

# Chapter 1

Life never ceases to be life, just as love never ceases to be love, and love is eternally at the heart of what every immortal soul yearns for. The desire for love, the wrenching yearning for it, continues long past the grave. Penny had lost sight of those hopes and dreams over the years. Today, they would crash back into her life with a force that could not be ignored.

As Jake's motorcycle climbed steep hills and roared down the other sides, he knew it had been worth skipping work that day to take a drive. He reveled in the carelessness and freedom of the young, handsome, and uncommitted. His shaggy, brown hair blew in the breeze, and he stretched his fingers in his new, black riding gloves, working out the kinks in the tough fabric. There had never been a more glorious spring evening in the Ozark Mountains. Jake was sure of it.

The winter chill had given way to the first hints of warmth in the air. As the sun set, the sky blazed with orange-lit clouds. Violent thunder and lightning the night before had left the air fresh and clean and full of the promise of a new season. Damp, brown pine needles and soggy piles of decomposing leaves clung to the narrow shoulders of the road, not quite ready to admit that their time was done.

On this early spring day, Jake had toured all along Highway 62 through scenic biker routes, zipping past the centuries-old rock outcroppings that were the primary landmarks along the snakelike

Arkansas mountain roads. He had just passed the creepy, giant ceramic bunny that sat—always watching—in a roadside front yard. It was an odd signpost, but it meant he was only thirty minutes from Eureka Springs. Even if it wasn't the official Pig Trail, an outstanding piece of highway lay before him.

Grown-up logic said that he should turn back to Rogers and head home, but the lure of the winding road ahead was a siren song he couldn't resist. Answering the call to adventure was easy to justify. He could simply extend the fun by spending the night at one of the easy-on-the-wallet biker hotels in the tiny, tourist town. There should be some good company and rowdy parties tonight with beer flowing freely. He had nothing to hurry home for and could always head back early in the morning. No harm, no foul.

That logic of the wild and free gave him the chance to take another run along his favorite stretch of road just ahead—daredevil, hairpin turns on a rocky mountainside where guardrails were scarce. The trick was to know when to brake, just at the last minute, to slide around each bend.

Barely budding trees overhung both sides of the two-lane road, their still-bare branches hovering expectantly around every curve. Jake leaned into the turns expertly, weaving within inches of the yellow center line as oncoming cars swerved away from his path. Dozens of bikers passed behind them, giving him a low thumbs-up or an imaginary high-five as they passed. He knew those comrades had just finished the epic turns and hillsides that were waiting for him. Blasting past the bright-pink warning of the "BIKER BEWARE" sign, he revved the engine and settled down on the seat in anticipation.

The next thing he knew, Jake was standing in an old-fashioned diner, staring at a bowl of ice cream on the bright-red counter in front of him. Confused, he looked up and noticed a brunette young woman standing on the other side of the counter. She had the most amazing green eyes he'd ever seen and was wearing what must have been a 1950s-themed uniform for the diner: her long, dark hair up high in a ponytail, a big poofed-up light-blue skirt nearly down to her ankles,

## At the Corner of Magnetic & Main

a spotless white button-up blouse, and perfectly shined saddle shoes. She smiled at him, calmly, like it was just any old day of the week.

Looking around, Jake felt even more bewildered. This wasn't just any diner. He recognized everything. He had been here before many times when he toured along Highway 62 through Eureka Springs. Just last week, he and his buddy Ed had grabbed some burgers here before heading on to Mountain Home. Magnetic Ice Cream Parlor and Diner was a unique place. Delicious American home-style cooking pulled in tourists from everywhere in the world. The cobbler was amazing—tender, delicate, and flaky, like it was created by the most perfect grandmother in existence. He thought he could still smell the day's offerings wafting gently in the air, but it didn't bring him comfort now.

Jake stared blankly at the walls in front of him. As always, they were covered from top to bottom with fun Coca-Cola memorabilia—posters and antique Coca-Cola pictures, Coca-Cola mirrors and clocks, and dozens of vintage Coca-Cola advertisements. Even the wallpaper had Coca-Cola symbols from one end to the other. He'd never asked about it, but it was pretty clear that the owners had spent decades gathering every Coke item they could get their hands on. It gave the place a kitschy aura in a town that celebrated kitschy in every shop and restaurant. Today, for Jake, it was all just disorienting. The bright-red bottle caps swam in front of his eyes. Wasn't he just on the highway?

Adding to his confusion, there were no lights on in the diner. The place was usually lit up and bright and cheery, but now it was dark with only the slight yellowish glow from a clock nearby and the deeper, ominous red of the emergency exit signs.

He had been headed in to Eureka Springs, he remembered that, but it was dusk just a moment ago. The black windows beside him proved that it was now well past dark.

