

Something Old,  
*Something New*

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Something Old, Something New*

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*one*

Christine flipped the front-door sign to Open as she hummed along with Cyndi Lauper singing “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” Her favorite ’80s satellite radio station poured through her store’s wall-mounted speakers, and after taking a moment to appreciate both her air-conditioning and the early morning sun streaming through the large windows, she turned to scan the business she’d established nearly four years ago.

With its booths displaying everything from the old—like vintage purses and clothes and antique toys and furniture—to the new—like her best friend’s handmade soaps, candles, and greeting cards—Treasure Hunting Antique Mall was a dream come true.

Leaving behind the law office she’d worked in had been a leap of faith. But thanks to the antiques she and her grandmother had collected over the years, the money she’d saved on her own, and the inheritance her grandmother left her, she’d finally opened the store Nana had always talked about owning someday. And right here on Main Street, in their hometown of Flowering Grove, North Carolina.

*If only Nana could see it. She’d love it!*

When a loud meow echoed throughout the large, single room, she spun to see her two resident tabby cats staring up at her. Wanda, the

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smaller, gray tabby, blinked up at Christine, while Pietro, her orange-tabby brother, meowed again. He was at least twice his sister's size.

"Well, now. I suppose you two are waiting for your breakfast, huh?"

Pietro bellowed another response as Wanda rubbed against Christine's shins.

"Okay, then. Follow me." She strolled down the aisle between a row of booths until she reached the breakroom across from her office at the back of the store. The cats began a chorus of loud meows as she filled their bowls with their favorite food and then provided fresh water.

"Now, Pietro, don't push your sister out of the way and finish her meal. You need to start watching your weight or the vet will put you on a diet at your next checkup."

Both cats ignored her, scarfing down their breakfast as if they hadn't eaten in a week.

"You two are way too spoiled," she muttered.

The bell above the front door rang, and Christine made a beeline to the front counter.

Mrs. Ward, a frequent customer, sashayed in. "Good morning, Christine. Oh my! It's another hot morning out there. But then again, the Fourth is next week."

Christine leaned against the counter. "June sure is flying by. What brings you in today?"

"I'm looking for a bookcase." With her perfectly coifed graying-blond bob, just the right amount of makeup to accentuate her brown eyes, and designer jeans and bag, Mrs. Ward seemed to be enjoying her early retirement from the corporate world in style.

"Are you looking for any particular finish, Mrs. Ward?"

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The older woman shook a finger at her. “How old are you and your twin sister now? Twenty-eight, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That means you should call me Harriet like any other adult.”

Christine smiled. “Well, I’ll try,” she said, but she would never get used to calling her Harriet. Her parents had raised her better than that.

“How is Britney doing?”

“She’s great. Thanks.”

“How old are her twins now?”

Christine couldn’t hold back a grin as she pictured the faces of her precious nieces—her “M&Ms,” Maddy and Mila. “They’re four, and they’re fantastic. Growing like weeds and learning to read. I’m hoping to see them this weekend.”

“It’s just so astounding that Britney is a fraternal twin and has a set of fraternal twins of her own.” She clucked her tongue. “Now, wouldn’t it be something if you had twins too?” She pinned Christine with a look. “Do you have a special fella in your life yet?”

Christine merely cleared her throat, unwilling to discuss her non-existent love life.

Mrs. Ward turned toward the furniture pieces up front, most of which Christine had found, refinished in her workshop at home, and then brought in to sell. “I have boxes of my favorite novels in the attic, and I want to put them on display.”

“Oh, how nice.” Christine followed her.

Mrs. Ward frowned. “I’m sure you heard about my Cameron’s messy divorce. His wife decided she didn’t love him anymore. Anyway, he stayed with us until he got back on his feet.” Her expression brightened. “And now he’s finally moved out, which means I have an office again.”

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“That’s wonderful.” Christine made a sweeping gesture toward the bookshelves, finished with varying stains. “I have a few here and more in the booths. What size do you need?”

Mrs. Ward touched a finger to her lips and then pointed to a five-shelf, solid-oak bookcase Christine had refinished and brought to the store last week. “That’s it.”

“Do you, uh, want to measure it?”

“Nope.”

Christine inwardly grimaced as she recalled the pieces of furniture Mrs. Ward had purchased without measuring them—a china cabinet, a dining room set and buffet, a triple dresser, and an entertainment center. Each time, Christine’s mother, who had occasion to visit the Ward home from time to time, informed Christine the piece was scaled a bit too large or small for the room it was in. Too bad Mrs. Ward’s design sensibilities didn’t necessarily translate to interior design.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to measure it, Mrs.—uh, Harriet?”  
*Not that you would have properly assessed your space before coming.*

Mrs. Ward waved off the question and then pulled a matching wallet out of her gray purse. “How much is it?”

Christine told her, then grabbed the tag off the bookcase and slipped behind the counter. She rang up the sale and had Mrs. Ward run her credit card through the machine before handing her a receipt.

“I have a truck parked right out front,” Mrs. Ward said.

“Oh. Let me grab my hand dolly, then.”

“Perfect.”

Christine maneuvered the heavy bookcase out the front door to the sidewalk, where Mrs. Ward stood waiting at the tailgate of a Ford pickup truck. Christine wished her brother-in-law was somewhere close by. Not only was Hunter a wonderful husband and father, but

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he often made time to help her haul heavier pieces of furniture to and from the store.

Christine squared her shoulders. She was strong and courageous. She could lift this bookcase by herself.

Couldn't she?

Mrs. Ward dropped the tailgate and then grabbed an armload of blankets. "I had to convince Marty to let me bring his truck today. But I knew you'd have what I wanted, and like I said, I'm ready to reclaim my office." She spread the blankets out on the tailgate and truck bed.

"Any chance Marty is nearby to help me lift this?"

"No, he went fishing with his brothers. But I can help."

