

The
LOVE
LETTER

RACHEL HAUCK



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Love Letter

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For Tony

Prologue



HAMILTON

*Hannah's Cowpens
South Carolina Colony
January 17, 1781*

He must finish. He must. Stumbling, he fell to the damp earth of the maple swamp with the *click-slap* of musket fire ringing through the cold dew, his breath billowing.

The smoke of guns and cannons dulled the first light, and the stinging scent of gunpowder poisoned the fragrance of winter.

He clung to the nearest tree, his back to the battle, dagger in hand. Blood from a saber slash stained his buckskin sleeve and pooled in his left hand.

The battle persisted not thirty paces hence but he collapsed, weary, as if fighting for days.

Finish, man, finish.

Hamilton's conflict had begun with Lieutenant Twimball long before today. And with the breath in his lungs, it would end with Twimball. Here. Now.

For what that man had done. For the deeds done by all who donned the king's redcoat.

Spots swelled and burst before his eyes, and his head seemed to float above his body. Clinging to his rifle with his good arm, Hamilton tried to stand, his damaged left wing wrapped around the tree. But his legs . . . his legs refused to obey.

Another volley of bullets drew his attention toward the battlefield. The British were charging as his brothers-in-arms retreated.

Trying once again to stand, he collapsed against the tree, a sliver of stationery fluttering past the corner of his eye. His letter! He dropped the dagger, then patted his left pocket, his finger protruding though a slice made by the edge of a sword.

The wind shuttled the solitary page over the cold, muddy terrain.

He must . . . retrieve it. Hamilton stretched, barely grasping the edge of the page with the tips of his fingers, then losing his hold as he toppled forward to the earth.

The fight waged above and around him. The shouts and cries of warring men clung to the bare January limbs as Hamilton Lightfoot faded away, dreaming of love, dreaming of her.

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CHLOE

Present-Day Hollywood
August

You see, love stories never worked for her. She never got the guy. In life or on-screen. Instead, she died. In nearly every major role she landed.

Last year, *Variety* dubbed her “the queen of the death scene.” What a stellar endorsement.

But today she determined to do something different. Stop waiting for change and go for what she wanted.

Driving her '64 red Mustang across Bel Air, the convertible top down, to the great Hollywood director Jeremiah Gonda's home, Chloe had high hopes.

Easing up to a red light, she powered up the radio.

“What you want, baby, I got it . . .”

The wind caught the loose ends of her ponytail as a black BMW pulled alongside. The driver, with his cut and chiseled profile, stared ahead, then glanced toward her with a flirting, cap-toothed smile. When their eyes met, his grin faded and he faced forward.

Chloe snarled and boosted the music.

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T.”

The light flashed green, and he shot off the line. Poser. Like she'd want that fake-toothed pretty boy. Please. She'd eaten them

for lunch when she was a teenager. (Not really, but that sounded good, didn't it?)

No, today was not about her past, the scandal (oh shudder), or her resumé of death and dying, but about what she wanted to accomplish. For the first time in her twenty-year career, she was asking for a part, not waiting to be called for an audition.

Yeah, you bet she'd called in a family favor. Why be the daughter of Hollywood legends—Academy Award-winning director and actress—if she didn't call in a few favors?

Her sordid career had her dying all over stage and screen. Not in slasher flicks or horror shows but on soap operas, coming-of-age films, Broadway, and one Shakespeare in the Park.

She'd turned down at least three roles due to the dying nature of the character she was offered. Because at twenty-nine, she began to wonder if she'd cursed herself.

Dying so many times, had she made some unspoken agreement with death? She died a hundred and fifty times her year on Broadway. A hundred and fifty!

Could such a role produce an unseen effect on her life? On her soul?

Because after Broadway came the scandal. The death of her reputation. Chloe turned the music up louder, forcing the ugly ordeal to the back of her mind.

Pulling up to the Gondas' gate, she pressed the speaker button.

"Chloe Daschle to see Mr. Gonda."

"What? I can't hear you."

Chloe lowered the radio volume. "Chloe Daschle to see Mr. Gonda."

With a click, the ornate iron gate swung open and Chloe eased up the stone driveway, following the curve to park in the shadow by the front door.

