve what he hadn't been able to realize on his own.

Cora and her father stopped inside the ballroom doorway and watched the couples whirling around the dance floor to the strains of a waltz. When the music came to an end, the buzz of conversations increased. Men escorted their dance partners to the side of the floor. Young women checked their dance cards or waved fans before their faces. Shy smiles were exchanged, as were calculated looks.

It was like an elaborate marionette performance, Cora thought as she observed it all. There were invisible hands controlling every movement in the room. Some were clueless of what went unspoken, but she wasn't one of them. She was all too aware of her father's manipulations and what the end result would look like.

As if summoned by the thought, Duncan Abernathy broke away from a group of men and strode in her direction. Her father patted her hand, signaling that he'd also seen the man's approach.

"Miss Anderson," Duncan said as he stopped and bowed. "Good evening, Mr. Anderson." It was more nod than bow this time. "It's good to see you both."

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Duncan Abernathy came from old money. His family had become shipping tycoons several generations back. Later, the Abernathys expanded into the railroad industry, managing to multiply their wealth even during economic downturns.

From what Cora could tell, Duncan held no interest in ships or railroads. He would rather spend the money his forefathers had made than make any of his own. He liked fast horses and trips to the Atlantic shore and to Europe. He liked dancing and gambling. He liked champagne and fine wines and rich foods. He liked to be seen with a beautiful woman on his arm. More than anything else, he liked to talk about himself.

She disliked him intensely.

“I believe this next dance is ours,” he said, holding out a hand.

She placed her fingers onto his palm and felt his hand close around them, like a noose tightening around her throat.

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Cora
APRIL 1895
Since 1798

The gardens behind the Anderson mansion were in full bloom on the day Cora’s father sat down at his desk to hammer out the details of the marriage contract. Cora and his wife knew, since he’d made no secret of it, that he would be settling a very large sum on Duncan Abernathy as soon as Duncan and Cora married. The bridegroom, in turn, had promised to make doors open for the senior Andersons throughout New York City and along the entire eastern seaboard.

Aaron Anderson thought it a brilliant exchange.

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Cora Anderson thought it a prison sentence.

The years of her life spread out before her—predictable, boring, unchanging, lonely, unescapable. All the polite tea parties. All of the fancy dress balls. The travel that took her only to places she had been before to see the people she already knew. She would be tied to a man who thought quite highly of himself but who had nothing interesting to say. When he had an affair—as he most surely would—he would be relatively discreet. Rules were rules in their society, after all. But it wouldn't occur to him that his wife might mind when he took a mistress. Cora would be little more to him than an attractive ornament on his arm. She would be expected to bear his children and to see that they were raised well. But she wouldn't be expected to have a thought of her own. Definitely not a thought that differed from his.

"We will announce the engagement at a dinner party," her mother said.

Cora turned from perusing the gardens.

"In two weeks, I think."

At the age of forty-five, Beatrice Anderson remained a striking woman. Her golden-brown hair was free of gray, her face unlined, and her waist still narrow despite giving birth to three children in quick succession.

Of those three children born to Beatrice and Aaron Anderson, only Cora had lived to adulthood. The two Anderson sons had died, one as an infant, the other at the age of three. Cora, the youngest of the children, didn't remember either of her brothers. Perhaps that was why her unhappiness with the life she led also made her feel guilty.

"Cora, do sit down. Your fidgeting is making me nervous."

Cora obeyed her mother, moving to a sofa and settling onto it.

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“Now, as I was saying, we’ll have a dinner party in two weeks to announce your engagement to Duncan. Perhaps forty people.” She pursed her lips. “I suppose I must wait to see who the Abernathys want to invite before I make up my own list.”

“Aren’t your friends important enough, Mother?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Nothing.” Eyes lowered, Cora plucked at a loose thread on the sofa.

“Straighten your shoulders, dear. A slouch is so unattractive on a woman.”

It doesn’t look good on a man either.

“Perhaps we should go to Paris to buy your wedding gown. Unless, of course, the engagement is to be less than a year. Has Duncan given any indication of his preference?”

“No.” She supposed he would like to marry sooner rather than later. The way he spent money, he could surely use an infusion into his bank account.

“I was nineteen when I married your father. Three years younger than you are. I was so happy to leave my parents’ home and begin life as a married woman.” Her mother’s voice trailed away on a wistful note.

But why was her mother wistful? Did she regret the life she’d led? She showed no true affection for her husband and little devotion to her daughter. She cared most about how things appeared. Had she ever desired to walk a different path?