Christine sucked in a deep breath. Where was a superhero—maybe Thor—when she needed him?

"All right," she said, doubtful but willing to try. "You take one side, and I'll take the other." Once their hands had grasped the bookcase, she called, "Ready? One, two, three!" ®

They heaved and moaned as they lifted the bookcase approximately an inch off the ground. It was even heavier than Christine had recalled. Then as they shoved it toward the truck bed, it started to slip, and she yelped.

"Whoa there!" a masculine voice said before the bookcase seemed to magically float up into the air and then gently land on the truck's bed.

Christine blinked, wondering who her hero was and where he'd come from. Had Thor appeared? She turned, and her jaw dropped when she realized who was standing beside her.

"Brent Nicholson," she managed to say. "Hi."

"Hey." He jumped up on the tailgate, rubbed his left knee, and then pushed the bookcase farther in. "I thought you were going to drop this," he said as he started arranging the blankets.

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“We almost did.” Christine stared up at him. With those broad shoulders, that curly, dark hair, and those honey-brown eyes, he looked almost the same as he had ten years ago. He just seemed taller than he had in high school. And more mature, perhaps due to the dark scruff that covered his angular jaw.

“Why, Brent,” Mrs. Ward sang as he hopped down, “aren’t you a sight for sore eyes? I didn’t know you were back in town.”

After shutting the tailgate—and rubbing his left knee again—Brent pushed his hand through his riot of thick waves and curls. They always had looked a bit unkept. “I’ve only been here two days, ma’am.”

“It’s been a long time. I don’t think I’ve seen you in probably a decade.” Mrs. Ward turned her curious stare to Christine. “Have you?”

Christine shook her head. “No, ma’am, not since before college.” Her mind’s eye filled with the vision of her sister hanging all over Brent as they wore their light-blue caps and gowns while posing for photos at their high school graduation. He’d stopped by the house a few times that summer before the three of them left for college—she and Britney for UNC at Charlotte and Brent for UNC at Chapel Hill—but that image was most fresh in her mind.

“So where have you been hiding yourself?” Mrs. Ward asked.

Brent cleared his throat. “In Virginia.” He took a step toward the sidewalk.

“Doing what?”

“Different things.” He turned his gaze to Christine, and she wished she’d styled her hair that morning instead of settling for a messy bun. Though Brent wouldn’t have noticed. After all, he’d never noticed anything about her in high school. She was always invisible next to Britney.

When he looked away, she cast her eyes on his left hand. No ring.

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“How long will you be in town?” Mrs. Ward said, prodding as she so often did. “Are you here for good?”

“No. Just for a while. I’m helping my great-aunt with some repairs to her house.” He jammed his thumb toward the row of stores lining Main Street. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I need to buy some supplies and get back.”

Mrs. Ward waved him off. “Of course. You run along now. And tell your aunt Midge I said hello.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said before turning to Christine.

“Thanks for your help, Brent,” she told him.

He nodded. “You’re welcome.” Then he hustled down the sidewalk.

“He’s easy on the eyes, isn’t he, Christine?” Mrs. Ward gushed once Brent was halfway down the street.

“He always was.”

More visions crashed into Christine’s memory—Brent and Britney walking arm in arm down the hallways of Flowering Grove High, laughing with their popular friends in the cafeteria, standing on the auditorium stage to accept their crowns as homecoming king and queen. But that was a long time ago, and Brent had broken Britney’s heart, leaving her twin devastated. She was much better off with Hunter, who knew how to treat her properly.

Still, Christine stared after her sister’s first love, wondering why the former high school quarterback, the captain of the football team, and the most popular young man in their graduating class had returned to their small town after all this time. He’d said it was to help his aunt with home repairs, but was that the only reason? He’d also said he’d been doing *different things* in Virginia. What did that mean?

“Well, thank you for the bookcase,” Mrs. Ward said. “I plan to put it to good use.”

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Christine smiled. “You’re welcome. Be sure to let Mr. Ward help you unload it.” *And I hope it actually fits in your office!*

“Oh, I’ll ask him and his fishing buddy brothers to take care of it for me.” She pointed to the store. “Looks like you have some customers. You’d better get back inside.”

A group of women around Mrs. Ward’s age were filing into the store. It looked like another busy day at Treasure Hunting Antique Mall.



Brent sighed as he stalked toward the hardware store, nodding hellos to familiar faces that didn’t mask their surprise at seeing him back in his hometown. So much for keeping a low profile and sneaking in and out of Swanson’s Hardware without being recognized by the locals.

Grimacing, he could only imagine what Harriet Ward would say to her friends if she learned what a mess his life was on top of failing to be the college football hero the whole town had expected him to be. She’d probably portray him as the prodigal son who’d come hobbling back to his family.

He’d hoped to sneak past the woman without even making eye contact, but when he saw the bookcase shift, he had to intervene before it fell to the ground, taking her with it. He wasn’t one to ignore someone who needed assistance.

While he’d recognized Mrs. Ward as soon as he looked over at the pickup truck, not until he’d hefted the thing—at his knee’s expense—had he realized the tall blonde also struggling to lift the bookcase was Christine Sawyer.

Brent swallowed a groan. He’d hoped to avoid running into the Sawyer twins during his stay, but there he was, already face-to-face

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with his ex-girlfriend's sister. Perhaps it was best to get it over with, though. His mother had told him both Christine and Britney still lived in Flowering Grove, making it inevitable that he'd see at least one of them since he was in town for more than just a quick Thanksgiving or Christmas visit with his family.

He rubbed his hand over the stubble on his jaw as he recalled his relationship with Britney. He'd once believed he would spend his life with her, but that fantasy had evaporated years ago, right along with the bright future his football scholarship promised—all thanks to a career-ending injury.

