



## Chapter One

It was cold outside. It had been the coldest February Charlotte could remember in a dozen years at least, and they were only one week in. She glanced around at the ice-crusting, shimmering world their farm had transformed into overnight and reminded herself that spring would be right around the corner. Not with tomorrow's sunrise—or the next—but before long, she'd be digging in the warm earth, planting seeds for her garden. Before she knew it, she'd be griping at the kids for trailing in mud and grass clippings on their sneakers. It was a nice thought.

But today, Charlotte's boots crunched on the ground's thin crust of snow. Her warm breath made soft puffs in the air. She tucked her hands into her pockets and hurried with her grandchildren toward the little Ford Focus.

Despite the crispness in the air, she loved the way the frozen briar patches on the edge of the fence line gleamed like the crystal candleholders she kept in her dining room hutch. The candleholders were a wedding gift she had never used and only took time to admire once a month when she took them out to dust.

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*Maybe I should pull them out for the next family celebration,* Charlotte thought as she scurried on. But she quickly pushed that thought out of her mind as she remembered last night's impromptu football game between Sam and Christopher with a pair of clean socks. The boys had too much pent-up energy and no place to expend it.

*Better to keep the candlesticks tucked away. Keep them safe.*

In the distance, the cottonwood trees stretched their frozen branches into the sky. Yesterday they appeared bare and uninteresting, but somehow during the hours she'd slept they'd been clothed in a glittery shroud.

"Grandma, it's awfully cold today. Are you sure it's okay for the horses to be out?" Emily asked, hurrying past her big brother Sam to keep up with Charlotte, her eyebrows scrunched in concern.

"Yes, they're fine. Uncle Pete is mucking their stalls, and then they'll go right back inside where it's nice and warm."

Britney and Stormy pranced behind the fence next to the barn as they watched Charlotte and the kids scramble to the car. The barbed wire resembled a string of fragile glass, giving the impression that the horses' slightest touch would shatter the wire into a million little pieces.

*Sort of like Sam's spirit,* Charlotte thought. *Sort of like Sam.*

Just like the cold wind that had swept in from the north, a chilly attitude had settled over Sam too. He'd been doing well lately—or so she thought. Last month he'd spent a weekend with Jake and Paul, and it appeared to Charlotte that he'd connected with his friends. Then—the same day the dark clouds over the north pasture blew in—Sam's attitude changed as well. In the past few days, his words had been sharp. His face drawn. His eyes downcast.

Charlotte wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Everyone had been tiptoeing around her oldest grandson lately as if his emotions would shatter as easily as the thin icicles that hung from the front porch. Even Bob had sensed Sam's sour attitude and had been easier on him. Charlotte wished she knew what was wrong. Wished she knew what to do about it.

Charlotte opened the trunk. She gently put down the bag carrying the laptop computer from Christopher's class. Ten-year-old Christopher put in his rocket and stand, and Emily laid his large display board on top of it all.

"Careful, don't put anything on top of that computer bag," Charlotte said, scooting the display board to the side.

"Grandma, it's cardboard. It's not going to hurt anything," said Emily, with a fourteen-year-old's typical disdain.

"I know, I know. But I told Miss Rivkin that I'd deliver the computer to the school in one piece. She said they usually don't let the students bring the school computers home, and she'd only agreed because I promised to watch over it." Charlotte slammed the trunk closed.

Emily smirked. "Yeah, well, thanks for giving us a ride too—since you were going all that way for the computer." Laughter burst from Emily's lips.

Charlotte chuckled at Emily's humor as she climbed in her car, shut the car door, and started the engine. Then she glanced into her rearview mirror, catching a glimpse of her oldest grandson's set jaw and downcast eyes. She felt her own smile fade.

Common sense told her that his sour attitude was mostly due to the fact that his car was broken down—yet again. But she also noticed sadness in his eyes. Sometimes he tried to hide it, but it was hard to miss.

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*Maybe his car breaking down is a good thing,* Charlotte thought. She actually missed the times when all three kids were together, even if it was riding in the car.

Over the past week or so, Sam had spent a lot of time alone in his room. He did his chores by himself and excused himself from family movie nights. In her opinion, his time driving to and from school by himself wasn't good either. Sam was already introspective by nature—he didn't need more alone time to think.

Their seat belts clicked in unison, and Charlotte drove down the pothole-filled driveway. The tires crunched over the patches of hard, dirty snow left from the last snowfall. She felt herself shiver despite her heavy coat and her thick gloves.

