

Chapter One



Today, of all days, Adrienne Chandler should've been swathed in white chiffon and Belgium lace. Instead, she wore khaki pants and a navy blue knit shirt with the words *Bayside Books* stitched in red over the pocket. Rather than floating down the church aisle on the arm of her father, she hid in the back office of her grandmother's bookstore, hovering over a slightly lopsided birthday cake.

Adrie struck a match and lit the two large purple candles shaped like the numbers seven and zero on top of Nana's cake. With a quick huff, she blew out the match and touched up a spot where the chocolate cake peeked through the pale pink buttercream frosting.

If her life had gone as she'd planned, she'd be enjoying wedding cake rather than birthday cake, but it was time to stop dwelling on what should've been and make today special for her grandma.

Hannah Bodine, curator of Fairhaven's small historical museum and one of her grandma's dearest friends, peeked in the doorway. She held up her bright red cell phone, her cheeks glowing from the warmth of the late summer afternoon. "Your grandmother's on her way!"

Adrie forced a smile. "All right. Let's get the party started."

More than a dozen of her grandmother's friends turned to watch as Adrie walked into the bookstore's café, carrying the cake topped with the blazing purple candles.

"They should be here any second," Hannah announced. "Barb has been keeping Marian busy over at Three French Hens."

Adrie chuckled at the thought of thrifty Nana shopping at the trendy boutique rather than the clearance racks of her favorite department store.

Irene Jameson, another member of her grandma's close-knit group of friends, affectionately known around town as the Bayside Treasures, hurried over. "As soon as they come in, I'll shout surprise, but you start the song, because I sing like an old jaybird."

"Oh, Irene, you don't sound like a jaybird."

"Of course not," Hannah added with a teasing twinkle in her eyes. "She sounds more like an old crow."

Irene gasped, then broke out in giggles and clutched Hannah's arm. "I'll get you for that one."

"Quiet, everyone. They're coming in the front door!" The crowd hushed just as the bell jingled. A few seconds later her grandmother and Barb Gunderson walked toward the back of the store.

"Where's Adrie? I thought she was going to hold down the fort until we got back." Marian Chandler stepped around the end of the bookshelves.

"Surprise! Happy birthday!" The chorus of friends leaped up from the tables, clapping and waving purple balloons and handmade *Happy Birthday* signs.

Adrie walked forward with the glowing cake and started singing.

Nana's expression bloomed from wide-eyed shock to a teary smile. "Thank you all so much. What a wonderful sur-

prise.” Her gaze traveled around her circle of friends, then settled on Adrie. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

Adrie smiled and shrugged slightly. “Yes, but I had a lot of help from the Bayside Treasures.”

“Oh, you darling girl.” Nana hugged Adrie, then embraced her fellow Treasures, Hannah, Irene and Barb. “I thought it was odd you had so much trouble making up your mind about that outfit at the boutique,” she said to Barb. “Made me wonder if you were losing your grip.”

“Not yet, honey.” Tall and slim with dark auburn hair, Barb was the youngest of the Bayside Treasures. Though she’d already passed sixty, she still taught more than a dozen piano students each week and played the organ and piano for church services and weddings.

Nana beamed them a bright smile. “So what are we waiting for? Let’s eat cake!”

Barb took charge, cutting generous slices. Irene passed them around, while Adrie served coffee and iced tea.

“This is delicious,” Pastor James said between bites. “Who baked the cake?”

Irene’s cheeks took on a rosy hue, and she ducked her chin.

“Who else?” Hannah slipped her arm around Irene’s shoulder. “Everyone knows Irene Jameson is the best baker in Fairhaven.”

Adrie smiled and stood back, watching her grandma make the rounds and greet her friends. Her bright blue eyes glowed each time she received a hug or birthday card. Her grandmother had known many of these people for over twenty years, since she and Grandpa Bill had opened Bayside Books. It was the only Christian bookstore in Fairhaven, and it served as a lighthouse to the community and a gathering place for family and friends.

The bell over the front door jingled again, and Adrie glanced down the aisle.

Cameron McKenna, owner of McKenna's Frame Shop, stepped inside. Adrie's friend, Rachel Clark, had recently announced her engagement to Cam, and they were planning an early fall wedding. Adrie released a wistful sigh. At least someone's relationship was working out.