Jeremiah and Laura Gonda, another dynamic duo, were like her parents, an award-winning director married to an Oscar-winning actress.

They were one of Hollywood's anomalies. Happily, faithfully married for twenty years and raising seven kids practically made them a sideshow.

Chloe's parents, also happily together for thirty-five years, had never married.

Stepping out of the car, Chloe released her ponytail, fingered the knots from her hair, and reached for her bag. At the door, she rang the bell, then stood back, waiting, the thump of her heartbeat drowning her thoughts.

Hey, Jeremiah, I'd like to read for Esther.

Surprise! Listen, I got hold of this script, Bound by Love. Have you cast Esther yet?

Please, please, please let me read for this part.

She'd heard of Jeremiah's latest film from a friend of hers, Smitty Barone, an actor-slash-Realtor in town who popped into her life every now and then. She couldn't even remember where she first met him. Acting class?

The breeze kicked up, and Chloe glanced toward the trees lining the gated grounds. Bel Air hosted a legend of stars in its day. Mary Pickford, Ingrid Bergman, George Reeves, Jerry Lewis, Johnny Carson. Even the Beatles during their '65 tour.

In years to come, her parents would become part of Hollywood's storied past. But she, Chloe Daschle, didn't ache for immortality. She wanted to work, do something meaningful with her craft, impact hearts for good.

And if she was so blessed, break the mysterious curse of death she'd somehow enacted in her life and find personal happiness and true love. Was that too much to ask? To believe in?

The door of the angular, glass Frank Lloyd Wright-home swung open. Jeremiah stood on the other side with his newest daughter, eight-month-old Eva.

"Chloe, come in, come in." He stepped aside, smiling. The grand marble foyer featured a *Gone with the Wind* staircase, a high, wood-beam ceiling, and a nine-foot chandelier. "Thanks for coming to

the house. Laura's reshooting some scenes this week, so I'm on deck all day."

"I'd rather come here than your office." She wrapped Eva's little hand around her finger. "You're so beautiful."

"And she knows it too. Ezra?" Jer called to his oldest. "Come take your sister." A gangly, cute blond teenager came around the corner, stuffing a piece of sandwich meat in his mouth, and reached for the baby.

"The nanny has the middle kids at gymnastics and dance." Jer motioned for Chloe to follow him. "So we'll have some quiet." He entered his office, the western wall of glass framing a spectacular view of the valley. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Um—" Chloe hesitated, her leather bag swinging from her elbow. This was crazy. If he wanted her to audition for the part he'd have called. But he hadn't. No, instead, he called the likes of Ginger Winters and Sabrina Fox.

Even if he miraculously wanted to cast her, the studio would balk. She was, to her regret, typecast. The girl who dies. He'd be crazy to—

"Chloe? Something to drink?" Jer stood by the fridge built into the wall.

"Um, sorry, yes, please, Diet Coke." She entered the room, set her bag on a plush leather chair, and strolled to the window. "I'm not sure I'll ever tire of this view." Her father's office at the Daschle mansion had the same one. But from her apartment in the mansion's north wing, Chloe saw only backyard trees and the guesthouse.

"Laura and I love to come in here at night after the kids are in bed, put on some music, and just watch the lights." Jer dropped ice cubes in a crystal glass and popped open the Diet Coke before handing it to Chloe. He retrieved a bottle of Perrier for himself, coming around to the long, deep red couch. "So you're interested in Esther?"

Chloe joined him, taking the time to sip her drink before setting it on a coaster.

"Am I too late?"

He shook his head. "You're not. She's the only one we've not cast. Did your agent send you the script?"

"No. A friend of mine, Smitty Barone." She'd run into him one Sunday. After church. Which he did not attend on a regular basis. But in the last five years, she'd grown accustomed to Smitty's strange comings and goings. "He said the screenplay was from a new writer. Said I should go for it."

"Smitty Barone?" Jeremiah sat back, arm resting on the back of the couch, his expression molded with concern. "Never heard of him. I'm not sure I like the idea of someone I don't know pitching my script around."

Chloe reached for her soda again, taking a drink to hide her nerves. "I-I hope it's okay I called."