*Did I stop by for dinner? Is the diner closed, and should I have left by now?*

Looking back at the waitress standing serenely in front of him, his thoughts were even more scrambled. The old folks who ran this place didn't dress up in throwback costumes, and he most certainly would have remembered this pretty waitress with the green eyes.

*Why is she just standing there? Am I supposed to order something or pay my check? I don't usually order ice cream. Why can't I remember?*

He looked down at the untouched bowl of slightly melted chocolate ice cream on the counter and tried to put the pieces together, but none of it made sense.

*How did I get here?* he wracked his brain.

"Give it a minute," the waitress with emerald eyes said quietly. "It'll come back to you."

The light in the diner was dim, but as Jake looked around, he noticed that they were not alone. Two strangers sat at the bar to his left. They were both staring at him, expectantly. The young woman, wearing a fancy black-and-white maid uniform, smiled at him like he was a little child lost in a shopping mall. She tucked a wisp of curly, auburn hair behind her ear and crinkled her freckled nose in an anxious smile. The old man with crackly, black skin and bright-white hair smiled and nodded reassuringly. It didn't help. Jake just felt dizzy and even more confused.

He reached for the spoon in front of him to take a bite of ice cream. Maybe that would help. But instead of picking up the spoon, his hand passed right through it. He tried again in frustration, and then he felt the waitress's hand on his arm. Her touch had a strange, dreamy feel.

"It may not work just yet," she said.

The two others at the counter shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"Miss Penny," the old man said, "ya best jus' tell 'im."

"It usually goes better when they can remember for themselves a bit first," Penny answered. "You know that much by now, Silas."

As Jake stared at the spoon and tried again to grasp it, the front door behind them swung open abruptly. Everyone at the counter jumped in surprise and turned to face it. Two older men, one in a robe and pajamas and the other in a police uniform, walked in and flipped on the front set of lights. No one at the counter moved an inch or uttered a sound.

"Thanks for opening up over here so I can use the phone, Hank," the sheriff said. "Hope we didn't bother Molly too much. That dang-

## At the Corner of Magnetic & Main

blasted radio gets all kind of interference down here in the low parta town, and I let my damn cell phone battery run out again.”

“No problem, Jimmy,” the man in the P.J.’s said, yawning. “Must have been a bad one to get everyone up and moving this late at night.”

“Yep,” Jimmy said, starting to dial the red Coca-Cola-emblazoned phone on the far wall from the counter. “I guess they just found him. Crazy young fella must have missed the turn and *psseeewww . . .*” He motioned with his hands in a large, diving arc. “Right off the edge of Highway 62 near Lake Leatherwood and into the trees a hundred feet below.”

Hank shook his head sadly and wrapped his worn, plaid robe closer around him.

“I sure wish the state would put up a few more guardrails. Did he even have a helmet on?”

Jimmy just laughed.

“Not sure, but wouldn’t have made much of a difference, from what I caught before the radio went out. That kinda wreck just leaves a big, gory mess. They’re guessin’ it happened earlier this evenin’. Kid actually went in the holler outside the city limits, but it seems like everybody took the day off today, goin’ fishing and whatnot, so they’re scramblin’ ’round for help.” His attention refocused on the phone call. “Yeah, Connie? Sorry we got cut off before. Did ya find any identification?” Jimmy continued, talking with the person on the other end of the phone.

But Jake wasn’t really listening anymore. He realized that Penny was now holding his hand, and the two strangers at the bar had gotten up to stand right behind him, each with a gentle hand on one of his shoulders.

Something felt wrong. *Why can’t I grab the spoon? Why are these people being so weird? And why don’t those two men notice the four of us or say anything to us?*

It was like they weren’t even there.

As his mind spun with questions, Jake heard his name. He looked up at Penny, and she smiled weakly, but it wasn’t her talking. It was the sheriff.

"Jake Thatcher. Got it. Have you reached his family yet? Well, keep trying. Thanks, Connie." The officer hung up the phone and made a few quick scribbles on a notepad before tucking it into his jacket pocket.

"I'm Jake Thatcher," he said, breaking away from the counter and the supportive touch of the others there. "I'm right here."

Neither man reacted at all, like they were blatantly ignoring him. He remembered games like that on the playground at school. Everyone would pick one kid to ignore for the day. It was funnier back then.

"Well, Hank," Sheriff Jimmy said, "it sounds like they've got it all moving smoothly now. I guess you can head back next door."

"Hello?" Jake shouted, stunned by their stupidity or rudeness or whatever it was. "I'm right here!"

Neither of the men looked at Jake. They simply headed for the door.