Cora rose from the sofa and returned to the window, as if hoping the colorful gardens could change the directions of her thoughts. It didn’t work.

Am I as passionless as Mother?

It took only a second to answer her own question. *No!*

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Cora wasn't passionless. There were many things she cared about, many things that interested her. However, she'd spent most of her life hiding her true feelings. She'd been trained to keep her opinions to herself. She'd been sent to school but not with an actual education as the goal. No, it had been so she could rub shoulders with young women of quality—and, with luck, to meet some of their eligible brothers.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

If she could do anything in life, if there were no restrictions upon her as a woman, she would become a concert violinist. Nothing stirred her soul like music, especially the music of a violin. But it wasn't considered seemly for a woman to perform on a stage. Her father would rather see her dead.

She looked out the window again as she wiped a tear from her cheek.



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Since 1798

Liam's Journal

The storm yesterday made me think a lot about Jacob. I remember one summer when we were up here in the old cabin we used to have. I was about six, I think, because the Jacob I can see in my head was still really little. There was a storm that day too.

Mom and Dad were fighting. I can't remember anything they said, but I remember that Jacob and I wanted to get away from them. So we went up into the attic. Dad didn't know that if I stood on the top bunk and used the bunkbed ladder, we could get up there, but we could.

There were small windows at each end of the attic. Not sure why anybody would build a place like that since it wasn't really a room. Jacob and I could stand up straight, but Dad couldn't have, if he ever tried. Except for dust and cobwebs, the attic was empty. I suppose because it'd be too much work to put anything up there.

Jacob and I sat by one of the windows, watching the rain run down the glass in sheets and the wind bend the trees way over. There was lots of rolling thunder. One of them cracked right over our heads. It was scary and exciting at the same time. Jacob clung to me tight. Now that I think back on it, he was probably scared to death. He probably wanted to go back to our room but was too afraid to go on his own.

I loved Jacob. Always did. Always will. I admit that sometimes I was jealous of the way Mom preferred him to me. I never understood why

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that was. Still don't understand it. But I never held it against Jacob. It wasn't his fault he was so likable. Besides, he was my kid brother, and I loved him. Like that song from the soundtrack of Rambo III (one of Dad's favorites), I could always say, "He ain't heavy. He's my brother." Because that's how I felt about him.



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Liam's Journal

Chickadee Creek is a quaint place. (That's what Grandma called it back when I was a kid. "Quaint." You don't hear that word often these days.) People are friendly, although I can't say I've given them much of a chance to prove it to me personally since I came up here this winter. The only person I really know is Mrs. Witherstone at the general store, and I've never met anybody who likes to talk more than she does. Definitely friendly.

The old family cabin wasn't in town. It wasn't too far from where I built my vacation house. So we didn't mix with folks back then either. Jacob and I ran all over these mountains. Rode our bikes along back roads and trails. We climbed trees like a couple of monkeys. We explored up around the remains of the old dredger. "Hooligans" is what Grandma called us. Another of her funny words.

One Christmas vacation we came up to stay. I think I was maybe ten and Jacob nine. There was a big snowstorm. Bigger than anything we'd seen in Boise. So Jacob and I took an old garbage can lid to use as a sled since nobody thought to bring sleds with us. There was this hill not too far from the cabin. It went down at a really steep degree, then made an abrupt turn up again. Formed a near perfect V. What we didn't realize, being stupid kids, was that when we hit that V-shaped

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bottom, the lid was going to come to a sudden and complete stop. We weren't going to simply start up the other side.

Don't know why we both didn't end up with broken necks. We flew down that hill until we hit bottom. Wham! I flew off one way, and Jacob flew off another. Knocked the breath out of us both. I'm pretty sure that's when I discovered what it meant to "see stars." I don't know how long we lay there, just trying to breathe normal. Finally, I was able to get out, "Jacob, you okay?" He answered, "Yeah," in a squeaky little voice. It was quite a while longer before we had the strength to get up and walk home.

We never did tell Mom or Dad about that. Not even after we grew up.



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Chapter 2

Light crept around the edge of the bedroom curtains. Not full daylight, but enough to disturb Chelsea's sleep. With a groan, she rolled onto her other side and pulled a pillow over her head. Too late. She was awake now. Staying in bed and pretending otherwise was useless.

She pushed the pillow away, opened her eyes, and sat up. The clock on the nightstand read 5:32 a.m. A ridiculous time to get up, in her opinion. It was suitable for farmers with cows to milk, maybe, and those irritatingly cheerful morning people—the ones she tried to avoid at all costs. But it wasn't suitable for her.