Another man followed Cam through the door. As he came into view, Adrie sucked in a quick breath. For a split second she thought it was her former fiancé, Adam Sheffield, but she quickly realized her mistake. Though his height and coloring were similar, this man's dark brown hair was longer, sweeping across his forehead and touching his collar in the back.

Over his shoulder, he carried what looked like a black leather camera bag. His well-worn jeans and the light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up sealed the difference. Adam never wore such casual clothes. His were always tailored and professional.

The man's large, dark eyes focused on Adrie. He nodded and sent her a warm smile.

She looked away, trying to shake off her discomfort over his resemblance to Adam.

"Hi, Adrie." Cam crossed toward her. "Looks like there's a party going on."

She looked up at Cam, but her traitorous gaze kept drifting toward the other man. "Yes, we're celebrating Marian's seventieth birthday."

"Sorry, we didn't mean to crash your party," Cam said.

Her eyes snapped back to Cam. "Oh, it's okay. You're welcome to stay. Would you like some cake?"

Cam turned to his friend and lifted one eyebrow.

The man grinned and nodded. "I always say yes to cake."

"Adrie, this is Ross Peterson. Ross, this is Adrienne Chandler. She manages the bookstore with her grandmother."

"Hello, Adrienne." Ross held out his hand.

She hesitated a split second, then offered her hand. His grip was firm and confident, his fingers smooth and warm. She looked into his dark brown eyes, and a ripple of awareness traveled through her. Heat flooded her face. She dropped his hand and turned back to Cam. “So, how can I help you?”

“Actually, I think we might be able to help you,” Ross said.

Her gaze darted back to Ross.

“Oh, Cam, Ross, so good to see you!” Hannah bustled over and gave each man a quick hug. She turned and motioned Marian to join them. Hannah knew Cam from the Fairhaven Arts Center. Cam’s frame shop was just down the hall from the small historical museum Hannah managed. Cam and Ross greeted Marian and wished her a happy birthday.

“So, did you come for the party, or is there something we can help you with?” Marian asked.

“We heard you were looking to hire a new manager for the bookstore,” Cam said.

“That’s right. Adrie’s been helping me for over a year now, since my husband passed away, but I want to free her up so she can play her flute professionally.”

Ross lifted his eyebrows and studied Adrie with renewed interest.

Her face flushed—again.

Cam clamped his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I think Ross might be just the man for the job.”

Adrie shot her grandmother a worried glance. They needed someone reliable and trustworthy, not a free spirit, adventurous type. The way Ross was dressed, he looked as though he’d just walked off the ferry from a vacation in the San Juan Islands or a hike up Mount Baker.

“Ross and I have been friends for years,” Cam continued.

“And we’ve also been co-op partners at the Arts Center. I think he could be a big help to you.”

Adrie pressed her lips together. Was Cam right? Could Ross be the one to step in and take her place, or would he let them down like the last two men they’d hired and then had to fire—one for stealing and the other for complete incompetence?

He seemed very self-assured and good-looking. How could you trust a man like that?

Nana nodded. “I’m glad you came by. Why don’t you have some cake, and as soon as things settle down, we’ll talk.”

“Thanks.” Ross flashed a broad smile, his white teeth contrasting with his tanned face. “I appreciate you meeting with me, especially on your birthday.” His smile faded a few watts. “But I’d hate for you to miss your party. Maybe it would be better if I came back tomorrow.”

Adrie nodded.

But Marian shook her head. “Oh, it’s not a problem, not at all. Come on, let’s get some cake for you and Cam.”

Adrie closed her eyes. Couldn’t her grandma see past his charming smile? How could she be so softhearted and trusting?

A wave of melancholy washed over Adrie. She used to be like that before all the heartbreak she’d faced the last few years, but not anymore. Trust had to be earned, and she hadn’t met a man yet who could earn hers.

Ross Peterson was probably no different than the rest. And if that was true, she’d need to be on guard and make sure he didn’t take advantage of them.

Thirty minutes later Adrie sat across from Ross and her grandmother while her grandmother conducted the interview with him. The store and café were quiet now. The only other people around were two middle-aged women browsing in the fiction section. Adrie sat facing the sales counter

ready to help them if they had questions or wanted to make a purchase.

