

## *Chapter One*

The little cat lay heavy, warm, and limp in Charlotte Carter's lap—bleeding right onto her new white pants. She stroked the animal with one hand and struggled to hold the phone and punch numbers with the other. After four long rings, an answer.

"Hello?"

Her words tumbled out in a hyperventilated rush. "Have I reached Dr. Ross? the veterinarian?"

"You have. Who's calling?"

"It's Snowball . . . I mean, it's Charlotte. Charlotte Carter. We met last Sunday. At church."

There was a thoughtful pause. "Mrs. Carter. Yes, I remember. You were sitting by yourself, toward the back. Do you wear glasses?"

"Yes. Sometimes. I need them for reading. About my—"

"Of course. I remember now, Mrs. Carter. I'm a deacon at Lighted Way, and I read your visitor card. You bought Tanglewood, didn't you? A great old house. I'm sure you'll fit right in at Lighted Way. You do realize that wasn't our regular preacher. Pastor Jock was out

of town. But we were glad to have you anyway. Hope you'll come back. Nice of you to call, Mrs. Carter."

"Thank you. Yes. I will. I mean I'll try to. Uh, Dr. Ross, what I'm calling about is my cat. I know it's late, and I am so sorry to bother you at home; but I didn't know who to call, and I'm afraid she just got hit by a car. I—I found her in the middle of the street, a good quarter mile from my house—which doesn't make any sense because Snowball has never been one to wander."

"Cats tend to roam when they're in a new place," said Dr. Ross. "You did just move here?"

"Yes. Two weeks ago tomorrow."

"Mrs. Carter, have you ever taught Sunday school?"

"Yes, but Snow—"

"Wonderful. Now you know cats will roam till they get settled in. You might want to keep her inside till she gets used to the new place. An old wives' tale says that if you put butter between a cat's toes it won't try to go back to its old home. Never put much stock in the procedure myself, though." Dr. Ross chuckled. "I'm trying to remember now. Is it the third graders or the fifth graders who need someone to fill in?"

"Yes, sir. About my cat—I planned on keeping her inside for a while, but it's sort of too late. You see, at first I thought she was just an empty sack or some trash or something, but when I got closer . . ."

This time Charlotte's words got through.

"You say she got hit? Your cat? How's her breathing?"

"Kind of funny."

"She trying to fight you?"

"No." Stroking the limp cat, Charlotte tried not to cry.

"We best take a look. Have you got a cat carrier? No? Well, then, wrap her up in a towel and put her in a box. I'll meet you at the clinic. You know where it is?"

"Just down from the post office?"

"That's right. Four Paws Pet Clinic. Sign's out front."

Charlotte wiped her eyes on the tail of her shirt.

"Don't get in any hurry. Be careful. Are you okay to drive?"

"I think so. Yes. I am." She had to be.

"Okay. See you in ten minutes."

Charlotte eased the injured cat out of her lap and onto a kitchen chair and raced through the house looking for a box. A shoe box, a packing box, any kind of box. But as she'd unpacked her things, she had carted all the boxes to the curb, and the garbage truck had come yesterday.

*Think, Charlotte. Think.* She made herself take a deep breath.

Pantry.

Crackers. They came in a box.

Charlotte grabbed the cracker box and emptied it out onto the kitchen counter.

"Mew," came a weak sound.

"Hold on," Charlotte called to the cat. The way the cracker box was shaped, she'd need to tape up the end and cut an opening in the side. Masking tape? Duct tape? Did she even have any? Charlotte scrambled through drawer after drawer but did not find a thing. Drat! What was she thinking? Snowball was not going to fit in a cracker box! What now?

She dashed to her bedroom. Yes! She pulled out her lingerie drawer and dumped all her underwear out onto the bed. This would do. Once she'd wrapped Snowball in a pink bath towel and set her in the drawer, off they went.

Or at least, off they went once Charlotte found her keys.

Dr. Ross, short, squat, and dressed in his everyday uniform of blue work pants and a loose-fitting embroidered Mexican shirt, was waiting when they arrived. It was almost eleven.