Hank turned off the front bank of lights as Jimmy ambled outside, but Hank hesitated before leaving and glanced back into the room.

"Good night, Penny," he whispered. Then he locked the door behind him.

"What was that?" Jake demanded, mostly to the closed door and the two men who had left through it. He spun around and looked at Penny, then at Silas and the maid. "Are they dumb as rocks?"

"They can't see you," Penny said flatly. "They can't see any of us."

"But the guy said goodnight to you."

"Yes, well . . . it's complicated." She shrugged one shoulder. "But he didn't see me."

Jake went weak in the knees. Penny rushed over and helped him to the stool at the counter, but it felt odd underneath him, like it was soft and barely there.

"Why did that cop say my name?" Jake wondered.

Penny sighed. She looked at Silas and the maid and then leaned in close to Jake. She spoke slowly and carefully, as if she thought he didn't speak English very well.

"Sheriff Jimmy was getting the name of a young man who died in a terrible motorcycle accident today."

"But he said *my* name."

"Yes, he did," Penny admitted.

## At the Corner of Magnetic & Main

“But I’m not dead!” Jake shouted at her.

Penny squeezed her lips into a tight line and sat down next to him.

“I’m not dead,” he said again, glaring at Silas and the maid. Silas looked at the ground. The maid just shook her head and wrung her hands slowly.

“So hard, so hard when they’re young’uns,” she said.

Penny leaned in close and whispered to him.

“Think. Close your eyes and try to remember.”

Angry and frustrated, Jake tried to pull away, but Penny just held his arm patiently.

“Close your eyes,” she said again. “Try to remember how you got here.”

This time, Jake closed his eyes and wracked his brain. He’d been on his motorcycle, having an awesome time. He’d been flying around the mountain trails. He could remember zipping through what his buddies called the zombie pit—a spot where the road had been blasted right through a mountain that now rose up rocky and daunting on either side. They joked about how they could lure zombies there and block them in. Jake had buzzed through it going about ninety miles per hour. He could remember slowing down some for the tighter corners, careening past Inspiration Point and the Opera in the Ozarks building, but he had run the engine full out again across the bridge outside of town at Lake Leatherwood. A sense of pride swelled up, remembering he must have hit near one hundred on that flat stretch. But how did he end up in the Magnetic Ice Cream Parlor and Diner with strangers on the far side of the city at the corner of Magnetic and Main? Did he drive here? Was his motorcycle outside?

The cop had mentioned a terrible accident. The cop said Jake Thatcher had been in a terrible accident. But there hadn’t been any . . .

Then—not all at once, like a scene in a movie, but in flashes of moments and feelings and images—Jake remembered. It sent an icy chill up his spine.

*I didn’t make that turn.*

The road had still been wet in patches, especially on the shoulders. He’d seen the bright-pink warning sign miles earlier, but he hadn’t slowed down. As if to spite it, he’d pushed on even faster, and then . . .

Yes, there had been a hairpin turn right past the entrance to Thorncrown Chapel. He'd leaned into it, but his bike had skidded off onto the wet, barely-existent shoulder. He closed his eyes and let it all wash over him. There was a frantic moment when he'd realized that the bike was out of control—that slide and panic, his hands in the still stiff, new riding gloves, desperately clinging to his beloved bike as the wheels spun uselessly in the air—and as they had flown off the side of the mountain, he could see the forest lying below him, and . . .

*Those men couldn't see me. They couldn't see any of us.*

*Dead?*

Jake did not take the news well, but he did better than some. Penny and the others waited without comment while reality sank in.

Penny had been through this hundreds of times—stood at this counter, witnessed them suddenly arrive, served up a bowl of ice cream, and helped as best she could. Sometimes they moved on quickly, gone before saying a word. Other times, like with Jake and so many young ones, the transition didn't go so smoothly. It probably didn't help that this boy was handsome and still filled with adventure and life. From the look of him, he couldn't be much more than twenty years old. He was going to cling to what he had with all his might. It was written on every inch of him from his wild, brown hair to his black riding boots. Clinging and resisting would be dangerous. Even more dangerous than speeding along Highway 62 on a motorcycle.

Jake was different from anyone else who had passed through the diner. Penny could sense it the minute he appeared. She had learned that everyone has a life-force. If she was paying attention, she could feel it in the air around her. Jake had more of a life-tsunami.

Blam! His arrival had sent out a shock wave that vibrated right through Penny's whole being. She was grateful that he had been disoriented for a minute because it took her that long to regain her composure. From the startled looks they had shot in her direction, Katie and Silas felt it too.