Nana reviewed Ross's résumé with a warm, pleasant expression on her face. "It looks like you have an excellent education and some good job experience." She looked up. "Tell us about your photography studio."

He frowned slightly, faint lines appearing at the corners of his eyes. "I started out at the Arts Center about three years ago. Things were building slowly over the first two years, but it's been tough this last year with the bad economy. I didn't want to go into debt, so I closed up shop a couple months ago."

"We've had a slump over the last year, as well," Nana said. "But fall tends to be our busiest season, so we're hoping things will improve." She checked the second page of his résumé. "You've invested quite a few years in photography. You're not planning to give that up altogether, are you?"

"No, I'd like to do it on the side."

Adrie studied him, trying to figure out the man behind the handsome exterior. What were his real motives for wanting this job? And how did he expect to continue his photography work while he managed the bookstore? This was a full-time job that would become more demanding as they moved into the holiday season.

"I believe you have the skills for the business side of things," Nana said. "But working here would be quite different than running a photo studio."

"In what way?"

"I consider this store a ministry as well as a business. Many of our customers come in with questions and problems. Some are hurting and need compassion and direction."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful, but Adrie couldn't tell what he really thought of her grandma's comment.

"I'm looking for a manager who can connect with people,

someone who is willing to listen and can offer encouragement and prayer. Would you be comfortable with that?"

He rubbed his chin. "My faith is important to me, but I'm a relatively new believer." He glanced toward the bookshelves. "I've always loved to read, so walking in here and seeing all the titles makes me feel a little like a kid in a candy store." He grinned at her grandmother, his dark eyes taking on a mischievous light.

Adrie rolled her eyes. It was time to cut to the chase and see where he really stood. "I'd like to ask Ross a few questions."

Her grandma looked her way. "Okay, dear, go ahead."

"Could you tell us where you attend church?"

Ross stared at her for a second. "I've gone to Grace Chapel a few times with Cam and Rachel."

She'd never seen him there. But with two services and over five hundred people attending, it was possible she could've missed him.

"We attend Grace Chapel, as well," Nana added, sending Adrie a questioning glance.

"Don't you find it hard to grow spiritually if you aren't committed to a church?" Adrie asked.

He shifted in his chair, looking uncomfortable. "I think being involved in a church is a good thing, but there are other ways a person can grow spiritually."

She tried to keep a neutral expression. "What would you recommend?"

He glanced toward the window. "Spending time in nature helps me connect with God." He looked around the store. "And of course reading spiritual books can help, too."

That was enough for Adrie to make up her mind. "Well, Ross, we appreciate you coming in," she said, ignoring her grandma's wide-eyed look of censure, "but we need someone who's knowledgeable about their faith and can help our customers choose the right resources. So I don't think—"

Nana squeezed Adrie's hand under the table. "I'd like to hear a bit more from Ross. Then I'd like to pray about it before I make a decision."

Adrie stared at her grandma. Was she serious? Why would she even consider hiring someone who obviously wasn't right for the job?

Nana's steady gaze rested on Adrie, her intention clear.

Her grandmother owned the store and would make the final decision. But why would she promise to pray about it? Hiring Ross Peterson would obviously be a mistake.

Ross climbed into the passenger seat of Cam's forest-green SUV and pulled the door closed with more force than needed. But it didn't relieve his frustration. He grabbed his sunglasses from his shirt pocket and slid them into place while his stomach churned.

"So, how did it go?" Cam started the engine, checked over his shoulder and pulled into the street.

"Not too well." Ross clamped his jaw and looked out the side window.

"How come? I thought you'd be perfect for the job."

"I am, but that doesn't seem to matter." He shook his head. What was he going to do now? Since he'd closed his studio, his photography business had dwindled, and he'd had to dip into his savings. Rent on his apartment was due in two weeks along with his car insurance and a few other bills. That would wipe out his reserves.

"That had to be the toughest interview I've ever had."

"I'm surprised. Marian Chandler is one of the sweetest ladies in town."

"She might be, but that granddaughter of hers is another story." Acid burned his throat as he thought of how Adrie had studied him throughout the interview. Each time he answered a question, he could see the doubt in her expression.