"Let's see here." He lifted Snowball out of the drawer and laid her on the exam table. Matted with blood and mud, the little thing was so injured that she didn't even try to get away.

The vet snapped on a pair of latex gloves and flipped on a bright overhead light. After giving the cat a shot to ease her pain, he proceeded to look her over from head to tail.

"How bad is she?" asked Charlotte.

"Not good. See how her hip's positioned? Got some broken bones in that back leg, probably in both back legs. I'll X-ray her. Probably has other injuries, too. Belly's hard as a rock."

"That's not good?"

"Internal bleeding."

"What can you do for her?"

Dr. Ross sighed. "Mrs. Carter, after thirty-seven years of practice, I still hate this part. We've got a couple of options."

Charlotte stroked the cat's chin. She thought she detected a weak little purr.

"I can do surgery on her and maybe fix her up. But nothing's for sure."

"Surgery?"

He nodded. "Cats are tricky. Patching her up will be expensive. Could run close to a thousand dollars, and there's no guarantee that she'll be all right when we're done. It might be better to think about putting her to—"

"Can I pay it out?" Charlotte cut him off.

Dr. Ross looked up.

Charlotte bit her lip. "I'm not one to fuss over animals. I understand there comes a time when it's best to put them down. But Snowball belonged to my late husband, J.D. He was a fool over her. Kept one hook baited on his trotline down at our little pond just so she could have her fresh fish. So many times I've watched him sit and

pick the bones out of a catfish and feed it to Snowball right out of his hand."

Dr. Ross peeled off his gloves and took a seat on a stool. "How long has your husband been gone, Mrs. Carter?"

"It's Charlotte. Six months."

"I see. I'm sorry to hear of your loss. I can't help but wonder what's brought a new widow like you to Ruby Prairie. We've not exactly got a booming metropolis here. There aren't many jobs for a person unless you're a schoolteacher or a nurse or you own some kind of business. I don't recall any Carters in Ruby Prairie. Are your people from around here?"

"No. Just me." Charlotte wasn't inclined to share more.

The short-acting shot began to wear off. Snowball raised her head, looked at Charlotte, then lay back down.

"I don't think I can let her go just yet," said Charlotte, her voice tight.

"Okay then." Dr. Ross stood up and patted Charlotte's hand. "I'll do my best to fix the little gal up. Let me call Lindy, my granddaughter. She assists me when I do surgery. Soon as she can get up here, I'll take Snowball back and we'll get started. In the meantime, you go on home and get some rest. Jot down your number, and we'll call you when we're finished. It may take several hours."

Charlotte hesitated. "May I stay with her till you're ready to start?"

"Sure." Dr. Ross went to make coffee.

"Poor baby." Charlotte stroked Snowball's bloody, matted fur. "You're going be all right. Yes, you are." Tears fell. "Doctor's gonna take good care of you. You'll be out catching a mouse before you know it."

*How in the world am I going pay for all this?* She hadn't budgeted for such an expense. And until she got the money from . . .

The kitty looked up with adoring blue eyes.

Within fifteen minutes a teenaged girl—apparently the granddaughter—popped her head into the exam room where Charlotte waited with Snowball. She had dressed for surgery in snowman-print pajama bottoms, pink flip-flops, and a Camp Red Oak T-shirt, size extra small.

"Hi. I'm Lindy. Sorry about your cat," she said as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail. "Granddad says she got hit."

"She did. I appreciate you coming up here in the middle of the night."

"No problem." Lindy yawned as she headed toward the back. "I'll see if he's ready for her." A moment later she was back. "Time to take her on back."

Charlotte gave the white cat one final rub behind the ears. "You be a sweet kitty. I'll be back."

"Don't worry," said Lindy. "We'll call you."

The night J.D. brought Snowball home, he had found her wet and mad, weaned but missing her mother. She was out alone in the rain, yowling her head off in the parking lot of a gas station where J.D. had stopped to fill up on his way home. When nobody claimed her, he scooped up the kitten and tucked her inside his sweatshirt jacket.

