

Robin Lee HATCHER

You'll Think of Me

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

Chapter One

April
Reno, Nevada

Brooklyn Myers sat on the narrow stretch of lawn beside the brick apartment building, watching her ten-year-old daughter. On this balmy Saturday afternoon, Alycia lay on her stomach in the grass while reading a book they'd checked out at the library that morning. Reading, thanks to the public library, was one habit that Brooklyn not only approved of but could afford to encourage. When a mother and child survived on a waitress's salary, toys and other gadgets were a luxury. As was most everything else.

A headache threatened, and Brooklyn closed her eyes, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. Thank goodness she didn't have to work today. She'd put in a lot of overtime in recent weeks and was in need of rest. Rest that always seemed just out of reach.

“Brooklyn?” Esther Peterman called from the second-story landing. “May I join you?”

Brooklyn looked toward the stairwell. “Of course.”

The rail-thin woman flashed one of her brave smiles before slowly heading down the final flight of stairs, a folded lawn chair clasped in one hand. She was only in her late forties, but she moved as if she were eighty.

Brooklyn's heart clenched at the sight. As far as she was concerned, Esther was—and had always been—a godsend. She couldn't begin to imagine how she and Alycia would have managed over the past decade without this kindly neighbor. Or how they were going to manage without her in the future.

Her temples throbbed, the headache full blown now.

Esther arrived at her side and unfolded the lawn chair. “What a beautiful day.”

“I couldn't agree more.” Brooklyn tilted her face toward the sun, hoping its warmth would ease the pain in her head—and in her heart.

When Esther spoke again, she sounded wistful. “I suppose San Diego will be just as lovely.”

“I'm sure it will be. And you'll be with your family.”

“Yes.” Her friend drew a long breath and let it out on a sigh. “But they might as well be strangers. I haven’t seen my cousins in years.”

Brooklyn reached over and took hold of Esther’s hand, gently squeezing it with her own. “I wish . . .,” she began, then let the rest go unsaid.

“I know, Brooklyn. I know.”

Esther Peterman was the first person Brooklyn had met when she moved into this low-income apartment building over ten years ago. She’d been eighteen, pregnant, and all alone in a strange city. Chad Hallston, her husband of only a few months, had left Brooklyn soon after learning they were to have a baby. Esther and her husband, Joshua, had become the closest thing to family Brooklyn had ever known. But prostate cancer had taken Joshua, age sixty, three years earlier, and now bone cancer was taking Esther.

It seemed so unfair.

“God has this,” Esther said softly. “I’ll be all right, and so will the two of you.”

Brooklyn swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Have you found someone to watch Alycia when you’re at work?”

She shrugged, unwilling for Esther to take on that worry. But honesty wouldn’t allow her to leave it alone, and finally she shook her head.

“I’ll keep praying.” Esther spoke with confidence, although her voice was weak. “God knows what you need. He will provide.”

Real faith was another blessing from Esther. Before meeting her, all Brooklyn had known were rules, restrictions, and God’s wrath. She’d lived in expectation of the Almighty slapping her down whenever she displeased Him—which she had been guaranteed to do on a daily basis. That was the God Brooklyn had learned from her father. But Esther had introduced her to a God who loved her, to a Savior who had willingly died for her, to a Spirit who renewed her mind and gave her strength.

“It’s going to be all right.” Now it was Esther’s turn to squeeze Brooklyn’s hand. “You’ll see.”

From behind them came a male voice. “Hey. Are one of you ladies named Myers?”

Brooklyn twisted in her lawn chair. “I am.”

“Got a delivery for you.” He held up a legal-sized overnight envelope. “Need you to sign for it.”

Brooklyn frowned, unable to imagine any reason for express mail. She wasn’t behind on her rent or her cell phone bill. Her few friends lived right here in Reno, and she never shopped online.

“Are you sure it’s for me?” she asked as she stood.

The young man, dressed in a cotton shirt and shorts, looked at the large envelope again. “Brooklyn Myers. M-y-e-r-s. Apartment 12B.”

Alycia appeared at her side. “What’ve you got, Mom?”