The script had captured her from the first line. She felt Esther, as if they'd sat together on the L.P. rooftop in West Hollywood and talked through the sunset to the sunrise.

If Jeremiah would let her read, she'd give Esther every ounce of her twenty years' experience.

"As a matter of fact, we just passed on Sabrina Fox for the role. She's—"

"Too beautiful." Chloe knew Sabrina. Talented, yes, but her striking looks proved to be a distraction. "She's not a colonial girl, but I am, Jer."

"We auditioned Marilyn West but passed on her too. We've been wondering where to go next." Rising from the couch, Jeremiah slipped on a pair of glasses, then retrieved a copy of the script. A prodigy of her father's, he'd risen to directorial greatness with the Oscar-winning *King Stephen I* and now the smash romance novel adaptation *Someone to Love*. One day he would be a legend.

"I get Esther Kingsley, Jer. I am Esther. A girl looking for love who doesn't believe she's worthy."

He regarded her for a long, intense moment. "That brouhaha with Haden really messed with you."

Understatement of the year. The last three years.

"Can I audition or not?" She scooted to the edge of her seat. "I'm tired of hiding. Tired of dying. I know, I know. I'm stereotyped and a risk, but if you give me a chance . . . Jeremiah, just let me read for it." Chloe dug in her bag for the script and drew it out, flipping through the pages, eyeing her notes. "I loved this story. I can't believe it's from a new writer. There's so much heart and truth in every word. It's hard to believe he didn't actually live in 1781, backwoods South Carolina."

"Jesse Gates? Yes, he's talented. Why do you think I'm making a movie of his script? He's playing the part of Flanders too."

"Who's playing Hamilton?" The hero. Esther's love interest.

"Chris Painter."

Chloe collapsed against the couch back. "Ah, I see." She kept her eyes averted. Painter was an old flame from her teen years when they both played on the TV show *High School Follies*. Chris grew up to be the current hottest actor in Tinseltown.

"Is that going to be a problem?"

Chloe found her bravado and leaned forward. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No. But I don't want any drama on the set. I don't want any romances among the cast. Clive Boston nearly cost me *King Stephen I* when he fell for one of the actresses playing a lady-in-waiting. It was chaos."

"Done. Chris is with Ginger Winters, and I'm with . . . well . . . nobody." She'd recently started a faith journey and was learning how to love God first, then others. Including herself. She'd need supernatural power to achieve the last one. "Trust me, romance is the last thing on my mind."

At least for now. In this moment. And for the duration of this film, should she get the part.

"All right. Let's see what you got, Chloe Daschle." Jeremiah flipped open his script. "Oh, hey, speaking of romance." He chuckled softly. "You going to the Steinbrenner wedding this weekend?"

"Of course. I'm a bridesmaid." Violet Steinbrenner was one of Chloe's best friends. Her father headed a major production company while her mother shuffled super talent through her boutique talent agency. "You all are going too?"

"Violet talked Laura into singing a solo." Jer grinned. "She's a frustrated Broadway star, you know." He held up the script. "So, Esther . . . She is strong, and she needs a strong actress to play her." His comment hung over Chloe in the form of a question.

Chloe stared across the room. "I have to do something different, Jeremiah. I can't be the one who dies again. I feel like I'm becoming that girl, and it's affecting every part of my life. I have to be, must be, the woman who lives." She peered at him, shaking her head. "I don't know, maybe it's time to give up acting, do something else. Write. Direct. Teach."

"I hate what this town can do to a person's soul." Sincerity gripped his confession. "Don't give up, Chloe. You're typecast, to be sure, but you're also a talented actress."

"Do you think you can sell me to the studio? I-if you like me for Esther?" She ran her fingers against the edge of the script.

She'd auditioned hundreds upon hundreds of times. She knew the routine. If the studio, in other words the money, didn't like an actor, no matter how brilliantly he or she played the part, it wasn't going to happen.

"I have some leeway here." He motioned to the script. "Let's read."

Chloe flipped to the emotional scene where Hamilton visited Esther to tell her he was going off with the South Carolina militia.

Closing her eyes, Chloe rolled back time to 1781, to an unsettled land, a rough log cabin where the scent of baking bread nearly made her stomach rumble. In the barnyard, chickens scratched and the dogs bayed. A horse peered from a stall window. Cattle wandered the winter hills.