He'd come in the front door empty-handed, feigning ignorance of the little white head sticking out of his coat. "Cat? What cat?" he had teased.

How she missed that man. Only six months since he died, a year since he was first diagnosed.

*"The bad news is that just as we suspected, the tumor was malignant. The good news is we think we got it all."*

Nervous smiles all around.

Final bill in the mail.

Then weight loss.

Pain.

Loss of balance.

And optimism that quickly wore thin.

The doctors were wrong. Like a hidden hot ember left smoldering in the attic of a once-burned house, J.D.'s cancer came back with a fury, tongues of it infiltrating lymph nodes, lungs, liver, and brain.

Turning down offer after offer of assistance from friends and extended family, Charlotte did everything for her husband. Bathed him, turned him, cleaned him up. She slept on a camp cot inches from his hospital bed in their living room. It was when she left him for ten minutes to sit alone on the front stoop of their house, to rest her back against the cold concrete steps and inhale her first whiff of outside air in three days, that J.D. chose to take his leave.

"Where is everybody?" he'd asked her the day before.

"Who, sweetheart? It's just you and me."

"Mother and Daddy. Grandma and little Jackson. They were just here. Standing right there."

Gone to glory. All four of them.

Seems they had come to bear her husband away.

For the first time since her move, weary and worried, Charlotte allowed doubts to enter her mind. Well-meaning friends and family had implored her not to make any major decisions or changes until at least a year after J.D.'s death. She'd politely listened to all their advice, then, true to her lone-ranger nature, gone against every word of it. What was the point of waiting some arbitrary length of time?

Charlotte knew exactly what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

Would things work out according to plan? She hoped so. She'd prayed so. As soon as the money came in and all the legal stuff was settled, she could get on with her dream. And, as far as she could tell, Ruby Prairie was the perfect location for what she had in mind. Good schools. Good churches. Low cost of living. Small-town values.

She'd done her research, but one could never be sure.

The drive home took ten minutes. In her haste to get Snowball to the vet she had neglected to turn on the porch light, and the night was dark and moonless. Not yet adjusted to the worrisome bifocals her forty-year-old eyes had only recently begun to require, Charlotte carefully picked her way across the yard, avoiding gopher holes. Had she locked the house? She couldn't remember but paused to dig in her purse for her keys just in case.

"Meow."

Charlotte jumped.

"Meow. Meow."

She felt soft fur against her ankles.

What was this? Charlotte only had one cat. A white one.

Which was the color of the cat at her feet.

A small one.

Which was the size of the one at her feet.

Doing her best to avoid tripping over the strange cat, Charlotte made her way to the porch and turned on the light.

It couldn't be.

"Snowball?"

"Meow."

"Snowball?"

"Meow. Meow." The cat's message was clear: *Where have you been? I'm hungry. And what is that strange cat smell that's all over you?*

Charlotte sat down hard in the rocking chair next to her front door. Snowball jumped up on her lap. The cat's erect tail grazed her face as she padded back and forth across Charlotte's knees.

"Oh my."

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

So she did a little of both.

At ten past eight the next morning, Charlotte heard the phone ring.

"Dr. Ross here. Mrs. Carter, we're done, and I've got good news. Only one leg's broken, and the internal injuries weren't as bad as I first thought. You should be able to pick up your cat by the end of the week. Uh, can you hold on just a sec?"

He held his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Sorry 'bout that," said Dr. Ross. "Lindy's filling out the records on your cat right now. What did you say her name was?"

"Visa," said Charlotte. "Just put down Visa."

*Lord, prayed Charlotte later that day, I told You I was ready to take in a few extras, ready to take care of them, love them, provide them with what they need. I've got to be honest, Lord. A stray cat was not what I had in mind.*

She held Snowball in her lap and let her mind drift. If things went according to plan, Visa—the lucky kitty of mistaken identity—would not be the last stray to come to live at her new Ruby Prairie home.