“I don’t know,” she answered her daughter. Then to the deliveryman said, “That’s me.” She walked toward the breezeway where he stood, Alycia following along.

He handed her the stylus, then held the device toward her. She scribbled her name on the small screen, hoping it wasn’t required that it actually look like her signature.

“Here you go.” He took back the stylus and replaced it with the envelope.

“Thank you.” She watched him stride toward the parking lot.

“What is it, Mom?” Alycia asked again.

“I’m not sure. Just a lot of papers, it feels like.”

“Oh.” Disappointment laced the word before her daughter returned to the grass and her book.

Brooklyn’s gaze lowered to the sender’s address on the thick envelope. *Hodges, Thurber, and Williams, Attorneys-at-Law, Miami, Florida*. Why would some lawyer in Florida send her overnight mail? Her stomach clenched with suddenly nervousness as she flipped the envelope over.

Thunder Creek, Idaho

Derek Johnson stopped at the northeast corner of his three-acre farm. Since buying the property six years earlier, he’d slowly cultivated more and more of it, changing the land from pasture to neat rows of vegetables. In addition, a small apple orchard—six trees planted by a previous owner—sat in the northwest corner of the property. Eventually, he planned to expand the orchard, adding more apple trees and other kinds of fruit as well. Maybe next year.

In the beginning he’d sold his produce on weekends from booths at farmers markets or from the back of his pickup at popular spots along the highway. But for the last two growing seasons, after receiving his organic certification, he’d been able to sell direct to a couple of small-town grocery stores. It had definitely made his life easier and his income slightly more certain.

One of his favorite books on the subject of organic gardening for profit said it was possible, if done properly, to make a living of sixty thousand dollars or more per year on one and a half acres. Perhaps that was true, but as of yet he wasn’t finding it that profitable. Besides, he wanted more than simply to make a living. He wanted to expand, to experiment, to offer the best produce available in this county and the ones surrounding it.

His gaze shifted to the neighboring land. All ten acres of the Hallston property lay in a tangle of weeds and bare ground. There was so much he’d be able to do with those additional acres once they were his. Another six months and he should have the down payment required by the bank.

“Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise,” he muttered to himself.

Impatience welled up inside him. What he wouldn’t give to be able to buy that land now, to be able to expand his operation this growing season rather than next. He longed for the day he could quit working as a part-time sheriff’s deputy and call himself a full-time farmer. But both of those dreams were on hold for now.

He sighed, consciously letting go of his frustration. At least Chad Hallston wasn’t in a hurry to sell. His best friend from childhood had promised to wait until Derek had the down payment. True, it was taking longer for that to happen than either of them had expected. But the last time they’d spoken—more than nine months ago—Chad had assured Derek he would continue to wait. “Take as long as you need. The house has sat empty all these years. Another

one or two won't matter."

Derek avoided looking at the two-story Hallston house with its boarded-up windows and faded yellow paint. He didn't understand why Chad had stayed away all of these years, letting the house go to ruin after his parents' tragic deaths. But then there were a lot of things about Chad that Derek didn't understand. His old friend had become almost a stranger to him over the years—a change that had started when Chad became involved with Brooklyn Myers.

With a shake of his head, he turned away from the neighboring property and headed toward the pasture where his two horses and the calf he raised for beef grazed on shoots of spring grass. In his head he heard his dad's voice: "Why on earth do you want to give up being a deputy for farming? What did you go to college for if all you're going to do is dig in the dirt? You could be elected sheriff, given a few more years' experience. You would be a shoo-in."

He stopped, leaned down, and scooped freshly turned soil into one hand, bringing it to his nose and breathing in. He loved the smell of it. Healthy. Rich. Life giving. The way dirt was supposed to smell. It indicated the kind of earth that could produce foods rich in nutrients and flavor. Flavor that had been stripped from most of the produce available in grocery stores today. That was one just reason he'd decided to become an organic farmer.

As for leaving the sheriff's department? His dad was right. There were plenty of reasons to stay. He liked helping people. He liked the men and women he worked with. He didn't mind the danger that could come with the job—although real danger was rare in these parts.