Jake emanated freshness, vitality, and an overwhelming sense of masculine rebellion. No one would dispute the fact that the young biker was ridiculously handsome. There was no denying it. Penny had



## At the Corner of Magnetic & Main

noticed it when he had visited the diner before. He may not have been able to see her then, but she had most certainly seen him. His charisma and charm enveloped a room the minute he swaggered in, and even a ghost sitting on the sidelines couldn't help but be impressed. But now that she was faced with his presence on the verge of moving on to whatever lay ahead, all of that was more of a liability than an asset.

Penny had a job to do. The anger and resistant energy bouncing off the walls of the diner had to be controlled and contained. A dish of ice cream, even the deliciousness of chocolate Blue Bell Ice Cream, might not be enough to get the job done this time. Penny needed to be calm, firm, and clear. Jake had been given a window of opportunity to adjust to his death, but she doubted it would last for long. This young man was going to need all the help she could muster.

Penny wished someone had been there for her when her time came. The night she had found herself standing alone in the middle of the dark diner had been horrible. That's one reason she had stayed there for so many years. Many lost ones passed through the door, and she knew she could be of some comfort. She knew she could help them adjust and come to terms with their totally altered lives.

Daytime in the diner was busy and full of life, but evenings were when those who could no longer truly enjoy the ice cream and cobbler came to visit. Silas and the maid, Katie, often stopped by. They had both been hanging around town even longer than Penny.

Silas was a convict who had died back in 1920 while working on building Highway 62 through town. He mostly hung out in a small cave below the road where the workers had slept, still wearing the gray jumpsuit with his prison number on the pocket. There was a thriving business there now, and lots of people came and went, but they couldn't see him. When he was lonely or bored, he wandered the quiet town after dark, meandered through Basin Park, or came to visit Penny.

Katie had been a maid at the Crescent Hotel back around 1900, when it was a really elite, luxury place to stay. She had accidentally fallen down the stairs, hurrying and carrying too much laundry at one time, and snapped her neck in an instant. That hotel was full of ghosts, human and animal, so she had plenty of company. There was a whole

basement full of souls left behind by a quack doctor who ran the place as a bogus cancer hospital around 1940. Tourists came through every day trying to catch some evidence of a ghostly presence. TV crews had even set up shop, searching for proof of haunting events, forcing the no-longer-living to hide for days on end. Sometimes it all got to be too much. Once Katie found the peace and quiet of the comforting diner, she started visiting Penny regularly.

Now the three of them sat with Jake, sharing the worst moment of his existence. They had all been where he was now, and they knew there was nothing they could say to make it magically all better. Dead was just dead, there was no going back, and he was going to have to face it eventually.

In his rage and frustration, Jake had figured out how to bang the countertop with no-longer-material fists. Now he just sat in a crumpled heap, his head down on the counter, wrapped in his arms. Bit by bit, the frantic energy in the room began to settle and return to normal. Maybe there was hope for this one after all, Penny thought.

“Would you like to try some ice cream now?” Penny finally said.

Jake shrugged his shoulders without looking up.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t taste as good as it used to . . . you know . . . before . . . but it’s still nice.”

Jake raised his head up slowly and rested it on one hand. Taking this as a “yes,” Penny slid the bowl of partially-melted ice cream in front of him. This time he was able to pick up the spoon and take a bite.

*She’s right, he thought. Not as good, but still pretty good.*

It was familiar. Cold, sweet, and creamy. It was comforting. It made Jake think back on good times with his friends, right there in that very diner. After a long bike ride, they’d all stop in for the best burgers in town and some apple cobbler. Such a cheery place. They’d sit and joke about the old-fashioned ads posted here and there and try to count how many Coke symbols each wall held.

As he took a second bite, Jake noticed that Penny was getting a bit blurry. The whole room was. It was like he was looking at her through a smeary telescope lens. He shook his head, but that didn’t help.

“Have another bite,” Penny encouraged.

## At the Corner of Magnetic & Main

As he did, the room began to glow with a brilliant Light. Looking around in wonder, he noticed that Penny was smiling. Silas and Katie were smiling. Jake felt weak and weightless, but calm and peaceful at the same time.

*What's in this ice cream?* he wondered. The Light grew brighter and seemed to be focused directly on him. Panic rose up. *Wait a minute!* He knew what this was. He'd read enough books and seen enough movies.

"NO!" Jake shouted, slamming the spoon down on the counter. "I'm not goin' into any Light! NO!"

Immediately, the radiance ceased, returning the diner to an eerie semi-darkness. Jake sighed in relief. He felt like himself again, and he could see everything clearly, including the pretty green eyes of the waitress.

But her eyes had lost their sparkle, and she was no longer smiling. Her hands flew to her mouth, and she shook her head in horror.

"Oh, Jake," she whispered. "What have you done?"