Cam grinned. "I thought she seemed a little cool toward you."

"Cool? It was more like freezing."

Cam's grin faded. "I wonder what's up with that."

"I have no idea. She seemed to have her mind set against me before the interview even started." He rubbed his chin, trying to figure out what he'd done to invoke such animosity in her. "What do you know about her?"

"Only what Rachel has told me. Her parents are missionaries in Africa. She was raised there, then she came back to Fairhaven to live with her grandparents and attend college."

"Wow, Africa. That's different."

"Yeah. I think it was Kenya. She must have some great stories, but she never says much about it. The few times we've talked, it's always been about church, work or friends." He tapped his finger on the steering wheel. "She plays the flute with the worship team. Have you seen her at church?"

Ross shook his head. He had only started attending Grace Chapel the last couple of months, after the bottom fell out of his business and Cam had talked to him about the importance of trusting God with his life and future.

He didn't think he'd ever seen Adrie there. He would've remembered her. As a photographer, he always noticed people with unique features and hair color, and Adrie had both. Her dark auburn hair had golden highlights. It curled around her face, then flowed down over her shoulders in soft waves. A fringe of dark lashes framed her large, lavender-blue eyes. Her skin was light and almost translucent like a piece of fine china. Her lips...

He stopped there. What was the point? Beautiful or not, she acted as cold as a glacier toward him. And she seemed intent on convincing her grandmother not to hire him.

"Hey, Ross. Are you off in dreamland?"

He glanced at Cam. "Sorry. What did you say?"

“I asked if you think there’s a chance you’ll get the job.”

He grimaced and shook his head. “No way, not in a million years.”

Adrie took another sip of hot orange spice tea, hoping the warmth would soothe the uneasy feelings swirling through her. These Sunday morning breakfasts with her grandma were usually one of her favorite times of the week, but today’s conversation was twisting her stomach into a nervous knot.

“I’m sorry, Adrie. I know you’re not in favor of hiring Ross, but you haven’t given me one solid reason not to.”

Adrie set her teacup back on the table. “I know he seems to have good qualifications, but there’s something about him that makes me uncomfortable. I’m sorry, Nana, but I don’t think we should trust him.”

“Those are just feelings, dear, not facts.”

“But doesn’t God work through our feelings? Aren’t we supposed to have peace about our decisions?”

Marian released a soft sigh. “I believe God gives us discernment and wisdom to make decisions when we ask Him for His help. Our feelings play a part in that, but we also need to look at the facts. In this case, Ross has the experience needed, and he has a young, growing faith. Cam seems to know him quite well, and that gives him a solid character reference.”

Adrie took another bite of Nana’s chocolate-chip coffee cake, giving her time to think before she answered. “But we need a manager who’s caring, someone who’ll give our customers solid advice. I don’t think he has the knowledge or spiritual maturity to do that.”

“But he’s eager to learn. I could see that in his eyes.”

Adrie clicked her tongue. “Please don’t get taken in by those delicious dark eyes of his.”

Nana’s hand stilled as she reached for her coffee cup. A

slow smile spread across her lips. “Did you say his eyes were delicious?”

Adrie’s cheeks flamed. “What I meant was, good looks have nothing to do with character. Men who are good-looking tend to know it and use it to their advantage.”

Sadness softened Nana’s expression. “Oh, honey, not every man you meet is going to treat you like that dreadful Adam Sheffield.”

Adrie’s heart twisted. “I know. I’m not saying he would.”

Painful memories swirled through her mind, taunting her. She would be leaving for her honeymoon today if Adam hadn’t walked away and broken every promise he had ever made. She forced those painful thoughts back into the secret corner of her heart and locked them away.

They had nothing to do with Ross Peterson. But was she letting his resemblance to Adam color her judgment? She *had* mistaken him for Adam at first glance.

No. That wasn’t it. She was just being cautious, looking out for her grandmother and considering what was best for the business.

Adrie looked across the table at her grandmother. “Promise me you’ll think about this a little longer before you make a decision.”

Nana patted her hand, her gaze tender. “All right, dear. I’ll pray about it some more. But Ross deserves an answer as soon as I can give it.”

Looking into her grandma’s eyes, she had a dreadful feeling the decision was already made.