But there were a number of good reasons to leave, a number of things he disliked about police work. What he hated most were the domestic dispute calls. Even in a county full of farmers, vineyards, and church-going folks, the deputies had to answer too many of those calls to suit Derek. Seeing the underbelly of the place he loved wasn't how he wanted to spend his life. He'd rather work the land.

The sound of car wheels crunching on gravel drifted toward him, and he turned away from the pasture. Beyond one of the sheds, he glimpsed his grandmother's car rolling to a stop. With a grin, he waved. "Hey, Gran," he called as he walked over.

His grandmother, Ruth Johnson, was a slender, spry woman in her seventies. Somewhat of an institution in Thunder Creek after more than fifty years as the wife of the town's physician, Ruth had come to the small town in western Idaho as a new bride. She and Derek's grandfather, Walter Johnson, had raised two sons and one daughter in a rambling Victorian house one block north of Main Street. Pappy had delivered most everyone Derek knew who was under the age of fifty and had set more bones and cured more fevers than anybody could count. Widowed for several years, Gran still lived in the same big house but had turned the attached doctor's offices into a tea and gift shop—a popular gathering place for the entire community.

His grandmother was out of the car by the time he drew close, and she greeted him with a kiss on one cheek, followed by a pat of her hand on the other. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm great."

"Not working today?"

He shook his head, still smiling. "I'm always working, Gran. You know that."

"Yes, I do know that. I meant the job that pays."

"My little farm pays. Not much yet, but it pays. I didn't do too bad last year, remember? And now that I've got my organic certification, I expect to do even better." He glanced toward

his fields. “I was just walking around, making some mental notes of things to do differently this season.” He took hold of his grandmother’s arm and steered her toward the back door of his house. “So, tell me what brought you out this way.”

“Do I have to have a reason to visit my grandson?”

“Of course not,” he answered—although he knew good and well she had one. He could see it in her eyes.

Inside, Gran settled onto the padded rocking chair beside the large living-room window.

“You want something cold to drink?” Derek offered.

“Oh, no need. I have a bottled water I’ve been sipping on.” She patted her purse.

“Fair enough.” He sat on the sofa and allowed her to guide their conversation wherever she wanted.

First they talked about his parents. His dad’s job had transferred him from Nampa, Idaho, to Southern California over eight years before. Both his dad and mom loved living near the ocean, and ever since then they’d been after Derek to relocate too. He wasn’t inclined to do so, no matter how much they raved about the great weather and ocean breezes. His roots went down too deep into the Idaho soil.

“I notice they haven’t convinced you to move either,” he said to Gran.

Her airy laughter filled the room “Your dad knows better than to try that with me. This is my home, and it’s where I intend to stay until they bury me next to your grandfather.”

“Which will be a long, long, long time from now.”

“God willing.” Her smile faded and she cleared her throat, cluing him in that they were finally getting around to the reason for her visit. “Have you talked to Hank McLean today?”

Derek cocked an eyebrow. “No. Why?” Hank was one of the full-time deputies with the sheriff’s department and a close friend and mentor of Derek’s.

“I saw Fran Tompkins at the market this morning.”

Before Gran said another word he knew what was coming next.

“She was sporting a black eye.”

His gut tightened. “Sorry to hear that.”

“I just wondered if Hank knew about . . . about this latest event.”

“Gran, there isn’t anything he can do—that any of us can do—as long as Fran continues to lie about what her husband’s doing. She always protects Mac. She always denies he’s done anything to her.”

“I know. But Hank’s her cousin *and* a deputy. I thought maybe he—”

“Gran.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I know. If only she would confide in someone.”

Derek wished the same, but before he could think of anything comforting or encouraging to say, the doorbell rang. He rose to answer it.

A FedEx driver stood on the front stoop, an envelope in hand. “You Mr. Johnson? Derek Johnson?”

“That’s me.”

“Here.” He held out a small electronic device. “Need you to sign for it.”

Chapter Two

Chad was dead.