The war for independence had moved south and settled in the colony where classic backwater folk were farmers and hunters, traders. Hardworking, raw people carving out a life for themselves.

ESTHER: You cannot go . . . not with the militia. Father will speak to General Cornwell. You may join his troops.

HAMILTON (With heated emotion): You've heard what Huck and his men did at Hill's Ironworks . . . the raids on the Presbyterian churches. From York to Ninety Six. Can I just sit by like a coward? Must I remind you what those redcoats did to my pa?

ESTHER: I've not forgotten. But you should aim to do some forgetting—a bit of forgiving. Riding off into the battle will not bring him back. Nor will it ease your pain. I think he'd thank you kindly to live a long life and give him grandsons to carry on the Lightfoot name. Dare I ask about the pledges we've made to one another? Do I not matter? Do I not have a say?

HAMILTON: Am I going back on my word? Have I made a promise I am now breaking? If I sit aside and watch my countrymen, yes, my American countrymen die, how does that speak of me as a man, as a friend and neighbor?

ESTHER: Yes, you go back on your word when you join a fight that cannot be won. What if you find yourself at the end of a Tory musket or bayonet? How can you marry me if you're dead, rotting beneath the ground? And for what? A few tax dollars? A cup of tea? Independence from our homeland that has been so good to us?

HAMILTON: England? My homeland? Nay, Esther, the soil in which you claim I'll rot be my homeland. My heritage is here, in the upcountry. What of England? A land I've never seen. Nay, I say: what of America?

ESTHER: Your friends and neighbors fight for the Crown. You dare raise your musket against them?

The LOVE LETTER

Against my father? Against my family? You may as well aim at me.

HAMILTON: I cannot help which side they have chosen. They fight for tyranny. But I speak for myself and my family. We fight for independence.

ESTHER (Glances about, lowers voice): Speak not of this treason in my father's house. There's no more devoted Tory in the colony. Have you forgotten he loves you like a son? If you join the militia, you will break both of our hearts!

HAMILTON (Reaches for her): Now you break mine.

How will I resolve this conflict of love and war?

ESTHER (Falls into his arms weeping): Choose me, Hamilton. If you love me as you say, choose me.

Chloe lowered the pages with a glance toward Jeremiah, who stared at his script without expression.

Falling into his arms . . . begging him to stay.

She'd lived that scene with Haden Stuart. In fact, she felt certain Esther's last line was taken from her viral video. Had Jesse Gates seen it? Hard to say, but when the video reached twenty million views, Chloe gave up hiding out and defending herself. She stopped resisting the truth that her crushing humiliation had become a part of pop culture.

"Well . . ." Jeremiah sighed, tossed the script to the table, reached for his water, and took a long drink.

"What?" Chloe said. "I overplayed her, didn't I? Let's read it again. I can tone her down. I wasn't sure on the accent. More British or more Southern? Geez, I don't want to do a Scarlett O'Hara. That's not right." She forced a smile. "I'm so used to the drama of dying and . . . Know what?" She stuffed the script into her bag. "It's okay. I don't regret trying. Thank you for reading with me, Jer. See you at the wedding."

"Sit down." Jeremiah pointed to her chair, using his director's voice. "You're not going anywhere."

Chloe stumbled back, tripping down into the chair, a jittery flip-flop tumbling through her.

"I can't believe I didn't audition you. Wow, Chloe. You are so much better than you know. Better than I knew." His eyes glistened as he spoke.

"I-I . . . What? Really?" She smiled. "You want me for the part?" A carnival with trumpets and balloons paraded through her. "H-how will you explain me to the studio?"

"You let me worry about the studio." He offered his hand. "Welcome to *Bound by Love*, Chloe Daschle. I'll e-mail the offer to your agent. Chip Mac, right?"

"Yes, the lovely and endearing Chip Mac." She started to leave, then turned into Jeremiah with a hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! I won't let you down, Jer. I'm going to act my heart out. Just you wait and see."

Outside, the sky seemed bluer, the birds' song clearer. This movie was going to change her life. She felt it in her bones.