But that was ancient history, and now he was here to help his aunt Midge before returning to whatever life he could scrounge together back in Virginia. Then except for those short, one- or two-day holiday visits with his family, he could once again leave Flowering Grove and all the painful memories it held for him in his rearview mirror.

Brent quickened his pace and swept past Miller's Dry Cleaners and the Fairy Tale Bridal Shop, which he noticed only because Britney used to love gazing at the dresses in the window. Then coming to the hardware store, he pushed the door open, grateful to find only a few customers milling about.

He grabbed a flatbed and zipped around the large store, grabbing the items on his list—four bundles of shingles, two boxes of nails, a hammer, tar paper, and a few sheets of plywood.

When he approached the front counter, the store was still quiet, and he found Mr. Swanson himself flipping through a catalog. Brent guessed the man was at least seventy-five by now, but with the same receding gray hair, matching bushy eyebrows, wrinkly face, and warm, welcoming smile, he still looked exactly as Brent recalled. He'd been a bachelor for as long as Brent could remember, and he assumed he still was.

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The older man smiled, peering at Brent over his reading glasses. “Well, I’ll be. If it isn’t the winningest quarterback in Flowering Grove High’s history!”

“Hi, Mr. Swanson.” Brent pinned a smile on his face, but heat crawled up his neck as he set the hammer and boxes of nails on the counter.

Mr. Swanson peered over the counter at the supplies he’d wheeled over. “Looks like you’re repairing a roof. Are you working over at your folks’ place?”

“No, sir. I’m helping my great-aunt get her house ready to sell.”

“Is that right?” His brow wrinkled with concern. “Where’s Midge planning to move?”

“She wants to join her friends at the retirement community over in Oakboro.” Brent pulled his wallet from the back pocket of his shorts. “She’s buying a condo there.”

Mr. Swanson shook his head. “How about that?” He began entering purchase prices on his cash register. “So what have you been up to the last few years, son?”

Brent pulled out the stack of bills Aunt Midge had given him for the supplies. “Working in Virginia.”

“What do you do there?”

Brent hesitated, then said, “I’m between jobs right now.”

It would be too embarrassing to tell Mr. Swanson the whole truth of the last six months, including that he’d had his own business but then lost it, forcing him to move out of his rental home and rent a room from his friend Devonte. Especially when he himself was still trying to come to grips with the shambles his life had become.

When Mr. Swanson gave him the total for the sale, Brent reached for his wallet again and pulled out some of his own cash. Aunt Midge told him she had enough money for the repairs—and insisted on

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paying him to make them—but how could he be sure she was telling the truth? Or that she truly understood that the condo and the retirement community’s fees wouldn’t come cheap?

Mr. Swanson handed him his change and dropped the receipt in the bag with the nails. “What were you doing before you were between jobs, son?”

“Mostly home remodeling.” Brent slipped the change into his wallet and then pushed it into his back pocket.

Mr. Swanson beamed. “Then you’re the man to help your aunt.”

“Yes, sir.” Brent swallowed a relieved sigh, glad the older man seemed satisfied with his vague responses—and hadn’t mentioned his failed football career.

“You tell Midge I said hello.”

“I will, and I’m sure I’ll be back soon for more supplies.”

Brent was grateful to dash out of the store and to his truck unnoticed. Now to return to Aunt Midge’s house and get to work. The sooner he finished with the repairs, the sooner he could get out of Flowering Grove.

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## two

Brent steered his gray Chevrolet Silverado pickup down Main Street, passing the town hall, fire station, and library, then turned left onto Maple Avenue to head out of Flowering Grove's downtown area. He flipped the air-conditioning to high and then drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as one of his favorite hard-rock tunes blared through the truck's speakers.

His shoulders tensed when the high school football stadium came into view and memories of his high school days overtook his mind. Leading his teammates to victory after victory and then the state championship. Witnessing pride on Dad's face, which he hadn't seen since his injury stole the future his father had planned for him.

The future he'd planned for himself at the time.

Brent frowned down at the multiple scars stretching across his left knee. Thanks to blowing it, he had nothing left to make his father proud—and Dad reveled in reminding him of that.

Slowing his truck, he slapped on his right blinker and eased into the driveway leading to Aunt Midge's one-story, brick ranch. Another swell of nostalgia overtook him. Many of his best childhood memories had taken place in this house, and the majority of them were of his great-uncle Sal. Brent cherished the time they'd spent together

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building things with wood, watching nature movies, and packing up his uncle's old pickup truck to head to his favorite fishing pond.

Uncle Sal had passed away fifteen years ago, but Aunt Midge was fiercely independent and had refused his mother's numerous offers for her to move in with her and Dad. They thought she could sell her home and then help them add a bedroom and bath to their own small house. But instead, she'd stayed where she was and only recently decided to sell it to join her friends at the retirement community in nearby Oakboro. That was when she'd called Brent and asked if he could get free to come fix up the house—almost as though she knew he was . . . lost. But he hadn't told anyone in his family about losing his business. When Aunt Midge called for his help, he'd just told her yes, he could make the time.

Brent slipped the truck into Park just as the screen door at the front of the house swung open. Aunt Midge toddled out, making her way down the front steps and then down the path that led to the driveway. Wearing her signature bright-turquoise, cat-shaped glasses, a bright-pink T-shirt and matching pink shorts, and bright-purple slippers, she schlepped toward him, her right arm waving in the air.

"Did I give you enough cash?" she called as she approached him.

He jumped down onto the pavement. "You gave me plenty, Aunt Midge." He didn't have the heart to ask her for more money in case she didn't really have enough funds for all these repairs and buying a condo. Besides, assisting her was his pleasure, and quite frankly, her call for help had been a balm to his bruised soul. And it wasn't as though he was totally broke—not yet. He was even paying Devonte rent while he was here, even though his friend said he didn't have to.

"Now, Brent, you wouldn't lie to your great-aunt, would you?" She squinted up at him, lifting her chin.