Still, nothing she tried made sleep possible.

Grumbling, she got out of bed and went into the bathroom. The lengthy shower did little to improve her mood. She remained grumpy as she went down the stairs to make her first cup of coffee.

Seated at the kitchen table a short while later, she sipped the creamer-laced beverage, her gaze moving around the room. The cupboards had no doors. Plates, cups, and glasses sat stacked or placed in neat rows on the two shelves. There weren't enough

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dishes to host a large dinner party, but there were enough for a few guests on special occasions. Of course, there wouldn't be many for Rosemary Townsend to entertain in this small community, even if she wanted to.

Chelsea rose and carried her coffee mug out to the deck that wrapped around two sides of the house. The wood beneath her bare feet was wet from the previous night's storm, and a chill permeated the air. According to the weatherman, the cool temperatures wouldn't linger. Warmer weather would follow on the heels of the storm.

Settling onto a deck chair, she looked across the winding road to the building that housed Rosemary & Time. It appeared less ominous than it had yesterday. Less ominous, but also in dire need of repairs. A broken window on the second story had been mended with duct tape. A shutter on the window to the left of it had lost a bracket and hung crooked, giving the building a crazy-eyed appearance. Another good windstorm might blow the thing off. The whole place needed a coat of fresh paint. And that was only the outside. She already knew what awaited her on the inside. It was overwhelming when she thought about it.

She took a deep breath and released it. Aunt Rosemary would have to hire someone for any major jobs, and painting the outside of the antique store was definitely a major one. Plus, Chelsea wasn't particularly handy when it came to household repairs. She was willing to work hard and was able to follow instructions, but her expertise ended with changing light bulbs and swapping out batteries in smoke alarms. Heaven only knew what other updates were needed before the shop could reopen.

"But I can clean and reorganize," she said aloud. "I'm good at that."

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The rumble of an engine drew her gaze up the road. Sounds carried a long distance in the forest, so it was hard to tell how soon the vehicle would come into view around the bend. In this instance, it wasn't long.

Although the truck with its SuperCrew cab was a newer model, the shiny black paint job was covered with a layer of dirt. Yesterday's storm hadn't dumped enough rain to wash it clean. The driver looked her way as he passed by Aunt Rosemary's house. She didn't know anybody in Chickadee Creek, but she waved anyway. She wanted to show that she belonged there and wasn't trespassing.

That was probably my excitement for the day.

She drained the last of the coffee from the mug, then stood. It was time to get to work. She had three more days before Aunt Rosemary would be released from the rehab center in Boise and return to Chickadee Creek. Chelsea wanted to surprise her great-aunt with how much she'd accomplished in only a few days' time.

She carried the empty mug to the kitchen and set it in the sink. A slice of toast would do for breakfast. When she'd hastily left Spokane, she hadn't brought much food with her. Just a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a few apples. Later, she would make a trip to the store to stock up on groceries. Aunt Rosemary had said to tell the woman at the mercantile to charge it to her account.

A smile tipped the corners of her mouth. How many places were left in this country where somebody had an account at a market? Couldn't be many. Only in places the size of Chickadee Creek. And places like Hadley Station where she'd grown up. Places where the woman at the grocery store would call a kid's

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mom if they bought too much candy. Places where everybody knew your name and what family you belonged to.

Which meant the guy who'd driven by in the black truck already knew who she was and why she was in town.



"There you be," Grace Witherstone said the moment Liam stepped through the mercantile doors.

He glanced around the store. No other customers. Which meant he would be listening to Grace for a while. There wouldn't be anything or anyone to distract her.

"That was some storm we had yesterday, but we coulda used more rain than blow. Tree come down behind my place. Lucky we all still have power. Never know when a tree's gonna fall on them wires."

He made a sound in his throat to show that he listened.

"I hear that development closer to the highway's got buried utilities. That's gotta help when the weather turns."

Liam looked around again. "Maybe I could get my order."

"Oh, sure. Listen to me. Yakkin' your head off. The boxes are right over there in that corner." She pointed.

He moved in the indicated direction.

"I heard Rosemary's great-niece got here yesterday."

"Rosemary?"

"The woman I told you about on the phone. Rosemary Townsend. The one who owns the antique store."

He thought of the young woman he'd passed on the way to the mercantile. She'd sat on a deck, her ginger hair resplendent in the morning sun. Only now did he realize the antique shop

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was across the road from where she'd sat. Rosemary's great-niece? Probably. Hadn't Grace mentioned that the little girl who'd come to stay years ago had freckles and red hair?

