

Chapter One

Charlotte Carter slipped into a back pew. She hated being late, though as far as she could tell, her chronic tardiness at Lighted Way Church was overlooked by most of its faithful members. These indulgent folks—and Charlotte was truly grateful for this—let her lateness, her preference for sandals and sundresses over high heels and hose, and her made-from-a-mix potluck contributions slide.

After all, Charlotte possessed what Ruby Prairie residents seemed to accept as the one perfect excuse: the sad misfortune of having been born and raised somewhere outside the Lone Star State. It had taken her until her fortieth year to make her way from her birthplace in Oklahoma to this small Texas town. In her six months at Lighted Way she'd found that even the most conservative members allowed abundant grace to "outsiders."

Tonight was the regularly scheduled second-Tuesday-of-the-month business meeting of the church. From all accounts, the January meeting was especially important for members to attend.

"Sorry," Charlotte whispered to her seatmate, Ruby Prairie's mayor

and her good friend, Kerilynn Bell. She'd stepped on Kerilynn's toes trying to get to her spot. "What've I missed?"

"Not a thing. Just getting started," Kerilynn whispered back. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," fibbed Charlotte. She took a deep breath. Estrogen-fueled crises were the norm at her house. Today had been an especially normal day.

Pastor Jock Masters, as was his custom at every Lighted Way gathering, began the meeting by approaching the Father with a moment of silent prayer.

Charlotte took advantage of the few quiet seconds to bring to God's attention the names of those sheltered by Tanglewood, the rambling pink-and-white Victorian that housed her home for troubled girls. She closed her eyes. The faces and needs of each member of her out-of-the ordinary household rolled past like credits on a movie screen.

First she mouthed the name Treasure Evans. Ample in body and heart, and full of rich wisdom, Treasure lived up to her name. Charlotte wouldn't be able to do what she did without the other woman's help. Treasure had been the friend of Charlotte's late grandmother, a friend lost for a while but now found. She had left a thriving massage therapy practice and moved to tiny Ruby Prairie to help Charlotte out with the Tanglewood girls.

When Charlotte had first bought Tanglewood, become licensed by the state, and begun taking in girls, she was determined to take care of everything without assistance from anyone in the church or in the town. Then one crisis after another hit. Without the loving help of Treasure and the folks of Ruby Prairie, Tanglewood would not have survived until Christmas. Now half a dozen girls were under Charlotte's care.

"Bless them," Charlotte prayed. "Please bless each one."

The eleven-year-old twins, Nikki and Vikki, had a mother dying of cancer and an incarcerated daddy. Their grandmother was doing all she could to care for their mother. She couldn't manage the girls, too.

Sharita, who was thirteen, was sent to Tanglewood by her parents, who lived in a gang-infested area of Houston. Sharita's older brother had been killed in a drive-by shooting, and her parents were determined to keep her safe—even if it meant sending her elsewhere to live.

Maggie, fourteen, had been found living with her mother in a broken-down van at a state park. Social Services placed her with Charlotte until her mom could get back on her feet.

Donna's mother had left when she was a baby. She and her dad had gotten along okay until he impulsively decided to take an off-shore oil drilling job, lured by the promise of quick and easy cash. The only problem was that the job would take him from home for months at a time, and Donna was left with no one to look after her. Despite her assertions that at fourteen she could take care of herself, she, too, was now a resident at Tanglewood.

Beth, fifteen, was the most troubled of the girls. In foster care all of her life, she ran away soon after her arrival at Charlotte's home. After two weeks she was found and returned, recovering from a broken foot. Though her body had healed over the past six weeks, it was the girl's spirit Charlotte fretted about. Beth was too quiet. Kept everything inside. Charlotte prayed for God to give her insight and patience in dealing with Beth.

Pastor Jock ended everyone's silent prayers with praises and requests, followed by "In Jesus' name. Amen."

Charlotte echoed his amen. When she raised her bowed head, her shoulders relaxed a bit. She let herself sink back into the pew.

Kerilynn reached over and patted Charlotte's knee, shot her a grin, and slipped her a peppermint from her purse.

Charlotte started to drop the candy into her pocket. She'd eat it later. But then again, had she remembered to brush her teeth before leaving the house? Better safe than sorry. Painstakingly, she tried to open the cellophane wrapper without making a racket. An impossible task.

"Sorry," she mouthed to Lester and Ginger Collins, sitting on her other side. She gave up on the candy. Just in case, she'd avoid breathing on anybody until she got home.

Ginger flashed her a sweet smile. Lester, who kept his pockets always well-stocked, offered her a stick of easy-to-open Juicy Fruit.

Charlotte had never belonged to a church served by a pastor as young as Jock Masters. At thirty-nine, he was a year younger than she. Nor had she known many pastors who were divorced. But she had found Jock and nearly all the Lighted Way Church members to be warm and welcoming. Catfish Martin, mayor Kerilynn's twin brother, had been cold at first. But he, too, had come around and had even been instrumental in helping Charlotte get Beth back when she ran away.