Brooklyn stared at the three-page letter from the attorney in Miami and tried to make sense of what it said in the first paragraph. The rest was still unread because the first sentences contained a revelation she could hardly wrap her head around. Chad was dead. At the age of thirty-two, Chad was dead. Something about his heart.

The sorrow that welled up inside surprised her. She'd stopped loving her husband long ago. For a while she'd even hated him. But by the time ten years of silence had rolled by, he'd become nothing to her but distant memories. And yet she ached at the news of his death. In her mind he remained the boy who'd made her feel noticed and valued and, for a while, loved. Yes, he'd broken her heart in the end. But she'd never wished him dead.

And now he was.

She didn't know how or when or why Chad had ended up in Florida. She didn't know what he'd done for a living or if he'd thought of divorcing the girl he'd eloped with, married, and then abandoned in Reno. Had he regretted never knowing his own daughter? Had he even known if the baby she'd carried was a boy or a girl? Had it mattered to him how Brooklyn had struggled to survive, first on her own, then with an infant? Had he given them any thought at all until now?

Seated nearby in Brooklyn's small apartment, Esther let out a long breath and looked up from the thick packet of papers that had accompanied the letter. Her eyes were wide. "Brooklyn, he left you a house. For Alycia."

"A house?" Confusion filled her head, like a jar filled with cotton. She stared at Esther, the letter in her hand momentarily forgotten in lieu of this new puzzle. "What do you mean, a house?"

"A house. In Idaho." Esther reviewed some wording, then held the papers toward Brooklyn. "It looks like it was his . . . parents' house?"

"His parents' house." Even to herself, her voice sounded wooden, inflectionless. Unbidden, her thoughts flew across the miles. Idaho. . . Thunder Creek . . . A chill shivered up her spine.

Esther noted the reaction and frowned. "Do you know the house?" she asked.

Large. Beautiful. Sunny. Warm. How could she forget it?

"I know it."

"And?"

Her friend and her surroundings momentarily forgotten, Brooklyn pictured Mrs. Hallston in the bright, airy kitchen, frilly curtains framing the window over the sink. She heard the woman's laughter, so full of joy. She remembered the way Mr. Hallston had taken his wife in his arms one Sunday afternoon and danced her around the kitchen as if it were a ballroom. She remembered the tenderness in his eyes.

Once upon a time, Brooklyn had expected Chad to cherish her in the same way. It hadn't happened. Why had she been surprised? Her own mother hadn't cared enough about Brooklyn to stay. Her father had thought Brooklyn worthless. What had made her think Chad would love her? Really love her.

"Brooklyn?"

She shook off the memories, both the bitter and the sweet. “It’s a beautiful home, Esther. I’ve never been in one that I liked more. And . . . you say Chad left it to Alycia?” She shook her head, bewildered. “But he never knew her. He didn’t care about her enough to even meet her, let alone be a father to her.”

She remembered the day he’d walked out on her. “*I can’t do this!*” he’d shouted, duffel bag in hand. “*I thought we were going to have fun.*” Then had come the slamming door. She winced.

Looking at her friend again, she began, “And what about Mr. and Mrs.—” She broke off just as suddenly, unwilling to hear the answer. Because there was only one reason that made sense. If Chad owned the house, if it was his right to leave it to Alycia, then his parents must be dead.

“You need to finish reading that letter.” Esther pointed at the papers in Brooklyn’s hands.

Her heart hammered in her chest. “I can’t. I . . . I’m not ready.” She held the sheets of textured paper back toward her friend. “Please. You do it.”

Esther gave her a patient smile, then took the letter and began to silently read. Brooklyn found it hard to breathe as she waited.

In her memories, Chad smiled at her. So handsome. So full of charm. Always in pursuit of a good time. “Oh, Chad,” she whispered. “You were so young. I’m sorry you died. I wish . . . I wish it all could have been different.”

She pictured the Hallston house a second time. Had Chad really left it to her, to their daughter? Hadn’t he known Brooklyn would have no desire to return to her hometown? When she’d run away from Thunder Creek—and from her father—as a seventeen-year-old, she’d run away for good. She’d never wanted to go back. Not ever. Not even when things were at their worst. Not even when she’d been hungry and homeless and scared to death. Because home to her had been every bit as dark, scary, and loveless as the streets of Reno.