Beside her on the front seat, Christopher sniffed the air. "Grandma, did you make strawberry cupcakes for our lunch?" He opened his paper lunch bag and peeked in before she had a chance to answer. His face immediately fell.

"Sorry, Christopher, just plain, ol' boring oatmeal raisin cookies—no fancy cupcakes today."

Emily leaned over the backseat. "The smell is my new lip gloss. It smells like strawberry shortcake. Want some?" She reached out her hand, pretending she was going to put it on Christopher's lips.

"Get away!" he squealed. "Lip gloss is for girls! I don't want pink lips."

"It won't make them pink." Emily settled back in her seat. "Only shiny and pretty."

"Ugh." Christopher stuck out his tongue. "That's even worse."

"I thought you liked shiny stuff. I saw shiny things flying all over the farm last weekend."

“Those were rockets, Emily, not shiny things. And they were really cool.”

Charlotte glanced into the rearview mirror, catching Emily's gaze. “Don't tease him, Emily. I know you were there and just as excited about what was going on. I heard your voice on the home video.”

Emily shrugged. “I know. I was just teasing. Everyone needs a little teasing now and then, right, Sam?”

Sam grunted an answer that left Charlotte guessing whether it was a yes or a no.

“I hope my science project does okay.” Christopher turned to Charlotte, his face bright with excitement. “They say the top two winners in each category get to go to the *county* science fair.”

Charlotte smiled at seeing her grandson excited. She said a silent prayer that he would win something. Every event, big or small, that could plug her grandchildren into the community was a plus.

“It better be good,” Emily complained, “to get me out of the house at o'dark thirty.”

“Well, I needed time to set everything up. I wanted to make sure I got a good spot too, because it's a cool project.”

“It *is* cool,” Charlotte added. “I bet they haven't seen anything like this around here. Most of the kids do tests on the soil. Or they grow things in their parents' greenhouses. I'm not sure I've ever heard of a rocket project before.” She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, trying to get them to warm up. “Christopher, when will you know if you're going on to the county science fair?”

“Next Friday, February fourteenth.”

“Valentine's Day? That's an odd day. I mean with everything else going on.” Charlotte's voice trailed off as she

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remembered how meaningful that day was when she was in high school—or how traumatic it could be.

“Do the cheerleaders still run their flower fundraiser?” Charlotte asked.

The words were barely out of her lips when Emily let out a moan. “Grandma, please don’t talk about that—I’ve heard the stories.”

“Stories?”

“Yeah, of people getting made fun of because they don’t even get one flower. I heard once there was a girl who didn’t come to school ever again after going home without a flower. In fact, no one has seen her since then.”

“Grandma, is that true?” Christopher craned his neck to look at his sister.

“Of course not, I’m sure there are disappointed kids, but many things in life will bring that. It doesn’t mean you just drop out of life.”

“Personally, I think they should find another way to make money.” Emily’s voice took on an authoritative tone. “The only ones who like it are the popular kids, since they’re guaranteed a ton of flowers. In fact, you can tell the pecking order by the number of flowers each person receives.”

Christopher wrinkled up his nose. “Pecking order? Grandma, what does that mean?”

“It means that some people have it good, and then there are the rest of us—who just keep getting pecked lower and lower, with no way to escape.” Sam’s voice was solemn. But as soon as the words were out of his mouth he was silent again.

Charlotte looked in the rearview mirror, but Sam’s hoodie was pulled over his head and he was looking out the window. If Charlotte had had any question before

whether there was something brewing in Sam's head, she was certain about it now.

"Actually, it's a term that developed because of chickens," Charlotte said lightheartedly, trying to add a note of interest to the dreary conversation. "A pecking order is like a system of people who are ranked, one above the other. Just like the chickens peck at each other to display dominance, sometimes people do that too."

"Peck each other?" Christopher wrinkled his nose, and Charlotte couldn't help but laugh. Christopher rubbed his arm. "Ouch."

"Yeah, unfortunately people often like to act as if they're more important than others, despite the fact God calls us equal in his sight—"

"Which is why we should outlaw the whole fundraiser," Emily interrupted.

"Or maybe they should lock you up for being a whiner," Sam mumbled. "It's just flowers. It won't be the end of the world if you don't get one."

"What's your problem?" Emily hissed at her brother. "You've been a grump all morning. Is it because you don't have tires for that piece of junk of yours?"

"No, I got tires. Not like you cared anyway . . ."