The church had embraced Treasure, too, when she moved in with Charlotte. She and Sharita were two of only a scattered handful of African-Americans in Ruby Prairie, but no one treated them ill. Lighted Way was not a perfect place, but it was full of love, and Pastor Jock preached the Word in a way that even her girls could understand.

He stood in front of his congregation now, ready to begin. Charlotte thought folks called to a meeting by the IRS would look more enthused.

First on the agenda was the quarterly budget report. Pastor Jock handed that off to Chilly Reed, church deacon in charge of finances.

Chilly coughed, cleared his throat, and took hold of the report as if it were a coiled-up snake.

Chilly tried his best to speedily steer the congregation through the budgetary maze so that he could sit down. Except for a few minor bumps and detours—an unexpectedly high light bill, an increase in first-class postage—he managed to do pretty well, probably because he read so fast that lots of what he said could not be understood.

But at the mention of a rocking chair and some new wallpaper for the ladies' bathroom, folk's ears perked up.

"Whoa. Back up there, Chilly," said Catfish. "Times are tight. What are we thinking, going and spending the Lord's money on something like that? No money trees growing in the churchyard last time I looked. If we've got extra for such nonsense as that, we ought to put those funds in the bank where they can gain some interest."

"Have you seen the wallpaper we've got?" asked Nomie Jenkins. Catfish had not.

"It's peeling. Been there twenty years at least. Half of it has come down of its own," said Ginger.

"You ever tried to nurse a baby standing up?" challenged Kerilynn.

Catfish blushed from his collar to his hairline. "Kerilynn. Please. Not in mixed company."

"Well, have you?"

Nomie cut in. "Attractive restrooms are important. It's embarrassing to direct visitors to a room that's shabby. And we should consider the needs of our young mothers. It's hard enough for 'em to get themselves and their babies to services. A rocking chair would make it much easier."

Charlotte's head turned from side to side as opposite opinions were expressed, with the split right down the gender middle. In the end, the ladies of Lighted Way prevailed, winning budgetary

approval not only for a rocking chair and new wallpaper, but for a coordinating border to match.

"Any chance we could add in some new flooring?" asked Nomie, after Pastor Jock indicated it was time to move on.

"Not this quarter," answered Chilly. "Less you ladies want to cut back on what we send ever' month to the orphans."

Which of course put an end to all that.

Chilly sat down.

Once the budget had been approved, Pastor Jock offered the floor to anyone who had a concern.

Lavada Castle raised an age-spotted hand. "We've got a problem with some of the young people in this church."

Charlotte swallowed. She imagined heads longing to turn and look at her. What were the chances the problem had to do with one of her six?

"I love every one of these children. You know that. That's why I lay it on the parents. In my day, mothers and fathers didn't allow their boys and girls to engage in such disrespectful behavior in God's house."

Charlotte racked her brain. Had some of her girls been seen passing notes? Talking during prayer?

"Somebody needs to put a stop to it," continued Miss Lavada. She looked about ready to cry.

Pastor Jock scratched his head. "I'm sorry, Miss Lavada. The young people of Lighted Way are of concern to all of us here, but I'm not sure we understand. Exactly what behaviors are you referring to?"

"Why, gum chewing, of course. Bad enough these children have gum during services, but they've been going and sticking it up under the pews. Take a look for yourself."

Like synchronized swimmers, every head in the room ducked down to inspect.

Miss Lavada was right.

Those kids.

"It's an awful mess," said Miss Lavada. "Unsanitary too."

Lester Collins stood up. "I reckon I'm part to blame. Ran into a special over at Sam's Club last time Ginger and I made a trip to Fort Worth to see the grandkids. Stocked up. Got mostly Big Red, but some Double Bubble and Juicy Fruit too. Been giving all the kids gum."

Miss Lavada sniffed.

"Didn't think nothing about it. From now on, I'll make 'em wait till after church to get their chewing gum."

"I'd appreciate that very much," said Miss Lavada.

Pastor Jock moved on. "Special event is coming up. Three and a half weeks from now we've got Friendship Sunday. It's time to be making our plans."

Kerilynn leaned over to whisper to Charlotte. "It's a day when members are supposed to bring their unchurched friends. We always have it the first Sunday in February."

"Attendance was down last year," said Nomie.

"Yes, it was," said Pastor Jock.

"I remember when we used to fill up this building on Friendship Sunday," said Gabe Eden. "In ninety-nine, best I recall, we broke 120. Had to put chairs in the aisles."

"No reason that can't happen this year," said Pastor Jock. "Though let's keep in mind that numbers aren't what we're most concerned with. Our goal is to reach out to folks with hungry souls."

"I say we do something different from our usual potluck," said Nomie. "Folks may have hungry souls, but filling up their stomachs with something extra good couldn't hurt."