Esther laid the letter atop the other papers on her lap. “Well.”

“Well, what?”

“You really should read it yourself.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Just summarize it for me. Please.”

There was a lengthy silence before Esther said, “Very well. Your husband died of a rare heart disease. Apparently he learned he was dying about six months ago. He hired an investigator to find you and your daughter. He also hired an attorney—this Mr. Thurber—to get his things in order.” She glanced down at the letter again. “It says his parents died around nine years ago and left him their house, but he never lived in it. Like you, he never went back to Idaho. Now he wants his daughter to have the home. So he left it to you as her mother.”

Once again, Brooklyn shook her head. “Why would he do it? He didn’t care. All of those years, he didn’t care . . .” Her voice trailed off as she stared at memories. Good ones. Bad ones. All mixed together. Memories long forgotten. Or so she’d thought.

“Brooklyn?”

“Hmm?”

“Has it occurred to you that this might be God’s answer to your prayers? That this is how He has provided for your needs?”

Brooklyn stared at her friend. Her pulse thrummed at the suggestion. No, it hadn’t

occurred to her. Not at all.

Because why would God send her back to Thunder Creek, a place of so much unhappiness, after all these years?

The image of the Hallston home flashed a third time in her mind. It had two stories and five bedrooms plus an inviting porch that wrapped around the house. Tall trees shaded it on all sides, and Mrs. Hallston's beautiful flowerbeds, ablaze with color, lined the sidewalk—so glorious throughout the summer. In front of it all lay a horseshoe-shaped driveway and an emerald-green lawn. She recalled the rope-and-board swing in the backyard and the day when she'd sat on it and Chad had pushed her over and over, making her go higher and higher. She remembered how happy she'd felt and the sound of their laughter, mingling together. And when she'd stopped the swing, he'd kissed her for the first time. She remembered that too.

Unexpected tears blinded her. She turned away so that Esther wouldn't see before she blinked them away.

"Brooklyn, think about it. A home of your own instead of this cramped apartment with a kitchen you can hardly turn around in. No more city traffic to avoid and bus fumes to inhale. An actual lawn for Alycia to play on. And surely there are people you knew who would welcome you home again."

Brooklyn released a humorless laugh. How little her friend understood about Thunder Creek.

"You were only seventeen when you left," Esther added. "Perhaps you are being unfair to at least some of those people you remember."

"Perhaps," she admitted reluctantly, facing her friend again. "But my dad won't be one of them. Besides, what would I do there if I did go back? It's a big house. Much bigger than Alycia and I need. We would rattle around in it. And there would be utilities and taxes to pay. I'd have to get a job, and there never were a lot of those to go around."

"Don't borrow trouble, Brooklyn Myers." Esther gave her a determined look. "Consider the possibilities first. Then look for solutions. If God can give you a house, He can surely take care of all the other details."

Brooklyn sank onto the chair. Once more she pictured the big yellow house—only this time she imagined it with Alycia on that rope swing going higher and higher. She imagined her daughter's laughter instead of her own. A house. A home.

"Esther." Disbelief mingling with wonder filled her chest. "Do you really think this could be God's answer to my prayers?"

After reading the attorney's brief cover letter, Derek wordlessly handed it to his grandmother. Then he opened the business envelope with his name written on the outside in uncertain cursive.

Derek, this probably sounds like a bad movie line, but if you're reading this, I'm dead. Sorry for the way you're hearing from my attorney about my decision regarding the property. Sorry I didn't have the guts to call you and tell you myself once I made the

decision. I know we never had any formal agreement, nothing in writing, but I also know you were counting on the sale. I'm sorry for disappointing you. But you're a stand-up guy, so I know you'll get it. It's what you would do too if you had a wife and daughter.

Alycia's my kid, and leaving the house I grew up in for her and her mom is what's right, even if it means breaking a promise to the best friend I ever had. Maybe the only friend I still have.