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He swallowed. He was at least a foot taller than Aunt Midge, but she could intimidate him with a look. “No, ma’am.”

“Let me see the receipt.” She held out a wrinkled hand.

He busied himself with collecting the bag of nails and the hammer from the back seat of his four-door cab. “He didn’t give me a receipt.”

“I happen to know that Jerry Swanson always gives his customers a receipt. You might as well tell me how much I owe you so I can pay you back.” She sidled up to him, reached into the bag of nails, and plucked out the receipt before he could stop her. She might be close to eighty, but she was still quick when she wanted to be.

“Aunt Midge—”

“So I *do* owe you money.” She frowned up at him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He pursed his lips. “I just want to help you. After all, I haven’t been around much since I left home.”

“You *are* helping me. But you must have given up a job or two to do it, and I don’t want you to lose money. Your great-uncle worked hard all his life, saved and invested well, and provided for me when he passed away. So I’m doing just fine. Money isn’t a problem.”

He closed the truck door, wondering why she’d never had all this work done before if money wasn’t a problem. Uncle Sal would never have let the house fall into such disrepair. But at least she’d installed new windows a few years ago.

“I need to start on your roof. How about we argue about this later?”

She huffed out a breath.

“Mr. Swanson told me to tell you hello.”

Aunt Midge rolled her eyes. “I bet he did. That old fuddy-duddy

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has been trying to get me to go out with him ever since your uncle Sal passed away.”

Brent blinked, trying to imagine her dating. No, that just seemed . . . *wrong!*

“I’m not interested in seeing anyone.” Her expression brightened. “Now, you on the other hand, should be. After all, you’re nearing thirty!” She rubbed her hand over his bicep. “Your mother told me you and Tara broke up. What on earth happened? I thought you two were so happy.”

*So did I.*

He shrugged as if Tara hadn’t broken both his heart and trust. “It just didn’t work out.”

“But she’s not all that’s bothering you, is it? I can tell.”

“I’m changing into cargo shorts before I climb up on the roof. I’ll need the pockets up there.” He walked to the detached garage.

“Brent,” Aunt Midge began, marching after him with her slippers slapping the pavement, “I’ll let you get away with changing the subject this time, but you *are* going to tell me what’s going on with you.”

He heaved a sigh as he punched in the code on the garage keypad, then waited as the door hummed and lifted before placing the bag of nails and hammer on his uncle’s workbench in the back.

“I’m making your favorite meal tonight,” Aunt Midge said from right behind him.

He turned and smiled. “The *best* meal.”

She gave his cheek a pat. “Only the best for my favorite nephew.”

“I’m your *only* nephew,” he deadpanned.

“That’s right, and you’ll stay that way until you get married and give me more nieces or nephews. You know, my sister over in South Carolina, Beverly, already has three great-grandchildren. Three! And

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I have zero little ones to brag about.” She held up her hand, making a round shape with her fingers, then strolled out of the garage.

Leaving his aunt plucking weeds from a flower bed, Brent headed into the house through the back door and made his way through the kitchen, dining room, and family room into the hallway that led to the guest bathroom, two guest rooms, and master bedroom. After assessing all the work to be done, he knew the house better than ever.

Halting in front of the sea of photos lining the hall walls, he took in Kylie’s high school senior portrait. With his younger sister’s light-brown hair, hazel eyes, and bright smile, she resembled their mother.

Brent smiled at a few more photos of his beautiful sister but then groaned when he found the senior year prom portrait of him and Britney. He’d asked Aunt Midge to take it down when he visited last Christmas, but she insisted she loved that photo too much to do it. “*You looked so handsome,*” she said.

Brent took in his huge smile, looking as if he was living in the moment without a care in the world. And except for his father’s constant pushing, he had been.

Britney, of course, looked like a supermodel, just as she always had. Her simple, powder-blue dress and subtle makeup accentuated her bright, baby-blue eyes. With her high cheekbones, petite frame, and bright smile, she’d lit up every room she entered. He’d had a crush on her in middle school and finally found the nerve to ask her out to a movie their freshman year of high school. They’d been inseparable from then on.

Brent snorted. Life had seemed so easy back then. He’d had a full scholarship to UNC Chapel Hill plus his beautiful girlfriend, Britney Sawyer, the woman of his dreams. He was certain they’d build a future together after they’d graduated college and he’d found a high-paying corporate job of some kind.

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Until he lost his scholarship and then Britney, his whole world crumbling. But that was old news. Britney Sawyer was in his past, his feelings for her long gone, and so was football.

He entered the guest room he'd chosen to sleep in and dug his cargo shorts out of his duffle bag. After changing, he headed back outside to grab the tallest ladder in the garage, eager to turn his thoughts elsewhere. But as he stared up at the house's roof in desperate need of attention, he realized just how different his life was now from what he'd expected it to be when he was that high school senior.

Well, he might not know what he'd do after finishing his work here, but at least he could look forward to his favorite meal tonight—Aunt Midge's fried chicken.

Christine smiled as a young woman carried a set of vintage, pink Pyrex mixing bowls to the counter. "You must have found those in the Simply Southern booth," she said as she managed a smile and pulled the tag off the bowls. Business had been good, but she was kind of tired and just glad it was Saturday so she'd have the next two days off.

"I did." The woman pushed a lock of her straight, nearly black hair over her shoulder. "I've been looking for more pieces to match the ones my grandmother gave me."

"I knew those wouldn't last long. They're beautiful." As Christine rang up the purchase, her cell phone chimed with a text message under the counter. But she ignored it.

She shared the total, and the woman slipped her credit card into the machine. Then Christine printed out her receipt and set the bowls in a box.

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“I noticed one of the booths is empty now,” the woman said as she slipped her card back into her wallet.

“Yes, that’s right. Melissa’s Creations. Her husband was transferred to Ohio.”