"They're not sure what the problem is," Charlotte chimed in. "Grandpa has to take a look."

Emily seemed satisfied by this answer, but Charlotte knew it hadn't resolved anything.

They pulled up to Christopher's school, and Charlotte turned in her seat. "Emily, can you help Christopher carry his rocket into the classroom? I'll follow in a minute with the poster board."

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"I don't need help, Grandma," Christopher asserted. "Everyone will think I'm a baby if Emily helps me."

"I insist. Emily, can you please help? I'll be in soon."

Charlotte's gaze met Emily's eyes, and Emily glanced at Sam as if knowing the purpose for the request.

"C'mon, Christopher. No one will think you're a baby." Emily opened the car door. "Besides I want to check out the other kids' projects—even though I know yours is going to leave them in the dust." Charlotte popped open the trunk for Emily and Christopher to retrieve the project.

Christopher carried his rocket tight to his chest. Emily put the computer bag over her shoulder and carried the stand in her hands. Charlotte said a silent prayer that Emily wouldn't drop the laptop on her way into the building.

Christopher and Emily merged with other kids heading into the double doors of the school, some of them also carrying their projects into the building.

Charlotte turned further in her seat to look at Sam.

"I can walk the rest of the way." Sam reached for the door handle.

"Not so fast."

He dropped his hand back to his lap.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

They sat there for a full minute, neither saying a word. Charlotte had read once that interviewers would often use silence to encourage the people they interviewed to talk—since no one likes a void in the conversation. No one except Sam, that is.

"Fine. I'll drop it for now, but you know you can come to me with whatever problem you're having."

Sam nodded once, but kept silent.

Charlotte's mind scurried to think of something else to say, to do, to leave their parting on a more positive note. "Your birthday is coming up," she hurriedly added. "Do you have any idea what you want to do? Have a family party? Invite some friends over?"

"Hop the next plane outta here?" Sam mumbled. Then he reached for the door handle and climbed out. "Thanks for the ride, Grandma, but I better get going." He offered a small wave. As he glanced down at her through the car window, Charlotte noticed something else in Sam's gaze.

An apology.

Charlotte watched Sam amble off, then she took her keys from the ignition and looked in the still-open trunk. Christopher's display board was inside, and she couldn't help but smile as she noticed how he'd used his best handwriting on the captions under his photographs.

She carried it to the school entrance while a little boy with a large backpack struggled to open the door for her. She thought she recognized him from church—maybe he was one of the little guys from the Christmas pageant. He smiled at her, and she knew her guess was right. She remembered those missing teeth from one of the wooly sheep.

She found Christopher's classroom, the third door on the left. It was the same one Bill had had, and Pete too. Denise had been down the hall with a different teacher. Being here—with the sights of the bright posters and kids' projects on the wall, the scents of floor cleaner and Elmer's glue, the sun streaming through the tall windows—made her feel as if twenty years hadn't passed. For the briefest moment she felt a twinge of emotion, remembering her

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own kids at this age—so innocent, so full of laughter and mischief.

She swallowed hard as she noticed Christopher's teacher, Miss Rivkin, filing graded papers into the students' cubbies in the corner of the room. She wore a sharp navy blue suit that perfectly accented her short, red hair.

"Mrs. Stevenson, so good to see you. Christopher's setting up his project in the gym. I can show you where he is."

Charlotte knew where the gym was. She had walked these halls more times than she could count, bringing sack lunches, cupcakes on birthdays, attending basketball games. Yet she knew better than to cross "The Boss," as she often heard the kids referring to Miss Rivkin. Charlotte smiled. "Sure, lead the way. And please call me Charlotte."

Miss Rivkin's high-heeled shoes clacked on the chipped tile floor as she walked down the long hall and crossed the breezeway into the gym. Christopher had already set up his rocket and display on a long folding table. Charlotte glanced around and noticed the usual array of volcanoes, star constellations, and plants in various stages of growth.

"Thanks, Grandma." Christopher took the display board from her. "Emily told me to tell you she already headed to her school."

Christopher diligently set up his display board and checked and rechecked to make sure everything was laid out "just right." Charlotte couldn't help but smile. He seemed older than he had this morning, sitting in his Shrek pajamas at the breakfast table. More capable too.