"When my help comes in this afternoon, I'm headin' over to see her. Want to know what day Rosemary's expected back." The woman grinned. "And I want to see what that girl's made of. No small job, trying to reopen the antique shop. It's a mess. Rosemary has her own way of doing things, but I sure as shootin' wouldn't call her organized. But there's plenty of interesting stuff inside that shop, that's for sure."

Liam lifted two boxes, one stacked on top of the other. "I'll have to go to the shop when it reopens. Have a look around."

"You sure should." Grace picked up a third box. "And make sure you talk to Rosemary when you get the chance. Like I said, nobody knows the history of Chickadee Creek better than she does."

Liam hid a smile as he headed out to the truck. If the conversations of the past two days were any indication, Grace Witherstone wouldn't be content until he met Rosemary Townsend. And since this town was where he meant to stay for the immediate future, he might as well get to know the locals. Up until recently, he'd kept himself isolated. It was time for him to change that.

After setting the boxes in the bed of his truck, he turned toward the woman, who had followed him out. "I promise I'll make it a point to meet Mrs. Townsend."

"It's Miss Townsend." Grace set the box she carried next to the others in the truck bed. "Rosemary never married—although she was engaged, I hear tell, when she was real young. I've seen pictures of her back then. My, oh, my. She was a beauty." She

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laughed softly. “Rosemary could’ve been in films. Movie-star pretty, she was.”

“I’ll get those last two boxes,” he said, then strode back into the store.

Liam didn’t know if Grace knew he was an actor or if she’d seen any of his films. Despite her love for gossip, if she did know, she’d never let on to him, and he’d found it a refreshing change to be treated just like anybody else in this small town. All too often, all someone wanted to talk about when they met him was his acting. What was it like in Hollywood? Who did he know? Was this actress or that one as beautiful as she looked on the screen?

Grace didn’t follow him into the store, and by the time he returned, she was talking to another customer who’d arrived in Liam’s absence. With all of the boxes now in the back of his truck, he closed the tailgate, gave a quick wave to Grace, and climbed into the cab.

It was strange, he thought as he drove toward home, that he desired anonymity. He’d worked hard to improve his acting skills, and he’d wanted the fame that came with success in Hollywood. He’d wanted the recognition. His lucky break had come several years back, leading to roles in some major motion pictures. Small roles led to bigger ones. His latest movie had released on Thanksgiving of the previous year. There’d been rumors of possible supporting-actor award nominations for him, although they hadn’t panned out. Rarely did for that kind of film. Not that he’d paid attention to any of the hoopla at the time. Jacob had been in a bad way by then.

After his brother’s death, after the funeral and helping his parents with all of the details of tying up a life cut too short,

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Liam had come to Chickadee Creek. To get away. To get his head on straight. To grieve. The few townsfolk he'd interacted with over the winter months seemed willing to leave him alone. Again, he couldn't be sure if they didn't know what he did for a living or if they just didn't care.

Maybe I don't care either. He let the words play in his mind for a few seconds, testing their veracity—and not for the first time. Did he care? Didn't he care? *God, what is it I'm supposed to do? What's next for me?*

As he approached the antique store, he saw the young woman from the front porch crossing the road ahead of him, carrying a pail and a ladder. She was a slip of a thing and looked even slighter as she carried the ladder. He slowed the truck. She wore a sleeveless top and jean shorts suitable for the summer heat. Her ginger-colored hair had been down around her shoulders when he drove into town. Now it was smoothed back and captured in a ponytail. She glanced toward the truck and hurried the last few steps across the road, stopping on the boardwalk outside the entrance to the shop, where she leaned the ladder against the wall.

Liam was tempted to say something to her through his open window, then thought better of it. She was busy, and he needed to get back to his own place. He pressed gently down on the accelerator and drove on.

Still, he couldn't quite shake the image of Rosemary Townsend's great-niece carrying that ladder. Maybe it was her hair. He had a weakness for women with red hair. All shades of it. From the palest strawberry blonde to the darkest auburn. It didn't hurt that Hollywood had more than a few of them. Jessica Chastain, Emma Stone, and Bryce Dallas Howard were

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just three of the redheads he'd worked with on films, and if he was honest, he'd had a crush on each of them in turn. Not that they'd noticed him much. They were way out of his league, even if they'd been available. None of them were.

But the memories made him smile. He had lots of good memories from his years of working in the film industry. So why wasn't he ready to go back to it? That was just one of the hard questions he needed to answer.

He hoped he'd be able to do that while staying in Chickadee Creek.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798