“Oh, well, that’s good for her family, I suppose, but I’ll miss browsing her cute displays.” She dropped her wallet into her large tote, then placed it on top of the bowls before lifting the box with both hands.

“If you run into anyone who might be interested in the booth space, please let me know,” Christine said as she held the front door open for her.

“I will. Have a great day.”

Back at the counter, Christine retrieved her phone and found a text from Britney.

*Game night at my house. 7 p.m. Don't be late.*

Christine chuckled as she shook her head. Her sister always knew how to get straight to the point.

*Yes, ma'am. What can I bring?*

*Just my daughters' favorite twin aunt.*

She smiled down at the framed photo of her sweet nieces she kept on the counter. Especially with their bright-blue eyes, they resembled Britney and Christine’s look at their age. But like their mother’s and aunt’s, they’re faces were different. Maddy’s was longer while Mila’s was rounder. And Maddy’s hair was a dirty blonde, like Christine’s, and Mila’s was a sunshine blonde, like Britney’s.

She was never too tired to spend time with her nieces. They were

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the light of her life, and she would never dare appear at their house without a surprise for them. She'd stop by the local bakery before grabbing a quick dinner at home. Their favorite iced cookies were always a hit.

A meow sounded before Wanda hopped up on the counter and rubbed her head against Christine's arm. "I suppose your sudden need for love means you're hungry again, huh, Wanda?"

Pietro appeared at Christine's feet and rubbed his head on her shin.

"That's a yes from both of you, then." Christine checked the time on her phone and found it was almost five. Then she started toward the back of the store. "Come on, you two. I'll fill your bowls and give you plenty of fresh water before I start closing up."

After taking care of the cats, Christine helped her remaining customers, then shut down for the day before heading to her waiting pickup truck. As she slipped inside, she realized she loved the gold Toyota Tacoma just as much as the day she'd bought it before opening her store.

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Christine parked in the driveway of her sister's two-story, brick colonial right behind her mother's silver Ford Escape SUV. Hunter's white Chevrolet pickup truck sat next to her mother's SUV with the words *Davenport & Sons Grading* emblazoned on the side. Her father loved cars and trucks, and Christine always paid attention to makes and models. It was one of the ways she and her father had always bonded.

She retrieved the box of pink iced cookies—they didn't have the twins' favorite purple icing today—and her purse, then climbed out of her truck. On her way to the front door, she took in her sister's

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perfectly manicured, lush, green lawn and happy flowers. Britney had it all—a doting husband, adorable children, and a beautiful home.

Christine was happy for her twin. She only wanted the best for her, and she was happy she'd met Hunter, who'd attended Oakboro public schools, and then settled down with him before her twenty-second birthday. Yet a tiny part of her still resented how Britney always seemed to get what she wanted without even trying.

She sighed. What was she thinking? She had her store, her house, and her family, and she was happy with her life—even though at times loneliness crept in. Deep down, she had to admit she longed for a husband with whom she could share her life, but she was grateful for everything she had, especially her family and adorable nieces.

Peering through the screen door, Christine rang the doorbell and immediately heard footsteps scrambling toward her. In a flash Mila and Maddy stood before her side by side, grinning ear-to-ear and wearing matching purple shorts and purple T-shirts featuring Rapunzel.

“Auntie!” Mila announced as she flung the door open, allowing Christine to step inside.

Maddy stood on tiptoes. “What did you bring us?”

Mila folded her hands, but Maddy reached for the box in Christine's hand. “Is there a surprise in there?”

Britney came around the corner and frowned. “Madison! Mila! Where are your manners?” She rested her hands on her small hips. Even with her blond hair in a ponytail and her face free of makeup, Britney was a stunning beauty.

“It's fine, Brit.” Christine smiled down at her nieces. “I'm their favorite aunt, so it's my job to spoil them, right, girls?”

The twins jumped up and down as she opened the cookie box

and tipped it so they could see inside. “I brought your favorites. How do these look?”

“Yummy!” Mila declared. “Even though they’re pink.”

Maddy reached again. “Can—I mean, *may* we have one now?”

Britney took the box from Christine. “Yes, but”—she held up the pointer finger on her right hand—“Only one. Take them into the family room and use one of the little plates already in there. Then choose the game you want to play, and we’ll join you soon.” She handed Mila the box.

“Yes, Mommy,” both girls sang before scooting away.

Britney shook her head. “They’re a handful.”

“Now we know how our mother felt, right?” Christine quipped.

They laughed as they walked into the kitchen, where Mom stood at the counter pouring potato chips into a bowl.

“Chrissy!” she announced. “You made it.”

Christine had always believed her twin favored their mother. Not only did both women stand at barely five foot one, six inches shorter than Christine, but they shared the same thick, light-blond hair. And while Mom’s bobbed style had started showing flecks of gray, her beautiful face was still youthful with only a few wrinkles around her eyes.

Christine dropped her backpack purse on a chair as a murmur of conversation filtered in through the screen door leading to the deck. She looked out the window to see Hunter and Dad chatting. Jake, the family’s patient golden retriever, sat nearby, happily wagging his tail.

“Put me to work,” she said as she stepped to the sink to wash her hands.

“How about you pull out the crackers from that cabinet up there?” Britney nodded in that direction, then opened the refrigerator and took out a block of cheese. “You can slice this too.”

Something Old, *Something New*

Christine opened the cabinet and found a box of Ritz crackers, then located a cutting board and knife and started slicing.

“How was it at the store this week, Chrissy?” Mom asked.

“It’s been busy, but I have an empty booth now.”

Britney spun to face her. “Who moved out?”

“Melissa Gorman. Her husband got a big promotion, and they’re moving to Ohio.”

Britney opened a bag of pretzels. “No way! I loved her handmade jewelry. It was so colorful.”

“It *was* nice. So you have an empty booth.” Mom took a container of dip from the refrigerator.