Charlotte looked at the display board. Over the last few weeks, she'd watched the progress of the project. That included viewing the rocket's launch from her spot at the

kitchen window a few days ago when Christopher, Emily, and Pete set it off in the driveway. Toby had even gotten into the act, barking and carrying on as if the rocket was a toy Christopher had picked out specifically for her. But Charlotte hadn't seen the completed display since she had gone to bed before Christopher had finished it. She was impressed. There were photographs of the different types of rockets; a hand-drawn picture of the rocket-launch liftoff, thrust phase, coast phase, and ejection; and a map printed off the Internet indicating rocket landing areas. She smiled, imagining Sam on the computer "Googling" the right information for his brother. Charlotte was sure her older grandson could find a way to order cheesecake from New York and pizza from Chicago over the Internet—and have it shipped to their house by morning.

"Mrs. Ste—I mean Charlotte—you're welcome to stay if you'd like. I assigned each of the kids a time to give their science talk, and Christopher just happens to be first this morning. He'll be meeting with the judges in less than ten minutes."

Charlotte glanced at her watch. She'd thrown a load of clothes in the dryer before she'd left. They were most likely done and wrinkling in the dryer at this very moment. Then there was the shopping she still had to do and the tractor part she was supposed to pick up for Pete at AA Tractor Supply Store. She'd already heard his speech twelve times at home.

Then again, she glanced around, realizing that through all the science projects over the years she'd never stuck around for this part. Her excuses most likely had been all the ones going through her head at this moment.

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“Sure, I’d love to stay.” Charlotte placed a hand on Christopher’s shoulder. “If it’s okay with you, that is.”

His face brightened. “Yeah, cool.”

“Okay.” Charlotte pointed to the end of the row. “I’ll wait down there so I won’t be in the way.”

Ten minutes later, Charlotte watched as Christopher gave his presentation.

He explained reasons he chose this project and the books he read in his research. He stated important key dates concerning rocket development, and then turned the attention of the judges toward the video he’d created with an actual rocket launch.

Christopher clicked a few buttons on the computer, and seconds later the video played. It was Pete’s voice that Charlotte heard first, talking to Christopher as he shot the video.

“Okay, tell me what you’re doing again?” Pete’s voice asked.

On the video, Christopher knelt on the cold ground. He pulled off his gloves and laid them on the dirty snow next to his rocket, then he began fiddling with the wires at the rocket’s base. “First, I’m clipping the hooks onto the igniters of the rocket. Here’s one and here’s the second one.” He glanced at Pete videotaping only briefly, then returned to his task. “But the first one is a little bit loose so I’m going to tighten it.

“And then after I get them clipped on, I’m going to move my gloves away from the rocket base,” Christopher continued. “I don’t want anything flammable very close by.”

“How come?” Pete’s voice asked.

“Because the hot exhaust could catch something on fire.

Now, I'm attaching the igniter and the plug. The plug keeps the igniter on and when it is launched the igniter and the plug come off.

"Then I have to put the rocket on the stand. Then I have to unwind the cord."

"Uh, Christopher, do you think we should stand back?" Pete asked. Charlotte chuckled to herself as she watched the shaky camera move backward.

"Come on, Toby," Pete added.

"And now, since the hooks are clipped on, I will put the key into the hole. Press it down until the light comes on, and then it's countdown time!" Christopher grinned at the camera.

Charlotte heard Christopher, Pete, and Emily count in unison. "Five, four, three, two, one . . ."

*"Wahow!"*

"There it goes!" Emily's voice said in the video. The video followed the rocket into the air and then back down again.

"There it is," Emily called out. "It's landing on the snow!"

"Wait, Toby, no!"

Charlotte chuckled as she watched Toby pouncing on the rocket, then she trotted back to Christopher with it in her mouth, her tail wagging. The video clicked off and the team of judges burst into laughter.

"And that is my project. If you look close you can still see Toby's teeth marks, which just goes to show that rocket science is something you can really bite into. Thank you," Christopher said with a wave of his arm and a bow.

All of the judges clapped, and Charlotte clapped the hardest, much to Christopher's embarrassment and delight.

After she had given Christopher a thumbs-up and waved

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good-bye, she walked to the car, remembering how just a few weeks prior Pastor Evans had given a sermon on the power of positive words. It was one of her flaws, she knew, to see all the problems rather than focusing on what was right. Fixing problems seemed to work for things like gardening, and chores, and the hundred and one things that broke down on the farm every week. Yet she could see by the look on Christopher's face that praise was necessary. Perhaps she could concentrate on offering him more praise—and Emily too.

And Sam—she still had to figure out what would help him.