But that's not the real reason for this personal note. I need to ask you something more important. I've never been around Alycia. I left before she was born and never went back. God knows what she thinks of me. Don't know what Brooklyn's told her about why I've never been around. Don't want to know, to tell you the truth. Because no matter how bad it is, no matter what her mom's said to her, I deserve it and more. Can't be bad enough, I guess. I don't know what you think of me now either.

But here's what I'm asking anyway. When Alycia and her mom come back to Thunder Creek to live, like I'm counting on, I'm asking you to be the father to my kid that I never was. The kind of dad like I had and like you had. The decent kind. Not a lousy one like Brooklyn's or an absent one like me.

Do it for an old friend, buddy. It's the best thing I can leave Alycia now. I know having a home and property will help them, but not as much as Alycia having some kind of a dad in her life. Somebody she can trust and look up to. Now that it's too late, I wish it could be me.

Although Brooklyn's getting a surprise packet from my lawyer, I don't plan to tell her what I'm asking you to do. I don't have the courage to write what I should. You can tell her yourself, if you ever think the time is right.

Chad

His gut churned as he read Chad's note a second time and then a third. Finally, he passed it to Gran as he had the more formal letter from the attorney. Then, without a word, he went outside, his gaze turning automatically toward the neighboring house with its faded yellow paint. Blowing out a breath, he clasped the back of his neck.

Twenty or thirty minutes ago, his dream for expansion had been within reach. Twenty or thirty minutes ago, the possibilities had seemed endless. And twenty or thirty minutes ago, he'd believed his best friend from childhood was alive and well in Miami.

It was difficult to make sense of the reality, to grasp the fact he'd been monumentally wrong about all of it.

"What am I going to do now?" he asked himself and the sky.

"Derek," Gran said from behind him. "I'm sorry."

"Chad was only thirty-two." He shook his head. "How can he be dead?"

"Death is always a surprise to us, no matter when it comes."

And that was the moment the guilt swept over him. Because it wasn't just Chad he'd thought of. He'd thought of himself—of his farm and the lost possibilities—and the disappointment had tasted bitter on his tongue.

“It’s all right, Derek,” his grandmother said softly. “I understand. ‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick.’”

He turned toward her. “The thing is, Gran, Chad was right to do what he did with his property. I know that in my head. I really do. The place *should* go to his daughter and Brooklyn. But it sure feels like it’s ruined everything for me. I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

What would he do? Decide to be satisfied with his three acres and what he could do with it? Give up on the idea of expanding and experimenting, of farming full time?

“You’ll wait to see what the Lord wants of you,” Gran said.

Derek barely heard her as disappointment washed over him again. Buying the Hallston property had felt like a done deal. He’d had the word of a friend. But that hadn’t been enough. He should have gotten it in writing. Or he should have borrowed the down payment from a family member. Maybe his dad would have given it to him, but Derek had been too proud to ask. He’d wanted to do this himself. Look where that got him.

Resentment followed hard on the heels of disappointment. Brooklyn Myers had always been trouble. At least that’s what Derek had thought from the moment Chad first took notice of her. After that Derek had become the proverbial third wheel. He blamed Brooklyn for the change in his relationship with his best friend, and he blamed her for making Chad take her away from Thunder Creek.

“And now she’s coming between me and the prime ten acres of Hallston land I was counting on,” he muttered.

There it was again. That twinge of guilt.

“Derek, what about Chad’s other request?”

He met Gran’s gaze again.

“About Alycia needing a father figure in her life.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “What can I do about it? She’s not here.” He frowned. “The letter didn’t say where they’re living now, but I remember that Brooklyn couldn’t wait to get away from Thunder Creek.”

He couldn’t help it. No matter how much he knew he should focus on more important things—the death of his friend, the idea of becoming a surrogate father figure—his thoughts turned like a beacon toward the land sitting in front of him. And despite his guilt, hope flickered in his chest.

“Maybe she won’t even come back. Maybe she’ll just sell the place.”

And therein lay the million-dollar question. Was it possible this situation could be salvaged? Was there a chance he could buy the Hallston property from Chad’s widow instead of from Chad himself?

He supposed time would tell.

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