Christine nodded as she arranged cheese slices on the crackers. “I’m designing new posters and flyers with information about it, and I’ll advertise the opportunity on my website and Facebook page too.”

Mom patted her arm. “I’m sure you’ll find a new vendor soon, then. In the meantime,” she began with a coy smile, “have any tall, dark, and handsome men stopped by and swept you off your feet?”

Christine’s thoughts immediately snapped to Brent, and she couldn’t stop a snort. “Uh, not really.”

While Brent Nicholson absolutely fit the tall, dark, and handsome description, he would never sweep her off her feet. He’d dated Britney, the beautiful and popular twin, cheerleading captain, and homecoming queen who could have been a supermodel if only she were taller. But that was beside the point. Even if he did notice her, Brent had broken her sister’s heart, and Christine would never date him let alone consider trusting him. That would be a violation of the unwritten sister code.

“What did that snort mean?” her twin asked.

Christine waved her off. “Nothing.”

Amy Clipston

“Whoa there.” Britney latched onto her arm and turned Christine to face her. “Tell me.”

“Like I said, nothing.”

Britney folded her arms over her green T-shirt. “Spill it, sis.”

Christine sighed and peeked at her mother, who was watching her with curiosity sparkling in her blue eyes. “Fine, but you won’t like it.”

“What do you mean?” Britney’s electric smile fell away.

Christine ran her fingers over the edge of the counter. “I ran into Brent on Thursday.”

“Brent Nicholson?” Mom asked.

“The one and only.”

“Brent is back?” Britney’s eyes widened as she covered her mouth with one hand.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## three

“Yes, Brent’s back.” Christine explained how he’d helped her and Harriet Ward load the bookcase into the truck. “Then Mrs. Ward tried to pull information out of him. You know how she always wants to know everyone’s business. But he just said he’d been living in Virginia and was here for only a little while to make repairs on his aunt Midge’s house. He was on his way to buy supplies.”

Britney studied Christine. “Helping his aunt?”

“Why wouldn’t he come back to help Midge if she needs it?” Mom shrugged as she filled the glasses with iced tea.

Britney shrugged. “He always said he wanted to leave Flowering Grove behind for good after college. But he was also close to his aunt Midge, so . . .”

The screen door squeaked opened, and Hunter walked in with Dad and Jake in tow. “Who said he’d never come back here, babe?”

Britney’s bright smile was back in a flash, and she stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss her husband’s cheek. “No one important.”

The twins appeared in the doorway, their lips caked with pink icing. Christine had a feeling the box of cookies was at least half empty.

“Are you ready to play now?” Maddy whined.

Amy Clipston

“Yes, we are!” Dad announced, rubbing his hands together. A smile filled his handsome face. Most people who noticed the wrinkles around Bob Sawyer’s hazel eyes and his mouth and the gray threading through his light-brown hair would correctly guess he was in his mid-fifties. But Dad always insisted he was young at heart.

Christine helped carry the snacks to the family-room coffee table, then took her usual spot between the twins on the sofa. Soon the whole family was seated, a Charades for Kids box lying on the table beside the bowl of chips.

“Before I forget, what are we doing on Tuesday for the Fourth?” Hunter asked as he lifted his glass of iced tea.

Christine had always thought Britney and Hunter resembled the Barbie and Ken dolls her nieces loved so much. The couple were both blond and blue-eyed, fit, athletic, and attractive, and their daughters had inherited their good looks.

Dad shrugged. “We’ll have a cookout and then go see the fireworks together like we do every year. Right, Karla?”

“That’s the usual plan.” Mom looked at Christine. “Are you closing the store?”

She nodded. “I always close it on holidays since nothing else is open on Main Street.”

“Perfect,” Dad said. “It’s settled, then. A cookout and fireworks.” He beamed at his granddaughters, and Maddy clapped her hands with obvious excitement.

“Can we please play now, Poppy?” Mila asked.

Dad grinned. “Only if you’re on my team.”

Christine laughed. If she never had children of her own, at least she would cherish these two for the rest of her life. They were a blessing.



After a rousing game of charades, Christine and Britney stowed the leftover snacks in the kitchen. Then Britney grabbed Christine's arm and pulled her back into the family room. "Tell me everything about when you saw Brent."

"There's nothing more to tell."

Her sister's eyes narrowed. "Chrissy, you're holding out on me. Hunter and Dad are on the deck talking sports, and Mom is upstairs reading the twins a bedtime story. So tell me everything now, while we have a moment alone. Is he married?"

"I hate to admit it, but I did look at his left hand. No ring. Listen, we talked for only a few minutes, and he just said he was on the way to the hardware store to get supplies for his great-aunt's house. That, and he's been living in Virginia."

Britney tapped one finger against her lips. "Huh. Did he look good?"

"Very."

Britney sank onto the sofa. "It's ancient history, but I was crazy about him. We dated for almost six years, and even though we hit a rough patch when he was injured and going through all those surgeries, I believed we'd get married someday. But then he up and cheated on me." She leaned back, a sour look on her face. "I thought I'd never have to see the man again." She groaned. "I can't imagine how awkward it would be to run into him now. And truthfully? I still get angry when I think about what he did to me."

Christine sat beside her. "Brit, you have no reason to feel awkward around him. *He* hurt *you*. He's the one who should feel awkward if you see each other. And it's time to let the anger go, don't you think?"

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Britney ran her perfectly polished fingernails through the tassels on a throw pillow. “I suppose. I’m just so grateful I found a good man.”

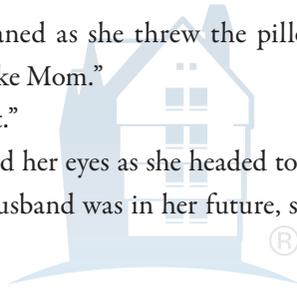
“Right,” Christine scoffed. “As if you ever had to worry about finding a man. Even in middle school, Daddy had to keep a baseball bat by the front door to fend off the droves of boys who wanted to ask you out.”

“Whatever!” Britney laughed as she tossed the pillow at Christine. “But I doubt any of them would have been as good to me and the girls as Hunter is.” She gave her a pointed look. “We have to find *you* a husband, Chrissy!”

Christine groaned as she threw the pillow back, then stood. “Now you sound like Mom.”

“But she’s right.”

Christine rolled her eyes as she headed to the deck to join Dad and Hunter. If a husband was in her future, she’d just as soon find him on her own.



THOMAS NELSON

“We need to leave for the fireworks now,” Aunt Midge announced as she stood at the bottom of the ladder and looked up.

Brent stopped hammering a shingle and sat back on his heels. When pain shot through his left knee, he lowered himself and sat, facing her. “I already told you. I have too much to do around here.” He gestured toward the rest of the roof.

“But you’ll run out of daylight.” She pointed toward the lowering sun.

“There’s still plenty I can do when it’s dark. For one thing, I need to look at that leaky faucet in your master bathroom.”

When Aunt Midge narrowed her eyes, he knew he was in trouble.

Something Old, *Something New*

“Brent Theodore Nicholson, either you take me to the fireworks or you’re fired!”

He laughed and picked up his bottle of water. How he adored his aunt, especially her feisty nature and sense of humor.

“I’ve never missed the Flowering Grove Fourth of July fireworks, and I don’t plan to start now.” She shook a crooked finger at him. “Both your parents had to work, so like I told you well in advance, I expect you to take me.” Then she muttered, “I can’t believe Donna agreed to take inventory at that store on a holiday, but she wanted the extra pay.”

Despite feeling bad that his mother felt she had to sacrifice seeing the town’s fireworks, Brent grinned, resting his bottle of water on his bent knee. “I would imagine Mr. Swanson would be more than happy to take you.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear you say that. Now get down here. We need to get there before all the best spots at Vet’s Field are taken. Besides, my friends will be waiting for me. They’re getting a ride over from Oakboro.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He gathered the box of nails and his hammer. Risking running into his former classmates at one of Flowering Grove’s biggest events of the year was the last thing he wanted to do, but he couldn’t let Aunt Midge down. “I just need to get changed.”

“You’ll look handsome either way. In fact, I imagine you’ll find plenty of pretty young women thrilled to watch the fireworks with you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not looking.”

“That’s when you find someone—when you’re not looking and least expect it. Now, take me to the fireworks!”



Brent stood in line at the Dreamy Ice Cream truck, waiting for his turn and nodding hellos to a few more familiar faces. He was grateful that, so far, no one had forced him to participate in an awkward conversation.

The air smelled of freshly mowed grass, pizza, and funnel cakes as he took in the crowd sitting on lawn chairs and blankets, all waiting for the fireworks display. Aunt Midge was sitting with several of her friends who'd come from the retirement community to enjoy the show. After he'd settled her in one of the two lawn chairs they'd brought from the house, she'd asked him to buy her a mint chocolate chip cone.

Especially after the other women refused his offer to get ice cream for them, too, he suspected her request was meant to force him into mingling with people. But he didn't argue. He'd do anything for her. After all, she was the one person he could count on to defend him when his father started in on what a disappointment Brent's life had turned out to be. Owning a business hadn't been enough to change Dad's mind, and now Brent didn't even have that.

When the couple in front of him left with their frozen treats, Brent stepped up to the window.

"May I help you?" a teenager inside the truck asked, her smile revealing braces as she pushed her bright-red braid off her shoulder.

"One single-dip mint chocolate chip waffle cone and one double-dip chocolate peanut butter waffle cone, please."

"Coming right up," she said before barking his order to a boy who had the same red hair. Must be a family business. When she gave Brent the total, he paid her and then slipped his change into the tip jar. Then

Something Old, *Something New*

she handed him his cones, and he thanked her before turning toward the sea of people.

He'd just taken a step when a little girl rushed toward him, giggling as her blond braids bounced off her shoulders.

"Maddy! Maddy, no!" a voice scolded just as the little girl crashed into him, knocking both ice cream cones out of his hands.

Brent stared down at his gray T-shirt, now sporting a large, brown stain. Then he looked up and found himself face-to-face with Christine Sawyer again.

He ran his tongue over his teeth and breathed in through his nose. Of all the people here, why couldn't he have avoided running into her?

"I'm-I'm so sorry." Christine's face flushed as she released the hand of a second little girl, who also had blond braids and wore a red, white, and blue shorts outfit that matched the first little girl's. They resembled each other physically, too, yet they looked about the same age. He surmised Christine had her own set of fraternal twins.

Christine reached behind her and grabbed a handful of napkins from the funnel cake truck. She leaned toward him, but then just cleared her throat and held out the napkins for him to take. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He rubbed a napkin over the stain but only managed to make it bigger. *Perfect.*

Christine frowned at the first twin. "What do you say, Madison?"

The little girl looked up at him, her expression hesitant and her blue eyes wide. "I'm sorry, mister."

"It's okay." Brent felt kind of sorry for the child. He remembered what it was like to be a kid.

Christine bent at the waist to be at eye level. "I warned you too

Amy Clipston

many people are around, so why did you run off? I asked you to hold my hand.”

“Like I did!” the second twin chimed in, looking pleased with herself.

Madison looked down at her red sandals. “I know.”

“I’m so sorry, Brent.” Christine reached into her pocket as she stood straight and then held out a few bills. “Here. Get two more cones on me.”

He shook his head. “That’s not necessary.”

“I insist.”

“It’s fine.” He stepped away from her. “Enjoy the fireworks.” Before she could respond, he returned to the ice cream truck line.

While he waited, Brent turned toward the line of porta potties and spotted Christine ferrying the two little girls into one. He briefly wondered how long she’d been married and how old her twins were, but he didn’t really care. He didn’t want to think about either of the Sawyer twins.

After making his purchase, Brent started back to Aunt Midge. But then he heard a male voice call his name, and he held his breath, hoping whoever it was would give up.

“Brent!” the man hollered again. “Brent Nicholson!”

Pasting a smile on his face, Brent turned to see his old friend Steve Barnes jogging over. He breathed a sigh of relief. He and Steve had struck up an easy friendship in Spanish class their freshman year, and Brent was happy to see him—especially since he wasn’t a member of the football team. Chances are he wouldn’t grill him about losing his college career.

“I thought that was you,” Steve said, pushing his dark hair off his forehead. “When did you get back?”

Something Old, *Something New*

“Last week. I’m here helping my aunt Midge with repairs so she can put her house up for sale. What have you been up to?”

Steve rubbed the dark-brown stubble on his jaw. “Well, for one thing, I followed one of my older brothers into his plumbing business.”

“That’s great.”

“And you remember Pam Gannon, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“We’ve been married for two years now.”

“No kidding.”

“How about you? Married?”

“Still single.” Brent lifted his cone and licked the melting ice cream trailing down one of its waffled sides.

“Why don’t you come sit with us?” Steve pointed toward the knot of people.

Brent followed his gaze and spotted Pam sitting with a group—*including* Britney. Her parents were there, too, as well as a good-looking blond man, her husband for all he knew. Or maybe he was Christine’s. “It’s probably not a good idea for me to sit over there.”

“Because of Britney?” Steve shrugged. “But that was a long time ago, and—”

“I should get this other cone to my aunt before it completely melts.”

“So go deliver it and then come.”

Brent backed away from him a step. “No thanks, but maybe we can get together sometime before I leave.”

“You need to come over for a barbecue.” Steve pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “What’s your number?”

Brent rattled it off, and moments later, his phone dinged.

“Now I have your number and you have mine.” Steve tapped Brent’s shoulder. “I’ll be in touch.”

Amy Clipston

“I look forward to it.”

Brent weaved through the crowd until he came to his aunt and her friends.

Aunt Midge took her cone, licked the drips, and then nodded toward his shirt. “What happened to you?”

“I had a run-in with a little blonde, which destroyed my initial purchases,” Brent said as he lowered himself down onto the lawn chair.

Aunt Midge pushed her turquoise glasses up on her nose with her free hand. “Did you get her phone number?”

Brent snickered. “I think I’d have to wait at least fifteen years for her to be legal.” He took a bite of his ice cream and savored the delicious flavor.

Aunt Midge snapped her fingers and looked at her friends. “Listen, do any of you have single granddaughters around Brent’s age? We need to get him fixed up with a nice young woman.”

While the group discussed the possibilities, Brent’s gaze moved toward the porta potties just as Christine steered twins toward her family. He took another bite and wondered how often twins had twins of their own.

“Did you hear that, Brent?” Aunt Midge asked, interrupting his thoughts. “Blanche’s granddaughter is single. She’s thirty-five, though. How do you feel about dating an older woman?”

He turned his attention toward her eager smile. “There’s no need to play matchmaker, Aunt Midge. I won’t be here long enough.”

“Pish-posh,” she said, waving off his remark. “I have a feeling you will.”

Brent sighed and looked up at the sky as complete darkness crept over his hometown. Aunt Midge had her plans, and he had his. He’d be back in Virginia before she knew it.



Christine led the twins to where everyone sat waiting for their return.

“Mommy!” Maddy announced, leaping into Britney’s arms. “I spilled ice cream on a very tall man!”

Christine sank into her lawn chair, and Mila climbed onto her lap.

Britney turned to Christine as Maddy snuggled against her shoulder. “What happened?”

“Your daughter ran right into Brent Nicholson, and he dropped both his ice cream cones. One scoop landed on his shirt. And it was chocolate.”

Britney smirked. “Serves him right.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You weren’t the one awkwardly trying to apologize and wrangle children at the same time. I don’t think I’ve ever been so embarrassed in my life.”

A man selling glow sticks walked up, and the twins jumped to their feet, immediately begging their parents to buy some. Britney and Hunter both stood and turned their attention to the vendor.

Pam leaned toward Christine and lowered her voice. “Did I hear you say Maddy ran into Brent Nicholson—literally?”

“You sure did.” Christine pulled two Diet Cokes from her small cooler and handed one to Pam. “And today is the second time I’ve seen him.” She summarized her first encounter with Brent, leaving out how handsome he’d looked since Steve was listening.

Steve brushed his wife’s shoulder-length dark hair off her shoulder and then looped his arm around her. Christine noted how much younger Pam looked than twenty-eight. Even now she was sometimes asked which high school she attended.

Amy Clipston

“I just spoke to him too,” Steve said, “and he told me the reason he’s making those repairs is so his aunt can sell her house. I said we’ll have to have him over. Maybe for a barbecue. I have his number.”

“Sure, but you’ll be the one grilling,” Pam quipped, her dark eyes twinkling.

“It’s a deal,” he said, his own dark eyes sparkling as he kissed the top of her head.

Christine looked down at her soda can. She was happy for Pam and Steve, who seemed to have a wonderful marriage. But sometimes she felt like an intruder when she spent time with them.

“Auntie!” Mila hollered as she jumped into Christine’s lap again. “Look at what I got!” She pointed to the green glow stick in her hand and then the glowing red necklace hanging around her neck.

Christine smiled. “How neat!”

Maddy joined them. “Look at mine, Auntie!”

“Wow. They’re beautiful.”

“When will the fireworks start?” Mila asked.

“Soon, baby. Really soon.”

Christine’s gaze moved over the crowd, and her eyes found Brent’s looking at her from across the field. He nodded, and as she nodded back, for some reason she felt certain she’d run into him again—and soon.